The Longing of the Lambs

The Lacanian Real in the Work of Lars von Trier

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The Cinematic Real

There is a certain type of scene that arguably displays the essence of Lars von Trier. It portrays victims that willingly submit to their own fate. In *Antichrist*, we see *Her* identifying with pure evil, and we see her guiding *Him* to strangle *Her* at the end. In *Breaking the Waves,* we see Bess seeking out a sadistic sailor who has abused her before, in order to perform the ultimate sacrifice for her beloved husband, Jan.[1] In *Medea*, a film Trier made largely from Carl Th. Dreyer's script that builds upon the play by Euripides, we can see him adding his signature touch to the story by having one of Medea's two boys take an active part in their murder. Although they are only small children, both brothers are clearly aware of Medea's intent. The younger of the

two tries to escape. The older says, "I know what is going to take place," runs after his younger sibling and brings him back to his mother, who hangs them both.

These are horrifying scenes. They are clearly meant to be. But they are also telling. They place violence in a very peculiar aestheticized context, which at the same time is highly unpleasant and yet thought-provoking. These scenes tell us something crucial about Lars von Trier, the artist. In my view, they offer an excellent vantage point from which we can see Trier's laborious struggle to comprehend and put on screen something that was originally framed theoretically by Jacques Lacan with his notion of the Real.

In making this point, I am entering a territory that has been mapped by others before me. A good example is Todd McGowan, who in his *The Real Gaze. Film Theory after Lacan,* emphatically argues that the Real is the crucial theoretical concept for a Lacanian approach to cinema.[2] McGowan argues this point against the tendency of previous film theorists inspired by Lacan, who were mainly interested in Lacan's early work on the mirror stage—and thus were focusing on the symbolic and imaginary registers.

In his discussion of the Real, and why it is the crucial Lacanian concept, McGowan puts specific emphasis on the related concept of the gaze. In the work of the early Lacanian film theorists, the gaze was understood in a relatively unsurprising way as the viewpoint of the spectators. The gaze was, in other words, situated securely in the imaginary register. The spectators would, according to this understanding of the gaze, be caught in an ideological position where they would identify with or desire the imaginary objects on the screen while at the same time feeling incapable of living up to that identity or fulfilling that desire. This approach would typically end up in some form of ideology critique, where the focus was placed on the ways in which subjects are interpellated by the ideology of film(s).

In the register of the Real, on the other hand, the gaze is itself understood as an object. It is something the subject can at certain points encounter. The gaze is that disturbing object I encounter at the very moment I feel that I am being watched; it is something that appears on the screen that gives me the discomposing sensation that the film is looking back at me. The point for McGowan is that the gaze, understood in the register of the Real, can, in fact, be a liberating encounter. Theorizing the gaze in this way can lead to a critical and thoughtful engagement with films that does not simply end up criticizing the medium itself for being inherently ideological and championing consciousness and rational thought.

As McGowan himself explains: "Rather than advocating suspicion about the cinematic experience (and thereby taking the side of consciousness), psychoanalytic film theory should pave the way to a more intense submission to the dictates of this experience in order to facilitate an encounter with the Real."[3]

That the encounter with the Real can be liberating, is not, however, a matter of course. In Lacanian theory, the Real can just as easily be understood to produce the very opposite. The Real can be identified as that which is at the locus of the incoherence in the symbolic and imaginary registers that form our reality. It is what we encounter when we look for something that ought to stabilize our reality, and instead, we are confronted with the Thing, the paradoxical object that fundamentally disrupts it. The Real can be understood as the true object of our most hidden desires, but exactly because of this, it is the most terrifying object. An unmediated confrontation with the Real can be horrifying. So why would McGowan describe it as liberating? One possible answer is that liberation, in a certain sense, requires a fundamental destabilization of reality. I believe that this is true to a certain extent, and, more interestingly, that this point can help clarify why the quintessential Trier scenes

mentioned above, albeit harrowing, can also be seen as thoughtful and perhaps even liberating.

In order to better understand how the Real can be terrifying and liberating at the same time, it is helpful to take a look at the related notions of the imaginary and the symbolic. The register of the imaginary is the realm of (mis)recognition, i.e., the realm where the subject identifies with idols, victims, and heroes, and where this identification immediately becomes a point of misrecognition and doubt ("am I capable of identifying with my idol?"; "how does he imagine my identification with him?"). The register of the symbolic, on the other hand, is the realm of the signifier, i.e., the realm of languages both formal and informal; it is the register that establishes meanings that ultimately are impossible to fixate, as they are constantly displaced and replaced in metonymical and metaphorical movements.

The crucial point is that both the symbolic and the imaginary registers are structured around a fundamental incoherence. They form a reality that is the messy, uncertain, and never stable background of human experience. What is crucial about the Lacanian understanding of reality is thus that it is precisely not the solid bedrock on which human subjects can find orientation. The Real as distinguished theoretically from reality is the paradoxical object around which reality moves in forever uncontrollable ways. It is the hard kernel of incoherence in reality itself—the stone in the shoe that never seems to disappear.

MacGowan's understanding of the gaze as an object is a good example of the paradoxical switch in perspectives that defines the Real. What takes place when an object on a screen becomes "the real gaze" is precisely an inversion of the normal relation between subjects and objects. At that moment, it is the object itself that is actively perceiving and the subject that feels looked upon. I think this kind of structural inversion of subject and object can be experienced in full force precisely in the most violent and disturbing

scenes of Lars von Trier's work. Behind the horror, the dread, and the feeling of needing to leave the theatre in protest (which has been a consistent part of the screening of von Trier's films in Cannes), I think we can pinpoint this kind of reversal. At the core, it is the distinct feeling of being watched while seeing what takes place on the screen that drives the emotions of the spectators.

The Passion for the Real

Settled in a reality that is both uncontrollable and disturbing, the subject finds itself longing for something stable. A constant part of being a subject is to search for some ground, some substance, or some *thing* that could provide the ultimate answer and make sense of it all. But the irony is that the only thing (i.e., the Real) it encounters is destabilizing. The only thing we find when we look for something to provide us with ultimate, transcendent answers is precisely something that turns our world upside down—if we find anything at all.

Alain Badiou has identified this longing as a crucial passion of our age. In his terminology, it is "the passion for the Real." In the twentieth century, this passion was experienced through the massive violence of the two world wars and the many so-called utopian political movements that swept across the world. This passion for the Real is not, however, simply to be identified as the utopian dream of making up for the deficiencies of reality. On the contrary, it is precisely the passion for something much more tangible and concrete. In his *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002), Slavoj Žižek notes a curious anecdote about Brecht that succinctly illustrates the passion for the Real:

> When Brecht, on the way from his home to his theatre in July 1953, passed the column of Soviet tanks rolling towards the

> Stalinallee to crush the workers' rebellion, he waved at them and wrote in his diary later that day that, at that moment, he (never a party member) was tempted for the first time in his life to join the Communist Party. It was not that Brecht tolerated the cruelty of the struggle in the hope that it would bring a prosperous future: the harshness of the violence as such was perceived and endorsed as a sign of authenticity.[4]

Violent authenticity that directly confronts the humdrum of everyday life is the essence of the passion for the Real. Thus, the passion for the Real is not simply a passive longing for a future or a past that is completely out of reach; it is rather the passion for direct contact with something that is authentically powerful and that cuts across our normal realm of experience.

Crucially, Badiou points to the famous Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* as he is describing the passion for the Real, i.e., the method Brecht invented to break with the mimetic ambition of traditional theatre and directly seek to destroy the illusion of semblance, making it impossible for the audience to be fully submersed in the story of the drama. Ideally, according to Brecht, this would force the spectators to be critically reflective of both the play and their position in life. In other words, the Real should be seen as the impact of truth, the disruptive realization thereof—the impact art can have when it is not simply presenting comfortable illusions but rather forces the audience to think. As Badiou argues: "Brecht is a thinker of the theatre conceived as a capacity to unmask the real, precisely because theatre is above all the art of the mask, the art of semblance."[5]

For Badiou, Verfremdungseffekt portrays the minimal distance between the theatre and the Real in the controlled environment of the theatre. By calling attention to the very fact that what the audience is watching is indeed a mere performance and not the Real, the Verfremdungseffekt dialectically underscores

the sense of the Real as something distinct from the semblance the theatre is traditionally offering. Precisely because the subject in the audience is not allowed to be submerged into the well-known confinements of imaginary and symbolic reality, the Verfremdungseffekt can be seen as a tool to force the subject into a confrontation with the Real. To no longer be able to hide in the stupor of a reality stabilized by ideological illusions is, ideally, a powerful and perhaps anxiety-provoking experience. The disturbing effect of having a thought, of thinking something—this is the object of the Brechtian passion for the Real.

This point is crucial for my argument because Lars von Trier has certainly inherited a lot from Brecht. As he himself has put it, it is important for any work of art "that one can see its history of becoming."[6] Indeed, according to Trier, the work of art should be like a "stone in the shoe."[7] Throughout most of his work, Trier has sought to introduce various kinds of formal effects that seem to have the intention of keeping the audience awake and aware—to never allow them to simply submerge themselves into the drama. The *Dogme '95* manifesto, the chalk lines making up the scenery in *Dogville*, the randomized camera positions in *The Boss of it All* are but a few examples.

There is a certain history of political cinema leading up to this development. In *Politics as Form in Lars von Trier. A Post-Brechtian Reading*, Angelos Koutsourakis argues that there is a crucial formal innovation (or rather reinvention) at stake in Trier's work. According to Koutsourakis, the greater part of political cinema of the 1970s and 1980s was deeply involved with content, i.e., with telling a moving story with a suggestive morale, which left the formal aspects of political cinema untouched. Thus, some very basic facts about cinema that have often been argued to be crucial for the understanding of the political power of the medium (e.g., by Walter Benjamin in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"[8]), were never actively

questioned. "The Effect was a moralising sentimentalism that did not omit standardised cathartic dramaturgical effects that failed to implicate the audience's social role in the depicted social relationships."[9] In other words, the audience itself is left in the comfortable and ultimately depoliticized position of being mere spectators. No matter how political the content of this form of art may turn out to be, it would, therefore, be suffering from a bad case of commodification. Political content would be consumable in exactly the same way as non-political entertainment, precisely because there would be no stone in the shoe. There would be nothing to disrupt the way in which the audience takes pleasure in the spectacle in front of it. Against this kind of contract between the audience and the cinematic work, the Verfremdungseffekt is precisely striving to create a distance in which there is space for thought. That distance is best established precisely by bringing the audience in contact with the kind of paradox that the Real embodies, i.e., where the audience stops being the spectators and instead becomes the objects of perception themselves. The aim is to turn the work into a mirror, to force the audience to think instead of simply take pleasure in the spectacle on the screen or the stage.

This should be borne in mind when we are dealing with the topic of aesthetics and violence in Trier's work. It is particularly important because of the way in which Trier's films have been received by audiences and critics. The relation between Trier and his audience is itself violent; it is violent in a way that is not unlike the violence of the artist toward his material.[10] In this regard, Trier should be seen as someone who follows through on the Brechtian ambition of implicating the audience in the work. Just like Trier himself has put it, there must be a stone in the shoe disturbing our relation to "normal" reality in a film.

It is thus in no way unexpected that Trier's screenings at Cannes Festival are accompanied by boos in addition to cheers,

that certain members of the audience leave in protest, and that critics write scathing reviews demanding an apology or a retraction or both.[11] If Trier's films did not provoke this reaction, they would probably be a disappointment. Yet the mere fact that Trier's films are scandalizing spectacles does not in any way guarantee that they are worthy of our attention. (If that were the case, snuff films depicting actual torture or murder would be the best works of art imaginable.) There is, in other words, a thin line that Trier must be careful not to cross if he is going remain worthy of our attention. This is the line that separates the all too familiar adolescent humor of "Ha-ha! I made you look" from the genuine Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt. In so many words, the ambition of Trier's work would seem to be to convert the "Ha-ha! I made you look" into a "Ha-ha! I made you think."

The question becomes even more pertinent the moment we consider what the strong, negative reactions to Trier's films are about. Usually, it is not the formal transgressions, the jump cuts, or the hand-held cameras. On the contrary, he is usually praised profusely for these aspects, both in mainstream and specialized media. What invokes the sense of the scandalous are the scenes such as the amputation of the clitoris in *Antichrist* or the torture of a duckling and the murder of children in *The House that Jack Built*.

The point is that the reaction to all of these scenes tends to be very emotional. While these scenes are clearly disturbing, it is not immediately clear how they disrupt the standard mimetic relation between audience and spectacle. Indeed, could it not be argued that they rely upon very traditional effects of identification and catharsis to do their work? And do they not simply force the audience to *feel* rather than *think*?

I believe these are the crucial questions that confront us when we engage with the relation between aesthetics and violence, the Real, and the spectacle in the work of Trier. I think the answers

to these questions can be teased out by first considering Trier's brief and unsuccessful encounter with Richard Wagner's *Ring* and, second, by taking a further and longer step back into the history of art—to Athenian tragedy and a very specific Lacanian interpretation of it.

Trier on Wagner

There is another side to Trier's relation to the Real than the engagement with a post-Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt, which can be seen in his own comments in the so-called "Deed of Conveyance"[12] that he wrote after giving up on the dream of directing a performance of Wagner's *Ring* at the Baureuther Festspiele. (Trier's fundamental idea was to let the performance play out mostly in darkness, something he realized would not be technically feasible.) "Experiences can, of course, take many forms," Trier writes,

> ... but with regard to Wagner (and opera in its traditional form in general, I felt) I soon saw only one possibility: that the experience ought to be an emotional one for me; and how do you achieve emotional contact with an audience? Or rather, how do you make sure you don't prevent it? You allow the audience to apply the range of emotions it knows from real life by insisting that the performance IS real! A stylized reality, a poetic reality in which the voices possess melody and the silence has notes, but reality nonetheless![13]

The crucial point is that this, if anything, sounds like the polar opposite of the Verfremdungseffekt. It is an argument in favor of the direct submersion of the audience to the illusion of the theatre—a fulfillment of the most grandiose ambitions of the

Gesamtkunstwerk. If Brecht's ambition was to keep the audience at a distance and therefore alert and reflective, Wagner's ambition was entirely different: to create a spectacle that would not only combine all (or at least many of) the arts in order to create one unified dramatic vision but additionally to create a unified vision of the world—a new mythology. Wagner, thus, precisely sought to create a work of art that would stand as a complete world in itself. A world in which the audience could be submerged and feel swept up in the drama. If it is true that Trier in his work is seeking to keep a certain inheritance from Brecht alive, his reflections on Wagner would seem to point in a different direction.

This suspicion is further enhanced later in "Deed of Conveyance":

> It is simple dramaturgy: if A via B leads to C, we show A and C, and let the spectator deal with B! It's the simple recipe for conjuring tricks. We see the presentation and the result but never the actual transformation. It is the spectator's acquired knowledge of sequences of events that creates the magic and the illusion.[14]

Here we have Trier unabashedly promoting a way of telling a magical story by strengthening the very thing that the Verfremdungseffekt is seeking to dismantle: the illusion. Trier goes on to describe how his idea of using enhanced lighting in the theatre would strengthen this illusion while using the familiar methodology of horror films in order to fortify the illusory effect of "letting the spectator deal with B":

> A via B to C: imagine two spots of light on a stage. Top and bottom. We see the top and bottom of an old ladder. The ladder is rotten and the bottom half is split. In a horror film blood would be dripping from the darkness above. As somebody climbs the

> ladder and disappears into the darkness the ladder begins to shake violently.[15]

Again, such effects are certainly the very opposite of the Verfremdungseffekt that seeks to break the illusion of the mythical horror that goes on in the strategically positioned darkness (on the screen or stage). Thus, in the Brechtian theatre, the B would be the perfect place to insist upon the very theatricality that ruins the illusion.

In so many words, it would seem that we have encountered a discrepancy in Trier's approach to the Real. On the one hand, we have Trier pursuing a Passion for the Real in the Brechtian sense. Here the Real is the gap that opens up when the illusion of the drama is breaking down in a carefully crafted Verfremdungseffekt. On the other hand, we have Trier seeking to establish real illusions—giving audiences the best possible experience of the illusion that the characters are real.

My wager in this argument is that this is, in fact, not simply a case of Trier (consciously or unconsciously) contradicting himself. Indeed, this discrepancy becomes truly interesting only if we consider the possibility that it might be the very same Real Trier is approaching from opposite directions. Trier is moving in two different directions between illusion and Real. In the former case, he is seeking to destroy an illusion in order to arrive at the Real; in the latter, he is seeking to enhance an illusion in order to arrive at the Real.

At least I think it can be argued that intensifying emotional attachment does not simply result in an immersion into an illusory stupor of mimetic enjoyment. Moving in the direction of presenting characters to identify with, does not simply mean falling back into sentimentalist drama. It does not simply mean to be captured by the ideological apparatus that offers enjoyment in exchange for our acceptance of the status quo. On the

contrary: Seen from a specific point of view, emotional immersion can be the very opposite of an uncritical stance toward the powers of ideology.

This point becomes clearer if we consider that there is an ideological trap lurking in the traditional Brechtian approach to the purely formal Verfremdungseffekts. There is a certain cynical element to the idea of asking the subject to take a critical, reflective, and distanced stance toward both the theatre spectacle and reality (in order to implicate the audience in the drama and force them to think). The problem this represents has been made visible by Slavoj Žižek in his seminal work on the critique of ideology, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*.[16] Drawing on Peter Sloterdijk's analysis of cynicism, Žižek argues that the dominant form of ideology today is not the direct immersion of the subject into false beliefs. On the contrary, the ironic distance toward such beliefs allows the subject to act in precisely the same way he or she would have if they had actually believed it. Using Sloterdijk's formulation "enlightened false consciousness," Žižek points out that today we are exceptionally well trained in taking the reflective stance toward spectacles. Nowadays, subjects are caught in the ideological trap, not by being fully submersed into the ideological narrative but by getting overly confident in their critical, ironic stance toward that very same narrative. Indeed, one could argue that the traditional Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt has become so commonplace that we hardly notice it. In mainstream Hollywood blockbusters, we constantly see characters breaking the fourth wall (a good example is Ryan Reynolds's character Deadpool, who can hardly complete a sentence without looking directly into the camera), and we find this funny and intellectually stimulating, as we are called to reflect upon the relation between spectatorship and spectacle. Still, this would hardly count as a powerful critique or disruption of ideology. Žižek's

point is very clear. Being critical and reflective is not enough. Indeed, this may just be the very trap through which we are led to accept the dictates of the ideological regime of our age.[17] In order to substantiate this point, it will be helpful to take a look at Lacan's understanding of ancient Greek tragedy and the function of the chorus.

Chorus, Canned Laughter, VCR's, and Interpassivity

The crucial Lacanian term that is at stake at the intersection of spectatorship, reality, and the Real, is the Other. It is through the Other that we achieve some kind of sense and meaning in the forever fluctuating registers of the symbolic and the imaginary. The Other is the one whom we rely upon in order to make sense of the world, although we never truly feel at home in it; the Other who teaches us who, how, and what to desire, but not only that, as we shall see.

In the present context, the best illustration of the Other takes us back to ancient Greek drama and the function of the chorus. Lacan argues in his Seminar VII, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*:

> When you go to the theatre in the evening, you are preoccupied by the affairs of the day, by the pen that you lost, by the check that you will have to sign the next day. You shouldn't give yourself too much credit. Your emotions are taken care of by the healthy order displayed on the stage. The Chorus takes care of them. The emotional commentary is done for you. It is just sufficiently silly; it is not without firmness; it is more or less human. Therefore, you don't have to worry; even if you don't feel anything, the Chorus will feel in your stead. Why after all can one not imagine that the effect on you may be achieved, at least a small dose of it, even if

> you didn't tremble that much? To be honest, I'm not sure if the spectator ever trembles that much.[18]

Lacan's interpretation here is radical. Rather than seeing the chorus as guides who tell the audience how it should feel, he inverts the relationship. The chorus are people who have emotions in order for the audience to be freed from the obligation to feel.

The crucial Lacanian point is the notion that desire is the desire of the Other. This does not merely mean that we look to others in order to learn how to feel and what to desire. It should also be taken more literally in the sense that my desire is at home in the Other. My feelings, my desires, do not belong to me; they do not "live" in me (neither in my heart nor in my brain). Instead, they can have their existence literally in the Other. The insight behind this idea is that we, as subjects, do not have the capacity to do all the work of feeling our own emotions, living our own experiences, thinking our own thoughts. It is against this background that we should see the great innovation of Greek drama and the chorus. What the chorus provides is the service involved in having people present who are moved on our behalf. They bear the burden of having an experience when we cannot manage to have one ourselves.

The Austrian philosopher Robert Pfaller has formulated the central point in Lacan's analysis of ancient Greek drama as "interpassivity." The strength of Pfaller's work is his ability to deftly analyze well-known everyday phenomena using this (to some perhaps counterintuitive) Lacanian insight. He thereby shows just how elegant and productive it is. For Pfaller, we are interpassive whenever we buy books in order not to read them but instead put them on a shelf or a coffee table because we let the coffee table and the shelf read the books on our behalf. Likewise, we are interpassive when we let our VCR's or hard disk recorders record our favorite TV shows. To be sure, we tell ourselves that

we do this in order to be able to see them later, but more likely than not, we are never going to see them. Instead, our electronic recording equipment performs the service of watching the TV shows on our behalf.[19]

It was Slavoj Žižek, however, who supplied the archetypical example of interpassivity. It pinpoints the phenomenon of canned laughter in sitcoms and similar TV shows.

> Why this laughter? The first possible answer—that it serves to remind us when to laugh—is interesting enough, because it simply implies that laughing is a matter of duty and not some spontaneous feeling; but this answer is not sufficient, because we do not usually laugh. The only correct answer would be that the Other—embodied in the television set—is relieving us even of our duty to laugh—is laughing instead of us. So even if, tired from a hard day's stupid work, all evening we did nothing but gaze drowsily into the television screen, we can say afterwards that, objectively, through the medium of the Other, we had a really good time.[20]

The point is that a surprisingly large part of both our intimate and social lives are determined by these and similar forms of interpassivity. We take pictures and record small films at concerts that we never look at subsequently, but that certainly made us pay less attention to the concert as we were actually there. And a similar point can be made about art collectors, who, as Pfaller argues, would "prefer to banish their collection to a safe, where they don't have to look at them."[21]

Returning to Trier, my point is that we should evaluate his engagement with the Real, both in terms of his inspiration from Brecht and Wagner, from the point of view of the realization that the primary way in which we experience emotions today is through some kind of interpassive medium. What

Trier is looking to do is, in other words, to force us to have an experience by ourselves. This is the point where the ambition of creating real emotions meets the Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt. The point is that alienation has an inverted meaning here. Today, Brecht's notion of Verfremdungseffekt is often translated as a distancing effect or estrangement effect. In the present context, I prefer the older translation of alienation,[22] because it helps illustrate how, in the Lacanian understanding of the subject, the usual understanding of the relation between feeling at home and being alienated is inverted. The point is precisely that we are not living our lives in a state of being more or less at home in reality and that something external (such as a formal technique used in cinematic art) must come along in order to alienate us (or as it were, create a distance). On the contrary, we live our lives in a reality that is as such alienating, unaccommodating. And in order to function as subjects, we have to create a certain distance to our alienation (in Seminar XI, Lacan calls this "separation").[23] We keep our alienation at arm's length; we must avoid feeling it too intensely. Being separated from our alienation but never relieved of it, *that* is the basic human condition. It is in this field that we find our ideological submission. Given this "baseline," it should be clear that the way to shake up a subject and force it to think, cannot simply consist in creating alienation (or distancing). On the contrary, the most effective method is probably to offer something that is experienced precisely as *Real*—here in a sense that somehow encompasses both the Wagnerian and the Brechtian inflections of the term.

Therefore, the confrontation with the Real in Trier's work should not simply alienate us and create distance. It should rather shake us from the comfortably distanced relation we have to our own alienation. This is precisely the way in which I understand the crucial comment Trier makes in "Deed of

Conveyance" quoted above: "how do you achieve emotional contact with an audience? Or rather, how do you make sure you don't prevent it?"[24] Preventing the audience from having an emotional connection is precisely what you risk doing when you leave room for interpassivity—when you open the space in which they can leave their emotions to be felt by an Other.

This brings us back to the scenes mentioned in the beginning. The transgressive scenes that are so typical of Trier's work. The scenes where the victims willingly submit to their fates. If I am correct in the Lacanian analysis I have presented so far, we should be able to see why these scenes are at the same time troubling and necessary. It is precisely through these scenes that Trier combines the Brechtian and the Wagnerian versions of the "passion for the real." Here, the audience can perhaps be shaken to the point of being forced to have a thought.

If that is the case, however, one is almost obliged to ask: What is the purpose of all the more traditional formal Verfremdungseffekts for which Trier is equally famous? The answer is right in front of us. These formal techniques should not be seen as *defamiliarizing*. They are not the parts of Trier's films that make the subject feel estranged. On the contrary, they present the kind of alienated reality in which the subject comes closest to feeling at home. It is here, in the fragmented world in which the difference between spectator and spectacle is blurred, that the subject finds its most comfortable position. And it is against this background that the confrontation with the Real can potentially take place. In short, the traditional Verfremdungseffekt is, at its core, the highest form of *realism*. What I am suggesting here is that we can see Trier's collected works as a long experiment with ways in which one can bring out this experience of the Real against the carefully crafted background of alienated reality.

The House that Jack Built

Given this general understanding of Trier's work, what, then, is the status and significance of his latest film, *The House that Jack Built*? The question becomes especially pertinent once we consider the fact that the scene depicting the quintessential Trier theme is not positioned at the climax of the film's narrative. In *Medea*, *Breaking the Waves* and *Antichrist*, we see the longing of the lambs at the very end of a long, at times disturbing, aesthetic journey. But in *The House that Jack Built*, we see it at the very beginning of the film. In fact, we are likely to have seen it long before we entered the theatre, as this scene is played out in the trailer. Uma Thurman's character (Lady 1) is a hitchhiker picked up by Jack. She immediately begins to flirt both with Jack (portrayed by Matt Dillon) and with the idea that he might be a serial killer. "You do look like one," she says.

Here, the theme of the willing sacrificial victim seems to move away from what I have argued so far. In this scene from *The House that Jack Built,* there is no confrontation with the Real in any sense. Instead, the scene is functioning through a form of morbid comedy. It relies heavily on the trope of the woman as the lamb longing to be slaughtered, but it is in no way a disturbing or even emotionally moving scene. Quite the contrary, it borders on comedy, playing on the well-known misogynistic trope of the woman, who talks too much. Lady 1 is not only not a lamb longing to be slaughtered, flirting as she is with the idea of Jack being a serial killer, she is also incredibly annoying as she goes on and on and on. She is talking, she is expecting the man to fix all her problems without showing the least bit of gratitude, and after he helps her, she is still talking. She is persistently exasperating, and as Jack hits her in the face with the jack he has helped her having repaired by an auto mechanic, the audience would be hard-pressed to feel anything at all. Perhaps

they could be tempted to think that she deserved it; perhaps they could entertain a slight giggle at the pun on jack and Jack. In all likelihood, however, the typical reaction of the audience to this sequence will be very similar to the way audiences tend to react to the many lazy puns we see in sitcoms. In short, in order to fit the archetypical example of interpassivity, the scene is only missing the canned laughter.

Clearly, in *The House that Jack Built*, Trier is taking his signature scene in a different direction than he has done before. That being said, it should be borne in mind that he does give his audience plenty of other scenes that are incredibly disturbing. But the classic Trier touch of the longing of the lamb is visibly transformed. Naturally, this opens for speculation on why he has chosen to do so and why he has done it in *this* particular film. I shall only offer one explanation that fits within the overall Lacanian schema I have been following so far.

The passion for the Real is in no way an innocent passion. After all, the twentieth-century spectacles of violence were certainly not models to be emulated—probably not even in the realm of art. In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Žižek makes that much clear, pointing out that the passion for the Real appears in all sorts of guises, one of them being the recent rise in extreme right-wing political movements. All the familiar ideological themes of these movements (nationalism, racism, misogyny) can be seen as ways of looking for the Real truth behind the false appearances of "fake news," "cultural Marxism," and "feminism." Žižek has a very promising approach to theorizing this problem:

> Is the passion for the Real as such, then, to be rejected? Definitely not, since, once we adopt this stance, the only remaining attitude is that of refusing to go to the end of keeping up appearances. The problem with the 20th-century passion for the Real, was not that

> it was a passion for the Real, but that it was a fake passion whose ruthless pursuit of the Real behind appearances was *the ultimate stratagem to avoid confronting the Real.*[25]

To Žižek, this means that the passion for the Real itself turns into a passion for semblance; it turns into a clearly defined image of what such a passion would look like. In that way, the Real becomes something quite different from what is entailed in the Lacanian notion. It rather comes to resemble something imaginary. In other words, the moment the Real we are passionately searching for begins to take the shape of something familiar, that is the moment it switches registers and enters the realm of imaginary semblance. The moment we already know in advance what the Real would look like is the moment it turns into a *trope.* This could perhaps be said to be the true danger for Trier and the longing of the lambs. Indeed, the very fact that this trope is recognizable as a trope seems to severely weaken its impact. In a way, therefore, there is a certain necessity to the scene at the beginning of *The House that Jack Built*. At a certain point, the lambs longing for their sacrifice morph from being a potential opening to the Real into a mere semblance—one that is longing for the canned laughter that ought to have accompanied it.

Notes

1. Slavoj Žižek has analyzed *Breaking the Waves* in great detail in "Femininity between Goodness and Act," in *Lars von Trier's Women*, ed. Rex Butler and David Denny (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).
2. Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze. Film Theory after Lacan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).
3. Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze*, 13–14.
4. Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002), 5.

5. Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 47.
6. Peter Schepelern, *Lars von Triers elementer. En filminstruktørs arbejde* (København: Munksgaard/Rosinante, 1997), 133.
7. As he puts it while playing himself in a scene in *Epidemic* (2005). See also Angelos Koutsourakis, *'A Film Should Be Like a Stone in Your Shoe': A Brechtian Reading of Lars von Trier*, PhD diss. University of Sussex, 2011.
8. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).
9. Angelos Koutsourakis, *Politics as form in Lars von Trier. A Post-Brechtian Reading* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), xv.
10. Which is the central theme of *The House that Jack Built*.
11. Trier's films have the effect of demanding commentary in the most surprising places. Thus, a film critic in the Danish newspaper *Politiken* devoted a long passage to a very critical commentary on *The House that Jack Built* in the middle of a very positive review of *Petra* by Jaime Rosales. The argument seems to be that *Petra* was the film Trier unsuccessfully had sought to accomplish with *The House that Jack Built*. While this may be true, the need for the critic to comment on Trier's film in a space that rightly should be reserved for another film (which she praised and gave 6 hearts out of 6), tells us everything we need to know about Trier's ability to be a stone in the shoe. See Eini Carina, "Usædvanligt original film bliver hængende i bevidstheden og skaber et nyt sprog at fatte verden igennem," *Politiken*, August 15, 2019.
12. Lars von Trier, "Deed of Conveyance", *The Opera Quarterly* 23, no. 2–3 (Spring-Summer 2007), https://doi-org.eres.qnl.qa/10.1093/oq/kbn038.
13. Von Trier, "Conveyance," 342.
14. Von Trier, "Conveyance," 343.
15. Von Trier, "Conveyance," 345.
16. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008 [1989]).
17. Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 24.
18. Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960, The Seminar*

of Jacques Lacan. Book VII, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 1986), 252.

19. Robert Pfaller, *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture. Illusions without Owners* (London: Verso, 2014).
20. Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 33.
21. Pfaller, *Pleasure Principle*, 35.
22. E.g., Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht On Theatre*, trans. John Willett (London: Bloombury, 1978).
23. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, *Seminar XI*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Karnac Press, 2004 [1977]), 213ff.
24. Von Trier, "Conveyance," 342.
25. Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002), 24.

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