



UNIVERSITETET I BERGEN

The aesthetics of depression in the work of Lars von Trier

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS ON "DEPRESSION TRILOGY"



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Abstract

The following dissertation investigates whether Lars von Trier's film representations of depression go beyond medical and social conventions related to the illness, in order to underline the complex character of its suffering and causes. To contextualise cinematic depression, the first chapter offers a historical summary of movie portrayals of the illness against the backdrop of the social and medical fields. The main corpus explores the way the motif of depression transpires in von Trier's *traumatic* aesthetics to express the filmmaker's vision and ethical beliefs, with a special emphasis on his latest trilogy – *Antichrist* (2009), *Melancholia* (2011) and *Nymphomaniac vol. I* and *vol. II* (2013) - known as “Depression trilogy”. The thesis' ethical inquiry unravels within the ethical frames established by essential theories that focus also on the viewers' possible reactions and attitudes regarding depression.

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Introduction

Depression appears to be the quintessential modern illness of the self. It has become a part of our daily vocabulary, used to encompass different degrees of misery. Despite its wide acknowledgement, a clear view on it continues to elude us. Its subjective character raises moral controversies in the psychiatric circles regarding its definitions and various treatments. The discussion surrounding the illness is almost exclusively medical, broached only in a few socio-anthropological studies (Møldrup & Knudsen, 2005; Ehrenberg, 2009). Given depression's numerous media representations, one would expect to find a fair range of media scientific articles on it. Surprisingly, these are almost non-existent. The current situation may well reflect a certain indifference to the theme. A fact of day-to-day life, it can easily go unnoticed. However, how much do we know about it and how do we perceive it? In the context of media aesthetics, I am interested in analysing whether cinematic depression is ethical or not. Are the illness' representations meant to go beyond mere conventions to shed light on individual suffering and its causes? The main corpus of the dissertation aims to answer the question through a close inspection of Lars von Trier's controversial aesthetics and the way it serves to express the filmmaker's vision and ethical beliefs, with a special emphasis on his latest trilogy - *Antichrist* (2009), *Melancholia* (2011), *Nymphomaniac vol.1* and *vol. 2* (2013). The first chapter will focus on the medical definitions and social implications of conventional depression. A historical summary will discuss movie portrayals of the illness and their degree of verisimilitude. In relation to this, parallels will be drawn to the social and medical fields in order to observe the potential influences they have on the cinematic medium. The thesis' ethical inquiry will unwind within the ethical frames established by essential theories that focus also on viewers' possible reactions and attitudes regarding depression. One of the prominent theoreticians, philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, underlines the importance of a fair acknowledgement of the "Other". One has to learn to accept her alterity and nature as unique (Levinas, 1990). At the same time, the philosopher finds himself before a conundrum. While trying to avoid an unjust representation of the Other and break with the earlier ontological traditions, he cannot entirely escape their mechanisms (Downing & Saxton 2010, 4).

A counterpoint to Levinas's moral views are the ones promoted by psychoanalyst Jaques Lacan. With roots in Freudian theory, his theories perceive "desire" as central to our ethical system (Lacan, 1992). In Lacan's opinion, spectators should give in to their desire, even if it is reprehensible and destructive. Saxton points out that "the ethical in Lacan is concerned not with the self as an ego or set of imaginary identifications, but with the self as a principle of negativity" (Downing & Saxton 2010, 6).

From a Lacanian perspective, the trilogy's crucial scenes challenge the viewers to look their controversial desires in the face - an exercise of honesty, valued more than the cathartic effect.

One of Lacan's disciples, philosopher Slavoj Žižek claims that it is necessary to confront the despicable without looking away. It should be our only ethical response upon seeing powerful, uncomfortable images (Žižek, 1991).

Since the female body occupies a central role in von Trier's "Depression trilogy", it is relevant to subject aspects of our analysis to feminist ethics. A well-known representative is film theoretician Laura Mulvey, who is interested in the portrayal of female characters. She applies Lacan's psychoanalyst concepts to shed light on the cinematic relation established between the viewer and the on-screen heroine. Traditionally, the former assumes a pre-determined objectifying male position from which to gaze at the latter, usually beautiful and young (Mulvey, 2009).

The subjective ethical response is not exclusive to Lacanian theories. We find it in Michel Foucault's "ethics of the self" (Foucault, 1997). Nonetheless, the French philosopher criticises the psychoanalytical focus on "desire" because it summons the risk of "normalising" Western sexual pathologies (Downing & Saxton 2010, 7). Foucault's ethics urges one to care for one's self as a method of limiting and controlling the power that one possesses. The theoretician points out that when people abuse their legitimate power and subject others to their fantasies and desires, they become "slaves of their own appetites" (Rabinow & Rose 2003, 31).

Within von Trier's cinematic diegesis, depression and erotic behaviour are intrinsically linked. Stripped of romantic connotations, the intimate scenes of *Antichrist* and *Nymphomaniac* position viewers as "Peeping Toms" (Metz, 2009) only to punish their voyeurism later on with impossibly violent visuals.

Equally reprimanded is aestheticized misery. Many critics express their disapproval of filmmakers that beautify suffering and viewers that let themselves be transported by its spectacle. Mieke Bal pinpoints the individual's natural affinity towards visuals of dreadfulness. Under artistic conditions, these immanently negative acts can turn to positive experiences (Bal, 2007). Once more, spectatorship turns voyeuristic. Nevertheless, to consider this affinity inhumane is an exaggeration (Sontag 2003, 67). In *Melancholia*, the poetic opening montage makes the idea of apocalyptic destruction seem majestic. The end of the world illustrates a beautiful, manic nature in perfect harmony with the main character's inner world. The attraction between the two planets leading up to the inevitable moment of contact follows the tact of Wagner's magnificent overture of Tristan and Isolde. Earth sinks slowly into "Melancholia", a visually stunning metaphor. However, the luscious aesthetics are counterbalanced by shocking imagery, negative elements of surprise with which von Trier's filmography has accustomed viewers throughout the years. Depression's darkest "monsters" are set in motion, particularly in *Antichrist* and in the *Nymphomaniac* volumes. These align with the last decades' negative cinematography known as "ordeal cinema" (Bradshaw, 2008). They are considered a sharp critique against traditional spectatorship, as well as an antithetical answer to commercial cinema. (Grønstad 2001,194) In the process of my ethical examination, I am also focusing on the moral development of von Trier's female characters, taking previous heroines into account, in order to shed light onto the common drive that fuels their ambiguous actions. The characters' psychological pain and their sacrifice are indicators of their moral integrity. They are "martyrs" (Bell 2006, 215). The filmmaker perpetuates the "victim" trait, easily identifiable in the depressed characters. Alone and misunderstood by their peers, they cross the line into madness. However, unlike the earlier ones, they possess a strong will. Even though they suffer, they realise and accept their conditions. The concluding chapter reveals the ethics behind von Trier's visual authorship and summarizes ethical expectations attached to spectatorship. In reference to the first one, the findings are based on the *mise-en-scène*, the director's vision and his artistic beliefs. When it comes to our reading of depression, the focus falls on our responsibility towards the visuals we gaze upon, rather than the identification of spontaneous reactions. When we apply a Levinasian perspective to the ethical inquiry, we commit ourselves to respecting alterity's "otherness" and to the idea that we cannot fully comprehend it. Albeit relatable, each and every person's experience possesses something singular; therefore, one cannot speak of total empathy. Consequently, we consider the

female characters as “the Other”, each with its own depression and tribulations. One has to tread carefully when one takes into account their roles and suffering.

On the other hand, we may see their depression in a general light, even dismiss it, if it appears alien to us. In the Lacanian context of “desire”, the characters’ pain and sexuality become mere devices designed to direct the viewer onto the path of discovering something inherently negative about herself. As such, the controversial imagery denounces social prejudice and hypocrisy.

According to feminine ethics, watching turns voyeuristic if spectators admire the characters’ beautiful bodies. Notwithstanding, visceral scenes centred on nudity and sheer violence avoid visual pleasure. One such example is the infamous female circumcision scene in *Antichrist*.

In von Trier’s transgressive films, with the exception of *Melancholia*, despair drives the depressed female characters to cross the line of lucidity. They cease to be the victims and start persecuting not only those who do not understand them, but also our gaze.

Last, but not least, depression’s fickle character and its moral burden translate to the screen. As viewers, we face its uncomfortable images and are expected to react in a certain ethical manner.

Even though there is no ultimate ethical response, one can still adhere to an ethics close to those proposed by Levinas or Foucault that stress responsibility towards the *other*, and towards the *self*. Thus, they prompt one to reflect on one’s previous opinions on the subject and on the purpose of its demanding visuals. Cinematic depression – albeit fictional – encourages debate on a pressing matter, easily overlooked by its deceiving accessibility.

Chapter 1. Depression – scientific quagmire translated on screen

It has always been a challenge to define depression. Its ubiquitous character tricks one into misusing it. How many times have we heard the phrase “I’m depressed” as to express the occasional bad mood in which one finds oneself?

Regarding sadness as the equivalent of depression is understandable. We relate to the pathos of the illness invoked by entertainment media. Among these, cinema occupies a significant place on account of its production of verisimilar stories. However, depression’s psychiatric dimensions remain obscure to the average individual. Even more peculiar is that this confusion extends to the psychiatric field itself. “(...) how does one objectivize the subjective?” seems to be the question that continues to trouble medical professionals (Ehrenberg 2010, 13). The fact that the illness shares common ground with other psychological imbalances and ailments could be the explanation. According to Pierre Janet, depression appears as “a crossroads from which all possible illnesses can flow” (Ehrenberg 2009, 44). A depressed person can show signs of anxiety, manic exaltation (Kristeva 1989, 9), despondency and morbidity - the slowing of vital processes, which intersect with symptoms found in melancholia, neurosis and other pathologies. Furthermore, the inability to pinpoint depression’s nature accurately increases the difficulty of treating it already summoned by its heterogeneous character (Callahan & Berrios 2004, 5). In this respect, historians¹ identify the opposing hypotheses of Sigmund Freud and Pierre Janet on the origin of neurosis. While the former considers it to stem from conflict ²(Freud, 1929), the latter claims it to be the result of a lack or insufficiency ³(Janet, 1914). Correspondingly, depression can be seen as the mark of a tormented individual or as a mood pathology instated in the aftermath of a traumatic experience. Modern psychiatry tries to relieve the sufferers from their burden. As Ehrenberg observes, “it transforms moral entities, for which the individual is

¹ Ehrenberg (2009) claims that “Freud and Janet modernized the old notion of nervousness by creating the notion of the mental: they made it acceptable to believe that the mind can be ill without a biological cause (...)” .

² Freud calls it *conflit* (fr.).

³ Janet uses the word *aboulie* (fr.) which Larousse defines as mental disturbance described by weakening of will, causing an inhibition of the physical and intellectual activity.
(<http://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/aboulie/177>)

responsible, into medical entities, by which the individual is affected.” (Ehrenberg 2009, 24) The treatment of depression consisting in different types of therapy combined with medication (antidepressants, anxiolytics, and benzodiazepines) has raised two ethical concerns.

Firstly, as these drugs “cure” mood imbalances, they also change the way in which one makes sense of the world and one’s self. It is possible that by altering perceptions, they alter personalities (Ehrenberg 2009, 71).

Secondly, as prolonged intake can lead to addiction and overdose to demise, they create a medical impasse. How can one effectively alleviate the patient’s suffering without prescribing this potentially harmful medication?

We are yet to find the answer. The current concern over the relationship between depression and addiction is the subject of several well-known movies such as Erik Skjoldbjærg’s *Prozac Nation* (2001), Joachim Trier’s *Oslo, 31. August* (2011) and Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne’s *Two Days, One Night* (2014). Further on, I will discuss these and others in relation to the social and medical history of the illness. The aim of this chapter is to show that cinematic representations mirror its’ evolution and evoke the notions and misconceptions surrounding it.

Prior to the Second World War, the term “depression” did not exist. In fact, as Callahan and Berrios (2004) observe in their study of the pre-war primary medical care, doctors were ill equipped in dealing with patients complaining about their nerves. In order to differentiate between emotional distress caused by extraneous factors and mental illness - the mark of faulty brain activity - they diagnosed them with “neurosis” and “psychoneurosis” (Callahan and Berrios 2004, 30; Ehrenberg 2009, 25). These clumsy diagnoses based on symptoms without biological explanation offered inaccurate accounts about personal suffering. Since little was known about these “minor” (Callahan and Berrios 2004, 30) afflictions, there was not any social awareness towards them. Affective pain was a discreet affair and it was treated rudimentarily with electroshock therapy (Ehrenberg 2009, 17), a standard method between the two world wars. Thus, the movies of the period do not focus on this theme.

However, after 1945, the need for better diagnoses and treatments for affective disorders becomes imperative as the number of patients increases (Callahan and Berrios, 2004). Albeit prudently, films begin to broach the subject of depression. One such example is Frank Capra’s 1946-fantasy

drama *It's a Wonderful Life*, in which the disillusioned main character decides to commit suicide. Following a series of unfortunate events that seem impossible to fix, the altruistic George Bailey (James Stewart) falls prey to despair. He becomes convinced of the fact that the world would fare better without him. In retrospective, one understands that the character is going through a severe case of depression prompted by the approaching failure of his goal to help his peers. Bailey's erratic behaviour frightens his wife and kids as they are kept in the dark about the head of the family's troubles. He perceives himself to be alone in the endeavour to save the family business upon which the livelihood of many depends. However, he does not go through with his morbid plan. Just as he is about to jump off a bridge, an angel sent by God prevents him from doing so and shows him that his existence changed everyone's lives for the better. Since it is a Christmas movie, one accepts the movie's highly romanticised story. After all, a more likely outcome would have saddened an already sensitive audience marked by the harrowing events of the newly concluded war. But it is interesting to observe the symbols used to convey the cure for George's depression. In tune with the credo of the nervous affliction, the "therapist" angel Clarence needs to change George's negative view of his situation. He restores his hopefulness quite easily by showing him an even worse state of affairs. This naïveté corresponds with depression's contemporary mystical character.

The cinematic representations of the illness changed quickly. By 1950's, the discovery of the neuroleptics (1952) and antidepressants (1957) would bring about a medical revolution. For the first time, "the medicine of the mind" provided depression and other disorders "situated on the limits of psychiatry" (Ehrenberg 2009, 17) with a palpable treatment. At the same time, the social views regarding the psychiatrists' role underwent a positive change. From medical practitioners dealing with mental diseases one did not speak about, they began to be seen as physicians like all others, in charge with treating the general public's psychological afflictions. Through various media, people familiarized themselves with the psychiatric field and its popular terms. This contributed to them considering mental health services and products (Lawlor 2012, 155). The scientific progress and people's altered attitudes towards depression can be noticed in films such as Alfred Hitchcock's *The wrong man* (1956). This docudrama reveals the story of Emmanuel Balestrero (Henry Fonda), a man wrongfully accused of several robberies around New York. As the quest to prove his innocence gradually develops into an ill-fated affair, it takes a toll on his

family and particularly, on his wife, Rose (Vera Miles). The director chooses to show the progress of her illness by employing aesthetics pertaining to madness rather than depression. This can be interpreted as a hint towards the danger of untreated depression. At first, dismay sets in. As the character loses all hope, she begins expressing her pessimistic view of the future in a detached, almost catatonic manner. Her facial immobility and her lost, wandering gaze appear to be depressive. Further on, she convinces herself that her husband's bad luck is her own fault. Her guilt obsession gives way to paranoid thoughts about the world as the enemy. Her anxieties reach critical level and throw her into a delirious state of mind during which she hits her husband with a hairbrush. A close-up of the husband's face cuts to a shot of its reflection in a broken mirror and back to Rose's perplexed face.



Fig.1 *The Wrong Man*. Warner Bros., 1956. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock

This symbol makes the viewer aware of her distorted point of view on reality. Right after the incident, Balestrero manages to calm her down. In a short-lived moment of lucidity, she points out that she has become unpredictably dangerous to her family and asks for treatment. The doctor explains to the husband that “she’s buried under some kind of landslide of fear and guilt.” Despite the uncertainty of his somewhat poetical diagnosis, he assures Balestrero that “no case is incurable.” The ending credits confirm Rose’s cure even though they do not clearly specify which mental ailment she has suffered from. This might be explained by the fact that regardless of the medical advances, depression and other affective disorders remain private affairs. Their wide

acknowledgement occurs on the backdrop of the individual's social emancipation brought on by the counterculture of the mid 1960s and 1970s (Ehrenberg 2009,8).

Until then, movies continue to represent depression in a discrete manner. A peculiar case in this context is the 1960 comedy, *The Apartment* (dir. Billy Wilder). Jovial Jack Lemmon plays the role of insurance clerk C.C. Baxter whose hope of a promotion leads him to lend his apartment to several company executives, as a retreat for conducting extramarital affairs. By trying desperately to make his superiors limit themselves to the scheduled appointments, comical situations ensue. His "poor-schmuck" persona raises sympathetic laughter. Behind his optimistic façade, one realises the miserable situation he is in. Baxter spends late hours at the office and even catches a cold while waiting the whole night outside his house. The depressed character, however, is Fran Kubelik (Shirley MacLaine), a lift attendant and Baxter's romantic interest. Over the course of the movie, her demureness and quirky observations give way to self-deprecation and unhappiness, the results of her on-and-off relationship with a personnel director. At first, she uses sarcasm to hide her suffering. When meeting him after a break, she comments on their rendezvous: "same booth, same song, same sauce - sweet and sour." This line appears to sum up their affair and hints towards the turning-point in the story, her suicide attempt. Later on, it echoes in the words spoken by the man's secretary, herself a past lover of his: "always the last booth in the Chinese restaurant and the same pitch about divorcing his wife." The bitterness of the conversation between the two women is all the more obvious as it happens at the office Christmas party, with drunken, cheerful noises in the background. It strikes a chord within Fran. Upon crossing paths with an upbeat Baxter excited about his promotion, she lends him her pocket mirror, so he could check how he looks like with a "junior executive" hat. A close-up of his twisted face in the mirror shows his intrigued expression at discovering that it is broken. Fran's reply to this is unequivocal: "Yes, know. I like it that way. Makes me look the way I feel."



Fig.2 *The Apartment*. The Mirisch Company, 1960. Dir. Billy Wilder

In an over-the-shoulder medium shot, his bemused eyes continue to look at Fran while he answers the phone. After a lovers' quarrel, alone and miserable in Baxter's apartment on Christmas Eve, she decides to commit suicide by ingesting a bottle of sleeping pills. Enlisting the help of his neighbour doctor and his outspoken wife, the clerk manages to save Fran and get her in shape. They get their Hollywood ending, when, on New Year's Eve, she realizes that her place is by Baxter's side. Fran's depression may have been downplayed, but her suicide attempt introduced then-audiences to the uncomfortable reality of the overdose.

Another example of reserved representation of depression is that of Alain Leroy, the protagonist of the 1963 French drama *The Fire Within*⁴, directed by Louis Malle. A recovering alcoholic, Leroy (Maurice Ronet) undergoes a treatment at a clinic in Versailles, near Paris. He enjoys his confinement because it gives him the peace he needs for self-reflection, and keeps his anxieties concerning the faced-paced world at bay. Monologues and dialogues are essential to the portrayal of his depression as "pathological sadness" (Lawlor 2012, 157). "Une vie de malade c'est réglée, c'est simple"⁵, he confesses to his lover, Lydia. What scares him is Paris with its noises and people. Although his four months' treatment has ended, he chooses to prolong his stay at the sanatorium precisely because of this fear. However, we soon realize that he is not experiencing

⁴ (fr.) *Le feu follet*

⁵ (eng.) "The life of a patient is organised, is simple."

the fear of living, but rather the fear of not being able to discover the meaning of life. This search is at the core of his depression. His perpetual unhappiness is the reason for his addiction, something that he admits to his doctor. When the latter claims that “life is good” and Alain’s cure is “a matter of willpower”, the former, perplexed, cannot understand how the psychiatrist failed to see the issue: “le mal est au coeur de ma volonté.”⁶ After all, he demonstrates decisiveness when he plans to take his life. His room can be seen as a metaphor for introspection. There are excerpts of newspaper articles, books and pictures on the walls. Through point of view shots and close-ups, we can follow his gaze tuned to his repetitive interior monologue. Alain walks between the four walls like walking within himself.



Fig.3 *Le feu follet*. Nouvelles Éditions de Films, 1963. Dir. Louis Malle

He analyses life from the distance and he knows that he cannot find its meaning by observing representations of it. Therefore, he decides to go on a whole day visit to see his friends in Paris. However, his last attempt to learn if life is worth living proves to be unsuccessful.

Alain’s depression and his metaphysical anxiety could be discussed in the context of Schopenhauer’s views on human nature and the meaning of life (Schopenhauer, 2012). The German philosopher believes that will is the force that drives one to live through every aspect of life, but one should deny one’s own existence. None of our perceptions are real since they are filtered through the lenses of our will. Notwithstanding, the denial of existence does not refer to

⁶ (eng.) “The evil resides within my willpower.”

suicide since taking one's life requires strong willpower. It speaks rather of one's renouncement of one's egotistical ways. By seizing to will, one becomes the ideal ascetic. Alain finds it impossible to isolate himself entirely, partly because of peer pressure, partly because of his own negative drive. He finds life mundane and unbearable in its insignificance, so he chooses to punish himself and his friends, because of their common coldness and superficiality. The ending scene is a visceral critique of our failure to notice the gravity of depression, intercutting between close-ups of Alain's face and shots of him shooting himself in the heart. After the loud discharge, the camera freezes on his immobile face. A suicide note fades in on the dead character's "j'accuse!" – stare, with the purpose of leaving "a permanent stain" on his friends and the public.

At the end of the 1960's, psychoanalysis experiences an increase in popularity that would last for a whole decade (Ehrenberg 2009, 11; Callahan and Berrios 2004, 36). As depression no longer seemed a matter of lack and conflict, the illness began to be regarded as the modern individual's struggle to find herself. Free of the rigid social customs of the past, she has the liberty to choose what she wants to be. But, as Ehrenberg observes: "internal insecurity was the price of this "liberation" (Ehrenberg 2009, 12). Woody Allen's drama *Interiors* (1978) introduces the subject of depression in the light of contemporary social changes. The film focuses on how transition, both personal and public, affects the women of a New York bourgeois family. The matron, Eve (Geraldine Page), is an emotionally unstable interior designer, suffering from chronic depression. Newly recovered from a mental breakdown, she occupies her time with decorating her daughter Joey's apartment. A middle child, the latter makes all the efforts to put up with her control obsessed mother. Her refined tastes and her careful attention to details leaves no room for spontaneity. She keeps the appearance of being strong and poised, but behind the clean-cut suits in pastels, the elegant hairdo and the chic eyeliner hides an ill, fragile woman, burdened by rigours and stuck in a past of her own making. Eve's depression can be perceived as the result of the old society's constraints and pressure on individuality. Joey (Mary Beth Hurt) is described by other characters as being intelligent and sensitive. Nonetheless, she struggles with finding her way in life for which she sees creative talent as the imperative. Because of her mother's strong approval of artistic creativity, Joey feels inferior to her other two sisters, one a successful poetess and the other, a beautiful actress.

The oldest daughter, Renata (Diane Keaton) is seen as mother's favourite, due to her creative career and her composure. As the story unfolds, one realizes that once more, things are not what they seem. Her mother's mental problems and her difficult relationship with her husband affect her poetry writing. In a documentary-like middle-shot, she confesses her yearlong writer's block. Although we cannot see to whom she is speaking, it is easy to recognize the situation. She is at the psychiatrist, trying to resolve her negative feelings about the "futility" of her work and her death anxiety. "The intimacy of it [death] embarrasses me." Renata's panic attacks make her "hyper aware" of the inner-workings of her body and its fragility. "It was like I was here and the world was out there and I couldn't bring us together", she tells her husband. In psychoanalytical terms, her depression appears as "poetics of survival" (Kristeva 1989, 71) in which the painful "anguish" is her reality check. The mise-en-scène is symbolically laden to create the proper depressive atmosphere. The grey winter light and the bare trees look gloomy and threatening. The restless sea is the reflection of the character's own "troubled waters" and it predicts the mother's demise.

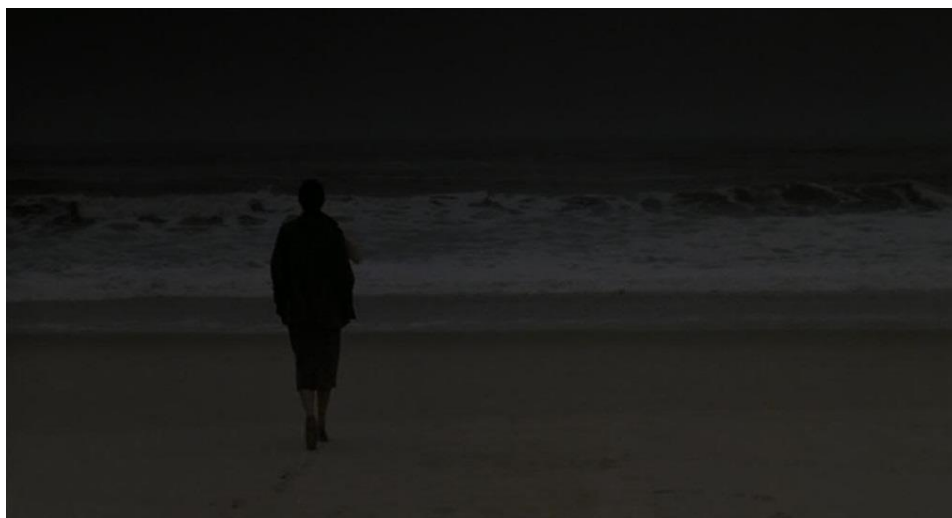


Fig.4, *Interiors*. Rollins-Joffe Productions, 1978. Dir. Woody Allen

Despite Eve's suicide attempt in the beginning, the girls do not seem to care that she might repeat it. They are busy dealing with their own problems, products of their family life and peer pressure. However, the former's suicide does not come as a surprise. After the hopes of rekindling her marriage shatter, she seeks solace with her daughters. Sneaking into the family's beach house at night, Eve is confronted by Joey whose accusations push her over edge. "At the centre of a sick

psyche there is a sick spirit”, the daughter concludes. As the mother drowns in the stormy sea, the daughters mourn her disappearance. The final take shows them looking outside the window and making a seemingly banal observation: “the water is so calm.” Notwithstanding, it suggests the idea of the peace Eve’s death brings them. As psychoanalysis claims, the loss of the mother is “the sine-qua-non condition of [their] individuation” (Kristeva 1989, 28).

The 1980s are seen as a stepping stone in the clinical study of depression. The suffering individual is no longer seen as a melancholy person, but one that fails to act in a society that regards action as the “measure of oneself” (Ehrenberg 2009, 12). His inhibition affects all his psychomotor processes. Despite their wide array of uses, anti-depressants become the norm for treating the biological imbalances that cause depression. Along with biological psychiatry’s integration into medicine (Ehrenberg 2009, 173), the idea of depression as “biological illness” gains wide recognition (Gold, 1988). Inhibition and failure to communicate are essential to the portrayal of depression in Robert Redford’s drama *Ordinary People* (1980). His directorial debut follows the dismantling of a family unable to overcome the tragedy of the loss of their son and brother. The younger son’s depression is central to the story. Its study gradually reveals overwhelming thoughts of guilt that dissolve the semblance of the family’s functional relationships. The only survivor in a boating accident, Conrad (Timothy Hutton) blames himself for being alive. After his suicide attempt, seemingly recovered, he returns home. All the same, he experiences insomnia, nightmares, loss of appetite and lack of interest towards mundane activities, his parents and his old friends. Fearing he will lose another son, his father, Calvin (Donald Sutherland) convinces him to get the professional help of doctor Berger (Judd Hirsch). Reluctant and incredulous at first, Conrad opens up about his post-traumatic feelings, his anger regarding his mother’s coldness towards him, and his father’s fruitless attempts to reconcile their constant fights. Through therapy, he starts to confront his emotions, rather than suppressing them. When a fellow patient and friend commits suicide, it prompts Conrad to revisit the events leading to his brother’s death. In a cathartic sequence intercutting between real-time takes at the psychiatrist’s office and images of the accident, he voices his rage towards his brother’s inability to survive and towards himself for choosing to hang on to the wreckage instead of going after him. The mother, Beth (Mary Taylor Moore) is also repressing her feelings, nurturing hopes of maintaining the normal, pleasing life the family had prior to the accident. Her distant, strict

behaviour towards Conrad does not go unnoticed by her peers. However, she rebuffs her son and her husband's attempts to talk about the unbearable situation. In the end, incapable of facing her son and admitting her misjudgement, she chooses to retreat.

Launched at the beginning of the decade, the movie approaches only briefly the subject of self-medication as treatment for depression. It is interesting to observe that it dispels this subsequent popular method through the unconventional words of doctor Berger. Asked by Conrad about his thoughts on anti-anxiety meds, the psychiatrist replies: "I think you came in here looking like something out of *The Body Snatchers*. It's not my impression that you need a tranquiliser." In retrospective, his words hint at the present ethical dilemmas surrounding drug prescriptions.

Towards the end of the 20th century, it becomes clear that mental illness and addiction go hand in hand in a medical climate concerned with the blurred lines between medication and drugs (Ehrenberg 2009, 13). The matter of treating depression with pills and its consequences, are evoked in several movies of the new century's first decade and a half. Their representations of depression are mostly contemplative. They look back at past societies and aim to shed light on the depressed persons' tribulations doubled by their struggle to avoid opprobrium. Anti-depressants and illegal substances appear as quick solutions to the characters' different problems. In *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), sleeping pills are taken as means to a literal end in a mass-suicide plan seen through by the Lemon family girls. Coppola's faithful interpretation of the homonymous novel, depicts the events leading to the death of five depressed teenage girls, desperate to escape their parents' oppressive rules and the rigid life they laid out for them. The same suicidal rush takes over Laura Moore (Julianne Moore), a depressed 1950's housewife from *The Hours* (2002), trapped in a loveless marriage. She feels connected with Virginia Woolf's character Mrs. Dalloway – a celebrated London socialite who sacrificed her desires and dreams for her high social status. Laura takes several bottles of pills and drives to a nearby hotel. She drifts into sleep and dreams of drowning. Nonetheless, she wakes up and realizes she does not want to die after all. *Prozac Nation* (2001) takes the topic of meds even further as it translates to screen the memoirs of Elizabeth Wurtzel, an American writer and journalist battling long-time depression. The main characters' psychological issues seem to stem from her inability to cope with a dysfunctional family life. As she enters college in the late 80s, Elizabeth (Christina Ricci) manages to hide her depression behind the façade of "a beautiful literary freak", experimenting

with cocaine and ecstasy. However, the drugs fail to cure her pain and so does Prozac, the anti-depressant the psychiatrist prescribes her. Instead, the latter numbs her. One can see Lizzy's restlessness dissolving into a shot of her lying completely still on a hospital bed.



Fig.5, *Prozac Nation*. i.a. Miramax, Millenium Films 2001. Dir. Erik Skjoldbjærg

In the *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (2009), the seemingly recreational drugs carousing teenagers take, are, in fact, meant for evading the harsh realities they are subjected to. The main character, Charlie (Logan Lerman), is suffering from depression induced by Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). His flashbacks, high-sensitivity towards other's pain, and blackouts are symptoms of an initially unknown past trauma he represses. Charlie's friend, Patrick (Ezra Miller) is forced to hide his sexual orientation for the sake of protecting the boyfriend, a fellow student and popular football player. When the latter's authoritarian father discovers their secret, he gives his son a severe physical punishment. After this, Patrick plunges into a self-loathing substance abuse frenzy. Nevertheless, instead of acting as shields, the drugs only accentuate their gloomy moods. In Charlie's case, they bring to surface shunned fragments of memories, and contribute to the process which in the end, prompts the shocking anamnesis of his sexual molestation as a boy, at the hand of his deceased troubled aunt.

As of yet, psychiatry has not been able to find another treatment as effective as pharmacotherapy. Despite numerous controversies⁷ (Møldrup & Knudsen 2005, 162) the intake of antidepressants and anxiolytics poses, the combination of therapy and drug prescriptions is still the main method psychiatrists resort to when treating depression. Patients face the risk of becoming drug users on their path to addiction (Ehrenberg 2009, 193). On the other hand, untreated depression can descend into madness. Between the addict and the madman, “we find the movement that drives some from alienation to neurosis, then from neurosis to depression” (Ehrenberg 2009, 24). The tragedies of the contemporary individual are explored in Joachim Trier’s drama *Oslo, 31. August* (2011). It tells the story of Anders (Anders Danielsen Lie), a recovering drug addict whose sobriety forces him to face the consequences of his actions. Wrecked with guilt and thoughts of failure, he plunges into a severe case of depression which renders him suicidal. The family’s disapproving absence, the futile attempts to reconnect with old friends and an awkward job interview strengthen Anders’s fatal decision. No longer under the cover of drugs, he is reminded of the bitter reality of life’s triviality. “It’s not about heroin. Not really. Look at me. I’m 34 years old. I have nothing”, he confesses to his friend. The latter does not understand him, as it is with all his peers. They offer cliché encouragements and hasten to talk about their own misery. “I’m not here for you to tell me to get my act together.” Anders’s remark makes the other uncomfortably aware of his ineptitude in dealing with depression. The main character’s addiction, his attitude towards friends and his certainty about general indifference towards him reminds one of Alain’s situation in *The Fire Within*. However, unlike the latter, he does not seek to punish anyone. By ending his life with an overdose, Anders fulfils what he believes to be everyone’s expectation. “They’d assume it’s an OD. It happens all the time.” Likewise, *Deux jour, une nuit* (2014) illustrates the matter of severe depression. However, it focuses on how stressful environments and situations can cause depressive relapses that medicines are unable to stabilise, not to mention, cure. This is the case of Sandra (Marion Cotillard), the main character, a factory worker whose breakdown forces her to take a sabbatical. Near the end of her leave, she finds out that she might lose her job because of an important bonus the management has offered her co-workers if they would cover her shift. Sandra has only one week-end to convince them to

⁷ “Insofar as we possess medicines that can be applied as much to serious pathologies as to small cuts and scrapes, the loss of the need for a diagnosis would mean that the nightmare of a society of “pharmacohumans” would finally come to pass.” (Ehrenberg 2009, 191)

vote for her staying on. The harsh financial climate makes giving up money an almost impossible task. The hopelessness of her goal puts enormous pressure on her already unstable psyche. As the deadline of the decisive meeting approaches, the dose of antidepressants she takes, increases exponentially. Despite having the moral support of her husband and her work friend, Sandra gradually relapses. “I don’t exist. I’m nothing. Nothing at all.” The distrust with which her colleagues regard her depression, pushes her over the edge. Alone and desperate Sandra gives in to her suicidal rush by taking an entire bottle of Xanax. This can be interpreted as a signal towards the easy access emotionally unstable patients have to potentially harmful meds. An unexpected, favourable shift in her situation leads to the woman confessing the deed to her husband. Together, they rush to the hospital and she is saved. In the end, Sandra makes the altruistic choice of leaving her job so that an underprivileged, young temp could keep his. The newly-gained confidence and respect of her colleagues give her a positive outlook on the uncertain professional future.

As we have seen, depression and its treatment have undergone several stages of change, from the nameless, frowned upon psychological illness and the confusion⁸ of the early years, through the decade of psychoanalysis, towards the “new depression” (Lawler 2012, 157) and its pharmacotherapy. The latter is at the centre of the contemporary psychiatric debate which still struggles to find a cure for this elusive disorder. As Ehrenberg observes, “the new antidepressants are certainly excellent medications, as long as we understand the limits of their therapeutic use.” (Ehrenberg 2009, 211). The problem lies with the field’s obstinacy of maintaining the illusion of a “miracle” it does not endorse.⁹

Cinematic representations of depression have not diverged from the medical and social realities of their time. Romanticised in the beginning, they have become as raw and graphic as befitting a more mature, socially conscious public. The cases analysed above can be seen as standard examples of depression. They focus primarily on raising awareness of the frequency of the disorder and the toll it takes on the sufferers. One makes sense of what one sees without

⁸ Lawler (2012) pinpoints Adolf Meyer’s disapproval of the nomenclature “melancholia” and his categorisation of depression. The American psychiatrist focused on depressive reactions and stressed the need for differentiation between “simple depressions”, manic depression and anxiety.

⁹ Idem

difficulty, due to the movies' clear narratives and descriptive styles. Nevertheless, there are those filmic representations of emotional impasse transgressing into madness. One well-known example is Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966) in which the identities of the main characters intertwine as they explore uncomfortable truths about themselves they initially repressed. Delusions, paranoia and manic disorders are also illustrated in *One flew over the cuckoo's nest* (1975), a classic adaptation of the same-name book that questioned the inhumane, rudimentary treatment of patients in the psychiatric wards (Swaine, 2011). The characters' emotional and mental instability appears as the result of the oppression they suffer from their women peers and the medical staff. To escape it, they need to rebel against the system. In *Taxi Driver* (1976), anarchy is not a means of salvation, but the self-destructive impulse of the main character's deluded mind. He is "God's lonely man", an ex-military turned taxi driver, disillusioned and fed up with "the filth" of night-time New York. His untreated clinical depression and his failed attempts to connect with others render him paranoid and murderous. Similarly, the depressed hero of *Fight Club* (1999) drifts gradually into madness aided by insomnia, alienation and his disappointment with a dead-end living. The alter-ego his dissociative identity disorder creates, is the charismatic, good-looking and careless person he wishes to be. By his "side", he experiences stress relief through violence, and founds a terrorist cell group which plans a major attack on several company headquarters. By the end, he realises his condition - "Was I asleep? Had I slept? Was Tyler my bad dream or was I Tyler's? I was living in a state of perpetual déjà-vu" - and manages to eliminate the other in a last self-mutilating, though non-deadly act. The heroine ballerina of *Black Swan* (2010) harms herself as well, a compulsive behaviour due to work related stress and emotional deficiency. Under the care of an overbearing mother, she represses her feelings and desires in order to achieve her professional goals. This leads to a severe psychosis which manifests through self-mutilation and harmful hallucinations that eventually prove to be lethal. Unbeknownst to her, she commits suicide during a peak performance which appears as a literal interpretation of her character's demise – the supreme sacrifice in the name of art. These briefly discussed examples only hint to the severity of the cases they illustrate. Their extensive analysis does not serve our purposes since we do not analyse the topic of madness. Even so, their close link to depression and their transgressive character make their mention relevant to the subject of our case study – the ethics of depression in Lars von Trier's latest trilogy. They distinguish themselves from traditional representations not only stylistically, but

also ethically, as they challenge us to the extent that certain meanings might elude us. Correspondingly, the way in which depression transpires in *Antichrist* (2009), *Melancholia* (2010) and *Nymphomaniac* vol.1 and vol.2 (2013) seems, at times, obscure and provocative. The emotionally volatile characters drag their peers along into their misfortunes. They go through extreme circumstances an average viewer - the outsider - would tend to misjudge. As we see later on in the analysis, the supporting characters do not understand the sufferers either. Hence, one can assert that the diegetic outsiders mirror the viewer's negative reactions. Their failure to notice the main characters' problems and provide the appropriate help, leads to their fatal endings. This punishment is not random. Further on, we explore the ethics of the filmmaker and how they influence the aesthetic and narrative choices in his representations of depression. In addition, we discuss the ethics of spectatorship through fundamental theories on the matter, as the films' symbolically laden visuals encourage introspection.

Chapter 2. Challenging representations of depression - a question of ethics

“Trier takes risks no other filmmaker would conceive of, mounting projects that somehow transcend the grand follies they narrowly miss becoming, and wilfully devastates audiences.”
(Badley, 2011)

*“The audience and the director, it’s an S & M relationship, and the audience is the M.”*¹⁰
(Tarrantino, 2003)

Lars von Trier is one of the controversial figures of contemporary cinema. His arguable “force of nature” resides in the systematic, graphic representations of challenging themes. In this context, mental illness, alienation, tyranny, sexuality, pathologies, death are a few of the recurring examples. The director’s illustrations of depression take place in diegetic spaces subjected to all of these themes. If one takes into account that von Trier has “never doubted how issues and things should be expressed and formed”¹¹ in his movies (Björkman 1999, 58), one can assume that by interpreting their meaning, one can get an idea of the filmmaker’s ethical goals concerning his spectators. In order to find out what reactions von Trier conscientiously looks to produce and why, we will subject the texts to psychoanalytic and feminist ethical readings on account of his focus on desire, sexuality and feminine images of depression. Since the filmmaker’s aim might not always correspond with the way the public reacts to the movies, we will examine the meaning of suitable ethical reactions to cinematic depression against the backdrop of Lacanian and Foucauldian ethics. To dispel any misunderstandings or ambiguity, the present chapter provides an introduction to the ethical context in which the analysis intends to operate. The next pages contain general concepts found in each of the four major ethical systems mentioned in the introductory chapter, and their relation to the cinematographic medium.

¹⁰ MacFarquhar quotes Tarantino in her article ‘The Movie Lover’.
(http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/10/20/the-movie-lover-2?utm_source=tny&utm_campaign=generalsocial&utm_medium=twitter&mbid=social_twitter)

2.1. Psychoanalysis and the “Ethics of desire”

The two foremost psychoanalysts whose theories benefitted the field of film studies are Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. While the former is the well-known founder of psychoanalysis, the latter is responsible for offering new perspectives on Freudian theories and bringing psychoanalysis into the realm of ethics. His discussions on the topic of morality stress the importance of following one’s “desire”. The immediate temptation is to consider desire an egotistical impulse, hence antithetic to the moral process. Nevertheless, for Lacan, the term designates an “unconscious theme, the very articulation of that which roots us in a particular destiny and that destiny demands insistently that the debt be paid” (Lacan 1992, 319). The “debt” to which the philosopher refers to, appears to be the interpretation of the Kantian motive of “duty”. Everyone should be able to recognize and seek to accomplish their duty according to the principle of good will (Lacan 1992, 77) which is the only thing intrinsically good. As one possesses “autonomy of will” (Kant 2010, 103), one is able to determine the will regardless of one’s objects of desire. Paradoxically enough, for Lacan, desire coincides with the will. To repress it is not the answer. “I propose then that, from an analytical point of view, the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one’s desire” (Lacan 1992, 319). To guide one’s actions by the thought of doing good or doing positive things for the sake of an “Other” does not guarantee a guilt-free conscience, nor does it spare one’s psyche from the “inner catastrophes” (Lacan 1992, 319). In Freudian terms, repression designates the blocking of unwanted, inappropriate thoughts and ideas by the conscientious “ego” - “I”- in order to have a clear conscience or “superego” (Freud 1915a, 147; Creed 2000, 76). The repressed returns at some point and creates havoc. It can manifest through different neuroses, dreams and “slips of the tongue” (Creed 2000, 76). Therefore, according to Lacan, by following the “unconscious theme” desire represents which is intended on a specific path, one escapes the burden of the repressed. Moreover, one has the chance to fulfil one’s destiny which is one’s duty (Lacan 1992, 319). “Not ceding one’s desire” is seen as a “radical ethical attitude” by Slavoj Žižek, an adept of Lacanian theory (Žižek 1991, 63). He believes that desire’s true nature can only be identified in “the death

¹¹ (Swe.) «(...) så har jag aldrig tvivlat över hur saker och ting bör uttryckas och gestaltas i mina filmer.»

drive". From a Freudian point of view, Lacan defines it as: "Will to destruction. Will to make a fresh start. Will for an Other-thing" (Lacan 1992, 212). Drives cannot be considered instincts, but something "memorable" from the past that urges us to remember. They are part of the human psyche in which "the experience of destruction" is located (Lacan 1992, 209). The embracing of the death drive leads to the "highest ethical gesture" which is "the radical self-annihilation" or "the second death" (Žižek 1991, 64). In Lacanian terms, the latter embodies "destruction beyond putrefaction" that reveals one the truth and offers her the clean slate she needs in order to create anew (Lacan 1992, 217). In order to substantiate his claims, Lacan gives the example of Antigone, the eponymous heroine of Sophocles' tragedy. She epitomises the death drive - by virtue of her "unreserved acceptance" (Žižek 1991, 63) of her destiny - as "she pushes to the limit the realization of something that might be called the pure and simple desire of death as such" (Lacan 1992, 282). The "inhuman" Antigone's death drive has its cinematic correspondent in the construct of the "femme fatale" (Lacan 1992, 263). She is feared by the male protagonist not because of her powerful feminine wiles that could diminish his masculinity, but for the prospect of discovering her "real dimension" behind the veil of "pathological enjoyment" (Žižek 1991, 66). In addition, they also symbolise the Lacanian concept of the "Woman who does not exist" (Lacan 1990, 38). Though the assertion might seem preposterous, it should be interpreted in the psychoanalytical context of sexuality. On a symbolical level, they are the "not-all"¹²Other onto which men project their fantasies. In this respect, woman appears as "the symptom of man" (Žižek 1991, 65), not what she really is. Behind this construct, one cannot accurately establish the essence of femininity (Freud, 1990; Laplanche 2011, 170). Women become "subjects" (Žižek 1991, 65) only when, like Antigone, they give in to their death drive. As evident later on in the analysis of *Antichrist, Melancholia and Nymphomaniac vol 1. and vol. 2*, this is precisely what von Trier's female characters experience. Their depression tunes in to their radical desire. Consequently, they rebel against the misunderstanding male characters' patronizing attitude and inability to help. The strong bond between the women's violence and eroticism fuels their actions. It prompts one to draw parallels to Freud's following claim: "Suppression of women's aggressiveness which is prescribed for them constitutionally and imposed on them socially

¹²"That everything turns around phallic enjoyment is very precisely what all analytic experience bears witness to (...) in the fact that the woman is defined by a position that I highlighted as *not all (pas-toute)* with respect to phallic enjoyment" (Lacan 1972, 27).

favours the development of powerful masochistic impulses which succeed (...) in binding erotically the destructive trends which have been divested inwards” (Freud 1933, 2). Set free, aggressiveness wrenches them out of their despondency and they become the much feared “castrating monsters” (Creed 2000, 84). With roots in Freudian theory on infantile sexuality (Freud 1933, 6), the fear of castration refers to the threat the sight of the female genitals poses for men in a non-sexual situation. As children, it takes hold of them when they discover that the cherished phallus “need not necessarily accompany the body.”¹³ What boys perceive as a shock, girls experience as a complex. Psychoanalysis posits that their lack of male genitalia is perceived as disadvantageous and blamed on the mother¹⁴, the “life bearer”. In the context of the Kristevan “abject” (Creed 2000,84; Goodnow, 2010), hostility towards the mother appears as general fear of the maternal. The *monstrous mother* is a form of abject that “threatens the collapse of order by threatening the collapse of meaning and the annihilation of the self” (Goodnow 2010, 30). According to Kristeva, both sexes see the matriarch as an emancipatory obstacle, on account of her reproductive power and authority. The compulsory independence is gained after a “violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling” (Kristeva 1982, 13; Goodnow 2010, 43). In the “Depression trilogy”, the menacing nature of women is illustrated through both of the concepts discussed above. The castrating force of the main female characters is manifest. Moreover, their hostile relationships with their mothers and their personal views on motherhood coincide with Kristeva’s own perspective on the matter.

As mentioned before, male characters look upon their female peers through the filter of their own fantasies, objectifying them for fear of discovering who they really are. The male gaze protects its subject from the radical drive and the castrating threat of the woman. However, the relation between gaze and object is a fickle one. The Lacanian “antinomy of the eye and the gaze” expounds upon the workings of the look (Žižek 1991, 109). The French psychoanalyst argues that the viewing process consists of a contradictory relation between our eyes and the gaze of things: “This is how one should understand those words, so strongly stressed, in the Gospel, *They have eyes that they might not see*. That they might not see what? Precisely, that things are looking at

¹³ Idem

¹⁴ Ibid.

them” (Lacan 1998, 109). The realization of “being looked at” makes one uncomfortable with regards to the uncertain angle from which it happens. The “uncanny”¹⁵ feeling is doubled by the prospect that it wants “to show” something one is unaware of and cannot predict (Lacan 1998, 75). Thus, “all seeing” film worlds challenge one’s gaze. Such is the case of nature in *Antichrist* and *Melancholia*, which reveals itself as a character, rather than mere landscape (Grønstad 2001, 197). In a traditional situation, the man experiences “jouissance” – the satisfaction of his transgressive drive (Lacan 1992, 209) – by gazing at the object of his sexual desire, the woman. This gives him an omniscient feeling, closer to the feeling of divinity as he is able to look at his own construct the way “God looks at Himself” (Žižek 1991, 108). Nevertheless, for male spectators, the initially positive experience turns into a negative one, if the on screen image reveals that all along they have been watching everything from the point of view of the voyeur or the criminal”. The Lacanian answer is that such a coincidence of gazes defines the position of the pervert” (Žižek 1991, 109). Von Trier’s films prevent the gaze from taking pleasure in the naked spectacle of the flesh by transforming it into a massacre (e.g. *Antichrist*) or revealing it as a mechanical, cold affair. (e.g. *Nymphomaniac vol.1* and *vol.2*) Voyeuristic and pornographic standpoints interchange with the sole purpose of violating our gaze mirrored in that of the characters. The mystery of the object gazing back at us disappears and so, we are left staring into ourselves with a “paralyzed object – gaze” (Žižek 1991, 110). It appears to be a forced introspection during which the vulnerable gaze – devoid of its patriarchal advantage – becomes the object (Downing 2010, 135).

These psychoanalytical observations on the workings of the gaze are central to 1970s “apparatus theory” and feminist film studies (Creed, 2000). The former criticises the classical cinematic medium for being organised in a manner that controls the viewers’ interpretation of its meanings, creating the artificial “impression of reality” (Baudry 2009, 187). It is an echo of the infant’s “mirror phase”¹⁶ because it requires the viewer to identify herself as the active signifier “without which the perceived would have no one to perceive it” (Metz 2009, 697). Moreover, she has to identify with the characters in order to understand them, all the while conscious of the fact that

¹⁵ The Freudian “uncanny” designates something unfamiliar that one fears (Freud 2006, 130).

¹⁶ In Lacanian terms, it refers to the first moment when the child recognizes itself in the mirror and “imagines itself to be more adult, more fully formed, perfect, than it really is” (Creed 2000, 78).

what she sees is fictional (Metz 2009, 701). The camera also demands identification because it imitates the actual seeing process: “the film is what I receive, and it is also what I release, since it does not pre-exist my entering the auditorium and I only need to close my eyes to suppress it (...) I am the camera, which points and yet which records” (Metz 2009, 699). In addition to these particular features that guide the gaze, Metz points out that cinema encourages “unauthorised scopophilia” (Metz 2009, 705). The physically absent object of the “filmic spectacle” is oblivious of the viewer’s clandestine gaze¹⁷. Cinematic voyeurism is further debated by feminist film theory in a context which stresses the difference between male and female gaze, using Neo-Freudian psychoanalytical observations as threshold for its discussions.

2.2. Feminist ethics of the gaze

Laura Mulvey’s essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) outlines the main concerns of feminist film studies, namely feminine film representations and spectatorship. The British author explores myths and stereotypes related to gender roles and demonstrates how cinema strengthens the unconscious of the patriarchal society’s underlying themes (Mulvey 2009, 711; Creed 2000, 81). She regards psychoanalytic theory as a “political weapon” which helps one understand the mechanisms of the “phallogocentric order” and fight it from within (Mulvey 2009, 712). The Lacanian “not-all” other is the woman who cannot transcend her castrated condition. The symbolic structure of the society forces her to be the “bearer of the bleeding wound”, a mere signifier for the male other, the only one entitled to creating meaning.¹⁸

Mulvey argues that the aforementioned status-quo not only translates on the screen, but pervades the relationship between cinema and its viewers. “The determining gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey 2009, 715). It displays signs of “fetishist scopophilia” by achieving jouissance through the contemplation of the *object’s* physical

¹⁷ Idem

¹⁸ Idem

beauty. On the other hand, the look becomes voyeuristic when it experiences a “sadistic” pleasure¹⁹ by “ascertaining guilt (...) asserting control and subjecting the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness” (Mulvey 2009,718). Our case study will show that the fetishist gaze belongs to the male character up to a certain point. The depressed women are young, attractive and mysterious. However, their frustration fuels their innate desire for a radical break with their past lives which have made them miserable. In order to carry their goals, the main characters of *Antichrist* and *Nymphomaniac (vol.1 and 2.)* turn into “femmes castratrices” (Creed 1993, 127; Chaudhuri 2006, 101). They tip the balance of power their way. In this case, the male characters are fashioned to be the weak and pitiful ones. As Creed observes, “it is the mutilated male form that evokes castration anxiety while the heroine is represented as the avenging castrator, the central protagonist with whom the spectator is encouraged to identify. The *femme castratrice* controls the sadistic gaze: the male victim is her object” (Creed 1993, 153). Consequently, one might consider von Trier’s representations of feminine depression as “daring to break the normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire”, a gesture that, according to Mulvey, classic Hollywood cinema lacks. (Mulvey 2009, 721; Creed 2000, 81).

However, even in traditional cinema, female characters are not what they seem. Behind the mask of *the beautiful object*, they hide their strength and their “otherness”, all the while mocking the stereotype of *Womanliness*, by exaggerating their feminine gestures (Doane 2004, 103). On analysing the character of Lisa in Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*, Modleski notices an interesting fact: “We are left with the suspicion (a preview, perhaps, of coming attractions) that while men sleep and dream their dreams of omnipotence over a safely reduced world, women are not where they appear to be, locked into male “views” of them, imprisoned in their master’s dollhouse” (Modleski 2009, 735). Similarly, the “Depression trilogy” ’s female characters lead tumultuous inner lives of which their male peers appear to be completely oblivious. In *Antichrist*, the wife’s sadomasochistic ideas – symptoms of a suffering mind – catch the husband completely off-guard. The clinically depressed newlywed in *Melancholia* knows that she will never settle down and accept the life her husband so eagerly describes. In *Nymphomaniac*, after a long confession, the male character disregards the heroine’s decision and betrays her trust, a transgression for which he is duly punished.

¹⁹ Not unlike the Lacanian “jouissance of transgression” (Lacan 1992, 195).

Feminist film theory is also concerned with spectatorship. While the diegetic male gaze is seen as a correspondent of the male spectator's (Mulvey 2009, 722; Chaudhuri 2007,39), the female one takes on a variety of forms. In order to divert criticism regarding her unilateral view on spectatorship, Mulvey tackles the subject of the female spectator. In "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)", she claims that women identify with the masculine hero of the narrative who embodies the phallic fantasy of their former split self. However, unlike their infant selves – described by Freud in his lecture on Femininity (Freud, 1933) that the author alludes to – they are "restless in their transvestite clothes" (Mulvey 1999, 38). Women's entrapment between male and female desire does not seem as "sad" to Doane as it does to Mulvey. "The transvestite wears clothes which signify a different sexuality (...) which, for a woman, allows a mastery over the image and the very possibility of attaching the gaze to desire" (Doane 2004, 102). On the other hand, in Doane's opinion, if the female spectator identifies with the female character, she becomes either too emotionally attached or experiences narcissistic pleasure at the sight of the ideal self (Doane 2004, 99;100; Nichols 1991, 76). Both situations preclude the necessary detachment responsible viewership requires. Moreover, the gender based analyses of spectator response appear one-sided and unable to convey how additional factors influence the viewing process (White 2000,119). Nevertheless, they are useful insofar as they offer a clear perspective on matters important to the auteur von Trier. In later chapters, we attempt to decipher the meaning hidden in the challenging visuals of depression in *Antichrist*, *Melancholia* and *Nymphomaniac vol 1. and 2.* As one cannot accurately pinpoint the initial reactions of their viewers, the analysis will not insist on the matter. However, an ethical reading of the films sheds light on the spectatorship of 'sufferance' underlying responsibility. The next two subchapters take on the issue of the "other" and its representations based on the views of Levinas, Derrida and Foucault. They inspire this paper's subsequent responsible perspective on Lars von Trier's depressed female characters.

2.3. The Ethics of Deconstruction

According to Levinas, one finds oneself in the realm of ethics when the presence of an *Other* forces the *ego* – consciousness – to re-evaluate her condition (Levinas 1990, 33). Inspired by Plato's theories, he perceives the ego as "le même"²⁰, an umbrella term that designates both the subject, and the subject's thoughts. The philosopher compares the ego's tendency to associate everything to herself with traditional philosophy's ontological "reduction of the other to the same" (Levinas 1979; Critchley 1992, 6). Therefore, he feels the need for a responsible ethics that treats the Other's alterity with respect. Levinas aims to show that this respect does not come from a supreme conscience or from our duty to a universal law. It is in fact the other that *demand*s respect by revealing herself to us in all her physicality. The most powerful weapon of alterity is *the face* with which the other haunts us. The subject – I – becomes the "hostage"²¹ of the Other (Levinas 1974, 232). The relationship the self establishes with this human being appears as a proximity which demands responsibility towards her. This responsibility can only be achieved through substitution, when one sacrifices oneself for the sake of the other, "a condition or non-condition of the hostage."²² Albeit radical, Levinas' ethical view does not carry the usual negative connotations we associate with the term "hostage". It speaks primarily of the philosopher's rupture with the universal thought that disrespects alterity by trying to contain its excessive, infinite nature. He remains faithful to the fundamental experience that the revealing of an Other's face - in all its defencelessness - does to the self. It is precisely this critical exposure of the other that takes hold of us despite ourselves and that should make us feel responsible. One should embrace and assume the feeling of responsibility towards the vulnerable other. By

²⁰ (fr.) the same

²¹ (fr.): "l'un-pour-l'autre- la relation avec l'alterité (...) comme proximité, la proximité comme responsabilité pour autrui, et la responsabilité pour autrui - comme substitution: dans sa subjectivité, dans son port même de substance séparé, le sujet se montré expiation-pour-autrui, condition ou incondition de l'otage."

²² Ibid.

welcoming *otherness*, we demonstrate morality because we question our liberties²³ (Levinas 1990, 82). Levinas perceives subjectivity only through the interaction with the Other. One must *deconstruct* the *subject-object relation* and the stifling conscience – the ego – which prevents one from being aware of the other’s “otherness” and reduces it to the self. Thus, one cannot reason the other, for the experience of her alterity resembles an epiphany. According to the French philosopher, it is “the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed” (Levinas 1979, 79). The facts above reveal an imperfect relationship between the self and the other, in which the key words are respect and vulnerability. The Levinasian concept of morality differs from the Kantian duty. After all, it relies upon the jolt that the face of the other administers the ego. “The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure and to the measure of its ideatum – the adequate idea” (Levinas 1979, 51). Therefore, the ethical for Levinas occurs when one breaks the bonds one has with totality (Levinas 1979, 35). In *Otherwise than being or beyond essence*²⁴, there is the revelation of an Other by all means irreducible that demands the upheaval of all the categories²⁵ through which the self knows itself (Levinas 1979, 39). The philosopher’s goal is to guide us to the realisation that Ethics precedes the being and its essence. The ethical gesture implies to give priority to the Other in spite of the aforementioned ontological egoism (Levinas 1979, 38). In *Ethics and Infinity*²⁶ (1994), his words underline the altruism of this relentless ethical requirement: “(...) I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it (...) It is I who support all. You know that sentence in Dostoyevsky: “*We are all guilty of all and for all men before all, and I more than the others.*” This is not owing to such or such a guilt which is really mine, or to offenses that I would have committed; but because I am responsible for a total responsibility, which answers for all the others and for all in the others, even for their responsibility. The I always has one responsibility *more* than all the others” (Levinas 1994, 98-99).

²³ (Fr.): “C’est l’accueil de l’Autrui, le commencement de la conscience morale, qui met en question ma liberté.” (idem)

²⁴ An allusion to the Levinasian work *Autrement qu’être ou Au-delà de l’essence* (1974).

²⁵ “(...) the Stranger who disturbs the being at home with oneself [le chez soi]” (Levinas 1979, 39).

²⁶ (Fr.) *Éthique et Infini*

Levinas's ethical views may seem utopian given their excessive character and their ontological paradox – their complete disavowal of a tradition in which their arguments are constructed (Derrida 2002, 41; Critchley 1999, 13). However, by making us question the ego and its subjective reasoning of alterity, they point out the selfish use of our liberties in relation to the other. Such is the “liberty” to look at mediated physical and mental misery, – be it real or fictional – the subject of news, artistic works and entertainment media. Cinematic representations of depression fall under the last category. Lars von Trier's transgressive films pose an ethical conundrum that we find necessary to discuss in parallel with the author's own expectations of the public. The seemingly free gaze of the viewer should be subjected to ethical inquiry because in the cinematic context, it can take uncomfortable forms. One only needs to think of the symbolic analogy of the Other's sufferance as a product which we pay for and consume. The self's *freedom practices* in relation to others is an important concern of the Foucauldian ethics. In this respect, Foucault stresses the actuality of Plato's “care of the self” and its principles which he uses to dissect traditional, authoritarian morality on madness, sexuality and politics²⁷.

2.4. Ethics and the “care of the self”

In his lifelong study of the “history of subjectivity” (Foucault 1997, 88) Foucault traces the formation of the subject engaged in relations of power with oneself and others. As such, he brings into foreground an ethics influenced by the “care of the self”. This philosophical concept should not be perceived as egotistical, but as the foundation for the so-called “technologies of the self” (Foucault 1997, 225). The latter imply “certain modes of training and modification of individuals,

²⁷ “So that in these three areas- madness, delinquency, and sexuality – I emphasized a particular aspect each time: the establishment of a certain objectivity, the development of a politics and a government of the self, and the elaboration of an ethics and a practice in regard to oneself. But each time I also tried to point out the place occupied here by the other two components necessary for constituting a field of experience. It is basically a matter of different examples in which the three fundamental elements of any experience are implicated: a game of truth, relations of power, and forms of relation to oneself and to others” (Foucault 1997, 117).

not only in the obvious sense of acquiring certain skills but also in the sense of acquiring certain attitudes.”²⁸ As such, one is regarded as one’s own master, in constant control of the body, soul and mind, which she exerts alone or aided by others. The ultimate goal is “a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.”²⁹ Plato’s *Alcibiades* lays the groundwork for Foucault’s discussion about the ethical need of “self-knowledge” (Foucault 1997, 88). In *Alcibiades*, three principles link the care of the self to politics, pedagogy and self-knowledge (Foucault 1997, 95). Firstly, the Platonic dialogue ascertains that one should constantly be aware of oneself and reflect upon one’s inner life. Here Foucault makes an observation similar to the Levinasian one regarding the self’s experience of the transcendental Other: “the impulse by which the soul turns to itself is an impulse by which one’s gaze is drawn “aloft” – toward the divine element” (Foucault 1997, 96). Secondly, the care of the self refers to education. One should be critical of oneself in order to discard faulty ideas from external sources that might bias or harm one’s reason (Foucault 1997, 97). Equally important is the “therapeutic function” of self-education which, through introspection and discussion, helps the mind (and by extension, the body) to “purge” itself of harmful pathos.³⁰ This implies that people cannot reach self-knowledge on their own. Thus, we *govern* ourselves and each other and precisely through this *governmentality*, our freedom and inter-relationships are made manifest. This is what Foucault believes to be “the very stuff [matière³¹] of ethics” (Foucault 1997, 300). The French philosopher regards ethics as the conscious practice of one’s freedom sustained by constant reflection (Foucault 1997, 284). In this context, the ancient responsibility to care for the self “[soccie-toi de toi-même]”³² requires further attention (Foucault 1997, 285). The praxis proposes an ethics different from Christian morality and secular tradition (Foucault 1997, 228). Thus, Foucault stresses the importance of thinking anew: “There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all” (Foucault 1993, 64). If one manages to

²⁸ Idem

²⁹ Idem

³⁰ Idem

³¹ (Fr.) “subject matter”

³² (Fr.) “concern yourself with yourself”

keep a close watch on oneself by constantly questioning one's ideas, reactions and external information, one succeeds in limiting and controlling personal power. According to Foucault, "it is the power over oneself that (...) regulates one's power over others" (Foucault 2000, 31). The risks of misjudgement and tyranny diminish if one employs reason and takes into account the others' views and existence (Foucault 1997, 300). In our position as viewers of images of depression over which the filmmaker has a certain control, we are compelled to question the legitimacy of our first reactions and how they influence the overall reception of the movies. As we will come to see later on, the Foucauldian ethical standpoint on the self and the other is absent in the controversial power relations established by the characters of Lars von Trier.

2.5. Summary

The "Depression trilogy" presents an array of transgressive visuals that lends itself to psychoanalytical and feminist ethical readings, as well as to Levinasian and Foucauldian ones. The three female characters exhibit signs of repressed³³ thoughts and desires that could be the cause of their depressions. In *Antichrist*, "She" is a housewife that writes a thesis on the challenging subject of gynocide³⁴. Left alone for long periods of time, the thought of her evil feminine nature creeps in. She manages to repress her fear of the nefarious, but the circumstances of her son's death and the subsequent grief retrieve it. In *Melancholia*, Justine tries to hold back a powerful yearning for something she does not know which results into a constant peddling between manic exhilaration and utter misery. The nymphomaniac Joe represses her immoral feelings for her father. All three are modern women, expected to be strong, and in control of their professional and sexual lives. The other characters demand of them an analytical mind and composure – qualities traditionally associated with masculinity – so that they can pick themselves up and face whatever challenge is thrown their way. At the same time, they are expected to be caring and gentle towards others, and especially towards their male companions. Their true selves

³³ See Creed (2000)

³⁴ Definition of *gynocide* (<http://www.yourdictionary.com/gynocide>)

are hidden behind “transvestite”³⁵ roles of loving mothers and wives. In reality, one is ignored for too long, another’s condition is dismissed as the fancy of a spoiled, egotistical person, and the third is left alone in battling a pathology she does not care for, labelled as a “man-eater”, used and despised. All these unresolved issues culminate in violent or illicit outbursts that symbolise their “self-annihilation”³⁶, the supreme ethical gesture according to Lacanian theories. They give in to their death drive³⁷ as it appears to be the only way to free themselves of their painful past and start fresh. The characters fit the typology of the “femme castratrice”³⁸ insofar that they perform both literal and symbolic castration on their male peers. On the other hand, unlike the traditional slasher movies that give little to no explanation to the “monstrous woman”³⁹’s violence⁴⁰, von Trier’s movies appear to be on a mission to empower these depressed women that society and close ones don’t understand or neglect. As mentioned before, their transgressive behaviour stems from the desire to regain control and sever all bonds with their mentally and physically fragile selves. Thus, the castrating woman becomes an ethical symbol.

From a Levinasian point of view, the female characters are the *Others*, suffering of clinical depression due to a complexity of factors thoroughly discussed in the following chapters. The nakedness of their physical and mental pain, leaves them vulnerable – at the mercy of the viewer’s gaze. Their “otherness” should not be quantified and understood, judged or empathised with. It should be respected due to its sensitive position of which the viewer partakes. Like in all imperfect power relations, the one who *seemingly* has the upper hand should tread carefully as to avoid abuses. In a Foucauldian manner, the viewer is encouraged to reflect on the freedom of her gaze as not to fall prey to fallacies. Hence, spectatorship implies a certain vulnerability of which von Trier takes full advantage by choosing to represent depression through challenging, sensitive visuals.

³⁵ See Doane (2004)

³⁶ See Žižek (1991)

³⁷ See Lacan (1992)

³⁸ See Chaudhuri (2006)

³⁹ See Goodnow (2010)

⁴⁰ See Creed (1993)

Chapter 3. L 'enfant terrible et ses films *horribles*⁴¹. *The traumatic turn* in Lars von Trier's meta-cinematic apparatus

“Mental illnesses are more contagious than physical ones. (...) An anxiety can spread within an assembly of people at the speed of lightning”, remarks Lars von Trier in his televised interview with Danish journalist, Martin Krasnik⁴². The sentence alludes to his lifelong fascination with the disturbed psyche which transpires in many of the director's movies, from the infancy period (e.g. *The Orchid Gardener*) to the highly elaborated *Europa*⁴³ and *Golden Heart*⁴⁴ trilogies. Written materials about Lars von Trier - the auteur and Lars Trier - the man, paint the picture of a controversial, provocative figure, that uses his own personal tribulations as the driving force of his projects. It should not come as a surprise that critics link the director's own experiences to the thematic and aesthetic choices of his films. The preference for the psychodrama subgenre coupled with his flair for shocking and his blatant self-styled persona, appear to him as perfectly logical consequences of a challenging childhood (Badley 2010, 4). In interviews that read like psychotherapy sessions, he blames his socialist mother for the lack of parental guidance which forced him to make his own decisions and fashion his own rules from a young age. “When one knows one has complete freedom of choice, one becomes irreversibly damaged when confronted with the outside world where free choice doesn't [really] exist” (Björkman 1999, 13). His constant concern with control and the much feared lack of it⁴⁵ are perceived as the beginning of his anxiety and neuroses. These ultimately paved the way to clinical depression. In this context, filmmaking⁴⁶ ensures von Trier's “survival” as he uses an energy he would otherwise direct

⁴¹ The terrible child and his *horrid* films

⁴² His first TV interview since he made the controversial remark “I'm a Nazi” at the 2011 press conference for *Melancholia* in Cannes.

⁴³ *The Element of Crime* (1984), *Epidemic* (1987), *Europa* (1991)

⁴⁴ *Breaking the Waves* (1996), *The Idiots* (1998), *Dancer in the Dark* (2000)

⁴⁵ Idem

⁴⁶ Von Trier calls it *konstproduktion* (sv.), art production. Ibid., p.22

towards his “dark thoughts” and phobias.⁴⁷ Earlier works such as the short-film *The Orchid Gardener*⁴⁸(1977) and *Images of a Relief*⁴⁹(1982) – Trier’s graduation piece – introduce viewers to a series of motifs meant to establish the context and reasons for the characters’ traumatic experiences: the despicable Nazi, the dishonest woman, sly and torturous, the symbiosis between mental illness and dystopian worlds. In the first one, the protagonist – Victor (Lars von Trier) - is a young visual artist with a strong desire for success. Plagued by his insecurities, he checks into a sanatorium where he meets nurse Eliza (Inger Hvidtfeldt) and begins to seek her affection. “He had studied women and knew them well”, the narrator’s voice claims. Victor’s attraction to Nazi paraphernalia, his interest in feminine behaviour and cross-dressing speaks of the youth’s identity crisis. The sadomasochist relationship he has with Eliza can be seen as an expression of his willingness to suffer for the woman he loves.

The final montage suggests the danger the woman symbolises. Victor’s demise is not surprising. A shot of him bleeding out on a canvas is followed by one where, dressed as a gardener, he drives a funeral limousine to a greenhouse to pick up orchids one assumes are for a funeral. This cuts to the image of a woman mechanic posing with a confident smile in front of a motorcycle which, in turn, is replaced by the shot of an old man impaling a cross into the ground. One does not see the actual grave, but the sequence above implies that Victor died because of his excruciatingly painful relationship with the cunning Eliza.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ (Dan.) Orkidégartneren

⁴⁹ (Dan.) Befrielsesbilleder



Fig.6 Orkidégartneren. Filmgruppe 16, Lars von Trier, 1977. Dir. Lars von Trier

Befrielsesbilleder offers a more emphatic portrayal of Nazi lawlessness, feminine betrayal and punishment, as its action unfolds on the backdrop of Germany's defeat in WWII. The wind howls in the bunker where a German officer, Leo Mendel (Edward Fleming)– the main character, and his soldiers hide. Somewhere, a prisoner in chains meets his end. The apparent calm of the nature surrounding them shatters under intermittent fires of distant guns. Defeated, but unable to commit suicide, Leo makes for the nearby city where his mistress, Esther (Kirsten Olesen) lives, hoping she would agree to run away with him. They drive to a forest the officer associates with peace and happy childhood memories. Little does he know that while he delights in the liberating sounds of nature, Allies, tipped by his lover, await to catch him. They bind him to a tree, and Esther drives a wooden stake through his eyes, as punishment for blinding an innocent boy during wartime. Mental turmoil seems to be the thread that holds the motifs together. Trier brings it into foreground with the help of several aesthetic choices. Light, sound and contrasts are crucial in conveying the gloomy atmosphere. In the bunker's semi obscurity, sweaty faces of men glow at times, lit by the torches' shallow light. The fiery hues and shadows underline the cluster. The camera dollies through the underground hideout, showing the soldiers' different degrees of misery, and rests on one of them who wants to end his life. He breaks the third wall by staring straight into it after which he draws a dirty sheet in order to veil the suicidal act. However, the sound of the fired gun pierces through all the while someone sings a cheerful national song. The long take is as discrepant as the opening sequence which alternates shots of a singing bird

nestling on top of a pine tree with images of defeated soldiers. It can be interpreted as a play on exterior calm versus internal tumult – the contrast the action rests upon. In the forest scenes, the greenish hues of the morning and the bright pale light create a sort of convalescent atmosphere. After the punishment, they give way to mist and brightness. The camera focuses on a middle shot of the blind officer looking upwards, while a background screen plays an ascending pedestal shot of the forest. This gives the illusion of the character’s ascension to the sky. Sufferance transfigures Leo and so the Nazi becomes the martyr.



Fig.7, *Befrielsesbilleder*. Den Danske Filmskole, DR, 1982. Dir. Lars von Trier

The director’s predilection for attributing religious connotations to utterly profane acts, the sadomasochistic aesthetics – the bound face, the woman as both dominatrix and victim, the torture – and the traumatic turn (Bainbridge 2004, 356) of the stories prefigure his provocative future works foregrounding various ethical concerns: the failure of the masculine ideal mirrored by the historical failure, the relativity of “good” and “evil”, the characters’ mental and physical pain.

A long term therapy patient (Badley 2010, 6), von Trier is all too familiar with psychoanalytical concepts and treatment methods which he employs in the storytelling and mise-en-scène. His first trilogy, *Europa* envisions a decaying post-war European society, with mentally wounded characters no longer able to differentiate between what is real and what is not. Central to the films is the motif of *anamnesis*. In order to understand the cause of their pain, the characters need to remember past actions and events. The only way to bring back repressed memories is through

hypnotic regression, a controversial therapy method. It involves entering a trance that enables the remembering of unconscious material with significant impact on one's mental health.⁵⁰ Such is the case of Mr. Fisher (Michael Elphick), the traumatised ex-detective in *The Element of Crime* (1984)⁵¹ who struggles with "psychosomatic headaches". The effect his unresolved mental issues have on his body is a residue of the character's strenuous life in Germany. The film plays out as a therapy session Fisher undergoes in Cairo, under the supervision of an Egyptian shrink (Ahmed El Shenawi). During the course of his hypnosis, the detective retrieves painful memories in relation to a series of murders he was called upon to solve, two months prior to the narrative present. In the beginning, Fisher visits his mentor Osbourne (Esmond Knight), a former criminology professor. In spite of the latter's protests and warnings, the detective professes his faith and admiration for the theory and investigative methods promoted by Osbourne's controversial book, "The Element of Crime". He believes that he can catch the killer, Harry Grey, if he succeeds in sharing his mind-set, dismissing altogether the danger of becoming one himself. Fisher's romantic view on self-sacrifice in the name of the greater good is what eventually lands him in trouble. The detective becomes the nightmare from which he cannot wake up when, like Osbourne before him, he commits a "copy-cat" murder. "I want to wake up now. Are you there?", he asks the shrink repeatedly, but the ending does not provide him with an answer, because von Trier's psychological thriller thrives on mental malaise. Post-war Europe – Germany – seems to have regressed from the ominous days of *Images of a Relief* to an atemporal dystopia. It is a dire place where shadowy figures lurk about, while the wind howls at the corners of old, dilapidated buildings. Several stylistic and narrative key-elements convey the fatalism of the story, by hinting towards the characters' ultimate distress. The opening scene⁵² shows a seemingly tired donkey rolling in the sand most likely to relieve discomfort or pain. The shot has no apparent relation to any of the following ones until, in a mildly disconcerting fashion, the luminous head of the donkey appears briefly at the bottom of the waters in Fisher's hypnotic dream. The contrast between the healing sands of Egypt and the deathly gutters of Germany

⁵⁰ Definition of *hypnotic regression* (<http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/past+life+regression>)

⁵¹ (Dan.) *Forbrydelsens element*

⁵² von Trier's homage to Tarkovsky's shot of a rolling horse in *Andrei Rublev* (1966)

prompts an analogy with the detective's own anamnestic incursion. It signals the danger of sinking into the depths of one's mind to retrieve painful memories, leaving behind the safe confines of reality. This long take debuting Fisher's story can be interpreted as a metaphor for the detective's wrecked psyche of which only the unconscious is aware.



Fig.8 *Andrei Rublev*. Mosfilm, 1966. Dir. Andrei Tarkovsky



Fig.9; Fig.10 *The Element of Crime*. Det Danske Filminstitut, Per Holst Filmproduktion, 1984. Dir. Lars von Trier

As the character's voice-over echoes the portentous words of Coleridge's poem⁵³ "water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink", one finds out that his state of mind is merely mirroring the general one. The water which surrounds him, represents the medium that sustains the vicious flow of corpses and decaying matter. Its ubiquitous presence nurtures the disease that creeps in through the cracks of Osbourne's house, dirty hotels, tunnels and abandoned administrative buildings. The light suffers an equal degradation, from the calm, bluish hues of the initial scenes,

⁵³ 'The rime of the ancient mariner' (1798) written by the romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, is known for tackling themes such as sin, guilt, death, repentance, fate, faith and the supernatural.

(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/43997>)

to the sepia, nocturnal shots of Fisher's memories, disturbed at times by the intrusion of neon lights. The latter's presence in the rundown police headquarters seems to be a warning the engrossed detective is unable to heed. While he traces the actions of the main suspect, Harry Grey, the cautionary fiery hues and claustrophobic shadows of defeated Germany – as depicted in *Images of a Relief* – replace the sepia tones. Unusual shots are also employed to send warning signals. A clear example is an early one of Osbourne filmed in an upside-down slanted angle in a mirror placed on the floor, with a highly contrasting globe of light he holds near his face.



Fig.11⁵⁴

It appears to be the visual symbol of what the professor stresses in his conversation with Fisher, namely the dangerous fiction his writings are. Another motif that re-emerges is the woman and her dual role. In this case, the protagonist, Kim (Me Me Lai) is a prostitute, the ex-concubine of Harry Grey. She becomes Fisher's partner and lover, which he chooses to use as he pleases. Resigned with her dismal fate, Kim agrees to help the detective empathise, and consequently, become Grey. Already a victim, she turns into an unwilling torturer. Like Esther in *Images of a Relief*, she binds Fisher's face with rope in order to relieve him of the headaches inflicted by the appropriation of the serial killer's disturbed psyche.

In a similar manner, the main characters of the second instalment of the trilogy, *Epidemic* (1987) meet their tragic end because of their unusual dedication to tasks destined to fail. Lars von Trier

⁵⁴ Idem Fig.9

and screenwriter Niels Vørsel play themselves as they set in motion a fictional film project. Its story-within-the-story focuses on von Trier's alter-ego, Dr. Mesmer, whose altruism compels him to travel around the countryside and give medical care to patients in need. By doing this, the man neglects the decision of an important medical college. His goodwill backfires when unbeknownst to him, his infected medical kit is the one which spreads the epidemic he believes he treats. Correspondingly, in the frame-story, von Trier's and Vørsel's ideal to make the script as verisimilar as possible, leads them to employ the services of a medium. Through hypnosis, her mind is transported into the fictional world of the script where she witnesses the traumatic effects of the plague and becomes convinced of their reality. Unable to quit the hypnotic trance, the medium brings the epidemic into reality and unleashes its horrors on the film crew. Filmed in a long take, with a hand-held camera which underlines the panic of the moment, the final sequence captures the woman's intense pain and fear through facial close-ups and disconcerting shots of her bubonic wounds she repeatedly stabs. These cut to shots of the infected Vørsel and those of another female colleague that perishes following a nasal haemorrhage. The bloody traces the latter leaves on the blank wall echo the shot of the ones left on the canvas by the troubled young artist in *The Orchid Gardener*. It seems as though both instances suggest the idea of the sacrifice in the name of art which, subsequently, can be perceived as another form of *fatalistic idealism*. (Bainbridge 2004, 355) The grainy, poor quality of the film and the light, coupled with the pedantic, at times disparate narrative are reminiscent of the rudimentary style of von Trier's early short films. Nevertheless, the visceral visuals of the climax scene, the motif of hypnosis and the film-makers' trip to Germany – to learn certain facts concerning WWII, reflect the main theme of a traumatised post-war European society and its individuals.

The third movie, *Europa* (1991) reprises it unequivocally, by portraying a defeated Germany with characters torn by the conflict between Allied forces and clandestine Nazi partisans, known as Werewolves. Because of his American and German heritage, the hero of the story, Leopold Kessler (Jean-Marc Barr) is the literal embodiment of this clash, closely tied to both victors and locals. Young and naïve, he returns to Germany with the sole purpose of “showing a little kindness” to the ravaged country and contribute to making the world “a better place.” With the help of his uncle, Herr Kessler (Ernst-Hugo Järegård), he becomes a sleeping car conductor with the railway company, Zentropa. Despite his desire to remain apolitical, both camps pressure him

into aiding their cause. It is not until after he falls in love and marries Katarina Hartmann (Barbara Sukowa), the daughter of his boss, that he finds himself in a conundrum from which he cannot escape. A former *verwolf*⁵⁵, she is kidnapped by one of her ex-comrades. In order to rescue her, a reluctant Leopold agrees to plant a bomb on the train. He tries to undo his terrorist act, but fails to do so on time. The train derails into the water. While other passengers swim towards the surface, Leopold drowns.

Intricate visuals foretell his tragic fate, and render von Trier's psychological thriller, a stylistic tour de force. From the start, the motif of regressive hypnosis compels viewers to assume Leopold's point of view. The calm, monotonous voice-over of the narrator (Max von Sydow) introduces it on the backdrop of a travelling shot of train tracks. It creates the claustrophobic effect of tunnel vision which appears regularly throughout the movie, either in its original form, or as the looming figure of a locomotive in motion inside a tunnel. Influenced by the postmodern spirit of the time, the director combines features of the neo-noir genre and classic epic drama elements in a collage-like *mise-en-scène*. On the backdrop of what seems like a rainy, perpetual night, the main male character finds himself entangled in a web of secrets and dangerous affairs, once he meets his *femme fatale*.

Whenever powerful emotions are involved, the characters appear and see in colours, filmed from unusual angles that increase suspense. Such an example is the gory shot of the railway magnate, Max Hartman's suicide discovered by Leopold and Katharina. Filmed in high-angle, one can watch, as in a doll's house, the helpless couple knocking on the bathroom door, behind which, the dead man lies in a pool of bloody water that ultimately reaches their feet.

⁵⁵ (eng.) werewolf



Fig.12 *Europa*. i.a. Alicéleo, Det Danske Filminstitut, 1991. Dir. Lars von Trier

Some of the aesthetic components are used to convey the ridicule of certain situations. The scene of Leopold's enrolment in the company filmed in wide shot, shows him being stripped, measured and weighed with mechanical gestures, in a manner reminiscent of the registering of prisoners in concentration camps. Another vivid image is that of child-workers listlessly dragging the heavy train from the depot which parodies the very wide shots of slaves in Hollywood epic dramas.



Fig.13⁵⁶



Fig.14 *Cleopatra*. i.a. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corp., MCL Films S.A., 1963. Dir. Joseph L. Mankiewicz

⁵⁶ Idem Fig.12

Multiple exposure renders traumatic moments surreal. One's psyche finds it hard to fathom that young children can kill in cold blood. The farcical *mise-en-scène* signals the ephemeral state of peace confirmed later on by chilling shots of the partisans' hanging silhouettes.

The *Europa trilogy* can be seen as the director's critique of an oblivious modern audience, forcing viewers to remember historical sins and admonishing them for moving on. In this context, Bell considers hypnosis as "a crude metaphor for cinema spectatorship", the procedure that submerges the unsuspecting viewer into nightmarish worlds (Bell 2006, 207). von Trier's representations of trauma subscribe to a "trauma paradigm" (Luckhurst, 2008) one is familiar with through overly mediated images of pain. His characters are driven by dangerously naïve ideals that bring about their downfall. As the director himself reveals in an interview: "the films that I have made have all had to do with a clash between an ideal and reality. Whenever there's been a man in the lead role, at a certain point this man finds out that the ideal doesn't hold. And whenever it was a woman, they take the ideal all the way" (Smith 2003, 148-149). The behavioural difference between male and female characters von Trier refers to, becomes evident when the latter are given the main stage, in "The Golden Heart trilogy". *Breaking the waves* (1996), *The Idiots* (1998)⁵⁷, and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) offer a feminine perspective regarding trauma. In the wake of the "Dogma'95" manifest co-written with fellow Danish director, Thomas Vinterberg (Walters 2004, 41), the trilogy leaves behind the aesthetic excessiveness of the previous one, aiming to obey the new document's stringent set of rules. Because of its radical view on film-making that rebels against Hollywoodian artificiality and the *decadence of the individual film* (von Trier, Vinterberg, 1995), the manifest is popularly considered as von Trier's therapeutic attempt (Stevenson 2002, 52), and at the same time, "a sado-masochistic project" (Schepelern 2005, 117). The strict set of rules forces the director to face his fear of not being in control. However, this conception is reductive (Bell 2006, 206) since it fails to take into account the possibility of von Trier entering a new ethical and artistic phase. (Lübecker 2013, 451; Wiedemann 2000, 237) Even though the only self-proclaimed "Dogme 95" movie of the trilogy *The Idiots* follows the rules verbatim, they all make use of an unpretentious film-making style that offers a more humane outlook on mental illness. The focus shifts onto

⁵⁷ (dan.) *Idioterne*

strong feminine characters, willing to sacrifice unflinchingly for their beliefs. Victimized by their peers, they carry their mental burden stoically until they accomplish their selfless goals.

Breaking the Waves is the story of Bess (Emma Watson), an impulsive, naïve and devout young woman whose straight-forwardness, simplicity and tendencies to deviate from the norm of her patriarchal society, are perceived as signs of mental weakness. Her marriage to Jan (Stellan Skarsgaard), an oil platform worker and an outsider, renders her unpopular in the eyes of the tyrannical elders, the pillars of the somewhat isolated community. She dedicates herself body and soul to her husband, impatiently awaiting and praying for his return from the sea. When a work-related accident leaves Jan bedridden with little hope for recovery, Bess becomes convinced that her husband's misfortunes are the consequence of her ardent plea with divinity to bring him home. Willing to do anything to save him, she agrees listlessly to a miserable Jan's deranged demand to commit adultery and report back: "it will feel like me and you being together again. Now that, that will keep me alive." With the conviction of a martyr, Bess launches into a series of affairs that gradually drain her of energy and lead to the young woman's untimely, savage death. Her beliefs prove strong enough to cure Jan, and redeem her soul. Von Trier's mise-en-scène conveys in a clearly constructed manner the moral dimension of the physical and mental traumas Bess experience. The narrative is divided into seven chapters bearing conspicuous names, and introductory tableaus.



Fig.15 *Breaking the Waves*. i.a. Argus Film Produktie, Zentropa Entertainments, 1996. Dir. Lars von Trier



Fig.16⁵⁸

Each and every static shot makes use of premonitory visual symbols. The bluish, light fog in the first one reflects the character's hopeful nervousness and uncertainty regarding her wedding and her married life. The serene, golden hues of the second, hinting at Bess's happy life with Jan, rapidly give way to dark, gloomy waters surrounding an oil rig - a sign of the danger and unhappiness to come. The dark clouds, the house in ruins and the fog suggest Bess's marital struggles and fears, while the long, winding mountainous road and the beautiful, fiery sunset lights predict her struggle and demise. Shots of a bleak, harsh landscape befit a diegetic world where there is no room for ostentatious church bell sounds, laughter, and improper questioning of the status-quo maintained through god-worshipping silence by obedient, voiceless women and marionette men. For the self-righteous elders, Bess appears as a mad pariah. The madness theme stands out not only in scenes of direct conflict with the authority, but also in those of intimate prayer in which she speaks to and replies with the voice of an authoritarian God that castigates, instead of advising.

⁵⁸ idem



Fig. 17⁵⁹

In the Epilogue, the tableau of a river flowing towards the light and the aerial shot of the bells of heaven, miraculously heard by Jan and his co-workers, are metaphors for Bess' beatification.

The Idiots (1998) celebrates mental impairment as a liberating way of life, far from the norms, constraints and materialism of modern society. The main character, Karen (Bodil Jørgensen), stumbles one day upon a group of people whose main goal is to reach complete freedom. Bitterly dissatisfied with the bourgeois ideal of security and the inauthentic behaviour of others, they act as mentally disabled, both privately and publicly, with disregard to the havoc they wreak wherever they go. Out of a desire to help, the mysterious, quiet woman tags along and stays on with the collective. After observing them for a while, she tries her hand at finding her inner idiot in spite of her initial legitimate protests against the members mimicking the actions of the mentally disabled they call *spassing*. Karen comes to realise the therapeutic benefits of living with warm, disinhibited people and embracing their escapist method. In the end, it helps her to confront her family and the painful reality she ran away from after the death of her infant child.

From an aesthetic point of view, *The Idiots* is the only "Dogme" film that makes extensive use of the manifest's rules. Filmed on location with a hand-held camera, without additional light sources, nor extra-diegetic music - except for a toy harmonica (Knudsen, 2003), with naturally delivered lines, the scenes give an unassuming, intimate account of the members and their activities. The fact that Karen is not always present in front of the camera leaves one with the impression that its main point of view is hers. Key long takes such as the group's confrontation with genuine developmentally disabled people, or the spassing orgy, zoom in on the

⁵⁹ Idem Fig.15

uncomfortable. In the first case, facial close-ups register the characters' embarrassment. They also signal the dismantling of their romantic view on mental illness that will eventually lead to the group's dissolution. As von Trier specifies, the film "(...) juggles with the concept of normalcy, with the way we ought to and ought not to behave. And if one devalues rationality, the world tends to fall apart" (Knudsen, 1998). Because of its pornographic imagery, the bacchanalia scene can be seen as uncomfortable. However, a *contrast cut* to intimate shots between two of the characters, Josephine (Louise Mieritz) and Jeppe (Nikolaj Lie Kaas), renders it bitterly artificial. The last sequence films Karen's tribute to the collective's dying ideal. By spassing in front of her family, she sacrifices the possibility of a reconciliation.



Fig.18 *Idioterne*. i.a. Zentropa Entertainments, Danmarks Radio(DR), 1998. Dir. Lars von Trier

Self-offering reprises the traumatic streak in *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) as Selma (Björk), a humble and parsimonious factory worker, dedicates herself entirely to the goal of saving her child that runs the risk of losing his sight. Her ascetic lifestyle is the consequence of a time-sensitive struggle to raise enough money for the operation the boy needs, before she, herself, becomes blind. The only repose Selma takes from her bitterly dry life is her day-dreaming fuelled by the passion for singing and musicals. Nonetheless, everything falls apart when the woman's ruined landlord, Bill (David Morse) steals her savings and forces her to shoot him. After a speedy, unfair trial, she is condemned to death by hanging. Her best friend, Kathy (Catherine Deneuve) and her admirer, Jeff (Peter Stormare) try to help by getting her a good lawyer. Yet, Selma obstinately refuses the latter's services asking her friends to use his fee to pay for her boy's eye procedure instead. On the way to the gallows, she panics, but news of her son's successful operation calms

her immediately. As such, Selma dies with a song on her lips. The mise-en-scène – which von Trier describes as “tap dancing at the end of the rope” (Björkman 2001, 228) – intersperses low-quality, hand-held shots filmed in a “making of” documentary style, with elaborated musical sequences in which Selma and her feelings take centre stage. It reflects the disparity between the reality and the inner life of the character. While the first fades away along with Selma’s sight, the other is her work of art that lives on even after her death. (Bell 2006, 214) The final scene confirms it as the words of Selma’s song – cut short by her hanging – appear on the screen, encouraging the viewer to continue to listen.



Fig.19 *Dancer in the Dark*. i.a. Zentropa Entertainments, Trust Film Svenska, 2000. Dir. Lars von Trier

Under the guise of madness and trauma, von Trier’s *Golden Heart* trilogy celebrates the feminine characters’ uniqueness and resilient sacrifice in the name of worthy causes. The director’s challenging means of voicing ethical concerns regarding vulnerability (Wiedemann 2000, 240), otherness and injustice obscure, at times, his vision and elicit the critics’ common accusations of misogyny (Smith, 2003; Winter, 2009), or male supremacy (Faber 2003, 74). Deliberately or not, the heroine of von Trier’s next trilogy (*USA: Land of Opportunities*⁶⁰), Grace (Nicole Kidman/Bryce Dallas Howard) breaks the pattern of the martyr with the “golden heart” (von Trier 1996, 12) and becomes the vigilante moral justice demands. A runaway, she seeks refuge within the confines of *Dogville* (2003), a small town in Colorado. Her kindness and hard work postpone for

⁶⁰ Unfinished trilogy: *Dogville* (2003) and *Manderlay* (2005).

a short while the abuse to come. However, Grace's inferior circumstances worsen when she is mistaken for a criminal. The townsfolk's dangerous sense of power appeals to their vicious nature. They start mistreating her both physically and mentally, deciding, in the end, to turn her in to the oppressors she had originally run away from. Little did they know that the latter worked for Grace's father, the head of a mafia clan. After an ethical debate on Dogville's fate, she accepts her parent's help to impart the gruesome justice they believed the lawless citizens deserved. The minimalist style of the set with its meagre props and artificial light increases the effect of the film-maker's acerbic and lengthy critique of the American dream – an ideal as bare as the stage onto which the characters parade their ugliness.

Grace's emancipation story from victim to executioner hints at von Trier's early motif of feminine duality, which he reprises in his representations of feminine depression. However, with *Antichrist* (2009), *Melancholia* (2011) and *Nymphomaniac: vol I and II* (2013), the director's traumatic visual language reaches its apotheosis. Visceral, transgressive imagery aligns his work with the contemporary ubiquitous aesthetics of torture, a phenomenon Luckhurst defines as "torturous times" (Luckhurst 2010, 13). The perplexing portrayals of depression on the brink of insanity and beyond, prompt the need of a responsible reading. Thus, the following chapters explore the "Depression trilogy" 's style, the ethical concerns its visuals raise, and the gaze's accountability.

Chapter 4. Case-study: aesthetic and ethical analysis of Lars von Trier's *Depression trilogy*

“And yet nothing – but nothing – could prepare us for the film that followed” points out film critic Xan Brooks, after the Cannes premiere of *Antichrist* in 2009. With reference to Lars von Trier's previous provocative antics (Brooks, 2009), the observation signals the radical shift that would take over his latest trilogy. The film-maker escalates the traumatic language, subjecting the viewers to boundless images of torture, accurately captured by ultra-high resolution digital cameras. Behind their transgressive façade lingers the motif of depression, a symptom of the characters' pivotal crisis. The trilogy's defining element is not an arbitrary choice, but the result of von Trier's own depressive streak (Crocker, 2009; Krasnik, 2015). The female characters' previous display of altruistic sufferance, undeterred pursuit of goals and righteousness, makes way for the new heroines' tormented confusion. “She” (*Antichrist*), Justine (*Melancholia*) and Jo (*Nymphomaniac*) seem lost and unable to recover on their own. The seriousness of their depression is downplayed, or simply dismissed by their male companions. Nonetheless, it is this opposition they eventually draw their strength from to leave behind their abysmal selves.

4.1. Transgressive depression – *Antichrist* (2009)

On a peaceful winter night, a couple's passionate love-making prevents them from noticing their awake young son, walking through the house. Attracted by the beautiful dance of the snowflakes, the little boy opens the window, slips and falls to his death. After the funeral, the grieving mother (Charlotte Gainsbourg) is checked into a hospital. Her prolonged despondency worries the psychiatrist husband (Willem Dafoe), who decides to treat her himself, disregarding the medical rule and her own warning on the matter. Following his advice, at home, she stops taking her drug prescription and, as a consequence, she plunges into a series of panic attacks and nightmares. These help the man detect her fear of “Eden”, the woods where their summer cottage is.

Although she despises his obnoxious rational way of treatment, she agrees to leave with him on a therapeutic trip to face the source of her malaise. In the woods, the husband's psychotherapy seems to have the desired effect. The illusion of her recovery is shattered however, by disturbing premonitory visions the couple experiences in the nature. Her sexual appetite becomes increasingly violent. After he unwittingly forces his wife to acknowledge her belief in women's evil inherent nature, she attacks him and circumcises herself. Badly wounded, he tries unsuccessfully to escape. In the end, left with no choice but to fight to stay alive, the husband strangles his wife. Upon his return through the woods, the man has a final vision: a sea of faceless women walking peacefully towards the glade he left behind. The ending is meant to astound us as the deceitful narrative thread and *mise-en-scène*, construct the image of the "woman – Antichrist" from which one cannot escape. The title caption leaves little room for interpretation. All throughout his experimental horror, von Trier inserts visual clues that predict the male character's dismal fate. In the Prologue, it is the enchanting nature that lures the child into climbing out the window. On his way out, a shot of him knocking over three soldiers – Pain, Grief and Despair – echoes the father's disregard of the cautionary encounters he himself has with the "The Three Beggars". A montage of the child's fall and the parents' love-making places the two actions in symbolic equivalence since the latter will prove itself to be as dangerous as the former. Similarly, parallel shots of the mother's climax and the son's fatal impact are a bad omen. One is not supposed to feel joy when one's child dies.



Fig.20 *Antichrist*. i.a. Zentropa Entertainments, Zentropa International Köln, 2009. Dir. Lars von Trier

The first chapter entitled “Grief” reveals the woman’s “atypical grief pattern” which the man chooses not to heed. Teary-eyed, she tells him that she knew about the child’s occasional night strolls, but he dismisses her confession as a normal feeling of guilt. Moreover, the man neglects her reproachful warning: “you shouldn’t treat your family (...) but you’re so much smarter, aren’t you?” Foreboding is also the transitional shot between the hospital and the home sequences. After the hand-held camera pans from her face to the left, it zooms slowly on a vase with green plants. The extreme close-up of stems and floating particles of dirt metaphorically invoke the threatening nature and its deep still waters. A discussion about the previous summer and her inability to finish her thesis, prompts her to make another meaningful observation: “You see a lot of things, but not that. You didn’t see.” However, she does not let her husband ponder over the meaning of her words, using her body to distract him. A transitional shot of nature fades ominously into the one of their kissing silhouettes.



Fig.21⁶¹

On the train ride to Eden, unaware of the peril that it might encourage her delusions, he asks her to visualise the source of her fear and confront it by “melting into the green”. As soon as they

⁶¹ Idem Fig.20

arrive in the woods, the therapist receives a distressful warning. He sees a female deer running away with her still-born offspring dangling at her rear. The first beggar appears to be a metaphor hinting at the relationship between his wife and son, an image too gory to process and therefore, immediately suppressed. As the second chapter (“Pain”) proclaims that “chaos reigns”, nature’s proofs of evil increase in number and intensity, until a hypersensitive “She” gives in to her transgressive impulses. The constant fall of acorns and a fallen vulture chick that gets eaten by its mother, echo their son’s death. “And falling, and falling, and dying, and dying”, the woman pinpoints to her husband. She recounts that while writing her thesis at the cabin the previous summer, she was interrupted by the boy’s frightened cries coming from the glade. After a desperate search, she found him safe and sound playing in the barn. Yet, the cries continued in the surrounding woods. The bizarre occurrence made her realise that Eden’s beauty was just a façade for cruelty and decay. For the woman, that was “the cry of all the things that are to die”. When he refuses to give credence to her story, she threatens him: “You’re just so damn arrogant. But this may not last.” In the third chapter (“Despair”), the woman’s erratic writings on gynocide (the mass-killings of women accused of witchcraft) and her intentional mutilation of her son, are belated evidence of her mental illness. The second beggar the man encounters is a self-devouring fox that hints at the wife’s self-destructive disposition. He interprets her belief of being possessed by nature as an obsession of which he can treat her. Nonetheless, the self-proclaimed lack of control materializes, as she uses her feminine wiles to maim his genitalia, in a frenzy resembling possession. A flashback sequence in the final chapter (“The Three Beggars”) reveals her awareness of the son’s flight, thus confirming her nefariousness. She is the embodiment of the “femme castratrice”⁶² and the monstrous mother⁶³ - punishing her husband for his neglect and patronising intellect, and their vulnerable child, by extension. Her persona is every man’s castrating nightmare. By killing her, the worn-out man appears to be hailed as the deliverer of evil. Notwithstanding, this simplistic reading does not take into account the mental tumult which set in motion her fear, her depression and consequently, her transgressive descent. Unable to cope with the death of her child, the woman enters an unusually benumbed mourning period that back home turns into depression. Her husband’s composed and distant manner increases her feelings

⁶² See Creed (1993)

⁶³ See Kristeva (1982)

of dejection. When she expresses her discontent on the matter, he listens with psychiatric attention, preoccupied with analysing her rather than discussing their issues. In order to provoke, she scolds him - “you’re indifferent whether your child is alive or dead”, or uses sex as an outlet for her frustration. However, none of the methods work.

The nightmare montage prefigures her lonely struggle against the uncanny⁶⁴ nature. A still image of the forest at night-time projected along with ascending menacing noise cuts suddenly to extreme close-ups of her rapid eye movements, trickles of perspiration, tinnitus⁶⁵ and heightened pulse. The panic attack repeats itself in a bathroom scene. The hand-held camera’s tremor reiterates her anxiety. Incapable of controlling the fear, the woman tries to sedate herself, but the panting and the shaking hands makes the gesture burdensome. Desperate, she ends up crying, on the floor, in a foetal position, seemingly fighting back something. The self-harming – psyched-up libido pattern begins to control the way the character responds to her inner crisis, a sign that she finds it harder and harder to repress nature. The visuals of the imagination exercise she goes through to face her fear, reveal the woman’s body (evil nature) – soul antinomy from which the ultimate visceral conflict arises. In a fairy-tale-like extreme wide shot, her diaphanous figure crosses a bridge over an equally luminous river. She stands out against the grim, dark blues of the surrounding forest.



Fig.22⁶⁶

⁶⁴ See Lacan (1998)

⁶⁵ Definition of *tinnitus* (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tinnitus>)

“Darkness comes early down here. I walk into it”, the woman tells her husband, yet until he asks her to become one with the nature, she remains unchanged. Though hidden, her pain is always nearby, as suggested by the point-of-view shot of the fox, in his lair, watching the woman go by. The fact that it coincides with the viewer’s point of view is not arbitrary. We are let in on a secret, as deep and uncomfortable as it may be. “It should be easy passing, and yet, it’s like walking through mud.” Her words hint at the souls nature holds captive. It is with their eyes that the trees seem to be watching her every move.



Fig.23⁶⁶

Overly-confident in his exercise, the man believes that the real trip will be successful. Nonetheless, her psycho-somatic burns on her feet, speak of the hell she believes nature to be. The sequence of the fallen chick devoured by its mother sends the woman into hysterical cries because it mirrors her own mistakes. Her guilty conscience appears to be the moral touchstone that keeps her soul intact.

The character’s depression and escalating anxiety can be regarded as signs of an arduous toil to contain the evil impulses which had made her mutilate her child’s feet and turn a blind eye at his impending death. In the fight against an elusive psyche and the supernatural, the husband’s modus operandi proves ineffectual, a classic trait of the horror genre. As such, she gradually weakens and lets herself be controlled by her transgressive desires. However, by giving up the body, she hopes to save the soul. Thus, she assaults her husband to punish him for his

⁶⁶ Idem Fig.20

misjudgement, but also to awake his survival instinct that would ultimately bring death as sweet release. By striking the man's genitalia and mutilating the clitoris, she castigates herself for having valued bodily pleasure more than her son's life. Yet, suffering is not enough to achieve the jouissance⁶⁷ of deliverance. A sequence of parallel shots confirms it when nature appears as the woman's doppelgänger demanding her to kill. "It is no use", the scream within concludes. She gives in to her death drive⁶⁸, sacrificing herself also for the "sisters" who fell victims to the nature's wicked lures. Her funeral pyre symbolises their liberation. Nature may have their bodies, but not their souls.



Fig.24⁶⁹

In this context, the character appears more as a tragic figure, brave enough to suffer and die in order to cleanse away the otherwise inescapable carnal sins. Even so, she lacks the deliberate altruism of the Golden Heart protagonists. Therefore, her gesture cannot be considered supremely ethical.⁷⁰ Her misunderstood depression could be an example of what Levinas calls the "reduction of the Other to the same."⁷¹ The therapist's methods fail because they are too generic a treatment for the wife's troubles. Preoccupied with solving their emotional impasse, he rushes the recovery process, and in doing so, he neglects her alterity. As such, the leitmotif of depression

⁶⁷See Lacan (1992)

⁶⁸ See Žižek (1991)

⁶⁹ Idem Fig.20

⁷⁰ See Levinas (1985)

⁷¹See Critchley (1999)

reflects the woman's humanity. Her guilt-triggered sufferance is the temporary safety net that postpones her descent into madness. However, the latter's arrival is impeding.

Von Trier's ethical project rests upon the symbolical self-destructive marionettes- "he" and "she" – that compel the viewer to partake of their supplice. His powerful visuals tap into our fear of the apocalyptic chaos the loss of morality could unleash (Ebert, 2009; Bourke, 2009). The director's masochistic use of the treacherous woman (Laura, 2012) resurfaces in the ultimate voyeuristic form of the female castrator. Her violent gesture becomes painfully personal as the point-of-view of the male victim deprives the spectator of the possibility of detachment. At the same time, the close-up of the female circumcision exposes one to a horrendous synesthetic effect, incomparable to the traditional horror-induced cringe with a pinch of excitement on the side. In spite of the legitimate criticism regarding von Trier's overly-saturated provocative stance (Gilbey, 2009), there is nothing pornographic about his so-called "torture porn" (Ruth, 2009) imagery. The characters' anguished gaze (Grønstad 2001, 200) pierces the fourth wall and along with the violence, strips the graphic sex scenes of any clandestine thrills.

Between the accolades of Handel's "Lascia ch'io pianga"⁷², the aesthetics of *Antichrist* reinforce a cruel introspection, as we are left pondering over the atrocities we are capable of inflicting on each other when humanity is out of the equation.

4.2. Artistic depression – *Melancholia* (2011)

"Within depression, if my existence is on the verge of collapsing, its lack of meaning is not tragic – it appears obvious to me, glaring and inescapable" (Kristeva 1989, 3).

On the first notes of Wagner's overture to "Tristan and Isolde", the close-up shot of a woman's face emerges. She slowly opens her eyes and stares into the camera with a grim, all-knowing look that sends chills down one's spine. In the background, birds drop dead from the sky. The

⁷² (it.) "Allow me to weep"

portentous visuals introduce Justine (Kirsten Dunst), the main character of von Trier’s romantic ode to melancholy, whose sufferance gifts her with an unusual philosophic clarity over the meaninglessness of being and the end of the world. The soft music lulls the viewer into the next extreme-wide shot. It shows the sumptuous garden of a château with symmetrically trimmed bushes on each side of the lawn overlooking the sea, where the barely-visible silhouettes of a woman and a child are playfully spinning clockwise. In the foreground, a sundial looms over the whole scenery. The imagery is reminiscent of Resnais’ *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961). It prefigures the anthropological aspect of *Melancholia* since, like its’ classic reference, it appears as “the setting in which human behaviour could be observed” (Ebert, 1999).



Fig.25 *Melancholia*. i.a. Zentropa Entertainments, Memphis Film, 2011. Dir. Lars von Trier



Fig.26 *Last Year at Marienbad*. i.a. Cocinor, Terra Film, 1961. Dir. Alain Resnais

Over the course of the movie, the illusory control the characters value, appears all the more futile in the face of imminent disaster.

As the music progresses in intensity, a succession of seemingly unrelated shots follows. The burning close-up of Bruegel’s “Hunters in the Snow”- a loose reference to Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Solaris* (1972) - cuts to a wide image of a blue planet eclipsing a distant red, luminescent dot. The iconoclastic gesture re-enforces the theme of the poetic demise, while the painting echoes the

motif of artistic depression. The second shot reflects Justine's later observation about Melancholia, the destructive planet blocking Antares, the brightest star in the Scorpio constellation, a recurring symbol throughout the movie.

On a golf course, a woman clutching a boy in her arms tries to run, but her feet are sinking into the ground. It signals the climax of the story, when Justine's sister, Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg), driven by her survival instinct, looks for a hiding place for her and her son, Leo, refusing to acknowledge certain death.

A magnificent, black horse settles in the grass, by a lake, while northern lights streak the night-sky. The Tarkovskian⁷³ shot of Abraham, Justine's noble steed, captures its essence. As the fatidic name alludes, the animal prophecies the coming of Melancholia, stopping repeatedly in places above which the blue spot sheds its ominous glare.

Shots of the main character hint at the bond she shares with the planet. When the latter closes in on Earth, Justine appears to obtain special powers, controlling nature's mesmerising dance of death. These visuals are interspersed with equally artistic ones that hint at her failed marriage. A woodland tableau shows Justine in a wedding gown, struggling to walk through grey, muddy matter that acts like shackles against her legs, while a middle shot of her as a bride floating on a river, evokes Millais'⁷⁴ *Ophelia* in her watery grave. The three characters are reunited in a very wide shot that underlines their pivotal role. They are the ones that align the celestial entities. Justine is Melancholia, Leo is the Sun and Claire, the Moon.

⁷³ As in his earlier movie, *The Element of Crime* (1984), von Trier evokes *Andrei Rublev* (1966) 's famous shot of a horse laying himself on the ground.

⁷⁴ Painting by pre-Raphaelite British artist Sir John Everett Millais (1851-1852), depicting the death of Ophelia in William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* (1599-1601)



Fig. 27⁷⁵

Towards the end, it is the women's shared love for the child that makes them forget their differences and embrace destruction together.

After the last wide shot of the Earth sinking into Melancholia, the montage concludes its announcement of woeful themes such as mental illness, sufferance, failed love, the meaninglessness of life, despair and death (Lippe, 2012). The next two chapters entitled "Justine" and "Claire", reveal the way the characters cope with these challenges and realizations.

The heroine of the story, Justine— a loose reference to the ill-fated ingénue of de Sade⁷⁶ - is a young, attractive and successful woman that seems to have completed the modern recipe for happiness by marrying the adoring handsome man she loves. On the way to the wedding celebrations, they are the picture of the perfect couple. However, their affections are interrupted by the first literal bump in the road, as their limousine cannot advance on the narrow road towards the venue. The sequence of their struggle to drive it to the destination and their subsequent resignation predicts the outcome of their marriage. Over the course of the festivities, Justine's behaviour oscillates between moments of manic elation and bitter despondency, noticed only by her close ones. In the beginning, the bride seems very determined to participate in the carefully organised activities, but interactions with inappropriate guests accentuate the feeling of charade overhanging the whole event and increase her discontent. Tired of supressing it, she

⁷⁵ Idem Fig. 25

⁷⁶ *Justine, or the Misfortunes of Virtue* (1791), novel by Marquis de Sade

gradually unravels under the concerned, at times judgemental supervision of the hosts – her sister, Claire and her husband, John (Kiefer Sutherland) – and that of the groom, Michael (Alexander Skarsgård). Constantly on the lookout for an exit, Justine takes long breaks from her supposed happiness by visiting her beloved horse, Abraham with which she feels a real connection, or going for walks around the domain to think and look at the sky. The recurring close-up and point-of-view shots of the woman contemplating the Scorpio constellation, suggest her attraction towards something she cannot yet understand. They also echo a known trait of the romantic melancholic – the tormented artist, looking at the stars for answers. As von Trier observes: "she is longing for something of true value. And true values entail suffering. That's the way we think. All in all, we tend to view melancholia as more true. We prefer music and art to contain a touch of melancholia. So melancholia in itself is a value. Unhappy and unrequited love is more romantic than happy love. For we don't think that's completely real, do we?" (Thorsen, 2011). Due to external pressure to become normal, Justine does not immediately embrace her affective condition as a positive attribute. Crucial here is the character's relationship with Claire. The sisters are each other's opposite⁷⁷. Older, the latter assumes the maternal role their insensitive and opinionated mother is unable to fulfil. Thus, she cares for and admonishes the sensitive Justine, in order to see her through the wedding she perceives as essential to her sister's recovery. The tardy arrival of the newlyweds worries Claire. Right from the start, she sees through the bride's carefree mask and senses that the plans will go amiss: "Are you sure you want this?" Her attempts to inculcate Justine with a sense of duty by constantly referring to the schedule, or reminding her not to make any "scenes" prove ineffective. Initially, Claire chooses to dismiss the gravity of her sister's melancholic despondency, a gesture of denial that resurfaces in the incipient phase of Melancholia's fatal approach. As the evening unfolds and the latter's sadness becomes obvious, she pressures her to "pull herself together": "We are not halfway through yet." Despite this, Claire is the only one that Justine relies on to help her emerge from her dark moods. She is the first person to whom Justine describes her depressive sorrow: "I'm trudging through this grey woolly yarn...it's clinging to my legs... it's really heavy to drag along", her words mirroring one of the preliminary shots.

⁷⁷In Thorsen (2011) von Trier quotes Jean Genet's play *Two Maids* (1947) as an influence for the sisters' relationship.



Fig. 28⁷⁸

The sisters' close relationship allows them to tell each other uncomfortable truths. Justine knows that Claire doesn't like to hear her complain, and in return, the latter reproaches the bride for her fake smile and her marital neglect.



Fig 29⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Idem Fig.25

⁷⁹ Idem Fig.25

After one of their quarrels in the library, a crying Justine notices images of abstract art exposed on Claire and John's bookshelves. Seemingly random, she proceeds with rearranging the books as to show classic paintings. Since they are rich in details and unequivocal meanings, Justine perceives them as truthful, unlike the abstract, hallow geometry of the others which she sees as yet another symbol of the modern world's deplorable artificiality. Her sadness and resignation find their expression in Bruegel's *Hunters in the Snow* while the motifs of unhappy love and death in Millais' *Ophelia* echo her feelings about the future. Justine reiterates her critical view of society through Bruegel's *The Land of Cockaigne* (1567) - a denunciation of gluttony. Caravaggio's *David with the Head of Goliath* (1610) reminds the bride of her materialistic, unscrupulous boss, Jack (Stellan Skarsgaard) who uses the party as an excuse to make professional demands: "Where's my tagline? You're always great with coming up with a tagline in a hurry." Fed up with his persistence and the easiness with which he disposes of his employees, Justine points out the futility of his "despicable, power-hungry" actions. Her strength of character and courage to speak up suggest that she is the only one who sees the meaninglessness of everything.

Another caring person that worries about Justine is her husband, Michael. More so than Claire, he shows his affection and patience throughout the whole celebration: "It's my fault. I haven't been taking care of you lately". While guests are waiting anxiously for the bride to appear, close-ups of the man's concerned face intersperse with images of her lying in a bathtub, - lost gaze and heavy breathing - sinking into despondency. He believes he can make her happy just by describing their carefree future, living in the countryside and owning an apple orchard. No matter how touching his naiveté may be, Justine realizes that Michael does not understand her depression and shows him that but discarding the picture of the garden he gives her. Towards the end of the party, when the couple and their guests light lanterns on the golf course, the camera zooms in on one of them onto which someone scribbled "love", cutting almost instantly to a close-up of another's failed launch. The sequence transforms the fragile lanterns bound to burn out in symbols of ephemeral love. The relationship's rupture finally occurs when unable to perform her nuptial duties, Justine leaves her husband. By cheating on him with her boss' nephew, the break-up becomes irreversible. Devoid of nudity and any visible physical pleasure, the perfunctory affair positions her as the "castrating monster". She dominates the young man,

holding him to the ground, concerned only with terminating her marriage. In the very-wide shot, his passiveness gives the whole scene the unsettling air of a rape. Justine's frigidness resembles that of her mother's, Gaby (Charlotte Rampling). The wilful matron does not believe in marriage, a fact she proclaims loud and clear, in her wedding toast, along with her contempt for her ex-husband: "Justine, if you have any ambition at all, it certainly doesn't come from your father's side of the family." The latter (John Hurt) appears as a cheerful old bachelor, with a penchant for young women and good living. Despite his weaknesses, Justine prefers his light-hearted company to that of her emotionally stomping mother. On the other hand, she realizes that his buffoonery cannot tackle the serious discussion she needs in order to calm herself. At the end of the party, with the opportunity of female company in sight and oblivious of his daughter's struggle, he breaks his promise to stay for the night. The absent father and the heated argument with Claire, drive Justine to seek the understanding of her mother. However, when the melancholic confesses her inexplicable feelings of fear and longing, the bitter other suggests marriage as the cause of her depression: "Stop dreaming, Justine! (...) You can still wobble, so just wobble the hell out of here." Thus, the dysfunctional family – reminiscent of the one portrayed in *The Celebration*⁸⁰ (1998) – appears as one of the factors conducive to the main character's depression as the parents' self-absorbed bickering and their past treatment of each other have unwittingly marked Justine's behaviour and sentimental beliefs.

The morning after the wedding, the sisters go on a peaceful horse-ride through the woods. An aerial dolly follows them on the long winding road through the fog. The landscape is in tune with Justine's resigned sadness. In the next scene, the mood turns ominous when Abraham's abrupt halt prompts her to look towards the sky and notice the disappearance of Antares from the Scorpio constellation, visible up to that point. By virtue of its resemblance to Mars, the red star has been interpreted as a symbol for the story's male characters that gradually lose their confidence, and become disposable before the end. The groom's happiness plans are shattered and he leaves disappointed, the self-assured boss fails to achieve his goal, the father is a flimsy figure who disappears when needed the most and the assistant is everyone's pushover. The only man that seems to be in control is John, Claire's rich husband. However, he belittles Justine's

⁸⁰ (dan.) *Festen*, a Dogme film directed by Thomas Vinterberg that illustrates the hypocrisy of a twisted bourgeois family

sufferance by considering her a financial and emotional burden (Figlerowicz, 2012). Hours before the collision, John’s rational façade gives way to a fear-stricken, coward man who retires without a word to commit suicide. Justine’s remark invokes the beginning shot of *Melancholia* eclipsing it – a metaphor for feminine superiority.

The second part of the film (*Claire*) focuses more on the dynamics of the sisters’ relationship as the destructive planet approaches and ultimately, absorbs the Earth into itself. Under the influence of her “black sun”⁸¹, Justine becomes almost catatonic, unable to move, nor think for days on end. Fatigued, she enters a stage of prolonged sleep from which only Claire manages to drag her, with constant care, understanding and affection.



Fig.30⁸²

Her illness coincides with “Melancholia hiding behind the sun”, as cosmology dilatant, John points out to his wife. Claire’s premonitory fear of the planet is met with contempt by the depressed Justine: “If you think I’m afraid of the planet, then you’re too stupid.” After Melancholia reprises her course towards Earth, the birds’ nervous chirping, the horses’ raucous neighing and the mixing of the seasons increase Claire’s anxiety. The changes have the opposite effect on the main character. Her gradual recovery does not go unobserved by the older sister. One night, a worn-out Claire notices Justine walking towards the forest, as in a daze. A close-up of the former’s curious gaze from the bushes and the following point-of-view shot reveal the

⁸¹ Metaphor for depression. (Kristeva, 1989)

⁸² Idem Fig.25

latter's naked body lying in the clearing, bathing in the light of Melancholia. The luscious nature, the nudity and Justine's sensual stare hint at sexual rebirth.



Fig.31⁸³

Her symbolic union with the planet helps her regain herself. The sequence marks the shift in the characters' moods. Claire's downward spiral contrasts with Justine's expectant calm. The thought of a fatal impact drives the older sister mad with fear. She tries in vain to control the situation by reading about the planet and constantly measuring its proximity to Earth with Leo's rudimentary device. The self-fashioned tin ring accentuates the futility of her feeble attempts. Desperate, Claire seeks solace and advice with Justine, but the latter's cold manner and frankness only succeed in frightening her more. "Aunt steel-breaker", as Leo calls her, tells her sister harsh truths she is not prepared to hear: "The Earth is evil. We don't need to grieve for it (...) I know we're alone". The scene introduces Justine as the pseudo-Aristotelian "ethos peritton" or the exceptional personality (Aristotle, 1957,163; Kristeva 1989, 9), omniscient and dignified, in contrast with the normal, terrified Claire. The planet's treacherous oscillation gives the latter hope. When the end becomes a certainty and John abandons her and Leo, she realizes that Justine is the one who can help them perish "the right way". The "magic cave" without walls the aunt and her nephew build out of wooden sticks brings them together (Peterson 2013, 418). It also offers an unobstructed view of the reality of death. The symbol of solidarity and love appears to be a reversed version of the Platonic cave (Plato, 2006) in which the characters have moved up to that point, unable to see life for what it was, a mere appearance. As Melancholia's menacing

⁸³ Idem Fig.25

silhouette pierces the stratosphere in the last extreme wide shot of the movie, we are forced, like Claire, to accept that there is no possibility of post-apocalyptic survival.



Fig.32⁸⁴

Her despair contrasts with Justine's acceptance and Leo's innocent tranquillity.

In view of the bond between the main character and Melancholia, one could argue that her sheer force of will - in Lacanian terms, her "death drive" - made the planet deviate from its course and set for the Earth. Disappointed with life's lack of meaning and its pretence, Justine pines over something she cannot quite make out. Her depressive sufferance is an expression of her uncertainty over this nameless object (Kristeva 1989, 11). The self-absorbed parents neglect the woman's need for help, whereas her peers believe her actions to be selfish and at times, obscure. They do not respect her alterity. Von Trier chooses to convey the bitter farce Justine tries to avoid through extensive use of hand-held camera that follows the characters intently, zooming in, as in a reality show, on all their arguments, emotional outbursts and secrets. In between, the director favours distant angles to emphasize voyeurism when the camera records moments that are not meant for us to see, but nonetheless essential to the story. It is the case of Justine's erotic union with Melancholia, the desired object, that contrasts with the very-wide shot of her transgressive sexual encounter with the young assistant. While the former encourages the viewer to take pleasure in the image of the naked body and, as such, objectify the character, the latter admonishes the gaze by resembling a sexual assault.

⁸⁴ Idem Fig.25

Through its faithful portrayal of the romantic melancholic, von Trier's film is an homage to the genial artist who within the lonely, dark hours of depression, finds the inspiration to create exquisite works of art. Justine's desire to be joined with Melancholia de facto, may seem egotistical as it brings about the end of the world. However, she sees death as a welcomed purge, a decent nothingness preferable to contemporary society's lack of soul. Ultimately, one feels compelled to observe the aesthetic qualities of *Melancholia*'s visuals of destruction. It should not come as a surprise that they are an expression of "beautiful suffering" (Mieke Bal, 2007) since it is Justine's equally aestheticized mental toil that sets them in motion. During the first segment, depression sets her apart from the others. Towards the end, her melancholy gives her an envied uniqueness. "You have it easy, don't you?" asks Claire and one is almost inclined to believe that habitual sufferance strengthened Justine in the face of death. The director's artful rendition of depression – melancholia, and demise could lead to illegitimate catharsis as the viewer might draw satisfaction from the inherently negative images. At the same time, the denial of the customary post-apocalyptic survival (Sontag, 1965) could be seen as a discouragement of emotional relief.

4.3. Depression of 'the ostracised' – *Nymphomaniac vol.1 and vol.2* (2013)

"A woman who self-immolates, particularly by way of sexual heedlessness and masochism, is the ultimate social insurrectionist." (Atkinson, 2014)

On a desolate winter night, between brick buildings, a meagre yellow street lamp casts its light onto a snow flurry, the only movement in view. The sound of water trickles breaches the silence as the camera follows them dripping from walls, past a screeching rusty fan, onto trashcans, making a metallic noise. In the next shot, its search continues on tin roofs, behind the corner of a building, where a heavy metal chain hangs from an iron structure. The next quick tracking shot stops onto the pavement where an outstretched arm reveals the ominous close-up of its bloody

hand. Still, the camera refuses to show to whom it belongs. Instead, it chooses to zoom in slowly into the darkness of an air vent nearby. Industrial rock music jolts one from suspense, as the wide shot of a beaten woman lying in alley comes in view.



Fig.33 *Nymphomaniac vol.1*. i.a. Zentropa Entertainments, Heimatfilm, 2013. Dir. Lars von Trier

She is Joe (Charlotte Gainsbourg), the main character of an epic replete with erotic escapades bordering on the transgressive, suffering, guilt and self-flagellation. The man who discovers her, Seligman (Stellan Skarsgård) wants to help her recover both physically and mentally, believing that he can be the impartial therapist listening to her story and finding the source of her issues. Joe's discontinuous daunting recollections focus on the subject of her sex addiction. In light of this fact, her clinical depression appears as an expression of the conflict between her alleged deviant nature and society's rigid morality that belittles sexual otherness (O'Malley, 2014). Her sad, tired gaze, deadpan storytelling and occasionally defiant self-deprecation stem from a profound belief in the wickedness of her essence. "It's all my fault (...) I'm just a bad human being", Joe tells Seligman. Her words reprise the obsessive refrain of *Antichrist's* tragic heroine. As her eyes wander aimlessly, she notices a "ridiculous fish hook" hanging on the wall next to her host's bed, which prompts Seligman's first digression on fishing. The so-called "fly" or "the nymph" inspires the beginning of her narrative. On a meta-cinematic level, it symbolises the bait laid out for the gullible viewer that expects extraordinary pornographic exploits as the name of the film would suggest. The first chapter named after Izaak Walton's book *The Compleat*

*Angler*⁸⁵, traces the origins of the character's addiction and her first carnal experiences. Since the beginning, Joe has "always demanded more from a sunset: more spectacular colours when the sun hit the horizon". The metaphor refers to her heightened senses that led to an early awareness of her erogenous zones. A flashback scene shows a young Joe and her equally curious friend, B slide like frogs onto the wet bathroom floor, enjoying the sensations their movement produced. In another one, her father finds her reading about the anatomy of the vagina. As she mistakenly pronounces "nervus clitorius", her gaze meets that of her parent. She giggles and leaves the room. The camera lingers on, capturing the ambiguous smile on his face. The scene hints at Joe's Electra complex⁸⁶. She adores her loving father (Christian Slater), a kind doctor who imparts his knowledge of dendrology and life lessons to his attentive daughter. Through the story of the ash tree - his favourite, he teaches Joe to appreciate her uniqueness and stand up to others. The allegory suits the girl as it alludes to later predicaments when she would need to stand tall like the enchanting tree that did not mind the scorn and envy of its peers. A young adult in chapter four (*Delirium*), Joe visits her sick father at the hospital and witnesses his paranoid seizure. The late autumn landscape filmed in black and white reflects the character's gloomy mood. Unable to cope with the visceral pain, she looks for sexual solace. However, nothing can erase the images of her father's sufferance.



Fig.34⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Published in 1653, the book offers a romanticised account of the fishing sport and nature. A fishing enthusiast himself, von Trier refers to it to create analogies with the character's stories in which sexuality and nature intertwine.

⁸⁶ Definition of the *Electra complex* (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/electra-complex>)

⁸⁷ Idem Fig.33

The hand-held camera zooms in on the patient's agonised face and severe body spasms. His distressed cries for help make his daughter leave the room, a reaction that could mirror that of the viewer. In the end, Joe lubricates at the sight of her father's dead body. The shot reinforces the idea of her hidden unorthodox desire.



Fig.35⁸⁸

Even though she interprets the fact as proof of her viciousness, Seligman counter-argues: “It’s extremely common to act sexually in a crisis”.

In contrast to the father, Joe perceives her mother (Connie Nielsen) as “a cold bitch”, worshipping solitude through games of Solitaire. Their initial distance becomes the norm in the mother-daughter relationship, and the reason for which the main character abhors her.

Another unpleasant memory is her sexual initiation with J or Jerome (Shia LaBeouf), a boy fated to be her husband and nemesis. The sequence shows them engaging in a paradoxically nonsexual act. J administers the perfunctory and brutal thrusts in a set of three and five, a symbol Seligman associates with the Fibonacci sequence⁸⁹, a string of numbers considered diabolical. The close-up of schoolgirl Joe’s face onto which the image of “3+5” is projected, echoes the conviction that her nature is evil. “It hurt like hell”. Although unfortunate, the episode did not deter the

⁸⁸ Idem Fig.33

⁸⁹ Definition of the *Fibonacci sequence* <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/fibonacci--sequence>

nymphomaniac from her climax-reaching goal. As they grew older, Joe's (Stacy Martin) and B's (Sophie Kennedy Clark) childhood games became competitions. In a sequence, they board a train to see which one can find most sexual partners until they reach a certain station, and earn a bag of candy. In order to comprehend her story better, the host compares it dryly with fly-fishing. The teenage girls are the nymphs that pretend to be in distress in order to attract men and then, capture them. However, during these trysts, Joe's face remains expressionless, suggesting lack of feeling or boredom. "I've consciously used and hurt others for the sake of my own satisfaction", claims the storyteller. The unsympathetic outlook on her personal behaviour speaks of sin and hatred towards the inner mechanisms that constantly compel her to seek pleasure without experiencing pleasure. Seligman does not share the same opinion. While Joe sees her nymphomania as a Sisyphean burden, the latter considers it a gift that has helped others "release their load". He tries to console her, but the woman dismisses him angrily: "Don't you little darling me!". She does not need his patronising compassion. The character's aversion of sentimentalism originates from her distrust in others. As such, Joe shares Justine's bitter opinion of her peers: "the human qualities can be expressed in one word: hypocrisy". In retrospective, her youthful rebellion against love manifests as a premonitory reluctance towards the imperfect social structures of sentimentality she could not avoid. In Joe's story, the young nymphomaniacs' clique was "committed to combat the love fixated society" with tritone chants Seligman calls "the devil's interval" and unrealistic sex rules that frowned upon emotional attachment. When she realizes she has fallen in love with her boss - none other than Jerome, the woman tries to stifle the feeling by plunging into a multitude of affairs kept in check through careful planning. Joe reduces her lovers to a mere sexual study (Stern, 2014). She categorises them through a penis montage during which random close-up shots of male genitalia appear on the screen. Her detachment is further validated by the chapter of *Mrs. H*, a sequence when a scorned housewife (Uma Thurman) and her three young boys follow their husband and father to his mistress' apartment, to show them "the whoring bed" that destroyed their lives. The uncomfortable situation does not seem to affect Joe who albeit reserved, confesses her lack of feelings for her lover. "No one can be that cruel", replies Mrs. H while the hand-held camera captures the ominous look she sends in the other's direction, framing her as if in agreement. The wife's words predict Joe's own familial misfortunes in which her lust plays a crucial part.

Despite her lewd behaviour, she cannot escape loneliness and misery. Thus, one could say that her addiction is also self-destructive. A childhood flashback predicts her sufferance. “It was as if I was completely alone in the universe, as if my whole body was filled with loneliness and tears”, the character says about the time when she was lying on a hospital bed, prior to an operation. On the melancholic tones of César Franck’s *Violin sonata in A major*, the girl imagines the stars moving in spatial solitude, a reference to von Trier’s *Melancholia*.



Fig.36⁹⁰

At the start of her relationship with Jerome, Joe experiences a short period of “secure and restful domestic comfort”. However, the abrupt loss of her orgasm- the essence of her desire, disturbs the couple’s peace. To underline the “agonizing anhedonia”, the woman tells her confidant about the pre-pubescent jouissance she experienced during a school trip in nature (Rapold, 2014). The shot of the 12-year-old girl laying in the grass is similar to that of the *Antichrist* heroine becoming one with Eden.



Fig 37⁹¹



Fig.38⁹²

⁹⁰ Idem Fig.33

A Dolly zoom close-up of young Joe looking around in confusion and breathing alertly shows her body levitating farther away from the ground. The mystery of the girl's spontaneous climax is doubled by the concomitant appearance of two female spectres which Seligman identifies as Valeria Messalina, "the most notorious nymphomaniac in history" and the great whore of Babylon riding on Nimrod in the form of a bull, a symbol of evil. The man interprets the episode as a twisted version of Jesus' transfiguration on the Mount, an opinion confirmed by the subsequent shot of the upper side of Raphael's *Transfiguration* (1516-1520). In and of itself, the sequence alludes to the evil nature of Joe's desire, as the two infamous figures give the young girl their blasphemous blessing and predestine her to a hellish life of addiction.

In the hopes of reviving her numb genitalia, Joe resorts to erotic flagellation, a gesture akin to the self-inflicted violence the female character performs in *Antichrist*. The situation worsens after the birth of their child with whom Joe feels no real connection. During labour, a distorted reflection of the laughing newborn – another satanic symbol, makes the woman ill-at-ease. "Every time I looked into the child's eyes, I had this unsettling feeling of having been found out." At Jerome's suggestion, she begins to have sex with others in order to keep her sexual insatiability in check. Focused on regaining her jouissance, Joe seeks out K (Jamie Bell), a young dominator.



Fig.39⁹³

⁹¹ Fig.37 *Nymphomaniac vol.2*. i.a. Zentropa Entertainments, Heimatfilm, 2013. Dir. Lars von Trier

⁹² Idem Fig.20

⁹³ Idem Fig.37

Under his unflinching gaze and excruciating, calculated lashes, she reaches the desired climax. At the same time, on the music of Händel's *Lascia ch'io pianga*, her little boy wakes up, leaves his crib and wanders through the empty apartment. The wide-open door of the windowless balcony attracts his attention and he rushes out to see the snowflakes. Upon his arrival from a business trip, Jerome finds the boy and prevents a tragic accident from happening. Despite the violence and minimal nudity, the sadomasochistic shots interspersed with those of the abandoned child are reminiscent of *Antichrist's* prologue. In this case, Joe's clearly deliberate gesture ends her marriage irrevocably. However, she refuses to grieve over what she believes to have been a lie. After taking the child from her, his father abandons him in a foster home. Like her mother, Joe maintains her distance, choosing to keep a strictly financial contact with the boy. Unsurprisingly, the woman's deprivation of maternal love and her overwhelming sexuality render her unfit as a wife and mother, incapable of obeying the traditional family norms (Crocker, 2014).

Following her marital failure, the character concludes her long exposure to sadomasochistic practices out of fear that her vaginal wounds are permanent. *The Mirror* chapter - a tribute to Tarkovsky's homonymous movie (1975), uses the symbol of the "magic mirror" that reveals the truth to the beholder. Joe's attempt to join a support group for sex addicts fails when she realizes she is different from the other women enslaved by sexual compulsions. By seeing her young self in a mirror, she is reminded of the fact that she cannot escape her nature. "I am a nymphomaniac and I love myself for being one." In her speech, Joe describes the group as "the morality police" whose only goal is to erase the obscenity that the bourgeois society frowns upon. Her radical words evoke the character of the filmmaker's vituperating *Dogme '95* manifest. The nymphomaniac's uprising unfolds as a darker version of the one the collective of *Idiots* sets in motion.



Fig. 40⁹⁴

She enters the debt collector business that helps her direct her personal anger towards insolvent upper-middle class clients. Unable to recover physically from the brutality of her previous sexual escapades, Joe transforms her constant libidinous desire into “erotic terrorism” to which she exposes the debtors (Warrick, 2014). The woman describes the case of a closeted paedophile whom she successfully blackmails by arousing him with twisted sexual scenarios in front of her male acolytes. “To be born with a forbidden sexuality must be agonising”. Despite being the harasser, Joe professes her sympathy for the victim: “I saw a man baring the same cross as myself.”

When her shady boss (Willem Dafoe) urges her to take on a protégée, she finds P (Mia Goth), an orphan teenager that bears a striking resemblance to her younger self. Joe follows in the steps of her father, teaching the girl the same caring lessons she was taught as a child. In return, P helps the woman ease the symptoms of her sexual withdrawal. Visuals of Joe’s feverish spasms recall the anxiety sequence in *Antichrist*. Just like the therapist husband, P resorts to sexual actions to calm her surrogate mother. Thus, on a symbolic level, one could perceive their Sapphic relationship as the fulfilment of Joe’s incestuous desire for her father. However, it is not meant to last. P’s training as a debt collector enables her to become self-sufficient. Through her work, she meets Jerome and falls in love with him. Alone again, Joe considers leaving everything behind. She goes for a walk in the nature. Her sadness seeps into the bare landscape. The convalescent day light casts its bluish-grey hues in Joe’s path to the top of a rocky hill. Once arrived, the

⁹⁴ Idem Fig.37

camera pans to show a very wide shot of her standing in front of a twisted, solitary tree which she later identifies herself with.



Fig.41⁹⁵

Then and there, she decides to return and stand up for what she holds dear. “It’s said to be difficult to take someone’s life. I would’ve said it’s more difficult not to. To every human being killing is the most natural thing in the world. We’re created for it.” Joe follows Jerome (Michael Pas) and P in the same alley she was found on, to shoot the man. When she fails, he beats her senselessly. Bleeding on the ground, she watches them re-enact the insensitive episode of her sexual initiation. The Fibonacci numbers re-emerge on the screen to brand them as evil. As such, the following scene transfigures P into Joe’s libidinous doppelgänger who urinates blasphemously on her mentor’s vulnerable body. The visuals evoke the woman’s revelatory experience of absolute wretchedness as the negative correspondent of her hillside’ mystical rapture. (Lewis, 2014) She stops Seligman from washing the stain of misery off her jacket, to serve as a literal reminder of love’s fetid consequences. “For me, love was just lust with jealousy added; everything else was total nonsense. For every hundred crimes committed in the name of love, only one is committed in the name of sex.”

⁹⁵ Idem Fig.37

Throughout Joe's long confession, the host assumes the heterogeneous role of therapist, friend and judge, listening attentively, analysing the facts and their psychological implications, and pronouncing his compassionate verdict. Seligman or "the happy one" is a middle-aged, non-religious Jewish scholar whose secluded life and asexuality contribute to his objective view of the world. His digressions barely scratch the surface of the nymphomaniac's problems, since he himself has not experienced any of the things and feelings she describes. Regardless, he considers his "innocence" as beneficial to the analytical process. "I have no preconceived notions or preferences, I'm actually the best judge you could give your story to. I don't look at you through the glasses coloured by sexuality". His sympathetic observations towards Joe's radical thoughts and controversial sexual escapades, are meant to dismantle the character's negative opinion of herself and boost her shattered confidence. Towards the end, Seligman's verdict denounces the sexually-biased society and its double-handed treatment of female sexuality, through inferences that perceive feminine aggressiveness⁹⁶ as a legitimate response to patriarchal abuse of power:

"You were a human being demanding your rights, but more than that you were a woman demanding *Her* right (...) You think if two men were to have walked down a train looking for women, you think anybody would've raised an eyebrow? Or if a man had led the life you have, then the story about Mrs. H would've been extremely banal if you'd been a man and your conquest would've been a woman. When a man leaves his children because of desire, we accept it with a shrug, but you as a woman, you had to take on a guilt, a burden of guilt that could never be alleviated. And all in all, all the blame and guilt that piled up over the years became too much for you and you reacted aggressively, almost *like a man*, I have to say and you fought back. You fought back against the gender that had been oppressing and mutilating you, killing you and billions of women."

Under the aegis of Seligman, Joe comes to terms with her nymphomania and accepts the fact that guilt is human. She conquers her depression when she stops wavering between contradictory feelings of pride and shame over her sexuality. The host's lack of sensual desire appears as a sort of ideal. The man seems content with his solitary life and his books. Hence, she decides to perform a symbolical suicide in order to achieve the peace she longs for, giving up her sexual

⁹⁶ See Freud (1933); Creed (2000).

uniqueness altogether. However, Seligman is the exception that proves the rule and his liberal thinking and feminist support, a utopian façade hiding the gravest lie of the story. Obstinate by her side, he conquers Joe's scepticism and, by correlation, that of the viewer. One does not see the signs until it is too late. The extreme close-up shot of a vagina turned upside-down followed by a similar shot of an eye, hint at Seligman's subsequent change of perspective regarding sexuality. At the same time, the short montage reprimands voyeurism through its underlying fear of castration. As an afterthought, close-up shots of the man's intense gaze seem to symbolise more than a scholar's avid curiosity. His selfless deed is as treacherous as the sunrise reflected in the dirty windows of the adjacent concrete building that brings Joe a flicker of hope. The last scene obliterates it as her only "friend" assumes she owes him sexual favours. By taking advantage of her vulnerable condition, Seligman joins the ranks of the other disappointing male characters. His unethical gesture⁹⁷ drives Joe to murder. Behind a black screen, in the darkness, Seligman's bewilderment at her refusal, echoes a traditional prejudice used to justify rape: "But you, you fucked thousands of men." She is a woman of loose morals, therefore she deserves it. The dismal ending frames death as Joe's only solution to earn her freedom. By forcing her to kill him, Seligman shows her the horrid truth, beyond the reach of the viewer's gaze.⁹⁸ Thus, the "fight and flight" manoeuvre represents the clean slate Joe needs to begin a new life (Lewis, 2014).

All things considered, the third instalment of von Trier's trilogy employs the motif of depression in the context of feminine sexuality, in order to illustrate the strenuous mental conflict that ensues from an antithetical relationship between alterity and society. Through his visuals of trauma, the film-maker denounces moral hypocrisy and sexism. Like Joe, viewers are urged to suspend their preconceived opinions regarding social misfits and respect their sufferance. Essentially, we are encouraged to reflect on the topic of normality, fickle on account of its subjective nature. One may not understand others' idiosyncrasies and mental turmoil, but they are nevertheless part of reality. As long as they are harmless, one should accept them as they are and avoid common biases.

⁹⁷ See Foucault (1997)

⁹⁸ See Lacan (1992).

Conclusions

Cinematic depression emphasizes the characters' inability to function as expected in today's society. Their medicated "normality" collapses under the abnormal emotional pressure to which they are subjected. The depressed bear their burden of otherness, wavering between addiction and madness. The conflict between alterity and social mentalities is also at the core of Lars von Trier's representations of depression. His latest trilogy – *Antichrist* (2009), *Melancholia* (2011) and *Nymphomaniac vol 1. and vol.2* (2013) illustrates the film-maker's well-known concern with mental trauma through visuals that align with the contemporary genre of ordeal cinema. As such the depressed female characters appear as *monstrous mothers* and *femmes castratrices* that resort to violence and erotic torture to punish their peers' condescendence, ignorance and betrayal. In doing so, they overcome their depression. Along with their suffering, the women's fight against prejudice, hypocrisy and sexism employs transgressive images that torture the gaze (e.g. *Antichrist* and *Nymphomaniac*) or aestheticized visuals of destruction that prompt one to take pleasure in intrinsically negative events (e.g. *Melancholia*). Von Trier uses their controversial nature to expose society's artificiality and its misconceptions regarding depression and sexuality. His representations of the illness go beyond the conventional ones of the earlier movies. Their main focus on individual hardship and its causes renders them ethical in the Levinasian sense of the term, while the characters' desire-driven actions, self-sacrifice and critique of power-relations manifest traits of psychoanalytic and Foucauldian ethics. Therefore, in this case, cinematic depression appears as ethical. Between the auteur's intentions and ethics, the meaning-making viewer is expected to share in the responsibility behind the torturous image, by adopting a reverential attitude towards the characters' uniqueness and their mediated sufferance. Consequently, ethics of spectatorship regarding representations of depression could contribute to reduce common prejudice relating to the mental illness, a fact that could be ascertained or dispelled by future studies focused on actual viewer response. On the other hand, these might also establish whether visuals of depression risk being overshadowed by the abundant circulation of atrocious images in contemporary cinema.

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Filmography

It's a Wonderful Life (1946)

USA

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 130 min | 118 min (DVD)

Language: English

Presentation: Colour (colourised) | Black and White

Production Company: Liberty Films (II)

Director: Frank Capra

Screenplay: Frances Goodrich, Albert Hackett, Frank Capra

Photography: Joseph F. Biroc, Joseph Walker

Editor: William Hornbeck

Cast: James Stewart (George Bailey), Donna Reed (Mary Hatch), Lionel Barrymore (Mr. Potter), Thomas Mitchell (Uncle Billy), Henry Travers (Clarence) and others

The Wrong Man (1956)

USA

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 105 min.

Language: English

Presentation: Black and White

Production Company: Warner Bros.

Director: Alfred Hitchcock

Screenplay: Maxwell Anderson, Angus MacPhail

Photography: Robert Burks

Editor: George Tomasini

Cast: Henry Fonda (Manny Balestrero), Vera Miles (Rose Balestrero), Anthony Quayle (Frank D. O'Connor) and others

The Apartment (1960)

USA

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 125 min

Language: English

Presentation: Black and White

Production Company: The Mirisch Corporation

Director: Billy Wilder

Screenplay: Billy Wilder, I.A.L. Diamonds

Photography: Joseph LaShelle

Editor: Daniel Mandell

Cast: Jack Lemon (C.C. Baxter), Shirley MacLaine (Fran Kubelik), Fred MacMurry (Jeff D. Sheldrake), Ray Walston (Joe Dobisch), Jack Kruschen (Dr. Dreyfuss) and others

Le Feu Follet / The Fire Within (1963)

France

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 108 min

Language: French

Presentation: Black and White

Production Company: Nouvelles Éditions de Films

Director: Louis Malle

Screenplay: Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, Louis Malle

Photography: Ghislain Cloquet

Editor: Suzanne Baron

Cast: Maurice Ronet (Alain Leroy), Léna Skerla (Lydia), Yvonne Clech (Mademoiselle Farnoux), Hubert Deschamps (D'Averseau), Jean-Paul Moulinot (Dr. La Barbinais) and others

Interiors (1978)

USA

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 93 min

Language: English

Presentation: Colour

Production Company: Rollins-Joffe Productions

Director: Woody Allen

Screenplay: Woody Allen

Photography: Gordon Willis

Editor: Ralph Rosenblum

Cast: Kristin Griffith (Flynn), Mary Beth Hurt (Joey), Richard Jordan (Frederick), Diane Keaton (Renata), E.G. Marshall (Arthur), Geraldine Page (Eve), Maureen Stapleton (Pearl), Sam Waterston (Mike) and others

Ordinary People (1980)

USA

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 124 min

Language: English

Presentation: Colour

Production Company: Paramount Pictures, Wildwood Enterprises

Director: Robert Redford

Screenplay: Alvin Sargent

Photography: John Bailey

Editor: Jeff Kanew

Cast: Donald Sutherland (Calvin), Mary Tylor Moore (Beth), Judd Hirsch (Berger), Timothy Hutton (Conrad), M. Emmet Walsh (Swim Coach), Elizabeth McGovern (Jeannine) and others

The Virgin Suicides (1999)

USA

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 97 min

Language: English

Presentation: Colour

Production Company: American Zoetrope, Eternity Pictures, Muse Productions, Virgin Suicides LLC

Director: Sofia Coppola

Screenplay: Jeffrey Eugenides, Sofia Coppola

Photography: Edward Lachman

Editor: Melissa Kent, James Lyons

Cast: James Woods (Ronald Lisbon), Kathleen Turner (Mrs. Lisbon), Kirsten Dunst (Lux Lisbon), Josh Hartnett (Trip Fontaine), Michael Paré (as Adult Trip Fontaine), Scott Glenn (Father Moody), A.J.Cook (Mary Lisbon), Hanna Hall (Cecilia Lisbon), Leslie Hayman (Therese Lisbon), Chelse Swain (Bonnie Lisbon) and others

The Hours (2002)

USA

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 114 min

Language: English

Presentation: Colour

Production Company: Paramount Pictures, Miramax, Scott Rudin Productions

Director: Stephen Daldry

Screenplay: David Hare

Photography: Seamus McGarvey

Editor: Peter Boyle

Cast: Nicole Kidman (Virginia Woolf), Julianne Moore (Laura Brown), Meryl Streep (Clarissa Vaughan), Stephen Dillane (Leonard Woolf), Miranda Richardson (Vanessa Bell) and others

Prozac Nation (2001)

USA

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 95 min

Language: English

Presentation: Colour

Production Company: Miramax, Millennium Films, Cinerenta Medienbeteiligungs KG, Giv'en Films, Cination, Prozac Nation Productions Inc.

Director: Erik Skjoldbjærg

Screenplay: Frank Deasy, Larry Gross

Photography: Erling Thurmann-Andersen

Editor: James Lyons

Cast: Christina Ricci (Elizabeth), Jason Biggs (Rafe), Anne Heche (Dr. Sterling), Michelle Williams (Ruby), Jonathan Rhys Meyers (Noah), Jessica Lange (Mrs. Wurtzel) and others

The Perks of Being a Wallflower (2012)

USA

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 102 min

Language: English

Presentation: Colour

Production Company: Summit Entertainment, Mr. Mudd

Director: Stephen Chbosky

Screenplay: Stephen Chbosky

Photography: Andrew Dunn

Editor: Mary Joe Markey

Cast: Logan Lerman (Charlie), Dylan McDermott (father), Kate Walsh (mother), Johnny Simmons (Brad), Ezra Miller (Patrick), Emma Watson (Sam), Mae Whitman (Mary Elizabeth) and others

Oslo, 31. August (2011)

Norway

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 95 min

Language: Norwegian

Presentation: colour

Production Company: Don't Look Now, Motlys

Director: Joachim Trier

Screenplay: Joachim Trier, Eskil Vogt

Photography: Jakob Ihre

Editor: Olivier Bugge Coutté

Cast: Anders Danielsen Lie (Anders), Malin Crépin (Malin), Aksel Thanke (therapist), Ingrid Olava (Rebekka), Øystein Røger (David) and others

Deux jours, une nuit / Two days, one night (2014)

Belgium | France | Italy

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 95 min

Language: French

Presentation: colour

Production Company: Les Films du Fleuve, Archipel 35, BIM Distribuzione, Eyeworks, France 2 Cinéma, Radio Télévision Belge Francophone (RTBF), Belgacom

Director: Jean-Pierre Dardenne, Luc Dardenne

Screenplay: Jean-Pierre Dardenne, Luc Dardenne

Photography: Alain Marcoen

Editor: Marie-Hélène Dozo

Cast: Marion Cotillard (Sandra), Fabrizio Rongione (Manu), Catherine Salée (Juliette), Batiste Sornin (M. Dumont), Pili Groyne (Estelle), Simon Caudry (Maxime) and others

Persona (1966)

Sweden

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 85 min

Language: Swedish

Presentation: Black and White

Production Company: Svensk Filmindustri (SF)

Director: Ingmar Bergman

Screenplay: Ingmar Bergman

Photography: Sven Nykvist

Editor: Ulla Ryghe

Cast: Bibi Andersson (Alma), Liv Ullman (Elisabet Vogler), Margaretha Krook (the doctor), Gunnar Björnstrand (Mr. Vogler) and others

One flew over the cuckoo's nest (1975)

USA

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 133 min

Language: English

Presentation: Colour

Production Company: Fantasy Films

Director: Milos Forman

Screenplay: Lawrence Hauben, Bo Goldman

Photography: Haskell Wexler

Editor: Sheldon Kahn, Lynzee Klingman

Cast: Michael Berryman (Ellis), Peter Brocco (Col. Matterson), Scatman Crother (Turtle), Mwako Cumbuka (Warren), Danny DeVito (Martini), Louise Fletcher (Nurse Ratched), Jack Nicholson (R.P. McMurphy) and others

Taxi Driver (1976)

USA

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 113 min | 110 min (cut)

Language: English

Presentation: Colour

Production Company: Columbia Pictures Corporation, Columbia Pictures, Bill/Phillips, Italo/Judeo Productions

Director: Martin Scorsese

Screenplay: Paul Schrader

Photography: Michael Chapman

Editor: Tom Rolf, Melvin Shapiro

Cast: Robert De Niro (Travis Bickle), Jodie Foster (Iris), Harvey Keitel (Sport), Cybill Shepherd (Betsy) and others

Fight Club (1999)

USA

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 139 min | 151 min (workprint)

Language: English

Presentation: colour

Production Company: Fox 2000 Pictures, Regency Enterprises, Linson Film, Atman Entertainment, Knickerbocker Films, Taurus Film

Director: David Fincher

Screenplay: James Uhls

Photography: Jeff Cronenweth

Editor: James Haygood

Cast: Edward Norton (the narrator), Brad Pitt (Tyler Durden), Meat Loaf (Robert 'Bob' Paulsen), Zach Grenier (Richard Chesler), Helena Bonham Carter (Marla) and others

Black Swan (2010)

USA

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 108 min

Language: English

Presentation: colour

Production Company: Fox Searchlight Pictures, Cross Creek Pictures, Protozoa Pictures, Phoenix Pictures, Dune Entertainment

Director: Darren Aronofsky

Screenplay: Mark Heiman, Andres Heinz, John J. McLaughlin

Photography: Matthew Libatique

Editor: Andrew Weisblum

Cast: Natalie Portman (Nina Sayers/The Swan Queen), Mila Kunis (Lily /The Black Queen), Vincent Cassel (Thomas Leroy/ The Gentleman), Barbara Hershey (The Queen), Winona Ryder (Beth Macintyre/The Dying Swan) and others

Orkidégartneren / The Orchid Gardner (1977)

Denmark

Format: 16 mm

Running time: 37 min

Language: Danish

Presentation: Black and White

Production Company: Filmgruppe 16

Director: Lars von Trier

Screenplay: Lars von Trier

Photography: Hartvig Jensen, Helge Kaj, Peter Nørgaard, Mogens Svane, Lars von Trier

Editor: Lars von Trier

Cast: Lars von Trier (Victor Morse), Inger Hvidtfeldt (Eliza), Karen Oksbjerg (Eliza's friend), Brigitte Pelissier (third girl), Martin Drouzy (the gardener), Yvonne Levy (woman on bicycle), Carl-Henrik Trier (old Jew), Jesper Hoffmeyer (the narrator)

Befrielsesbilleder / Images of a Relief (1982)

Denmark

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 57 min

Language: Danish

Presentation: Colour

Production Company: Den Danske Filmskole, Danmarks Radio (DR)

Director: Lars von Trier

Screenplay: Lars von Trier, Tom Elling

Photography: Tom Elling

Editor: Tómas Gislason

Cast: Edward Fleming (German officer Leo Mendel), Kirsten Olesen (his mistress Esther)

Forbrydelsens element / The Element of Crime (1984)

Denmark

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 104 min

Language: English

Presentation: Colour | Black and White

Production Company: Det Danske Filminstitut, Per Holst Filmproduktion

Director: Lars von Trier

Screenplay: Lars von Trier, Niels Vørsel

Photography: Tom Elling

Editor: Tómas Gislason

Cast: Michael Elphick (Fisher), Esmond Knight (Osborne), Me Me Lai (Kim), Jerold Wells (Police Chief Kramer), Ahmed El Shenawi (therapist), Astrid Henning-Jensen (housekeeper), Lars von Trier (Schmuck of Ages) and others

Andrei Rublev (1966)

Soviet Union

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 165 min (re-edited) | 186 min (re-edited) | 183 min (2004 re-release) | 205 min (original length) | 145 min (UK) | 183 min (Blu-ray)

Language: Russian | Italian | Tatar

Presentation: Color (Sovcolor) | Black and White

Production Company: Mosfilm

Director: Andrei Tarkovsky

Screenplay: Andrey Konchalovskiy, Andrei Tarkovsky

Photography: Vadim Yusov

Editor: Tatyana Egorycheva, Lyudmila Feyginova, Olga Shevkunenko

Cast: Anatoliy Solonitsyn (Andrei Rublev), Ivan Lapikov (Kirill), Nikolay Grinko (Daniil Chyornyy), Nikolay Sergheev (Feofan Grek), Irina Tarkovskaya, Nikolay Burlyayev (Boriska) and others

Epidemic (1987)

Denmark

Format: 16 mm | 35 mm

Running time: 106 min

Language: Danish | English

Presentation: Black and White

Production Company: Det Danske Filminstitut

Director: Lars von Trier

Screenplay: Lars von Trier, Niels Vørsel

Photography: Henning Bendtsen

Editor: Thomas Krag, Lars von Trier

Cast: Lars von Trier (Lars, Dr. Mesmer), Niels Vørsel (Niels), Michael Simpson (cabbie, priest), Susanne Ottesen (herself), Cæcilia Holbek Trier (nurse), Udo Kier (himself), Claes Kastholm Hansen (himself), Gitte Lynd (hypnotised girl) and others

Europa (1991)

Denmark | Sweden | France | Germany | Switzerland

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 112 min

Language: English | German

Presentation: Black and White | Color (Pathécolor)

Production Company: Alicéleo, Det Danske Filminstitut, Eurimages, Fortuna Film, Fund of the Council of Europe, Gérard Mital Productions, Institut suisse du film, Nordisk Film, Sofinergie 1, Sofinergie 2, Svenska Filminstitutet (SFI), Union Générale Cinématographique (UGC), WMG Film

Director: Lars von Trier

Screenplay: Lars von Trier, Niels Vørsel

Photography: Henning Bendtsen, Edward Klosinski, Jean-Paul Meurisse

Editor: Hervé Schneid

Cast: Jean-Marc Barr (Leopold Kessler), Barbara Sukowa (Katharina Hartmann), Udo Kier (Larry Hartmann), Ernst-Hugo Järegård (Uncle Kessler), Erik Mørk (Pater), Jørgen Reenberg (Max Hartmann), Eddie Constantine (Colonel Harris), Max von Sydow (narrator) and others

Cleopatra (1963)

UK | USA | Switzerland

Format: 35 mm | 70 mm

Running time: 192 min

Language: English

Presentation: Colour

Production Company: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, MCL Films S.A., Walwa Films S.A.

Director: Joseph L. Mankiewicz

Screenplay: Joseph L. Mankiewicz, Ranald MacDougall, Sidney Buchman

Photography: Leon Shamroy

Editor: Dorothy Spencer

Cast: Elizabeth Taylor (Cleopatra), Richard Burton (Mark Anthony), Rex Harrison (Julius Caesar), Pamela Brown (High Priestess), George Cole (Flavius), Hume Cronyn (Sosigenes) and others

Breaking the Waves (1996)

Denmark | Sweden | France | Netherlands | Norway | Iceland

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 159 min

Language: English

Presentation: Colour

Production Company: Argus Film Produktie, Arte, Canal+, CoBo Fonds, Det Danske Filminstitut, Eurimages, European Script Fund, Finnish Film Foundation, Icelandic Film (as Icelandic Film Corporation), La Sept Cinéma, Liberator Productions, Lucky Red, Media, Investment Club, Memphis Film, Nederlands Fonds voor de Film, Nordisk Film- & TV-Fond, Northern Lights, Norwegian Film Institute, October Films, Philippe Bober, SVT Drama (Stockholm), Svenska Filminstitutet (SFI), TV1000 AB, Trust Film Svenska, Villealfa Filmproduction Oy, Vrijzinnig Protestantse Radio Omroep (VPRO), Yleisradio (YLE), Zentropa Entertainments, Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF)

Director: Lars von Trier

Screenplay: Lars von Trier, Peter Asmussen, David Pirie,

Photography: Robby Müller

Editor: Anders Refn

Cast: Emily Watson (Bess McNeill), Stellan Skarsgård (Jan Nyman), Katrin Cartlidge (Dodo McNeill), Jean-Marc Barr (Terry), Adrian Rawlins (Dr. Richardson), Jonathan Hackett (Priest), Sandra Voe (Mother), Udo Kier (Sadistic Sailor), Mikkel Gaup (Pits), Roef Ragas (Pim) and others

Dogme # 2 – Idioterne / The Idiots (1998)

Denmark | Sweden | France | Netherlands | Italy

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 117 min

Language: Danish

Presentation: Colour

Production Company: Zentropa Entertainments, Danmarks Radio (DR), Liberator Productions, La Sept Cinéma, Argus Film Produktie, Vrijzinnig Protestantse Radio Omroep (VPRO), Nordisk Film- & TV-Fond, CoBo Fonds, SVT Drama, Canal+, Rai Cinemafiction, 3 Emme Cinematografica, Arte, October Film, Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF)

Director: Lars von Trier (uncredited)

Screenplay: Lars von Trier

Photography: Lars von Trier

Editor: Molly Marlene Stensgaard

Cast: Bodil Jørgensen (Karen), Jens Albinus (Stoffer), Anne Louise Hassing (Susanne), Nikolaj Lie Kaas (Jeppe), Louise Mieritz (Joséphine), Troels Lyby (Henrik), Henrik Prip (Ped) and others

Dancer in the Dark (2000)

Denmark | Germany | Netherland | Italy | USA | France | UK | Sweden | Finland | Iceland | Norway

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 140 min

Language: English

Presentation: Colour

Production Company: Zentropa Entertainments, Trust Film Svenska, Film Väst, Liberator Productions, Pain Unlimited GmbH Filmproduktion, Cinematograph A/S, What Else? B.V., Icelandic Film, Blind Spot Pictures Oy, France 3 Cinéma, Danmarks Radio (DR), Arte France Cinéma, SVT Drama, Arte (in collaboration with other companies)

Director: Lars von Trier

Screenplay: Lars von Trier

Photography: Robby Müller

Editor: François Gédigier, Molly Marlene Stensgaard

Cast: Björk (Selma Jezkova), Catherine Deneuve (Kathy), David Morse (Bill Houston), Peter Stormare (Jeff), Joel Grey (Oldrich Novy), Cara Seymour (Linda Houston) Vladica Kostic (Gene Jezkova), Jean-Marc Barr (Norman), Vincent Paterson (Samuel), Siobhan Fallon Hogan (Brenda) and others

Dogville (2002)

Denmark | Sweden | Norway | Finland | UK | France | Germany | Netherlands | Italy

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 178 min

Language: English

Presentation: Colour

Production Company: Zentropa Entertainments, Isabella Films B.V., Something Else B.V., Memphis Film, Trollhättan Film AB, Pain Unlimited GmbH Filmproduktion, Sigma Films, Zoma Films Ltd., Slot Machine, Liberator Productions (in collaboration or in association with other companies)

Director: Lars von Trier

Screenplay: Lars von Trier

Photography: Anthony Dod Mantle

Editor: Molly Marlene Stensgaard

Cast: Nicole Kidman (Grace), Paul Bettany (Tom Edison, Jr.), James Caan (Big Man/Grace's father), John Hurt (narrator), Harriet Andersson (Gloria), Lauren Bacall (Ma Ginger), Jean-Marc Barr (man with big hat) and others

Antichrist (2009)

Denmark | Germany | France | Sweden | Italy | Poland

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 104 min

Language: English

Presentation: Colour | Black and White

Production Company: Zentropa Entertainments, Trust Film Svenska, Film Väst, Liberator Productions, Pain Unlimited GmbH Filmproduktion, Cinematograph A/S, What Else? B.V., Icelandic Film, Blind Spot Pictures Oy, France 3 Cinéma, Danmarks Radio (DR), Arte France Cinéma, SVT Drama, Arte (in collaboration with other companies)

Director: Lars von Trier

Screenplay: Lars von Trier

Photography: Anthony Dod Mantle

Editor: Anders Refn, Åsa Mossberg

Cast: Willem Dafoe (He), Charlotte Gainsbourg (She), Storm Acheche Sahlström (Nic)

Melancholia (2011)

Denmark | Sweden | France | Germany

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 130 min

Language: English

Presentation: Colour

Production Company: Zentropa Entertainments, Memfis Film, Zentropa International Sweden, Slot Machine, Liberator Productions, Zentropa International Köln, Film Väst, Danmarks Radio (DR), Arte France Cinéma (with the participation and support of other companies)

Director: Lars von Trier

Screenplay: Lars von Trier

Photography: Manuel Alberto Claro

Editor: Molly Marlene Stensgaard

Cast: Kirsten Dunst (Justine), Charlotte Gainsbourg (Claire), Alexander Skarsgård (Michael), Brady Corbet (Tim), Cameron Spurr (Leo), Charlotte Rampling (Gaby), Jesper Christensen (Little Father), John Hurt (Dexter), Stellan Skarsgård (Jack), Udo Kier (Wedding Planner), Kiefer Sutherland (John) and others

Nymphomaniac vol. I (2013)

Denmark | Germany | Belgium | UK | France

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 117 min | 145 min (uncut)

Language: English

Presentation: Colour | Black and White

Production Company: Zentropa Entertainments, Zentropa International Köln, Heimatfilm, Film Väst, Slot Machine, Caviar Films, Concorde Filmverleih, Artificial Eye, Les Films du Losange, European Film Bonds, Caviar

Director: Lars von Trier

Screenplay: Lars von Trier

Photography: Manuel Alberto Claro

Editor: Morten Højbjerg, Jacob Secher Schulsinger, Molly Marlene Stensgaard

Cast: Charlotte Gainsbourg (Joe), Stellan Skarsgård (Seligman), Stacy Martin (Young Joe), Shia LaBeouf (Jerôme), Christian Slater (Joe's Father), Uma Thurman (Mrs. H), Sophie Kennedy Clark (B), Connie Nielsen (Joe's Mother) and others

Nymphomaniac vol. II (2013)

Denmark | Germany | Belgium | UK | France | Sweden

Format: 35 mm

Running time: 123 min | 180 min (uncut)

Language: English

Presentation: Colour

Production Company: Zentropa Entertainments, Zentropa International Köln, Slot Machine, Zentropa International France, Caviar Films, Zenbelgie BVBA, Zentropa International Sweden, Arte France Cinéma, Film Väst, Groupe Grand Accord, ARTE G.E.I.E

Director: Lars von Trier

Screenplay: Lars von Trier

Photography: Manuel Alberto Claro

Editor: Jacob Secher Schulsinger, Molly Marlene Stensgaard

Cast: Charlotte Gainsbourg (Joe), Stellan Skarsgård (Seligman), Stacy Martin (Young Joe), Shia LaBeouf (Jerôme), Christian Slater (Joe's Father), Jamie Bell (K), Uma Thurman (Mrs.H), Willem Dafoe (L), Mia Goth (P), Sophie Kennedy Clark (B) Michael Pas (Old Jerôme), Jean-Marc Barr (Debtor Gentleman), Udo Kier (The Waiter) and others