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Lars von Trier's Women. Edited by Rex Butler and David Denny. Bloomsbury Academic, 2017 (264 pages).

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When Linda Badley published her *Lars von Trier* in 2011, she inaugurated a series of informed, rigorous monographs on the Danish director. Scholarly interest in the work of von Trier has steadily increased since then, as demonstrated by the recent publication of, among others, *Politics, Theory, and Film: Critical Encounters with Lars von Trier*, edited by Bonnie Honig and Lori J. Marso, and Ahmed Elbeshlawy's *Woman in Lars von Trier's Cinema, 1996–2014*. Elbeshlawy is also a contributor to the similarly titled *Lars von Trier's Women*, edited by Rex Butler and David Denny. What differentiates the two volumes is the scope: *Woman in Lars von Trier's Cinema* focuses on von Trier's films from 1996 to 2014, whereas the book edited by Butler and Denny also includes the director's early works. From *Menthe—The Blissful* (*Menthe—la bienheureuse,* 1979) to his most recent film *Nymphomaniac Volume II* (2013), female protagonists are brought to the forefront of a comprehensive analysis in this edited collection. Particular focus is placed on the Depression Trilogy (*Antichrist* [2009], *Melancholia* [2011], and *Nymphomaniac I* and *II* [2013]) that, the editors contend, had yet to receive its deserved level of scholarly attention.

Two foundational essays open the volume: Linda Badley's "Performing the Feminine" and Slavoj Žižek's "Femininity between Goodness and Act". These two texts not only shed light on the crucial elements of von Trier's cinema, but are also, in a sense, propaedeutic to the following essays, which in many cases build on their findings and indicate them as their theoretical premises. "Performing the Feminine," previously published in Badley's aforementioned monograph on the director, addresses von Trier's shift from the masculine, cold and ironic perspective characterising his Europa trilogy to a feminine mode of emotion and immersion typical of his later works, attributing the change to the director's militancy in the Dogme 95 movement. In particular, Badley observes how von Trier's aesthetic choices, especially the contrast between a melodrama-driven narrative and a naturalistic form, push the audience past voyeurism and into such an emotional proximity to the image that "deep ethical and intellectual discomfort" follows (17). Von Trier's films, Badley argues, have the ability to break through typical masculine distancing mechanisms, inducing the male, or rather the masculinised, spectator to relinquish his emotional detachment in favour of a more vulnerable position.

In Žižek's "Femininity between Goodness and Act", first published in *Lacanian Ink* in 1999, the Slovenian psychoanalytical theorist applies Lacan's notion of feminine *jouissance* to the 1996 feature *Breaking the Waves*. Žižek focuses the reader's attention on the deep, unconditional and excessive nature of female protagonist Bess's (Emily Watson) love for her partner Jan (Stellan Skarsgård). Bess, having had to renounce her own *jouissance* to support

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her partner's masturbatory fantasies, is now essentially alienated in the male phallic economy. It is when her predicament, this inescapable imposition by patriarchal society, is presented and heralded as a woman's ultimate sacrificial act for a man that *Breaking the Waves* becomes a chauvinistic film. Nevertheless, as the Slovenian theorist argues, the dynamic underlying this act is actually more complex and is best understood through the lens of Lacanian theory. Indeed, it is the excessive and unconditional nature of Bess's love for her partner that leads to an inversion of the terms of phallic seduction. As Žižek eloquently puts it: "Bess's sacrifice is unconditional, there is nothing Beyond, and this very absolute immanence undermines the phallic economy—deprived of its 'inherent transgression' … the phallic economy disintegrates" (23). Writing five years later, in his Afterword (and not in the Introduction, as the editors state) to *Revolution at the Gates*, a selection of Vladimir Lenin's writings, Žižek argued that, for his cinematic treatment of his female protagonists, "von Trier should never be forgiven" (222). Yet, the editors decided to use the theorist's first essay on *Breaking the Waves*, thus implicitly signalling an alignment with his first interpretation.

In Chapter Three, Ulrike Hanstein relies on the work of Stanley Cavell on the Hollywood melodramas of the 1930s and 1940s to address the treatment of the human voice from philosophical and aesthetic points of view. Specifically, Hanstein analyses *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), considering the duality between visual body and vocal expression, as well as between the visible world of female protagonist Selma (Björk) and the one evoked by her singing. This tension peaks during one of the final sequences of the film in which Selma sings *The Sound of Music* classic "My Favorite Things", while awaiting execution in her cell. In relation to this scene, Hanstein skilfully highlights the irreconcilability between Selma's two worlds: her contingent one, consisting of isolation and misery, and the unseen world evoked by her singing, which tragically is and remains absent.

The theoretical premise for Butler's essay "A Woman's Smile" is Žižek's concept of the act. By using the actions of three characters—Bess of *Breaking the Waves*, Medea (Kirsten Olesen) of the homonymous von Trier's 1988 film, and Johannes (Preben Lerdorff Rye) of Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Ordet* (1955)—to illustrate his point, Butler disputes Žižek's contention that the "feminine" act is unrecognisable within the symbolic order. In particular, Butler interrogates the temporal—or rather causal—relationship between the act and its rewriting of symbolic reality, affirming their necessary simultaneity. He concludes that the feminine act in *Breaking the Waves*, *Medea* and *Ordet* is never unrecognisable and, therefore, never transgressive, thereby departing from Žižek.

In Chapter Five, Sheila Kunkle considers the notion of masochism and self-torture in David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999) and von Trier's *Breaking the Waves*, *Melancholia*, and *Nymphomaniac: Volumes I* and *II*. While the actions of *Fight Club*'s protagonist Jack (Edward Norton) can be understood as the by-product of capitalism's alienation, no causal explanation can be offered for these women's masochistic behaviour. This is because they are faced with "the impasse of being, or the Real at the core of the symbolic" (67). As the author puts it, Bess, Justine (Kirsten Dunst), and Joe (Charlotte Gainsbourg), the respective protagonists of the films mentioned above, occupy "this impossible place of paradoxical self-referentiality, a place where an Other fails to define them, and where their Acts reset not the relationship between a subject and others, but the very structure through which their Acts can be read" (68). It is, however, this paradoxical positioning that allows them to proceed along a trajectory of loss, loneliness and *jouissance*, and eventually perform an act of freedom and autonomy. In this sense, Kunkle argues, von Trier's films not only discharge the director from accusations of misogyny, but also point towards a redefinition of feminine ethics and

jouissance.

In Chapter Six, Angelos Koutsourakis draws a parallel between the work of von Trier and the concept of the real as elaborated by Alain Badiou. More precisely, he argues that von Trier's penchant for transgressive female figures and formal experimentalism recalls Badiou's contention that access to the real can be obtained only through conflict and cruelty. By focusing on the director's three student films, *The Orchid Gardener* (*Orchidégartneren*, 1978), *Menthe—The Blissful*, and *Images of a Relief* (*Befrielsesbilleder*, 1982), Koutsourakis traces elements of continuity in the filmic corpus of von Trier, arguing that his heroines' appeal lies precisely in their radicalism and relentless attack to "institutional conformity" (99).

In his essay, Lorenzo Chiesa combines the notion of gift exchange as theorised by Marcel Mauss through Charles Baladier's reading of *Dogville* (2003). In the film, the normal circuit of gift exchange is interrupted; protagonist Grace's (Nicole Kidman) gift—her giving herself away to the people of Dogville—is not reciprocated. In this sense, Baladier argues, Grace's generous and self-sacrificial behaviour appears to be more an expression of Christian grace than the embodiment of the practice of gift exchange. While acknowledging the value of Baladier's interpretation, Chiesa points out its inconsistency with the film's final sequence, where Grace refuses to "turn her cheek" and orders the extermination of the Dogvillians. Departing from readings that consider Grace's violence to be an act of revenge, Chiesa argues that her violent response is precisely what prevents the apocalypse caused by the interruption of the circuit of gift exchange from happening. As he elegantly puts it: "The carnage is the unavoidable product of the *overcoming*, on Grace-Kidman's part, of perverse Christian arrogance, whose more familiar name is 'forgiveness'" (106; emphasis in the original).

In Chapter Eight, Elbeshlawy observes that, at first glance, and in spite of its unconventional style, *Manderlay* (2005) appears to be in line with the Hollywood tradition that portrays—and fetishizes—the black body as a "cinematic gift", an object of gaze and desire. Nevertheless, a more in-depth look demonstrates that *Manderlay* actually breaks with this tradition through its portrayal of Grace's (Bryce Dallas Howard) desire. To prove his point, Elbeshlawy considers a number of scenes of Grace's fantasies and interactions with one of the black slaves, Timothy (Isaach de Bancholé). In this sense, the sequence in which Grace whips Timothy becomes of extreme significance, as it reveals her desire for what it is: inaccessible and unattainable. As the author explains: "Grace … maybe be punishing one of the blacks who flatly rejected her gift of freedom and democracy but, … she is also hitting at the very nothingness of her own subjectivity" (137). It is precisely this development, Elbeshlawy argues, which problematises our common understanding of freedom and situates the film beyond any discourse of race and gender.

The remaining six essays are organised in diptychs, providing two perspectives on the same film. Magdalena Zolkos's essay, originally published in 2011, argues that von Trier's portrayal of *Antichrist*'s protagonist, She (Charlotte Gainsbourg), signals a departure from the female figurations of his earlier works, particularly from the idealism and self-sacrificing attitude displayed by Bess, in *Breaking the Wave*s, and Grace, in *Dogville*. Indeed, the violent acts She performs—castrating her husband and cutting off her own clitoris—do not answer any redemptive or transcendental logic; they are contingent and self-standing. By turning away from the register of self-abnegation and victimisation that characterise the actions of her predecessors, She establishes herself as an autonomous ethical agent, outside of

patriarchal law and worldview.

Denny's analysis of *Antichrist*, in turn, considers the acts of violence performed by She in light of the flashbacks intercut throughout the film. In particular, he focuses on the flashback in which She sees her young son climbing up to the window, before falling down. The sequence precedes another key one, that of her self-mutilation. In disagreement with those who consider the sequence to be reflective of von Trier's sadomasochistic fantasies towards women, Denny considers the castration of She to be an authentic act, in Lacanian terms, which allows her to free herself from a symbolic deadlock, transfiguring her guilt about her son's death into an act of freedom.

In Chapter Eleven, Todd McGowan considers how *Melancholia* pushes the boundaries of the "disaster film", by failing to limit the scale of destruction occurring in it: when the planet Melancholia hits the ground, Earth is annihilated and there are no survivors. As he observes, the film "displays its inability to imagine a negation of capitalist modernity other than total destruction, and in this precise sense, it aligns itself with fascism's aesthetization of politics" (183). In capitalist modernity, McGowan explains, the subject occupies a contradictory position: "[It] is not simply a living being but a life mortified by the signifier" (183). The subject reacts to this deadlock by attempting to align itself with either life or death, as exemplified in the film by the opposite behaviours exhibited by John (Kiefer Sutherland) and Justine. Nevertheless, according to McGowan, von Trier's depiction of his female protagonist's embracing of death situates both Justine and *Melancholia* within the logic of fascism.

Jennifer Friedlander's "How to Face Nothing: *Melancholia* and the Feminine" offers a very different reading of the film. By considering how sisters Justine and Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg) react to the threat of the planet Melancholia colliding with Earth, Friedlander examines the film's two female characters' contrasting attitudes towards loss and the collapse of the Big Other, concluding that it is precisely Justine's depressed, melancholic state—in contrast to her sister Claire's anxiety—that allows her to accept the end of the world and, in a larger sense, "the triumph of the Real over reality". As the author puts it: "In carrying out an act that attempts neither to reinstall symbolic authority nor to reject its efficiency, Justine … undertakes a potentially transformative engagement, aimed at the very point at which the symbolic ruse gives way to the real" (211).

The collection concludes with Hilary Neroni and Tarja Laine's contributions on the *Nymphomaniac* dilogy. In Chapter Thirteen, Neroni uses the example of film protagonist Joe to illuminate von Trier's depiction of the feminine, particularly in relation to the patriarchal restrictions his characters experience. In his films, Neroni observes, von Trier offers a compelling portrait of femininity faced with external limits, but fails to acknowledge women's potential for an internal limit, thus creating a rather reductive and incomplete picture of femininity. This becomes particularly evident in *Nymphomaniac*, where the excess of Joe's desire leads to destruction rather than fulfilment.

Finally, Laine's essay hinges on the idea that the relationship between the two central characters Joe and Seligman (Stellan Skarsgård) can be read as an allegory of the broader one existing between cinema and its audience. In this particular equation, both Joe and von Trier ask for their audience's trust and the suspension of disbelief. Nevertheless, the relationship is far from one-sided, as both Seligman and the film's audience play a participatory role in the creation of the story's meaning. This, Laine argues, opens up a space for critical reflection on

the ontology of cinema, while at the same time calling into question our viewing modes and practices of looking.

Lars von Trier's Women has the considerable merit of offering a comprehensive look at the director's work, embracing his cinematic opus in its entirety, including his earliest films, and granting his more recent ones, namely *Melancholia*, *Antichrist* and the *Nymphomaniac* dilogy, scrupulous attention. It does so by showing a varied range of the sometimes-opposite readings of von Trier's films, which attests, as the editors argue, to the complexity and irreducibility of both his cinema and his female protagonists.

The volume draws its coherence from the works of Lacan and Žižek, to which the majority of the essays are theoretically indebted. Nevertheless, this might also work as a disadvantage, since readers unfamiliar with the terminology of Lacan and Žižek may feel that the texts are rather difficult to comprehend. Further, one wonders whether an overreliance on these theories could preclude the exploration of alternative, newer theoretical avenues and methodological approaches to von Trier's cinema. The fact that four of the fourteen essays (those of Badley, Žižek, Zolkos, and Chiesa, the latter of which is slightly modified) have already been published confirms this hypothesis.

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