

PAULA QUIGLEY
Trinity College Dublin

The spectacle of suffering: The ‘woman’s film’ and Lars von Trier

ABSTRACT

Many of the films of Lars von Trier can be situated within the context of the ‘woman’s film’ and, more specifically, within its subgenre of the maternal melodrama. However, the films’ intensification of the investments typically demanded by the woman’s film could be said to function as a form of ‘provocation’ (Nobus 2007). This opens up a space within which to explore the spectacle of suffering in the woman’s film in general and in von Trier’s films in particular.

KEYWORDS

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Stella Dallas
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Antichrist

Many of the films of Lars von Trier can be situated within the broad context of the ‘woman’s film’ or, more precisely, within its subgenre of the maternal melodrama. This is most obvious in relation to *Breaking the Waves* (1996) and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000). Elements of the woman’s film are evident in *Idioterne/The Idiots* (1998) also and, in a more complicated way, in *Antichrist* (2009). This curious appeal to a ‘female’ genre has, unsurprisingly, attracted the attention of a number of influential feminist film critics, amongst whom opinion regarding the value of these films to a feminist agenda is deeply divided. Debates have centered primarily on the apparent misogyny of the films themselves. For many, their intense scrutiny of the extreme (and often sexualized) suffering of the female protagonist is particularly problematic.

In addition, von Trier's peculiar take on the gendered structures of power intrinsic to the genre itself intersects with complex issues of cinematic investment and spectatorship already at stake in feminist film theory. These discussions have focused quite specifically on the spectacle of female sacrifice and suffering in the woman's film and its implications for a female spectatorship. However, while the scenario of female sacrifice is typically idealized in mainstream film and popular culture, von Trier's 'provocation' (Nobus 2007) is to push this to its extreme, to the point where the depiction of the woman's suffering becomes so excessive that it can no longer function as cathartic. Consequently, these representations are much more resistant to being recuperated as 'positive'.

My suggestion is that this intensification of experience, both on the part of the female protagonist and of the spectator in the cinema, opens up a space within which to explore the spectacle of suffering in the woman's film in general and in von Trier's films in particular. In order to consider this, I will revisit briefly some of the key contributions to the study of the maternal melodrama with a view to bringing this to bear on more recent work on von Trier. My intention is not simply to rehearse familiar arguments however but to move in a direction initiated by Dany Nobus in his 2007 article, 'The Politics of Gift-Giving and the Provocation of Lars Von Trier's *Dogville*'. Appropriating some of the insights offered by Nobus's discussion of the Derridean dynamics of gift-giving within *Dogville* in a different context allows us to approach the issue of spectatorship from a slightly different perspective, one that acknowledges its crucial role in witnessing and in a sense facilitating the spectacle of female sacrifice or loss on screen.

I will argue, extending the application of Nobus's ideas around *Dogville*, that the act of spectatorship 'makes room for the act of love to be recognized as an act of giving' (2007: 31). This is not to ignore the gender-politics inherent in this operation however. On the contrary, my suggestion is that giving the 'impossible gift' of love (2007: 30) is persistently aligned with a 'feminine' position and that the privileged tableau for the impossibility of a system of true reciprocity is the spectacle of female sacrifice. However, the audience of the woman's film is implied as female, raising the question of our own collusion in this scenario. As such, bringing together feminist theories of spectatorship and aspects of Nobus's discussion of the dynamics of gift-giving in *Dogville* may give us a way to approach the issue of female over- and under-investment in the film image, so frequently invoked in feminist readings of the woman's film.

In *Dogville*, Grace (Nicole Kidman), a 'beautiful fugitive' seeks refuge amongst 'the good and honest people' of Dogville. She offers her labour in return for shelter and the townspeople agree to this arrangement. However, as it becomes clear that Grace is not only 'missing' but 'wanted' as well (despite the fact the townspeople know she could not have committed the crime she is wanted for), their attitude towards her gradually worsens until they routinely physically and sexually abuse her. After an attempted escape, Grace's status as a slave is confirmed when she is chained to a large iron wheel and made to wear a collar with a bell. Finally, her whereabouts is revealed to her father, who is a gangster. When he arrives in the town to get her back, he tells her that she is arrogant for not holding the townspeople to the same standards as herself. Eventually, Grace agrees and orders the destruction of the entire town, sparing only the dog, Moses.

Nobus focuses on the extraordinarily cruel exchange that takes place between Grace and Vera (Patricia Clarkson) during two key scenes in the

film. During a night of 'girl talk', Vera destroys Grace's seven expensive china figurines as punishment for Grace having been repeatedly raped by Vera's husband, Chuck (Stellan Skarsgård) (Vera blames Grace for this). Vera tells Grace that if she can control her emotions while watching the first two figurines being smashed as a demonstration of her knowledge of the doctrine of Stoicism that Grace is teaching Vera's children, she will spare the rest of the figurines. Grace fails to restrain herself and has to watch while the remaining five figurines are destroyed. Grace 'repays' Vera for this in the final scene of the destruction of Dogville by replicating the scenario, this time with the destruction of Vera's seven children, claiming 'I owe her that'. If Vera does not react while watching her children being killed, the remaining children will be spared. Vera of course does react and the rest of her children are murdered before her eyes.

Nobus situates this scenario in the context of a Derridean politics of gift-giving as an 'impossible' act that resists all attempts at true reciprocity. The gift is 'impossible' as it must not be acknowledged as such by either the donor or the donee if it is to remain 'pure'. Nobus returns to Lacan's famous definition of love as 'giving what you don't have'; in these terms, love epitomizes the 'impossible gift' (2007: 30). As Nobus argues, this is not the same as saying that giving love is impossible, rather that love cannot be recognized as a gift if it is to survive as such:

If love were to be perceived and ascertained as a gift-object by one or more of the loving parties involved, then the act of loving would instantly be annihilated and re-integrated within an economically sanctioned process of commodification and exchange – reduced to the provision of a social service. The act of loving simply does not tolerate the object of love being identified as a gift, neither by the lover nor by the beloved. [...] [F]ollowing Derrida, we also need to acknowledge that the refusal to identify the love-object as a gift is precisely what allows it to persist as a pure, uncontaminated, free gift-object and what makes room for the act of love to be recognized as an act of giving.

(2007: 30–31)

Though the violent exchange between Vera and Grace appears to defy any commonsense notion of gift-giving, Nobus argues that what these scenes 'provoke' is a realization of 'the radical impossibility of reciprocity in the relationship between the giver and the receiver' (2007: 33). The fact that neither the figurines nor the children functioned as gifts during their existence means they can maintain their purity as 'free' objects for which there is no equivalent exchange. It is only when Grace realizes what the figurines mean to her (they are described by the voice-over as 'the offspring of the meeting between the township and her') that they acquire a value and thus re-enter a system of symbolic exchange. Grace realizes what she had and what she has now lost. Thus, Nobus argues, a system of 'quid pro quo' becomes inevitable, even though there can be no equivalence between the objects of exchange. This is not because Vera's seven children are automatically worth more than seven figurines. On the contrary, Nobus suggests that Grace's figurines could be considered more precious than Vera's children as the figurines mean more to Grace when smashed than Vera's children did to Vera when they were alive (that is, of course, until she lost them) (2007: 33).

Accordingly, Nobus identifies the 'real provocation' of the film as our realization that:

the installation of a symbolic system of exchange on the basis of solidarity, reciprocity, 'quid pro quo', counterbalance and friendship does not lead to the development of stable community life, but to the gradual deterioration of the social fabric into a structure of retaliation, punishment, revenge and outright hostility.

(2007: 34)

In short, the ruthless principle of 'quid pro quo', though apparently fair, can only ever lead to a radically unfair society that constantly seeks to exact its due. In this way, Nobus argues that Grace herself personifies the gift and its inexhaustible ability to provoke a destabilization of the existing structures of power, a provocation that the inhabitants of Dogville are unable to rise to.

While this gives us a fresh – and provocative – perspective from which to view *Dogville*, a film that is more usually discussed in terms of its technique (Brechtian) or politics (anti-American, apparently), what I wish to add to this analysis is the fact that this exchange takes place between women and it involves the loss of their 'children' (albeit figuratively, in Grace's case). The women destroy each other's 'offspring' and force each other to watch. In a horrific revision of the scenario of maternal loss in the woman's film, they confirm their status as 'real' women (they cannot help but cry) and as mothers (ultimately, it is their offspring that matter the most). Understood in these terms, when Grace says 'I owe her that' regarding the brutal murder of Vera's children, it can be read as something other than revenge. It can be understood as Grace visiting upon Vera the same opportunity for suffering that she herself endured earlier (Grace had already indicated that she knew Vera could not help but cry). What ensues is a harrowing spectacle of maternal loss that, in a restaging of the act of cinematic spectatorship, Grace forces herself to watch, through the window-screen of a car, having agreed to the curtains that obscure her view being opened.

Approached from this perspective, these scenes can be read as a perverse illustration of a painful system of spectatorship between women in cinema whereby each bears witness to the other's loss. In order to consider this dynamic further in relation to von Trier, I will return briefly to a key woman's film that has similarly divided feminist film critics, King Vidor's *Stella Dallas* (1937). When film theorists first turned their attention to the maternal melodrama, much of the work focused on the 1930s and '40s. Within this context, *Stella Dallas* emerged as a privileged text. If we accept *Stella Dallas* as a paradigmatic example, this gives us a place from which to consider what happens to the narrative and generic conventions of the maternal melodrama when appropriated in a manner that seemingly goes against the spirit of the woman's film. It also provides a platform from which to consider feminist theories of spectatorship and to extend their scope to include a discussion of von Trier and his treatment of the maternal melodrama. Indeed, returning to Linda Williams's influential article, "'Something Else besides a Mother": *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama' (1984), may be particularly productive as it anticipates many of the insights that have since been applied to the problem of aligning a female spectatorship with a position of power in discussions of von Trier, as encountered for instance by Caroline Bainbridge (2007) and Suzy Gordon (2004).

Essentially, *Stella Dallas* revolves around Stella (Barbara Stanwyck) 'making a show of herself', both literally and figuratively. A small-town working-class girl who aspires to the glamorous lifestyle she sees at the movies, Stella marries a wealthy man only to find that her penchant for excess in the style stakes and her love of fun mark her out as *déclassé*. Reined in by her disapproving husband, Stephen (John Boles), and by motherhood with the birth of her daughter, Laurel (Anne Shirley), Stella is suffocated by the upper-class context she longed to belong to. Her lack of good taste distances her from her husband who eventually leaves her and marries a more suitable woman, Helen (Barbara O'Neil). Stella instead devotes herself to her daughter, who becomes the love of her life. Realizing that her lack of class is harming her daughter's chances of a good marriage, she deliberately alienates her, only to finally watch Laurel's wedding to an upper-class man, alone in the rain, through the window of Helen's home.

The fundamental problem for feminist critics – here and again in relation to von Trier's films – is how to reconcile the debasement of the female protagonist with a progressive gender politics. This problem constitutes the crux of the exchange between Williams and Ann Kaplan in *Cinema Journal* in the mid-1980s. In a nutshell, the debate has to do with whether or not *Stella Dallas* resists or insists upon patriarchal norms of maternal sacrifice, with particular emphasis on the significance of the ending of the film. While Williams accepts that at this moment Stella becomes 'an abstract (and absent) ideal of motherly sacrifice' (1984: 16), she also asserts that the female spectator's response to this may not be one of straightforward acceptance of Stella's fate, but instead may be characterized by a 'double vision', a recognition of:

the contradictions between what the patriarchal resolution of the film asks us to see – the mother 'in her place' as spectator, abdicating her former position *in* the scene – and what we as empathetic, identifying female spectators can't help but feel – the loss of mother to daughter and daughter to mother.

(1984: 18)

For Kaplan, on the other hand, this is an idealized reading of the process, one that is available, on reflection only, to an educated, feminist academic in the 1980s, but certainly not the default position of a hypothetical female spectator of 1937, who is brought by the film to accept the 'necessary loss' (1985: 40) of mother to daughter and vice versa.

Despite their different positions regarding the possibilities for resistance afforded by the film, both Kaplan and Williams identify Stella's transition from spectator to spectacle and back again to spectator as a key narrative trajectory. Speaking of Stella's desire to 'be' one of the stars she sees in the film that so fascinates her, compared to the 'mere spectator' she becomes by the end of the film, Williams argues that 'Her story will become, in a sense, the unsuccessful attempt to place herself in the scene of the movie without losing that original spectatorial pleasure of looking on from afar' (1984: 12). Both Williams and Kaplan therefore see Stella as somehow reduced in her status as spectator within the film, although they disagree on the spectator's response to this in the cinema.

Certainly, the film does signal Stella's position as spectator in the last scene of the film. The curtains drawn by Helen allow her to see Laurel's wedding through a window creating a scene reminiscent of the movie screen, as has

been frequently noted. However, this is not her final moment. The last shot of Stella walking towards us finally instates her as the star of her own show, a status that is reinforced by the film's title. In this context, Stanley Cavell's reading of *Stella Dallas* invites investigation. Cavell refuses to accept a feminist reading of Stella's destruction under patriarchy, saying: 'I deny that she is eradicated as a woman and as a mother' (1996: 216). Instead, Cavell argues that at this moment Stella is finally transformed into the movie star she so aspired to as a young girl:

Her walk towards us, as if the screen becomes her gaze, is allegorized as the creating or presenting of a star, or as the interpretation of stardom. ... This star, call her Barbara Stanwyck, is without obvious beauty or glamour, first parodying them by excessive ornamentation, then taking over the screen stripped of ornament, in a nondescript hat and cloth overcoat. But she has a future. Not just because now we know – we soon knew – that this woman is the star of *The Lady Eve* and *Double Indemnity* and *Ball of Fire*, all women, it happens, on the wrong side of the law: but because she is presented *here* as a star (the camera showing that particular insatiable interest in her every action and reaction), which entails the promise of return, of unpredictable reincarnation.

(1996: 219)

As such, the fundamental paradox of the film is that in erasing herself Stella finally becomes a 'star'. For if, as Cavell suggests, Stella has not been 'eradicated as a woman and as a mother', it is because, according to the terms of the maternal melodrama, the spectacle of her self-sacrifice confirms her as both. Stella has proven herself as a mother precisely in her capacity to give the 'impossible gift' of love. However, as the 'impossible gift' of love cannot be acknowledged by either Stella or Laurel if it is not to be reduced to a mere 'social service', then our responsibility as spectators is to witness the act of love and recognize it as the gift it truly is. However, this exchange between women is not without pain. If we witness, and thus facilitate, Stella's sacrifice and consequent 'stardom' through our act of spectatorship, has Stella not also facilitated the suffering (as the result of the loss of her much-loved mother) and witnessed the consequent 'stardom' (as the result of her good marriage played out on the surrogate screen) of her own daughter? Like Grace and Vera, Stella and Laurel bring about the loss of the very thing that the other values the most. In *Stella Dallas*, the compensation for this sacrifice is a certain kind of 'stardom' that confirms their status as women and (potential, in Laurel's case) mothers. It is this profoundly problematic idealization of the female protagonist as a consequence of her self-sacrifice, rendered in a powerfully cinematic way, that returns us to von Trier, and the scrutiny as well as the suffering to which his protagonists are subjected.

Caroline Bainbridge (2007) suggests that its proximity to the woman's film offers a way of understanding von Trier's assertion that the Gold Heart trilogy is a 'feminine trilogy' (2007: 103). She argues: 'the films might be seen as feminine despite the fact that they cannot realistically be described as feminist' (2007: 120). Certainly, *Breaking the Waves*, *The Idiots* and *Dancer in the Dark* all reconfigure the 'feminine' scenario of loss and sacrifice central to *Stella Dallas*. For instance, in *Breaking the Waves*, Bess (Emily Watson), a childlike young woman living in an austere, pious community on a small Scottish island, sacrifices herself to save her dying husband, Jan (Stellan Skarsgård), who has

been injured in an accident on an oil rig. Paralyzed and sexually impotent, Jan asks Bess to have sex with other men and then to tell him about it. Bess agrees and has a series of sordid sexual encounters until finally she dies having been brutally raped by sailors. After her death, Jan recovers.

The Idiots has a less straightforward relationship with melodrama, though the dramatic culmination does involve the revelation of maternal loss. The film tells the story of Karen (Bodil Jørgensen) who joins a group of people pretending to have learning difficulties ('spassing') for a variety of reasons and with various effects. In the final scene, Karen returns home and 'spasses' in front of her family. It is here that we learn of the death of Karen's son and her inability to attend his funeral and here that we witness the disturbing effect her 'spassing' has on her family. *Dancer in the Dark*, on the other hand, is more obviously indebted to the maternal melodrama. Selma (Björk) is an immigrant factory worker approaching total blindness. She is saving for an operation to save her son's sight. When her neighbour steals the money intended for her son's operation, she kills him during an altercation and is tried for murder. She refuses to spend the money she has saved for her son on legal fees in order to save herself and is found guilty and hanged.

Thus, all three films depend upon the woman's loss and, in another sense, her victory, to conclude the drama and upon closer examination we find that the endings resonate with that of *Stella Dallas* in unexpected ways. At the end of *Breaking the Waves* for instance, we see a shot of huge bells pealing in the sky, a moment that, coming after the hand-held proximity of most of the film, speaks to an almost Sirkian sensibility in its fantasy resolution to a horrific chain of events: Bess's 'heavenly' sacrifice effecting Jan's 'miraculous' recovery. Likewise, the scene of Selma's hanging (also featuring curtains closing, again calling to mind a movie screen) finally rewards us with the crane shot so characteristic of the American musicals Selma loved, a perspective that had been withheld from us, and her, until then. Thus, Selma's suffering is not in vain and she becomes, to appropriate Kaplan's phrase in a different context, 'something else besides a mother'; she becomes a 'star'.

In this sense, the aesthetic of these films, although pushed to an extreme, appears to replicate Cavell's description of the sensibility inherent in *Stella Dallas*. The ending functions to make a 'star' of the abused woman, the camera already having shown that 'particular insatiable interest in her every action and reaction' (1996: 219). It is obvious though that this 'insatiable interest' is of a different order than that of Vidor and his contemporaries and that its excessive nature marks its protagonists out from the long line of suffering women that have populated the history of melodrama.

Bainbridge, for instance, believes the trilogy to be marked by an excess that operates both at the level of the films' stories and in terms of an 'excessive mode of filmmaking, one that is made memorable by the insistent use of large close-up shots of the protagonists' faces in scenes of heightened emotional fragility' (2007: 111). While close-ups of the female face have always been a key feature of melodrama, in the trilogy we are conscious of an unusual level of intrusion into the intimate space of another person's suffering. Bainbridge situates this intrusion in a narcissistic post-modern cultural context of a desire for an ever more elusive 'authenticity'. In this sense, von Trier's manipulation of the maternal melodrama and his intensification of its emotional affect occur in the context of a culture where a sense of self is always mediated and can only 'be authenticated through the act of being witnessed' (2007: 112).

Bainbridge recognizes the significance of the fact that we are witnessing *female* suffering however, saying:

Von Trier appears to elide femininity with masochism and therefore to perpetuate a patriarchal view of femininity as irrevocably 'other'. However, it is also arguable that he is responding to cultural assumptions and dominant perceptions of what is to be understood as femininity. Von Trier's work can thus be seen to draw attention to the way femininity often exceeds the boundaries imposed on it by patriarchal systems.

(2007: 138)

Thus, for Bainbridge, in its very excess the woman's suffering becomes something other than simply evidence of the director's misogyny. Suzy Gordon (2004), too, sees something else at work in this. Gordon argues against reading *Breaking the Waves* (1996) as a 'bad' film from a feminist point of view. Instead, she argues for a reading of the film that recognizes the ways in which it complicates the very categories of 'good' and 'bad' themselves.

Gordon approaches its negativity in terms of Melanie Klein's thesis of recognizing the violence inherent in an ethics of 'goodness' or love. Recognizing both love and hate as primary impulses, Klein identifies a dynamic whereby the child's inherent capacity for love and compassion is dependent upon his belief in the power of his own destructive force. The child wants his destructive impulses to be stopped, not only because he could cause harm to others but also because the attendant anxiety and remorse will cause himself more suffering. Thus, 'goodness' and 'badness' are simultaneous and contradictory and it is impossible to establish the primacy of one over the other. According to Klein, women epitomize this tension, in that they possess an inherent capacity for 'self-sacrifice to social and ethical tasks' (Klein quoted in Gordon 2004: 220). This can be understood as simultaneously a genuine impulse towards 'good' and as reparation towards 'loved people who in phantasy have been harmed or destroyed' (Klein quoted in Gordon 2004: 220). According to Gordon, 'The stakes for the woman are all too clear: naturalizing her sacrificial qualities displaces any recognition of the woman's violence and aggression onto an approval of her capacity for self-damage' (2004: 221).

As such, for Gordon, *Breaking the Waves* participates in the dynamic inherent to the 'feminine' position as well as disclosing the contradictions in feminist accounts of female spectatorship. Bess participates fully in her own annihilation; indeed, it is at this moment that she is most effective. Gordon identifies this aspect of the film as most resistant to recuperation by feminist critics, despite feminist film theory's own history of interrogating the internal contradictions thrown up by mainstream and/or 'misogynistic' film:

What apparently makes *Breaking the Waves* most inimical to feminism is its association of a woman's 'will' with her subordination. [...] Viewed this way, the challenge of *Breaking the Waves* might be what is perceived as 'bad' (convention, conformity, self-sacrifice) cannot be prised apart from what is 'good' (power, autonomy, agency). [...] *Breaking the Waves* disputes the idea that we can distinguish easily between 'bad' patriarchal forms and 'good' feminist modes. It complicates the possibility of positing a 'good object' for feminism, insisting instead that the 'good' is

necessarily contaminated by the destructiveness – the ‘badness’ it hopes to diminish.

(2004: 211)

To support this, Gordon cites the violence and aggression that Bess displays – showing her love for Jan by attacking him, beating him when he is late and so on – and points to the fact that Bess’s belief in her own power of destructiveness (she believes Jan was injured as a result of her begging God to bring him home no matter what) is matched only by her belief in her own goodness (‘love can save Jan’). A double burden is thus placed on Bess: she must stand for pure uncontaminated goodness and as the origin of the destructiveness that the film must rectify (2004: 211–12). According to Gordon, the film deals with this difficulty by ensuring that redemption (i.e. Jan’s recovery) is possible only with Bess’s eradication, a double punishment as it were for in dying Bess never learns of Jan’s recovery.

Gordon suggests that insisting on the woman’s active assent to her own dissolution returns us to image of the woman as both passive spectacle and over-invested spectator, here dramatized by the scene set in the cinema. In this scene, first we are shown Jan and Bess watching a film from the point of view of the screen and then we are shown Jan looking on indulgently at Bess’s immersion in the image. The cut from Bess as spectator to Bess as spectacle retraces a well-worn and particularly difficult path for feminist film theorists, as per the discussion of *Stella Dallas* outlined earlier. Interestingly, Gordon looks to the modernist writer H.D.’s response to Carl Dreyer’s *La Passion de Jeanne D’Arc/The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) as a way of thinking through this problem of female over- and under-investment in the image in cinema. Dreyer organizes his film around a painful proximity to the suffering Joan (Maria Falconetti). This torments H.D., who is deeply affected by the agony she sees on screen yet powerless to prevent it. Gordon cites Lizzie Franke’s response to *Breaking the Waves* as similar, as Franke too is pained and frustrated by the film’s unbearable proximity at the same time as she can do no more than observe (Bjorkman and Franke 1996).

Clearly, then, many theorists have been troubled by the intimation of passivity in relation to female spectatorship. As Gordon notes, this concern was articulated most influentially by Mary Ann Doane in *The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s* (1987) and other feminist film criticisms of the 1980s. However, if we return to Nobus’s discussion of love as the ‘impossible gift’ that can never be recognized as such by either party, then within this context the act of spectatorship must be passive, for to intervene would be to deny the protagonist her right to perform her ‘femininity’. However, as I have argued, the payoff accorded to the female protagonist of the mainstream woman’s film is what we might call a sense of cinema. In her self-sacrifice she becomes the star of the show and the reward for the spectator is a powerful cinematic investment that alludes to and idealizes a figure of loss.

For Gordon, the inclusion of this scene of spectatorship in *Breaking the Waves* serves to amplify the demands made on Bess:

Breaking the Waves [...] makes that link between debilitating proximity and a female spectator. Held within the male gaze of a lover whose later sexual demands motivate her to engineer her own violation, this moment not only profiles the classic alignment of the male gaze with sadistic voyeurism and the female spectator with a self-effacing

masochism, but adds the proviso that the woman assume responsibility for the man's sadism, that she take the matter of suffering into her own hands. All this makes the problem of proximity even more devastating than we might once have imagined. The film's thesis on 'goodness' therefore requires more than the woman's complicity alone. It demands that she claim as her privilege the terms of her annihilation.

(2004: 213)

This idea of pain as the woman's 'privilege' engages my own thoughts on the spectatorial bond between suffering women so frequently alluded to in cinema: women watching other women suffer on screen and women watching this suffering in the cinema. We need only think of Godard's *Vivre Sa Vie* (1962), a familiar, if defamiliarized, tale of a beautiful young woman's descent into prostitution and her ensuing destruction. Here, we as spectators are moved as we watch Nana (Anna Karina) watching Dreyer's *Joan of Arc*, crying as she bears witness to Joan's anguish in anticipation of her death at the stake. Though Nana's status as an image is frequently underlined and in the process interrogated by the film, she is denied a similar spectacular martyrdom. Her death in the film is a fairly perfunctory affair, rendered briefly in long shot. The suffering of Joan, on the other hand, is profoundly cinematic – not only in the sense that Dreyer's film is organized around close-ups of Joan's anguished face – but in the sense that its primary purpose is to be witnessed. Like Bess (and Selma), Joan is a young woman whose self-belief is matched only by her self-destruction and, like Bess (and Grace and Selma) her 'goodness' constitutes a 'provocation' that those around her are unable to rise to.

This comparison is clearly not without its problems however. Despite the obvious points of contact between the two filmmakers, unlike von Trier, Dreyer is rarely accused of misogyny, despite the close-up agonies to which Joan, and we as spectators, are subjected. There is clearly something else in von Trier's films that undercuts the satisfaction of our own status as spectators, witnessing the gift of love. As noted earlier, one way of approaching this is by identifying an excess, something that goes too far in von Trier's films and in so doing becomes obscene. In this sense, *Antichrist* surely constitutes a tipping point.

If we accept Gordon's reading of Bess as the origin of both goodness and destructiveness in *Breaking the Waves*, we can see that this holds for several of von Trier's other protagonists also. For instance, in *Dancer in the Dark*, Selma has passed her son Gene's (Vladica Kostic) condition onto him. The deterioration of his sight is genetically inherited; Selma wanted a baby to love, so she went ahead and had a child despite knowing he would be similarly afflicted. Furthermore, her refusal to participate as required in the legal system, as well as her refusal to use the money that she saved for legal fees, brings about once more the loss of much-loved mother to child. Thus, Selma's self-sacrifice is not without its painful consequences for those around her and once again her victory is simultaneous with her loss. Thus, much as Stella visits a violence upon her daughter Laurel when she leads her to believe that she has rejected her, the woman's self-sacrifice is not without its destructiveness and nowhere is this more starkly realized than in the character of the grieving mother (Charlotte Gainsbourg) in *Antichrist*. If *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark* ultimately privilege the woman's 'goodness' over her 'badness' however, *Antichrist* inverts this and makes the woman's destructiveness the source of all evil.

In *Antichrist*, as a result of the woman's atypical (i.e. ferocious and unrelenting) grief after the death of their child, a couple retreat to their house in the woods ('Eden') to try to come to terms with their loss and to attempt to bring the woman to a point of acceptance. The retreat gradually deteriorates into an orgy of violence however, with notorious scenes of sexual violence and genital self-mutilation, culminating in the woman's death at the hands of her husband (Willem Dafoe). So, once again, *Antichrist* is concerned with maternal loss; however, the sleight of hand that the film performs is to identify the grieving mother as the architect of her own annihilation. This is achieved by segueing from the terrain of the maternal melodrama to its inverse, the dark and dangerous realm of the 'monstrous feminine' (Creed 1993).

As in *Stella Dallas*, the problem of reconciling a sexual identity with the maternal role is central. This time however, the link between the mother's active sexuality and the destruction of her child is made explicit in the opening sequence, cutting between the couple having sex and their child climbing out of his cot and falling from an open window to his death. The film then moves from its initial presentation of the woman as sympathetic in her grief and the man as curiously detached to its final depiction of the woman as sexually rapacious and monstrously violent, while the man manages to remain rational in the face of insane provocation. Early indications of the woman's madness are achieved primarily through an escalation of her sexual demands, showing how her sexual appetite has increased from a source of comfort in the wake of her child's death to a violent and voracious desire that can never be satisfied and threatens to consume her husband.

The fundamental conflict between the woman's sexual self and her role as a good mother is underlined by subsequent revelations. Her admission that she knew her son could climb out of his cot initially seems like the self-torment typical in the aftermath of such a terrible accident. This admission becomes more ominous however when we learn the results of her son's autopsy, which reveals that the bones of his feet were malformed. The man's scrutiny of an old photograph then reveals the child to be wearing his shoes on the wrong feet. Though the woman passes this off as an innocent mistake, further detection on the part of her husband reveals that his shoes were always on the wrong feet and a flashback confirms his suspicions. We see the woman forcing the wrong shoes on her son's feet, ignoring his distress. The implication is clear: there was some abusive element in her relationship with her son that situates her sexual activity on the night of her son's death in a more explicitly guilty context.

This in turn is situated in the broader context of an equation of women with evil. Before her son's death, the woman had been writing a Ph.D. thesis on gynocide and, again, through her husband's eyes, we see that this topic may have become an unhealthy obsession. Disturbing depictions of violence against women line the walls and her notebooks show her increasingly erratic handwriting. Thus, it is slowly revealed to us that the woman's madness predated the death of her son and at the same time her grief becomes something monstrous. The film suggests that the sexually rapacious destructiveness given free rein in the aftermath of the accident was both incipient and inherent to her gender, a point that is reinforced by the use of anomic characters, suggesting a universality that is less emphatic in von Trier's earlier films. In keeping with its insistence on female irrationality, the film has the woman espouse this position herself ('women do not control their own bodies – nature does') while the man tries to make her see 'reason'. This ensures that

identification of the female with an irrational destructiveness comes from the woman herself and thus the responsibility for her elimination is her own.

Arguably, *Antichrist* is the point in von Trier's *oeuvre* where the woman's idealized self-sacrifice becomes grotesque self-harm. In one of the most controversial scenes in the film (after she bores a hole in her husband's leg through which to drive an iron bar with a heavy wheel attached) we see the woman mutilate her genitals with a pair of scissors. The 'painful proximity' of von Trier's earlier films here gives way to surgical close-up and the image of genital mutilation is a violent intensification of von Trier's earlier representations of a specifically female capacity for self-damage. That her self-mutilation is sexualized is no coincidence however. Like Stella before her, she has failed her child and the only appropriate response in this generic context is the excision of her sexual self.

Thus, in moving from the realm of maternal melodrama to the realm of the 'monstrous feminine', *Antichrist* exposes the extent to which one is held in the other, as well as the extent to which each is invested in the spectacle of female suffering. Like Bess and Selma before her, the woman's destructiveness is ultimately directed at herself. However, given her monstrous nature, it falls upon her husband to kill her and only then can order be restored. Significantly, after strangling her, the man burns her body on a pyre. In a sense then, like Joan of Arc she is burned at the stake; however, unlike Joan, she is the witch she is suspected of being. As such, if one of the most problematic aspects of *Breaking the Waves* is its presentation of suffering as not only the woman's destiny but her 'privilege' (Gordon 2004: 203), the explicit collapse of the maternal into the monstrous in *Antichrist* makes the woman's suffering a requirement.

In the maternal melodrama, for the woman to be denied the privilege of suffering is to be denied the right to perform the maternal role. As such, in *Breaking the Waves*, by giving over control of her own sexuality to Jan, Bess effectively becomes 'mother' to him in that her sexual sacrifice nurses him back to health and ensures his survival. His return from impotence to virile masculinity is in inverse proportion to the violent destruction of her own active enjoyment of sex. In this sense, Selma is perhaps the 'best' mother in the Gold Heart trilogy as she has no interest in sexual liaisons at all, focusing all her energy on her child instead. In *Antichrist*, then, the idealization of maternal self-sacrifice evident in von Trier's earlier films and the suppression of the violent tendencies inherent therein (as argued by Gordon), is inverted, and the destructiveness apparently inherent in female sexuality is given free rein only to once again guarantee its self-destruction.

Williams identifies 'the mixed messages – of joy in pain, pleasure in sacrifice – that typically resolve the melodramatic conflicts of "the woman's film"' (1984: 2). From this perspective, one of the many questions raised by von Trier's films is: what happens to the familiar narrative and generic conventions of the woman's film when appropriated in a manner that seems excessive? This is not simply a question of what happens when a male director appropriates a female genre. The established 'masters' of the of the genre are all men – D. W. Griffith, King Vidor, Douglas Sirk, to name but a few – and so questions of authorship and/or spectatorial investment cannot be linked to gender in any straightforward way. That said, the intensification of affect characteristic of von Trier's films reflects back on our own fascinations with more mainstream images of female suffering and makes the conventional investment of the spectator much more problematic.

As I have argued, one way to re-think the prescribed role of the spectator in the woman's film is as inhabiting the crucial role of witness, recognising the inherently 'impossible gift' of love. We must remember however that in *Breaking the Waves*, *The Idiots* and *Dancer in the Dark* the scenario of self-sacrifice is persistently figured as feminine and that the female protagonist is often abused by her community as a result. In these instances, the woman's effectiveness is dependent upon her capacity for self-destruction. However, instead of accepting the Kleinian position of imagining women as inherently more amenable to self-sacrifice we must think this through in terms of the gendered positions available within a social and cinematic system such as our own.

In short, my suggestion is that in our own profoundly gendered social system governed by a principle of quid pro quo, the 'feminine' scenario of self-sacrifice is naturalized and idealized on screen in the image of the suffering woman. This is situated in a social and cinematic context that is already profoundly invested in the spectacle of woman (as has been extensively argued elsewhere) and already fundamentally conflicted as to the compatibility of the sexual and maternal roles. And so, in the woman's film, spectacle and sacrifice coalesce in powerful ways that identify the woman's femininity precisely in her capacity to give and ergo, to lose. In the maternal melodrama this is condensed into the image of the de-sexualized mother who claims self-sacrifice as her right and through the exercise of her inherently destructive capacity for love ensures the perpetuation of this cycle. As I have argued, this is idealized in mainstream cinema in ways that transform the suffering woman into a 'star', engaging our fascination and ensuring our complicity with its consequences. However, perhaps in going too far, von Trier's 'provocation' is to bring us closer to the painful realities of our own investments in the spectacle of female sacrifice and suffering on screen.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Paula Quigley is a lecturer in Film Studies at Trinity College Dublin.

Contact: Film Studies Department, School of Drama, Film and Music, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin 2, Ireland.

E-mail: pquigley@tcd.ie

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