

Violence, Pregnant with Peace: Criminological Reading of Lars von Trier

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The world's peoples, wherever they might live, are divided into two tribes: The world in which the tribes live is a desert. One tribe lives in the land that surrounds that of the first tribe. The desert tribe in the land around the well wants peace. The tribe in the more distant land does not want peace. It wants water! The tribe in the more distant land may be a little uncivilized and does not even have a word for peace. It does, on the other hand, have a word for thirst, and in this situation that's more or less the same thing. The committee from the land around the well consists of good, intelligent, beautiful, rich and comfortable people, who are not thirsty (and who thus have the energy and time required by committee work). In the land around the well there's a lot of talk about the peace prize, which people from the land with the well give to other people living in the land of the well. In the more distant land one doesn't talk about the peace prize very much. Thank you for the peace prize!

Lars von Trier, accepting the UNICEF Cinema for Peace prize
(Hjort 2005, p. 79)

Abstract. In this article, the works of cinema director Lars von Trier are invoked as an instrument to explain various criminological theories. Mostly, the approach of cultural criminology is applied as well as other perspectives: dramaturgical-existential ap-

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proach, peacemaking, and (anti)positivism. Both because of the topics presented (such as transgressing and questioning the socially acceptable norms, violence, fear, humiliation, deviant sexuality, despair, etc.) and the methodology of the filmmaking process, the self-labelled 'best director in the world' can be quite rightly described as one of the most thought-provoking criminologists in Europe. Paradoxically, ideas presented in his films, though seemingly violent and destructive, might be inspirational for those who seek peace and enlightenment.

Key words: Cultural criminology, cinema; Lars von Trier, existential approach, peacemaking.

Taikos kupinas smurtas: kriminologinė Larso von Triero filmų interpretacija

Santrauka. Šiame straipsnyje kino režisieriaus Larso von Triero darbai pasitelkiami kaip instrumentas įvairioms kriminologijos teorijoms paaiškinti. Dažniausiai taikomas kultūrinės kriminologijos požiūris ir kitos perspektyvos: dramaturginė-egzistencinė prieiga, taikdariška kriminologija ir (anti)pozityvizmas. Tiek dėl pateiktų temų (tokių kaip visuomenei priimtinių normų peržengimas ir kvestionavimas, smurtas, baimė, pažeminimas, deviacinis seksualumas, neviltis ir kt.), tiek dėl filmo kūrimo metodikos Larsas von Trieras, save vadinantis „geriausiu pasaulio režisieriumi“, gali būti visiškai pagrįstai apibūdinamas kaip vienas iš labiausiai susimąstyti verčiančių kriminologų Europoje. Paradoksalu, bet jo filmuose pateiktos idėjos, nors atrodo smurtinės ir destruktivos, gali įkvėpti siekiant ramybės ir nušvitimo.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: kultūrinė kriminologija, kinas, Larsas von Trieras, egzistencinė prieiga, taikdariška kriminologija.

Introduction

Criminological theory is produced not only in the academic world, through scholarly research, but also in popular culture, through such vehicles as film (Rafter, Brown 2011, p. 2). As Majid Yar notes, it has been suggested that the moving image (and hence the 'movie') was the quintessential and dominant cultural form of the 20th century. Shared meanings, social changes and challenges, narrations of human drama, utopian dreams and dystopian nightmares, our fears and fantasies; all have been projected through the lens of cinematic technology (Yar 2010, p. 68-82).

Since this publication deals mostly with the works of one director, the question arises how Lars von Trier and his films could be of interest to lawyers and

criminologists? Luckily, the answer to this question has already been presented by criminologists who work(ed) in interrelated fields. Rafter argued that philosophically similar films raise questions concerning the nature of good and evil. Psychologically, they encourage viewers to identify with victims and offenders – even serial killers – whose vulnerabilities, sexualities and moralities may be totally unfamiliar. Ethically and religiously, they take passionate moral positions that would be out of place in academic analyses. Thus, this kind of films constitute a type of discourse different from academic criminology, one with its own types of truth; a kind of ‘new, independent artistic reality’ (Rafter 2007). Admittedly, the ‘new reality’ of Lars von Trier is usually very cruel, and it may be criminal as well. In this respect von Trier’s stance is similar to, among others, French poet and playwright Antonin Artaud who has stated that without an element of cruelty at the root of every spectacle, the theatre is not possible: in our present state of degeneration it is through the skin that metaphysics must be made to re-enter our minds (Artaud 1958, p. 99). Interestingly, cultural criminologists employ similar notions: for example, Stephen Lyng (2004) speaks about an *embodied criminology of the skin*. According to him, criminal edgework represents a form of resistance to the existing structures of political and economic power, as it stands in opposition to the disembodied system imperatives of late capitalism. As for a wider contemporary context, German director Michael Haneke has transmitted the interrelated idea: arguing that the whole Western world lives at the cost of the third world, he rhetorically asks what other topics we could take – both in cinema and in literature – if not disgust with ourselves or our dirty conscience (Interview with Michael Haneke, 2014).

And von Trier, too – like his colleague Haneke – bespeaks the dirty conscience of our society. By doing so, Lars von Trier creates self-reflective and authentic films, and when he tries to look at the wicked side of the human mind, his characters in the films become really dark and merge with darkness. For this reason, the works of von Trier might be inspirational especially for those who engage into the subjects that were called by Immanuel Kant ‘radical evil’. By this Kant meant affronts to human dignity so insistent and persistent that our ordinary moral assessments and responses seem to dwindle into irrelevance (Watts, Bessant and Hill 2008, p. 224). Sometimes von Trier’s films are called social experiments; at times – meditations on evil, modern sanctity, misogyny, alienation, the destructive nature of current society, etc.

The text of the article is divided into two parts: the first part analyses how Lars von Trier rejects an objective stance in his movies and the second part discusses a cultural and existential approach, as well as the link to peacemaking criminology. The second part is a continuation of the first one: when 'grand and general' theories are rejected, there should be something left; and although it is far from easy to grasp as to what theoretical perspective exactly is left, the cultural-existential approach might help to fill the void.

1. A critical stance towards positivism

Bearing in mind the historical context, 'rejection of positivism' in this part is understood similarly to how Erving Goffman put it. Goffman (together with Becker) challenged positivist criminology, which assumes that deviance and crime are objectively real transgressions of the social order requiring the development of specialist-expert knowledge (by way of diagnosis, classification and measurement), and professional corrective interventions (therapy, treatment, etc.). The sympathy towards similar theoretical outlook in von Trier's works is witnessed by the rejection of the positivistic belief that crime can be rationally explained and subsequently rooted out (esp. in *Dogville* (2003) and further analysed *Antichrist* (2009)). In *Dogville*, such endeavours might be seen as a repressive ideology *per se*: people cannot impose the 'universal' values of humanism and 'treat' other people with some quasi-therapeutic means since such imposition might go hand in hand with destruction.

As for the storyline of the film in question, it can be summarised as follows. *Dogville* is a small American town, affected by the Great Depression, and its inhabitants Joe and Jane are seemingly sweet and ordinary people, each with some human weaknesses. However, when Grace (a name which Christian viewers see as highly significant), who is running from gangsters, comes to the town, these 'slight weaknesses' gradually turn into sadistic exploitation of the vulnerable person. Grace is gradually transformed into an object designed to meet someone's needs. In the end, having psychologically, physically and sexually degraded her, they hand her over to her pursuers. She is thrust into the head mobster's car, and it becomes apparent that he is in fact her father, from whom she was fleeing as much in anger as in fear. Her pursuer turns out to be her rescuer. The father and

daughter then discuss what the fate of the town should be. Given time to think, Grace notices the gooseberry bushes at the roadside. At first, she sees these ugly, thorny things as hopeful signs of potential fruit in future years; then the moonlight shifts, and she sees the reality of their present thorns. This makes her realise that if she had stood in the townspeople's shoes, she might have done what they did – but could have never then justified her actions to herself (Pyper 2010). So, while persistently trying to justify and like people of the town, Grace eventually fails in her efforts and, at the end of the film, gives orders to kill everyone in the town, except for dog Moses. She believes that the dog is the only one that has the right to be angry at her (accordingly, the dog is the only one having the right to live) because she once took its bone.

The film is described as a social experiment, which seeks to find out how solidarity and mutually beneficial exchanges transform into animosity, punishment and grand revenge (Koutsourakis 2011, p. 191). The press reported that *Dogville* was one of the favourite films of imprisoned killer Anders Breivik. In response to this news, Lars von Trier said that he was sorry if *Dogville* inspired Anders Breivik to kill 77 people, but the film itself was intended to educate the public by giving people the opportunity to separate themselves from revenge rather than to encourage violence (The Hollywood Reporter 2011). In that respect, von Trier's answer echoes the insights of James Gilligan who has said that aggressive behaviour is not provoked by the presentation of violence in media as such – it is provoked by its presentation as entertainment rather than as tragedy. A case in point is Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – probably nobody would doubt that the sufferings in this drama are extremely deep and strong – and thus nobody would like to repeat and reproduce them (Gilligan 2002, p. 96-97). To put it bluntly, through the lens of cinema, it is convenient at times to use violence and brutally unmask humanity – yet with one essential condition – such unmasking cannot be done in a cheap, banal, shallow and/or mocking way. Von Trier's movies are not supposed to be cheap. However – and probably here lies the danger of misunderstanding and misinterpreting his films – at times, the ideas presented within the films are indeed dangerous and the proper interpretation of them require philosophical, cultural, and even theological knowledge. Without certain knowledge, it might appear that the author of the movies is not von Trier, but the Devil itself. For example, a theological perspective can help interpret the finish of previously discussed *Dogville*. Victor Morton argues that the end of *Dogville*

and the ‘turn’ in Grace’s character should not trouble anyone with a firm grasp of the Bible and Christian history. Or rather it should not trouble any more than Christianity itself does (Pyper 2010). Among others, the link to the story of Sodom in The Book of Genesis is reinforced because that story explicitly deals with the problem of the indiscriminate nature of divine justice. A case in point is Abraham who pleads with God to rescind his intention of punishing the town precisely on the grounds that the wicked and righteous would be destroyed alike: “*Will you sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that guilty and innocent are alike*” (Genesis 18:23-25). He succeeds in bargaining God down so that the presence of only ten righteous people in the city would be enough to save it (Pyper 2010).

In addition, *Dogville* can be seen as a clash of two paradigms: The Old Testament (represented by Grace’s father) and the New Testament (represented by Grace before her ‘turn’). Interestingly, both paradigms seem to fail, and this has something to do with von Trier’s critical stance towards objective truths in general. By citing Jeffrey R. Wilson, it might be said that von Trier does not attempt to achieve objectivity, but instead attempts to sustain a pluralised version of subjectivity – the difference being that objectivity tries to ascertain truth from a God’s-eye view of the world, a perspective that is simply unattainable, while a diverse form of subjectivity remains firmly rooted here on earth, looking from multiple human perspectives, weighing the circumstances and commitments of each perspective (Wilson 2014).

To continue consideration of the motives for terror, serial killing, revenge and the destructive nature of the society in general, another movie, *The House that Jack Built* (2018), needs to be analysed. This film is about a serial killer who is supposedly different from ‘ordinary’ members of society. However, probably one of the warnings of this film is exactly the opposite: our society is organised in such a way that personal love and empathy are replaced by cold rational calculation, indifference and obedience to an abstract order.¹ Thus, all of the members of society bear certain responsibility for the actions of the serial killer: similar

¹ For the sake of comparison, it should be noted that this idea is inherently characteristic not only to von Trier and his films. For example, in *Clockwork Orange* a similar question is raised by Burgess and Kubrick: whether mechanical ‘goodness’ is really better than freely chosen evil (Milerius 2018, p. 289).

indiscriminate justice as in *Dogville* is evident. And also, theological interpretation may come into play here: rough justice is evident *inter alia* in The Book of Genesis when God threatens *all* of Abimelech's people with death (because of Abimelech's inadvertent involvement with Sarah) (Pyper 2010).

Returning to the storyline, in the film Jack is an engineer and owns some land where he tries to build a house. He is not successful and keeps changing building materials and drawings several times until he realises that the building he wants to leave behind is not just the construction of wood or concrete, but the columns and arches of stagnant human bodies. Then Jack starts killing. The movie is interesting to view through the lens of a positivist paradigm, which seeks to identify key differences between criminals and non-criminals. As can be inferred from the film, these differences are not that clear. In this regard, the key concept of critical criminology applies: crime has no ontological reality (Hulsman 1986). Jack's evident 'lack of empathy' is inherent in the society where he lives – by taking a more sophisticated form that Zygmund Bauman called 'adiaphorisation' (Bauman, Donskis 2017, p. 16, 67). The scene where adiaphorisation reveals itself most evidently is the one with an elderly policeman who, upon hearing the plain truth that a man killed sixty people and his girlfriend is seeking help, stays indifferent to these facts and, instead, mocks the couple as if they have had too much to drink.

Hence, in von Trier's films nothing is self-evident. There are no objective truths, and no universal morality. And that might be the contribution of von Trier to law and criminology: his films (similarly as, for instance, Shakespeare's plays) open up an imaginative space for working out various emotions, judgments, analyses, and theories of criminology, imaginative *Verstehen* of sorts – but a *Verstehen* in which the consequences of erroneous thought are less severe than they are in life, which allows for the exploration of uncomfortable or even dangerous ideas (Wilson 2014).

2. Cultural criminology, existential approach and peacemaking

In fact, it should be admitted that cultural criminology is far from being the only (or the 'best') way to explain Lars von Trier's movies. One can claim with similar success that his films are inherently postmodern, since the emer-

gence and popularity of such films is symptomatic of a more general social and cultural shift, where clear ideological and moral messages no longer dominate popular representations (Yar 2010, p. 68-82). Cultural criminology's collage of intellectual influences surfaces *inter alia* in the methodologies employed by cultural criminologists: within the context of works by Lars von Trier, existential approach and interrelated ethnographic methodology are topical.

The existential approach can be mostly observed in the *Golden Heart* trilogy. In all three films, the protagonist sacrifices herself for the sake of a higher purpose. The sacrifices look irrationally blind, stupid and naïve (esp. in *Breaking the Waves* (1996), but at the same time they are light and full of hope. Here, the teaching of Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard comes into play: when faith transgresses the boundaries of rationality, then an authentic individual's relationship with God might appear as criminal, absurd or insane.

In this regard, certain characters in von Trier's films (esp. Joe in *Nymphomaniac* and Bess in *Breaking the Waves*) might be compared to the character of Abraham, described in Kierkegaard's 'Fear and Trembling'. This book praises Abraham as a symbol of the 'suspension of the ethical.' For this reason, Buber and Levinas condemn this work as it has been linked to fundamentalism and terrorism. However, 'the suspension of the ethical' implied in Abraham's silence might be linked not to religious fanaticism, but related to a new ethics, or 'hyper-ethics' as Kierkegaard and Derrida try to call it (Llevadot 2011). Von Trier seemingly joins these two sides of the same coin: he shows that 'hyper-ethics' might lead both to enlightenment (the case of Abraham in Judaism and Christianity), yet also to even deeper destruction (in *Nymphomaniac* at the end of the film) (Mažeikis 2018, p. 346).

This 'hyper-ethical' dimension also helps to explain the aforementioned anti-positivistic insight that criminals do not ontologically differ from non-criminals. To illustrate this by using the words of the director himself, a short excerpt from an interview with Lars von Trier follows (AK refers to Angelos Koutsourakis):

AK. *What strikes me in your films is that the boundaries between the oppressors and the oppressed are not easily distinguishable.*

LvT. *Oh yes. But I am old fashioned. I do not believe in good and evil. I think that there are tendencies inside an individual; it is like a more complex understanding of human nature* (Koutsourakis 2011, p. 267-275).

It might be added that not only are there not so many identifiable differences between offenders and non-offenders (the oppressors and the oppressed in Koutsorakis' terms), but also offenders' behaviour raises certain existential questions for themselves and for society in general; and they solve some of these questions by committing criminal acts. In this respect, both positivism in law and positivism in criminology seem to be insufficient in dealing with existential queries and – as Norwegian criminologist Nils Christie puts it – society needs guidelines for sentencing originating from deeper norms than those given by the state. In plain words, Nils Christie advocates for the revitalisation of the natural law, and, interestingly, he states that, in searching for the natural principles of law, artists (such as Shakespeare and his co-workers) might be better allies than behavioural scientists, social workers, psychiatrists or politicians (Christie 1986). In other words, art may help to supplement the stringencies of cognitive legal and scientific dogmatics, drawing attention to the irreducible complexity of individual human existence. Instead of bypassing the intricacies of particularity, the artistic imagination could complement modern law's tendency to simplify situations to more or less objective standards (Van den Berge 2017). In this respect, von Trier is exactly the proper ally, and undoubtedly there are more. Von Trier himself stated that one of his films was inspired *inter alia* by Dostoevsky (O' Donoghue 2014). And that is not strange: both for von Trier and Dostoevsky crime-related feelings and emotional expressions are more important than (criminological) rationalised theory. Crime, then, as Dostoevsky teaches out of the depths of his own experiences, is the exacerbation of constrained, thwarted personality: and he brought this message many decades before Alfred Adler developed his doctrine of the inadequacy-reaction. It is all a theme with variations: the striving for the feeling of superiority, of power, the Napoleonic or Jehovah complex. We are speaking of the genuine criminal; that is to say, one who commits crime for crime's sake, for the subjective feeling he gets out of the anti-social act (Squires 1937). As for Lars von Trier's interrelated stance, the importance of subjective experience within his movies is present in the narrative sense: von Trier puts autobiographical details into his films, and such technique resembles the ethnographical method. For example, Lars von Trier claims he has been on shamanic journeys with the talking fox, whereas in *Antichrist*, the fox said that 'chaos reigns' (Interview with Lars von Trier 2009). In addition, the director

endeavours to create works of art such that a spectator would literally feel the presence of violence and deviation. For instance, in *The Idiots*, real people with Down syndrome are acting,² whereas in *Dancer in the dark* the viewing public together with the director are forced to count the steps until the death penalty is carried out. Therefore, by his famous motto 'film should be like a stone in the shoe' Lars von Trier calls for a self-reflexive, emphatic and, to some extent, painful experience while watching his films. In this respect, such ideas again echo Goffman's dramaturgical approach. The ethnographic method has a certain advantage over other (qualitative) methods in that during ethnographic observation (or self-reflexive film as in von Trier's context) the actors are supposed to be natural. Therefore, such observation of the acting crew allows for direct understanding of the 'backstage' i.e. unplayed things. More traditional filmmaking methods do not cover, or cover fewer, behind-the-scenes aspects, as actors tend automatically to establish demonstrative relationships (or, as Lars von Trier puts it, 'a more controlled way of performing') with the viewing public.

One of the films where the actor (Emily Watson) breaks the fourth wall and literally looks into the eyes of the viewers and, by doing so, enters the territory of self-reflexive film, is *Breaking the Waves*. This film might be described as 'a meditation on modern sainthood, on the power of childlike innocence and faith'. The storyline goes like this: a naive young woman, Bess, from a conservative and isolated Scottish Christian community, falls in love and marries an outsider, Jan, an oil-rig worker who must leave her to go to work. He returns after having been gravely injured in an accident and is paralysed. What Jan wants and needs, he says, is for Bess to have sexual experiences with other men and retell those encounters to him. Bess becomes convinced that this behaviour will keep him alive and so she submits to his plan. As Bess spirals down this path, she is eventually killed by the increasing levels of sexual violence that come along with her prostitution activities. After her death, Jan makes a miraculous recovery. This miracle is signalled by the sounds of ringing church

² Such a way of making a movie raises certain legal questions, but again the same criteria (as with portraying violence) might be applied. If people with Down syndrome were portrayed in a mocking or degrading manner, then the movie should probably be censored. However, one of the main ideas of the film is much deeper: the viewers are called to challenge middle-class values and conformism, as well as to explore their 'inner idiot'.

bells, perhaps from the direction of the mainland, although this is impossible in practice since that church was, for theological reasons, bell-less. Jan and his friends steal Bess' body from the clutches of the church and bury her at sea. So, it appears as if Bess had, indeed, saved Jan – at the cost of her own life (Mercadante 2016). Bess' behaviour is perpetually pathologised, but it remains a question whether or not she is to be understood as developmentally challenged, psychologically unsound, or simply operating in a radically different tenor than the rest of the world comprehends or allows (Dasios 2016).

Still, even the strangest demeanour can be comprehended; and to do that the concepts of dissent and edgework as well as theological interpretation turn out to be useful. As for crimes of dissent, these types of deviant acts imply a higher (or different) standard of morality. In the face of tensions between personal morality and collective responsibility, autonomy and authority, the dissenting individuals stay true to their personal conscience. Criminal forms of dissent are therefore a legitimate, indeed a noble, form of political action. They are also individual acts of anarchy (Lovell 2009, p. 65-69).

From the perspective of cultural criminology, Bess' behaviour reminds so-called 'edgework' behaviour. 'Edgework' describes activities that involve a clearly observable threat to one's physical and mental wellbeing, or sense of ordered existence. Edgeworkers voluntarily participate 'in life-threatening or anomie-producing activities' in order to sharpen their skills in navigating a challenging, passionate experience that turns a blind eye to the rational concerns of modern Western culture. As Ferrell has noted, the activities of those attracted to extreme experiences offer a type of resistance to the dehumanising constraints and routine degradations of everyday life. Voluntary risk-taking provides individuals with creative and self-actualising experiences that can amount to a form of (resistive) transcendence. Moreover, in criticising 'rational choice' models for understanding crime, contemporary writers such as Katz, Ferrell and Young have sought to further explore the significance of subjective experience in criminal action, especially around notions of escape, the quest for intense sensual stimulation, testing of the body, and the construction and display of character (Hardie-Bick, Hadfield 2011, p. 30).

From the theological point of view, such a storyline might be perceived as a modern narrative about a Christ figure embodied not in a man, but in a woman. Moreover, the female figure is not only a carnal change; the con-

ceptual ideas are also different compared to those of the traditional Christian doctrine. Graphically, such a narrative might be presented as an alternative Gospel (Discussion on Breaking the Waves, 2016).

The difference between traditional Christianity and Gospel according to Woman



Love your neighbour as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these (Mark 12:31). Do what you want yourself to be done (*traditional Christianity*).



Do to your beloved one what is needed for him/her. Even if this is against law, morality or your own intuition (*alternative Gospel*).

An alternative 'Gospel' might be called as a protest against socially acceptable 'masculine' norms. As is seen, Bess is calling for a different set of norms – those that correspond to the spontaneous flow of nature. Similar cosmic motives are also seen in other von Trier's films – especially in *Nymphomaniac* (2013) and *Antichrist* (2009).

One of the writers closest to von Trier in this regard (i.e. one who also emphasises the male-female dichotomy both literally and figuratively) would be Hal Pepinsky. Paradoxically, such a peaceful writer as Pepinsky can be very close to 'aggressive' von Trier. The common thread that links the works of these two authors is the attempt to deconstruct norms, values and the patriarchal order in general. Both authors try to show that politics, law, order, and even justice might be the cause of violence.

In other words, peacemaking criminology tries to deconstruct the old paradigm that originated from Ancient Greek culture and, precisely, the Iliad, that, possibly, war is the father of all things; and that the universe of the Iliad is woven completely out of the deeds and sufferings of rage (Sloterdijk 2010, p. 7). Similar insights are presented by Lithuanian-American philosopher Algis Mickūnas who has said that the rise of patriarchy echoes the turn from *my-*

thos to *logos* – from natural cosmos to unambiguous logocentrism, restrictions and limitations (Mickūnas 1997, p. 39-67). It is held that the patriarchal order is higher and purer, since it is subjugated to rational rules. It comes out that Western civilisation by itself presupposes violence – since the inherent Eros, the mystery and vitality of a woman, is negated by the use of ‘plain’ masculine power and, accordingly, a ‘clear’ watershed between the righteous and the erroneous is drawn (Mickūnas 2010, p. 126, 137, 148, 165).

In addition, according to Pepinsky, building up safety, security, trust, and peace takes place in a realm quite different from that of justice. The metaphorical call might be – ‘stop seeking justice’ – stop searching for winners and losers, the righteous, and the erroneous. An alternative to ‘seeking justice’ is found in the day-to-day lives of real people engaged in the existential decisions of their daily lives (Pepinsky 2006, p. x). Thus, peacemaking criminologists observe that (final) justice, which is a radical idea even within radical criminology, is not the objective of criminology. Justice connotes a result, a solution, a completion, rather than a promise of communication and open negotiation of social conflict. It connotes attachment to an outcome too soon imagined and realised. In this regard, justice is merely one of many mental constructs, and people, being overly attached to their ideas and thoughts, mistake these constructs for reality itself. By doing so, they are chained in the cave, observing merely the shadows of appearance on the wall before them. Awareness is a breaking of the chains of conditioned thought and a viewing of the reality beyond the shadows. Without awareness, humans are bound to the suffering caused by a grasping mind, since the mind that is attached to its own thoughts is the mind of a self-centred and possessive being (Pepinsky, Quinney 1991, p. 5).

It seems that deconstruction of the existing social order – legal, theological or moral – is an immensely tricky task. Peacemakers give certain advice on how to overcome violence: their recommendations imply decentralisation, subsidiarity, cooperation, respect for human dignity and dejuridisation (Sanzen 1991, p. 239-244). Von Trier goes further – he tries to show a world in which pre-given social norms are totally ignored. By doing so, von Trier possibly applies the Buddhist principles of paradox and completeness – that is, total aggression is no longer aggression; complete pain is no longer pain; complete chaos makes certain order, and every complete moment (without

judging whether it is good or bad, beautiful or ugly³) leads to eternity. Even so, it should be noted that similar paradoxes are not exclusive to Buddhism. For example, the works of French philosopher Derrida are said to have had an incredible effect in the academic world, and deconstruction proved to be the last chance for a theory that *achieves integration through disintegration*: by breaking through the boundaries of the archive, it offered a possibility of holding it together (Sloterdijk, Derrida 2009, p. 4). As for the interrelated artistic context, a deconstructionist approach is used by other contemporary directors and playwrights. Therefore, not only the works of Lars von Trier are characterised as being radically extreme and violent. Among others, Lithuanian theatrical director Oskaras Koršunovas, when staging Sarah Cane's 'Cleansed,' stated that her plays are beyond socially acceptable norms and they cannot be evaluated using the traditional matrix of good and evil, but have to be deconstructed and felt by going/recurring to the beginning of the beginning: to the origins of all human existence, as well as to the initial Greek tragedy (Discussion on Cleansed, 2019). Such viewpoint resonates with the insights presented by German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, who spotted that the word 'rage' appears at the beginning of the first sentence of the European tradition, in the first verse of the Iliad. *"It appears fatally and solemnly, like a plea; a plea that does not allow for any disagreement. As it is fitting for a well-formed propositional object, this noun is used in the accusative tone: Of the rage of Achilles, son of Peleus, sing Goddess(...). How does he intend to address the particular kind of rage with which everything began in the old Western world? Will he depict it as a form of violence, a violence that will entrap peaceful human beings in atrocious events? Should one attenuate, curb, and repress this most horrible and most human of affects? Should one quickly avoid it as often as it announces itself, in others or in oneself?"* (Sloterdijk 2010, p. 1-2).

To imagine possible replies, again, one may refer to the Buddhist principles that might help to address those rhetorical queries. By admitting that von Trier or Sloterdijk do not present clear-cut answers (rather quite a few 'eternal' ques-

³ It should be noted that similar ideas are also characteristic to Christianity. For example, medieval theological aesthetics sought to understand beautiful and repulsive things as being equally involved in transcendental, cosmic beauty, inherent and revealing in everything that exists. The concept of *Christus deformis* at that time springs as a theo-aesthetic archetype of beauty (Eco 2002, p. 35).

tions are posed), it is worth noting that the Zen Master leaves a person not in clarity, but in chaos that encourages intuitive thinking. Here, the transcript of *Dogville* resonates with one of the everlasting questions raised above: *whether Grace left Dogville or on the contrary Dogville had left her and the world in general is a question of a more artful nature that few would benefit from by asking and even fewer by providing an answer. And nor indeed will it be answered here!* (Online script of *Dogville*).

Naturally, it is not easy to be satisfied with such an 'artful interpretation' of the whole film and the end of it. Whether we like it or not, the human mind depends on meaning and clarity. It is not that easy to stay silent in front of the fundamental questions.⁴ Still, one could be comfortable without such clarity by letting go of the need to make sense of things. A big doubt, according to the Zen Master, is the premise and foundation for a great awakening. Then, the answer comes like rain falling from the sky, becoming another spontaneous (space) fountain, gushing and gathering. This feeling puts the person in contact with the universal knowledge that underlies the meaning of every thought (Shinzen 2016 2018, p. 194). With that in mind, it is not strange that, for example, von Trier's *Antichrist* is dedicated to Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, whose works are characterised by spiritual and metaphysical themes connected to the cosmic elements of nature.

Not by chance, the text of this article is wrapped up exactly in the interpretation of *Antichrist*. According to Lars von Trier, *Antichrist* is his most personal work, based on the thesis that the earth was created by Satan and not by God. The film tells a story of a couple, grieving after their son's death (though it turns out later that the woman intentionally allowed their son to die). It seems that the man is successfully coping with the stressful situation, while the woman suffers from anxiety and fear attacks. She is afraid of nature, believing that evil comes from nature, and of all women, who are the tools of the devil.

⁴ Although it is exactly the dimension of silence which is also accentuated in existentialist thought. Philosopher Martin Buber gave a symbolic meaning to silence – it is not only the speechless human conscience, but also the fundamental inability to explain certain paradoxes. One of the greatest of them is the problem of the theodicy, which opens the question of how devilish power is possible, if God exists. Buber argues that this question has no answer and uses the metaphor of abyss – it is so deep and dark, as divine mystery, and all one should do in front of this speechless abyss is to remain silent (Buber 1952 1953, p. 60).

Actually, these diabolical insights embrace more than the simplified misogyny of which von Trier is sometimes accused of. Already Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero have connected women with abnormality and crime stating that the abnormality of women is explained *inter alia* by hysteria and eroticism, which are among the key attributes of women (Ruggiero 2003, p. 76-77). There is no need to state that von Trier is not advocating this kind of positivistic criminology by his ‘misogynistic’ films. Rather, his female characters are closer to mythological Lilith, Pandora, Antigone and (male !) Prometheus – those who created civilisation by denying the laws of Gods, by employing means of disobedience, trickery, theft, suffering, and hope. In this regard, the crime expresses the essence of human being – civilisation, fire and warmth come from the sin and it is punished by the curses and misfortunes sent by Gods (Mažeikis 2018, p. 140-141). Zeus gave *pithos* to Pandora (the first woman created by the Olympian Gods; she brought about many misfortunes, but also was an inspiring beauty). *Pithos* symbolises an ark in which opposites are kept – these opposites might both exhaust and strengthen humankind. It was a tendency of early Greek thought to systematise the world according to a series of opposites. For instance, the two Erides have opposite roles in the world: the Bad one leads men into war and unproductive conflict in the law-courts and agora, while the Good Eris causes men to engage in honest and fruitful labour in the fields. The two sisters balance each other, much as the will of Zeus maintains a balance between pride and humility, fame and infamy. Similar in this respect is the Roman Goddess Fortuna who might call up luck as well as calamity (Zarecki 2007).

Returning to the storyline of *Antichrist*, the husband, who is a psychiatrist by profession, takes his wife to a remote forest cabin (where she spent time with her late son a year ago) and attempts to cure her by creating situations where she can face her fear and overcome it. Here, a traditional interpretation of the film is that the rationalised psychotherapeutic techniques used, in fact, were hidden male aggression (Koutsourakis 2011, p. 272). In that regard, a famous poem written by Rainer Maria Rilke is relevant.

*“I am so afraid of people’s words. They describe so distinctly everything:
And this they call dog and that they call house,
here the start and there the end.
I worry about their mockery with words,*

*they know everything, what will be, what was;
no mountain is still miraculous;
and their house and yard lead right up to God.
I want to warn and object: Let the things be!
I enjoy listening to the sound they are making.
But you always touch: and they hush and stand still.
That's how you kill.”* (Goodreads, Quotes of Rainer Maria Rilke).

Apparently, with this poem Rainer Maria Rilke warns us that rationalised language and techniques following from the use of the language might be a bigger evil than seemingly scary speechless things. By naming and controlling things, we herewith stigmatise them – and in such a way things lose their miraculous vitality. Similarly, in *Antichrist*, modern psychotherapy does not help the woman, and she becomes increasingly abusive both to her husband and to herself. Moreover, nature (as if out of revenge) becomes more and more inclement for both of them, and the man's rational efforts fade before dark forces like snow under the warm sunlight. At the end of the film, the man murders his wife, repeating a witch-hunt ritual of the 16th century by supposedly defeating evil and destroying the devil's seed. In this way, the rational origin of the man appears to exhibit no lesser evil than the unexplainable woman's fears – there was no particular reason to kill the woman (it is doubtful whether the man was still at risk of death), yet she was killed.

Antichrist seems to warn that an attempt to curtail aggression by means of scientific or therapeutic means can go far beyond what a person can imagine. Accordingly, a 'face-to-face' encounter with violence can act not like a catharsis that helps to purge violence, but as a catalyst for violence, a kind of 'game with fire'. This resembles other interpretations of some tragic works of art. As Van den Berge notes, Sophocles' *Antigone* makes us aware of our precarious position in which we are bound to make use of law and politics as rationalist devices that at once elevate us, but in that elevation endanger us. We created our legal orders and cities to assist us in our human lives, controlling and cultivating wild nature and protecting us from its harsh forces. In our furious attempts to become nature's masters and possessors, we are constantly and inevitably at risk of being overcome ourselves, now led by the intricate legal and political structures that we created to assist us in the first place – a terrible fate indeed (Van den Berge 2017).

The last words actually apply to the works of Lars von Trier. Almost all his movies end in some tragic note. Paraphrasing Van den Berge's words quoted above, such a tragic note seems rightful vengeance applied by nature (and universe in general) to all humanity. It might seem that Lars von Trier also takes vengeance on humanity by painfully unlocking the darkest sides of it. His method resembles the mousetrap used by Hamlet to convey the guile and guilt of his uncle Claudius. In a similar fashion, humanity is invited to look at violently inconvenient movies so as to confront its own shams and sins. As Hamlet (Shakespeare 1599-1601) famously says:

*The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.*

Thus, Hamlet unmasks his uncle Claudius by telling the actors to play a scene similar to the murder of his father:

*I'll have these players
Play something like the murder of my father
Before mine uncle: I'll observe his looks;
I'll tent him to the quick: if he but blench,
I know my course.*

As Hamlet predicted, Claudius gives himself away and makes off being unable to stand up to this scene. Then Hamlet realised that the ghost of his father had told him the truth – it was not a serpent that stung him in the garden, but Claudius poisoned his brother and took over his throne and wife, Hamlet's mother Gertrude.

And, similarly, people (like Claudius in *Hamlet*) at times vomit from cruelty embedded in von Trier's movies – both literally and figuratively. In general, as mentioned during the introduction of this text, the Danish director is extremely sharp by allowing himself to be politically incorrect, inconsistent and courageous. He even admitted that he created *Antichrist* without any specific goals: the prevention of aggression or education was not his aim; it was just a tool that allowed him to be maximally open to himself and treat his own depression. Yet again, it is hard to tell whether such a bold statement has more to do with an archetypal trickster's joke or with a genuine confession. Probably both points of view are possible. Accordingly, it remains an open – and

serious – ethical question whether by treating his own depression the director does that at the cost of viewers (and by doing so ‘cures’ the audience without its permission and without realising that the observers/viewers have all at once become the observed/viewed). And the next question that follows is whether by allowing himself to be completely sincere this particular director is actually one of the most manipulative tricksters in the world? In this respect one can bespeak seductive power (Ferrel 2006, p. 258) being inherent in his films. Such power seemingly has similar contrasting features as the famous concept of *pharmakon* in Derrida’s writings, meaning both ‘cure’ and ‘poison’ at the same time (Derrida 1981, p. 95-101); consequently, Lars von Trier by extension could be named as a sorcerer – *pharmakeus*. As with all medications, composition and concentration are likely the most crucial factors. And here, medical parallels merge with the aforementioned Gilligan’s caution that pain must be portrayed with depth and sensitivity. The drug has the potential to become a cure if its concentration and composition are well-balanced (i.e., the violence is not depicted as superficial and cheap).

Final observations

The works of Lars von Trier are not easy to understand since the technique he uses resembles that of a Zen master. His movies are full of paradoxes. One single film can embrace tragedy and comedy, cinema and theatre, social experiment and documentary film, Christian theology and shamanic rituals. If one were to choose the dominant qualities of his films, they would probably be confusion, instability and transition. The sacred, the sinful, and the insane are capable of coexisting, exchanging, and complementing one another.

It seems that von Trier’s characters (especially female figures) are continuously trying to solve one of the famous Zen kōans: what did your face look like before your parents were born? Or (to be more in line with von Trier): what did your entire body look like before your parents were born? The metaphor of ‘parents’ refers, beside other things, to subordination, law, order, religion, even logic, meaning and science in general. When the films end, the audience is left disoriented and confused, but – ideally – ready to accept such confusion with equanimity – similarly to how Verge (the Roman poet Virgil) does in *The House that Jack Built*.

What is more, aggression in von Trier's films is at times so extreme that it transcends its own limits. Violence in von Trier's works might be conceptually compared to the performances of Marina Abramović: painful and at the same time designed to overstep pain (Abramović, Kaplan 2018, p. 381). In a similar vein, both surprisingly and unsurprisingly, violence in von Trier's works is pregnant with peace.

The latter insight has not only a poetic bearing: Lars von Trier often dialectically plays with contrasting images (remember Pandora's jar!). For example, in *Nymphomaniac*, sex-addict Joe speaks at length (and by doing so – shares her whole colourful life) with virgin bachelor Seligman. Similarly, the audience should not be too much shocked that the static house of corpses (in *The House that Jack Built*) and the fragile construction made out of thin tree branches (in *Melancholia*) might be actually the same 'magic cave' existing primarily within our own imagination.

To sound more scholarly, one could conclude that while Lars von Trier's works do not rule out the possibility that the violent and overcommercialised West causes various deviations, this is not the central message: it is not so important why the characters find themselves in an unenviable position; what matters is their experience of living on the margins, on the edge of life.

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