

American Museum of the

# Moving Image

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## LARS VON TRIER

March 13-28, 2004

Presented with assistance from the Danish Film Institute

Saturday, March 20

1:30 p.m.

### EPIDEMIC

1987, Denmark, 106 mins. 35 mm print source: Vitagraph Films.

*Directed by Lars von Trier. Written by Lars von Trier and Niels Vørsel. Produced by Jacob Eriksen. Photographed by Henning Bendtsen. Edited by Lars von Trier and Thomas Krag. Costume Design by Manon Rasmussen. Original Music by Peter Bach. Principal cast: Susanne Ottesen, Allan de Wall, Ole Ernst, Michael Getting, Colin Gilder, Svend Ali Haman, Claes Kastholm Hansen, Gitte Lind.*

4:00 p.m.

### THE KINGDOM

EPISODES 1 AND 2

1994, Denmark, 128 mins. 35 mm print source: Danish Film Institute.

*Directed by Lars von Trier and Morten Arnfred. Written by Lars von Trier and Niels Vørsel. Produced by Sven Abrahamsen, Philippe Bober, Peter Aalbæk Jensen, Ole Reim and Ib Tardini. Photographed by Eric Kress. Edited by Molly Malene Stensgaard. Costume Design by Bjarne Nilsson. Original Music by Joachim Holbek. Principal Cast: Ernst-Hugo Järegård (Stig G. Helmer), Kirsten Rolffes (Mrs. Sigrid Drusse), Ghita Nørby (Rigmer), Søren Pilmark (Krogen), Otto Brandenburg (Porter Hansen), Jens Okking (Bulder), Holger Juul Hansen (Dr. Einar Moesgaard).*

6:30 p.m.

### THE KINGDOM

EPISODES 3 AND 4

1994, Denmark, 144 mins. See above for credits.

### Epidemic

From *Lars von Trier* by Jack Stevenson (British Film Institute: London, 2002):

In the autumn of 1985, Lars von Trier visited Claes and they talked about his predicament. This led to a wager that would enshrine itself in Danish film lore: Lars bet Claes he could make a commercial feature film for just 1 million kroner [approximately \$150,000] if only Claes could come up with the money. It would be a true poverty-row production since a normal feature film cost

seven or eight times as much to make. Claes took him up on the bet and actually found it easy to secure financing from the DFI since it was such a bargain. Nonetheless, the sum was so small that it aroused suspicion, and according to von Trier, 'I had to put up all sorts of absurd guarantees to prove I wouldn't abscond to South America with the money'.

Together with Vørsel he created Element Film to raise 200,000 kroner more in private funding, and in June of 1987 they got an additional 181,000 in completion funds.

With his newfound poverty, von Trier claimed he had also found freedom; freedom from the oppressive apparatus of commercial filmmaking, freedom to improvise, experiment and find spontaneity. While some claimed he was simply making a virtue out of necessity, he was by any measure now forced to tell and to make his film in a different way. As he expressed it, it was more important to challenge himself and grow and develop as an artist than to just give people what they expected. Up to this point, though, nobody had accused him of pandering to the audience. The question rather seemed to be did he care anything at *all* about his audience?

Originally, *Epidemic* was to be another collaboration between von Trier, Elling and Gislason, but they dropped out when it became apparent that this was no collective effort but would be very much a Lars von Trier film. Indeed, it would be the 'purest' Lars von Trier film. He was writing, directing, producing and partially filming a story that was about himself as he attempts to make a movie, and in which he plays two of the leading roles.

It opens with a filmmaking duo (played by the filmmaking duo of von Trier and Vørsel) in the process of completing a manuscript to a film entitled *The Cop and the Whore*. They are scheduled to present it to a DFI consultant, played by none other than DFI consultant, Claes Kastholm, in five days.

Suddenly their diskette accidentally gets erased and everything is gone—a year and a half work! (Parallels to *The Grand Mal* here—a film simply abandoned.)

Rather than attempt to re-create that film from memory, they decide to write a manuscript to a completely new movie and hand that in to Claes instead. The new film will be about a plague and it will be called *Epidemic*.

[...] This carefully staged, enacted and scored fictional narrative, filmed in 35mm mono-color stock by Henning Brendtsen, proceeds to interweave with the everyday reality of the two filmmakers as they cast about for ideas. In this way the film's creative genesis becomes part of the piece itself. At von Trier's behest, Vørsel lays out the film's plotline on a wall with a paintbrush. Put 'drama' two-thirds of the way through, Lars instructs him, because without any of that people will be about ready to walk out at that point. It is not only a film that reflects itself but also a film that mocks itself.

The fictional line, in English, is heavily stylized and the acting is underplayed (a foreshadowing of the style he would employ in his next film, *Zentropa*). And the dialogue feels dubbed, magnifying the sense we get that we are watching a movie. Reality, on the other hand, transpires in Danish and in unstaged locations. It is shot in grainy black-and-white 16mm in a deadpan documentary style complete with plenty of *non sequiturs* and what at least feels like a total absence of editing. In these 16mm sequences von Trier wears his hair (relatively) long and swept back and seems to be enjoying himself, while as an actor in the fictional line his head is shaven and he wears glasses, and says almost nothing.

The film functions as both a playful reflection on the filmmaking process itself and a somber exploration of the psychology of plagues and the mythology they give birth to. On a kind of third level it gives viewers an opportunity to personally get to know von Trier in a way that none of his other films, before or since, have come close to permitting. The 'real' von Trier has a genuine presence, a sly, soft-spoken affability. He's relaxed yet mischievously conspiratorial. Niels Vørsel, on the other hand, appears edgy, as one might tend to be when placed in front of a camera without knowing what was about to happen. He's prone to inexplicable bursts of nervous laughter that can be a bit grating. His wife, Susanne Ottesen, who rounds out the central threesome, shares this tendency.

By intertwining disparate visual styles and technical and aesthetic approaches, *Epidemic* inevitably confuses and annoys many of those unprepared for what is very much an experimental film. On the other hand, many of those who can accept it on its own terms find it an audacious and entertaining venture that, at least some of the time, is right on the mark.

From a review in *Variety*, April 29, 1987:

Lars von Trier, undoubtedly Scandinavia's most experimentally daring and technically most dazzling filmmaker, now at work (His *The Element of Crime* was a Prix Technique winner at Cannes in 1984), has done *Epidemic* on a dare at a subminimal budget and sees it as an intermission Part 2 of a trilogy begun with *Crime*.

*Epidemic*, filmed mostly in black & white, features primarily the director himself, his screenwriter and their private cohorts, while a handful of professional actors are seen in sharply etched cameos. A story of a kind is told about helper and writer devoting 18 months to thinking about a horror film, which has been promised a government production grant, and coming up at the end with only a few visualized sequences and a 12-page plot outline.

This may sound like self-indulgence—and it is. Outside of highly specialized situations, *Epidemic* will find the going tough. Still, such is von Trier's cinematic wizardry that his once-acknowledged mastery of technique and dramatics should have at least the international fest circuit clamoring to see what he has been doing as an encore after his previous opus, which was an English-language futuristic shocker.

The greater part of *Epidemic* is filmed in 16mm and constitutes a tongue-in-cheek rendition of von Trier's and writer Niels Vørsel's kicking ideas around during researching and side trips to secret library vaults; hospital pathology departments; labs specializing in rat behavior; sessions with an oenologist describing the "noble rot" that precedes the harvesting of great white grapes; and to Germany to travel among atomic energy plant towers and to listen actor Udo Kier telling about his pre-natal experiences during a World War II bombing raid on Cologne.

Bits of Wagnerian music and allusions to Wagnerian ore are dropped along this grainy, but always beautifully framed and moving excursion into non-action, and there is plenty of sly wit and farcical sleight-of-hand to go with it. In between, we get the 35mm parts (color film, but subdued to match the b&w sequences). Here, we have the late Carl Dreyer's favorite cinematographer Henning Bendtsen gloriously at work again after years of retirement.

The 35mm bits come as jolts of astonishing, slightly surrealistic imagery combining to indicate what the two young filmmakers really had in mind if only they might get a right angle on things. It would be the story for an idealist epidemiologist (played by von Trier in a neatly non-committing performance) who, with his doctor's bag of needles and antidotes, ventures outside the big city that has been sealed off in anticipation of the arrival of a rumored plague.

[...] Scenes of classical horror follow, but they are all restricted to fantasy flashes with suitably obscure dialog to go with them.

There is really some great horror stuff budding here, and audiences may well wish that von Trier had scrapped the filmmaker-at-work parts in favor of going all out on the real McGhoul. They will have to wait until von Trier scares up the international financing he needs for his trilogy's Part 3, existing already in screenplay form under the title *The Grand Mal*. However, just as the mood and immediacy of the toils, troubles and fun of the two auteurs tend to flag, von Trier comes up with a surprise ending that is, in any sense of the word, a true scream.

### **The Kingdom**

From a feature story by Rebecca Lieb in *The New York Times*, October 29, 1995.

When a director with a reputation for being rigorous and intellectual suddenly has to his credit a cult film—one originally made for television, and a comedy to boot—something really must be rotten in the state of Denmark.

Filmgoers familiar with the Danish director Lars von Trier's vaguely sinister and highly stylized films like *Zentropa* and *The Element of Crime* will be surprised by his new movie, *The Kingdom*, a four-and-a-half-hour wickedly surreal black comedy-cum-melodrama about supernatural goings-on in a Copenhagen hospital.

*The Kingdom* has enjoyed more popular success than any other Danish film (though made for television it was also released theatrically) and has gained a cult following throughout Europe as a sort of auteurish "E.R.-meets-Twin Peaks" miniseries. At festivals, midnight screenings of the film have induced audiences to stay up all night to find out who the little girl crying in the elevators is, why doctors transplant and re-transplant diseased livers into themselves and what has happened to a severed head stolen from the morgue.

It's a film about the fallibility of science and reason. The only characters who understand the occurrences in the haunted hospital are two dishwashers toiling somewhere in its windowless bowels.

In his review of the film in *The New York Times* early this year, when it was shown at Lincoln Center's Walter Reade Theater, Stephen Holden called it "a prolonged tongue-in-cheek assault on film and television realism and, ultimately, on rationality itself."

Boyish, not quite 40, clad in jeans, leather jacket, and cellular phone, Mr. Von Trier discussed *The Kingdom* recently here at his office, which overlooks Rigshospitalet, the immense hospital that helped inspire the film and served as its location. The place is actually called the Kingdom.

Mr. Von Trier calls his movie an exercise in "left-handed filmmaking," a term he also applies to David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Both are television productions of epic proportions written and directed by respected filmmakers.

Thinking back to when he was originally approached by Danish television, Mr. Von Trier recalled: "They said, 'Let's do something small.' I said, 'No, no, no, no, no! I want to do something enormous!'"

"The left-handed statement," he explained, "is meant in a very positive way. With television, you don't have to prove anything. You don't have stage fright. There's this 'it's not film' feeling. If I had made a film, it would have been really, really important to me. We wrote the script in six weeks. Writing a script usually takes me a year."

*The Kingdom* has attracted inevitable comparisons to Mr. Lynch's foray into television, which Mr. Von Trier readily accepts. "From *Twin Peaks* I got the idea that you can work with the occult," he says. "I liked the beginning of the series very much. Much more than Lynch's feature films."

Injecting references to a panoply of films into his own work is a von Trier specialty. Remind him of a scene in *The Kingdom* and a likely reaction is, "Oh yeah. *Carrie*."

"I was a projectionist, and I was always watching the audience," he says. "That's how I know what works. It's all stealing."

"In all my films I usually have lots and lots of quotations, but I treat them in different ways than I do here. Here, there are a lot of clichés, and we didn't care."

It is the way Mr. Von Trier combines elements of other works, he says, that defines him as a filmmaker. "I work very much with style, you could say. Which is very important to me. Elements of design. I'm a film designer. A film stylist."

The brooding, surrealistic melodrama of *The Kingdom* has its roots in *Belphégor*, a macabre French television series from Mr. Von Trier's childhood about a phantom in the Louvre. But the feel of his film is nothing if not modern. Shot in 1993 on a tight schedule, most of the film was made on location with available light and a hand-held camera. Hospital corridors became the setting.

Mr. Von Trier may be unaccustomed to popular success, but he seems to be reluctantly enjoying it, with a certain degree of serious-director embarrassment. While reeling off references to the difficult Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky, he betrayed a pronounced appetite for popular culture. He couldn't help interrupting himself in mid-sentence to demand a Hugh Grant update from a visitor from the United States. Does Woody still live with Soon-Yi? ("Now there's a story!") What does his visitor know about David Letterman?

If ghosts and spirits don't daunt the director, fame does. He rarely gives interviews or attends film festivals. He recalls with horror attending a premiere in Cannes.

"Terrible ... like the Beatles ... it must be terrible to be famous," he said. "They're very crazy down there."

Mr. Von Trier is no longer the enfant terrible known for calling Roman Polanski, the Cannes jury chairman in 1991, a bad name when *Zentropa* failed to win the Palme d'Or. But he is still unpopular in Sweden for calling for Ingmar Bergman's death. "He's kind of running the whole thing," he said in explanation. "For my generation it's really tough to become something."

An indication that Mr. Von Trier is mellowing are the textured characters that populate *The Kingdom*. They are not the sleekly styled, world-weary Eurotypes so evident in his other films. Instead, he has presented a hypochondriacal old lady who repeatedly checks herself into the hospital so she can monitor the occult goings-on, a surgeon who runs a basement black market in hospital supplies and a misanthropic Swedish doctor who is miserable about having to work with what he calls the "Danish scum" in Copenhagen.

"*The Kingdom*," says Mr. Von Trier's longtime producer, Philippe Bober, has touched audiences precisely because of its humanity. He points out that compared with *Zentropa*, the writing and the camera work bring the characters closer. "The characters are more human," he said. "There's an element of warmth that was missing in his previous work."

Which is not to say that Mr. Von Trier is considered an actors' director, at least not from the actors' point of view. "Lars does not allow you to improvise," insists Udo Kier, the German actor who is the veteran of seven von Trier features and who plays a pivotal role in *The Kingdom*. "He does not allow you to act. He hates when actors act. He says: 'Oh, just do it. Just be real.' If I go to him and say I have an idea he says, 'Oh, please.'"

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