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LARS VON TRIER

March 13-28, 2004

Presented with the assistance of the Danish Film Institute

Saturday, March 27
1:00 p.m.
ZENTROPA
1991, Miramax, 113 mins. 35mm print courtesy Danish Film Institute.
Directed by Lars von Trier. Written by Lars von Trier and Niels Vørsel. Produced by Bo Christensen and Peter Aalbæk Jensen. Photographed by Henning Bendtsen, Edward Klosinski and Jean-Paul Meurisse. Edited by Hervé Schneid. Costume Design by Manon Rasmussen. Original Music by Joachim Holbek. Principal cast: Jean-Marc Barr (Leopold Kessler), Barbara Sukowa (Katharina Hartmann), Udo Kier (Lawrence Hartmann), Ernst-Hugo Järegård (Uncle Kessler), Erik Mørk (priest).

3:30 p.m.
DANCER IN THE DARK
2000, Fine Line Features, 139 mins. 35 mm print source: Criterion Films.
Written and directed by Lars von Trier. Produced by Vibeke Windeløv. Photographed by Robby Müller. Edited by Molly Malene Stensgaard and François Gédigier. Costume Design by Manon Rasmussen. Original Music by Björk, Richard Rodgers and Thom Yorke. Art Direction by Peter Grant. Principal Cast: Björk (Selma Jezková), Catherine Deneuve (Kathy), David Morse (Bill), Peter Stormare (Jeff), Joel Grey (Oldrich Novy), Vincent Paterson (Samuel, the director).

6:30 p.m.
BREAKING THE WAVES
1996, October Films, 158 mins. 35 mm print source: Danish Film Institute.
Directed by Lars von Trier. Written by Lars von Trier, Peter Asmussen and David Pirie. Produced by Peter Aalbæk Jensen and Vibeke Windeløv. Photographed by Robby Müller. Edited by Anders Refn. Costume Design by Manon Rasmussen. Art Direction by Karl Juliusson. Principal Cast: Emily Watson (Bess), Stellan Skarsgård (Jan), Katrin Cartlidge (Dodo), Jean-Marc Barr (Terry), Adrian Rawlins (Dr. Richardson), Jonathan Hackett (the minister).

Zentropa

From a review by Richard Corliss in *Time*, June 8, 1992:

There is a new style in European cinema—finally. For three decades, since Michelangelo Antonioni and Robert Bresson made anomie fashionable, European directors have dreamed—or nightmared—small. Their movies are dyspeptic miniatures: people sitting at a kitchen table, silent, sullen, waiting for the worst. Everybody, on both sides of the camera, has the glums. The camerabatic dazzle of, say, the French New Wave is now politically incorrect—as if displaying any effervescence of imagination would betray a yearning for Hollywood's technical and narrative know-how. So the European cinema has aged like a movie star who retired decades ago. The question isn't even, "When did she die?" Instead it's, "Oh, is she still alive?"

Zentropa gives signs that the answer is yes. This existential melodrama was originally known as *Europa*, and Danish director Lars von Trier's ambition is that vast: Continent-wide. Set on a German train rumbling through the rubble of World War II—but suggesting the recent chaos of post-communist Europe—*Zentropa* plays like a hallucinogenic remake of *The Third Man*. A naïve American, Leo (Jean-Marc Barr), walks into a web of political duplicity spun by a desperate provocateuse (Barbara Sukowa), a cynical Allied officer (Eddie Constantine) and lots of supporting sharks and werewolves. And where is Harry Lime, the charming, murderous third man? Everywhere. Everyone has something to prove or hide—everyone but Leo. Which makes him, in the movie, in the movie's seen-it-all eyes, the real villain. The elemental crime is to take no side, to do nothing.

Von Trier will never be nailed on that rap. He passionately promotes himself and European movies. At last year's Cannes festival, when this film lost out to the Hollywood comedy *Barton Fink,* Von Trier threw a snit fit, angrily claiming that his movie was bolder and better. He was right. *Zentropa* plunders the film vocabulary—back projection and superimposition, black-and-white with shrieks of color—to anchor its weirdness in classical technique. The legerdemain reminds you of the artificial nature of movies even as it draws you back to the era when pictures seduced the audience into a communal trance.

Like *The Nasty Girl* from Germany, *Toto le Héros* from Belgium and *Delicatessen* from France, *Zentropa* finds movie energy in spiritual malaise. These films take their cue from the dystopic visions of *Blade Runner* and *Brazil*—pictures set in the future but cluttered with décor from the *film noir* past. The imagery possesses a kind of dour voluptuousness: bleak and busy. Their crammed, skewed compositions excite the eye. These movies won't push *Lethal 3* off the multiplex screen; they can't compete with Hollywood product. And that is the happy point. They are appealingly strange—different from the American behemoths, but, unlike most examples of European cine-minimalism, not less.

Zentropa is the strangest. It has the overweening will to be a masterpiece and the verve nearly to carry it off. Big, enthralling and, frankly, nuts, *Zentropa* gives notice that European cinema is alive and kicking, one more time.

Dancer in the Dark

From a review by Rhys Graham in the online journal *Senses of Cinema* (www.sensesofcinema.com), December 2000:

Dancer in the Dark opens with an overture—four minutes of darkened screen filled with grand orchestral sounds written by the film's central actor and composer, Björk. This operatic beginning introduces Lars von Trier's distinctive and divisive foray into the genre of film musicals and sets the tone for the tragic peaks of opera to follow, heights which few film musicals have attained. A solitary heroine with a tragic secret. Unrequited loves. Horrific deaths. Heart-rending music. And none of the joyful releases of the Hollywood studio musicals which defined the genre.

Dancer in the Dark, von Trier's *Palm d'Or* winning follow-up to his *dogme* experimentation, forms the final installment of what the filmmaker calls his "Golden Heart" trilogy. The trilogy, initiated with the extraordinary *Breaking the Waves* (1996) and followed by *Dogme 1: Idioterne* (*The Idiots*, 1998), is loosely based on a story that von Trier recalls from his childhood about a young

girl whose generosity and goodness is 'punished' with great suffering. Each film forms an intricate study of a woman with a 'golden heart' immersed in circumstances that give rise to grave self-sacrifice resembling a modern-day martyrdom. This final part of the loose trilogy connects with certain thematic elements of the preceding films but *Dancer in the Dark*, like *Breaking the Waves* and *The Idiots*, is not necessarily strengthened by the comparison. Instead, it stands alone as a singular and confoundingly brilliant film that, like much of the recent output of von Trier, has already given rise to extreme reactions.

[...] *Dancer in the Dark*, when recounted in the twists and turns of its plot, is pure melodrama. Björk plays Selma, a hardworking Czech migrant who works in a factory in small town, Washington State. She lives in a caravan with her ten-year-old son Gene (Vladica Kostic) rented to them by an all-American couple, local policeman Bill (David Morse) and his wife Linda (Cara Seymour) in whose backyard they live. As Selma struggles to make ends meet, she lives concurrently in two worlds. The first is a world of darkness—she is partially blind with a hereditary illness that will also rob her son of his sight unless she can afford to pay for an operation. Selma keeps this a secret but works night and day, allowing neither Gene nor herself any small reward, saving every penny toward his operation. But the secret becomes a terrible burden as she must pretend to the world—to her fellow employees at the tool-and-die factory, her friends and family, and, more humorously, her fellow cast members in an amateur production of *The Sound of Music*—that she has the ability to see. Amid these hardships, she descends into the imagined second world—a world of light—in which she sings and dances in the musical numbers that she has always loved. In these magical sequences, Selma can never quite escape her surroundings and both the music and her imagined dances are strongly affected by the real world. Rather than the tinkle of pianos and harps, Selma's songs are punctuated by the clattering of machinery or train engines. These songs (sung by Björk and orchestrated in her unique style) are Selma's escape. So, as the events around her begin to descend steadily into tragedy, greater are her escapes into musical fantasy.

[...] The intermediation of fantasy and reality is a consistent theme throughout von Trier's recent films and his well-publicised Dogma declarations. Where the Dogma 95 manifesto seeks to break down artifice and fantasy in order to return to a closer, if more playful, "truth" in cinema, his own films focus on characters who rely on or are afflicted by complex emotional fantasies that help them to endure their circumstances. Selma, with her constant escapist fantasies, is the most generically familiar expression of this idea, but the enforced artificial reality of the 'idiots' and their commune, and Jan's (Stellan Skarsgaard) damage induced fantasies in *Breaking the Waves* are part of the same exploration. Visually, *Dancer in the Dark* moves effortlessly between two extreme states—that of the pure fantasy of the musical numbers and the documentary realism of the narrative.

It is clear that von Trier is interested in creating characters that he can then dissect at their most vulnerable, most fraught moments. It is perhaps this that led Björk to suggest that he is an emotional pornographer. But this is also an admirable quality in a time of often emotionally evasive narrative film. Von Trier, undoubtedly, takes his cinema and the performances of his actors to the limits of emotional endurance. It makes for confronting, relentless and grim material and, in the case of Björk in *Dancer in the Dark*, it also makes for one of the most intense and extraordinary performances in recent film history. [...] Her performance of a woman waiting for her own death, while doing her best to uphold one simple value that she has clung to through endless hardship, is heartbreaking. To his credit, von Trier creates the time and space for this performance to slowly reveal itself. Clearly, for the well-publicized turmoil on set, Björk's performance has been taken to depths that are difficult to watch. [Some sequences] have the sense of such emotional realism that it is quite bizarre that 'Selma' could be mistaken for an internationally acclaimed musician from Iceland with no connection to a blind Czech factory worker, save that of music. Instead, I think it is the intense performance of an actor with a strong emotional connection to the film, both creatively and emotionally. There is no doubt that this intensity makes the film difficult to watch, and screenings so far suggest that many have difficulty handling the dark depths of the story. Interestingly, the lightness and seductiveness of the musical numbers do not necessarily alleviate

the impact of the drama but co-exist as an imagined state that ironically enhances the tragedy of the events.

The cinematography of Robby Müller (*Breaking the Waves*, *Paris, Texas*, *Dead Man*, *Ghost Dog: the Way of the Samurai*) is gritty but embraces the loss of depth and color saturation inevitable in digital video, opting for an observational documentary approach to the film. This works to bring us closer to the action, tuned as most audiences are to accept a certain 'real'-ness to DV images, and the closeness creates an uncomfortable intimacy as the melodrama takes a turn for the worst. Von Trier and Müller's observational style also makes for one of the more hard-to-define successes of the film which is to marry a new DV-realist tradition of photography with the excesses of the song and dance number. One of the most discussed technological elements of the film has been the use of 100 simultaneously rolling cameras to shoot the musical numbers. This concept, equal parts techno-gimmick and innovative exploration of the impact of DV on performance (begun in Vinterberg's *The Celebration*) serves two purposes. At once, the use of 100 cameras concealed within the set, draws attention to the means of production, and creates a new space for viewing the musical numbers. The viewer is aware while watching the dance numbers that the cameras are directly avoiding an interaction with the movement of the dance numbers. Each change of camera perspective is an abrupt leap around the perimeters of the space in which the dancing occurs. Sometimes the camera is like a voyeur peeping in on Selma's dream-dances, viewing through the spokes of a bicycle, from behind a factory machine, through a window; sometimes the camera has the distance of a surveillance camera watching action pass through the frame. True, each camera is not necessarily figured for elegant framing, but as a composite whole, the energetic movement from camera angle to camera angle as the dancing unfolds creates a spatial priority favouring the choreographed numbers. There are no tracking shots as dancers fall into step behind the camera. Instead, the dancing occurs, on screen as in Selma's imagination, and the cameras loop and circle around this movement maintaining a sense of completeness or coherence for each song sequence as it unfolds. It is the realist camera of von Trier's recent works imposed onto the most anti-realist of cinematic sequences.

Each musical moment is heightened in color and therefore distinguished from the almost monochromatic bleakness of the remaining scenes, but the transitions between styles are always triggered by onscreen action or diegetic sound. Von Trier suggested in the press kit for the film that, "I thought it would be interesting to put the documentary style up against the musical but I believe that I act from admiration for the way musicals are—I'm not trying to subvert or destroy anything. I'm trying to make it richer by somehow importing true emotion. It's such a beautiful cocktail, emotion and music." Von Trier's respect for the musical is most clearly seen in his use of Vincent Paterson as choreographer. Paterson, who also appears in the film, has been one of the pre-eminent choreographers in recent years, working primarily with artists like Michael Jackson and Madonna on large-scale dance productions, both live and in music video. His dance sequences embrace the reactionary approaches of von Trier but maintain a rhythmic and musical allure that are usually captivating. The courtroom dances, in particular, confuse with their ability to entice the audience while our hearts ache with Selma's predicament.

While the notion of a grueling musical tragedy set to the sounds of Björk directed by Lars von Trier seems truly incongruous, *Dancer in the Dark* succeeds exactly where it should fail. Von Trier lovingly extracts elements from the musical tradition and refigures them into a decidedly anti-American narrative performed by an international cast. The setting, shot in Sweden, set in America's north-west, peopled by an international cast is a dreamscape in which the emotions and interactions suggest a 'realism', while the physical reality is constantly undermined by the transition into Selma's imaginary dance numbers. Von Trier cannot be underestimated as a unique director, nor can his influence in using new methods and new technologies in creating cinematic landscapes go unrecognized. He employs a confident and reckless approach to integrating the kind of narrative and image over-saturation that makes up the viewing experience of much of his audience. Yet, in this recklessness, he keeps an undivided attention on his 'emotional pornography' which, in this case, means laying bare that which most films conceal

through artifice and stylistic flourishes: the potential depths and heights of human emotion. The performances are consistently impressive, though Björk's rawness sits more comfortably (for all their conflict) with von Trier's style while Deneuve, Stormare and Morse seem somewhat overshadowed. *Dancer in the Dark* will undoubtedly polarize audiences but it should be seen if only for the purposes of collecting ammunition before weighing into the debate. This marriage of a scrutinizing documentary approach to the joyous excesses of the Rodgers and Hammerstein is unlikely, brilliant and almost certainly a landmark in recent cinema.

Breaking the Waves

From interviews with Lars von Trier by Stig Björkman reproduced in *L.A. Weekly*, November 22, 1996, and *The Village Voice*, November 26, 1996:

Did the film's technique—hand-held camera, CinemaScope format—come with the idea?

No, that comes from the experience of *The Kingdom*. The new film has some of the same clichélike ingredients as in *The Kingdom*; that's why I felt it important to give it as realistic a form as possible. A more documentary touch. If *Breaking the Waves* had been rendered with a conventional technique, I don't think you could have tolerated the story. One normally chooses a style for a film in order to highlight a story. We've done exactly the opposite; we've chosen a style that works against the story.

Breaking the Waves *is deeply religious. Why?*

Probably because I'm religious myself. I'm a Catholic, but I don't worship Catholicism for Catholicism's own sake. I have felt the need to experience a sense of belonging with a religious community, because my parents were convinced atheists. I flirted with religion quite a bit as a youngster. You perhaps search for a more extreme religion as a youngster—you either go to Tibet or seek out the most rigorous of all faiths. I think I have a more Dreyer-like view of the whole thing, because Dreyer's religious view is in essence humanistic. He also accuses religion in all his films. Religion is accused, but not God. It's like that as well in *Breaking the Waves*.

In the film, you describe religion as a power structure. The mechanics and enigma of power are subjects you have treated in several of your films.

My intention has not been to criticize a particular religious community, such as the one that exists in this Scottish environment. That doesn't interest me—it's far too simplistic. And it's nothing I want to concern myself with. In many ways I have an understanding for—or rather, *that* people are engaged by spiritual questions and that they are so in an extreme manner. It is just that, if you want to create a melodrama, you have to furnish it with certain obstacles. And religion provided me with a suitable obstacle.

Bess' conversations with God have a directness and intensity that give the religious motif a human voice.

Bess is also an expression of the same religion; it is her foundation, and she accepts its conditions completely. In the burial scene at the beginning, for instance, the priest condemns the deceased to eternal damnation in hell, something that Bess also finds quite natural. She has no scruples with regard to that. It is we that have them. Bess is confronted with many different power structures, including the hospital and its doctors. And she's forced to adopt a position with the purity of the heart she possesses.

How did you come to choose Emily Watson, an actress untried in film?

One problem with financing this expensive production was that we could not have any big-name actors in the leading roles. We realized this at an early stage, because we couldn't find any big names who wanted to participate. They were afraid of the nature of the film.

Because of the erotic scenes?

Probably because of the whole story. It is a curious mixture of religion and eroticism and possession. The well-known actors we turned to didn't dare put their careers on the line—for example, Helena Bonham Carter pulled out of the production at the very last minute. That's why it felt important to find some actors who really had the enthusiasm to participate. And I think it feels as if the heart is in it among those we finally chose.

We screen-tested quiet a number of actresses for the role of Bess. Later I watched the video together with Bente [von Trier's girlfriend], and she saw it as quite obvious that Emily Watson should get the role. I was also engaged by Emily's performance, but it was Bente's enthusiasm above all that convinced me. I also remember that Emily was the only one who came to the casting barefoot and with no makeup at all! There was something Jesus-like about her that attracted me. She had had no earlier film experience, which means that she was, to a great extent, forced to trust me as a director. [...]

In Breaking the Waves*, great weight has been placed on small details. I'm thinking of Bess's house, with the paintings of cats and dogs on the wall.*

The art director, Karl Juliosson, decided how the different environments should look, but it is purely coincidental what we finally see on screen—that's how it is if you work with a handheld camera. There's a whole lot of interior detail we never see, and there are other details that appear more clearly. But we had a lot of fun with those dog painting hanging in Bess's house. They're pure kitsch, and at one stage we thought they were a little over the top. But, on the other hand, they suit the context well.

I can say that in the hospital scene and others, we tried to create a universe, a performance space faithful to reality, which was subsequently largely edited out. The activities which, with the help of extras, simultaneously took place alongside the actual performance space, were ther mostly to create a fertile atmosphere for the actors. In my earlier films I've placed great importance on this kind of detail outside of the performance and cared less about the actors. A big shift has occurred there now.

I also think that it is good that you perceive these details at the edge of the frame, because they give the feeling that there is a bigger world outside the reality that we're concentrating on.

You filmed on the Isle of Skye in Scotland. How did it strike you?

I know that many painters and writers who could be said to have belonged to the English Romantic movement visited the Isle of Skye. The landscape is also very romantic. It has nothing to do with our Danish romanticism. It is considerably wilder and grandiose. I was most of all taken by the strong contrasts in the landscape: rips in the middle of barren mountain slopes with dense vegetation.

How did you choose the images for the chapter illustrations?

The painter Per Kirkeby, who created these images together with me, traveled around Scotland for a few months and took photographs. I wanted, above all, for him to find different expressions for the Romantic landscape. I was of the opinion that this Romanticism would expose a greater banality, bur Kirkeby's first suggestion distanced itself quite considerably from that view. The final

result could perhaps be described as a diplomatic mix of his and my ideas. What he brought to the images made them much more interesting and ambiguous. I strived perhaps toward the grand gesture.

Since The Kindom*, you've been experimenting with looser film structures, something you have further developed in* Breaking the Waves. *What does it give you over and above your previous, more austere and form conscious methods?*

It means, primarily, that I can work a lot faster. This film is also a lot more intuitive. And I think that that is a very important quality. This rapidity and consequently more intensive contact with all the collaborators, both behind and in front of the camera, has given me a greater enthusiasm for the work. I could maintain that it's given me back the desire to work.

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