Playing With Our Emotions:

Genre, Realism and Reflexivity in the Films of Lars von Trier

by

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Abstract

According to reviewers, bloggers, and scholars, Lars von Trier's films, particularly *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) and *Dogville* (2003) tend to evoke multiple intense, often contradictory, emotional responses from viewers. The films' dialectical effects can perhaps be explained by the fact that they broadcast their artifice, which results in a seeming break in the audience's emotional immersion. The question that this thesis seeks to explore is how the films can simultaneously distance and engage viewers. Generic theories, as well as theories on emotion and film reception, are useful in exposing von Trier's emotive strategies. In the end, it might be that von Trier endeavours to evoke emotions in viewers while also making us aware of his manipulations in order to suggest that as spectators we must constantly question the film and its creator. More troublingly, he implies that there might be something fundamentally perverse about our desire to watch films.

Introduction

Emotion resulting from a work of art is only of value when it is not obtained by sentimental blackmail.

~ Jean Cocteau

My love is like a storybook story
But it's as real as the feelings I feel

~ William Goldman (*The Princess Bride*)

As its title suggests, the catalyst for this project was a feeling. It was not only the sorrow, pity, excitement, frustration, anger, and ambivalence that I experienced watching Lars von Trier's films *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) and *Dogville* (2003) for the first time that drew me back to explore these films again and again. Rather, it was the embarrassment I felt over having such profound emotional responses to what are perhaps best described as cliché characters and formulaic narratives. I was a university-trained film viewer, and still von Trier could *manipulate* me so completely that I could not hold back my own tears (especially when those of the protagonists flowed freely). I became suspicious. He had fooled me into crying for these characters—characters that I saw only through a projection of actors on a screen. Of course, many films can make us cry. My real concern was this: how could I be moved to tears when I was aware of the ways in which von Trier was pulling me in? And furthermore, how could von Trier manipulate me this way using a musical, which is in many ways blatantly artificial, and even

fantastical? How could I be consistently moved to tears watching characters act on a bare Brechtian set which loudly broadcasts its artifice? At the same time that I pondered these troubling questions, I also felt a hint of admiration for the filmmaker who had manipulated me so openly, without releasing his hold on me until the very end. He had somehow managed to simultaneously *reveal* the ways in which films elicit emotions from us and successfully *employ* these tactics. Yet this immediately made me suspicious once again—suspicious that I was playing right into the hand of this acclaimed Danish filmmaker, a man whose arrogance was as well-known as his films.

Granted, not everyone experiences the films in the same way that I do. When I began my research, I was anxious to find responses similar to my own that would validate my emotional reactions to von Trier's films. However, I also wanted to seek out divergent reactions to the films which I hoped would broaden my understanding of exactly what von Trier was up to and help me to figure out how exactly the famous "provocateur" was provoking viewers. Of particular interest to me here were responses contradictory to my own, or those that either explicitly or implicitly described ambivalent feelings towards the film. For example, I became interested in responses from viewers in which ambivalence seemed to be partially concealed by anger and frustration at characters or events depicted onscreen. I was interested in ambivalence because it is an emotion which can arise when one is not sure how to feel about something. I began reading articles on von Trier, reviews of his films, and interviews with him. Then, in search of still more responses from viewers who were not necessarily engaged in writing professionally about their opinions of film, I turned to the internet, and to online discussion groups, especially those focused on von Trier, to learn more about how other

viewers have responded to his emotionally provocative films. As I read and thought "how do you solve a problem like von Trier," to borrow from Rodgers and Hammerstein, my methodology began to take more definite shape. I decided to recruit a number of responses, from a number of "audiences," in the service of finding answers to my questions.

Thus, in order to explore von Trier's strategies and their effects in the two films I have chosen to study, I make use of online discussion group contributions, reviews, and articles written by amateurs, professional film critics, and scholars. Each of these groups of writers offers distinct viewpoints helpful to a well-rounded discussion of the films' emotional effect on viewers.

Professional reviews and scholarly articles are usually the most well-written, articulate, insightful, and considered responses to the films. The use of scholarly articles in research on film topics is obviously expected, and typical. Such writers can offer great insight into the films, at the same time as clearly (or at times obliquely) articulating their own thoughts and feelings about them. Scholars also write primarily for other scholars, and so it is interesting to see how the sense of a certain kind of audience can shape the scholarly discussion of emotion in film. Professional reviews have also been used in scholarly work, in order to discuss different readings of or approaches to a film, for example. These are useful because, while they are still often well thought-out and eloquent, they tend to focus on the reviewer's more immediate reaction to the film, and often emphasize an element of the viewing experience that the reviewer thinks will be interesting or relevant to other would-be viewers. Again, the reviewer writes for another

kind of audience, the kind that expects a pointed evaluation of the film, and uses this when deciding whether or not to go see the film under review.

However, the apparent spontaneity and general anonymity of online reviews and discussion group contributions adds another important dimension to my research. The contributions of online bloggers offer a wealth of film responses that often go unstudied. These reactions also give other online readers the impression of unmediated access to the thoughts and feelings of the poster, an impression that tends to be stronger in these on-line contributions than it is in the writing of either professional film reviewers or film scholars. It is this impression of immediacy that I find interesting and useful. Though it is always possible that online bloggers and posters are as guarded and careful in their online writing as any other writer is, the circumstances in which they write, and the audience they write for, can encourage unselfconscious responses to film. Thus, though I understand that online remarks and opinions about films may not represent the poster's *real* feelings, I have decided to use online postings as a stand-in for the amateur audience, for this is as close as I could get to non-professional viewers who had contributed to public discussions about these films. It could also be argued that the writers of online responses are more likely to discuss feelings that might be construed as socially unacceptable, out of fashion, or even as too obvious for film critics and scholars to write about. Furthermore, I have found that amateur bloggers and reviewers are more likely to express *emotional* responses to the film; they do not necessarily attempt to explain these responses intellectually. People who post online often choose to remain anonymous, which means that they do not have to worry as much about the ramifications of making their personal responses public. Thus, although the "honesty" of these responses is

difficult to gauge and impossible to prove, bloggers have little to lose by expressing their unguarded responses to films. Anonymous online contributors need not worry about having to defend their responses on a personal, social, or professional level from the critique of peers or colleagues. Their audience is the audience of other online writers, who also participate in an environment that, while it does not guarantee honesty, truth or reliability, also permits all three.

Each of these sources—scholarly, critical, and amateur online—is helpful to my exploration of von Trier's films. I believe that this way of discussing the films, based on my own reactions as well as those of scholars, critics, and computer-savvy cinephiles, allows me the opportunity to consider multiple emotional and intellectual reactions to von Trier's films. Since one of my aims is to try to explain how von Trier provokes certain emotional responses from viewers, it is of utmost importance to consider *all* of the responses he evokes, and not just those expressed in professional discourses. For this reason, I intend to use a mix of different responses in my analysis of these films. In fact, using such a mix of responses is fitting, given that my discussion of von Trier's films focuses on the way in which he mixes different genres together in order to elicit emotional responses from his audience, as I will discuss.

In conducting this research, I was amazed to find that I was certainly not the only person who walked out of the movie theatre feeling sad, stunned, and at the same time a little bit angry after watching von Trier's films. In fact, the films of Lars von Trier are notorious for evoking strong emotional responses from viewers, to the point where he can justly be described as deliberately seeking to provoke viewers emotionally. Audiences frequently respond to his films with a variety of emotions, but feelings of sadness,

feelings of anger, and a frustrated combination of the two are prominent, as articles, reviews, and on-line blogs and discussion group contributions reveal. Whether you are a scholar, a professional reviewer, or a spectator who posts your thoughts about films on the internet, von Trier seems to have your number. How does he do this? What ingredients do his films make use of, or even exploit, as they push our emotional buttons?

In addition to using various responses to von Trier's films in my discussion of his work, this thesis also explores von Trier's use of certain generic and stylistic tactics in the production of scenes apparently calculated to evoke emotional responses in his audiences. In this aspect of my exploration of von Trier's filmmaking, I have made use of the history of the Dogme 95 film "movement" with which von Trier is identified, as well as insights from the field of cognitive film theory, both of which contribute to my examination of how von Trier works with genre and style to produce emotionally effective films. Given the high level of reflexivity, the clichéd characters, and the almost formulaic melodramatic storylines in his films, the emotion that they can elicit is puzzling. *Dancer* and *Dogville* are two of von Trier's films to which strong emotional responses are particularly frequent and, at least to me, surprising, given their tendency to alienate viewers in multiple ways. It was this last element of von Trier's work that also led me back to the writings of Bertolt Brecht, whose theorizing of *Verfremdungseffekt*, often translated as "alienation effect," I have made use of in pondering the emotionally distancing moments of both *Dancer* and *Dogville*.

The Dogme 95 film movement initiated by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg in 1995 calls for a renewal of the art of film in a rebellion against the "cosmetics" of conventional "individual" film, by which they meant the effects of technologies that

distract from a film's truth, in fact that "wash the last grains of truth away in the deadly embrace of sensation" (Dogme 95 Home Page). The *Dogme 95 Manifesto* and the accompanying statement known as the "Vow of Chastity," which apparently promote a kind of realism, prohibit the use of certain technologies (which are, perhaps ironically, often used to promote naturalist aesthetics), in order to counter what von Trier and Vinterberg see as the modern cinema of illusion. Of course, the terms "realist" and "formalist," or "naturalist" and "stylized," have particular meanings according to one's understanding of what constitutes "reality." It is usual to see a "realist" film as one that depicts the world and its inhabitants as we normally encounter them. A realist or what some would term naturalist film renders a detailed film world that reproduces the world we walk around in; it commands our belief in its existence by giving us onscreen what we know, what we are familiar with, offscreen. A formalist or anti-naturalist film, on the other hand, calls attention to its constructedness, its artificiality.

But on another level of argument, the formalist film, in drawing attention to the "un-reality" of its settings, is really more honest, and thus more "realist," while the "realist" or "naturalist" film is, in passing itself off as a version of the world we know, the most artificial, illusory kind of film. Perhaps the purpose of the Dogme 95 manifesto, in all its tongue-in-cheek irony and postmodern self-consciousness—as well as von Trier's filmmaking as a whole—is to promote the type of realism that achieves truth by broadcasting its *lack* of realism. Films made according to the Dogme 95 guidelines can serve to draw attention to the film medium, a formalist strategy that is often characterized as emotionally distant. Indeed, there seems to be an intriguing ambiguity, if not a blatant

contradiction, in the aims of Dogme 95 and, as I will argue, the films of Lars von Trier—particularly *Dogville* and *Dancer*.

Von Trier's second Dogme 95 film, *Dogville*, does not follow all of the rules set out in the Dogme 95 *Vow of Chastity*, but it provides an excellent example of the tension between emotional realism and the cinematic reflexivity that tends to accompany its stripped down aesthetic. *Dogville* was filmed entirely in a theatrically staged space, a Brechtian minimalist set, which draws attention to the staged nature of film production and to the lack of realism that is implied in the mere attempt to tell a story on film. After all, film, like theatre, is a staged medium, though audiences tend to experience it as more or less "real." Nevertheless, the emotional response generally evoked in the viewer by *Dogville* is of such intensity that one might forget that the film's set continually reminds the viewer of its status as artificial. This is made clear in the absence of walls and doors, as well as other elements of film set design that generally support the realism of the film world. In *Dogville*, von Trier seems to bellow film's mediation, and his manipulation of the film—and by extension of the audience—from the (invisible) rooftops. Yet the film's ability to evoke strong emotions from most viewers is undeniable.

Dancer in the Dark embodies a similar contradiction. While it is not an official Dogme 95 film, one can read it in the light of von Trier's public yearning for whatever it is that Dogme 95 provides (realism, newness, collaboration, reflexivity, … etc.). Like *Dogville*, *Dancer* tends to evoke heart-wrenching emotion from its audience. Yet the musical genre prepares the audience for something very different from the emotional turmoil that *Dancer in the Dark* creates in its audiences—an effect much more in keeping with melodrama, for instance. Moreover, since few people dance about and burst into

song in public places in reality (a fact that Jeff points out to Selma in the film), the musical genre involves more suspension of disbelief for the viewer than many other genres do. As a result, there is an added element of artifice separating the world of the audience from the world of the film in a musical. It would make sense, then, for viewer identification with the protagonist not to be as intense in such a film. We tend to think of our emotional responses to films as being a function of how closely we identify with the characters in them. However, given the emotional response *Dancer in the Dark* commonly elicits, von Trier's film (along with several other musicals, perhaps) seems to challenge these assumptions.

The tactics I am particularly interested in are genre and style, as responses to each of the films that I am looking at here often seem to be incongruous with the response that one would expect of a film of the particular genre or style that von Trier uses in different sections of the films. Von Trier is clearly creating "mixed" genre films—works in which different modal patterns appear at different moments throughout the films, often very dramatically juxtaposed. For example, the trial scene in *Dancer*, a staple of dramatic films, is suddenly interrupted by a musical number. And in *Dogville*, melodramatic scenes covered primarily in close-ups often end with long shots from overhead, which illuminate the film's minimalist aesthetic and distance viewers emotionally. I wish to explore how, in each film, von Trier draws viewers into the world of the protagonist, and makes us care about her fate. But I am also interested in tracing the differences and similarities between the styles of these two films, for despite the usual association between sympathetic identification with protagonists and realist filmmaking, in these two films von Trier achieves emotional effects even when he departs from realist filmmaking

strategies. In fact, at certain times von Trier's films are arguably most successful in eliciting emotional responses from viewers when they are least, rather than most, naturalist in their tactics. Nevertheless, the mixed genres and modes of each of the films that I discuss are often difficult to pinpoint. In the end, it may be the *shifts* between one generic mode and another in a given film that are more important in shaping emotional response than the presence of multiple genres in the film.

Rick Altman argues in his article, "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre," that film genres can be distinguished by the various semantic and syntactic elements that certain films have in common with one another. Noel Carroll asserts that all films of any given genre are in large part *criterially focused*, meaning that the specific elements of a particular genre bring about certain expectations in viewers, based upon other film-viewing experiences we have had with that genre. "That is," explains Carroll, "whereas all genres tend to evoke anger, joy, hatred, and the like, in addition to these emotions, some genres also aim at arousing specific emotions in spectators as a condition of being an instance of the very genre in question" (35). Arguably, particular people are more attracted to certain genres than to others in part because of the different emotional states that disparate genres promote in viewers. Carroll also asserts that, "[o]nce in an emotional state, the prevailing state further structures our perception by drawing our attention to further elements in the array that are pertinent to sustaining the emotional state that we are in" (28). As a result, according to Carroll, viewers criterially *pre*focus genre films. In other words, we search for further stimuli within the film to support the emotional state suggested by the given criteria of those generic elements (30-31). For example, the stock character of the self-sacrificing woman, significantly present in both

of the films that I discuss here, might encourage us to feel pity, sorrow, or admiration. Once we have identified the self-sacrificing woman, we will then be on the lookout (perhaps unconsciously) to detect other elements which reinforce in us feelings of pity and sorrow, such as a close-up of a woman crying or sweeping music, in order to maintain our emotional status quo.

It is generally agreed that melodramas tend to evoke feelings of sorrow, pity, and sometimes awe. Even in films that are not melodramas proper, to which a film such as *Breaking the Waves* (1996) arguably belongs, von Trier's interest in the melodrama clearly comes out. For instance, both the musical *Dancer in the Dark* and the Brechtian *Dogville* are centred on melodramatic martyr figures within an arguably melodramatic narrative. Torben Grodal points out that lengthy close-ups are customarily found in melodramas during powerfully dramatic scenes (90). Von Trier does not break from this tradition; close-ups almost always cover scenes of heightened emotion, particularly those in which the female protagonist is seen crying. Yet frequently after the emotional moment has past, and the film has had its emotional way with us, von Trier switches modes, bringing the artifice of the film crashing down upon us. Why does he do this? It has the effect of making us aware of our emotion, of the film's ability to affect us emotionally, of our roles as spectators, and of the manipulation of the film. That is perhaps what makes von Trier's films so striking. Von Trier's ability to employ the strategies of the melodrama rivals Douglas Sirk's. Yet von Trier reveals his manipulation by radically shifting modes mid-film, thus breaking the spell of the genre. What might frustrate and anger viewers most is the film's refusal to allow us to remain spellbound.

In what follows, I wish to explore the connection between realist and formalist strategies in these films and their ability to evoke emotion in the viewer. I recognize that there is a difference between realist set design and credible character motivation. I am not suggesting that artificial set designs are inherently incredible to audiences. What I am interested in are von Trier's experiments with the necessary conditions for evoking emotion in the viewer—experiments which fool around with elements of set design as well as character development and motivation. The underlying question in my thesis will be: how can a viewer be emotionally affected by a character or story that should be unconvincing? Employing and exploring diverse scholarly views about film identification, affect, genre theory, Dogme 95, and Brechtian aesthetics, as well as individual scholarly, professional, and amateur readings of and responses to von Trier's films, I will endeavour to discover what makes these films, which are in many ways unconvincing, so emotionally affecting.

Chapter I: Mixed Feelings About *Dancer in the Dark*

As this chapter is concerned with a musical—albeit an unconventional one—it is perhaps most fitting that we "start at the very beginning," and, particularly in a film which makes repeated reference to Rodgers and Hammerstein's *The Sound of Music*, it seems "a very good place to start." *Dancer in the Dark* begins like many musicals, with what director Lars von Trier himself refers to in the DVD commentary as an overture on the soundtrack. This is significant since the overture is an integral part of many musical films, and this chapter argues that the film employs generic strategies, particularly those of the musical, to set up and subvert generic expectations, engaging the audience only in order to distance them later on. *Dancer*'s overture gives this unconventional musical a seemingly conventional kick-off.

The overture itself is an element of the conventional musical which tells the musical's narrative or emotional story through music in the span of just a few minutes. This, I think, is the function performed by the images we see as the film begins, before we have met any of the characters. This sequence is not merely an overture in the conventional sense of being a musical anticipation of melodies we will hear later on in the film. Rather, it is an overture of images as well as of music, in which the overlapping and fading of colours and shapes tells the story of fading vision, Selma's vision. The montage of images which accompanies the so-called musical overture in *Dancer*, visual art which seems at least obliquely associated with blindness in its dim opacity, anticipates the protagonist Selma's journey through the film as her physical blindness intensifies. In fact, Per Kirkeby, the artist of the paintings which dissolve into one another throughout

the musical overture, remarks that the images, like the film's narrative, are about the loss of sight. Kirkeby describes his work on the opening sequence in this way:

> I did a variation of what I thought it would be to discover that you are losing the ability to see […] strange, you know, spots and dots and clots and whatever. […] This is basically the story. […] You can see here, she can't see. In between there's a lot of strange things going on. (*Dancer*, audio commentary)

The musical overture begins with an orchestra slowly and subtly playing a long, lone note, foreboding in its solitude and in its length, which suspends our anticipation of what comes next. The first images are pencil tracings on white paper, seen from a ways off—perhaps artistic representations of chromosomes that suggest the hereditary nature of Selma's (and potentially Gene's) blindness, and how the guilt of this fact will plague her. As the montage continues, the images are seen from an increasingly close perspective. The tracings become warm, reddish blurs with ill-defined borders. On a second viewing, one could argue that these images are, finally, all that Selma actually sees: indistinct forms of the people around her. It was Kirkeby's intent that these images suggest that this is how Selma sees her fellow human beings—they are not quite clear enough to be understood, but they are nevertheless beautifully present. Alongside these images, the melody continues sadly, in a plaintive minor key, but its progression is suggestive of hope. The paintings, now warm and reddish, begin to blend into one another, forming a sort of dance within the montage, under the music. As the images become darker, the music changes. The tempo slows as the notes descend tentatively, complicating the imagined story told by the darkening images. Suddenly, swelling drums and brass come in to suggest some sort of climax. As the music continues in this culminating manner, the darkened art dissolves into something much paler, losing its warmth—its life-force—perhaps in an anticipation not only of Selma's blindness, but of

her death. Red paint has seemingly been spilled unevenly on a pure white background, suggestive of death. The last image, which looks like a sparse forest in a snow storm from a distant bird's eye perspective, is Kirkeby's abstraction of all that is left of Selma's sight in the end. And this too fades to white in a slow acquiescence to Selma's blindness—and her hopeless situation.[1]

The music of the scene functions in an intriguing discord with the images, setting up the productive dissonance of the evocative strategies von Trier employs to elicit emotion from viewers. While the music suggests a narrative progression in which a main conflict is resolved to some comfortable end, the visuals suggest a narrative that is, above all, a construction, or an abstraction, and, moreover, one that ends in ultimate emptiness. Already von Trier is gesturing to dissonance—that between sound and image, here, but anticipating the discord between film and reality that will be illuminated throughout *Dancer*.

Of course, when the overture is encountered by first-time viewers, likely only a fraction of what I mention in the preceding reading is gleaned. More than shedding light on the narrative that will proceed, the overture puts viewers in a certain mood by way of the music and images, and their juxtaposition. Viewers familiar with the musical genre know that the overture often foreshadows the structure of the story, so we might guess at the general structure of *Dancer*. And viewers familiar with melodrama might encounter the music as particularly melodramatic, which I will discuss in greater detail below. However, the dissonance between the sound and image creates confusion perhaps most of all, right at the outset of the film, which anticipates the emotional dissonance that is the likely lot of the viewer confronted with von Trier's mixing of genre patterns in this film.

The overture comes to a close to reveal the film's title shot and then what at first, by virtue of von Trier's shooting style, appears to be a documentary about Björk and Catherine Deneuve making a musical. As the scene continues, it becomes clear that this is indeed a fiction film, in which Björk's and Catherine Deneuve's characters are rehearsing for a stage production of another musical, *The Sound of Music*. Thus the film, in its introduction and beyond, is a mish-mash of generic modes, generating conflicting expectations in order to subvert them as the film moves forward.

At the outset, through the overture and what immediately follows the shift out of the overture, viewers are cued to the film's major modal strategies for realism and reflexivity. In the very first few minutes of the film, von Trier sets up expectations of various modes and genres that will be challenged and subverted throughout the film. That the overture sets up the expectations of the *musical* genre has already been established. The expectations of the musical are to a great degree emotional, since viewers tend to go to musicals in order to be thrilled and excited, and to ultimately be assured that the world is a good and fair place. The intended symbolic content of the images in the overture, though, far from corresponding to the uplifting conventions of a musical narrative, suggests something tragic or melodramatic in the story that is not quite in keeping with the conventions of the musical genre. Even the music suggests a (perhaps excessively) dramatic story, which is often how melodrama is defined. It is in this way that the idea of the *melodrama* is suggested—perhaps obliquely, but nevertheless as an integral part of the introduction of this film. Next, as the picture fades to white and the first "real" images of the film appear, von Trier's mode switches to *documentary*, with a shaky camera and seemingly improvised dialogue. (Of course, this is not just any documentary; this is a

documentary about the making of a musical.) The fact that the viewer might mistake the film for reality because both involve making a musical is a highly reflexive move, but it also introduces the audience to the film's documentary mode, which sets up very different expectations from those called up as a result of musical and melodramatic cues.

The gargantuan size of von Trier's name surrounding the significantly smaller size of "Dancer in the Dark" on the shaky title shot just before the first scene begins is not simply a product of the filmmaker's oversized ego. This is also reflexive—a reference to the Dogme 95 film movement, which von Trier spear-headed. The Dogme 95 "Vow of Chastity" forbids the filmmaker from being credited in the Dogme film. By crediting himself in this way, von Trier is not simply calling attention to the fact that this is not a Dogme film. He is also not mocking the ideal of truthfulness which Dogme 95 represents. Rather, this element of the film, along with the hand-held shooting style, is reminding viewers of this ideal—the refusal of the individual or auteur film—holding it up at the same moment as calling it into question. This is a repeated effect of many of von Trier's strategies throughout the film: at the same time arguing for and against, not offering viewers a safe place from which to sit and watch, evoking in us explosively mixed feelings.

Now that I have introduced the film's major modal strategies which are significantly set up very early in the film, even through its overture, I will delve into the emotions that the film tends to elicit from viewers and attempt to reconcile the relationship between the film's style and its emotional effect. It is my intention to show how *Dancer in the Dark* employs the tropes and strategies of a "strange brew of movie styles"—three distinct modes—in the service of playing with our emotions (Abrams).

Clearly, the film is an unruly mish-mash of different genres, and thus of contradictory expectations, satisfactions, and subversions. This is perhaps one reason that many viewers (bloggers, professional reviewers, and film scholars alike) have found the film so confounding, expressed definitively by one reviewer who proclaims: "I loved it! I hated it! It's brilliant! It's pretentious! It's…It's…It's exasperating!" (Murray). *New York Times* reviewer A.O. Scott writes that the film "can elicit, sometimes within a single scene, a gasp of rapture and a spasm of revulsion." Calling von Trier a "bastard," in his scholarly review, José Arroyo laments the film's "theatrical shock tactic," and in the same breath he admits that "as the final number unfolds one finds oneself moved" (16). Von Trier uses the conventions of each mode or genre both to satisfy and dissatisfy the audience, sometimes simultaneously, evoking powerful emotions, including sadness, anger, helplessness, and ambivalence.

Viewers often describe feeling anger after leaving the theatre—the feeling of having been duped. Brian D. Johnson perhaps generously calls von Trier "coyly subversive" (72), while others write that *Dancer* is "merely [a demonstration] of emotional manipulation" (Overstreet), or, in the harsher words of Peter Bradshaw, simply "shallow and crudely manipulative." However manipulative (and manipulated) all forms of film are, this feeling is not a common reaction to watching most films. Even the openly emotional motives of the "excessive" melodrama, which I will discuss below, do not often evoke such feelings even when the work successfully elicits tears. One might instead posit that this feeling comes from a blend of this film's contradictory thrusts—that the feeling of having been manipulated comes from the eclectic blend of manipulative styles which are no less effective for their transparency. That is, all of these

genres or modes are manipulative in different ways. And von Trier pulls the strings and pushes the envelope to encourage us to read them in alternative ways, both being affected by them and aware of their functions. One function of the musical is to engage viewers in an openly unrealistic world. In that way, this musical fails to go the distance; instead of being an unbelievable but entertaining spectacle, many of its musical numbers are believable as failed escapes from a painful reality. And while the melodramatic and documentary strategies work together to pull the viewer into the reality of an emotional whirlwind, they both serve to draw attention to the artifice—the manipulation—of film in different ways.

Before discussing von Trier's individual modal strategies in *Dancer*, I will provide a brief synopsis of the story. A single mother, Selma (played by Björk), is slowly succumbing to hereditary blindness. She tries to hide her disability from everyone, especially her son Gene, whom she is certain will suffer the same fate unless she can buy him an operation by his thirteenth birthday. She works extra shifts at the factory in order to save money for Gene's operation. Her "painful reality" is made livable by her participation in the production of *The Sound of Music* with her best friend Kathy (Catherine Deneuve). In a moment of intimacy, her friend and landlord Bill (David Morse) admits to her that he has frittered away his inheritance, and he is afraid that his materialistic wife will leave him when she finds out. To ease his pain, Selma confesses her secret—that she is not, in fact, sending the money she saves to her supposed father, Oldrich Novy, the once famous Czech dancer. Rather, she is keeping it hidden until Gene's thirteenth birthday, when he will be able to have his operation. Bill tricks Selma into revealing her money stash, and he steals the cash. When Selma confronts him, he

points a gun at her, but then he begs her to kill him. Out of desperation, Selma shoots him—and she must, gruesomely, shoot him several times because she cannot see where he is, and then, after running out of bullets, beat him to death with his metal safety deposit box. She winds up in jail, awaiting the death penalty because she is willing to disclose neither Bill's secret nor her own, for the sake of honour and the good of her son.

In understanding the discussion of mode and genre which follows, Rick Altman's suggestion of a "semantic/syntactic approach to genre" is useful (2006, 34). That is, the modes in operation in *Dancer* are similar to modes operating in certain distinct genres, which can be described by their semantic traits, such as common "attitudes, characters, shots, locations, sets, and the like," and their syntactic definitions which stress "certain constitutive relationships between undesignated and variable placeholders," or the structures into which semantic qualities are arranged (Altman 2006, 31). The "semantic/syntactic approach" recognizes genre in terms of both semantic traits and the syntax which organizes them in order to retain both "explanatory power" and "broad applicability" (Altman 1984, 33).

Like its *Golden Heart* predecessors *Breaking the Waves* and, especially, *Idioterne*[2] (1998), *Dancer in the Dark* is shot with a Dogme-esque, shaky hand-held camera which often captures seemingly improvised performances. In that way, it has the feel of a documentary film or of *cinema verité*. This type of hand-held shooting style in which Selma's reality (as opposed to her musical imaginings) is shot reads as "gritty reality." Upon reflection, this is a strange fact. Why does the viewer tend to read documentary-style shooting as more authentic than fiction film that is conventionally shot? It is not as though people constantly experience the world this way, recognizing the

bumps and jostles of their bodies as their visual field moves up and down and side to side, the images they see pulsating as their hearts beat and heaving as their lungs fill with air. The brain hardly picks these movements up. Regardless of whether the body is moving or stationary, the visual perception of the image—the way the framing of the image is perceived in the brain after having been seen by the eyes—is generally stationary. So, since this effect is not realistic, what such an aesthetic does is draw attention to the medium through which so-called reality is being represented—it draws attention to the artifice of film. In fact, reviewer Raphael Shargel notes that von "Trier clearly enjoys announcing himself" (55). So clearly the film's reflexive style does not go unnoticed. Since the form is in focus, as the shooting style or the framing is in focus in much of *Dancer*, the content of the images is brought into question and, ultimately, their status as fictional is declared.

Nevertheless, whether or not the documentary strategy is consciously noticed, people tend to view films that employ it as more realistic, authentic, and potentially engaging than naturalistic shooting in which the artifice of film is largely invisible. One blogger admits: "*Dancer in the Dark* was a film in which I felt a connection to the characters and it moved me to the point of crying long after I rewound the tape and got ready for bed. It's not that I particularly related to the characters, but it felt so real" (Echo). The documentary film only "feels" real because contemporary audiences have been trained to associate documentary films with reality or truth. Documentarian Jill Godmilow asserts that, to her dismay, "unconsciously embedded in these forms called documentary is the conceit of 'the real,' which substantiates the truth claims made by these films" (Shapiro 80-81). We know that documentary films are likely to have rough

camera movement, and we associate documentary films more closely with truth than we do fiction films because the stories they tell are literally and figuratively framed as factual. As a result, unsteady framing elicits a conditioned (conscious or unconscious) response characterized by a strong belief in the content which is being represented.

In this way, the documentary shooting style that von Trier uses has two possible effects on the viewer—effects which can place the viewer in a double bind. On one level, the medium itself is visible, which suggests that the film is mediated and therefore not necessarily truthful. On the other hand, the documentary shooting style is one which allows itself to be seen, thus implying that it is more honest about its mediation. Furthermore, the documentary style of filmmaking demands an immediate conditioned reaction to the film as factual, much like news footage, no matter what we know about the film's fictional nature. So the same technique has strongly opposing potential effects on the viewer at once, "creating a sensory experience that is as powerful as it is manipulative" (Anonymous, *Star Pulse*). The position in which the viewer is placed is a position of ambivalence wherein a viewer can remain of two minds about the subject, undecided perhaps until long after the film ends. Roger Ebert contends that within the film is a certain "messy truth," which perhaps comes from this uncomfortable viewing position. Similarly, Brian D. Johnson recalls his experiences after watching *Dancer*:

> You walk out of the dark feeling stunned and hollow. Outside, however, the world seems sharper, more real -- popped into focus like one of those musical numbers in the film. Briefly, the human condition appears to dance, as if you are seeing it with new eyes. And as the images keep flooding back days later, you wonder if this is a movie about vision that might actually improve it. (72)

Here, Johnson gestures to what can be gained from a position of ambivalence. It is this position which can make a work of art most interesting to experience—to inhabit—because it is so unsettling.

Interestingly, the documentary-like shooting style that characterizes von Trier's filmmaking is often attributed to his connection to Dogme 95, even though he employed such a style in films he directed before 1995. The Dogme 95 manifesto, which von Trier co-wrote with Thomas Vinterberg, was a self-described "rescue action" for film, which they saw as superficial and meaningless. One of the Dogme 95 "Vow of Chastity" rules demands that the camera be hand-held, which gives Dogme films the documentary "look" that I have been discussing. In the FAQ section of the Dogme 95 website, one can glean that "the essence" of the movement is "to challenge the conventional film language – in order to make authentic films, in search of the truth," which is very much in keeping with the ideals of the French New Wave, to which the manifesto winkingly gestures. While *Dancer* hardly conforms to Dogme rules as a whole, the non-musical sequences of the film have that same Dogme-esque quality of rawness that comes from its hand-held, improvisational shooting style. As I will discuss further in the next chapter, I believe that one of the goals of the Dogme 95 movement was to expose the mediated nature of filmmaking, rather than to continue to conceal it and perpetuate the contemptible (for von Trier and Vinterberg) artificiality of contemporary film. Thus the documentary strategy, which I have argued serves both to draw attention to the mediation that occurs during filmmaking and to suggest a powerful authenticity on screen, could be seen as the perfect Dogme 95 strategy, since the movement seems to long for "truth" on film (whatever that is) at the same time as realizing that the truth of the film must always be that it is untrue.

By engaging the viewer in a credible, perhaps seemingly factual story and by simultaneously disrupting the viewer's total immersion in it, the documentary feel of the non-musical parts of *Dancer* gestures towards its ultimate (in)authenticity. Thus perhaps the documentary style of the film makes it "something that's truer than reality" in terms of both the emotional experience of that which is projected on screen and the intellectual experience of film as an openly mediated experience (Shapiro 91).

The more pressing question, then, might be this: is the ambivalence resulting from von Trier's strategic use of the documentary mode intentional, a happy bonus, or a mere accident? Given the lack of clarity that artists often have about their own work, the answer to this question may not be illuminating even if it were forthcoming. Nevertheless, even if these are issues or questions that might be raised by the documentary strategies in the film to begin with, I do not believe that the viewer is thinking about these things any longer after ten or twenty minutes, and certainly not by the time the film ends, which explains why this is not an aspect of the film that is discussed in detail in amateur blogs and reviews, which I am taking as tending to be more emotion-centred than professional and scholarly writing.

What *are* discussed a fair amount by amateurs are strong emotional responses to different parts of the film. Several comment threads on the International Movie Data Base (IMDB) are dedicated to discussing uncontrollable weeping for some viewers, in such aptly titled postings as "one of the only films that i have ever truly cried at!", "Was anyone else crying?", and "Did anyone NOT cry?" Other bloggers confess to "tears streaming down" their faces (wooby) and "trembling and crying like a baby" as they left the theatre (jblank). This affective response is not limited to "amateurs," as an *Austin*

Chronicle critic calls the film a "two-and-a-half hour slice of unmitigated depression" (Savlov). Such reactions cannot be explained by von Trier's documentary or Dogme 95 strategies alone. Professional and amateur online responses to the film suggest a reading of *Dancer* as a film which employs the generic strategies of the melodrama.

The melodrama, even more specifically the Hollywood family melodrama, is difficult to define as it is in many ways a "fragmented generic category," as Christine Gledhill asserts, "and as a pervasive aesthetic mode [it breaks] genre boundaries" (6). The late nineteenth century definition of a theatrical melodrama is "a romantic and sensational dramatic piece with a happy ending." This evolved from the 1802 definition: "a stage-play in which songs were interspersed and music accompanied the action" (Online Etymology Dictionary). It is significant that the melodrama has a history of music, since that connects it to the musical, which I will discuss in the next section. It is perhaps this commonality which gives both the melodrama and the musical a duality that elicits heightened emotional effects as well as an arguable lack of realism. In the melodrama, this falseness comes from overstated performances and exaggeratedly tragic plots. Melodramas are often distinguished from tragedies by the fact that they have happy endings. It is important to note that, should such a distinction be made here, *Dancer* would hardly qualify as a melodrama. Nevertheless, looking at *Dancer* in relation to all of the other semantic and syntactic definitions of melodrama will make its inclusion in (or at the very least collusion with) the category more apparent.

Melodrama is often defined in terms of excess. According to Torben Grodal, "[a] film or novel is called melodramatic when the themes are 'too huge', when the means of expression are too exaggerated, and when the emotions they evoke in the spectators are

too strong." Grodal highlights Peter Brooks' use of the word "muteness" in melodrama to suggest that "an interior life which cannot be fully verbalized is expressed by excess, stylization, and gesture," and most importantly, Grodal adds, by indexical signs through which the viewer can gain meaning, such as a woman crying or a tragic situation that could give rise to such an indescribable interior life (259-260). But this is still an incredibly broad, not fully satisfactory explanation of what we call melodrama.

Most often, melodramas have in common certain subjects, such as class conflict (Gledhill 16) and "the Law"—socially and legally constructed norms—as a subject of discourse (Lang 9). While legal and social issues, particularly those which affect women, are often directly addressed, most melodramas do not offer alternatives to the status quo, but merely lament injustices within it, their primary concern being to distinguish between good and bad (Lang 9-13). In melodramas, a "woman (or a woman's point of view) often dominates the narrative," and such characters generally lack depth and dynamism, being "acted upon" more than acting themselves in order to effect changes within their lives (Lang 8-9). Thus, the American family melodrama which Robert Lang describes has many generic elements in common with *Dancer in the Dark*. Not the least of these elements is the stock character of the self-sacrificing woman, i.e. Selma.

In their attempted explanation of "tear-jerkers" (which could be seen as a sub-class of the melodrama), Tan and Frijda assert that there are certain narrative paradigms that elicit sentimental responses from audiences. First, there is the *separation-reunion theme* which "acts upon a basic attachment concern" (56). Then, the *justice in jeopardy motive* includes the "rough diamond" narrative and a recurrence of the concept of "self-sacrifice" (58-60). The last one is *the awe-inspiration theme*, in which one recognizes

"the vastness or endlessness of a landscape" either through image or music, provoking a desire to "surrender" either out of wonder and veneration or out of helplessness (62). Perhaps not surprisingly, these themes tend to be unifying tropes in films of the melodrama genre. In an examination of *Dancer*'s plot, one can find at the very least elements from each of these narrative paradigm scenarios throughout the film.

The paradigmatic *justice in jeopardy* theme is perhaps the most easily recognized: Selma finds herself in several situations throughout the film where she is faced with some adversity, and time and again, rather than fighting or coming at the problem strategically, she copes by sacrificing herself. Her self-sacrifice is evident in the fact that she works two jobs to save money for Gene's operation, living in a tiny rented trailer. Also, although it could elicit comforting compassion from her friends who would likely be glad to share her burden emotionally, Selma refuses to tell anyone about Gene's eyesight for fear that he will find out (which she is afraid will make it worse). Of course, the ultimate self-sacrifice is Selma's decision to be executed rather than to tell the court about the money she has given the doctor for Gene's operation, which could potentially save her life at the possible expense of Gene's eyesight.

One can imagine how this *justice in jeopardy* narrative paradigm could elicit tears. Empathetic viewers know that Selma sees herself in a no-win situation, even if we believe that Gene would be better off growing up with his mother alive.[3] So this sacrifice elicits in us feelings of increasingly helplessness, as the increasingly gloomy musical numbers lead Selma to her execution more agonizingly and immutably than Brenda the prison guard (Siobhan Fallon) ever could.

In this way, one wonders if perhaps Tan and Frijda's *awe inspiration theme* is also satisfied; the viewer arguably cries because of Selma's helplessness as well as his or her own as a sort of submission to the powerlessness involved in being human (or perhaps more troublingly, in being a spectator). At the same time, Tan and Frijda's awe inspiration, which could be seen as an updated version of Edmund Burke's notion of the sublime, is perhaps an altogether faulty explanation of the helplessness evoked in viewers from the film. Selma's self-sacrifice for the sake of her son is not overtly associated with a higher being; her powerlessness and eventual death have to do with social and economic status, gender, and disability, more than with Burke's "howling wilderness." It is true that Selma's (and our own) helplessness is in the face of "vast power"—not that of God or Nature, but rather the infinite powers of people with money (particularly white able-bodied non-immigrants with money). The sublime can perhaps be glimpsed in Selma's apparent altruistic actions, which are themselves godly, and can be associated with a virtue of vast proportions. However, it could be argued that her actions elicit our pity—and perhaps even our fear—as much as our awe.

Tan and Frijda's *separation-reunion theme*, which is absent from few mainstream Hollywood films in circulation, is partially fulfilled by the fact that Selma is separated from her son, except that there will be no reunion. Although this paradigm is partly satisfied, the reunion—arguably the most sentimental part—is absent. Of course, it is significant to recall here that the tragic ending is where *Dancer* parts decisively from the melodrama genre.

It is evident that the film employs many melodramatic elements, and it does so arguably more overtly than many melodramas do. However, the film also diverges from

the melodrama in important ways, such as its tragic ending which serves to subvert expectations, making the final tragic blow even more distressing. And, of course, there are many ways to respond to such subversion. At the end, viewers might feel cheated. We are angry at having been manipulated not because we have been formulaically led down a path which ended where we expected it to, but rather because it ended on the other side of town. We are disoriented. Some of us take this moment to try to explain the confusion, through an intellectual puzzle: perhaps von Trier is clearly trying to evoke this feeling of disorientation in me to point out my powerless position as an audience member. On the other hand, some of us are still inhabiting Selma's last song, which is cut off as abruptly as her last breath when she falls through the trapdoor hanging from the noose, her neck snapped. The shock is the result of a mix of final realizations: this is the end of Selma's (fictional) life, of the melodrama, of the musical and, ultimately, of the film. As the actual curtain closes, separating Selma's lifeless body from the audience of her execution, it is the end of happy endings. It is the end of the escape of the film.

At the same time, there is more to weep at in this film—and in melodramas in general—than the narrative content or structure that Tan and Frijda discuss. Von Trier's customarily moving handheld camera frequently rests and zooms in on close-ups, particularly of Selma, during emotional moments. For example, in a bluish medium shot, Selma listens to the judge read her sentence in the courtroom: "Selma Jezkova, you are hereby sentenced to be taken from this place and confined in the state penitentiary until such time as you shall be executed by being hanged by the neck until you are dead." The camera slowly zooms in to an extreme close-up of Selma's eyes; we are so close that every freckle and pore is subject to our observation, and we cannot miss the water in her

eyes reflecting the drab fluorescent lights. Many theorists posit that the emotion expressed in the actors' performances is what truly brings forth the same emotions in viewers through emotional contagion.

Carl Plantinga asserts that "facial expressions in film not only communicate emotion, but also elicit, clarify, and strengthen affective response—especially empathetic response." Nevertheless, just knowing that a character with whom the viewer identifies is sad will not guarantee that sadness is evoked in the viewer. If the character cries in a lengthy close-up, the viewer will be more likely to be sad. Plantinga argues that "[t]his is possible because viewing the human face can elicit response through the processes of affective mimicry, facial feedback, and emotional contagion" (240). *Emotional contagion* means "'catching' others' emotions or affective states" (Plantinga 243), and it can rely on *affective mimicry*, *character simulation,* and *facial feedback*. *Affective mimicry* involves an automatic response to an emotional expression, which can be recognized by body language, facial expression, utterance of sounds, verbal articulation, etc. So *affective mimicry* could be an explanation for why the sound of Björk's voice crying or even singing sadly in certain musical numbers is emotionally affecting. It is, in a way, in opposition to *character simulation,* in which the viewer imagines the experience of an emotion based on the character's situation. The *facial feedback hypothesis,* currently widely accepted by scholars of emotion, contends that "our facial expressions provide us with proprioceptive feedback which at most determines and at the least influences our emotional experience" (Plantinga 243-44).

Melodramatic film is also associated with a number of close-up and medium close-ups during scenes of heightened emotion (generally expressed through tears) in

protagonists. And the framing of *Dancer*'s non-musical sections is highly reliant on close-ups of Björk/Selma's face, which might have the effect of stimulating affective mimicry, even at the same time as it employs the strategies of the documentary, and of the musical, for different reasons. So the emotion elicited in viewers could be a product of emotional contagion, as much as of Tan and Frijda's sentimental narrative paradigms.

Another possible source of emotional power in the melodrama is its music. As mentioned above, melodramas often employ sweeping music in emotional scenes to heighten affective response. That music often acts as a stimulus to provoke emotion has long been discussed (both affirmed and contested) in the study of music; in film studies, the affective nature of music is virtually self-evident, judging from the fact that the question of whether music is affective is not a point of debate. But from both of these standpoints, a question remains. What quality of music makes it emotionally affecting?

Stephen Davies describes music's expressiveness as being "more like a face-to-face encounter with someone who publicly and vividly displays his feeling than it is like hearing a dispassionate description of an emotional state" (96). To Davies, and other scholars like Susanne Langer and Carroll Pratt, "music sounds the way emotions feel" (Kivy 40). While Stephen Davies implies that music is more adept at emotional expression than language, say, because he believes that it does not use "an arbitrary symbol system" in order to convey emotion, Peter Kivy more cautiously and convincingly asserts that "music, in many respects, resembles our expressive behaviour" (52). In an explanation of what he calls "contour theory," Kivy describes the way in which a certain melody can be moving because of its "[*resemblance* to] passionate speech" (22). Thus, while Davies draws on Kivy's theories, Kivy likens music's symbol

system to that of language and speech patterns. Similarly, Caryl Flinn, a film music scholar, argues that music "is bereft of any imprint of its own [and] it passively awaits meanings to be imposed upon it," pointing out that "music's functions do not emerge automatically or naturally but as a result of having been culturally assigned" (8). In that way, for Kivy and Flinn, in opposition to the views of Davies, Langer, and Pratt, music is not expressive of emotion without prior experience with the music, emotive behavioural culture, and the speech patterns of the group of people for or by whom the piece of music is composed. That being the case, music can be seen as an expressive stimulus capable of potentially inciting an emotional response (based on culture and conditioning) from listeners. In fact, fans of certain genres such as the melodrama have been particularly well-conditioned to the (excessive) meanings of melodramatic styles of music. Thus, the use of music in melodramas might be even more effective at producing emotional responses in regular viewers of the melodrama.[4]

While Tan and Frijda's list of sentimental themes is useful in identifying the narrative elements that tend to elicit affective responses in these films, such a list does not explain why these particular themes are effective in bringing out viewer's responses, nor does it prove that these are the only scenarios which bring forth tears. Clearly, other elements such as sound, music, framing, and performance are also in play, stirring up the emotions of viewers.

In watching *Dancer in the Dark,* Andrew Howe asserts in his internet review that "[i]t's impossible not to feel something, not to feel overwhelmingly moved by it, and after you leave the theater, part of you wants to kick yourself for giving in to the director's emotional bullying." So the film blatantly *pushes* the viewer into feeling, using

the formula of the melodrama, which in fact draws attention to it. Although the product of the melodrama seems to be widely understood as an excessively emotional effect, Jane Shattuc recalls the neo-Marxist argument that the melodrama has political importance. The "visual and narrative ruptures and fissures of the film's bourgeois realism and ideology," along with the melodrama's blatant excess, make the genre an apparent "precursor to Brechtian distanciation" (Shattuc 147). In the next chapter, I will discuss the link between Brechtian strategies and von Trier's techniques in greater depth. Suffice it to say that, like Brecht, von Trier seeks to engage the viewer at the same time as he draws attention to the medium of film, thus gesturing to a recognition that the story is not merely escapist, but must be understood in relation to the world outside the (movie) theatre. For Shattuc and others, the melodrama's reliance on formula and its blanket exaggeration serve to disrupt viewer identification. Thus, in the last analysis, what *Dancer*'s collusion with the melodrama does is two-fold: tears are elicited by means of the melodrama's tear-jerking abilities, and viewers are made aware of their viewership, and perhaps even of their desire to be emotionally manipulated, by means of its characteristic excess. This strengthens the resultant ambivalence precipitated in viewers, first apparent in the above discussion of von Trier's use of the documentary mode.

The strangest thing about this mongrel film is the counterintuitive effect of each of its generic strategies. I have already discussed the documentary and the melodrama, genres which gesture to realism and affect, respectively, but serve a secondary function to draw attention to the constructed status of film. Possibly the oddest of all is the effect of the musical genre. While it is true that musicals sometimes make use of melodramatic plots and can thus be seen as aiming at similar emotional effects as melodramas,

conventionally, they have been expected to cheer their audience and to charm and entertain them in much the same way as a vaudeville show. In the simplest sense, while melodramas are thought to be fundamentally sad, musicals are seen as fun, happy, and exciting. Thus, although both the melodrama and the musical are *moving* (in different ways), the fact that this film elicits the most powerful feelings of *devastation* and *helplessness* within its fantastical musical scenes is quite peculiar indeed. Curiously, it is the musical scenes which make us weep harder than any of the non-musical sections of the film, judging from the fact that it is most often musical numbers, such as "The Next to Last Song," "My Favourite Things," and "I've Seen It All," that are cited as tear-jerking scenes on internet blogs. It is for this reason that the rest of this chapter will be concerned with the musical strategies of the film, which I believe are the most emotionally affecting, conflicting, and intriguing.

Even though the first forty minutes of the film are wholly unmusical, the film repeatedly reminds the viewer, if not about *this* film's classification as a musical, about musicals in general and their significance to the story. This begins with the film's title, *Dancer in the Dark*, which is a direct reference to Fred Astaire and Cyd Charisse's famous musical number, "Dancing in the Dark" in Vincente Minnelli's *The Band Wagon* (1953). Also, Selma is starring in the musical *The Sound of Music*, just as Björk is starring in *Dancer in the Dark*. Selma loves musicals, and she uses the name of an old Czech musical star, Oldrich Novy, as the name of her father. As Brenda Austin-Smith notes, Oldrich Novy, played by Joel Grey, "signifies as an ambassador of the musical film through his inter-textual identity as the master of ceremonies in Bob Fosse's film *Cabaret*" (38). Partly because of the studio system, Golden era Hollywood musicals often

featured musical stars such as Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Gene Kelly, and Cyd Charisse. Joel Grey satisfies that criterion, as does Björk, on a certain level. However, because she is a pop music star, particularly one with an eccentric image and a "whispery-shriek of a voice," her presence is somewhat incongruous in a musical (Abrams). Already something is off-kilter.

Von Trier also makes reference to musical spectatorship within the non-musical sections of the film. This is best illustrated by the scenes in which Kathy and Selma go to see musical films. Kathy must describe the choreography because Selma cannot see. Eventually, Kathy must mirror the dancers' movement with two fingers dancing on the palm of Selma's hand in order for her to experience the musical. These scenes invoke the idea of the musical and its charm, emphasizing the *visual* pleasure of watching a musical through Selma's inability to see. Nevertheless, Kathy's verbal and tactile descriptions of the film suggest that, for Selma, there is more than one way to watch a musical. As Selma's blindness progresses, this alternative "viewing" becomes more and more tempting both because she literally becomes unable to see the real world as her blindness worsens, and because her life becomes progressively intolerable, so that figuratively "seeing" it is too agonizing to bear.

Selma also discusses musicals with Bill in the trailer she rents from him in a scene that precedes any of the film's musical sequences. As a child in Czechoslovakia, she used to "cheat on" the ending by leaving the theatre before the end of the film so that the film went on forever. (Here, von Trier is not so indirectly warning the audience that the last scene of this musical too might ruin our enjoyment of the film.)

These references to the musical inside and outside of the diegesis serve to remind the viewer of two things. First, this film is (going to be) a musical. The film is setting a trap. The viewer must expect certain things from this film as a musical, perhaps most importantly that "in a musical, nothing dreadful ever happens," in order for the film to subvert those expectations. This is in part how von Trier elicits such a strong response from the viewer, whether that be anger (at von Trier and the film) or despair and disorientation because the genre lifeline has been lost. Just as there are certain unassailable laws in reality, related to such things as gravity or mortality, there are generic laws. A feeling of confusion—of everything suddenly being suspended in midair—results from a break in these laws or norms. These breaks happen not only when the musical ending is sad (which is the case in some other musicals, such as *Carousel* (1956) and, more recently, *Moulin Rouge* (2001)),[5] but when *Dancer* transgresses other generic boundaries, related to colour, costumes, set design, characters, and narrative structure, which will be discussed below.

Secondly, the musical references in the film gesture to the film's status as a construction. Selma's rehearsal for this staging of *The Sound of Music* is anything but seamless; all the elements of artifice that might be hidden from a theatre-goer in the final production are revealed to the "documentary" viewer. Just as the musical within the musical *Sound of Music* production implies construction, this musical film has been fabricated. Some of the musical numbers later on in the film are choreographed less conventionally than the classic musical, which I will discuss below. And the framing of the musical sections, though smoother than von Trier's shaky camera in the rest of the film, is still not conventional, as there are no cranes or dollies, and only a few bird's eye

view shots. Therefore, the musical scenes are somehow imperfect, which lends credence to the idea that part of von Trier's aim in using the musical genre (in combination with the strategies of the documentary mode and the melodrama) is to expose film's artifice.

While *Dancer in the Dark* may be melodrama, documentary, and musical all at once, its musical elements mark it as quite distant from a Western audience's idea of a conventional Hollywood musical. Although common elements are in play, which I will discuss below, von Trier satisfies the expectations of the genre just enough so that the viewer mentally (consciously or unconsciously) categorizes *Dancer* as a musical, a category with which it is at odds, just as it is at odds with the two previous modes in operation, which were discussed above.

This leads us to ponder some important questions. What are the generic expectations audiences have of the musical? And which musical are we talking about, anyway? I believe that the type of film that one (perhaps unconsciously) expects from a film under the broad heading *musical* is the Hollywood musical of the Golden Age, since that is when musicals dominated the screen. The Hollywood musical of the Golden Age, or the studio era, lasted broadly from the advent of sound in 1927 to the mid 1950s.[6] It is characterized semantically by extravagant costumes, lively ensemble choreography, and mostly upbeat songs, among other things. Syntactically, Rick Altman characterizes it in terms of its romantic narrative, that is, its "dual focus, built around parallel stars of opposite sex and radically divergent values," which I will discuss in greater detail below (2002, 42). In contrast to the Dogme 95 and documentary aesthetics detailed above, the aesthetic style of the musical film in its heyday in Hollywood was achieved through the use of smooth camera-work, crane movement, studio shooting with high-key lighting,

and, when colour technology became available, a production design and film stock which accentuated vibrant colour. All of these elements combined to produce fantastical musical numbers such as *The Wizard of Oz*'s (1939) "Follow the Yellow Brick Road."

Of course, the 1960s family musicals offered films like *Oliver!* (1968), *My Fair Lady* (1964), and *The Music Man* (1962) which could be seen as slightly less cheery, given the fact that they include sadder songs, although they are still undoubtedly upbeat. And films like *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971), *Cabaret* (1972) and, more recently, *Moulin Rouge* have challenged the conventions of the musical, which has allowed the genre to evolve beyond its basic parameters. Nevertheless, these films, like *Dancer*, are drawing on generic conventions which are upheld by a large number of relatively traditional musicals still being produced (though in smaller quantities these days). Examples of these are the updated "pop" musical of the 1980s, *Footloose* (1984) and *Flashdance* (1983); the flood of animated (Disney) musicals in the late eighties and nineties such as *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), and *The Lion King* (1994); as well as the more recent reworkings of previous musicals, such as *Hairspray* (2007) and *Chicago* (2001). Clearly, the musical genre, like all genres, has evolved over time, but the viewer still assumes a generic expectation in a musical—one that I argue is related to the musical's success throughout Hollywood's studio era.

In short, what most closely binds all musicals together is cheer, romance, song, and dance—a veritable utopia. According to Richard Dyer, the musical's "central thrust" is "utopianism." To Dyer,

> Entertainment offers the image of something better to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide. Alternatives, hopes, wishes—these are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined

> and maybe realized. […] Rather [than presenting models of utopian worlds,] utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies. It presents, head-on as it were, what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized. (20)

Thus, Dyer believes that entertainment offers escape through the emotion in the film.

If the musical represents a utopia, as Dyer contends, it is not surprising that after the first forty minutes of the film, in which Selma's dystopic life is introduced, Selma tells Kathy that she prefers her when she dances—or, in the utopian world in which this might be so. Kathy replies, "I will dance when there is music." But to Selma the world is full of music, so there is no need to wait for it. All the musical numbers in the film are simply external representations of what is going on inside Selma's head—her imagination combined with the way she sees the world. So when Selma hears Kathy's reply—a veritable plea for music, so Selma surely believes—true to musical form, the music begins. There is an immediate shift in filming style. We are now finally watching a musical that recalls Hollywood musical conventions of the 1940s and 1950s. The colours are a bright homage to Technicolor. The movement is no longer shaky and stilted, but smooth, incorporating the movement of dollies and cranes, seamlessly stitching together different elements of the beautiful dance of life. Everything belongs, everything is fantastic. Brightly dressed factory workers dance as one about the factory floor, jumping up in the air and working their machines in time to the music. This is modern life as it was meant to be. Here, the cynical and overworked Kathy becomes "Cvalda," the "big, happy" person Selma sees in her.

As in a conventional Hollywood musical, the viewer is cheerfully entertained in an escapist style in this number. (In contrast, subsequent musical numbers in *Dancer* only rarely divert Selma and the viewer to pleasurable thoughts, as I will discuss.) The

distraction that such a style produces (in both the viewer and Selma) does not seem to be the primary function of the musical scenes in this film. In fact, the conclusion of this scene, which is perhaps the number most likely to be seen as mindless diversion, is the recognition of a painful contrast between the reality of Selma's deteriorating life (and eyesight) and her initially healthy and vivid imagination, which is the only thing that makes her life halfway bearable. The viewer is reminded of Selma's reality; drab Selma drifts off inside her mind in the factory, a place drained of colour. The number is suddenly cut short by a disaster in the factory. Selma has put two glass sheets into her machine at once, causing the machine to break, which will mean the loss of a day's production on the machine. Thus Selma's imagination is not something in which she can truly take solace. It is, in effect, her imagination, and its collusion with the musical genre that the audience has been enjoying, which contributes to her ultimate downfall. She is fired from her job as a result of it, so that when she later finds her money stolen, knowing that there is now no way for her to make it back, she is desperate enough to do whatever it takes to get it back.

This first musical number, however, does not generally elicit a major *affective* response in the viewer. Reviewers have referred to the "factory workers on the night shift syncopating to the machine-hiss and piston-thump" as "stunning" (Abrams) and "the rhythmic grinding, clattering and crashing in the factory [as …] catchy and clever" (Muskewitz). In other words, it is the cheerful *aesthetics* of this scene that are cited, as opposed to any fearful affective response, or foreboding, experienced as a result of watching the scene. Certainly, the scene is emotionally stimulating in that it thrills, and thus the emotion elicited in viewers through this scene is of a different sort from that in

play in future scenes. Even so, the depth of the emotion elicited does not seem to be on a par with the level conveyed in response to the later, more distressing musical numbers, or even to Selma's gloomy life, narrated through the documentary and melodramatic modes.

While this first musical scene effectively contrasts Selma's horrible life and satisfies some of the long awaited expectations of the musical, the function of the film's musical scenes is not only to draw a distinction between the two modes (musical and documentary), emphasizing the dreariness and danger of real life in comparison to Selma's imaginative musical life. As the film progresses, the musical scenes too become ever more miserable, by virtue of their content (lyrics), the way they are filmed, the music, and of course the mournful vocal performances of Björk and others. In fact, if anything, all of these elements make the later musical numbers more heartbreaking than her painful reality, or the non-musical segments which comprise most of the film, because we expect them to be happy.

The second musical number in the film, "I've Seen It All" is the one brought on by Jeff's realization that Selma cannot see. (This is notably the song in the film which was nominated for an Academy Award, so it is arguably the one most resonant, at least with the American public.) Unlike the first number, this one is often cited as both innovative *and* emotionally charged. One blogger testifies, "the first musical moment had me giddy, the second […] brought tears to my eyes" (Rogers). The scene's emotional impact seems to stem from several different elements. Each of the scene's strategies interact with one another in order to produce the scene's effect (for me, tears).

First of all, the music itself is moving. Music's emotive qualities, discussed above, are all but taken for granted in current film studies. The bulk of the song,

rhythmically linked to the diegetic sound of the train (much as “Cvalda” is linked to the factory), is drudging in the same way that a death march can be drudging. But the musical climax of the song comes near the end, when Selma (or Björk) utters her child-like howl, yearning for the fantasy that the musical number suggests but refuses to deliver. She sobs for her dwindling eyesight at the same moment that the song’s lyrics declare her acquiescence to her plight.

Particularly striking is the fact that the song begins conversationally as Selma begins to sing the first line of the lyrics in an unnatural tempo before the orchestra comes in, posing as the diegetic noise of the train beside which Selma and Jeff are standing. José Arroyo calls this scene “the emotional core of the film, but [contends that it] also indicates why the film doesn’t work as a musical: there are problems with the music, the dancing, the tone” (15). If, as Peter Kivy contends, the emotional impact of music is derived in part from the reading of certain melodies as speech patterns, then it is significant to note that the speech pattern of the song’s lyrics is very different from that suggested by the melody. So there is a friction between the lyrics and the tune, both in terms of their form (disparate “speech patterns”) and in terms of their content, in which phlegmatic lyrics confront a melancholy, sometimes throbbing, melody. And there is also friction between the expected flowing spectacle of the musical number and the stilted discord of the song’s elements in this scene in the film. As Margaret McGurk comments, “something [Selma] feels makes the film ‘flawed.’”

Ultimately, the song fails Selma. The musical number is supposed to divert and distract her from her woes, but this one provides only a transparent veil for Selma, through which she cannot help but retain a vision of her life, which seems to be falling

apart around her. The number is set on a moving train in the bright green landscape of the country. In this background, many of the extras dance in a manner that gestures to the old studio musicals; the choreography *here* is seamless. However, in addition to the unconventionally stilted and slow music of the song, much of the choreography *on the train* is performed with a seeming reluctance, the bodies of the dancers moving in a wooden manner that anticipates the death that will infect Selma's future. In this way, the musical number betrays. Instead of carrying Selma and the viewer away through a moving operatic melody or a cheerful musical ditty, the song never quite leaves reality. The closer the musical gets to Selma (on the train), the less musical it seems. Rather, as a failed fantasy, the number becomes a musically (and choreographically) expressionistic representation of Selma's tragic situation. In one particular shot, the screen is filled with the farm landscape, wherein a few tiny figures dance. This is in stark contrast to the coverage of the choreography in the factory scene, which is consistent with most conventional musicals, wherein the screen is filled with the movement of dancers. In opposition to this, the dance on the train is sad in its attempt to be what we know it could be if it were a *real* musical. This is not because of its tragic content, which can work in an operatic aria or even a conventional musical's heart-breaking ballad such as "Who Will Buy?" from *Oliver!* Rather, it is sad because the momentum of the music and the dance is enough to carry neither the viewer nor Selma fully into the musical spirit.

All Selma's dancing seems to be a failed attempt at grace and cheer. This is epitomized when she makes stiff, affected hand motions as part of her dance. As mentioned above, the movement of the other dancers on the train is similarly stilted, reluctant, and devoid of musical glee in opposition to the dancers in the country

landscape.[7] For example, the fishermen's symmetrical casting motions with their fishing poles are smooth and rhythmic, if rather drudging. In contrast, the train hoboes simply look at Selma questioningly without any movement at all at one point in the number. And when they do move, it is an awkward, slow movement resembling that of an automaton—a movement that likens them less to dancers than to Frankenstein's monster, or zombies, which again aligns the scene with death. While we never question the momentum of "Cvalda" as it smoothly leads us into the musical genre despite Björk's "funny voice,"[8] *this* scene "reveal[s] the lie of musical fantasy," leaving the viewer in the real world as Selma makes a failed attempt to hide in her imagination (Anonymous, *StarPulse*).

The lyrics of the song entrench us ever more in the real world, as in them Selma professes to something that we as viewers know to be untrue. She is asserting that she does not care that she is losing her eye-sight, as she has "seen it all." From previous scenes, we know this to be a lie. We have evidence of her love of sight in our recent memory of her watching Gene ride his new bicycle, saying, "He looks really happy, doesn't he?" Also, when she talks about musicals with Bill, she remembers what she *saw* on screen much more than what was heard. And we know that she longs to be able to see the dancers on screen in the musicals she goes to "see" with Kathy. Selma even *asks* Kathy to describe the choreography on screen to her, which converts it from a visual experience to an oral one. And later, when Kathy mimics the visual experience of the dance by dancing her fingers on the palm of Selma's hand, she again converts the experience of the musical—this time to something tactile. So, as mentioned above, the musical is a predominantly *visual* genre as it is represented in the film—one that must be either transformed or imagined in order for Selma to experience it. The musical, for

Selma, is more than just an embodiment of her imagination; it is the incarnation of imagined sight. This song might particularly sting, then, because it is an admission that she *is* really blind.

This scene is so emotionally affecting in part because of its narrative content—the literal and musical admission that Selma is going blind. More than that, however, the scene gestures towards a glee (related to the musical genre) that it will not allow. The scene **"**point[s] out both the phoniness of Hollywood musical invention and the […] transcendence of the joy that springs from the same lie" (Rogers). So, inherent in viewers' reaction to this scene is a mixture of affective and reflexive responses to the tragic narrative in which Selma is going blind and to the scene's form which refuses to be what the film promises.

Although there are frequently melancholy songs in musicals, particularly in musicals produced since the Golden Age of musicals, such as "Who Will Buy" from *Oliver!*, mentioned above, there is usually no more than one "downer" in each film. I have established that the genre tends towards an overarching cheery tone, leading inevitably towards a happy ending. *Dancer* includes singing and dancing numbers, which is enough to make the film a musical in the minds of most viewers. One of the songs, "Cvalda," which is set in the factory, might even be described as happy (despite the tragedy it causes). Nevertheless, the film's collusion with the musical—always frail—breaks down ever more as the tragedy of Selma's life steadily worsens.

One of the most emotionally charged musical scenes in the film is the song that immediately follows Selma's murder of Bill, called "Smith and Wesson (Scatterheart)." I cannot help but personally succumb to tears specifically following Gene's first lines in

the song: “You just did what you had to do.” And I am clearly not alone, as Rolling Stones reviewer Peter Travers asserts that this is “the film’s most touching scene.” But is it true in this musical scene, as in the previous one, that what makes this scene so emotionally affecting is its refusal to adhere to the norms of musical, in effect, the undermining of the audience’s expectations?

An anonymous JoBlo poster’s less than effusive review admits that the scene immediately preceding this number is “pretty harrowing […] featuring one of the most realistic murders” on film. This reviewer is not conflating realism with explicitness; the realism in *Dancer*’s (first) murder scene seems to be an *emotional* realism, one that von Trier perhaps gestured towards in co-writing the Dogme 95 manifesto. The shift from this traumatizing yet realistic murder to another musical number might be what causes such an intense emotional response. It may be the tension between the fantasy and the shocking reality grinding against one another that yields tears in this scene, just as it does in the film’s devastating ending. We know that Selma has just killed Bill, and yet here he is dancing and singing, comforting Selma, forgiving her, and telling her to run away so that she does not get arrested.

However, there are other reasons for the emotion elicited by the song. The fact that this is the first musical scene with Gene in it makes one wonder if it is merely Gene’s presence outside riding his bicycle that overwhelms the viewer. After what Selma has done, coupled with the fact that Bill’s wife, Linda has already gone to get the police, Selma will likely be incarcerated at the very least. Gene’s presence reminds the viewer that there is more at stake than Selma’s life. Gene will have to go without a mother now

because of Selma's sacrificial crime. In this case, the conscious cognitive (imaginative) elements involved in eliciting emotion in this scene seem clear.

Moreover, more abstractly, Gene is Selma's child, and as such he represents hope in this dream-like musical sequence. However, his circular cycling can be seen as deadening any such hope. Gene's presence is accompanied by his one line, which summarizes the agonizing situation in which Selma "did what [she] had to do," reminding her and, most importantly, the viewer of her self-sacrifice for her son, in committing murder, a social, personal, and moral transgression, for which she will now be (arguably, wrongly) punished by society. This, in itself—the reiteration of the tragic situation in which Selma finds herself—reminds the viewer of the melodramatic narrative which could also trigger an emotional response.

Of course, it is difficult to separate the various aspects of the scene from one another to figure out which were affective/effective and which were not. One cannot forget that, even although David Morse delivers a less than operatic performance, this is still a song. And, as mentioned before, the power of music can have intensely emotional results. In a similar manner to "I've Seen It All," this song embodies a certain dissonance. However, this dissonance does not come from the fact that the meaning of its lyrics do not correspond to its musical quality. *Salon* reviewer Stephanie Zacharek's remark that the songs "seemed pointlessly meandering, droney and dull, as if the grayness of the movie had [leaked] into them" is perhaps most applicable to this morbid number. The fact that the song's verses are sung in a stilted, lifeless manner by both Björk and David Morse (notably, playing a corpse) and that the choreography is almost entirely made up

of stilted movement in reverse undercuts the generic expectation of a spectacular number. The discord of this number comes from its failure to collude with the musical genre.

At the same time, the chorus of the song, Gene's lyric, is not monotonous. In fact, it seems to be the only part of the song that is expressive of true feeling. This is partly because of its dynamism and the fact that it breaks from the bulk of the song melodically. Perhaps it is the plaintive notes sung in a minor key which make the line sound so melancholy. This is a product either of some magical ability for a minor chord to mimic lament or, more plausibly, of the Western listeners trained ear which understands that the minor chord laments. In any case, the sentiment in this line clearly also resides in the way Gene sings it. It is a mournful child's song—so it is reminiscent of innocence. In a song in which Selma tells herself, "Silly Selma, you're the one to blame," the question of innocence is a significant one. Furthermore, Gene is singing *alone*, and his voice has a high, distant, small quality to it, which suggests powerlessness. And, as Tan and Frijda contend, this is a concept that tends to elicit tears of sentiment in viewers. So narrative and musical qualities seem to be working together in this song, or at least in this section of the song, to produce a strong emotional effect.

The dissonance between the expectation of spectacle and the deliverance of what seems much more emotionally real (and harrowing) is something that exists in all of the musical numbers except the first. "In the Musicals" part I and II, which occur when Selma is arrested and on trial, respectively, are musically cheerful. However, when she utters the words, "there's always someone there to catch me," such cheer grates against the audience's dark knowledge, in the first scene that features this song, that to catch her will only be to arrest her, and in the courtroom scene, that no one will catch her at all.

"107 Steps" works in the same way, as Selma, walking her final steps to the gallows, somehow manages to fool herself into believing that the world inside her imagination exists, without convincing us. In contrast, both "My Favorite Things" and "The Next to Last Song" are attempted musical numbers akin to "I've Seen it All" and "Smith and Wesson (Scatterheart)". They are beautiful, but they have little to no orchestral support and dancing. In addition, they are sung with great sadness, in a kind of sustained sob. "The Next to Last Song," notably, is not shot in the style of the other musical numbers. We see Selma in the shaky handheld shots of the film's reality; we see Selma's fantasy from the outside rather than the inside. Thus this one and "My Favorite Things" hardly seem to be colluding with the musical genre at all. And, in a film that takes great pains to set up an expectation of the musical genre, therein lies their power.

In addition to unconventional elements in its musical scenes, *Dancer* also seems to subvert generic conventions in its very structure. In the conventional structure of Hollywood films, which coincides with the structure of many musicals (to which von Trier gestures in this film), the hero(ine) is faced with an obstacle, overcomes it, perhaps by learning something or showing some strength of character), and everything goes back to how it was before (only better). At the beginning of *Dancer*, things look pretty bleak for Selma, but all is not lost. Gradually, she is saving enough for Gene's operation, and she seems to be coping quite well with her growing disability. It is sometime after the forty-minute mark that she begins to encounter a series of obstacles: she loses her job, her money is stolen from her, and she is arrested. That these obstacles come into play so late in the narrative, which would be strange for a conventional Hollywood film, could be explained by the fact that they begin after the first musical number, which supposedly

establishes the (one) genre expectation. However, an insurmountable break in this classic structure occurs in act three, with Selma's death. Thus *Dancer* clearly does not follow the classical structure of Hollywood film.

However, as mentioned before, according to Rick Altman, while the musical is often measured by this same yardstick, its structure frequently relies on a very different paradigm. Altman puts it this way:

> [In the musical,] problematic dichotomies are eventually resolved […] when the resolution of the sexual duality (marriage) is used as a non-rational mediatory model for the attendant thematic oppositions, bringing together categories and individuals that seemed irreconcilably opposed. (2002, 50).

Romance in the musical resolves culturally constructed oppositions by pairing them with gender oppositions. Thus Altman's version of conventional musical structure is subverted by von Trier's so-called musical as well, since the Jeff/Selma romance is not a major storyline. In fact, it is arguably Jeff's refusal to play ball with the musical genre that causes his exclusion from romantic consideration.[9]

Whether we measure the film against one in which two very different characters become ever more similar until they can conceivably be united in a musical ending or one in which one character must face adversity in order to come out on top in the end, *Dancer* falls short. In both versions of the conventional story, a question is asked. Will the protagonist succeed? Or, will the two protagonists find a way to literally and figuratively dance together? Asked in a broader manner: will everything work out in the end? In the musical, the answer to these questions is generally yes. Even in a film like *Moulin Rouge*, in which Satine's death ends the story, in answer to the question of Satine and Christian's love, the film answers that their love is "a love that will live forever." In contrast, *Dancer*'s answer is a sharp and resounding "No!" In fact, the story is downright tragic.

Dancer is thus narratively and structurally in stark contrast to musical films made between 1927 and 1955, which were almost universally musical *comedies*, a category to which *Dancer* cannot be assigned. Rather, it is a musical tragedy, which is how opera is more commonly described. But opera is another genre into which this film does not quite fit, as most of the dialogue is not sung as would be the case in an opera, and, unlike in most operas, there are indeed several vibrantly colourful (at least in contrast to the bland non-musical sections) choreographed dance scenes. In an opera, the songs are mostly sad or mournful in congruence with a tragic narrative. In contrast, the narrative of *Dancer* is sad, but the musical songs tend to make attempts at happiness.

Throughout the musical numbers of *Dancer*, which are the only fragments of the film which are truly part of the musical mode, similar to a conventional musical, the colours are brighter and the choreography is often stunning. However, even in these sections, *Dancer*'s connection to the musical mode is not unproblematic. As I have discussed, much of the choreography and the framing is unconventional and, as such, it too disrupts the pleasure of watching the film as a musical.

Furthermore, like the melodrama and the documentary, the musical mode itself is disruptive to the perception of reality because, as Selma's would-be boyfriend Jeff says in the film, real people "don't suddenly start to sing and dance." Jane Feuer asserts that "[i]ncorporated into the structure of the art musical [the subgenre of the musical film in which a musical is produced] was the very type of popular entertainment represented by the musical itself." For this reason, musicals like *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), *The Band Wagon*, and even *Dancer* are part of "a self-referential form" (31). Similarly, Steven Cohan contends that "the big production numbers are too over-the-top to be taken

seriously" (1). Embedded in the "excessive spectacle" of the musical is a fundamental "disregard for cinematic realism" which could ultimately distance viewers (Cohan 103, 2).

Even so, musicals are charming and, almost by definition, escapist. The average emotional response to any musical is positive, particularly after the film's happy ending has been seen. As in the case of a vaudevillian stage show, the viewer is conscious of the medium, and the film is a spectacle. Even though that decreases the film's level of realism, the viewers' engagement with the film remains intact—we are lost in the show as we get lost in the rapture of the circus.

Dancer in the Dark is not the circus, though. If indeed the purpose of watching a musical is diversion—the desire to laugh or to inhabit a fantastical world—then this film does not deliver. Von Trier will not let us forget that Selma's fantastical imaginings—utopist compared to the bulk of the film, however short of paradise they fall—are not real. In effect, von Trier uses overt generic cues to invite us to a musical, and then he shows us something else surreptitiously, so that we might not even notice until the music comes to a jolting stop as Selma falls through the stage-like trapdoor. Significantly, Selma is killed in front of the execution audience, figuring as the film audience most definitely, just before the curtains are finally closed on her death, quite definitively on the musical, and on the film itself. Of course, other generic cues, such as the shaky handheld camera and a protagonist and narrative structure that correspond to the melodrama, challenge the strength of our musical expectations and set up different expectations. In other words, all of these generic strategies work in the service of evoking mixed feelings in the viewer. Sadness, cheer, anger, and helplessness are the result of unfulfilled—or

partially fulfilled—expectations, such as have been set up in us by von Trier's confounding generic strategies.

Although this "gleeful tear-jerker" is incredibly emotionally affecting, it is so precisely *because* von Trier is employing strategies of distanciation (Matthews). The documentary mode pulls viewers into the film emotionally, and in the same movement reminds us that it is mediated. Similarly, von Trier uses the tropes of the melodrama, in which the dramatization of the story takes precedence over the realism of characters, settings, and even the judicial system. And in his appropriation of these tropes, he accentuates the disparity between the outlandish film world and the real world in order to expressly call attention to the artifice of film. The melodramatic self-sacrificing mother trope also brings with it a formulaic quality akin to superficiality, even if it does often effectively elicit emotional responses. In refusing to sufficiently conceal some of the harder-to-swallow tropes and conventions of the melodramatic genre, von Trier emphasizes the genre's lack of realism. In the musical mode, von Trier alienates the viewer not by emphasizing the lack of realism of the musical numbers, but by making them increasingly more akin to the reality depicted in the film, so that they are not "believable" as musical numbers. In this way, instead of "desir[ing] a valorization of entertainment," this musical diminishes the illusion of entertainment with every number, as the musical fantasy retreats further and further into the recesses of Selma's brain (Feuer 32). In other words, the musical's refusal to be musical-like creates a dissonance; spectacle is expected, but self-reflexive melodramatic documentary is delivered.

At the same time as emotionally engaging viewers, at every turn the film disengages us, mocking us, and challenging us to think about our own position in relation

to the film. While warning us not to buy into the story, von Trier tricks us into feeling it. In the audio commentary of the *Dancer* DVD, von Trier calls himself a "manipulator" in this film. Each of the modes employed makes one gesture that elicits tears and one that forces the viewer to take a step back from the film. This friction causes embarrassment in viewers because we have been moved, as well as anger towards the filmmaker who caused it and who also pointed out the film's fiction, thereby disrupting our ability to be unselfconsciously moved. Viewers are frustratingly faced with an emotionally moving (as well as manipulative) documentary of a clearly fictional story, put to music. If we go to see musicals for the same reason that Selma does—to escape to a place where "nothing dreadful ever happens"—is it any wonder some of us are left in tears?

Notes:

[1] As much as this whiteness cues viewers to Selma's blindness or helplessness, it may also represent her ascent into heaven (or perhaps more bleakly the emptiness of death), which would be a fitting "end" for the last film of von Trier's *Golden Heart* trilogy.

[2] English title: *The Idiots*.

[3] It is easy to imagine Selma seeking out alternative courses of action after her money gets stolen that might not result in her death or even her incarceration. However, one possible explanation for such a questioning and even condemnatory viewer response to Selma's victimhood is social psychologist Melvin Lerner's *Just World* theory. Stated simply, Lerner posits that "individuals have a need to believe that they live in a world where people generally get what they deserve and deserve what they get" (1030). This perhaps explains the phenomenon wherein people find reasons to blame victims (of crimes, natural disasters, and even diseases) for their own pain. Thus we might be more disposed to find fault in Selma's actions (and in Grace's actions in *Dogville*)—to believe that they have led to her victimization—*because* she is not to blame for her misfortunes. Although the narrative does not imply that she deserves her fate—it implies, in fact, that the world is unfair—we might still prefer to believe that the world might have been fair if she hadn't lied, if she hadn't committed murder, or if she hadn't played the part of the martyr.

[4] By this logic, coming back to the film's musical overture, it is viewers who are most familiar with melodramatic film who will be most likely to interpret the musical overture as one which foretells an emotionally dramatic or melodramatic story.

[5] It is significant that both of these films with sad endings warn viewers of the ending in their set-up. *Carousel* and *Moulin Rouge* begin in the "future," after death has already separated the couple whose romance will develop and be celebrated throughout the films. In that way, the films are grieving narratives which celebrate a love that is now lost. One wonders whether the films are set up in this way in order to circumvent the subversion of the musical genre which von Trier seems to be after.

[6] It has been argued that the cause of the musical's decline in popularity was due to the dismantling of the studio system which was ordered in 1948 (Cohan 5). However, another element that may have contributed is the rise in the popularity of rock 'n roll, which meant that there was a bigger range of musical tastes to cater to in the United States than there had previously been, which would mean that musicals would have to have a smaller target audience, no matter what music they used. Furthermore, in the 1950s, the costs of producing musicals were increasing, and television—the competition—was introduced to the American public as an alternative entertainment source. Whatever the reason, it seems clear that the "classic" musical no longer dominated the screen by the late fifties.

[7] This choreography could perhaps be seen as congruent to the aesthetics of Social Realism, as such art is generally concerned with the plight of the labourer. Social Realism engages in the depiction of "real" social issues in everyday life, and the Dogme 95 ideals similarly yearn for a depiction of the "real" problems of our time. So von Trier may well have intended the dance of the workers on the train to be suggestive of the ideals of Social Realism. Of course, much like everything else von Trier's films, this gesture is simultaneously made and put into question. Social Realism is, of course, ironic in the middle of a musical number which, in many other ways, seems fantastical, or *un*real, (even if the number may not be as fantastical as musical fans might expect).

[8] This is a reference to the first scene of *Dancer in the Dark*, in which the producer of the stage production of *The Sound of Music* expresses his distaste for the director's choice of casting Selma as Maria.

[9] That Selma takes a ride from Jeff is based more on her pragmatic need than on any desire for companionship on her part. Jeff can only be seen as Selma's male counterpart—or, opposite really—in the sense that he is entrenched in the real world while Selma is in love with the fantasy of the musical. What Jeff can offer her is only practical: a ride home. Neither of the two develops to become more like the other throughout the course of the film, a structure which would align the film with the musical genre.

Chapter II: *Dogville* as Brechtian Melodrama?

In the last chapter, I argued that Lars von Trier employs different generic strategies that both engage and alienate viewers, evoking in them strong and mixed feelings. While many films are capable of both engaging and alienating viewers at different times, von Trier's films elicit seemingly contradictory emotions sometimes simultaneously or in rapid succession, which is less common. We are drawn in, and then repelled, quite violently by these films. Furthermore, the rapidly alternating absorption in and estrangement from the filmic text gives rise to an ambivalence about the film that is not easily resolved, and that persists long after the viewer has left the theatre, or turned off the DVD player. It is this ambivalence, this emotional irritation, that makes von Trier's work impossible to forget, no matter what one may think of his films as satisfying aesthetic or emotional experiences.

I concluded the last chapter by suggesting that it is perhaps the alienating aspects of scenes in *Dancer in the Dark* which elicit the most powerful emotions from viewers. In this chapter, I will build upon that premise, and suggest that "identification," or our sympathy and empathy with characters in the film, is not in fact a prerequisite for profound emotional responses. On the contrary, in von Trier's *Dogville*, he creates a distance between the film and the viewer at certain moments, and breaks the viewer's engagement at other points, and both of these tactics encourage strong emotions in the viewer. Of particular interest to me is von Trier's use of Brechtian strategies which seem to "alienate" viewers, but also end up deepening viewers' emotional reactions to scenes (perhaps in a Brechtian manner, which I will discuss below). For this reason, when a shift

occurs and a scene moves from being largely characterized by naturalism and melodrama to embodying Brechtian aesthetics and aims, the scene becomes more affecting (perhaps even more affecting than either mode could be in isolation). In this film, we experience strong emotions that are not necessarily a function of identification with or allegiance to a character. Nor are these emotions necessarily only reactions to Brechtian strategies alone. In fact, these strong emotions can arise as a result of a *break* in the circumstances that encourage identification. For example, a sudden cut from close up to long shot can cause frustration at being so suddenly cut off from closeness with a character. Even more than von Trier's Brechtian aesthetics or his master manipulation of melodramatic narrative, his customary set-up and subversion of genre and mode winds up distancing viewers emotionally from the characters on screen and eliciting contradictory emotional responses simultaneously or in rapid succession at certain points in the film. It is actually these reversals of modal strategies throughout the film that bring out in us such strong emotions as anger, sadness, loss, frustration, bewilderment, and ambivalence.

Throughout this thesis, I have been consumed by the question of how Lars von Trier's films are able to elicit such powerful emotions from viewers when they employ non-naturalist—in fact, increasingly stylized, formalist—aesthetics and portray unbelievable characters in unconvincing plots. Lars von Trier's *Dogville* provides an interesting case study for this discussion of the disconnect between naturalism and affect, particularly because it makes use of a minimalist set which flaunts its artificiality. The set seems, in its deliberate anti-naturalism, an odd choice if the intention is to promote the emotional engagement of its spectators.

Just as I set the scholarly stage for my reading of *Dogville*, von Trier sets the stage for the viewer's perception of his films. As is often the case in scholarly work, his introductory staging says as much about the films as any other sequence. In *Dogville*, von Trier is particularly concerned with communicating his modal strategies to viewers at the outset, just as he did in *Dancer in the Dark* in the musical overture and afterwards by incessantly calling forth the idea of the musical genre through the film's narrative, dialogue, casting, and imagery. Von Trier draws attention to the specific genres and modes that he uses in order to ensure that we expect to encounter specific elements of narrative, themes, characters associated with these genres, and even expect a certain kind of emotional connection or disconnection with characters to be shaped or determined by the genres he has chosen to work with. In this way, von Trier stages his modes, introducing the *performance* of his genres or styles in order to promote criterial prefocusing.

Dogville displays elements and strategies common to several genres and modes.[1] As mentioned in the introduction, criterial prefocusing refers to the tendency of viewers to look for certain elements within particular genres which maintain the particular emotional states encouraged by the film's genre. Of course, some genres encourage a certain way of reading a text more than they suggest an overarching emotional state through which we receive them. For example, as I suggested in the last chapter, the shaky hand-held shooting style of the contemporary documentary film suggests that the content is authentic, as in a newsreel. Interestingly enough, in contrast, *Dogville*'s sparse theatrical-looking set design brings to mind film's artifice, even its theatricality, a move often associated in film with self-consciousness. Although both of these modes—the

realist and the formalist—do encourage different ways of looking at the film, they do not promote a particular emotional state. And, in that way, a documentary, an allegorical, or a generally "theatrical" mode does not encourage a viewer to criterially prefocus the film in the same way that a melodrama, for instance, does.

In von Trier's *Dogville*, the viewer's criterial prefocusing of the melodrama will set up expectations that will be frustrated by von Trier's experimentation with other, more intellectually stimulating modes, such as the allegory. This will mean that the expectations of the melodrama will go ultimately unfulfilled. And some viewers will not be able to adjust to the shifts in mode and tone. Rather, these viewers will remain frustrated and upset because their expectations have not only been subverted, but they have arguably been mocked. It is this dissonance between the film and the viewers' expectations of the film that often yields the most powerful emotional effects.

Of utmost importance to this exploration of *Dogville*'s emotional yield is a preliminary exploration of von Trier's staging of the film. What expectations exactly is von Trier setting up in his audience? The film is set in a warehouse that functions as a sound stage, even if it is called the town of Dogville, Colorado by the film's narrator. So the stage for von Trier's telling of this story is itself a stage, one where most of the walls and set pieces are depicted by a white paint outline on a black floor. In this way, the set gestures to film's artifice. It is a formalist set, but it could be seen as realist as opposed to naturalist because it is more honest about the mediation of film. This bare-bones minimalist set no doubt gestures to Brecht and his condemnation of illusion in theatre, which anticipates the concerns outlined in the Dogme 95 manifesto. At least for the first few minutes of *Dogville*, the set produces an almost Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, into

which I will delve deeper below. The white paint outline on the ground is also reminiscent of chalk on a teacher's blackboard, and it is thus suggestive of the didacticism of an allegory or fable (which is, incidentally, often how Brecht's plays are presented). Of course, the narrator's tone—laden with irony though it may be—also suggests the omniscient narrator of a fairy tale, or a parent's reading of a terrible bedtime story, which is in keeping with that same didactic and moralistic tone. Moreover, at their most disturbing, the chalk outlines of *Dogville*'s set read as coroner's markings, which gives the set a morbid, gothic air, as though the space itself foretells a tragic ending. As much as the set brings to mind Brecht's plays, it is also reminiscent of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, especially since *Dogville* is the first installment in von Trier's *USA – Land of Opportunities* trilogy and *Our Town* is a story set in small town America. While *Dogville* certainly doesn't echo the themes of *Our Town*, something of the latter work's morbidity characterizes Dogville, if only in the way that the chalk outlines on the stage in von Trier's film figure as crime scene markings.

Before I delve into a discussion of the film and its collusion with different modes and genres, I will provide a synopsis of the story. Grace (Nicole Kidman), a young woman on the run from the mob for reasons at first unknown, finds herself in the Colorado hamlet of Dogville, located significantly at the *dead* end of a road. There, she meets Tom Edison Jr. (Paul Bettany), a self-serving writer—in many ways a stand-in for von Trier. Because of his apparent attraction to her, which is perhaps better understood as his self-proclaimed desire to "decipher" her, and because he wants to "illustrate" to the town its inability to accept (the gift of Grace),[2] Tom invites Grace to stay in the town.[3] Tom gathers the townspeople in the mission house where they are forced to make a

decision, democratically, about whether or not to allow her to stay.[4] Tom suggests that they allow Grace to stay for two weeks to get to know her before voting on whether or not she can stay for good. Grace eventually persuades the townspeople to reluctantly allow her to perform small, unnecessary tasks for them, in order to gain their favour. At the end of two weeks, they vote unanimously to let her stay, and to pay her for her labour.

Grace's initial reprieve is short-lived. When the police bring a wanted poster with her picture on it to pin up in the secluded town, the townspeople believe there is more danger for them now in harbouring her, and they want compensation for doing so. As a result, Grace must do more work for the townspeople for less pay—in fact, the townspeople finally stop paying her at all. Grace is ever full of forgiveness for and understanding of the selfishness of the townspeople and their exploitation of her, concluding that, were she in their place, she would have done the same. Gradually, Grace is treated with increasing cruelty. In the film's most heart-wrenching scene, the grumpy apple orchard farmer, Chuck (Stellan Skarsgård), rapes Grace, blackmailing her into submission by threatening to turn her in. With Tom, Grace devises a plan to run away from the town, but her plan results in betrayal and even more abuse. Grace is enslaved, chained to a weight and forced to wear a bell like an animal, and raped daily by most of the men in the town.

Tom and Grace have now declared their love for one another, but Grace senses that Tom is growing increasingly envious of her rapists since they themselves have not consummated their relationship. When Grace addresses (and forgives) Tom's unspoken feelings—his occasional momentary desire to force her into submission as the others do—he is insulted by her recognition of his base desires. He and the other townspeople

call the gangsters to come and take her away. When the mob arrives, the Big Man (James Caan) orders Grace to be released, and it becomes clear that Grace is not his enemy, but rather his daughter. Grace had run away because she had not wished to be implicated in the mob's violence, cruelty, exploitation, and corruption. In her reunion with her father, though, she realizes that he is right: her continual forgiveness of those who would abuse and exploit her has been "arrogant," to use the Big Man's words, since she would not have forgiven herself had she committed such atrocities. Her father at first suggests merely nailing the dog to a wall as a sign to warn the townspeople against mistreating others the way they mistreated Grace. However, finally free of her "arrogant" tendency to forgive, Grace resolves to punish the townspeople. She tells her father, "if there's any town this world would be better without, this is it." Her father orders the townspeople shot and the town burned down—orders with which Grace whole-heartedly agrees. Acclimatizing nicely to her new role in her father's business, Grace is happy to be "part of the problem-solving," and she shoots Tom in the head. On the way out of town, Grace and the gangsters hear Moses the dog barking. Grace stops the thugs from killing him. As the cars drive away for good, Moses, who has been invisible all this time—a mere chalk outline—appears, barking up at the camera which is in a God's eye position.

Through Moses' manifestation, the film self-consciously gestures to the reality which the artificial film world represents, which was theretofore understood through its sparse scenery as merely a delicately constructed story space. Throughout the film, Moses' existence has been indicated only by the sound of a dog barking, combined with the name "Moses" stenciled on stage next to Chuck and Vera's house. His existence has been imagined, just as the set has been imagined. Now that he has been made "real," at

the end of the film, the film world can perhaps be seen—in retrospect—as having been a closer representation of the real world outside the movie theatre than it initially seemed to be. Thus, von Trier's message (whatever it is, in the end) can be more easily applied to the real world. On the other hand, as much as Moses' appearance gestures to the "realness" of the dog and the film world as a whole, it also draws attention to the fact that throughout much of the film neither the dog nor the film world has been real, regardless of the excruciating emotions that von Trier has likely put us through.[5]

After Moses appears, the credits of the film roll over photographer Jacob Holdt's snapshots of extremely poor people in America, to the sound of Davie Bowie's "Young Americans." These final sad and disturbing images are photographs of the Depression era commissioned by the Farm Security Administration. They clash with Bowie's lively rock 'n roll in a manner that recalls *The Threepenny Opera*'s beginning, in which the frightening lyrics of "Mack the Knife," written by Bertolt Brecht, clash with the lively sound of Kurt Weill's music. Von Trier abandoned the notion of ending the film to the sound of the song "Pirate Jenny," from *The Threepenny Opera*, because it was "too obvious," given that he has said that the film is an adaptation of Jenny's imagined narrative in the song (*Dancer*, audio commentary). Nevertheless, *Dogville*'s ending still offers one last gesture to Brechtian aesthetics in the form of the dialectic, productive clash between Bowie's song and Holdt's photographs. To some, this ending is still "too obvious." Yet, to others, what the photographs and music add up to is perhaps still open to interpretation, oscillating between the condemnation and the (perhaps inadvertent, and even ashamed) celebration of Americanness.

Moving from the film's content to its reception, what now requires attention is the wide range of different responses to *Dogville* that sometimes exists in a single viewer. Philip French of *The Observer* writes that the film is "ludicrous, arrogant, pretentious and naïve," but also, "boldly conceived, genuinely risky and disturbing." Amateur online responses to *Dogville*, differed little in their essence from those of professionals. Apparently arguing over the merits of the film on an *Internet Movie Data Base* message board, sage9 and ravenbard actually seem to have shared similar emotional reactions to the film; sage9 calls *Dogville* "a pure crime," that he or she had to "suffer through," condemning the film as an "incredibly bad movie," whereas ravenbard calls the film "intense, […] disturbing, [and…] distressing," but, unlike sage9, celebrates the fact that he or she was "completely blown away by it!" These online contributions confirm the "disturbing" effect of the film. Because of their powerful emotional reactions, they each suggest a strong ambivalent response to the film, whether they explicitly praise or condemn it.

Furthermore, despite that fact that politics and aesthetics are often at the forefront of scholarly discussions of the film (and are prominent as well in more casual internet reviews), imbedded in these reactions too are strong emotional responses to certain scenes. For example, the emotional nature of Andrea Brighenti's careful scholarly reading of social law and sacrifice in *Dogville* is illuminated, significantly, by the very first sentence of his article: "If a director is to be assessed on the basis of the feelings, interpretations and reactions that his or her work is able to excite, then Lars Von [sic] Trier is to be counted among the masters of the art." The significance that emotional

responses have for Brighenti, and his own personal "excite[ment]" and "shock" in response to *Dogville* bubble productively beneath the surface of his essay (96).

What are some possible causes of all these emotional responses? As mentioned in the last chapter, Ed Tan and Nico Frijda assert that the use of certain themes helps to elicit emotional responses in sentimental novels and cinematic melodramas alike. Sentimental novels and Hollywood melodramas both draw on "a collection of conventional situations and stock characters" (Tan and Frijda 50). In *Dogville*, such stock characters include the town beauty, Liz (Chloë Sevigny), the town grouch, Chuck, and even Grace herself, the self-sacrificing woman, akin to Selma in *Dancer in the Dark.* Of Tan and Frijda's three paradigmatic sentimental scenarios mentioned in the last chapter, the "justice in jeopardy motive" is most apparent in *Dogville*, in that Grace is, like many von Trier heroines, self-sacrificing. When she becomes aware that the townspeople wish to use her by lowering her pay and increasing her labour hours, she accepts that she likely deserves such treatment or that, even if she doesn't, the townspeople have had it hard and they do not know any better than to treat her badly. This in itself might be enough to elicit sentiment from the film's audience. More than that, it might also elicit anger, since one could read this plot device as another instance of von Trier dressing up his interest in presenting the abuse of female characters in the guise of "self-sacrifice" so that the blame for their mistreatment falls on the victims, rather than on their abusers (or on the filmmaker). Clearly writing as a member of this camp, Peter Bradshaw asserts that "Lars von Trier is never happier than when subjecting an ethereally lovely young woman to extravagant physical and emotional cruelty."

Nevertheless, sentiment is not the only emotion one feels in response to Grace's victimhood. The townspeople's mistreatment of virtuous Grace gets much worse than mere capitalist exploitation of her. Many scholars, reviewers, and bloggers agree that "the film's most grueling scene" is that in which Chuck rapes Grace for the first time (Fuchs). Scholars call the scene "brutal," and "crude" (Nobus 23, Brighenti 101). More distressingly, as Brighenti points out, Grace "exhibits such a weak reaction to all of this that the viewer cannot help but become more and more shocked and offended" (101). Underneath many scholarly readings of the sado-masochistic perversion in Grace's consent to being raped is a fundamental discomfort and unease with the scene. Some viewers, such as A. O. Scott of *The New York Times*, on being presented with Grace's apparent weakness, or her unwillingness to defend herself, feel frustrated or angry. Such viewers perhaps want to understand Grace's surrender—her passivity in the face of attack—in order for it to be less frustrating.

I will go into the first rape scene in the film in greater detail further on, as it will be used as an extended example of what the film as a whole might be up to. Suffice it to say that, while this scene is striking in part because of the Brechtian staging which makes it appear as though Chuck's brutalization of Grace is happening right in front of the townspeople's eyes, something that might anger and frustrate viewers, it also has a fundamentally melodramatic air about it, especially early on in the scene.

However, there are other scenes throughout the film that can perhaps be even more closely linked to melodrama. Closely reading these scenes can perhaps offer some insight into the extent to which the melodramatic mode is responsible for the film's

emotional effect. In contrast to other reviewers, blogger Ricky Roma sees another scene as the most heartbreaking one:

> In fact, the most upsetting scene isn't one of the numerous rape scenes – […] it is instead the womens' [sic] abuse of Grace and the destruction of her figurines. It's more than just a physical violation. It's a violation of everything. Her dreams are being smashed right before her eyes.

The scene Roma is referring to is that in which Vera, Martha, and Liz awaken Grace in the middle of the night to confront her about having sex with Chuck in the apple orchard, which Martha was witness to earlier in the afternoon. They do not realize that Chuck is taking advantage of her, and she is too "good" to set them straight. In the midst of their gripping confrontation, Vera tells Grace that she "believe[s] in education," and proposes to break all seven of the precious, if homely, figurines that Grace has procured from Gloria and Ma Ginger's store. Grace pleads with her, reminding her of how happy she was when Grace was finally able to make Vera's children understand the doctrine of stoicism. Vera acquiesces—"for that [she] will be lenient." She proposes to smash the first two figurines, after which, if Grace "can demonstrate the doctrine of stoicism by holding back [her] tears," she will stop.

All of the dramatic action in this scene is covered in medium and medium-close shots. As in the bulk of most of the scenes in the film, there is no dramatizing music. However, when Vera angrily throws the first two figurines to the floor, the camera moves in to a close-up of Grace's face. Grace's body is held back by Martha and Liz, and she attempts to show no emotion to save the dearest of her few possessions. As Grace becomes unable to keep from crying, baroque music begins to play, and the voice-over narration takes over, in order to explain Grace's thoughts:

> As the porcelain pulverized on the floor, it was as if it were human tissue disintegrating. The figurines were the offspring of the meeting between the township and her. They were the proof that in spite of everything, her suffering had created something of value. Grace could no longer cope. For the first time since her childhood, she wept.

The narrator's voice-over could be seen as a Brechtian element that could cause the *Verfremdungseffekt*. *Verfremdungs* is often translated as "alienation" or "defamiliarizing," which I will discuss in greater detail below. Suffice it to say that the narrator's voice comes from outside the scene in front of us, and it may indeed distance the viewer from Grace in some ways. Voice-over narration does not conform to the natural state of the world—this is not how the world is experienced in everyday life. However, the narrator's words communicate the symbolic meaning of the figurines for Grace: they are the product of her relationship with the town. This means that the voice-over narration does not cause an *emotional* distance to be created between the viewer and Grace. More than merely deepening the melodramatic effect of the scene, the narrator's explanation promotes a deeper level of (emotional) understanding between the viewer and Grace.

It is most often said that such moments in film strengthen the viewer's "identification" with the character. Although the word "identification" is often used to describe our level of engagement with the characters and stories on screen (not to mention in novels and plays)—as well as being used as an explanation for the affective properties of a film—it is also a word that often goes undefined. Murray Smith's illustration of the structure of character engagement in film might be instructive here. In his book, *Engaging Characters*, Murray Smith discusses viewer "identification" using the more well-defined terms, *recognition*, *alignment*, and *allegiance*. According to Smith, the *recognition* of a character involves the most fundamental engagement: the spectator

"perce[ives] a set of textual elements, in film typically cohering around the image of a body, as an individuated and continuous human agent" (82). *Alignment* is defined as the relationship between the spectators and the characters, which is informed by our access to their actions, thoughts, and feelings (Smith 83). Smith sees the term *allegiance* as possibly being the closest to the general usage of "identification," and it is associated with "the moral evaluation of characters by the spectator" (84).

Coming back to the scene in which Grace's figurines are smashed, the viewers' relation to the scene can be explained in terms of Smith's structure of character engagement. In *Dogville*, viewers *recognize* Grace's character by virtue of the way she looks. She also behaves in a consistent way throughout the course of the film until her final decision (which maintains continuity with the rest of what we know about her character, given the situation in which she is placed). Our *alignment* throughout the film is more complicated. We are privy to the thoughts of both Grace and Tom by virtue of the omniscient narrator. In other words, we are most often aligned with Grace, but sometimes we are aligned with Tom. For the moment, spectators are aligned with Grace because we know that her sexual relationship with Chuck is one in which she is being exploited—so we are privy to extra information about her. Furthermore we have apparent access to her thoughts via the narrator. Although *allegiance* is "a dynamic phenomenon which develops across the text," in this scene we are most certainly allied with Grace, since she "represent[s] a morally desirable (or at least preferable) set of traits, in relation to other characters within the fiction" (Smith 189, 188). She is kind and giving, whereas the townspeople have already begun to exploit and ostracize her.[6] Moreover, Grace can be identified as a victim in her relationship with the women in her room, who are punishing

her for something that she did not do willingly, as well as in her sexual relationship with Chuck, the relationship for which she is being punished. In general, viewers are more likely to ally ourselves with characters who are wronged than those who do wrong.

I have discussed how narrative paradigms and character engagement common to the melodrama might work to elicit emotion in viewers watching certain scenes in *Dogville*. However, perhaps the most affecting element of many of these scenes is the use of the close-up to depict the human face exhibiting emotion. In the scene in which Vera punishes Grace by breaking her figurines, the use of the close-up is striking. In close-up, Nicole Kidman's credible, naturalist performance of Grace's anguish, provokes powerful feelings from viewers, especially when she eventually sheds tears. This could be because of *emotional contagion*, which I mentioned in the previous chapter. While Murray Smith contends that "recognition, alignment, and allegiance comprise a structure of sympathy," emotional contagion, which is made up of (voluntary) *emotional simulation* and (involuntary) *affective mimicry* is associated with empathy (85, 98-105). *Emotional simulation* occurs when viewers "centrally imagine" being in the situation of the characters on screen (76-81). In her performance of Grace, the more Nicole Kidman sheds tears, contorts her face to express sadness, slouches, or makes sobbing noises, the more likely it will be that the viewer, to use Carl Plantinga's term, "catches" that emotion as a result of *affective mimicry* (243). So, clearly, there are complex systems of engagement between viewers and the characters in *Dogville*, and there is reason for viewers to be engaged in systems of empathy as well as sympathy in our engagement with Grace in this scene.

The fact that the scene in which Vera punishes Grace includes a lengthy close-up and dramatizing music, and that it can provoke tears in viewers, demonstrates the film's affiliation with the melodrama mode. The term "melodrama" often conjures up the idea of an excessive, exaggerated drama with little substance. Peter Brooks has asserted that "melodrama at heart represents the theatrical impulse itself: the impulse toward dramatization, heightening, expression, acting out," which would seem to explain melodrama's excess (xi). In the last chapter, I focused on melodrama's semantic elements, such as its sweeping music and its stock characters. I also touched on certain syntactic formulations of the melodrama. Here, I will focus on Peter Brooks' articulation of melodrama's most reliable syntactic configuration:

> Melodrama starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue. It plays out the force of that anxiety with the apparent triumph of villainy, and it dissipates it with the eventual victory of virtue. (20)

Undoubtedly, in *Dogville*, anxiety is brought on by a disruption of morality. However, it is difficult to imagine how *Dogville* could be read as finally a story about the "victory of virtue," since an entire town is massacred at the end of the film, which in itself implicates Grace in its immorality.

Brooks qualifies victory by drawing a distinction between the *rewarding* of virtue within the narrative and the drama's *recognition* of virtue, which is how Brooks believes its primary victory is won. For example, in *Dancer in the Dark*, Selma's virtue—the fact that she sacrifices everything for her son—is recognized in that viewers (and a few select characters) know about it. In this way, her virtue is celebrated, even though it ends up killing her. So although her virtue is not *rewarded* within the narrative, the fact that we

recognize that Selma is virtuous in her self-sacrifice valorizes the virtue.[7] In contrast, *Dogville*'s protagonist's virtue arguably goes unrecognized. Grace's self-sacrifice, or, her submission to abuse, is motivated by her desire to forgive the townspeople; her virtue could be described as "Christian charity." While this virtue is recognized, it is not recognized *as* a virtue because it causes her to be exploited so brutally by the townspeople. The *reward* in the film is arguably Grace's revenge on Dogville—an act that allows viewers a certain amount of catharsis. "Dogville got what it deserved," as Roman Kossarev sees it. But this reward does not come without a *recognition* that Grace's actions are not just, but vengeful. As Harry T. Yung sees it, "Dogville ends in revenge disguised as poetic justice." Even though viewers are aligned with Grace during this final scene, and we might even ally ourselves with her on the basis of retributive justice, it is difficult to see vengeance as a virtue—and thus to see virtue as victorious.

Perhaps the power of the final scene lies in our ambivalent response to it. On one level, viewers are satisfied by the violence in the scene, since we too would like to see the people of Dogville punished. However, the violence is seen as extreme, and even distasteful and immoral, since it is extended to children whom we generally take to signify the innocent. Thus we are both in agreement with and contemptuous of Grace's final act of violence in the film.

Dogville breaks from the melodramatic mode in more ways than merely its position with regards to virtue. Peter Brooks stresses the melodrama's "optimism, its claim that the moral imagination can open up the angelic spheres as well as the demonic depths and can allay the threat of moral chaos" (20). It is true that Grace is a damsel in distress, in that her virtue (along with her body and mind) is threatened. In that way, her

story conforms to a fundamentally melodramatic paradigm. But this stereotypical threat is rarely acted out in melodrama; the damsel is generally rescued. Whereas melodrama is customarily a story of "virtue misprized and eventually recognized," virtue in the Gothic can be ultimately compromised—unnoticed until it is lost—without hope for salvation (Brooks 27). This is perhaps how *Dogville*, in its meditation on virtue, can be best understood—in terms of the Gothic. In *Dogville*, von Trier introduces gothic-style violence into what seems in other ways to be a melodrama.

Dogville's ending sheds further light on how von Trier breaks from melodrama. As mentioned in the last chapter, Robert Lang asserts that melodramas identify social problems *without offering solutions*. The solution offered in *Dogville* may not ultimately work well since there are many more "dogs" in the world outside of Dogville. Moreover, it is clear that to most viewers such a solution is relatively distasteful. Nevertheless, it must be noted that this is yet another way in which *Dogville* breaks from melodramatic conventions—it offers a (perhaps faulty) solution to the social problems it introduces. It is also significant that, given *Dogville*'s ending and the fact that Grace is not only saved but that she herself, with the help and resources of her gangster father, inflicts fatal retributive justice on the town, the film breaks from the traditional self-sacrificing formula of the melodrama which was set out in the *Golden Heart* trilogy.

So, if *Dogville* is not a melodrama, what is it? Clearly, the film has some of the feel of a documentary, as many of von Trier's films do, because of his hand-held shooting style. For this reason, it gestures to the "real" in that documentaries somehow "feel" more "real" than fiction film, but it also gestures towards film's artifice at the same time, in that it draws attention to the camera that von Trier as the director and camera

operator controls.[8] *Dogville* also draws on the manifesto of authenticity associated with von Trier and with the loosely affiliated group of filmmakers with which he is associated, known as Dogme 95. And on top of this, the film's sparse set, its voice-over narration, and its very structure are suggestive of a Brechtian play or an allegory. Nevertheless, it may be the melodrama mode that best explains the emotional *strength* of the reactions to this film, despite the ways in which *Dogville* diverges from melodramatic conventions.

It makes sense to read *Dogville* in light of von Trier's other work, much of which is blatantly melodramatic, but perhaps a stronger connection can be made between *Dogville* and the second *Golden Heart* film, *Idioterne*, which doubles as von Trier's first Dogme 95 film. In order to offer a context for this film, as well as for *Dogville*, I will now turn to Dogme 95.

Long before *Dogville* was a twinkle in Lars von Trier's eye, he had co-written the Dogme manifesto, by which light the film is almost universally read, in 1995. Through Dogme 95, co-written with fellow Danish filmmaker Thomas Vinterberg, von Trier tried to revive and renew the discussion of film form enacted by the French New Wave. He did this by critiquing "'certain tendencies' in the cinema today."[9] The manifesto faults the current state of filmmaking, in which the "'supreme' task of […] decadent film-makers is to fool the audience [through illusions] via which emotions can be communicated" (Dogme 95 Home Page). To get closer to "the truth," or what Thomas Vinterberg calls "the naked film," Dogme 95 directors had to comply with the rules of the "Vow of Chastity," or at least make a confession to cheating before receiving their certificate, which usually appears in the credit sequence of a film with Dogme 95 "certification."[10]

In an effort to attain this elusive "truthfulness" sought after in the Dogme 95 manifesto, *Idioterne* was filmed in documentary style, its scenes intercut with interviews of the characters some time after the primary timeline of the film, and it largely complies with the "Vow of Chastity" rules. The politically incorrect premise of the film involves a group of people getting together in order to pretend to be mentally disabled, or to "spass," in public. No doubt the idea sounds distasteful, and the film does grimly illuminate the immaturity, as well as the cruelty and repugnance, of some of its characters, particularly the apparent ringleader, Stoffer (Jens Albinus). Stoffer, the *provocateur* of the group, is often pitted against viewers and against Karen (Bodil Jørgensen), with whom viewers can be said to "identify" most profoundly.[11] Stoffer is another character, along with *Dogville*'s Tom, who has been seen as von Trier's "bold self-portrait" (Kelly 223).

According to *Dogville*'s narrator, Tom is a writer who, "in order to postpone the time at which he would have to put pen to paper in earnest," devises "a series of meetings on moral rearmament with which he felt obliged to benefit the town." Tom's primary method for these moral lessons is, in his own words, "illustration." Looking down on the town from the God's eye perspective of the film's first shot, in which the entire town is seen, with actors milling about on a *painted* set, over which the sound of a narrator's voice introduces the story, one gets the feeling that the *filmmaker* is sketching out a fable, or a moral *illustration*.[12]

Towards the end of the film, when Tom is about to call on the gangsters whose phone number Tom told Grace he had destroyed, von Trier clinches his affinity with Tom through the omniscient narrator's voice-over:

> He allowed sincerity and ideals plenty of room in his life without getting sentimental about it, as he would put it. Throwing away a document that

> might be of significance to Tom and with him future generations of readers as the basis of a novel, or indeed a *trilogy*, was not an act he was so stupid to commit. (*Dogville*, my emphasis)

The fact that there is the possibility that Tom's novel could turn into a trilogy is not insignificant, since *Dogville* is itself intended to be the beginning of a trilogy.

As with Stoffer in *Idioterne*, by affiliating himself with Tom through this narration, von Trier creates an opposition between himself and viewers, who are likely contemptuous of Tom's sudden betrayal of Grace. Even though von Trier does not have Tom actually rape Grace, he is clearly to blame for exploiting her and putting her in a situation in which she is in danger of being raped. So, if we see Tom as a stand-in for von Trier, then, in writing *Dogville* in which Tom must finally pay for his betrayal by being literally shot dead, von Trier figuratively punishes himself. For if Tom/von Trier is to be condemned for his exploitative illustration of Grace, then how are we to take von Trier's film? Von Trier's film engages viewers in its story and characters at the same time as it reveals itself to be somewhat repugnant to us. Our ambivalence about the film is thereby reinforced by our (at times negative) emotional responses to its central characters and its filmmaker. Von Trier's films are often, if not always, vehicles through which von Trier opposes, taunts, and manipulates his audiences.

In *Idioterne*, "spassing," or acting mentally disabled, becomes enticing in its function as an emotional vent—a way to express thoughts and feelings that have no place in politically correct society. Perhaps von Trier's work—including the Dogme 95 manifesto—can all be read in relation to this film, or even seen as manifestations of "spassing" themselves. At times he is militant about the need to create art which illuminates something new and authentic about the real world, and at other times, such as

his public performances of arrogance, and even the addition of the "von" in his otherwise common Danish name, he seems merely mischievously reflexive. He rarely, if ever, concerns himself with political correctness, and he has often been referred to as "a playful rascal" and an "enfant terrible" (*Tranceformer*). One could see his performance of filmmaking and his public performance of a certain kind of provocative filmmaker persona as "spassing" activities. The status of his work, then, some might argue, is a disguise: "spassing" disguised as art. Of course, because like beauty, art exists only in the eye of the beholder, a disguise, or "spassing" for that matter, can be just as artful as any work created for the purpose of being art.

Coming back to *Dogville*'s association with Dogme 95, it is useful to determine the apparent aims of the movement. The Dogme 95 manifesto seems to be at its core opposed to the illusion of film. However, this yearning for a more authentic film must not be confused with a call for a more authentic representation of reality, or an even more seamless illusion that better approximates reality. The absence of much scenery or even walls in the stage-like set of *Dogville* draws our attention to the artifice of film. So, while on the surface the aesthetic of the film seems to prize that which lacks realism and displays the artifice of film, it can also be seen as a strategy to reject the "trickery" of conventional film by admitting that film is superficial. One is less likely to be faulted for deceit—and an accusation is no longer necessary—if one admits to it. Nevertheless, such a technique could be seen as more honest than conventional illusive filmmaking, which pretends that there is nothing constructed about the projected image. Thus the anti-naturalistic aesthetics of the set design are perhaps quintessentially "*real*istic."

Although *Dogville* is officially a Dogme film, this is a fact that is often left out of scholarly discussions of the film. That is perhaps because it breaks the "indisputable […] rules" set out in the "Vow of Chastity" in several instances. The first rule dictates that on-location shooting is mandatory; *Dogville*, however, is entirely shot in a warehouse that acts as a huge soundstage in which the floor is simple white paint on black and the walls are black or white, depending on whether it is night or day, respectively. In as far as the film is not shot in the (imaginary) town of Dogville, the rule has been broken. But because the film is *visually*, if not narratively, set in the soundstage, the true nature of the space as warehouse-space is never hidden from the viewer. The film takes place in a sound stage, even if the narrator says otherwise, so the rule simply does not apply.

Many of the rules, however, seem to have been disregarded for the purpose of drawing attention to von Trier's rebellion against his own rules. In fact, von Trier says of himself, "I don't just provoke others, **I declare war on myself**, on the way I was brought up, on my values, the entire time" (Nicodemus, emphasis in original). The second rule, which outlaws all non-diegetic sound (and in fact all foley and re-recorded sound) is blatantly broken, as the film makes use of a voice-over, baroque music, and foley sound effects throughout. Another rule bans special lighting, which was extensively used in the warehouse where *Dogville* was filmed.

Many of the rules seem, in fact, to have been broken openly and overtly, in order to draw attention to the fact that von Trier's second Dogme film rejects the "chastity" that the Dogme manifesto prizes. For example, the third rule, which restricts the camera to a hand-held shooting style, and the fifth rule, which bans filtering and optical effects, are largely adhered to, but there are a few shots—important and memorable ones—in which

the camera does not appear to be hand-held. Notably, the very first shot of the film, dubbed a "moon landing" shot by Lars von Trier, breaks these rules. It is a God's eye perspective of the chalk-outlined town, a shot that slowly descends to the level of the characters who inhabit it. The camera is not handheld, and the apparent downward movement is achieved through a series of static shots; in other words, it is faked. The people within the shot were added in post-production. So this sequence is entirely anti-Dogme 95. Similarly, while it is not a genre film per se, which is forbidden by rule eight, *Dogville* includes elements of the gangster film genre and the melodrama, particularly characters belonging to both genres: the gangster, the mob boss, the self-sacrificing (at first) woman, who becomes a literal femme fatale, and the stereotypically suspicious townsfolk, among others. Furthermore, both weapons and murders, examples of "superficial action," are central to the film's climax and conclusion, which is a blatant transgression of rule six.[13]

So many of the rules (arguably seven out of ten) were broken in this film that many fail to realize that it is officially a Dogme film—Dogme #151. For example, Kim Morgan's review of *Dogville* argues that von Trier "has only made one 'official' Dogme picture, the brilliant The Idiots." While the rules were created to constrain filmmakers—even those who break a rule or two—von Trier apparently did not allow the rules to constrain him *at all* in the making of *Dogville*. He is quoted as saying that he was "experimenting with a new dogma formula" (Glei). Given the fact that 150 films had already been made by this time in Dogme's "rebellious" but formulaic style, perhaps the game no longer held any meaning for von Trier. Originally intended to "rescue" Danish film—and perhaps international independent film—from the demands of Hollywood and

the viewers of Hollywood film, perhaps Dogme films had become for von Trier as formulaic in their militant adherence to the rules of the "Vow of Chastity" as Hollywood films can be in their courting of studio executives and mass audience alike. Or perhaps he simply wanted to use aesthetic effects that were not possible within the Dogme game. But if von Trier's reasons for breaking the rules were purely aesthetic—for the sake of art, or "personal taste," then why did he not simply repeal the film's official Dogme 95 status? One could argue that the reason for *Dogville*'s official connection with Dogme 95 had to do with marketing, but that seems unlikely, since other von Trier films made after 1995, such as *Dancer in the Dark*, were immensely successful. This suggests that at the time of making *Dogville*, von Trier no longer had to rely on Dogme as a marketing stunt in order to ensure that his films would be seen (if indeed he ever did). So there must be something more to the transgressions of the Dogme rules than the mere desire or need to break the rules for aesthetic purposes.

I would suggest that the reasoning behind transgressing the rules of the "Vow of Chastity" may have in fact been to break the rules. In *Dogville*, von Trier sets up viewer expectations that what we see will be a Dogme 95 film by its very title, as well as by using a shaky handheld camera. Moreover, *Dogville* is clearly intended to be read through some knowledge of the filmmaker's association with Dogme 95, since throughout the film Lars von Trier makes fun of Dogme 95 obliquely.[14] When the film breaks Dogme 95 rules, it does so to deliberately thwart the audience's expectation. The documentary air of these filmmaking strategies creates the expectation in audiences that what is onscreen is "real," and at that same time draws attention to the "real" artifice of film by emphasizing the presence of the camera. Yet, as mentioned above, the film is not

shot on location, it employs artificial lights, and makes use of generic elements that feel phony. This makes viewers aware of the film's mediation and von Trier's manipulation of our emotions. More than that, von Trier is making a (perhaps oblique) confession of his own complicity in the deceit of filmmaking. By breaking the rules, he admits that this is *his* film, that it is *impossible* for him to refrain from considerations of "personal taste," and that the film *is* an illusion. If the point of the manifesto was to escape the fakery of film and "to force the truth out of […] characters and settings," von Trier's arguably cliché American town setting and allegorical stock characters might offer a type of truth that is often left unexplored in naturalist film. In this way, von Trier's apparent departures from the "rules" might actually achieve a kind of truth, or "realism" that the rules were originally meant to achieve. Through them, von Trier provokes in us an understanding of the dialectical meaning of a film, which consists of both being drawn into the story and distanced from it by the knowledge that what we are responding to is indeed a fiction and a construction.

Dogme 95 has often been seen merely as a publicity stunt, not to be taken seriously (even by its founders, who apparently wrote the manifesto in under an hour interrupted by frequent bursts of laughter), or to be taken at most as an artsy prank. However, even if von Trier's (arguably performed) public fits of arrogance and the Dogme manifesto were clearly intended as publicity stunts, that does not necessarily mean that they were not simultaneously intended to be taken seriously. As the Dogme 95 "brotherhood" assert, "[s]eriousness and play goes [sic] hand in hand" (Dogme 95 FAQ). Jan Simons argues that Dogme 95 must be interpreted "from the point of view of mimicry and mocking," but not without the serious and intentional ramification of

"[turning] filmmaking itself into a game" (183). Although *Dogville* does not adhere to many of the rules set out in the "Vow of Chastity," it is a perfect example of a work resulting from the imposition of a new framework or set of rules for the production of a film—new rules for a new game. This is the same type of constraint articulated in the "Vow of Chastity," which von Trier believed would provide needed "therapy" for himself and other filmmakers who felt numbed and disillusioned by the "sensation[al]" state of cinema. So the game itself has useful ramifications: therapy, or perhaps a cure, for the illness of contemporary cinema.

Even if von Trier's films are instances of "spassing," the Dogme 95 manifesto—ironic though it may be—through its set of rules which stress an elusive "truthfulness," provides the framework through which many of them articulate his filmmaking ideals. Regardless of how many Dogme 95 rules were broken in *Dogville*—or perhaps *because* so many of them were broken—the film itself is in dialogue with the manifesto, and thus with von Trier's ideals. The fact that it breaks so many rules does not overturn its inclusion in the Dogme film category. Rather, it indicates something that was perhaps apparent in the Dogme manifesto from the beginning: the conflict between the "truth" that art is supposed to strive for and the nature of the art form itself. A fundamental conflict exists between von Trier's filmmaking—Dogme film or not—and his articulated ideals; perhaps there is something he finds troublingly "untruthful" not just about films in general, but most distressingly about his own films. Even when he uses aesthetics that only loosely match those of Dogme 95, he and his work are engaged in a discourse with Dogme 95, arguing, sometimes ironically, about its authenticity, and its ultimate worth.

The dialectical effect of reading Lars von Trier's *Dogville* against the Dogme 95 manifesto brings to mind *epic theatre*. *Dogville* is often read as Brechtian, a reading supported by von Trier's own intimations about the source of the film, as mentioned above. So I will now turn my attention to the theories of Bertolt Brecht and explore how such theories might inform a reading of *Dogville*.

Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator conceived the term *epic theatre*, or what Brecht later called *dialectical theatre*, in opposition to *dramatic theatre*, as they called it, which "disguises its materiality, melting all the signs together into a synthesis, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (collective work of art) that aims to envelop the spectator in an illusory world" (Bryant-Bertail 7). In this way, what Brecht and Piscator took issue with in the popular *dramatic theatre* is similar to what von Trier and Vinterberg take issue with in "the cinema today": illusion. The aim of the Dogme 95 manifesto was to encourage filmmakers to scale back the illusory tools of film in order to concentrate on what really matters in the films (whatever that may be). In contrast, a key concept in *epic theatre* is the notion of *Verfremdungs*, which is often translated as "alienation," but which Sarah Bryant-Bertail calls "'making strange' or 'defamiliarization'" (19). So Brecht's work not only condemns strategies that use illusion to simulate reality, but it also goes so far as to promote displays of artificiality to counter what he perceived as a customary tendency for spectators to "identify" with the play because of a believe that such a tendency promotes passivity. Furthermore, Brechtian theatre can be seen as a mode characterized by the "nonintegration" between opposing elements which "follows the same dialectical principle as in Eisenstein's cinematic montage [in which two opposing…] images collide and 'explode' […] into revolutionary meaning" (21-22).

It might seem strange to align von Trier's film, which I perceive as an artifact which tends to evoke strong emotional responses, to Brechtian theatre, which is often conceived of as "alienating" and thus unemotional. However, although Brecht wrote that epic theatre embodied a "lack of interest in any investment of its spectators' emotions," emotions are apparent in his plays (46). Brecht is often misunderstood to have argued for a theatre in which the spectators do not "identify" with the characters, and thus one in which emotion is largely secondary. However, it is obvious from his plays that Brecht prized the emotional aspect of theatre. Rather than producing theatre in which an emotional connection between spectators and characters is all or nothing, Brecht experimented with such a connection, seeking ultimately to redefine the relationship between the audience and the play. For example, he would follow up an emotionally affecting scene with strategies of distanciation or include such strategies in the scene itself in order to promote a double meaning; spectators could be sad about the characters plight, and on being reminded that it is merely a play—a metaphorical representation of the real world—angry at those who would make such a plight possible.

In addition, there exist in his plays dialectics related to affect. First, the "revolutionary meaning" of Brecht's plays is produced by opposing elements, which are often emotional. Brecht reasoned that in epic theatre the spectators' "emotion will come from recognizing and feeling the incident's double aspect" (271). Other strategies of distanciation, such as the use of "placards, direct addresses to the audience, songs out of character, and nonhistrionic acting," contradict the elements by which Brecht thought that the spectator might be engaged and emotionally moved (Bryant-Bertail 18). Thus, Brecht's plays create a dialectic in which viewers are both emotionally engaged—either

by the story and its characters *or* by the political implications of the story—and simultaneously aware of the artifice of the play. This, Brecht reasoned, would counter the natural tendency for the audience to identify with the play and use it only as an escape from reality. His aim was to incite the desire for political change in spectators whom he imagined would otherwise be passively seeking escape in the theatre. Brecht wished "to teach the spectator a quite definite practical attitude, directed towards changing the world," and he thought that to do that, he must force the spectator "to adopt in the theatre a quite different attitude from what he is used to" (57). The emotion the plays elicit in viewers can be both a part of the dialectic *and* the revolutionary effect of Brechtian theatre, which clearly both distances *and* engages viewers, in order to encourage radical political thought *and* evoke strong feelings in them.

In addition to its dialectical elements, *Dogville* has often been called Brechtian because of its sparse, stage-like set which serves to draw attention to the film's artifice. *Dogville* can be seen as Brechtian in several different ways. However, the film is not a film version of epic theatre. Unlike Brecht's plays, von Trier does not have his actors break into song, there are no placards, and von Trier cannot, of course, ensure that the audience is bathed in white light at every showing. Nevertheless, the fairy-tale-like voice-over and the chapter intertitles throughout the film, along with the obviously constructed set, do serve to remind the viewer that this is not reality, despite the smoothly crafted melodramatic narrative which we perhaps have a tendency to become engaged in.

Through the film's Dogme 95 aesthetics, particularly the film's hand-held shooting style, von Trier deliberately draws attention to film's artifice. In that way, Dogme 95 reflects a similar ideology to that of epic theatre. Also, the set of *Dogville* is

reminiscent of a Brechtian set, in that it is minimalist and emphasizes its character *as a set*. The story itself is said to be loosely based on the *Threepenny Opera* song "Pirate Jenny," in which Macheath's favourite prostitute Jenny fantasizes about being a pirate and thus able to take revenge and kill her oppressors. As mentioned above, von Trier has admitted that his initial intention was to use "Pirate Jenny" for the closing credits song. Grace's dialogue actually includes a line from the song; she says of June's soiled bed that she is cleaning, "Ain't nobody gonna sleep here."[15] The fact that *Dogville* references Jenny's dreams of justice (and eventually ends the film by making the fantasy a reality) suggests that von Trier's equalitarian ideals bear some resemblance to Brecht's.

Professional reviews of the film, such as that of Todd R. Ramlow, comment on "[i]ts calculated staginess [which] distances viewers from film, as do the chapter titles that interrupt the narrative ("Chapter Six: In which Dogville bares its teeth"), an intrusive narrator, and the often wooden dialect and delivery of lines." Unlike Ramlow, I see the actors' performances as largely naturalist, artificial only in the sense of melodrama's excess as opposed to Brechtian "woodenness." However, his comments bring to light the fact that the distancing strategies of the film are quite obvious and fundamentally theatrical. Elaine Canning cites the use of voice-over and chapters in *Dogville* as theatrical (162). However, voice-over narration is universally recognized as a filmic convention—albeit one that sometimes reflects adaptation from another medium, such as the novel's omniscient narrative voice—and chapter breaks are reminiscent of the novel. Clearly, the set of *Dogville* reads as (minimalist) theatre and is particularly reminiscent of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and Brecht's plays. Perhaps Canning's assertion suggests that, despite the primarily novelesque quality of voice-over narration and chaptering,

there is an affiliation between the chapter titles and Brecht's placards and between *Dogville*'s narration and the narrating singers as well as the non-naturalist acting in Brecht's plays, in which actors often directly address the audience.

Von Trier's techniques for distanciation are not only apparent to the art-house crowd; on the contrary, they have been discussed in detail by bloggers on popular websites. For example, anonymous blogger R-O-N-I-N writes "the best movies are like watching novels. In some ways, this can be detrimental, and at times, I did indeed find myself disconnected from the movie." Online bloggers such as R-O-N-I-N illuminate both the pleasure *and* the disruption of the novel-like aspect of the film.

One of the main differences between reading a novel and watching a film is that a film can give us a sense of what characters are thinking and feeling by showing facial expressions and body language, which novels cannot do except through the use of the written word. And, in contrast, a novel is able to explicitly offer the reader the specific internal thoughts of its characters, which most films do only through the use of voice-over narration. For that reason, one would think that the voice-over used as a novelistic strategy in film, to give viewers access to the internal thoughts of the characters, would tend to *engage* viewers in the story. In fact, my previous discussion of voice-over narration in this chapter similarly concludes that the narrator's voice-over seems to result in a deeper understanding of Grace's situation. In that case, R-O-N-I-N's blog is strangely counterintuitive. After all, many people find the voice-over narrations of certain films, such as *Stand By Me* (1986) and, more recently, *Moulin Rouge* (2001), to be extremely emotionally engaging. However, novels can and do often use the written word to be ironic rather than to represent internal thoughts. A third-person narration in film,

such as that in *The Royal Tannenbaums* (2001), often takes this tact, producing an engagement with the film, but from an ironic distance from its characters. The narrator in *Dogville* is often positioned in this way, providing an oddly ironic "God's eye" narration.

The fact that the film is divided into chapters is something that reminds the viewer of another storytelling medium (the novel), and thus it draws attention to the medium of film as a *different* medium. The narrator's ironic tone has a similarly distancing effect. Although voice-overs can potentially engage viewers, this *particular* voice-over has a quality that frequently distances viewers from a total allegiance with the members of the town with whom we are occasionally aligned. For instance, in the scene towards the end of the film, in which Tom leaves Grace's home after being "forgiven" for his base desires, viewers are aligned with him, as we are given access to his actions. We see Tom searching in his house for the card the gangsters left him. The narrator explains why he kept the card, despite having lied to Grace, telling her that he had destroyed it. However, instead of it being a convincing explanation, it is ironic, apparently intended only to underscore our distaste for Tom's actions, rather than to reverse it. Thus it is perhaps not the novel-like quality of the film, but rather its ironic tone, which "disconnected" R-O-N-I-N from the narrative at times.

The film's Brechtian strategies do not undercut the emotion elicited through its melodramatic strategies; rather both sets of strategies work together, perhaps ending up promoting some third "revolutionary" effect. In what follows, I will be considering what this third meaning could be. Admittedly, the use of Brechtian aesthetics, whether or not they are in combination with those of the melodrama, do not have to accompany Brechtian politics. However, it is helpful to consider the political and moral implications

of *Dogville*, comparing the way moral ideals are set up in the film to the way in which Brecht's ideals would be set up in an epic play.

Dogville can be read in the same light as Brecht's plays, in that they were generally set up as didactic, moral parables (reflecting Brecht's Marxist politics). By virtue of the film's skeletal stage design, fable-like voice-over narration, and stock characters, *Dogville* too is presented as an allegorical sketch. The design of the stage, which I mentioned is reminiscent of chalk on a blackboard, suggests didacticism, as does the vocal tone of the omniscient narrator. More than that, the mere fact that the film has a narrator, along with chapter breaks and title "pages" accompanied by the sound of flowery baroque music is also suggestive of a "storybook," as mentioned above, which is often structured as a fable, or in which a moral is at least clearly articulated. That the town is located at a *dead end*, and that it (along with the film) is called *Dog*ville[16] smacks of direct symbolism, which is the modus operandi of allegory. All of these elements of the film which point to its classification as allegory are also elements which alienate viewers, preventing us from "identifying" with the film in a conventional way. Von Trier employs this Brechtian strategy to *defamiliarize* the melodramatic story that the film is narrating. And the allegorical structure of the film is in turn *defamiliarized* as the film progresses, since it includes elements like rape and mass murder, which are foreign to contemporary fables. Von Trier's gestures to film's artifice imply that the film is a *metaphor* for the real world, even though his use of naturalist acting performances and melodramatic elements draw viewers into a strong engagement with the characters.

Any allegorical meaning that we draw from *Dogville*, however, will not be straightforward. Andrea Brighenti begins his article by "oppos[ing] any temptation to

reduce *Dogville* to any single, planned allegory" (96). Ultimately, it is at the point when one comes to attempt to sort the allegory out that it begins to get a tad slippery. Thomas Beltzer sees the allegory as one that is more sophisticated than the conventional allegory: it is "complex, subtle, dialectical, real and open to multiple readings." While we might all be able to agree that an allegory can (and perhaps should) be complex, how can an allegory be "real?" And more importantly, isn't the point of an allegory to be an extended metaphor *for* something in particular, as opposed to a story that contains within it multiple, sometimes conflicting metaphors, and is thus potentially left open to multiple meanings? Beltzer's interpretation of *Dogville*'s "allegory" as complex and dialectical are exactly the reasons that many people reject an allegorical reading of the film. If we take the film to be a *Brechtian* allegory, then it, in fact, should be dialectical, and thus potentially complex; Brecht's parables are often, if not always, complex. But it was also important to Brecht that his politics be relatively transparent to the audience—they should certainly not be obscured by the aesthetics of his art.

While Todd R. Ramlow suggests that the allegory in *Dogville* "is clear enough," he also seems to contradict himself, admitting that "there are numerous ways to read" it. One of these readings sees Grace's inner conflict externalized by her final conversation with her father and by the reciprocity of violence in the film as a whole (that Grace's violence towards the townspeople is balanced by their violence of a different kind towards her). Brighenti asserts that the conflict is a metaphor for that between "the morality of retribution" and the "morality of forgiveness" (97). But if this is the central parabolic conflict in the film, then which morality prevails? Throughout the bulk of the

film, exploitation and abuse are consequences of Grace's forgiveness. It is only when Grace takes revenge that she is safe and the viewer, arguably, satisfied.

But are we satisfied? Anonymous blogger Akilis explains, perhaps glibly, that in *Dogville* "[y]ou reap what you sow." In contrast, although there have been "reports of audiences cheering Grace on," reviewer Gary Mairs believes that the catharsis inherent in Grace's destruction of Dogville "is undermined both by the ugly specificity of the revenge she carries out and the sad acceptance of her expression as she does it." In that case, through our recognition of the "ugliness" of Grace's actions, retribution does not emerge as the victor of this moral conflict. But nor does the ending indicate that forgiveness of the townspeople would be preferable. We are aligned with Grace throughout most of the film, so if we consider her actions, forgiveness is shown not to be "right." But we likely also recognize revenge as excessively brutal. Despite the fact that the film has a definitive ending that is *dramatically* satisfying, viewers are stuck with regards to our *ideological* satisfaction. Neither of the moralities (of forgiveness or of retribution) is illustrated in ways that satisfy; neither of the moralities is "right".

Since the film premiered at Cannes in 2003, *Dogville* has been attacked as blatantly, even brutally, anti-American, which might not be altogether opposed to Brecht's Marxist politics. In Roger Ebert's review, he intimates his "fear" that Dogville "works as a parable of America [since] the citizens are xenophobic, vindictive, jealous, suspicious and capable of rape and murder." Ebert insists that von Trier is a "crank" with a "dislike of the United States."[17] In contrast, in a blog entitled "Not as anti-American as you might think," Joe Howes writes that Lars von Trier's critique of the townspeople could be applied to "ANY region of ANY nation at ANY time."

As Dany Nobus proposes, the film surely "provoke[s] a serious re-consideration of the notions of acceptance, tolerance, hospitality and solidarity, which political theorists and sociologists have identified as central principles of a democratic society" (25). Others suggest a similar reading of the film "as a critique of capitalist exploitation," in that the "capitalist system is unveiled as an orgiastic charnel house, but also as a natural extension of the grubbiest impulses of the human animal" (Ramlow, Sherwin). In such readings, where the film illustrates "a parable of America," Dogville can be seen as capitalist America, in which Grace represents someone within such a society who is ultimately exploited and consumed by the "system" (Ebert). In that case, *Dogville* is indeed anti-American, as Ebert and others suggest.

It is true that at the beginning of the film, Grace is most clearly a foreigner in (small-town) America, and she is progressively treated despicably by the latter. Of course, later on in the film, Grace is able to enact her final retributive justice on the town only because of her association with her gangster father. Gangsters are often linked to immigrants, as a life of crime could be seen as an immigrant's best chance to become successful within an American system which oppresses outsiders. Nevertheless, the gangster is also a very American icon, and James Caan, who plays Grace's father, has made a career performing the quintessential romanticized American (if American Italian) gangster, epitomized by Sonny Corleone in *The Godfather* (1972). In this way, Grace is apparently going back to her American gangster roots, or indeed *becoming* American.

An article that perhaps articulates best such an interpretation of *Dogville* as a parable that condemns American politics is Jacques Rancière's "The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics." In it, Rancière sees *Dogville* as a simplification of Brecht's

political fable *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, one that illustrates the only conceivable moral justice as the eradication of the town, as opposed to equally illustrating two moral rights, which is how he reads Brecht's play (3). Rancière's reading of *Dogville* highlights how the moral of the story is aligned with current politics, particularly the Bush administration's articulation of doling out "infinite justice […] in the fight against the axis of evil." The moral of the story as Rancière sees it is this: it is wrong to exploit others (immigrants), and if they are exploited they will eventually take revenge. Thus Rancière reads the story as Tom's fable for the townspeople, with whom viewers are only seldom aligned, as opposed to reading it as von Trier's fable for us. Even if the simplistic moral Rancière reads was the allegory's intended central theme, that is not where its power lies. Rather, the power within *Dogville* is found in the dialectical ending in which viewers are both allied and contemptuous of Grace's vengeful actions.

Rancière's reading ignores the ambivalence with which viewers greet Grace's "infinite justice." In fact, scholars such as Andrea Brighenti see such a (mis)reading as "a poor hermeneutical result" (97). Although viewers are likely ready for Grace to seek vengeance on her abusers in the town, we are troubled by her cold instructions to one of the executors of this "justice" to re-enact the scene in which Vera takes vengeance on Grace. In that scene, Vera maliciously tells her that she will be merciful if Grace can refrain from crying while she breaks the first two figurines. Likewise, Grace tells her father's henchmen this: "Do the kids first and make the mother watch. Tell her you'll stop if she can hold back her tears. I owe her that." While this is perhaps a "fitting" punishment for Vera, one cannot help remembering that one of her children is merely an infant—an innocent in the town if anyone is.

In *Dancer in the Dark*, von Trier sets his viewers up to anticipate a musical with what I call its initial overture, only to subvert and frustrate their expectations by executing the protagonist during the final song. In the same way, he sets us up to expect an allegory in *Dogville* by using various elements of the Brechtian parable, perhaps most strikingly, the voice-over narrator and his didactic tone. What this does is ensure that throughout the film, the viewer expects there to be an allegorical meaning to the story, at times attempting to link the figure on stage with what must be its abstract symbol in the real world. For this reason, we need not be as critical of the story's victimization of its female protagonist (a now familiar trope in von Trier's oeuvre) because it is all in the service of a larger thematic discussion.[18] Moreover, the points at which the film transgresses into another, more naturalistic genre—indeed the highly affective melodrama—are more shocking because they fail to satisfy the expectations set up by the fairy-tale devices suggested by the chapter titles and the tone of the narrator.

In this way, much of the power of *Dogville* seems to stem from von Trier's manipulation of genre and style. Thus viewers' criterial prefocusing of the film, which takes its cues from the initial way in which the film is set up, is of the utmost importance in *Dogville*. As much as von Trier seems to be using distancing techniques reminiscent of Brecht, these act as a counterpoint to his engaging techniques, particularly the use of melodrama's "excessively" affective elements. In this way, one can hardly help being strongly affected by *Dogville* emotionally and at the same time painfully aware of its artifice. *Dogville* might then succeed marvelously in ultimately Brechtian aims. But the end result of von Trier's film does not seem to be intellectual more than it is emotional.

In this final section, I will analyze the scene in which Chuck first rapes Grace in order to illustrate how I believe von Trier's strategies work in the film. Rape, or the threat of rape, can be seen as a conventional story device often used in melodrama, as are such plot elements as murder and adultery (notably also present in *Dogville*). But the question remains in this devastating scene whether its power lies in its melodramatic nature, its distancing strategies, or, as I argue, in the troubling combination of the two.

Halfway through the film's sixth chapter, subtitled, "In which Dogville bares its teeth," the rape scene begins in a relatively long shot of the town, focused on Grace in Chuck and Vera's home. Chuck is on his way home, as we and Grace can see, and he is early. The narrator's voice-over returns, along with the film's customary accompanying baroque music. The narrator describes Grace's vulnerability to the townsfolk—perhaps to Chuck in particular, in this scene—likening it to the town's vulnerability to nature in that it is "quite unprotected from any capricious storms." The narrator describes Grace's vulnerability in sexual terms, though, likening her to a juicy "apple in the Garden of Eden," further setting up Chuck's desire of her which will come to light in a few moments. As the narrator speaks, the camera zooms out further to show the police cars, which the narrator now mentions. After this piece of information is offered, the camera coverage returns to medium close-ups of Grace and Chuck in the house, the voice-over and music cease, and the skeletal set suggestive of allegory is perhaps forgotten. However, von Trier's gesture to Brechtian techniques of distanciation—in fact, his gesture to the artifice of film in his direction of focus to the *artificially* represented set and in his use of an *outside* perspective of the story (from the narrator's point of view) which also implies the *audience*'s existence—should not be overlooked. This is a

reminder that this is "just a film," right before its arguably most emotionally powerful scene. It serves to remind viewers that this fiction is not meant to facilitate escapism, but rather it is a Brechtian parable for which we must sort out its meaning—if indeed it has one.[19]

Back in Chuck and Vera's house, Chuck tells Grace that he forgot to mention to her that "the Laws"—the FBI along with the police—were in town. Grace is thus trapped there with Chuck, unable to call for help. Chuck proceeds to threaten Grace, telling her that he will turn her in unless she consents to being raped by him. The beginning of their conversation is shot in medium close-ups, interspersed with very few—but significant—long shots of the FBI and the townspeople outside. Notably, there is one zoom in to Tom strolling along the otherwise empty Elm Street.[20] The fact that von Trier does extract us from the dramatic scene using a distancing strategy such as the zoom out makes it likely that our engagement with the melodramatic scene in the house has much to do with the fact that the film has in some ways been set up as a melodrama. Because the film is criterially prefocused as a melodrama, even though von Trier brings us out of the melodrama at various points, "the emotional state of the viewer [which the melodrama has promoted] fixes *and* then shapes her attention" (Carroll 31). So perhaps we remain dramatically and emotionally engaged in the scene occurring within the house, as opposed to following von Trier's Brechtian cues to encounter the exploitation of Grace intellectually and politically, because we are looking for ways to maintain a continuous involvement with the film that is congruent with our melodramatic expectations of it. The viewer's criterial prefocusing of a recognized melodrama promotes the maintenance of a

particular emotional state—sorrow or pity, according to Carroll—because he or she is more likely to perceive further elements within the film which elicit such a state.[21]

As the scene progresses, and Grace and the audience become more and more certain of the real danger Chuck poses to her, the shots become tighter and tighter. In this way, viewers *are* encouraged to forget about the film's Brechtian staging and allegorical tone. Perhaps more than any other section in the film, this one is shot and performed in a style that promotes a disturbingly naturalist reading.

In one shot in particular, as Chuck begins to touch Grace against her will, Kidman's performance exhibits more than just helplessness and fear. She smiles and titters, looking around her, perhaps with shame, her gaze not quite penetrating the walls, which are invisible only to us, so that she remains helpless. On the other hand, the laugh could be seen as one last attempt to pretend, with Chuck, that this was all a misunderstanding. After all, when she did this in the previous chapter, after Chuck tried to kiss her in the orchard, it worked well enough. In this scene, when her titter does not faze him, she begins to plead, "this is wrong," which is exactly the same thing that she told Jason at the beginning of the last scene, when he made deliberate mistakes in class in order to get Grace's attention. However, her delivery of the line in this scene is more dramatic, in keeping with the scene more dramatic tone. Even after Chuck has removed his overalls and hitched up Grace's skirt, she tries to remind him that they are friends, to which Chuck replies, perhaps obviously, "no, Grace, we're not," as he violates her.

This is the point at which the coverage of the scene switches again, this time from mostly close-ups inside Chuck and Vera's house to longer shots and zooms in and out of the townspeople outside the house, with Grace's disturbing rape in the background. In a

series of six quiet long shots, the townspeople are seen in the foreground, with Chuck on top of Grace in the background. Because there are no walls, the entire stage becomes a joint space of rape and domesticity—the horror being brought "home" by the sheer banality of the rest of the activity on the stage. More importantly, the viewer's awareness of the fact that this is a stage returns. However much the first zoom out in the scene points to Tom's—and by extension von Trier's—complicity in Chuck's abuse of Grace, it is not as heart-wrenching as these long shots during the actual act of rape itself. As Bill Chambers remarks, "You realize you're watching an inversion of every rape scenario ever staged once the tight close-ups of Grace's abasement begin to feel less oppressive than the distant wide shots." Why is it these shots which are the most distressing, rather than those in which Grace pleads for Chuck to spare her, or rather than those in which Chuck pushes up against her in close-up?

The very fact that two of the six long shots are *zooms* has the added effect of gesturing to the artifice of film. As Richard Barsam asserts, zooming in or out "not only feels artificial to an audience but can unintentionally disorient viewers" (157). There is also a difference in the relative space within the frame between a dolly and zoom. A dolly movement out in the same situation would similarly de-magnify the image of Chuck on top of Grace and reveal the unresponsive townspeople in the foreground, but it would also cause "relative changes in position between onscreen figures or objects" (Barsam 179). This expansion of relative space, in turn, would imply a difference in the actual relationship between them, metaphorically, which is quite the opposite of what the zoom out does. The zoom illuminates the constant spatial relationship between Grace and the townspeople, and the viewer's changed relationship with Grace and with the

townspeople—which could be seen as a Brechtian gesture. Arguably, this moment could be characterized as one in which the viewer is considering his or her position in relation to the storyline. Moreover, the long shots show more of the non-naturalist sets, reminding viewers of the artifice of the film world. As a result, they work in Brechtian and allegorical ways to give the rape a deeper, more figurative, less naturalist meaning, but without taking away the emotional state of the viewer which has been promoted through the criterial prefocusing of the film as a melodrama combined with the preceding powerfully emotional section of this scene.

By virtue of the coverage of this scene, the subject—the rape—is in effect "defamiliarized." This is true in the Brechtian sense in that Bryant-Bertail interprets *Verfremdungseffekt* as a defamiliarizing effect. It is also true in the way that Victor Shklovsky discusses defamiliarization in his formalist essay of 1917, "Art as Technique":

> Habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. […] The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.

Von Trier's visual technique of foregrounding elements which would ordinarily be outside the scope of the description of the rape scene makes the tragic scene unfamiliar. Normally the scene of rape would not be accompanied by a reminder of the system (the town) and those who comply with it (the townspeople). This part of the scene juxtaposes the brutal realm of the rape with the small-town domestic realm, producing a strange effect. As Miguel B. Llora notes, "the juxtaposition of the townsfolk milling about uncaring [with the rape in the background makes it] as if they were complicit in the rape."[22] Thus, the coverage of the scene illuminates both their passivity and our own.

For some viewers, the power of this scene has to do with the way the transition to long shots heightens the intellectual meaning of the scene without the loss of the emotion it provokes. For others, its emotional power is the result of a shocking transition from one mode to another. In the melodramatic portion of the scene, viewers are perhaps, in Brecht's words, "in the thick of it, shar[ing] in the experience" of the drama because of the medium shots and close-ups, which allow the aesthetics of the set—the space's non-naturalism—to fade into the background and be momentarily forgotten (37). When these non-naturalist elements are once again perceptible, "the spectator [is encouraged to stand] outside, stud[ying]" the dramatic action (Brecht 37).

Viewers are tormented by Chuck's violation of Grace, only to be suddenly placed on the *outside* of her suffering, seeing it for what it is: a fiction and a metaphor. Yet such a *complete* transition on the part of viewers demands a switching off of our empathy with Grace, which, for some viewers, would be at this point be impossible, perhaps inhuman. The transition in the film might elicit anger because we can detect the hand of von Trier's (self-conscious) manipulation. Online poster, R. Wignall articulates such an experience: "It is a visceral experience of attritional abuse, which only becomes intellectual when you suddenly realise you have been sucked into its world. […] You leave the film feeling violated." In addition, we are encouraged to see von Trier's manipulation in the same light as Tom's, and thus as further exploitation of Grace, for whom we have both sympathy and empathy. At the end of this scene, Chuck leaves Grace, and the narrator takes over again. In fact, the chapter comes to an end as the camera ascends once again into the God's eye position with which the film began, Grace lying on the floor of Chuck and Vera's domestic space, trying to recover from Chuck's abuse.

If the film's bare aesthetics, incongruous fable-like voice-over, disruptive chapter intertitles, and allegorical stock characters, as well as its arguably condemnatory and possibly circuitous politics, serve to distance the viewer, then performances which are at times compelling in their authenticity and the strong melodramatic narrative of a tragedy, with gothic elements, re-engage the viewer through affective means. The transitions that von Trier makes between the melodramatic and Brechtian modes could deepen our intellectual engagement with the film, allowing us to maintain our sympathy for Grace, while simultaneously breaking our empathy with her, for we now perceive her story from the outside, from a distance. In fact, von Trier's creation of a dialectic between the dramatically engaging and the reflexive is reminiscent of such strategies in Brecht's plays. While *Dogville* is not always believable—in keeping with the rest of von Trier's work—there is an emotional naturalism, and arguably a political realism, which is in line with Dogme 95 ideals, if contrary to the "Vow of Chastity". This political realism, as well as the film's lack of aesthetic naturalism, aligns *Dogville* with Brechtian ideals. Intriguingly, *Dogville* oscillates between the natural and the artificial throughout its unfolding. What viewers perceive as real and what we perceive as artificial or imagined seems to change from moment to moment. One is perhaps initially struck most by the incongruity between the naturalist acting styles in the film and the design of the set, which depicts anything but the naturalism of the world outside the film. Curiously, the artificial-looking set reminds viewers of the most basic *reality* of film: its artifice. So, in effect, the staginess of the set design is also what illuminates reality most clearly. At the same time, the naturalist performance styles of the actors and the exaggerated but naturalist formulaic melodramatic narrative draw us into the story emotionally, and set up

the film's criterial focus. By eliciting emotion, the film engages us to the point where its lack of narrative and visual believability—its artifice—does not impede our connection to the film. After the melodrama is set-up, we willingly *suspend* our disbelief in order to be moved, even when the film is trying to alienate us by way of its other pervasive self-conscious modes.

Notes:

[1] Although in this chapter I will focus mainly on sorting out the allegorical and melodramatic elements of *Dogville*, as well as the film's connection to Brechtian and Dogme 95 aesthetics, there are several other modes in play. For example, Wim Staat discusses the film's collusion with the generic elements of the post-war road movie and the gangster film (90).

[2] There has been extensive scholarly work done on *Dogville* in the area of hospitality and gift exchange. See the Chiesa and Nobus articles for in-depth considerations of Grace as a gift and "the problem of Dogville" being related to an economy of "social goods" (Nobus 25). Atkinson, too, calls Grace an "illustrative gift" in what he sees as von Trier's discussion of an economy of hospitality. To Atkinson, von Trier and Tom "stag[e…] the violence of the host" in the town's consumption of the gift, or Grace.

[3] It has been suggested that Tom's experiment is intended to fail, by virtue of its framework as a "fable," which is how Tom himself describes the lesson he wants to teach the town. As Adam Atkinson asserts, the fable is structured "to show the people of Dogville a bad example of hospitality," as fables tend to illustrate by bad example, "but by having the town participate directly in his fable rather than identifying with characters in a text, Tom forces both Dogville and Grace to share in the violent possibilities of hospitality." It is in this way that Tom begins to set the stage, as von Trier's surrogate "illustrator" within the film, for the townspeople's subsequent mistreatment of Grace, as well as for the retributive justice that the townspeople must suffer if this is truly a fable.

[4] Significantly, the mission house is a space of orderly Christian morality and also the sacred space of divinity and fellowship. That democracy, which is arguably suggestive of a certain brand of morality depending on the culture in which it functions, is enacted in this Christian space suggests that the ideology that dictates the social structure of Dogville is a mixture of Christian morality and democracy. It is also significant to note that this space (of democracy and Christian morality) has been abandoned by God, in that Tom later tells Grace that its new preacher will never arrive. Lattek provides a full discussion of the ways in which the absence of God is highlighted in *Dogville* (100). Thus von Trier implicitly attacks the mission house and all that it represents by denying it any affiliation with a higher power.

[5] Lorenzo Chiesa suggests that Moses' appearance can be metaphorically linked to the townspeople's treatment of Grace as an animal. Chiesa proposes that "we cannot see Moses because it is possible to separate animal life from human life only within man, and this separation is precisely what is revoked by the biopolitical animalisation of man" that the exploitation of Grace represents (16). However, in my view, the dog appears mainly in order to highlight the importance of Grace's final forgiveness. Although the narrator tells us that Grace has stopped making excuses for those who would mistreat her, Grace forgives Moses for barking at her because she once stole his bone—in other words, because it is his nature to bark at her under those circumstances. Thus Grace has not fully "learned her lesson," a lesson which will presumably be expanded upon in the other two

films within this trilogy. If the film articulates the notion that "idealism [is] an illustrative way of thinking that translates into an exploitative way of acting," as Michael Lattek asserts, then Grace's final gesture of kindness to Moses indicates that her idealism is still a guiding force in her thinking, which could lead to further acts of violence, in the name of either (capitalist) exploitation or retributive justice (99). Even though killing Moses (or allowing him to be killed) would be an act of violence, it is not unprecedented in the film. Viewers are to some degree satisfied by the act of violence Grace enacts by participating (perhaps implicitly) in burning down the town because, even though it is distasteful (especially because *children* are killed), it is a suggestion that Grace is no longer allowing herself to be victimized by making any excuses for those who would abuse her. Although Grace burns down the town, she does not finish the job. However innocent and adorable Moses might seem, he could expose Grace to danger again, perhaps especially now that the film has made him "real."

[6] The way in which we evaluate the characters morally in this film becomes more complex, however, because Grace commits a morally ambiguous act in the film's final scene. Our alignment with and allegiance to Grace throughout the film complicates our feelings about her violent acts of revenge which arguably find their origin in this scene.

[7] An argument could be made here that Selma's virtue *is* rewarded, since Cathy tells her that Gene's operation was a success. However, since viewers are not privy to the potentially melodramatic scene in which Gene's eyesight is saved, so the reward is surely, as Brooks asserts, "secondary" to the recognition of virtue in the film.

[8] I discuss the documentary mode and how it reads as "real" and simultaneously gestures towards artifice in detail in Chapter I.

[9] This is a direct reference to François Truffaut's essay turned New Wave manifesto, "Une certaine tendance du cinéma français."

[10] It is unclear exactly what "the truth" that is being aspired to in the manifesto is. There is no explicit mention in the manifesto or in the "Vow of Chastity" of any allegiance to naturalist aesthetics or narrative credibility. There is only an implication that "the truth" is opposed to spectacle, "illusion," and "trickery." Nevertheless, it is interestingly exactly those offenses which the Dogme 95 "movement" and many of von Trier's films have been accused of. In addition, like *Dogville*'s omniscient voice-over narration, the Dogme 95 manifesto is laden with irony. Von Trier's films similarly include ironic elements or moments in them, which suggests that neither the manifesto nor any of the films is entirely in earnest.

[11] When Stoffer behaves reprehensibly, viewers are generally allied with Karen, who watches the "spassers" with curiosity. When Karen finally takes part in the activity—in a much more personal, risky, and indeed almost admirable way, in front of her own family—viewers are caught in a moral bind, both condemning and commending her actions. In this way, at the end of *Idioterne*, viewers occupy a position similar to that occupied at the end of *Dogville*, disturbed as we are by Grace's questionable morality.

[12] On top of this, for a filmmaker to use the name Thomas Edison Jr. for one of his characters is a loaded strategy. Thomas Edison is the name of a filmmaker and the inventor of the kinetograph and the kinetoscope—the veritable father of film. Thomas Edison, Jr., then must live in the shadow of such a man. Furthermore, Lorenzo Chiesa points out that the real Thomas Edison, Jr. was a fake and a failure, on top of being an alcoholic. Chiesa cites Ben's mention of his leaky carburetor as a reference to Junior's failed attempt to perfect Henry Ford's carburetor (9-10). It is also significant that biographers such as Neil Baldwin now often attribute Thomas Edison, Sr.'s success to business savvy and an exploitation of the talent of other uncredited scientists. Thus, the fact that *Dogville*'s story ends up affirming Tom's identity as a phony is significant as well. Perhaps *Dogville* is von Trier's most honest film yet in its consideration of von Trier's identity as a fake, a businessman, and, perhaps worst of all, an illusionist.

[13] "Temporal and geographical alienation," meaning that the story of the film does not take place here and now, are forbidden by the seventh rule, as if in anticipation of von Trier's *Dogville*, where almost every kind of alienation is attempted in accordance with the film's quasi-Brechtian aims.

[14] If indeed, as I argue, Tom stands in for von Trier in the film, then Tom's illustration, which is aimed at the "moral rearmament" of the town, can be seen as a stand-in for Dogme 95 as well as for this film itself. The narrator's earnest tone highlights Tom's arrogance in "fe[eling] obliged to benefit the town," without acknowledging his part in the town and its failings, and it reflects the arrogance of von Trier (and his recognition of such arrogance) in feeling obliged to benefit the cinema by initiating "a rescue action" for "certain tendencies" to which von Trier admits no affiliation.

[15] In the song, this is what Jenny thinks as she does housework, fantasizing that at night the pirates will flatten every building in town except the "cheap hotel" in which she lives before taking her to live with them on their pirate ship. This reference foreshadows Grace's inevitable change of heart from being all-forgiving to vengeful.

[16] The name of the town, Dogville, could refer—and likely does refer simultaneously—to many different things. First of all, it is a reference to von Trier's affiliation with Dogme 95. In that way, the people of Dogville are already encountered as "dogmatic," even before we meet them, and even if we are not quite sure what dogma controls them. Secondly, the townspeople can be seen morally as dogs. Finally, the word dog is often suggestive of its reverse, "God". Given that the moral conflict in the film, as I will discuss, is concerned with Christian morality, that von Trier is gesturing to religion, or the idea(l) of a religion, is not a great stretch.

[17] That this review reflects Ebert's strong emotional response to the film as much as his distaste for its politics underscores the film's power yet again.

[18] Different allegorical (and other interpretive) readings of *Dogville* include articles by Fibiger (who reads it as a political allegory), Abella and Zilkha (who read it as

psychological perversion in form and content), and Atkinson, Chiesa, and Nobus (who all read it as a parable on the gift and hospitality, but in different ways).

[19] It is intriguing, though, that von Trier's reminder does not appear to lessen the dramatic effect of the scene that is to follow, but merely to provide a contrast with it—particularly upon subsequent views.

[20] That the interruption of Grace's pleading with Chuck not to rape her is a shot of Tom is significant. It marks Tom as Grace's potential saviour, but it also implies that he is at least partially to blame for what is about to befall her. This is particularly intriguing given the fact that Tom stands in for von Trier. So, at this highly dramatic point in the scene, von Trier pulls us out of complete engagement with the characters in order to point the finger at arguably none other than a figure for himself as the illustrator of this so-called "parable" and the orchestrator of this scene's brutalization of Grace.

[21] In contrast, as mentioned above, the establishment of the expectation of the theatrical or Brechtian film has little to do with emotion. The aesthetics of the set do not elicit an *emotion* or an *emotional state* in the viewer, but merely ideas. The viewer realizes that the story is metaphorical, unreal, or even anti-real. So any expectations that are set up are intellectual, and not emotional: we expect that we will learn something from a fable, for example.

[22] As actors, the townspeople "outside" the house know what is happening, but what is happening is not *actually* a rape. (Rather, it is the performance of a rape.) So while there *appear* to be witnesses to the rape because of the design of the filmed space, they are not witnesses in the sense of being aware of a real act of brutality. Having said that, however, the fact that there *appear* to be witnesses to a rape is at any rate defamiliarizing.

Conclusion

What the project of a genre system for film implies is […] that the reality socially constructed by Hollywood "realism" is a map whose coordinates are parceled out among the specific genres, to whose distinct registers are then assigned its various dimensions or specialized segments. The "world" is then not what is represented in the romantic comedy or in film noir*: but it is what is somehow governed by all of them together—the musical, the gangster cycles, "screwball comedy," melodrama, that "populist" genre sometimes called social realism, the Western, romance, and the* noir *[…]—and governed also, something more difficult to think, by their implicit generic relationships to each other.*

~ Frederic Jameson (*Signatures of the Visible*)

My main question throughout this thesis has been this: how can von Trier elicit such powerful emotions when his films employ non-naturalist aesthetics and unbelievable characters within unconvincing stories? An exploration of the different genres and styles he uses in *Dogville* and *Dancer in the Dark* has demonstrated that von Trier does, in fact, evoke emotional responses in audiences using these various genres. The melodrama, a genre that is most often (pejoratively) characterized as excessive, particularly with regards to its emotional display and apparent desired impact, is one of von Trier's recent mainstays. There is no denying that the melodrama alone often causes viewers to be moved. Other modes in von Trier's films, associated with Dogme 95 and Brecht defamiliarize the subject matter so that viewers might begin to think about things in a

different way. This too, however didactic von Trier's style may be, can serve to elicit strong emotion.

Nevertheless, no one genre or mode fully explains the emotional effect of these films. Identification, as Murray Smith discusses it in terms of character engagement, has little to do with a film's ability to elicit emotion beyond its association with the dissemination of character-related information, upon which cognitive emotions can be based. And Tan and Frijda's attempt to explain the reason for strong emotional responses to the melodrama by citing various "paradigm scenarios" that make people cry is more discursive than explanatory. The affective nature of melodrama, and of film as a whole, remains somewhat of a mystery. It is this same mystery that likely encapsulates all emotion.

When I first began thinking about these films, it was clear that they were unlike many films in that they were both made up of several different genres and modes. Von Trier showcased various styles in these films, often simultaneously. I suspected that this had at least something to do with the way that the films made me feel. However, perhaps counterintuitively, I found that it was not in moments of sustained generic identification but in moments in which von Trier seemed to be *openly* "playing" with my emotions that he managed to bring them out most. Thus, the devastating emotional power of von Trier's films lies not in their engaging melodramatic nature nor in their distancing strategies, but in the troubling combination of the two. It is a combination of all of von Trier's strategies, the series of shifts that occur throughout the films among the multiple styles of each, that provokes such strong emotional responses from viewers. It could even be said that the *combination*, or the manner in which von Trier combines the genres and modes

of his films—rapidly shifting from one to another so that the viewers' expectations are confusedly mixed and end up being both satisfied and subverted at different times—is the main cause of the films' emotional effect. When the dominant mode (at any given moment) is in some way abandoned in order for von Trier to pursue another mode, the expectations of viewers are thwarted, evoking in us sometimes confusion, at other times frustration, and often anger.

Even so, this does not necessarily reinforce the common perception of Lars von Trier as a mere prankster. It is true that von Trier "plays" the villain in many of his films, characterizing apparent community leaders, such as Tom in *Dogville* and Stoffer in *Idioterne*, with ambiguous morals as figures of himself. He thereby calls himself—and perhaps all of his films—into question. As the Dogme "brethren" elucidate through the FAQ on the Dogme 95 website, playfulness is not always simply a foil to seriousness. In fact, if we see von Trier as a "provocateur," then we must come to terms with his earnest aggression as much as his impishness. Von Trier may not just be experimenting with different ways of eliciting different types of emotion from viewers. He may also be provoking very particular contradictory emotions from us while simultaneously revealing the artifice of film in multiple ways, in order to expose us somehow. Could von Trier, in fact, be playing the part of his construction, Tom, in *Dogville*, in another way—using his films (illustrations) to make us aware of some deficiency on our part? Is von Trier's "play" itself—his subversion of genre and his exposition of film's artifice—didactic? And if so, what exactly is he trying to teach his audience?

By mixing genres in his films, von Trier breaks them down. The films are emotionally effective in part because of their generic strategies, but they also reveal some

of the functions of genre. They reveal the phoniness of genre formulas. But they also reveal our *susceptibility* to such phony strategies. Von Trier's dashing of our generic expectations has emotional implications for us as viewers that might be uncomfortable for some of us to come to terms with. We are quite easily manipulated—often moved to tears by his films, films which appear at first to be in many ways formulaic. However, it is unpleasurable when von Trier breaks from these formulae which we supposedly disdain. We get upset, even angry, when someone does not give us what we expect. Moreover, we might feel that we have somehow been duped, tricked into feeling something. We do not like the idea that Von Trier is trifling with our feelings. On top of that, he keeps reminding us that this is a film. It becomes undeniable that these films are artifacts, and some of us want them to be something else. Perhaps the reason that so many people seem to hate von Trier (sometimes despite the fact that they watch and to some degree enjoy his films), as well as the reason that so many others seem to love him, is because of his refusal to indulge our illusions, not only about the characters, but about film itself, and about ourselves.

Frederic Jameson wrote that "[t]he atomized or serial 'public' of mass culture wants to see the same thing over and over again, hence the urgency of the generic structure and the generic signal" (19). If this is true, then perhaps part of our distaste for von Trier's filmmaking, or, if we do not find it distasteful, part of the anger and frustration that we experience watching the film, is a reaction to von Trier's refusal to conform to generic mores. Even more infuriating than that is the tendency for von Trier to put on display his manipulations—in the form of his formulaic generic conventions as well as the medium-specific tools of his trade, such as the handheld camera. This has the

effect of disturbing our identification with the film, its genre, and its characters, as well as pointing out our seemingly perverse expectations. It is perhaps no surprise that we enjoy von Trier's recognition of our "base desires" no more than Tom Edison, Jr. enjoys Grace's recognition of his. We like to think we are above such things. Von Trier exposes us as sheep that he can manipulate, and, even worse, he implies that we enjoy such manipulation—and perhaps some of us do.

Von Trier seems to "play with our feelings," but he perhaps does so only in the service of something more serious. He often chooses to employ genres which are particularly openly artificial, such as the melodrama, which is excessively emotional, or the musical, which is excessively fantastical. These tactics, along with his use of Brechtian theatrics and/or dialectics indicate that von Trier's aim is to put the mediation of film—its constructedness, its manipulation, and its artifice—on display. Using Brechtian strategies, which we take—perhaps fallaciously—to be unaffecting emotionally, von Trier makes a point of tugging on our heart strings. Perhaps the lesson he wants us to learn regards our inability to resist emotional manipulation in film. Perhaps he wants us to experience anger and frustration, because in those moments of distance, we have a chance to acknowledge our need, to see the artificiality of the cinematic artifact, and to reflect on why it is that we need to be soothed by film. By evoking and thwarting our expectations in these violent and almost mocking ways, he illuminates something about the nature of film, about its artificiality, and about the nature of our own perhaps inexplicable need for illusions.

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