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In the Kingdom of Men: Love, Faith and Spirituality in von Trier's Breaking the Waves

Abstract

Rehabilitating Lars von Trier: The power of von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* lies exactly in its irreducibility to a fixed interpretation. The director reconceptualizes the themes of spiritual devotion, faith and love in an unorthodox tale of the human struggle to find meaning and purpose in the world. The character of Bess allows us to penetrate into the innermost regions of the mind and affirms a humanistic approach to our relationship to ourselves and others. Von Trier places an individual's actions as a form of development, a gesture towards transcendence that nonetheless exists within the mixture of banality and profundity that constitutes the world of man.

Introduction

Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* has raised multiple issues and a considerable amount of controversy since its release in 1996. Not only does the film deal with the highly contested topics of religion and spirituality but its plot continuously eludes a fixed meaning, with characters' intentions in the end remaining as much of a mystery as, for instance, the discourses surrounding the existence of God. Von Trier's film has received a plethora of interpretations ranging from critics who view the story as a modern-day version of scapegoating in the name of religion to others who denounce the film as misogynistic and exploitative of the female figure as a fetishized object undergoing degradation through the representatives of a demanding and isolating patriarchal system. There is even a third interpretation that speaks to the film's difficulty and the ambiguity surrounding the director's aspirations. In his Chicago Reader review, "Mixed Emotions," Jonathan Rosenbaum reacts with a mixture of annoyance and bafflement, stating that although the film seems profound on the surface, this falsity adds to its achievement as "a very clever con-game, a faux-naif masterpiece."¹ I will cover the basic arguments behind the feminist and Christian readings as well as analyzing the potential in Rosenbaum's argument. However, my objective lies in exploring attempting to partly reconstruct von Trier's intentions, even if these amount to a series of contradictions, in creating the figure of Bess and the

circumstances which befall her as well as the material the director cites as inspiration for crafting the film in the first place. In many ways, the plot of the film, the often obscure actions of the main characters film, and the plurality and conflict of narrative styles double von Trier's own lack of certainty as to what he wishes to achieve throughout *Breaking the Waves*. In many ways, one can claim the film is truly experimental at both a formal and psychological level. It is on the one hand, the merging of directorial styles that von Trier appropriates as his legacy as well as extensive pairing of elements that figure as disruptive and incoherent, most notably the Romantic-themed non-narrative sequences in opposition to the jarring documentary style of the narrative sequences. On the other hand, these juxtapositions as well as the seemingly straight-forward "good conquers all in the end" plot pattern endow *Breaking the Waves* with a certain kitschy quality and irony that prevents the viewer from seriously considering the film as one involved with the theme of internal meditation.² In the end, I am left to explain the reasons why this particular film appeals to me despite the lack of coherence one finds in it or precisely because of it. What grabs me is the incertitude that permeates *Breaking the Waves*, which translates to a sense of heightened vulnerability in dealing with the world and, at least for me, the equivocal concept of meaning and the desire to believe. In this manner, I view von Trier's film not to be so much about religion itself, but the process by which an individual constructs faith and the spiritual in

trying to make sense of the events taking place around her and her sensuous way of relating to “God” and other humans.

My emphasis in this project concerns the relation of the individual toward the chosen beloved—a form of faith rooted in the body which I will refer to as personal love--over that of the community—an abstract beckoning towards an impartial higher being. The traditional mutually exclusive worldviews of Eros and Agape fail to account for the structure of personal love and the role it plays in our everyday encounters with the reality of the world. Anders Nygren regards Eros as a selfish, materially-based desire—“acquisitive love” that can be reduced to the imperative of the organism to continuously self-enhance, as with Nietzsche’s will-to-power as the organizing life force.³ This definition is formed in opposition to the more abstract, non-object driven concept of genuine Agape, God’s love and the basis of Christian brotherly love.⁴ These categories lead to frustration because neither can fully represent the way we as human beings relate to each other. Rather, we need to create a middle ground in which everyday interactions are possible. Isn’t the sentiment we feel towards those we care radically different from Eros or Agape? This is extremely difficult to discern because at one level we need the somatic presence of the individual and greatly suffer when this is taken away. In other words, part of loving comes from co-dwelling. At another level, we carry a more idealized impression of the loved one not vitiated by corporeal materiality as in the

memory images we keep of those who have passed away or even in the emotional picture that presents itself in my mind when I recall my mother or my husband. This second relation to the loved one is not primarily sensory but I cannot call it disinterested, spontaneous or unmotivated as I would Agape because at some level, it belongs to my senses and precisely emerges from my conscious contact with the person and my reconstruction of those moments in time. In reality, what we feel is closer to a simultaneous sense of loss and fulfillment, or as H el ene Cixous would put it, depositing “our life in the hands that hold our death” (Cixous 37). This is the kingdom of personal love, the love of mortals in the kingdom of men. Personal love, while sharing characteristics of both Eros and Agape, breaks with this dichotomy and allows for thinking about alternate forms of affect outside of either a strictly egocentric or theocentric dogma. Personal love subverts systems of ethics and morality and traditional ways of conceptualizing the connection between self and other. Like Christianity, it is an epistemology in and of itself, proposing a unique worldview. The altered perspective to be found in personal love coincides with the primary ethos of *Breaking the Waves*, a film displaying skepticism toward the practice of categorizing and creating meaning as, even in its stylistic form, the film engages in blurring boundaries between the banal and the sublime and highlights the presence of each element in the other within the context of embodied experience.

Plot Summary and Critical Reception

If one looks at it from a superficial point of view, *Breaking the Waves* candidly recounts a pretty simple, straight-forward story about unconditional love and the rigors an individual will endure to preserve this love in the face of greatest calamity. The film opens with the wedding of Bess McNeill and Jan. Bess is part of a rigorously orthodox Protestant religious community in a small town on the west side of Scotland, who has chosen to marry Jan, an oil rig worker and complete outsider to the community. Von Trier establishes Bess' innocent naivety from the get-go. After her wedding at the church, Bess loses her virginity to Jan in the bathroom of the reception where family and friends celebrate the event. Bess invites Jan into the most intimate part of her being, signaling to him, "Now you can love me." Jan is astounded by both the lack of traditional romance in her gesture as well as the fact she has kept herself intact until marriage. In asking, "Who did you talk to [all these years]?" the viewer is introduced to the other major character in Bess' life, God. Bess conducts extensive dialogues with God, whose answers she articulates through a stern voice and rigid facial expression. Bess thanks God for bringing Jan into her life and introducing her to the pleasures of the flesh. However, she laments Jan must soon desert her when he goes back to work at the oil rig. Von Trier gives the viewer insight into another part of Bess' personality in her protests against Jan's departure. The same girl we encounter as the picture of purity also

possesses an unruly temperament and determination. On the day Jan flies out, she storms away from him and begins to violently bang a pipe against the concrete of a nearby construction site. Additionally, when told her behavior is irrational and that she must endure the separation gracefully, Bess refuses to abide by these expected norms of female comportment in her community, continuing her pining for Jan and the closeness of his body. During his absence, she asks God to return him to her despite the risks this “miracle” might entail. Her prayer coincides with an accident at the plant in which Jan suffers severe injuries to the head and is paralyzed from the neck down. Upon his untimely return to Bess, something in Jan changes. Regardless of the fact Bess blindly adores him and takes care of him, Jan begins to distance himself from his wife, a woman he no longer can make love to. He tests her love by urging her to have sexual relations with other men and then recounting these events to him as a form of therapy. The motivation behind the request is never clear. At several points during the film, Jan is told by doctors that his condition renders him “evil in the head,” an opinion or articulation of the medical gaze he passes on to Bess, who chooses to ignore it. Von Trier eludes a conclusive answer by placing Jan as a background character. He acts as the catalyst for Bess’ development, but his thoughts and bizarre logic remain impenetrable. The love triangle between Bess, Jan and God intensifies as Bess’ god also articulates Jan’s absurd request. Bess, ridden with guilt over the accident and believing God wills this proof of her love and will save Jan’s life, begins to have sexual encounters with

strangers, which become increasingly perilous and humiliating and ultimately fatal as the story develops. Whether coincidence or fact, Bess' sacrifice pays off in the end. Expelled from the community and shunned by her own family, Bess suffers severe injuries while providing sexual services on a ship off the harbor and dies after arriving in the hospital and seeing Jan, still unconscious, for the last time. Inexplicably, Jan, previously on his death bed, rises and is able to walk again. The religious community refuses Bess blessing at burial due to her loathsome sins of the flesh. In response, Jan steals the body and gives his wife a burial at sea. The film concludes with an aerial shot of the oil rig that continually ascends until two bells are revealed in the clouds of heaven, an allusion to Bess' purity of spirit and resurrection.

Breaking the Waves was greeted by critics and audiences with a mixture of praise and criticism. The film won the Grand Prix at Cannes but came under ferocious attack for its non-idealized, and often gritty, portrayal of nudity and sexual encounters. As expected, pairing off sex and religion offended many, who saw von Trier as utilizing the veil of religion to justify what they deemed an unnecessarily obscene film, not about the spiritual but rather the director's own obsessive voyeuristic penetration into the realm of sexual pathology. The accusation of sexual pathology exacerbated when it combined with von Trier's already tarnished reputation as a director who repeatedly presents the battered

bodies of women as fetish objects that promote traditional misogynistic depictions of female sacrifice and martyrdom. This type of criticism is not uncommon and follows the course of feminist readings that boil down to expounding the place of women in cultural products such as film and literature as limited to that of self-sacrificing maiden figures or sexualized women who suffer for their transgressions of patriarchal boundaries and become abject bodies.⁵ Counterarguments have also been advanced by other feminist critics. Due to the film's complex and often contradictory cues, authors such as Irena S. M. Makarushka, portray the film as critical of this reductive binary of female behavior with a convincing argument that von Trier highlights the stereo-types of woman-as-sinner/woman-as-martyr as a cultural critique of rigid patriarchal religious tradition (Makarushka, no pagination).

Breaking the Waves even received a radically different type of critique, one accusing von Trier of cynicism and an inevitable banality. This is most evident in Rosenbaum's reaction to the film in his review "Mixed Emotions," mentioned earlier in this essay. He cites von Trier's own comments regarding the legacy he feels he partakes of as a film director to establish the way in which the film can be read as almost a parody and an indulgence in pastiche and a lack of sincerity. Von Trier saw *Breaking the Waves* as a film following in the footsteps of Carl Dreyer and Federico Fellini in bringing issues of spiritual meaning as frameworks for their

stories. Rosenbaum refers to an interview in which lead actress Emily Watson discloses that the director asked her to study the performances of Renee Falconetti in Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) and Giulietta Masina in Fellini's *La strada* (1954) as preparation for the character of Bess. According to Rosenbaum this attests to a certain amount of cynicism and self-delusion on the part of von Trier, when he denounces, "The grotesque incompatibility of these two models of innocent female suffering—Falconetti's raw, carnal martyrdom and Masina's hammy, pop-eyed Harry Langdon imitations—suggests a lack of true respect for either Dreyer or Fellini" or claims "the cynicism and shameless crudity of von Trier's plot and dramaturgy make it impossible to consider him seriously alongside Dreyer" (Rosenbaum, no pagination). Moreover, *Breaking the Waves* produces aesthetic ambiguity due to the interweaving of its narrative and nonnarrative styles, the raw documentary style interrupted by digitally created panoramic shots accompanied by pop music. If the stationary images are meant to imply meditation or be read ironically as post-cards that distance the viewer from the harsher plotline and convert some of the friction into cultural parody, Rosenbaum finds their role as part of von Trier's "jazzier techniques [that] come across like postmodernist pastiches." In fact, the main problem with the film seems to be its pretentiousness at being a sincere effort at approaching the topic of spirituality. In the end, it's more of a bag of tricks that although novel in format falls short from deeper probing and understanding of the phenomenon of belief. Rosenbaum characterizes *Breaking the*

Waves as weighted down by “so many layers of postmodernist irony about truth and faith that isolating any form of belief or disbelief from the resulting tangle becomes impossible: style becomes almost everything, content next to nothing” (Rosenbaum, no pagination). Although Rosenbaum picks up on the various levels at which the film operates, I feel he conflates the film’s complexity by holding von Trier to the standards of Dreyer and seeing his divergence as incapacity rather than exploration and self-affirmation. If I were to compare it to anything, perhaps it resonates more with Flaubert’s “A Simple Heart,” in its intersection of the sublime and the over-the-top than Dreyer’s somber, crisp and intensely directional cinematic style and narratives.⁶ Part of what makes von Trier interesting is precisely this lack of cinematic discipline, so to speak. He tends to go beyond or even in direct opposition to what is expected (as a film director within a particular tradition and of him personally as someone with an eccentric vision) and classified as artistic, meaningful and tasteful. Rather, he implodes and re-invents these categories through a process of stylistic and narrative amalgamation.

What perhaps I find most astounding in the overall criticism of *Breaking the Waves* lies in the lack of attention by critics to von Trier’s commentary on the work and the unique elements he cited as inspiration. Why is it almost impossible to read von Trier directly rather than as a cynic when he discusses the hybridity of elements at work in the making of *Breaking the Waves*? For all his anti-

authoritarian ethos, I believe the director aimed to capture something sincerely perplexing in the creation of the film—perhaps the very ineffable itself. Jeffrey Pence touches on a crucial point when, in contrast to films dealing with religion, he categorizes *Breaking the Waves* as a spiritual film, an open engagement “exploring the questions of being and the limits of the knowable” (Pence 29). By choosing the more ambiguous term spirituality over the historically thematized term religion, Pence can contemplate the trajectory of the individual’s quest for the sublime outside of a historically and theologically informed context.

However, as with any public encounter with sensitive subject matter and an unorthodox configuration of it, I can also see why the story’s interpretation developed a life of its own, with different individuals imputing meaning through self-reference to such intimate and contested issues as the relationship between agency and victimhood, religious belief and the message of Christianity, the personification of God and the presence or absence of God in our world. This will become apparent in our analysis of the two related readings of *Breaking the Waves*—one by Linda Mercadante focusing on the relationship between social institutions, the masculine and the feminine as symptomatic of von Trier’s inherent objectification of women throughout his oeuvre. I will supplement her reading with other feminist critical analysis of *Breaking the Waves* espousing a similar point of view. The second interpretation considers Christian doctrines regarding whether

goodness and Agape can stand the test of the human world. Both readings rely on a Girardian interpretive paradigm. Girard's usefulness in the analysis of character and plot prototypes is hard to dismiss because key concepts of his work are based on his assessment of literary texts. In addition, his original theory has transcended disciplinary categories and has been successfully integrated to studies in anthropology, philosophy, religious studies, political science and even economics (Fleming 2). Girard's concept of the connection between religion and violence has also extensively been applied in film studies, especially in films characterized by a high degree of violent imagery such as Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972), Jon Woo's *The Killer* (1989), and David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999).⁷

Feminist and Christian Readings

Bess as Unfortunate Scapegoat or Female Christ Figure?

In her essay "Bess the Christ Figure?: Theological Interpretations of *Breaking the Waves*," Linda Mercadante views Bess as a deluded, sacrificial victim hounded and destroyed by her misused human volition and her internalization of the merciless, judgmental personification of God expressed by the community elders and their theology. Utilizing the Girardian scheme of the scapegoat, Mercadante renders Bess as the creator of her own fate and isolation from the community. Bess places herself on the margins of society by marrying an outsider and then violating the

behavioral norms of the community to “further dehumanize herself, a course she had been set upon long before she met Jan” (Mercadante, no pagination). Above all, her lack of resources as a woman and limited, even perhaps psychotic vision, push her into the position of scapegoat, an easily identifiable “marginalized individual incapable of establishing or sharing the social bonds that link the rest of the inhabitants” (Girard, VS 12). Mercadante implies Bess’ deficiency originates from physical and mental pathology. She has a past history of mental illness, making her doubly susceptible to persecution. Further, she fails to liberate herself from oppressive structures of powers seeking to eliminate the open display of radical difference. Bess internalizes guilt and bitterly accepts and endures the role of the deviant she has come to embody vis-à-vis the condemning gaze of the elders. She becomes the perfect victim to deflect the uneasiness of the community, a feeling rising from the occurrence of contagious crimes, namely the profanation of the sexual act through Bess’ casual interactions with strangers. Her expulsion from the community as the source of impurity culminates in the elders’ denial of a proper Christian burial as her acts should condemn her to eternal suffering in hell. Once her presence is obliterated, all returns to business as usual. Although disturbed by her curious case, even her most ardent supporters, sister-in-law Dodo and Doctor Richardson, meekly attempt to rebuke the elders, unable to fully justify the significance of Bess’ acts. Although he makes the effort to qualify Bess’ condition as a case of pure goodness during the medical inquiry, Dr. Richardson chooses to

maintain the medical diagnosis of pathology as the official version and explanation of the events. The religious community of the elders comes together to denounce Bess and restore common ground against the threat of hierarchical dissolution. With her death, another community also reunites. Jan once again joins the exclusively male fraternity at the oil rig now that his health and virility have been fully restored and he can behave as ‘one of the boys.’

From this vantage point, we can suggest von Trier idealizes female suffering. Alyda Faber reaches a similar conclusion in “Redeeming Sexual Violence? A Feminist Reading of *Breaking the Waves*” by emphasizing the lack of balance of power between the masculine and the feminine in the film. Similar to Mercadante, Faber suggests Bess’ pathologization, sacrificial goodness and unfortunate demise affirm a familiar sexual economy in which “[female] power is repetitively channeled into the same patriarchal streams” (Faber 73). In *Breaking the Waves*, Bess’ sexuality is a form of obedience to Calvinist law, here represented by the figures of Jan and Bess’ personal God who orchestrate Bess’ masochism. Faber views the end of the film as evidence of “the miracle of cultural acceptance of male power over female powerlessness,” pointing out that her death is precisely what allows the debilitated male, Jan, to regain his masculinity and power as he symbolically rises from his sickbed and walks again.

Both of these readings contend that Bess subjects to the domination of women in a patriarchal system, reifying traditional gender roles that justify female victimization under the guises of selflessness and purity. After following the voice of the Abrahamic God channeled by the church elders throughout the duration of her life prior to marriage, she submits to a replacement of this merciless God in the form of Jan and his demands for sacrifice. As a woman, Bess finds meaning in life through fulfilling the needs of others—the Church elders, God and then Jan. As a result, she lacks both the agency and introspection to realize the nature of her violent exploitation. In the end, Mercadante like Faber concludes “Bess is not a model of loving self-sacrifice, but a perfect example and victim of the kind of scapegoating that the once-for-all model of Jesus’ sacrifice was meant to both reveal and eventually, to end” (Mercadante, no pagination).

On the other hand, one can view Bess as a female Christ figure, relentlessly faithful to Christianity’s teachings of unconditional forgiveness to those who trespass against her and extreme piety in the face of evil. Following Girard’s interpretation of Christ, we can claim that like Jesus, Bess is bound to the word of God to bring about change to the world through nonviolence, even if this means suffering great humiliation and constantly “turning the other cheek.” Bess ignores the false prophesying of those about her, including the elders and Dodo and Dr. Richardson, who predict her doom. As mandated by the First Commandment, she

worships God above all else, harboring faith in the Word of God which is incomprehensible to mere humans. As such, she breaks from society and exposes the foundation of the world and the community on sacrifice. Sacrifice relates to the disavowal of man's tendency towards violence as the entrance into the social contract. In the Girardian paradigm, the social order rests on the quelling of this violence through the sacrifice of a person or object seen by the community as an outsider or threat. This crime serves to strengthen the ties of such a community against its own potential internal turmoil, projected onto the victim as disorder. As a result, violence is diverted onto a surrogate victim whose sacrifice protects the entire community from its own violence. Ironically then, the most rational social structure rests on a series of habitual purges that unite the community against the sacrificial victim and deny man's violent urges. This is the secret pact at the bottom of group solidarity, consolidated as community and national belonging. According to Girard, violence resolved into sacrifice is inevitable in the Kingdom of Men as it is its basis. In relation to *Breaking the Waves*, Bess, like Jesus, must die because the Kingdom of God is incompatible with the Kingdom of Men, or as Girard states, "Rather than become the slave of violence, as our own word necessarily does, the Word of God says no to violence" (Girard, GR 184). Jesus' death breaks with the pattern of the sacrificial victim. He dies, "not as a sacrifice, but in order that there may be no more sacrifices," which incarnates the Word of God: "I wish for mercy and not sacrifices." Jesus challenges injustice, fulfilling God's calling to mankind

to truly turn the other cheek. This becomes impossible in the Kingdom of Men because the entire community has been tainted by violence as its founding condition. As a result, pure goodness not complicit with violence cannot be of this world. Jesus and those like him committed to non violence cannot last precisely because they represent the anomaly, that which evolutionary instinct suppresses and leaves behind. Hence, “Where violence remains master, Jesus must die” (Girard, GR 184). Because of his incompatible goodness, Jesus presents a special case for Girard and dies not as another random victim of scapegoating, but in the revelation of his divinity and human incarnation of the Word of God, ‘the Word made flesh.’

Bess, like Jesus, embodies pure goodness and Agape, which direct her exchanges with different members of the community—from the most compassionate such as Dodo to the criminal, exemplified by the sailors who ultimately strike the fatal blow. She makes no distinction between them for, like Jesus, a true agent of God must love the righteous as well as the sinners. But exposure to the Kingdom of Men and their violence results in a turn from God and thus, her faith must withstand the influence of the evil in the world. Bess’ goodness undergoes a process of degradation, visible in the film through her humiliating sexual encounters and the marks of violence on her body as she is bruised and stained. However, she does not succumb to the cycle of violence and, like Jesus,

transcends it. Her goodness does not belong to the world and hence she perishes as a form of example to the rest of mankind, exposing the detestable underlying structuring of an oppressive community. Her actions touch and change the lives of some. Both Dr. Richardson and Dodo find themselves faced with a revelation of pure love and understand the extent of Bess' sacrifice as a symbol of goodness. Nonetheless and unlike in the case of Jesus and his followers, God's message remains largely ignored and once she dies, the majority of the community returns to its old system of belief, including Bess' own mother. The supernatural element of the bells at the end of the film in some ways implies this failure. Although all can hear the bells, Bess' message, the word of God, remains incomprehensible and she transforms from a mere mortal into a quasi-saint, someone to venerate rather than follow.

Both of these interpretations satisfactorily engage with the film's protagonist as the successful or failed vessel of spiritual instruction. Something remains undeveloped, however. The feminist reading ignores the possibility of agency in the figure of Bess and fails to explore the logic behind her actions. As Makarushka proposes, *Breaking the Waves* emphasizes the discrepancy between two models of 'goodness,' the rigid one of the Church elders which values sameness and Bess', which embraces difference. In this subversive feminist reading, Bess appears as a figure irreconcilable with social expectations of humble

and silent femininity. Thus, the film is a battlefield in which competing notions of what it means to be ‘a good woman,’ engage in a struggle till death. Bess’ interpretation of ‘goodness’ and faith outside the social paradigms of the Church Elders challenge structures in which women can only participate as second-class citizens who accept repression and constraint. For Makarushka, whether one should consider Bess and a heroine or victims is irrelevant. What *Breaking the Waves* achieves is a denunciation of “the religious and cultural attitudes that [. . .] condemn women to ‘the bondage of some stereotype of normal femininity. . . .’” (Makarushka, no pagination).⁸

Similar to a narrow feminist critique, a strictly Girardian reading that parallel Bess’ position in the story to that of Jesus universalizes *Breaking the Waves*’ unique storyline and humanist message. This interpretation seeks refuge in abstract and impersonal categories of goodness and Christian Agape. As such, it neglects the physical grounding of von Trier’s film and his exploration of faith through the doctrine of personal love and its unclassifiable and sometimes illogical manifestations in the world. In the film, personal love ruptures the Agape/Eros dichotomy, opening the way for an alternate form of spiritual comportment and transcendence. Von Trier’s own claims on *Breaking the Waves* serve as ground for delineating the relationships among sexuality, love and belief at the core of the film, responsible for Bess’ worldview, fueling her actions and determining her fate.

Deciphering von Trier

Breaking the Waves marked an important transition in von Trier's career, becoming his first internationally acclaimed English-language film and bringing the Danish director into the limelight as an enfant terrible not hesitant to delve into controversial subject matter. He continues to follow this mission in the present, baffling the press and audiences in the 2009 premiere of *Antichrist* at Cannes, another work pairing sexuality and the spiritual. Two components of *Breaking the Waves* are crucial in its interpretation and often overlooked: its origin and the director's professed intentionality. While the credibility and trustworthiness of a director's comments can be debatable, they give a certain insight into the process behind the final product. By intentionality, I am not suggesting von Trier's words should be taken as a given and used to explain a film as complex as *Breaking the Waves*. However, because any analysis of a film is bound to be subjective, von Trier's own biased readings of his own material are fair game. In fact, I feel personal curiosity in the way his own comments add to the film as supplementary texts. I do not guarantee these texts will give us any clear answers, definitely not final ones, but it sheds light into what he identifies as themes in his work and the personal way he choose to develop these, which is part and parcel of what makes von Trier von Trier and not Fellini or Dreyer.

For me, one of the most compelling elements of the film is that the director cites a children's book, *Goldheart* (Guldhjerte, see Figure 1), as inspiration for the story, emphasizing the mythical fairy-tale tone of the film which is not meant to be taken as realistic while downplaying a strictly Christian interpretation. He describes *Breaking the Waves* as a film about extreme ideas, focusing on the concept of "goodness." Von Trier continues this line of thought:

When I was little, I had a children's book called Guldhjerte (Goldheart), which I had very clear and happy memories of. It was a picture book about a little girl who goes into the forest with some slices of bread and other stuff in her pockets. But at the end of the book, when she's got through the forest, she's standing naked and with nothing left. And the last line in the book was: ' "But at least I'm okay," said Goldheart.' It seemed to express the ultimate extremity of the martyr's role. I read the book several times, in spite of the fact that my father thought it was absolute rubbish. The story of *Breaking the Waves* probably comes from that. Goldheart is Bess in the film. I also wanted to make a film with a religious theme, a film about miracles. And at the same time I wanted to make a completely naturalistic film (von Trier, VT 164).

Certain elements prominently emerge in this passage. For one, there is a conflation of the religious and the fantastic as he seems to place them both on a similar scale when he uses the word "miracles." Miraculous events are as much a part of religious texts as they are of fairy-tales. Perhaps what the two type of texts have in common is the quality von Trier's father dismissed as "absolute rubbish"—the unexpected element of the supernatural that in the realm of these texts is part of the natural. *Goldheart* like *Breaking the Waves* both defy reason, the type von Trier associates with a father figure he rebels against. In watching the film, the spectator is invited

to inhabit a world that works against reason, which leads to the fascination with the very incoherence of both the filmic styles and the story. When von Trier mentions the extreme, and as evident in works such as the Danish television mini-series *The Kingdom* (1994) and his most recent film *Antichrist*, he is bringing traditionally contradictory concepts into play in ways that are often over-the-top. For the director, religion and martyrs are not necessarily incompatible with fairy-tales. In fact, the association childhood innocence and the fairy-tale might be what lead to the possibility of believing in miracles in the context of *Breaking the Waves*. Bess can engage with the supernatural because in a way, she is child-like, untainted by the restrictions reason begins setting as one grows into adulthood.

Von Trier addresses the possible religious background of the film at another point in the interview, stating his need for having a sense of “belonging to a community of faith, because my parents were committed atheists” (von Trier, VT 168). Nonetheless, he opts for a different interpretation of religion, one grounded in individual experience. He compares himself to Danish predecessor Carl Theodor Dreyer, proclaiming, “I think I’ve developed a more Dreyeresque view of it all now. Dreyer’s view of religion was primarily humanist. He also tackles religion in all his films. Religion is attacked, but not God. That’s what happens in *Breaking the Waves*” (Von Trier, VT 168). What emerges from these diverse and conflicting comments makes sense in the context of the film. This proposition might at first

seem absurd, but as someone living in the modern world, von Trier's notion of what he terms religious or spiritual is not unlike a Google search. He is amalgamating points of his own experience into one text that becomes the hybrid product that we see as *Breaking the Waves*. As a result, it is not surprising that he invokes an atheist's perspective on what constitutes a community of faith, Dreyer's quasi-mystical and aesthetically potent explorations of "the religious," and the figure of God as an independent deity open to interpretation and personal appropriation. This might be supported by Zygmunt Bauman argument that the stamp of modernity precisely lies in the precariousness and often collage-like nature of identity, in which objects and concepts are recyclable. Basically, nothing is either precise or immutable. In "the liquid modern life...everything is born with a branding of imminent death...[it] is a civilization of excess, redundancy, waste and waste disposal" (Bauman 80). One can read *Breaking the Waves* in a similar manner: as a collection of attempts at sincerity in a confused world that ultimately relies on and inevitably returns to ready-made cultural products, stereotypes and prototypes that nonetheless come together in some kind of concoction that proves meaningful at some level. My own attempt at finding meaning with similar raw materials as an unstable base grounds my own emotional attraction to *Breaking the Waves* as a film pertinent to this particular moment in time.

These aspects of von Trier's interview responses confirm my conviction that he is working with a loose interpretation of the religious outside theology. For von Trier, the religion he aspires to is a form of personally-grounded spirituality with an emphasis on the transformation of the protagonist, hence his reference to humanism. As a doctrine, humanism turns away from the supernatural, stressing the individual's dignity, worth and capacity for self-realization through his/her concrete actions in this world. Whether von Trier is successful at finding his ideal spirituality remains questionable. This presents itself in the way we interpret the figure of Bess and what she accomplishes. Does she have a profound dialogue with God or is she merely psychotic? Do her sacrifices make any difference? In the end, does Bess achieve the miraculous or are Jan's unexpected healing and the invisible bells a parody of the lack of probability of someone like Bess actually surviving the trials and indifference of this world? All I can take from it are my own observations of what the film seems to value. Here, I come back to trajectory and transformation in the story. Here I agree with Makarushka when she notes, "Bess is a very ordinary woman," in the sense that she goes through struggles common to someone faced with her circumstances. I cannot see Bess as a Christ-figure because hers is a personal journey that is not pre-destined but informed by her own volition. In addition, I feel *Breaking the Waves* is less a religious text than one depicting a rite of passage in a style associated with the monstrous and cruel world of fairy tales. This is the reason I choose to associate my reading with *Goldheart* rather than the

Christian Gospel. Bess has little in common with Jesus. Jesus possesses a certain authority over his actions that arise from the disembodied will of God and presents himself through his impact on others and their subsequent conversion to faith. Bess' authority has no such divine backing, but constantly keeps her in a situation of risk without the prospect of much reward. Moreover, Bess is changed by her interactions because they represent a painful learning process. This again places her at a distance from a figure like Jesus. Although he is the protagonist of the Gospels, Jesus cannot undergo ascending transformation because as the son of God, he is already perfect and wise. The Gospels narrate the teachings of Christ and remain didactic in nature. Bess' story has the feeling of a nightmare from which one barely survives, much less recuperates. It is about stubborn, selfish (in a positive sense as self-affirming), and often reason-defying persistence which might or might not lead to anything meaningful depending on the way the viewer desires to take it.

Both *Goldheart* and *Breaking the Waves* revolve around the transformation of the main character, a journey marked by isolation and irrefutable will power. When introduced to the protagonist in the children's tale, the reader is told "Goldheart was so poor and lonely in the world. She had no mother or father. The fire in the fireplace was almost out and the only food left was a small cookie" (Guld Hjerle, no pagination).⁹ To counteract the stagnation surrounding her, Goldheart "[trots] through the huge forest," exploring the limits of her faith in her quest for

companionship. Goldheart gives away all her possessions to less fortunate individuals she encounters throughout her journey, including a prince disguised as a beggar. Although poverty-stricken and naked, she says her prayers and finds strength within herself, always affirming “I’ll be all right.” Her unselfish devotion to others is unexpectedly rewarded at the end of the tale. Despite her suffering, one night, “Stars fell from the sky and sprinkled Goldheart. All of a sudden she saw that the stars turned into money. A bright smile lit up her face. ‘I’ll be all right,’ she said.” The prince also returns to Goldheart, instating her as a princess. At this point, she offers him her last possession, her heart, and they live happily ever after. Even though von Trier does not mention the ending in his interview, one can see its fantastic tone as not unlike the “miraculous” conclusion—suggesting Bess’ redemption—in *Breaking the Waves*.

Unfortunately, Bess’ fate in *Breaking the Waves* is far from joyous, but her approach to belief and her conception of her role in the world coincide with those of Goldheart. In addition, as in the fairy-tale, the film has a tendency to foreground the narrative of Bess as the main character with other events adding to the construction of her persona, much as in the case of the heroine in *Goldheart*. We should describe von Trier’s work as Bess-centric, relegating all other characters, even Jan and God, to positions that enable Bess to construct a particular worldview. Throughout the film, the camera continuously closes up on Bess’ face, at certain

times even having her stare blankly ahead of her as if addressing the viewer. We read the action through her expressions and reactions and as such, she provides the volition behind the entire story. Von Trier renders Bess not as a helpless victim, but as a force to contend with. First and foremost, the film's title alludes to Bess' resilience. Amidst the grayish, cold landscape of the Scottish coast, what kind of agency does it take to break a wave, to suffer the violence of nature's forces upon one's body? Like the ancient cliffs holding up civilization against the ruthless sea, Bess maintains her faith in the face of both natural and man-made odds. She never doubts her identity or role in life, embodying the goodness and pure love that can originate within a human being without the intervention of supernatural forces.

Bess' exchanges with members of the community also point to the subversive nature of her character. The first scene of the film relates the interaction between Bess and the church elders as she insists on marrying an outsider. The screenplay reflects her rebellion in its direction to the actress. Bess breaks the solid presence of the ruling patriarchs with her optimism and smile. When asked what values the outsiders bring with them, she answers: "Their music." At this point, "the chairman looks at her angrily. She beams up at him. He cannot break her smile" (von Trier, BW 25). Some interior force radiates through Bess in the form of simple joy and a smile immune to degradation by others. In a community banning women from speaking, Bess continues to challenge the elders at other points in the film

through an insistence on sound and being heard. Not only does she believe the accursed bells can be brought back to the church despite the ban on sensual pleasures and excesses, but she is the only female figure in the film to realize the injustice of the patriarchal religious system, when in reference to the silencing of women at church, she protests: “It’s stupid only letting men do the praying during the services. I bet God never said that” (VT, BW 63). It is not surprising Bess displays her vitality through strong physical actions that emit sound. When Jan leaves for the oil rig, she wails and beats a metal and cement structure with a pipe, causing bell-like noises to serve as expression of her sadness and frustration. We can link this scene to the final scene in which, when Bess potentially reaches Heaven, the bells ring incessantly, once more articulating the protagonist’s unbreakable will and inner state through sound. Her conversations with God also come into play, as we must note that in the story, Bess stands in closest proximity to the deity despite her marginal status in the community. I am not saying this is meant to be taken at face value, but the crucial element is the fact that out of all the characters, Bess is the only one that “presentifies” a channel of communication, rendering a connection with a spiritual force visually and audibly.¹⁰

One of the most remarkable qualities of *Breaking the Waves* lies in the conflict between Bess’ self-image and the image others have of her. Dodo suspects Jan will exploit Bess as “It’s a mystery to [her] why a bloke like [Jan] would marry

such a halfwit of a girl” (VT, BW 42). Dodo, perhaps one of Bess’ most intimate friends, describes her as not being “right in the head.” extremely “susceptible,” and “full of love,” the last attribute diminishing her ability to deal with adversity. Dodo’s maternal impulses blind her to Bess’ true personality. After trying to place her in a mental hospital, she momentarily succumbs to Bess’ will when the latter goes back to the ship with the sadistic sailors and asks Dodo to pray for a miracle. Dodo obediently recites the words: “Dear God let Jan get better...let him rise from his bed and walk” (VT, BW 123). However, she repeats these words without full understanding because she lacks unquestioned faith in both love and prayer. We learn Dodo was married to Bess’ brother, who died some years ago. But her practical nature and austere gestures indicate their love completely differed from the more intense bond Jan and Bess share. Further, as a nurse and part of the medical establishment, Dodo has reservations about devotional faith, lacking Bess’ gift, the talent to believe even when reason contends otherwise. Dodo’s condescension and incomprehension is partaken by Dr. Richardson, another character that despite good intentions, undermines Bess’ self-awareness and obtains only partial exposure to Bess’ message. It is Jan as an outsider who most accurately comprehends Bess’ essence, informing a skeptical Dodo Bess is “stronger than you or me...She just wants it all” (VT, BW 42). In this way we can perhaps understand Bess’ persistence in sharing her life with Jan at any cost and the loneliness she experiences when he

begins to retreat from her life due to the illness. Apart from God, only Jan has faith in the authority of her goodness and its transformative potential.

This leads us to another ambiguous but crucial element in the film. Who is Bess' God and should her conversations be interpreted as engagement with the supernatural? One of the main caveats of criticism on *Breaking the Waves* results from the construction of Bess' relationship with God in one of two ways: as either delusional or literally having a conversation with a supernatural agent. Here, it might be useful to turn to Daniel Dennet's conception of prayer as a symbolic activity, "a way of talking to oneself about one's deepest concerns, expressed metaphorically" (Dennet 10). Bess' conversations with God reveal a side of her that she keeps even from herself. An example of her interaction illuminates this possibility. After Jan leaves for the oil rig, a disconsolate Bess seek comfort inside the Church:

BESS (in her own voice) Dear Father in Heaven, I am so miserable...

(In assumed gruff voice) You deserve to be.

(Frightened, in her own voice) Why do I deserve to be?

(Gruff voice) You are guilty of selfishness, Bess. You didn't consider even for a second how painful it must have been for him. You put your own feelings before anyone else's.

(In her own voice) But I love him so badly.

(Gruff voice) I can't see that you love him when you behave like that. Now you must promise me you'll be a good girl.

(In her own voice) I promise to be a good girl (VT, BW 45-46).

In this scene, we see two sides of Bess' personality. On one hand, she has internalized the condescending attitude of the community who dismisses her as child-like and naïve and views her longing for Jan as a common tantrum. Nevertheless, Bess' self-consciousness conveys her spiritual maturity, making her accept, even if painful, the selfish nature of her actions and disregard for the feelings of others. The very real guilt over her involvement in Jan's accident later on stems in part from her realization of selfish desire and the amends she seeks to remedy the situation and transcend the more childish aspect of her personality. Part of Bess' journey includes the loss of innocence and the refuge behind it as a form of justification towards the full physical and psychological revelation of her full womanhood, both aroused through her ability to share pleasure and pain with the other, to so to speak, attempt to inhabit Jan's skin and come to terms with his misery.

Bess' invocation of God can also be described as an individual's construction of the spiritual in trying to make sense of the events around her. Bess finds little comfort in the impersonal God of the elders and utilizes the basic moral principles of religion (how to be a good girl) to create a more adequate God, a God sensitive to human love and physical yearning who individually connects to his

worshippers. As her character matures, her relationship with God changes, with the gruff voice becoming less demanding and even soothing. After having lost confidence in her actions and metaphorically unable to speak in the voice of God, Bess regains her self-assurance prior to the final trial. In one of the most moving scenes, God once more answers Bess, tenderly referring to her as “this daft little thing called Bess who keeps on wanting me to listen to her.” Bess jokingly corrects God, insisting she is “Not daft, just funny...” which the gruff voice follows, calling her “funny little thing.” This marks the moment of revelation for both the protagonist and the audience, with the assurance that Bess indeed possesses the strength to believe and endure in the name of her faith in love. Her reunification with God exemplifies her full evolution and comprehension of her role in the world. She has found her place in the Universe and courageously arises to fulfill what she has deemed as her destiny without self-pity, fear, or regret.

Beyond Agape and Eros: Personal Love as a Worldview

Above all, *Breaking the Waves* exemplifies a film bent on pushing boundaries and categories of knowledge, a true “cinema of the sublime,” to use Pence’s term. Von Trier chooses a filmic style that contradicts the story. Although the film deals with subject matter reflecting the most highly sought forms of human behavior, pure love and goodness, the film body possesses a documentary feel, emphasized by the use of hand-held cameras and the gritty quality of the picture.

The “Merchant Ivory treatment” would have compromised the necessarily ambiguity of the subject matter and its relationship to everyday embodied experience. The primacy of the ordinary saves the story from being overtly romantic or melodramatic. Von Trier accounts for the raw style as a method of forcing the audience to “accept the story as it is,” seeking to decode it in its own terms rather than imposing traditional conceptions of popular film dealing with religious or spiritual subject matter (VT, VT 166). Other elements further prevent ease of interpretation. *Breaking the Waves* ruptures the continuity of the story in one particular style of filming, characterized by naturalistic images and sounds, by the surprising interposition of chapter titles depicting surreal landscapes based on romantic painting. Renowned late 1960s and 1970s tunes, such as Procul Harem’s “A Whiter Shade of Pale” (1967), Elton John’s “Your Song” (1970) and “Goodbye Yellow Brick Road” (1973), Leonard Cohen’s “Suzanne” (1967), Mott The Hoople’s “All the Way from Memphis” (1973) and T-Rex’s “Hot Love” (1971), accompany the images. These intrusions can be read in a variety of ways. Makarushka presents a convincing argument when she advances that these post-card like images are a form of ironic distancing from the brutality of the main narrative that comments on the incommensurable gap between traditional models of spiritual “goodness” and the realities of everyday life. This leads her to formulate that:

von Trier's insertion of the picture-postcard chapter breaks creates a tension between a sense of being there and having been there. Inasmuch as the viewer is tempted to enter into the world wherein Bess fills the screen with the power of her openness and vulnerability, the post-card images accompanied by sixties and seventies songs nostalgically declare: 'Having a wonderful time; wish you were here!' as they dissolve leaving viewers with a sense of geographic and narrative bleakness...Arguably von Trier's trip back to the psychedelic world of the sixties and seventies, a kind of musical mystery tour, is an ironic reminder that god watching over the characters cannot save them; neither then nor now (Makarushka, no pagination).

This, in combination with humor and the explicitly sexual scenes in the film collapse the boundaries between the sacred and profane. The more 'common' elements constantly undermine viewers' assumptions of clean spirituality as traditionally portrayed in visual media. Makarushka also proposes that the inserts function as visual reminders that Bess exists in multiple worlds. Both points direct me to a third and related elucidation. We have established the film integrates an atmosphere of the banal as it relates to quotidian life. The kitschy inserts might testify to the limited possibilities of constructing the spiritual in the world. Part of being human presents a desire for meaning is sometimes found in the manufactured cultural products we are exposed to. It is not beyond comprehension to see why a pop song can inspire and comfort a person. In fact, we sometimes add soundtracks to our emotional states, which we associate with a particular type of music or environment. Ordinary music and prototypical images are the spiritual nourishment of everyday life, even if these fall short of the legitimacy we associate with objects of faith and worship. One can say recourse to these forms of the spiritual are part

and parcel of being in a modern world where the religious is no longer clear-cut, but alludes to a multiplicity of objects and moments, not unlike von Trier's Google search for material that he feels pertains to this topic. The post-card inserts add a further element of reality to the story because of their very improbability and lack of coherence. They can be seen as human appeals to meaning that when appropriated by an individual, acquired their own aura of spirituality and mysticism. A certain ambiguity also envelops the themes of love and goodness central to *Breaking the Waves*, opening the way for a reinterpretation that takes into account the more earthly side of human experience.

Anders Nygren's *Agape and Eros*, published in 1930-36, marked one of the first modern theological studies of the incompatibility of Agape and Eros as distinctive worldviews. For Nygren, Agape, the Christian ideal of Divine Love, possesses certain qualities relegating it far from the realm of the human. Agape lacks the egocentric element of necessity, conceived as a form of love that is spontaneous and unmotivated, indifferent to value, and only to be received as a gift from God and not attainable within the worldly as "there is from man's side no way at all that leads to God" (Nygren 88). In contradistinction, Eros stands as the "love of desire," a form of acquisitive love that must satisfy an objective need. Once the need is fulfilled, the love perishes and finds another object of desire. Eros originates in man and seeks to escape the world in its upward movement towards God. Most

importantly, Eros' largest fallback and distance from Agape results in its egocentric nature, bounded to the body and centering on the individual self and its destiny (Nygren 92). In order to bypass the dichotomy of these worldviews, I propose Robert Ehman's concept of personal love as a unique epistemology transcending both Agape and Eros. Ehman's notion of personal love resonates with the more earth-bound spiritual and humanistic message of *Breaking the Waves*, providing an alternate reading of relationships between individuals.

Like Agape, personal love partakes of the revolutionary. It falls outside social institutions promoting the equality of all beings, reversing the basic structure of modern ethics. The feelings towards the beloved precisely originate in his/her essence, their unique style of life and physical gestures. Ehman defines this form of love, a worldview in itself, as "the most radical attempt to transcend the solitude of our separate self and to participate in an intimate common life with another self" (Ehman 254). The motivation behind personal love remains beyond grasp because we can never completely objectify the features arousing affect towards the other. Its unselfish nature manifests itself in the devotion to the personal style of the beloved, for which the lover is willing to endure pain and suffering in order to partake of a shared existence. Going back to the words of Cixous, when we love, we place part of ourselves in the hands of another at the greatest peril. Love is about accepting to remain in this vulnerable position, even if it means we are always

incomplete because in a symbolic way, we allow ourselves to become half dead or stand at the border of our death. In other terms, we place ourselves at the mercy of the other. This type of love places its ultimate faith on the mere presence of the beloved, finding the utmost joy in the delight of the other rather than the personal fulfillment of sexual and psychological needs. Personal love often conflicts with an individual's larger role within the social context because it privileges uniqueness over equality, whim over practicality, and encourages the retreat from the community into a private world only accessible to the lovers.

Is not this worldview the most compatible to what von Trier presents, given his consideration of individual will? For von Trier, love is often vulnerable in the Kingdom of Men. It partakes of sacrifice because it is of this world. It might not prove rational in the end, but remains honest. Personal love is not Eros because it implies succumbing rather than acquiring and mastering. It is also far from Agape as it aspires for concrete fulfillment at the level of the flesh in the proximity to the beloved. In *Breaking the Waves*, we witness the epistemology of personal love in the relationship between Bess and Jan. The bond between them enables a world of the imagination in which the lovers can communicate without the restriction of language or adherence to social norms of romantic behavior. Inhabiting this world implies exile from the world of men, represented by the community and the Church elders. Bess abandons her personal interests and welfare in order to share her life

with Jan, first by marrying him and then by subsisting on his mere presence. She retreats from the community, placing Jan as the sole figure of worship, the unique target of her overflowing love. Her attraction to Jan does not depend on predictable variables enchaind to some ultimate form of desire. In fact, part of the story's mystery centers on the improbable match of these two characters and their intuitive connection. Bess loves Jan for his physicality, his active presence in her life rather than the potential value he brings to her. Her desire stems from the preliminary sexual attraction with "the sexual as a fundamental mode in which we participate in the personal being of the beloved and share our life with [him]" (Ehman 258). Not surprisingly and typical of personal love as a lifestyle, Bess often confuses sex and love, amalgamating them into the same strand of emotion and collapsing the binary of body and soul. When she first loses her virginity to Jan, she welcomes him into her spiritual life through the experience of the flesh, allowing the sexual act to stand for the principle that he can now "love her." This confusion of the sexual and emotional recurs throughout the film. After Jan's accident, when Bess first offers herself to an astounded Dr. Richardson, she matter-of-factly declares, "I will be good to you. I want us to make love" (VT, BW 83). Later in the story, Bess formulates her sexual interactions with strangers as spiritual contact with Jan, claiming "I don't make love with them, I make love with Jan. And I save him from dying...Sometimes I don't even have to tell him about it" (VT, BW 103). Bess expresses her inner goodness and volition by investing in the high-risk impetus of

love and finds herself exposed in her utmost physical and psychological vulnerability. We learn this is not a capricious kind of love, but one that requires a leap of faith. Those closest to Bess condemn as irrational what they cannot penetrate. Bess comments on the community's disapproval in a telephone conversation with Jan, when she passionately whispers, "Everyone says I love you too much. If you found out how much I loved you, you might get upset...I mean because we're not together right now" (VT, BW 51). What others view as pathological obsession precisely marks her love as unique, an emotion that transcends human boundaries. It is through this type of love, individual and to some extent self-serving as meaningful, that we carve our own sense of identity and relate to others in the world. From the point of view of preservation of the species, this love is impractical and ultimately leads to loss and grief due to its own mortality, which in turn emphasizes the perishability of all things and the urgent need for its expression in the moment.

Often, the force of personal love acts against Bess. Part of her love for Jan includes the acceptance of misery as the only way of existence in which she can take part of his life. Although, unlike Agape and like Eros, her love depends on an object—the person of Jan—she never experiences a fulfillment of individual need. In other words, it does not aspire to a concrete goal that can be quantitatively and qualitatively measured and enjoyed. Her dying words confirm the lack of material

reward or expectation, as she entertains the idea that she could have “been wrong after all” (VT, BW 126), that all she did accrued to nothing. Nonetheless, rather than seeking a priest in her last breath, her love for Jan provides consolation and her last request consists of begging Dodo to allow her to dwell in his presence one final time. Like Agape, Bess’ love extends the unconditional absence of value judgments, but originating in the natural rather than supernatural, it acknowledges the presence of evil as part and parcel of human nature. This pragmatic realization develops in a scene in the interior of the church where as she washes the floors, Bess discusses her faith on Jan with God. Responding to her doubts as to Jan’s mental soundness, the gruff voice instructs Bess on the ultimate form of love, Divine but not out of reach, which forces the lover “to take the good with the evil” for “after all, he’s only human” (VT, BW 96).

Dedication to the doctrine of personal love drives Bess to her death, constituting the utmost test of faith in her utter loneliness. When the community and her own family marginalize her, Bess retreats into a private world suspending the laws of social morality and obligations. Within the universe of the lovers, Bess feels affirmed and full of life, obtaining the agency she is denied in the real world. Bess’ worldview originates within this private world, countering reason with illogical belief, not as delusional but simply as another way of living her life or as “a faith in her own powers to heal and sustain life” (Makarushka, no pagination).

But rather than seeking to escape from the world through the worship of beauty like those who pursue Eros, personal love flourishes within the extreme ugliness of life and its most banal qualities. Bess' love refuses the abstract for the concrete. Jan, in his most extreme monstrosity as a psychotic paraplegic, arouses the goodness in Bess, a goodness subverting the power structures of the human world and leading to the possibility of the beyond as a private world within the human world, one not free from the kitschy nature of human emotion or the hopeful appeal to the occurrence of miracles and the inexplicable.

Conclusion

What makes von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* powerful lies exactly in its irreducibility to a fixed interpretation. The director reconceptualizes the themes of spiritual devotion, faith and love in an unorthodox tale of the human struggle to find meaning and purpose in the world by embracing rather than ignoring its limitations. The character of Bess allows us to penetrate into the innermost regions of the mind and affirms a humanistic approach to our relationship to ourselves and others. Von Trier places an individual's actions as a form of development, a gesture towards transcendence that nonetheless exists within the mixture of banality and profundity that constitutes the world of man. Although the film has been read in various ways, I believe von Trier's own comments act as powerful related texts in attempting to define his vision of *Breaking the Waves*. I personally give von Trier

the benefit of the doubt, given the multiple associations he brings in when discussing the topic of spirituality. Where others find the aesthetization of female suffering as part of the devaluation of the role of women in certain social constructs or prominent cynicism in the style of the post-modern, I feel a gesture towards reflection on the highly problematic topic of spirituality. Hence, it makes perfect sense that von Trier appears at odds with himself or that the film amalgamates clashing elements that do not always seamlessly come together in the final product. *Breaking the Waves* presents a quest for personal meaning—grounded in everyday experience—on the part of the main character. This personal meaning represents her worldview and integrates parts of other worldviews that have affected the life of the protagonist. In simple terms, it is an interpretation that privileges individual action and self-reflection and which figures as multi-directional and at times, self-defeating.

In foregrounding faith and personal love, von Trier shows us a version of goodness uncontained by theocentric and egocentric conceptions of the type of relations between beings, such as those encapsulated by the terms Eros and Agape. Although it leads to the most disastrous consequences in Bess' particular story, the director salvages this tumultuous and effervescent side of human nature—our opening to the precarious and the leap of faith we undertake when we choose to invest ourselves in another—in his assertion that in the end, “the ‘good’ will always

be recognized—somewhere!” (VT, BW 22). As with everything else in *Breaking the Waves*, von Trier’s words are more of a challenge than a promise. Not only does he asks his viewers to form their own version of ‘the good,’ one perhaps as muddled as his own, but he presents the larger question: Is it possible to recognize ‘the good’ in the Kingdom of Men?

¹ For full review, see Jonathan Rosenbaum’s “Mixed Emotions” in *Chicago Reader* (Dec. 5, 1996) available WWW: <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/mixed-emotions/Content?oid=892246>.

² See Irena S.M. Makarushka, “Transgressing Goodness in Breaking the Waves” in *Journal of Religion & Film* 2:1 (April 1998).

³ Nietzsche proposes that the driving force of every organism whether partial or connecting into a whole is based on action. He defines “life” as the will to power. The will to power is the objective manifestation of the vital force that animates the workings of the world. It organizes what we perceive as life forms, from its most basic as in the protozoan to more complex structures such as the body politic. But it does not require social validity as a subject, but rather the ability of the organism to enhance itself and expand. In order to be part of the ecosystem, every organism is already enmeshed in enacting some form of this type of willing. Nietzsche’s brilliant contribution de-idealizes mankind and assumes no particular superiority that would place the human at the center. He privileges the instinct to enhance as the basic form of motivation and allocates similar value to all life forms rather than concocting hierarchical structured based on a special quality evident in humans as opposed to non-human animals or other active elements in nature.

⁴ For full discussion of the difference between Agape and Eros, see Anders Nygen, “Agape and Eros” in *Eros, Agape, and Philia: Readings in the Philosophy of Love* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1989): 85-95.

⁵ In “Redeeming Sexual Violence? A Feminist Reading of Breaking the Waves,” Alyda Faber challenges essays by Stephen Heath, Kyle Keefer, Tod Linafelt and Irena Makarushka that propose the figure of Bess as embodying liberating subversive sexuality. She invokes Kristeva’s concept of the abject as an excluding category and concludes that von Trier idealizes feminine masochism in his association of the female body with abjection, pathology and the irrational, and in so doing, reaffirms patriarchal authority through power and rationality. The article serves as a substantial summary of the competing feminist interpretations of the film.

⁶ Flaubert’s “A Simple Heart” also goes to extremes in portraying the constant peril of the main character, Felicité, who often suffers in vain. The ending is similarly open to doubt as to its

sincerity or cynicism, with the stuffed parrot appearing in a vision as the Holy Spirit welcoming the saint-like Felicité to the afterlife.

⁷ See for example Tony Michael and Ken Derry's "Jon Woo's The Killer and Girard." *Journal of Religion & Film* 5:1 (April 2001); Paul Graham's "Revisiting Violence in The Godfather: The Ambiguous Space of the Victimhood Model." *Journal of Religion & Film* 9:2 (October 2005); and Jethro Rothe-Kushel's "Fight Club: A Ritual Cure for the Spiritual Ailment of American Masculinity." *The Film Journal*. Available WWW: <http://www.thefilmjournal.com/issue8/fightclub.html>.

⁸ Here Makarushka is quoting Louise J. Kaplan's *Female Perversions*.

⁹ I am using the Guld Hjerle children's picture book as my source because I am interested in the form and tone of this story. For references, please WWW: <http://www.oldkingcole.com/reviews/movies/DancerInTheDark.html>. I am using the story as a separate text and not basing my comparison between the film and the fairy-tale purely on von Trier's incomplete remembrance of it in one of the interviews

¹⁰ For elaboration of the concept of "presentification," please see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht. *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004).

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