



Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 4
Issue 2 October 2000

Article 6

12-16-2016

Dancer in the Dark

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Recommended Citation

Plate, S. Brent (2016) "Dancer in the Dark," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol4/iss2/6>

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Dancer in the Dark

Abstract

This is a review of *Dancer in the Dark* (2000).

Saying Lars von Trier's films are not religious is like saying Flannery O'Connor's stories are not religious. The bull gores Mrs. May at the end of O'Connor's "Greenleaf," but is the story really about farm accidents? Or is it about something metaphysically grander? The answer may depend on the interpretation, but there are easy interpretations, and others that offer more of a challenge.

There is an easy religious way to interpret von Trier's recent *Dancer in the Dark* (just as there was for his earlier *Breaking the Waves*, with which *Dancer* shares many similarities), and that is to see the film as being about salvation and pointing out the Christ imagery in the film - as when Selma (Björk) strikes the crucifixion pose in one of the dance sequences. But perhaps it is time for scholars of Religion to take a five-year moratorium on interpreting films for their Christic similarities. Especially considering the continuing accumulation within religion and film circles of "Jesus and Film" publications, such a break might stimulate us all to refresh our critical-imaginative capacities and see cultural texts from new perspectives. In the case of *Dancer*, this would mean the Christ-images would not overshadow the much more important ethical, human issues with which this film grapples: issues like capital punishment, the role of the arts (and, self-reflexively, film) in a world of suffering, keeping one's word, secrecy, and immigration and otherness, issues that go to the heart of lived religion itself.

This is one of those films that to mention anything about the plot would be to say too much; the unfolding of events is part of what makes it such an extraordinary cinematic experience. It is one of those films everyone with interests in ethics and religion needs to go see, and then we can all get together and talk about it. As with *Breaking the Waves*, we know what's coming, and for anyone paying attention to this review, you know it is not a happy ending ... or is it? Again, such decisions are in the hands of the interpreter. Like the writings of his countrymate from another century, Søren Kierkegaard, von Trier's films open themselves up to the viewer. They refuse to provide clearly defined answers as they offer several modes of viewing, and let the viewer stumble along on their own journey.

Happiness, if it exists overtly in this film, consists in the intermittent dance routines, operating similarly to the postcard-like chapter breaks in *Breaking the Waves*. They provide a pollyannish view of the world where God is in His heaven and all is right with the world. *The Sound of Music* functions as a backdrop to the film, as Selma aspires to be a pseudo-Maria - if only we could all sing and dance the bad stuff would go away, Selma seems to want to believe even if her seeing is gradually failing. The less she sees, the more she believes. Yet, apart from some fun music by Björk, the twisted undertow of the dance sequences only makes one

sink further in one's seat. The viewer awaits the inevitable end, but the viewer must also wait to be surprised.

And in the end one must wonder how far it is possible to excise the Christic-consciousness from our collective cultural unconscious, or do we remain, as O'Connor put it, "Christ-haunted"? Von Trier himself, a somewhat recent convert to Catholicism, seems to be imbued with such a haunting as it finds its way now through each of the three films that form his "Gold Heart Trilogy" (i.e., *Breaking the Waves*, *The Idiots*, and *Dancer in the Dark*). But his struggle with this haunting becomes the viewer's struggle. And part of the struggle is to see the film (and thus on a grand level, to see life itself) for all its possible interpretations, and not to shut down viewing by imposing a singular view. Von Trier is fiercely polemical, but he doesn't allow this to keep the loose ends tied up.

One warning should accompany this film though, and that is to note how difficult it is to watch: one should watch this with one eye open and the other shut. Two women were overheard after the screening, one saying, "That was the most amazing film I've ever seen," to which the other replies, "Oh, you liked it?" "I didn't say that," says the first one, "I only said it was amazing."