Transgressing Goodness in Breaking the Waves

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol2/iss1/5

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Transgressing Goodness in Breaking the Waves

Abstract
This analysis of Breaking the Waves falls into two sections: 1) the 'good'; and 2) transgressing goodness. The focus is Bess, her status as woman in a patriarchal culture and her struggle to be 'good'. The reading that I propose explores von Trier's meditation on competing notions of goodness and the cultural assumptions that inform them. In the first section, I explore how Bess negotiates the moral landscape within which she lives as daughter, sister-in-law, member of a religious community, and wife. The church elders and Bess represent von Trier's vision of the two extremes of the contested notion of the 'good'.

In the second section, I consider how the tension between a static and a dynamic understanding of the 'good' is experienced. What choices are available to Bess as she struggles to make sense of her life in the aftermath of Jan's accident? How does she reimagine her desire to be a 'good girl' under these circumstances?

As I reflect on the 'good' as a moral category, I turn to Female Perversions by Louise J. Kaplan, who argues that submission and purity are culturally encoded expectations of femininity and consequently, of what it means to be a 'good' woman. These expectations function to demean and constrain women. I explore the unfolding of Bess's desire and inquire whether she does indeed choose out of her own sense of freedom, whether she is coerced or both. Bess's desire to be 'good' by transgressing culturally constructed values offers an insight into the cost to women for making choices informed by a deeply held personal belief in goodness.

This article is available in Journal of Religion & Film: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol2/iss1/5
For a woman ... to explore and express the fullness of her sexuality, her ambitions, her emotional and intellectual capacities, her social duties, her tender virtues, would entail who knows what risks and who knows what truly revolutionary alteration to the social conditions that demean and constrain her. Or she may go on trying to fit herself into the order of the world and thereby consign herself forever to the bondage of some stereotype of normal femininity - a perversion, if you will.

**Introduction**

It is tempting, as many critics have done, to read the character of Bess in Lars van Trier's *Breaking the Waves* as one more Christ-figure, Mary Magdalene or Joan of Arc. Fitting Bess neatly into these Christian literary conventions provides a replay of familiar paradigms and guarantees that the 'natural' order of things will not be disrupted. It is equally tempting to dismiss Bess, as others have, as a woman with a history of mental illness, who, like so many other heroines in women's films, behaves irrationally because she refuses to accept reality. To give into either of these temptations, I suggest, is to reduce this complex film to its least significant common denominators. To my mind, Bess is neither a tragic nor saintly heroine. Rather, like most women, she is caught between two patriarchal paradigms: the virgin and the whore.
On the surface, the story is deceptively simple. Bess, a young inexperienced woman living on an island off the northern coast of Scotland falls in love and marries Jan, an older and more experienced man who works on the off-shore oil rig. Their love and passion for one another transforms them both. An accident on the rig leaves Jan paralyzed from the neck down, irrevocably altering their expectations of sexual intimacy. Bess feels responsible for the accident because she had prayed for Jan's return. Either out of concern for her loss of sexual pleasure, or under the influence of strong pain medication, or both, Jan asks Bess to have sex with other men.

He believes that they can reclaim some vestige of their sexual intimacy if Bess tells him about these encounters. At first she is horrified but later begins to believe that Jan needs to hear these stories in order to heal his physical and psychological brokenness. In spite of attempts to intervene by Dodo, her sister-in-law and Dr. Richardson, Jan's physician; and in spite of being cast out by her religious community, Bess prostitutes herself because she believes that she can prevent Jan from dying. As his condition worsens, Bess places herself more at risk by returning to a boat where her life had previously been threatened. After she dies of slash wounds inflicted by her 'client', Jan's recovery accelerates.

The simplicity of the story masks complex and troubling questions. Is Bess 'good' despite her choice to prostitute herself? Furthermore, whose values
constitute the norm by which the 'good' is defined? I am not convinced that there is one adequate way of interpreting her choice; nor, for that matter, of approaching competing notions of the 'good'. I see her choice as profoundly conflicted. On one hand, it underscores the paucity of culturally sanctioned positive paradigms available to women. On the other, it surfaces one of the core issues that concern women: is it possible to be 'good' outside of the culturally constructed paradigms that, as Kaplan writes, demean and constrain them. In other words, is it possible to see Bess's choice as a transgression of culturally convenient and patriarchally over-determined categories of goodness? Or is it possible to see her not as a victim of patriarchy but as a woman who chooses to be 'good' out of her own desire to live for the other on her own terms? My analysis of *Breaking the Waves* focuses on this dilemma.

My reading of *Breaking the Waves* is informed by feminist film criticism. However, it differs from that of some feminist critics who have argued that von Trier, like the sadistic, misogynist deity with whom Bess speaks, creates a failed religious fable of woman as sacrificial victim. I can see why feminists could find fault with von Trier's creation of Bess. Encoded in the beginning of this story is its tragic end: fairy-tale weddings do not have happy endings. In both narrative and real time the princess dies. The recent death of Diana, Princess of Wales, and
the unprecedented out-pouring of grief were sad reminders of the fate that inevitably awaits women.

Even today the traditional paradigm seems to pertain: the 'good' woman is the dead woman who can be safely mourned when she can no longer disrupt the 'natural' order of things.\(^7\) Therefore, given women's history, it seems appropriate to suspect von Trier of rehearsing the same old story in *Breaking the Waves*.

Tempting though it may be to accept this feminist critique and hard though it may be to argue against it, I believe that von Trier is interested in more than creating yet another film to titillate viewers with violence against women. I am not attributing to von Trier a conscious intentionality. Rather, following Bordwell's description of symptomatic meaning, I suggest that embedded in von Trier's filmic narrative are current cultural and ideological concerns, including that of gender.\(^8\) Von Trier does use the woman-as-sinner/woman-as-martyr stereotypes that have led critics to see Bess as Mary Magdalene or Joan of Arc; however, I see his use of these stereotypes as cultural critique. If one allows for this possibility, then von Trier can be seen as less of a misogynist, less of a proponent of repressive attitudes toward women and more of a critic of the religious and cultural attitudes that, as Kaplan argues, condemn women to "the bondage of some stereotype of normal femininity ..." (*FP* 528).
I base my argument regarding von Trier as a cultural critic on several facets of the film's production and style. To my mind, the use of a hand-held camera; the post-card like images that mark the 'chapters' of Bess's life; the music that accompanies these images; and the ending that verges on kitsch collectively conspire to suggest both irony and parody. For instance, the images and 70's songs that constitute the chapter breaks create a sense of visual and temporal distanciation and comment on the unfolding narrative while putting the events of the story into a critical, if not comic, relief. Such visual devices make it possible to see Breaking the Waves not only as a painful representation of the life of a woman in a culture over-determined by a rigid patriarchal religious tradition, but also as a condemnation of that culture and of its destructive effects. Furthermore, they help to focus the viewers’ attention on the film's fundamental questions: Is Bess, in the end, the 'good' girl she desires to become? If she is 'good', what is the moral of von Trier's story?

My analysis of Breaking the Waves falls into two sections: 1) the 'good'; and 2) transgressing goodness. The focus is Bess, her status as woman in a patriarchal culture and her struggle to be 'good'. In the introduction that accompanies his screenplay, "Director's Note - This Film is About 'Good'," von Trier states that he tried to represent the complex nature of goodness. The reading that I propose explores von Trier's meditation on competing notions of
goodness and the cultural assumptions that inform them. In the first section, I explore how Bess negotiates the moral landscape within which she lives as daughter, sister-in-law, member of a religious community and wife. The church elders and Bess represent von Trier's vision of the two extremes of the contested notion of the 'good'. At one end is unambiguous, uncompromising, immutable and eternally true definition of the 'good'; on the other is the desire to be 'good'. In the second section, I consider how the tension between a static and a dynamic understanding of the 'good' is experienced. What choices are available to Bess as she struggles to make sense of her life in the aftermath of Jan's accident? How does she reimagine her desire to be a 'good girl' under these circumstances?

As already noted, goodness is particularly problematic for women within a patriarchal culture. As I reflect on the 'good' as a moral category, I turn to Female Perversions, Kaplan's brilliant clinical analysis of social and sexual behaviors for which she uses Flaubert's Emma Bovary as a case study. Perversions, Kaplan argues, ostensibly parody the dominant culture's expectations of what it means to be a 'good' man or a 'good' women. In the case of women, submission and purity are culturally encoded as prescriptive femininity. Consequently, obedience and virginity are affirmed as normal and, therefore, normative. These expectations, she argues, function to demean and constrain women. Some women become aware that they can never be 'good' enough within the cultural paradigm that
obtains. The realization that they do not fit the norm leads some to engage in self-destructive behaviors that include eating disorders and bodily mutilation (FP 3-29). Others try to fit themselves into the 'natural' order of things, into a 'normal' femininity. For Kaplan, such compliance constitutes perversion (FP 528).

Therefore, regardless of which choice women make, they lose. Although Kaplan's analysis doesn't resolve the dilemma of Bess's desire to be 'good' by transgressing culturally constructed values, it does offer some insight into the cost to women for making choices informed by a deeply held personal belief in goodness. In what follows, I explore the unfolding of Bess's desire and inquire whether she does indeed choose out of her own sense of freedom, whether she is coerced or both.

The 'Good'

Perceptions of the good are ineluctably bound to perceptions of otherness. Von Trier begins Breaking the Waves with an elegant short prologue that sets the narrative in motion. The first frame after the title is a close-up of Bess's remarkable face looking directly at the audience. Her image seems to push at the edges of the screen that can barely contain her. Wide-eyed with anticipation and certainty about the rightness of her love for Jan, her expansiveness, generosity and warmth are in stark contrast to the cold and austere faces of the church elders who interrogate her. Bess's simple declaration, filled with light and hope, "His name is Jan", is met with the elder's ponderous response, "I do not know him." These two
competing images shape the moral landscape upon which battles over competing notions of the 'good' will fought to the death. In the prologue, Bess and the elders never appear in the same frame during the interrogation that takes place inside the church. The visualization of their apartness is as stunning as it is unbreachable. If the elders value sameness, Bess celebrates difference. Von Trier's visual clues suggest that the twain shall never meet or be reconciled. Insofar as her image is the first and last of the opening sequence, it effectively creates a set of visual bookends that confine the power of the elders to the church. In the last frame before the scene changes to the picture-postcard marking Chapter One, "Bess Gets Married," we see Bess sitting outside the church, bathed in bright sunlight, smiling. The battle lines are drawn: insiders against the outsiders - sameness against difference - the story seems all too familiar.

In the epilogue that begins with the inquest into Bess's death, von Trier returns to the competing, if not contradictory, perspectives on the 'good' that he developed both visually and narratively in the prologue. This time it is not Bess who is interrogated by the church elders, but Dr. Richardson who is being questioned by the coroner about his expert testimony. The coroner states: "You have described the deceased as 'an immature, unstable person. A person, who, due to the trauma of her husband's illness, gave way in obsessive fashion to an exaggerated, perverse form of sexuality'" (BW 128). Hesitant and clearly
uncomfortable, Dr. Richardson struggles to respond. At first he appears surprised at his own words and then he asks to amend the diagnosis: "... if you asked me now, instead of 'neurotic' or 'psychotic', my diagnosis might quite simply be ... 'good'" (*BW* 130). The bewildered coroner responds: "You wish the records ... to state that from the medical point of view the deceased was suffering from being 'good'? Perhaps this is the psychological defect that led to her death? Is that what we shall write" (*BW* 130)? In the end, in spite of his own belief in Bess's goodness, Dr. Richardson reverts to his original diagnosis. Bess's choice to sacrifice her life for Jan is judged a perversion.

These two scenes are emblematic of the vexing question of the 'good' woman. By locating these scenes in spaces defined by patriarchal authority but, nevertheless, allowing for Bess to have the last word, von Trier anticipates the final sequence of the bells to which I will return. If the prologue ends with Bess basking in the sun, the scene of the coroner's inquest ends as the camera pans to Jan in a wheelchair accompanied by Dodo and then cuts to Jan on crutches at the cemetery on a beautiful sunny day. From all appearances, Bess did indeed save Jan's life. In between the prologue and the inquest, von Trier creates a compelling argument against a universal or essentialized view of the 'good' as he emphasizes its implicit contingency. Moreover, through the intensity of Bess's struggle to be 'a good girl', he forefronts the relativity of moral assumptions and values. Her
personal choices are situated within larger communal and cultural contexts. What unfolds, then, is as much a question of whether Bess is 'good', as it is of the dominant perceptions of the 'good', particularly with regard to women. As I have suggested elsewhere following Zerilli's analysis, in a patriarchal culture women signify as both "culture and chaos, ... [as] the radical sexual other ..., ... a cipher, a series of absences to be filled ..., ... energy to be harnessed ...., [woman is both] the site of sociosymbolic stabilization and destabilization ..."11 How this cultural schizophrenia regarding women effects ways in which Bess is judged and how she judges herself are my immediate concern.

Bess's world is inscribed within three overlapping circles: family, religion and marriage. Each encompasses a range of complex and ambivalent attitudes about the nature of the 'good' in relation to Bess. Traditional views about women and their role in the community inform and are reaffirmed within the spheres of religion and family - although not without dissent. After all, Bess chooses to marry an outsider which sets the third sphere apart. Whether her death is seen as a matter of choice or the result of "bondage of some stereotype" (FP 528) is the question that von Trier invites viewers to engage. Before turning to this central question, I explore the perceptions of Bess that pertain within her family and religious community. Insofar as both spheres of influence represent a single-minded belief in what Kristeva describes as the law of the Father12 and Bess's
deeply personal faith in love; they are mirror images of one another. Furthermore, by emphasizing competing values within these spheres of patriarchal power, von Trier creates a space for the power of difference, albeit at a very high price.

The cold austere landscape of northern Scotland is symbolic of the rigid and unforgiving moral landscape of the church, its pastor and elders. The interior of the church is dark, uninviting and joyless, in contrast to the brightness of its white-washed exterior. The religious beliefs of this community as expounded by the pastor and the church elders during services, burials and finally in their condemnation and shunning of Bess are based on their certainty that truth is found in the Word and the Law which are immutable and eternal. Furthermore, they reject all that is considered worldly and sensual. Their Law commands endurance, faith and obedience. Their god is a god of wrath and justice: rewarding the good and punishing the wicked. The problem, of course, is differentiating one from the other.

Bess's goodness is acknowledged by the pastor at her wedding when he describes how she cleans the church not for worldly praise but for the love of god.

However, his praise competes with oblique references to mental and emotional instability made by her mother and others. Although, she signifies as
the domesticated woman who is necessary to sustain culture; she also signifies as chaos. Where to be 'good' means not to make waves, not to destabilize the 'natural' order of things, not to express deeply felt emotions, not to experience pleasure, Bess is undeniably the 'other'. She is radiant with a love for Jan that seems both unconditional and boundless. Her fearless willingness to trust his love and to believe in its possibilities is counterintuitive to the values of the community. Her otherness is interpreted as a flaw, an emotional deficit.

Both her mother and Dodo describe Bess as simple-minded and excessively emotional. Her mother tells her that she must learn to endure her lot in life without complaint or emotion, as countless women before her have done and will do after her (BW 41). When Bess doesn't play by the rules, when she isn't a 'good' girl because she makes a public display of her grief or anger, she is either threatened with hospitalization or her offending behaviors are controlled by medication. At the airfield where Jan is boarding the helicopter to return to the rig, Bess becomes very agitated and Dodo gives her pills to calm her (BW 45). Dr. Richardson at first rejects the idea that Bess ought to be medicated. He acknowledges that her grief and emotional turmoil after Jan's accident are perfectly normal under the circumstances. He makes a point of differentiating himself from Bess's previous doctor who had hospitalized and medicated her when her brother, Sam, was killed. However, in the end, Dr. Richardson betrays
her. When Bess refuses to heed his advice to stop prostituting herself to save Jan's life, Dr. Richardson compels Jan to sign the order to put Bess into a mental hospital for her own good (BW 108, 110). His paternalism reflects the attitudes toward women of both the religious and scientific communities.

Von Trier creates a visual and narrative dissonance between the community's expectations and Bess's behaviors. In so doing, he politicizes the discourse, and, I would argue, takes sides. His hand-held camera frequently isolates Bess from others in the scene, particularly in emotionally charged situations. Her joyous, tearful or anguished face fills the screen before the camera takes in the larger context whether it be the hospital, her mother's house, Dr. Richardson's office or the bar where she goes to meet clients. Bess is the heart of the story and von Trier's camera seeks her out as the center around which the other elements revolve. The level of Bess's emotional engagement invariably exceeds that of others. In numerous instances, either her mother, Dodo or the pastor tell her to control her feelings. By focusing so intently on Bess's face, von Trier's camera creates an intimacy between her and the viewer. It also suggests that he is not only empathetic with his character but critical of the emotional withholding that is the cultural norm.

The use of a hand-held camera as well as the film's sepia hue and granular surface give the film a sense of immediacy inviting the viewer into the film.
However, 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.

Von Trier describes these interludes as a "God's-eye-view of the landscape in which this story is unfolding, as if he were watching over the characters." 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.

The chapter-breaks, with musical interludes, also function as visual reminders of the multiple worlds in which Bess exists. Effectively, Bess embodies the conflict between two radically different ways of being 'good' in the world. On one hand, she wants to belong by being a 'good' girl, which, under the conditions of patriarchy, requires submission and silence. On the other hand, when she choose to be 'good' on her own terms, she is cast out by the church elders, her family and community. The point is made painfully clear when, toward the end of the film, the children of the village stone her as she tries to make her way to the
church. As Kaplan argues, there are no safe choices for women. If compliance is a form of self-destruction—a perversion, non-compliance as an indictment of normative values leads to communal recrimination and retribution.

For Bess, marriage signifies living by the rules. Yet, the fact that she marries an outsider and, furthermore, that she takes pleasure in their sexual passion for one another, puts her at the very edge of communal acceptability. Jan, after all, does not share their religious worldview, nor does he share their perceptions of Bess. When Dodo tries to tell him that Bess is susceptible, weak and vulnerable, foreshadowing Bess's choice to save his life, Jan insists that Bess is stronger than both of them. He loves her goodness, openness, sensuality and strength. When Dodo tells him that Bess "is wrong in the head;" he disagrees saying the Bess "just wants it all." To him, Bess is a loving, generous, passionate free-spirit whose imagination and faith in the goodness of life is boundless. Like Jan, Dodo loves Bess, but sees her as emotionally unstable and in need of her care. At the wedding, when Dodo speaks about Bess, she acknowledges her "good heart," selflessness and acceptance of outsiders, yet chides her for her lack of good judgment (BW 34). She claims that it was Bess's good heart that compelled her to stay even after her husband Sam, Bess's brother, had died. Dodo begins to understand the depths of Bess's love for Jan and recognize her strength and
determination to be 'good' on her own terms only after she is cast out by the community.

Bess's understanding of the 'good' reflects the teaching of the church filtered through her deeply personal faith in the power of love. In the traditional view preached by the pastor, the 'good' is synonymous with unconditional love for the Word and the Law. Bess's grief and her unconditional love for Jan exceed this narrow frame of reference. The tension between the literalism and stasis implicit in the traditional interpretation of the 'good' and the dynamic realities of Bess's life is played out in Bess's private conversations with god. Her relationship with god is as conflicted and problematic as her relationship with her religious community and her family. The common denominator is patriarchy. Like her other choices, her choice to speak with god signifies the complex nature of her faith and her desire to be a 'good' girl. For Bess, the 'good' is interpreted as much through the lens of her 'otherness' as it is through her need to belong to a community. Therefore, her conversations with god reflect both the traditional values that she internalized and a freedom to desire more than that which her religious community values.

Speaking with god places Bess both inside and outside of the worshipping community, literally and metaphorically. Von Trier situates these deeply personal
conversations inside the church as well as in a restaurant, on the boat and in the hospital where she lies dying.

Furthermore, von Trier eroticizes her religious experiences as he sacramentalizes her sexual experiences. He interweaves scenes in which she is making love to Jan with scenes where Bess is speaking with god, trying to cope with the aftermath of Jan's accident or trying to save his life by prostituting herself. He also creates a visual commentary on the different dimensions of power: erotic, religious, familial, climatic, scientific, mechanical and moral in the guise of the 'good'. Von Trier underscores the insider/outsider dilemma in which Bess finds herself. The first conversation with god to which viewers are privy takes place immediately after a scene in which Bess and Jan make love on their wedding night. The intimacy of this scene, like that of their love making, is created through von Trier's voyeuristic use of close-ups. As they make love, Jan wonders how Bess managed not to stay away from the boys before she met him: "You must have been lonely. Who did you talk to ..." (BW 37)?

Their faces dissolve into an image of Bess knelling by a church pew thanking god for the gift of Jan's love. The warmth and smallness of the hotel room, their nakedness and the intensity of their passion are bathed in sepia tones which lose their golden hue as the scene changes to the cold and stark interior of
the church. A different kind of emotional intensity characterizes Bess's face and
voice as the intimacy of her relationship with god unfolds.

    Bess speaks to god in an empty church - a place where, owing to her
gender, she is ordinarily forbidden to speak. Furthermore, she not only speaks to
god in her own voice but also speaks for god. By attributing to Bess both the
voice of the supplicant and the voice of law-giver, von Trier creates an ironic
juxtaposition between Bess and the pastor who also believes that he speaks to god
on behalf of the community and for god in proclaiming the Word and the Law.
When Bess speaks to god, she raises her face and her voice upward. When she
speaks for god (or perhaps as god), she looks down and speaks in an admonishing
tone. Arguably, von Trier parodies the traditional moral geography that locates
god above his creatures. Her god warns her to be good because, after all, he giveth
and taketh away. As she promises to be 'good', von Trier cuts to Jan and Bess
standing naked and silent in their hotel room. Jan pinches her nipple and Bess's
face registers surprise, then pleasure as the camera cuts to their sexual intercourse.
As they climax, Bess simply says thank you, the only spoken words in this scene.
This brief interlude ends as von Trier cuts from Jan's snoring to the sound of
waves crashing onto the rocks where Jan and Bess brave the elements along the
craggy coast. The interweaving of sex, religion and nature are repeated again. As
Jan and Bess make love in an old factory building, the camera cuts to the church
where one of the elders is condemning those among them who prefer worldly things. Bess sits distractedly looking away from the pulpit, as her mother looks at her disapprovingly. Her status as an outsider is reinforced when she says to her grandfather: "Stupid that only men can talk at the service." Horrified, he replies: "Hold your tongue, woman" (BW).

Bess, of course, doesn't hold her tongue. Reflecting on Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, de Lauretis comments that his text is "an accurate representation of the paradoxical status of women in Western discourse: while culture originates from women ... women are all but absent from history and the cultural processes." In *Breaking the Waves*, the religious community that passes judgment on Bess begins with the assumption that 'good' girls are meant neither to be seen nor heard. The church law forbids women to speak in church and prohibits them from attending burials. Bess is expected to be "absent from history and the cultural process." In a culture that believes that women to be silent and absent, Bess is both vocal and present threatening to transform order into chaos.

In Bess's refusal to be silenced, von Trier situates the paradox of women's lives. To comply, as Kaplan suggests, is to "consign herself forever to the bondage of some stereotype of normal femininity - a perversion, if you will" (*FP* 528). Not to comply, is to risk being judged a deviant, a danger to tradition and, therefore, cast out. The reality of this losing proposition is played out in mixed
messages Bess sends when she speaks to god and for god. If being a 'good' girl echoes in her promises and in god's admonitions, so does the impossibility of achieving that status. On the one hand god tells her to endure her loneliness, on the other, he tells her to prove her love for Jan. To prove her love by trying to save Jan's life, she prostitutes herself. Vomiting after her encounter with the man at the back of the bus, she says: "Dear god, I have sinned." In response, god reminds her that Mary Magdalene was one of his dearly beloved (BW 87). At times, god is silent. Yet, as she sails for the last time toward the ship to sacrifice her life for Jan's, god tells her that he is always there. When she lies dying, her doubts about her ability to save Jan are not answered. Perhaps, her grandfather's admonition is finally heeded: she holds her tongue.

Von Trier's parodic representation of the intractable nature of institutional religion draws on the tension between an external sense of morality in opposition to an internally imagined moral landscape. Von Trier invites viewers to consider who speaks for god - the pastor and the elders or Bess herself. Or, perhaps, no one. For Bess to be 'good' - a 'good' that emerges out of her own desire and love for Jan, she must defy and deny the notion of the 'good' preached by her religious community and affirmed by her family. She breaks out of the "stereotype of normal femininity" (FP 528). But what other models are there to emulate? Transgressing the cultural norm of the 'good' girl, she finds herself in the role of
the 'bad' girl, the flip side of the same patriarchal paradigm of how women signify in culture. Whether her decision to prostitute herself is coerced or freely chosen remains be considered. For women, the question of subjectivity or agency is complicated. De Lauretis notes that:

"contemporary work in feminist theory ... (tries) to define the female-gendered subject as one that is outside the ideology of gender: the female subject of feminism is one constructed across a multiplicity of discourses, positions, and meanings, which are often in conflict with one another and inherently (historically) contradictory. A feminist theory of gender, in other words, points to a conception of the subject as multiple, rather than divided or unified, and as excessive or heteronomous vis-a-vis the state ideological apparati and the sociocultural technologies of gender."15

In the next section, "Transgressing Goodness," I explore how Bess's obsession with being 'good' is, in and of itself, a transgressive act that reflects multiplicity and excess. Bess is more than the sum of the parts. She is neither the sacrificial 'good' girl who dies for love, nor is she the 'bad' girl cast out for sexual misbehavior. In Bess, von Trier creates a character who is as much defined by her culture as she is alienated from it through her own desire. She is everywoman whose life is lived between the cultural expectation that a woman will stand by their man, even if the internal logic of that expectation has fatal consequences, and a sense of her own power to effect change. The value and significance of her life cannot be measured by its outcome, but rather by the process of living her commitment to love another human being unconditionally.
Transgressing Goodness

Critics have puzzled over the meaning of von Trier's title, *Breaking the Waves*. To my mind, it is suggestive of the powerful clash of competing cultural values and the challenge to the 'natural' order of things. If, as von Trier claims, *Breaking the Waves* is about the 'good', I would argue that it is also about transgressing goodness. Bess's goodness, about which Dodo and Dr. Richardson give public testimony, transcends the moral vision of her community. Her desire to be 'good' exceeds the interpretative capacity of a traditional dualistic either/or, 'good'girl/'bad'girl framework. The rigidly dualistic normative values of her religious community do not take into account her agency or subjectivity; nor do they affirm the merits of faith lived as the unconditional love for another. Therefore, because their judgment against Bess reflects a narrow moralistic understanding of faith and love, the complex and dynamic aspects of her life are obscured. To inquire whether Bess is a 'good' girl is misleading, if not misguided. It assumes an external reference against which all choices and behaviors can be measured and assessed. In the end, what matters is not whether Bess is a 'good' girl. Rather, her goodness matters: a goodness that allows for vulnerability, that takes risks, that crosses from the familiar to the unknown. If the 'good' is a static moral category that assumes compliance, goodness is dynamic, transgressing, and, therefore, dangerous.
Bess's goodness places her at risk. As Kaplan argues, "For a woman ... to explore and express the fullness of her sexuality, her ambitions, her emotional and intellectual capacities, her social duties, her tender virtues, would entail who knows what risks and who knows what truly revolutionary alteration to the social conditions that demean and constrain her" (FP 528). In Bess, von Trier creates a character who risks goodness as an act of freedom. There is a little evidence that the miracle of "a(n) ... alteration in the social conditions that demean and constrain" women is imminent. Fittingly, von Trier situates Bess within a traditional religious community, thereby, underscoring the limited choices available to women. Furthermore, I believe that von Trier sees Bess's transgressing goodness as both breaking and being broken on the waves of traditional morality. In order to explore Bess's transgressive choices, I turn to three interconnected visual and narrative symbols: music, sex and the bells. To my mind, they reflect the complex nature of both Bess's faith and von Trier's moral vision. I also consider the 'miracle' of the bells which brings the story to its controversial end. Is it von Trier's ironic, or even cynical, response to fate of women? Or, is it an acknowledgment that, in the end, goodness is its own reward?

In the prologue, von Trier introduces music as the signifier of difference and otherness. In response to Bess's petition to marry an outsider, one of the
elders asks: Can you think of anything of real value the outsiders have brought with them" (BW 25). Smiling, she responds, "Their music" (25)?

The irony of this response is startling, particularly when seen in relation to the final moments of the film. Huge bronze bells, that may or may not be Bess transfigured, ring out over the oil rig barely visible in the vast expanse of ocean. In between the prologue and the epilogue, music features as the film's primary leitmotif signaling cultural difference between insiders and outsiders. The fact that von Trier makes music central to the film's moral vision supports the view that he believes religion to be an aesthetic practice rather than a moralizing authority.

Bess's life is permeated with music both inside and outside the church. Traditional hymns are sung during the marriage ceremony; Scottish jigs are played at the wedding reception. Whereas Bess loves all kinds of music; the elders tolerate only their own. The sixties and seventies pop music to which Bess listens signifies freedom, solace and hope. When she misses Jan, she finds comfort listening to pop songs on the radio late at night. Intolerant of outsiders, the elders are suspicious of their music and its corrupting influence. The difference between their view and that of Jan and his buddies is exemplified in the scene where they listen to pop music as they cavort naked after a shower on the rig. Music as an accompaniment to transgression is also in evidence when Bess
tries to seduce Dr. Richardson, another outsider. When Jan asks her to take a lover, she goes to Dr. Richardson's apartment where Elton John's music is playing as she dances on the table - worlds apart from hymn singing in church.

The most striking way in which von Trier uses pop music is as an accompaniment to the postcard images that mark chapter breaks. The images and music are integrally connected - one reinforcing the other and both commenting on the content of the narrative. The images themselves are eerily psychedelic. Filmed in highly saturated colors that distinguish them from the grainy sepia tones of the film itself, the images alter very gradually to a pulsating rhythmic beat. In Chapter One, "Bess Gets Married," an image of a tiny helicopter become visible through thick clouds hanging over the tops of craggy mountain tops as Mott The Hoople sings, All the Way from Memphis. An incongruous combination at best, but remarkably effective as the camera cuts to Bess who, in full wedding dress, is pacing angrily on the tarmac awaiting Jan who is late in arriving from the rig. In another instance, distressed by Jan's request that she make love with other men and tell him about it, Bess faints into the arms of Dr. Richardson. The camera cuts to Chapter Five, "Doubt," where an image of the ruins of a stone building provides the backdrop to Leonard Cohen singing, "Suzanne takes you down to her place near the river. You can hear the boats go by. You can spend the night beside her. And you know that she's half crazy but that's why you want to be there ..."
The camera cuts to Bess awakening in Dr. Richardson's office. He advises her to take care of herself, go dancing - a perplexing suggestion as she struggles to make sense of ambiguities and doubts.

The surrealism of the idyllic scenes and triteness of the lyrics also function to relieve some of the tension and horror elicited by the events in the story. Through the sense of deja vu that animates them, von Trier seems to remind viewers that the story is an old one - as are the postcards and music. Yet, this old story, like other myths of evil, bears repetition. As Jan struggles to sign the order to have Bess committed to a mental hospital, the camera cuts to the image of the fjord at evening illuminated by a red-skied sunset with a large tanker in the far distance: Chapter Seven, "Bess's Sacrifice." "If you've been bad," sings Deep Purple, "Lord, I bet you have, and you've not been good ... you better close your eyes, you better bow your head. Wait for the ricochet."

Von Trier focuses on a close-up of Bess's face as she is being ferried to the tanker to buy time for Jan's life.

Has she been bad? The question is yet to be answered. In the final postcard image that marks the Epilogue, a stone bridge stands over the clear water of a rushing mountain stream as Elton John sings, "It's a little bit funny, this feeling inside, not one who loves that can easily hide ... I know it's not much, but
it's the best I can do, my gift is my song and this one's for you." The lyrics anticipate the song von Trier offers in the end: a resounding, if not triumphant, ringing of bells on high. Perhaps this image is nothing more than another picture postcard with a love song, perhaps not.

Although many critics\textsuperscript{17} found the bells in the final scene as excessively melodramatic, taxing the viewers' ability to suspend disbelief, I see them well within von Trier's moral vision and filmic imagination. Like the postcards that mark chapter breaks, the image of the bells offers an alternative perspective on the immutable Law and Word preached in the church. For von Trier, the bells affirm the possibility of beauty, pleasure and desire. From the beginning, they are associated with Bess and her transgressive choices. Three scenes focus on the absence or presence of bells. The first takes place immediately after the marriage ceremony. Jan's friend and best man, Terry, who is also an outsider and non-believer, says to one of the elders standing in front of the church, "Ring the bells then!" The disapproving elder replies, "our church has no bells." Looking up at the steeple, Terry say, "Not too fun, is it." Signifying the community's refusal to affirm desire, to experience pleasure, the church steeple - a traditional symbol of male power, is without a bell, impotent by choice. In the second instance, after a church service, Jan asks the pastor why there are no bells in the belfry. The pastor explains that, "Bells are man's work. We do not need bells in our church to
worship God” (BW 37). Ever the transgressing voice, Bess whispers to Jan that she had once heard bells, and found them beautiful. She wonders whether she and Jan could put them back. Ironically, the only bell actually heard during the film is the clanging bell on the boat that ferries Bess to the big ship where she is assaulted.

Effectively, both Bess and the bells are silenced by the church elders. Neither is welcomed to participate in church services. In Chapter Seven, Bess enters the church dressed like a prostitute as the pastor addresses the congregation with the admonition that to achieve perfection it is necessary to love the Word and the Law unconditionally. Breaking the law with her transgressing voice, she answers from the back of the church: "I don't understand what you are saying. How can you love a word? You cannot love words. You cannot be in love with words. You can love another human being. That's perfection!" Echoing the elder's, "Our church has no bells," the minister responds: "No women speak here!"

The symbolic association between Bess and the bells leads logically to the final scene. Silenced in death, the cast-out Bess is refused a proper burial because her transgressions are judged by elders as reason enough for eternal damnation. However, Jan, who believes in her goodness and in the fact that she saved his life by sacrificing her own, steals her body in order to bury her at sea. Perhaps Bess's
final transgression is her escape from the damning law of the Father. Salvation -
the reward for her unconditional love - is visualized in the 'miracle' of the bells. If
women (and bells) are silenced in life, they are given a voice in death - outside the
church's sphere of influence. The bells, after all, ring out over the ocean. Does
von Trier expect this symbol to be taken literally? I doubt it. Can it be interpreted
as an ironic or even cynical interpretation of the status of women in patriarchal
religious traditions? I believe that it can. Does he see an imminent "alteration to
the social conditions that demean ..." women? Probably not.

Arguably, von Trier toys with traditional Christian notions of sacrifice and
miracles, but he deliberately subverts them through his implicit criticism of
organized or denominational religions that disallow that which he values most:
freedom, art, pleasure, desire and sensuality. In Breaking the Waves, he creates a
quasi-religious fable for our times which resonates with aspects of literary fantasy
as described by Jackson. In Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion, she writes that
"fantasy characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from
cultural constraints.

It is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as
absence or loss."18 Portraying the religious community as one that silences
women, discriminates against outsiders, has strict rules for separating the saved
from the dammed, von Trier offers a critique of these practices by articulating
what they lack - empathy and compassion. The fantasy or 'miracle' of the bells makes present the absent church bells and gives voice to the silenced Bess. The fantastical - the literature of desire - is a compensatory sublime that speaks for the possibilities rejected by the dominant community.

The 'miracle' of the bells is ineluctably connected to Bess's sexual transgressions. Her most serious transgression, the reason she was cast out, I would argue, is not the fact that she prostituted herself. Rather, it is the pleasure she took in her sexual intimacy with Jan. This pleasure was so great that they both believed it to be life-giving. After the accident, Jan is convinced that having lost his ability to have sexual intercourse, he will die if he can no longer experience sexual pleasure. The pleasure he describes is not only related to their physical intimacy but also to the psychic and spiritual intimacy that is essential to their love. After all, the 'phone sex' they shared when he was on the rig allowed them great satisfaction. Whether or not Jan asks her to take lovers because he is heavily medicated or because the injury created a mental imbalance is not the issue. What matters, it seems to me, is what Bess believes to be the power of her unconditional love. Jan says: "Love is a mighty power." He also believes that without the pleasure of sexual love his life will be deprived of what is necessary for his very existence.
Just as Bess cannot readily be judged through dualistic categories, their love also resists any physical/spiritual dualism. Body and spirit are one. To take pleasure in one is to satisfy the other. In response to Dr. Richardson's anger that she is prostituting herself to satisfy Jan, "a dirty old man who wants to play the peeping Tom," Bess tells Dr. Richardson, "Jan and me have a spiritual contact" (BW 103). "I choose for myself ... To give Jan his dreams ... don't make love with them. I make love with Jan. And I save him from dying" (BW 103)

Bess's choice to have sex with other men as a way of saving Jan's life puts a transgressive spin on the traditional understanding of the proper purpose of sex: procreation. Their sexual intimacy can never again have reproduction as its goal; yet, ironically, it is, nevertheless, a matter of life (or death). If women's bodies and lives are traditionally valued as commodities or tokens of exchange, in this instance, von Trier complicates the issue considerably. He recognizes both the traditional role of women and subverts it by giving it a higher, spiritual calling.

But is von Trier convincing? Does he really expect viewers to see Bess as a woman acting on her own behalf or is she merely one more woman who loses her self and gives up her life to satisfy a man's needs? Furthermore, and perhaps even more perversely, through a curious thea-logical sleight of hand, von Trier expects viewers to accept the idea that a woman can give up her body for the salvation of a man. Jan's salvation is inscribed, or perhaps incised, on Bess's body
by the man who rapes and kills her. The cuts she suffers are marks of both punishment and resistance. For women, agency and freedom come at a price. Bess's choice to prostitute herself to save Jan is punished by the brethren who cast her out, and by the rapist/slusher whose needs she doesn't satisfy. If the scars of rejection and banishment inscribed on her body by the elders are invisible, the slash's are painfully visible. In both cases, men do what they think Bess deserves, what she 'asked for' by not playing by their rules.

Furthermore, von Trier extends the idea of Bess as savior by suggesting a kind of phallic cross-dressing. Believing absolutely in the power of prayer, Bess is convinced that because she prayed for Jan's early return without specifying a safe return, god punished her for her impatience. Therefore, she believes that she is responsible for the accident and, by extension, for his impotence. From the traditional religious and psychoanalytical perspectives that attribute to women the power to castrate men, it seems possible to read von Trier's choice of injury for Jan in relation to the larger religio-cultural issues that he raises in the film. Arguably, Bess takes responsibility not only of saving Jan's life, but also for making amends for his impotence. Within Bess's traditional world, she is permitted neither voice nor desire. Yet, as Adams writes, "Desire is engendered by difference."\(^{19}\) Furthermore, "desire is the investing of the object with erotic value, this investment is not made in relation to difference as such, but in relation
to a gendered difference. The object's erotic value is dependent on the question of whether the man or the woman has the phallus.”

Von Trier problematizes the 'ownership' of the phallus. In the beginning, Bess transgresses community and family values, marries an outsider and engages in a highly erotic sexual relationship with her husband. Jan possesses the phallus/penis which Bess regards with awe when she first sees it and which continues to focalize her desire and their sexual intimacy. Furthermore, Jan works on an oil rig whose huge phallic drill bores deeply through the ocean waters into (mother)earth's core. Her mother tells her that she, like all other women, must endure absence - the lack of access to the phallus. Bess, however, balks at the idea of enduring lack; she wants Jan back. The compensatory phone-sex in which they indulge in a phone booth virtually at the church door transgresses the communal exhortation to endure absence. Bess's desire is eroticized; she pines for her husband's penis and for her own pleasure. Once Jan is impotent, Bess accepts responsibility for the phallus. Her eroticized desire focuses on keeping Jan alive. As a woman, she is without a penis. But, as a woman who desires for her husband to live, she appropriates his power of creation/procreation: the phallus. She strikes a bargain with god to prove that she loves Jan enough to save his life. She gambles her sex for his life. In the last scene, sex, the phallus and the bells are reconnected. As she gives Jan his life in return for her own, Von Trier imagines
Bess's womanly body transfigured into huge bronze womb-like vessels that contain within them the phallic ringer giving voice to her desire. Ironically, the sound of the bells is heard over the ocean and on the oil rig, not in the church that refused her the right to speak.

**Conclusion**

In the preface to von Trier's film script of *Breaking the Waves*, Stig Workman notes that the question the writer-director explores is: "Can we believe in miracles?" Furthermore, he writes that von Trier sees this film as a "sensual melodrama ... a violent passion play about religious dogmatism and erotic obsession where physical love is endowed with life-giving powers of healing." What 'miracle' is von Trier asking viewers to believe? Owing to his rejection of religious dogmatism and literal-mindedness, surely he is not suggesting that viewers believe in the literal transfiguration of Bess into the bells. Metaphorically, how does this 'miracle' signify? Is Bess to be interpreted as a martyr for misguided male sexual desire? Is her choice, in the end, a perversion? Or does it affirm her faith in the possibility that "physical love is indeed endowed with life-giving powers of healing"?

To my mind, Bess is not a martyr. Recounting Reik's writings on masochism and martyrdom, Adams identifies three characteristics of martyrdom:
1) identification with the divine figure; 2) longing for pain in his name; and 3) postponement of pleasure till the next world. Bess herself doesn't identify with a divine martyr. The closest she comes is through god's suggestion that neither her sexual sins, nor those of Mary Magdalene, exclude her from his favorable attention. Her resistance to the pain that enduring Jan's absence will bring, as well as her unwillingness to 'sacramentalize' that pain, argues against any notion of longing to suffer 'in his name'. In the end, Bess is a very ordinary woman. Although she does engage in conversations with god, there is little evidence that she believes in an afterlife where her desires will be gratified. Her desires are far too connected with the materiality of life and sexual intimacy. Furthermore, she accepts being cast out rather than give up her faith in her ability to save his life - a faith in her own powers to heal and sustain life.

Von Trier's eroticization of Bess's religious faith as well as his sacramentalization of her sexual intimacy with Jan affirms the transgressive nature of Bess's goodness as it condemns the self-righteousness dogmatism of the church elders. Arguably, for von Trier, perversion is not Bess's problem. She does not, as Dr. Richardson writes, "g(i)ve way in an obsessive fashion to a perverse form of sexuality." Rather, perversion is the elders' problem; because they pervert the true nature of religion that von Trier associates with faith, passion and goodness. In *Breaking the Waves*, von Trier makes the case that as long as a "truly
revolutionary alteration to the social conditions” is still in the future, women will continue to pay with their lives for the sins of the fathers. Whether Bess is a victim of patriarchy or whether she is heroic in her choice to live and die on her own terms is a question that viewers will invariably need to answer for themselves.

1 Breaking the Waves, written and directed by Lars von Trier, 1996. The screenplay, Breaking the Waves (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1996), will be cited parenthetically as BW with page numbers. Since there are several differences between the film and screenplay, quotations from the dialogue in the film will be cited parenthetically as BW without page numbers.


4 For a study of women's films of the nineteen forties see: Mary Ann Doane, The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press,1987).

5 My reading of film is informed by a number of feminist film theorists. Among the most significant are: Teresa De Lauretis, Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics. Film (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); Teresa De Lauretis, Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory. Film and Fiction (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987); Mary Ann Doane, The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987); Constance Penley, ed. Feminism and Film Theory (New York: Routledge, 1988).

6 See: E. C. S., Breaking the Waves, in Out, June 1997, p. 81. I would like to thank Marilyn Reizbaum, my friend and colleague, for the many hours of heated discussion around this very vexing issue.

3 David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), chap. 4. Symptomatic interpretation is described as follows: Whether sources of meaning are intrapsychic to broadly cultural, they lie outside the conscious control of the individual who produces the utterance.... Repressed meaning is what no speaker will own up to" (72).

9 Lars Van Trier, "Director's Note - This Film is About 'Good'," in *Breaking the Waves* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1996), pp. 20ff.


11 In an article titled "Traces of the 'Other' in Household Saints" to be published in a special issue of *Literature and Theology* on religion and film (1988), I used the categories suggested by Linda M. G. Zerilli, *Signifying Woman* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 1. She writes that woman signifies as both "culture and chaos" she is "... the radical sexual other...," "... a cipher, a series of absences to be filled ....," "... energy to be harnessed ....," woman is both "the site of sociosymbolic stabilization and destabilization...."'


15 de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender*, pp. ix-x.


17 For example, Johnson, *Breaking the Waves*, p. 94.

18 Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London and New York: Methuen, 1981), p. 3. This book was brought to my attention by Meghan Murphy, a student who worked with me in the spring of 1997 on an independent study research project focusing on gender and film.


20 Ibid.