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## Lars Von Trier's Cinema: Excess, Evil, and the Prophetic Voice

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## Lars Von Trier's Cinema: Excess, Evil, and the Prophetic Voice

### Abstract

This is a book review of Rebecca Ver Straten-McSparran, *Lars Von Trier's Cinema: Excess, Evil, and the Prophetic Voice* (Routledge, 2021).

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### Author Notes

Jeanette Reedy Solano is author of *Religion and Film: The Basics* (Routledge, 2022) and former Co-chair of the Religion, Film, and Visual Culture Unit in the American Academy of Religion. She earned her Ph.D. from the University of Chicago and has served as a film critic for Sundance and other film festivals. She is an Associate Professor at California State University, Fullerton, USA.

**Ver Straten-McSparran, Rebecca, *Lars Von Trier's Cinema: Excess, Evil, and the Prophetic Voice* (Routledge, 2021).**

Rebecca Ver Straten-McSparran's *Lars Von Trier's Cinema: Excess, Evil, and the Prophetic Voice* is a densely argued analysis of the prophetic voice that emerges from von Trier's *oeuvre*. It is not an auteur study per se; rather it turns to the content and style of the works themselves, honing in on spiritual conflict, to highlight the prophetic voice that confronts viewers and forces them to examine evil both within and without. Its scope is ambitious and it assumes familiarity with a wide variety of thinkers: from Edmund Husserl, Vivian Sobchack, Slavoj Zizek, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to the more philosophical and theological work of Paul Ricoeur, Ben Quash, and Walter Brueggemann. The author argues that von Trier's body of work is provocative and prophetic, much like the biblical Hebrew prophet Ezekiel. Her elucidation of the parallels between Ezekiel and von Trier, especially embodied prophetic acts, is compelling.

### **Contribution of the Study**

Ver Straten-McSparran is correct when she notes the paucity of book-length treatments of the theological and religious dimensions of von Trier's work; however, this is changing.<sup>1</sup> This volume is part of the Routledge Studies in Religion and Film monograph series which began in 2015 and now boasts eighteen titles.<sup>2</sup> The series, edited by Robert K. Johnston and Jolyon Mitchell, is unique in that it produces both in-depth auteur studies and topical or thematic texts, both single-authored and edited volumes. These works are written for both scholars and graduate students in theology, religious studies, film studies and the humanities at large. Many titles began as doctoral dissertations and accordingly the bibliographies and notes are fecund. Samples of recent topical titles in the series include *Transcendence and Spirituality in Japanese Cinema: Framing Sacred*

*Spaces* by Melissa Croteau (2022) and *Film and the Afterlife* by David Rankin (2019) as well as edited collections of essays such as *New Approaches to Islam in Film* edited by Kristian Petersen (2023). Ver Straten-McSparran's study on von Trier joins other volumes in this series that focus on the work on one filmmaker including *The Dardenne Brothers' Cinematic Parables: Integrating Theology, Philosophy, and Film* by Joel Mayward (2022) and *Theology and the Films of Terrence Malick* edited by Christopher B. Barnett and Clark J. Elliston (2016).

Studies within the field of Religion and Film have tended to offer in-depth studies solely on famous European or North American male filmmakers of European descent (Bergman, Dreyer, Malick, Kiesłowski, Tarkovsky, etc.). Despite profiling yet another white male European filmmaker, Ver Straten-McSparran should be applauded for delving into von Trier's cinema of excess which most Christian scholars avoid due to the graphic nature of his films: scenes depicting a woman cutting off her clitoris with a pair of rusty scissors (She in *Antichrist*) or a woman being raped and beaten until dead (Bess in *Breaking the Waves*) are not the usual fodder for theological exegesis. As the author acknowledges, von Trier's films are referred to as "extreme cinema." Film critic Donald Clark refers to von Trier as the "arch-provocateur of Danish nihilism." Many viewers simply walk out of his graphic films in protest (Cannes screenings of *The House that Jack Built* in 2018 for example) and von Trier revels in evoking revulsion in viewers.<sup>3</sup> Yet Ver Straten-McSparran argues his films confront us with authentic embodied realities which force viewers to examine themselves and "excavate evil." She suggests that the apparent misogyny and graphic sexuality might be read as ironic, even comedic, and should be understood as provocation to deeper questioning. The theological value of von Trier's work, according to the author, lies in the effect on spectators; i.e., the ethical and ontological introspection that may be provoked. Bolstered by the perception theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Vivian Sobchack, the author helps us

combine biblical scholarship with a broadly phenomenological approach to aesthetics when evaluating von Trier's films. She finds meaning in spectators' trauma, arguing that von Trier purposively traumatizes viewers in order to "irreparably shake their paradigms of evil" and expose their complicity in the evil being explored in the spiritual conflict. She goes as far as to propose that von Trier's disruptive work is fruitful for theological reflection as it is analogically similar to the provocative, uncomfortable work of the Hebrew prophet Ezekiel who sought the attention of the Israelites with extreme acts and visuals.

### **Summary and Highlights**

Chapter 1 is devoted to outlining Ezekiel's mission and method as well as referencing Ricoeur's hermeneutics of revelation. The role of the Holy Spirit in prophecy is also central to the chapter. Prophets are vessels, not the source of prophecy, and Ver Straten-McSparran is clear she is not arguing that von Trier is a prophet. Most relevant within her summary of the role and method of biblical prophets is her assertion that all prophecy is contextual and a prophet's role is to disturb and expose people's sins. Ezekiel's performative sign-acts would have been physically revolting to witness: bread baked in feces, being bound by ropes on one side for 390 days, shaving his head with a sword until his scalp was bloody and raw, etc. Such images are comparable to the extreme embodied abuse and exposure of bodies in von Trier's films. The chapter concludes with reflection on the role of the Holy Spirit in the prophetic task of unmasking the idols of the people and in personal conviction.

The second chapter highlights affinities between authors Dante, Milton, Dostoyevsky, and O'Connor, and filmmakers Tarkovsky and von Trier. While as a former English major I appreciate the many connections made in this chapter, at times it felt like a gallop, and I think that the study

as a whole would have been better served by selecting perhaps three artist-prophets and elucidating their connections to von Trier alone. I found Ver Straten-McSparran's parallels between Flannery O'Connor, Tarkovsky, and von Trier the most compelling not only in this chapter, but throughout the book as a whole.

Chapters 3 and 4 are the interpretive heart and soul of this study and highly original. She focuses on the parallels between the films and Ezekiel's narrative structures and themes with special attention given to the theme of evil. The comparison utilizes Paul Ricoeur's ideas associated with evil: defilement, guilt, and sin. Like Ezekiel's prophesy, the author reads von Trier's films as works that "prophesy" against sin, grotesquely highlighting human defilement. The author offers nuanced and detailed readings of diverse von Trier works such as *Nymphomaniac* Volumes 1 and 2 and his television series *The Kingdom* in conversation with Ezekiel. Her interpretation of both *Dogville* and *Melancholia* are skillful and thought-provoking. The congruencies highlighted between von Trier's films and Ezekiel's narrative prophecies are intriguing.

Von Trier's style and especially his use of nonverbal acts, symbols, and embodied aesthetics are the focus of chapter 4. The author posits that the extreme violence and excess of von Trier's films, like Ezekiel's prophecy, are necessary to shock a hardened and numb audience. In this chapter the symbols, images, sound, and style are analyzed in four films with an expert technical eye and ear.

The volume ends with an extended rumination on von Trier's 2009 film *Antichrist* which many readers may find the most illustrative chapter in the book. The method and ideas in the four preceding chapters culminate in this final chapter. *Antichrist* is a profoundly honest story of guilt, loss, idolatry, and evil. The inciting incident is the couple's (She and He) sudden loss of their

toddler son who falls from a window while they are making love. I remember watching it in 2009 and being haunted by the lyrical images as well as the deep psychological and theological issues that it raised. Ver Straten-McSparran reads *Antichrist* as a “treatise on evil”—supernatural evil, nature as evil, and sin (or evil) within and between human beings. Coming from a Christian standpoint, the author sees Satan as a literal force both in the world and in the film—von Trier suggests this, but leaves it open to interpretation. The character She certainly believes in a Satan with nature as his “church” and the wind as his “breath.” The author sees the film as a tale of possession, not madness, and here we have yet another instance of how a spiritual interpretation may alienate some readers. Though a murderous tale of possession, Ver Straten-McSparran ultimately interprets *Antichrist* as a story in which love triumphs over evil through death and sacrifice. Her argument that the film represents Danish Lutheran views on atonement, influenced by Eastern Orthodoxy as opposed to substitutionary atonement, is intriguing and persuasive. Viewing *Antichrist* through an Orthodox lens of atonement that highlights Jesus’ descent into hell and his salvation of humans is revelatory and engaging.

One of the unique contributions of this study of von Trier’s cinema of excess is the nuanced reading of *Antichrist*. Her explications of symbols, such as the blackbird, aids viewers in appreciating the many layers of the film. Not only does she offer a thick description of this “destabilizing confrontation” of a film, but her background in film production equips her to detail the aesthetics of image, sound, and style in ways few in the field can match. For example, she notes the frequent focus pulls in the Prologue and the “elegantly slow and caressing” effect of the Red camera’s 1000 frames per second. She highlights and expounds on the use of light and draws parallels with Tarkovsky’s *Mirror*. Her analysis of sound design and its impact on the viewer is

also illuminating. Most academics in religion and film are not trained to notice these precise cinematic elements and the author's background in film production deepens her analysis.

### **Final Thoughts**

The work has many strengths. Her authorial voice and original theses are crystal clear. She constructs the volume well by first grounding the reader in the world and mission of Hebrew prophets, Ezekiel in particular, as well as Ricoeur's typology for understanding symbols of evil and pneumatology. By comparing von Trier to artists such as Dante, Milton, Dostoyevsky, Flannery O'Connor, and Tarkovsky she widens her conversation partners further. The study really shines in chapters three and four devoted to the aesthetics of prophecy, narrative, image, sound, and style wherein she offers nuanced examples from a wide variety of his films and television productions. Finally, the author culminates her study with an in-depth analysis of one of von Trier's most disturbing and difficult films, *Antichrist*.

While I discern how each element of the book is a vital part of her design to reveal the prophetic voice which emerges from von Trier's *oeuvre*, per my view, the scope and examples are at times excessive and the 258-page book could have been trimmed down. More theologically inclined readers may be drawn to the first two chapters and students of von Trier may be naturally drawn to chapters three through five. Instructors of Religion and Film courses will find rich fodder in various chapters, but many undergraduates may struggle with the advanced style and expected foreknowledge.

My second advisory is related to audience. The author invites secular film theorists to engage her analysis, yet it is clearly written from a Christian orientation which may put off readers who do not share this worldview. For example, Ver Straten-McSparran unapologetically speaks of the Spirit as active in the world today. The paraclete's agency, biblical truth, and an



understanding of a God in close relation with humankind are foundational to the study. Just as Christian scholars in religion and film benefit from familiarity with a wide array of secular film theorists and philosophers, I urge secular film scholars to consider this edifying reading of von Trier as the author's exegesis of the prophetic voice that can be experienced in his films is highly original and thought-provoking.

In sum, Ver Straten-McSparran's groundbreaking book is a welcome addition to a subfield of study which too often plays it safe with the filmmakers and films they consider in-depth. In this careful study, she does precisely what I challenge scholars of Religion and Film to do more of in order to advance the field: "religion scholars who wish to explore film should ground themselves in film history, study film mechanics and explore critical film theory...[as well as] the basics of film production: production design, cinematography, sound design, etc."<sup>4</sup> Ver Straten-McSparran combines all of these areas with aplomb in *Lars Von Trier's Cinema: Excess, Evil, and the Prophetic Voice*. This contribution to the canon of Religion and Film scholarship is an excellent example of multi-disciplinary fearlessness and offers a unique biblical, filmic, and theological approach to an important contemporary artist whose films force us to grapple with life's big questions even if they make us uncomfortable by exposing modern hypocrisy, idolatry, and evil.

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<sup>1</sup> Morgan Meis and J.M. Tyree's *Wonder, Horror, Mystery: Letters on Cinema and Religion in Malick, Von Trier, and Kieślowski*. Punctum Books, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv26qjjqn> is one recent example and there are many peer-reviewed book chapters and journal articles that address everything from redemption to eschatology to evil in von Trier's work.

<sup>2</sup>To peruse the diverse titles in this superb series visit <https://www.routledge.com/Routledge-Studies-in-Religion-and-film/bookseries/RSIRAF?publishedFilter=alltitles&pd=published.forthcoming&pg=1&pp=12&so=pub&view=list>.

<sup>3</sup>Donald Clark, "Lars Von Trier: 'I am disappointed only 100 people vomited' The arch provocateur on his divisive film *The House that Jack Built*, misogyny and Björk" *The Irish Times* September 7, 2018, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/lars-von-trier-i-am-disappointed-only-100-people-vomited-1.3719920>

<sup>4</sup> Jeanette Reedy Solano, *Religion and Film: The Basics*, Oxford: Routledge Press, 2021, 187.