

Film Screenings at the Danish Institute at Athens

Screening on the 23rd of May 2017, "Breaking the waves" directed by Lars Von Trier

The beginning of Danish filmhistory can be traced back to the period of early silent cinema. Historical research (Cherchi Usai by Geoffrey N. Smith, 1997: 131) has proven that shortly after 1910, Scandinavian countries like Sweden and Denmark, despite their small size of inhabitants (less than two and half million inhabitants in Denmark in 1901) and little financial power, played a great role in the development of early cinema at an artistic as well as commercial level. The founding of the film company *Nordisk* in Denmark in 1906 was a landmark, being the second biggest cinematic company after the French *Pathe*, with the oldest preserved cinema studio in the world.

Danish Pioneer directors as Stellan Rye ("The Student from Pragh", 1913) and Urban Gad ("The Abyss", 1910) enter the scene dynamically with their new light techniques and camera position as well as directory practicalities – a manifestly and enduring influence on International Film production. In the same period, we are introduced to the great Danish actor Asta Nielsen, who, according to historian Janet Bergstrøm, incarnated in her own outstanding way a great variety of roles (Bergstrøm by Smith, 1997: 26). The tight relations between German and Danish cinema is imprinted in the issues and the creation of existentialistic art of the camera with the characteristic "stimmung/atmosphere" as a result, meaning the creation of the appropriate atmosphere with a connotative vibration of the soul through the use of lights (Eisner, 1987: 190). In the decade between 1910 and 1929, the "invasion" of the Danes in the German cinematic enterprise, creates a powerful dynamic tradition promoting German cinema with an international resonance. This explains why Modern Danish cinema of today is considered powerful and responsive to the framework of European as well as International cinema.

Our first screening on the 9th of January 2017 of the movie "Gertrude" by Carl Theodor Dreyer, who was an emblematic and exploring Danish director with a huge influence on the creators of International cinema but similarly on today's director.

We have chosen to screen "Breaking the waves" (1996) directed by the most important director of Modern Danish cinema, award winning Lars Von Trier, who together with director Thomas Vinterberg created Dogma 95.

Trier and Vinterberg made a great impression in Paris in 1995 when they presented their idea of a new cinema, controvert and with no limits as to cinematic aesthetics and filmographic borders. Dogma meant the essential overthrow of cinematic rules, the so-called *mise en scene*. According to its founders, the Dogma movement was the presentation of "naked truth" through an ultimate realistic dramaturgy with natural lighting, handheld camera - a rejection of the melodramatic and beautified form. The plausibility of the story is emphasized by the power of the script as well the performing of the actors. A genuine proof of this is Thomas Vinterbergs movie "Festen" (The party) from 1998 (Borckwell, Thomson, 2011: 713).

Similarly, the perception of the Dogma-95 can be found in other movements within history of cinema, for example in the Italian and French neorealism. The development of cinematic means as a heterogeneous semiotic system proves that there is no such thing as a "golden manual" when telling a story in a movie, on the contrary the director uses any means to pass on his message.

According to *The Introduction to the art of cinema by Bordwell and Thompson*, Lars Von Trier stood out from the rest of European Filmmakers with this movie and was awarded with the Price for best movie at the Cannes Festival, making him one of the most important filmmakers in the world with his unique style of filming. The theme of the movie could easily have developed into a melodrama but "the *elliptical filmmaking of Von Trier (in the cinema verite genre) with interludes of hallucinatory landscapes, create an emotional telling of a reciprocal love story distant from the aversion of the community" (Bordwell and Thompson 2011:712). Lars Von Trier creates his own film style with the handheld camera (especially in the scene of the accident the camera is moving in an almost frantic way) with certain ingredients of postmodern aesthetics (with references to the American series *Homocide Life on the streets* and modern pop and rock music). The director has claimed, "a good movie should be like a stone in a shoe, in order to bother the consciousness of the audience". Von Trier initially shot the movie in 35mm, transferred into a video film in order to remove most of the colour and finished it by transferring it into the final film. The unconventional style of a handheld camera combined with an anamorphic picture on the wide screen create a profound optical result in many parts of the movie (Bordwell, Thompson 2011: 712)

Even though the movie is characterised by formal innovations, it is a genuine "Dreyerian" movie. Von Trier expresses that in every phase of his career, his role model has been Th. Dreyer and his influence is obvious in many parts of the movie:

Female model: The female protagonist is Bes (played by Emily Watson) who is characterised by contradiction and divergence - "she is different". The small community considers her behaviour scandalous. Her suffering and torment as well as her bravery and sacrifices refer to great Dreyerian female heroes (such as in "The Word", "Day of Wrath" and "The passion of Joan of Arc"). The movie is a hymn to true love and emotional expression (*Amor Omnia in Gertrude*).

Another important female in the movie is Dodo (played by Kathrine Catlidge) who is characterised by courage, independence, genuine love and capability.

Religion: The presentation of Christian Church with its hard and brutal patriarchal face based on punishment, control and suppression of (sexual) needs but with emphasis on belief, forgiveness and true love. Bes expresses herself to the Church with powerful words opposite "the seniors". "How can you love speech, the word and not human beings?" Dodo explodes at them at Bes funeral "You have no right to send Bes to hell".

There are contradictions in the tight rationalism and disciplinary power of Medicine, showing that when separated from humanity it proves to be worthless and catastrophic.

The outcome of this movie reflects the contradictions that we may see in the presentation of the female heroes in all Von Trier's movies. The female protagonist must die because she is intuitive, powerful and passionate – she sacrifices herself for the one she loves. Bes must like the ancient Iphigeneia sacrifice herself so that Jan can live and her body must be thrown into the sea. In the movie "Dancing in the dark" with Bjork as the female protagonist, she sacrifices herself so that her child can live.

**elliptical filmmaking:* Certain parts of a scene is skipped in the shooting, creating a decline in the duration of the plot and the story

Central female roles and the tragedy that they reflect in Lars Von Triers movies, is an issue of great interest.

Sources:

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