

## **NOTE ON *DANCER IN THE DARK***

**Paul Willemen**

Von Trier's film opened the Edinburgh International Film Festival in 2000, preceded by fulsome praise from the festival's artistic director, Lizzie Francke, who claimed that the film proved that cinema in the new millennium had great and artistic things to offer. The Von Trier-group's manifesto, called a 'Vow Of Chastity', received positive comments in a journal as prestigious as *The New Left Review* and was promoted by a film school in Wales as a model for young film makers in Britain.

I have a problem with the adulation of Von Trier's films. The Cannes Festival is a notorious event dedicated to the celebration and promotion of films made by and for those who dearly would like to achieve the money-making capacity of a Spielberg. These people and their retinue of hustlers accorded their highest honours to Von Trier's films. Twice. Evidently, some people generally describable as 'on the left' also want us to endorse and acclaim Von Trier's films. Why? Is it that the films are, in fact, exemplary for us on the left and that the money-grubbing businessmen and their retinue in Cannes made a stupid mistake? Twice?

Or is it that the films are despicable and we as lefties, if we bring to bear our intellectual abilities, can do something with them? If the latter, then we have two options. We may be able to derive pleasure from exercising our intellectual abilities, reading the films against the grain and thus achieving gratification from mental skills. The pleasures involved in such an exercise are genuine and not to be dismissed. However, they are the pleasures of self gratification. This may be, under the circumstances, an appropriate activity, given that we are dealing with the consequences of a vow of chastity. But why perform such an act of self gratification in public? Why publish the traces of such an activity in journals? Why perform that kind of activity on the platform of a conference in front of students?

Pleasures are not easy to come by, and when there are some to be had, then, by all means, let's have them. But keep it to yourself. The spectacle of someone's self gratification is not at all gratifying to the rest of us. The second thing we can do, legitimately in public, with Von Trier's films, as indeed with the films of Leni Riefenstahl or Michael Winner or anyone else, is to use them as raw material with which to perform a reading aiming to help readers to understand what is going on, that is to say, what must be happening in the realm of industrialised cultural production for films like these to receive such acclaim from the very people who have nothing but contempt for understanding (after all, these are people in the entertainment business, as they never tire of repeating). In this respect, Von Trier's films are to be read as symptoms of something to be resisted. It would be easy to do a reading demonstrating that many of the Dogme films constitute barely cloaked attempts to come to terms with a desire to abuse children (or barely adult people, mostly female, with learning

difficulties). Such a reading would be legitimate, even obvious. But it would be too depressing for words if that were the only or even the main reason why his films received such acclaim by the industrialists and their sycophants who rule Cannes. Most of these people would vehemently deny that they are fascinated by and have immense difficulty controlling a desire to abuse children (or 'innocents' of whatever stripe). As indeed would Von Trier and his clique, no doubt.

Perhaps the films ought to be read in the context of success stories such as the gross stuff churned out by the Farrelly brothers, or by the makers of *The Blair Witch Project*, that is to say: as examples of a type of cultural production that exemplifies the possibility of making superprofits at relatively little labour cost. In that respect, of course, Von Trier's films are an accountant's or a gambler's dream. And what is more, the child abuse theme, suitably disguised, of course, allows this cynical money-making enterprise to be endowed with 'cultural prestige'. What more can a European hustler want than money and prestige at the same time? Americans, as is obvious from the Farrelly films and the *Blair Witch* film, are content simply with the money.

If read in that context, what becomes important to notice in Von Trier's films is the relentless inflation of advertising techniques, here mostly deployed to advertise one and only one item: Von Trier himself as a directorial value on the cultural stock market. Camera positions are consistently divorced from narrative logic - thereby drawing attention to the narrator's godlike power to dispose of the world as he sees fit, scripts are reduced to manipulative cliches, cinematic space and time are destroyed in favour of snippets that can be combined and recombined until they have been emptied of all traces of a world other than that of the film maker's idiotic, sorry: idiosyncratic 'personal perspective', replete with pompous kitsch (evidenced most painfully in the pre-credit music of *Dancer in the Dark*).

If looked at in that light, it begins to make sense why Cannes and other festivals along with television executives and assorted hangers on should be so keen on us accepting Von Trier's films as exemplary, as the model to be imitated or followed in years to come. In that context, the child abuse theme merely provides the profit enhancing piquancy so prized by media institutions (demonstrated by *The News of the World*, a British tabloid, which also latched on to the theme of child abuse to enhance sales). It is still depressing to be confronted by evidence of cultural production being governed by such considerations, but no more depressing than, say, Riefenstahl's films were in their day. On that occasion, at least, we were allowed, indeed encouraged, to take some distance from the films in question. But, as Brecht once pointed out, there is no reason for complacency: the beast is still pregnant and slouching around Europe, regularly stopping at Cannes for a thorough grooming.

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