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A Tradition of Torturing Women

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When teaching courses in Scandinavian art cinema, particularly those that focus on film authorship, it is difficult to avoid the anxious question of why the most prominent Scandinavian directors of the 20th and 21st centuries seem so caught up in the representation of female suffering and sacrifice. It is certainly not the case that only Scandinavians turn to the representation of female sacrifice in their films; horror films everywhere, for instance, depend to a large degree on female sacrifice (Clover 1992). But given the (deserved) Scandinavian reputation for a progressive measure of gender equality, it is more than striking that the trope of the sacrificial woman links the work of the most prominent Scandinavian film directors as a kind of authorial inheritance: Ingmar Bergman's witch-burning in *The Seventh Seal* (1957) re-stages Carl Th. Dreyer's repeated witch-burnings in *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) and *Vredens dag* (*Day of Wrath*, 1943). Following Bergman and Dreyer, Lars von Trier forges an authorial persona largely identified with the torture and sacrifice of women, from *Breaking the Waves* (woman dies voluntarily at the hands of brutal rapists, 1996) to *Dancer in the Dark* (2000, woman elects execution to prevent her son from going blind), to *Dogville* (2003, woman is abused and repeatedly raped). At the conclusion of his *Antichrist* (2009), a woman who researches witch trials is herself burned on a funeral pyre. An article on von Trier's *Antichrist* asks "Antichrist, or just anti-women?" and the Danish director, always happy to project a controversial public image, responds, "I often wonder what would happen if I just came out and said, 'I hate women'?" (*Telegraph* 2009).

There are two interesting things about von Trier's answer, both of which lead into my discussion of Nordic film authorship and female sacrifice: first, the Danish director's casual and potentially ironic claim to misogyny finds a much more nuanced, complex, and paradoxical

representation in his cinematic works, and the same applies to all three of the directors who occupy center stage in my analysis: Carl Th. Dreyer, Ingmar Bergman, and Lars von Trier. They have all been labeled sadists and misogynists for their treatment of both female actors and female characters, but in the eyes of some critics, their films perform a critique of the patriarchy. And so one question to explore is how the torture and sacrifice of women relates to misogyny... if at all. Second, von Trier's comment leads one to consider the issue of cultural inheritance, since Scandinavian literature provides a prominent antecedent for the expression of (apparently) unabashed misogyny: the work of August Strindberg.¹ Bringing Strindberg into the discussion points toward an earlier starting point for the Nordic interest in staging female sacrifice, which extends into early silent cinema with such virgin-sacrifice narratives as Mauritz Stiller's *Herr Arnes pengar* (*Sir Arne's Treasure*, 1913). The central importance of "The Woman Question" in Scandinavian drama at the turn of the last century indicates that Nordic film directors may see themselves as inheritors of an earlier cultural project, one in which Scandinavian authors broke upon the world stage with daring violations of the gender and sexual codes of their time: Henrik Ibsen's Nora, for instance, who slams out of the doll house, leaving husband and children, or Strindberg's Laura, who drives her husband insane in order to take control of their child in *The Father*. And both Ibsen and Strindberg create sacrificial female characters as well, for whom death seems to be the only response to the strictures of their lives: *Miss Julie*, *Hedda Gabler*, Hedvig in *The Wild Duck*.

My argument is that the motif of the sacrificial woman marks a discernable line of inheritance from Ibsen and especially Strindberg to Dreyer, Bergman, and von Trier, though I will not spend time here on a close analysis of the work of the two playwrights. It is enough to note that a kind of discourse takes shape in which the younger playwright or filmmaker repeats and at the same time challenges the work of his predecessor(s), without being able to enter into dialogue, either because the elder is dead or because the elder refuses to answer. My emphasis on authorship as a construct within cinematic discourse is indispensable to this argument, because it

is the primacy of the author as master that triggers the urge in the younger, rising artist to respond to his predecessor and add to what becomes a tradition. My reader may recognize this notion as borrowed from Harold Bloom; I will elaborate on Bloom's argument below. At this juncture suffice it to say that the pattern of encountering silence or indifference when attempting to enter into a dialogue with the Master finds expression precisely within the narratives of these Scandinavian films featuring sacrificial women. Thus, as Elisabeth Bronfen notes, the suffering of women and the representation of the woman's dead body are displaced emblems; they both represent what they appear to be (tortured women) and point to something beyond what they appear to be – in this case, relationships among male authors within a tradition and, further, the human relationship with an absent divinity (Bronfen 1992).

Elsewhere I have proposed that the emergence of cinematic authors as the focal point of art cinema practice, reception, and criticism led to a culture of self-projection among these director/authors; that is, once films are imagined as emanating from an individual artist's imagination, the body of work produced by that artist is strongly associated with the artist's persona, and the artist's persona, the face he presents to the audience, is formed through his films (Rugg 2014). Dreyer articulates this notion himself in his short essay "A Little on Film Style" from 1943: "All art is a single person's work. But a film is created by a collectivity and a collectivity cannot create art unless an artistic personality stands behind it and acts as its driving force. [...] We directors have a very large responsibility [...] we must work to create a mark of style, a mark of personality in the film" (Dreyer 1973, 128).

At times some autobiographical details may enter into the film narratives of cinematic auteurs as a gesture toward the author's presence (Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander* fits that profile), or the director may himself appear as a figure in the narrative (as von Trier does, comically, in *Direktøren for det hele/The Boss of it All*). Another strong indicator of the director's presence as author occurs through intertextual reference. For instance, in *Les 400 coups (The 400 Blows)*, François Truffaut includes a sequence in which his two young protagonists steal a poster

for Bergman's film *Sommaren med Monika* (*Summer with Monika*, 1953), signaling in a broader sense the importance of Bergman's work for Truffaut. Bergman casts Victor Sjöström, one of Sweden's most important silent-era film directors, in *Smultronstället* (*Wild Strawberries*, 1957) and the opening dream sequence contains strong visual cues linking it to Sjöström's *Körkarlen* (*The Phantom Carriage*, 1921). Through such cross-references Truffaut and Bergman forge links between their own practice as cinematic authors and a tradition of film as high art.

Truffaut's presence in this argument makes clear that the art cinema author tradition (a tradition Truffaut himself defined as "la politique des auteurs," Truffaut 1955) is per definition an international one, but a look at films by the most broadly acclaimed Scandinavian art house directors reveals particularly strong links between them, which create a strong sense of transnational, regional cinema. The repeated staging of the torture and sacrifice of women is one such link, as is the accompanying meditation on the theological and ethical ramifications of human suffering. It is not only the discernable repetition of topoi and other aspects of the films themselves that forge the image of the director as author in the imagination of the spectator; an array of extra-textual practices, such as film scholarship, reviews, advertisement, awards, fan blogs, DVD "special features," and "making of" documentaries contribute to the sense of the author's persona and his position within a particular canon. What occurs in the case of the three directors I analyze here, is that their self-projections expand to form a kind of collective projection of Nordic film aesthetic and consciousness, at least in the experience of the art cinema audience. Among the three of them, it is Lars von Trier who not only acknowledges but promotes this idea in the public arena where authorial self-projection is forged.

While Carl Th. Dreyer and Ingmar Bergman seem mostly to ignore one another (for Bergman's denial of Dreyer's influence, see below), von Trier repeatedly claims a kinship with his two predecessors, a kinship that sometimes crosses into fetishism and involves a significant amount of public performance. He employs Dreyer's cameraman and, through the cameraman, procures Dreyer's tuxedo, which he then wears in cameo appearances in his 1994 television series

Riget (The Kingdom). He has himself filmed, praying, at Dreyer's grave; he claims to have had telepathic contact with Dreyer while creating a film version of Dreyer's script for *Medea* (Carl Th. Dreyer, *The Man and His Work*. 2010, Schepelern 2000). These public performances and statements are startlingly like Ingmar Bergman's report that he received a telephone call from the long-dead August Strindberg after the premiere of one of Bergman's productions of Strindberg's *A Dream Play*. He and Strindberg, he writes, met on Karlavägen in Stockholm, the street where Bergman moved into an apartment where Strindberg's used to stand: "I am relating all this as if it were a funny story, but naturally, deep within my childish mind I don't consider it a funny story at all" (Bergman 1987 235, my translation).² Both Bergman and von Trier, then, play a game of representing themselves as supernaturally linked to their aesthetic forebears, a game that the spectator is invited to receive either ironically ("a funny story") or seriously ("not funny at all"), or some odd combination of both. "Ghosts, demons, and other beings without name or known origin have surrounded me since childhood," Bergman writes, but the only ghost he identifies in his autobiography is the ghost that deeply influenced his work in film and theater: Strindberg. In an interview for *The Saturday Review* (December 31, 1961), when Bergman is asked to list the filmmakers who have inspired him, he cites Victor Sjöström as an important mentor, but then adds that "Karl [sic] Dreyer, the Danish director, has never been an influence. I find myself very remote from him and, in fact, his films have never touched me." In other words, Bergman claims that Dreyer leaves him cold, an assertion that might be filed under "protesting too much."

Lars von Trier's feeling for Bergman, if one puts credence in a 2012 Swedish television interview, oscillates between love and fury, but is never cold. I will cite it at length here, reminding the reader that von Trier is responding in Danish to questions asked in Swedish by a female interviewer, and that he modifies and explicates the Danish a bit, in order to make his points more clearly to the broader Swedish audience. The interview was subtitled in Swedish, as well; here I am giving my English translation of von Trier's concluding remarks:

But he has meant so much to me, the pig. I don't know how many fan letters I wrote to him, without a single answer [...] Now he's dead, and I can finally say, "Fuck Bergman [in English]. I'm 55, I'm finally going to live my own life." He didn't want any contact: fine. We'll forget Bergman. It was like with my father, who wasn't my real father and died before I could really talk to him. I had a little bit of the same relationship with Bergman, which is why it irritates me. Why couldn't the old bastard just say, "Come on up to Fårö [an island where Bergman spent the last years of his life in self-imposed isolation], and we can chat for a while." That's what makes me mad, that he never did. [Pause] But I love him, too, of course. [Von Trier seems moved, almost in tears. Pauses. Interviewer wonders: "Is that it?" Von Trier laughs.] Yeah. But fuck Bergman [English].

For an argument like mine, von Trier's remarks are overdetermined. What more can one say when an artist compares his dead predecessor to his dead father? It seems that Lars von Trier may have unwittingly (or wittingly) taken a page from Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*, where Bloom proposes that poets (in my analysis, film authors) working within a tradition must overthrow their father/predecessors through the reinterpretation (a "misreading," as Bloom would have it – "misprision") of the artistic forebear's work.

Von Trier's well-documented love of irony, performance (are those real tears?), and self-projection leads one to wonder whether the interview might not at least in part be an elaborate joke on a Swedish public eager to document Bergman's importance for contemporary cinema. (Particularly a segment of the interview in which von Trier enthusiastically pantomimes Bergman as an ancient masturbator strikes one as suspicious.) But a serious, Bloomian interpretation may work alongside the ironic one. SVT's title for the interview was the somewhat pathetic "He never answered my fan letters," a direct quote from von Trier. Anyone with an interest in Nordic literature could in all probability name another famous rivalry in which a similar imbalanced relationship occurs: Henrik Ibsen (the elder playwright) and August Strindberg (the younger

ephebe, to use Bloom's terminology). Ibsen was a little more than twenty years older than Strindberg (thus old enough to be his father). They never met (Strindberg as a young man saw Ibsen once on the street in Stockholm, but was too shy to approach). Strindberg grew desperate in a suspended state of both knowing that Ibsen knew his work, but never hearing anything from Ibsen about it. The silence between them produced a high level of anxiety and then hostility in Strindberg, who imagined that Ibsen was using details from Strindberg's personal life in his plays, that he was plagiarizing Strindberg. He writes infamously in a letter of his influence on Ibsen: "Do you now see that my seed has fallen into Ibsen's brain-pan – and fertilized! Now he carries my seed and is my uterus!" (letters, 10 March 1891, to Birger Mörner). The paternal, gender, and sexual implications of Strindberg's remark have not gone unstudied (see for instance Olsson 1997). Thus von Trier's description of his (non-)relationship to Bergman (and the sexualization of his representation of Bergman) is not unfamiliar; it belongs to a tradition of Nordic authorship.

Bloom's influential theory applies to the transmission of tradition, and one can take art cinema as a whole as a tradition, one that crosses linguistic and national lines. But when a tradition is very small, like the Nordic one, relationships among the artists seem more intertwined. As the interview with von Trier indicates, the three major Scandinavian countries almost (but not quite) share a language; thus the possibility of financial and artistic cooperation, with an accompanying recent proliferation of films with casts made up of Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish actors. It is impossible in this setting, ultimately, for Bergman to ignore Dreyer, for von Trier to ignore either Dreyer or Bergman: the work of the older director is the standard to which the younger must, in some way, respond, if he wants to be counted as part of the Nordic art cinema pantheon. Part of the response to tradition, it seems, is frustration at its silence, which in the films I will examine here is extended into a metaphor of the silence of God... who is then imagined as speaking, at least in some sense. In the following section I will do close readings of three instances in which the directors seem to work through the issues of interrogation and torture

of a female innocent. For the two later directors, this will involve a misprision of Dreyer's *Passion of Joan of Arc*.

Woman, Interrogated – or, Her Master's Voice

For what purpose are the women of Nordic art cinema interrogated, tortured, and sacrificed, repeatedly? The films I will analyze here suggest a drive toward accessing the unknowable, invisible, and all-powerful (the voice and presence of God) by imagining the innocent, virginal woman as having privileged access to that voice. The narrative of God's silence dovetails with the narrative of the Master's silence and the artist's desire to enter the priesthood of cultural tradition (von Trier, in his Dogme manifesto, ironically references the notion of film author as priest explicitly). My focus here will be very tight, on scenes of interrogation and spiritual dialogue in Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* [*The Passion of Joan of Arc*, 1928], Bergman's *Det sjunde inseglet* [*The Seventh Seal*, 1957], and von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* [1996]. Ultimately, however, I would say that my analysis could apply to a number of other films by each of these directors: *Vredens dag* (*Day of Wrath*, 1943) and *Ordet* (1954) by Dreyer; Bergman's *Jungfrukällan* (*The Virgin Spring*, 1959) and *Viskningar och rop* (*Cries and Whispers*, 1972); and von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), among others.

Dreyer chose to make a film about Joan of Arc not, his biographers claim, because of any interest in the theological question of her canonization (which had occurred in 1920), but because among the choices he was offered by his French production company (Marie Antoinette, Catherine de Medici, and Joan of Arc), Joan was, he felt, the most "noble" subject: "Suffering always means ennoblement." (cited in Drum 2000, 125). [IMAGE ONE**: "Suffering always means ennoblement," *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, Carl Th. Dreyer. Joan's/Maria Falconetti's hair is shorn so close to the scalp that it bleeds.] His biographers emphasize the secular nature of Dreyer's interest: "He knew that excessive concentration on the immediate issues of the trial was largely pointless, since they were issues that no longer moved mankind." (Drum 2000, 127). But as David Bordwell, who has done the most exhaustive frame-by-frame reading of the film, points

out, the presence of the cross, crown, and textual artifacts in the film “reinforce a second text [in addition to Joan of Arc’s biography] upon which the film narrative depends: the tale of Christ’s suffering and death. The outcome of the film is programmed from the beginning, not only because we know the historical Jeanne but also because we know the story of the Passion” (Bordwell 1981, 90). It is emphatically not the case, in other words, that Dreyer’s film is a purely secular rendering of a woman’s suffering; rather, Dreyer stages Joan’s trial as an attempt by a crowd of male authority figures (judges, monks, soldiers) to force Joan to retract her claim that she enjoys direct contact with God and his angels. Bordwell goes on to posit that *The Passion* depends on a dialogic structure, both in terms of the verbal exchanges between Joan and her interrogators (which Dreyer lifts directly from the trial transcript), and in terms of the visual language of the film, which alternates between Joan’s face and the faces of her opponents. Finally, at the heart of the film there is a conflict between the patriarchal written word (the trial transcript that opens and determines the film, canon law, a forged letter, the label “Apostate” fixed to Joan’s stake) and the spoken word, linked to images of the body: “We find in *Jeanne d’Arc* echoes of the ‘logocentrism’ which, Jacques Derrida suggests, recurs throughout Western thought, and which elevates the mystical expressiveness of the spoken word (further sanctified in the film by the mystically expressive face) above the static repressiveness of writing” (Bordwell 1981, 91). Though he does not state explicitly that embodied spoken language sets up a gendered female opposition to the patriarchal logocentrism of writing, Bordwell’s allusion to Joan’s “mystically expressive face,” accepted by most critics from 1928 to today as the focal point of the film, implies a gendered dichotomy.

Bordwell, for his argument about spoken language and the face, focuses on the moments in the trial dialogue when we see words mouthed in synchronization with the appearance of title cards with the same words; for instance, the initial exchange between Joan and the primary interrogator, in which he asks her to give her name and her age. A viewer who knows French can see clearly that the judge asks “What are you called,” precisely as is given in the title card, and

that when asked to elaborate on her response of “Jeanne,” Joan adds that in her village, she was called Jeanette, which can be read on her lips as well as the title card. But there are many occasions in the film when we see people talking – in particular, Joan’s interrogators – and there are no titles to tell us what is being said. For instance, there are several key moments during the opening interrogation scene in which a remark from Joan provokes a heated verbal response from one of her questioners. Joan asserts that she knows “that all the English will be driven from France, except those who die here” (which is relayed verbatim on the titles cards), which moves an angry soldier to stand and berate her at length. His speech does not appear on any title card, though his bearing and Joan’s reaction indicates the severity of what he is saying. It is often the case in silent film that sections of conversation are understood through pantomime and without the aid of titles, but Dreyer is doing something more, something significant; he deploys a form of silence in his staging of the interrogation by wiping out the words of Joan’s antagonists (words that appeared in the trial transcript?) in order to let their facial expressions and gestures (and, importantly, Joan’s physical reactions) carry meaning.

In a long sequence following the assertion of one young monk that he believes Joan to be “a saint” (as we are told in the title), the camera focuses on an anxious, very elderly man with white hair, following his reactions as the rebellious young monk is arrested, and an agitated crowd bustles and confers around him. The man is, to all purposes, anonymous, so the viewer has little context from which to assess his feelings. As Bordwell points out, *The Passion* does not identify individuals for the viewer, either through the common silent-era practice of mapping character and actor names onto portraits in the credits or through the use of characters’ names in direct address in the titles. Because we are told that the script follows the trial transcript precisely, we know that the figures are historical (many of them “important”), but they are emptied of their full significance through the lack of identification between name and body, and then their angry or scheming words are often expunged from the titles. The story of Joan of Arc demands that her opponents emerge as victors in the trial, and clearly they exercise a full measure of secular and

ecclesiastic power against the young woman. But they are oddly silenced by the absence of titles in key moments of the film. It is interesting in this connection to consider Kaja Silverman's argument about the primacy of the disembodied masculine voice as the source of authority in sound film narrative. Her assertion is that the masculine voice-over narrative "works to align the male subject with potency, authoritative knowledge, and the law," and that "this disembodied voice can be seen as 'exemplary' for male subjectivity, attesting to an achieved invisibility, omniscience, and discursive power" (Silverman 1988, 164). The missing titles for the men speaking on the screen of *The Passion* might point in an opposing direction; despite their subjugation and destruction of Joan, they have been silenced in the film. Only their bodies represent them, not their words or their names.

Further, a central issue in the trial, one that will dominate all three of the films I discuss here, is Joan's privileged access to the voice of God. Her interrogators probe her for information on what God has communicated to her: "You claim to be sent by God?" "So it is God who orders you to dress as a man?" "What reward do you expect from God? What has He promised you?" "Has God promised you that He will deliver you from prison?" For the purposes of the trial, they hope to catch Joan in an act of blasphemy, but the blasphemy she represents is precisely contact with God that is unmediated by the patriarchal power of the Church. Joan claims to have heard the voice of God speaking to her, God sends the angel Michael to communicate with her; one has the impression that God has not spoken to her interrogators, that their God is silent, and that this moves them to rage. One of them, on hearing Joan's claim that God has promised her the salvation of her soul, walks up to her and harangues her at length, so furiously that he spits on her face. The title card says only, "You blaspheme God!" In Elisabeth Bronfen's study of the use of the woman's dead body as topos in art history, she emphasizes the way in which the otherness, the alterity of women is used as a safe way for male artists to displace their own terror of death: "Over representations of the dead feminine body, culture can repress and articulate its unconscious knowledge of death which it fails to foreclose even as it cannot express it directly"

(Bronfen 1992, 11). Joan is ultimately a dead body, but as a living woman she also exists as an alterity that challenges masculine hegemony through her opacity. As Marilyn Blackwell writes in her study of gender in Bergman's films: "A purely silent woman character becomes the 'dark continent' inaccessible to interpretation, impossible to master and contain (thus, film's recurrent need to extract speech from silent female characters), whereas a woman who speaks but is not seen is even more dangerous since she has the authority of the invisible, which places her beyond the control of the male" (Blackwell 1997, 79). Joan's opponents respond most violently to the underlying silence of God, for which Joan must be punished.

In *Det sjunde inseglet* (*The Seventh Seal*, 1957), Ingmar Bergman inserts the story of a witch burning as a subplot, one of the stations on the journey of a knight returning home from the Crusades. Still, the brief moments in the film when the young "witch" appears are of great significance, both because they bring into sharp focus the problem of God's silence and because, I would argue, they represent a response to Dreyer's *Passion*. Here, too, we find an interrogation: the knight, beleaguered by a failed Crusade and the inexorable spread of the Black Plague, is on a quest to find tangible proof of God's existence: "I want God to give me his hand, uncover his face, speak to me," he cries. When he catches sight of a young woman in stocks, condemned to burn for alleged intercourse with the Devil, he approaches her, kneels, and gazes deeply into her eyes: "Have you seen the Devil?" he asks. At this point the exhausted and tortured girl can only moan, and he leaves, disappointed. The knight's questions to the girl echo the questions posed by Joan's interrogators; in both cases, the men attempt to access the woman's privileged knowledge. While the pragmatic impetus for the men's questions during Joan's trial seems to be the determination of her guilt as a heretic, their facial expressions and gestures strongly indicate anger at her insistence that she hears and sees what they cannot. In *The Seventh Seal*, the legalistic pretension is put aside; the knight does not care whether or not the girl is guilty of heresy. Instead, Bergman's film shines a light on the lack (of God's presence) and desire (to touch God) that is so palpable beneath the judicial discourse in *The Passion*.

Tyan, the young “witch” in *The Seventh Seal* resembles Joan in that she is very young (Joan believes she is nineteen; Tyan is described as “a child”) and her hair has been closely shorn; the scene in which Joan’s/Maria Falconetti’s hair is cut to the quick is one of the most heart-rending sequences of Dreyer’s film, in part because it is clear that the actor’s hair is in fact being cut close to her scalp, painfully. Joan’s interrogators plague her with the idea that it is not God who has spoken to her, but the Devil; the knight of *The Seventh Seal* approaches Tyan a second time, as she is about to be burned, to see if she can help him speak to the Devil. “Why?” she asks. “To ask him about God,” the knight replies. “He must know. If he doesn’t, no one does.” Dreyer’s Joan, her eyes wide, now with horror, now with a kind of inward-looking ecstasy, seems at times truly to see God. The viewer, brought near to her face in the close-up images, seems to be looking into her soul, as many scholars have noted (Bordwell 1981, 85) and Dreyer himself has claimed: “I don’t know how I could have possibly told the story of Joan’s trial and death if I had not had the help of the close-ups in getting the viewers completely inside of both Joan’s and the judges’ hearts and souls” (Neergard 1940, 53; translation in Drum 2000, 137). Despite the claims that *The Passion* is purely secular, the film offers nothing to contest her visions, and the viewer is led to identify the deceptive power of the Devil with her interrogators (who try to trick her with a forged letter) rather than with her inner convictions. Bergman’s depiction of Tyan, on the other hand, rejects the idea that she has a privileged connection to either the Devil or God. When the knight asks her how he might see the Devil himself, she answers, confidently, “You must do as I say: Look into my eyes.” The camera cuts to the knight’s face, as he gazes earnestly into her eyes. We see him from her point of view, through the staves that enclose the wagon bed, so that he looks at her through bars, as if he is imprisoned. “I see a silent horror in your eyes,” he says. “Nothing more.” The camera shifts to his point of view, and we see the young girl, incredulous: “No one?” she asks. “Nothing? No one?” Later, as she hangs, suspended above the flames, her face partially obscured by clouds of smoke, while the knight and his squire look on. [IMAGE TWO: The witch burning, *The Seventh Seal*, Ingmar Bergman] They carry on a theological

dialogue that has dominated the film's narrative, with the knight as idealist and the squire as skeptic:

Squire: [standing just behind the knight, with his head just above the knight's shoulder, and his mouth near the knight's ear, like the voice of conscience] What does she see? Can you answer me that?

Knight: [his face in agony, lips compressed] She has no pain now.

Squire: You didn't answer my question. Who will take care of that child? The angels or God or Satan? Or emptiness? Just emptiness, milord?

Knight: [through clenched teeth] It can't be so!

Squire: Look at her eyes. Her poor consciousness has just made a discovery. The emptiness under the moon.

Knight: No!

Squire: We stand helpless, arms hanging at our sides, for we see what she sees, and her terror is ours. The little child, the little child! I can't stand it, I can't stand it!

Mark Sandberg has observed that "narrating [Tyan's] pain makes her simply another piece of evidence in [the two men's] ongoing feud. They are struggling for narrative rights both to her silent terror and the opacity of existence in general" [Sandberg 1991, 21]. This, I think, is absolutely correct; the woman serves as a vehicle for the doubt and fear and cynicism of the men who judge her or pity her. Similarly, Joan performs as a platform for theological and political debate in Dreyer's film, with some defining her as a heretic and others as a saint. The burning of both women removes them effectively from the field and leaves the true concerns of the narratives exposed: not the women, but what they are made to represent. But Dreyer, in his adoption of the close-up as transparent window to the soul, finds a challenger in Bergman's insistence on opacity. The knight sees nothing and no one in Tyan's eyes. They express only terror and have no access to the transcendent. The squire remarks that he can see in Tyan's eyes that she

has discovered the abyss of nothingness – but that is the squire’s own vision. Tyan is a mirror that reflects what others want or fear to see; the squire sees nothingness, others see the Devil: “The priests didn’t have any trouble seeing him,” Tyan protests when the knight claims to see only fear, “neither did the guards. They were so afraid of him that they didn’t dare lay a hand on me.” And here we have a reason why Tyan herself wants to believe that she has contact with the Devil: he is her protector. As long as the men fear the Devil’s presence, they will leave her alone. Elsewhere in the film we see what happens to women who are left without protection in this chaotic and fearful time: rape and murder are both depicted or implied. Joan of Arc, too, takes on the mantle of God’s protection in assuming power over French soldiers; God, she says, has instructed her to wear men’s clothing until her mission of driving the English from France and reinstating the true French king has been accomplished. She and Tyan remove themselves from the ordinary circulation of women as sexual chattel by invoking their privileged access to supernatural power, and it is this challenge to the masculine power structure that leads to their destruction.

Yet despite these marked similarities, Dreyer’s and Bergman’s films treat the sacrifices of these two women quite differently. Even while Joan of Arc is still burning, an uprising breaks out among the common people watching her death. Her martyrdom inspires them to run riot, protesting the perversion of justice that Joan’s death sentence represents, and acknowledging her sainthood, the truth of her privileged relationship with God. Dreyer’s narrative, as Bordwell points out, is predetermined to some degree by the existence of the historical Joan and the trial transcript. Yet it would have been possible, as Bergman demonstrates, to cast some doubt on the reality of Joan’s visions. In inventing a “witch” of his own, Bergman escapes the need to represent a historical event. But he makes some significant choices in how he fictionalizes the witch burning. First, he situates the execution at night, in the middle of a dark, deserted forest. It just happens that the knight and his companions meet the execution party. To highlight this oddity, Bergman has his cynical squire ask, “Why burn her at night when the people need diversion?” The guard does not explain, so the viewer must remain unsure about why the

execution, usually a form of public entertainment, is secret. The source of Tyan's belief in the presence of the Devil seems to come from the priests and guards, who see the Devil reflected in her eyes. Joan, on the other hand, is depicted in Dreyer's film as having direct access not to the Devil, but to God and his angel, Michael, and while her questioners express doubt that her visions are real, they must ask her to describe them herself: they cannot see them reflected in her eyes and have apparently not projected them into her consciousness. Bergman's film, in other words, denies the reality of Tyan's privileged status, while Dreyer's underscores Joan's, using the rebellion of the common people against the Church as a form of witness.

Sandberg, in his compelling reading of the film, wonders whether the foregrounded presence of one of knight's troupe, the so-called "mute girl," might indicate a move in the film from the "dominant male voice to its feminine counterpart" (Sandberg 1991, 22). He notes that the mute girl stands as sole witness to Tyan's burning while the rest of the troupe moves on, that she finds her voice when Death (in the form of the black plague) arrives to take the troupe, announcing, in the final words of Christ: "It is finished." And Sandberg also notes the shift from a male voice-over, reading from the Book of Revelation, in the opening of the film to a female voice finishing that reading near the film's conclusion. But this shift in voiced discourse is accompanied by the complete silencing of Tyan's voice and the re-enactment of female sacrifice, this time without rebellion. As Sandberg indicates in the conclusion to his analysis, Bergman is an unreliable feminist at best; the defeated figure of Tyan seems a challenge to Dreyer's transcendent cross-dressed Joan.

Lars von Trier, in *Breaking the Waves*, does not employ a literal witch-burning as the mode of female sacrifice, but the topoi of interrogation by church elders and direct communication with God bring the film into a line of descent from both *The Passion of Joan of Arc* and *The Seventh Seal*. His film opens, in fact, with an interrogation that closely mirrors, in some respects, Joan of Arc's trial in *The Passion*. The film opens with Bess McNeill standing in a severely ascetic church sanctuary, reminiscent in its blankness of the white walls of Joan's trial

room. Bess wears a knitted cap, which in some lights, with its gray color and tight weave, resembles the chain mail that was hung over medieval helmets to protect the neck and shoulders of the knight. She speaks first, in answer to a question we have not heard: "His name is Jan." A male voice is heard from off-screen: "I do not know him." Bess looks up at her still-invisible interrogator: "He's from the rig," she explains. And now the camera moves to her interlocutor, a gray-haired, bearded man dressed in somber black, resembling a clergyman's garb: "You know we do not favor matrimony with outsiders." The camera moves behind him and reveals a group of men assembled to hear Bess, all of them somber and dressed in dark, formal clothes. The hand-held camera makes a motion that resembles the odd movements that distinguish *The Passion*, panning rapidly to the left to focus on another questioner: "Can you even tell us what 'matrimony' is?" he asks. Not only the odd camera movements, but the lack of clear spatial orientation bring Dreyer's film to mind – where is Bess standing in relation to her questioners, for instance? There is no establishing shot to show us the church or the interior of the room. Like the missing titles in Dreyer's film, where a person is shown speaking without words, there is an occasional lack of correspondence between voice and speaker in von Trier's film: a disembodied voice reaches Bess from some position outside our screen view, though it should be noted that these voices are not truly disembodied, like the voice-over narrative analyzed by Kaja Silverman, and thus do not, I would argue, represent the locus of transcendent male power. No, this male power is embodied and earthly, and about to be challenged by Bess, who is portrayed, like Joan, as a simple woman, potentially incapable of caring for herself. While we do not see the conclusion of her trial, we do see in the next sequence that she gets her own way despite the objections of the church fathers, and marries Jan.

It develops that Bess, like Joan, claims a direct connection to God, but von Trier works very differently with the representation of this connection. At key moments within the narrative, we see Bess in prayer, and while she is praying aloud, we hear both her voice and the voice of God, answering her. Or, we hear Bess speaking God's voice. Or inventing God's voice? **IMAGE**

THREE: Bess, praying. *Breaking the Waves*, Lars von Trier When her husband Jan has departed for the oil rig, leaving her to suffer in his absence, she goes to the empty church to pray:

God: [Bess looks down, closes her eyes, speaks in a deeper voice than normal]

Bess McNeill, for many years you've prayed for love – shall I take it away from you again, is that what you want?

Bess: [opens her eyes, stares out and down. Then she looks up to address God, eyes wide open, speaking in a higher voice]: No, no. I'm still grateful for love.

God: [shuts her eyes, opens her mouth wide, deep voice]: What do you want then?

Bess: [Eyes open, looks up. Trembling, higher voice]: I pray for Jan to come home.

Bess's voicing of God can seem ludicrous, absurd, a symptom of some mental condition rather than a true transcendent experience. Her God seems a simple instantiation of the voice of her superego, speaking with the Scottish burr and disapproving scowl of the elders who interrogate her in the opening scene. Yet in the context of the narrative, it appears that the exchanges she has with God reveal truth: directly after the scene in which she asks God to bring Jan home (and God warns her not to ask for something without understand the consequences). Jan is brought home... on a stretcher, barely alive. That Bess ascribes responsibility to herself for what has happened to Jan would seem delusional, except that the film proceeds in all its narrative developments to validate Bess's communications with God, up to the point at the film's conclusion when her willingness to give up her body to anonymous sex, beatings, and ultimate death seems to lead to Jan's miraculous recovery. Skeptics like the squire could perhaps still argue that some medical intervention might have returned Jan's ability to walk, except that the film insists on the miracle worked by Bess's martyrdom by inserting (through the magic of digitization) a couple of actual tolling church bells in the sky high above the sea over the spot where Bess's body lies under the waves. These tolling church bells are the final rebuke to skepticism, even as they bring a whole

new field of questions into play: is it the Devil or God working through Jan when Jan demands that Bess offer herself up to other men in order to effect his cure? Might God and the Devil be the same in this scenario? Does Bess's sacrifice really pose a challenge to the Church fathers who shun her, or does God's demand for her death fall into line with their beliefs? How can von Trier, a filmmaker working after the nihilism and doubt expressed by Bergman, return to a model of blind belief? How does the move into digital cinema correspond to the return to an age of miracles? More questions, in other words, are raised by what seems like a simple, naïve approach to belief. Bess's apparent ability to ventriloquize God leads us to return to the issue of voice in cinema, just as Dreyer's and Bergman's films do. For Bess's God's voice is not disembodied: she embodies it. To have God speak through a female body seems to run counter to the idea that it is the disembodied male voice that wields absolute narrative power in cinema. Yet ultimately, the voice of God, even channeled through a woman's body, leads to the woman's demise.

Shutting Our Eyes

What film scholars and critics have argued about Dreyer and Bergman and von Trier is that the sacrificial women they depict in their films are in fact self-images (Blackwell 1997, 3; *New York Times* 2104). This substitution of female sacrificial victim as stand-in for the male plays neatly into Bronfen's argument about the image of dead women in art history: "representations are symptoms that visualize even as they conceal what is too dangerous to articulate openly but too fascinating to repress successfully. They repress by localizing death away from the self, at the body of a beautiful woman, at the same time that this representation lets the repressed return, albeit in a disguised manner" (Bronfen 1992, xi). And the same system of substitution and repression seems to apply to the film narratives themselves, in which the women serve as evidence or counter-evidence in the courtrooms of men who want to prove (or disprove) the existence of God.

To take this a step further, I want to return to my argument in the first part of this essay and think about how the tortured and sacrificed women play a role in a discourse linking the film

directors of the North to a tradition. An easy answer to the question about apparent (and counterintuitive) Nordic cinematic misogyny would be to say that these filmmakers are part of a greater Western tradition, identified and analyzed by Bronfen in her study, which displaces male anxiety about death onto the female other. But I think that the Nordic legacy exhibits a defining feature: it seems clear that in focusing on sacrificial women, these directors are in conversation (or would like to be in conversation) with one another and with the dramatists that precede them. Like the opposing political and theological forces in *The Passion*, for whom Joan is a pawn in their larger game, like the knight and the squire using the young woman at the stake as a piece of evidence in their ongoing theological debate, like Bess's God in arranging for Jan's recovery through Bess's sacrifice, the women are instruments in a larger scheme of staging a discussion between directors. But it is a bit more complicated than that, because the "dialogue" between the directors is one-sided. The younger director addresses himself to the artist that came before him, challenging or elaborating the argument and aesthetic he finds there, with no expectation of response from the older director. Dreyer leaves Bergman cold, but Bergman engages Dreyer and his work in any case; he only pretends to ignore him. Von Trier openly expresses his debt to Dreyer and his resentment of Bergman, and his films go beyond the hint of redemption in *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, beyond the suffering and terror of Bergman. Von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009) inspired the *New Yorker* reviewer to enjoin his readers: "If you have eyes, prepare to shut them now" (*New Yorker* 2009). One has to wonder: is the final stage on this trajectory, a development that has its roots in the late 19th century, an escalating chain of violence that eventually must lead viewers to reject images of tortured and sacrificed women? Bronfen suggests that there are at least two ways to "read" the woman's body in these narratives: as actual women, actual bodies, or as symbols, symptoms. Her work focuses on art history primarily, but in cinema, with its dependence on the photographic image and the photograph's more direct relation to the real, it becomes more difficult to shut out the presence of an actual woman. At the point when suffering becomes unbearable, shutting one's eyes becomes the last recourse.

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1 In Bergman's autobiographical film *Fanny and Alexander* (1982), Strindberg is pronounced "that old misogynist" by one of the narrative's central and most appealing female figures, the grandmother/actress. She undoubtedly bases her judgment on Strindberg's early Naturalist plays and writings, such as *The Father* or *Miss Julie*. But now she has been asked to read for a part in *A Dream Play*, a piece that complicates Strindberg's earlier representation of the sacrificial woman by transforming her from a confused suicide (Julie) or virago (Laura/*The Father*) into a Messiah figure (Indra's Daughter). The grandmother settles in with her grandson (Alexander/Bergman) on her lap and begins to read aloud from the preface to *A Dream Play*. This is the conclusion of Bergman's valedictory film: a reading of Strindberg.

2 "Allt det här berättar jag som en lustig historia, men längst inne i mitt barnsliga sinne anser jag naturligtvis inte alls att det är en lustig historia" (Bergman 1987 235).