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WOMEN, SUFFERING AND REDEMPTION IN THREE FILMS OF LARS VON TRIER

Carleen Mandolfo

Abstract

In *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark* director Lars von Trier experiments with the limits of sacrificial notions of atonement by gendering his Christ figures as females who sacrifice their lives for the men they love. Many feminist critics find in this formulation a reinscription of patriarchal hegemony. While posing the same scenario initially, *Dogville* ultimately offers a justice-oriented, rather than sacrificial, model of redemption. An intertextual reading of all three films results in an appropriately complex understanding of Judeo-Christian models of salvation that may bridge the critical divide between von Trier's sceptics and 'believers'.

The acclaimed Danish film director, Lars von Trier, is reported to have said that he is afraid of everything, except filmmaking. He may not be afraid of his filmmaking, but his penetrating representations of the intersection of human love, cruelty, forgiveness and retribution should terrify the rest of us. His haunting films have won many accolades, including both the Palme d'Or and the Grand Prix at Cannes.

In this article, I am particularly interested in the way in which von Trier rehearses the problematic intersection of gender, violence and Jewish and Christian notions of suffering and atonement in three of his films—*Breaking the Waves* (1996), *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) and *Dogville* (2003). Admittedly, these three films are not typically linked together by inclusion in one of von Trier's trilogies (though *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark* do belong to the 'Golden Heart' trilogy, the third film of which is *The Idiots*), but they share one powerful element that makes such a linkage credible. All three films are, to a large degree, religious meditations on gendered violence, especially in the form of self-sacrifice. Accordingly, a number of commentators have explored the ways in which the female

protagonists of the three films function (or do not) as Christ figures.¹ Reviewing *Breaking the Waves*, James Wall says of the protagonist, Bess:

Bess's actions are not signs of corruption; they are signs of steadfast faith. They entail not a defilement of goodness but an embodiment of goodness. This goodness seems absurd to others. But then the world saw Christ and 'knew him not'.²

Critics are prompted toward Christological formulations because of the way in which von Trier's protagonists suffer for—and in the case of *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark* ultimately give up their lives for—those they love. The films disagree in one particular, however, which is revealed in *Dogville's* preference for judgment over mercy. As Jeffrey Overstreet says, 'Dogville is . . . a powerful expression of what those who reject Christ must consider as the alternative'.³ As we will see, although all three films contemplate sacrifice as an appropriate response to affliction, *Dogville's* ultimate ruminations on sacrifice and redemption diverge dramatically from von Trier's two earlier films, functioning as an apt discursive counterpoint to what turns out to be the former's embattled gender politics.

I. METHODOLOGY

Many find the presentation of female subjectivity in *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark* disturbing in the extreme, and if von Trier had left his meditations on female suffering at these two films, he would have been guilty, to my mind, of perpetuating Christianity and Judaism's long history of misogynistic and masochistic teachings. His rendering of female subjectivity within a 'hermeneutic of sacrifice' results in a troubling sanctification of female suffering. A hermeneutic of sacrifice refers to the understanding of the death of Jesus as a sacrificial (i.e. 'meaningful') act. Incumbent upon such an interpretation of the cross is the expectation that believers will find ultimate value in bearing their own crosses. It is a hermeneutic that has come under suspicion by feminist and womanist theologians who point out the ways such an interpretation of the cross can lead to the oppression of marginalised groups, demanding that they prioritise the well-being of others over their own selves, even unto extreme suffering.⁴ Similarly, Bess and Selma, protagonists of *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark* respectively, are forced to be complicit in an economy of salvation that justifies their self-annihilation for a higher 'good'. As will be made clear in the synopses below, *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark*, for all their subversive content (characterised by sexual and violent transgressions), are structurally deeply traditional, relying on the Christian idiom of redemptive suffering. Von Trier may be critiquing a

particularly virulent form of religious dogma (especially in *Breaking the Waves*), but not the hermeneutic of sacrifice that undergirds it.⁵

With *Dogville*, however, von Trier offers viewers an alternative theological vision as well as a different version of female subjectivity while still drawing on the discourse of Christian and (especially) Jewish soteriological traditions. *Dogville* counters the hermeneutic of sacrifice with what I will call a 'hermeneutic of justice', a way of looking at salvation that has particular resonance with biblical apocalyptic traditions.⁶ Similar to the prophetic literature that constitutes its roots and often eschews the glorification of sacrifice, the rhetorical telos of apocalyptic literature is justice. Rather than embrace suffering, a hermeneutic of justice constitutes a determined resistance to all forms of victimisation. While depictions of suffering and sacrifice are hardly unusual in apocalypses, meaningful suffering does not enjoy the same kind of ultimacy it does in the Gospels or in the subsequent teachings of the Church. The Gospel writers, responding to several cultural pressures—imperial as well as within Judaism itself—derived meaning from Jesus' death in order to make sense of their own suffering as well as their seemingly dashed messianic hopes. In apocalyptic thought there is little that is meaningful or salvific about suffering, *per se*. In the Book of Revelation, for example, Jesus's death is admittedly the foundation upon which salvation can be obtained, but justice rather than suffering becomes the primary soteriological impulse.⁷ Similarly, in contemporary Jewish thought, suffering and sacrifice are not held in the same esteem as they have been in Christianity. Although an oversimplification, it is safe to say that Judaism (especially after the Shoah, but not exclusively) prioritises mundane justice over the abstraction that suffering in this world brings salvation in the next, or results in a metaphysical 'good'. Not only does *Dogville* embrace the Jewish emphasis on this-worldly justice, it also provides alternatives to female subjects, whereby suffering is not inherently meaningful and should be eradicated—by force, if necessary. There is a particularly pressing need for narratives that feature the suffering of women and rely on Judeo-Christian idioms to offer soteriological alternatives to the hermeneutic of sacrifice, or they are in danger of enshrining female suffering.

In essence, then, I want to posit a different trilogy than von Trier intended. An intertextual or dialogic reading of *Breaking the Waves*, *Dancer in the Dark* and *Dogville* reminds us that Judeo-Christian discourse has more to offer on the vexed question of female suffering than only a hermeneutic of sacrifice, and as it turns out so does Lars von Trier, contrary to the assertions of many of his detractors. Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic ethics teaches us that truth is found in the nexus of discrete, often duelling discourses that never find ultimate resolution. Bakhtin observed that dialogic writers bring 'together ideas and world views, which in real life [are] absolutely estranged and deaf to one another, and force them to quarrel'.⁸ Dialogic interactions are staged by an

'author' who does not impose his/her point of view on the protagonists, but rather lets them work out their own existences in material and embodied—rather than ideological or philosophical—ways.⁹ Von Trier's critics complain that he is subjecting his female protagonists to a patriarchal vision of reality that curtails genuine female agency, but feminist theory applied to these films runs a similar risk of being just another site where 'differences will be subsumed into the general',¹⁰ and options are similarly inhibited. Alternatively, an inter-textual reading of all three films provides an extraordinary—and most crucially, an unfinished—dialogue on the issue of female sacrifice and suffering in which women's agency is preserved.

In addition to a dependence on Bakhtin, my reading will be bolstered by the contributions of African American and womanist religious thinkers for whom sacrifice and justice are equally viable soteriological strategies. These religious thinkers understand that the trope of sacrifice has contributed to the disempowerment of already disadvantaged believers, but also realise the importance of finding a way to continue to honour the religious commitments of their constituency. In order to offer a faithful alternative to the hermeneutic of sacrifice some of these thinkers are turning to apocalyptic discourse as a response to the injustices incumbent on an unequivocal devotion to sacrificial tropes.

II. SYNOPSIS OF *BREAKING THE WAVES* AND *DANCER IN THE DARK*

The following summaries are offered in order to make some cursory observations about the ways in which the female protagonists in *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark* are situated theologically and soteriologically.¹¹ Because *Breaking the Waves* has received so much more critical attention than *Dancer in the Dark*, most of my observations throughout the article will be referencing the former, but I include *Dancer in the Dark* here because of the structural similarities of the two films.

Breaking the Waves was released in 1996 to much critical acclaim and garnered among other honours an Academy Award nomination for its female star, Emily Watson. Watson's startlingly moving portrayal of an emotionally fragile (even disturbed), yet poignantly pious young woman catapulted her career into the spotlight. The film is set in a strict Calvinist community in rural Scotland, in which the church elders prohibit women from speaking in church. The claustrophobic austerity of the community is formally represented by the cinematographic technique of a hand-held camera, the stark mise-en-scene and the near absence of a musical score; and symbolically by the absence of bells in the church tower, long since removed by the (male) church elders.

Bess is a young woman who demonstrates her piety by cleaning the church and carrying on conversations with God, in which she prays out loud and God answers her in her own, albeit lower, voice. The church elders disapprove when Bess insists on marrying an outsider, Jan, who works on an oilrig off shore. When Jan has to return to the rig for work, Bess becomes emotionally unhinged, and begs God to return him to her. Jan indeed returns to shore sooner than expected when he is nearly fatally injured in an accident on the work site. As Jan hangs between life and death, both Bess and her God blame her for Jan's condition. In between bouts of unconsciousness the quadriplegic Jan begs Bess to have sex with other men and to tell him about it in order to keep him alive. She is deeply repelled by the idea, but resolves to honour Jan's request when God's voice castigates her by saying: 'Who do you want to save, yourself or Jan?'

In short, Bess 'sacrifices' her body to save Jan. After Jan shows some ambiguous signs of recovery that Bess interprets as her doing, she continues to engage in deeply disturbing sexual encounters with men she does not know, finally culminating in her death aboard a ship of violent sailors that not even the town's prostitutes would visit. Bess dies unsure of whether or not her actions have saved Jan, but at her burial (the elders refuse her a traditional funeral), we learn that Jan is alive and well, even walking, with the help of a cane. In what is perhaps his most unfortunate directorial decision in this film (from a theological point of view, at least), von Trier ends the film with a God's-eye view of church bells mysteriously ringing in the heavens above the rig where Jan and his friends have secretly and lovingly disposed of Bess's body after stealing it from the church.

Dancer in the Dark was released in 2000, and takes place in the state of Washington in North America in 1964. The protagonist, Selma—played by Björk, the award-winning Icelandic singer-songwriter (who also wrote the film score)—is a refugee from Cold War Czechoslovakia, a single mother who works in a factory in order to secure enough money to pay for an operation that will save her son from a genetic condition that results in blindness—a condition that is causing her to rapidly lose her sight, as well. She suffers from tremendous guilt in this regard because she gave birth to her child knowing that it was almost certain that he would inherit her condition (a not too subtle allusion to the idea of Eve's culpability in 'original sin').

Selma gives her life over completely to saving her son's sight. She tells no one but a close friend, Cathy, of her condition and insists on working long hours in the factory, risking her life because she cannot see well enough to protect herself from the large machinery with which she is forced to work. Selma and her son, Gene, live in a modest trailer behind the home of a local law enforcement officer (Bill) and his beautiful, blonde wife (Linda). They serve as surrogate family to her and her son, charging her a low rent and

providing her son with a few of the material pleasures she cannot afford. Bill and Linda's patina of perfection is burned away, however, when Bill confides to Selma that he is in dire financial straits, but is afraid that if he tells his wife she will leave him. In desperation, Bill steals her meagre savings. In the fracas that ensues during Selma's effort to retrieve her money, Bill is injured and successfully convinces Selma to put him out of his misery. This deeply gentle woman does the thing she hates most—committing an act of physical violence—not out of any desire for self-preservation, only out of love, surely knowing she will lose her own life for the act. Throughout her subsequent trial on murder charges, she keeps Bill's secret, although divulging it could potentially result in her acquittal. Selma is executed by hanging in one of the most harrowing representations of capital punishment ever produced for the screen. Von Trier even supplies a 'centurion' figure (Lk. 23:47), in the form of one of her guards, to emphasise the injustice of her execution. Although it may seem counter-intuitive to highlight Selma's suffering and furthermore to conclude her acts are redemptive, when in fact she commits acts of extreme violence herself as part of that redemptive matrix, the film makes it clear that Selma never acts out of self-preservation—only out of love for her son, and even Bill.

III. CRITICAL RESPONSES TO THE FILMS

Most of the literature on these films has focused on *Breaking the Waves* because of its more overt handling of Christian themes. Von Trier has said the philosophy underlying this film is 'goodness exists'.¹² The commentators are mostly split between those who read Bess's 'goodness' as a good that suggests an unproblematic subjectivity and those who view her 'goodness' as a screen obscuring the patriarchal structures that underwrite her suffering: '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.'¹³ Because this film conflates patriarchy and divinity in complicated, but undeniable ways, this question has both political and theological repercussions; and many reviewers offer nuanced responses that recognise what a difficult question this is to resolve. K. Keefer and T. Linafelt are well aware of the problematic nature of Bess's gendered suffering, but in the end read her sacrifice as the overcoming of existential discontinuity, a priority in terms of their theoretical commitment to the work of George Bataille.

[Bess's] desire is not 'good', in the same way that it is not 'bad'. It is, rather, excessive; and such excessiveness is required if one is to overcome discontinuity. Bess's desire, in its excess, unites good and bad, her church and the outside world,

sexuality and theology, the audience and the film. To paraphrase Bataille, what Bess desires is to bring into a world founded on discontinuity all the continuity such a world can sustain.¹⁴

In essence, then, Bess's battered body serves the profound function of bridging the gap between the divine and human. Keefer and Linafelt do not deny that Bess is sacrificed on the altar of patriarchy, a reality they eschew on one level, but in the end they seem (along with von Trier) to find in Bess's sacrifice a virtue beyond ethical considerations. Another nuanced reading that settles down finally on the same side as Keefer and Linafelt is that provided by J. Solano, who seems fully aware of the challenge levelled at traditional Christian notions of atonement by the gendered representations offered by this film.¹⁵ Problems aside, Solano identifies in *Breaking the Waves* a central (and even feminist) concern with this-worldly justice, and reads Bess as possessing a surpassing power and agency.

A few feminists, myself included, find that Bess does indeed possess autonomy and power. I . . . find her stronger than the lot of us. I would argue that she does have tremendous power of choice despite her choices being made by patriarchal figures. She does ultimately choose to pursue what is *most important to her: love*.¹⁶

For Solano, then, Bess is a feminist icon because her decision to sacrifice her life for love of a man was fully within her control (although she seems to insert an element of ambiguity into her own argument by allusion to the 'patriarchal figures' who are apparently making choices for Bess too). Ultimately, Solano wants viewers to value and validate Bess's devotion to love above all else. For Solano, this commitment trumps the otherwise objectionable subject matter and makes Bess an agent of feminist resistance against a patriarchal church that would have its members love 'the Word' more than humans.

On the other side of the equation are commentators like A. Faber who take exception to the metaphysical readings rehearsed above. In what might be a direct response to Solano, Faber says of Bess's refusal to worship the Word over humans: 'Bess changes the object of her devotion from Word to flesh, but the terms of her devotion, and its funding of male power, does not change at all.'¹⁷ A telling illustration of this point is found in the middle of the film when Bess prays directly to a comatose Jan. She says, 'I love you, Jan'. In her 'god voice', she answers herself and says, 'I love you, too, Bess. You are the love of my life.' Faber takes exception, as well, to Keefer and Linafelt's sidelining of Bess's gender status for theological considerations. 'Keefer and Linafelt say with Bataille that eros is like sacrifice, but they neglect to mention the terrible misogyny of his analogy: *a male sacrificer opens the body of a female victim*.'¹⁸ Faber's concerns are more purely feminist and very little theological,

and she sees previous commentators as colluding in the ennoblement of female suffering over females themselves.

For many critics, the ardour of Bess's unconditional devotion to Jan embodies an excessive desire that exceeds patriarchal impositions Von Trier creates the image of Bess as sexual martyr through a peculiar valorization of feminine abjection as madness, formlessness, malleability, hysteria. This common reiteration of femininity as weakness, even if it is a 'higher, spiritual calling', recreates male power over against feminine power as fascinating debility.¹⁹

While many commentators applaud, at least to some degree, von Trier's apparent attempt to empower a woman to subvert patriarchal privilege through transgressive sexual acts, Faber understands von Trier's narrative as a reinscription of that very privilege.

Von Trier is well aware that patriarchal religious structures, in the form of the Church, are complicit in the oppression of his protagonists, but he seems less aware of the negative repercussions of using the Judeo-Christian atonement narratives—which form the ideological foundation of the 'Church'—to valorise his female characters. As problematic as a soteriology based on sacrifice may be,²⁰ so long as the symbol of self-abasement is gendered as male (Suffering Servant, Jesus), there is a potentially valuable ethical and moral advantage to be gained from it. It can serve, for instance, as a profound challenge to the bearers of power and a powerful catalyst for change when introduced into a patriarchal cultural paradigm.²¹ Unfortunately, what happened instead is that Christianity left patriarchy intact and the suffering messiah became—perversely—its weapon of domination. Because the gospel did not in fact lead to an overturning of hierarchical social structures, the continuing insistence on traditional notions of atonement actually puts in jeopardy those it is meant to redeem. For example, throughout history racial and gender minorities have been expected to embrace a sacrificial model of devotion for themselves that participates in the understanding of white male privilege as inevitable and 'natural'. Although von Trier's valorisation of his female protagonists' sacrifice is clearly meant *on one level* as a critique of male and church privilege,²² what he is providing instead is a dangerous role model, and the best evidence yet that atonement theology can provide a shield for oppression and pathological self-abuse—especially when the sacrificial victim is gendered female.²³ Like so many hegemonic religious discourses, von Trier's God 'sides with the powerful against the powerless . . .'.²⁴ Feminist viewers may be disposed to remember Mary Daly's now classic formulation that 'If God is male, then the male is God' when Jan tells Bess to give her body to other men for his sake and 'God's' voice supports this request in one way or another throughout the film.

In short, the sacrifices of these women are rendered *meaningful*, when they should be left as tragic. Von Trier transforms mundane acts of violence in much the same way the Church has for two millennia—by means of sublime formal representations that make abstractions of real flesh and blood. Indeed most reviewers seem swept away by the power of his aesthetic, and compelled to fall down on their knees in praise of Saints Bess and Selma. But von Trier's protagonists (as well as the millions of women they represent) would be better served by our lamentation than our celebration of their canonisation. We need to remember that while the suffering servant and Christ are, in the end, rewarded for their service, in the case of Bess and Selma it is the men in their lives who reap the rewards. 'Bess symbolizes the crucifixion and Jan the resurrection. Jan gets the *noli me tangere* line (don't touch me)... She gets the Golgotha text.'²⁵ A story in which the phallus triumphs at the expense of the abject woman is nothing new in the religious and secular myths of patriarchy;²⁶ von Trier has simply brought a contemporary (and admittedly sublime) religious passion and justification to an age-old injustice. With *Dogville*, however, von Trier offers an alternative version of salvation that upends the problematic rendering of gendered suffering in *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark*, and perhaps even redeems his characterisations of Bess and Selma by demonstrating that his vision of female subjectivity is broader than suggested by his two earlier films.

IV. *DOGVILLE* AS APOCALYPTIC RESPONSE TO THE HERMENEUTIC OF SACRIFICE

The first two and two-third hours of *Dogville* led me to believe I was watching the same formal representation of female sacrifice, and so I was somewhat flummoxed by the ending.

Dogville was released in 2003 to mixed reviews. The film's religious intentions are referenced explicitly in the naming of the film's protagonist, 'Grace', played by Nicole Kidman, and further underscored by the name of the town's watchdog, 'Moses', as well as by the several references to the Creation Story in Genesis 2. Taken together, these elements contribute to the sense that this film on the whole has a more Jewish cast to its religious sensibilities than *Breaking the Waves* or *Dancer in the Dark*.

The context is once again North America, this time circa 1930s (seemingly depression era) where the focus is on a small town in the Rocky Mountains. Regardless of the specifics, it is clearly meant to be 'any town, USA', past its prime, but with a citizenry that seems content with its fortunes, appreciative of life's simple blessings, for the most part. The entire three-hour film is boldly shot on one blocked-off set and narrated in singsong voice-over, enhancing the impression that we are watching a kind of fable. Formally,

the set also serves to bracket off this 'world', suggesting it is a microcosm on which we will watch unfold a universal tale.

Into this quiet idyll comes the gorgeous, mysterious Grace, apparently on the lam from 'gangsters' of some sort. Tom Edison, Jr., the town's self-styled moral conscience, convinces his fellow citizens that they should harbour Grace. Tom tells Grace the 'good news', but suggests it would be wise to make some effort to win the town folk over by helping them out with their daily chores. Initially, nearly everyone responds to her offers with polite reluctance. Little by little, however, they come to rely on her generosity until it appears that they cannot make it through a day without her help. The more she gives, the more selfish and petty the town becomes.

On the surface, Grace seems on her way to becoming an accepted member of the community, but the viewer cannot help but be made uneasy by the way Grace is continually marked as an outsider, even to the degree that she is eventually raped by Chuck, the village apple farmer (a scene which serves as a feminist allegory of the Creation Story in which violation of the female body replaces the original sin of Eve's/woman's disobedience). Soon Grace is a prisoner of the town, their conscripted labourer and sex slave. The same town that was reluctant to take her in now makes sure she cannot leave—they chain her to a large iron wheel that she pulls around the town to complete her chores. With this, von Trier closes the symbolic circle of traditional abuses around his female protagonists—Bess can't speak, Selma can't see, and now Grace can't move.

Finally, Tom, who has become increasingly irritated with Grace's refusal to give to him what the rest of the men take from her at will, decides to turn her over to the thugs from whom she is escaping. When they come to town to collect her—in several circa 30s gangster mobiles—we learn that the (nameless) leader of the gang is actually her father; and when she climbs into his car a long and fascinating conversation ensues in which they argue over whether or not Grace should return home and join the 'family business'. Grace resists, stating that her father's methods are too thuggish and unforgiving. He replies that people are 'dogs' and deserve what they get. Grace comes back with, 'They're human beings, daddy!' This obviously allegorical conversation between God and his (messiah) child is replete with Judeo-Christian atonement language—'forgive', 'mercy', 'judgment' and 'transgressions' to name a few—in which the two fundamentally disagree over whether or not to approach humanity with love and forgiveness or just retribution. Although it is an admittedly stereotypical (bordering on offensive) depiction of the differences between Christian and Jewish theological and ethical/moral positions,²⁷ it serves a useful heuristic purpose by meditating on many of the issues that are being deliberated in these films and in this article. The issue around which the argument between Grace and her father pivots is that of mercy

vs. justice, with Grace arguing for the former and her father the latter. Their disagreement parallels a fundamental difference between Christian and Jewish economies of salvation, with Christianity opting for a postponement of justice to the afterlife, and Judaism insisting on justice in the here and now. At the metanarrative level, this discussion is homologous to the disagreements between von Trier's interpreters—should we applaud his hermeneutic of sacrifice, or should we insist on this-worldly justice for his protagonists? Grace seems initially to be arguing—against her father—that mercy should always trump justice. Her father counters with an insistence on personal responsibility:

Father: 'The only thing you can blame is circumstances. Rapists and murderers may be the victims according to you, but I call them dogs. If they're lapping up their own vomit the only way to stop them is with the lash.'

As crude and harsh as the father's arguments are on one level, they resonate with the unequivocal emphasis on justice with which we are familiar in biblical prophetic and apocalyptic texts; and as the discussion progresses they become more compelling.

Grace: 'Why shouldn't I be merciful? Why?'

Father: 'No, no, no, you should, you should be merciful, when there is time to be merciful. But you must maintain your own standard. You owe them that. You owe them that. The penalty you deserve for your transgressions they deserve for their transgressions.'

The father acknowledges a situation in which mercy may be called for, but he refuses to give ground on the fundamental ethic of justice. The logical result of Grace's argument applied to her own situation would have been a continuation of the abuse she experienced at the hands of the townspeople.

Nonetheless, Grace seems unpersuaded when she steps out of the car, seemingly to stake a claim with the townspeople. As she looks at the town, the narrator tells us that the light shifts just so, and Grace sees the town for what it is. The truth previously occluded by her principles forces itself on her:

Narrator: 'And all of a sudden she knew the answer to her question all too well: If she had acted like them she could not have defended a single one of her actions and could not have condemned them harshly enough. *It was as if her sorrow and pain finally assumed their rightful place.* No, what they had done was not good enough. And if one had the power to put it to rights, it was one's duty to do so for the sake of the other towns, for the sake of humanity; and not least for the sake of the *human being that was Grace herself.*' [italics mine]

Climbing back into the car, Grace says to her father, 'if there's any town the world would be better without, this is it;' and in an apocalyptic melee the gangsters subsequently set fire to the town and brutally gun down its inhabitants (except Moses), as Grace watches on. The scene culminates in Grace's decision to shoot Tom herself.

As gruesome as this apocalyptically inspired ending is, I see it as a persuasive corrective to the problematic aspects of the atonement narrative as played out in the first two films. Dogville is an imaginative space in which the powerless can reclaim a sense of agency, where Grace's humanity holds a value equal to those around her. Apocalypticism is the originally Jewish understanding of a world so corrupted by human evil that only a show of violent retribution by God himself can cleanse it. Its foundationally dualistic view of the world can be toxic when put to the service of mere mortals, who are always quick to claim allegiance with God against perceived 'evil-doers'. That is, when put in the service of patriarchal prerogatives, an apocalyptic worldview can result in a state of myopic systemic injustice. A sad, but telling example occurred when televangelist Jerry Falwell proclaimed on national television that 9/11 was God's just retribution against a homosexual-loving, feminist nation.²⁸ With that we were given a transparent example of the perverse misuse of apocalyptic rhetoric by a representative of the very type of power structures against which that rhetoric was originally meant as an imaginative hedge. Given its potential for misuse, the eschewing of apocalyptic models of justice may seem the appropriate stance. For women, however (and other marginalised groups), they can provide an alternative to the self-sacrificial messages in the Gospels, which often have the detrimental effect of serving the powers that oppress them. As womanist theologian JoAnne Marie Terrell notes:

Privileged exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount and other texts and the categorical exclusion of violence, particularly as a countermeasure against oppression, ironically deploy a scapegoat mechanism that enables oppressor classes to maintain their privilege *by any means* while they proscribe the kinds of liberative options that may be taken by those whom they have already violently disempowered.²⁹

Feminist scholars have recognised this correlation for some time, but what has not been adequately explored is the idea that apocalyptic discourse might be a fitting response to an overemphasis on sacrificial understandings of suffering. Most liberal scholars are uncomfortable with the blatant dualism and violence that is a hallmark of apocalyptic rhetoric. As Allan Boesak (writing from the perspective of South African apartheid) points out, many of us with our humanist-influenced moral sensibilities have a misplaced resistance to the violent rhetoric of apocalypses and like biblical discourses.

People who do not know what oppression and suffering is react strangely to the language of the Bible... The oppressed do not see any dichotomy between God's love and God's justice.³⁰

There are some, however, who are starting to explore the possibilities of apocalyptic responses to systemic injustice. Brian Blount, an African American biblical scholar, questions the aptness of sacrificial models of salvation for a population that has suffered a history of enslavement and oppression, and posits an apocalyptic alternative. He points out that in African American churches an exclusive focus on the gospel message has been internalised by the congregants to the detriment of their own subjectivity.

The problem is that slaves came to believe through white teaching and their own internalization of white spirituality that *their* unmerited suffering was God's chosen tactic for effecting that removal... The end result was a hermeneutic of sacrifice. It ignored the injustice of the slave condition; it praised instead the slave who, because of his or her love for the Lord, forfeited his or her entire life and work effort to the demands the slave condition imposed.³¹

Blount suggests a reading of the Apocalypse of John that could undo the damage done to Black identities by the 'redemptive suffering arguments', pointing out that the Jesus of the Book of Revelation does not embrace suffering, but rather wields the sword of his mouth to oppose suffering.³²

Likewise, it seems the women in von Trier's films need narratives that offer alternative responses to their suffering. That is not to say that we need an alternative that forthwith and forever excludes a sacrificial hermeneutic of redemption, but one that provides crucial imaginative options, similar to what Black thinkers are crafting for Black religious communities. And we need to be clear that apocalyptic language was then and should remain now an *imaginative* option. Imagination should not, however, be considered impotent in the fight against intractable oppression. As Queer theorist Judith Halberstam well understands, imagination is, rather, a crucial condition of hope.

We have to be able to imagine violence, and our violence needs to be imaginable because the power of the fantasy is not to represent but to destabilize the real... Imagined violence does not advocate lesbian or female aggression, but it might complicate an assumed relationship between women and passivity or feminism and pacifism.³³

I think the very extremity that has made apocalyptic rhetoric indigestible for many Jews and Christians³⁴ makes it *exactly right* as a response to oppression that has proven intractable, including the different manifestations of the

systemic violence levelled against women. Under such conditions, the violent impulse of apocalyptic, like that found in the Book of Revelation, may seem more hopeful than troubling: its author transfigures the slaughtered Lamb into a conquering Lion (5:5), 'armed with the fullness of God's power... who deposes the dragon Satan (12:11), and, having taken up the sword of God's word, rides out to meet Satan's forces on the field of apocalyptic battle' (2:16; 19:11–16).³⁵ When this Jesus decides to save, he does not climb back up on the cross; 'he mounts a war horse and unsheathes a sword (19:11–16). He is about to change the world, not suffer for it!'³⁶ While apocalyptic notions have polluted US politics for decades (at least since the ascendancy of the 'moral majority' and its offshoots), with *Dogville* von Trier is effectively reclaiming it as a rhetorical device of the profoundly disenfranchised.

The unconditional love, forgiveness and mercy Grace bestowed on the town of Dogville did nothing to resolve her suffering, nor did it bring salvation or enlightenment to those she loved. In other words, there was *nothing meaningful* about her suffering, and we should not assume that Christianity's only response to her suffering is a hermeneutic of sacrifice. The sacred texts of Judaism and Christianity have always offered competing and complementary visions of salvation, and we would be wise to start emulating the conversation taking place on those pages, as messy and unresolved as that exchange undoubtedly is. Whether wittingly or not, it seems that von Trier has done just that.

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- ¹ There is some debate over what elements constitute a 'Christ film', but there are some generally agreed upon features. For instance, as Arnfridur Gudmundsdottir notes, rather than a focus on the person of Jesus, *per se*, Christ films feature 'persons with messianic characteristics. Such so-called Christ-figures often play the role of a redeemer who transforms people's lives and indeed sometimes dies as a martyr' ('Female Christ-Figures in Films: A Feminist Critical Analysis of *Breaking the Waves* and *Dead Man Walking*,' *Studia Theologica* 56 [2002] 27–43, esp. 28).
- ² J. Wall, 'Breaking the Waves', *Christian Century* (1 February 1997, online: <http://www.christiancentury.org/>).
- ³ J. Overstreet, 'Dogville', *Christianity Today* (26 March 2004, online: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/>).
- ⁴ J. M. Terrell, *Power in the Blood?: The Cross in the African American Experience* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998), esp. pp. 10, 125 and 139. And C. R. Bohn, 'Dominion to Rule: The Roots and Consequences of a Theology of Ownership', in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, eds J. C. Brown and

- C. R. Bohn (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1989), pp. 105–16.
- ⁵ T. Penner and C. Vander Stichele, 'The Tyranny of the Martyr: Violence and Victimization in Martyrdom Discourse and the Movies of Lars von Trier', in *Sanctified Aggression: Legacies of Biblical and Post Biblical Vocabularies of Violence* (New York: T&T Clark, 2003), pp. 175–92, esp. pp. 188.
 - ⁶ Scholars draw a distinction between 'apocalypse', the genre, and 'apocalyptic', the worldview or ideology that inheres in the form.
 - ⁷ See especially Rev. 5 and 12–22 in which Jesus is depicted as a conquering lamb and heavenly warrior, respectively.
 - ⁸ M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and tr. C. Emerson (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 91.
 - ⁹ M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. M. Holquist, tr. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), see especially 'Discourse in the Novel', pp. 259–422.
 - ¹⁰ B. Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship: An Introduction* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature), p. 60.
 - ¹¹ The following brief synopses serve not only the purpose of situating these films soteriologically, but they will also provide to those readers who have not seen all three films (most readers, undoubtedly) the pertinent information needed to follow the argument of this article.
 - ¹² Quoted in J. Bekkenkamp, 'Breaking the Waves: Corporality and Religion in a Modern Melodrama' in *Begin with the Body: Corporeality, Religion and Gender*, (eds) Jonneke Bekkenkamp and Maaïke de Haardt (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), pp. 134–56, esp. p. 142.
 - ¹³ I. Makarushka, 'Transgressing Goodness in Breaking the Waves', *Journal of Religion and Film* 2/1 (April 1998, online: <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/>), paragraph 55.
 - ¹⁴ K. Keefer and T. Linafelt, 'The End of Desire: Theologies of Eros in *The Song of Songs* and *Breaking the Waves*', *Journal of Religion and Film* 2/1 (April 1998, online: <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/>), paragraph 27.
 - ¹⁵ J. R. Solano, 'Blessed Broken Bodies: Exploring Redemption in *Central Station* and *Breaking the Waves*', *Journal of Religion and Film* 8/1 (April 2004, online: <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/>), paragraph 1.
 - ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.
 - ¹⁷ A. Faber, 'Redeeming Sexual Violence? A Feminist Reading of *Breaking the Waves*', *Literature and Theology* 17/1 (2003) 59–75, esp. 69–70.
 - ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 62.
 - ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.
 - ²⁰ An atonement version of salvation has been operating within the Jewish and Christian traditions from the beginning. This notion has to do with the idea that salvation is contingent on some expiatory act, and probably finds its earliest manifestation in the ancient Hebrew practice of sacrifice. Sacrifice is the epistemological foundation of the Christian Church and the primary ordering principle of its economy of salvation, with Jesus as the quintessential suffering servant who suffers not only to redeem Jews, but all humankind.
 - ²¹ Penner and Vander Stichele, *Sanctified Aggression*, p. 181.
 - ²² Gudmundsdottir (p. 35) does not think that von Trier is offering any such cultural critique.
 - ²³ Penner and Vander Stichele, *Sanctified Aggression*, p. 191. See Gudmundsdottir, 'Female Christ-Figures in Films', p. 33 for a summary of the work of V. Saiving and others who warn against masculine understandings of sin that demonize behaviours that women need to embrace to balance out the power differentials that currently dominate: 'Saving criticizes both Anders Nygren's and Reinhold Niebuhr's understanding of human nature, arguing that both

- unfairly universalize men's experience, when they define sin as hubris and *agape* as sacrificial love. Simply stated, Saiving questions how such theories could possibly reflect women's experience, as women have been raised to think too much about others and too little about themselves. For a long time women suffered from low self-esteem and a lack of self-confidence. From the perspective of women's experience, it becomes highly questionable to label that which women lack, namely self-confidence and a strong self-image, as bad or even sinful.'
- ²⁴ Gudmundsdottir, 'Female Christ-Figures in Films', p. 35.
- ²⁵ Bekkenkamp, *Begin with the Body*, p. 153.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 154.
- ²⁷ The conversation could just as easily be understood, however, as a play on the conversation between God and Abraham on the future of Sodom (Genesis 18).
- ²⁸ Falwell made this statement on 13 September 2001 on Pat Robertson's television show, 'The 700 Club'. See <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/09/14/Falwell.apology/>
- ²⁹ Terrell, *Power in the Blood?*, p. 27.
- ³⁰ A. Boesak, *Comfort and Protest: The Apocalypse from a South African Perspective* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1987), p. 72.
- ³¹ B. Blount, *Can I Get a Witness: Reading Revelation through African American Culture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), p. 72. See also, A. Pinn, *Why Lord?: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1995), p. 9.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 82.
- ³³ J. Halberstam, 'Imagined Violence/Queer Violence: Representations of Rage and Resistance', in M. McCaughey and N. King (eds) *Reel Knockouts* (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 2001), pp. 244–66, esp. p. 263.
- ³⁴ Including feminist biblical scholar Tina Pippin who writes extensively of the misogynist elements of apocalyptic literature (*Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992], pp. 78–9).
- ³⁵ Blount, *Can I Get a Witness*, pp. 78–9.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 76.