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Pleasure, Duty, and Faith in Lars Von Trier's Cinema and Kierkegaard's Philosophy*

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Abstract

Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard and his existentialist philosophy in *Fear and Trembling* mainly highlight the significance of personal choices in an individual's life. According to Kierkegaard, the individual passes through three realms of existence on the way to becoming a true self: the aesthetic realm of existence, the ethical realm of existence, and the religious realm of existence. The key objects of these realms of existence are pleasure, duty, and faith respectively. Exploring the feelings of individuals when faced life choices, and the ideas of mercy, morality and sacrifice in his films, the well-known Danish film director and screenwriter Lars von Trier can be said to have made much use of Kierkegaard's existentialist ideas in many of his films. Therefore; it is possible to trace the effects of Soren Kierkegaard and his existentialist philosophy on Lars von Trier's cinema. In this essay, three films by Lars von Trier are analyzed by using the aforementioned key objects within the context of Kierkegaard and his existentialism: faith and *Breaking the Waves*, pleasure and *Nymphomaniac I-II*, and duty and *Dancer in the Dark*. We watch the aesthetical individual in the first stage on life's way in *Nymphomaniac*, the ethical individual in the second stage on life's way in *Dancer in the Dark*, and the religious individual in the final and highest stage on life's way in *Breaking the Waves*.

Keywords: *Kierkegaard, Lars von Trier, existentialism, aesthetics, ethics, religion*

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A prolific and controversial Danish film director and screenwriter, Lars Von Trier mostly produces the existential and socio-political films exploring the ideas of mercy, morality, and sacrifice. His existential approach and the ideas like morality that he explores in his films bring to minds his fellow countryman Soren Kierkegaard, the father of existentialism. It is no doubt that Kierkegaard has inspired numerous artists, writers, and film directors with his groundbreaking existentialist philosophy so far, but perhaps no other director has shown the torturous and bitter journey of the individual for true self in such a provoking way like von Trier has done in his films.

Kierkegaard's famous *Fear and Trembling* (2015) is universally considered as the Bible of existentialism and it draws attention to the significance of the choices an individual makes in life. The concepts of *sacrifice* and *self-sacrifice* are the central themes in this book in which everything revolves around the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac within the contexts of ethics and morality. Though ethics and morals may sound the same, they are actually quite different from each other. Morality focuses on how to be a good person for the society while ethics moves this focus from the person to having a good or happy life for the sake of the individual. Moral traditions talk about how to treat other people morally and they are built upon traditions and norms. However, ethics has shifted this focus from the good person to the good or happy life. In this sense, a person is not responsible for others, but for himself/ herself (Beier, 2014: 11). That is the starting point of existentialism. A person is not responsible for the society or religions, but for himself/herself, and his/her attitude towards the absurdity[†] of the World is the sole factor that determines the life itself.

Within the above-mentioned context, it can be said that many lead characters in Lars von Trier's films are existentialists. According to Kierkegaard, the individual passes through three realms of existence on the way to becoming a true self: the aesthetic realm of existence, the ethical realm of existence, and the religious realm of existence (qtd. from Kierkegaard in Çelebi, 2011: 73). The key objects of these realms of existence are pleasure, duty, and faith respectively. In this essay, three films by Lars von Trier are analyzed by using the aforementioned key objects within the context of Kierkegaard and his existentialism: faith and *Breaking the Waves*, pleasure and *Nymphomaniac I-II*, and duty and *Dancer in the Dark*.

The lead character Bess in Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* represents an innocence believing the absurd, which is hard to come across in modern times. Different from Camus' and Sartre's absurd, the word absurd in the previous sentence means the faith in the absurd in a theological context. Religions are inherently miraculous and in this sense they are all the objects of faith rather than reason. There is a horrible abyss between *Raison* (rational) and religion (miraculous) or the absurd. Since one cannot build a bridge between the rational one (*Raison*) and the divine/miraculous (absurd), the individual leaps from one side of the abyss to the other with a leap (*springet*), and the leap itself is faith here (2014: 130. Translator's note).

[†] Different from Kierkegaard's absurd, the absurd here signifies Camusian absurd, the meaninglessness of the world and life.

Getting back to the movie *Breaking the Waves*, the lead character Bess is a pretty woman who is vulnerable to being abused with her naive innocence and she has a clinical history of psychological problems. Having been brought up in a strict Calvinist community, she's not allowed to marry her boyfriend, Jan, an atheist oil rig worker at first by her family, but then they consent and Bess gets married with Jan. Emotionally fragile Bess has difficulty living without Jan when he's away on the oil platform. Pure of heart and childlike in her beliefs, she often visits church and has imaginary conversations with God there begging for her husband's immediate return home. Her prayers are answered and one day her husband returns home unexpectedly, but severely and fatally injured in an industrial accident. He's paralyzed and he has very little chance of survival. Bess thinks that she, herself has caused this accident by praying. Having been told that he will never be all right again, Jan tells Bess he'll be no use to her anymore, so she should go out and sleep with other men. And he adds that this is the only way he can survive and be happy. Bess believes that the only way to save her husband's life is to sacrifice herself by sleeping with other men and this is also the will of God. In other words, she really believes in the absurd. She thinks the more sins she commits, the more mercy God will have upon her husband. Despite her repulsion, she goes out and has sex with other men. Giving up her own will, she surrenders her body and soul to the divine will, the absurd, to save his life. Sacrificing herself by offering her body to other men, Bess helps her husband survive and his condition ameliorates. Just like in the Kierkegaardian paradox, one can save another by committing a sin or with the suspension of ethics because he/she has faith in the righteousness of the end that God will bring about. In the film, Bess has absolute faith in God just like Abraham which allows her to make an unethical decision, or commit a sin. Putting religious concerns over ethical concerns, Bess saves her husband's life miraculously by proving her faith in God in her own religious realm of existence.

In *Nymphomaniac I-II*, we watch the life story of a sex addict seeking pleasure in the aesthetic realm of existence. The lead character Joe represents pleasure while the Jewish Seligman, a bibliophilic aesthete sets an aesthetic background to her biographical stories as he listens to her confessions. Unlike all other male existentialist protagonists in literature like Kafka's Gregor Samsa[‡], Camus' Mersault[§] or Oguz Atay's Turgut Ozben^{**}, Joe is a female existentialist protagonist who has to pay the price for experiencing her femininity. To embrace her sexuality fully as a woman, she refuses gender roles such as being a wife and a mother and she's also punished by the society because of her sexual promiscuity. As a nonconformist and promiscuous woman, Joe is regarded as a misfit and threat to other women and society in the film. If we read between the lines of the film, we can infer that a male sex addict is not considered a threat to society; moreover, this is seen as natural and normal for human males, which is the hypocrisy of the society. Rejecting group therapy to get rid of her addiction, Joe actually rejects all "values and norms" of the society. She chooses to live the way she likes instead of what the others (society) dictates to her and she never lets others control her and keeps paying all the price for violating gender roles.

[‡] The name of the protagonist in Franz Kafka's well-known novella *Metamorphosis*.

[§] The name of the protagonist in Albert Camus' novel *The Stranger*.

^{**} The name of the protagonist in *The Disconnected*, a novel by Oguz Atay, a prominent Turkish author.

Refusing obligations of motherhood^{††}, Joe leaves her husband and son in pursuit of her desires instead. Though it's so cruel and unacceptable to see a toddler abandoned by his mother just to chase her desires, von Trier's implied message here actually is a radical feminist one uttered by Seligman criticizing gender inequality and hypocrisy of the society. Each day thousands of babies are abandoned by their biological fathers in the world and this situation is almost normalized in society whereas the abandonment of a baby by its biological mother so as to pursue her own life and liberty seems to us/the audience horrible and totally unacceptable. The underlying cause of this inequality is probably gender roles which double underline the obligations of motherhood considering them as "sacred" while the society doesn't care much about fathers who fail to shoulder the obligations of fatherhood. This shows us that women still shoulder the larger share of parental obligations today. In this sense, we need to remember the fact that an individual cannot exist in two or more realms of existence (the aesthetic realm of existence, the ethical realm of existence, and the religious realm of existence) at the same time according to Kierkegaard (qtd. in Çelebi, 2011: 74). Joe would choose either the ethical realm of existence with the object of duty (the duty of motherhood) or the aesthetic realm of existence with the object of pleasure (nymphomania). She prefers the latter. According to Kierkegaard, the reason behind this preference is as follows:

An aesthete uses all his or her power to maximize sensory pleasures. The aesthetic realm of existence begins with the aesthete's entry into the domain of natural desires. The aesthete wants more than sole satisfaction of his or her instincts like hunger or sex. At this point the value of pleasure changes quality as the individual makes progress in the aesthetic realm. From now on the essential thing is not to take pleasure, but to experience that pleasure fully with the Soul.... In this sense, pleasure evolves into a lifestyle from a simple need and put in the center of life. Therefore, we can state that pleasure is the basic value of this realm. The individual in this realm of existence craves for pleasure and enters into the domain of his or her natural desires. The aesthete has a never-ending craving or yearning for pleasure, which is never fully satisfied. And this individual always asks for more to maximize pleasure. The aim of the aesthete is to take pleasure from life and make pleasure its basic value. For the individual in the aesthetic realm, the idea is to pursue pleasure rather than having it since pleasure disappears as soon as the individual obtains it. However, the desires of the aesthete are never-ending (qtd. in Çelebi, 2011: 73-74).

Lastly, in *Dancer in the Dark* we watch an episode from the life of a character in the realm of ethical existence with the object of duty. The lead character in the film is Selma, a Czech immigrant who works at a factory and lives a life of poverty with her son in a trailer home on the property of the town policeman Bill and his wife Linda. Selma suffers from a degenerative eye condition and because of this losing her vision. She saves all her money to pay for an operation which will prevent her son suffering the same fate. Meanwhile Bill spends all his salary to make Linda happy and he's behind in payments, but his wife doesn't know anything about his financial situation. One night, he tells Selma his secret adding that the bank would take their house if he can't pay back. To comfort Bill, Selma tells him her secret blindness and the money she's been saving up for her son's

^{††} This refusal presents the harsh reality of child neglect in the film and raises questions about the misogyny of the director once again just like in the *Anti-Christ*.

operation, hoping that they can keep each other's secret together. Bill asks Selma for a loan, but she declines. Knowing that Selma is blind, Bill hides in her house and learns the whereabouts of her savings box watching her secretly later. One day when she comes home, she finds out that her saving box is empty and goes to Bill and Linda's house to report the theft. She goes next door to report the theft to Bill and Linda only to hear Linda discussing how Bill has brought home their safe deposit box to count their savings. Linda additionally reveals that Bill has "confessed" his affair with Selma, and that Selma must move out immediately. Meanwhile Selma goes upstairs to see Bill and ask her money back. He draws a gun on her, and in a struggle he is wounded. Linda discovers the two of them and, assuming that Selma is attempting to steal the money, runs off to tell the police at Bill's command. Bill then begs Selma to take his life, telling her that this will be the only way she will ever reclaim the money that he stole from her. Selma shoots at him several times, but due to her blindness manages to only maim Bill further. In the end, she performs a coup de grâce with the safe deposit box. Slipping into a trance, Selma takes the money to the Institute for the Blind to pay for her son's operation before the police can take it from her. Then Selma is caught, put on trial and eventually given the death penalty. On her way to the gallows, she learns that the operation was successful and her son will see. She sings a final song on the gallows and finds relief through her final self-sacrifice for her son. Happy to have fulfilled her "duty" towards her son, she completes her existence in the ethical realm of existence and dies^{**}.

According to Kierkegaard, the individual has a higher consciousness and awareness in the ethical realm of existence and makes conscious choices no matter what the consequences are (qtd. from Kierkegaard in Celebi, 2011: 76). In this sense in *Dancer in the Dark*, ignoring one's duties like Joe in *Nymphomaniac* is replaced by the fulfillment of one's duties because the ethical realm of existence has no aim but the duty and obligation. Unlike Joe, Selma lives for her duty and obligation towards her son and she even declines her colleague, Jeff who confesses his love and asks for her hand. She tells him she has no time for this sort of things because she must work so as to save up money. For the individual who is in the realm of ethical existence, his or her responsibility / duty is not towards God; it is towards society and its members. The aim is to become a true self for the individual through fulfillment of his or her duties. Selma who is in the realm of ethical existence does not seem to have a relationship with God unlike Bess in a spiritual sense since only ethics, her duty towards her son is sacred and worth living for her. Because the ethics and religion may sometimes conflict with one another and this dilemma is exactly what Kierkegaard tries to tell us in *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard explains this situation as following: "Ethics is the realm of moral obligations and duties; however, real responsibility is the responsibility of an individual to make his or her own choices (*free will*, added by the author, DGD) and to fulfill his or her duty to become a true self" (qtd. from Taşdelen in Çelebi, 2011: 77). In this sense, the individual in *Nymphomaniac* who is totally possessed by her desire for sensory experience and pleasure is substituted by an individual who fulfills her duty in the realm of ethical existence in *Dancer in the Dark*.

^{**} Synopsis summarized from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dancer_in_the_Dark to a large extent.

To sum up, we watch the aesthetical individual in the first stage on life's way in *Nymphomaniac*, the ethical individual in the second stage on life's way in *Dancer in the Dark*, and the religious individual in the final and highest stage on life's way in *Breaking the Waves*. It can be said that what Soren Kierkegaard tried to tell us through his existentialist philosophy was depicted in Lars Von Trier's movies mentioned above to a great extent. Von Trier shows us the true essence of Kierkegaard's famous quote "Everything good in man is sorrow's child" through his films (Kierkegaard, 2009: 65). He was declared a *persona non grata* in Cannes Film Festival because of his provoking "I understand Hitler" comment in 2011 and he was banned from the festival. In one of his interviews, he says that the aim of a good provocation is to stimulate people to think; when you provoke people, you give them the opportunity to express their true thoughts (Stevenson, 2005). Though deserving respect for his artistic motives to understand Hitler on the basis of an existentialist archeological excavation, it is hard not to regret for he didn't limit his provocations to his films.

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