# Ringing The Bells in *Celebration*: *Red*, *Breaking the Waves* and Transcendent Humanism in Dogme Films

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### Chilling the Spine: From *Transcendental Style* to Transcendent Humanism

Paul Schrader's 1972 book *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* links three very different filmmakers, from Ozu's Zen-like, still-framed shots to Bresson's and Dreyer's theological and expressionist concerns, through what Schrader defines as "transcendental style": first, a "meticulous representation" of the everyday, second, showing the disparity between people and their surroundings which leads to a "decisive action," and third, the moment of stasis, "a frozen view of life" that transcends the disparity (Schrader, 1972: 39, 42, 49).

The 1990s European art films *Three Colours: Red* (1995) and *Breaking The Waves* (1996), with the latter film leading to the Dogme 95 movement [1], evince what I term "transcendental humanism". Although this seeming paradox often stems *in part* from the cinematic details Schrader outlines, transcendental humanism is not a style but an effect or aim, revealing a holiness or secular spiritualism rooted in human community – friendship, a sexual relationship, or merely an attempt at social interaction or integration – that not only transcends the everyday, material world. Characters in a film of social realism who undergo such transcendence are transported, by such a deeper meaning or bond, beyond their separate, self-absorbed selves, while the viewer is often haunted or chilled by the expression of transcendent humanism on screen. By allusively and artfully expressing human communion through the combination of sound and images or motifs, along with other cinematic qualities, a film can show human transcendence in such a subtle and affecting way that the viewer feels a kinship with the characters on the screen and is moved, with them, beyond the earthly and egotistical. (In a sense, then, I am trying to elaborate on the chill you might feel down your spine when you are particularly moved by an elegantly constructed, deeply heartfelt film.) Whereas Schrader talks about a certain non-expressive, "static, well-composed" (Schrader, 1972: 67) cinematic minimalism employed by Ozu and Bresson in particular (and echoed in such films as Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Maborosi* [1995] and Laurent Cantet's *Time Out* [2001]), the transcendental humanism of many social realist European films – from *The Dreamlife of Angels* (1998) and *Rosetta* (1999) to *Burnt By The Sun* (1994) and *Breaking the Waves* – can arise from more expressive acting and experimental, exaggerated camerawork, rather than the simple sets and minimalist framing of a *Tokyo Story* (1953). These modern European films still show the tension between characters and the fractured, "schizoid world" in which they try to survive, often using irony to cope, as Schrader notes (Schrader, 1972: 45). But in *Red*, *Breaking the Waves*, and *The Celebration* (1998), ambiguous, complex images and motifs of etherealness heighten the tension between characters and their milieu to the extent that transcendent humanism is achieved. Kieślowski's film, *Red*, uses a wind-blown curtain and ruffling posters as images of flickering, halting stasis that suggest holy, enduring human connections; von Trier, in *Breaking the Waves*, employs still shots and musical interludes,

culminating in a god's-eye view of ringing bells, to evoke the triumph of Bess' secular faith; Vinterberg uses curtains, water, and candlelight to create a blurring, shimmering, eerie screen between our world and the afterlife in *The Celebration*.

Early films in the Dogme 95 movement, notably Dogme 1, *The Celebration*, continued the theme of personal spirituality in European cinema seen in such directors as Bresson, Dreyer, and Bergman, and best exemplified in the 1990s by Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Red* and the love-centred transcendence of Bess in von Trier's 1996 Cannes jury prize-winning film *Breaking the Waves*. [2] The Dogme films that best convey transcendent humanism, however, have done so by transgressing the rules of the Dogme manifesto [3] and using ambiguous motifs and images of transience and impermanence, similar to the curtain in *Red* or ringing bells in *Breaking the Waves*, to suggest transcendence. The dissipation of the Dogme 95 movement can be seen in films that are increasingly formulaic and grounded in genre conventions, forgoing expressions of transcendent humanism within complex, socio-political explorations of human community or secular spirituality.

**Raising the Curtain: Draping *Red* in Holy Community**

*Red*, Kieślowski's last film and the final part of his *Three Colours* trilogy, is about fraternity. Perhaps no other filmmaker in recent years has been so closely associated with transcendent humanism, though critics have skirted around the idea. Annette Insdorf, in her book *Double Lives, Second Chances: The Cinema of Krzysztof Kieślowski*, calls his work "profoundly humanist" and notes "the transcendence in which he seemed to believe" (Insdorf, 1999: 166, 184). Geoff Andrew, in his analysis of the *Three Colours* trilogy, states:

> we need to come to terms with the workings of fate, chance, the past, ghosts, and maybe even God . . . In this respect, Kieślowski belongs to that small number of film-makers – most notable are Dreyer, Rosselini, Bresson, Bergman and Tarkovsky – who have attempted to explore, through a medium that is by its very nature materialistic and confined to the visual reproduction of physical surfaces, a world that is obscure, metaphysical and transcendental. (Andrew, 1998: 68)

Increasingly, Kieślowski used visual or musical leitmotifs to express the ineffable in more lyrical and imagistic ways than the three filmmakers Schrader examines. Kieślowski felt, and showed in his films, that there was something holy beyond the material world, which could be

> incarnated by the physical. Rather than use fuzzily romantic 'holy images' to portray epiphanies or transcendental experiences in the Hollywood tradition . . . the *Three Colours* films suggest the presence of the extraordinary or inexplicable by showing something that is ordinary or familiar in itself, in a context which is extraordinary or inexplicable. Music or a light may suddenly appear, unexpectedly, as if from nowhere. (Andrew, 1998: 69)

*Red* commences with the model Valentine making a call to her boyfriend in England. The camera follows bundles of red wires running under the English Channel, crossing other cables and lines, only to reach the flashing red signal of the busy phone on the other end. Thus begins the film's assertion that people's lives are interconnected, through time and space, by a greater force, a higher power consistently conveyed by the red motif. A scarlet

backdrop to a photo shoot links eerily with Valentine's escape from death; the changing red light at an intersection links Valentine, former judge Joseph Kern, and the judge's younger counterpart, the law student Auguste. Kieślowski uses this metonymy of colour to suggest that, through even more than chance and luck, human beings are interconnected through love and hope. For if only chance or luck were involved, these various coincidences would merely be clever plot points of intersection and characters would cross paths to little dramatic or artistic effect, à la *Pulp Fiction* (1994), which trumped *Red* for the 1994 Palme d'Or. But Kieślowski's aim here is far more ambitious than Tarantino's; the connections enable transcendent humanism by showing that people are linked in enlightening, moving ways, and that individuals can surmount their own problems through sympathy and community with others. The godlike prescience and connections of flawed humans are entirely believable, because the lightness of touch with which Kieślowski interweaves the various threads of characters' lives together merges with the luminosity of the film's look, from Valentine's radiant expression on a lit runway to the lush red motif. *Red*'s combination of artistic subtlety and visual grace is epitomized by the most charged scene of the film, as Joseph meets Valentine amongst the red plush chairs and crimson-toned runway of her last fashion show before she sails for England. Valentine rushes to close the building doors as the storm outside picks up, foreshadowing the storm that will wreck her ferry, and the camera glides over the red seats, watching as the woman struggles to close the door, the light-saturated drapes streaming around her as the judge looks on, concerned. Framed by red, the shot foreshadows the shipwreck, suggests that Valentine's struggles and acts of kindness will not go unrewarded and, ultimately, in the natural yet eerie eruption of light and wind, establishes the sense of a greater force bringing people together, imbuing human events and actions with a spiritual power. When *Red* ends with the judge watching a news report on the ferry disaster and seeing the freeze-frame image of Valentine's face against the background of a fireman's red uniform, the link with Valentine's blown-up profile against a red backdrop on a billowing, red advertising canvas resonates, echoing the late Polish director's hopeful message of transcendent humanism, a message summed up best by Andrew:

> By the end of the trilogy, Kieślowski's attitude to life was both clear and complex: we all of us live in a world tainted by grief, loneliness and suffering, and the only way to achieve some sort of equilibrium or 'spiritual' peace is by acknowledging the fact that we share that desire for a fuller happier life with the rest of mankind… We must reach out to others, through love, compassion, and understanding, and we should accept that there are bonds between us which we may not fully comprehend; to recognize our common humanity, our equal worth as individuals, with our own special needs, desires, fears and responsibilities, is to accept our 'destiny.' (Andrew, 1998: 76)

The commercial image of Valentine is made spiritual; a transitory moment captured on photographic film is briefly frozen on celluloid; as the judge watches the still image, the picture on a giant red backdrop flutters in the breeze, linking it with the curtain scene in the theatre, when Joseph and Valentine momentarily felt a timeless bond between them. Thus Kieślowski, in this haunting, ambiguous image, crystallizes the over-arching theme of transcendent humanism in *Red* by employing Schrader's 'third step,' as Emma Wilson suggests: "Cinema is explored as [a] medium which allows the generation of movement from stasis, of virtual existences extending beyond the bounds of temporal and material reality" (Wilson, 2000: 115).

### *Breaking the Waves*: Sounding the Note of Righteous Sacrifice

Perhaps no other film of the 1990s ignores the typically sober visual form of transcendental style films as much as Lars von Trier's 1996 Cannes Grand Jury Prize-winning *Breaking The Waves*. The Danish director's jumpy, handheld camera shots, on-location shooting, and video transfer to 35mm rang in a time of technological change, presaging the rise of digital moviemaking and the Dogme 95 movement, but the stylized, painterly 'chapter' breaks, where landscapes by artist Per Kirkeby are digitally rendered onto film, and the accompanying 1970s songs, are obvious technical transgressions of the later Dogme rules concerning effects, on-location sound, and temporal and geographical alienation. [3] Yet these interludes are, as Kirkeby explains in a prefatory note to the published screenplay, "not stills, but moving sequences" meant to make "the soul move" (Kirkeby, 1996: 13). Thus the chapter scenes partly comprise the third and final step in Schrader's notion of "transcendental style," the "complete stasis, or frozen motion" that "is the trademark of religious art in every culture" (Schrader, 1972: 49). The chapter scenes, which present a "God's-eye view of the landscape . . . as if he were watching over the characters" (Anon., 1996: 18), lead the viewer to the closing shot of *Breaking the Waves* and its moment of lingering, transcendental humanist beauty – the ringing of bells in the clouds above the oil-rig to commemorate Bess' death.

Many critics see the ringing bells as kitschy or melodramatic or, in Irena Makarushka's "Transgressing Goodness in *Breaking the Waves*" and Victoria Nelson's "The New Expressionism: Why The Bells Ring in *Breaking the Waves*", as a symbol of triumph over patriarchy and an example of a new filmic expressionism, respectively (Makarushka, 1998; Nelson, 1997). But by the end of the film, the medical, legal, and patriarchal religious establishments have not only been cast in doubt, but abandoned by Bess; the pealing of the bells is a simultaneously secular and spiritual signal of Bess' enduring connection, through sex and love, to Jan. As hokey as this bridging of the earthly and the beyond may seem, it is entirely in keeping with the message, as well as the aesthetic and plot devices, of von Trier's film. Although Bess is initially shown seeking approval from the strictly Calvinist community for her marriage, it is soon clear from her internal, seemingly schizophrenic conversations with God that she is not a parishioner like any other. She is unafraid to raise materialist matters in the church, suggesting that the outsiders' music – played over those chapter scenes – is one thing "of real value" that they have brought with them. When a church elder dourly notes to one of Jan's friends after the ceremony that "our church has no bells," the trajectory of the film is complete. Bess, already an outsider within the community, will create her own spiritual connection with her non-religious, excluded husband, until she rings the bells of her self-erected church, a temple built on earthly sex and love rather than Biblical tenets and Calvinist dogma. After being introduced to physical communion on her wedding night and realizing her profound, all-encompassing love for Jan, Bess becomes more and more vocal with each act of lovemaking, and more critical of the pleasure-denying religious elders. Bess and Jan encounter the minister near the church, by the phone booth where Bess will exchange loving words and even have phone sex with Jan when he calls her from the oilrig. When Jan asks the preacher why there are no church bells, he replies, "we do not need bells in our church to worship God" and, as he walks away, Bess smiles at Jan and rebelliously whispers to her fellow new believer, "I like church bells – let's put them back again."

Between the rocky shores of a patriarchal religion and the stormy, secular world of corruption and non-belief, Bess charts a different course, making and breaking waves as she nurtures and soon single-handedly sustains a loving devotion to Jan that seems irrational and even dangerous to others, especially after Jan is crippled in a rig accident and Bess decides that, by giving her body to other men, she will redeem her disastrous wish to have him return to her.

Even as she plunges herself further into her secular love for Jan, believing that by having sex with other men she will save him, Bess continues to talk to God while spurning the medico-legal establishment's diagnosis of Jan and herself, thwarting Doctor Richardson's attempt to institutionalize her. After sleeping with a brutish sailor for Jan's sake, she tells the congregation that "you cannot be in love with a word; you can love another human being. That's perfection." With that profession of transcendental humanism, the community leaders excommunicate her. Disowned by her mother and stoned by townschildren, Bess trusts entirely in her faith and sails back to the "big boat," where she knows she will be killed. As she is motored out along the waves, the small bell of the craft tinkling behind her, Bess beseeches her previously silent God to return to her, and this new God of a secular faith talks to her as the pilot rings the bell, signalling their arrival at the big ship and Bess' demise. After being viciously raped, Bess lies dying in hospital from stab wounds, sees the still-paralyzed Jan and is full of doubt; her last words are "It's all wrong." Yet after sneaking her body away from the church and burying Bess at sea, the surreal shot of the bells ringing not only testifies to the success of Bess' sacrifice as the recovered Jan looks up to the heavens, but ironically, in a faux-religious scene, confirms Bess' faith in the human bond between her and Jan. In a narrative twist on the ringing phone that linked the longing, lonely Bess and Jan across the sea, and just like the letterbox-framed landscape vistas between chapters that merge the transgression of outsiders' music with a romantic, ethereal still motion, the camera looks at large bells ringing back and forth in the clouds above the oil-rig. This moment of redemptive transcendence, then, is the inevitable and stirring result of the various symbols of and struggles towards Bess and Jan's holy human bond.

Of the three directors Schrader discusses, von Trier connects himself with Dreyer. Stig Björkman notes in his preface to the screenplay that one key fount of inspiration was "Dreyer's ORDET (THE WORD), also a film about a miracle in a religious community that refuses to accept the inexplicable" and that von Trier is extending the potential Dreyer saw in cinema for "abstraction" and a "defiance of naturalism" (Björkman, 1996: 4, 5, 10). The director himself quotes Dreyer, in a note to the screenplay that curiously focusses on the ambiguous morals of Jan rather than Bess (von Trier, 1996: 20-1). Indeed, the lyrical and emphatic ending to von Trier's film makes it easy to forget the complexity at the heart of Bess' transcendence – Bess' faith in physical love condemns her to leave the material world and forsake a religious afterlife so that Jan, for whom she sacrificed herself, may live, but always without her. In fact, contrary to von Trier's disingenuous "Director's Note," written before filming, and Bess' apology for "not being good," the film is not about goodness so much as it is about Bess' abiding faith in the profoundly secular, sexual, loving human bond between her and Jan. Makarushka belatedly realizes this: "there is little evidence that [Bess] believes in an afterlife where her desires will be gratified. Her desires are far too connected with the materiality of life and sexual intimacy… she accepts being cast out rather than give up her faith… in her own powers to heal and sustain life" (Makarushka, 1998: par. 53). Nelson recognizes the "distinctive transcendental element" in the film, but feels it is "transmitted by cliché" (Nelson, 1997: 236), failing to see that von Trier's climactic use of bells ironically asserts, with the camera looking down on the bells from above, the endorsement of Bess' earthly, secular faith by the *director*, who is the film's true omniscient power. Makarushka, focussing on Bess' rebellion against patriarchal religion and the phallic symbolism of the steeple, reduces the final scene to an image of transgression and confirmation of Bess' vocal opposition to the church, neglecting the positive and transcendent symbolism of the ringing bells. The bells are not heard in "the church that refused her the right to speak" (Makarushka, 1998: par. 51) because Bess has left the church behind and died in doubt. After the narrow-minded verdict of the coroner's inquest, the bells are a post-

mortem confirmation of Bess' sacrifice by von Trier, in an appeal on her behalf. This lingering artistic motif is a *deus ex machina* that, in combination with the painterly chapter scenes and the unforgettable, smouldering intensity of Bess as captured on an 'in-your-face', handheld camera, justifies Bess' belief in earthly love.

If the transcendent humanism of *Red* rises organically from the visual metonymics and subtle plot details of Kieślowski's intricately scripted film, the ending of *Red* still reveals the all-seeing writer-director's hand pulling strings, as the lives of all the characters in Three Colours trilogy briefly intersect when they survive the ferry crash. In *Breaking the Waves*, von Trier juxtaposes computer effects and digital video to close a film immersed in the pain and suffering of humans with a winking yet effective nod to the celluloid medium itself, in a work controlled and brought to a resonant ending by the godlike director.

**From Manifesto to Mani*festen*: Celebrating the Potential for Transcendent Humanism in Dogme**

The early, theoretically non-director-centred Dogme 95 films (the Dogme 95 films purport to shift attention away from the directors, but by simply signing and promoting the manifesto, the four founders – particularly von Trier and Vinterberg – became big names, immediately undermining their modest intentions) seem to share certain traits. An isolated setting is usually accompanied by a sense of constriction, characters are socially isolated or retarded in some way, there is sexual rawness or tension, and a strenuous effort to speak the truth to and/or forge a connection with another person. Dogme 95 films often show characters using irony to cope with a "schizoid world," two more traits of the films Schrader analyzes (Schrader, 1972: 45).

The conclusion of the Dogme 95 "Vow of Chastity" states, "My supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and settings." Of course, outsiders trapped in a closed setting is perfect theatre, and Dogme 95 accordingly offers great opportunities for actors to carry the film. While the expressionist camerawork and acting of Dogme 95 films are clearly not "transcendental style," the gritty social realism conveyed by the handheld camera and the enclosed environment easily enable a director, if so inclined, to fulfill the first two steps in Schrader's outline of transcendental style by other means. In fact, the disparity in Dogme films is twofold; not just between the characters and their environment, but between the viewer and the image on screen, as well – a grainy, digital, often shaky view of the world that simultaneously calls attention to the film medium while lending the subject matter a harsh, immediate authenticity. By enveloping the audience in the "here and now" while immersing them in a cinéma-vérité approach, Dogme 95 films potentially heighten the mundane realism and disparity between participant and environment, likewise necessitating a more extreme and profound transcendence of both the medium and the bond between characters in the film's moments of insight and stasis. The rigid technical rules of the "Vow of Chastity" certainly make it difficult to convey such transcendence on the screen: special effects cannot be employed and props cannot be brought in, sound cannot be produced apart from the images, special lighting and filters are not permitted, and temporal or geographical displacement is outlawed. Props, sound, lighting, and flashbacks or dream sequences – as in *Red* and *Breaking The Waves* – are all standard cinematic methods of transporting characters, and viewers, out of the film narrative and, by transcending the immediate, conveying the ineffable and stirring the soul.

Yet, borne from shaky filming and visceral acting, humanist transcendence can potentially be all the more moving in a Dogme film; a leap in faith is all the more stirring because of its contradistinction to the fairly banal, stifling limits from which an extraordinary moment can soar, often led up to by the various flourishes of acting and sparks of innovative camerawork that mark an accomplished work such as *The Celebration*. The typically stark, unchaste Dogme films are extremely austere, potential launching pads for transcendent humanism – for showing a striving beyond the physical and sexual, and the realization of a quasi-spiritual epiphany by a character or a near-mystical connection with another person. Ironically, though, in order to convey characters' epiphanies, spiritual motivations, or their realization of a state of grace, Dogme 95 directors must often bend or break the very manifesto rules that allow them to so vividly and grittily establish the murk, earthiness, and gritty realism that characters must eventually transcend. A 2002 Associated Press news item, however, revealed that all of the founding four Dogmatists crossed their self-imposed lines: "the founders of the strict rules for filmmaking that were introduced in 1995 admit they broke their own credo when they made the first of the movies that created a new genre" (Associated Press, 2002: R2). In the documentary *The Purified* (2002), Vinterberg "admitted he had been forced to adjust the lighting in one scene of *The Celebration* by hanging a towel over a window." Von Trier used a cable to get lighting in a scene in *The Idiots*, breaking rule four. A hairdresser cut an actor's hair between scenes in Kristian Levring's *The King is Alive* (2000), presumably transgressing either laws one or seven. Søren Kragh-Jacobsen confessed to directing an actress before a scene in *Mifune* (1999), though whether or not this contravenes any of the manifesto's strictures is unclear. "We must conclude that the genuine Dogme film has not been made," said von Trier. While the four co-founders (the notoriously tongue-in-cheek 'bad boy' auteur von Trier in particular; many of its later disciples seem to take Dogme quite seriously) may have seen the manifesto as something of a lark, a game with rules made to be broken, the establishment and transgression of those rules permitted a playing with and subversion of formal strictures that lent itself to transcendental humanism.

Of the commercially released Dogme 95 works, only Thomas Vinterberg's 1998 Cannes special jury prize-winning *The Celebration*, the first Dogme film and perhaps most commercially and critically successful, offers a consistent effort to transcend the 'here and now'. The reason for this lies partly in characters' deep tensions that are etched from the start, seething tensions that echo Schrader's notion of a disparity between character and environment, that is, "a growing crack in the dull surface of everyday reality" (Schrader, 1972: 42). Early in the film, the loutish brother Michael – who strives to preserve the status quo at all costs in order to join the Masons with his father's backing – pinches his sister Helene's breasts, suggesting the incest that remains hidden in the Klingenfeldt-Hansen family ("It's just not done. I'm your sister," she tells him.) Even more than in most Dogme films, the characters are on edge: father Helge seems oddly strict and pent-up on his sixtieth birthday, even as he tells inappropriately lewd jokes, Helene is a chain-smoking mass of nerves, and Christian seems to be boiling up inside, wanting to keep everything quiet and polite but unable to do so. To these churning dramatic tensions, Vinterberg adds a spiritual and eerily atmospheric aura to the memories of Christian's dead twin sister Linda, breaking rule seven ("Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden") as he establishes the motivation for Christian's revelation of child abuse and lends symbolic weight and dramatic tension to Christian's relentless efforts to force his father Helge to admit his sins. Vinterberg cleverly achieves the ghostly effect of the dead Linda in a number of transcendent ways, often transgressive of Dogme rules.

The discovery of Linda's note fuels the entire drama, for it is the clinching proof of the abuse that Christian accuses Helge of committing against him and his twin sister. Vinterberg's curiously framed and angled shots proliferate when Helene is given her dead sister's room and we see her and the concierge from an upper corner of the ceiling; then we see Helene from the bathroom in slow motion as, *Red*-like, a drape billows, filtering the sunlight into the room like a white aura, as though a ghost is watching her. When they enter the bathroom, the camera stares down from directly above the bathtub (where Linda killed herself). These shots are intercut with scenes of the maid Pia's sexual advances towards the still grief-stricken and traumatized Christian, and a vicious fight between Michael and Mette and their make-up sex afterwards. The camera swoops and soars around the concierge and Helene as they search for Linda's little symbols and arrows in a game she always played, leading them to the note explaining her suicide and the abuse that caused it. Christian, who will later dream of his sister on the "other side," has stared at the refracting, blurry images of the guests outside through a window and now stares ruefully at a glass of water he causes to shimmer and slosh slightly (liquid in a cup sloshes after the curtain scene in *Red*, too), then slop over the lip of the glass, foreshadowing Christian's disruption of a seemingly placid family, a truth-spilling motivated by Linda's drowning, which Pia now seems to imitate as she submerges herself in the bathtub. The diffraction of memory, an ethereal barrier between our world and another, and the rippling effects of Linda's death are all evoked here. As Helene starts to read the letter and cry, the concierge approaches and she stops, yelling "Boo!" at him, cutting to Christian dropping the glass, Michael falling down in the shower, and Pia breaking the surface of the water as she comes up for air in the tub. Thus, after a haunting search for it, the startling significance of the note is tragicomically suggested. The bath is also a darkly ironic symbol and reminder of the rape, as Helge would rape or molest the twins as they bathed, thus tainting their cleansing; now, however, Vinterberg has made it clear that Christian is determined to air the family's dirty laundry.

Later, as Helge accuses Christian, after his attempt to tell the truth, of being a "warped soul" and scornfully asks why Linda never left him a note, the curtains billow in the breeze and a white light filters through them into the room from outside, as if the dead sister is with Christian as he looks off in dreamy abstraction while his father torments him once again. When Pia happens upon the vial with the note inside while looking for medication for Helene, the camera shoots her entering Linda's old room in slow motion, then from behind a gauzy curtain as she approaches. Amidst sexual tension and trauma, Vinterberg transcends the earthy and the earthly, using camera angles, natural lighting, symbolism, the light and curtain motif [4], and imaginative editing to convey a sense of transcendence – of Helene and Christian looking beyond themselves and their petty lives to see a secret that must be spoken for the common moral good of the family and to honour the memory of Linda.

If Vinterberg did not alter the lighting in any of these scenes, he certainly bends rule seven when Christian sees a vision of Linda. Not long after Helene reads Linda's note addressed to Christian that says, in part, "I know that there is light and beauty on the other side," Christian falls down drunk in the hall and envisions, in the flicker of a candle, his sister Linda smiling comfortingly at him; with a candle in one hand, Christian approaches Pia and tells her that his sister is here, then he turns away and, in what becomes a dream sequence, approaches his smiling sister, who says, "I miss you," but tells him not to follow her and that "I am going now." They hug, the star-point of candle flame shining like a beacon as Christian finally reconciles himself to life, the truth, and the death of his twin. The very last shot of the film, after fading out from Christian's face, is of a sparking, moving flame, and the credits are shown under light-dappled water, as tragic death and traumatic memory have been cleansed.

The haunting presence and eerie beauty of a dead person speaking from beyond the grave, urging Christian to reveal his father's sexual abuse, is deftly and concisely evoked by Vinterberg with the ambience of his light and curtain shots, his camera angles and slow-motion scenes, and his water imagery. Helge may viciously explain his molestation of Christian by telling him, "It was all you were good for," but such brutishness is overwhelmed by the ethereal calm and secular holiness surrounding the scenes of Christian's inner determination to tell the truth, an atmosphere suggesting his insistent, immanent goodness, a transcendental humanism that links him to his sister, provides the lasting hope and solace in the film, and is achieved through Vinterberg's use of ambiguous motifs: the flickering light of truth, shimmering curtains, and rippling water.

**Wagging the Dogme: Searching High and Low for Transcendent Humanism, from the Dardennes to Korine**

The commercially released Dogme films since Vinterberg's work, while similar in their confined settings, stigmatized or handicapped characters, and concern with sexual tensions and connections, have usually ignored any effort to use lighting, flashbacks, dream sequences, motifs, or symbolism for transcendent effect. Søren Kragh-Jacobsen's dramatic comedy *Mifune* offers just one compelling example, early on, of the strength of an "out-of-time" scene in Dogme films. Kresten, in a blue-lit (possibly breaking rule five) dream sequence on a rooftop (perhaps breaking rule seven, although, as with Christian's hazy vision, if he is dreaming at the time, it is not necessarily "temporal alienation") silently pads along the roof in a robe with sweeping, martial arts steps as he brandishes and swings a long wooden pole (breaking rule one?), merging in his mind with Toshirô Mifune as a Kurosawa samurai. This dream image is never repeated, but it surreally contrasts with Kresten's ruthless entrepreneur lifestyle and suggests a hidden life or a secret in his past, eventually making his play-acting as Mifune with his mentally handicapped brother Rud all the more affecting. This is a small but important instance of an established motif being used to rebellious and transcendent effect; the Dogme rules are being bent or broken in order to introduce a theme and link up with a later scene, making a human connection all the more stirring.

Von Trier's *The Idiots*, however, remains rooted in the daily efforts of people posing as spastics; the scenes of camaraderie, sexual abandon, trickery, and emotional squabbles are amusing and naturalistic, but devoid of symbolic or artistic meaning. Thus the overwhelming sadness of the woman-child Karen in the final scene, unlike Bess' death, fails to stir the viewer. Harmony Korine's *Julien Donkey-Boy* (1999), which breaks rule two by having a soundtrack, employs still images and freeze frames, most notably of a figure skater, but the film is a choppy, disjointed look at a schizophrenic's fractured mind. Its aim cannot be transcendent humanism when characters exist in separate worlds, and their motivations and interactions are often incomprehensible. Slow pans and still images, together with a patchwork story and flat characters, purposely disrupt any narrative arc or movement, and bring attention to the medium rather than transcend it. Lone Scherfig's *Italian For Beginners* (2000), too, is a romance-comedy that bogs itself down in the present and the earthly, focussing on the foibles and dark pasts of the characters, who suffer from social stigmas, sexual dysfunctions, parental abuse, or personality flaws that they must overcome in order to make a connection with someone else. Ole Christian Madsen's film *Kira's Reason* (2001) suggests that the only way back to sanity for a mentally unstable woman is for she and her husband to restore faith in their marriage and rediscover their love for each other. There are moments of surrealist beauty, particularly in the redemptive ending when Kira and her

husband dance in a hotel ballroom, oblivious to the rest of the world, but the film remains engrossed in the daily, profane, sexual, earthy excesses of its characters.

None of these films fully transcends their down-to-earth though powerful subject matter, preferring to stay in the present and engross the viewer in the charged emotions and authentic realism of day-to-day existence. The commercially released Dogme films have been set in the "here-and-now" and focussed on people connecting and thereby overcoming the quotidian, but there seems to be a reluctance by the directors to evoke transcendent humanism. In order to do so, would they have to bend the rules of the "Vow of Chastity," as Vinterberg and Kragh-Jacobsen seem to have done by using time shifts, music, and props? In order to transcend, must Dogme directors transgress?

As the movement sputters out, no widely released Dogme film has followed the manifesto to the letter while endorsing a humanism that exceeds mere physical or emotional bonding, becoming an ineffable testament to the human spirit and a secular faith. By adhering strictly to the artificially limiting manifesto and stripping their art of transcendental overtones, fundamentalist and born-again Dogme directors are producing well acted but fairly conventional human dramas about people rediscovering romance. The startling, provocative ambiguity of humanist transcendence in a film such as *Breaking the Waves* or *The Celebration* has been distorted into a melodramatic formula in many of the Dogme 95 films, which seem to be edging closer to digital-camera romantic comedies, rejecting symbol- and motif-driven cinematic explorations of what love is in a spiritually and morally complex modern world. Agnès Peck writes of Krzysztof Kieślowski "confronting the principal existential themes – of love and death, of chance and destiny… he proposes a real humanism… which attests to a keen sense of relativity and ambiguity, and questions the audience about our times" (Peck, 1994: 161-2). Audiences may never see if, truly adhering to the "Vow of Chastity," a Dogme 95 film will be made that can transcend its own manmade strictures and material medium, resulting in a work of art that whispers the ethereal and stirs the soul as only the most complex and enlightening art can. For in June 2002 the "Dogmesecretariat" announced that it was closing because "the manifesto of Dogme 95 has almost grown into a genre formula, which was never the intention" (Nielsen-Ourö and Rørsgaard, 2002). Dogme directors no longer need to apply for a certificate of authenticity. For all intents and purposes, the Danish-led, rigidly austere experiment, which tried to produce a theatrical, actor-centred work while putting a twist on the European cinéma verité style, has been left behind.

As von Trier and Vinterberg meander off into increasingly inward and conceptual arty projects such as *Dogville* (2003) and *It's All About Love* (2003), it remains to be seen if European directors such as the Dardenne brothers [5] and Lukas Moodysson (*Lilya 4-Ever* [2002]) will, through their films of social realism, employ the images and interconnected means necessary to convey the ineffable in film – from music and lighting to flashbacks and effects – and so lift our eyes from the gutter to the stars.

**Notes**

[1] DOGME 95 FILMS (as of February 2004)

1. *Festen* (*The Celebration*); Denmark, 1998; Thomas Vinterberg *

2. *Idioterne* (*The Idiots*); Denmark, 1998; Lars von Trier *

3. *Mifunes Sidste Sang* (*Mifune*); Denmark, 1999; Søren Kragh-Jacobsen *

4. *The King is Alive*; Denmark, 2000; Kristian Levring *

5. *Lovers*; France, 1999; Jean-Marc Barr †

6. *Julien Donkey-Boy*; USA, 1999; Harmony Korine *

7. *Interview*; Korea, 2000; Daniel H. Byun †

8. *Fuckland*; Argentina, 2000; Jose Luis Marques †

9. *Babylon*; Sweden, 2001; Vladan Zdrarkovic

10. *Chetzemoka's Curse*; USA, 2001; Rick Schmidt et al.

11. *Diapason*; Italy, 2001; Antonio Domenici

12. *Italiensk For Begyndere* (*Italian For Beginners*); Denmark, 2000; Lone Scherfig *

13. *Amerikana*; USA, 2001; James Merendino

14. *Joy Ride*; Switzerland, 2001; Martin Rengel

15. *Camera*; USA, 2000; Rich Martini

16. *Bad Actors*; USA, 2000; Shaun Monson

17. *Reunion*; USA, 2001; Leif Tilden

18. *Et Rigtigt Menneske* (*Truly Human*); Denmark, 2001; Åke Sandgren †

19. *Når Nettene Blir Lange* (*Cabin Fever*); Norway, 2000; Mona J. Hoel †

20. *Strass*; Belgium, 2001; Vincent Lannoo †

21. *En Koerlighedshistorie* (*Kira's Reason*); Denmark, 2001; Ole Christian Madsen †

22. *Era Outra Vez*; Spain, 2000; Juan Pinzás †

23. *Resin* (*Send in the Clowns*); USA, 2001; Vladimir Gyorski

24. *Security, Colorado*; USA, 2001; Andrew Gillis

25. *Converging With Angels*; USA, 2002; Michael Sørenson †

26. *The Sparkle Room*; USA; Alex McAulay

27. *Come Now*; USA

28. *Elsker Dig For Erigt* (*Open Hearts*); Denmark, 2002; Susanne Bier *

29. *The Bread Basket*; USA; Matthew Biancaniello

30. *Días de Boda*; Spain, 2002; Juan Pinzás †

31. *El Desenlace*; Spain, 2003; Juan Pinzás

32. *Se til venstre, der er en Svensker*; Denmark, 2003; Natasha Arthy †

33. *Residencia*; Chile, 2003; Artemio Espinosa Mc.

34. *Forbrydelser*; Denmark, 2004; Annette K. Olesen

35. *Cosi x Caso*; Italy, 2004; Cristiano Ceriello

sources: www.dogme95.dk, www.imdb.com

* widely released (in the U.S.A. or UK)

† had a limited release in North America and/or the UK (on the film festival circuit or in selected arthouse cinemas in certain cities)

[2] Another 1990s European film that exemplifies transcendent humanism is Nikita Mikhalkov's 1994 Cannes Grand Jury Prize-winning (and 1995 Best Foreign Film Oscar winner) *Burnt By The Sun*. A fireball that reappears throughout the film serves as a double-edged motif of transcendence. The inexplicable, unnatural occurrence cannot be defined or categorized by the totalitarian state, is established before the title credits, and then returns at key moments to suggest a life-force that transcends the intruding, bloody chaos of Stalinist Russia. The solar lightning is a fiery bundle of hope, a fierce ball of energy that cannot be controlled by the state and suggests that something – perhaps memory or love – lingers on. Yet the fireball also represents what Mikhalkov's closing dedication terms the "sun of revolution" that burnt so many during Stalin's time. Mikhalkov deftly uses the fireball in combination with a song ("Burnt by the sun / As the crimson sea did run / I heard you say, my dove / That there would be no love") as a two-fold motif of both a revolution gone horribly astray and a symbol of community and love that can overcome the ghastly atrocities of Stalinist Russia.

[3] The Vow of Chastity

"I swear to submit to the following set of rules drawn up and confirmed by DOGME 95:

1. Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where this prop is to be found).

2. The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot).

3. The camera must be hand-held. Any movement or immobility attainable in the hand is permitted. (The film must not take place where the camera is standing; shooting must take place where the film takes place).

4. The film must be in colour. Special lighting is not acceptable. (If there is too little light for exposure the scene must be cut or a single lamp be attached to the camera).

5. Optical work and filters are forbidden.

6. The film must not contain superficial action. (Murders, weapons, etc. must not occur.)

7. Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say that the film takes place here and now.)

8. Genre movies are not acceptable.

9. The film format must be Academy 35 mm.

10. The director must not be credited.

Furthermore I swear as a director to refrain from personal taste! I am no longer an artist. I swear to refrain from creating a "work," as I regard the instant as more important that the whole. My supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and settings. I swear to do so by all the means available and at the cost of any good taste and any aesthetic considerations.

Thus I make my VOW OF CHASTITY."

Copenhagen, Monday 13 March 1995 (source: www.dogme95.dk)

[4] The curtain in *The Celebration* is also a metaphor for the flimsy screens put up to block the truth. Christian can shine a light through this barrier, unsettling it (as he shakes the glass of still water) until the curtain is parted. Yet the curtain is also the fragile demarcation between our world and the afterlife, which Christian briefly breaches after he tells the truth and meets his dead sister.

[5] The Dardennes' recent film *The Son* (2002), as well as their previous works *La Promesse* (1997) and *Rosetta* (1999), is a fascinating example of purposely unreached transcendent humanism. While the latter two films conclude with a recognition of moral obligation and a moment of vulnerability, both scenes cut off abruptly to end the film, leaving a lingering aftertaste of uncertainty to bitter pills about refugee workers and youth employment, respectively. *The Son*, though, ends on a striking off-key note, when the tension between a carpenter and his protégé (who killed the carpenter's son, we discover) reaches fever pitch and then the camera, which has been lingering by the carpenter's neck, goes black. With *The Son*, particularly, the Dardennes are more interested in showing the attempt at human contact, community, or trust, and remain agnostic, or are perhaps simply uninterested in, whether a transcendent bond (based on faith, trust, or mercy) is achieved. Such a result would be too didactic; for the Dardennes, the moment of transcendence is not so important as the everyday human struggle for it.

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