

Comment & Debate

Micro-topographies: Geological Imprints and The Destabilization of Materiality in the Films of Lars von Trier

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In the summer of 2009 the first major British retrospective of the Danish painter, sculptor, filmmaker and former arctic geologist, Per Kirkeby, was held at the Tate Modern in London. The pieces exhibited included an extensive group of blackboard works, bronze sculptures and a selection of the monumental canvases for which Kirkeby is best known.¹ Yet, the gallery space also conjures up sounds and images that strongly evoke Kirkeby's collaboration with his fellow compatriot, the filmmaker Lars von Trier, and thus invite a timely reflection on his contribution to the cinematic specificity of von Trier's work. The exhibition does not explicitly reference Kirkeby's artistic collaboration with von Trier, but this paper will endeavour to draw closer attention to the finely nuanced film images that they have worked on together. The focal point of this paper will analyse the impact of Kirkeby's formal training in geology on the creation of the topographic and the representation of matter in key sequences from von Trier's 1996 film *Breaking the Waves*.

Thinking through the implications of the geological in von Trier and Kirkeby's film images encourages us to rethink the rationality that lies behind the notion of the beautiful indifference of nature or '*fatum*', as the philosopher Simon Critchley (2005: 111) puts it. This study of the geological, micro-topographies at the centre of von Trier's films, then, leads towards a new approach to the filmic image as a synthesis of geological matter or, at least, my aim is to try to ascertain what kind of

1. Further details of the exhibition can be found in Achim Borchardt-Hume's catalogue, *Per Kirkeby* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009). The exhibition ran from 17 June to 6 September 2009.

geology the filmic image has to offer us, buried within its layers of lights, sounds and colours.²

In the mid-sixties Kirkeby graduated with a degree in Geology from The University of Copenhagen. It was while Kirkeby undertook a research project in the summer of 1963 in arctic geology in North Eastern Greenland that he started to think about the painterly possibilities of the scientific research he had carried out. On his return from Greenland he wrote a small piece of prose entitled 'From the World's Most Northerly House', published in May 1964 in the Danish literary journal *Grains of Wheat* (Morell 2005: 10). Reflecting on his experiences in the arctic wilderness, Kirkeby writes: 'I wage war on the colour when it is merely beautiful. I wage war on the picture when it is merely the dream of the autonomous abstraction. A picture without intellectual superstructure is nothing' (Kirkeby quoted in Morrell 2005: 10). Kirkeby's scientific observations in Greenland, then, seemed to compel him to inhabit the dual role of artist and scientist, synthesising and adapting scientific techniques in order to examine the metaphysical and existential power of art. Indeed, many of Kirkeby's foremost critics including Lars Morell (2005) and Siegfried Gohr (2008) put forth the case that his work is best understood in such terms – as the creation of a dialogue between art and science.

Kirkeby's fascination with the depiction of geological formations is reflected in many of the titles of his exhibitions, most notably in his 2006 shows *Prototypes of Nature and Crystal – Reflections, Connections and References*, and remain a powerful source of inspiration for the artist. Critics have commented on the recurrent influence of the geological in Kirkeby's work; recently, a reviewer for the *Los Angeles Times* wrote that his paintings and sculptures 'evoke geological processes whose time spans and scales are so far beyond human scale that they are almost inconceivable' (Ng 2009) while for Morell, Kirkeby is a 'polyhistor, adopting the approach of a scientist, documenting, storing, and constructing systems, but also generating meanings and insights through a continuous exploration of art and science'. Kirkeby's paintings can be interpreted as mineralogical slides seen under the polarizing microscope, but I am also cautious of this view especially as his work often bears no name, simply listed as 'untitled', which suggests to me that the preservation of their anonymity is integral to the experience they offer the viewer. Kirkeby's paintings invite the viewer on an expedition into

2. Some of the ideas contained in this article were first explored in a paper presented as part of the December 2009 'Cinema and Climate Change' Symposium organised by the Department of Scandinavian Studies, University College London, and supported by the Royal Danish Embassy in London and UCL Urban Laboratory.

unknown territory, taking risks, treading and slipping as they are guided through uncertain climates, slowly, carefully, navigating between the artist's perspective and their own, subjective response.

Before I flesh out further the nature of the work produced by Kirkeby and von Trier, and indeed the ways in which the viewer engages with such filmic pieces, I want to return to the gallery space in which I first encountered Kirkeby's art in order to make clearer the significance of the geological as a key characteristic of his work.

The Tate Modern's arrangement of Kirkeby's retrospective, set out over ten rooms, attempts to trace the trajectory of the artist's career, from his earlier work in *Car Pictures* (1964-65) to *Flight into Egypt* and *Nikopeja II* (both exhibited in 1996). While the retrospective opens with Kirkeby's *The World's Northernmost House* (1987), his attempt to capture the dense textures of light and space that first struck him during his scientific expeditions in Greenland, it is in the final rooms of the exhibition space that we encounter the iconic, geological imagery of *Brett-Felsen* (2000) which bears his signature thick, tactile brush strokes, fractured etches and layers of glossy textures fissured with veins of bright colour.³ *Brett-Felsen* can be described as an invocation of geological time, portraying the vastness of the Scandinavian glacier-world, its vivid hues of sepia brown, murky green and ochre spill across the canvas, ossified and frozen yet, simultaneously, strangely visceral. Indeed, the layers and blocks of blue, brown, green and white recall over-processed, enlarged images of *stratigraphy*, the geological process used to record sedimentary layers of the Earth. Face to face with *Brett-Felsen*, glaring into its overwhelming glaze of intricate lines, scratches and smooth patches of colour, it appeals to our senses and we are alert to texture in a way that recalls the haptic perception of the art historian Alois Reigl's writings.⁴ As *Brett-Felsen* suggests, Kirkeby's recurrent gesture to evoke physicality as both layered and dense, and its obvious geological symbolism, is emblematic of his artistic sensibility; his thematic concerns with issues of temporality, stasis and the ambivalent nature of materiality are what drives his collaboration with von Trier. My analyses of key moments from *Breaking the Waves* will explore Kirkeby's film images, their technological specificity, and their especially geographic and geological qualities which recall the style of *Brett-Felsen* and his other *untitled* projects in mixed media.

3. This image can be viewed online, along with full details of the Tate's retrospective of Kirkeby at: <<http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/perkirkeby/>> [accessed 10 November 2009].

4. See, in particular, Alois Reigl, *Problems of Style: Foundations for a History of Ornament*, first published in 1893, trans. by Evelyn Kain (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

Von Trier and Kirkeby

In interview, Kirkeby has described his relationship with von Trier as one that is based on a long-held friendship, but he is also quick to add that the filmmaker 'makes a lot of jokes and teasing is a great part of the conversation' (Ng 2009). Indeed, von Trier is well known for his playfulness, his jokes and his penchant for 'poking fun', but the filmic sequences he creates with Kirkeby suggest a tone that is more akin to melancholia than mirth; they are intensely emotive and brooding, complex and enigmatic. While Kirkeby's collaboration with von Trier on *Breaking the Waves* will be the focus here, it is important to mention Kirkeby's creation of the bristling, scrawled typography for the opening titles for von Trier's horror film *Antichrist* and his hypnotic, Rothko-esque deep red and brown patches of colour which fade into each other, played over the overture for his 1997 film *Dancer in the Dark* which starred the Icelandic popstar Björk as a immigrant worker who faces the death penalty in America.

Before collaborating with von Trier on the 1996 film *Breaking the Waves*, Kirkeby had worked with another well known Danish filmmaker, Jørgen Leth, on their 1970 poetic short film *The Deer Garden, the Romantic Forest* (*Dyrehaven: Den romantiske skov*) filmed at the Royal Deer Park in Copenhagen in which four cameramen filmed each other filming the park through its seasonal transformations. However, while Kirkeby can indeed be seen in the film holding a Super 8 camera and acting as one of several directors on *The Deer Garden*, Kirkeby was specifically employed by von Trier on *Breaking the Waves* as an artist who would contribute a series of landscape images or moving panoramas, digitally mastered, to be interspersed throughout the film, serving as eight chapter headings to each new turn of events in the narrative. *Breaking the Waves* is the first instalment of von Trier's most widely viewed and critically acclaimed corpus of films: the 'Golden Heart' trilogy. *Breaking the Waves* also anticipates the ten rules of filmmaking, constituting the Dogme '95 'Vow of Chastity' established by von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, which challenged the ideals and conventions of mainstream cinema, though it is not officially a Dogme 95-certified film.⁵ The film takes place on a remote Hebridean coastal village and it follows the plight of a young woman,

5. See Evamaria Trischack's abridged details of The Dogme '95 'Vow of Chastity', 'Dogme 95', Cinetext: Film and Philosophy, URL: <http://cinetext.philo.at/reports/dogme_ct.html> [accessed 10 December 2009]. For further scholarly analyses of the Dogme '95 movement, it is useful to view Mette Hjort & Scott MacKenzie's comprehensive and insightful book *Purity and Provocation: Dogme 95* (London: The British Film Institute Publications, 2003).

Bess, played by Emily Watson, whose romantic delusions have tragic consequences. There is also much religious symbolism in the film and, in this sense, Bess is a martyr-like heroine; Kirkeby's panoramas also appear somewhat celestial, providing an omniscient view – the bigger picture – as it were, as we zoom out of the claustrophobic tension of the narrative. The look of the film is grainy, handheld and stark, the pale skin of the bodies being filmed is sallow, anaemic and opaque, while foamy shots of the sea are gritty and translucent. The chapter headings produced by Kirkeby are deliberately romantic, deeply contrasting the imagery in the film's diegesis; their euphoric use of colour, scale and, especially, light, is amplified by the use of grandiose, pop songs from the early 1970s, from Elton John's *Goodbye Yellowbrick Road* to David Bowie's *Life on Mars*, which underscore the dramatic shift in tone that the chapters create. The panoramas serve to take the viewer out of the action and intimacy of the film and release us from its intensity, like gasps of air or breaths between hurried, intensely focused sentences in a conversation. In this sense, the immense evocation of light and air in works such as *Flight Into Egypt* and *The World's Northernmost House* is transposed to the viewing experience of Kirkeby's filmic work, translated into the formal 'body' of the film.

The panoramas feature exaggerated, melodramatic imagery which is almost magical and certainly mythological. Over the eight chapter headings, we view richly embellished rainbows, beautiful cloud formations, sunsets, skies filled with lightning, valleys and streams, motifs which collectively evoke the romantic tradition of painters such as Turner or Constable. Furthermore, the panoramas are what Kirkeby (1996: 12-14) describes as 'living pictures' – they contain movement while simultaneously evoking stillness. Thus, we watch delicate shifts in the composition take place, water flows, a car – a tiny thing in the scale of the image – passes along a road on a mossy headland. The images also recall the aerial and horizontal viewpoints of Kirkeby's paintings. Ultimately, both von Trier and Kirkeby have remarked on the purpose of the panoramas as one which hints at a 'greater banality' (Kirkeby 1996: 12) they are synthetic props which provoke an emotional response, contrasting the deeper level of emotional intensity that is elicited through the more naturalistic images in the rest of the film. While the panoramas reflect Kirkeby's interest in terrain, vistas, scale and stillness, they might be seen to reflect a different kind of geology, one that owes much to the specificity of the technology used to create them.

In order to create the chapter headings, Kirkeby first travelled around Scotland and took photographs which would form the basis of the final images in the film. Kirkeby then worked with the visual editors Søren Buus, Steen Lyders Hansen and Niels Valentin Dal in order to digitally enhance and fabricate various components of the image, adding a

rainbow here, a stream there. The process involved transferring the digital images to video and then to Cinemascope, in line with the rest of the film's video-processing and final mastering. As a consequence of such processes, the panoramas represent a technological specificity that is separate from the rest of the film, since they are entirely digitally mastered and thus provide a different material layer to the film, a literal as well as symbolic sediment that might be analogous with the archeological *stratigraphy* of Kirkeby's art such as *Brett-Felsen*. To stretch this analogy a little further, stratigraphy is, as I have suggested earlier, the study of geological time in which organic matter represents various timelines; the panoramas in *Breaking the Waves* also, then, signify a particular temporal dimension of the film – a dimension that operates on a difference scale to the rest of the film. Of course, the diegesis of the film time is measured by the slow, micro-movements in the content of the images, the car travelling down the narrow lane, the softly running water in a stream, clouds gently crossing the skies. Time moves in natural cycles. However, this sense of time that is suggested through the content of the images is complicated through their digital rendering and thus their ontology is wholly bound up with the electronic. As the film theorist D. N. Rodowick argues in his recent book *The Virtual Life of Film* (2007) it is difficult for the digital image to communicate duration, time. Indeed the panoramas are more akin to what Rodowick describes as a 'digital event' in which space no longer has continuity and duration or, rather, any definable quality of defined space is discrete and variable. Thus, by applying a kind of stratigraphy to the film itself, Kirkeby's panoramas represent an ambiguous materiality that rests within a state in flux, whose temporal and spatial parameters are mobile and variable.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore in further depth the ontological implications of the digital in *Breaking the Waves*, my study, so far, has emphasized ways in which to think through the fruitful connections between the geological and the ontological in Kirkeby's film aesthetic.

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