Authorised Viewing:
Lars von Trier’s Models of Spectatorship

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Abstract
This article examines Lars von Trier's authorship from the perspective of para-cinematic discourse (such as manifestoes, interviews, public appearances, and press conferences) that he has generated throughout his career, arguing that evident aesthetic shifts in his films have been accompanied by changing models of spectatorship. Even though film theory has moved beyond auteurist notions of the director as the singular 'author' of their films, film culture still affords the director a privileged position as the producer of para-cinematic discourse, which tend to occupy an authoritative discursive position. With this in mind, this article shows how Lars von Trier has sought to 'authorise' certain models of spectatorship, signaling (frequently shifting) ideals of how viewers should engage with his work. Taking a broad view of von Trier's career, this article shows how these shifting models of spectatorship have oscillated between authoritarianism and interactive play, and how the tepid public response to his most recent films has also been accompanied by an apparent disregard for the spectator in von Trier's public statements about his work.

Keywords
Lars von Trier, authorship, spectatorship, auteurism

Explaining the many overt refusals of continuity in Lars von Trier's 2006 comedy *Direktøren for det hele* (*The Boss of it All*), David Bordwell draws on a metaphor first articulated by Trier much earlier in his career: 'A film, von Trier has said, should be as irritating as a pebble in your shoe, and his abrasive tempo gives his comedy an anxious edge' (Bordwell 2006).[1] The comparison between a film and an irksome pebble was originally drawn in von Trier's 1987 metafilm *Epidemic,* in which a filmmaker played by von Trier tells his writing partner, Niels (played by von Trier's actual script collaborator, Niels Vørsel), 'A film ought to be like a pebble in your shoe.' In the context of the scene, the remark seems to be a complete non sequitur—it follows a brief pause after Niels has returned to the room with a couple of bottles of beer for the two to drink while working on a script, and after the remark von Trier raises his bottle and says 'Cheers.' The remark is not discussed any further or even acknowledged by either of the characters, and for many viewers, it is apt to go entirely unnoticed. But as Bordwell's use of the 'film as pebble' metaphor suggests, for many critics and scholars, the comparison seems to have some explanatory value for the contrariness and confrontation one has come to expect from Trier's films. For a director who seems to take such pleasure from shocking and upsetting his viewers—I am thinking here of such spectatorial traumas as the sight of Selma's dangling body at the end of *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), the explicit genital mutilation in *Antichrist* (2009), or the gruesome dismemberment of corpses in *The House That Jack Built* (2018)—the dull, insistent pain of a pebble in the shoe seems entirely too benign a description that does not at all convey the way the spectator is 'shattered'[2] by such spectacles. Indeed, Roger Ebert favored a decidedly more brutal metaphor after his glowing review of *Antichrist*: 'Its images are a fork in the eye. Its cruelty is unrelenting. Its despair is profound' (Ebert 2009). As A.O. Scott writes in a review of *Melancholia* (2011), spectatorial cruelty might even have the potential to draw, rather than repel an audience: 'The expectation of punishment is, of course, one reason people go to a Lars von Trier movie in the first place' (Scott 2011).

What interests me is not the 'film as pebble' metaphor as such, but instead the way that such a metaphor's entry into the critical discourse structures the spectator's experience of the film. Clearly the image has resonated with Bordwell's reading of *The Boss of it All,* to the extent that he sees the jump cuts and the generally 'abrasive' non-continuity editing of the film as yet another instance of von Trier refusing to soothe or pacify his viewer. The metaphor is so telling for Bordwell that he titles his blog post 'Another pebble in your shoe,' giving the reader the impression that, although *The Boss of it All* seems like a lighthearted—though often absurdist—workplace comedy, it bears a certain family resemblance to the abrasiveness of von Trier's previous films. Nearly 20 years after Lars von Trier first articulated the 'film as pebble' metaphor on screen, this seemingly offhand remark is still structuring the way that at least one influential film scholar watches and discusses von Trier's films.

Although film theory has moved beyond any simple notion of the director as the sole autonomous agent responsible for the unified meaning of the film, the currency of this 'film as pebble' metaphor should give pause to those wishing to dismiss auteurism out of hand and insist on the autonomy of the spectator from the oppressive authority of the director. Even if we no longer subscribe to a simple acceptance of the

[1] I am grateful to Mason Allred for his insightful comments and incisive revision suggestions on an earlier draft of this article.

[2] This is the word used by Caroline Bainbridge in her discussion of spectatorial trauma in the films of the Gold Heart Trilogy. Of *Dancer in the Dark,* which ends with the unmerciful depiction of the execution-by-hanging of the film's protagonist, Bainbridge writes 'the spectator is shattered by the unbearable weight of such an ending' (Bainbridge 2007: 118).

director's authorial role, in practice the filmmaker is still regarded as a privileged producer of discourse about his or her films. And that means that the viewer's experience of any given film is often informed by discourse originated by the filmmaker and perpetuated by the scholars and critics who write about the films. If the director is no longer viewed as the 'author' of the filmic text, the director may still be seen as the 'author' of certain ways of viewing the film by virtue of the privileged status director-originated discourse enjoys.

Because of the deference that continues to be given to the director in contemporary film culture, modes of spectatorship emerge through a complex interplay between director-generated discourse and film viewers. As the filmmaker shapes para-cinematic coverage and discussions of the film through discursive interventions like interviews—all the more accessible now through digital channels such as podcasts and YouTube videos—film festival press conferences, and other published pronouncements about their work. Through those platforms, directors articulate positions that have the power to sway viewer response. This article will focus on one such interpretive intervention a director can make, namely metaphors of spectatorship that situate the viewer toward their films in particular ways. Identifying the qualities of this imagined, hypothetical spectator is the first step to discerning to what degree modes of film viewing are 'authored' or 'authorised' by the filmmaker.

In this article, I will identify some of the dominant models or metaphors of spectatorship that Lars von Trier has developed not only within his films, but also in para-filmic discourse like press conferences, interviews, and (especially important for early von Trier) manifestoes. Lars von Trier makes a fascinating case study for this article in part because of his penchant for self-contradiction. I account for this tendency by describing a pair of highly contradictory metaphors that dominated the critical discourse about Lars von Trier's films for roughly the first two decades of his career. For von Trier's earliest films, the dominant metaphor is that of hypnosis, in which the viewer is imagined as a hypnotised subject under the filmmaker's suggestive (and coercive) power. In his later rule-bound, post-Dogme films, an invitation is extended to the viewer to become a co-participant in the filmmaking 'game.' The contradictions implicit in these two models are obvious enough: the hypnosis metaphor emphasises the filmmaker as the sole agent, and portrays the viewer as little more than a 'puppet' whose actions and reactions are pre-determined by the will of the director; in the game-based notion of spectatorship, the viewer is imagined as a highly participatory, autonomous subject who can become a co-creator with the filmmaker.

Finally, I discuss how the ludic model of spectatorship suggested by von Trier's post-Dogme films has been superseded by a return to a unidirectional model of authorial communication. Since the release of *Antichrist* (2009), Lars von Trier has cultivated a hospitality-based metaphor of the 'viewer as guest' of the filmmaker, albeit a guest whose comfort and pleasure are (at most) incidental to the experience to which they have been invited. Lars von Trier's infamous 2011 Cannes press conference, in which he jokingly professed empathy for Hitler led to a dramatic reversal in this metaphor, as von Trier himself was disinvited from the festival and declared *persona non grata* until 2018. This reversal of the power dynamic between audience and author seems to have left its mark on von Trier, who has recently expressed skepticism about his ability to make any further feature films after his latest effort, *The House That Jack Built* (2018). As a coda to von Trier's oscillation between exhibitionistic authorship and an ostensibly inviting game-based model that defined his career through most of the 1990s and early 2000s, his retreat back to an earlier reiteration of the primacy of the authorial voice—and apparent disregard for the experience of the spectator

—seems to have accompanied a general waning of relevance for Scandinavia's most provocative contemporary filmmaker.

The Director's Discursive Authorship

As a way of theorising this back-and-forth struggle between von Trier and his audience, Roland Barthes's foundational 1967 essay 'The Death of the Author' provides some useful conceptual templates. Barthes's famous pronouncements on authorship in the essay are part of a broader effort to free the written text from any notion of a unified meaning implanted into the text by the author that can be ascertained through criticism. Pronouncing the death of the author is part of Barthes's attempt to liberate texts from a model of closed meaning, in which the aim of criticism is to discern what the author intended. Barthes's position is anti-theological and anti-authoritarian, and the liberating rhetoric at its core has an undeniable radical appeal. Barthes says that 'writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin… the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing' (Barthes 1988: 142). Simply put, the 'author enters into his own death' (Barthes 1988: 42) via the very act of writing; as soon as a text is penned, it is independent from its point of origin, and its meaning is from then on only construed or realised by the reader. Barthes even comes up with a new title to denote the person who pens a literary text—he calls this new figure a 'scriptor,' attempting to evacuate any sense of authority from the act of writing. He calls the text a 'multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash' (Barthes 1988: 146). Thus it is not only the authority of the author he is calling into question, but also the emphasis on originality and genius, which are central to Romantic notions of authorship.

As Barthes's essay draws to a close, his polemical aim becomes clearer. 'Once the Author is removed,' he writes, 'the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing' (Barthes 1988: 147). Barthes's aim is to restore open-endedness to the literary text by pronouncing the death of the god-like figure whose imposing, originary relation to the text invariably narrows its meaning. The aim is to shift authority to the reader, a point that is articulated explicitly in the essay's closing line: 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author' (Barthes 1988: 148). Barthes imagines the author/reader dynamic as a zero-sum game in which the one's loss is the other's gain. Or, to translate this formulation into cinematic terms, the spectator may only gain interpretive agency through the 'death' of the auteur.

One of the implications of Barthes's essay is that author-oriented criticism is inevitably focused on discerning the 'secret' meaning of the text encoded by the author, as well as a model of authorship located in the literary text itself. But despite his argument's undeniable appeal from a democratic perspective, one might well question some of Barthes's conclusions. First, does criticism that refuses to abandon notions of authorship inevitably hem in and close off a text's possible meanings, robbing the reader of interpretive autonomy? And must 'authorship' be limited to the primary text itself, through the 'hidden' meanings that are thought to have been implanted there? This article argues against these implications of Barthes's essay, and instead formulates a theory of cinematic authorship that does not attempt to discern the author-originated 'hidden' meanings implicit in the text itself, but to view the director as the 'author' of a certain privileged discourse about the filmic texts. Such an argument is sensitive to the ways in which the categories of 'author' and 'reader' (or their cinematic analogues, 'director' and 'spectator') are not at all stable or mutually

exclusive, and that in fact a single person may drift fluidly between these two seemingly opposing subject positions. Not only is the director also a spectator, but the director even enjoys the privilege of being the 'first' spectator of the film, and is thus able to set the critical agenda in crucial ways. By being one of the primary originators of meta-cinematic discourse about their films, directors are able to influence subsequent discourse by setting up authoritative pronouncements that subsequent critics and viewers often consider and feel compelled to take a position on.

My recognition of the director's privileged discursive position is a way of accounting for the persistence of auteurist practices in contemporary film culture. By virtue of the impulse that film culture has to constantly seek out the director's privileged 'take' on his work, the director has been allocated the right to originate an 'inaugural' discourse about the film that subsequent critical discussions often feel compelled to address.

Even if film critics 'know better' than to rely on outmoded theoretical constructs like *auteurism,* old film culture habits die hard, and any accounts of authorship that are to remain responsive to the actual conditions of film consumption must grapple with the pesky persistence of auteurist practices and attitudes. One example of this is the Cannes Festival press conference which, in the case of films screening in competition at the festival, the director tends to preside. This ritual meeting of the press and the director may both be viewed as a marketing practice, as well as a yearly re-affirmation of the privileged position the director occupies as the producer of paratextual discourse about their film. Significantly, these press conferences have been an important site not only of some of Lars von Trier's most public confrontations and meltdowns over the years, but also a stage for so much of his auteurist self-performance. And if this rather theatrical confrontation between the director and the assembled press corps is to be taken seriously at all, it should be noted how authoritative the director's 'inaugural discourse' articulated in these situations can be. Because of this authority, it is highly likely that habitual ways of viewing a particular film may not simply be the spontaneous development of autonomous film viewers who have simply *happened* to gravitate to the same ideas about the film, but may instead be variations of (or responses to) ideas that were generated by the director early in the film's reception history and have since ossified to the point that they appear to be the 'natural' ways of seeing the film.

Examining the ways in which Lars von Trier has imagined the spectator helps to demonstrate this notion of 'authorised viewing.' It is particularly difficult to discern the intention behind any of von Trier's statements; the question is always, is he being ironic or sincere? This interpretive difficulty leads Linda Badley to write that von Trier is 'an auteurist critic's dream subject and worst nightmare' (Badley 2010: 6). However, what is important is not whether von Trier always *means* exactly what he says about the spectator, but to investigate the ways these often contradictory models of film viewing have exerted an influence upon the critical discourse and subsequent ways of viewing the films themselves. And while many of von Trier's approaches to film authorship—most notably his co-founding and participation in the Dogme 95 collective—have flirted with anti-auteurism, his intense engagement in para-cinematic discussions about spectatorship shows that, if he is anxious about his position as the 'author' of a filmic text, he is by contrast quite comfortable in his position as the 'author' of ways of viewing his films. What follows is an account of several of the most dominant (and frequently paradoxical) models of spectatorship in the films of Lars von Trier.

Model 1: The Auto-Erotic Director

In an article published in *Financial Times* occasioned by the premier of *Europa* at Cannes in 1991, Lars von Trier is quoted as saying, 'I am a simple masturbator of the cinema…. The only thing I have in mind when I make a film is my own enjoyment' (Lumholdt 2003: 82). What is initially striking about this comment is the radical disregard of the spectator it implies. Indeed, it seems to reinscribe the traditional auteurist myth of the film as a highly personal text, made by, about, and for the director himself. It seems to opt out of the author/viewer interaction entirely, and turn filmmaking into a radically narcissistic endeavor in which the director seeks exclusively his own pleasure. The metaphor does not address the audience directly, but seems to imply that the audience is only *incidentally* involved in the film viewing experience; if they *happen* to see the film, they will be watching a product that was not intended for them. The spectator implicit in this metaphor is thus a highly voyeuristic observer whose pleasure is necessarily second-order and limited to the scopic dimension.

Although this metaphor may be helpful for understanding the ways that Lars von Trier often describes his projects as personal, therapeutic endeavors, this ostensible disregard for the spectator is belied by the deep interest his films evince in questions of spectatorship. And if one examines another para-cinematic text in which this same metaphor is articulated, one sees both that the spectator is not at all incidental to Lars von Trier's filmmaking, and that the viewer is imagined as a radically corporeal being whose bodily reactions are the sole measure of artistic value.

The metaphor of masturbation was first introduced by von Trier in 'Manifesto 3,' which was released on 29 December 1990 to accompany the impending premier of *Europa,* and the expanded form the metaphor takes in this text allows for a more explicit description of von Trier's imaginary embodied spectators. Von Trier writes:

> There is only ONE excuse for suffering and making other people suffer the hell that the genesis of a film involves: the gratification of fleshly desires that arise in a fraction of a second, when the cinema's loudspeakers and projector, in tandem, and inexplicably, allow the illusion of movement and light to find their way like an electron leaving its path and thereby generating the light needed to create ONE SINGLE THING: a miraculous blast of LIFE! THIS is the only reward a filmmaker gets, the only thing he hopes and longs for. This physical experience when the magic of film takes place and works its way through the body to a trembling ejaculation… NOTHING ELSE! (Bainbridge 2007: 169)

So far it is unclear whose 'trembling ejaculation' is imagined: is it the filmmaker's or the viewer's? What is clear, however, is that the pleasure of cinematic consumption is imagined as a bodily experience, gratifying the 'fleshly desires' of this fully corporeal spectator and thus providing 'the only reward a filmmaker gets.' In the context of the manifesto, the capital letters and exclamation point that conclude the passage quoted above even seem to serve as a kind of discursive ejaculation, and in the ensuing sentence, the coital *jouissance* seems to give way to post-coital vulnerability and confession:

> There, now it's written down, which feels good. So forget all the excuses: 'childish fascination' and 'all-encompassing humility', because this is my confession, in black and white: LARS VON TRIER, THE TRUE ONANIST OF THE SILVER SCREEN (Bainbridge 2007: 169).

Masturbation is invoked here, then, not simply as a self-involved filmmaking stance that disregards the spectator, but as a position that acknowledges the embodiedness of the cinematic spectator and in the process radically deconstructs traditional filmmaking rhetoric about the childlike joys associated with cinematic illusionism.[3] That von Trier's cinema is intent on drawing bodily fluids to the surface is made clear later in the manifesto, where he writes, 'JUST GIVE ME ONE SINGLE TEAR OR ONE SINGLE DROP OF SWEAT AND I WOULD WILLINGLY EXCHANGE IT FOR ALL THE 'ART' IN THE WORLD' (Bainbridge 2007: 169). It is still unclear whose tear or drop of sweat he has in mind (the filmmaker's or the spectator's?), but what is clear is that he's interested not so much in the filmmaking process as in the bodily response derived from viewing the final product. If it is only himself he imagines as the spectator in this formulation (a possibility made more plausible by the declaration of himself as the 'onanist of the silver screen'), it is still significant that he is focused on the act of film viewing. And the mode of spectatorship that he has in mind here is decidedly more in line with the embodied vision articulated by Jonathan Crary (who focuses on the 'opacity or carnal density of the observer' [Crary 1995: 34]) and Vivian Sobchack (who describes cinematic spectatorship in terms of the corporeal experience of 'embodied eye' [Sobchack 1995: 54]), than it is with the purely scopic, disembodied formulations of earlier psychoanalytic spectatorship theory, such as that of Christian Metz or Laura Mulvey.

In this manifesto there is an undeniable pleasure gained by being seen, and it is important to note the exhibitionistic potential of the filmmaker-as-onanist metaphor. Scholars have picked up on the exhibitionism of his early films. In retrospect, they are difficult to reconcile with the studied clumsiness of his post-Dogme style, with its preference for handheld camera-work, jump-cutting, and a generally improvisational aesthetic. The early films—in particular *Forbrydelsens element* (*The Element of Crime,* 1984) and *Europa* (1987)—betray the highly controlled aesthetic fussiness of a young auteur seeking to make his mark for the highly refined quality of his images and for his almost encyclopedic mastery of film history. Because of this, von Trier has been seen by scholars as a bit of a show-off in his early films, an interpretation that seems to owe something to the metaphors of exhibitionism von Trier himself was using at the time. Discussing the extensive use of layered images in *Europa*, Caroline Bainbridge writes:

> In its extensive and highly detailed attention to complex cinematic techniques ranging from back-projection to front-projection, super-imposition, dissolves, and the layering of film over film, *Europa* indicates von Trier's desire to *be seen* as a consummate master of the cinema in his own right (Bainbridge 2007: 9, emphasis added).

Bainbridge emphasises that von Trier's desire is, first and foremost, to *be seen* as a skilful filmmaker, and thus the operative desire at work is not simply the desire to move and provoke emotion, but rather the

[3] This might be seen as a veiled reference to Ingmar Bergman's child-like fascination with cinematic illusionism (see Bergman 1987).

exhibitionistic longing to expose oneself to a viewing public. In a similar vein, Jan Simons has called von Trier's early films 'highly stylised proofs of cinematic mastery' (Simons 2007: 105). In both of these cases the aspect of the masturbation metaphor that scholars have responded to the most was not the self-involved or even narcissistic pleasure involved, but instead on the exhibitionistic impulse it evinces.

Model 2: The Hypnotised Spectator

The common element that justifies the grouping of Lars von Trier's first three films into what he calls the E-Trilogy (besides the obvious fact that all three films have a title that starts with the letter E) is that they all use various forms of hypnosis as important structural elements. The first time that hypnosis is explicitly 'performed' on the viewer, however, comes at the beginning of the third film in the trilogy, *Europa,* in which the soothing narrational voice of Max von Sydow—played over the entrancing shot of a train track passing below the camera—'hypnotises' the viewer into the film's fictional space. As the film opens, Sydow adopts the imperative, guiding voice of a hypnotist, insisting to us, 'You will now listen to my voice. My voice will help you, and guide you still deeper into Europa. Every time you hear my voice, with every word and every number, you will enter a still deeper layer, open, relaxed, and receptive.' As the count proceeds, he tells us 'Your hands and your fingers are getting warmer and heavier,' and that 'the warmth is spreading through your arms to your shoulders and your neck.' His voice draws our attention down along the length of our bodies as he tells us that our feet and legs have become heavier, and as he tells us to go even deeper under his suggestive power, he tells us that 'the whole of your relaxed body is slowly beginning to sink. . . . You go deeper and deeper and deeper. . . . On every breath you take, you go deeper. . . . You are floating.' The sequence makes up about the first three minutes of the film, and the first recognisably diegetic shot only comes after we have been 'hypnotised' into the fictional space: the American protagonist Leopold Kessler is shown arriving in postwar Germany, seeking employment at the railroad company Zentropa under the supervision of his domineering uncle.

It is worth noting that, for a sequence that so directly addresses the spectator *qua* spectator, there is never any mention of the scopic dimensions of spectatorship. We are not told to *look* at the screen, though much of the scene's hypnotic effect (to the degree that it has any at all) derives from the insistent visual rhythm created by the railroad cross-beams passing continuously down the screen. Instead we are first told to *listen*—to attend to this disembodied voice that claims that it 'will help you' by guiding 'you still deeper into Europa.' The ambiguity of the second-person pronoun puts the viewer in a specific discursive position in relation to the narrator-hypnotist, but it also conveys an uneasy awareness that the 'you' being addressed is not necessarily referring to the viewers in the theatre. 'You' could well be an unseen psychiatric patient whose healing involves being fully immersed in the cinematic space the voice calls 'Europa.' Such a therapeutic context echoes the framing narrative of the first film in the trilogy, *The Element of Crime,* in which the protagonist is hypnotised into his mental conception of Europe in order to recall an eventful murder case that he investigated in the recent past.

The hypnosis moves from the ears to the rest of the body, as the hypnotist describes a warmth that flows from the fingertips and into the body, as well as a heaviness in the lower extremities that presumably anchors the spectator more securely into their seat. Mobility (via the legs) and agency (via the hands) are jettisoned in favour of an immersive experience that demands a passive and almost vegetative state.

Although the reference to the body seems to nod to the importance of embodied spectatorship, this is only a temporary acknowledgment that quickly gives way to an immersive, disembodied mode of viewing: after von Sydow reaches six in his count, he says that 'the whole of your relaxed body is slowly beginning to sink.' The body has made a token appearance in this meta-cinematic description of spectatorship, only to be willed by the hypnotist into a subdued state. Later in the monologue, we are told, paradoxically, that the spectator is now 'floating,' but this apparently contradictory set of instructions (first float, then sink) describes a viewing body that is under the coercive control of an outside agent. This hypnotising agent is one whose whim can make the body alternately 'sink' and 'float,' performing an analogue of the movement of the drowning victim's corpse, whose body first sinks deeper into the water, and then floats to the surface when it begins to bloat. The foreshadowing function of this performed spectatorial submersion becomes more obvious at the end of the film, when the protagonist (a subject position that the viewer has been 'hypnotised' into identifying with) is depicted drowning, his idealistic mission to sow some international goodwill in postwar Germany having been an unqualified failure.

This very particular way in which the film directly addresses the spectator figured prominently in the interviews von Trier gave around the time it was released. In one, he said 'The only thing we ask of people is that they have a certain naïve openness—some receptiveness for what we present on the screen' (Lumholdt 2003: 41). In retrospect, the point of such 'teasers' seems to have been to prime his audience into a state of heightened suggestibility. Von Trier's statement here obviously echoes the hypnosis performed by von Sydow, who instructs the viewer to be 'open, relaxed, and receptive.'

The form of address the hypnosis takes thus becomes a commentary on the way cinematic communication works; just as the hypnotised subject is not the 'sender' of discourse, only the 'receiver' of instructions from the hypnotist, it could be said that, because of the ontological barriers of recorded film, cinema is always inevitably a one-way communication, and the spectator is thus by default relegated to a receptive position. At least this is what von Trier's statements wishing his viewer to remain 'open' and 'receptive' suggest. And if one wishes to continue the sexual overtones of the auto-erotic model of spectatorship described above, one could say that this 'open' and 'receptive' mode of viewing is inherently feminised by von Trier, a formulation that automatically puts both the director and the filmic text in a masculine subject position. The implication is that the film can in some way 'penetrate' the spectator's consciousness, but only if the spectator is ready and willing. The penetrative quality of hypnotic speech is underscored by an anecdote von Trier told about Svend Ali Hamann, an actual hypnotist he hired to perform hypnosis on an actress and convince her that she has contracted the bubonic plague, which von Trier recorded and used as the climactic scene in *Epidemic* (1987).[4] In an interview that emphasised the authenticity of the hypnosis shown in *Epidemic,* von Trier says:

> We called in a real hypnotist, a notorious hypnotist at that, because he had spent three years in prison—he had had sex with a few women who were under his spell, about eighteen to twenty of them. So he was very skilled, and that's why we got him. (Lumholdt 2003: 57)

[4] Lars von Trier would later hire Hamann to play a hypnotist in a crucial scene in his television miniseries *Riget* (*The Kingdom,* 1994).

The hypnotist's coercive position is described by von Trier as being inherently sexual and predatory in nature; why else describe the hypnotist's use of his powers to commit sexual assault? The penetrative aspects of hypnosis are further elaborated by von Trier as he described in the interview how they came to choose the actress who ended up in the scene:

> He got three girls and they all read a text we gave them, Daniel Defoe's account of the plague in London in 1348. They would then be put into a trance and asked some questions about the text. The girl we eventually chose went into a trance immediately—it took four minutes. Niels and I thought she faked it, but she was deeply hypnotised. She cried and screamed and hyperventilated. This was a very shy girl. First, we wanted her to act out a couple of things while she was awake, but she was too shy in front of the camera. She did all the scenes, except one short one, under hypnosis. Then she woke up and jumped up on the table. And there was blood and everything. I was in total shock! (Lumholdt 2003: 57)

The rhetoric here has obvious parallels to speculations about the difficulty of 'authenticating' a female sexual orgasm—they 'thought she faked it'—but these doubts are subsumed in an insistence on the successful accomplishment of the hypnosis: 'she was deeply hypnotised,' von Trier insists. The way von Trier determined the woman was truly hypnotised, presumably, was by seeing how she 'cried and screamed and hyperventilated' while under the trance, despite the fact that she 'was a very shy girl' before the hypnosis began. The implication of the male sexual excitement engendered by such uninhibited female convulsions has important ramifications for the 'hypnotic' model of spectatorship I am describing here. The presumably pleasurable awe that von Trier feels when the woman is under the hypnotist's suggestive powers seems to echo the pleasure the director feels when he witnesses an audience enthralled by the 'hypnosis' performed by the film.

Such a scenario raises the possibility of a reciprocal spectatorship between the director and the viewer: not only is the viewer watching (and simultaneously being hypnotised by) the film, the director is also figuratively watching the viewer watching the film, in awe at the apparently authentic bodily reactions he is able to elicit via cinematic address. But the questions about the authenticity of his claims here—was the hypnotist *really* a sexual predator? Was the actress *really* hypnotised?—are less important for my purposes than the aspects of hypnosis that von Trier emphasises in the interview: the coercive, sexual, and predatory potential of hypnotic discourse.

The passivity implied by the 'naïve openness' of this mode of spectatorship appears to be antithetical to the idea of an autonomous spectator, since 'openness' here is equated with suggestibility—a willingness to be controlled like a marionette by the compulsion of the filmmaker's address. Hypnosis conforms in this instance to a top-down, unidirectional model of cinematic communication. One lingering question, however, is whether or not the hypnosis actually 'works'—do we feel ourselves transported to another place, immersed in an imaginary world and in an alternate subjectivity, or does the device simply call too much attention to itself to effectively entrance us? Writing in *Time Out* in 1992, Jonathan Romney was skeptical about the hypnotic effect of *Europa's* form of address. In an account of an interview with von Trier

around the time of *Europa's* premier, the journalist expresses his skepticism about the 'cheapness of his cinematic tricks':

> The power of his peculiarly grandiose tackiness is that the tawdrier the effect, the more transparent, and so the less manipulative the film. In this sense, *Europa* lays its cards on the table from the start, as mesmerist Max von Sydow hammily exhorts you to 'Relaaaaax…, as you go deeeeper into Europa….' The effect, paradoxically, is to put you on your nerve ends. (Lumholdt 2003: 85)

The claim here is that the conspicuous meta-cinematic device used at the beginning of *Europa* is so transparent that it is not at all effective as hypnosis; on the contrary, it only makes the viewer *more* aware of the cinematic devices, and therefore less suggestible and less willing to be goaded into the diegetic space by the director.

The question of whether or not this hypnosis *actually works* is not as important as the way this model of spectatorship structures the way people see and talk about the films. This model of hypnotised spectatorship manifests itself in a critical discourse that chafes at such attempts to subdue the spectator—in trying to hypnotise the viewer, von Trier has paradoxically made the viewer *less* suggestible and more aware of his 'cheap tricks.' Using the 'film as pebble' metaphor as a guide, however, we may infer that this has been von Trier's intention all along—not to plunge the spectator into the diegetic world, but instead to draw attention to the filmic devices, disrupt the usual practice of immersive spectatorship, and thus turn the film into an irksome 'pebble' that troubles the usually comfortable relationship the viewer has to the filmic text.

Model 3: The Game Spectator

In von Trier's film and TV projects of the 1990s and the early 2000s, we encounter virtually the opposite of this desire for a passive and suggestible viewer. In various experiments at creating cinematic 'games,' von Trier spent a time emphasising a participatory spectatorship in which the viewer was given some kind of agency in the meaning-making process. One of the most audacious of these experiments was a project that aired on Danish television on January 1, 2000 entitled *D-Day.* Rather than a unified televisual text, the viewer was presented with four different potentially intertwining narratives—each following a different character involved in some capacity in a bank heist. Each of these narrative strands was filmed live by a separate camera operator and each aired on its own channel on Danish television at the same time. The conceit that drove the project was the invitation to the viewer to 'edit' the various narratives into a single televisual text by switching between the channels. Many critics welcomed this experiment and hailed it as the world's first truly interactive film. When *D-Day* aired, there was a distinctly pedagogical opening that 'taught' the viewer how to participate in the creation of the film; a voiceover demonstrated how one could switch between the various channels, depending on which character one wanted to follow at any given moment, and the voiceover ended with this declaration: 'One thing is certain: Nobody will see the same film' (Hjort 2005: 70).

Various iterations of participatory game structures were involved in many of von Trier's post-Dogme films—at least from *The Idiots* (1998) up until the distinctly un-gamelike film *Antichrist* (2009). The Dogme 95 Manifesto itself is structured as a game, with its ten 'commandments,' which form the so-called Dogme 'Vow

of Chastity,' acting as rules guiding what is acceptable 'play' within the parameters of the Dogme filmmaking game. Jan Simons elaborates on this in *Playing the Waves,* a monograph that takes a game-theoretical approach to the films of Lars von Trier. As Simons points out, 'the game of Dogma 95 operates at all levels' and encompasses all four of the game categories elaborated by game theorist Roger Callois: *agôn* [competition], *mimicry* [simulation], *alea* [chance], and *ilinx* [vertigo] (Simons 2007: 53). The fact that the Dogme 'rules' are often intended as a way of deflating the auteur's ego or self-aggrandisement is made clear in the 'Dogumentary' film *De fem benspænd* [*The Five Obstructions* (2003)], in which Lars von Trier subjects his Danish filmmaking precursor Jørgen Leth to five different sets of rules according to which he is induced to 'remake' his 1967 short film *The Perfect Human.* The antagonistic role of these rules with regard to Leth's persona as an auteur is made perhaps more obvious by translating the film's title more literally from Danish —a *benspænd,* far from being an arbitrary obstruction that just happens to be there making one's task more difficult, actually means something like a 'trip up,' in the sense that somebody might put out his foot to trip somebody running by. The game in this case is conceived as a kind of therapeutic exercise for Leth, and von Trier hopes to help Leth overcome is 'perverse perfectionism' by forcing him to create an 'ugly' film, as von Trier puts it.

But in these cases the 'game' is one that is entirely played by the filmmakers themselves, and the spectator is largely uninvolved in the game. Besides *D-Day,* the other instance in which Lars von Trier explicitly engaged the spectator in a 'game' was a comparatively modest endeavour. For his 2006 film *Boss of it All,* von Trier devised a gamed he called 'The Lookey' to activate what he viewed as the usually passive cinema spectator. In the film, von Trier claimed to have inserted between 5 and 7 out-of-context or other unusual objects, which he now invited the viewer to actively seek out by means of a contest: the first person in Denmark to identify all of the film's 'Lookeys' would be rewarded with a cash prise of 30,000 Danish kroner and the chance to be an extra in his next film. What exactly a 'Lookey' might be is difficult to say, though von Trier said that 'For the casual observer, it's just a glitch or a mistake,' while 'For the initiated, it's a riddle to be solved. All Lookeys can be decoded by a system that is unique' (Brown 2006). True to form, Lars von Trier elaborated on the 'rules' of the Lookey game through a press release on 6 December 2006:

> THE LOOKEY
> 1. Lookey is a mind-game, played with movies as a board.
> 2. A 'Lookey' is a visual element out of context that is added to a movie.
> 3. A feature film includes between five and seven Lookeys.
> 4. All Lookeys in a movie can be decoded by a system that is unique for the movie. To decipher the system is part of the challenge.
> 5. The superior observer is awarded. (Bainbridge 2007: 176)

This game is explicitly pitched by von Trier as an effort to involve the cinematic spectator in a more active way, since, he says, film is inherently 'a one-way medium with a passive audience' (Bordwell 2006). Whereas in the hypnosis model of spectatorship described above, passivity is an entirely desirable trait—one that he even explicitly *requests* his viewer to cultivate prior to seeing *Europa*—in the game model, passivity is a weakness inherent in the medium that the game seeks to overcome. It is clear that though the

same terms are used to describe spectatorship in both the hypnosis and the game models, terms like 'passivity' are valued in completely opposite ways—the hypnosis model requiring it as a prerequisite, and the game model framing it as a debilitating flaw.

One important point to note in this connection is that the more the cinematic game involves the spectator as a participant or a co-creator, the less unified the filmic text becomes. To take *D-Day* as an illustrative example, the most ambitiously participatory of von Trier's cinematic projects: there is no single filmic text one can call the *D-Day* film—there is simply an endless number of possible realizations, thousands of which were 'authored' by Danes sitting in their living room sofas on New Year's Day, 2000. The loss of directorial authority, then, signifies the loss of a unified text. The ostensibly anti-authoritarian bent of Lars von Trier's cinematic games, then, discursively situates the spectator as an active agent at the expense of authorial agency, in much the same way that Barthes presents the zero-sum antagonism between reader and author.

Part and parcel with this challenge to the ontological properties of the cinematic medium that a truly participatory spectatorship poses, is the challenge that spectatorial 'games' seem to pose to the authority of the director. Indeed, many of von Trier's most conspicuously game-like, rule-bound projects are described as anti-auteurist efforts to divest the director of agency, or otherwise hinder the degree to which the director can exert direct control over the filmic text. For films like *The Boss of it All,* in which one of the major 'game' elements in the film is the involvement of a system von Trier called Automavision, in which the framing of individual shots was achieved by choosing a fixed camera position, and then using a random number generator to let a computer program 'decide' how to frame the scene. Von Trier takes the game so far as to officially credit Automavision as the Director of Photography for the film. But the degree to which this actually constitutes a challenge to the director's authority is actually quite minimal, since there are constraints placed upon the randomness of the framing by von Trier. A certain percentage of the shots achieved by Automavision were deemed 'completely unusable,' for instance, according to VFX supervisor Peter Hjort. As Lars von Trier put it, 'You have to give it some limitations. I'm deciding, but I'm just deciding in a more un-precise [sic] way' ('Automavision: The New Set of Rules' 2006).

Model 4: Director as (Inhospitable) Host

Over the past decade, von Trier's films have been marked by an aesthetic affinity for his earliest work. Von Trier has resumed his early interest in highly controlled, masterfully composed filmic images. This return of auteurist technical fussiness and control is evident from the prologue sequences of both *Antichrist* (2009) and *Melancholia* (2011), both of which used Phantom cameras shooting at a frame rate of 1,000 FPS to achieve a crisp, high-definition digital image that slows the action to a glacial pace. In the case of *Melancholia,* some of these nearly frozen prologue images also reference well-known masterpieces of European painting, such as a shot of Justine in her wedding dress floating face-up in a pond with a bouquet of flowers clutched to her chest, which echoes John Everett Millais's haunting oil painting *Ophelia* (1852). In these highly controlled, nearly static images, von Trier implicitly places his own filmmaking within a continuum of western pictorial art, a gesture toward canonicity and artistic authority that is symptomatic of his turn away from a playful and inviting relationship between director and spectator. This aesthetic turn in von Trier's films was accompanied by a new conception of the spectator, as expressed through paratextual

discourse such as interviews and press conferences. Rather than seeing the spectator as a participant in the 'game' of making movies, von Trier has returned to the top-down aesthetic reception theory of his early work. This time, however, hypnosis does not make its way into the metaphor, though the spectator is still seen as a passive 'looker' subject to the whims of an auteur who seems uninterested in the film-viewing experience.

This return of the passive spectator—and its complement, the authoritative auteur—was dramatically ushered back into the critical discourse during the press conference at Cannes held the day after the premier of *Antichrist.* Laughs and jeers greeted the provocative film, and the raucousness carried over into the press conference, when one angry British newspaper journalist opened the proceedings by demanding that von Trier explain why he had inflicted the traumatic and unsettling images of *Antichrist* upon his audience. Von Trier's response was to tell the whole press corps 'You are all my guests; it's not the other way around. That's how I feel…I work for myself… I haven't done it for you or for an audience. So I don't think I owe anybody an explanation.'[5] One question raised by von Trier's response to the reporter is, what kind of host would subject his guests to such a spectatorial trauma? Von Trier's model of hospitality here seems to be strikingly at odds with the usual sense of the guest/host relationship. What his 'You are all my guests' pronouncement does communicate, however, is a clearly defined power dynamic—it is von Trier who has 'extended the invitation,' as it were, and it is the viewer's lot as 'guest' to submit to the treatment and not complain too much.

Von Trier's tendency to court controversy has been accompanied by films that—with the exception of *Melancholia*—have been read as increasingly assaultive and transgressive works that confront viewers with graphic and visceral images of sex and brutal violence. Because of this, von Trier's work has increasingly been understood as part of a broader wave of transgressively brutal and provocative art cinema in recent decades alternatively called new extremism (Horeck and Kendall 2011; Coulthard and Birks 2015), or, in more prosaic terms, simply unwatchable films (Grønstad 2011; Baer, Hennefeld, Horak, and Iversen 2019). Such films, writes Asbjørn Grønstad, transgress the boundary between staging violence *for* the viewers and directing violence *at* them, and possess a violent energy that seems to 'burst through the membrane of the work to target the spectators themselves' (Grønstad 2011, 2). Films like *Antichrist,* according to Grønstad, 'brought a new kind of viscerality' to cinema, and 'put the body—more often than not in stages of agony, ecstasy, or abjection—center stage, and it seemed mischievously intent on triggering scandals' (Grønstad 2011, 3). To the extent that von Trier had begun to see his spectators as 'guests' invited to view his films, as he said to the reporter at Cannes in 2009, the type of hospitality he has in mind involves subjecting his guests to brutal and transgressive spectacles that carry the double-edged potential that Grønstad describes here; no longer content with merely staging graphic sex and violence *for* his guests, von Trier instead begins directing violence *at* them.

The power dynamic implicit in the metaphor of 'spectator as guest' underwent a dramatic reversal at Cannes in 2011, when von Trier famously—using the ironic vocal tone of a director who felt he'd begun to lose an argument with the press corps—declared empathy for Hitler, and was subsequently disinvited from the festival, shunned for a number of years, and threatened with possible legal action in France for his evident flirtation with hate speech. Von Trier was not re-invited to Cannes until his most recent film, *The*

[5] For streaming audio of the entire press conference, see Dargis 2009.

House That Jack Built (2018), premiered (out of competition) at Cannes, marking a definitively non-triumphant return to the festival.

The seven years of von Trier's exclusion from Cannes mark a period of relative silence and reticence for a director who had previously relished the chance to comment directly on his work, often in confrontational and provocative ways. Appropriately, von Trier's modest engagement with the press in connection with the release of *The House That Jack Built* was also marked by an eagerness to reconceive his relationship to his viewers, notably through a number of metaphorical images of that interface. In a 2018 interview with the Danish film scholar Peter Schepelern, von Trier addresses both his recent reception of the Sonning Prise (describing previous awardees Ingmar Bergman and Michael Haneke as 'very appropriate company' for him [Louisiana Channel 2018]) and his feelings after completing *The House That Jack Built.* Von Trier seems noticeably older and more physically enfeebled since his press appearances during and after the production of *Nymphomaniac* (2014), a reminder that he has been beleaguered by his very public battle with alcohol dependence. In his discussion with Schepelern, von Trier frequently returns to how he views his role as a filmmaker and his relationship with his audience. Von Trier's reflections on filmmaking and his particular place in contemporary European cinema are mostly articulated through metaphor during the interview. Describing his resistance to new aesthetic currents and trends, von Trier says that he feels like 'an explorer who has been dropped on a deserted island and who is told that he must go east. It doesn't make sense to change route because something looks more exciting. I have decided not to do that' (Louisiana Channel 2018). Later in the interview, after Schepelern notes that von Trier is fond of using metaphors to describe his artistic project, von Trier says that he has a 'new metaphor, which is that I make the films that are otherwise never made. They are missing, you know, like when you have a constellation and a star is missing' (Lousiana Channel 2018).

Absent in these metaphors is any notion of an audience—in seeing himself as an explorer, he doesn't describe himself leading a band of followers; and in describing himself as a creator of missing astral bodies, he doesn't mention the people on earth looking up at the sky and enjoying the now satisfyingly complete constellation. As if to underline his lack of regard for his viewers, he goes on to say that he was once asked how filmmakers can attract an audience, and his reply was that getting people into the theaters 'has no fundamental purpose. . . unless you want to get them away from the street corners. That's the problem with films—they must be shown' (Louisiana Channel 2018). Later in the interview, the topic of VR technology comes up, which von Trier dismisses as too interactive, allowing the user too much latitude to explore virtual spaces and to dictate their own experience within the world. Von Trier concludes that VR is not art, because it 'gives the spectator freedom—I don't think that is the way to make art. I believe that all good art is created under dictatorial conditions' (Louisiana Channel 2018). With this observation about spectatorial freedom and its incompatibility with art, von Trier says that 'people must enjoy being led,' and expands on his filmmaker-as-explorer metaphor, this time with a focus on his relationship to his spectator:

> I've said earlier that it's a black forest that people must go through and they are scared to. But if they have a friend who says, 'I know the forest,' they will happily follow. And then they enjoy this black forest. And that's my principle. (Louisiana Channel 2018).

Although von Trier's tone in recent interviews has implied that he has been suitably chastised for his expression of sympathy for Hitler in 2011, his regard for the spectator's agency has apparently only diminished. Von Trier sees himself now as a leader or a guide to be followed, but attracting followers is not, evidently, his priority. His recent film has been received mixed reviews, alternatively heralded as a top-ten film of the year by *Cahiers du Cinéma,* and panned by other critics as a shallow, self-involved reflection on the aesthetics of atrocity and violence. As one representative example of that reception, Richard Brody, film critic for *The New Yorker,* writes that von Trier, 'simply dallies with disgusting images and ideas in a carefully calibrated, ante-upping ploy to attract attention,' and calls von Trier the 'cinematic counterpart to the right-wing trolls who, in the mild guise of frank confrontation with difficult ideas, seek to normalise and extend the reach of their destructive program.' For Brody, von Trier isn't actually an 'extreme rightist, or any kind of ideologue, but, rather, that he's a casual provocateur whose flip, adolescent café-table musings about the nature of art and the art of nature are as simplistically shocking as his gory and sadistic drama' (Brody 2018).

Conclusion: Films Without an Audience

One valid question raised by these several contradictory models of spectatorship is what this apparent oscillation between authoritarianism and play, between one-way-communication and two-way, reciprocal participation, has to say about Lars von Trier as an 'author.' Even though von Trier's persona makes it difficult to reach beneath the layer of self-irony to some kind of underlying sincerity, and despite his penchant for self-contradiction, it does seem clear that since his (presumably ironic) professions of sympathy for Hitler in 2011, von Trier has largely turned away from his audience. Those viewers who are left—an increasingly niche contingent of art and horror film enthusiasts with a tolerance for the filmic brutality that has accompanied von Trier's recent extremist cinematic turns. Although he has gleefully played the role of provocateur throughout his career, his more recent comments on spectatorship have expressed a disregard toward his audience and a distrust of film journalists. This turn away from the cinemagoing public and press is a convenient rhetorical stance for an auteur whose most recent films—*Nymphomaniac I & II* and *The House That Jack Built*—have inspired tepid reviews in the mainstream press. By framing his film's abilities to shock and anger the viewer as a marker of aesthetic success—characteristics that have only more firmly situated him in the niche of new extremism—von Trier is also justifying his inability to engage or inspire an enthusiastic audience response among mainstream arthouse filmgoers in recent years. But the ability to provoke shock and anger requires the viewer to invest some emotion into the experience of seeing a film. Even von Trier recognises this calculus—that shock can only take hold in an emotionally invested audience—so he seemed pleased in a recent interview with *Cineuropa* when the interviewer referenced the loud groans and mass walkouts that took place during the screenings of *The House That Jack Built* at Cannes. Von Trier says that this response 'made me very relaxed,' and that 'It's quite important not to be loved by everybody, because then you've failed. I'm not sure if they hated it enough, though. If it gets too popular, I'll have a problem. But the reception seemed just about right, I think' (Lumholdt 2018). It remains to be seen how sustainable this tactic of shocking viewers with juxtapositions of virtuosic aesthetic control and images of brutal and sometimes grotesque violence is. Many reviews of *The House That Jack Built* suggest,

however, that this tactic has already run its course, describing the film's aesthetic as 'tired' (Brody 2018), 'rote' (Dargis 2018), and 'a total bore' (Morris 2018).

Perhaps recognising a growing critical and public apathy about his films, von Trier has suggested that he may start projects that are conceived purely as technical exercises for the director, rather than expensive, feature-length films meant to be distributed widely and screened for audiences. In his 2018 interview with Peter Schepelern cited above, von Trier describes these future projects as short, technically-challenging films meant to sharpen his mastery of cinematic technique, likening them to *études* in classical music. If this is indeed the direction von Trier is headed, it suggests a more radical disregard for the spectator than he has expressed at any other point in his career. This tendency reflects not only von Trier's difficulty sustaining his ability to shock and anger his audience, but also suggests how large spectatorship looms in von Trier's imagination, since his back-and-forth relationship with his spectator has seemed to dictate all of the most radical aesthetic and stylistic shifts in his career. As von Trier says, in a statement that is symptomatic of the disregard for his viewers that he has recently expressed: 'That's the problem with films —they must be shown' (Schepelern 2018).

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