



Review: Caroline Bainbridge (2007)
The Cinema of Lars von Trier: Authenticity and Artifice
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Davina Quinlivan
King's College, London

For his special achievement in the realm of European Cinema, Lars von Trier recently received the 2008 Bremen Film Prize (*Bremer Filmpreis*) at the opening ceremony of this year's Bremen International Film Conference. While von Trier's acceptance of this prestigious award will no doubt further secure his position as one of the most remarkable *auteurs* of his generation, this year also marks a decade since the release of his first official Dogme film *The Idiots* (*Idioterne*, 1998) and work also begins this summer on *Antichrist* (2009), the eleventh feature in the Danish filmmaker's impressive oeuvre.

Reflecting on von Trier's radical contemporary cinema, Caroline Bainbridge's study is, then, particularly timely and indeed testament to the impassioned contribution von Trier has made to filmmaking over the last twenty years. Bainbridge's book is also the first publication to offer a sustained treatment of von Trier's work since Jack Stevenson's 2002 authoritative overview published as part of the BFI's *World Directors Series*. Certainly, given the five year period between the two works, Bainbridge's book features more recent films such as *Manderlay* (2005), *Dogville* (2003), *The Five Obstructions* (2003) and *The Boss of it All* (2006), but this is not to say that her aim is at all limited to these films or indeed to

updating existing analyses. Stevenson's volume offers stimulating insight and a wealth of detailed information on all films pre-2002, but Bainbridge presents the first in-depth theoretical analysis of von Trier to delve more deeply into contextual and formal issues that are, to a certain degree raised by Stevenson's analysis, but still demand further questioning. Although highly original and valuable criticism has also been made by film scholars such as Mette Hjort, Suzy Gordon, Emma Wilson and Adam Atkinson, substantial contributions to the study of von Trier's cinema are still surprisingly rare. It would seem that in dedicating her analysis to von Trier, Bainbridge confronts the problems surrounding his work that have made him a difficult and troubling subject to discuss, arguing that such issues are integral aspects of the film experience von Trier deliberately constructs. Analysing the implications of both von Trier's embodiment and his cinematic address of 'authenticity' and 'artifice', Bainbridge's argument leads toward an ethical orientation that incites the viewer to question the power *between* von Trier's indelible images, a subtle shift of light that, in equal measures, attracts and disturbs.

As her title suggests, Bainbridge's principal concern is to open up a space for thinking about issues of authenticity and artifice underscoring much of von Trier's cinema. These twinned aspects of von Trier's style of filmmaking are made explicit through Bainbridge's engagement with philosophy, forging a dialogue between cinema and, in particular, the feminist thinking of Luce Irigaray that works well to make sense of von Trier's cinematic 'seductions' (x). It is this allure of cinematic pleasure, Bainbridge argues, that takes place not through the individual representation of artifice and authenticity, but precisely from the latter's roots in the former. Drawing attention to von Trier's adoption of a symbiotic relationality between authenticity and artifice, Bainbridge foregrounds an implicit link between subject matter and auteur that is most suggestively bound up with von Trier's self-invention and mastery of a constructed identity, exemplified by his 'adoption of the 'von' at the heart of his professional name' (x). Exposing such potential concordances between von Trier and his cinematic subjects, Bainbridge posits new theories of spectatorship, sexual difference and cinematic affect grounded in von Trier's paradoxical invocation of contrivance as itself a kind of pure, artistic expression.

Bainbridge's book takes the form of an introduction followed by four sections, privileging discussion of key films that were released internationally and are broadly available. Explaining the reasoning behind her choice of films, Bainbridge acknowledges

the corpus of von Trier's work that lies beyond the domain of internationally distributed cinema including his lesser known video installations and music videos, but rightly argues the need to flesh out responses to widely received films that still require further unravelling. Mapping von Trier's cultural and cinematic heritage, Bainbridge's introductory chapter is a clear and comprehensive analysis of von Trier's artistic sensibilities reflecting on his involvement in the Dogme 95 movement and the importance of key cultural figures including Frederich Nietzsche, Bertolt Brecht, Richard Wagner and most intriguingly, David Bowie.

Following this detailed and well organised introduction, the first section is divided between two chapters investigating the 'Europa' trilogy. Encountering this early work, Bainbridge centres on its most dominant concern with what she succinctly views as 'questions of the future shot through with a keen scrutiny of the past, of history and its inflections of power and politics' (25). For Bainbridge, von Trier's first trilogy of films compellingly proposes visions of a future that are finite, a dystopia ossified through its relationship with the past. In this sense, history clasps the events of *Europa* (1991), *Epidemic* (1987) and *Element of Crime* (1988) within a tangible frame of existence, but the weight of its presence ultimately negates all possible futurity for the trilogy. Situating her reading of the 'Europa' trilogy's interrogation of European politics within a theoretical context of post-modernism, Bainbridge makes important connections between the trilogy's complex staging of alienation and both individual and cultural trauma (40). Developing a reading of the way in which such issues of identity relate to the formal construction of time and space, Bainbridge's analysis of von Trier's trope of hypnosis offers a particularly effective way of understanding his conceptualisation of a spatio-temporality effected by trauma. In this fascinating exploration, Bainbridge draws on a wide range of theoretical perspectives including those of Vivian Sobchack and E. Ann Kaplan in order to emphasise how von Trier's *narrativisation* of history relates to a psychical staging of events (40-41). Central to Bainbridge's discussion is also von Trier's inter-textual references to film noir (26-8) that shape not only the diegesis, but with 'its strangely hypnotic quality' (41) encourage the spectator to 'bear cultural witness' to historical events that are otherwise difficult to articulate or, indeed, imagine (41). Although one could argue that film is always already an hypnotic medium no matter what genre it adopts, Bainbridge emphasises well

the importance of film noir to the 'Europa' trilogy as a key textual reference to artifice that ruptures the diegetic, 'authentic' existence of von Trier's cinematic subjects.

Bainbridge's concern with the way dominating exterior forces impact upon the potentiality of the subject in von Trier's cinema is broadened in the latter half of the first section, addressing the power relations that underpin the 'Europa' trilogy. She writes: 'the films foreground issues of ethics and morality through their examination of power relations and their effects of power on the construction of identity' (44). According to Bainbridge, such 'effects of power' also have implications for the sexed subject, expressing the view that 'von Trier's ethics are distinctly framed by gender as a component of human nature' (45). It is this specific emergence of the ethical relations between sexed subjects, surfacing in the early imagery and narrative trajectories of von Trier's cinema that leads Bainbridge to the philosophy of Irigaray. In this respect, Bainbridge's work forms part of a significant wave of thinking that has sought to develop energising thought on an Irigarayan theorisation of sexual difference in the cinema.¹ While the highly valuable and innovative work of Liz Watkins (2001), for example, questions the extent to which Jane Campion's role as a female filmmaker effects her evocation of sexual difference in her film *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996), Bainbridge's emphasis on von Trier's maleness holds much promise with respect to what might be affirmed from an Irigarayan perspective when analysing the work of a male filmmaker. Certainly, for Bainbridge, von Trier's provocations of gender, alterity and difference 'mirror' (55) similar concerns that are inherently felt throughout Irigaray's overarching project of sexual difference, daringly envisaging a dialogue between von Trier and Irigaray that offers fresh insight into both filmmaker and philosopher.

Towards the end of the second section and a large part of the third, Bainbridge pursues issues of trauma and the role of affect in order to understand the appeal of von

¹ For example, the work of Lucy Bolton draws on the work of Irigaray to develop a reading method for analysing the cinematic representation of female consciousness. See, in particular, 'The Camera as Speculum: Examining Female Consciousness in *Lost in Translation*, Using the Thought of Luce Irigaray' in *From Plato's Cave to the Multiplex: Contemporary Philosophy and Film*, edited by Barbara Gabriella Renzi and Stephen Rainey (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006), pp. 87-97, p. 95. The work of Chysanthi Nigianni also develops a model of thought that raises questions about cinema from the perspective of both the thinking of Irigaray and the post-structuralist philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. See, in particular, 'Revising the ethics of "becoming-woman": from transcendent to immanent becomings' presented at the annual 'Luce Irigaray Seminar' organised by the University of Liverpool 2007

Trier's 'unpleasurable' cinema, progressing towards an Irigarayan strategy that develops thought on the ethical positioning of the viewer. Perhaps the strongest of the four sections, Bainbridge offers an enriching discussion of von Trier's 'Gold Heart' trilogy, opening with views on the filmmaker's involvement in the Dogme 95 movement with Thomas Vinterberg which foreshadowed his experimental use of fly-on-the-wall footage juxtaposed with his subject's direct address of the camera in *The Idiots* (1998). On criticism of von Trier's Dogme films, Emma Wilson rightly points out the way in which 'less attention has been paid to the specificity of their subject matter' (Wilson, 2004, 124), but Bainbridge's thoughtful examination of *The Idiots* establishes ways of understanding cinematic affect that situates both film subject and its viewer within a mutual frame of experience. This powerful point of identification is, for Bainbridge, strongly related to the emergent themes of love in the 'Gold Heart' trilogy which, in turn, shifts each film's articulation of trauma towards a heightened level of feeling experienced by the spectator: In the 'Gold Heart' trilogy, the narrative trauma, which is constructed through personal and intimate relationships, is paralleled by a trauma that is evoked in the spectator. Just as there is a shift away from the terrain of power toward the terrain of love, there is also a corresponding shift in the way trauma is motivated in the films and in their ethical investment in structures of feeling and affect rather than in structures of discourse and power. (119)

Elaborating on the 'Gold Heart' trilogy's foregrounding of female desire and pleasure, Bainbridge innovatively builds on Irigaray's assertion of a feminine consciousness in order to demonstrate how the film's subject matter exceeds, through von Trier's formal style, the limits of the contained world within the filmic diegesis and is inscribed upon the viewing experience. Bainbridge also usefully explains how her engagement with Irigaray builds on earlier paths of enquiry that explored von Trier's representation of women and 'the silences of femininity as they are played out in the psychic mechanisms of fantasy, enunciation and identification' (116). This point of 'enunciation' is most impressively reconfigured according to spectatorial relations that embed within each film a different kind of access to trauma. Bainbridge's analysis of the 'Gold Heart' trilogy is an important contribution to both studies of von Trier and to film analysis with a philosophical edge. More specifically, Bainbridge's encounter with Irigaray calls into being a new facet of von Trier's cinematic ontology which forces the viewer to reconsider their relationship with the

image as an ethical mode of address. Indeed, Bainbridge's treatment of von Trier strongly suggests to me an invocation of the model of thought recently offered by Daniel Frampton's envisioning of the 'filmmind' (Frampton, 2006, 147), a cinematic consciousness whose form embodies the very ideology that it diegetically symbolizes.

The final and concluding section of the book entitled 'Experimentation at the Boundaries' is interested in von Trier's most recent self-reflexive approach to filmmaking and its involvement in the continued structuring of his public persona that is as much artifice as it is authentic. This section offers insight into von Trier's latest Kafka-inspired 'Amerika' trilogy as well as his relatively new satire *The Boss of It All* (2006) and his 'Dogumentary' (18) *The Five Obstructions*. In her closing comments, Bainbridge interestingly remarks on von Trier's cinema as a signalling of the importance of art as a 'testing ground for what authenticity might still mean', while the staging of artifice, at the level of the performative, 'has as its aim a fascination with the possibility of authenticity' that resolutely defines his *auteur* status (166). Bainbridge underlines the importance of understanding the nature of von Trier's paradoxical status, yet while she is right to affirm this enigma, it is also significantly marked by a sense of haunting uncertainty that implies a loss of faith, as it were, with his own skin. Thus, Bainbridge suggests that von Trier's eagerness to remain unfixed in the eyes of others relinquishes familiarity and the pleasures of intimacy that he, perversely, engenders between his film subjects and spectators. Bridging spaces between film, filmmaker and spectator, Bainbridge's work is a highly valuable and accessible contribution to studies of von Trier that inspires further viewings and new reconsiderations of his work. Above all, at the heart of Bainbridge's book lies a challenge to the reader to embrace von Trier's film experience and think afresh the possibilities of its intensely felt sensations.