

When you can't see it "the world is a wonderful place"

Dancer in the Dark, written and directed by Lars von Trier

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Danish director Lars von Trier's latest film is the final part of a trilogy (including *Breaking the Waves* [1996] and *The Idiots* [1998]), whose basic motif is that of a fairy tale. The little girl "Goldenheart" is so good-hearted that she is prepared to sacrifice all she has for other people.

The musical-tragedy *Dancer in the Dark* has met with both enthusiasm and disapproval. The film opened this year's New York film festival and won the top prize, the Golden Palm, at this year's Cannes film festival. Icelandic pop singer Björk (once of the Sugarcubes), who plays the lead in the film, won the prize in Cannes for best actress.

The story takes place in the American Pacific Northwest in the sixties. Selma, an immigrant from Czechoslovakia, has a poorly paid job in a factory. Out of the little money that remains after she has met her day-to-day expenses, she saves every penny to pay for an eye operation for her son. He faces the same fate as Selma herself—going blind in the near future. Selma's eyesight is deteriorating rapidly and she works like a demon to get enough money together before her lack of vision means she can no longer work.

Selma lives with her son in a trailer on land owned by Bill, a policeman, and his wife. Bill finds about Selma's cache of money and steals it to pay off debts. The bank is demanding repayment and Bill is fearful he could lose his wife, house and property. In a scrap with Selma, she grabs his gun, shoots and wounds him. From the floor Bill pleads with her to shoot and finish him off—she obliges enthusiastically and he dies.

The pair are then transported as if in a daydream. As music strikes up, the deceased Bill rises from the dead. Bill and Selma are reconciled—they sing and dance through the house. Bill has been redeemed. As a consequence, in court, Selma feels no guilt for his death. In a torturously drawn out sequence we accompany Selma on her way to prison and then finally to the gallows. She

dies at the end secure in the knowledge that her son will receive his long awaited operation.

While the little girl in the fairy-tale "Goldenheart" is rewarded at the end in heaven with real dollars, Selma's death serves to redeem her bad conscience. She is guilty because out of "self-interest" she gave the gift of life to a child although she knew he would inherit her genetic eye disease. The conservative message of the film is unmistakable. Only he or she who personally comes to terms with the blows imposed by fate will find a form of inner peace. This is the intellectual framework which the director had already employed in a previous film *Breaking the Waves*.

In that work, Bess, a young woman, thinks she is responsible for her husband's dire condition because she had prayed to God to return him to her as quickly as possible from the remote oil platform where he worked. Her "egotistical" wish is fulfilled. Her husband returns home, but he has been so badly injured in an accident that his doctors say it would be better if he were allowed to die. Bess undergoes a trial of persecution (offering herself sexually to one and all), convinced that this will restore her husband to life. At the end of her passage of torment she dies, but her sacrifice was worthwhile—her husband improves. Her doctors finally conclude that she died from being "too good".

Selma is also a pure soul, an angel exuding childish traits such as a powerful sense of fantasy. Condemned to a life of misery on earth she resolves to see everything "with her heart" and not her "eyes". As Selma begins to dream, often in the middle of her work, she discovers beauty in the midst of her humdrum surroundings. (She loves musicals, where nothing bad ever happens.) The world is full of noise and rhythms, song and dance, a musical in which there are really no bad people,

everybody is good-natured, there is always some one there to catch you when you fall. Suddenly the monotonous machines which Selma operates take on a life of their own and everything is suffused with momentum, strength and boisterousness—underlined in the dance scenes by Björk's emotion-fired music and song.

The director has stated that Selma, in common with Bess from *Breaking the Waves*, stands for the “defence of naiveté”. They are “icons.” In fact, when von Trier speaks of naiveté he is not speaking of childish innocence—which is directly bound up with curiosity about the world and the desire to know. The strength of Selma and Bess's convictions is intimately bound up with an inability to come to terms with reality. Isolation from the world is what protects their dreams.

In *Breaking the Waves* Bess admits frankly that she is stupid—stupidity is the only gift she has been given by God. In this gift resides her “talent to believe”. The director allows her to die in the film precisely at that point when she begins to doubt her own convictions. In the scene in *Dancer in the Dark* which first makes clear the threat of Selma's impending blindness, she bluntly declares to her factory colleague Jeff, without an ounce of regret: “I have seen enough—there is nothing more for me to see.”

Lars von Trier recently described the advantages of living in a beautiful world of illusion in an interview with the *Süddeutschen Zeitung*: “I was so disappointed by Africa. There were black people and lions and everything, but it was no way as fantastic as I thought it would be. That's why I think it is so important not to travel. Then the world remains a beautiful place.” In the same interview he goes on to say that he thought it was an advantage making his film in the US, under conditions where he had never previously visited the country.

Given such a conception it comes as no surprise that the narrative of *Dancer in the Dark* lacks any sort of concrete social or historical foundation. The elements of the plot could in fact be transposed to any time or place. Von Trier stated that he found it interesting to make Selma an inhabitant of a former “communist” country. But this plays no role in the film. The only line in the film which refers to this fact sounds hollow, as if it had just been tossed in.

In his last film *The Idiots* von Trier employed his so-called “Dogma Rules” and technical effects to achieve a sort of spontaneity and “authentic atmosphere”. In the case of the *The Idiots* the results were obtained with a minimum of technology—a few handheld video-cameras to

obtain the documentary-type effect. Now, in *Dancer in the Dark*, no less than 100 video cameras were employed in one of the dance scenes to improve the sense of “spontaneity”.

When it comes to the development of plot and the main characters von Trier, however, applies less care. Much in the film comes across as crudely constructed and designed to appeal on the basis of affectation and cheap melodrama—for example, when von Trier allows the nearly blind Selma to trip her way home along the tracks of a railway line, skipping to one side as the locomotives roar down the track. Or nearly blind Selma in the factory making elementary mistakes as she places her tender fingers inside the huge stamping machine pressing metal plate. The director, it seems, does not want the audience to do too much of its own thinking. Despite the best efforts of some of the talented actors involved none of the characters and relationships portrayed on screen convince.

It is interesting that in addition to some criticism, such a confused film has been the subject of considerable praise. It would seem as if the film has struck a nerve amongst certain social layers. The film evidently feeds the sentiments of those predisposed to fatalism and the sentimental glorification of intellectual backwardness.

Today it is perhaps for some a source of consolation to learn that the indisputable cultural decline of society is an unstoppable process. Even more consoling is the notion that those who suffer most are prepared to suffer with dignity and quietly accept their “fate”. Cocooned in this cloak of security, it is then possible to be moved and weep for such holy souls as Selma and Bess.

The film can also serve to ease the conscience—perhaps a conscience initially formed years ago when one was far more radical in thought and deed. Everybody has their own cross to bear and to suffer because of the evil ways of the world—is not that the eternal fate of the goodly person? This is the inescapable and profoundly conservative message that von Trier communicates in his latest, thoroughly unconvincing film. Not exactly the most promising basis for a revival of critical cinema.



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