

Director Lars von Trier at Cannes: Playing with social dynamite

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The Danish filmmaker Lars von Trier is representative of a certain type of self-indulgent and self-promoting modern artist who makes a virtue of failing to think through a single serious social problem to the end. Encouraged by a small but influential coterie of smirking admirers, von Trier tosses around his provocations like sticks of dynamite without the slightest consideration for the consequences.

Von Trier's latest outburst took place at the Cannes Film Festival, which came to an end at the weekend. In response to a question at a press conference following the showing of his new film, *Melancholia*, he commented that he had discovered he was not a Jew, but "that I was really a Nazi, which also gave me some pleasure". Von Trier then went on to declare a degree of sympathy for Hitler sitting in his bunker.

Following a barrage of criticism for his remarks, including from the directors of the Cannes Film Festival, who declared him persona non grata at the event, von Trier made an attempt to apologise for his statements. In so doing, he only intensified the controversy. What was important, he declared, was his film, and that had nothing to do with his own opinions or prejudices.

He told reporters, "even if I was Hitler, what does that have to do with my film being here? It's a festival for films, not for directors.... Albert Speer was for me a great artist, and we must accept that there can be big artists, like [pro-Nazi filmmaker Leni] Riefenstahl, that suddenly get their room to work because of a dictatorship. There are people who want me to take that back, but for the sake of truth I can't do that".

Von Trier's claim that an artist's social views and his or her art exist in two separate realms is false. To argue that a filmmaker is not *simply* the sum total of his or her conscious political views is not the same thing as saying that it makes no difference what an artist thinks or feels.

As Trotsky pointed out, "the artist who creates this form, and the spectator who is enjoying it, are not empty machines, one for creating form and the other for appreciating it." The ultimate impact of a film or any other

piece of work exists in a definite relationship to its seriousness, purpose and truthfulness, which, in turn, have a good deal to do with how the artist—a living, breathing social creature, not an abstraction—views the world. Riefenstahl's films are so much bombast, in fact.

This is not the first time von Trier has made the statement "I am a Nazi". In an interview he gave in 2005, von Trier referred to an apocryphal account of his mother's death in which she told him with her last words that his real father was not a Jew, but rather a German. Glibly and indefensibly associating all Germans with Nazism, von Trier then went on to declare in 2005 that he himself was a Nazi.

There is no evidence that von Trier is associated in any way with organised Nazi groups. In the course of one recent Danish general election, he took out newspaper space to oppose the candidacy of a radical right-wing party. Nevertheless, there is logic to political positions and statements—even if von Trier is not prepared to admit it. A closer look at von Trier's political background—as opposed to his ethnic origins—indicates he is moving, as a man and an artist, in a deeply disoriented and reactionary direction.

In many respects, von Trier epitomises the disenchanted product of the type of leftist radical politics that prevailed in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the 2005 interview cited above and on other occasions, von Trier has acknowledged that he was the child of "communist" parents, who allowed him to do whatever he liked. At a certain point, however, he rebelled against their permissiveness.

Unable, or lacking the interest, to examine the social and historical origins of the opportunist and ultimately unserious activity pursued by various Stalinist-Maoist and left protest groups in the 1970s, von Trier simply rejected any possibility of being able to transform society in a progressive manner. Instead, he concluded that social ills had their roots in the rottenness of the human race and that as an artist he was supremely positioned to confront mankind with its own evil.

He declared in his 2005 interview: "My family had a very clear idea of good and evil, of kitsch and good art. In my

work, I try to throw all this into question. I don't just provoke others, I declare war on myself, on the way I was brought up, on my values the entire time. And I attack the good-people philosophy which prevailed in my family".

Von Trier's abhorrence of the "good-people philosophy" of his leftist parents recurs throughout his cinema production and culminates in his latest film, *Melancholia*—a film dealing with the end of the world, because in the words of the director, mankind deserves no better.

One film critic notes that the new film by director Terence Malick, *The Tree of Life* (also shown at Cannes), takes a generally positive view of the development of humanity. He then contrasts Malick's film with "Von Trier's vision of negation (which) almost feels like a chuckling rebuke: No, this is what life is really like, a circus maximus of pain, anxiety and darkness that weighs you down until it's snatched from you by the indifference of fate".

Von Trier concluded that mankind is irredeemably bad and dominated by animal drives—most notably the sex drive, which fascinates the director. The Danish writer-director (who converted to Catholicism as an adult, although he claims not to be a believer) then went on to develop his conviction that instinct, faith and imagination, even mental illness, are far superior means of comprehending reality than the rigours of science or social analysis.

In his earlier film *Breaking the Waves*, the figure of Bess (Emily Watson) declares that the only gift she has received from God is her "talent to believe". The director then arranges for Bess to die precisely at that point she ceases to believe. When confronted with inevitable blindness, Selma (Björk), the main character in von Trier's especially dreadful *Dancer in the Dark*, declares: "I have seen enough. For me there is nothing more to see". And in his film *The Idiots*, von Trier intimates that the idiot or a mentally ill individual has a more privileged access to truth.

One of von Trier's most recent efforts, *Antichrist*, was named after the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's work of the same name, which the filmmaker claims to have kept on his bedside table since he was 12 years old. The WSWS noted that von Trier's work was "a murky, hopelessly contrived, and, frankly, ridiculous film."

Speaking of the Danish director's artistry, we commented: "To coin a phrase, if von Trier's ideas are bad, his drama is worse. He invites us into 'the dark world of his imagination,' but why should we want to go there? It's not interesting, and the events portrayed are largely dull and unconvincing. With the look and feel (and sometimes sound) of one of the contemporary sado-pornographic horror films, everything in *Antichrist* is muddy and ugly, not the 'ugliness' of everyday life, life as it is, but an imposed, pseudo-intellectual, schematic ugliness, the ugliness of

misshapen and barren, outdated ideas, which are merely meant to impress. Von Trier is entirely lost, or plays at being so, and celebrates the condition."

In any event, von Trier apparently prefers to stay at home and deepen his study of Nietzsche than find out about the world. In an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, he explained his disillusionment following a trip to Africa: "I was so disappointed with Africa. There were black men and lions and everything, but it was nowhere near as fantastic as I imagined. That's why I think it is important not to travel, then the world remains a wonderful place". In the same interview, the director stated that he thought it advantageous that he had not visited America prior to making his series of films set in the country.

The confused ramblings of von Trier point to a man who is self-absorbed, superficial and proud of his superficiality.

The most interesting question does not concern von Trier himself, who is of little importance intellectually or artistically, but why he and his films are held in such high regard by a layer of intellectuals, artists and journalists. His misanthropy, world weariness, fascination with violence and animal drives, contempt for social life, distrust of the masses, hostility to reason and predilection for national stereotypes evidently speak to a layer of the privileged middle class.

Under conditions of rapidly developing social polarisation, this layer feels impatient with the limits prescribed by democracy—even traditional bourgeois democracy—and is increasingly amenable to the temptations of a form of dictatorship, in order, like the Nazi icon Riefenstahl, to "get back the room they need to work".

Von Trier's musings on the merits of dictatorship do not take place in a vacuum. Parties of the radical right are involved in government in a number of Western and European countries. In Denmark, the ultra-right Danish People's Party plays a major role in determining the policies of the country's conservative government. In attempting to put as much distance between himself and his leftist parents, von Trier is orienting towards profoundly reactionary forces.



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