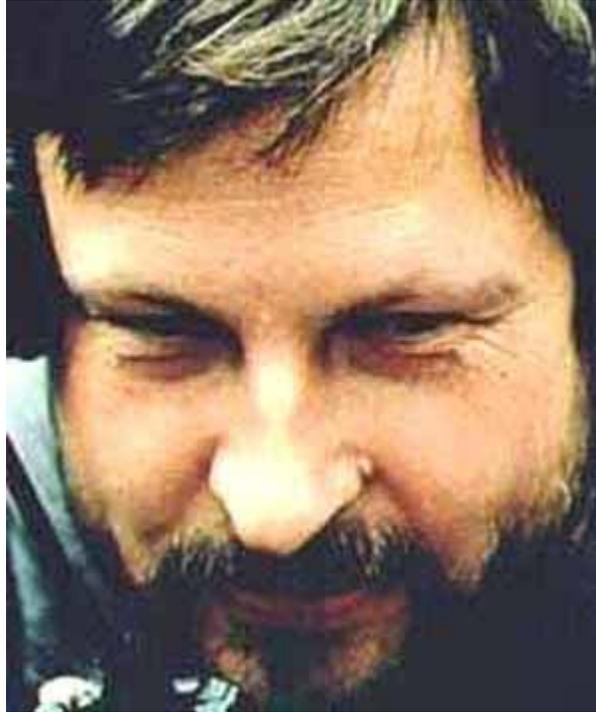


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## At War with Myself

A Word with Lars von Trier at Cannes 2005

*On Manderley and more*

BY KARIN BADT

Most directors at Cannes you can meet at their hotels lining the boardwalk, for a Perrier and an interview. Not Lars von Trier, the director of such disturbing films as **Europa**, **Dancer in the Dark**, and **Dogville**. Von Trier had sequestered himself in Antibes, far from the maddening crowds, at the exclusive Hotel Cap perched atop a nature reserve. As my taxi rounded the cliffs, the sky turned gray and mist floated on the waves, rather like the empty landscape of von Trier's own movie, **Breaking the Waves**. A lone tornado ripped across the water. The taxi dropped me into total silence — except for the twittering of birds — and on the mowed slopes to von Trier's private cabana, there on a path rounding the sea, I came upon the director himself, walking calmly alone in his white suit and white beard, looking like the gentle proprietor of a great plantation. After all, his newest film **Manderlay**, a scathing critique of racism in the United States, takes place on one.

Von Trier is a lot more gentle than one might expect from a man with the reputation for terrorizing his actresses. A small man, with a twinkle in his eye, he is quick to tilt his head and mumble a response, no matter what you ask — and what usually comes out of his mouth seems to surprise both him and the journalist. Unlike other film directors, who are prompt with soundbites, repeatable from interview to interview, a conversation with von Trier is an original opus. He speaks in spurts, inventing metaphors and images inspired by whatever word comes before him, rather as if the journalist is a Rorschach

test. For example, we began our interview discussing why it was he did not fly — why he took a trailer home from Sweden to Cannes — and he whispered: “I have psychological problems. Many many. It’s hard right now.” And by the time our interview concluded — in midsentence (the publicist checking her watch) — he was on to new revelations about his family life.

Intellectual? Consistent? Ideological? Here too von Trier was a surprise. The von Trier of the Dogme Manifesto, the von Trier who bombasts the world with political statements about the death penalty, about religious and judicial institutions, the von Trier who has been cited to be motivated by a conversion experience to Christianity, came across as a man tortured by his own contradictions. Throughout the interview, he squirmed in his white jacket, as if caught and netted by it, and then apologized sporadically. For what? For being tired of journalists, for rebelling against his parents, and even, when it could not be avoided, for his own film, a film that seemed to have disappointed both himself and the public, for its over-heavy tone.

“I am at war with myself,” he concluded, taking his hands and swinging fists at each other, rather as if the battle were aimed at his own frame.

Below is our interview, conducted May 20, 2005, in Cannes.

**How many Lars Von Triers are there? Everyone who sees your movies expects you to be an angry person, but here you are the kindest person, with lots of humor.**

I am actually quite a nice guy, not mean, not idiotically positive either. I am just reacting like a slave to the world you meet, the different people you meet. I have always been very mean to myself.

**Why did you call Bush an asshole this week?**

I was just speaking my mind, to explain that I am not anti-American. And then some Israelis yesterday said you called Bush an asshole, and I said it’s not so good. And they said, well how do you feel today, and I said, “I feel the same. He’s still an asshole.”

**Did you say America is sitting on the world or shitting on the world? Both comments were published in the international press.**



America is sitting on the world. Face-sitting they call it in erotic terms, which is a good thing for both parties I hope, it’s nothing I practice, oh sorry for that.

**Why do you keep apologizing?**

I am a little tired. A situation like this, no matter how friendly you are, is hostile. You must know this as a journalist. It’s like being back in the schoolyard, there is something hostile about the situation. I get easily provoked by situations like this because I was always the one who was beaten in the schoolyard. Especially in press conferences, I feel surrounded by the group. Perhaps it’s because I say a lot of things, and I provoke, and then it becomes a game, but I feel fragile. I was beaten at school because I was extremely small, and I came to school a year before the others. My parents were a little bit more wealthy than the other parents, this was not a good

neighborhood, and they moved there for principled reasons, because they were socialists. I wanted to go to a private school. I had a terrible time in school.

**Why is *Manderlay* so cynical? Usually, your movies — even *Dogville* — show a great faith, an idealism reminiscent of Carl Dreyer. What has happened between the first Grace and the second Grace?**



Has Grace already forgotten that she has killed a whole town, and this is two months ago, and now she is just eating chicken, yum? There is no real reflection. She is cartoonish and cliché; she is from a gangster family where okay, they have to do these things.

**But is it true that your movies are motivated by a great faith?**

No, I have no faith. I am very happy when we go another 50 kilometers without being killed. My self-worth, my physical self-worth is low.

**What about faith in God, in the world?**

I wish.

**But the focus in other films such as *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark* has been on faith. Have you changed your focus?**



No, I am trying to draw this whole story out in three movies. You haven't seen the end yet. Although I don't make a plan when I do a film, I just write a story and film it. I was fascinated by the story, and I wrote it. I was very happy when one night I found out that the Danny Glover character wrote "Mam's Law," and that was after I did most of the script. It's quite smart. But if I were to criticize this film, it is that it is too smart. Story-wise everything fits too well. It's superficial in that sense. I blame myself for doing things for the smartness of it, instead of for what I really feel. It's not the kind of director I want to be.

**Are you going to redo the movie?**

No, no, no, it's over now!

**Is Nicole willing to act in your next movie?**

Yes, I asked her, and she has time in the spring. My version of it is that she always wanted to do the film, and that she was very sorry, very angry when it did not happen, because it was a matter of our schedules. When she does a film, maybe it takes two months or maybe it takes a year. I try to support my actresses the best I can, but in a way that I want them to be the best they can be in film.

**women heroines. Why not men?**



Well this was Carl Dreyer's speciality, and I've gotten used to it. Also my contact with actresses is better. The problem with men is that they will always piss up your back, like when all the deer are together in the woods. That's fine, you can change your shirt. But also men hold back a little, that is very masculine, so there is always something to give in case there is a crisis. A woman has a tendency to give it all. Also, my main characters are also built on my own person. I think women are better, more understanding. This is my female side.



In your film [*Manderlay*], the town is destroyed basically because Grace is busy masturbating, and then has sex with Timothy, the night watchman.

Yes, you can say that.

So are you implying that there is something wrong with women satisfying sexual needs?

Not at all. Nobody should be blamed for it, only me. I just had a good time writing the scene when she goes by the chicken house — when she gets kind of turned on by the chickens, I thought that was quite funny.

In the sex scene, is Grace living out a racist fantasy?

Oh yes, she loves Black men. There are plenty of clichés in the scene: black/white clichés. There is also a little joke there about the ritual that the woman shouldn't look at the men. All these political issues have an erotic side, that we don't like to talk about. Maybe we vote for people because he looks good, or maybe it's more complicated than that. We always talk about politics as if it is only the decent part of the brain that makes the decisions. We never talk about how erotic issues and political issues collide.



In *Europa*, there is the erotic connection between Leopold and the woman....

But here sex is a problem for her. Here Grace is saying she is a revolutionary, but she is trying to get rid of her erotic fantasies. By the way, Zentropa, our film company, decides to have some porn figures for women, by women directors. It should be interesting. Maybe I am not man enough to see some bald German guys being sucked, but it depends on your taste, although women think that is what men want. I would like to see what it looks like, just to learn.

What angle on America are you going to take in part three of your trilogy entitled *Washington*?

Can't tell you. I have been working half a year on a script, it didn't work, and I have thrown it all away, so I will postpone this film, which is dangerous,

because it might not get done. We had planned to do the film this spring, and the idea was that there would be a sister, and that we would have Nicole and Bryce would be playing at the same time. I don't know who should be the sister. I worked a long time on the script, and it was no fun, it didn't sparkle, so my producer said: well, throw it away, which was great. You need somebody else to see that. I am going to make a comedy now instead, a Dogma film, a Danish film that is unpolitical, stupid, completely empty. It is like cleansing myself. I will cheat like hell on the Dogma, because everyone cheated, I was the only one who didn't cheat. Now I am going to cheat. It will be called **The Director of It All**. This is a reaction to this exhausting trilogy. I am exhausted. Also from my psychological problems. Yes, there is a chance I won't finish the USA trilogy, if I get hit by a car, but I absolutely will do it, but then suddenly I might rebel against this will. I actually have these two personalities struggling all the time.

In this film and in *The Idiots*, a father comes back at the end. In *The Idiots*, the father comes back to get Karen, and here a father comes back to get Grace. What does the father mean to you? Is the father "the law"?



It might be. I had several fathers. Lots of my work is a discussion between me and myself. We are arguing like hell all the time. I also rebelled against my parents. I was show-off Nazi in high school; no, I didn't go that far. The rebellion was to dye my hair. What color? No color. I never got to it, because my mother broke down behind a closed door. She should have told me who my real father was, instead of using her energy on this! She told me on her deathbed that my father was not my father, and that I was not Jewish!

**One final question: why so many jump-cuts in your films?**

I love jump-cuts, because on one hand I am trying to do something that is very controlled, on the other hand, I am trying to do something that is not so controlled at all, so it is kind of a medicine against myself.

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**ACCESS:** For more information on **Manderlay**, go to the [official site](#). The Cannes site can be found [here](#).

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