

## Review of *Politics as Form in Lars von Trier: A Post-Brechtian Reading*

Sara Marino

University of Westminster, [sara.marino@my.westminster.ac.uk](mailto:sara.marino@my.westminster.ac.uk)

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### Abstract

Controversial and unconventional designer of formal experimentations, simultaneously celebrated and despised around the world, performative to a point that realism is achieved through the manipulation of realistic conventions hidden in everyday forms of human interactions, von Trier is indeed one of the most important contemporary filmmakers within European cinema, as well as the protagonist of Koutsourakis's *Politics as Form in Lars von Trier: A Post-Brechtian Reading*.

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Reviewed by:

Sara Marino, University of Westminster, UK

Controversial and unconventional designer of formal experimentations, simultaneously celebrated and despised around the world, performative to a point that realism is achieved through the manipulation of realistic conventions hidden in everyday forms of human interactions, von Trier is indeed one of the most important contemporary filmmakers within European cinema, as well as the protagonist of Koutsourakis's *Politics as Form in Lars von Trier: A Post-Brechtian Reading*.

Through an accurate and in depth formal analysis, the Author spans over von Trier's entire career in order to explore the politics of form, highlighting the cross-fertilisation of elements and narratives, the redefinition of the relationship between the audience and the medium, and "the power of cinema to challenge the politics of perception and turn into a radical medium, instead of a consumerist one" (p. ix). From Brechtian to Post-Brechtian: Koutsourakis moves beyond the mere allegorical readings of the films' content and challenges the simplistic dichotomies that traditionally reduced von Trier's Brechtianism to a one-dimensional form of intellectualism based on binary oppositions (image vs. narration; space vs. non-space; material vs. representation). More interestingly, the analysis is defined upon a materialistic framework drawn from Marxist theorists such as Jean-Luc Godard, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Jacques Rancière, Fredric Jameson, and the Frankfurt School, which are tantamount in framing not only Brecht's influence on von Trier's oeuvre, but also in locating von Trier's apolitical treatment of

history and his consideration of the inadequacy of the medium within a Post-Brechtian perspective (Chapter 1).

In this respect, Chapter 2's analysis of the Europa trilogy, *The Element of Crime* (1984), *Epidemic* (1987), and *Europa* (1991) is defined within a Post-Brechtian aesthetic that aims to portray history as a positive teleological progress and as a means of understanding contemporary Europe. Here, careful attention is placed on the concept of temporal and geographical defamiliarization as a way to transform the audience's historical consciousness, which seems to be, in the Author's perspective, another sign of von Trier's Post-Brechtianism. In Chapter 3, cinema's realism is analysed in relation to the Dogme 95 movement and the performative narratives expressed in *The Idiots*. Drawing on Bazin's interpretation of Neorealism and Laura Mulvey's analysis of cinema's role in the contemporary digital times, the Author untangles the film's various emphases on performances and its shift from acting to performance, which "demarcates the Brechtian from the post-Brechtian" (p. 112). Chapter 4, building on Brecht's idea of experimentation as a method that makes the audience doubt social values that are taken for granted, moves across the unfinished trilogy *USA: Land of Opportunities*, which includes *Dogville* (2003) and *Manderlay* (2005), perhaps the more political and controversial productions, given how social reality and human relationships are treated as changeable and soaked in power, violence, and sexuality. Interestingly, Koutsourakis shifts the emphasis from the films presumed Anti-Americanism and misogyny to focus more on the pedagogic function of political cinema and the various ways cinema can inform the audience with "a dialectical method of thinking" (p.181), which is something critics and films scholar often forget to depict.

The book ends with a brief description of *Melancholia*, while pointing out what probably is the most important lesson we can draw from Koutsourakis's work: the need to rethink the whole idea of Brechtianism not as an example of stylistic performance, rather as a methodology and a form of negation.

Overall, *Politics as Form in Lars von Trier: A Post-Brechtian Reading* represents a very important contribution within the fields of film and cinema studies for at least two reasons: first and foremost, because it positions von Trier as a post-Brechtian filmmaker whose political and dialectical experiments 'wake up' the audience's perception of history and human relations. Secondly, because unlike other books on von Trier, mainly focused on biographical exploitations or rhetorical commentaries over the director's controversial personality, this richly illustrated study pushes the analysis to reveal von Trier's multiple connections with the avant-garde and Italian Neo-Realism, also including interviews with the director and his mentor Jørgen Leth.

Nonetheless, a minor point of criticism concerns the portrayal of von Trier as a political filmmaker, which seems to remain unclear. In some respects, Koutsourakis seems to take for granted that the practices of defamiliarization and fragmentation are sufficient to define the filmmaker as political and dialectical, something von Trier himself is not quite sure about, when he replies to Koutsourakis's 'To my understanding you are a political filmmaker' with: 'Interesting, people tend to think that political cinema is something like Ken Loach, which I do not think is right.'

Perhaps it is here, in the unfinished representations of social phenomena and interactions, in the tendency to make the familiar strange by breaking the boundaries and turning social roles upside down that the politics of forms and the films of Lars von Trier intertwine and merge in a

radical way; if this might not be enough to define his cinema as political *per se*, certainly a Post-Brechtian perspective can help us to re-examine the connection between form and politics and to re-value the formal complexity of European cinema, particularly when it resists definitive answers, be they narrative, political, or otherwise.