
M. EVANS

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INVESTIGATING THE FEMINIST SIGNIFICANCE OF LARS VON TRIER’S REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN HIS

By

Melissa Evans

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Supervisor: Prof Adrian Konik
DECLARATION

I, Melissa Evans 208045728, hereby declare that the treatise for M.A. in Media Studies is my own work and that it has not previously been submitted for assessment or completion of any postgraduate qualification to another University or for another qualification.

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ABSTRACT

Despite critics’ negative appraisal of Lars Von Trier’s *Antichrist* (2009) for its ostensible misogyny, a deep thematic resonance exists between its representation of women as historical victims of patriarchal discourse, and the positive representations of women as Christ-like figures found in his *Golden Heart Trilogy* (1996/1998/2000). Arguably, it is important to recognize this, because these films together comprise an exercise in cinematic resistance to the narratives of the ‘backlash’ against women’s rights, thematized by Susan Faludi in her *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*; resistance which is undermined when these films are considered disparate or incongruous.

**Keywords:** Lars Von Trier, feminism, misogyny, women, ‘backlash’, discourse, patriarchy, film, women’s rights, eco-feminism.
Introduction

Feminist resistance to patriarchal discourses can, within the European context, be traced as far back as the Renaissance. That is, from the advocates of proto-feminism, through the exponents of First Wave feminism during the 19th/20th century – who opposed official inequalities relating to women’s suffrage – to the militant Second Wave feminists who in the 1960s and 1970s successfully challenged restrictions to women’s reproductive rights, the subordinate position of women in society has been contested. However, while through the subsequent Third Wave of feminism – from the 1980s onward – women established themselves as assertive and creative beings in control of their identity, their focus on the politics of identity became far less militant in orientation than Second Wave feminism. And it has been argued that through this Third Wave feminism played right into the hands of what Susan Faludi, in her work Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women, termed the patriarchal ‘backlash’ against women’s enhanced status in society.

In what follows, this text will be explored with a view to detailing the progression of the ‘backlash’ phenomenon into the contemporary era, where women are increasingly being represented in the media as infantile or as passive sex objects – all in opposition to the hard-won achievements of First and Second Wave feminism. Yet, within this milieu of ‘backlash’ propaganda, it will also be advanced that Lars Von Trier’s cinematic Golden Heart Trilogy (1996/1998/2000) comprises an important ally of the feminist cause, because it provides new representations of women that oppose those of the above-mentioned status quo. That is, representations of women as immensely powerful in their bravery and maternal devotion,1 and as worthy of deep respect, all of which constitute part of an important emancipatory counter-hegemonic discourse. This is a significant issue to consider within the

1 While Second Wave feminists and some contemporary liberal feminists may criticize such representations for their implication that ‘biology is destiny,’ other contemporary radical feminists have embraced woman’s biological difference from men as something positive. This treatise is couched within the approach of the latter (Salleh 1995), according to which woman’s tendency toward nurturing and care – which may be in part biologically determined and in part socially constructed – remains an important site of resistance to the excesses of patriarchy.
ambit of Film Studies, because such recognition of Von Trier’s films has recently been severely problematized through negative reception of his subsequent film *Antichrist* (2009), which critics have slated as horrendously misogynistic, and which has led to a retrospective appraisal of his *Golden Heart Trilogy* as cast in a similar anti-feminist mold. In this treatise, it will be argued that Lars Von Trier’s *Antichrist* – rather than being misogynistic – follows along the counter-hegemonic trajectory of his *Golden Heart Trilogy*, insofar as it delves further into consideration of how women are victims of discourse, albeit through highly brutal and visceral visual means.

However, before discussing the manner in which this research will be pursued, it is important to consider the contextual backdrop against which it unfolds, in order to underscore its relevance for the contemporary era.

Proto-feminism, within the European context, and as evinced in the work of figures such as Christine de Pizan, Catherine of Aragon and Modesto di Pozzo di Forzi, developed as early as the Renaissance, as a means of opposing those aspects of the social system which, through explicit or implicit means, legitimized the exclusive establishment of patriarchal/male figures in the dominant cultural and economic roles (Dawson, 2002: 221). As such, although the term ‘feminism’ was only established in the late 19th and early 20th century, arguably it was such proto-feminist efforts that laid the groundwork for discursive resistance which ultimately saw First Wave feminism opposing officially mandated inequalities relating to women’s suffrage, in “recognition of the historical and cultural subordination of women” (Kahle, 2005: 4). In turn, the latter movement served as point of departure for the subsequent media-fuelled struggle of Second Wave feminism, which sought to address, by way of a counterbalance, a wider range of de facto inequalities relating to employment, sexuality and, most importantly, female reproductive rights. In terms of this, there was both a recognition that a move had to be made toward opposing domesticity as the feminine ideal (Chapman, 2010: 171), and a realization of the need to address the way in which “women’s oppression is tied to
her sexuality” (Kunjakkan, 2002: 101) – issues which were neatly thematized in Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. Yet, instead of remaining part of an overarching political strategy, the above focus on sex and sexuality soon became construed by many Third Wave feminists as the *primary* site of such struggle. Indeed, by the time Third Wave feminism was established in the early 1980s, it was being argued that “sexuality, in all its guises, has become a kind of lightning rod for this generation’s hopes and discontents” (Henry, 2004: 88), and that the ‘new woman’ was embracing her sexuality as a form of power and affirmation. However, instead of being contested within the ambit of mainstream, popular culture – as so many of the assertions and strategies of Second Wave feminism had been – such assertions on the part of Third Wave feminists met with uncanny widespread support. That is, as Susan Faludi points out in *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, the cosmetic, film and pop-psychology industries, among others, touted as crucial components of the new female sexuality, respectively, the pursuit of feminine beauty, the adoption of a demure and passive disposition, and an eschewal of politics in favor of a self-indulgent preoccupation with the politics of identity (Faludi 1991, 12-18). In effect, this constituted part of what Faludi identifies as a ‘backlash’ against women, or, in other words, “an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories the feminist movement did manage to win for women” (Faludi in Genz & Brabon, 2009: 54). This was all the more so because, at the same time, media representations and ‘trend journalism’ played a large role in creating the idea of the erstwhile ‘liberated woman’ of Second Wave feminism as deeply unhappy and prone to profound ontological dissatisfaction (Faludi, 1991: 28). The cause of this was advanced as her rejection of the ‘naturally’ subordinative relationship between men and women (Wood, 2011: 93). Arguably, this has continued unabated into the contemporary era, insofar as, for the most part, females are still represented in the mainstream media as primarily vacuous objects of a fatuous sexuality.
Yet, although the ‘backlash’ phenomenon has approximated hegemonic status within the realm of contemporary popular culture, there nevertheless exist important sites of opposition to its tenets; sites from which an emancipatory counter-hegemonic discourse emanates, as it were, and of which Lars Von Trier’s *Golden Heart Trilogy* (1996/1998/2000) is a good case in point. That is, in contrast to the infantile and highly sexualized ‘backlash’ representations of women found in the contemporary mass media, in his *Golden Heart Trilogy* – comprising the films *Breaking the Waves* (1996), *The Idiots* (1998), and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) – Lars Von Trier consistently represents women as immensely powerful in their bravery and maternal devotion, and as worthy of deep respect. This is not least because, in all cases, the female protagonists in various ways and to different degrees, approximate Christ-like figures (in a Nikos Kazantzakis sense),\(^2\) whose sufferings emerge as a concomitant indictment of the patriarchal injustices of contemporary society, and a valorization of the capacity of women to proffer an alternative mode of being. In short, these films by Lars Von Trier can be understood as a form of cinematic resistance to the ‘backlash’ against women, which successfully navigates its way around the complex of “martyred femininity” (Badley, 2012: 76), and its corollary, namely a naïve, idealistic, and ultimately unrealistic representation of women as morally flawless.

Yet, the success of his films in this regard now hangs in the balance, because of the perceived misogyny present in his later film *Antichrist* (2009), in which – according to critics – the female protagonist emerges not only as affected by madness linked to her sexuality, but also as a modern-day witch, whose ultimate demise is morally sanctioned. In what follows, it will be argued that such perceptions of the film are not only conceptually myopic, insofar as they fail to comprehend its framing of how contemporary women are victims of discourse, but also deeply destructive, because they have led to a retrospective appraisal of his *Golden Heart Trilogy* as cast in a similar anti-feminist

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\(^2\) In Nikos Kazantzakis’s novel *The Last Temptation*, he portrays Jesus as a man unsure of his own divinity, and hence subject to error, yet whose mistakes are nullified by the greatness of his compassion, which ultimately affords him the status of a ‘Christ.’
mold. That is, it will be argued that in *Antichrist* one finds representations of women as victims of the patriarchal discourses to which they are subject (Tasker, 2011: 401), such that the female protagonist of the film emerges as a misanthropic character *only* because she is “pushed to the limit by masculine denial” (Badley, 2012: 149). Moreover, on account of this, rather than viewing Lars Von Trier’s *Antichrist* as either discordant with his earlier *Golden Heart Trilogy*, or as a hermeneutic key that retrospectively unlocks the misogyny contained within its predecessors, it will be advanced that *Antichrist* in a positive sense remains in thematic harmony with the earlier *Golden Heart Trilogy*. In other words, it will be argued that *Antichrist* continues along the same positive, progressive and emancipatory trajectory as the narratives of the *Golden Heart Trilogy*, in defense of the successes of First and Second Wave feminism, and with a view to furthering their augmentation of the status of women in the contemporary era.

Finally, the related (and unavoidable) question of the political significance of these films for the feminist cause will be considered, against the backdrop of David Bordwell’s “Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice,” in which he declares the *apolitical* nature of such contemporary ‘art’ films. That is, the question of whether these films constitute for Lars Von Trier platforms for “opportunistic showmanship” or, whether they are in actual fact “well-meaning films with humanistic messages” (Tapper, 2003: 75) will be broached. In this regard, it will be argued that although Lars Von Trier’s films have been categorized as ‘art cinema’ (Bordwell in Fowler, 2002: 94), there nevertheless exists the strong possibility that they are *not* culturally apolitical, but rather that – when considered in unity – they comprise an important site of resistance to mainstream ‘backlash’ ideas of femininity.  

3 The status of Lars Von Trier as a man will be bracketed during this treatise, insofar as this study is couched in the argument that men too can adopt and support pro-feminist orientations. In this regard, see Bob Pease’s work *Recreating Men: Postmodern Masculinity Politics* (2000), and Michael Kimmel’s text *Misframing Men: The Politics of Contemporary Masculinities* (2010).
as pointed out above, is to see them as gravitating around the same issue, rather than as discordant and contradictory.

As such, the hypothesis of this treatise is that, despite critics’ negative appraisal of Lars Von Trier’s *Antichrist* (2009) for its ostensible misogyny, a deep thematic resonance exists between its representation of women as historical victims of discourse, and the positive representations of women as Christ-like figures found in his *Golden Heart Trilogy* (1996/1998/2000). Arguably, it is important to recognize this, because these films together comprise an exercise in cinematic resistance to the narratives of the ‘backlash’ against women’s rights, thematized by Susan Faludi in her *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*; resistance which is undermined when these films are considered disparate or incongruous.

In the interest of exploring the above, Chapter One will investigate relevant aspects of female resistance to the ideology of patriarchy, from proto-feminism, through the achievements of First-Wave feminism, to the successes of Second Wave feminism. This will be done with reference to, among other texts, Imelda Whelehan’s *Modern Feminist Thought: From The Second Wave to Post-Feminism*, Lindsay Anne Hallam’s *Screening the Marquis de Sade: Pleasure, Pain and the Transgressive Body in Film*, and Antje Kahle’s *First Wave of Feminism in Politics and Literature*.

In turn, Chapter Two will investigate the dynamics of Third-Wave feminism (which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s), the problems of the concomitant ‘backlash’ against women’s rights, and the continued influence of ‘backlash’ perspectives in contemporary mainstream popular culture. This will be done with reference to, among other texts, Astrid Henry’s *Not My Mother’s Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism*, Susan Faludi’s *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* – along with related academic commentary – Heywood and Drake’s *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*, and Nancy Hewitt’s *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*. 
Next, Chapter Three will investigate Lars Von Trier’s representation of women in his *Golden Heart Trilogy* – *Breaking the Waves* (1996), *The Idiots* (1998), *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) – with a view to identifying how, in certain important respects, they together comprise an exercise in cinematic resistance to the narratives of the ‘backlash’ against women’s rights, thematized by Susan Faludi in her book *Backlash*. This will be done with reference to, among other texts, Linda Badley’s *Lars Von Trier*, Caroline Bainbridge’s *The Cinema of Lars Von Trier: Authenticity and Artifice* and Jan Lumholdt’s *Lars Von Trier: Interviews*.

Following this, Chapter Four will investigate the narrative of Lars Von Trier’s *Antichrist* (2009), along with both the negative responses on the part of critics around the world to the ostensible misogyny of the film, and the possibility that such criticism was the product of thematic myopia. At this point it will be advanced that a deep thematic resonance exists between its representation of women as historical victims of discourse, and the positive representations of women as Christ-like figures found in his *Golden Heart Trilogy* (1996/1998/2000). This will all be done with reference to Brian Goss’s *Global Auteurs: Politics in the Films of Almodóvar, Von Trier, and Winterbottom*, Dettweiler and Taylor’s *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture*, Jan Simon’s *Playing the Waves: Lars Von Trier’s Game Cinema*, and Von Trier and Björkman’s *Trier on Von Trier*.

Finally, in the Conclusion, David Bordwell’s “Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice” will be considered, with the objective of identifying the extent to which – as part of ‘art’ cinema – Lars Von Trier’s representations of women have political significance for feminists in the contemporary era. At this point it will be advanced that, provided his films are understood as gravitating around the same issue, rather than as discordant and contradictory, they comprise important sites of political resistance to the narratives of the ‘backlash’ against women’s rights, insofar as they go against the grain of mainstream cinematic practices.
Chapter One: From Proto-feminism to Second-Wave feminism

1.1. Introduction

“Feminism is an entire world view or gestalt, not just a laundry list of women’s issues” (Bunch cited in Bennet, 2006: 13); that is, feminism covers aspects that run far deeper than patriarchal dominance, related officially mandated inequalities, and cultural and social subordination of women on a de facto level. In addition, it also includes the positive ways in which women perceive themselves, in relation to the world and time – perceptions which run counter to such ‘lists’ of patriarchal oppression. In the interest of exploring the tensions between such positive perceptions and such patriarchal oppression, in what follows, firstly, the ideology of patriarchy will be considered. After this, an exploration of proto-feminism will be undertaken, and the manner in which it laid the foundations for First Wave feminism will be outlined, before the importance of Second Wave feminism for the contemporary era will be discussed.

1.2. The ideology of patriarchy

Female subordination is by no means something natural or unavoidable, nor has it ever been a universal phenomenon. Rather, the idea of its legitimacy emerges in the shadow of patriarchy, such that it is a cultural construct evidently indissociable from the rise of hegemonic forms of masculine power. There is little by way of solid evidence for the exact time-frames in which patriarchal discourses came into being, and as such, a historical origin of patriarchy must be approached from different angles (Lerner, 1986: 17). However, this section’s main focus is on the ideology of patriarchy; ideologies that appear analogously throughout patriarchal discourses around the world, and to which feminism – in its various forms – has offered resistance.

One of the most powerful patriarchal views derives from the Christian religious notion that man and women were created asymmetrically – for different purposes – and that men were created
first. In terms of this, man’s superiority is seen as natural, physical and biological, with women comprising a “second human being” (Raming, Macy and Cooke, 2004: 189). Anthropologists, in contrast, believe rather that the earliest societies found the difference in sex and skills to be complementary and essential to one another (as far as hunting and foraging was concerned), and that patriarchal systems only came into being with the rise of agriculture and technological innovations, about 6000 years ago (Stefik, 1997: 176). This was because the latter innovations saw a rise in settled agriculture that allowed for a greater gender hierarchy, insofar as men became the largest suppliers of food, and women were encouraged to bring forth more children to aid in farm labour (Stearns, 2000: 14). Following on from this, ancient Greece (8\textsuperscript{th} century BCE) is believed to have been one of the most important forrunners of patriarchal systems, because at this time each household was ruled by a dominant male figure, or patriarch (a compound of patér and anchon, meaning ‘father’ and ‘leader’ respectively), and the “insistence that [women] should obey without question,” finding their place and purpose in life in relation to the home and household tasks (Redfield, 2003: 27). Regardless of their various possible origins, however, the ideologies of patriarchy share very similar features the world over.

First and foremost, the idea of male domination over females was predicated on belief that their role was not only as fathers in the biological sense, but also as ruling figures and providers, because they saw themselves as intellectually, decisively and physically superior to their female counterparts (Fuchs, 2000: 7). Moreover, as social systems developed with time, these ideologies became more established, and anything that might afford women power in society was systematically withdrawn from their grasp. Women were to have no part in the ruling of the State, they were denied the right to own property, they were forbidden from making religious decisions, and they were prevented from seeking out education. Instead, their primary duty was to the dominant male figure and household, and to the degree that these ideals became unspoken and inherent mores of society, they ensured the
“fulfillment of appropriate roles” (Harvey, 2012: 6) and the subordination of women to patriarchal power. In short, the implicit and explicit practices of patriarchy meant the exclusive establishment of male figures in cultural and economic roles, with females as subordinate mothers and nurturers.

With regard to patriarchy as a social system, and against the idea of biological determinism, Anthony Giddens identifies six structures concurrent with patriarchal practices, namely: the patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations in paid work, patriarchal relations in the state, male violence, patriarchal relations in sexuality, and patriarchal relations in cultural institutions. To elaborate, women would be divested by men in their households through a labour-maintenance exchange, which meant that they would be maintained in their households for performing the tasks required of them, while also receiving jobs of a lesser nature in the work-force. In relation to the state, they would suffer discrimination in terms of patriarchal bias, insofar as they were allowed no say or claim in state matters. They could also be subject to male violence with minimal state intervention; for example, they could suffer abuse at the hands of their spouse or father without protection from state authorities. In terms of sexual double standards, women were compelled into heterosexuality, and the role of subordination to men. Finally, gender-differentiated subjectivity within arenas such as religion, education and the media meant that women were always considered subordinate to men in important cultural spheres (Giddens, 2010: 30, 31).

The collective consequence of these structures was a legacy of traditional gender roles that were accepted as the social status quo for thousands of years. For the purpose of this study, however, it is important to remember that ‘patriarchy’ is not simply another word for ‘male domination,’ but rather the term for an entire society orientated around the privileging of men, a society in which both men and women participate, in accordance with the practices mentioned above (Johnson, 2005: 5).

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4 The interpretation of humans from a strictly biological viewpoint, in this case, the idea that women are inferior to men due to their differing genetic make-up (Martin, Sugarman & Thompson, 2003: 83).
1.3. Proto-feminist resistance to patriarchy

Yet, within the European context, subtle subversions of patriarchy began to take place as early as the 15th century, through what has subsequently become known as proto-feminism. Proto-feminism can be defined as the anticipation of feminist concepts – the term ‘feminism’ would not be coined for many centuries. For the most part, proto-feminism was moral in nature, beneath the veneer of which lurked a growing critical attitude in relation to issues beyond morality (Koyzis & Weir, 2009:2). Resistance to patriarchal structures during the 15th and 16th century Renaissance period usually took the form of writing, and in order to understand the approach involved it is necessary to examine some texts by the proto-feminists of the time, such as those of Christine de Pizan, Modesta di Pozzo di Forzi, and Catherine of Aragon. The latter, although not an author herself, commissioned a book detailing the need for education in women; a need which was frowned upon at the time of its publication. (Coldiron, 2009: 34).

Christine de Pizan, in her 1404 text *Le Livre de la Cité Des Dames*, opposed the marginalization of women through an anticipation of key tenets which would play out in later feminist movements, such as women’s right to decide their destiny for themselves, and to couch their contestation of the patriarchal status quo in terms of their experience of injustice within this milieu. Pizan, however, cannot be viewed as an ‘activist’ in the contemporary sense of the word, but should rather be seen as an advisor, prone to using historical, philosophical and theological sources in celebration of feminine achievements (Brown-Grant, 1999: 4). In her text, Pizan creates an allegorical response to masculine writings of the time, specifically to an already-renowned 1361 work, Giovanni Boccaccio’s *On Famous Women*. However, she portrays her characters from a viewpoint that celebrates the universality of their goodness and virtue, instead of undermining them in a misogynistic manner as Boccaccio had done (King, 2010:9). For example, the character of Ghismonda (who appears in both Pizan and Boccaccio’s texts) is portrayed from two contrasting angles. Ghismonda, married
and widowed in a short period of time, is sent home to live with her authoritarian father who has no intention of allowing her to wed again. As such, she takes a household squire as her lover, who is murdered by her father once the affair is discovered. Heartbroken, Ghismonda takes her own life, but only after posing a final question: “What is nobility except virtue, for it never comes from flesh and blood!” (Pizan, cited in Blumenfield-Kosinski, 2000: 237). Boccaccio’s version appears to serve as a subtle warning against refusing established patriarchal structures, while Pizan’s final indictment cleverly creates the tone missing from Boccaccio’s text, and forces the reader to question why women should not be allowed to make their own choices, regardless of their familial and societal roles. Together with this, Pizan claims authority in her text, “by virtue of her own biological experience as a woman” (Gusick & DuBruck, 2007: 35), and thereby adumbrates later opposition to male patriarchal dominance.

In the 16th century, another proto-feminist author appeared under the pseudonym Moderata Fonte. She was, in fact, a woman of noble birth, Modesta di Pozzo di Forzi, living in Venice, Italy. Often described as an “erudite maiden” and “unique poet,” she is said to have spent much of her life within the walls of her family home – as befitted an unwed Venetian woman of the time – immersed in her studies and literature (Price, 2003: 11). In Fonte’s 1593 text, *The Worth of Women*, she creates a conversation between seven noble ladies (of varying experience and age), in a space where they can escape subordination and make claims to their power as females, exercise freedom of speech, and display their knowledge – practices which, in reality, would have been perceived as extremely distasteful, and which were largely unheard of (Amussen & Seeff, 1998: 164). The topics of the conversation, which range from the vices of husbands, through the deficits of education, to the monotony of household tasks, created a new multifaceted insight into the lives of women, as well as simultaneously forging a connection between “cultural perceptions of women and the social realities in which they [were] rooted” (Cox, 1997: 1). Toward the end of her life, and after recently marrying,
Fonte is said to have displayed signs of frustration at the need to be a perfect wife and mother, while still dedicated to her writing, as well as toward challenging the class difference rampant in Venice – which afforded only a small minority of society great privilege (Russell, 1994: 130). In this she arguably evinced the psychological and emotional anguish of those women of her time who were aware of their situation and its injustices, but whose capacity to resist and alter such dynamics remained limited.

In turn, Catherine of Aragon, being the first wife of King Henry the VIII and Queen consort of England, served as a proto-feminist ambassador of her time, in the late 15th and early 16th century. During her marriage to the King, Catherine served as the regent of England for six months, playing a significant role in the England’s victory during the Battle of Flodden, and arguably proving women’s worth in positions of authority – through demonstrating what Aristotle referred to as “virtues in the mode of command” (Jordan, 1990: 106), and simultaneously debunking Aristotle’s prejudices against women as unworthy of positions of power (Loughlin, Bell & Brace, 2012: 207). At the time, however, Catherine’s success in this regard, and her eventual divorce, were often argued to be a result of power and rank exceeding wifely vocation. That is, her husband, infatuated by his mistress and dissatisfied by her inability to produce a male heir, broke with the Roman Catholic Church and divorced Catherine, although she considered herself his rightful Queen until her death, refusing to accept him as Head Supreme of the Church of England. Nevertheless, together with her celebrated actions, Catherine also commissioned a book in 1529, *The Education of Christian Women* by Juan Luis Vives, that argued for the paramount importance of educating woman, without which, it was emphasized, states and cities “deprive[d] themselves of a great part of their prosperity” (Fantazzi, 2000: 45). Understandably, the importance of this was that it brought to light the fundamental principle that women were inseparable companions to men in every aspect of life, and henceforth would need to be equipped with suitable educations (Vives cited in Fantazzi, 2000: 46).
It may be argued that, through allegory, narrative, and in Catherine of Aragon’s case, example, these women, through their anticipation of struggles to come, helped pave the way for what would eventually become feminist movements. That is, although they did not blatantly oppose patriarchal systems in a manner akin to later feminists, their subtle gestures led to an exploration of women’s social, economic and cultural roles, in a time when a women’s ‘place’ was primarily in the home (Dawson, 2002: 221). Indeed, concerning their modes of resistance, the importance of their writings and actions would only fully come into focus in later years, when their influence was drawn upon by First Wave feminists.

1.4. The emergence of First-Wave feminism

By the late 19th century, the discursive groundwork laid by women such as Pizan, Fonte and Catherine of Aragon, among many others, developed into what became known as First Wave feminism, defined in terms of both the “recognition of the historical and cultural subordination of women” (Kahle, 2005: 4), and the correlative willingness to fight both the implicit and explicit manifestations of patriarchal ideology. Among these manifestations (and in correlation with Giddens’ six social structures) were the beliefs that women were not to be afforded civil status under the law, were to remain minors until married, were not to be educated or attend colleges, were not eligible to sign contracts or wills, or to have any control over wages should they have a job. Essentially, it was still believed that women should remain in the home, subordinate to men (Kramarae & Spender, 2000: 764).

Although First Wave feminism only arose in the late 19th century, already at the end of the 18th century certain women stand out as precipitating the emergence of future women’s movements, among the most important of whom were the American, Abigail Adams, and a British woman, named Mary Wollstonecraft.
Abigail Adams, in 1776, wrote a letter to her husband John Adams, second President of the United States, questioning the constitutional statement that ‘all men are created equal.’ In her letter, she wrote: “I desire you would remember the ladies, and do not put such unlimited power in the hands of the husbands[;]...we will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice, or representation” (Adams cited in Adams, 2003:6). Adams’ sentiments did not change the constitution, being more pensive than reactionary; however, she believed that in time women would unite for change and this belief steadily began to gain credence among many women.

Similarly, in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft produced what is known as one of the earliest women’s rights philosophies, a fundamental text for later First Wave Feminists called *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Against the background of the French Revolution, and arguably born of a passion for progress and human rights, through her text Wollstonecraft tackled issues such as women’s education, questions related to equality and morality, sexual double standards and the female’s ability to be a companion to her husband, as well as a home-maker (Brody, 2000: 74). Her importance in feminist history is also a consequence of her engagement in heated debates with influential political philosophers, among others, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Edmund Burke. To the former she contested the ‘appropriate’ way to educate women,5 and to the latter she questioned the idea of women in political positions.6 Although no tangible change was directly attributed to Wollstonecraft’s works, her refusal to remain silent paved the way for future assertions, and indeed actions, by women in pursuit of recognition of their rights, in what was an increasingly revolutionary environment. In this regard, her example proved extremely relevant to women’s suffrage movements, and was justified by the invaluable utility of female labour during the First World War (Falco, 1995: 3).

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5 Rousseau believed that a women’s nature, sensibility and behavior was a result of her ‘femaleness’ and, as such, regarded women as too different from men to be educated in the same way (De Mattos, 2007: 52)

6 Burke argued that women in political positions threw off the natural order of man as sublime and powerful (versus women as simply beautiful) (Zerilli, 1994: 63)
Only a few years later, the middle class in the United States and Britain was becoming ever more stereotypically patriarchal. Men were encouraged to fill the roles of lawyers and office managers, while the women stayed at home, raising children in stable but limited domestic environments, and creating an escape for their husbands at the end of long working days (MacBain-Stephens, 2006: 7). Against this situation, women’s movements began to arise, drawing on the influences of the authors and prominent figures mentioned above; movements that were focused on lobbying for woman’s suffrage, education, equal contract laws, property rights and parenting rights. Forerunners among these include American suffrage activists Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan Anthony (LeGates, 2001: 197).

Mott was a well-known abolitionist and women’s right activist, who, together with Stanton – the principle author of the Declaration of Sentiments⁷ – presented this detailed document to 300 attendees at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, which was hailed as one of the very first women’s right’s conventions. The document tackled issues such as “the social, civil and religious rights of women” and was modelled on the Declaration of Independence (Biermann, 2009: 4). In this regard, it contained a list of resolutions, the most prominent being the demand for recognition of women’s right to vote. After heated debates, these resolutions were put forward for signatures, obtaining support from exactly 100 of the 300 attendees. This document was later acclaimed as a defining moment in the beginning of women’s suffrage and presented as the fundamental document of the American woman’s suffrage movements (Zinn & Arnove, 2004: 127). In 1850, as a direct result of the Seneca Falls Convention, a National Women’s Rights Convention was organised, with increased focus on the topics covered in the Declaration of Sentiments, and with more than a thousand people in attendance. Over the following ten years, annual conventions were held, all of which augmented the growing agitation for women’s cultural and social rights. Although women’s suffrage would not change within American

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⁷ This document, through its resolutions, was the basis for the struggle to obtain women’s cultural, political, social and religious rights, and was modeled after the United States Constitution (Rife, 2002: 11).
legislature until after the Civil War, an early success was the passing of the Married Woman’s Property Act (1882), which allowed woman to retain control over incomes related to their property, which they previously could not inherit or possess in their own names (Dilke, 2009: 26).

The American Civil War, which lasted from 1861 to 1865, for the most part inhibited the progress of women’s rights, as activists were encouraged to place their focus instead on war efforts and the abolition of slavery. Nevertheless, a year after the war was declared over, the American Equal Rights Association was formed by women’s rights patrons and black rights activists, as a means of petitioning for the causes of both gender equality and race equality. By 1969, however, the AERA had dissolved into two separate groups, due to the inability to reach an agreement regarding the Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution.\(^8\) The resulting groups were the American Woman Suffrage Movement and the National Woman Suffrage Association, which, a decade later (and after agreeing that it was unwise to have separate groups campaigning for the same right), would merge into the National American Woman Suffrage Association (Cullen-DuPont, 2005: 238-242). The NAWSA achieved hearings in congress every year from 1869 to 1919 (although subject to major opposition); however, it was only with the founding of the National Women’s Party (NWP) in 1917 that real progress was made.

This success was partly the result of the First World War (1914 – 1918) which saw significant political and economic instability, resulting in a growing number of women entering non-traditional roles as members of the workforce while the men fought the war. Accordingly, the NWP, led by Alice Paul, emphasized the worth of women during America’s time of struggle. And in 1919, in response to growing recognition of women’s social roles, President Woodrow Wilson passed the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which declared that no citizen could be denied the right to vote on the basis of their gender (LeGates, 2001: 281).

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\(^8\) The Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution would prohibit the United States from denying any man the right to vote based on colour, race or previous condition of servitude.
In the United Kingdom, the Reform Act of 1832 had denied women the right to vote, and although woman’s suffrage was considered a political topic, it would only become nationally recognized with the formation of the National Society for Woman’s Suffrage in 1867 (Gordon & Doughan, 2005: 107). The NSWF, which later became the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies, achieved little success though their tactic of peaceful and constitutionally correct measures for obtaining women’s rights, and, as a result, the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) was formed in Manchester in 1903, led by Emmeline Pankhurst. Their campaign was far more militant than previous British women’s suffrage movements and was born of the belief that working women found it difficult “to overcome the handicap of poverty, and the domestic cares which fettered them. Being voteless they lacked prestige” (Davis, 1999: 21). The WSPU carried out demonstrations that were most often both radical and violent, leading to a generation of suffragettes (extreme militants), who attracted great attention and publicity to the women’s cause at a national level. The most sensationalized case of extreme activism was arguably the death of Emily Davison, who was fatally injured at the Epsom Derby in 1913, after attempting to throw a suffragette banner over the King’s horse (Crawford, 1999: 163). Together with this, imprisoned suffragettes’ insistence on hunger strikes, and an abandonment of the practice of force feeding those who refused to eat – an act described as humiliating, distressing and painful (Griffiths & Jacob, 2004: 75) – saw the passing of the Prisoners Temporary Discharge for Ill Health Act of 1913 – also known as the Cat and Mouse Act. This legalized the release of prisoners who had grown dangerously weak, so as to avoid the embarrassment of their death in government prisons, yet it also ensured that prisoners could be re-arrested after their health improved. Due to the outbreak of the First World War, serious campaigning by the WSPU

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9 Only large cities would be granted seats in the House of Commons, and only one male in six was entitled to vote (Evans, 1994: 3).

10 Upon their release prisoners had to agree to certain conditions which would allow them to be re-arrested, hence the Cat and Mouse term was born (Griffiths & Jacob, 2004: 76).
came to a halt, although the NUWSS continued peacefully. Moreover, as in the United States, and as predicted by Mary Wollstonecraft, women’s worth was increasingly realized during the war effort, after which the Representation of the People Act of 1918 was passed, granting women over the age of 30 who owned property the right to vote. This act was amended to the Representation of the People Act of 1928, which allowed all women over the age of 21 the same rights as men (Law, 2000: 28).

The First Wave of feminism celebrated numerous achievements – specifically regarding the laws mentioned above – through which they obtained the right to vote (their foremost goal), and also established groundwork for equal rights regarding property law, marriage law and education. However, “equal access to employment, equal pay, or freedom from men’s violence and sexual abuse” (Walby, 1997: 154) had not yet been won, nor was the idea that women belonged primarily in the domestic environment overturned. These many legal and de facto inequalities still plagued women, regardless of the achievements won by First Wave feminists; the most worrisome among them relating to sexuality, employment, reproductive rights, and marital laws. Society was arguably still adhering to patriarchal discourses, specifically those regarding domesticity, and forms of oppression tied to women’s gender (Whelehan, 1995: 30).

1.5. The importance of Second-Wave feminism for the contemporary era

Between the 1920s and the 1960s it was believed that the women’s movement, without the cause of suffrage, had become a “spent political force,” and that it had been deterred by the turmoil of the Second World War. However, it had not come to an absolute standstill; rather, smaller groups were focused on more specific activities and concerns (Lovenduski, 1986: 61). That is, during World War II, women countered previous employment trends by taking up labour in industry rather than in domestic service, expanding production on lines that had only ever been worked by men. Although it has been suggested that this was a result of simplified processes in the means of production,
nevertheless women labourers were necessary during this time to keep the economy partially stable (Summerfield, 1984: 10). However, after the war, efforts to negate women’s above involvement got underway, and during the post-war economic boom of the 1950s there occurred increasing emphasis on nuclear families in suburbs, idealized domesticity, and the establishment of a new form of media-driven patriarchy (Mahon & Campling, 1997: 6). That is, whereas during the war women had been encouraged to aid in the labour relations of the state, the post-war media tended toward portrayals of women happily enjoying domestic bliss, and blatantly highlighted the ideal of women as homemakers, mothers and wives (Ryan & Schlup, 2006: 420).

Simone de Beauvoir’s best-known work, *The Second Sex* (1949), not only responded to this, but also greatly influenced the emerging Second Wave feminist movement, and another two texts that would soon become associated with it, Helen Gurley Brown’s 1962 work *Sex and the Single Girl*, and Betty Friedan’s 1963 work *The Feminine Mystique*. In a reflection upon the Freudian psychoanalytic theory popular during that time, Beauvoir “attack[ed] the sexist concept of normalcy that effectively condemned women to dependant, passive lives” (Simons, 1999: 8), and blamed sexism for deep-rooted psychological, social and political oppression. Her text rests largely on comparisons between slavery and racism in relation to women’s oppression, drawing heavily on Hegel’s master/slave dialectic.¹¹ The main question she poses in this regard is why women have difficulty in affirming their autonomy; a question she then answers by claiming that, through independence, women would lose the protection and privilege offered to them by their protector (oppressor), with whom they have a bond like no other (Beauvoir, 1949: 24 – 29). Hence, it may be suggested that Beauvoir’s argument stems from the idea that the feminine ideal is, in fact, to serve a patriarchal figure in a domestic environment, whether happy or not; an ideal upheld and pursued by women themselves, out of habit and fear.

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¹¹ A slave, dependant and oppressed, comes to a self-consciousness, while the master, in turn, realizes his dependency on the slave. Reciprocity is achieved (Mills, 1996: 87).
Within 20 years, two prominent Second Wave texts were produced in response to many of the ideas brought forth by Beauvoir, namely Helen Gurley Brown’s *Sex and the Single Girl*, and The *Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan. Brown’s novel, although not nearly as influential as Friedan’s text, encourages women to escape the everyday ideal of domesticity to pursue, instead, the pleasures of sexuality, self-sufficiency and being single in a modern, consumer-driven world (Hogeland, 1998: 56). Although reflecting similar principles, Friedan’s text is credited with laying the theoretical groundwork for Second Wave feminism, by exploring the dissatisfaction of the modern woman in much greater detail. That is, she begins *The Feminine Mystique* with the claim: “we can no longer ignore the voice within women that says: I want something more than my husband and my children and my home” (Friedan cited in Sills & Merton, 2000: 71), and thereby directly opposes the ideal of domestic bliss rampant in the media. Throughout the book, Friedan explores different themes, beginning with the fact that media representations of women in magazines were decided upon by men, despite the great victories won by First Wave feminists – media representations that idealized domesticity regardless of the great effort of women during the war. It may be argued that these portrayals of ‘perfect housewives’ were part of American culture’s “[attempt] to re-create itself during and after a depression” (Walker, 2000: 17). However, Friedan disagreed, claiming that such representation denied women the celebration of excellence in a career, or independence. In the following chapters, she explores the role of education in the 1960s and the expectations placed upon women’s knowledge, claiming that women would often deny themselves tertiary education for fear of not finding a husband. Indeed, if further education was pursued, more often than not it was to improve household skills, rather than to “fully develop their potential” (Friedan, 1964: 77). Together with this, Friedan also criticizes Freudian theory and functionalism; she writes: “There was a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the images to which we were trying to

12 The theory of society as a framework of complex systems whose parts work together to promote stability. For the purpose of this study, the ‘functionalism’ referred to indicates the role of housewives during this era (Barnes, 2000: 148).
conform, the image I came to call ‘the feminine mystique’” (Friedan cited in Sherman, 2002: 17). In short, it can be argued that she opposed the patriarchal ideological claim that, in order for society to function successfully, women needed to serve in their predetermined roles of mothers and wives. Also touched upon in this section is the idea that, after the end of World War II, and during the Cold War, men longed for the comfort of nuclear homes, not busy, career-driven women fated to raise badly-adjusted children. Ironically, later studies overwhelmingly pointed to the contrary, that it was more likely the over-bearing nature of some mothers that would cause maladjustment in the future generations (Fischer, 2005: 615).

The final discussions of The Feminine Mystique accentuate the relationship between women’s self-identification and their sexuality. Using the example of Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs – a theory of human development psychology describing the stages of growth in humans (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2010: 448) – Friedan claims that “the feminine mystique prevents women from developing their higher human capacities by recognizing no need higher than the need for love or sexual satisfaction,” implying that it is within human psychology to desire fulfilment from pursuits other than domesticity – such as having a career, or being financially independent (Muirhead, 2004: 139).

Although Sex and the Single Girl and The Feminine Mystique tackled many de facto inequalities, and did much for the Second Wave movement, progress was also being made to overturn the remaining officially mandated inequalities. The Presidential Commission on the Status of Women, instituted by President John F. Kennedy in 1961, revealed many issues pertaining to discrimination against women. Among their chief concerns was the desire for equal employment opportunity rights, in both the private and government sectors, as a means to allow women to make the maximum contribution to the society in which they lived (Schultz, 1999: 70). The failure of the commission to successfully enforce the Civil Rights Act of 1964 – which outlawed discrimination against women and
African Americans – led to the founding of the National Organization for Women in 1966 (NOW), which lobbied extensively for its use. Betty Friedan herself served as an integral part of NOW.

In just a few years, NOW grew in membership and popularity, winning numerous small victories for women’s rights. They did, however, receive opposition from more radical women’s liberation activists (as well as conservative groups), who felt their liberal reform agenda did not successfully raise consciousness. Nevertheless, by the 1970s, they rallied their affiliates to support the introduction of the Equal Rights Amendment, written in 1923 by Alice Paul. And by 1972, the amendment had passed through Congress and been sent through to state legislatures; however, upon their failure to ratify the amendment, it was never made legal (Chapman, 2010: 389).

Shortly after the establishment of NOW, in 1969, The National Abortion Rights Action League was established by Friedan and Conni Bille, who felt that women’s reproductive rights were undermined, and that women should have the right to abortion based on their own discretion. Barely a year after their formation, the New York state legislature legalized abortion, effective on July 1, 1970 (Herring, 2003: 67). Other victories won by Second Wave feminists include the Equal Pay Act of 1963, which abolished wage differences based on gender, as well as the introduction of Affirmative Action, which saw special consideration being given to undermined minorities. Similarly, the Women’s Educational Equity Act of 1974 was passed, which rendered discrimination against women in education illegal, as well as the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, which prohibited discrimination based on pregnancy (Nicholson, 1997: 80).

As such, Second Wave feminism was largely successful, as far as overcoming both *de facto* inequalities and officially mandated inequalities was concerned. Indeed, by the late 1980s, most battles – with the exception of perhaps the installation of the Equal Rights Amendment – had largely been won, leaving a new generation of women far more aware of their new status within society, and of their own sexuality. Friedan, although not able to forcibly prevent media representations of women
pursuing domestic excellence, did play a major role in creating consciousness surrounding the issue of the implicit oppression of women through the media. Similarly, the overwhelming popularity of Helen Reddy’s 1972 hit single ‘I am Woman,’ “reflected a public acceptance and understanding of feminism” (Goren, 2009: 36). Nevertheless, within less than a decade, Second Wave feminist gains in terms of reproductive rights would be turned on their head by certain Third Wave feminists, who felt that a woman’s sexuality was her greatest weapon in the politics of self-identity, in a modern world (Code, 2007: 474).
Chapter Two: Third Wave feminism and the ‘backlash’ phenomenon

2.1. Introduction

While some feel that Third Wave feminism involved a refinement of the First and Second Wave feminist approaches to female liberation, others – in particular Susan Faludi – maintain that, in many respects, under the auspices of Third Wave feminism many of the achievements of earlier feminist activism were undermined. In the interest of considering this issue, in what follows, after an overview of the features of Third Wave feminism, the related birth of the new ‘individualized’ and ‘sexualized’ woman will be discussed, before Susan Faludi’s *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* will be explored, against the backdrop of relevant commentary.

2.2. The features of Third Wave feminism

By the early 1980s, a new feminist dynamic had begun to develop, namely, Third Wave feminism. Unlike its predecessors, Third Wave feminism was less explicitly political directed and structured, although it continued to retain the more radical and multiracial principles of Second Wave feminism, including within its ambit of concern the situations of “women of different ethnicities, abilities and disabilities, classes, appearances, sexual orientation[s] and sexual identities” (Wood, 2012: 87). As such, although it continued the fight against any and all discrimination towards the female population, it began to pay increasing attention to the way in which such discrimination occurred at cultural and discursive levels, rather than being exclusively concerned with discriminatory laws. In other words, from the perspective of Third Wave feminism, gender oppression needed to be viewed holistically in order to understand the “constantly shifting bases of oppression in relation to the multiple, interpenetrating axes of identity.” In short, the “creation of a coalition politics” (Sterba, 2001: 182) was aspired to, with the aim of *recognizing* first, and solving second.
In her text, *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender and Culture*, Julia Wood identifies six salient features of Third Wave feminism that also highlight the differences between it and previous feminist movements. These factors are: the recognition of differences amongst women, the building of coalitions, the practice of engaging in everyday resistance, the development of media literacy, the embracing of aesthetics and consumerism, and the valorization of individualism (Wood, 2012: 87–90).

That is, firstly, with regard to the recognition of differences amongst women, in previous movements, feminism tended to be orientated around a select group of women, specifically middle-class white Europeans/Americans. In contrast to this, the 1980s saw a new consciousness surrounding the idea of women’s oppression as not specific to one particular demographic, but rather as universal, although its manifestation within different female sectors of society was understood as varying from context to context. Importantly, these differences were embraced as a means of uniting women in the diversity of their awareness of their differing circumstances, and through the acceptance of “multicultural inclusion, identity politics and intersectionality” (Hewitt, 2010: 98).

Secondly, together with this acceptance and celebration of diversity, Third Wave feminists followed the ideal of building alliances and coalitions with organizations that challenged oppression, even if they were not strictly ‘feminist.’ That is to say, even organizations dominated by men, but which lobbied for the greater good of society as a whole across social-cultural and political boundaries, were accepted by Third Wave feminists, on the basis of the idea that appreciating the inter-relation of oppression led toward the goal of empowering women in all various spheres of their life (Schacht & Ewing, 2004: 155).

Thirdly, there was a move toward practicing resistance in everyday life. That is, whereas First and Second Wave feminists had focused predominantly on specific causes – such as obtaining suffrage, reproductive rights and education for women – Third Wave feminists began to use personal
acts as a means to instigate change in a manner that built upon, rather than negated, “the 1970s [Second Wave] feminist slogan ‘the personal is political’” (Voet 1998: 24). Engaging in everyday resistance was largely due to the fact that sexism and discrimination had become ever more subtle as defining changes to women’s rights were made. Accordingly, while factors that had previously been obvious barriers – such as gender, race and class – were dissipating, other obstacles emerged and led to oppression that for the most part escaped legal censure. This everyday “consciousness raising” was a way of claiming small victories with the intention of emphasizing their collective political power to transform society and the conditions of women (Steinberg, Parmar & Richard, 2006: 514).

Fourthly, helped by the growth of the media in previous years, the 1980s also saw a radical increase in the number of women advancing their objectives through media sources. Whereas the media had previously predominantly displayed women in ideal domestic settings, Third Wave feminists used the mass media for their own benefit. For example, rock music, a major component of American popular culture, began to be infiltrated by the likes of women such as Annie Lennox and Blondie, who explicitly rejected the stereotypical “girlie” image of pop music of the time, and created their own personal and political styles (Curran-Smith cited in Goren, 2009: 2). Indeed, by the 1990s, The Girl Power Movement began establishing groups of activists “dedicated to developing a positive girls’ culture and making room for girls and women in the arts and society” (Rutherford, Capdevila, Undurti & Palmary, 2011: 42). In later years, social networking and the greater extent of media freedom provided by improving technology would also create room for women to further their own views through a large variety of platforms.

Fifthly, and related to the above, Third Wave feminists diverged strongly from Second Wave feminists through their embrace of aesthetics and consumerism as a means of empowerment. Admittedly, this move was initially reflected in texts such as Sex and the Single Girl and The Feminine Mystique, discussed in the previous chapter. In terms of this, there was a celebration of sexiness and
femininity on a level *determined* by the woman herself, so that the ideas of the household and domesticity as the feminine ideal were almost entirely brushed under the carpet. However, later this stance was exchanged for the idea that the erstwhile demure women should have the temerity to take the time and spend the money needed to make herself beautiful, because as the object of sexual appeal she would also wield power over men (Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003: 12).

Finally, and in relation to the previous point, Third Wave feminists of the late 1980s valorized individualistic goals and strategies rather than the collectivity of supporting an explicitly defined political agenda, which stood in marked contrast to the orientation of First and Second Wave feminists. It may even be argued that many Third Wave feminists felt that the manner in which able-bodied, white, middle-class women went about their activism actually marginalized those of less privileged sectors of society through making the feminist struggle one of power and class, before gender (Skelton & Francis, 2009: 141).

### 2.3. The new ‘individualized’ and ‘sexualized’ woman

As such, it may be suggested that overall, Third Wave feminism chose to tackle those aspects of feminism that they felt were lacking in previous feminist movements. Consequently, they focused less on the fact of patriarchal societal and discursive structures, officially mandated inequalities and *de facto* inequalities, and more on the stereotypes and generalizations placed upon women that had thus far prevented them from “defining themselves in their own terms” – whether this be sexually, politically or psychologically (Tong, 2009: 20). Yet, as the image of the ideal woman portrayed in the midst of domestic bliss disappeared, within the relatively affluent societies of the West it also gave way to portrayals of women not only as strong and independent, but also as *sexy*. Understandably, on account of this, identity politics became the centre of feminist discussion, as it became increasingly difficult to view ‘women’ as a “universal identity,” due to the vast differences across culture, race,
religion, class, sexual preference and social situation (Hekman, 1999: 2). This phenomenon indicated Third Wave feminism’s reputed room for contradictions, and the manner in which they “struggled[d] to accommodate the differences and conflicts between people[,] as well as within them” (Heywood & Drake, 1997: 124), in many respects impelled them away from political struggle and into a struggle of identity – which in certain quarters became heavily imbricated with sexuality and sexual identity.

In this regard, though, Third Wave feminism was perhaps also a product of a particular attitude toward sex and sexuality, generated by one of the most important Second Wave feminist texts. Simone de Beauvoir, author of The Second Sex, although often regarded as the mother of Second Wave feminism, nevertheless remains an important source concerning the origins of Third Wave feminist emphasis on sexual identity (Martin & Bailey, 2011: 265). To begin with, Beauvoir claims that due to the fact that women are able to reproduce, they have an intrinsic fascination with their own bodies. Indeed, this condition is such that women have allowed themselves to be dominated by men (the producers), who are, because of the historical trends of patriarchy, deduced as being the superior sex (Buikema & Van der Tuin, 2007: 21). As such, Beauvoir asserts that women are not oppressed by men, but rather by the fact that they, themselves, are women. She does this by tracing the life path of the female through childhood to old age. To elaborate, the female child is taught certain things at a young age and thus “imperiously modifies her consciousness of herself,” being unsure of her own subjectivity (Simons, 1995: 182). The teenage female then learns to accept her femininity, and, upon her first sexual initiation, can suffer the repercussions of this generally subordinate experience for her entire existence. Beauvoir further elaborates on her views of marriage, as both impractical in terms of a permanent sexual partnership, and as stifling toward the woman destined for a life of housekeeping and child-bearing – rather than a life pursuing her own freedom (Evans, 1985: 14). Indeed, Beauvoir concludes this argument with the acknowledgement that women know how to be as effective as men in society, but are condemned to a life of usefulness in daily pursuits, such as the management of small
household tasks, and thus their situation does not permit them the freedom to realize their potential. In short, a large part of what has been holding women back is their own acceptance of themselves as the ‘second’ gender or sex, and their implicit willingness to be oppressed (Card, 2003: 39).

Subsequently, certain Third Wave feminists became more aware of this particular inequality, as opposed to those inequalities which had previously held centre-stage for (First and) Second Wave feminists, namely women’s suffrage, reproductive rights, educational and property laws, and so forth. Accordingly, political solidarity was side-lined even further by a generation of women determined to embrace their sexuality as a factor over which they had complete control. In short, sexuality became empowering and “unsettled traditional images of virtue,” making room instead for lusty, defiant women in control of their own pleasure-seeking, and no longer willing to be bartered as household tokens by men (Ferriss & Young, 2008: 5). To elaborate, a selective or abstracted aspect of Beauvoir’s thesis was drawn upon by certain Third Wave feminists, the consequence of which, as will be discussed, led ironically to further female subjugation rather than liberation.

That is, this woman, rather than being fascinated with the reproductive ability of her body, becomes enchanted by the power and affirmation associated with sexuality. As a child, she watches her mother accentuate her beauty with cosmetic products and provocative clothing. As a teenager, she is fully aware of the power associated with femininity, and is moreover constantly bombarded with media images of sexy women as happy women. Her first sexual experience may no longer be a rite of passage between active male and passive female, but rather can take the form of open relationships, experimentation, lesbianism or female dominance (Henry, 2004: 109). Should the Third Wave feminist woman choose to pursue a marriage, it is up to her whether she wishes to engage in domesticity, or focus on a career. Indeed, should she not wish to marry, she is entitled to the pursuit of sexual pleasure, just as she is entitled to the pursuit of social standing and physical beauty. Arguably, the Third Wave feminist woman has as much right to the freedom enjoyed by men, only now she is no
longer oppressed by her own knowledge of her gender, but empowered by it (O’Brien & Embree, 2001: 91).

The mid-1990s, as well as being the fostering ground for Third Wave feminism, also saw the introduction of “new media” – which revolutionized contemporary media – with new forms of technology causing an explosion in the communication industry. Previously, media communication had relied heavily on broadcast and print media, which was mostly analog, in order to transmit information (Hendricks, 2012: 4). However, at this point, progress in technology allowed more space for women in the media industry to work within the system, and to influence stereotypical media representations to their own benefit. Indeed, small groups of activists, such as the Women’s Media Action Group, were founded with the objective of preventing sexist representations of females, such as the portrayals of the domestic ideal popular after World War II (Humm, 1997: 181).

What this arguably meant for Third Wave feminists was a new playground for them to present their flourishing, sexier identities. *Cosmopolitan* magazine, edited by Helen Gurley-Brown, became the pioneer for frank discussions surrounding sexuality and women in the workplace, actresses wore increasingly revealing outfits and found themselves in increasingly compromising positions on screen, magazine advertisers ceased to punt vacuum cleaners as the key to domestic bliss, and instead prompted independent women to spend their hard-earned salaries on cosmetics, clothing and other appearance-altering accessories. And all these developments were understood as signifying that women had succeeded in moving forward their socio-cultural and politico-economic status within a dominantly patriarchal society (McNair, 2002: 24).

Never before had women been so empowered. Reception analysis from the 1980s onward determined that the media, which had previously seemed only to reinforce gender stereotypes, underwent a massive turning point with the induction of females into the industry – to the extent that even feminist academics admitted to enjoying soap operas and magazines aimed at women. The result
of this was a new generation of female role models; popular, confident, beautiful, independent and intelligent. However, before long, they would come under fire (Osborn & Greenfield, 2006: 71).

2.4. The ‘backlash’ phenomenon

With each of the feminist movements described thus far, there has always been a tendency toward what is known as a ‘backlash,’ which occurs each time women successfully achieve a step towards their liberation from patriarchal subordination. This ‘backlash’ can be defined as the negative reaction to, or rejection of, advancements in women’s status which have gained prominence or popularity. In this case, the advancements referred to specifically encompass women’s liberation (Superson & Cudd, 2002: 4).

For instance, with regard to First Wave feminism, there was both an explicit and implicit disapproval of the struggles for suffrage and against officially mandated inequalities. Explicitly, the militant aspects of First Wave feminism – such as protests and self-sacrificial gestures – were met with outright state repression, such as the Cat and Mouse Act mentioned in the previous chapter. Implicitly, the shift in sexual discourses met with great opposition, as ‘husband-free’ women were seen as unnatural, and the pressure on them to revert back to more ‘appropriate’ sexual behavior increased (Kennedy & Lubelska, 1993: 84). Similarly, Second Wave feminism, while more focused on opposing de facto inequalities, met with resistance in the form of media representations of women pursuing domesticity as an ideal lifestyle. After concentrating their energy largely on sexual, reproductive and intellectual independence, and after playing a prominent role in the war effort, women were still being encouraged to remain under patriarchal authority (Lind & Brzuzy, 2008: 438). The ‘backlash’ phenomenon, not to be mistaken as a definitive or official rejection of a minority group, is generally reflected, rather, as a collective cultural and media-driven response to events or beliefs that are not widely supported. In this case, it could also refer to the attempts of men to regain the power and the
status they feel they have lost to women, attempts which can involve state, discursive or media repression (Kirby, 2000: 719).

Third Wave feminism, too, underwent a ‘backlash’, which is chronicled in Susan Faludi’s text *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. As previously established, Third Wave feminists moved away from political struggles and centered their arguments on sexual identity and freedom in the media. Yet as Faludi states, this was met with the idea that feminism as a movement was no longer necessary, due to the many successes that had been achieved over previous decades. Indeed, this trend also cultivated the notion that women’s unhappiness was largely because of the successes of the women’s movement, and by the end of the 1980s, several new developments had come to light regarding the *liberated* woman. “Statistically”, educated women over the age of 30 were more likely to be affected by a ‘man shortage’ should they wish to marry; women would suffer a devastating plummet in economic status should they get divorced; hard-working women could be afflicted with an infertility epidemic as a result of postponing pregnancy; and the single, successful career woman was at dire risk of suffering depression, anxiety or burn-out. Regardless of all that women had achieved, according to the media, they were still ultimately “dissatisfied” – the blame for which was placed entirely on their liberation (Faludi, 1991: 20, 91).

Faludi’s ‘backlash’ theorization focuses largely on the effect of the media and popular culture on women’s liberation, and, for the purpose of this study, can be broken down into different subsections of representations. That is, through media portrayals, film, television, fashion and consumer aesthetics (Faludi, 1991: 89).

Firstly, there was a blossoming of media portrayals that systematically tarnished the image of the working woman or single mothers, characterizing them as tired, depressed, confused, incapable and unappealing. These representations were backed up by studies conducted by various institutions which allegedly proved that, in fact, the pursuit of domesticity had been far less detrimental to the
health and happiness of women than their pursuit of high-powered careers (Andersen, 2008: 464). And all of this was communicated in skillfully implicit ways. As Faludi argues, the media was doing nothing to deny the idea that a woman’s freedom and independence were her own worst enemy, choosing instead to reinforce the notion through news reports of women leaving their jobs to return to the household, women exhausted after long days at work, and poverty-stricken single mothers struggling to raise their children – the latter were, ironically, usually young women of colour (Valdivia, 2000: 45). For example, one such article, published in the *New York Times Magazine*, entitled “The Opt-Out Revolution,” featured high-power, ivy-league educated women who had chosen to leave their careers in order to stay at home with their families. In this article it is stated that, “while the absence of women in positions of power was once chiefly a result of sexism, the fact that women still don’t rule the world is now increasingly a result of deliberate choice” (Hayden & Hallstein, 2010: 16). Indeed, it may even be argued that this choice became increasingly viewed as the “correct” choice, insofar as the media increasingly portrayed a woman’s place as being in the home with her family. Stay-at-home moms were also once again considered happier and more fulfilled (Schlessinger, 2010, 71).

Secondly, the movie industry began to portray women in two opposing directions, namely, as vapid, empty sexual beings, or as dissatisfied, ‘liberated’ women on the path to self-deprecation. Dan Laughey, in *Key Themes in Media Theory*, uses two films to argue Faludi’s point, namely, *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1991). The former portrays a woman as “nothing but a sexual being,” so far removed from political solidarity that continuing gender-inequalities and oppressive patriarchal discourses have all but ceased to matter. The latter shows the single woman as devoid of confidence, consumed by the deficits of her image, and characterized as personally to blame for her inability to attract a partner (Laughey, 2007: 116). Similarly, the early 1990s saw an onslaught of ‘chick flicks’ – the name of the genre alone denoting degradation of women as beings with little better to do than to pass their time with tear-jerking films – in which the solution to crises within the
narrative are primarily achieved through immense amounts of intensely emotional female bonding, rather than through the independence or intellect of the female characters (Ferriss and Young, 2008: 93). In terms of this, *The Wedding Singer* (1998), *Never Been Kissed* (1999) and *My Best Friend’s Wedding* (1997), serve as good examples. That is, in *The Wedding Singer*, the protagonist Julia (Drew Barrymore) is torn between two men, her fiancé and a good friend, both of whom she cares for deeply. Upon deciding that she would rather be involved with her friend than with her fiancé, she comes to the realization that it is too late to change her mind and boards a flight to Las Vegas to get married sooner. Needless to say, her cousin, Holly (Christine Taylor), alerts the friend and the day is saved when he boards the same flight and wins her over. Similarly, in *Never Been Kissed*, Josie (also played by Drew Barrymore), a copy editor, returns to high school under cover in order to determine how teenagers’ lives have changed in the passing years. She soon reverts to the ‘geeky’ girl she had actually been in high school and is subsequently tormented and teased by the popular kids in the school. She befriends Aldys (Leelee Sobieski), who helps her to overcome all the obstacles she faces on her path to finding true love and her first kiss. Finally, in *My Best Friend’s Wedding*, Julianne (Julia Roberts), spends the entire film pursuing Kimberley’s (Cameron Diaz) fiancé, as she feels they do not make a good match; only to realize towards the end of the narrative, amidst many tears, that Kimberley is actually right for the man they are both in love with. In each case, the support of their female friends has helped these women to overcome the obstacles within the narratives; obstacles to happiness and contentment defined in terms of romance.

Thirdly, Faludi argues that women began to lose ground as far as their roles in prime-time television were concerned. Television dramas such as *Charlie’s Angels* (1976 – 1981), which featured sexy but also powerful women in roles generally reserved for men, were systematically scrapped, with the 1987-88 season of television dramas featuring only three female leads in twenty-two series. This lack of feminist support, further explored by Bonnie Dow in her text *Prime-Time Feminism*: 
Television, Media Culture, and the Women’s Movement Since 1970, was arguably the result of the regressive nature of shows such as thirtysomething (1987 – 1991), or due to the fact that female-driven dramas such as Cagney and Lacey (1981 – 1988) intentionally muted their feminist implications – choosing instead to portray women as lacking in any real depth or personality (Dow, 1996: 86). That is, on the one hand, thirtysomething portrayed women primarily in the private sphere of the home, while men were in the public sphere of the paid labour force, reflecting how social life should be organized (Heide, 1995: 1 – 2). On the other hand, Cagney and Lacey portrayed women as over-involved crusaders who were seldom able to agree, and who thus came across as lacking depth and breadth of understanding (Mizejewski, 2004: 82).

Fourthly, with regard to fashion, previously, as more women entered the workplace, they were encouraged to dress more demurely, in more business-like, and subsequently less feminine, clothing – as dressing in a sexy manner could be interpreted as inviting sexual advances or needing to be taken care of. However, the liberated 1980s saw the enthusiastic induction of the mini-skirt, low cut necklines and push-up bras. Moreover, it was only a matter of time before fashion moguls took this trend further, by taking as a point of departure for the creation of high-fashion, couture pieces that reduced women to “little girls” (Rodnitzky, 1999: 165). This was not only impractical, but made women look frivolous and ridiculous, overtly undermining their hard-won right to dress how they pleased, in a manner that comported with the successes of feminism. This can be seen in Christian Lacroix’s fashion line “Baby Doll,” described by Faludi as having “frenetic baroque excrescences [which] succeeded only in obscuring the female figure. It was hard to see body shape at all through that thicket of flounces and floral sprays” (Faludi cited in Beckingham, 2005: 13). Again, this derided the female gender by characterizing women as silly and excessive, and ultimately careless with that which they had achieved thus far in terms of liberation.
Finally, there was the matter of consumer aesthetics. As previously mentioned, certain Third Wave feminists were renowned for their embrace of sexuality and identity; however, what Faludi describes in the chapter ‘Beauty and the Backlash,’ is a tendency toward the medicalization of aesthetics forced upon women who had been convinced by the media that they were suffering from professional stress, which had resulted in a decline in their appearance. Fashion magazines portrayed increasingly skinny models, the plastic surgery industry grew in leaps and bounds, and for every cosmetic ailment there was a cure readily available (Lou, 2008: 37). Accordingly, as Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth* explains, the beauty industry was in the process of teaching women to see their bodies as defective, and suppressing women’s independence. Cosmetic surgery, which can be debated as women’s acceptance of pain at the expense and expectation of their gender, remains both painful and invasive (Wolf, 325: 1991).

The ease with which all of the above dove-tailed with the consciousness of Third Wave feminism was arguably the consequence of the sexual identity focus they held in such high esteem. Third Wave feminists chose to be in control of their sexuality, and they were determined to have their say in this regard; yet, through the media, the ‘backlash’ phenomenon described thus far came into play, just as it had in each previous feminist Wave. And each step toward liberation – and the increasing possibly that it could occur – furthered anti-feminist notions (Sherriff, 1997: 3).

As such, it can be argued that Faludi’s book *Backlash* attempts to prove that consumer culture distorts women’s self-image and warps feminist concepts, in such a manner that instead of fighting for the power of determination and independence, women are left misconstruing this power with buying power, and the ability to purchase self-improvement and sexual freedom (Boyd, 2007: 5).

Faludi states: “Once a society projects its fears onto the female form, it can try to cordon off those fears by controlling women[,]…shrinking them in the cultural imagination to a manageable size” (Faludi, 1991: 84). To elaborate, the liberated woman of the 1970s who was not afraid to flaunt her
sexual appeal and independence was being reduced to a “woman on display” – immobile, infantile, vapid, static and child-like, and above all, silent; after all, the opinion of such a creation was worth little. The borderline-narcissistic, consumer-driven feminist woman of the 1980s onward had successfully undermined one of the most prominent principles of feminism – that women should be allowed the right to their own decisions. Although not, perhaps, a conscious choice, the effect of the media was so great that it was impossible not to be influenced by it, at least at some level (Ehrenreich & English, 2011: 5).

These media representations were also not critiqued by Third Wave feminists with the vehemence characteristic of First and Second Wave feminism, and this was possibly due to two factors, namely ‘Postfeminism’ and a lack of political solidarity. Postfeminism offered a “pseudo-intellectual critique on the feminist movement, rather than overtly hostile response to it” (Gamble, 1999: 38), and sought to persuade contemporary women that stringent feminism was now unfashionable, that women had achieved equality, and that the whole matter should be laid to rest in favor of the embrace of their own sexuality. Similarly, the huge diversity of Third Wave feminist beliefs led to a lack of political, cultural and social solidarity. Indeed, this lack can also be attributed to the fact that Second Wave feminists paved the way for greater gender equality, while Third Wave feminists enjoyed the benefits thereof without necessarily continuing to champion the same causes (Blake, 2007: 91).

However, although this ‘backlash’ has arguably continued into the present, there have been instances of resistance to it, and in this regard, in the following chapter, the cinematic modes of resistance in Lars Von Trier’s Golden Heart Trilogy (1996, 1998, 2000), will be explored. That is, the manner in which his female leads are represented in such a way that they stand in complete contrast to the representations of ‘backlash’ women with which we are otherwise so familiar.

3.1. Introduction

Cinema constitutes a particularly powerful medium through which to thematize and oppose the common deleterious conditions afflicting large groups of people or minorities, as evinced, for example, in the films of Sergei Eisenstein, Roberto Rossellini and Jean-Luc Godard (Shiel & Fitzmaurice, 2001: 322), among others. As mentioned toward the end of the previous chapter, despite the great influence of the mass media in the formulation of the governing discourses of everyday life, and notwithstanding the ‘backlash’ orientation of much of contemporary mass media content, resistance to this *status quo* does occur. In this regard, in what follows, after a brief overview of the critical use of cinema by the above mentioned three directors, Lars Von Trier’s critical approach to film – which draws on certain features of their respective work – will be explored, with particular focus on his *Golden Heart Trilogy*, namely *Breaking the Waves* (1996), *The Idiots* (1998), and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000). Arguably, Lars Von Trier’s approach to cinema can be summed up in his statement that: “I think it’s important that we all try to give something to this medium, instead of just thinking about what is the most efficient way of telling a story or making an audience stay in a cinema” (Lumholdt, 2003: 157). And, as will be discussed, what he contributes to cinema – at least through these three films – are images of women at odds with ‘backlash’ inspired representations; that is, images of women as ordinary, sincere, and serious human beings, in every way deserving of deep respect.

3.2. Critical/neo-realist/counter-cinema and the films of Lars Von Trier
After the Russian Revolution of 1917, which occurred during a time of near-global turmoil which some hoped would precipitate the birth of a new communist era, the critical political role of cinema emerged as something in desperate need of exploration. Sergei Eisenstein – both a cinematic artist and a writer – has often been referred to as the ‘father’ of critical cinema, because he spent a great portion of his life in pursuit of a definitive cinematic theory (LaValley, 2001: 148). In an attempt to understand, and explain, what critical cinema entails, Eisenstein drew inspiration from both Japanese haiku poetry and the Marxist principle of dialectical materialism in his definition of the technique of ‘montage.’ According to him, a montage is “collision, the conflict of two pieces in opposition to each other” (Eisenstein, 1949: 37), which, in its most basic terms, means a variety of shots placed immediately after one another, with the aim of creating an abstract concept through the tensions which arise between them; a concept which might otherwise be impossible to represent. In other words, this ‘collision’ between the alternate shots, which comprise the thesis and antithesis, as it were, produce the synthesis of a new meaning. For example, one of the more famous of Eisenstein’s montages occurs in his film Strike (1925), through his juxtaposing of the slaughtering of a bull with the suppression and murder of strikers in pre-revolutionary Russia, to create the concept of the workers being slaughtered like animals (Kenez, 2001: 55). This dialectic, in theory, brings forth conceptual progress, insofar as its conscientizing of the masses to their predicament galvanizes them into action when they are oppressed, or ensures their vigorous defense of the communistic state where they are victorious – something which was much sought after in the cinema of the new communist Russia. Similarly, in Italy, after the fall of Mussolini’s government and the end of the Second World War, and due to the social and cultural crises which ensued, the face of film began to change. One of the more critical developments in this regard was Italian neorealist cinema, created by a group of film directors who

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13 The failure of Russia’s tsarist regime during World War I, in which millions of Russian lives were lost, brought the Communists to power in the Soviet Union in 1917 (Welch, Gruhl, Comer & Rigdon, 2009: 406).

14 Indeed, the film closes with armed cavalry firing at the striking workers, and the words: “Never forget…workers.”
recaptured the attention of audiences who had become disillusioned with existing mainstream cinema tropes, in a world of poverty and chaos. Among these was Roberto Rossellini (Fabe, 2004: 99). Like Eisenstein, Rossellini sought to create meaning through unconventional methods, such as, firstly, using unknown actors, secondly, filming in the streets and countryside of Italy, and thirdly, cross-cutting news/documentary footage with his own work (Bondanella, 2009: 78), to blur the boundary between reality and his fictions which were closely based on recent events. That is, while the use of on-location filming and the cross-cutting of news/documentary footage with his own new footage lent a heightened sense of legitimacy and credibility to his films, the use of unknown actors, claimed Rossellini, even for prominent roles such as Louis XIV, was in order to overcome the tyranny of the Hollywood “star” system, as well as the potential tyranny of any actor’s hegemony as an actor (Graham & Alberro, 1999: 140). These techniques were unheard of in mainstream Hollywood cinema (Gazetas, 2008: 145).

Subsequently, Jean-Luc Godard, a French-Swiss film-maker and critic known for his exceptionally radical views against the conventions of Hollywood and Mosfilm – both of which had gained in popularity in the years after World War Two – sought to contest orthodox cinema through the creation of a new form of ‘counter-cinema.’ As explored in Peter Wollen’s “Godard and Counter Cinema: Vent D’est,” this new form incorporated a variety of techniques that challenged the cinematic status quo; its narrative intransitivity countered narrative transitivity, its foregrounding countered transparency, its multiple diegesis countered single diegesis, its aperture countered closure, its unpleasure countered pleasure, and its reality countered fiction. The result was cinematic theory which would produce non-linear, open-ended, non-fictional, inter-textual and political films, which relied more heavily on truth than theatrics (Wollen, 1999: 507).

Although Godard’s theory was fascinating and ambitious, Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni argued that cinematic ‘revolution’ needed to take place within the realm of the ‘system,’ that
is, the capitalist film industry which expressed the dominant ideology. Comolli and Narboni were both members of the collective that edited the radical magazine, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, after 1968, which was a time when television, and for that matter, film, were becoming ever more popular. In contrast to Godard’s attempt at counter-cinema, or the countering of mass production in cinema (Mulvey, 84: 1996), Comolli and Narboni believed that film could not escape the economic and ideological constraints in which it was produced. In this regard, they maintained that “even film-makers who set out to be ‘revolutionary’ on the level of message and form cannot effect any swift and radical change in the economic system” (Comolli & Narboni, 1993: 45).

Arguably, a contemporary film-maker who has drawn on the above three cinematic modes of resistance – and the criticisms proffered by Comolli and Narboni – is Lars Von Trier. Von Trier is a Danish filmmaker and screenwriter, born in 1956. Although not critical in a Marxist sense, his work is considered highly controversial in the cinematic world insofar as he is renowned for his involvement in the *Dogme 95* movement, his co-founding of the Zentropa Entertainment production company, his use of explicit sexual imagery in his films, and his habit of creating thematically-linked film trilogies (Willis, 2005: 26).

That is, although Von Trier began making films at the age of 11, he arguably first gained notoriety with the creation of the *Dogme 95* movement in 1995, founded together with fellow Danish filmmaker, Thomas Vinterberg, and consisting of two main documents, namely the ‘Dogme 95 Manifesto’ and the ‘Vow of Chastity.’ In many respects, this involved an echo of aspects of the neorealist approach, insofar as the goal of *Dogme 95* was to “counter ‘certain tendencies’ in cinema today” through a set of rules which opposed most of the stereotypical, aesthetic and technical characteristics of contemporary films (Von Trier & Vinterberg cited in Utterson, 2005: 87). Among these, the following prominent rules were included. Firstly, all shooting must be done on location

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15 *Dogme* is the Danish word for dogma, which can be defined as a code of beliefs accepted as authoritative.
(should a specific prop be necessary, a location containing that prop must be found). Secondly, sound must never be produced separately from imagery, including music, which can only be used if it occurs in the shot being filmed. Thirdly, the film must not contain superficial action (murders, weapons and so forth). Fourthly, cameras must be hand-held (based on the principle that shooting must take place where the film is taking place, and not vice versa). Finally, the supreme goal of *Dogme 95* is to “force the truth out of characters and settings,” to create authenticity (Fowler, 2002: 83). During the time that *Dogme 95* rose to prominence, mainstream film was becoming increasingly popular in comparison to less renowned “indie” or independent and art house cinema. Also, new techniques and special effects, such as computer graphics and stereo sound, were being employed to create cinematic pieces that had never previously been imagined – for example, *Jurassic Park* (1993) and *Batman Returns* (1992) (Holmlund, 2008: 2). In contrast, what *Dogme 95* offered was a return to honesty in film, which Von Trier and Vinterberg felt had become lost through the decades since Rossellini.

While this ideal met with much criticism, as many filmmakers regarded the manifesto as pretentious, provocative and unskilled (Hjort, 2005: 49), it was matched by a similarly ambitious enterprise on the part of Von Trier, namely the pursuit of financial independence from ‘the system,’ through the establishment of the Zentropa Entertainment company. In a gesture strongly reminiscent of Godard’s desire to work parallel to ‘the system,’ Von Trier founded Zentropa in 1992, along with friend and producer Peter Aalbæk Jensen. Initially, though, Von Trier created a miniseries called *The Kingdom* (1994 – 1997), in order to facilitate the accumulation of capital, after which Zentropa began pushing the boundaries of cinema, producing and releasing numerous hardcore sex films over the

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16 The “breathtakingly persuasive” computer-generated (CG) dinosaurs of *Jurassic Park* sparked a new era in movie-making, convincing many who had opposed digital effects previously that they were the future of film techniques (Vince, 2003: 99). Similarly, *Batman Returns* left audiences in awe of its flashy stunts and effects, and reached record high grosses at the box office (Bruns, 2010: 20).
following years. In this regard, Von Trier regarded real (penetrative) sex as yet another measure of authenticity in film-making (Sundholm & Thorsen, 2012: 417).

In order to better understand Von Trier’s approach to cinema, and the manner in which it is inspired by Eisenstein, it is helpful to investigate a few of his more popular and controversial films, which were almost always shot in trilogies. For example, his first feature film, *The Element of Crime* (1984), sparked what would later become known as the *Europa Trilogy*, which highlighted traumatic occurrences through the years in post-war Europe. Stylistically, *The Element of Crime* draws on the theme of tragic childhood, and follows a detective, Fisher (Michael Elphick) who, under hypnosis, narrates his investigation of a serial killer prone to murdering young girls. The imagery used in the film emphasizes the purity of children (Wilson, 2003: 124). The second film in the series, *Epidemic* (1987), is slightly different, focusing on the screenwriting process as well as the tragedy of an outbreak of an incurable, plague-like disease. Both Von Trier and co-producer Niels Vørsel act in the film as writers of a screenplay involving a terminal epidemic, who find themselves caught up in the onset of a real epidemic within only a few days. And while, thematically, this hints at the concept of a film-within-a-film (Hampton, 2007: 355), the conflict between the first and the second film – the incompatibility between purity and contagion – becomes embodied in a subsequent film *Europa* (1991). The third and final film in the trilogy, *Europa*, is about a young American man who hopes to show some kindness to German citizens shortly after the end of World War II (through his work as a conductor on a train), but who soon becomes embroiled in a pro-Nazi terrorist conspiracy, after falling in love with German girl (Tasker, 2010: 401), which ultimately leads to his demise. Indeed, although these films may seem random when considered alone, regarded in comparison to one another a montage of rather epic proportions emerges. In short, the goal of the *Europa* Trilogy was to pit nature against culture in portrayals of a newly deterritorialised Europe, where the “inquiring humanist who
leaves his home terrain...ends up being destroyed by the very process in question” (Hjort & Bondebjerg, 2003: 216); something which occurs in each of these films.

In keeping with his tendency to explore the deeper aspects of human nature, Von Trier went on to begin another trilogy, known as the *USA: Land of Opportunities* trilogy, which, to date, consists of two films, *Dogville* (2003) and *Manderly* (2005), with the third, *Washington*, still in production (Rombes, 2005: 166). Although many have criticized Von Trier for making films based on a country with which he is not familiar, there is arguably some value to be found in the method of his storytelling. To elaborate, *Dogville* follows the story of Grace (Nicole Kidman) who, while hiding from mobsters, exchanges physical labour for safety in the small American town of Dogville, Colorado. Eventually, she becomes exploited by the townspeople, who take advantage of her difficult situation. *Manderly* is the sequel to *Dogville*, and follows Grace’s experience in a cotton plantation, where she idealistically attempts to abolish the slavery of the labourers, but fails due to an overarching hierarchy determined by a town elder (Badley, 2011: 118). Just as the *Europa Trilogy* commented on the state of European trauma and corruption, with themes of crime, war and disease, and the impact of these factors on people’s daily lives (Jess-Cooke, 2009: 102), so too, the *USA: Land of Opportunities* trilogy, which contemplates “insider/outsider dynamics and institutionalized oppression,” will constitute a form of commentary on the ‘hypocrisy’ of America (Tasker, 2010: 401). In terms of this the third part of the trilogy will ultimately complement the preceding two films, through an extension of their critical considerations.

Moreover, what each film portrays is Von Trier’s structuring of a martyrdom-based narrative, because time and time again the viewer is confronted with a character who is an outsider/victim (Sherwood, 2007: 185). As such, Von Trier’s method of film-making can be viewed as a form of cinematic resistance to the status quo of mainstream fare, due to the manner in which his main characters so often expose themselves to their own eventual downfalls, and many times suffer such a
fate because of their innate goodness or naivety. When paired with his largely idiosyncratic filming techniques, and his use of unknown actors, what Von Trier tries to evoke is a ‘discussion’ between the observed and the observer, on a level that transcends the barrier of cinema-spectator (Corrigan, 2011: 191). At any rate, in the case of both trilogies, he delivers strong opinions on that which society has discursively constructed, and this is important for the following discussion of his *Golden Heart Trilogy*.

### 3.3. Lars Von Trier’s *Golden Heart Trilogy*

Lars Von Trier’s *Golden Heart Trilogy* focuses on the role of women in society and consists of three films, namely *Breaking the Waves* (1996), *The Idiots* (1998) and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000). As discussed in the previous chapter, in the contemporary era, women tend to be portrayed as sexy, vapid, and child-like, lacking in both depth of personality and breadth of understanding; yet, in Von Trier’s films the female characters stand in stark contrast to such representations (Badley, 2011: 70).

That is, in each film, Von Trier’s protagonists – Bess (*Breaking the Waves*), Karen (*The Idiots*) and Selma (*Dancer in the Dark*) – are portrayed as possessing an innate goodness, or rather a “golden heart,” and bear certain similarities. To begin with, all three women find themselves in situations where they are alone, rather than united with other women. Together with this, each woman has been infantilized to some degree; Bess through mental deficiency, Karen through her own choices, and Selma through economic difficulty brought on by a lack of education. The situation which results is one of great distress for each character, as they quickly become caught between conflicting discourses. While for Bess, the world of patriarchal dominance proves inescapable, and while Karen finds herself torn between idealistic fools and traditional tyrants, Selma is inextricably caught between a devastated homeland and an exploitative new home (Hallam, 2012: 122). The result of these difficulties is that each woman desperately clings onto someone/something, to the point where she is
ultimately obliged to sacrifice herself, through not fully comprehending the dynamics of her situation, or realizing alternative actions (Porter, 1997: 196). Yet, as will be discussed, each character contrasts with the mainstream cinematic representations of women, in far more profound ways, such that together they serve as cinematic resistance to the ‘backlash’ against women in contemporary society.

Set in the 1970s, *Breaking the Waves*, the first film of the trilogy, follows the story of Bess, a young woman in the Scottish Highlands, and her irrevocable love for her husband, Jan. Although prone to psychological problems, and very naïve, Bess marries Jan – notwithstanding blatant apprehension from her community and church. However, subsequently, Jan (an oil rig worker) is in an accident and becomes paralyzed, and hence sexually impotent. Up until this point, both Bess and Jan have continuously expressed their love and sexual desire for one another, but following his injury, Jan urges Bess to find new lovers and then relay her sexual experiences to him, claiming that it will keep him alive. Despite her unwillingness, Bess obliges, as she truly believes it is helping him. Needless to say, her self-sacrifice leads to her eventual downfall; after she is brutally raped and beaten on board a merchant ship, she dies in hospital (Halliwell, 2004: 229).

Throughout the film, there is an over-arching theme of patriarchal oppression. Firstly, there is Bess’s relationship with her rigidly Calvinistic church elders and their male God, and secondly her relationship with her husband, Jan. And between these two forces she is, in effect, condemned to become what men want her to be, either a docile being or an object of male pleasure, or both. In this regard, the patriarchal rejection she encounters from her church, and the patriarchal enslavement she experiences with Jan (Boeve, Geybels & Bossche, 2003: 35), are the two poles between which the narrative of her unfortunate life plays out.

The narrative begins as Bess is about to be married. It is no secret that her union is frowned upon by the strict Presbyterian elders of her church, who seem to thrive on condemning sinners to hell. They feel she is far too mentally unstable for marriage, and maintain that she lacks the requisite
restraint in a community that is extremely conservative, but Bess marries regardless. However, after Jan’s injury and her foray into sexual relations with other men, the issue of religion is once again raised. Bess, who throughout the film speaks to God through prayer, also answers herself in a deep, severe tone, as she imagines God would answer – indicating that in her religious outlook God is a dominant male figure. Arguably, the question that comes to mind is whether these ‘conversations’ “betoken simple-mindedness, internalization of a patriarchal voice, or actual contact with a real transcendence” (Coates, 2003: 90). For the purpose of this study, it is the internalization of the patriarchal voice which is most important.

It is clear that the community in which Bess is raised is one of strict patriarchal constructs, as evinced by the initial apprehension of the church elders towards her marriage and their efforts to silence her opinions, and through the rejection she experiences by the church/community once she begins sleeping with other men. In each case, the place of a woman in society – and religion – is determined by patriarchy (Chanter, 2008: 142). But the extent to which such constructs inform her subjectivity and render her submissive is most strongly thematized by her own submissiveness towards God (especially after Jan’s injury). It may be suggested that Bess tries to be a good Christian and a good wife, but seems unable to achieve both simultaneously. The most poignant example of this, perhaps, is her conversation with God, shortly after she begins sleeping with other men, in which she questions whether she will go to hell for her actions. Her internalized answer: “Whom do you want to save? Yourself of Jan?” indicates the deep extent of her subordination. There is no wise mediation between the conflicting discourses of patriarchy; rather, a male God informs her that she must damn herself in terms of one, to fulfil her role in terms of another, but in a way they will ultimately condemn her to death anyway.

As such, it has been argued that she is “good like all women have been good for centuries, that is, how men for centuries have liked women to be good. Not word but body, speechless, sacrificing”
(Pisters, 2001: 148 – 150). Consequently, Von Trier’s notion of “goodness” does need to be considered in relation to these patriarchal discourses and such criticism, in order to determine whether his films compound the ‘backlash’ against women in our contemporary age (Kirk-Duggan & Torjesen, 2009: 18) or whether they serve to contest it.

However, that *Breaking the Waves* achieves the latter, rapidly becomes conspicuous when one considers not Bess’s ‘goodness,’ but rather her ‘nobility.’ This is because, even though Bess suffers a brutal end for her goodness, her ultimate nobility is what becomes important to the story, inspires *pathos*, and produces the ethical and aesthetic discomfort of the film. Arguably, its most notable feature in this regard is its representation of a woman in a time when sexy female heroines were becoming exceedingly popular. Indeed, the same year saw the release of the film *Striptease*, starring Demi Moore as a stripper who is manipulated by a congressman, but who eventually overcomes him through the use of her feminine wiles. In this way the film resonated with the thematization of sexuality in the mass media, which was being celebrated as an ostensible means of empowerment, implicitly linked to the ‘backlash’ against women (Tasker, 1998: 6), discussed previously. Yet, unlike a character such as Erin in *Striptease*, Bess would probably not be regarded as very sexy, nor is she even mildly manipulative. Instead, her sexuality is embraced when she makes love to her husband, Jan, but it is not used for her personal gain; rather, it is something she *gives* to the man she loves. In turn, when Jan is injured, sex remains something to give away, but still only to please Jan or ‘save him’ from depression. Thus her entire personality is orientated around trust, self-sacrifice, and vulnerability – without a trace of maliciousness, spite or distrust (Russell, 2010: 77 – 78), and it is through this that her character attains (a Christ-like) nobility.

As such, the film comprises a critique of Third Wave feminism, and for that matter, patriarchy, in a number of different ways. Firstly, Bess is not a stereotypical female character, as mentioned above, in either appearance or personality. Secondly, Von Trier’s portrayal of extreme patriarchal
prejudice reflects a critical awareness of the role of such attitudes in the formation of female subjectivity, indicts patriarchy for its negative effects in this regard, and poses correlative questions about the freedom of Third Wave feminists when it is defined in terms of their sexuality. Instead of gaining leverage over men by using sexual prowess (such as Erin), Bess is brutally raped and beaten when she acts in terms of a sexual ‘freedom’ quietly dictated to her by Jan. Thirdly, and imbricated with the above, Von Trier makes use of an internal voice (God) to highlight the inner struggle of Bess, which is informed by the conflicting patriarchal discourses that govern her world. Finally, he makes her completely and unfailingly good, and willing to give anything of herself to help and protect those that she loves (McNair, 2002: 175), in a gesture which is deeply poignant. In this way, Von Trier’s film contests the ‘backlash’ against women that prevails in the contemporary era, through the manner in which Bess is not portrayed as a vapid, child-like mannequin, but rather as a character of deep substance and sincerity, whose only real crime is longing for a true and human connection.

The second film in the trilogy, *The Idiots*, contains similar principles but goes further by exploring not only patriarchy and sexuality, but also the ideals of free choice and clinging to innocence in times of difficulty. In short, *The Idiots* tells the story of a group of people who, feeling that their intelligence is a product of and subordinate to the ‘establishment,’ maintain that the only authentic way to express themselves is through a complete lack of inhibition – which they do by pretending to be mentally challenged. This behaviour, which they call ‘spassing,’ is noticed by the protagonist, Karen, at a restaurant, and, impressed by their self-expression, she ends up going to the group leader’s house and joining in their antics. The pivotal moment in the film is when Stoffer, the leader, requests a ‘gangbang’ at his birthday party, after which the whole group allows idiocy to take over their everyday, personal lives. Karen, however, not only takes up this challenge, but takes it further than anyone else. This occurs when Suzanne (another member of the group) accompanies Karen back to her home, where it is revealed that she has been missing for two weeks following the death of her young
baby. Without any explanation of where she has been, Karen tries spassing at the dinner table, and is met with a violent slap from her husband. The film closes with Karen and Suzanne leaving the house (Tasker, 2010: 202).

In effect, Karen, who is fleeing from the restrictions and confines of her traditional patriarchal family, becomes enslaved to this radical group whom she perceives as holding the keys to freedom, through their daring to experiment with personal and public norms. Initially hesitant about their activities, she soon realizes that all of them – like her – are in emotional and psychological pain, and that their ‘spassing’ is a means of expressing it. In *Breaking the Waves*, Bess is caught between two forms of patriarchal discourse – one moral and one sexual – and while she chooses the latter over the former because of the freedom she thinks it offers her, it ultimately leads to her demise. Similarly, in *The Idiots*, Karen is caught between two forms of patriarchal discourse – one traditional and staid, and one new and dynamic – and although she embraces the latter over the former because she construes it as a path to liberation, she too pays a heavy price for her error. Admittedly, the price she pays is not as heavy as the one paid by Bess. However, one nevertheless senses how emotionally painful the final slap in her face is, particularly because the group which she was faithful towards, and whose discourse precipitated her ‘spassing’ among her family, no longer exists to embrace and comfort her after the abuse. As such, the abysmal loneliness which confronts this already emotionally traumatized woman looms large after the incident, because there is no-one to appreciate the merits of her gesture, and though this, to dilute the hegemony of the traditional patriarchal discourse, which now surrounds her.

Similarly, just as a prominent issue in *Breaking the Waves* was Jan’s sadism, so too a salient feature of *The Idiots* is, arguably, the underlying sadism of Stoffer. This is evinced, for example, in the scene where Stoffer asks a group of burly bikers to mind Jeppe (another member of the group) for ten minutes. The striking part of this scene is how it almost seems to highlight two groups of outcasts interacting with one another (Pisters, 2003: 132). The bikers, who initially look menacing, treat Jeppe,
who tries to wander off in panic, with surprising compassion – whereas Stoffer comes across as sadistic for pushing Jeppe into a situation where he is forced to ‘spass’ for his life – to avoid the brutal reprisal from the bikers that would follow if they realized the joke being played on them (Badley, 2011: 64). Similarly, the orgy scene is a product of Stoffer’s narcissistic imagination, and the consequence of his extreme egocentricity, which is brought into conspicuousness by the contrast presented through Jeppe and Josephine’s gentle and sincere approach to each other at this time (Williams, 2008: 268).

This contrast, in turn, reaches its apogee when Karen – after she has suffered a very real tragedy which led to her search for her ‘inner idiot’ – along with the group, are faced with the challenge of ‘spassing’ in front of those most meaningful to them, but in a different social context. That is, she is the only one willing to accept the challenge, and does so even as the group begins to fall apart. Yet, it is not so much her naïveté as her true goodness – or nobility – which comes to light in this act, because through it we realize that both it, and the slap she receives for it, is the consequence of the whole-hearted allegiance she felt for the group, and the true human connections she sought to establish with them. A connection that was based on deep trust and fidelity which they could not reciprocate (Laine, 2007: 75). Although Karen is very naïve, the rest of the group treat her with compassion and kindness (Jerslev, 2002: 61), which leads her to trust that such support will be there when she needs it most, while the contrary proves to be the case.

Like Breaking the Waves, The Idiots also lacks the beautiful women seen so often in mainstream films, and does not instantly establish the protagonist’s issues, but rather leads the audience towards a subtle revelation of their magnitude (Rosewarne, 2012: 212). As such, while Karen from the outset of the film, remains an ordinary human being – rather than a Hollywood screen siren – and while her problems are not dramatic and unbelievable, but rather relate to the tragic everyday reality of infant mortality, she also only attempts to traverse the path toward freedom with hesitance
and a lack of confidence. And in this she contrasts markedly with the confidence generally displayed by mainstream female protagonists (Erens, 1990: 115). The final scene, too, stands to critique the form of Third Wave feminism discussed earlier, along with patriarchal dominance, through the manner in which Karen is beaten by her husband. Here we again encounter an example of how Von Trier’s characters, as Nicholas Rombes puts it, are “idealized depictions of…self-sacrificing women,” with hearts of gold (Rombes, 2005: 164) who in spite of their errors and the consequences they bring, inspire in us not simply pathos but also deep respect.

The final film in the trilogy, Dancer in the Dark, continues even further along the narrative trajectory established in the above two films. In short, it tells the story of Selma, who in 1964 moved from Czechoslovakia with her young son to the United States, where they live in a trailer on the property of local policeman, Bill, and his wife Linda, and where she works on an assembly line in a factory, alongside her good friend Kathy. However, both Selma and her son secretly suffer from a degenerative eye disease which will eventually cause both of them to go blind, and Selma saves every spare penny in a tin in her kitchen, in order to pay for an operation that will spare her son this fate. Both on account of her dwindling vision, and in order to escape the difficulties of everyday life, Selma tends to slip into daydreams about great Hollywood musicals that she has seen at the local cinema, and it is during one such daydream that her friends begin to realize that she can barely see at all. Before long, she breaks her machine through careless error and is fired from the factory. In the meantime, Bill has revealed to her that his wife spends more money than he earns, and he asks Selma for a loan, which she refuses to give him. In order to comfort him, Selma reveals her near blindness to Bill, who then sees her placing her wages in the tin in her kitchen. After being fired, Selma goes home only to realize that her savings tin is empty. She goes next door to inform Bill, hears his wife discussing how they now have money again, and realizes that Bill has robbed her. Bill also lies to his wife when he ‘confesses’ to an affair with Selma, which results in a struggle as she tries to retrieve her stolen money.
Bill is wounded after pointing his gun at Selma, and begs her to kill him, and in her blindness and fear she mortally wounds him by accident. She retrieves the money, however, and quickly takes it to the institute for the blind to pay for her son’s operation. After this, Selma is arrested, accused of being a communist sympathizer and murderess, and is hanged. Thankfully, before she is sent to the gallows, she receives the news that her son’s operation was successful and she dies singing one of the songs from her favourite musical (Booker, 2007: 86).

As such, just as in *Breaking the Waves*, Bess was caught between two forms of patriarchal discourse – one moral and one sexual – and just as in *The Idiots*, Karen is caught between two forms of patriarchal discourse – one traditional and staid, and one new and dynamic – so too, Selma is caught between two male figures. On the one hand, there is Bill, who is emblematic of patriarchal dominance, not only because his position is one of authority on account of his status as policeman, but also because of the way in which he kowtows to patriarchal peer pressure in his desperation to live up to the ideal of a financially successful male provider. And for that matter, for the way in which he readily exploits Selma to this end. On the other hand, there is Selma’s son, who by virtue of his status as male seems to command Selma’s devotion, insofar as she willingly sacrifices both her eyesight and her life to save him from blindness. That is, in the scenes preceding her death, we realize that her biggest sacrifice was loving her son more than anything else, as she preferred to spend the money she saved on his operation, rather than on a trial lawyer who could have saved her life (Lumholdt, 2003: 131).

And just as Bess seeks answers through speaking to God, and Karen ‘spasses’ in pursuit of liberty, so too, Selma loses herself in colourful musicals, in which she imagines herself in a leading role. Arguably, though, this does not comprise an indictment of her on account of her predilections for the escapist products of the mass media, but rather renders her character all the more poignant. This is because, through the narrative, her fantasies – like those of Bess and Karen – are revealed for what they are, namely imagined moments of respite in an otherwise bleak world, in which she finds herself
hemmed in on either side by the different voices of patriarchy. And through this respite, Selma is rejuvenated, so that there is hardly a moment in the film where it seems as if she is giving up (Sultanik, 2012: 73). Moreover, in the final scene before she is hanged, she sings to the witnesses in the hanging room, and hugs the other inmates on death row. This display of bravery differs from the usual idea of women’s self-defence mechanisms, and is provocative in its characterization of her willing martyrdom (Zizek, 2006: 397).

In this regard, it may be suggested that what Von Trier does in Dancer in the Dark, as well as in Breaking the Waves and The Idiots, is find a voice for a female protagonist that transcends that to which we are accustomed. Indeed, it may even be suggested that the lack of a voice, as is often the case with Bess, creates a louder message. And it is through this that “patriarchal underpinnings move in active paradox to an evocation of feminine subjectivity,” a subjectivity that is often missing from mainstream media (Sjogren, 2006: 196).

If one compares Dancer in the Dark to other mainstream Hollywood fare released at the same time, such as Almost Famous, Erin Brockovich and 28 Days, it becomes easy to see just how differently Von Trier represents women (Aronson, 2010: 423). Although some have viewed Von Trier’s films as highly misogynistic, on account of the subordinative roles of the female characters, a closer examination reveals them as potentially exceedingly feminist, because of their representation of women as deeply sincere and affectionate beings, caught up in a heartless patriarchal world. If one concedes to the latter perspective, for which – as discussed above – there exists good support, then it becomes possible to suggest that Von Trier’s Golden Heart Trilogy can serve as a cinematic mode of resistance to the patriarchal status quo, because it allows us to see women differently. That is, not as the impossibly beautiful, coy and silly, sexual goddesses of Hollywood male fantasy, but rather, as ordinary, sincere, and serious human beings, who may under certain circumstances evince a heart of gold, and who ultimately are deserving of respect because of their nobility.
Chapter Four: Lars Von Trier’s Antichrist (2009) as a critical feminist film

4.1. Introduction

If one concedes that Lars Von Trier’s Golden Heart Trilogy can serve as a cinematic mode of resistance to the patriarchal status quo, because it allows us to see women as ordinary, sincere, and serious human beings, then a question arises concerning the existence of a dissonance or a resonance between it and his later film Antichrist (2009). In the interest of exploring this question, in what follows, after a brief synopsis of Von Trier’s Antichrist, the reception of the film by critics and the public alike will be discussed, before the idea of a thematic resonance between this film and Von Trier’s earlier Golden Heart Trilogy will be advanced. A resonance that involves not simply the continued thematization of patriarchal constructs that betray or negate the Christ-like female protagonists of his films, but also the first tentative allusions to the possibility that such patriarchal constructs can be challenged, through the formation of a counter-ideology, couched in terms of women’s mystical relationship with nature. Arguably, through the above, Antichrist emerges not as the intensely misogynistic film it has been made out to be, but rather as an insightfully brutal, but nevertheless realistic, appraisal of the role of patriarchal discourses in present society, and their effects on female subjectivity – effects which range from engendering docile subordination to precipitating violent retaliation.

4.2. Synopsis of Lars Von Trier’s Antichrist (2009)

Lars von Trier’s 2009 film Antichrist, which is fractioned into chapters (Prologue, Grief, Pain, Despair, The Three Beggars and Epilogue), follows the story of He (Willem Dafoe), a therapist, and She (Charlotte Gainsbourg), a researcher into the history of injustice against women who focuses specifically on witch hunts, as the couple try to overcome the loss of their son.
The film begins with the couple’s young son, Nic (Storm Acheche Sahlstrøm), falling to his death while He and She are having sex. She, overcome with grief at the loss of her son, collapses during his funeral and is subsequently hospitalized. However, after only a month, He insists that She discharge herself, so that he can take over her treatment and help her to face her deepest fears. To this end, they travel to Eden, a remote cabin in the woods, which is also the place where She had spent the previous summer with her son, while working on her dissertation about the gynocide that occurred under the guise of witch hunts in the 15th and 16th century. Yet, upon their arrival at Eden, He begins to see strange things, such as a deer with a stillborn fawn still partly within her. Undeterred, though, He continues the therapeutic exercises with his wife. However, their conversations become more intense with the passing of time, because of He’s resistance to the idea that She is healing or healed – as this would mean She is no longer disempowered and in need of He’s help and guidance. Meanwhile, his strange encounters continue, when during a walk he comes across a wounded fox that utters the words “chaos reigns.” And these words prove to be prophetic, when he discovers photographs of Nic and his autopsy report, as well as the research She has been busy working on. While the autopsy report indicates that Nic’s feet were slightly deformed, and while the photos reveal that She habitually put his shoes on the opposite feet, causing the deformity, her research into (and identification with) witches hints at the possibility that she may have done so out of sheer malevolence. After realizing what He knows,17 She knocks him unconscious, mutilates his genitals, and pins his leg to a lathe wheel. Although He manages to crawl away into a fox lair, he discovers an injured crow half buried, which starts crying out – despite his best efforts to silence it – until it gives his position away. At this point She approaches to inflict further harm on him. However, unable to reach him, She later experiences remorse and helps him back to the cabin. Here she imagines that she saw Nic climb up to the window-

17 It is equally possible though, that such deformity may have been congenital, and that She’s affinity to nature was such that, instead of perceiving it as a medical problem to be addressed and altered, she simply regarded it as an anomaly of nature that should be preserved.
sill, but did nothing to stop him, and hysterical and delirious, she proceeds to mutilate her own genitals. That night, the Three Beggars (the deer, the fox and the crow) appear during a hail-storm, and as per her prophecy – which further confirms her status as a witch – the death of someone is anticipated. While He tries to remove the lathe wheel She bolted to him in her earlier attack, she stabs him, but in the ensuing struggle he strangles her to death. He subsequently burns her body and leaves the cabin, struggling on a crutch back toward the road, through a dream-like landscape littered with the corpses of women. In the final scene of the film, while foraging for food in the woods, He looks up to see the ghosts of The Three Beggars, before He is overrun by countless women with blurred faces, as they make their way back to nature – in a reflection of She’s spiritual journey.

4.3. The problematic reception of Lars Von Trier’s *Antichrist* (2009)

Upon its release the film was not well-received. Indeed, premiering at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival, *Antichrist* received a special Anti-Award from the ecumenical jury, who protested against its ostensibly blatant “misogyny.” Even though this decision was met with great disdain from the director of the festival, who felt that the award bordered on censorship (Wong, 2011: 90), it generated a perception of the film which grew in momentum, and led to the film being rejected by much of the public and many critics. That is, although leading film critics from acclaimed publications scrutinized the film upon its release, as evinced in David Edelstein’s review for *New York Magazine*, Philip French’s review in *The Observer*, and Ryan Gilbey’s review for the *New Statesman*, it proved difficult

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18 It is not clear whether this is indeed a memory, or an unfortunate product of the discursive delusion to which she becomes subject; however, it is arguably more possible that it is the latter, on account of the critical stance of the cinematic narrative toward both patriarchal ideology and its capacity to inform the subjectivity of women in negative ways – even to the point of synthesizing prosthetic ‘memories’ of this sort.

19 They are also star constellations which He remembers encountering in her research, and which he sees in the night sky through the window, as he lies injured on the floor of the cabin.

20 A jury comprised of six members nominated by religious organizations SIGNIS and Interfilm annually (Ecumenical Jury 2012 Cannes Festival Press File).
for this cinematic work to shake off the mantle of perverse misogynist indulgence, with which it was bedecked at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival.

Edelstein’s article, published on 23 October 2009, and entitled “Female Trouble: Lars von Trier’s Highbrow Horror Show,” describes the film as “managing to revive an idea that Judeo-Christian teaching, the Enlightenment, and feminism have helped us to suppress: that misogyny is a sound religious position.” Furthermore, he claims that Antichrist stands to dissolve any doubts about Von Trier’s attitude toward the female sex and their place within society, through its outright testament to misogyny. In fact, he even goes so far as to suggest that the martyrdom of women is a trend in Von Trier’s films, regardless of whether they are innocent or “demonic” (Edelstein, 2009).

In turn, Philip French’s review, published on 26 July 2009, and entitled “Antichrist,” focuses more on the original sin and creation myth aspects of Antichrist; that is, the religious myths concerning the inclination of women to be destructive towards themselves and others, as highlighted throughout the film by She’s study of gynocide and various biblical symbols. Yet, French fails to develop this theme into a valorization of Von Trier’s film for its critical stance, implying instead that Von Trier’s tumultuous relationship with his own mother could be responsible for his representation of She as cold and uncaring enough to allow her child to fall from a window. And in this way French endorsed the idea of the film as painfully misogynistic; an idea which around the time was rapidly becoming de rigueur (French, 2009).

Ryan Gilbey’s review, published on 23 July, 2009, and also entitled “Antichrist,” begins more ironically by pointing out that Von Trier acknowledges a ‘researcher of misogyny’ in the film’s closing credits, and he is slightly kinder about Antichrist through his valorization of the sensitivity with which Von Trier portrayed female characters in his older films, such as Dogville. Yet, he fails to make the thematic connection between such older films and Antichrist, and continues to read the latter in a rather stereotypical fashion. In this regard, Gilbey’s focus surrounds the idea of Antichrist as
thematizing the disruption between order and anarchy, or rather, the logical male mind versus the irrational female body. Accordingly, logic is represented by He, who attempts to rescue his wife from herself and is mutilated for his troubles, while She represents the irrational female, who when overcome by grief and pain, can precipitate her own destruction and cause injury to those around her. He concludes by advancing the film as a “battle between beauty and horror” (Gilbey, 2009), in a way that does little to debunk the aura of misogyny that has come to surround it.

Although the above is only a small sample of the many reviews that have since been published regarding Antichrist – ranging from those written by experts to the brief responses of ‘armchair’ critics – for the most part, it is nevertheless quite representative of the popular reception of the film. That is, while the formal features of its cinematic aesthetic are sometimes valorized, the thematic elements of the narrative of Antichrist continue to be identified largely with an unpalatable misogyny. This can be seen, for instance, via reputable film review website, Rotten Tomatoes. For example, while Jeffrey Chen states that it is a film “built on a shallow premise designed to cheaply evoke feelings of disgust while elaborating on a simplistic theme” (Chen, 2009), Leigh Paatsch maintains that “this woman-hating, audience-baiting, nerve-grating tripe gets off to a rancid start, and then just rots away before your very eyes for 104 stupefying minutes” (Paatsch, 2009).

4.4. Reading Lars Von Trier’s Antichrist (2009) differently

However, what needs to be considered, is whether this is a fair appraisal of the film, or whether it is simply a reflection of the myopic aesthetic benchmark reserved for conventional cinema, and used so often by the public in general – and critics in particular – to devalue films that make more than a dilettantish nod in the direction of the avante-garde. There are varied opinions on what exactly it is that makes “good” film, and perhaps a brief exploration of these ‘cinematic codes’ may shed some light on why Antichrist has been met with such disdain (Thomson-Jones, 2008: 51).
It may be suggested that some of the factors that make a ‘good’ film, in mainstream cinematic terms, include aesthetics, interest, emotiveness, subtlety and the possibility of escapism. Aesthetics in film play a large role in the viewer’s reaction to what he/she is watching, and will, in turn, also impact upon the level of the viewer’s interest in the film. Characters and situations, and the ability to relate to them, as well as their ability to evoke an emotional response from the viewer, also affect the movie-goer’s attention and opinion. Subtlety of effect and escapism form part of the legacy of the film, which will remain with the viewer long after the screening. In these ways, films create pleasure (Jancovich, Reboli, Stringer & Willis, 2003: 181). Understandably, in many ways, Antichrist fails to meet these ‘requirements.’ Although it is an undeniably picturesque film (particularly the Prologue), the horrific nature of some of the subsequent imagery tends to disturb rather than interest viewers. The characters, too, are not likeable; while He is overbearing and patronizing, She at most times seems deeply disturbed. Importantly, there is a lack of subtlety involved. It was after all Von Trier’s aim to shock and horrify as much as possible in a short span of time, which in turn leaves little room for escapism from the harsh realities of everyday life, and engenders a legacy of bewilderment or contempt. And because the reasons for an experience of bewilderment – by definition – are hard to pin down, it is possible that the related contempt led to emphasis on the misogynistic overtones so thoroughly frowned upon by critics and the public alike (Goss, 2009: 118).

Yet, it is possible to view Von Trier’s Antichrist differently, in a way more resonant than dissonant with his earlier Golden Heart Trilogy, on account of its continued thematization of the problematic socio-cultural dynamics of patriarchy, in a manner akin to that which occurs in Breaking the Waves, The Idiots and Dancer in the Dark. Moreover, as will be discussed, Antichrist also moves beyond the Golden Heart Trilogy, insofar as it presents the first tentative allusions to the possibility that such patriarchal constructs can be challenged, through the formation of a counter-ideology, couched in terms of women’s mystical relationship with nature.
The defining characteristic of The Golden Heart Trilogy’s protagonists – respectively Bess, Karen and Selma – is that they all represent feminine figures who are almost Christ-like in terms of their goodness, faithfulness, kindness, etc. And their attributes remain discordant with the societies in which the three narratives unfold, dominated as they are by patriarchal discourses that exploit rather than valorize the women’s saintliness (Thomson, 2006: 208). As discussed in the previous chapter, Bess is caught between the two patriarchal discourses of the parish elders and Jan, and is not only damned by the former for subscribing to the latter, but also suffers horribly and is eventually killed through the latter. Similarly, Karen – distraught over the death of her child – falls under the sway of a charismatic young man and his bizarre group, only to be abandoned by them at the very moment when she remains faithful to them, such that she is obliged to endure, alone, a severe reprimand from her dominating husband after her return home. Selma, in turn, is not only the victim of the exploitative patriarchal attitudes of her landlord, but also sacrifices everything to save her son’s eyesight – including being put to death for a crime she did not commit (Žižek, 2009: 13).

Arguably, within Antichrist (2009), She, too, represents a character with a ‘golden heart,’ who is almost Christ-like in her willingness to share – via her research – the suffering of tortured women throughout history – rather than a demented wife and defective mother intent on spreading pain and grief. However, unlike the protagonists in the Golden Heart Trilogy, She in Antichrist is not a Christ-like figure who willingly dies for others, but is rather akin to the Christ who overturned the money-changers tables in the temple of Jerusalem (Lamb, 2011: 43). In other words, intuiting the oppressiveness of historical patriarchal discourses, and their contemporary therapeutic variants which surround her and inform her world, she responds not with passive acquiescence but with active (and growing) confrontation, after formulating a counter-ideology in terms of the idiom of witchcraft from Church lore. Interestingly, though, through doing so, She intimates not the evil nature of women, but rather that such inhibiting and patronizing patriarchal discourses are the ‘Anti-Christ,’ or the forces of
darkness that seek to undermine the Christ-like figures of women, such as those represented in the *Golden Heart Trilogy*.

That is, like the protagonists of the *Golden Heart Trilogy*, She in *Antichrist* is caught up between two patriarchal discourses. On the one hand, that of the ecclesiastical authorities of the Catholic Church, responsible for the witch hunts in the 15th and 16th centuries – which She researches for her dissertation – and, on the other hand, the contemporary patriarchal therapeutic discourse, which her husband employs to ‘heal’ her after the death of her son.

On the one hand, her study of gynocide therefore plays a significant role in the film, with the consequence that elaboration on its parameters is necessary at this point. The term, first used by authors Mary Daly and Andrea Dworkin in the 1970s, is similar in principle to the term ‘genocide,’ as it not only encompasses violence toward women, but also the destruction of the spirituality, morale, culture, language, sense of self and tradition of women (De Alba & Guzmán, 2010: 280). In short, gynocide can be defined as leading to the “systematic crippling, raping and/or death of women by men[;]…relentless violence perpetrated by the gender class men on the gender class women” (Caputi, 1987: 3). Caputi further adds that “under patriarchy, gynocide is the ongoing reality of life lived by women.” Of course, the strongest and most brutal historical evidence for this hails from the Middle Ages, when women accused of witchcraft were made to suffer enormously under gynocide, and in *Antichrist*, She undertakes significant research into this tragic history of gender oppression and abuse, which occurred under the patriarchal ecclesiastical auspices of the Catholic Church. In terms of this, witches were viewed as the antonym of ‘good’ women, largely because it was speculated that their “social, economic and sexual independence threatened patriarchal authority” (Burns, 2003: 90). To be labeled a witch, however, did not generally require any actual demonstration of magic or casting of spells; rather, being classified a heretic sufficed, and it was reserved for women who generally were

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middle-aged or older, poor and not native to the area in question (Barry, Hester & Roberts, 1998: 177). Witches were also said to possess traits disliked by the general public, such as quarrelsomeness, insolence, aggression and a bad reputation – traits which derived at times from their tendency to voice their opinions regarding their sexual matters and those of others (Oldridge, 2002: 94). Within this context, witches were arrested, tried, tortured and often put to death, because of the misogynistic ecclesiastical system of the time, as well as the patriarchal socio-cultural constructs rampant in the 15th and 16th centuries (Kors & Peters, 2001: 18). Indeed, methods of torture used upon suspected witches were some of the cruelest seen throughout history. Victims were routinely stretched on the rack until their legs and arms became dislocated, fingernails were torn out and eyes were gouged out (Roper, 2006: 49). Furthermore, and pertaining, perhaps, to sadistic sexual punishment, victims often had their breasts mangled with sharp iron forks, and, at worst, were brutally raped with red-hot irons (Guiley, 2008: 347). And, as though that was not enough, accused witches were in addition stripped of their property and any funds they possessed, which were then used to pay those responsible for their torture: their meals, travel costs, tools and assistants (Pavlac, 2009: 67).

On the other hand, He’s recourse to a patriarchal therapeutic discourse to ‘heal’ She emotionally and psychologically, after the death of her son, is also evidently a source of deep despair and anxiety for her. That is, after collapsing at her son’s funeral, She is institutionalized. However, before long, He insists on taking over her treatment – even though She is clearly hesitant – and He argues that, even though therapists are not supposed to treat their own family, no one could possibly know as much about her as he does. As She spirals further into fear and anxiety, He attempts various methods of containing her grief, such as teaching her how to breathe quietly and calmly (inhaling and exhaling in five second increments), and reminding her that her grief pattern will move through stages, and improve over time. Indeed, like a parent explaining a problem to a child, He creates a diagram of She’s mind through which he tries to capture the real source of her fear and anxiety. Together with
this, he constantly reminds She that the only way for her to deal with her grief is to expose herself to it, rather than to hope it will pass. The over-bearing nature of He’s patriarchal therapeutic discourse is further evinced when, on their way to Eden to expose She to her fear, He refuses to listen to her when she complains that she cannot walk any further, and that the ground is burning. Instead he bluntly dismisses her claims, chastising her when she chooses to run to their cabin, rather than expose herself to the walk she had earlier feared would be ‘difficult.’ In an attempt to regain control of this situation, He then sets She the task of walking, in front of the cabin, from one stone to another, forcing her upon completion to walk on the grass. Through getting her to follow his orders – albeit tremulously – He feels She exhibits small signs of progress, and He patronizingly congratulates her for this. Yet, later, He begins to reject She’s growing happiness and health – which has begun to re-empower her. And, when she subsequently tells him that she is cured, and moreover happy again – he refuses to acknowledge it, saying nothing in return, because his confirmation of this would allow her to slip from his patriarchal grasp.

Unlike the protagonists in the *Golden Heart Trilogy*, however, She identifies with neither of the above patriarchal discourses, but rather chooses a “line of flight” (Deleuze cited in Bogue, 2007: 130) involving opposition to He’s therapeutic patriarchal discourse that is couched in identification with the witches who suffered during the gynocide she researched. That is, identification not with their ostensible ‘evil,’ but rather with their mystical relationship with nature.

In some of He and She’s initial exchanges, it is possible to witness her growing opposition to him. This begins already in their conversation in the hospital, where on two occasions He criticizes She’s doctor for being too young and inexperienced to treat her. When He complains that her dose of medication is too high, she begs him to “trust others to be smarter than you.” Similarly, when He informs her that he will be taking over her treatment, even though She believes her doctor is correct about her grief pattern being atypical, she comments sarcastically, “But you’re so much smarter than
him, aren’t you?” – albeit to little effect. She then also opposes him, once she is under his care, by her response to him concerning her growing fear – He is convinced that there is a particular something that frightens her. She asks him why she cannot just be afraid, without a “definite object,” but He simply insists, again, that she needs to be exposed to that which she is afraid of. Indeed, when she does choose to confide in him, recalling her experience in Eden where she heard Nic crying and crying, only to find him happily playing in an outside room, and then realizing the cry was coming from the nature all around her, He tries to explain the experience away rationally. Patronizingly, he tells her that she simply experienced something that she could not explain, leading to her deep-seated fear of Eden. However, because the event was precipitated by her deep connection (as a woman) with nature, and her ontological predisposition to maternal care, She becomes angry at He’s reductionism, and lashes out with, “You shouldn’t have come here, you are just so damn arrogant! But this may not last. Ever thought of that?” The latter part of her statement, arguably, adumbrates the revolutionary events that are to come.

Her above sentiments derive from the fact that, although Eden frightened her earlier, because of the brutal simplicity of life that became apparent to her there, it also ultimately heals her, through helping her to let go of her emotional clinging to the past. This occurs as the constellation of the Three Beggars (the deer, the fox and the crow) draws closer. During this time, she learns to accept that infant mortality is a tragic everyday reality (as evinced by the deer with the dead fawn still attached to it), and that life is chaotic (a fact to which the talking fox bears witness), but that the will to survive is indomitable (which is represented through the half-buried crow in the fox’s lair that refuses to die). He, on the other hand, does not learn from the visions of the animals, but simply construes them as ‘crazy dreams.’

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22 This is also evinced by the chick which falls from its nest onto an ant heap, where it squirms as it is bitten by the insects, until an eagle swoops down, plucks it up, and tears it to pieces – all of which She witnesses alongside her husband shortly after their arrival at the cabin.
Indeed, He seems increasingly uneasy in nature. On their first night in Eden, He is unsettled by the loud noises on the roof of the cabin, while She sleepily informs him that it is just the “stupid acorns” falling on the roof, and that he should try to get some sleep. He does so, but lets his hand dangle from the open window, only to awaken in the morning to find it covered in ticks, which he clumsily removes in a state of mild panic. The following day, they discuss the acorns, and She’s connection to nature is further evinced by her description of the falling acorns as the “the cry of all things that are to die.” She attempts to explain to him her view, that of the hundreds of acorns to fall, only one or two will grow to be trees – with the others just “falling and dying” (perhaps like her son). Her deep realization, however, is quickly dampened by his opinion that “acorns don’t cry,” and that her fear has distorted her reality. She, in an allusion to both her growing connection with nature, and her resistance to him via her counter-ideology based on witchcraft, reverently advances that “Nature is Satan’s Church.” This goes some way toward explaining why her previous summer in Eden had made her dissertation of decreasing importance to her; evidence for which occurs later when He discovers how her research clearly deteriorated over time, to the point of becoming indecipherable. The point that emerges is that, while her dissertation was a means of opposing him (and the patriarchal discourses he represents), He’s physical absence and emotional distance from Eden during the time in which She was writing – and the corresponding physical presence and emotional proximity of nature with which she forged a connection – made the formulation of such a counter-ideology less imperative. Conversely, his physical presence and emotional proximity in Eden after Nic’s death, and his tendency to reduce the sacred elements of nature through rationalization, make the formulation of such a counter-ideology more urgent – which leads She to identify once more with the witches she studied. Perhaps intuiting his imminent loss of control over her, in a desperate last bid He suggests a role playing exercise, in which She becomes Reason and He becomes Nature. Yet, in the middle of the game, he redefines Nature as cruel human nature instead of the natural environment, which causes her
to subtly shift Reason from rationality to the rationale of male dominance. She then, in terms of the latter, presents him with a series of negative descriptions of women, as advanced through patriarchal discourses. She proclaims that women do not control their own bodies but that nature does, and advances this as the inherent evil of women. At this point, perhaps sensing that something has gone awry in his role playing game, He tries to defuse the situation by telling her that many women died simply because they were women, not because they were evil. But then, during their sexual encounter which follows, She begs him to hit her, declaring that if he does not, he does not love her. When He refuses and responds with, “Well, then, maybe I don’t love you,” She, in turn, runs outside and begins masturbating under a tree – in an embodiment of the patriarchal myth of the hysterical woman saturated with sexuality.  

Before long He joins her, and in one of the most pivotal scenes of the film, they make love amidst an assemblage of clawing hands and arms that have emerged amongst the roots of the tree (but which were absent when She was alone). Arguably, this symbolizes the patriarchal discourses gaining purchase on her once more, after her attempt to free herself from their influence through her counter-ideology. Indeed, from this point onwards, She becomes all the things that men criticize women for being. Fearing that He will leave her on the basis of her possible involvement in the deforming of her son’s feet (the evidence of which is discovered in photos of She and Nic the previous summer), she becomes vengefully hyper-emotional, knocks He unconscious, mutilates his genitals, and bolts a lathe-wheel through his leg. Regaining consciousness, and managing to crawl to a fox-hole, He attempts to hide inside it, but she soon seeks him out and attempts to harm him further. By nightfall, however, she begins to feel what appears to be remorse, and helps him back to the cabin. Here, She lays her head on his chest and begins to weep, but after only a brief moment, raises her head

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23 This is discussed in more detail below.

24 In doing so, she reflects the prejudice against women first communicated by William Congreve, in his 1697 poem The Mourning Bride, namely the idea that hell has no fury like a woman scorned – a phrase often erroneously attributed to William Shakespeare.
and with a deadpan expression delivers more patriarchal clichés concerning the evil nature of women; first proclaiming that “a crying woman is a scheming woman,” and following this with a description of women as “false in legs, false in thighs, false in breasts, teeth, hair and eyes.”25 And then, with the same calm expression, she takes a pair of scissors and brutally performs a clitoridectomy on herself. The latter is important, not simply because it is the most visceral and disturbing part of the film, but also because it evinces the extent to which patriarchal discourses are coursing through her, causing her not just to demean her gender verbally, but also to mutilate herself physically – in a mirror image of recent patriarchal ‘medical’ or therapeutic practice.

As Michel Foucault reminds us in The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality, Volume 1, one of the four central anchorage points of the deployment of sexuality, which emerged in the 18th/19th century, was that of the ‘hysterical woman.’26 In terms of the “hysterization of women’s bodies” the “feminine body was analyzed – qualified and disqualified – as being thoroughly saturated with sexuality [and thereby]…integrated into the sphere of medical practices, by reason of a pathology intrinsic to it” (Foucault 1998: 104). Accordingly, hysteria, believed to derive from the womb, had two predominant “cures,” namely induced orgasms and clitoridectomies (or female circumcision). Physicians of the time, should they be presented with a patient suffering from hysteria, would take one of these two routes. In the preferable scenario, the patient would be given a “pelvic examination,” during which the doctor would stimulate her genitals until an orgasm was achieved (Keesling, 2004: 158). Over time, the pelvic examination was replaced with the use of the vibrator – invented by Dr. Joseph Mortimer Granville, who felt physicians spent too much time stimulating the female sexual organ (Maines, 2001: 3). In the worst case scenario, a clitoridectomy (removal of the clitoris), was

26 The other three anchorage points were the masturbating child, the perverse adult and the Malthusian couple (Foucault 1998: 105)
performed. This surgical process, founded by Dr. Isaac Baker-Brown, was said to be a far more successful cure for hysteria, as induced orgasms were understood as potentially encouraging further excitation in a woman (Fennel, 1996: 65), rather than leading to tranquility.

Thus, She’s self-mutilation in Antichrist serves as an indication of how she is once again operating under the influence of He’s patriarchal therapeutic discourses. Yet, in the denouement of the film it is also clear that He – and the discourses he represents - have not attained a complete victory, for as she regains consciousness, she realizes he is trying to free himself, and she attacks again, stabbing him in the back with a pair of scissors. And even though, after a brief struggle, her aggression abates, He responds to her prior attack by strangling her to death. However, although he kills her and burns her body, in the epilogue of the film, He is overrun by countless women who are returning to nature, women whose blurred faces make them representative of “every woman,” such that the narrative ends in an expression of hope and possible revolution, rather than simply with martyrdom.

In this way it may be argued that She is indeed also a Christ-like figure similar to Bess, Karen and Selma in The Golden Heart Trilogy. While, on the one hand, she constitutes a martyr whose death miraculously draws other women toward Nature, on the other hand, because of her education, and associated insights into the injustices carried out against her gender, she also fits the role of the Christ who became so angered in the temple in Jerusalem, which he found to be filled with livestock and money-changers, that he overturned the tables in fury (Palestini, 2011: 95). In the latter regard, She does not always respond with docile subordination, but also later with violent retaliation, insofar as she not only mutilates He’s genitals, but also attempts to pin him down – and the discourses he represents – by inserting a rod into his leg attached to a lathe wheel. In many respects, she may perhaps be likened to someone fighting to free herself from an ocean of discourse in which she is drowning. She occasionally surfaces and obtains clarity about her position, and responds critically (and sometimes violently), but the power of the discursive ocean is such that it soon drags her under again. Or again,
she might be likened to someone caught up in an array of discursive nets, cast upon her by elusive (historical) male assailants she can’t see. She occasionally wrenches herself free, sees the vague outline of one of her attackers, and claws at his face, but more nets are soon cast on her again, confusing her and rendering her blind and powerless once more.

The above is not meant to imply a deficit on the part of women to understand and change their circumstances, but is rather framed in an understanding of the role of discourse in the formation of subjectivity, and the often great difficulty of repositioning oneself in relation to the discursive momentum of one’s era. Seen from this perspective, *Antichrist* is not really the intensely misogynistic film that critics have made it out to be. Rather, it is similar, thematically-speaking, to Von Trier’s earlier *Golden Heart Trilogy*, in terms of its sympathetic portrayal of women, and in its thematization of patriarchal cruelty.
Conclusion

Von Trier’s *Antichrist*, along with the films of his *Golden Heart Trilogy*, namely *Breaking the Waves*, *The Idiots*, and *Dancer in the Dark*, have readily been grouped together with those films distinguished as ‘art’ cinema, and it is precisely for this reason that their political orientation has been questioned. As David Bordwell explains, in his “The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice,” although contemporary ‘art’ cinema developed in relation to the critical cinema and neorealist cinema of, respectively, Eisenstein and Rossellini, the subsequent demands of the market in the latter part of the 20th century have transformed their texture. These economic demands have resulted in a dilution of the deeply *avant-garde* elements in ‘art’ cinema, and its replacement with an array of formulaic elements, which now readily allow a film to be identified as belonging to ‘art’ cinema. In other words, ‘art’ cinema is now no longer marked by its transgression of forms, but rather by its adherence to a formula. To be sure, the ‘art’ cinema formula is different from the mainstream formula, but it is has proved no less effective in its reduction of ‘art’ cinema to a commodity for consumption by a specific segment of the market – namely the ‘art’ cinema audience. In this regard, Bordwell maintains that “we can usefully consider the ‘art cinema’ as a distinct mode of film practice,” possessing its own “implicit viewing procedures;” the most important of which is that, when in doubt, one should read for “maximum ambiguity” (Bordwell, 1999: 716 - 721).

Yet, this raises the issue of whether such ‘art’ films can, in the contemporary era, be political in orientation, or whether they are condemned to remain primarily apolitical commercial-aesthetic exercises that – under the threat of financial failure – can only gesture in the direction of the transgressive, and allude to a hallowed cinematic past in which formal and thematic ‘statements’ were permissible. And in relation to Lars Von Trier’s work, the analogous question arises of whether the
above four films constitute for him platforms for “opportunistic showmanship,” or whether they are in actual fact “well-meaning films with humanistic messages” (Tapper, 2003: 75).

Although these are difficult questions which resist definitive answers, one can alternatively not ask them in the first place, and focus instead on the political meaning that audiences can create in relation to the films they watch. As theorized by Stuart Hall, there are three methods of ‘reading’ films, namely dominant, negotiated or oppositional readings. While dominant readings imply the viewer’s acceptance of, and agreement with, the dominant ideology in which the film is produced, in turn, negotiated readings suggest that the viewer “fits into the dominant ideology but needs to inflect it for his or her own social position”. Finally, oppositional readings signify that the reader is in direct opposition with the dominant ideology (Hall cited in Castenell & Pinar, 1993: 109), insofar as they reject and decry what is presented to them on screen. Arguably, negotiated readings are the most politically profitable, because while dominant or oppositional readings involve a subscription to or a rallying around a particular existing conceptual position, negotiated readings involve a creative inflection of visual material, in a way that can lead to new thought. That is, because metaphors are notoriously slippery, even their appropriation in terms of an existing conceptual position tends to creatively extend the parameters of that position, almost by default, leading to the emergence of new questions, and the forging of tentative connections between previously disparate domains of ideas and practices.

Considered in this light, the preceding chapters in which Lars Von Trier’s films Breaking the Waves, The Idiots, Dancer in the Dark, and Antichrist have been discussed, have all involved such a negotiated reading of the material – a production of political meaning in relation to the images and metaphors of their respective narratives. However, arguably, this task was made relatively easy by virtue of the orientation of narratives, which in so many respects evince a deep sympathy for the plight of their female protagonists. And because of this, there exists the strong possibility that these films –
although undoubtedly ‘art’ cinema – are not culturally apolitical, but rather, when considered in unity, comprise an important site of contemporary resistance to mainstream ‘backlash’ ideas of femininity. The key, as already pointed out, is to see them as gravitating around the same issue, rather than as discordant and contradictory.

The self-sacrifice and suffering of women, as represented in Von Trier’s *Golden Heart Trilogy*, as well as in *Antichrist*, is an age-old problem that derives from the notion that women *should* dedicate their lives to their men and children. In Western (capitalist) culture, there has for a long time existed an idea that “women are…placed structurally closer to the natural functions of human existence in a way that allows dominant males to escape to a transcendent public world” (Eaton & Lorentzen, 2003: 20).

In other words, due to the very fact that women are the gender capable of reproduction, it is demanded that they give up their own “transcendent public lives” for the lives of their families. Yet, despite this, the significant contribution of women’s labour is not yet being recognized as the basis of the existing capitalist economic system (Huan, 2010: 146). To further elaborate, without the meta-industrial tasks performed by non-monetised labourers such as mothers, the natural cycles needed to ensure regenerative and sustainable futures would cease to exist, which is exactly why the role of women in society cannot be understated. Without someone raising children, there will be no hope of a workforce for future industrial and economic endeavours. Indeed, it is also meta-industrial labourers who know best how to “instil social justice and autonomy with ecological sustainability” (Salleh, 2004 cited in Huan, 2010: 145 – 147).

The female gender suffers from a great injustice. Women are expected to look after families and to be sensitive and nurturing. Furthermore, they are expected to do so, so as to allow room for men to do the things that they wish to do. At the same time, they may not rebel or complain, or revel in sexual pleasure, as these are indulgences reserved for men (Block & Greenberg, 2002: 34). Hence, a new wave of feminism, which advances the proper appreciation of the role of women in the economy,
ecological sustainability and the creation of the labour-force in society – termed eco-feminism – is emerging.

Arguably, eco-feminism is admirable for its incisive critical analyses of the dominant discourses in our contemporary era; however, it is not without its loopholes. Unlike its predecessors – namely Second (and Third) Wave feminism – eco-feminism pays less attention to film, and to those cinematic representations of women still in concord with the ‘backlash’ phenomenon, such that this constitutes something of a blind-spot for them. As such, when films such as Von Trier’s Breaking the Waves, The Idiots, and Dancer in the Dark represent the manner in which women have been dominated by discursive patriarchal constructs, and when Antichrist thematizes feminist revolution against such domination – based, moreover, on a deep spiritual connection between nature and women, which imbues the latter with transformative power – eco-feminists should take note.

Women cannot deny the patriarchal ideology which surrounds them, and they ignore at their own peril its power to inform their subjectivity. Yet, while rapid and radical change of their situation is unlikely, incremental transformation begins whenever women choose how they will receive and respond to the patriarchal discourses of their world. And as long as cinema remains a privileged stage upon which patriarchal prejudices are paraded, it will remain a valuable site for feminist contestation of, and negotiation with, the status quo.
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