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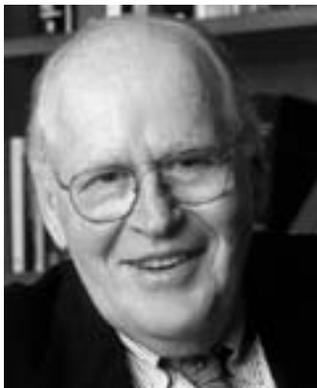
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## Opinion

*Reel Life*

### Dancer in the Dark

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Lars von Trier, a highly successful Danish television producer, filmmaker, and cinema rebel, is full of psychological contradictions. The life story he tells journalists could have been written for the movies and is only slightly less melodramatic than his films. His Danish parents met in Sweden, where they were escaping the Nazis—his father because he was Jewish, his mother because she had been in the resistance. Both parents—devout atheists and nudists—dragged their children to nudist camps. His mother, a lifelong communist, told him on her deathbed that his deceased Jewish father was not his biologic father. Von Trier spent 9 years on a therapist's couch, “coming up with one enormity after another about my mother and the way she let me down” and struggling to make sense of his childhood without knowing that crucial family secret. He claims that his mother also revealed his biologic father's identity and urged that he seek him out. He so did after his mother's death, and the man wanted nothing to do with him.

No real artist—and von Trier is one—can do without his personal taste. Film certainly can be and is always to

some extent a collective endeavor. But it cannot be leaderless. The auteur in particular is alone in his moment of creativity even though he may dream that his muse is the others. When roused from that dream to full wakefulness, the artist's ego usually takes over.

Von Trier says that a film should be "like a rock in one's shoe." By that standard, his two films that are best known in America, "Breaking the Waves" and "Dancer in the Dark," are certainly successes. Both have as their protagonists eccentric and victimized women—direct descendants of Jane Campion's mute Ada, who spoke to us through her piano.

Like Picasso, von Trier has an extra-large ego, and his art has a sadistic streak. Hard as it may be to accept, sadism can be an important element of creativity. Many celebrated filmmakers, including Hitchcock, thrived on a carefully titrated dosage of sadism—often against women (as in "Psycho" and "The Birds"). Hitchcock's hallmark is the sense of cruel danger lurking behind the commonplace. The sadistic creators of such art push characters and audience beyond the limits of their psychic security system; one either turns away or accepts the "rock in one's shoe."

Though von Trier is neither Picasso nor Hitchcock, he is one of Europe's most provocative and adventurous filmmakers. When "Dancer in the Dark" won the Palme D'Or at Cannes to the boos, cat whistles, and jeers of the audience, von Trier got just what he wanted. His films do not pander to escapism or to the audiences' settled expectations about entertainment. In "forcing the truth out of [his] characters" he makes them and his audience suffer. But surely it was not "truth" that the Cannes jury saw in "Dancer in the Dark." They gave von Trier the prize because they felt the full force of his quirky personal artistic taste and welcomed his assault on their jaded sensibilities. "Dancer in the Dark" is a film that is also a critique, an all-out assault on cosmeticized movies that is intent on offending the consumers of glamorized, adrenalized, beautified film.

The first assault is leveled at his heroine, Selma, played by the Icelandic rock star Bjork. Selma escapes from the horrors of her reality into the saccharine fantasy world of "The Sound of Music." Selma is a selfless and childlike saint, and in the course of the film she will suffer and die for her son.

Robert Wise's "The Sound of Music," which the critic Pauline Kael described as capable of turning people "into emotional and aesthetic imbeciles," infects "Dancer in the Dark." Von Trier's heroine Selma, who has few material possessions, keeps singing "My Favorite Things." The New York Times ran a waggish headline: "From the Voice of Dogma Comes the Sound of Music." But that voice is filled with withering irony. "The Sound of Music" belongs to the class of films that von Trier and his heroine Bjork will here decosmeticize.

Von Trier begins by literally depriving Bjork of any cosmetics, and by making her wear thick, ugly glasses. His handheld camera cruelly exaggerates every imperfection in his actress' face and complexion. The Bjork one sees on posters in the windows of music stores is unrecognizable as von Trier's Selma. Von Trier takes us beyond the ugliness to an unglamorous beauty that becomes visible on the screen.

Bjork was already an international rock star before her role in "Dancer in the Dark." She had done it all in music—from recording folk songs at age 11 to punk rock to atonal rock to Icelandic jazz to the soul-jazz of her MTV hit, "Human Behavior." Von Trier could not have found a better collaborator for a musical; she is a rebel in her own right, quite willing—indeed eager—to test the limits of convention, musical or otherwise. Together they have made a movie musical that mocks the genre at every turn. But it is a strange kind of mockery: absurd, ironic, and far from dismissive.

"Dancer in the Dark," for many reasons, including its style, is more like an opera than the musical it mocks. But, in fact, it does not comfortably belong to any genre—which is what one has come to expect of a von Trier film. His original idea was to have no transitions: Bjork would just break into song. But he settled for the device of having the music and dance sequences as the moments when Selma escapes from painful reality. The dancing is consistent with the inventive style of the film. It flows naturally out of an elaboration of Bjork's spontaneous

movements and body language rather than the choreographer's independent invention. In striking contrast to these emotionally expressive moments, which Selma creates as her musical, there are recurring rehearsals for the role of Maria in an amateur production of "The Sound of Music." There, Selma is pathetically wooden, unable to act, unable to sing or dance, and increasingly unable to see. Each rehearsal is an exercise in humiliation.

"Dancer in the Dark" is a unique achievement, but not a classic that will serve as a model for future film musicals. Directors may learn from it and be emboldened by it, but I doubt that even von Trier and Bjork could or would make another. They reportedly fought for 3 years in a titanic clash of egos, and the enterprise came close to collapse and bankruptcy. They parted on less than friendly terms and Bjork refused to join von Trier on the stage when the awards were handed out at Cannes.

Bjork, as von Trier now tells the story, is not an actress. She lived and experienced the role of Selma and could not turn it on and off; he had to keep the cameras rolling for hours while she stayed in character rather than filming for minutes with breaks and retakes. The fact that she was living the role made her obstinate and difficult to direct. But it also is what gives power to von Trier's absurd plot, and keeps the story from simply careening into farce. A young European woman told me that she sat in the theater transported and weeping, moved by this film as by nothing before. Although I did not share her reaction, I think I understand it. "Dancer in the Dark" is preposterous because it uses old movie clichés, and yet it is deeply moving because of Bjork's incredible performance.

Selma, a single mother and an immigrant from communist Czechoslovakia, is going blind; her son has inherited the same condition and will go blind too unless she can pay for an expensive operation. But Selma cannot tell anyone she is going blind, she cannot ask anyone for money, and the doctor in this melodrama does not believe in using his surgical skills to save a child's sight without being paid in advance. When, after unbelievable hardship, she has saved enough for the operation, her kind neighbor, a policeman, takes advantage of her blindness to steal her money. Then in a scene both unbelievable and yet unbelievably powerful, the guilt-ridden policeman, who doesn't have the courage to commit suicide, forces Bjork to kill him to get her money back. For this "crime," which no one understands but Selma and the audience, American justice will sentence her to the gallows. This happens in a surreal courtroom scene, where the diminutive Joel Grey, bringing with him memories of "Cabaret," makes an unexpected but brilliant appearance in the most telling production number in the show.

Everything goes wrong for Selma in life and in that courtroom. She escapes into her beloved musical genre, and all the otherwise grim participants in the trial begin to dance to the tune she sings. It sounds farcical, and yet Bjork and Grey make one feel the pathos—not a pathos of reality but the pathos stored in our screen memories of all those musicals that von Trier is mocking.

This melodrama does not stop in the courtroom. We follow Selma to prison, where she is befriended by a woman guard. Selma has left her twice-earned money at the clinic where her son is to have his operation. Saving his sight will complete her only purpose in life. But her uncomprehending friends discover where the money is and plan to use it to pay a good lawyer to save her from execution. With all their sensible calculations about her best interests, they are ready to destroy the person they hope to save. Uncertain of the outcome, Selma sings and dances her *via dolorosa* to the gallows accompanied by the guard. The narrative moves inevitably to her execution with every hope of clemency failing. Then, in the moment before she dies—the vision of hope—her friend and coworker Kathy breaks into the execution chamber to hand Selma her son's eyeglasses; he has had a successful operation and no longer needs them. A moment of joy and transcendence passes before the trap door opens. Von Trier's screenplay is a string of clichés that draws its pathos from those very clichés—not from real life but from the medium it mocks.

The emotional power that makes people weep in "Dancer in the Dark" comes not from its truth but from its art. We weep most of all because Bjork, either because she was inspired or was forced by von Trier, gives a performance unlike any other I have ever seen.