

PREFACE

POSTCRITIQUE

This book examines the late work of Lars von Trier, the cycle of four films he made in the decade after his clinical depression of late 2006 through early 2007, through primary-source research (archival materials, interviews, scripts, and official statements), close analysis of the films, and synthesis from a range of cultural contexts. Much has been written about the reception of von Trier's films, which is often skewed by controversies stoked by the director himself, as well as his working methods on set—the imposition of constraints, the handheld camera following the action, the “liberation” of actors by forcing them to try out different interpretations of a scene, and so on. Far less has been written about the brainstorming, incubating, and writing stages, as well as what genetic critics call the “avant-textes”—the author's (or, in this case, the auteur's) notes, statements of intention, sketches, drafts, shooting scripts, consultations, research materials, and hypotexts in general, in addition to a rich array of paratexts.¹ Hence, one of my aims is to shift the understanding of von Trier's work toward a sort of preproduction history: a study of artistic development and the creative processes employed by it, including the inspirations, collaborations, and material conditions of his practice. During the last decade, these have changed considerably. Publicized as the nearly unfiltered product of—and therapy for—his depression, *Antichrist* (2009) epitomized the highly Romantic (even Faustian) approach to the creative process that he claims to have used for years, in which he wrote in self-isolation for a week or two of intoxicated frenzy. Beginning with *Melancholia* (2011), he shifted to a dialogic and

dialectical methodology in which he brainstormed and wrote with collaborators, a process reflected in the “digressionist” form of the last two films. My approach shifts accordingly, from textual comparisons of notes and scripts that reveal the development of *Antichrist* to an analysis that liberally interpolates interviews with the various makers of the last three films.

My methodology also concurs with the postcritical turn that attempts to find means of interpretation venturing beyond a “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Paul Ricoeur) or “paranoid” reading (Eve Sedgwick) that informs much of the commentary on von Trier. Sedgwick, for example, points out the value of a “reparative” impulse, one that is “additive and accretive,” aiming “to assemble and confer plenitude.”² Rather than treating archival materials with distrust, or looking for what is concealed, I have chosen to trust my sources, to follow the grain, the visible signs and “watermarks” (Ann Laura Stoler), with the aim of interpreting carefully, commonsensically, and comparatively while attempting to resolve or explain contradictions.³ Rather than intervention, my aim is elucidation, through description and analysis of the origins, influences, circumstances of production, paratexts, ideas, and affects of the films together with the films themselves. Risking credibility, I quote the eponymous antihero of *The House That Jack Built* (2018), who pontificates that “the material does the work,” that it “has a kind of will of its own,” and that following that will produces the most efficacious results. While reading in this fashion a large folder consisting of von Trier’s notes, fragments, and research materials for *Antichrist*, a fascinating and rich metanarrative emerged: of how a transparently autobiographical psychodrama about a male anxiety patient with an irrational fear of nature developed into the film that shocked, offended, and polarized Cannes in 2009. Along the same lines, the contents of a folder archived at Zentropa with the label “Director’s Intentions” I have taken as just that—as manifesto-like statements von Trier wrote prior to each of the films that provide insights into those films, together with commentary from interviews with a range of practitioners including cinematographer Manuel Alberto Claro, cowriter Jenle Hallund, assistant director Anders Refn, story supervisor Vinca Wiedemann, sound designer and composer Kristian Eidnes Andersen, personal assistants Katrine Sahlstrøm and Emilie Spliid Pearce, producer Louise Vesth, and writer-director Lars von Trier. Additionally, I bring a range of critical contexts to the films and these materials, including genre studies, film-philosophy, ecocritical perspectives, and the postcinematic.

FROM TRILOGIES TO DUOLOGIES

This method has yielded revelations that revise several ingrained critical assumptions about the person and practice of Lars von Trier, including my own. My first book on Lars von Trier was organized to reflect his grouping of his films into trilogies, a performative auteurist practice he adapted from Ingmar Bergman, and I originally envisioned this book to focus on the “depression trilogy,” the designation that fans, critics, and scholars have given to *Antichrist*, *Melancholia*, and *Nymphomaniac* (2013–2014).⁴ Any trilogy is to a greater or lesser extent an auteurist construction, but early in the series of interviews I conducted from June 2018 through fall 2019, it became apparent that the “depression trilogy” was a fantasy created and shared by fans and critics. When I approached von Trier, Claro, Wiedemann, Hallund, and others about the designation, they were bemused, then quickly dismissive. When I asked von Trier what he thought of the notion, he laughingly noted that since he has been depressed much of his life, it “could fit all my films.” When I interjected that he had “always made a point of . . .,” he finished my sentence with “of having trilogies,” before quipping, in reference to the failure of the third installment of the USA trilogy, “Washington,” to materialize: “But I’m also an expert at making trilogies with only two films.”⁵ Similarly, Claro, his cinematographer since 2010, observed that von Trier has shifted “from trilogies to two films. To Two-logies.”⁶ Wiedemann, who has known him since film school and served as his amanuensis and script consultant for *Melancholia* and *Nymphomaniac*, explained that she has “always” seen his movies as “coming in couples, like twins,” a pattern that has played out since *Riget* (*The Kingdom*, 1994 and 1997).⁷ From this perspective, the Gold Heart “trilogy” is really a pair (*Breaking the Waves*, 1996, and *Dancer in the Dark*, 2000) plus *Idioterne* (*The Idiots*, 1998), which is remembered primarily as something else—as Dogme #2, a radically transgressive, performative ensemble experiment that enacted or perhaps parodied the spirit of Dogme 95 itself, than for its self-sacrificing female protagonist, Karen. “What always happens,” in Wiedemann’s view,

is that he takes a theme and he tries to reinvent the theme or expand on it and . . . but also . . . it has to do with the feeling that he’s not finished with it. . . . to replicate . . . because it’s easier. So you have to get through this crisis before you then invent something completely new. So on *Manderley*, I believe

it was very obvious that, I mean there was not enough new to it. I mean, it was uninspired. And I feel that [von Trier made] *The House That Jack Built* . . . kind of to make two testaments.”⁸

Apparently, von Trier has become more comfortable with acknowledging this strategy. Accordingly, *Antichrist* and *Melancholia*, which are similar in their opening prologues, operative elements, and virtuosic cinematic flourishes, constitute a “depression duology.” *Nymphomaniac* and *The House That Jack Built*, however, as Claro stressed in my interview with him in June 2018, were born out of a rebellion against what he came to regard as *Melancholia*’s “popcorn film” elements and classical aesthetic flourishes and an urge to experiment with a new transmedial and essayistic form von Trier called “Digressionism.” In fact, the developmental process of the two most recent films may have had less to do with his depression than the conditions surrounding his recovery, a pursuit of sobriety, and the joys of reading long philosophical novels (by Marcel Proust, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Thomas Mann, and Hermann Broch, among other classic European authors), together with collaborations at the conception and writing phases. *Antichrist* and *Melancholia* had returned to cinema in the grand style; *Nymphomaniac* and *The House That Jack Built* were deliberately “ugly,” talky films about intensely driven characters, compelled by sexuality and violence. And while expressing and reflecting on von Trier’s experience of depression and anxiety, *Antichrist* and *Melancholia* were transmedial experiments directly inspired by his work on Wagner’s Ring cycle. Alternating Dogme-style realism with a sublime expressionism, both opened with brilliantly stylized prologues or preludes set to classical music. Finally, while *Nymphomaniac* and *The House That Jack Built* were also, arguably, about psychological disorders—sex addiction and psychopathy—they are equally, perhaps chiefly, “testament” films about the female and male principles at their extreme limits, as masochistic hypersexuality and sadistic violence, respectively.