

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background Study

1.1.1 Danish Cinematography and Lars von Trier

The first Danish filmmaking company was founded in 1906 during the silent film era. Later it was successful for creating a great number of historical and meretricious films. The meretricious films were mostly based on German or European fictions and dramas which were relative to commitment of crime or adultery, conscience condemnation and forgiveness, etc. There are servants, performers and ordinary people in different social classes who have suffered huge disasters in the film world.

Besides, “happy ending” was not the Danish’s favorite. On the contrary, they preferred great tragedy as the ending of the film. Therefore, most of the Danish films at that time were immersed in pessimistic atmosphere. Additionally, after World War I, there were much of fantasy films in Denmark. It indicated the occurrence of German Expressionism in Denmark

In 1914, this kind of Danish film created a sketch for the future film style. It has made hussy and kissing become essential ingredients in the future Hollywood film. The hussy kissing in screen was originally treated as offenses to the public. However, it had been widely accepted by the public before World War I. (Sadoul, Georges. *North European and Italian cinema* <<http://hk.cl2000.com/?/video/film/dsyj/world/wen-9.shtml>> Nov. 12, 2005).

However, the early golden age of Danish film had ended after World War I due to the born of sound films. It was the limit of Danish language that reduced the international popularity of Danish films (Stevenson 2002: 191).

Later, According to Stevenson (2003: 25-28), a group of angry young American filmmakers led a movement called “The American Underground”, or “New American Cinema” in 1961. Von Trier was affected by the idea of the American Underground. It pioneered the technique of shaky hand-held camera combined with improvised acting. Thirty-four years later, these two requests became the main ingredient of Dogme 95 that was led by Lars von Trier in 1995. There was another movement closely connected to New American Cinema. It was the “Direct Cinema”, also called the “Living Cinema”. The Direct Cinema movement was focused on documentary film. It tried to deemphasize the importance of director and emphasized the importance of the cameraman. In Direct Cinema, the cameraman is the most important person to guide the subject matter. As Stevenson mentioned in his book (2003: 29), “Direct cinema used the camera as a silent observer that allowed people to reveal themselves in unguarded moments while forgetting about the presence of the camera or the crew.” This idea also echoed with von Trier’s idea of Dogme 95.

Based on Stevenson (2003: 29-30), Dogme is a movement for commercial fiction filmmaking. However, the camera in the hands of Lars von Trier appeared to be invisible. Von Trier used the camera as a tool to search for the truth rather than to record the image passively. The hand-held camera for von Trier is used as a means to invade the actor’s personal sphere and get right in their faces. In von Trier’s shooting method, looking through the camera and talking with the actor simultaneously are very important to him.

1.1.2 Lars von Trier



Fig.1.1 Lars von Trier

Lars von Trier, the talented Danish director, was born and grew up in Denmark, a cold and unstable country. Since childhood, he has been taught not to talk about private feelings, religion, and enjoyment. Those personal taboos such as feeling, religion, and enjoyment have become some of the main controversies in his film which are disclosed through his unique suppressive film language. As a result, he is an expert upon portraying humanity in his films.

Von Trier suffered from multiple phobias including fear of flying. He used to say that he is afraid of everything in life except filmmaking. That is why he devoted himself to filmmaking. Because of flying phobia, most of his film was shot in either Denmark or Sweden. Even the story of American Trilogy took place in America; he has never been to there. He would rather drive from Denmark to France to attend Cannes Film Festival than take planes.

The uniqueness of von Trier is that he is nowadays the most remarkable Danish film director in the world that has led Danish film to its second “golden age”. In addition, his unique idiosyncrasy is also what makes him so outstanding. According to Stevenson, he is the antithesis of young average successful film maker. Probably the most provocative, unpredictable and polarizing film maker in the West nowadays. As an independent director, he has never been hired by any company or adapted any story by others. As an uncompromising film artist, he makes his own unique story. He is good at creating irritant and resourceful story that causes controversy and profound meaning (Stevenson 2002:1-2).

1.1.3 Major Films of von Trier

Von Trier's main principle of presenting a story is to make it as close as possible to "reality" by means of the detailed portraying of character and scene. He likes to use hand-held camera to catch and capture different angles of actors. Without exquisite making up, they are just like normal people who would sometimes feel repressed or depressed emotionally. In a sense, he would make the frame of filming look rough and dull intentionally to achieve the simple and honest presentation of the story. Most importantly, in von Trier's viewpoint, a good film has a duty to offer insightful perspectives or lessons. Therefore, he likes to reveal the dark side of humanity in his film which always provokes people to think profoundly about the issue of humanity.

Lars von Trier used to make his films a trilogy. The followings are the two ones that concentrate most on the issue of suppression of humanity. They will be further discussed in the content of this research.



Fig.1.2 *Breaking the Waves*

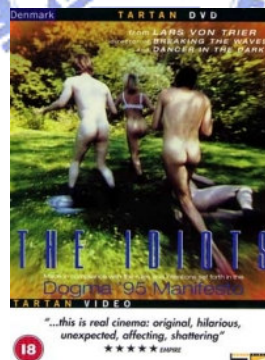


Fig.1.3 *Idiots*



Fig.1.4 *Dancer in the Dark*

Breaking the Waves (1996), *Idiots* (1998), and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) is the series of "Golden Heart Trilogy". They are stories about the rebellion and suffering of three women. *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark* are about the spirit of women sacrifice for their beloved one. One is for her husband; the other is for her child. Besides, *Idiots* is a film that boldly challenges to tradition. The behaviors of main characters are very defiant against

society and even abnormal. It even involves erotic content and was forbidden to play in public.

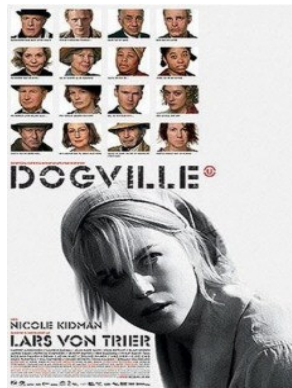


Fig.1.5 Dogville



Fig.1.6 Manderlay

The series is “American Trilogy”. These two films, *Dogville* (2003) and *Manderlay* (2005) with the coming piece “*Washington*” are the latest works of von Trier. The film titles are the name of the towns where the female leading character has stayed and in which the story takes place. The three films still centers on a female character that possesses evil power from gangsters. Ironically, her idea of humanity is always too perfect to put into practice. Through the innovative approach of setting and narrative, the most subtle appearance of humanity is revealed as an aim of this trilogy.

1.2 Objective

The films of Lars von Trier are quite different from the Hollywood films. The major concern in Lars von Trier's film is revealing the dark side of humanity. The meaning behind this subject is thoughtful and worth discussion. However, the implicit messages conveyed in his films are sometimes too complicated for people to grasp the meanings no matter they are originally from the film directors or re-created by the viewer during the process of experiencing the film. Therefore, the research is focused on studying the content of von Trier's films through interpreting the visual language used in the films and joining the process of creating meaning by entering the *Hermeneutic circle (Note1.2)

Besides, visual language is the initial form of film to present the story and bring out the theme. The function of Lars von Trier's film is to deliver specific messages to the viewer and through these messages to provoke their thoughts. Therefore, in this research, the interpretation and explanation of the visual language used in von Trier's films would be the central objective. In Ben Shahn's opinion, form and function are inseparable. *"For form is not just the intention of the content; it is the embodiment of content. Form is base, first, upon a supposition, a theme. Form is, second, a marshaling of materials, the inert matter in which the theme is to be cast. Form is third, a setting of boundaries, of limits, the whole extent of idea, but no more, an outer shape of idea...Form is thus a discipline, an ordering, according to the needs of content."* (Shahn 72). Along with this idea, the main objectives of this research are as followings:

1. To clarify the content of von Triers' films by analyzing the essential visual languages in the narrative.
2. To interpret and explain the implication behind the lines and images and its profound meaning which is closely connected to our life experiences.
3. To expound the narrative techniques of von Trier's films including the settings, the plots

and storylines, and the state of mind of characters which borrow from literary approaches.

4. To discuss what techniques such as the after-productions, shooting and lighting support the visual expression.
5. To discuss how the symbols and metaphors are used as vehicles to deliver intended messages.

In this case, the films open dialogues between the film content and the viewer. They will provide much more thoughtful insights for the audience. As a result, the expected contribution of this research is through the interpretation and explanation of visual narrative, we hope that the viewer of the films, or the reader of this research, are able to make personal connections with the films, and in return, new meanings will be created. Through this process of creating, we also hope that more people are able to appreciate and grow fascinated with the meaningful contents of this genre of films.



Note1.2 The phrase "hermeneutic circle" refers to the circle of interpretation necessarily involved when understanding some work of art. According to this theory, it isn't possible to really understand any one part of a work until you understand the whole, but it also isn't possible to understand the whole without also understanding all of the parts. This is not actually a paradox in which a person is trapped and never able to understand an artwork. It is, instead, a way of explaining and expressing how understanding and interpreting a work of art is an ongoing process which takes time. As more information about the work is acquired, an interpretation gradually changes to incorporate that. Those who argue that no attempt at interpretation can ever reach any sort of closure will refer to this as a hermeneutic spiral, because it simply goes around and around forever.

(Hermeneutic Circle.

http://atheism.about.com/library/glossary/aesthetics/bldef_hermeneuticcircle.htm Jul. 17 2006).

1.3 Scope and Limit

The expert of film semiotics, Metz, has divided the subject of film into “cinematic fact” and “filmic fact”. The cinematic fact means the fact of film production and film market. Then Metz confines the scope of film semiotics to “filmic fact”. That is to study the text of films, not the industry of films. Based on Metz’s confinement of filmic fact, this research will focus on the film text only. The scope of this research is as following:

1. The subject about ‘suppression of humanity’ in the film text.
2. The visual languages correspond to the subjects.

The limitation of this research is that there is not much related source written in text regarding von Trier and his films. Only a few books can be ordered from abroad, not to mention that the research sources in Taiwan are even more limited. For this reason, concentrating on exploring film text in this research is also a proper way to solve this problem.



1.4 Procedure and Purpose

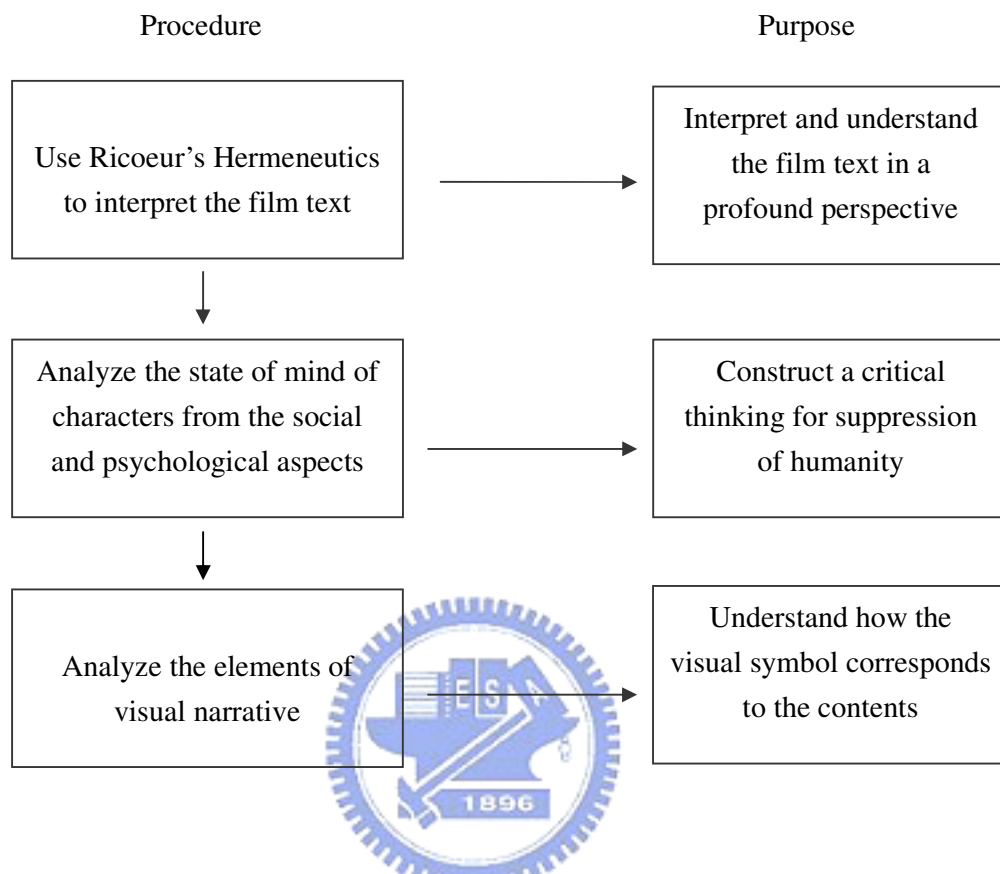


Table 1.1 Research procedure and purpose