

Chapter 4

Golden Heart Trilogy

“Idiots”, *“Breaking the Waves”*, and *“Dancer in the Dark”* are known as “Golden Heart Trilogy”. Based on the children tale “Golden heart”, von Trier has made three different stories talking about innocent girls entering the world, or society (Stevenson, p.90). They devote, even sacrifice themselves for fulfilling their faiths and beliefs.

There are three “golden hearts” in this trilogy: Karen in *Idiots*; Bess in *Breaking the Waves*; and Selma in *“Dancer in the dark”*. *“Idiots”* didn’t quite like the other two films. It is the only film that has followed most of the Dogme rules. The film describes a group of people pretending to be idiots in public to test people’s reactions and challenge their tolerance. In the film, the protagonist Karen doesn’t sacrifice herself for someone. She is an innocent witness who guides the viewer to see as well as to speak the truth under all circumstances. In *Breaking the Waves*, Bess is a naive girl who sacrifices everything for her husband, her chastity as a wife, and even her life. In *Dancer in the dark*, Selma is a blind mother who gives up her life for her only son. However, these two “golden hearts” don’t sacrifice themselves simply for foolish kindness, but for their beliefs in love.

4.1 Plot and Setting

4.1.1 Religious Force in *Breaking the Waves*

1. The geographical setting

In *Breaking the Waves*, God and his believers create an irony system. It is a conservative community that strictly obeys the doctrines from Catholic Church (Stevenson 93).

Von Trier puts the setting on a geographically bleak and desolate island in Scotland. The weather is harsh and cold, there are weeds and rocks everywhere (Fig.4.1). Thus, faith is very important for people to move on in such an environment (Fig.4.2). The view of Scotland gives significant metaphors in several ways. First of all, it results in the religiousness of community residents. The second is the cruelty and desperation of reality. The third is that it also symbolizes the stubborn and resolute features of the female protagonist, Bess. As a matter of fact, the harsh environment for *Breaking the Waves* has formed a dramatic and sentimental atmosphere for the film, which also corresponds to the tragic plot of the story (Fig. 4.3).



Fig.4.1 The harsh environment of Scholand



Fig.4.2 The bleak environment around the church



Fig.4.3 The desolated Scotch landscape in *Breaking the waves*

Besides, the environment is so relevantly fitted in the theme that some film posters even adopt the geographical symbols as the background to represent the film in substance (Fig.4.4, 4.5, and 4.6).

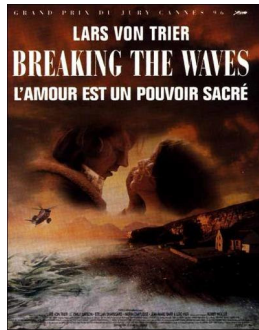


Fig.4.4



Fig.4.5



Fig.4.6

Fig.4.4-4.6 Geographical symbol in the poster of *Breaking the Waves* 1, 2 and 3 respectively

2. The religious community

The power and force of religious belief dominates the will of the female protagonist, Bess. The following descriptions have evidenced such religious suppression, which are based on the words extracted from the film.

At the very beginning of the film, when the female protagonist, Bess, decides to marry, she has to ask the community patriarchs' permission in church (Fig.4.7). Also when they are married, the Father gives such a lecture to them (Fig.4.8):

“We should love Christ, and give our souls to him. You have given your time not once in this building (church), up to your love for God in heaven, not things on the earth.”

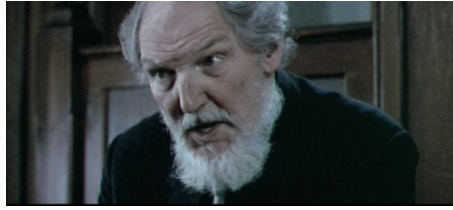


Fig.4.7 The patriarch questions Bess about her husband



Fig.4.8 The Father lectures on Bess in her wedding

According to Bible, God could be regarded as a groom, and the person who is cherished by God is described as a newly-married. In *Breaking the Waves*, Bess takes her husband, Jan, as a precious blessing from God. Therefore in her mind, Jan's love represents God's love to her.

Further more, whenever Bess feels guilty for her desire, she confesses to God in church (Fig.4.9). During the confession, she imagines the reply of God to repress the yearning that tortures her in reality. Here is some example of God's speech:

*“But remember to be a good girl, for you know I give it and
I take it away.”*

The interpretation for this sentence is – You shall obey my [God] rule, or you may lose my blessing on your life including everything you have.



Fig.4.9 God is speaking in Bess imagination

In my opinion, God is almighty for the inhabitants. Everything they have is given from God and be taken away if they violate the doctrines. For this reason, they must do their best to absorb the moral principles to keep away from offending God. Therefore Bess must repress herself to cooperate with the community rule and submit to reality.

“So you keep saying but I didn’t see it.... Prove your love to me [God] then I [God] will make him [Jan] live.”

The implication behind this sentence is – The way to prove the faith to God is to devote and sacrifice for God. Then God may response to their wish. This is a kind of “self abusing” sentiment that is similar to the sacrifice of a saint in order to prove the true faith or get redemption from God. Besides, the price for offending the doctrines can be illustrated by the following line and picture (Fig.4.10):

“You are a sinner, and you should have your place in hell.”



Fig.4.10 The sinner is condemned to hell in the funeral

People who don’t believe in God or infringe the doctrines would be punished. Once a person commits sin, there is no doubt that the sinner shall be condemned to hell when he is dead, despite other goodness he has done, or how slight the sin is. Furthermore, they will be treated coldly and cruelly in their community. Even their family members are not allowed to speak for them, and they would also be cast out from the family. For example, Bess is rejected by her family after her violating the discipline and being cast out of the church (Fig. 4.11).



Fig.4.11 Bess is cast out of the church

4.1.2 The Rebellion against Society in Idiots

In *Idiots*, the group members all belong to some position in society. They still come to the house and feign idiot together for fooling others. They are purposely to show their angry and discontent with the society. Through gathering together, they get the courage to simulate idiocy. Once they are back to their positions in society, they can never act like idiots again in front of their colleagues. In fact, they still couldn't give up their social status and escape their duty in society. Therefore, even by adopting the most furious way to protest against the society, they still need to live within it. For example, a girl in their group is taken away by her father and forced to return to a normal life. Consequently, other group members gradually sense the pressure from the reality and start to leave the group (Fig.4.12).



Fig.4.12 The girl is taken away from the group

The group members all suffer from the reality. That is why they escape from it and play idiots as a healing. For example, Karen endures her family members' indifference to her grief. They are blind to see her grief of being a mother who has just lost her child. Thus she finally becomes the only one who dares to play idiocy in front of her family members. By acting

idiocy, she shows her free will and accuses her family for ignoring her and always being so cruel to her (Fig.4.13).



Fig.4.13 Karen act idiocy in front of her family

4.1.3 The Social Prejudice in Dancer in the Dark

An important concept for the setting of Dancer in the Dark is the prejudice against the female protagonist, Selma. The American court in the final part of the film reveals this idea.

On the court, the Americans' judgment upon Selma symbolizes the perspective of America. They bring an outsider to trial, and severely criticize her. At the beginning, the American lawyer addresses his prejudice against an outsider so as to demonize Selma. He also emphasizes sense of superiority of the American to obtain general agreement among people there. For example, from the American people's perspective, the American couple, Bill and his wife, takes care of Selma and her son, but the Czech, Selma, returns evil from good by murdering Bill. The lawyer even exaggeratedly accuses that Selma is a Czech Communist who infringes the peace and democracy of America. Besides, Selma loves musicals; therefore, the lawyer also taunts that Selma regards musicals as the only good thing in America.

In sum, the American lawyer criticizes Selma in the name of justice and gives no opportunity for Selma to speak for herself (Fig.4.14). The lawyer represents the authority of American public and possesses a superior status in the court. Hence he is able to use the force of language to suppress the weak, who is Selma in the court. In other words, Selma is oppressed by the sense of superiority held by the majority of American community members (Fig.4.15). The court scene has revealed the oppression of the superior upon the inferior in the

American society.



Fig.4.14 The lawyer accuses Selma in the court



Fig.4.15 Selma is oppressed in the court

Moreover, after killing Bill, people all change their viewpoint toward Selma and consider her behaviors as evil. For instances, Selma's boss treats her love of musical as the only thing she likes about America; Bill's wife, Linda, charges Selma for her mentioning about money and Bill's gun (Fig.4.16). In another word, once people commit crimes, all their words and deeds would be misinterpreted as evil acts.



Fig.4.16 Linda charges Selma for murdering Bill

The above-mentioned biases against Selma correspond to the concept of “fundamental attribution error” from humanistic psychoanalyst Fromm. “Fundamental Attribution Error” refers to the fact that whenever people are making attributions about an action, they tend to over-emphasize dispositional factors about the actor (Fan 200). In “fundamental attribution error,” we believe that human make mistakes because of his own character and personality.

Therefore, after Selma commit murder, people in society tend to emphasis her wicked thoughts and violent preference.



4.2 Suppression of Humanity

4.2.1 Psychoanalysis in Breaking the Waves

1. Self as I and self as know in the confess scene

According to William. James, the modern psychologist, “self as I” represents pure ego, and “self as know” comes to existence from social constraints and regulations (Fan 205). While conversing with God, the weak Bess belongs to “the self as I”. And Bess who belongs to “the self as known” follows the rules of chastity in the name of God. The social ethics constitutes her self as known. Bess loves her husband deeply and believes he is God’s blessing for her. Therefore, the worship of God turns to the worship of her husband. It becomes her self as known and makes her follow her husband’s demands. Her self as I stands for such faith in sacrificing for love. It takes over regulations of the original self as known. It changes her to cater to all the perverted demands.

2. Libido and Eros

After being serious sick, Jan’s mental state including his desire, impulse and compulsion are obviously driven by what Freud calls the “unconsciousness”. The other layer of mental awareness suggested by Freud is the “consciousness” that follows the principle made by reality (Freud 2001: 75). When Jan becomes paralyzed in bed, he asks Bess not to come to see him too often because he knows that Bess’s body provokes his sexual desire (Fig.4.17). This is “libido” that belongs to the unconsciousness. “Libido” leads him to seek vitality and power from his basic physical instinct. The power and energy of libido keeps him in a high spirit. Therefore, he can survive. This is how his heart has been following the pleasure principle of libido and gone beyond the reality principle of his consciousness.



Fig.4.17 Jan endures the sexual instinct toward Bess

In Freud’s viewpoint, the instinct of “Eros” is energized by libido. In male and female relationship, the instinct of Eros always drives one to seek the sexual love. (Freud, *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis* 1989: 18-20). The instinct of Eros between Bess and Jan is also based upon sex (Fig.4.18). Since they are lovers, as well as husband and wife, the sexual interaction is the most direct expression of exchanging love. Therefore, Jan demands Bess to have sex with other men after his paralysis, and Bess herself submits to Jan’s demand.



Fig.4.18 The sexual attraction between Jan and Bess

However, other people can not understand the perverted behavior between Jan and Bess, and regard it as abnormal and guilt. Only Jan and Bess know why they want to do this— Jan regards Bess’s sexual intercourse with other men as his own experiences. And Bess also hypnotized herself to believe that her behavior is the concrete proof and practice of her love to Jan and faith to God that will cure Jan’s illness. This strange relationship between Bess and Jan comes from the instinct of Eros that is encouraged by the intensity of love.

3. The suppression upon Bess

(1) Fromm’s idea about the suppressions of society

In humanist psychoanalyst Fromm’s opinion, there is a type of ethical system called “authoritarian and totalitarian ethical system”, in which “obedience is the best virtue of all,

and disobedience is the worst, as well as an unforgivable crime.” Any doubt or rebellion against the power holder can lead to an unforgivable sin (Wang 155). In *Breaking the Waves*, the villagers must fulfill the ethic system created by God and the community, and sinner is unpardonable. This rigorous system restricts everyone in this community and forbids all the objection or challenge. Therefore, it is equal to Fromm’s “authoritarian ethic system”.

The other idea is about “giving up one’s personal character to adapt to the environment.” According to Wang (194-195), a person gives up his sense of uniqueness in order to join others. He can’t be himself anymore because he lives up to others’ expectations. In this way, he won’t suffer from anxiety and worry about social values. Therefore, everyone in the community tends to obey the rules made by church for the purpose of adjusting to the environment and the wish of majority.

(2) Bess’s suppression from Jan

Goffman says, “We are always tied to the wheels of control.” (Fan 205). It means that humans are forced to act in their own roles without choice. That makes them become tragic figures like a puppet. With anxiety, we are forced to do what the society obliges us to perform. Fromm says, “In order to live up to others’ expectations, one repressed himself and his identity so as to get a sense of security.” (Fan 205). However, giving up our sense of subjectivity and uniqueness may make us feel depressed all the time. It makes us live like a walking zombie instead of being ourselves.

After marriage, Bess lives for Jan. However, under the regulation of the society and control of Jan, she is forced to become a tragic figure. She represses her own emotions and casts away her original identity and innocent personality (Fig.4.19). So that she can meet Jan’s expectations. She hopes by doing so her husband could get a sense of security and hope. Unfortunately, these acts have turned Bess into a person without soul. She is forced to behave accord with Jan’s wish and unable to be herself anymore (Fig.4.20).



Fig.4.19 Bess cast away her innocent personality to save Jan



Fig.4.20 Bess resembles a walking zombie as fulfilling Jan's wish

4. The anxieties of Bess

Bess is repressed by the external forces from the society. Freud assumes that the environmental stress causes people to suffer from anxiety. The sense of anxiety comes in three ways: reality anxiety, neurotic anxiety and moral anxiety (Fan 206).

(1) Reality anxiety

Firstly, reality anxiety is based on our fear toward the dangers in the reality life (Fan 206). Despite of the misfortune that Jan has suffered from, Bess also loses a sweet vision of love between her and her healthy husband. Therefore, she is anxious about her faith in love.

In the conservative community, the belief of God and the religious institutions constrain Bess's life and will. Her husband represents the power of patriarchal system and she is oppressed by her husband. Furthermore, the men in town and those who have sexual intercourses with Bess also represent the power of superiority that cracks down on the weak. Consequently, Bess can only turn her anxiety from these external forces into the inner conversion with God. Through which it reduces her reality anxiety.

(2) Neurotic anxiety

Neurotic anxiety comes from the conflict between our basic instinct and reality. Out of

fear, we fail to control the anxiety of ourselves (Fan 206). In *Breaking the Waves*, the basic instinct of Bess is to cater to Jan's wishes. However, Jan's wishes are in conflict with social norms. Therefore, she constantly suffers from the anxiety for doubting herself and her decision.

Jan remains in the superior position of the patriarchy. He demands Bess to follow his wishes that are in conflict with Bess's will and the normal ethic principles. These two opposing forces are in conflicts, which force Bess to make a choice out of them. Like her sister-in-law's comment on her, "*She'll give everything to anyone.*" To Bess, both of them are important to her. While one is God for whom she has always kept her faith and belief, the other is her beloved husband for whom Bess can sacrifice everything.

The increasing sense of anxiety that Bess has suffered can be perceived through her conversations with God. She feels that God even doesn't want to listen to her anymore. Therefore, we can see Bess suffers from a neurotic anxiety, which reveals the balance between her faith in God and her love for her husband has been destroyed (Fig.4.21).



Fig.4.21 Bess suffers from the anxiety for offending God

Secondly, her sense of neurotic anxiety can be perceived through the moment when the reality goes against her wishes. The first situation revealing this moment is that Bess tries to stop the plane when Jan is about to leave for work. (Fig.4.22). The other moment is when her sister-in-law takes away her calendar and tears it up. The calendar is an important means for Bess to keep track on the remaining days of Jan's returning home (Fig.4.23). After Bess regains the tattered calendar, she suddenly becomes mad and screams out intensively (Fig.4.24).



Fig.4.22 Bess tries to stop the plane of Jan



Fig.4.23 The tattered calendar of Bess



Fig.4.24 Bess gets mad after regain the calendar

(3) Moral anxiety

Thirdly, moral anxiety is a result of the conflict between superego and id. In other words, it is the conflict between moral-constrained self and the instinct-driven self (Fan 206). In Bess's instinct-driven self, she wants to satisfy her husband's sexual fantasy by having sex with other men. Jan makes her believe that this is what keeps his spirit alive as well as his paralyzed body up. In the moral self, she knows that Jan's demand will make her deviate from the course of social ethics.

Through conversing with God, Bess interprets this anxiety as God's test of her love towards her husband. Conversing with God is a means to conquer her moral anxiety. According to Freud, the origin of religion comes from human beings' psychological illusion and people's vision of hope. Religion is a way that enables people to protest and challenge the poverty and distress of the real world. Religion is a way that people resort to escape torture and pursue happiness. Religion represents the psychological anesthesia of people (Fan 183).

Whether Freud's proposal is correct or not, Bess can escape the harsh reality through her faith in God and resolves the dilemmas in the reality. Therefore, we can say that religion gives her courage to undergo the difficulties ahead and makes her believe that her deeds are rightful choices. The heaven bell rings after Bess's death. This scene seems answer most of the viewers' question regarding whether Bess's death is worthy or not, and her behavior before death is right or wrong.

5. The need of dependence

(1) The need of root

Based on Fromm's need of root theory (Fan 207), we can explain why Bess still wants to return to church and home after being humiliated by children in town. The blood relationship is the root of one's origin, which becomes the basis of a community and nation. The need to search for root gives humans a sense of identity that helps them to define themselves and bestow them a sense of security and belonging.

(2) The relationship between Bess and Jan

In Fromm's "humanistic psychoanalysis," (Wang 190) he mentions that nowadays people are afraid of loneliness. To conquer the fear of loneliness, they might give up freedom or personal characteristic to cater to others.

There are three regimes that facilitate people to escape freedom. The first is "totalitarianism", which is based on constraining and dominating others. We can say the relationship built on this one is like a relationship between a torturer and victim. But this relationship is also based on a reliance of each other. So that the new constraint of dominating others has taken place and replaces the original constraints. The representations of this kind of torture can be viewed in these three ways (Wang 190-195).

a. The first one is based on the desire to rely on and control others, which tends to regard others as their instruments.

- b. The second one is based on the desire not only to control others, but to dominate others and disrupt others.
- c. The third one is based on the malignancy to hurt others and want to see others suffer, physical and spiritual destitution and humiliation.

To Jan, he feels quite lonely after being paralyzed, sent back to Bess and left alone in the hospital. Others in his eyes are at least mobile because they are healthy. Therefore, the way he can escape his dreadful sense of loneliness is by dominating Bess (Fig.4.25). His behaviors are exactly these three kinds of torture explicated before: He controls Bess and forces her to do something that can hurt herself. And he enjoys seeing her in pain, suffering and humiliation. And Bess who is controlled by Jan represents the desire to be tortured.



Fig.4.25 Jan is paralyzed and starts to dominate Bess

According to Fromm (Wang 190-192), the act of torturing and being tortured express a pessimistic state of mind which embodies in one's depression and powerlessness. The one who is in torture are accustomed to constrain the free will. Life is an irresistibly natural force to them. They look down on themselves and force themselves to follow others' demand. They always repress their true feeling and regardless of their own desire and request. They consent to be suffering from the torture by others. Ironically, they still regard their experiences of being forced and tortured represents their love and faith. However, the torturer and sufferer depend on each other very much. Fromm regards this relationship made by submission and dominance as a symbiotic relationship (Wang 193). In this relationship, the torturer seeks to satisfy their sense of superiority from controlling and making others become part of him. On the contrary, the sufferer loses a sense of identity by succumbing to others.

Bess gives up her original self to become what Jan expects her to be. She puts on a mask upon herself by succumbing to Jan's unreasonable demands. Bess's behaviors are what masochism will inflict on her. She obeys Jan's will and regards her sufferings as an expression of her faithful love to him (Fig.4.26).



Fig.4.26 Bess is satisfied with her sacrifice for Jan

(3) Psychological distance

Ming-de Fan in his analysis of the movie "Malena" said that the female protagonist, Malena, who is pushed out from the society, suffers from a psychological distance from the folks in the town (Fan 2009). The situation in *Breaking the Waves* is similar to that in *Malena*. Bess's enthusiasm, eagerness and sacrifice for love seem to be in a drastic contrast with the repression and indifference of the community. Therefore, Bess suffers a psychological distance with the town folks. Being in a marriage with an outsider of the community, she loves and protects her husband against others. After Jan has fallen so sick, she becomes extremely lonely and powerless psychologically.

Besides, the sense of powerlessness and vacuum in her makes her eager to find a sense of security. To her, her husband is her world and she can only live up to her husband, even by sacrificing and hurting herself. To be free from lacking of security, she even transgresses against the moral principles at all cost. The psychological distance that Bess keeps from the community allows her to do whatever her husband asked her to do.

4.2.2 The Patriarchal Power in Society

1. Breaking the Waves

Basically, there are three patriarchal dominators in *Breaking the Waves*. (1) God: as an almighty father to his people. (2) Bess's husband, Jan: He is so important to Bess that his power becomes the hugest damage to her life. He asks Bess to do anything for him during his illness. Bess even disregards her own concern to satisfy Jan's most irrational request – having sex with other men and describing the experiences to him. This has eventually ruined Bess's reputation and life, and causes her death in the end. (3) The male power upon female in society (Fig.4.27) Among Bess's family, the grandfather is the only man who takes charge of the family. All the women in the house should follow his decision.



Fig 4.27 The paternal power among two generation: Bess and her husband, Bess's grandparents

The male power upon female occurred in the sexual relationship between Bess's husband and her, as well as that between the adulterer and her. Here is one example from the film: Bess couldn't accept Jan's ill request for having sex with other men at first place. Therefore she asks for resolution of God. This is the imagined answer of God in her mind:

“It's god's test for your love.” “God give you power, people only listen to others, you got to listen to him (Jan), you are the only one who make him live.”

In Bess's mind, she transfers the power of her husband into the power of God, so that she could accept his request. Furthermore, she regards the terrible demand of Jan as the request

from God. What she has done later not only shows her faith to God and her love to Jan, but also reveals two kinds of patriarchal power- God and her husband's control of her.

2. Idiots

In *Idiots*, the patriarchal oppression upon Karen can be seen from her husband's way of treating her. She is slapped by her husband when seeing her faking idiocy in front of her family. He never tries to consider the sorrow inside Karen, but blames her for neglecting her duty as a wife. This has proved his patriarchal oppression upon Karen.

3. Dancer in the Dark

In *Dancer in the Dark*, the policeman Bill is the symbol of male superiority in the society. He is the landlord of Selma and is an American citizen. He represents both male dominance and social authority upon Selma. In the film, Selma is a Czech and a single mother with a son. She comes to American and struggles with the difficult life (Fig.4.28). She works very hard in order to save money to cure her son's eye illness. As an illegal immigrant, she has no civil privilege or any protection from the government. Therefore, she can only accept the oppression from the public authority unconditionally.



Fig.4.28 Selma struggles for life in the factory

For Bill, he is a man who strongly believes in taking all the responsibility for his family. He is frustrated for sustaining family finance that has been exhausted by his extravagant wife. Because of his male esteem, he would rather maintain his position in family than reveal his financial difficulty to her wife (Fig.4.29). As a result, he let her wife keep wasting money. Besides, Bill's wife, Linda, resembles a delicate doll, who is a mindless woman who depends

on her husband for everything (Fig.4.30). Maybe owing to her relying personality, Bill is willing to take care of her. That makes him acquire a sense of superiority and power by taking charge of his wife's life. Thus he gains a sense of dominating his wife and retains his masculine superiority. That's why he doesn't want his wife to find out the truth of his bankruptcy, which might cause the collapse of his male power. Both of them have already lost the ability to face the reality. One is living in the luxurious dream, and the other is denying his inability.



Fig.4.29 Bill is repressed by the difficulty in life



Fig.4.30 Bill's delicate wife, Linda

What Bill has done to Selma is that he takes the advantage of being a police and a stronger man to peculate Selma's savings. Apparently, on one hand, he is a kind person and feels sympathetic for the hard life of Selma; on the other hand, he is a repressed and selfish person who is too coward to face reality. He preserves his own dignity by harming the innocent Selma (Fig.4.31).

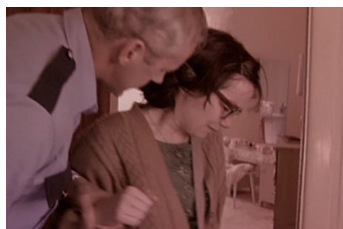


Fig.4.31 Bill harms Selma for his dignity

4.2.3 The Characteristic of Female Victim

Bess in *Breaking the Waves*, Selma in *Dancer in the Dark*, as well as Grace in the next American trilogy are all blind in some way. They are foolish for always being benevolent to others and repressing themselves. They are so excessively with the wish to satisfy others' demands that rarely consider their self-interests. Worst of all, their constant tolerance has kept evil expanding. For this reason, people take advantages of them and this causes the suffering and tragedy of these three women.

For Selma, she still keeps her promise of keeping the secret for Bill despite that Bill harms her so much and forces her to kill him (Fig.4.32). She would rather give up defending for herself and accept death sentence than revealing Bill's secret to the judge. Therefore, she should also be responsible for her own misfortunate and suffering.



Fig.4.32 Selma is forced to murder Bill

Further more, in *Breaking the Waves*, Bess permits her husband's request and even encourages his sick idea. This finally destroys Bess's life and leads her to death. In *Dogville*, Grace also bears the charge of being evil and voluptuous that makes the situation out of control. All these girls follow their free will and derail themselves from the reality. Nevertheless, they also suffer greatly from keeping their belief and being considerate for others. However, they are willing to bear the misunderstandings from people and sacrifice their lives.

4.3 Visual Narrative

4.3.1 Psychological Transition of Characters

1. The confess scene in *Breaking the Waves*

The lines describes the struggle of Bess, the visual expression of her countenance also strongly conveys the suppressive feeling inside her. The struggle between following desire and submitting to reality can be observed from the following pictures in the film.

During the confession, God speaks for the moral obedience in reality. The voice is very forceful and even threatening. Also the expression of God presented through Bess is very stern and awesome (Fig.4.33). On the contrary, Bess's own voice expresses her most innocent and humble desire, which is weak and trembles with fear. Her original self behaves frightened and powerless (Fig.4.34).

Here von Trier successfully creates a paradoxical condition between good and evil. Bess's innocent desire is considered guilty and evil, and moral obedience is turned into a powerful and threatening force.



Fig.4.33 Bess's facial expression of God in her imaged confession



Fig.4.34 Bess's original expression in her confession

2. The contrast between imagination and reality in *Dancer in the Dark*

The image quality in Selma's joyful imagined world is dynamic and colorful (Fig.4.35-4.37). On the other hand, the image of the reality in the film is shaky, rough, and

dull (Fig.4.68-4.70). As I have mentioned before, it is von Trier’s ambition to reveal the true reality. Von Trier intends to create a strong contrast between imagined musical world and reality. It is also the contrast between the delightful consolation and the brutal reality. Also, it allows the viewer to engage with the state of mind of the characters – to experience the feeling of characters through the shift of colors.



Fig.4.35



Fig.4.36



Fig.4.37

Fig.4.35-4.37 The dancing scenes in *Dancer in the Dark* 1, 2, and 3, respectively

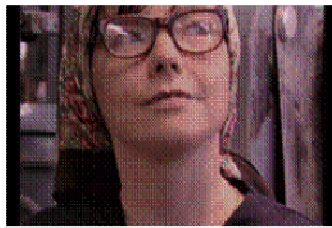


Fig.4.38



Fif.4.39



Fig4.40

Fig.4.38-4.40 The reality scenes in *Dancer in the Dark*

4.3.2 The Innovation

1. The title scene in *Breaking the Waves*

The story is divided into eight chapters. Von Trier usually uses this method to organize and simplify a complicated narrative. Additionally, he adds a digital and vivid image of beautiful landscape before each title scene. In this way, viewing the film is like reading a picture book. Besides, it also creates an ironic transition between the true story and fiction,

which matches the feeling of the story itself, sad but beautiful (Stevenson 2002: 95).

Along with the image of landscape are various period pop songs. The images also gradually change with the song. They are meant to make a contrast with the sorrowful mood and the plain image in the film itself. Also in the film, there is no background music at all. The lively and constant music only appears in the title scene between each chapter, which also corresponds to the content of the coming chapter. As a result, it gives the audience room to reflect on the previous mood, and extend the emotion to the next chapter.

The followings are the title scenes and their implication for the titles (Fig.4.41-4.49)

- (1) Beautiful clouds for the new marriage of Bess and Jan



Fig.4.41 The title scene, Chapter One

- (2) The sunlight for the marriage life.

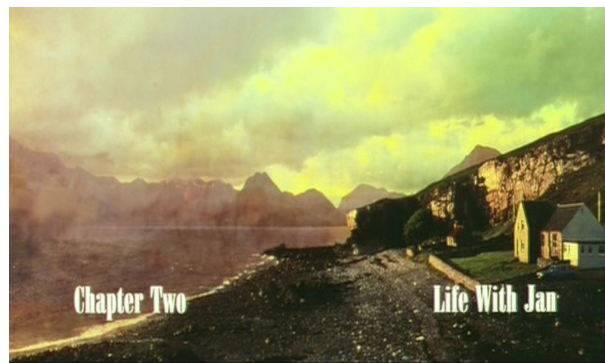


Fig.4.42 The title scene, Chapter Two 1

The light is changing with music



Fig.4.43 The title scene, Chapter Two 2

(3) The darkness for Bess to live alone away from Jan



Fig.4.44 The title scene, Chapter Three

(4) The sky changes into dark cloud for Jan's illness



Fig.4.45 The title scene, Chapter Four

- (5) The misty cloud for Bess doubting about her husband's irrational request



Fig.4.46 The title scene, Chapter Five

- (6) The beautiful mountain and river symbolize the faith of Bess



.Fig.4.47 The title scene, Chapter Six

- (7) The light with sacred quality for the sacrifice of Bess



Fig.4.48 The title scene, Chapter Seven

- (8) The flowing river symbolizes the life keeps evolving and hope is always there



Fig.4.49 The title scene, Epilogue

2. The interview scene in *Idiots*

The interview scenes reveal comments or opinions on the group conduct or specific group members (Fig.4.82 and 4.83). They also give the audience an impression of expounding true feelings for the characters. It is like a documentary combined with the interview of the pivot. It records the talking of them. Along with their gestures and facial expressions, it reveals the true feeling of the characters beyond the surface.



Fig.4.50



Fig. 4.51

Fig.4.50 and 4.51 The interviewing scenes in *Idiots*

4.3.3 The Shocking Scenes

1. The erotic content

The erotic content reveals the issue of the film. In *Breaking the Waves*, Bess asks her husband for their first lovemaking in the bathroom during the wedding. She is pushed by the

wall and is occupied by the male sexual power of her husband (Fig.4.52). On the perspective of visual narrative, the colors of wall in the bathroom are red. The color is vigorous to symbolize the erotic attraction between Bess and Jan.



Fig.4.52 The first sexual contact between Bess and Jan

In addition, in *Idiots*, there are many images expose to erotic contents. A famous scene in the film is about the group members running nakedly. It even becomes the film poster that represents the rebellious idea of the film (Fig.4.53). Additionally, being naked is the most original appearance of human being. Here von Trier intends to abandon the conventional judgments and uses the most straight forward expression to stress the free state of human being.

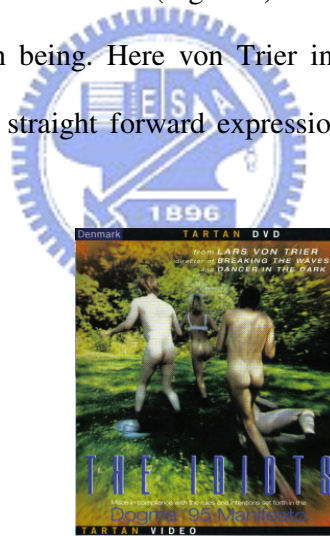


Fig.4.53 The poster of *Idiots* with naked running

Except running nakedly, people in the community even have a group sex in the party. These erotic scenes have caused a lot of controversy and are forbidden to play in most of theaters. Nevertheless, it also represents the unique and innovative style of the film.

In fact, the erotic contents are truly connected with the theme in the film. For people, it is the most direct way to release their sense of repression (Fig.4.54). They find delight in sexual indulgence that makes them feel extremely released and comfortable. This is a way for them

to completely satisfy their bodies and souls. Their behaviors directly represent the liberation and rebellion of humanity against the constraints of society. Therefore, the perverted behaviors include pretending retardation and sexual emancipation together bring out the theme of *Idiots* – the liberation from the suppressive social system.



Fig.4.54 The natural and erotic act in *Idiots*

2. The Last Scene in *Dancer in the Dark*

In the last scene, Selma is going to be executed by hanging. While the rope is put around her neck, she starts singing to overcome the fear of going to die (Fig.4.55). The last moment before being executed, she sings with most passionate tone: “*It isn’t the last song, and that’s all...*” Suddenly the singing stops, Selma falls across the floor and dies from being hung. Before that, we even do not realize that they are Selma’s last words in her singing before she died.

The last shot is a long take of Selma alone; hanging in the air and all become silence. This shocking scene lasts for very long, which is the most grievous and unforgettable scene in the film of *Dancer in the Dark* (Fig.4.56).



Fig.4.55 Selma starts to sing before being executed



Fig.4.56 The last shocking scene

Plenty of emotions emerge from the scene: the innocent is sacrificed and justice only cares about the guilty and is blind to see the truth behind. The back of Bill's family is in the forefront of the shot. They are the victim's family and are witnessing the murder committed by law, which is Selma's execution. At this moment, a few words appear in front of the image (Fig.4.57). That is:

*"They say it's the last song.
They don't know us, you see
It's only the last song.
If we let it be."*

These words that come with the scene imply very significant meaning for the film. If "they" in the sentence means the victim's family who is watching the execution of Selma, they may regard the death of Selma as the "the last song", which also implies the end of the story. However, although Selma is dead, the truth can never be disclosed as long as they continue their attribution on Selma.

Besides, "us" in the second sentence can be interpreted as people who stand by Selma's side. It includes Selma herself, her friends, and even the audience who have viewed the whole story. In this aspect, Selma, her friends, and the viewer of the film all understand the hidden truth behind the murder. However, the secret is concealed for fulfilling the last wish of Selma.

Considering the last two lines, "*It's only the last song, it we let it be*", the implication for these words is very inspiring. That is, if the audience, or we, just let go the story and stop pondering on the issues in the film, then what the audience or we have perceived so far is just

the end of the fictional story, as if “*the last song*” . In fact, the film reveals an important issue on the suppression of humanity which exists in our society for a long time.

The revealing issue in the film can be illustrated by the following example. What Bill imposes upon Selma represents the power of the strong upon the weak. From my point of view, this suggests that the whole American society is the symbol of the suppressive force and the dominant society. Furthermore, Selma’s sacrifice also suggests that such suppression and force of society should account for the crime that is committed by the innocence. In the film, the crime that compels by society is the murder of Selma.

Moreover, based on the Hermeneutics of Ricoeur, pondering is an act of entering the circle of Hermeneutics. The more we pondering, the better we can interpret. The more we interpret, the better we understand our world. Therefore if we just let go of the story and stop pondering on the film content, the above-mentioned issue will never be revealed. Then we will never acquire a better sense to understand our world. The idea of Hermeneutic circle echoes to the above-mentioned lines. It is a convincing reflection that supports the idea given by von Trier in *Dancer in the Dark*.

In conclusion, the last lyric is never complete before Selma taking her last breath, and the story does not really end. This is what Selma expects for a story in musicals— there is no ending for her life story as well.

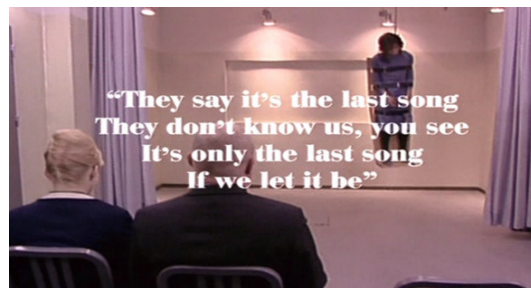


Fig.4.57 The sentences emerge from the execution scene

4.4 Symbol and Metaphor

4.4.1 Breaking the Waves

1. The metaphor of confession

(1) Ambivalence between belief and desire

Through the confession, Bess transforms the struggle between moral and desire into the conversational exchange between God and herself. God's reply presides over the moral side in order to repress her desire and obey the principle in reality. Only in this way, she can be convinced by God and overcome her confusion and fear in reality.

(2) The therapy

For Bess, the faith in God and the confession with God are what save her from distress. She always relies on the imagined reply of God to rebuild confidence for life. Although her deed of having sex with the men other than her husband does seriously infringe the doctrines of societal morality, she believes this is God's will—a test to prove her love for her husband, as well as for God. In God's opinion as well, it is the only way to save Jan from illness. Such faith thereby becomes the strength that gives her courage to carry on her catastrophic life.

Besides, when Jan is back with great injury, she blames herself for his injury due to her continual praying for his back (Fig.4.58). Therefore, Bess's own sacrifice also brings her a sense of healing for her regret.



Fig.4.58 Bess worries about the injured Jan

2. The symbol of furious waves

The sense of suppression in humanity is often represented by the harsh geographic views. In the film, the wave in the harsh environment not only symbolizes the force from the environment for Bess, but also the mental condition of her. Whenever she couldn't bear her intensive emotion, she would go to the beach and cry out to the sea as the waves are echoing with her heart. The wave has reflected her fierce emotion. It also symbolizes the difficult trail from the reality. Therefore, the scene that she cries out to the waves implies that she tries to resist the miserable suffering which is so cruel for her (Fig.4.59).



Fig.4.59 The strike of waves against Bess

3. The clothing of Bess

In the film, the clothing of Bess changes accordingly with her fluid identity. At the beginning, Bess is a simple and innocent girl with plain dress and little makeup (Fig.4.60). Later, when Bess follows her ill husband's request and has sexual contact with other men, she feels very shameful and disgusted for what she has done. Then she meets some prostitutes, which leads to a solution to overcome her guiltiness. Hence she starts to wear seductive clothes and showy makeup as if she was one of them (Fig.4.61). Only in this way, she overcomes her fear and doubt. She adapts to her new identity as a woman who has sexual intercourse with other men just like a prostitute. Nevertheless, we can still feel the sense of emptiness and bitterness from her face even though covering by frivolous dressed;. Her hair is uncombed and her facial expression is depressed and vacant as if she was a walking zombie with no wish to live (Fig.4.62).



Fig.4.60 Bess's original clothing



Fig.4.61 The clothing changes with self identity of Bess



Fig.4.62 Bess resembles a walking zombie after changing identity

4. The church bell

At first, there is no church bell in their community, though she likes church bell. The priest in their community even said: “*we don't need such thing!*” Here the church bell can be a metaphor for the characteristic of Bess. She is so innocent and indulged in love that she has done everything for her husband. Similar to a church bell, the sound is pure and pleasant, and it only rings by the control of others. The community doesn't accept such naive and enthusiastic spirit, just like they don't allow any rebellious behaviors.

At the end, Bess has sacrificed her life for Jan. Finally the miracle happens, Jan has recovered. He accompanies Bess beside her coffin all night long. Then in the morning, the

ringing sound of church bell suddenly strikes in sky. It sounds like the angel's blessing for them and phrasing Bess's spirit of sacrifice (Fig.4.63). Although she has seriously violated the doctrine of God and been banished from the community, her bravery and innocence still earn her the forgiveness of God. Therefore, the angles send the melody of bell down upon the earth sounding like the messages of blessing from heaven (Fig.4.64). The heavenly melody occurs at the time when Bess's wish and dream have finally come true – Jan recovered. She believes that the angles praise her spirit and acknowledge what she has done by sending her favorite melody of church ringing to earth. All the darkness becomes bright and all the grief turns to hope. Through God's messages falling on earth people can know the true spirits of Bess herself. What she has left is not sorrow but the fulfillment of an ideal and a beautiful dream. This is not a tragedy but an inspiring story to human heart.



Fig.4.63 Jan has recovered and hears the heavenly sound



Fig.4.64 The bell rings from heaven

4.4.2 Idiots

1. The metaphor of pretending idiocy

(1) Self awakening and rebellion against society

The film describes a group of people who feign idiots in public to mock at others' tolerance and test their reactions (Fig.4.65). Somehow they think they deceive those people

for justice, and they believe their operations are valuable for revealing the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie and humanity.



Fig.4.65 The group members pretend idiocy

Besides, their leader Stoffer announces that they are searching for their inner idiocy by acting like idiots (Fig.4.66). Abandoning the appearance, the self-esteem, even the social status, the inner idiot is the courage for a personal awakening and showing one's free will. People always recognize or judge things from the surface, and isn't open-minded enough to understand others' heart or see the truth. For example, Karen's family never tries to consider her grief for losing child. They only regard her absence from her child's funeral following by escaping home as an act of indifference. As a matter of fact, her deed is an implication of unspeakable sorrow. Most obviously, everyone only sees their acting then believes they are idiots. From this point, faking idiocy can be an expression of indignation. Von Trier uses such phenomenon to satirize the hypocrisy of humanity and the suppression of one's existence in society.



Fig.4.66 Stoffer talks to Karen about faking

(2) The therapy

No matter how horrible the situation is, people would find their own healing therapy, such

as their passion, religion, or love. The therapy is the most powerful comforts for people to move on from despair.

In “*the Idiots*”, Karen plays retardation to forget the pain for losing her child. She joins the group to pretend idiots. There, she finds joy and happiness, but the agonies for the loss of child and the guiltiness for leaving family conquer her, which make her feel shame for being happy. Consequently, she starts playing idiot and transforms herself to an innocent idiot to forget the unspeakable pain inside (Fig.4.67)



Fig.4.67 Karen pretends to be idiot to forget the pain

2. The house that bring the members together

There is a very important setting in *Idiot*, which is the place for the group members to spend most of their time together. The house is claimed to be a “mental hospital” to outsiders. In this way, they scare away everyone who is interested in buying the house. Therefore, the place has become their territory that no one is allowed to come close or take it away.

Besides, the house symbolizes a place for them to escape from reality. They feel happy to stay in the house for they are free to do anything there. It can be interpreted that the house is their “Eden”. Everyone lives happily and enjoys following his instinct and free will to do anything in the Eden (Fig.4.68).



Fig.4.68 People live happily in the house

4.4.3 Dancer in the Dark

1. The machine in factory

The machine in the factory where Selma works symbolizes the cold and harsh environment where she lives (Fig.4.69). The sound of machine is so sharp that it implies the potential danger which might occur to harm Selma.



Fig.4.69 Selma works with machine in the factory

2. The musical

(1) Escaping from reality

From von Tier's works, we can see these women suffering from tribulations in reality and at the same time pursuing different ways to escape the blight of reality. To Bess, she achieves this by engaging herself in the imagined conversations with God. To Selma, the musical is the escape, the fantasy and dream that pacify her fears to holding on in reality.

For example, when she is scolded in the factory, she immerges with musicals to forget the worry and trouble. The tediousness in reality such as the monotony of works, the disturbing buzzing of machines all turn into the vigorous melody in musicals (Fig.4.70).



Fig.4.70 Selma dances in the factory

The other touching example about the healing of musical occurs with the panic feeling of Selma when she kills Bill. In the musical, Bill rises from death and washes the blood off his face (Fig.4.71). She asks Bill, *“Is it hurt, Bill?”* But Bill replies, *“I hurt you more, so don’t you worry.”* The imagined Bill even holds her, dances with her and advises her to leave as soon as possible (Fig.4.72). Though she feels scared and insecure at that moment, in her imagination, her son appears outside the window riding bicycle and singing to her, *“You just do what you have to do.”* (Fig.4.73)



Fig.4.71 Bill washes the blood off his face



Fig.4.72 Bill forgives Selma’s murdering him



Fig.4.73 Selma’s son appears outside the window

By this way, Selma regains the courage to get away from the corpse of Bill. When she passes the yard, she sees Bill’s wife, Linda, who walks toward her smilingly. She feels sorry and confesses to Linda by saying, *“I kill your husband.”* But Linda also forgives her and reminds that she has already called the police. She supports Selma’s determination to leave as soon as possible (Fig.4.74).



Fig.4.74 Linda supports Selma in her imagination

All these things give Selma a sense of being understood. They also give her the courage to escape from the crime scene. Though in reality, these conditions are impossible to happen, her imagination still sooth her broken heart and turns all the turmoil into a world of musical comfort. That is the magic power for her to retain hope and energy and move on in life.

Moreover, when Selma sees her favorite musical star, Novy, she imagines herself dancing with Novy (Fig.4.75). She sings to him, *“You’ll always be there to catch me [when I fall].”* However, in reality, Novy comes to the court to verify Selma’s lies and certify her as a dishonest person. When Selma feels wronged and helpless in the court, she even imagines all the unfriendly people there singing, *“We’ll always be there to catch you,”* to her (Fig.4.76).

Additionally, the words, *“There is always someone to catch me [when I fall].”* symbolize what she has been longing for in the reality. In reality, she is all alone. She refuses to accept love from Jeff because of the pressure in life, which includes being a single mother and losing her eye sight gradually. Therefore, she imagines a state of refuge in musicals that always waiting for her in the hard condition.

She likes musicals, because only delight lives in musicals. Furthermore, she hates the end of stories; hence she always skips the ending. She likes to be held up high and sing, *“And there is always someone to catch me [when I fall].”* These are why Selma has become so fascinated and obsessed with the power of musicals.



Fig.4.75 Selma imagines Novy dancing with her in the court



Fig.4.76 Selma imagines everyone sings to her and comforts her

(2) The therapy and Selma's son

The musical is Selma's favorite. It also symbolizes her therapy. When she confronts with misery, she enters the world of musicals where only happiness remains and all the affliction turns to be good. Subsequently, she forgets the pain and finds herself possessing adequate strength. In short, although reality brings her unbearable plight and pain, imagination of musical brings cure for her.

Furthermore, when the execution time is due, Selma is too panic to stand up and walk out of her cell (Fig.4.77). She cannot overcome the fear until she hears a few rhymes of steps and starts to imagine a musical. In the musical, the policeman embraces Selma and dances with her. She also embraces and dances with other prisoners (Fig.4. 78). The more steps she launches, the closer the execution room. When the music suddenly stops, she finally approaches the execution room (Fig.4.79).



Fig.4.77 Selma is too scared to stand up before execution



Fig.4.78 The imaged musicals on the way to be executed



Fig.4.79 The execution room

In the execution room, Selma can not stand the fear anymore because she knows that she is going to be put to dead. Nevertheless, she is forced to stand straight and has her neck encircled by the rope (Fig.4.80). At this moment, Selma is so terrified that she cannot stop her intense sobbing until she gets the glasses from her son. Here her son is another therapy that enables Selma to calm down and helps her connect with the imagination of musicals (Fig.4.81). Without her son, without musicals, Selma would never have courage to go forward and be strong during execution. In other words, Selma's son and musicals are what enable her to persist at the last moment of her life.



Fig.4.80 Selma is forced to be pull up for hanging



Fig.4.81 Selma is holding her son's glasses during execution

