

Interview with LARS VON TRIER

BY OLAV SKAANING ANDERSEN

O.S.A.: Your latest film, Zentropa, is about Europe, especially Germany. It seems to me that you identify Germany with Europe, they are identical to you. What is so fascinating about Germany?

L.T.: Germany is the entrance to Europe and I am obsessed by the country. Germany is a symbol, it is Europe. And the German society has always demonstrated the most extreme passions: in its national character as well as in the relationships between individuals and the relations to other countries. I feel it as a kind of thread, and this creates a universe of war, a perfect setting for a film.

I have a kind of anxiety concerning Germany. I feel that Germany humiliated me during the Second World War. Besides that I consider the fact that my parents had to escape from Germany during the war as a great humiliation.

But I don't have any ideas of or any opinions about Europe. To me Europe is a feeling or a sentiment, which I find quite difficult to explain. That is why I make movies.

O.S.A.: You are not able to discuss Zentropa as a film related to Europe as reality?

L.T.: No, Not really. I don't know anything about real life except that I voted yes to the Maastricht-treaty in the recent Danish referendum. Primarily because of the events in Eastern Europe. I am interested in the present opening of Europe, but you can be completely sure: Europe will never be able to co-operate seriously. There will always be a country that disagrees, i.e Norway.

Chaos will always exist and that is exactly what I like. If there was to be an European Union with precise and well defined borders, one could not talk

about chaos. And that is why you can easily find a figure as Kessler in Eastern Europe today.

O.S.A.: Why do you want to show chaos?

L.T.: It is very unpleasant to live in chaos. The human being cannot stand chaos, it is ruin to the human being, a heading towards destruction. But nevertheless I see a poetic beauty in chaos. And it can be a good educational point to confront people with chaos in short moments. Afterwards they can return to their safe homes in the suburbs. So perhaps I am an excellent educator, but I will deny that till my death.

O.S.A.: The failure, or ruin, of the idealist is an important theme in almost all your films. Fisher in Element of Crime, Dr. Mesmer in Epidemic and Leo Kessler in Zentropa. Why?

L.T.: During my life I have always felt that people exploited me when I was good. So it is a kind of revenge when the idealistic character meets with bad luck in my films. Now I really hate teachers and idealists. They are didactic and tell people how they should act and behave. But the idealist is also a boring figure. I was a true idealist when I was young and look how I am sitting in my own company now.

For commercial reasons it is always good to be an avangardist at the beginning of your career. It creates a kind of idealism, so today it is still possible to live well on your baldheaded past....

O.S.A.: If the artist is not an idealist, what is he then?

Lars Von Trier, *Werewolf's sons*, 1991.

L.T.: Primarily he is preoccupied with fighting other artists. Art -or media- is a great force, but is also something which easily fossilizes. So it is very important to fight against other artists; i.e. to avoid that art fossilizes completely. I would like to be the one who sits in the corner and says; this has to be done differently. The whole machinery - technique, economy - of art grows and because of this we have to fight against this limitation of our possibilities. I want to tell stories people do not necessarily want to follow or watch. I want to give people pictures and images from a world of film they do not know in advance.

O.S.A.: You combine popular culture and classical themes in Zentropa and I see a great inspiration from Hitchcock and Orson Welles?

L.T.: Yes, I have a great interest in Orson Welles. Especially when he makes the clash between the traditional Hollywood film and the art movie. He really bends the rules. When he made *Touch Of Evil* he took the worst novel, he could find and it became an excellent film. On the contrary his screen vision of Kafka's *The Process* is not - not at all - so interesting as *Touch Of Evil*. There's no clash in *The Process*, perhaps because there is too much Kafka in

Orson Welles' own personality. I was very inspired by Hitchcock when I made *Zentropa*. I don't know exactly what it is, but I feel good in his company. It is like watching a soap-opera on Television. You get a family in a dramaturgic sense, that means you know what is going to happen. It is an alphabet, which I know through and through in the case of Hitchcock: When I watch a movie of him I immediately know the alphabet so to speak! Hitchcock and Donald Duck are both part of the common knowledge and culture of our generation. We have their visual stereotypes in our heads. When I

made *Zentropa* I returned to this problem and confronted it with my eyes open again, so to speak. I really like these clichés. They are instruments, like the words of the alphabet, and they can be extended. The principal technique concerns the putting together of things in a different way.

O.S.A.: You use rear and front projection quite openly and obviously?

L.T.: I have the fascination of rear projection from Hitchcock. He uses it in an abstract way, so it is obvious that rear projection is at play. When you stylize in this way, or in any other way, what you do is to tidy up the picture. Hitchcock, Dreyer and Welles all did this. Rear and front projection in *Zentropa* is made with quite an old-fashioned technique. It was meant to be difficult. I like to make film as difficult as possible. It is too easy to make a videofilm, everybody can do that. That is why I make films which are difficult to make technically.

O.S.A.: You challenge your own ability as filmmaker?

L.T.: Yes, it is a challenge, a kind of athletic endeavor. And you always get results when the conditions are difficult. In *Zentropa* we try to do an immense job to raise people's awareness and consciousness as to the challenge and the difficulty of making the actual film. We show people exactly when it is the question of superimposition and draw their attention to the fact that this is film, and not reality. We emphasize the medium, film.

We can have up to seven layers of images when we are working on image superimposition, in black and white as well as colour. But the important thing is that we combine two images which could be filmed with different lenses. With background shot with a telephotolens and a foreground shot with a wideangle lens, we can create an unsettling effect which marks the audience although it is not immediately noticeable. The same is true with the movements and changes of the camera. We are making images that seem perfectly realistic, but turn out to contain an element which leads the film in directions planned beforehand although hidden in the actual image.

O.S.A.: What does it mean to match foreground and background?

L.T.: It is always interesting to see a close-up of a man -and then in the background to be able to watch what is inside his head. It has always interested me. We also did it in *Element of Crime*. You smash the perspective and it becomes decorative.

O.S.A.: What does your part in the avantgarde film milieu imply?

L.T.: The avantgarde is obviously important as such. Nevertheless I find a mixture of the avantgarde and the popular film to be more interesting. In all my films I have tried to develop the film language applying hypnosis, front and rear projection, superimposition, internal monologue and voice-over.

O.S.A.: You have a special relationship to the famous Danish director, Carl Theodor Dreyer.

L.T.: I find a kind of honesty in Dreyer's film which does not exist anywhere else. That is all. I discovered him when I was quite young and I must have seen *Jeanne D'arc* hundreds of times. Dreyer is a saint to me. I will not accept anything to be wrong with him. He made films which are very unlike mine. But he did it with a purity of heart. Not because he wanted to make money. That is completely certain. Ten years passed between his films. In the silent film era he made bad, or poor, film. But afterwards he followed a specific goal right until his death and that is a good attitude towards life.

O.S.A.: What do you have in common with him?

L.T.: I have learned purity and stylistic ability from Dreyer, but I do not have much in common with him when it comes to the subjects. All his movies are about woman as a victim. He sees the woman as a saint. On the contrary women are almost absent, or non existent, in my films. The women are really stereotypes in *Element of Crime* and *Epidemic*. But in my new film *Breaking The Waves* I try to change this. This film is inspired by Dreyer's *Gertrud*. I try to make a melodramatic story, a sonorous melodrama, where you get to weep in the cinema. Directly, with undiluted presence, without layers of any kind.

O.S.A.: You are absorbed by hypnosis and used it in your previous film Epidemic. Would you prefer to hypnotized your actors, in order to achieve better control of them?

L.T.: Yes, it would be interesting. I have always had difficulties with the direction of female actors. Although I had a close cooperation with Barbara Sukowa in *Zentropa*.

Perhaps one could remove the actors restraints with hypnosis, but only in order to release something inherent, something within them. One could perhaps say that is a contradiction, or at least a contrast between being an actor and being hypnotized, but I don't think so. Every actor has a fairly good contact with his emotional life. But it is an admission to the unconscious, the hidden, which interests me.

You have the best pictures inside your head. If you are able to untie them and bring them out in the open, you really have achieved something.

O.S.A.: This is the way you actually want to approach hypnosis, your empirical attitude, so to speak?

L.T.: Hypnosis is a good excuse to get in contact with powerful and hidden feelings. It is an excuse to talk about things which we are not allowed to show or talk about. Filmmaking is an excuse to do the same, i.e. to tell tales about blood and death. If it was not for the film medium, you would soon end up as mad, locked up, when you told the tales of death and blood, the forbidden layers. When you feel something for images that

you cannot understand, you can no longer control them. That is the unsettling effect I am aiming for. I like to communicate with these feelings within cinema, to take them into cinema. That is hypnosis.

O.S.A.: Have you ever tried hypnosis?

L.T.: No, I'm afraid of it. I am afraid of being manipulated by somebody else in this way. I don't like to go to the cinema either. I have a fear of cinema, a cinema-fear. I always want to sit on the outer chair and I want to leave immediately when they switch off the light.

*I am afraid of being seduced. I was scared to death when I saw *Deerhunter* and *Taxidriver*. I watched *Peter Pan* with my daughter lately. And this is about as much as I can stand, it is so peaceful. But still I definitely don't like going to the cinema and I look forward to the day I get a big screen in my livingroom...*

Literature: Kimergaard and Johansson: Lars von Trier, Sekvens, Department of Film, Television and Communication, University of Copenhagen, 1991.

Peter Øvig Knudsen: Den Indre boddel og bonnen om evigt karbad, Interview with Lars von Trier in: Press no. 61, 1990.

Olav Skaaning Andersen: Elementer fra en anden filmverden, (Elements from another world of film) in: Studentbladet no. 2, 1987.

Olav Skaaning Andersen, born 1965, is a film and television critic. He lives and works in Copenhagen, Denmark.

Credits, filmography and pictures: Credits: *Zentropa* (Europa). Director: Lars von Trier. Script by Lars von Trier and Niels Vørsel. Producers: Peter Aalbaek Jensen and Bo Christensen. Executive Producers: Gerard Mital, Gunnar Obel, Patrick Godeau and Francois Duplat. Directors of Photography: Henning Bendtsen, Jean-Paul Meurisse and Edward Klosinsky. Set designer: Henning Bahs. Actors: Jean Marc Barr (Leo Kessler), Barbara Sukowa (Katharina Hartmann), Udo Kier (Lawrence Hartmann), Ernst Hugo Jaeregard (Uncia Kessler), Erik Moerk (Pater), Jorgen Reenberg (Max Hartmann), Henning Jensen (Siggy), Eddie Constantine (Colonel Harris). Narrator: Max von Sydow.

Filmography: Lars von Trier, born 1956. Educated at the Danish Filmschool 1983.

Feature Films: *Nocturne*, 1981; *Images Of a Relief*, 1982; *Element Of Crime*, 1984; *Epidemic*, 1987; *Medea*, 1988 (TV-film); *Zentropa* (Europa), 1992.

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Lars Von Trier, *Zentropa* (Europa), 1991.