

THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT

– A POST-FREUDIAN DIVINE DARK COMEDY?

JOSÉ GABRIEL PEREIRA BASTOS
APPPA – Associação Portuguesa de
Psicanálise
CRIA – Centre for Research in
Anthropology

The enigma of human duplicities

It is with Freud, in *Civilization and its discontents* (1930) that we first identify the enigma of the human double face: on the one hand cooperating in the struggle for survival, in reproduction and family life; on the other, the *homo hominis lupus*, the narcissistic man, compelled by competitive and confrontational contexts (identity-related, erotic, economic and martial).

Lars von Trier confronts us, in his last two films (*Nymphomaniac* and *The House That Jack Built*), with another kind of human duplicity, one also explored by Sigmund Freud: female polymorphous perversity, which, in its erotic form, can propel a man to his Seventh Heaven, but may also destroy them; and the narcissistic male's phallic destructive psychopathy, which can thrust us all into Seventh Hell and extinction. Von Trier confers upon both films a reflective tenor, through the voice of a cultivated and chaste pair of interlocutors, Seligman (the Jewish 'happy man') and Verge (Vergil, the founding poet of the Greco-Roman World), both representations of western civilization's difficulty in dealing with the most extreme forms of gender conflict: extramarital 'perverse' female eroticism and phallic violence enacted on women, which, in its warlike form, also decimates children and men.

But Von Trier isn't trying to build a stratifying categorization that distinguishes between psychopaths and perverts, such as with the psychiatric approach. Rather, by contrasting the sexes to the extreme, he is trying to annul Aristotle's vision, in *Politics* (a work of prodigious power, still greatly influential in civic life today), of a political, albeit irrational, category, 'Man', a 'Citizen' amongst the Proprie-

tors, ostensibly 'superior by nature', who reduces his women, his subjects, to submission, together with the children and slaves. The woman, subservient to her 'man', and the man, as omnipotent Master of his submissive women and potential executioner of those womenfolk who resist him, is an idea that persists even today, under the cover of 'philosophical' unconsciousness, in all the ideological discourse about 'Man' and 'Humanity' that demagogically homogenises gender, generations and cultures.

And yet this is nothing new in the realm of Nordic culture. Ibsen was one of the first to expose, in the theatre, the kind of suffering caused by the Battle of the Sexes that philosophy, law or classical political science suppress, and sociology reduces to statistics (the superior form of rationalism which, in a sleight of hand, replaces humans with numbers). Something which Bergman returns to in the cinema, and Stieg Larsson, more recently, to Swedish literature, demonstrating that the arts do carry the power to confront us with what the Academy enshrouds.

From structural-dynamic duplicities to rationalist binarisms

In this modern Jack, the ripper, we are confronted with a set of dichotomies, treasured by rationalists and indispensable to them as a shield against the truth. Crucially, the 'rational-irrational' opposition, which presents 'Man' (but not women, the 'primitive', the 'poor' or the 'mad') as a 'rational'; a feat that Marx (1844), Durkheim (1912) and Freud (1895, 1913) thoroughly contested, calling attention to the centrality of delirium in culture, and compelling Edgar Morin to propose that '*homo sapiens demens*' (Morin 1973) replace '*homo sapiens*' – in the process, rejecting gender hierarchisation.

We advance, with Morin, from dichotomy to complexity. And, with von Trier, we witness for a moment (for the sake of examination) the weakening of the normal-pathological opposition; a dichotomy dear to the discrete charm of the bourgeoisie, and the psychiatry that underpins and legitimises it. Moreover, we also witness the contrast between citizen and murderer fade (a contrast reversed by the actions of hunters and soldiers, prime examples of the citizen-murderer genus); and also, what is not new, the dissolution of the opposition between Genius and Crime, which Lombroso has questioned, and that between Crime and Art, which is enfeebled by the Criminal Arts and the Arts of War, that is, by historically structured crime and the Arts of Hunting, decoratively displayed as trophies high up along the stately walls of such mansions as those owned by the aristocratic masters of Europe and its Colonies.

¹ In French, 'verge' is a popular term to allude the male sex.

Von Trier return to complexity and reflective nihilism

In Lars von Trier, nihilism is less political than reflective. Whether we agree with it or not (and on the margin, Verge, representing western civilisation, disagrees with Jack and confronts him), von Trier is not the first to pose these (and other) distressing questions in a meditative type of cinema that persists in opposing the mere story-telling of so-called popcorn-film, which is already depleted the minute the lights are turned back on.

What motivates the director to make such a film is, according to what von Trier himself has stated in interview, the intense curiosity women possess for psychopaths and other 'destruction-and-crime' phallic heroes. Which complements the strong inquisitiveness men in turn hold for the perverse and polymorph life of the opposite sex; the intense museological and ethnographical interest the 'white man' has in *his* overseas 'primitives', and the disturbed curiosity the 'normal' hold for the secret psychopathology that inhabits and undermines them from within, in a movement that also perturbs them, culturally, from the outside, and leads to the type of personal and historical infraction they wish could be forgotten. Such as the amnesiac investigator in *The Element of Crime* (1984), von Trier's first feature about the figure of a serial killer.

Questioning the links between double eroticism, battle of sexes, religion, imperialism, racionalism, art and criminality

Joe, in *Nymphomaniac* and Jack, in *The House That Jack Built*, form a dyad that demands the consideration of male and female patterns of disturbing behaviour and their hidden motivations. Another dyad, Seligman and Verge¹ represent Academic Rationalism, assuring the false dialogue between asymmetrical worlds, the lived and the institutionalised. In the first film, nymphomaniac sadomasochisms, only apparently 'passive', and in the second, psychopathic phallic violence (what nearly amounts to a pleonasm), only apparently 'active', although impulsive and, later, obsessive-sadistic (OCD), pointing to the Gender Wars, and the civilizational malaise first detected by Freud (1915, 1930).

With both films receding from Erotic and demanding, similarly, in parallel, a debate about religion and politics, art and criminality (underlined by the false dialogue with Verge, who defends, through his homilies, the proud and unquestioned West-

ern Civilisation), it is our civilizational discontentment (Freud 1930) that is exposed by the extremism of their sadomasochistic gamut, which is compulsively repeated. Far from the labelling provided by psychiatry (which the director ironizes) and from the aggrieved bourgeois spectator who would see him as another 'case' of unsettling marginality (which von Trier could have saved us from), Jack emerges as a metaphor for the dark side of western civilisation, Judaeo-Christian, Greco-Roman, an Imperial Civilisation which torments and plagues us with its sacred imperialistic wars, they too, obsessively replicated.

That von Trier should have relieved us all from this torment is what one of the most esteemed film critics in Portugal has defended, berating the man while, at the same time, he casts aside the analysis of the cultural artefact at hand; revealing, even, an unsuspected cognitive regression and a drastic censorial vocation, whose roots rest in Portuguese Catholicism and its long-lasting fascist *Estado Novo* tributary². According to Jorge Leitão Ramos, since the last decade, "Lars von Trier has been drawing nearer the most diabolical pornographic ferocity (...) what proves his need for urgent psychiatric attention" and signposts *The House That Jack Built* as "a film to be avoided by all means." (Expresso, Revista 2410, 5/1/2019: 77).

Contrary to Sartre, since it is not philosophy that is at issue here, in these two films, 'Hell is us'. It is not the director's unconscious that ought to be examined by psychiatry, it is our 'cultural normality' (our perverse sexuality and criminal aggressiveness, in their historical dimension), which, condensed and rid of negation, becomes strangely disquieting (*Unheimliche*), when *ex-posed* and placed outside us (Freud 1919). Encroaching perversion, crime, the Academy and Art, the memory of our lives and of the History we have been imparted ('the Real') becomes a veiling representation which, in the name of 'normality', we may want to compulsively repress again, as an intolerable idea, instead of wishing to see it projected in the cinema. "This is the secret" of vulgar criticism. A fool's secret, the puerile return to super-egoic Filmmaker evaluation, be it as Censorship, the originator of scapegoats, be it as filmic Ideal to be prized ritualistically, in place of the analytical probing of civilizational malaise. In this Von Trier's Divine Comedy, Dante idealism bequeaths *Hollywoodesque* critique the model of vulgar criticism.

Structurally, then, Lars von Trier, by stretching out his protagonists to the limit, grants Joe's feminine sexuality a precociously hyper-erotized biographical tone, and enriches Jack with traumatic childish memories and sceptic dialogues with Verge. Besides, von Trier organises this *peregrinatio ad loca infecta* following two spectres: Joe's revenge over the emissary of Academic Power, dispatching Seligman, the transferenceal pater who had presented himself asexual, as his own father had also shown to be; and Jack's uterine retreat into a plant world, troubled by the harvesters, turning aggression into a form of female harming chastity, into a search for refuge in Art, and ambivalent oscillation between the identification with Phallic Power (deified) and the revolt against that same constabulary authority he ridicules, ending with a compromise between anonymity and Fame, punishment and the decamping to Eternal Peace.

² The dictatorial regime that ruled Portugal between 1933 and 1974.

³ In the film, the interplay of action with the voicing of the noun “jack” convokes a range of interweaving meanings, from formal to informal and slang, here impossible to reproduce: ‘jack’, as a colloquial term descriptive of any or the common man; ‘jack’, as in Jack’s own name; ‘jack’, as in the hydraulic hand tool normally used to lift a car and change a tire; ‘jack’, meaning very little or nothing, as in the expressions “you don’t know jack” or “you *ain’t* got jack”; ‘jack’, as in jackass, a male donkey or a human tomfool; and, more obliquely, ‘jack’, as in the phallic ‘tool’ men normally possess and will readily use, but Jack seems to lack, or is unfit to utilise or to know how to employ – pointing to the phonetic proximity (bar the initial consonant) between “jack” and “lack” and the transience between having and wanting. Trans. note.

Von trier clues to a non-literal, metaphorical and thoughtful reading

Clues for a nonliteral, metaphorical and thoughtful reading overflow the comical interludes, the scholarly referencing and the profound dialogues that supervene, signalling that only by favouring a reflective and complex Freudian interpretation can one avoid reducing the cinema to the telling of a character’s story, to a performative narrative devoid of distance; a form of objectification that confounds Art and Reality and which, after Bertolt Brecht and Hannah Arendt, can only fall upon the peripheral cinephile.

In his exchanges with Verge, Jack confesses the vocational ambition to identify with the Holy Father – monarchic religion’s Supreme Architect (and also Leibniz’s and the republican freemasonry’s) –, but reminisces about how his mother castrated his identity when she condemned him to becoming nothing more than an engineer, to best equip him for making a living. Castrated by his mother, Jack realises that he is just the failed engineer of unliveable constructions, such as those in the nursery rhyme *This Is the House That Jack Built*, full of the human chaos and creature misconduct conjured by the film’s title:

This is the farmer sowing his corn, / That kept the cock that crow’d in the morn, / That waked the priest all shaven and shorn, / That married the man all tatter’d and torn, / That kissed the maiden all forlorn, / That milk’d the cow with the crumpled horn, / That tossed the dog, / That worried the cat, / That killed the rat, / That ate the malt / That lay in the house that Jack built. Jack also understands that, lacking the Grace of loving maternal integration (once again, he is humiliated, now as an adult, because he *ain’t got ‘jack’*³ and hence is perceived as a sexual ‘coward’), all he has left is the will to transform the Torment he and his utensils have brought upon the smashed lives of his victims into the grace of recreating their destroyed bodies in the realm of Art, in a New Architecture of Frozen Death, placing outside the performative and neo-baroque Artistic Tomb he erects the bodies which, according to Euro-normativity, should have been hidden inside. In this remorseless cinema, “to show or not to show, that is the question”. Uncared-for by his mother, incapable of finishing his own House, which he repeatedly demolishes, repudiated by his woman – although we will only learn this with the final song obsessively repeating “*Hit the road Jack and don’t you come back no more, no more, no more*” –, Jack gifts us his Frozen Performative Artwork, returning humanity to the rigid Ice Architectures populating the WASP Northern Parts of Europe (the equivalent of the more precarious ‘sand castles’ found in the Mediterranean south).

In support of his destructiveness, Jack (the common man) summons up three cultural models, all devoid of empathy – with Nature, the animals and humanity –, which stratify three periods of historical evolution: agriculture, hunting (resulting in colonialism) and the military emergence of the Imperialist State.

In the film, the harvesters come first, in rigid formation, devising automated work and mutilating mother-nature's fecundity by cutting close the spring herbage that served Jack-the-child's first return to womb. Then come the hunters, forerunners of the military and Kantian philosophy, expunging the Beautiful, the feminine and the puerile, through the Sublime destruction of the helpless 'game', which is turned into trophies of artistic merit, warranting the passage from Necessity to Sublimation and from Crime to Decorative Art, with the narcissistic exhibition of such morbid Trophies high up the walls of aristocratic manors. Finally, the soldiers at the service of the Imperialistic economy, Nazi or any other, for decades American, to cite Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*, committed to killing, most efficiently, the largest number of prisoners with the smallest amount of bullets.

The Genesis Of Psychopathy And The Merge Of Phallic Imperialism

This mode of presentation, as a series of 'incidents', hides here the fact that the genesis of phallic psychopathy is situated in childhood, triggered by (castrating) maternal humiliation. It does not stem from an 'education for crime' (which will come later, in the guise of heroic cinema, as in Quentin Tarantino's *The Hateful eight*, 2015), but from identification with the phallic aggressor, which acts collectively, an affinity culturally institutionalised by Phallic Civilisation.

Returned to womb on the pasturage that will later be reaped, little frightened Jack, fascinated by the rhythmic sound emitted by the harvesters who castrate Mother-Earth's salient herbs (an indirect reference to the primal scene), identifies with their castrating sadism and clips a duckling's foot (a structuring movement which Freud identifies as the passage from passivity to activity, through identification with the aggressor, a form of identity transformation linked to Castration anxiety, leading, in the boy, to the Negative, homoerotic Oedipus, then to machismo and Phallic violence).

For fear of the Father (telluric or celestial), the boy assumes the principles of violence over women and children which, in his adult life, he will try to rationalise, framing his cruelty in the rationalist synthesis of religion, philosophy, politics and the arts – a phallic unification initiated by Dante, "Christianity's poet", in the *Divine Comedy*, , advanced by Machiavel, in *The Prince* (1513), taken by Hobbes in the *Leviathan* (1651) and later by Leibniz, in the eighteenth century, when, in the *Monadology*, he equates the celestial Father, the Human Artists becoming 'Creators', the Princes and the biological fathers, inter se, in their relationship with humans, artistic endeavour, subjects and offspring.

⁴ WASP – White Anglo-Saxon Protestants

⁵ “Why won’t you shut up?!”

In psychopathy, elimination of others occults castration anxiety

As an object to be eliminated, men are also of service, on a political (ideological) level. But it is women (and their children) who, on a different psychoanalytical plane, propel Jack’s obsessiveness to compulsively repeat his crimes with the amount of detail he then invests in their occultation. It all starts with the initial, impulsive incident, when a female stranger, in a chance meeting, venturing a ride with Jack, outdoes him, throwing his sexual impotence and cowardice in his face, for he hasn’t even been able to rape her when she has shown not to fear him, because she finds him incapable of such phallic feat.

Given the female paradoxical injunction which torments the American Century, in its new, challenging and dominating, #MeToo guise – “See if you can rape me, or else you’re nothing but a useless coward; but if you do fulfil my command and try to do it you’re just a crook and I’ll report you to the police” –, Jack (who doesn’t even have a jack) declines to serve her (refusing to change her punctured tire, this time using her ‘jack’), to then impulsively grab her tool as the partial object symbolising the *phallus* (‘jack’, as he himself) to smash her silent forever. (And here returns the memory of the Spanish King, still looking upon himself as Emperor of the Spanish Americas, but already harmless, sovereignly fronting the revolutionary President with a “*Por que no te callas?!^{4,5}*”)

Two different types of women appear in the first couple of ‘incidents’: the Archaic Woman (the Mother cautioning her daughter not to go inside a stranger’s car alone, for he might want to rape her); and the Modern, #MeToo Woman, undaunted by strangers, disqualifying them genitally, between the threat of punishment and humiliation, what perpetuates the battle of the sexes instead of overcoming it.

Following this first ‘episode’, we switch over to a second phase of the script, during which time two distinct but complementary movements will recur. Women incarnate, for the unloved male, either excessive autonomy, which stands for abandonment, or disorder and, principally, humiliation. It is necessary to kill them so that this crumbling phallic order is restored, deceiving them and cutting back their defences to then rationalise the phallic crime aesthetically, exploiting the bodies as artistic productions.

Lars von Trier grants this second victim (a widowed, maternal figure) an unexpectedly longer resistance time before he finally nudges Jack to acting out her departure. First, at the moment when Jack is still negotiating his entry and manipulatively switches from the role of patrolling policeman to that of an insurance salesman who might double her pension. Later, as he neurotically vacillates, simultaneously trying to strangle and comfort her, to then stab her right in her chest (Jack-the-child’s elected area, the portion of female body he will tear up later) and watch, riveted, as blood gushes out of her body, apparently forever.

It is this blood which threatens his impunity, and which he deliriously believes may be, hazardously, concealed behind a picture frame or hidden under the legs of a stationary chair; but which he will then spread all over town, as he drags her corpse behind his car, painting a long impression of the crime he has just committed. The loss of this maternal figure is offset by religious over-dimensioning, when the Great Architect (Jack's totemic figure) ordains a well-timed rainstorm to wash away all traces of blood, showing that Divine Providence Phallic Planning can bond together, in impunity, the different strata of virility and criminality (celestial, religious, political, social and artistic).

And yet, the Art of Crime cannot be displayed right away. Jack's trophies first need to be frozen and then worked by the Artist. What Jack, or even God, could not avert has, now, such as with Culture, to be methodically organised and legitimised, through the ideals divinised by that same cultural compass (hunting, punishment attached to female erotic overture, war and the arts).

The first two 'incidents' draw together two different generations, two single women and two greatly dissimilar sets of norms: no fear of getting into a man's car, never opening the front door to a stranger (such as in *The Wolf and the Seven Young Goats* fairy tale) – since male sexuality can, in an instant, transmute from a desire for phallic penetration into a craving for metallic incursion; and the desire to kill into metamorphic, artistic, philosophical or political enterprise.

Mocking public opinion supported by psychiatric and media simplicities

From a formal standpoint, it is attached to this second incident that, in a mocked form, the 'diagnostics' of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and the PSYCHOPATHIC label emerge (fig. 3): and also the recollection of that childhood scene with the harvesters (fig. 4), after which he committed his original crime (clipping the duckling's foot); the accelerating sequence of female murders; compulsively running over an old woman; starting to twist his victims into bizarre, seemingly artistic positions; Verge's various interpellations; and William Blake's (1794) the metaphorical interrogation about the Tiger and the Lamb⁶ – 'one as perfect as the other, but only the lamb will forever live in Art History'.

Growing in self-esteem under the Omnipotent guard of his Celestial Father, protective of those sons who execute their Mothers (what Freud characterised, tardily, as the simple and negative Oedipus complex, and interpreted as the process of identity transformation which protects Phallic Society), Jack mocks psychiatric 'truth', mimics the media and organises the private displaying of his feats, arranged from newspaper clippings which dub him "Mr Sophistication", as he will shortly begin to sign himself, and artsy photographs of sets of corpses assembled in comical posi-

⁶ "When the stars threw down their spears / And water'd heaven with their tears: / Did he smile his work to see? / Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" (a strophe of 'Tiger', from "Songs of Experience"). This poem has been considered "the most famous" and "the most anthologised poem in English". "Tiger" can be seen as a figure of the British Colonial Empire and "the Lamb" as a figure of the Christ sacrificed to the will of the Father. Political and biblical contradictions or complementarities can be read in the interdependence of the two poems. Terror, Fear and Blood intertwines the two poems from "Songs from Experience and Innocence". In modernity, the political 'sacrifice' of Jack Kennedy figures the Lamb.

tions – whose relational disorder is uncovered by the displaying of the negatives, the black light metaphor that only technology can convey. The importance of this rapport with light is illustrated by the changing shadow Jack-the-walker projects as he paces beneath the streetlights; a metaphor for all the variations his compulsion to kill evokes, whose fulfilment temporarily alleviates the obsessions resulting from the obstruction to the elaboration of anguish – a barrier rooted in childhood, as the film indicates.

The bourgeois appetite for killing in hunting and war

The third ‘incident’ is more premeditated and no longer involves stalking a woman. Lifted in status by identification with the belligerent aristocracy, Hunting emerges as the original liquidation art legitimised by the colonial bourgeoisie – the bourgeois may no longer go to war, but he surely hasn’t lost his appetite for killing. Following the murder of a ‘seductress’ travelling alone (who could conceivably have been his lover) and the killing of a suspicious widow (who could well have been his mother), comes the assault on maternal fecundity, perpetrated by a man who never led to his own family. This involves, as per the Arts of Hunting, the implementation of a plan to kill mother and children (as if they were animal trophies), first by seducing the victims to identify with the hunter, and then by turning predator into prey, accomplice into victim. Such as with Aristotle, Leibniz and Kant, the world is hierarchised binarily: between aristocracy and the people; between Males and mothers (whether animal or human); between the ‘Sophisticated’, Phallic and Sublime, and the merely Beautiful, who live despondently. Artistic irony now arrogates the child, transfigured into Gotham’s clownish Joker (turning Jack into Marvel’s super heroic figure of the Batman); a vision that sees criminal America enthralled by its own image, splitting the world into the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ (such as with religion), to legitimise and globalise imaginarily its own lack of empathy, its compulsion to repeating its attempts to dominance and its military psychopathy.

Phallic Battle of Sexes Between Sophistication and Simplicity

In a longer fourth ‘Incident’, Jack flirts with Jacqueline while putting on the haughtiness of a Mr Sophistication who, momentarily, has had to settle for his Ms Simple. He challenges her to scream for help (he himself helping her by screaming even

louder), eventually slashing her envied saliences (he who lacked the kind of 'jack' that could lift a car and help fix a flat tire) and pasting one to the windscreen of a police car, while the officer remains reliably oblivious and inept. An officer who treats the threat of serial crime, confessionally yelled, as a mere few words between a drunken couple, instructing that Jacqueline take her man home, back to the space that will shelter the crime. After the Supreme Architect, it is now the Police that underprops the impunity of Male violence against women, rather complicitly. Jack faces the crimes he perpetrates on women quite ambivalently, between culpability and the helplessness of a "no one cares, no one helps!" Captive to his own compulsiveness, he wants to be stopped, denouncing his crimes, demanding serious investigation, or even shouting his culpability as a serial killer; in a bipolar mix of crying for help from the authorities, and a megalomaniac belief in the impunity ratified by the Supreme Architect and the prevailing culture.

Von Trier Calls Woody Allen Comedies to Face the Anxiety of Castration by the Mother

More explicitly, because de-dramatized by how laughter tends to disarm aggression (Freud, 1905), the two great threats faced by the desire for phallic pretention are clearly exposed in a few of Woody Allen's comedies. Both derive from the unconscious association between the face of the Mother, when castigating, and the breasts of lovers that excite him, as an obsessive memory. In the sixth episode of *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex * But Were Afraid to Ask* (1972), a pair of scientists try to defeat a giant breast flying over Central Park, ravaging the countryside; and years later, in *Oedipus Wrecks*, Allan's part in the *New York Stories* film triptych (1989), he puts his hero (played by himself) under the humiliating spell of his diseased mother's face-in-the-sky, forever cold, sadistic, ceaselessly and overtly censoring him, from high up, as if he was still a child.

As *The House That Jack Built* constantly reminds us, pointing to Dante, Leibnitz, Hitler and the postmodern performing arts, by way of which architecture returns to its Renaissance status, equating as Workers the hand of God and mankind's creative (but also murdering) hand, the aggressor is the epitome of the artist and the victim his material in the Arts of Crime. Jack himself makes it explicit that what fascinates him is the Art of the Negative, since in Art 'it is the material that makes the Work', and it is the bodies that best make up the substance of all performing arts, narcissistic, of Egos inflated by individual exposition, if possible transgressive. In such a case, the materials are, mostly, the bodies of assassinated women. And the House of Dead, presented for artistic effect, represents western civilisation's necrophagous dimension. The Art of War, recalled in the final 'incident', works here

as an Interrupted Melody, rendering Peace precarious and illusory (such as with the familistic milieu), and our Armistice as long as the Korean.

From Castration by the Mother to Phallic Omnipotence

This last ‘incident’ evokes another film, Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket*, by staging an attempt to execute a line of handcuffed prisoners with a single full metal jacket bullet. It is at this moment that the police intervene, attesting the impermissibility of assailing the State and its organised violence, since, such as with God, the State constitutes and represents the social organisation of phallic violence. The increasing success of this phallic fortification, based upon sexual crime and the identification with both hunters and the military, leads, with Jack, and now irrevocably, to a Dantesque flight through the interior of his Funerary Installation and into Mother Earth’s tunnels. This return-to-uterus is escorted by Verge, who shepherds Jack towards the expectation of a coming back to light, having him face the challenge of walking an insuperable wall over the opening to a burning Hell, into which he will fall and with which he will fuse, in a conclusively fiery uterine becoming, far from human History and its cold stores, which, similar to funeral parlours, attract the crimes of the flesh.

This is *The House That Jack Built*; this is the World of Modern Civilisation that the WASP, the Founding Fathers, and their paired Empires (such as the Nazi, and the Soviet in rural Ukraine), heirs to the Greco-Roman Empire chanted by Vergil and to medieval witch-hunts, have built for us, in the course of their first American Century. A world where, with Jack, one can “believe heaven and hell are one and the same.”

The new Lars von Trier’s Critique of Civilization and its Referents

Renouncing the whodunit of his first film (*The Element of Crime*, 1984) to revisit this same subject (the serial killer’s assault on femininity), Lars von Trier opts here for the kind of distance that repudiates realist dramatization (‘descriptive’ and casuistic), assuming a Dark Comedy tone reminiscent of the Hitchcock of *Psycho*, the Kubrick of *A Clockwork Orange*, *The Shining*, *Full Metal Jacket* and *Eyes Wide Shut*, the Lynch of *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks*, and the Haneke of *The Piano Teacher* and *Funny Games*. Von Trier does this without shunning the questioning of a Civi-

lisation erected over the phallic crime, forcing us to face the extreme forms of a non-casuistic malaise that cannot be cured by reinstating psychiatric or cinephile forms of censorship.

This is adult cinema. Not because it is perverse or psychopathic, but rather since it is equipped with a complex, multi-referential structure, and because it reflects (on the Battle of the Sexes, on Sadistic Violence and on Phallic Society's Malaise) and confronts us with the blind alleys that the Academy promotes in its increasingly imposed teachings, ever more fragmented into 'disciplines' and myopic specialisms, and less and less reflective. Coming back to Dante, if the dialogue between Jack and Verge warrants continuation (Verge, who keeps declaring, from the high-minded stance of his academic omnipotence, that the narratives men insist in telling him never bring anything new), it would then be our turn to now become reflective, instead of attempting to kill the messenger.

Lars von Trier may look, to the troubled film critic, as if he was trying to align himself with Rotterdam's Witte de With 2014 collective exhibition *The Crime Was Almost Perfect*; a city destroyed by Nazism which, rooted in Thomas de Quincey's *On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts* (1827)⁷, proposes here, in this exhibit, an aesthetic approach to crime. Instead, what the 'damned' filmmaker is seeking to highlight (with his reflective approach to film) is how the American Century has led to hell on Earth, intensifying the battle of the sexes, the indifference before narcissistic aggression, and the legitimisation of the aesthetic and economic use of weaponry – in hunting, psychopathic crime and the extension of military Imperialism into the twenty first century.

This American Century's performative Civilisation (individualistic, hypercompetitive, sporty, economic, statistical, indifferent before pain and death – which have become mere journalistic and mediatic fodder), conceals Imperial authorship and splits the lesser social World between the free, supposedly logical 'Citizens', and the incomprehensible, ostensibly obsessive-compulsive Criminals; that is, between 'Normality' and Madness. It is sustained by its own sacralisation and exaltation, thoughtless and, allegedly, incomprehensible. In the arts, what appears as "strange (*unheimliche*) is that category of the frightening that appoints to what is known, as ancient and from long time familial", (Freud 1919), phallic violence against the feeble and the weak.

Psychoanalytic Illiteracy and 'Critical' Trumpist Despotism

The reception of "Nymphomaniac", Lars von Trier's latest film turned it into a scandal. As in Freud's times, the unrest of critics is embodied in a cognitive mirroring, in the rejection of any project of 'reading' this 'scandalous object', and its substitution

⁷ Influencing Poe, Baudelaire and Borges.

by *ad personam* attacks disguised as ‘critical’ argumentation. Psychoanalytical illiteracy becomes aggressive in its defence of the discreet charm of the bourgeoisie, and makes it clear that without Freud, a congruent reading of the cultural productions of the unconscious becomes impossible.

Thus, more palpably in his two last features, Lars von Trier has employed the strange power of placing film critique outside of itself, taking down its rational appearance. Converging with the Freud of *Civilisation and Its Discontents* (1930), the filmmaker screams, through and beyond Jack’s character, that this PERFORMATIVE CIVILISATION IS A PSYCHOPATHIC CIVILISATION, countering Verge’s academic deafness and the Trumpist film critic’s wanting to silence the film (which, in their mind, not even adults should dare watching, in an attempt to restore despotic censorship). Cultural Trumpism has arrived to academicized cinephilia. Walls are being raised by ‘critique’, separating between the irreflective, the ‘good’ cinema of entertainment, and the ‘bad’ cinema of reflection.

Conclusion

As Freud mentions humour is “a rare and precious gift” (1927, 221), that “has in it a *liberating* element, (...) something fine and elevating, (...) the triumph of narcissism, the ego’s victorious assertion of its own invulnerability. It refuses to be hurt by the arrows of reality or to be compelled to suffer. It insists that it is impervious to wounds dealt by the outside world, in fact, that these are merely occasions for affording it pleasure. This last trait is a fundamental characteristic of humour.” (idem, 216-217).

With Lars von Trier’s dark humour, ‘Jack’ is to be understood not in a clinical register but as a symptom of the *malaise* in civilization, induced by the work of the third type of man, the omnipotent Action Man (Freud 1930, 144) or Narcissistic man (Freud 1931). In this type, sadism allows “the satisfaction of the instinct (...) accompanied by an extraordinary high degree of narcissistic enjoyment, owing to its presenting the ego with fulfilment of the latter’s old wishes for omnipotence.” (Freud 1930: 144). “The ego has a considerable amount of aggression available, one manifestation of this being a proneness to activity; (...) People belonging to this type impress others as being ‘personalities’ (...)” (Freud 1931: 249).

‘Jack’ appears as a condensed mask of the sociopathic millenar criminality of Occidental ‘civilization’ against women, and their children, in the battle of sexes, and against colonised or invaded peoples in Imperial Anglo-American aggression, as it appears in this American Century conducted by Machiavellian presidencies “prepared to lie, violate the law, and betray principles to achieve (their) ends” (Friedman 2012, xvi). A Culture of Narcissism (Lasch 1979) marked by brutal sadistic sexual, religious and political aggression promoted and accepted as a competence of the omnipotent Father Figure (as by Aristotle, Leibnitz, Monotheisms and Imperial-

isms), hidden in post-democratic Olympus, the political counterpart of Super-ego in History.

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