‘I know what has to happen’: Lars von Trier’s Tragic Politics[1]

Abstract

Many of Lars von Trier’s films are distinguished not merely by their haunting female protagonists but also by their tragic emplotments. This paper looks as von Trier’s Medea – a television adaption based on a film script by Carl Theodor Dreyer. It asks how von Trier’s version of Euripides’ play engages with a modern politics of tragedy. In particular, it argues that von Trier uses the tragic script to explore questions of agency and sovereignty. By bringing von Trier into dialogue with Freud, Schmitt and Kierkegaard, the paper explores the dialectic between melancholia and responsibility which gives voice to his distinctive tragic politics.

Asked in an interview whether he chose to film Carl Theodor Dreyer’s script of the *Medea* because “the subject fascinated” him, Lars von Trier replied: “the subject doesn’t fascinate me at all! I have never been interested in classical drama.”[2] What does it mean for von Trier “not [to be] interested in the subject at all”? And how does this lack of interest in “the subject” relate to his indifference to “classical drama”? If von Trier rejects the “subject” of classical drama, does he also reject its form? In his formal innovation, von Trier clearly reacts to and against a number of established genres. Item 8 of the “Dogme 95 Manifesto” declares “genre movies are not acceptable.” *Medea* predates the manifesto and von Trier’s films routinely violate these self-imposed interdictions; nevertheless, in its formal conservatism, one might well imagine tragedy to be considered beyond the pale. I want to argue that although von Trier asserts his disinterest in tragedy, it remains the form through which he explores a series of questions about agency.

In advocating a new thinking about politics “in a tragic key”, Alberto Toscano has urged us to reject the equation of tragedy with resignation and to recognize its potential as a heuristic framework: “There is a tendency […] to present [tragedy] as a condition: a condition of mature and disenchanted engagement, rather than a way of giving shape to the contradictions between intention and consequence, individuality and system, freedom and necessity.”[3] Toscano exhorts us to look beyond the subject of classical drama to the political efficacy of tragedy’s form. We should no longer think of the tragic as a condition, but rather as an explanatory structure which makes

sense of the paradoxes inherent in action. In Lukács' words: "The miracle of tragedy is a form-creating one."[4] Von Trier, on my reading, both resists and embraces this tragic script and in the process reveals his insights into sovereignty and subjectivity. A particular relationship between melancholia and responsibility emerges as the hallmark of von Trier's tragic politics.

Mourning and Melancholia

"Our age certainly has one peculiarity to a greater degree than Greece, namely that it is more melancholy and hence deeper in despair. Our age is thus melancholy enough to realise there is something called responsibility." Kierkegaard

1. Opening scene of *Medea* (Lars von Trier, 1988)

Von Trier's television adaptation of Euripides' tragedy starts with an image of Medea lying prone on the beach.[5] She digs her hands into the sand as the water laps around her whilst she becomes partially submerged. As the opening intertitle announces, von Trier's film "is based on a script of Carl Th. Dreyer and Preben Thomsen of Euripides' drama *MEDEA*. Carl Th. Dreyer never managed to film his script. This is not an attempt to reconstruct a Dreyer film, but an interpretation of a script, in respect and appreciation, and as such is a tribute to the master." While von Trier's *Medea* follows Dreyer's script quite closely, this opening scene, von Trier insists in an interview, "had nothing to do with Dreyer. It was a purely Trieresque invention – a prelude."[6] "The idea" he tells us "was for her to hold her breath as the water rose.

Then she would get up, then sink into the water again. The idea was absurd. But I imagined that she was holding in all her anger and rage by holding her breath. That enormous rage she feels and carries within her."[7] While the prologue may be Trieresque, the figure of Medea dressed in black, her hair covered, certainly coveys a Dreyeresque aesthetic. Medea, long before she has killed her children is presented by von Trier as a mother in mourning. And yet, as von Trier's reference to her rage suggests, Medea is also a woman poised to act. She may be holding her breath, but this is only better to exhale her revenge. As the camera spins around Medea's immobile figure, the film establishes the dramatic tension between suffering and action, mourning and revenge, which I will be exploring.

Greek tragedy as a genre has an intimate connection to mourning. From Electra to Antigone, Clytemnestra to Hecuba, the female tragic protagonist assumes her identity in confrontation with loss. Electra's entire being is given over to mourning the death of her father. In Aeschylus' *Oresteia* she only appears on the scene in the second play of the trilogy, the *Choephori*, in the wake of Agamemnon's murder since her dramatic raison d'être is her lamentation. In Sophocles' depiction she, like Antigone, becomes the embodiment of *ceaseless* mourning. Cassandra's mourning is perhaps more diffuse, it has no singular object. She simultaneously grieves her virginity, her countless relatives and the destruction of her city. Her loss is both deeply personal and part of a wider social devastation. But what about Medea? What does Medea mourn? At the start of Euripides' drama the nurse describes how Medea fled her country to establish a life in Corinth with Jason and their children. "At first" the nurse recounts "she had […] a good life":

> But now all is enmity, and love's bonds are diseased. For Jason, abandoning his own children and my mistress, is bedding down in a royal match, having married the daughter of Creon, ruler of this land. [20] Poor Medea, finding herself thus cast aside, calls loudly on his oaths, invokes the mighty assurance of his sworn right hand, and calls the gods to witness the unjust return she is getting from Jason. She lies fasting, giving her body up to pain, [25] wasting away in tears all the time ever since she learned that she was wronged by her husband, neither lifting her face nor taking her eyes from the ground.[8]

In Euripides' description, more than a mourner, Medea resembles the melancholic. "The distinguishing features of melancholia", Freud affirms "are a painful dejection,

cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment."[9] Freud's essay 'Mourning and Melancholia', represents melancholia as the pathological twin of mourning.[10] One of the most important features which distinguishes the two affects for Freud is that while, for the mourner the object of loss is external and obvious, for the melancholic the object is more elusive:

> In one set of cases it is evident that the melancholia too may be the reaction to the loss of a loved object. Where the exciting causes are different one can recognise that there is a loss of a more ideal kind. The object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love (e.g. in the case of a betrothed girl who has been jilted). In yet other cases one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss of this kind has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either. […] This would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious.[11]

Medea does not grieve for a dead person but for a different kind of loss. "The object" as Freud writes "has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love (e.g. in the case of a betrothed girl who has been jilted)." Her despondency is so extreme that, as the nurse reports, "she loathes the children and takes no joy in looking at them". Euripides makes clear that the pain that Medea feels at being "jilted" is exacerbated by her social situation. As an exile, a foreigner, and a sorceress, Medea has no standing within the Corinthian polity and Jason's abandonment is never acknowledged by the community. Medea's despair at Jason's marriage to Glauce is not recognised and the object of her loss remains invisible. Medea literalises her social death by killing her children. She creates a tangible object for her grief. Murdering her children, it seems, transitions her from melancholia back to mourning. The opposite of the tragic protagonists Clytenmnestra or Hecuba who kill to avenge the murder of their children, Medea murders her children to make her unconscious loss become conscious. As the Senecan Medea pronounces on the death of her children: "Nunc Medea sum" "Now I am Medea." She can only assume her tragic identity when her melancholia is transformed into mourning.

As Bonnie Honig has explored at length in *Antigone Interrupted*, the politics of lamentation in tragedy can all too easily become a "lamentation of politics".[12] Within contemporary theory, tragedy has repeatedly been invoked in the formulation of what Honig calls a "mortalist humanism": "Humanism has in recent years been making a comeback; not the rationalist universalist variety discredited by post-structuralism and the horrific events of the twentieth century, but a newer variant. This humanism asserts that what is in common to humans is not rationality but the ontological fact of mortality, not the capacity to reason, but the vulnerability to suffering."[13] To counter the "spellbinding assumption that suffering or lamentation get beyond the politics to the stark 'human'" Honig foregrounds "the politicality of lamentation all the way down."[14] In the process she demonstrates the *logos* which subtends even the most inarticulate of wailings and reveals how mourning and sovereignty need not stand opposed. But where would Medea fit into this scheme? Medea's sovereignty finds its source in her dejection rather than in her lamentation. Von Trier makes clear that the efficacy of Medea's actions results from her strategic *inaction* at the start of the film. As she holds her breath on the beach, Medea begins to script her future. While Freud represents melancholia as a state of inactivity, does von Trier propose melancholia as a site of political agency?

Carl Schmitt detected an important generic distinction between mourning and melancholia. In his essay *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Intrusion of Time into the Play*, Schmitt draws a sharp contrast between the literary forms of tragedy and *Trauerspiel*, the mourning play of the German baroque.[15] Melancholy is the affect which Schmitt associates with *Trauerspiel*. In its commitment to 'Spiel', to play – *Trauerspiel* celebrates aesthetic autonomy which for Schmitt represents the inauthentic other of tragedy: "The tragic ends where play begins, even when this play is tearful – a melancholy play for melancholy spectators and a deeply moving *Trauerspiel*. It is with Shakespeare's *Trauerspiel*, whose 'play' character also appears in the so-called 'tragedies', that we can least afford to ignore the unplayablity (*Unverspielbarkeit*) of the tragic."[16] But the contrast between tragedy and *Trauerspiel*, melancholy and mourning also has an important temporal dimension. For Schmitt opposes Nordic and Greek myth here, arguing that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* takes its bearings from the former. The Greek mythic figure is Orestes; while Hamlet represents the melancholic passivity of modernity, Orestes embodies the active vengeance of antiquity.

What should a son do if he wants to avenge his murdered father but in the process comes up against his own mother, now the wife of the murderer? The opening situation contains […] an ancient theme of myth, legend, and tragedy. The equally ancient answer allows for only two possibilities. A son who is caught in this way in a conflict between the duty of vengeance and the bond to the mother has, practically speaking only two routes open to him. The first route is that of Orestes in Greek legend and the tragedy of Aeschylus: the son kills the murderer as well as his own mother. The other route is followed by the Amleth of Nordic legend that Shakespeare knew and used: the son allies himself with his mother, and together they kill the murderer.[17]

Schmitt recognises in the Shakespearean moment "the transformation of the figure of the avenger into a reflective, self-conscious melancholic."[18] What Schmitt calls Hamletization is a vehicle of modernization. The melancholy paralysis of modernity stands in contrast to the active vengeance of the ancient. History, in Schmitt's terms, "intrudes" to thwart the activity of the ancient tragic protagonist and redirect it towards a modern indecision characterized by the "internality" of conflict.

In both her Euripidean and Trieresque guises, there is no doubt that Medea, in contrast to Hamlet, is an avenger. In fact she represents the spectre of *disproportionate* revenge. Clytemnestra, certainly an archetype of Greek female monstrosity, in the end only kills to avenge killing. A dead husband for the price of a dead child. Aeschylus' *Oresteia* may seek to overcome the *lex talionis* but even that tragic world-view remained within the realms of proportionality. Euripides' Medea, by contrast, trades in excess.[19] Jason's betrayal is repaid with two dead children, a dead wife and a dead father-in-law. But Medea also reverses the chronology of mourning and action we find in Hamlet. Hamlet is so stuck in his lamentation that he cannot move towards his necessary revenge. Medea, by contrast, finds a release from her mourning in her actions. For Schmitt, Hamlet represents the confluence of modernity, melancholia and inaction associated with the *Trauerspiel*. Medea stays closer to ancient tragedy's script of mourning *followed* by vengeance. Revenge, in Schmitt's scheme, is the narrative that tragedy must assume to remain authentic. But in contrast to Schmitt's typology, Medea's action has its source in melancholia rather than mourning. Her vengeance precedes Greek tragedy's classic scene of 'mourning' – a women's grief for her dead child/brother/father - and instead has its root in what

Freud diagnosed as melancholia. Despite her mourning habit, the Medea who lies prone on the beach in von Trier's opening shot is gripped by melancholia.[20]

In his attentiveness to melancholia, the modern von Trier seems to turn his back on one tragic Dane and replace him with another. For Medea's melancholia has more in common with Søren Kierkegaard's tragic vision than it does with Hamlet's. Unlike Schmitt and Freud who see only paralysis in melancholia, Kierkegaard, for his part allies melancholy with responsibility. Although he anticipates Schmitt in associating melancholy with the modern condition, Kierkegaard sees responsibility rather than inaction as its defining feature. For Kierkegaard, melancholia is a symptom of modernity's recognition of responsibility. Melancholia is a response to this crushing sense of obligation but it can also compel the tragic protagonist to act. While for Schmitt the internalization of modernity stands in the way of action, for Kierkegaard, internalization is what makes the call to action meaningful.

Freedom and Necessity

'Tragic action always contains an element of suffering, and tragic suffering an element of action.' Kierkegaard

If the opening shot of von Trier's adaptation literally revolves around a static Medea holding her breath as the waves lap around her, the closing scenes depict her in throes of activity. Medea, as we have seen, assumes her identity in her moment of active vengeance and von Trier's depiction of this revenge is highly distinctive. After poisoning Jason's new wife, Glauce, with the crown that she asked her children to give her as a wedding gift, Medea departs on a long journey with her two young boys. She drags the infants on a cart made of wood with great difficulty. She finally comes to a halt when she sees a bare tree on the horizon – a tree that resembles a slightly asymmetrical cross. While the younger child asks Medea, "Mummy why are we here?", the elder brother when he wakes in the morning calmly says to his mother: "I know what has to happen." "What will you hang from the branch?", the younger boy asks as Medea fixes the noose: "Something which I love." The younger child then runs away and is caught by his elder brother who returns him crying and resistant to his mother. He then holds his brothers legs and pulls them down while Medea ties the

noose around his neck. After the death of the younger child, Medea pauses sitting in the long swaying grass. The elder boy comes up to her, hands her the second noose and says: “Help me, mummy.”

2. Medea ties a noose to the tree.

The climax of von Trier’s adaptation significantly departs from both Euripides’ play and Dreyer’s script. In Euripides’ version Medea stabs her children after rushing off the stage with a dagger. Dreyer, according to von Trier “wanted to give them poison. He thought it was too violent to have them knifed, which is what happens in the classical drama. He thought that was too bloody. He just wanted them to die in their sleep.”[21] Reacting against Dreyer’s bad faith, von Trier says “I chose to make it more dramatic. I think there’s more edge to my version as a whole. I thought it better to hang the children. And more consequential. Either you kill them or you don’t. The action ought to be presented as it is. There’s no reason to tidy it up and make it look more innocent than it is.”[22] As Nicole Loraux has highlighted in her classic study, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, when women in tragedy kill others or themselves the choice of weapon is highly significant. As opposed to the silence which greeted the death of women in the Greek *polis*, Greek tragedy made a spectacle of deaths that women inflicted upon themselves and others. “Women in tragedy died violently. More precisely it was in this violence that a woman mastered her death, a death that was not simply the end of an exemplary life as a spouse. It was death that belonged to

her totally."[23] The level of self-mastery that women achieved on the tragic stage in death was fundamentally at odds with the subjection they experienced in the Athenian *polis*. Loraux, in particular, highlights the disjunction between "the rope and the sword" as means of inflicting harm. While the noose was the route most associated with decorum and feminine self-sacrifice, the sword had resonances of phallic penetration. Medea's decision in Euripides to use a sword to kill her children only served to amplify the inversion of gender norms enacted in her revenge.

Von Trier's choice of the rope may blunt some of the masculine violence of the Euripidean depiction. Although Medea may hang her children from "feminine" ropes, their deaths preempts Jason's which the film intimates will come by the sword. The scene thus hardly represents a toning down of the Greek tragic staging. For one, as opposed to the Euripides version where the violence is enacted off-stage, von Trier's portrayal is the visual climax of the film. As I have already noted, the tree from which Medea hangs her children is not only striking, it has strong associations with a cross as well as foreshadowing the mast of the ship on which Medea escapes. The image of the children hanging from the branches also recalls the hanging scene in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* where little Jude hangs himself and his two siblings leaving the note "Done because we are too menny." This echo, of course, brings out what is perhaps most shocking and most distinctive about von Trier's adaptation – an aspect which he fails to mention in his own discussion of the scene. The older child's complicity in his brother's and his own death opens up a highly idiosyncratic exploration of tragic guilt.

3. Medea's and Jason's children hang from the tree.

The death of a child is a recurring thematic in von Trier's films. The final scene of the *Idiots* revolves around the revelation of the death of Karen's baby. The trauma establishes an explanatory framework for Karen's previously unexplained narrative and arguably for the film as a whole. The *Antichrist* starts rather than ends with the death of a child. In the highly stylized opening sequence, 'She' and 'He's' toddler tumbles towards his death from an open window while his parents have sex.[24] *Dancer in the Dark* and *Melancholia* both feature young children who are not yet dead but whose survival provides a motivating force for the female characters in the films. Von Trier's later oeuvre thus seems to grapple with the after-effects of Medea's infanticide. Yet, the thematic of the dead child oscillates between maternal sentimentalism and violent complicity. The *Idiots,* and *Dancer in the Dark* both present the mother-child relationship as an essential component of female identity. *Melancholia* sees maternal responsibility shifted from Leo's biological mother to his aunt Justine. In each though, the responsibility towards the child represents an essential component of feminine "goodness".[25] In the *Antichrist,* by contrast, it is "she's" potential participation in the death of the child which returns as an anxiety in the film. "She's" mental breakdown is first depicted as mourning for her dead child, but the violence she later displays towards herself and others tips her decidedly into the domain of melancholia. (Parodying the language of therapy, the film is divided into chapters entitled: "Grief", "Pain", "Despair"). "She" starts out as Karen and ends up as Medea. The tragic archetype in the *Antichrist*, however, is Oedipus rather than/as well as Medea. The baby boy, Nick, leaps towards his death after witnessing his parents making love. This primal scene echoes the opening montage of Pasolini's *Edipo Re*. Later in the film, after receiving postmortem reports, "He" begins to suspect that "She" was mutilating Nick's feet by placing them in the wrong shoe. Oedipus, whose name means "swollen feet", had his feet pierced by Laius before he was exposed on the mountain top to prevent him from escaping – a technique "She" later replicates when she bolts a grindstone to "He's" leg. "Freud is dead", "She" jests to her therapist husband, Oedipus lives on.

But if Freud provides one way of making sense of the alternations of maternal love and violent female sexuality in von Trier, the aria that accompanies Nick's death in the *Antichrist* might provide an alternative perspective. "She" and "He" make love

and Nick falls from the window to the accompaniment of Handel's 'Lascia ch'io pianga' aria from the *Rinaldo*:[26]

Lascia ch'io pianga	Let me weep
mia cruda sorte,	my cruel fate,
e che sospiri	and sigh
la libertà.	for liberty.
Il duolo infranga	May sorrow break
queste ritorte	these chains
de' miei martiri	of my sufferings,
sol per pietà.	for pity's sake.

The dialectic between 'sorte' and 'libertà', freedom and necessity, that the aria explores is at the heart of the philosophy of the tragic. Tragedy enacts the violent clash between human autonomy and divine predetermination. The German Idealist philosophers Schelling and Hegel, would make Greek tragedy the starting point for their investigations of freedom and the limits of human agency. Oedipus' fate becomes paradigmatic. His guiltless guilt articulates the hope and the deception of the autonomous subject. Oedipus is objectively guilty but remains subjectively innocent, and yet, he *chooses* nonetheless to suffer for the crime. So although Oedipus ultimately succumbs to the necessity of his fate, it is the fact that he is punished for a crime that he did not willingly commit that reaffirms his autonomy. It is not just that he struggled against a necessity which he would not accept but that he was actively censored for assuming his agency - that is what constitutes, for Schelling, "the recognition of human freedom."

The distinctiveness of von Trier's *Medea* is that he redirects the question of agency away from the maternal figure and focuses on the responsibility of the children. For von Trier, it is the elder child who occupies an analogous position to Schelling's Oedipus. Watching his mother assemble ropes into a noose in the shadow of the bare tree, the boy reassures her: "I know what has to happen." His statement is a familiar metatheatrical gesture, one which has been used in adaptations of Greek tragedy from Seneca's *Medea* ("Nunc Medea sum") to Anouihl's *Antigone*.[27] Anouihl's 'Prologue' announces at the start of his play:

The people gathered here about to act the story of Antigone. The one who is playing the lead is the thin girl sitting there silent. Staring in front of her. Thinking. She is thinking that soon she is going to be

Antigone. That she'll suddenly stop being the thin dark girl whose family didn't take her seriously, and rise up alone against everyone. Against Creon, her uncle…the king. She's thinking she is going to die…though she is still young, and like everyone else would have preferred to live.

But there's nothing to be done. Her name is Antigone, and she's going to have to play her part right through to the end.[28]

Antigone, in Anouihl's script, "knows what has to happen." She, like Anouihl, has read her Sophocles. She may have preferred to live but she knows she has to die. It is as if Anouihl transfers his own narrative constraints onto the characters in his drama. The playwright relinquishes his agency by suggesting that it is Antigone's immovable fate rather than his artistic choices which propel her towards her tragedy. Von Trier performs a similar sleight of hand: it is *he* who has read Euripides not the elder child. The child assumes the role of the director in this scene, setting the stage by positioning his brother's body to be hung, asking for help, like a director in his own movie directing himself. So although it may seem a gesture of disavowal, the elder child's complicity becomes von Trier's own complicity and, by extension, maybe our own.

But beyond the question of metatheatricality, Schelling would detect a more metaphysical question. Unlike Oedipus, Medea's child is both objectively and subjectively guiltless but he nevertheless actively *chooses* to suffer. He knows what has to happen but he also asserts his human autonomy. He not merely hands his mother the noose with which to strangle him, he pursues his brother and is an ancillary to his murder. By turning the question of guilt onto the child, von Trier ups the ante of the German Idealist speculations about freedom and necessity.

With its doctrine of original sin, Christianity may well provide the key to understanding von Trier's portrayal of Medea's infanticide. Von Trier's complex relationship to Christianity is well-documented. From a biographical perspective, much is made of von Trier's atheist/Jewish background and his decision to convert to Catholicism.[29] In filmic terms, Dreyer remains a crucial influence: "I flirted with religion a lot as a young man. In your youth you're probably attracted to more extreme religions. […] I think I've developed a more Dreyeresque view of it all now. Dreyer's view of religion was primarily humanist. He also tackles religion in all his films. Religion is attacked but not God."[30] What von Trier identifies as Dreyer's

humanism is closely connected to the tragic thematics of his films. Von Trier inherits from Dreyer an insistent questioning about the relationship to the divine, the limits and potential of human agency and the logic of sacrifice. Dreyer and von Trier present us with a tragic conception of Christianity and Christianising perspective on tragedy. The tree from which the children hang replicates the iconography of the crucifixion. Medea's elder child willingly sacrifices himself for the sins of his father. Nevertheless, von Trier seems to meld Christian and Greek elements into this climatic scene. The dramatization may be Christianising, but *Medea* remains recognisably a tragedy. Kierkegaard saw both the connection and ultimate disjunction between Greek tragedy and the suffering of Christ:

> The synthesis of absolute innocence and absolute guilt is not an aesthetic feature but a metaphysical one. This is the real reason why people have always been ashamed to call the life of Christ a tragedy; one feels instinctively that aesthetic categories do not exhaust that matter. […] The identity of an absolute action and an absolute suffering is beyond the powers of aesthetics and belongs to metaphysics. This identity is exemplified in the life of Christ, for His suffering is absolute because the action is absolutely free, and His action is absolute suffering because it is absolute obedience. The element of guilt that is always left over is, accordingly, not subjectively reflected and this makes the sorrow deep. Tragic guilt is more than just subjective guilt, it is inherited guilt. But inherited guilt, like original sin, is a substantial category, and it is that substantiality that makes the sorrow deeper. Sophocles' celebrated tragic trilogy, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, turns essentially on this authentic tragic interest.[31]

Despite its metaphysical preoccupations, tragedy remains for Kierkegaard essentially an aesthetic form. Where for Schmitt it was the aesthetic dimension of *Trauerspiel* that made it fall short of real tragedy, for Kierkegaard the aesthetic is an integral component of the tragic. Kierkegaard's understanding of "the aesthetic" is distinctive: he sets it up in opposition to the ethical. The ethical is the domain of self-reflexivity yet "in the ancient world subjectivity was not fully conscious and reflective. Even though the individual moved freely, he still depends on substantial categories, on state, on family, and destiny." Kierkegaard understands the aesthetic as this ambiguous zone between activity and passivity, subjectivity and pure externality.

> The sorrow of Greek tragedy is deeper because guilt has the ambiguity of the aesthetic. In modern times the pain is greater. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God, that is what one

might say of Greek tragedy. The wrath of the gods is terrible, yet the pain is not so great as in modern tragedy where the hero suffers all his guilt, is transparent to himself in his own suffering of his guilt.[32]

As Vassilis Lambropoulos phrases it: "the inherent ambiguity of being and yet not being responsible makes ancient guilt aesthetic while the unambiguous grounding in personal responsibility makes modern guilt ethical."[33] But while as a form of "aesthetic" guilt, Greek tragedy may stand opposed to the ethicality of modern tragedy and the true metaphysical tragedy of Christ's suffering, it shares with Christianity what Kierkegaard calls a "substantiality". For in dealing with "inherited guilt", tragedy is brought closer to the concept of "original sin". Kierkegaard's reading of *Antigone* illustrates the centrality of this guilt which is always "more than subjective":

What in a Greek sense provides the tragic interest is the fact that, in the brother's unhappy death, in the sister's collision with a single human circumstance, there is the re-echoing of the Oedipus' sorry fate; it is, one might say, the afterpains, the tragic destiny of Oedipus ramifying in every branch of the family. This totality makes the spectator's sorrow infinitely deep. It is not an individual that goes under, but a little world; the objective sorrow, set free, now strides forward with its own terrible consistency, like a force of nature, and Antigone's sorry fate is like an echo of her father's, an intensified sorrow.[34]

When Medea's elder child places the noose around his own neck, he seems to understand that "it is not the individual that goes under, but a little world". Medea's sorrow was never her sorrow alone and once it is "set free" it roams the world "like a force of nature." As a melancholic, Medea is unable to differentiate between her own sorrow and that of the world. Indeed, from the very first scene, Medea's connection to the world and "nature", in particular, is highlighted by von Trier. Much of the film's emotive force is communicated through the landscape and the natural environment. The sounds of the waves, the wind, the dogs, the horses and the birds drown out the human dialogue. Many of von Trier's later films also reflect on the natural world as an extension of the human drama. The use of landscape in *Breaking the Waves*, as von Trier himself comments, has many connections to *Medea*.[35] *Antichrist* and *Melancholia* reflect more self-consciously on the malignity of nature.[36] Von Trier's depiction of the infanticide in its complex distribution of "guilt" and agency seems to occupy an intermediate position between Kierkegaard's notions of

inherited and original sin. For von Trier, like for Kierkegaard, Greek tragedy ambiguously negotiates the aesthetic, the ethical and the metaphysical.

What force does this tragic understanding of agency and guilt have in von Trier's politics? I started this essay by recalling von Trier's lack of interest in the subject of tragedy. What, in a sense, I have been exploring is how tragedy shapes von Trier's indifference to the subject. Through its focus on fate, and the distribution of guilt and agency, tragedy draws attention away from individual subjectivities and immerses them back into a (usually hostile) world. Medea's infanticide is not hers alone. Yet, far from being "Dreyer-esque" icons, von Trier's protagonists, like Kierkegaard's moderns, manifest complex subjectivities which enter into conflict with their environments and social structures.

For although von Trier "knows what has to happen", he nevertheless presents us with narrative alternatives. While the later films which feature dead or dying children all have one child, Medea has two. The two children may ultimately suffer the same fate but they nevertheless represent two contrasting ways of confronting necessity. The younger boy runs away. Like Oedipus who flees to Corinth on hearing the oracle, the child tries to escape but soon finds that escape is not possible. The elder child represents the other facet of Oedipus, he is the Oedipus who "knows". This is the Oedipus who uses his knowledge to defeat the Sphinx, as Sophocles' chorus sing of him: "Who knew the famous riddles and was a man most mighty." But the Oedipus who knew the riddles of the Sphinx is the same Oedipus who remains ignorant of his true identity. This child knows more than Oedipus, he not only commands his reason, he also recognises the limits of his agency. In the process he takes control of necessity and makes it his own will.

The children are also differentiated by Medea's responses to them. To the younger child's question, "What will you hang from the branch", she answers "something which I love." The logic of Medea's tragedy is that she must kill her children because they are something which *Jason* loves.[37] Through their deaths she ultimately kills him and thus repays the betrayal *in love* which he inflicted upon her. The necessity of their death stands opposed to the freedom which she might express in love. When she hangs the children from the tree she also throttles the possibility of self-expression

through love. Her opposing dialogues with the children, place love in conflict with necessity but they also reveal their structural interrelation. It is because she and, more importantly Jason, loves the children that they must be killed. Similarly by choosing to love Glauce and betray Medea, Jason exercises his freedom but his actions ultimately lead to the necessity of his death which, in von Trier's retelling, is both symbolic and actual.

In *Breaking the Waves* von Trier returns to the conflicted relationship between love and fate staged in Medea's dialogue with her children. Bess McNeill struggles with many of the same paradoxes of guilt and agency which beset von Trier's Medea. The belief in divine determination is more extreme in Bess' world than it is even in Medea's. The austere Presbyterian church has no conception of a human will independent of God. This authoritarian theology is mirrored in the regulatory patriarchal structures of the Church ("No woman speaks here"). Nevertheless, Bess has a strong belief in her autonomy. For the drama revolves around Bess' conviction that she willed Jan's accident which propels her towards her own tragedy. Bess imagines that she can speak to God and that God can speak through her. In pleading for Jan's return from the oil rig, Bess asks God to change his plans and precipitate his homecoming. God, in her voice, asks "are you sure that's what you want?" and Bess insists it is. When Jan has his accident and returns gravely injured and paralysed, Bess experiences both gratification at the efficacy of her desires and a deep sense of guilt about her complicity in his suffering. We encounter again the catastrophic motif which is a hallmark of von Trier's films, and the same questioning of levels of self-determination. As the film progresses, the questions intensify as Bess is repeatedly placed in a position where her volition is both called upon and placed into doubt. When Jan asks her to have sex with strangers to gratify his frustrated desires, Bess resists but comes to see these encounters as the only means to bring about Jan's recovery. Each time Jan approaches death, Bess believes that she is able to "save" him by fulfilling his wishes. This culminates in a final act of sacrifice where Bess wilfully returns to the ship where she had previously been assaulted. While Bess dies in the encounter, Jan survives and is able to walk again. The miracle validates - ironically or otherwise - Bess' sacrificial logic.

Discussing the tension between volition and determinism in *Breaking the Waves*, Caroline Bainbridge draws attention to von Trier's interest in the fateful interdependency of love and self-sacrifice. Referencing Nietzsche's discussion of the 'eternal return' she writes: "In *Breaking the Waves*, […] these concerns are at the very heart of the narrative and are centered on Bess (Emily Watson) and her motivations in acting against the rules of the Church to which she belongs in pursuit of her desire for the romantic beginnings of life with Jan (Stellan Skarsgard) to be returned to her after his accident. Nietzsche's concept of the *amor fati* (a love of fate) enables the subject to move beyond a state of endurance with regard to the eternal return and into a position of actively wishing for this, regardless of the pain and anguish it might entail."[38] The Nietzschean *amor fati* becomes on this reading a redirection of Schelling's philosophy of the tragic. The love of fate is the celebration of freedom in necessity. If Medea's younger child represents love and her elder child fate, Nietzsche's tragic philosophy encompasses both these principles and reveals their mutual interdependency. So Nietzsche writes in the *Gay Science*:

> I want to learn more and more to see what is necessary in things as the beautiful in them – thus I will be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love from now on! I do not want to wage war against ugliness. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse the accusers. Let *looking away* be my only negation! And, all in all and on the whole: some day I want only to be a Yes-sayer.[39]

William Connolly is one of a number of political theorists who have found in tragedy a resource for a critique of the contemporary condition. In *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style*, he calls for the adoption of a certain tragic vision: "A tragic drama by Sophocles concentrates a tragic result into a play. A tragic vision builds such a set of possibilities into its fundamental conception of being. You approach a tragic vision if you doubt the providential image of time, reject the compensatory idea that humans can master all the forces that impinge upon life, strive to cultivate wisdom about a world that is neither designed for your benefit nor plastic enough to be putty in your hands, and cultivate temporal sensitivity to how this or that concatenation of events could issue in the worst."[40]

4. Medea removes her mourning cap and sails to freedom.

Von Trier, on my reading would be a proponent of just such a tragic vision. In creating a television adaptation of the *Medea*, he co-opts a tragic outlook which is both ancient and modern.[41] In her active revenge, von Trier's Medea stands opposed to the paralysis of Schmitt's Hamlet, yet she also embodies Kierkegaard's melancholic modern who acts not despite but because of her responsibility. But can a tragic vision, ancient or modern, ever deliver on Nietzsche's promise of "yes-saying?". Bess may find her release in death as her ashes are scattered into the sea to the sound of pealing bells, but Medea departs from her tragedy very much still alive. She boards Aegeus' ship, removes her mourning cap and sails to freedom in Athens. Meanwhile it is Jason who is sacrificed; he scrambles around on the ground and appears to turn his sword on himself. Perhaps von Trier is fascinated by the subject of classical drama after all?

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[2] Björkman (1999), 111
[3] Toscano (2013), 28
[4] Lukacs (2010), 183
[5] See Michelakis (2013), 182-4 and Baertschi (2013) for different readings of this scene.
[6] Björkman (1999), 116
[7] Björkman (1999), 115
[8] Euripides, *Medea*,16-27. Translated by David Kovacs
[9] Freud SE 14, 244
[10] Freud would revise his thinking about mourning and melancholia partly in response to the suffering he witnessed in the wake of the Great War. In the *Ego and the Id* (1923) he recognised that many of the attributes he had previously associated with

melancholia were in fact also features of mourning. In particular, he highlights the extent to which identification with the lost object which takes place in the melancholic is not pathological but an integral part of the formation of the ego. Freud SE 19, 28-9, on which see Clewell (2002). This collapsing of the distinction between mourning and melancholia is a theme that von Trier explores both in *Medea* and in *Melancholia*.

[11] Freud SE 14, 245

[12] Honig (2013), 38

[13] Honig (2013), 17

[14] Honig (2013), 19

[15] Schmitt takes over this distinction from Walter Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* but adapts it to his own distinctive ends.

[16] Schmitt (2009), 40

[17] Schmitt (2009), 12

[18] Schmitt (2009), 19

[19] On the relationship of the Euripidean Medea's revenge to other Greek poetic paradigms and, in particular, to Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, see Hopman (2008).

[20] There is a strong visual echo of Medea on the beach in von Trier's shot in *Melancholia* of Kirsten Dunst submerged in a stream in her wedding dress holding a bouquet. The image is a pastiche of John Everrett Millais' pre-Raphaelite painting *Ophelia*– one of the paintings that Dunst's character Justine defiantly puts on display in the library. Where Justine is enveloped by the white of her wedding dress, Medea is encased in black. The twinning of marriage and death we find in the juxtaposition of these two images is a repeated topos in Greek tragedy. The cinematic technique of filming reclining female characters from above reappears in many of von Trier's films and is a reference to Tarkovsky – see Lynne Huffer's piece in this collection.

[21] Björkholm (1999), 118

[22] Björkholm (1999), 118

[23] Loraux (1987), 6

[24] A scene which is itself parodied by *Nymphomaniac*, see contributions by Rosalind Galt, Lori Marso and Lynne Huffer.

[25] The word comes from *Breaking the Waves*. Although Bess' sacrifice is not a maternal sacrifice, her childlike openness keeps the theme of childhood innocence within its framework.

[26] The aria is also connected to the Medea through Maria Callas. As well as making a famous recording of the Handel she played Medea in Pasolini's film. Von Trier suggests that Dreyer had anticipated Pasolini by casting her in the same role in his unmade *Medea*: "I've never heard of any credit being given to Dreyer for that idea, because he is one who came up with it, not Pasolini". Lumholdt (2003), 47

[27] For an exploration of how Euripides' *Medea* itself fits into to this history of 'mythopoiesis' see Hopman (2008), 179: 'Yet her [Euripides' Medea's] mythopoiesis also underscores the impossibility of creating a new story at odds with the mythical tradition. Even though Medea's initial plan to kill Jason would fulfill epic values and bring her glory, it cannot be completed, partly because of psychological motivations, and partly because the tradition says that the children will die. Medea's revenge cannot alter the brutal "facts" of life and death yielded by the mythic tradition; it can only appropriate them'. Von Trier's mythopoesis consciously operates within the same constraints even as he thematises them.

[28] Anouilh (2005), 3
[29] See Björkman (1999), 168.
[30] Björkman (1999), 168. It is with reference to Dreyer's films that Deleuze develops his thesis about the affinity between cinema and Catholicism. Deleuze sees cinematic illusion as a compensation for our loss of faith both in religion and in reason: "We no longer believe in this world. We do not even believe in the events which happen to us, love, death, as if they only half concerned us. It is not we who make cinema; it is the world who looks at us like a bad film". Deleuze (1994), 171, see also Koch (2007).
[31] Kierkegaard (1992), 107
[32] Kierkegaard (1992), 105
[33] Lambropoulos (2006), 65
[34] Kierkegaard (1992), 112
[35] Björkman (2003), 116
[36] These films also explicitly reflect on the relationship between women and nature which is a theme which also runs through the *Medea*. The violent debate about the misogyny/feminism of von Trier's later films like the *Antichrist* is fully relevant to his depiction of Medea who becomes in a sense a prototype for his later powerful female protagonists. See Lori Marso's contribution to this collection.
[37] See Honig (2013), 139: "The importance of sons to fathers is well known to the women of Greek tragedy and myth. That is why, from Procne to Medea, women angry with their children's father kill the children, because the women know they are the *father's* children". See also Cavarero (2009).
[38] Bainbridge (2007), 4
[39] Nietzsche (2003), 157
[40] Connolly (2008), 121
[41] The choice of television as the medium of von Trier's tragedy may point to its *hypermodernity*. *Medea* was shot on video and then transferred to film and transferred back onto video. Von Trier recounts that they "toned down the colours in the first version in the laboratory, then ran the refilmed version through the lab a second time. We kept toning down the colours more and more." Björkman (1999), 119. Critics have pointed out that the washed-out colours contribute to a sense of the fragile antiquity of the story. The hypermodernity of the medium is thus contrasted to its atavistic subject matter. The use of techniques such as inter-titles also gesture towards old silent films which adds to the complex temporalities of the film, on which see Michelakis (2013), 182-87.