‘You cannot be in love with a word’: Theologies of Embodiment in Dreyer’s The Passion of Joan of Arc, Axel’s Babette’s Feast and von Trier’s Breaking the Waves

Alina Birzache

University of Edinburgh

Abstract

My article investigates the representation and significance of the suffering female body in three films by Danish male directors operating in a religious framework: Dreyer’s The Passion of Joan of Arc (1928), Axel’s Babette’s Feast (1987) and von Trier’s Breaking the Waves (1996). In these films the visual level complements the narrative level in order to accentuate the heroines’ physical suffering, often in a manner which is particularly poignant. More specifically, my analysis will point out the ways in which the body is brought into the foreground in each film and valorised against the backdrop of a confrontation between the body as pathos and the word as logos.

Dreyer’s images and close-ups use the potentialities of the body to suggest the spiritual chasm between Joan of Arc and her judges. Moreover, the opposition between Joan and the theologians is also rendered in terms of the opposition between the oral and the written word, from which she is excluded. Hers is the embodied word and the passion; the subjective experience of embodied suffering becomes a test for her truth. With Babette’s Feast we move into a Lutheran pietistic background but the action is still played out in terms of Protestant – Catholic worldviews. Here the suffering of the body is toned down in a symbolic representation. Babette’s feast is actually an act of self-giving, her own body being offered to the others, symbolized by the cailles en sarcophages she prepares for the consumption of the community. Bess in Breaking the Waves challenges directly the theological foundations of the Calvinist faith of the community, opposing their veneration of the word as the letter of the Bible with an existential dedication to the embodied Word and the immediate consequences this has for human relationships. Like Joan, Bess lays bare the mechanics of power which becomes violently inscribed on her body.
About the Author

Dr. Alina Birzache was an assistant lecturer at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Bucharest before she moved to the United Kingdom where she obtained a PhD from the University of Edinburgh with a thesis on holy foolishness in European cinema. She has interests in religious representations in art, literature, and film, and has taught and published on these topics. She has been a member of ecumenical juries at various film festivals.

To cite this article: Birzache, Alina, 2014. ‘You cannot be in love with a word’: Theologies of Embodiment in Dreyer’s The Passion of Joan of Arc, Axel’s Babette’s Feast and von Trier’s Breaking the Waves. Journal of Religion, Media & Digital Culture 3 (1), pp. 8-30. [online] Available at: <http://jrmdc.com/category/papers-archive/>

Introduction

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La passion de Jeanne d'Arc / The Passion of Joan of Arc (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1928)

In giving us one of the masterpieces of silent cinema Dreyer relies on the familiarity of his French audience with the story of the fifteenth-century heroine Jeanne/Joan. He concentrates exclusively on the last days of her trial at the hands of the English authorities, with the endorsement of their French ecclesiastical allies. The outcome of the trial is not only known by the audience but is also something of a death foretold, with the English presented as determined to eliminate the inconvenient challenger of their territorial rights in France. The plot is minimalist: Joan faces a politically motivated religious trial for her belief that her actions have been inspired by heavenly visions. She manages to avoid the verbal traps set by her accusers with her simple wisdom but her steadfast faith in the truthfulness of her inner voices is constantly undermined as the authorities resort a variety of underhand methods,
including deception, presenting her with a fake letter from the King Charles VII; spiritual blackmail, threatening to withdraw from her the Church’s protection; and ultimately torture. Faced with being burned at the stake Joan agrees to sign the recantation and her sentence is commuted to life imprisonment. Remorseful for having betrayed her faith, she soon reverses her decision, which results in her execution.

Dreyer made extensive use of the historical records of the trial, which bear out the threefold challenge that Joan, willingly or not, posed to her judges’ ecclesiastical authority from her disempowering position as a person uneducated, lay and female. This gives rise to a series of antitheses: she is a woman but is dressed in man’s clothes, upsetting the social roles; an illiterate who had difficulties working out her age and signing her name but who claimed certain theological knowledge; and finally a lay person who claims to be the recipient and interpreter of messages from God, calling into question the customary channels of divine inspiration.

The film emphasises, on the one hand, the political and ecclesiastical importance of the trial and, on the other, the obstinacy with which Joan remains faithful to her own truth and visions. At the intersection of the two stands Joan’s passion or her ‘martyrdom’ as Dreyer has her say in one of the few lines that are not in the trial records (Grace, 2009, p.127). The interpolation is revealing about Dreyer’s intentions. While the historical figure was declared by the Catholic Church venerable (1903), beatified (1909) and canonized (1920) as a virgin, Dreyer is very keen to promote his protagonist as a martyr, a sufferer and a confessor of her own personal faith. While subscribing to the Church’s doctrinal tenets she has faith in her personal revelations, and in what her guiding voices from beyond this world tell her. This
innovation helps to widen the gap between her and the Church on the screen, emphasizing their irreconcilable spiritual visions.

Dreyer is interested in establishing a relation between Joan’s suffering in her body and a truth which for her is the truth of her inner voices (Pipolo, 1988, p. 301). The connection between truth and suffering is, however, a long established one, and not necessarily Christianity’s exclusive remit. In ancient Greece truth was considered to be extractable from the slave’s body through torture (DuBois, 1991, p. 66). Yet it was the followers of Christ, the crucified truth, who began to ascribe new positive connotations to the connection between body, pain and truth. Faced with persecution in the Roman Empire in the first centuries, the Christians regarded martyrdom, the suffering of the body, as a means of giving witness to the truth of their faith and ultimately to Christ himself as its embodiment. Only centuries later would the ecclesiastic authorities revert to the ancient idea of reaching truth through the torture of the body in their persecution of witchcraft. Even if Joan’s persecutors revel in the mindset of the witchfinder, endeavouring to suggest a demonic origin for Joan’s inner voices, the way Joan accepts her suffering to testify for a personal, subjective truth receives a modern treatment. This relation between truth and subjectivity is very close to the vision upheld by Søren Kierkegaard: truth is subjectivity, that is to say it is inwardly appropriated by the person of faith. The Danish philosopher also notes that in an unjust world ‘Christianity is the suffering truth’ (Kierkegaard, 1968, p. 268). In other words in a corrupted world truth’s condition involves a dimension of suffering brought about by the disparity between the person of faith and the world.

Joan can only give witness to the truth of her visions and she finally decides to remain faithful to them, in spite of the threat by her judges to use torture and to refuse her Holy Communion. Apparently turning her face away from ‘mother Church’, she
is left isolated and is made to appear irrational from the outside. As Kierkegaard’s
knight of faith, she is incapable of fully communicating her experience since it has no
grounding outside of her own interiority. However, it is exactly this inwardness that
Dreyer wants to capture on the screen. The camera lingers on Joan’s unadorned
suffering face in extreme close-ups, disclosing either a rather confused, emotional,
and frightened young woman or an eminently ecstatic one. The innumerable close-ups
are meant to venture beyond the skin, serving, according to Andrew Sarris (1970, p.
62), as a Protestant device that focuses on the individual’s inner passion rather than on
the institutional context. In André Bazin’s (1952) terms, the face becomes a
‘privileged area of communication’. Indeed through frontal close-ups the camera
scrutinizes Joan’s reactions and states with the same intrusiveness her judges
scrutinize her words. The face is treated as a mirror for the inner torture Joan to which
is subjected. Before her actual physical torture, Dreyer emphasises her psychological
torture, the face becoming a medium for her inner torment.

The director is well aware of the empathetic effect of the close up on the
audience. He admits that he intentionally directs the camera to present the torturing
effects of the interrogations on Joan in a manner that affects the viewer: ‘…the result
of the close-ups was that the spectator was [as] shocked as Joan was, receiving the
questions, tortured by them. And, in fact, it was my intention to get this result’ (Sarris,
1967, p. 145). James Schamus (2003, p. 323) goes as far as to refer to this strategy as
the ‘sadistic reading of the close-up as an effect of torture – of torture by language
nevertheless.’ To a great extent, prior to her body being committed to the fire, it is a
torture by language, but the moral intimidation is permanently accompanied by
humiliating or menacing gestures which are meant to violate the integrity of her body:
she is fettered, spat at, blood taken, made to swoon, her hair is cut. Both emotional
and physical suffering are played out on the body. However, as a primary site for affective expression, it is the face that is exploited in all its communicative potentialities. While the extreme close-ups of the judges’ faces amplify the impression of their evilness by revealing their treacherous intentions and undermining their good words, Joan’s face, even when reflecting pain, is shown in a manner which upholds her genuine innocence and religious devotion.

The opposition between Joan and her judges is interestingly rendered at first by the opposition between the oral and the written word. Dreyer, following in Kierkegaard’s steps, critiques a slippage whereby the Logos is replaced by the logoi, God replaced by words about God, be they uttered or written. Using the classic Pauline distinction between the spirit and the letter, the scholars are seen as the representatives of the latter. Equipped with their bookish knowledge they challenge Joan’s religious experience. In David Bordwell’s (1981, p. 90-91) words: ‘Illiterate, she [Joan] is closed off from the written contract. Hers is the expressive, personalized word, an inspired speech opposed to the ossification of the written record, transcending the systems of political and religious exchange.’ Her judges are shown as keenly interested in recording her answers, thereby making her words susceptible to manipulation, and also forcing her to sign the recantation, thereby ascribing to her words alien to her own experience. Ultimately the scholars are depicted as trying to defeat her spirit either by direct verbal confrontation using their scholastic training, or by dishonest means such as the false letter from King Charles VII. In both cases the word is manipulated in order to serve the interests of the authorities.

The conflict between the two parties cannot, however, be simply reduced to an opposition between the orally inspired word and the written one, as Bordwell (1981) suggests. The chasm between Joan and the men of the Church emphasised by the
camerawork is then played out in terms of passion (as lived, embodied experience and ultimately martyrdom) and logos. I have mentioned previously Dreyer’s interpolation at the moment Joan realises that the victory her guiding voices have promised is in fact her martyrdom, and her release nothing else than her death, which immediately follows her withdrawal of the recantation. This moment marks a change of attitude from the theologians, seeming more benevolent, as well as an aesthetic change: a transition from extreme close-ups of the face towards medium shots. As Joan approaches her execution the focus on her face gives way to images of other parts of her body as sites of spectacle.

Dreyer explores the intimate connections of the passion of faith with moral anguish and physical suffering. The passion is no longer located internally, with the face as the ideal site of affective expression, but is about to involve her whole body. Joan’s words themselves betray a preoccupation with her body, first when at the sight of terrifying torture methods she accuses her judges of wanting to separate her soul from her body, and second when she asks for her body to be buried in holy ground. Significantly, Joan appears in very few medium-length shots from the waist up, other than in the scene of her execution at the stake, when we can also see a shot from her waist down. Her body is never shown entirely in a single frame, except after her recantation when she is lying in bed severely ill, and even then her body is wrapped from the neck down. This visual fragmentation of her body is not meant to obnubilate or obscure the body in its wholeness but rather to allow us to look more closely and entertain an almost tactile relation with the parts of the body that are foregrounded. Painfully emphasising the concrete materiality of the body, these haptic images prevent the viewers from keeping their distance and invite them to contemplation and co-presence in a way that the representation of the whole body would not be able to
suggest (Marks, 2000, p. 163-164). The unrelenting close-ups of Joan’s face facilitate intimacy and solicit the viewers’ empathy, triggering their participation in her passion.

Ultimately Dreyer asserts the passion, the subjective experience, as the test for truth. In a world in which alternative truth-statements make claim to truth, he anchors Joan’s claims in her own passion. By so doing, Dreyer brings the body into the foreground, in a confrontation of the body as pathos with the word as logos (Thomsen, 2006). The suffering of the body is Joan’s last victory over her political and ecclesiastical enemies. As the execution scene concludes only two symbolical objects are left in the frame: the cross and the stake, both triumphantly robbed of the bodies hung on them. The intertitle that concludes the film undermines a reading of the scene as destruction: on the contrary, the ‘protective flames’ are said to envelop Joan’s soul as she rises to heaven and is vindicated posthumously off-screen.

Dreyer’s camera work attracts attention to the unmediated materiality of the body and turns it into a site of signification as it begins to bear the marks of external hostility and violence. The body is shown to be both a medium of redemption and a witness to truth. It is through Joan’s embodied passion (both as desire for God and suffering) that her final liberation, as promised by her inner voices, is enacted. The consumption of her body by flames ends the process of objectification and manipulation begun by committing her words to paper and helps her escape the controlling forces of the world. It also reflects critically on Christ’s commodified body as it is manipulated in the sacred host which the priests trade for her recantation. Their spiritual power is exposed as brutal materialistic control, whether it is exercised over the bodies of Joan or of Christ.
Dreyer suggests clearly that the passions render Joan Christ-like, not in the sense of a need to purify her body but from a personal choice to share in His passions if this is the price to be paid for witnessing to the truth. As Christ was mocked as a fool king, Joan is shown being mocked by her wardens, in a faithful recreation of the famous icon of Christ in the Crown of Thorns. By accepting the suffering she participates in a bigger story of redemption, retracing Christ’s passion.

Dreyer brings together contrasting theologies in order to explore his heroine. He was brought up in a strict Lutheran environment, hence his interest in Joan’s subjectivity, yet there is a rather Catholic imagination at work here. In search of its own spirituality, Lutheran theology moved from the medieval understanding of human suffering in the body as participation in Christ’s passion towards an understanding of Christ as a participant in human suffering (Rittgers, 2012, p. 207). However, Dreyer is keen on ennobling his saint’s suffering by rendering them Christ-like.

In this section I have shown how the images and the text come together to highlight the potentialities of the body. The close-up is employed to suggest the spiritual chasm between Joan of Arc and her judges, as well as to bring about the painful awareness of her body. The conflict between Joan and the theologians is rendered in terms of the opposition between the oral and the written word, from the latter of which she is excluded. Moreover, it is played out in terms of passion and logos. Hers is the embodied word/logos and the passion. The subjective experience of embodied suffering becomes a test of Joan’s veracity, affirming the body’s potential to bear witness to truth.

*Babettes gæstebud / Babette’s Feast* (Gabriel Axel, 1987)
It is striking that the next Danish film after Dreyer’s to achieve similar international recognition was again one preoccupied with religious issues. Babette’s Feast is a faithful adaptation of Isak Dinesen’s novella of that name, with Gabriel Axel allowing himself very few and minor moments of directorial license. The plot is relatively simple. The action is set in a pietistic community during the second half of the 19th century. The inspirational figure of the spiritual leader, the Dean, and his two extraordinarily beautiful daughters – named Phillippa and Martine in remembrance of the religious reformers Phillip Melanchthon and Martin Luther – detach themselves from the unadorned, grey context. As the story progresses marital opportunities present themselves to the two girls in the person of the young lieutenant Lorens Lowenhielm and the Parisian opera singer Achille Papin, the latter offering the promise of a successful musical career to Philippa who is a gifted singer. However, the duty to their father and his religious mission prevail. Discouraged by the girls who have charmed them with their purity and beauty, Lowenhielm and Papin return to their former lives in pursuit of social success and artistic glory respectively.

Fifteen years later, after having dedicated their lives entirely to their father and then to the community, the sisters receive Babette in their household as a servant. Babette, the ‘Papist’ friend of Achille, has lost both her husband and son in the street protests and is in political exile from France. The story jumps another twelve years later in time when Babette, having won the lottery, insists on making and paying herself for the dinner that is to commemorate the Dean. The dinner, a culinary feast, brings back the grace and forgiveness in the community, while Babette’s identity is finally revealed: she was once a famous Parisian chef.

Axel departs from Dinesen’s narrative on just a few occasions, out of which one instance is particularly significant, regarding the location of the action and the
character of Babette. The first such instance attracts the viewer’s attention from the very beginning. Originally, Isak Dinesen – the pen name of the Danish female writer Karen Blixen (1885-1962) – placed the action of her story in Norway. Gabriel Axel moves it to Jutland, the Danish hotbed of pietism and, incidentally, the ancestral hearth of Kierkegaard’s family. This location facilitated the contrast between an extremely austere Protestant, disembodied spirituality, and a Catholic incarnated sacramentality, the two competing views that underpin the narrative.

Babette is a destitute foreigner, a ‘Papist’, which renders her an outsider to the Lutheran community by ethnicity, faith and substance. Without being eccentric in a blatant way, she is, in her stylish dress and boots, still at odds with the plain dressing style advocated in the community. A great culinary artist, she effaces herself by hiding her gifts and choosing to live incognito and remain in the remote Danish village even after she is given the possibility to leave and start a new life. For years, it is her humble devotion which ensures that the food is cooked for the sick and the needy, and which frees Martine and Phillipa from the daily chores so that they can dedicate themselves to the community. In winning the lottery she is given the chance to reactivate a gift she gave up when she put herself in the service of the two sisters. And when the time comes she sacrifices all her substance to prepare one dinner, without expecting anything in return. The gesture seems even more extravagant as she is not in any way liable to the moral norms of the community as an outsider.

However, she arouses suspicions of preparing a ‘black sabbath’ due to the lavishness and exoticism of the ingredients. The emphasis is clearly not on the golden mean of the Lutheran virtues but on the overflowing abundance of the feast and divine grace, an excess that baffles human expectations. This lack of moderation is advocated in rather the same way by Kierkegaard, for whom ‘the corrective
exaggeration will not lead to the virtue of moderation but rather the scandal of the absurd”. In comparison with the kind of spirituality promoted by the Dean and his daughters, Babette’s is of a transgressive, excessive type in its manifestation and its challenge to the austere principles of the community. But this disruption of the established order, apparently produced by ‘irrational’ forces, is necessary in order to allow the irruption of the divine. The freely given love and forgiveness disrupts the economy of scarcity that dominated the puritan community and that no longer provided a connection to the transcendent (Duncan, 2009).

There is still a more fundamental way in which Babette is disruptive. She reverses the paradigm of spiritual power: the male spirituality embodied by the Dean and then replicated in his daughters by their strict following of his words is exercised from top down, by exalting the virtue of submission to the paternal founding figure of the community. In Pierre Bourdieu’s terms it can be described as ‘symbolic power’, as imposed by the dominant figure of the father and internalized by the subordinate two daughters. As such, it is accompanied by ‘symbolic violence’, exercised by the person in authority through a kind of coercion that is not made explicit (Swartz, 2011, p. 75). The community manifests the same submission to the word and memory of the Dean, perpetuated within the religious community by his daughters. As the narrator’s voice informs us the small community gathered regularly in the house of the sisters ‘to read and interpret the Word and to honour the spirit of their master’. Significantly, while the two sisters are dedicated to the ministry of the word, Babette attends to the bodily needs of the community. In opposition to the sisters’ spirituality based on the word, on the logos – both capital and lower-case – Babette’s spirituality is exercised from a position that lacks symbolic power and legitimizes itself just though an
extravagant self-sacrifice which is expressed in material terms. In other words, her spirituality is embodied and derives its power from its very embodiment.

With her feast Babette unchains the possibility of the impossible. The deferred reality of the celestial kingdom is sacramentally granted to the members of the community that share Babette’s ‘eucharistic’ feast (Marsh, 1998, p. 214). Not even in the initial enthusiasm that animated them when the Dean was still alive were his followers experiencing a foretaste of the Kingdom, which remained always a deferred reality. Evoked in hymns, ‘Jerusalem, my happy home/name ever dear to me’ was never hoped for in this world. The spiritual kingdom was presented in the words of the Dean as a reality still to come, never experienced in actuality. But, with Babette’s feast, for the first time, ‘Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and bliss have kissed one another,’ in an actualization of the messianic times.

As Lorens explains, Babette has the skills to turn a dinner into a kind of ‘love affair that made no distinction between bodily appetite and spiritual appetite.’ As a true love it is self-giving and once again, as in The Passion of Joan of Arc, it is ‘ultimately the woman’s own body that is offered up, in displaced form, through her Eucharistic culinary corpus’, symbolized by the Cailles en Sarcophage, the French term for ‘quails in coffins’ (Aiken, 1990, p. 245). The name of Babette’s special dish is not without biblical resonances. According to the Exodus 16:13 God fed the people of Israel with both manna and with flocks of quails. Neither is it without significance, for the choice of words for coffin, in Greek ‘sarcophage’, means ‘flesh eater.’ We do not witness a direct bodily sacrifice like in The Passion of Jan of Arc or Breaking the Waves to which I will refer in what follows, but a symbolic one. Not only the material world in all its abundance but also the entire human person with all their talents is brought as an offering. Two distinct metaphoric culinary images define the two types
of ministry: the sisters’ sun-dried fish and the bland food obtained with them, and Babette’s exquisite *Cailles en Sarcophages*. Both imply practices that leave an indelible mark on the body, but while the former suggest transcending the body through a denial of its natural gifts, the latter suggests putting them in the service of the others.

The underlying feminist undertone that is present in Dinesen is also taken over by Axel. The different visions are structured on oppositions that not only pit Catholic against Protestant, but also male against female. The figures of the Dean and of Babette are inspirational in different ways. In opposition to the Dean’s ultra-spiritualized version of Christianity, Babette proposes an embodied spirituality, in which the material is valorized as a way of accessing the transcendent. There is no open or graphic violence here, as in The Passion of Joan of Arc; the conflict is attenuated as it is played out at a symbolic level.

*Breaking the Waves* (Lars von Trier, 1996)

Perhaps the most distinctive recent Danish director is Lars von Trier, a filmmaker who makes regular reference to religious themes in his works. In *Breaking the Waves* the issues of religion and faith are the driving force behind the story. Bess is a devout young girl from a puritan Calvinist community in Scotland who gets married to an outsider, Ian, who works on an oilrig. Devastated by his long absence while on the oilrig, she prays that he returns home. A work accident brings him to her, paralyzed from the neck down, which makes her feel responsible. With no hopes of recovery he wants her to continue with her life and asks her to have relations with
other men as a way to cure him. Hesitant, Bess does what she is told, attracting opprobrium and ostracism from her family and community. As Ian’s condition deteriorates she puts her life at risk by going to a ship notorious for the violence of the sailors towards women. Ian miraculously recovers after her death, saves her body from the shameful burial to which the elders of the community condemn her and delivers it to the sea from the oilrig. The last shot of the film vindicates again her self-sacrifice showing in a God’s view of the oilrig a pair of bells tolling for her in the sky.

In order to understand Bess’s situation we should start from the challenge she poses to the patriarchal order represented by the elders of the community. From the very beginning she is described as someone who transgresses the law, both social and religious, as in this case they overlap to a great extent, reinforcing each other. By marrying someone from outside her community she enhances her liminal position, a position to which she is automatically condemned by being both a woman and mentally unstable.

From this liminal position she threatens to destabilize the system with her unconventional views. The elders’ static interpretation of the letter of the law, the logos – which stands here for the rational and the ethical – stands in stark contrast with Bess’s more dynamic, existential interpretation of it. In fact Bess develops a threefold attack on the established order: aesthetic, ethical and religious. Aesthetically, her secular and religious preferences go in opposite directions: she likes the music of the outsiders – Jan and his group of friends, and the chiming of the bells banned by the elders, which she hopes to bring back one day. Ethically she breaches the law of submission to the elders of the community, posing a threat to status quo. Not only does she behave like a sexual being in private but she is a sexual scandal in public. She also challenges directly the theological foundations of the Calvinist faith.
of the community, opposing their static veneration of the Word as the letter of the Bible with an existential dedication to the embodied Word and the immediate consequences this has for human relationships: ‘You cannot be in love with a word. You can love another human being. That’s perfection’, she says. The effrontery is double as Bess asserts herself not only as a voice in a community where women are not allowed to have one but also as someone who can make theological claims. In addition, like Dreyer’s Joan who is illiterate, Bess has a mental impairment or instability, which cannot but offend the elders’ theological knowledge.

Bess is also a challenge for the secular rationality – the secular logos – to the extent that her ‘madness’ cannot be contained and the categories used to define it fail. From the point of view of a society privileging reason, and all the reason-based virtues, Bess’s excessive sensibility should be repressed and her uncontrolled bodily reactions. On two occasions institutionalization is recommended as the best way to deal with her excessive feelings: first when her brother dies and later when she is trying to save Ian by prostituting herself. Von Trier shows that Bess’s strength springs from her heart rather than her mind, which shortcuts the rational categories of understanding. Dr Richardson – who can be seen as ‘a symbol for the kind of rational, white, middle-class masculinity’ (Bainbridge, 2007, p. 130) – when asked during the court investigations over her death about his diagnosis says that Bess suffers from ‘being good’ but withdraws it later as a scientifically untenable assessment. In a previous episode when he is trying to reason with Bess, pointing out that she carries out the desires of a husband mentally disturbed by his illness, he gets very irritated by her explanation that, to make up for her stupidity, she has a gift from God to believe.

Two sequences attract attention to Bess’s body and show the sufferings she is ready to undergo out of love for a person, not a word, as she puts it. The first
sequence in particular suggests Bess’s striking affinities with the holy fools, paradoxical figures who hide their saintliness under the mask of sinfulness and challenge the validity of our assumptions. In red revealing shorts, her top torn and her hair dishevelled as a result of the violence she has suffered at the hands of the sailors she visits on a ship, she is walking her bike up the hill to church, crying, while the village children are following. The shots change from medium long to medium as the children draw near and start throwing stones at her, calling her a ‘tart’. When she finally collapses in front of the church the priest appears, dismisses the children but leaves her, not daring to break the rules of the community that has ostracized her for her scandalous behaviour. For her this is just the road to Calvary, the beginning of her passion. A second sequence that brings forward the lacerations of her body follows shortly. Returning to offer sexual services to the same ship Bess suffers injuries and contusions that provoke her death. Brought to hospital, the camera lingers on her face and torso, both full of cuts and blood, while she is preoccupied with the medical state of her husband. In contrast to Joan and Babette, in Bess’s case this mechanics of power is most violently and graphically inscribed on her body. She is in a state of utter abjection, the integrity of her body having been violated on many levels. Still, she is at her utmost moral force, even prepared to concede that she might have been wrong all along.

We could not conclude though without addressing a problem that arises from this reading of Bess’s sacrifice, as well as Joan’s and Babette’s. The way they are presented to us reinforces the cultural prescriptions about the female body and sanctity in terms of suffering. Alyda Faber (2003, p. 65) reads the film within a theoretical framework offered by Julia Kristeva and Katharine MacKinnon, in which patriarchy has no real transgressive ‘outside’ and therefore any act of abjection
ultimately results in strengthening the male social dominance as rational power: ‘This common recreation of femininity as weakness […] recreates male power over against feminine power as fascinating debility’. What is at stake here is the idea of power, worldly power and how it could be distributed genderwise. Bess lays open the mechanics of power but her inner force does not constitute a pole of power on the same level with the powers she opposes, which would neutralize the very criticism of power.

Far from being unaware of her manipulation by Jan and lacking agency, as some feminist commentators have argued in order to render her a victim of a male-dominated society, Bess chooses to sacrifice herself for her husband by following the male gendered model of Christ, emphasized at her wedding in the words of St Paul to the Ephesians: ‘Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her […] that he might present her to himself in splendor’. It is exactly this excessive love, which goes as far as to disregard the sense of self-preservation, that saves Ian. A self-sacrifice like hers is neither seen as necessary nor is it something expected from her by the elders, her husband or somebody else. It is not predicated on the moral law but on the individual’s faith in a God for whom nothing is impossible and from whom she forces an answer.

As for Von Trier’s intentions here, he does not himself exclude the conscious manipulation of religious elements as part of a director’s work: ‘if you want to create a melodrama, you have to furnish it with certain obstacles. And religion provided me with a suitable obstacle’ (von Trier, 1996). At the same time he makes it clear that, without being an introduction to religion, Breaking the Waves is an expression of his own religiosity (von Trier, 2001, p. 219). At this time von Trier (2009) liked to declare himself a Catholic and his writings indicate that religion offered him a sense
of both belonging and of defiance, the latter directed toward his bourgeois atheist family and their convention-free lifestyle. His religiosity may have functioned at the time in a Christian framework, but as he later stated, it was essentially ‘humanistic’, very much in the vein of Dreyer, in the sense that ‘Religion is accursed, but not God’ (von Trier, 1996).

Von Trier’s emphasis on the body and the redemptive quality it can acquire rehearses a well-known Catholic doctrine, while taking it to the extreme in a most unconventional way. Bess’s theological thinking is starkly opposed to her austere Calvinist background. Instead she conceives of the human person as embodied and valuing the agency of the body, an understanding rooted in the incarnation of the Word/Logos. At the same time, giving a last word to Kierkegaard (1964, p. 89), we can look at suffering as ‘the qualitative expression of disparity [of man] with this world’. Applied to Bess, whose description in terms of excess points towards the proportions of this disparity, it means that the clash with the power structures of the world is inevitable. The greater the disparity, the greater the pressure exercised on the individual; at the same time the inherent violence in repressive systems is ever more exposed (McLaughlin, 2005, p. 92). The clash happens, however, in the terms of Bess’s own personality and specific situation, hence the idiosyncratic character of her experience.

It is worth emphasising here that it is the female body that is subjected to suffering, either literally or symbolically, in the works to which I have referred. Given the Christian frame of reference, the importance of suffering is not surprising. From the very beginning Christianity promoted a certain kind of human subject – the sufferer – and formed its identity around this model prescribed across genders. When the persecutions against the Christians in the Roman Empire ended, this suffering was
translated from the bodies of the martyrs to the bodies of the saints. St Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897), who embraced bodily suffering, is perhaps the most recent and famous example of this tradition. Suffering was not exclusively the women’s remit though, since the first recorded stigmatic was a male, St Francis of Assisi (c. 1181–1226). On the other hand, the female body has always been perceived as more prone to suffering through its inherent openness and vulnerability. Placing the three films within the filmography of each director it is obvious that such a mindset is at work here as well: women seem to have the franchise for suffering.

The directors’ gaze is different in each of the films analysed. Axel’s is the most discrete since everything is translated in a visual language that is metaphoric. In Dreyer we cannot detect a ‘male gaze’ of the kind suggested by Laura Mulvey (1975). Dreyer’s Joan shuns any sexualizing: she wears man’s clothes, her body hardly betrays any feminine attributes, while her face, painfully presented in close-ups, is not erotically attractive. She rather represents the idea of sexless sanctity. The result is that the only pleasure the viewer might derive from watching is that provided by Dreyer’s mastery. In opposition to Dreyer, von Trier’s gaze is one that emphasises Bess’s sexuality. Bess, as well as the camera, are aware of the sexual potential of her body. Moreover, the kind of sexual suffering she undergoes is gendered. This serves the director’s purpose to create an unconventional and scandalous type of sanctity. However, as in Dreyer, the visual pleasure is undermined. First, at the beginning of the film when Bess turns to look directly into the camera that gazes at her, making the viewer self-conscious. Second, at the end of the film when the ‘male gaze’ is made to cry with emotion at Bess’s death, as Linda Badley (2010, p. 79) argues.

All three female characters analysed in this paper have a common trait: their determination to assume their self-sacrifice as an integral part of their existence,
emphasizing its redemptive value. They do not so much deliberately challenge the 
norms around them as enter into conflict with them, while following a decision that 
spings from their own ‘heart’ rather than any prescribed norms. While their suffering 
in confrontation with the forces that oppose them is willingly assumed, it does reveal 
the injustice and violence that is already built into the very foundation of the religious 
and social order and to which women are particularly vulnerable. It can be said that 
while their bodies are destroyed – either physically as in the case of Joan and Bess, or 
metaphorically like in the case of Babette – they also help to expose and undermine 
the kind of power that exerts itself through the aggression of the individual. While 
doing so, they valorise the inescapable materiality of our embodied condition: words 
such as truth, faith, love, redemption, need a body to prove their truthfulness.

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