

The following four-page essay is an example of an *A* paper turned in by a student. It provides thoughtful, detailed analysis of the film's visual and narrative elements, while using specific examples to support the writer's ideas. Some further formatting guidelines you should be following include:

- ~ Use specific, detailed examples from the film to support your analysis. This is crucial for writing successfully in this class.
- ~ Avoid using too much summary/exposition. Assume the reader (me) has seen the films, and understands them intimately (because I have, and do).
- ~ Dispatch of any review-type language (ex: The film is a blockbuster extravaganza!).
- ~ Do not ask rhetorical questions, and do not raise questions you do not attempt to answer. Also, do not talk about what the film doesn't do, but rather, what the film *does* do. Be critical and express your ideas.
- ~ Use *italics* for all film titles, i.e. *Citizen Kane* not **Citizen Kane** or Citizen Kane.
- ~ Do not qualify your analysis (ex: I think, perhaps, probably, sort of, etc.). Do not be afraid to make statements and support them with examples/analysis.
- ~ If you refer to a character in the film, research their name (as well as directors, writers, etc.). www.IMDB.com is a great site for information about the films (though not an outside source; see below).
- ~ Don't use quotes as stand-alone analysis, but rather, as support for your own thoughts about the films. I'm interested in *your* perspective, not someone else's.
- ~ Do not simply copy down the readings/interpretations of your fellow students during the discussion and pass them off as your own. If we talk about something in class, I expect you to elaborate with your own perspective to support.
- ~ Use present tense for film criticism (ex: *Citizen Kane* is a good example of... not, *Citizen Kane* was a good example of...).

You are also required to use **at least two** written sources to support your ideas in your papers. For each paper you are to use **a)** one of the chapters/essays read in class as a source, along with **b)** a source outside of the class materials that you have researched either in the library, or online. Wikipedia is not a source. In addition to your two written sources, you may also use other films as references. Be sure to cite your references appropriately using any citation method of your choosing (MLA Style, Chicago Style, etc.). If you are unsure of how to cite your paper properly, see the below website:

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>

All papers are to be turned in using the Turnitin.com application. You must first set up an account here:

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After completing the following you will be given access to the site, where you can visit the assignments page to turn in your papers. I only accept papers through the Turnitin.com application, and no emailed or physical papers will be accepted. Adhere to standard formatting conventions (one-inch margins, 12 pt. font, double spaced, etc.). Your works cited page does not count as one of the 4-5 pages, and if you format your paper incorrectly (16pt. font, 2.5 spacing, etc.) I will simply reformat it as I'm grading and you'll be docked points for improper submission. Do not try to skimp on providing analysis.

You are responsible for uploading your papers by the start of class time on the assigned due dates. Upon receipt of your paper I will email back a response that I received it, and will email back your graded paper with comments, usually a week after I receive them. If I don't email you back, assume I have not received your paper, and re-send it to me. You are not bothering me if I receive your paper multiple times; it's better to be safe than sorry!

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sample essay

Analyze Lars von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark* as a work of cinematic realism. How do the films' formal and narrative elements function to evoke a realistic film-watching experience? How does the film build upon, and reinterpret the tenets of previous realist movements (Neorealismo, Nuevo Cine Mexicano) that have emerged throughout cinema history?

Seeing Reality: *Dancer in the Dark*

Realism in the plastic arts has throughout history, existed as a mutable concept. In the medium of cinema, advancements in technology and a social atmosphere in constant flux have functioned to produce a number of different realist movements. The forebears of these diverse approaches have always been fascinated with the ways in which reality is perceived, and with developing experimental techniques to challenge cinematic conventions. This need to break away the barriers surrounding one's impression of reality and shed new light onto the ways in which it can be experienced, has been the defining principle in the quest for a truly realistic cinema.

In his essay "An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism," French critic and theorist André Bazin says of the Italian cinema, "What is a ceaseless source of wonder...is the significance it gives to the portrayal of actuality" (Bazin, 1967). With an eloquence that few scholars of the cinema are capable of emulating, Bazin postulates that it is the neorealist aesthetic that best captures the essence of reality, due to a formal style that is implicitly real in its representation and a 'fundamental humanism' that resonates a universal emotional appeal (Bazin, 1967). It is a concoction of these vital components that Bazin asserts as being so pertinent to the concept of cinematic realism, that are most skillfully revived for a contemporary audience in Lars von Trier's 2001 film, *Dancer in the Dark*. Loosely guided by the tenets of his *Domga 95* manifesto, von Trier experiments with visionary formal techniques and a subversive approach to genre conventions, to infuse a raw emotional quality that evokes the essence of 'actuality' that Bazin champions (von Trier, Vinerberg, 1999). With his experimental approach and deviation from traditional conventions of storytelling, von Trier is able to push beyond established techniques to formulate his own unique aesthetic of cinematic realism.

Waves & Movements

During the final production days on his film *Breaking the Waves* in 1995, von Trier phones his fellow film school graduate Thomas Vinterberg to ask, quite bluntly, if he wants to start a new 'wave' (Stevenson, 2002). Enchanted by the phenomenon of waves since the late 1980's, von Trier had already developed a keen desire to spark change in the film world:

It is clear that during great periods, such as The New Wave in France, or New German film, with Fassbinder, Wenders etc., a lot of people can suddenly become incredibly inspired and a great amount of exciting films can get made. One must experiment (Stevenson, 2002).

On the 13th of March 1995, von Trier unveils their Dogma 95 manifesto in dramatic fashion at the Odeon theatre in Paris, during a Director's symposium on the future of film. Born out of frustration with special effects-laden Hollywood blockbusters, the Dogma 95 manifesto outlines ten cinematic 'vows of chastity' for filmmakers who wish to "bring purity back to a medium that has been corrupted by money, creative dishonesty and laziness" (Stevenson, 2002). These rules were developed as a means of liberating filmmakers from the oppressions of major studio filmmaking and of the vast assortment of paint-by-number productions, to revive the creativity of those who had lost their ability to "tell a good, basic story that deals with genuine human emotions" (Stevenson, 2002). While *Dancer in the Dark* is not a strict adherence to the technical regulations set forth by the Dogma vows, it is indeed in-line with the spirit of the movement; that a unique approach toward a realist aesthetic will yield emotionally compelling content.

The Performers

Bazin's proposition of the law of the amalgam posits that as a definitive rejection of the Hollywood star system, the casting of occasional actors in opposition to professional actors leads to an 'atmosphere of general authenticity' that is a key trait of a truly realistic cinema (Bazin, 1967). The realism that resonates from Björk's performance in *Dancer in the Dark* can be directly attributed to her inexperience as an actress, which is compensated for by an emotional investment that transcends the boundaries of traditional film acting.

Having only performed in two films previous to *Dancer*, Björk was asked by von Trier to write the music and star in the film after seeing her music video for the song 'It's Oh So Quiet' (Stevenson, 2002). She agreed, and though during the two-year span of composing she tried desperately to convince him to cast a 'real' actress, she ultimately relented when he threatened to abandon the whole project if she dropped out of

the role. Throughout their strenuous relationship during filming, von Trier and Björk fought incessantly on the set over the details of Selma's character. As a means of establishing an identity for her, Björk abandons her own persona to *become* Selma, but as some noted, "without the distance a professional actor brings to the task, (and) without the ability to leave the set at the end of the day and think about something else" (Stevenson, 2002). Björk's emotional digression into the spirit of Selma facilitated the development of a more complex relationship between actress and character, which produced a dissolution of the line between acting and being. This is evident in the simultaneous eruption of terror and sadness that exudes from Selma as she is forced to shoot Officer Bill, or the quiet relief that falls over her face as she hears that her son Gene has had the operation to correct his vision. Much more than just the performance of an actress in a dramatic sequence, these scenes register as a genuine outpouring of human emotion that emanates from the screen to the spectator, conveying a realism that cannot be achieved through the simplicities of acting.

Overture

In his essay "Imagining from the Inside," Murray Smith re-examines his argument that films create an emotional engagement between the spectator and the story world, and that he/she is brought to imagine the character's experiences and predicaments 'from the inside', through two specific processes: central and acentral imagining (Smith, *Imagining*, 1997). Central imagining is prompted when the spectator is given direct access to a character's experience through a particular formal device, such as a point-of-view shot. Acentral imagining occurs at other points in the film, where we may be outside of a character's individual perspective, yet still engaged with their experience of the story world. While the spectator might centrally imagine from inside a character during a specific situation in the film, he also remains fully aware of that character's overall situation within the film acentrally, and so his ultimate engagement involves an assimilation of the two. Imagining from the inside does not require a total replication of the character's experience at a given moment, and in many cases, it is only a partial sensation (Smith, *Imagining*, 1997). Smith asserts multiple ways in which the spectator can be situated either centrally or acentrally, and *Dancer in the Dark* utilizes the formal device of the overture as a creative fabrication of his process of affective mimicry.

The action of mimicry in film studies relates to the involuntary perceptual registering and reflexive simulation of the emotion of another person via facial and bodily cues (Smith, *Engaging*, 1995). Mimicry is often likened to a 'sixth sense' that functions as a psychological mechanism, in which the spectator

unconsciously probes the screen-image in search of meaning (Smith, Engaging, 1995). *Dancer* opens with the image of a plain white canvas, that is gradually infused with an assortment of colors and shapes that slowly fade in and out of the frame, creating a seemingly amorphous collage of movement. In the DVD extras for the film, Danish artist Per Kirkeby, speaks about his design concept for this overture sequence:

Here I did a variation of how I thought it would be to discover if you were losing your ability to see, strange spots and dots and clots and so on.

An individual is apt to respond with some degree of emotion to a given work of art as one engages in the process of looking. To effectively engage with *Selma*, it is necessary for the spectator to experience the overture's artistic rendering of vision loss, so that he may develop an emotional response specific to that process. With this formal device, the spectator is presented with a direct visual representation of the process of losing one's sight as a means of emotional engagement with the film's main character Selma. Because it is impossible for the spectator to physically mimic her emotional response to blindness without actually losing the ability to see, this direct representation of her physical experience of going blind functions as an ersatz process of affective mimicry. During this brief introduction, the spectator at once experiences and mimics Selma's predicament of sight loss, allowing him to centrally imagine her emotional state; a feeling which he can refer back to as the film progresses. The spectator is given direct access to Selma's perception of reality, and through this emotional engagement procures an enhanced faith in the film's realism.

Aesthetic Duality

Dancer in the Dark continues its experimental formal style through the use of two distinctly different technical routes, each functioning to achieve their own unique realistic quality. The bulk of the film utilizes a gritty, hand-held camera style to convey a documentary-like realism, which Bazin asserts is critical to an 'immediate raising of the reality coefficient' (Bazin, 1967). The indexical quality of the image as it appears through this particular form attests to the film as a representation of a lived reality, unfolding as it occurs on-screen.

The mobile camera gives the spectator the sense that he is on the scene, experiencing the duration of the events alongside the performers. When Selma and Bill are confessing their secrets to one another, the camera moves around her cramped living room and motions as if it's sitting down at the table with them. As they speak, it pans back and forth between the two, following the flow of their dialogue. The spectator is invited to sit with the performers, appropriately situated within the story world and fully engaged with their

discussion. At the same time the freedom of the camera lens to zoom in-and-out of the visual field, allows for a more personal interaction with the characters. When the camera zooms-in for a close-up of Selma as she confides in Bill about her illness, the intense emotion that resonates from her eyes and face are immediately registered by the spectator. Von Trier's hand-held aesthetic functions to convey the intimate details of Selma's emotional state, captivating the spectator with an authentic moment of emotional expression.

The documentary-style imagery also functions to align the spectator with Selma's unique perspective on everyday life. The gritty, digital images are equal in representation to the images she encounters on a daily basis as an effect of her fading vision. Able to refer back to the textual device of the overture, the spectator is prompted to centrally imagine Selma's physical perspective, and is subject to her emotional state of being. When Selma chooses to walk home in the dark after work, the drab image of her small frame treading cautiously along the railroad tracks evokes an uneasy sense of anticipation in the spectator, who mimics her fear of stumbling through the unforeseen territory ahead. The gloominess of her murky reality is further emphasized by the stark contrast of the vibrant fantasy sequences.

The high quality, static imagery of the musical numbers illuminates an alternate state of reality for Selma, which gives her an escape from the banality of her bleak daily life. Captured with an innovative technique that utilizes one hundred fixed video cameras recording from just as many different angles, these sequences come alive as eruptions of raw, unencumbered energy. Unlike the Hollywood musicals that burst into spontaneous, seemingly unrelated episodes of song and dance, the musical scenes in *Dancer* function as an extension of Selma's psychological state. The music is introduced diegetically under the guise of clanking machinery or the chugging of a railroad car, that begins to pound in a rhythm that slowly drifts Selma's consciousness toward another plane of reality, existing solely in her imagination. For the "Smith and Wesson (Scatterheart)" song sequence, just after Selma has killed Officer Bill, the repetition of a record player skipping on a scratched portion of the album slowly filters into the soundtrack. The camera quickly pans from a close-up of the phonograph to a tightly framed profile of Selma's eyes, and then makes a sharp cut to the vibrant image of her sitting in Bill's room. As the music materializes and she begins to sing, the spectator has made the transition from her physical reality, to her psychological reality, just as she has experienced it. This allows the spectator to centrally imagine Selma's gradual passage into daydream, and subjectively experience her emotional release through song and dance.

To further align the spectator with Selma's psychological experience of daydreaming, the camera is placed at a multitude of different angles to capture the wonder of exploring her alternative world of perfect

vision. The majority of the images in these sequences appear jilted or obstructed in some way, and are positioned in an ostensibly random fashion about their particular locations. With such a drastic change in perspective from her dingy reality to her luminous imagination, the camera angles take on a metaphorical significance of her passion to see as much of the world around her as she can during her flights of fancy. The spectator shares her desire to consume the images, indulging in their spectacle through his centrally imagined engagement with her psychological reality. With an application of its two distinctly different formal techniques, *Dancer* functions to engage the spectator with Selma's physical and psychological states, attributing an overwhelming realism to his identification with her genuine humanity.

Genre Subversion

Often labeled 'melodramatic,' *Dancer* detaches itself from the stigma of the classic melodrama by subverting a key characteristic of the genre at the film's emotional apex. Melodramatic films often utilize an exaggerated visual spectacle coupled with a grandiose musical accompaniment, to appeal to the spectator's emotions. The result is an evocation of sentimentality, or a false or unearned emotional response. This sentimentality is grounded in a fiction of innocence, and is construed as a 'misrepresentation of the world in order to indulge our feelings,' and contribute to a 'self-righteous gratification of one's image' (Plantinga, 1997). Sentimentality is most notably employed at the end of melodramatic works, and it is precisely at its conclusion where *Dancer* subverts a sentimental approach through its formal aesthetic. As Selma stands on the gallows awaiting the execution order from an official, she cries out uncontrollably for her son Gene. In an act of reassurance, Kathy runs up the stairs of the gallows and places Gene's glasses into Selma's hands, telling her that he's had his operation to correct his genetic sight disorder. At hearing the news, her crying suddenly stops and a wave of comfort washes over her face. Gently holding Gene's eyeglasses in her hands, she begins to sing the "Next to Last Song," without the flashy visual style of her retreat into an alternate reality. Where a melodramatic film might conclude with a sweeping orchestral arrangement to signify her ultimate emotional triumph, the spectator is instead left with Selma's *à capella* rendition of the film's final song. The camera quietly observes with its hand-held shooting style, and the authenticity of Selma's contentment resonates with the spectator in a final moment of intense emotional engagement. This however, is violently interrupted by the collapse of the gallows door, and her voice is quieted by the constraint of the noose tightening around her neck as she is hanged. This abrupt action fractures our engagement with Selma, and the film concludes with its tilt upward toward the roof of the prison. With this subversive act,

Dancer sidesteps sentimental conventions to surmount the transparency of melodramatic fiction, and emerges as a realistic work of genuine emotion.

As an experimental approach to form and genre conventions, *Dancer in the Dark* stages an aesthetic of reality that successfully produces an emotional engagement between spectator and performer. While the various kinds of emotional responses that the film conveys is not discussed here in specific detail, what asserts itself as important is not the *kind* of emotions that the spectator can experience, but that he simply enjoys *any* emotional response to the film. Ed Tan gives a poignant perspective on the notion of cinema as a medium for emotional outlet:

Not all emotional responses are pleasurable. Sadness and horror, for example, are distinctly unpleasurable sensations. But the release from emotional tension is always pleasurable, and the promise of this pleasure is what makes sadness and horror in movies not only tolerable but worthwhile (Eitzen, 1997).

That von Trier's film is able to effectively satisfy this necessity to feel, attests to its value as an exemplary illustration of cinematic realism.

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