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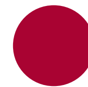

Castration Anxiety and Traumatic Encounters with the Real in the Works of August Strindberg and Lars von Trier

Bunch, Mads

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The International Strindberg presents the latest research on the Swedish playwright August Strindberg and his relation to modern and contemporary literature and art. Strindberg's career spanned the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although he was also a poet, novelist, painter, and critic, he is best known for his plays. No less a dramatist than Eugene O'Neill called him "that greatest genius of all modern dramatists." Strindberg's style and methodologies exert a deep influence on theater, poetry, fiction, and filmmaking to this day.

In her compelling introduction, Anna Westerståhl Stenport argues that Strindberg's work embodies and promotes the spirit of internationalism that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. Strindberg never seemed at home in Sweden or any other country. His writing transcended any "national" literature. Contributors consider Strindberg's impact on a range of cultural and artistic movements and disciplines—from French decadence, Russian expressionism, and European surrealism to ecocriticism, translation studies, and dramatic practice and theory.

Anna Westerståhl Stenport is the author of *Locating August Strindberg's Prose: Modernism, Transnationalism, Setting*. She is the director of the Scandinavian Program and an associate professor in the departments of Germanic Languages and Literatures; Comparative and World Literature; Media and Cinema Studies, Theatre; Gender and Women's Studies; and Criticism and Interpretive Theory, as well as in the Global Studies Program in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois.

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Edited by
Anna Westerståhl Stenport

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As I write these acknowledgments, a centenary commemorative year marking the death of August Strindberg in 1912 is in full swing. My final words of gratitude are to August himself for showing me, and so many others around the world, alternate and fascinating aspects of the complexity and wonder involved in living in and through international modernity.

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Castration Anxiety and Traumatic Encounters with the Real in the Works of August Strindberg and Lars von Trier

MADS BUNCH

It is commonly acknowledged by scholars that August Strindberg has been a source of inspiration for Danish director Lars von Trier, not least due to the many interviews following the release of *Antichrist* (2009), in which von Trier himself has pointed out the connections to Strindberg.[1] It seems, however, that this pertinent influence runs much deeper than what has so far been uncovered. In fact, the influence from Strindberg seems to permeate the works of von Trier on so many levels that he could arguably be regarded as one of the director's *most* important influences. Both have been understood as radical visionaries within their aesthetic form of expression, and specifically as purveyors of a distinct Nordic radicalism. Von Trier's varied cinematic expression includes the technically brilliant montage and back projection strategies of the meta-noir early masterpiece *Zentropa* (1991), the spearheading of the Dogme 95 movement, and the experimental films of *Dogville* (2003) and *Manderlay* (2005). Von Trier has called the two latter "fusion films"—"a fusion between, film, theatre and literature" (Björkman 241)—and coined the "fusion film" as a whole new genre.

Like Strindberg's heterogeneous dramatic production, spanning the naturalist reimagination of stage space, décor, and costume in *Miss Julie* (*Fröken Julie*, 1888) to the fluid spatio-temporality of *A Dream Play* (*Ett drömspel*, 1901) with an experimental set design, von Trier's films continue to challenge commonly acknowledged artistic genres and forms and, like Strindberg's did, export a particular branch of radical Scandinavian modernism abroad. Von Trier's "Dogme 95 Manifesto" and "Vow of Chastity" (both 1995; *Dogme 95*, uncredited) can even be regarded as

a meta-connection to Strindberg's naturalist manifesto in the "Preface" to *Miss Julie,* where Strindberg is propagating a new naturalistic theater form. Von Trier's manifestos also propagate a new radical naturalism in cinema (handheld camera, no artificial sets, no music, etc.). His arguments and criticism of 1995 filmmaking praxis have many similarities to the ones Strindberg uses with regard to the theater tradition in 1888. Von Trier's fusion films can also be seen as another way to follow in Strindberg's footsteps by trying to invent a whole new form, just as Strindberg did in his later experimental and expressionistic plays.

Von Trier's interest in Strindberg started years before he began making films. He grew up only a few miles away from Skovlyst (now Geelsgaard), where Strindberg wrote *Miss Julie* during the turbulent summer of 1888. At the age of twenty, von Trier wrote a long article about Strindberg's stay at Skovlyst and published it in a local newspaper: "På vanviddets rand i Holte. En beretning om August Strindberg i Holte—en frugtbar krisetid" ("On the Brink of Madness in Holte. An Account of August Strindberg in Holte—A Productive Time of Crisis," my trans.) One of the most interesting elements of the article is that Trier signed it Lars *von* Trier. Scholars have mentioned that Trier added the "von" to his name when he was attending the Danish Film School (1979–83) and as a tribute to Joseph von Sternberg or even as a provocation toward his teachers (Stevenson 20–21). But the "von" signature in the newspaper appears three years before von Trier started at the Danish Film School. Von Trier himself points to Strindberg as the main source of inspiration behind this radical decision:

> In the middle of the 1970s I read an awful lot of Strindberg, and Nietzsche, of course. During Strindberg's crisis in Paris—which is always called his "inferno crisis"—he signed his letters "Rex," the royal signature. I thought it was pretty funny. I liked that . . . both the craziness and the arrogance of it. So I started adding a "von" to my name. (Björkman 2)

Aside from adding the "von" to his name, elements from August Strindberg's dramas and personal life have found their way into the films and self-presentation of Lars von Trier (many have indeed associated von Trier with both lunacy and arrogance).

The careers of von Trier and Strindberg also share further characteristics: their works have often been better received abroad than in their home countries. In addition, both continue to challenge norms of social decorum, particularly in their depiction of gender roles and sexuality. Specifically, both deal with gender-based conflicts and psychoanalytical traumas, which appear to challenge persistent Scandinavian and Western identification

with rationality, moderation, and social and gender equality. This study will focus on the male protagonists of Strindberg and von Trier in order to show how the psychological complex of castration anxiety permeates the characters and determines their behavior toward the female protagonists.

Slavoj Žižek's Theoretical Framework and Links to Strindberg and von Trier

In order to penetrate and understand the psychoanalytical subject matter in Strindberg's and von Trier's works, the theories of Slovenian philosopher and psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek will be used because they offer a beneficial theoretical framework for this analysis. Žižek himself mentions both Strindberg's and—especially—von Trier's works more than once in his writings (on Strindberg, see for example *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects* 2, 215, and *Interrogating the Real* 65; on von Trier, see among others "Femininity Between Goodness and Act," *Revolution at the Gates* 219–22, and *Interrogating the Real* 307). No extensive discussion relating Žižek to Strindberg and von Trier has yet been undertaken, which is what I aim to pursue in the following. But before entering into the analysis, I will briefly explain some of the core ideas of Žižek's theoretical framework of relevance to the ensuing discussion.

We find the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary to be the three core elements in what Lacan and Žižek believe to be the triadic (Borromean) structure of all being. What we normally refer to as "reality" is articulated through signification (the symbolic) and the characteristic patterning of images and archetypal fantasies (the imaginary). The Real by contrast does not belong to the (symbolic-imaginary) order of signification but is precisely what cannot be incorporated into such an order. It is a negative ground from which the two others derive. The order of the Symbolic can thus be regarded as an ordered structure (civilization, language) deriving from an ongoing attempt to escape the chaos and disintegrative effects of the Real (death, destruction, disaster, chaos). The structure of the Symbolic is in principle open-ended with its infinite combinations of *signification* and organization, but the Imaginary seeks to domesticate this open-endedness through the imposition of a *fantasmatic* (illusory fantasies that narrate the Symbolic). In other words, the Imaginary arrests the Symbolic around certain fundamental fantasies (Žižek and Daly 6–7), and this way of forming imaginary narratives (fantasies) is a way for us to orient ourselves in the open-endedness of the Symbolic. Most of these fantasies are particular to the individual and function as fundamental

narratives upon which we understand and explain ourselves. Žižek uses a brilliant example from the film *The Silence of the Lambs* concerning the female protagonist Clarice Starling to illustrate how the Symbolic is arrested by the Imaginary:

> In a close approximation to a Lacanian psychoanalyst, what Lecter seeks to discover is the specific way in which the symbolic universe of Starling is structured (in tendential terms at least) around a fundamental fantasy—the crying of the lambs and the failed attempt to save them. The point is that Starling makes sense of the world (she is able to narrate symbolically "who she is" for the Other) precisely through a certain arresting fantasy at the level of the imaginary. (Žižek and Daly 6–7)

But some fantasies of death, horror, and trauma are connected to the realm of the Real and are commonly shared (for example, the fear of going blind, being paralyzed, losing one's children, and so on), and in some cases even gender-specific. For example, the male horror fantasy of castration. Aside from uncovering this archetypal male fantasy of castration in the works of Strindberg and von Trier, I will also show how Žižek's newly reworked and expanded theories about the Real (which he now divides into the real Real, the symbolic Real, and the imaginary Real) can be employed to explain the haunting anatomy of the works of Strindberg and von Trier.

Male Protagonists: Castration Anxiety and Impotent Violence

In both Strindberg's and von Trier's works we find male protagonists whose actions are determined and guided by an archetypal neurotic fear of castration as a fundamental fantasy that unconsciously structures their symbolic universe and guides their behavior. The theory of castration ultimately derives from Sigmund Freud but was later developed by Jacques Lacan into a more general theory about the sexes. Subsequently it has been promoted and further developed by Žižek:

> The most salient example of this is in *Totem and Taboo,* where Freud developed Darwin's myth of the primal father. According to Freud, men lived in relatively small groups within which the strongest male jealously prevented sexual promiscuity by keeping all the females for himself. Hence, while all men were subject to his phallic law, there existed one male who was not, yet nonetheless by which the law itself was grounded (SE, 13:125). On the basis of this example, one can also describe the masculine formula of sexuation in terms of castration: all men are castrated, but there is one exception that proves the rule. The exception has the function of the father who subsequently establishes the set of men, thereby allowing for a unitary trait: all men are castrated. . . . Lacan's point is that there is no objectifying trait that defines woman as a whole in the way that castration defines men as a whole. (Pound 106–7)

The male protagonists of Strindberg's naturalistic plays are for the most part sensitive yet ambitious men who find themselves trapped in the very rigid, masculine, and authoritarian structure of the late nineteenth century. None of Strindberg's male protagonists are depicted as being able to successfully fulfill the demands of nineteenth-century masculinity, or what Žižek calls "the symbolic 'big Other'—the 'substance' of our social existence, the impersonal set of rules that coordinate our existence" (*Interrogating,* 320), which in this case is the "impersonal set of rules that coordinate" masculinity and potency and define it as "successful provider and breadwinner."

The Captain in *The Father* (*Fadren,* 1887) is ill, sensitive, and his career plans within the military and the sciences are failing, and his relationship with his wife is deteriorating. In *Creditors* (*Fordringsägare,* 1888), the male protagonist Adolf (the same name as Adolf in *The Father* and in character quite similar) is bedridden and physically and mentally ill. He finally dies when he finds out that it is his wife's former husband who has turned up and started manipulating their marriage. Humiliating money problems constantly haunt the Captain from *The Dance of Death* (*Dödsdansen,* 1900), and Jean in *Miss Julie* has become a neurotic due to his low social status and intense feelings of fear and paranoia toward his omnipotent superior, the Count (87/168, 110/190).[2] This inability to live up to the late nineteenth-century demands of a successful macho man (note that both protagonists in *The Father* and *The Dance of Death* are military men) creates for the male protagonists a framework based on humiliation and intense feelings of impotence. In Žižekian terms, the imaginary fantasy of castration becomes the fundamental fantasy with which they arrest the Symbolic around and which guides their behavior toward the female protagonists. This behavior commonly plays out as accusations that the female protagonists look down upon them and only want to control them and spoil their prospects for recognition in the military, science, or business. Or it plays out as impotent accusations of adultery, most prominent in *The Father* and *Creditors,* which

literally points out the male protagonist's fear of castration and emasculation. Some of the female protagonists in Strindberg's plays can thus be regarded as "scapegoats"—agents who are blamed for something that has nothing to do with them:

> As Beattie points out, Girard's scapegoat theory sheds further light on psychoanalysis that is applicable to Žižek. It is the nature of scapegoating that one masks the innocence of the victim, and hence the random nature of the sacrificial process. This is what Žižek would call the impotence of violence, violence that acts to mask castration rather than the violence incurred by a traumatic shift within the symbolic itself. (Pound 124)

It is exactly the traumatic shift within the symbolic itself, the impossible demands of patriarchal society for them to be real "macho men" in combination with a time in history when women are asserting their individuality in traditional male-dominated areas, that seems to be the real source of the violence that acts to mask their own castration and impotence. Many of Strindberg's plays deal with this archetypal male complex of castration anxiety, first and foremost simply because it is an integrated, archetypal part of male psychology, but also because Strindberg lived in a specific time in history when gender roles were radically changing for the first time in Western history, causing turbulence, resistance, and insecurity on the part of the male agent, who not only had to live up to the traditional role of the macho man implied by the big Other, but at the same time had to deal with a new, stronger, and more independent woman.

Miss Julie: The Impossible Revolt Against the Big Other

Strindberg also seems to have been very aware that the strict patriarchal hierarchies of the late nineteenth century produced anxiety and paranoia. In his semiautobiographical *Son of a Servant* (*Tjänstekvinnans son I–II*, 1886), Strindberg indicates how this strict power structure produces male anxiety:

> Above him loomed a hierarchy of authorities wielding various rights, from the right of seniority of his brothers to the supreme tribunal of his father. And yet above his father was the deputy-landlord, who always threatened him with the landlord. This last was generally invisible because he lived in the country, and perhaps, for that reason, was the most feared of all. (2/10)

Many of Strindberg's plays, for example, *Miss Julie, The Dance of Death,* and *A Dream Play,* operate with this notion of an invisible—seemingly omnipotent—agency of power which is haunting the male protagonists, creating paranoia and trauma. This agency is what Žižek calls the Other of the big Other, "who effectively 'pulls the strings' behind the visible, public Power. This other, obscene, invisible power structure acts the part of the 'Other of the Other' in the Lacanian sense, the part of the meta-guarantee of the consistency of the big Other (the symbolic order that regulates social life)" ("The Big Other Doesn't Exist"). In nineteenth-century society, God normally played the role of "the Other of the big Other," the meta-guarantee for the consistency of Christian-bourgeois norms (the big Other) and the notions of the sanctity of marriage and the submissive role of the woman. We can regard "the Count" in Strindberg's most frequently staged play, *Miss Julie,* as an equivalent to this anxiety-producing agency, "the Other of the big Other," who has immense influence over the behavior of the characters—especially Jean—even though he is not physically there (like God):

> What's that? I thought the bell moved!—No! Shall we stop it with paper ——To be so afraid of a bell!—Yes, but it's not just a bell—there's somebody behind it—a hand sets it in motion—and something else sets that hand in motion—but if you stop your ears—just stop your ears! Yes, but then he'll go on ringing even louder—and keep on ringing until someone answers. (110/190)

The Count is indeed an omnipotent authority, the "Other of the big Other," who guarantees the late feudal social norms of division (the big Other) still in play at the estate, and Jean is indeed the impotent subject of his whims and wills, as we see in the above quotation. But as the play unfolds, this structure is reversed, and we witness how a seemingly impotent man, symbolically castrated by the Count, for just one night is granted the power and potency of the agency oppressing and castrating him, when he gets a chance to have sex with the Count's daughter. Jean is aware of how his ambitions "to climb" (the social ladder) are impossible in the type of society he lives in, and he ultimately takes this frustration out on Miss Julie. His having sex with her becomes a violent act of impotence, since their relationship is not possible within the structure of late-nineteenth-century social reality, which he is perfectly aware of and even though she tries to fool herself into believing otherwise. The sexual encounter must then be understood as a way for him to get revenge on a society, the big Other, represented by Miss Julie in

the absence of the Count—a patriarchal society that symbolically has castrated him by denying him the right to climb socially and choose his own sexual partners, even though he is intelligent, hardworking, and ambitious. A traumatic gridlock in the symbolic order prevents him from building a better life for himself, and when he cannot build, he chooses to destroy. Having sex with the daughter of the omnipotent Count (the Freudian "primal father") becomes his revenge, but he is also painfully aware that if the affair comes out, his life will be ruined. He will be facing charges of rape and adultery and probably life in prison and maybe even death. A real revolt is impossible, and if he wants to save himself from the omnipotent destructive powers of the Count, who has just returned to the estate, the only way out is Miss Julie's suicide.

Manderlay: Von Trier's *Miss Julie*

Manderlay (2003) stands out as von Trier's most prominent rewriting of Strindberg's *Miss Julie*. The connection has been widely overlooked by scholars, because attention so far has focused on *Breaking the Waves* (1996)[3] and *Antichrist* (Bunch 159). But in *Manderlay* we find a very obvious parallel to the Miss Julie/Jean relation in the protagonist-antagonist couple, Grace and Timothy. In *Manderlay*, Grace is also an upper-class woman (a "society woman," as Timothy calls her) like Miss Julie. In the absence of her father, she has become the new leader of a former slave colony, the estate of Manderlay. Grace is also repeating Miss Julie's fatal encounter with Jean, when she eventually has sex with the former black slave Timothy. A man socially inferior to her like Jean, who in von Trier's script is also described as a "proudy nigger." Timothy's characterization is eerily reminiscent of Jean's statements on working-class pride in *Miss Julie*. The mental battle between Grace and Timothy is further escalated by the clear sexual undertones and explicit erotic tensions, shifting back and forth between attraction and repulsion. Grace, like Miss Julie, also naively believes that everyone is equal, regardless of social class and gender (or race), and that her interaction with the former black slaves is uncomplicated, even though she is in a superior situation. Timothy's pattern of reaction toward his female superior Grace is similar to Jean's and has its roots in the same feelings of inferiority and of being stuck in a situation with no way out. Timothy's impotence is obvious in the bizarre sex scene, where he covers Grace's face with a white handkerchief and stages the intercourse as a kind of rape, where he is holding her down while aggressively penetrating her. In the words

of Žižek this is "violence that acts to mask castration," and in this case Timothy literally masks the face of his scapegoat, the innocent object of his violence. He is symbolically raping the powerful agency he is subjugated to, as the only way of compensating for his lack of power in the social hierarchy at Manderlay, where he in fact belongs to the very bottom tier (though Grace believes the opposite to be the case). Grace thus becomes Timothy's scapegoat for problems caused by a traumatic shift within the symbolic order, the breakdown of the old set of regulations (slavery) and new ideas of democracy and free enterprise promoted by this young, self-confident woman in a male-dominated environment.

Another obvious parallel to the traumatic yet hidden agency as represented by "The Count" in *Miss Julie* is Grace's father, the gangster leader. Grace's gangster father shares many characteristics with the Count: he is the hidden, but big, omnipotent agency, "the Other of the big Other," whose persona, power, and money regulate the behavior of the characters without his being physically present. As the absent Count he acts as a guarantee for the consistency of the power of the big Other, in this case the norms and ideas of liberalism and democracy represented by his daughter Grace. This is also von Trier's way of showing how military force and capitalism have taken over as the postmodern version of the Other of the big Other guaranteeing the consistency of the big Other; the ideas of liberalism and democracy as "the impersonal set of rules that coordinate our existence." As Jean points out in *Miss Julie*, "Do you know who your earliest ancestor was? A miller who let the king spend the night with his wife during the Danish war" (96/166). The point is of course that there is no "Other of the big Other" in an ontological sense. These meta-agencies of power are not founded on solid ontological truths but are agencies that primarily function to consolidate and guarantee the consistency of "the visible, public power" (Žižek, "The Big Other Doesn't Exist"), even though the agents of public power claim otherwise.

When Grace's father returns in the last scene, in which he has given Grace one chance—and one chance only—to leave Manderlay with him, we hear the clock of Manderlay strike, which is again an echo of a scene in *Miss Julie*, where Jean thinks he hears the bell move also in the last scene (110/190). But as a result of an absurd decision to vote on what the time should be in Manderlay, the clock is off, and Grace is too late. Her father has left for good, and she is now entirely on her own, fleeing the revenge of the former slaves. As the last image before the closing credits, we find her, lonely and haunted, running across a map of the United

States to the soundtrack of David Bowie's "She Was a Young American." Grace is, in the film, indeed portrayed as a young and naive American (or Western) woman with all the right ideals but without any practical knowledge or experience with the workings of the world. As a sheltered, young upper-class woman, she subscribes to an idealistic fantasy of equality and of crossing the borders of social classes without consequences. This also means that on a deeper psychoanalytical level, Grace's approach to the slaves, while based on her ideals of equality, is just an attempt to avoid the traumatic fact that social groups and cultures are *very different* and that this gap cannot be mediated through an ideological fantasy about freedom and democracy. "What ideology offers is the symbolic construction of reality—the ultimate fantasy—as a way to escape the traumatic effects of the Real" (Žižek and Daly 10).

Von Trier appears to be arguing, along the lines of Žižek, that instead of trying to mediate this fundamental cultural discrepancy through an ideological fantasy of Western liberalism and democracy as the only solution, one should instead acknowledge the gap and try to find other and more complex solutions to a peaceful coexistence (Žižek and Daly 117). Miss Julie and her ideals about equality are also annihilated when reality returns in the guise of the Count and the catastrophic dimension, the Real of her sexual encounter with Jean, shatters her imaginary fantasy of overcoming the social barriers of the late nineteenth century. If Jean faces imprisonment, Miss Julie faces the horror of being pregnant with a bastard child of one of her father's male servants, which is a horrible nightmare fantasy turning frighteningly real. In a society with strict borders between the social classes, this is the worst imaginable scenario for a young upper-class woman (and for her father too), indeed, to such a degree that suicide could be regarded as the better option.

Grace is not destroyed physically like Miss Julie, but is broken down mentally and deeply alienated when she sees her idealistic fantasy disappear in the abyss of the cultural gap between her Western ideology and the ancient "real" mindset of the former slaves. And here von Trier also seems to suggest—along the lines of Strindberg in *Miss Julie*—that one of the worst traumas for a young woman is to lose her idealistic fantasy, the imaginary fantasy that we are all equal, that we as individuals can transgress the borders of culture, class, and race, without any traumatic consequences. In both *Miss Julie* and *Manderlay*, Strindberg and von Trier bluntly show us how the borders of social class, gender, race, and culture will always in some way exist, even though we would like to think differently, and *that* seems to be the real trauma in these two works.

The Echo of the Straitjacket

As we have seen, Strindberg's and von Trier's male protagonists share characteristics, including what appears to be a repetitive reworking of similar psychological issues that hinge on traumatic inferiority complexes, both sexual and social, along the lines of what Žižek outlines as symptomatic of masculinity. One critic suggests that Lars von Trier (not unlike Strindberg) is telling the same story in his films with regard to his male protagonists, depicting a "passive, paranoid man, a megalomaniac, who is bedridden (as in *Breaking the Waves*) or buried alive (as in *Antichrist*), while sexually abusing a sick or mentally ill woman to the point of death in order to produce images of sadomasochist desire and voyeuristically satisfy his sexuality" (Romer n. pag.). Even though Knud Romer's analysis only tells half of the story, he does point out an important common trait for von Trier's male protagonists (especially after the *Europe Trilogy*, 1984–91), which is that they all seem to be trapped or fixated in different ways, physically and mentally. This setup is very obvious in *Breaking the Waves*, where Jan lies in the hospital bed, paralyzed from the neck down and unable to move, but with his brain still functioning. He is in darkest despair and on the brink of a mental breakdown, which he is trying to overcome by asking his wife, Bess, to have sex with strangers in order to compensate for his own broken phallus, which is literally dysfunctional as part of his paralysis.

But the character of the sexually and socially paralyzed man is actually foreshadowed in von Trier's *The Kingdom* II (*Riget* II, 1997). In this television series, the haunting character of Lillebror (Little Brother) makes manifest the essence of male impotence. Little Brother's body grows way too fast, and he must be strung up in the hospital bed in order to prevent his limbs from breaking. The double horror is that Little Brother's mental development is that of a young man in his twenties (he has a grown man's head and full ability to think and speak), even though he is only a few months old. He is being taken care of by the doctors and his mother, to whose decisions he is totally subjected. He is fixated in a traumatizing role, where he is conscious but has no power or potency. There is a pertinent connection to Strindberg's plays in this character figuration in the films of Lars von Trier and there even seems to be a direct meta-narrative connection to *Creditors*, where Tekla consistently calls her ill and bedridden husband Adolf "lilla bror" (little brother) throughout the play (28/229, 29/230, 31/236, 52/272) in order to emasculate him during their venomous discussions: "My heart is so big, you see, little brother, that there's room in it for many more than you" (31/236) and

later: "Adolf. 'You hate me then?' Tekla. 'No, I don't. And I don't believe I ever shall. But that of course is because you are a child'" (38/247); this achieves the same effect of castration and emasculation. Even in the final scene, when he dies and she is full of remorse, she calls him both "my darling child" and "little brother" (52/272).

Little Brother's situation in *The Kingdom* is also similar to the infant-like state in which the grown man the Captain finds himself in *The Father* after being lured into the straitjacket at the end of the play (49–53/94–98). By then, the Captain is portrayed as an impotent and powerless child with his arms strapped and trapped in the straitjacket and surrounded by women of three generations, to whose powers he is entirely subjected. Similarly, in von Trier's *Manderlay,* we find Timothy strapped to the whipping block, while Grace is savagely whipping him, and in *Antichrist* we are confronted with a male protagonist bound to a big grindstone by the female protagonist, who is attaching it to his leg while he is unconscious. These different scenes are all different versions of the "Ur-scene," the straitjacket scene from Strindberg's *The Father,* and are different ways for von Trier to symbolically stage the same traumatic condition: the male castration complex.

In many of von Trier's films, the male protagonists try to compensate for feelings of inferiority and impotence through violence exercised toward the female protagonists in order to reclaim the potency they feel is absent. This is a behavior we have seen in many of Strindberg's works too, but this type of impotent violence is taken further in von Trier's films. In *Breaking the Waves,* Jan forces Bess to have sex with strangers; in *Dogville,* Tom turns a blind eye to the sexual abuse of Grace; in *Manderlay,* Timothy performs sadistic intercourse with Grace. There seem to be a fifty–fifty ratio with regard to the outcome of this "battle of the sexes" in von Trier's films, and we actually find just as many of von Trier's male protagonists who eventually break down trying to exercise their power over the female protagonist through various forms of violence (Tom and Timothy), as we find male protagonists succeeding (Jan and "He" in *Antichrist*), just as the case is in regard to Strindberg. Von Trier himself is well aware of the redundancy of this—and other—motifs in his own films: "My story is practically the same every time. I'm well aware of that by now" (Romer n. pag.). But he is also perfectly aware that his male protagonists fail over and over again: "My male protagonists are basically idiots, who don't understand shit. In 'Antichrist,' too. So, of course things get fucked up!" (Romer n. pag.). The so-called misogynistic behavior of the male protagonists in Lars von Trier's films must be understood within this context, namely that von Trier is well aware of the reasons behind

his male protagonists' behavior and that these actions are consistent with the psychology of the characters (which is also the case for Strindberg). Von Trier also sees these actions as part of a self-reflexive, indeed meta-narrative, framework for his films connecting him through Strindberg to the artistic tradition of late-nineteenth-century Scandinavian drama. He does not condone their actions but instead points his finger toward what he sees as a common and dominant trait in male psychology: castration anxiety and feelings of impotence compensated for through violence. Von Trier thus manages to say something true about male psychology and behavior, just like Strindberg does in his plays, whether we like it or not.

Traumatic Encounters with the Real

One of the reasons why both Strindberg's and von Trier's work have called forth such strong and opinionated views may be that both address and depict our deepest anxieties and fears with an honesty that is unusual even among avant-garde artists. Their most experimental and challenging works—from *Miss Julie* to *Antichrist*—can, in fact, be closely related to Slavoj Žižek's understanding of the terror and complexity of the Real (indeed, Žižek has been referred to as the "philosopher of the Real" [Myers 29]).

> I'm more and more convinced that there are at least three notions of the Real. I would say that the very triad of real, symbolic and imaginary is in a way mapped onto or projected into the Real itself. So we have to put it in brutal terms: real Real, imaginary Real and Symbolic Real. . . . The result of all this is that, for Lacan, the Real is not impossible in a sense that it can never happen—a traumatic kernel which forever eludes our grasp. No, the problem with the Real is that it happens and *that's* the trauma. *The point is not that the Real is impossible but rather that the impossible is Real.* A trauma, or an act, is simply the point when the Real happens, and this is difficult to accept. . . . One aspect of the Real is that it's impossible, but the other aspect is that it happens but it is impossible to sustain, impossible to integrate. And this second aspect, I think, is more and more crucial. (Žižek and Daly 68–71)

Žižek has developed his notion of the Real through Lacan, Hegel, and Freud. In Strindberg's and von Trier's works we see how the imaginary Real (the collective nightmare fantasies of castration) is turning real Real

(is actually coming true for the characters), and that is the true horror of their works: the impossible fantasy is real. Žižek uses the example of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 as an example to describe this phenomenon of trauma caused by the Real as a realization of the imaginary Real:

> Yet it is not simply at the level of cinema and cyberspace that the imaginary Real is experienced. The tragedy of 11 September 2001 can also be looked at from this perspective (Žižek 2002). In a way we could say that, especially for Americans, the trauma was doubly inscribed. First there was the cataclysmic event itself but, second, there was this dimension of the imaginary Real in which popular fantasies regarding the orgiastic destruction of New York (viz. *Independence Day, Godzilla, Deep Impact,* to name but a few) seemed to erupt through to reality—and thereby to render meaningless any escape back to reality. In this way the trauma of 11 September was intensified precisely as a result of this transdimensional breach; this transgression of the subliminal injunction that fantasies should "stay there" and not pursue us. (Žižek and Daly 9–10)

Examples of these archetypal imaginary nightmare fantasies belonging to the imaginary Real that suddenly turn real Real in the case of Strindberg include: that we are not the father of our own children (The Captain in *The Father*), that we will never be able to rise socially even though we have the potential to do so (Jean in *Miss Julie*), that we have sex with a man below our class with the risk of giving birth to a bastard child and being ostracized by society (*Miss Julie*), that the former husband of our wife suddenly turns up and destroys our marriage (*Creditors*), or that we are stuck forever on a small island in a venomous and disastrous relationship (*The Dance of Death*). In the case of von Trier: that we are paralyzed and not able to have sex anymore (Jan in *Breaking the Waves*), that the woman we love turns out to be a Nazi terrorist (Kessler in *Zentropa*), that the woman we love has molested and killed our child and now wants to kill us ("She" in *Antichrist*), that we become pedophile killers without being aware of it (Fisher in *The Element of Crime*), or that we are bringing death and disease instead of the cure without being aware of it (Mesmer in *Epidemic*). Of the archetypal female imaginary fantasies of horror and trauma we can also mention a lineup of worst-case scenarios turning catastrophically real Real: that our child dies in the moment of the highest physical pleasure and that we go mad and self-mutilate ourselves ("She" in *Antichrist*), that our child is asking us to kill it, and we have no other option than to do it (Judith in *The Kingdom* II), that the love of our life turns into a paralyzed

sadist asking us to have sex with strangers (Bess in *Breaking the Waves*), or that we are raped by people who promised to protect us (Grace in *Dogville*).

In Strindberg's and von Trier's works we see how these gender-based collective fantasies of horror and destruction belonging to the imaginary Real become real Real, like a nightmare coming true. That is the real trauma for both the protagonists and for us as readers/audience. Žižek further argues that horror movies are built around this dynamic of a nightmare coming true, but where the protagonist fights the demon or serial killer and manages to escape back into reality. But in the experimental, norm-pushing, and self-reflexive works by Strindberg and von Trier, there is no waking up for the protagonists. *The Father* provides a prominent example of how the imaginary Real becomes real Real and there is no waking up. The Captain's paranoid fantasy of the imaginary Real that he is not the "real" father of his child (which is an archetypal male nightmare) actually becomes real (at least in his own imagination), fed by Laura's manipulative suggestions. The Captain himself falls apart and eventually becomes the real Real himself: a representation of pure horror and madness, physically constrained in a straitjacket while he is having a stroke. The imaginary Real becoming real Real, and thus inescapable, is the ultimate kernel of Strindberg's and von Trier's works. It is the very core of their anatomy and what makes them so haunting, since we are all a part of the collective imaginary nightmare fantasies they stage, and that is what makes their works so impossible to escape. And that is also why their works remain so powerful and ultimately so challenging to social conventions, whether those of the late nineteenth century or the early twenty-first century.

Traumatic Struggles with the Idol Strindberg

Von Trier has obviously integrated many serious Strindbergian elements in his films, but Strindberg himself and many core themes from his works are also present as comedy in the works of von Trier. These works include the eight-episode television series *The Kingdom* I–II (1994, 1997) and the feature film *The Boss of It All* (*Chefen for det hele*, 2007). The television series *The Kingdom* is a very special mix of thriller and comedy with "spiritism" and "the occult" as dominant topics and Strindberg as an important part of the meta-narrative. We are introduced to the meta-narrative concerning Strindberg twenty-five minutes into the first episode through Rigmor, Dr. Helmer's partner and head nurse:

RIGMOR: Stig you can be a little brusque, you know. But do you know why I love you?
DR. HELMER: No.
RIGMOR: Would you like to know?
DR. HELMER: No.
RIGMOR: I love you because you are a great man. All the others are so tiny. . . . When are you going to move your things into my place?
DR. HELMER: I have to get settled first.
RIGMOR: My little August Strindberg. You do have his curls.
DR. HELMER: You know I don't like it when you touch my hair.
(*The Kingdom* I, episode 1. My translation.)

The dialogue above reads as if it could have been cut out of one of Strindberg's own plays, and Dr. Helmer (the only Swedish doctor at the hospital called The Kingdom) and his paranoia and dominating, impolite attitude toward the other employees is indeed very similar to the legacy of Strindberg's attitude and behavior in real life. *The Kingdom* also stages a parody of one of the core themes in Strindberg's and von Trier's works, "the battle of the sexes." The parody is illustrated by the relationship between Dr. Helmer and Rigmor that turns increasingly venomous as the TV series progresses and culminates in the bizarre and very funny scene where Rigmor blackmails Dr. Helmer into marrying her, using an anesthesia report that proves Dr. Helmer is guilty of severe medical malpractice. The Swedish actor Ernst Hugo Järegård, who plays Dr. Helmer, furthermore has a physical appearance that is strikingly similar to the older Strindberg. Järegård died in 1998, the year after *The Kingdom* II was released, but as von Trier points out in an early article from 1976, he was one of the all-time best Strindberg actors and even played the role of Strindberg himself in Per Olov Enquist's debut play *The Night of the Tribades* (*Tribadernas Natt*, 1975),[4] which makes the meta-connections to Strindberg in von Trier's *The Kingdom* even clearer.

On another level, *The Kingdom* also deals with Strindberg's changing approach to spiritism and the occult, as represented by the shifts from the naturalist works of the 1880s to those associated with the so-called Inferno Crisis of the mid-1890s. In the first episodes of *The Kingdom*, Dr. Helmer resents Fru Drusse and her spiritual séances, calling her a simulant, a hysteric person who just wants attention. This resentful notion of spiritism is in line with how Strindberg portrays the female protagonist Thekla in the short story "Shortcuts" ("Genvägar," 1888), where he takes a scientific and psychological approach to the phenomenon through his

studies of Charcot, Blenheim, and Nordau. But Strindberg's understanding of spiritism and the occult turned away from the scientific approach during the Inferno Crisis and became much more emotional and mystic. At the time, he became interested in quasi-elements such as the teachings of Swedenborg, spiritism, and the occult, as represented in *Inferno* (*Inferno*, 1897), *Legends* (*Legender*, 1898), and the Swedenborgian drama *Crime and Crime* (*Brott och Brott*, 1899). Dr. Helmer undergoes the same transformation as Strindberg did in real life during the eight episodes of *The Kingdom* I. After initially behaving as a rigorous scientist, scorning Rigmor for her interest in the occult practices of Haiti and theories of natural healing, he becomes increasingly paranoid and interested in black magic and voodoo. He eventually flies to Haiti to buy a special zombie drink in order to make Dr. Hook psychotic, so that the latter will not be able to reveal the crucial anesthesia report that proves Helmer guilty of medical malpractice. We also find a reference to Swedenborg, when Fru Drusse is talking to one of the patients at The Kingdom, who has just entered into "The Swedenborgian Room," and toward the end we find Dr. Helmer running around in the empty halls of The Kingdom as if haunted and pursued by invisible spirits.

Von Trier's desire to poke fun at elements belonging to Strindberg's private life—his emotional demeanor and fascination by hypnosis and the occult—can be regarded as a way for him to deal with various sides of his own personality that he himself has difficulty accepting. Von Trier—like Strindberg—has always been divided between a strict Darwinist scientific view of the world, most strongly expressed in *Manderlay* and *Antichrist*, and less scientifically rigid notions of hypnosis and religion (von Trier was a Catholic for some time) as ways to escape the traumatic realities of the Darwinist anti-transcendent Real. The concept of hypnosis is especially prevalent in *The Europe Trilogy* but is turned into a parody in *The Kingdom*, where Strindberg's fascination with the occult in the guise of Dr. Helmer becomes the vehicle of the parody. Eventually this parody is a self-mockery, a way for von Trier to create distance from the side of himself that is fascinated with quasi-science and religion and the hypnosis theme of *The Europe Trilogy* that he retrospectively feels embarrassed about.

Aside from sharing the same interest as Strindberg in quasi-scientific areas, von Trier also has an extreme emotional side just like Strindberg. The extreme side of him surfaces when he is working with his actors and especially the female leads, where the dynamic often takes on dimensions similar to the Strindbergian "battle of the sexes." As a consequence of this dynamic, Icelandic singer and actress Björk has refused to ever work with

von Trier again, and in Jesper Jargil's documentary *The Humiliated* (*De ydmygede*, 1998), about the shooting of *The Idiots* (*Idioterne*, 1998), we see how Anne Louise Hasager has a nervous breakdown on camera forced by von Trier, who later admitted that he had secretly been in love with her during the shooting. Von Trier's behavior during the shooting of *The Idiots* is truly erratic and Strindbergian. From von Trier's own diary *Idioterne: Manuskript og dagbog (Dogme 2: Idioterne)* [*The Idiots: Script and Diary (Dogma 2: The Idiots)*, my translation] published in connection with the film, we see how he is violently jealous of the male lead (Kristoffer) and how he has paranoiac visions that the whole cast hates him. One day he turns up naked and tells everyone on the set that today is "naked day," and if they want to work with him, they have to be naked too—a sort of bully tactic. But as the control freak he is, he has huge difficulties accepting this emotional and erratic side of himself.

Such inner antagonism appears to be a reason why von Trier is both repelled and deeply fascinated by Strindberg's uncontrollable side, where no feelings are bottled up, but are expressed violently and honestly without the normal filter of social decorum and without shame. Strindberg and his erratic behavior are also mentioned directly in von Trier's comedy *The Boss of It All*. Von Trier is poking fun at the cliché about the great artist who is an abusive and violent person but because he makes great art:

> KRISTOFFER: Strindberg was misunderstood too.
> RAVN: Oh.
> KRISTOFFER: People were always talking. They said he pushed his wife down the stairs.[5]
> RAVN: And he didn't?
> KRISTOFFER: Sure, but that doesn't make him less of a writer.
> RAVN: No.[6] (My translation.)

The Boss of It All is basically a parody of *The Idiots* but also a final, humorous blow to the idea that there *is* an Other of the big Other. The story line is that the owner and real boss Ravn has invented a nonexistent company boss in the United States to hide behind, since he is unable to take responsibility for his shady and cynical decisions, when facing his employees. When Ravn gets the opportunity to sell the company and take all the profits for himself, he is forced to bring the "Boss of It All" face-to-face with potential buyers. Since there is no "Boss of It All" in the United States (no "Other of the big Other"), Ravn hires a failed actor, Kristoffer, to play this part. The idea of the big Other is driven

into absurdity when, toward the end of the film, Kristoffer claims that he is actually not the real boss but that there is another boss above him—an Other of the Other of the big Other. This is quite possibly a humorous self-reflexive meta-commentary on the invisible and absent omnipotent agencies in both *Miss Julie* and his own *Manderlay*, but also a way for von Trier to underline the fact that there is no Other of the big Other as Žižek claims. This agency is a phantom of our own imagination and only functions as a justification of the power and consistency of the big Other, in this case Ravn's egotistical, cynical, and unethical behavior toward his employees.

Danish actor Jens Albinus plays the role as the "Boss of It All." He also played the lead role in *The Idiots*, where the character was named Kristoffer. We also find many of the same actors from the group in *The Idiots* playing the characters in the employee group of the company. The cynical yet impotent manipulator Ravn thus appears to be von Trier's parody of himself and his behavior as the director of *The Idiots*. The meta-narrative connections to *The Idiots* are numerous, and it lies outside the purpose of this chapter to mention them all, but the point is that we see how von Trier uses Strindberg as a vehicle for self-mockery. In this case it is a mockery of his own abusive behavior during the shooting of *The Idiots* (and in many of his other films), and the ethically questionable practice that he, like the main characters Ravn and Kristoffer, is willing to do anything to push his own artistic projects, even if it involves pushing people down the stairs mentally (Bunch 155). This was indeed also the trademark of Strindberg's artistic career, and here we see how von Trier eerily repeats not only the themes of Strindberg's dramas, but also significant patterns in his personal life.

On a deeper psychoanalytical level the parody of Strindberg becomes von Trier's way to deal with sides of his own personality and violent behavior that the rational side of him has such difficulty accepting. But it is also a way to deal with his own castration anxiety with regard to the big icon Strindberg—this "primal father" figure and omnipotent purveyor of Nordic artistic tradition—and create independence and distance through irony and comedy.

Conclusion

In their works, Strindberg and von Trier repeatedly, indeed repetitiously, challenge social and gender norms. Their works stage and visualize a challenge to what people are normally able (and allowed to) verbalize

and enact, and transgress the common idea that nightmares should stay where they belong: in the realm of the Imaginary. This is what makes their works so disturbing and provocative, and the main reason why they have been subject to such debate over the years. The ongoing debate "for" or "against" von Trier's films, starting with the heated debate about Jan's sadism and the masochistic sacrificial behavior of Bess in *Breaking the Waves,* is in many ways similar to the "for" or "against" Strindberg debate in the late nineteenth century, where the Christian-bourgeois establishment and its critic spokesmen deemed Strindberg's work to be immoral, perverse, misogynistic, lunatic, and blasphemous. Von Trier has also faced the same type of accusations by multiple scholars and film critics (Winters 1996; Scallan and Garin 1997; Romney 2004 according to Bainbridge 4; but also Nestingen 121), even though the behavior of his protagonists can be explained perfectly within the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis dealing with male castration anxiety. From a psychoanalytical perspective these violent and resentful reactions are very similar to the type of resistance a patient undergoing psychoanalysis initially meets the analyst with, when he starts to dig under the surface of what the patient and society commonly recognize as proper and acceptable behavior. In the world of Strindberg and von Trier we, the audience, are the resistant patients. It is time to stop resisting.[7]

Notes

1. http://www.list.co.uk/article/19091–antichrist-lars-von-trier-interview/; http://www.theblurb.com.au/Issue108/Antichrist.htm; http://www.citypaper.com/film/review.asp?rid=15461.

2. When referring to Strindberg works, I note page references to the published English translation first, followed by references to the Swedish original in *Samlade Verk.*

3. Bainbridge overlooks the *Manderlay* connection to *Miss Julie* and instead claims that the plot of the play is mainly reworked in *Breaking the Waves* (Bainbridge 4).

4. "For nogen tid siden kunne skuespilleren Ernst Hugo Järegård skue ud over 'Dramatens' fyldte sal, aften efter aften når han gav rollen som Strindberg i Per Olov Enquists skuespil 'Tribadernes Nat', til bedste" (von Trier n. pag.); ("Not that long ago the actor Ernst Hugo Järegård could gaze out over the packed hall of the 'Dramaten,' when evening after evening he played the role as Strindberg in Per Olov Enquist's play 'The Night of the Tribades' to the point of excellence"; my translation).

5. Lars von Trier is probably confusing the incident where Strindberg pushed Marie David, and not his wife Siri von Essen, down the steps at Strindberg's cottage in Runarö in June 1891 (Lagercrantz 224).

6. *The Boss of It All,* chapter 11, "Ravn's Dirty Laundry." The text is a direct transcription of the English subtitles.

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Reconsidering the Place of Strindberg in Surrealism: André Breton and the Light of the Objective Chance Encounter

MAXIME ABOLGASSEMI

André Breton mentions Strindberg's name in only two places in his oeuvre: one almost insignificant because of its purely anecdotal nature, and the other such an encomium that it is astonishing.[1] The first reference to Strindberg concerns the incidents provoked in June 1928 by a band of surrealists led by André Breton against Antonin Artaud's short-lived production of *A Dream Play* (*Ett drömspel,* 1901) at the Théâtre Alfred-Jarry in Paris. The sabotage stemmed from Breton's conviction that drama, because it is scripted and elaborately produced in a theater setting, lacked the spontaneity and immediacy associated with surrealism (Swerling 68–71). The second occurrence, however, expresses such admiration that it appears almost unbelievable: in the work *Arcane* 17, originally published in 1944, André Breton erected a personal pantheon of men having acceded to an "inexorable attitude of sedition and of defiance" in the face of social conventions, wherein he nominated "Pascal, Nietzsche, Strindberg and Rimbaud" (*Arcane 17* 44).[2]

One may venture to ask by just what measure Strindberg would merit such an eminent position in Breton's eyes, as the Scandinavian writer's name would never reappear so prominently again in his writing. More generally, the question posed here is why Strindberg's work could have sustained a rapport with surrealism, when the Swedish author died in 1912 and the first *Manifesto of Surrealism* (*Manifeste du surréalisme*) was published in 1924? Generally, Strindberg is best known as a playwright in France, and most of the plays for which he is known internationally—perhaps with the exception of *A Dream Play* (1901), *To Damascus* (*Till Damaskus,* 1899), and *Ghost Sonata* (*Spöksonaten,* 1907)—have not