

Art Is When The Material Thinks

Dancer in the Dark with Didi-Huberman

The title of this paper is stolen from my colleague Kirsten Hyldgaard. She is one of those philosophers who are able to foster new thoughts while speaking. As she was giving a talk on Lars von Trier's *Nymphomaniac* she paused and made this statement: "Art is when the material thinks". I felt this was a precise wording of something I have been thinking and saying less precisely for years. The artist does not have some thoughts that she then expresses through her special material, be it words or paint or something else; the thoughts are rather produced by her struggling to give form to her material. Or, she may have some initial thoughts, but her struggling with the material will produce other thoughts, embedded in the art work, waiting for readers, viewers, interpreters to take them on.

Lars von Trier seems to me an obvious example of this. The point of departure for his films often seems a quite simple, even simplistic, contradiction (science versus superstition, reason versus emotion, nature versus culture, golden hearts versus cynics, etc.), but his highly aesthetic 'giving form' to his cinematic material produces other and more complicated thoughts. In this paper I shall try to unfold some of the thinking that I find taking place in von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark*.

The thought that art is letting the material think is something I have found also in the French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman whose understanding of art is fundamentally inspired by psychoanalysis. Didi-Huberman wants us to focus on the things the artwork *presents* to us, rather than the things it *represents*.

This mode of “presenting” is analogous to the mode of the dream according to Lacan: “Ça montre” – “It shows”. An indefinite “it” shows us something, presents us to dream pictures that are not *representations* of anything. The mode of “ça montre” may also be appropriate to designate the musical scenes of *Dancer in the Dark* that are the result of 100 automatic cameras randomly distributed on the location, thus allowing images to “show” themselves beyond the intention of any director or camera man or posing actor. The automatic cameras may also be seen as a radicalization of the hand-held camera, or of von Trier’s intention with the hand-held camera: The shifting, unpredictable point of view prevents the actors from posing, from flirting with the camera, from showing their best side, etc. The musical scenes are to a high degree *montage*, contrary to the kind of classical Hollywood musicals that are quoted in the film, in which a static, elevated, and centrally placed camera gathers the dancers in an arranged pattern.

As we learn from Lacan’s seminar XI, the artwork is not only the object of our gaze, we are just as much objects of what it shows to us, does to us. Didi-Huberman wants us to be a little more like dreamers in front of the artwork, to be less decoders of its representations and more objects of its presentations, its “ça montre”.



One of the “odd shots” from the musical scenes, here the son of the heroine on his bike, singing to his mother, who has just killed a man: “You just did what you had to do”

THE SYMPTOM

The dream is one of the two things by which Freud has “broken the box of representation” according to Didi-Huberman. The other one is the symptom:

C'est avec le rêve et avec le symptôme que Freud a brisé la boîte de la représentation². (It is with the dream and with the symptom that Freud broke the box of representation.)

What Didi-Huberman finds in Freud's interpretations of dreams and symptoms, is an attention to “déchirure”, to the flaw or the cut in the representational tissue, that which disturbs or disrupts representation and sense-making, which is actually what the apparently nonsensical symptom (such as a tic or a slip) does. As an analyst, of the subject on the coach, but also of the artwork, you have to “penser le tissu de la représentation avec sa déchirure”³, to think the tissue of representation together with its flaw. You have to be attentive to that which does not make any sense in the midst of what looks like an attempt to make sense, you have to be attentive to non-sense, where sense is expected. Freud found his clues in that which obstructs meaning: A tic, a slip, a nonsensical dream.

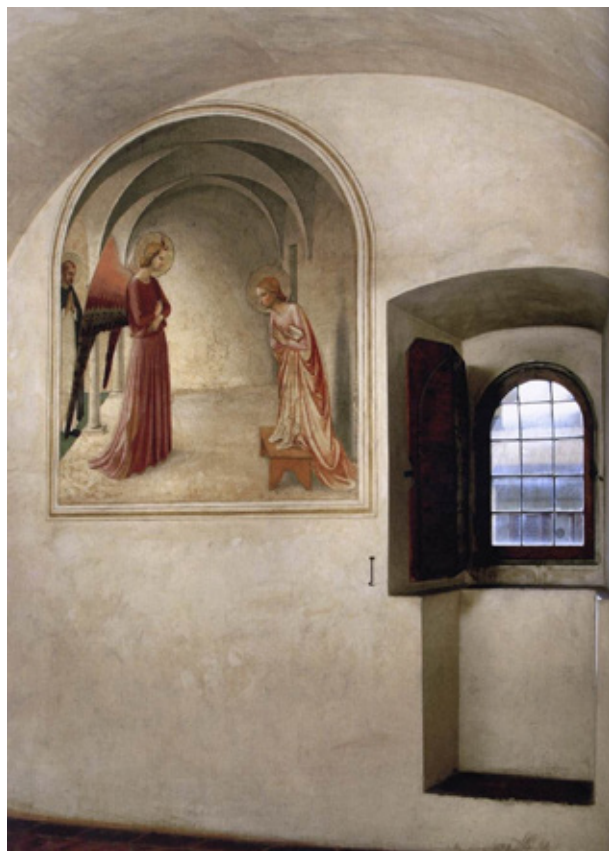
Jacques Lacan, of course, has his own version of the symptom, his own way of spelling it: *sînthome*. Like the Freudian symptom it is the moment when the real speaks instead of the symbolic signifiers, for instance when the body starts to speak instead of verbal language (as in the hysteric's spasms and tics), or when the normally non-signifying material of the words themselves (letters, sounds) starts to signify, as in slips and puns. In his special spelling of “*sînthome*” Lacan makes of the word a pun, punning on *saint homme*, the holy man, and even Saint Thomas, not only Aquinas, but also the incredulous Thomas who wouldn't believe Christ when he told him he was Christ, the resurrected, but had to put his finger into his side wound to be convinced. One way to understand the Lacanian “*sînthome*” is to understand it as identification with the symptom. When you identify with your symptom, you do not see it as signifying or representing anything but itself, yourself as a symptom. The symptom changes from a representation to a presentation.

ART IS AN INCARNATION OF THOUGHT

Didi-Huberman appropriates the Christian theological term “incarnation” to name the alternative to “representation”. In incarnation the idea is not represented, but materialized (Christ is not a representation of God, but his materialization in flesh and blood). Leaning on Didi-Huberman, the idea that “Art is when the material thinks” could thus be translated into “Art is an incarnation of thought”.

To give an example from Didi-Huberman that I have used before⁴, but that I will now approach from a somewhat different angle: Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* in the San Marco Monastery in Florence. This fresco is from 1440/41, early renaissance that is, but not yet subjected to the paradigm of representation that was installed with the renaissance, replacing a Christian art tradition of presentation or “incarnation”.

Here you have a conventional representation of the annunciation (Mary and angel), but you also have, as the central part of the painting, the disruption of representation, this space that is just white. From a representational logic you would see this space as nothing, but from a presentational logic you would see it as the painting presenting its own material, its white pigment. If the spectator lets the painting present its whiteness to him, he will notice that this white pigment is not only in front of him, but surrounding him, embracing him, as the painting is a fresco on the white wall in the monastery cell. The painting is presenting to the spectator the wall that actually embraces him. What the painting tells the spectator is that God, or the virtuality of God, is both in front of him and embracing him. The white pigment (which is where God should be, the medium of God's becoming) embraces you – God, or God's virtuality, embraces you. So this painting thinks, this painting has a theological thought, but Didi-Huberman stresses that this is not because the painter, Fra Angelico, translated some theological exegesis into painting. Rather his work with the pigment is in itself an exegesis: “l'authentique travail exégétique que l'emploi d'un pigment réussit à délivrer lui-même”⁵ (“the authentic exegetical work that the very use of a pigment successfully delivered”) So it is here the very use of a pigment that thinks – art is when the material thinks . . .



Fra Angelico: *The Annunciation*, San Marco Convent, Florence

D.I.D WITH DIDI

I shall now try to take this understanding of the artwork into an analysis of *Dancer in the Dark*, focusing on the moments when the materiality of the film seems to disrupt its representations, the moments when sense and the sense-less seem to overlap in some kind of non-sense, the symptomatic moments. This implies drawing attention away from the story line, from the characters seen as representations of real persons, and from the overt “thoughts” of the film, its overt criticism of US society and culture. Briefly summarized the film’s plot in itself sounds like a parody of the Hollywood melodrama: A poor musical-loving woman suffers from increasing blindness and sacrifices her own life in order to save her son from the same, genetically conditioned, blindness. The film is located in a small town in the state of Washington in the 1960es. Selma (Björk) is an immigrant from Czechoslovakia, living

in a caravan with her son, working hard on the factory to make money for the operation of his eyes, while her own eyesight is getting still worse. Her friendly neighbour and landlord, the policeman Bill (David Morse) discovers where she hides her money and steals them to be able to support his consumerist wife (Cara Seymour). In her struggle to get back the money, Selma has to kill Bill and is sentenced to death by hanging. She does succeed, though, in delivering the money to the doctor who is to operate her son. In the film's overt criticism, the US stands for xenophobic patriotism and communist bashing (Selma is despised as an immigrant from a communist country), a merciless social system (even the poorest has to pay for medical and juridical aid), a destructive housewife consumerism (Bill has to steal to satisfy his wife's consumerist desire), and of course the death penalty that kills our heroine. But US also stands for the musical genre that is Selma's great passion and becomes her decisive driving force. The musical scenes in themselves draw away our attention from the plot, just like I am going to do in my analysis, partly by focusing on these very scenes.

Reading *Dancer in the Dark* with Didi-Huberman will also partly imply reading the film through the lenses of pre-renaissance Christian art, as a kind of image of devotion. This may seem a little odd, but one should bear in mind that one of the names of the film's heroine is the name of the holy virgin: Maria. The heroine Selma (Björk) plays Maria in an amateur staging of *Sound of Music*. Furthermore, she belongs to those self-sacrificing saints that Trier portrays in his so-called *Golden heart-trilogy* (*Breaking the Waves*, *Dancer in the Dark*, *the Idiots*).

The Maria-dimension of her character is stressed when the director of the amateur musical tells her: "You will always be my perfect Maria". (This is of course also one of these moments when von Trier seems to make a meta-commentary on his own relation as a director to his leading actress – I guess that no matter how many times Björk left the production of the film in anger, she stayed to von Trier his "perfect Selma".)

Dancer in the Dark is Lars von Trier's musical. It is actually a mixture of musical and melodrama, or even musical and tragedy, but I shall come back to that. What kind of thinking takes place in the materiality of this musical? Firstly, what is the materiality of a musical, out of what material is it made? A musical is made of bodies (notably limbs), props, voice, sound, rhythm - and colourful backgrounds and clothing. Colour is of course not part of the early black and white Hollywood musicals that are actually quoted in the film, but it is a decisive

part of Jacques Demy's musical films, to which Trier refers not least by the casting of Catherine Deneuve, Demy's leading lady, as Selma's (Björk's) closest friend. Finally, the materiality of film of course has a certain spectrality about it. It is not the raw material of voices and bodies; it is their spectral reflections and echoes, registered by technical apparatus. The scene in *Dancer in the Dark* where the deceased rises to dance and sing could thus be seen as an allegory of the fact that what we see in movies are always spectres.

As for the musical "stuff" this analysis will focus on the aspects that are preeminent in the film, colour and rhythm, but first I would like to comment briefly on the remarkable use of props. Props make themselves very present from the beginning of the film, the opening scene where Selma is rehearsing her role as Maria in *Sound of Music*, singing "My favourite Things." As the song lists all the "favourite things" ("raindrops on roses", "whiskers on kittens", "bright copper kettles", "warm woolen mittens", "brown paper packages tied up with string") Cvalda (Deneuve) hands her these things as props (roses, mittens, a copper kettle, brown paper packages) to her. This excess of props has a rather comical effect, culminating when Cvalda puts a plate of "schnitzel of noodles" on top of Selma's head and is scolded by the director: "It looks like a hat!". The props are excessive objects not unlike the "hot potato" that according to Zupančič is handed from one character to another in true comedy⁶.



Too many props ... Selma (Björk) with kettle, Cvalda (Catherine Deneuve) with brown paper packages and woolen mittens ...

Another kind of props are the valuable papers around which the plot revolves: First and foremost, the bank notes that Selma has saved for her son's operations, but also the coloured candy papers that represent

to Selma the American dream, and the paper with letters copied from the doctor's eye chart that she learns by heart in order to pass the sight test in spite of her increasing blindness. When Selma and her son are visiting their landlord and his wife, they are offered candy in coloured papers from a box, and Selma relates how the sight of that kind of candy in an American film back in Czechoslovakia made her think that Americans must be happy. Bill's wife lets her take the box back home where she replaces the last pieces of candy with her bundle of dollar bills. Unlike the excessive, sense-less props, those objects are symbolic signifiers, representing a value and/or having a function in the plot. But their materiality is stressed: The camera dwells upon the colour of the chocolate paper, the hand-written letters on the white paper, and the bank notes in the chocolate box. Without the materiality of the bank notes there would actually be no plot; imagine Selma in our digital times where her money would just be numbers on her bank account. Thus, even when it comes to the props, whether superfluous objects or symbolic signifiers, the film seems to insist on their excessive or decisive materiality.



The American dream – coloured candy. Selma is offered candy at the neighbours' place.



The American dream – dollars. Selma hides her dollar bills in the candy box.

COLOUR

The film opens with colour, nothing but colour. Yes, music of course. What I would call colourful music, that is music dominated by the colours of sound rather than the scissions of rhythm. The opening sequence is a transformative series of abstract, colourful paintings by Danish artist Per Kirkeby, accompanied by Björk's sonorous overture for brass instruments.

Colour at first appears as a stain. From the initial grey dots on a white background a red stain emerges. A red stain suggesting blood. But the stain takes on a form. A kind of jelly-fishy proto-bio form, like the first and most primitive organisms on earth. It is like this "certain red" about which Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes that it is "un fossil ramené du fond des mondes imaginaires" – a fossil taken from the profundity of imaginary worlds. (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 173) At the same time this form suggests the retina, the eye. At a point, when the background turns yellow, it looks like a sun. When the green colour enters, it looks like a flower, something like a poppy painted by a German expressionist. Further transformations occur: the form turns green and almost black, blue colour spreads like a sky, and finally we have green stains on a light blue background, like little leaves, as a counterpoint to the blood stains in the beginning. Then we end up in a white-out.



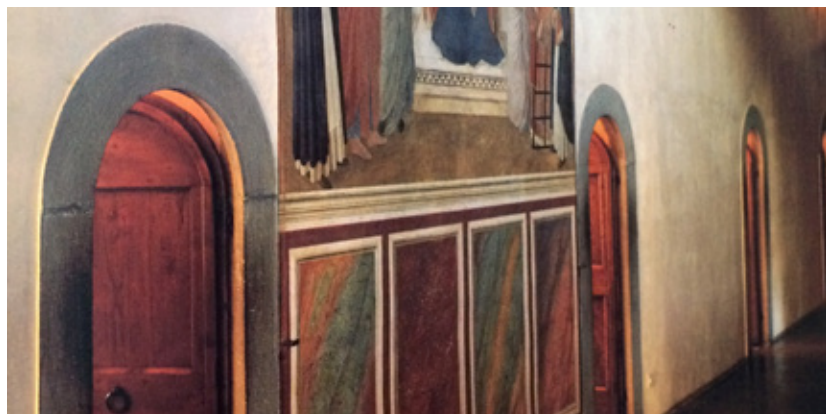
The colourful overture of the film. Still from Per Kirkeby's dynamic painting.

Thus, the overture takes us through colour as stain, colour as light, colour as blood, colour as vegetal green. As the colour of blood, the red foreshadows the violence of the story to come; as the colour of the sun it rather offers warmth and comfort. As the colour of leaves, the green

foreshadows the green and brown of the trees that will be important in the film's colour scheme, not least when duplicated in the heroine's green dress and brown cardigan or the green floor and brown wooden bars of the court room.

But here I am already making a lot of sense out of the nonsensical Rorschach blots of colours. Actually, I would like to wager the claim that the opening colour-show is to the story of the film what the coloured panels are to the figurative painting in Fra Angelico's *Madonna del ombre*. This painting is also in the San Marco Monastery in Florence, covering a large part of wall between two doors in a corridor. The upper half is a figurative depiction of the "sacred conversation": The Christ child on Mary's lap, conversing the saints at his side. The lower half consists of four panels filled with nothing but colour: ochre, turquoise, Siena red, marbling into non-figurative splotches. They do not even figure marble, as they are painted in rough strokes, with no attempt to reproduce marble veins. What they, wonderfully anachronistically, remind Didi-Huberman of, is Jackson Pollock⁷.

To Didi-Huberman the coloured panels *present* whereas the figurative upper part of the painting *represents*. The coloured panels present a virtuality instead of representing an actuality; the pools of colour are like wombs of creation from which different forms and figures can emerge. They work in the register of "the visual", not the visible, but the virtuality of visibility. The figurative painting says: "C'est comme cela" ("It is so"), the coloured panels say: "Non, ce n'est pas comme cela" ("No, it is not so"), there is something that escapes signification⁸. So here the panels are the flaw in the tissue of representation, that moment when the materiality of the signifier surpasses signification. *Dancer in the Dark* opens with such a flaw, such an anti-representational gesture, such a surplus of material, such a moment of visibility instead of visibility.



Fra Angelico: *Madonna del Ombre*, San Marco Convent, Florence

What we then see is the story of a musical-loving woman going blind and sacrificing herself in order to save her son from that, genetically conditioned, blindness. Retrospectively the introduction's beautiful colour visions may seem almost cruel, showing a visual richness and thickness, from which our heroine is going to be excluded. On the other hand, the images could be interpreted as representing the spots and lines reflecting the retinas and veins when closing your eyes and pressing your fingers to your lids. We could be on the backside of the eyelid. Interpreted as the cinema on the back of our eyelids, the opening colour show might be a fantasy of Selma's visions as blind. Didi-Huberman's distinction between visible and visual may help us here²; the blind Selma may be in the visual, even when not any longer in the visible.

In any case, the introduction prepares the spectator's eye for colour. Be attentive to the colours, it says. Colour will be a very important dimension of the film's visual tissue. The coloration is meticulously worked out through scenography, costumes, and grading. We consequently have this colour matching of clothing and scenography: Selma is dressed in clothes that reflect the colours of walls, floors, furniture, etc. when she is inside, or trees, grass, bridges, etc. when she is outside. Furthermore, it can even be the same cardigan that matches the powder pink interior of her neighbours, and the brown trunk of the trees outside, as the grading shifts, the clearest shifts of grading being those marking the entrance into a musical scene – in the musical scenes the grading is consequently brighter.

The match of colours between Selma's clothes and the scenography is very much Lars von Trier's tribute to Jacques D emy, whose

film musicals work with colours in the same way. In *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* you have this perfect match between the scenography and the young Cathérine Deneuve who is dressed in the same colours and patterns as the wallpapers.

The colour match between Selma and scenography has the effect of dispersing Selma's character all around her. In this way the film is like a devote painting in which the presence of the holy virgin is diffused all around her, as you will find the colours of her drapes dispersed in her surroundings¹⁰. This way the film's use of colour stresses the Madonna-like dimension of Selma's character.



Same clothing, different grading. Selma in the musical scene on the railway track, Selma after the murder.

RHYTHM

To Selma, rhythm is what keeps her up, keeps her going, makes her rise when she is about to fall. The musical scenes that she fantasizes are triggered by rhythm, the rhythm she finds when succeeding in making a regular beat out of some noise in her surrounding, such as the noise of the machines in the factory.

In some sense, or from a certain perspective, this rhythm is a non-sensical surplus of the signifier, like the colour stains of the opening. In a scene you see Selma passing by a flagpole with stars and stripes. Here you could focus on the flag's symbolic value: USA, American patriotism (of which Selma becomes a victim), but camera(s) and sound focus on the line of the flag slapping against the pole. Thus, the flag's symbolic value disappears for its nonsensical sound to steal the picture.

Something similar happens in the courtroom scene when the function of the pencils, drawing sketches of the parties, makes way to their rhythmical sound. The figurative representation of the drawing is overruled by the sound it produces as a nonsensical leftover of its signifying operation.



The flag waving after the murder. Selma focuses on the sound of the line against the pole.



The drawer transformed into a percussionist. Selma focuses on the sound of pencil against paper.

The shift from the flag to its slapping line and from the courtroom sketches to the rhythm of the pencils of course reflects Selma's shift

from vision to hearing as she goes blind. But it is also a shift from “symbol” to “symptom”. Based on Freud’s reflections on the symptom in *Hemmung, Symptom und Angst*, Didi-Huberman describes what happens in the symptom: “Le ‘contenu’ se disperse [...] et ‘l’essence’ n’a d’accroche que dans la matière *nonsensical* du signifiant.”¹¹ (“The content is dispersed, and the essence has a grip only in the nonsensical matter of the signifier”). Having a grip in the nonsensical matter of the signifier is to me quite an accurate description of the grip that Selma has in rhythm. Generally, the film’s musical scenes could be seen as “nonsensical matter of the signifier” and thus symptoms. I will get back to that.

But there is also some kind of opposite movement in the rhythm, not from sense to nonsense, but from nonsense to sense. The sound that Selma grabs may be some kind of nonsensical surplus of the signifier, but her listening gives to it a structure. It becomes a beat. The beat cuts into the free flow of sounds, thus making some kind of sense or order, but still it is not a signifier. Perhaps one could compare the beat to what Lacan (in seminar IX, translating Freud’s “einziger Zug”) calls “le trait unaire”, the unary trait, this kind of pre-signifier that makes a scission, a difference without yet being part of a signifying chain. As some kind of pre-signifier, the rhythmic beat could also be an opening to new signifiers, thus making of Selma’s rhythmical revelations possible moments of true transformation, of change ... Perhaps Selma’s letting herself be gripped by the nonsensical sound may really be seen as some kind of identification with the symptom (a Lacanian “*sînthome*”) leading to redemption. If Lars von Trier states his admiration for his golden hearts as those women who through their self-sacrifice make sense out of the senseless, out of their death, I would propose to find the same operation in Selma’s making rhythm out of noise.

TRAGEDY AS MUSICAL

Another psychoanalytic approach to rhythm would be, of course, to connect it to the drive, the pulsation, that which will not die. That which insists even when the chain of signifiers stops, like the needle of the gramophone stuck in the groove after the record is played to the end – which is the noise that triggers the most redemptive musical scene of *Dancer in the Dark*, the one after the murder. In order to get her stolen money back Selma has had no choice but to shoot Bill to death, and in some kind of excessive violence even smashed his head

with his safe box. (Dramaturgically there is a possibility to regard Selma's murder as Bill's suicide by way of Selma; he has earlier uttered his wish to die, and repeats it as he lies bleeding at her feet.) But the gramophone needle triggers the musical mode; Bill rises and dances with Selma in the most loving and caring way, while still having stains of blood all over him.



After the murder. The needle of the gramophone is stuck in the groove and triggers the dance between Selma and the dead Bill.



After the murder. Selma and the dead (here painting!) Bill are dancing and singing.

Bill's dancing corpse is here that which insists even beyond death, just like the drive. Bill-the-ghost or Bill-the-zombie sings to Selma that he forgives her. Like the voice of an angel, the voice of her bike-riding son rises from below singing "You just did what you had to do".

The son's address, taken in by Selma herself when she starts singing "I just did what I had to do", makes her a tragic heroin akin to Antigone as interpreted by Lacan. According to Lacan¹², Antigone is a figure of "pure desire", that is drive, staying true to her desire to bury

her brother, even if it is against the law. She just does what she has to do. In his essay “From Desire to Drive” Slavoj Žižek proposes another figure to exemplify this “pure desire” of the drive: Lassie the dog who does not hesitate in finding his way home¹³. Like Antigone’s “pure desire” to bury her brother – “pure” because it is free from the symbolic order, the Other – Selma follows her “pure desire” to save her son from blindness, even if this makes her a murderess, killing Bill to get back the money he has stolen from her. We’re in the land of tragic heroines, Western movies, and Lassie-dogs: A woman’s gotta do what a woman’s gotta do, a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do, a dog’s gotta do what a dog’s gotta do.

The dancing scene after the murder is to me completely overwhelming; we never saw anything like that in cinema before. There is something deeply touching about murderer and victim dancing and singing in a tender embrace. It may seem the most bizarre scene one can imagine (or actually could not imagine until von Trier made it), a murder scene turning into a musical scene, but it has the effect of redemption, it takes to its height the redemptive effect that the musical scenes in general have in the film.

It is commonly said that *Dancer in the Dark* is a mixture of musical and melodrama – I would go further and say that it is a clash between musical and tragedy, as I see Selma as a truly tragic heroine, she is really this Antigone-like character just doing what she has to do, staying true to her desire. I would even propose to regard the musical scenes as the film’s “symptoms”.

MUSICAL AS SYMPTOM

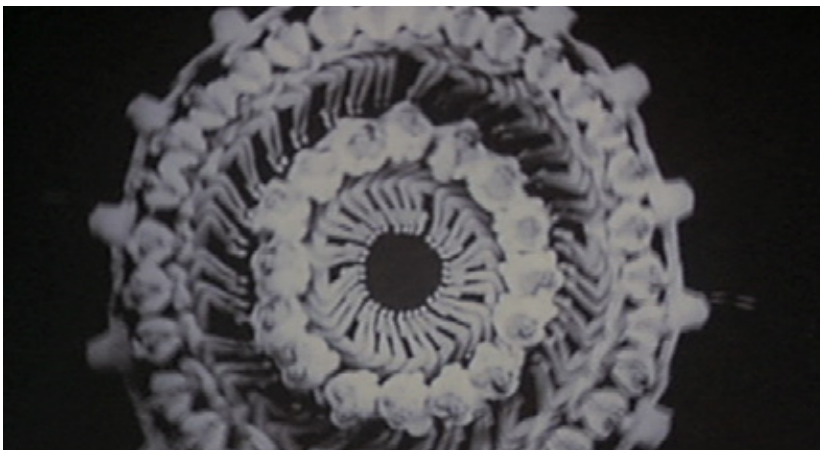
To Freud, the symptom arises when there is strife, ambivalence, conflict between ego and superego or ego and id, or between contradictory oedipal feelings (love/aggression). The symptom in itself has an ambivalent function: both expressing repressed desire and punishing for it; both repressing desire and giving repressed desire an outlet. To Lacan the conflict of the symptom is rather between “being” and “the Other”, l’être and l’Autre. In seminar XI he draws a diagram of two circles, one representing the subject (being), the other one the big Other (sense). The field where they overlap is the field of no meaning, non-sens. This kind of non-sens is not the negation of sense, but rather what happens when the subject tries to make sense of the messages from the big Other, but does not succeed, or something in the subject’s being resists to being made sense of¹⁴. Such kind of non-sens is the symptom. The

symptom appears where there is strife between sense and non-sense, or more accurate: the symptom is the non-sense at the place where that which has no sense meets the striving for sense. In Didi-Huberman's wording the symptom is a wound in the tissue of representation.

You may see the dancing and singing as Selma's symptom. The way her body starts moving, her voice rises, and her face has this ecstatic expression of *jouissance* is not far from hysteria. But what I propose is a little different: I would like to see the musical scenes as kind of symptoms of the film itself, revealing some kind of symptomatic dimension of the musical as such which was perhaps inherent in the genre from its beginning.

In *Hemmung, Symptom, Angst* Freud describes the symptom as "einen Fremdkörper, der unerhörlich Reiz- und Reaktionserscheinungen in dem Gewebe unterhält in das er sich eingebettet hat"¹⁵. ("A foreign body that undoubtedly maintains irritation and reaction in the tissue in which it has embedded itself.") This could be a description of the way the musical scenes have embedded themselves in the tissue of the film, provoking excessive movement as some kind of affective outlet.

Musical scenes are disruptions of the tissue of representation. They have something absurd, monstrous, excessive about them. They may even look like wounds, like one of the musical scenes that Selma and Cvalda (Deneuve) see in cinema, in the very touching scene when Cvalda translates the dance on the screen by tapping its choreography with her fingers on Selma's palm, so that she can follow even if she does not see anything any longer.



A wound of dancing girls. The quoted musical scene.

Like all of von Trier's films, *Dancer in the Dark* is also a meta-film, a film reflecting upon its own medium and material, so it is also a meta-musical. Sometimes the characters discuss what they think about musicals. Jeff (Peter Stormare), who is truly and unhappily in love with Björk, expresses his dislike for the genre: "Why do they start to dance and sing?!!" This is a question that musical scenes easily trigger, also the musical scenes in *Dancer in the Dark*.

The musical scenes in *Dancer in the Dark* could be accused of being a kind of imaginary escapism: Selma escapes from the harshness of reality by imagining the throbbing of the machines to be sweet music, and the audience is allowed to escape the harshness of the story by enjoying Björk's breath-taking compositions, Vincent Paterson's magnificent choreography, von Trier's deeply original images and the beauty of their colours. But actually, the musical scenes do not inhibit the march of the tragic heroine, rather they support it: It is by finding the rhythm in her steps that Selma manages to go on – in the most extreme way at the end when the caring prison guard Brenda (Siobhan Fallon Hogan) helps her to find the rhythm so that she can walk the 107 steps to her own execution. Selma's passion for musicals is not depicted as a silly distraction from her mission, but on the contrary as the power that fuels her very mission. If the Hollywood musical is a "symptom" of the American society (the symptom of a society that pacifies the people by the opium of the entertainment industry), then Selma is the one who identifies with this "symptom", takes it on, incarnates it, and in this gesture the symptom is no longer pacifying, but on the contrary activating. Von Trier himself takes on the "symptom" of the film industry, the musical scene, and turns it into a place for completely new visions instead of dull entertainment. A place in which the conventional system of signs is dissolving, because the materiality of the film (rhythm, colours, bodies in motion) is allowed to "present" itself (to the non-human eyes of the 100 cameras) and drown out conventional dramaturgy and symbols.

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- 1 Lacan XI :72
 - 2 Didi-Huberman 1990: 176
 - 3 Didi-Huberman 1990: 175
 - 4 Rösing 2017
 - 5 Didi-Huberman: 35

- 6 Zupančič 2008: 90
- 7 Didi-Huberman 1995: 53
- 8 Didi-Huberman 1995: 92
- 9 Didi-Huberman 1990: 26
- 10 Didi-Huberman 1995
- 11 Didi-Huberman 1990: 212
- 12 Lacan 1986: 329
- 13 Žižek 1996
- 14 Lacan 1973: 236
- 15 Freud 1971: 242

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