Soft strength, mild mystery:
Female characters in the films of Joachim Trier

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Abstract

The appearance and agency of the most prominent female characters in Joachim Trier's films are analysed with reference to a study of gender relations in early New Wave cinema. Trier's female characters emerge as strong and independent; at the same time their mild, non-threatening demeanour and appearance effectively disguise their agency. While the first three films sympathize with their female characters, Thelma is deeply ambivalent, either revealing or sustaining misogyny.

Full text

Joachim Trier's artistically ambitious filmmaking has predominantly received very positive reviews. One aspect that has drawn some criticism, however, is his representation of female characters, who are perceived as lacking agency or being out of control (Bahr 2010; Iversen 2010; Torvund 2017). This criticism motivates the following brief discussion of female characters in Trier's films. Keeping in mind the 'self-knowing influence of the early French New Wave' on Trier, as Manohla Dargis' puts it (2008: 1),1 I find Genevive Sellier's study of the New Wave (2008) relevant to an investigation of the appearances and narrative functions of female characters in Trier's films.2

Sellier argues that early New Wave proved its divergence from contemporary commercial cinema by downplaying the extravagant and explicit sexualization of the female body, exemplified by glamorous heroines and sex bombs. Instead these male directors fostered a new female ideal, one where eroticism should be conveyed 'more through the face and the voice (through lighting and framing) than through the body' (Sellier 2008: 150), with no or very little make-up and with hair and costume plain rather than connoting glamour. On-screen beauty should become manifest through the sensuous and erotic potential of the cinematographic apparatus, demonstrating that 'the men behind

the camera' were able to reveal the 'secret beauty of the female characters' (Sellier 2008: 151). Concerning narrative function, Sellier points to different trajectories in films with male versus female protagonists in the body of films she studies,3 both categories favouring the male subject. Films with a male protagonist, for instance *Le Beau Serge* (Chabrol, 1959) or Jules et Jim (Truffeau, 1962) tend to concern a vulnerable hero or heroes, wounded young men, often positioned as artists. The female characters in this type of narrative represent 'the male hero's fears and desires made concrete […] the fatality that will befall the hero' (2008:149). In films with female protagonists, such as Une femme est une femme (*A Woman Is a Woman*) (Godard, 1961) and Vivre sa vie (My Life to Live) (Godard, 1962), the female leads come across as masculine creations to be investigated by the director's gaze, often through a male character and 'with more or less pity and distance' (Sellier 2008:149).

In the following I examine the extent to which female characters cause the male protagonists' downfall in Trier's first two features, *Reprise* (2006) and *Oslo, 31. august* (*Oslo: August 31st*) (2011). In his genre-oriented art films with female protagonists, *Louder Than Bombs* (2015) and *Thelma* (2017), the question is to what degree Sellier's analysis of the New Wave can be applied. Could the protagonists be understood as investigated from a distance? Regardless of the protagonist's gender, how are the female characters positioned as visual attractions? And beyond Sellier's model, to what extent are the female characters active agents?

While *Reprise* has one quite prominent female role and several important secondary ones, in *Oslo: August 31st*, the protagonist Anders' suicidal detachment from his surroundings causes a distancing from and disinterest in women. This is mirrored in a narrative marginalization of female characters, for instance when his ex-girlfriend does not answer his phone calls and his sister cancels their appointment. Anders' estrangement from women is striking in the opening scene, especially when compared to the equivalent scene in *Le feu follet* (*The Fire Within*) (Malle, 1963), based in the same novel. In both films, we meet the troubled male protagonist after he has had sex with a female friend and former lover. In Malle's film, the male character scrutinizes the woman's face, in

close-up and fully lit, her black hair on a white pillow, with his exploratory thoughts and questions in voice-over. In Oslo: August 31st, the scene is so dark that we can scarcely identify the woman in bed, and Anders gives her only a brief glance as he dresses and leaves the room. Visiting his friend Thomas later the same day, he mentions being unable to feel anything during this sexual encounter. While the scene in Malle's film could serve as a very explicit example of how women in New Wave cinema are examined, Anders's lack of interest in his female friend signals his depressive state of mind. Attraction to and fascination with women are beyond relevance in *Oslo: August 31st*, nor does the film position the supporting female characters whom Anders meets and relates to this last day and night of his life as the reason(s) for his hopeless situation and final withdrawal. Instead Anders is portrayed as his own worst enemy, causing nothing but trouble for his ex-girlfriend.

The writer Phillip, the main protagonist in *Reprise*, is also in trouble. His sweetheart and the main female character, Kari, is introduced through a quarrel between Phillip and his mother. She has removed photos of Kari from his wall in response to his doctor's theory that Phillip's infatuation with her has triggered his breakdown. Kari is not, however, positioned as a femme fatale in this narrative. Her relationship with Phillip is portrayed as matter-of-fact and playful. Understanding Kari as Phillip's downfall, mentally or socially, nevertheless echoes the misogyny that marks several conversations among Phillip's friends. *Reprise* systematically reveals and implicitly criticizes this paradoxical embracement of discriminatory stereotypes in a society known for its gender equality.4 Neither in Reprise nor *Oslo: August 31st* do the female characters correspond to the role type Sellier identifies in New Wave male protagonist narratives. The portrayal of Kari and in particular her appearance does, however, call to mind New Wave ideals of screen femininity. As Dargis (2008) among others points out, Kari resembles Godard's young star and partner Anna Karina.5 Visually Kari is introduced when Phillip finds her black hair on his sweater.6 The actor playing Kari is fair, but for this role her hair is dyed black, like Karina's, although she appears without make-up in more scenes than Karina's characters in Godard's films. Lacking the somewhat mischievous quality of Karina's performances, Kari is portrayed as an even more fragile character.

With regard to agency Kari has been described as a weak character with no purpose beyond being Phillip's girlfriend (Iversen 2010: 282), but the fact that she has been watching and investigating Phillip before they actually meet establishes that she has a will of her own. Kari also has a strong on-screen presence for around a third of the film, in contrast to the girlfriend of Phillip's best friend, who is marginalized not only in the story but also cinematographically, placed totally or partly out of frame. The voice-over informs us about Kari's thoughts independently, that is, not through Phillip. When Phillip teases her and makes her laugh, then calls her laughter disgusting, her voice becomes raw and undisciplined, signalling a strength usually not on display. During the couple's second visit to Paris, Phillip is eager to recreate the photos his mother threw away. Kari is uncomfortable with this staging of her and communicates this clearly. Later, when Phillip is unable to tell her whether he still loves her, she immediately packs her things and leaves Paris. In the last scene of the final sequence suggesting a possible future for the couple, Kari seems strong and more confident. She and Phillip exchange playful looks over a coffee table. When Phillip starts a countdown from ten, Kari is displeased. As she shouts stop, the frame freezes and the film ends. In this way Kari is given the last word, the agency to end the story. She has agency throughout the narrative and not only as a reaction to Phillip's actions, but this agency is masked by her performance of gentle femininity and her delicate appearance.

As in *Oslo, August 31st*, the male protagonist in *Reprise* generates his own despair, but in this film the female character represents a force in the opposite direction. Rather than creating problems, Kari's acts are in keeping with the traditionally 'feminine' qualities of caring and compassion, though she does not ignore her own feelings and needs.

Female protagonists: *Louder Than Bombs* and *Thelma*

With *Louder Than Bombs*, Trier for the first time creates a female protagonist who is just as important to the story as the other protagonists, her husband and their two sons. Her conflicting positions as mother, wife, war photographer and her colleague's lover signal great strength and agency. Isabelle has had a very successful career as a war photographer, expecting her husband to safeguard the home and raise their children. She

has taken a male colleague as her lover when at work. When she realizes she is incapable of at last settling down with her family, she makes plans for and executes her own death. She thus transcends conventions of motherhood to set her own footprint in the world. At the same time the performance establishes a mild, even fragile quality to the character. Isabelle is introduced receiving a prestigious award and giving a television interview. Dark-clothed, slim and without make-up, she is not on display, not playing into feminine 'to-be-looked-at ness'.7 But her indisputably feminine appearance matches that of Kari's in Reprise, although in *Louder Than Bombs* there is more to disguise, more unquestionable agency.

Large parts of Isabelle's life are hidden from her family, prompting 'investigations' by older son Jonah and husband Gene after she is gone. The younger son Conrad is to a greater degree haunted by visualizations of his mother's car accident as well as by memories of her in situations where she proved her love and compassion for him. One of Isabelle's secrets, her romantic relationship with her colleague, is discovered by Jonah. He is puzzled by a series of photos from his mother's hotel room. His mother, naked in the bed linens, is not the photographer; the naked male in the mirror is. Jonah chooses to eliminate the evidence of his mother's infidelity. His father, however, is investigating the matter on his own and eventually confronts Isabelle's former colleague straight out. Gene gets a direct answer as well as the colleague's analysis of Isabelle's stressful juggling of family and work and her decision to leave both her career and him, her lover.

Since the female protagonist is no longer alive, she is of course scrutinized from a distance in time. Memories, things she has left behind or her lover's experiences are clues to her secrets. The public exhibition with a documentary on her life and achievements also comprises a kind of distanced investigation.8 In her sons' memories, however, we also gain a more intimate understanding of Isabelle, who is close to them both physically and emotionally. In her own recording made at home, Isabelle looks into the camera in a long close-up shot.9 Her open, wrinkled face, so calm, unblinking and almost transparent, brings the narrative to a halt. It is not a sexualized body that arrests narrative progress in this scene, but the female character's quiet facial expression. This shot brings Isabelle

close to the cinema audience both visually and emotionally, and it is also her last enigmatic gaze into the camera before she leaves her family forever. Though investigated from several angles, Isabelle's secrets are not completely revealed, but significantly, her choices are never condemned. More than an investigation from a distance 'favouring the male subject' (Sellier 2008: 149), the story of Isabelle is told with respect for the almost unsolvable dilemmas of modern family life, the professional woman's situation in particular.

While the family drama *Louder Than Bombs* invites reflection on recognizable, though highly intensified family/work conflicts, Thelma introduces forces beyond the everyday to tell the story of a potentially monstrous young female student experiencing a sexual awakening and seeking independence from her controlling parents. In the exposition, Thelma is presented as a 6-year-old child when her father, unbeknownst to her, points his rifle at her head. The subsequent title sequence further discloses the film's debt to the horror genre, as the title appears through an iris shot in quaking letters accompanied by a deep, disturbing and escalating sound. The title character herself is thus associated with the disturbing and dangerous.10 After the title sequence, *Thelma* is presented as a university student. A close-up reveals a harmonious, radiating, open face with no make-up, soft skin and straight brown hair; she is wearing jeans and a jumper. It is only the golden cross hanging from her necklace, signalling Christian faith, that sets her somewhat apart. Her performance of femininity equals both Kari's in Reprise and Isabelle's in Louder Than Bombs, though Thelma displays more firmness in her body language, gaze and facial expression. Her agency is thus to a larger extent on display, also when, for instance, she chooses not to answer her mother's controlling phone calls or makes an effort to end the conversations as quickly as possible.

As soon as Thelma meets fellow student Anja, strange things start to happen: she experiences her first epileptic-like seizure, leading to a medical examination that parallels her parents' constant, controlling investigation of her. Two more seizures occur, both when Thelma is close to Anja. Thelma undergoes an examination during which she is hypnotized by the doctor so that she can be studied while suffering an attack. The

therapist, though maintaining voice contact, investigates her from a neighbouring room, at a distance and from behind a full-length glass wall. Medical instruments measure all her bodily responses. During this controlled seizure, Thelma experiences an imagined erotic meeting with Anja and also, it seems, a deep wish for her to disappear. When Anja actually does disappear, apparently because Thelma has willed it, Thelma is terrified and flees to her childhood home, only to find it a house of horror. When her father imprisons and medicates her, Thelma's supernatural powers seem to take over, mysteriously causing her father to catch fire in a boat and drown. Before leaving home Thelma heals her mother's paralysed legs.

In the final scene, a happy Thelma is back on a sunny campus. Whether or not she is freed from her supernatural abilities, her healing and destructive witchcraft, Trier leaves an open question. The camera follows her glance up to a huge green tree filling the frame while on the soundtrack a flock of crows is cawing. Crows have been narratively established as a sign of the supernatural powers at work in or through Thelma. In this last scene Thelma is aware of the crows, and then imagines Anja kissing her neck. Anja actually do appear as Thelma imagined. This may be understood either as a conventional happy ending or as an indication that Anja is drawn to Thelma by her supernatural powers. Since Thelma remains a mystery, the narrative in *Thelma* is open to varying interpretations. Thelma could be seen as the horror genre's 'final girl',11 defeating the monster, her father, but it seems just as likely that she herself is the monster. If so, *Thelma* can be read as the story of a strong, independent young lesbian woman who is also a kind of contemporary witch. As a horror film character Thelma grows increasingly strange, her open, innocent appearance effectively masking the enigmatic forces that she may or may not deliberately employ. As in Sellier's model, she is investigated at a distance, the medical investigation spelling out the parents' less direct examination. Through these investigative processes Thelma is objectified, in striking contrast to the way Isabelle' subjectivity is established through the investigations of her caring family.

Concluding remarks

Trier's female characters, Kari, Isabelle and Thelma, all share a certain unquestionable screen beauty, neither seductive nor frightening. Sellier's study has been instrumental in drawing attention to this cinematically created ideal of beauty in Trier's films, realized through close-ups of hair and skin, the curve of a neck, hair spread over a pillow or a gentle and secretive face touched by time. These characters are simultaneously more determined and independent than at first they may seem. Though active agents to varying degrees, in all cases their agency is disguised by their non-threatening, low-key sexual attraction. I find this common thread in Trier's representation of female characters to be the most important finding of this brief analysis.

It is also significant that in Trier's films with male protagonists the female character is not positioned as the reason for the protagonist's difficulties. In *Oslo: August 31st* female characters are marginalized, while Kari in *Reprise* helps Phillip, help himself. These films thus diverge from Sellier's findings with regard to New Wave films with male protagonists. Rather than identifying the female as a threat, Reprise repeatedly reveals and implicitly criticizes the perception of women as both inferior and threatening, evident both in psychiatry and in contemporary young men's talk. However, in line with Sellier's findings for female protagonist films, both Isabelle and Thelma become the objects of investigation, though differently so. Isabelle's independence causes pain for her loved ones, but she is not assigned blame. The investigations of Thelma, in contrast, seem to implicate her guilt step by step.

From Reprise to *Louder Than Bombs*, Trier's films portray with cinematic sophistication the complexities of existence and intimate relations in white middle-class society. The films explore emotional turmoil and conflict from a predominantly male perspective, albeit a male perspective sympathetic to women that incorporates female agency. The implicit defence of the female character in Trier's first three films is somewhat undercut in Thelma. This seemingly culturally progressive story of a woman finding independence and coming to terms with her sexuality seems to enable the discourse of female threat exposed and criticized in Reprise. Or possibly, the perplexing narrative of Thelma can be interpreted as a continuation of Reprise, and as such a more provocative exploration of contemporary misogyny.

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Notes

1. This influence and inspiration has been discussed in relation to Reprise (Trier, 2006), connected by critics to Jules et Jim (Truffaut, 1962) and Oslo: August 31st (Trier, 2011), explicitly based on the same novel as Le feu follet (The Fire Within) (Malle, 1963). See, for instance, Lyngar (2011) and Iversen (2014).
2. Ginette Vincendeu is enthusiastic about an early version of Sellier's work. At the same time she comments that although women on-screen may be 'male projections or under the glare of the camera-as-microscope', her own work on stardom modifies this to the extent that 'the stars of the new wave define a new femininity in tune with the film: fresh, alluring, different' (Vincendeau 2000: 113).
3. Sellier studies films of the 150 filmmakers, all male, entering film production in France between 1957 and 1962.
4. For a discussion of masculinity in contemporary Norwegian cinema, including Trier's early films and from the perspective of contemporary equality politics, see Donner (2015).
5. Dargis (2008) points to Jules and Jim as a reference for Reprise as a whole. With regard to the main female character she does not refer to Jean Moreau, the star of Jules and Jim, but to Anna Karina's screen performances in films such as A Woman Is a Woman and My Life to Live. This illustrates how writings on Trier relate his work to the French New Wave as an aesthetic wave rather than film by film.
6. On Trier's fixation with hair, see Sødtholt (2017: 4–6).
7. 'To-be-looked-at-ness' is a concept introduced by Laura Mulvey to describe a desirable quality for the woman on-screen in mainstream Hollywood cinema (Mulvey [1975] 2004: 841).
8. For a reading of this scene, see Bruhn and Gjelsvik (2018: 54).
9. On the close-up, see Anne Jerslev in this In focus section.

10. See articles by Andresen and Lysne in this In focus section.

11. The ‘Final girl’ is a concept coined by Carol Clover to describe the last girl or woman alive to confront the killer in the horror/slasher film (Clover 1993).