

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL
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Néfer Legramanti Kroll

“ART IS MANY THINGS”:
A reading of Lars von Trier’s *The House that Jack Built*

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Trabalho de conclusão de curso apresentado ao Instituto de Letras da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul como requisito parcial para a conclusão do curso de Licenciatura em Letras - Língua Portuguesa e Literaturas de Língua Portuguesa, Língua Inglesa e Literaturas de Língua Inglesa.

Orientador: Dr. Claudio Vescia Zanini

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This work is dedicated to the bun in my oven.

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Quem já não se perguntou: sou um monstro ou isto é ser uma pessoa?

(*A Hora da Estrela* - Clarice Lispector)

¹ Teaser poster for *The House that Jack Built*. Zentropa Films, 2018. Internet. Available at < <https://www.indiewire.com/2018/09/house-that-jack-built-posters-female-characters-tied-up-contorted-lars-von-trier-1202007137/>> Access on November 9, 2020. Lars von Trier poses as one of Jack's victims.

RESUMO

Este trabalho tem como objetivo apresentar uma leitura sobre a forma como o diretor dinamarquês Lars von Trier constrói e utiliza o personagem Jack em seu último filme, *A Casa que Jack Construiu*, como meio de reflexão a respeito do processo de criação artística. Lançado em 2018, nesse filme o diretor explora a ideia de gênero cinematográfico, transitando entre suspense, comédia, horror, terror e drama e, para tanto, traz um serial killer com tendências artísticas como personagem principal. Além disso, diversas obras do campo das artes visuais e literárias são direta e indiretamente trazidas ao longo do roteiro como forma de explicitar as inspirações do personagem e roteirista. Considerando essa pluralidade na elaboração do filme, a análise se concentra em compreender alguns dos principais aspectos intertextuais presentes entre a obra e o cinema, a literatura e as artes visuais. Para essa análise, serão utilizados principalmente textos de Kristeva, Zaaiman e Manoussakis. Já para a análise da construção de personagem, serão utilizados textos de Stoller e Cohen.

Palavras-chave: *A Casa que Jack Construiu*; monstro; perversão; Lars von Trier

ABSTRACT

This work aims to present a reading about the way in which the Danish director Lars von Trier builds and uses the character Jack in his latest film, *The House that Jack Built*, as a way of reflecting on the process of artistic creation. Released in 2018, in this film the director explores the idea of cinematographic genre, moving between suspense, comedy, horror, terror and drama and, for that, brings a serial killer with artistic tendencies as the main character. In addition, several works in the field of visual and literary arts are brought directly and indirectly throughout the script as a way of explaining the inspirations of the character and screenwriter. Considering this plurality in the making of the film, the analysis focuses on understanding some of the main intertextual aspects present between the work and the cinema, literature, and the visual arts. For this analysis, texts by Kristeva, Zaaiman, and Manoussakis will be the main bases. For the analysis of character construction, texts by Stoller and Cohen will be used.

Keywords: *The House that Jack Built*; monster; perversion; Lars von Trier

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1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary world has been gifted with several great storytellers and filmmakers who have found very interesting and different ways of narrating stories. Despite not being an enthusiastic cinephile or a fanatical bookworm, I am passionate about art in all its forms. This passion probably has its roots in my early and constant contact with films and television, the main media available for me at home and important tools for me to approach readings about the world. From delicate to aggressive stories, from fantasy to reality, I have experienced all kinds of strong feelings through films, either happy or sad, and I have done my share of thinking about what is happening in society because of certain films. I suppose when people think about film directors who can cause this strong effect on the audience, a few names come to mind, amongst them Lars Von Trier. He was both the screenwriter and director of nearly all his films and has impressed the audience and the cinema critics with his peculiar – and not so popular – onscreen way of expressing ideas.

Lars von Trier was born in 1956, in Denmark. After studying film theory at the University of Copenhagen and film direction at the National Film School of Denmark, von Trier started his career winning important awards. Since 1981, he has garnered a considerable number of prize nominations, but great recognition came after winning a Palme d'Or award at the Cannes festival for *Dancer in the Dark* (2000). In 1995 he wrote the *Dogme-95 – The Manifest* with Thomas Vinterberg, which stated several rules (*Vow of Chastity*) for filmmaking to be not as commercial as the Hollywoodian films. In their opinion, cinema must show images with a strong and deep relation to reality, leaving behind elements such as special effects, props and sets, lens filters or special lighting, temporal or geographical alienation or any other element which could interfere with the reality of what is being filmed².

From that manifest on, von Trier has developed his directing into a disturbing style, which some critics have classified as overly exaggerated and appellative. Although he has not been following his own *Vow of Chastity* rules to the letter recently, he has maintained some of them, such as the hand-held camera style, and has introduced new elements which have been present in several of his most recent films, such as the organization of the story in chapters.

² The texts were published on a website that has been discontinued by the authors. Now, there is a tribute website, available at <<http://www.dogme95.dk/>>, on which the *Dogma-95 - The Manifest* and *The Vow of Chastity* can be found. Access on November 9, 2020.

His latest film, *The House that Jack Built* (2018) is not different. It comprises a twelve-year cut in the life of Jack, a serial-killer who has artistic inclinations and suffers from obsessive-compulsive disorder. The story is divided into seven parts, namely, an opening, five “incidents” and an epilogue.

At first *The House that Jack Built* might look like a horror film. Carroll (1990) states that horror has been among us for a considerable amount of time, either through cinema, television or books and songs. However, this is not just a horror film, but an interesting combination of genres and art references. Personally, I do not have a specific film genre preference: as a child I fell in love with fairytales, comedies, and love stories. Then, as a teenager, I became very interested in horror and crime stories, and as an adult I developed a strong taste for drama stories. Just when I thought I knew all there is about genres, *The House that Jack Built* was released and brought important question marks for me. Its reading of the contemporary world is not surprising, yet it is shocking. Throughout my first undergraduate course (I hold a Bachelor of Arts in Visual Arts) I became acquainted with several contemporary art works and theories. *The House that Jack Built* struck me as a result of Lars von Trier’s reflection on contemporary art and creative process, almost as if he teases us to reflect on the two-way relationship between art and the society that creates it. Now, as a Literature student, I see literary studies can provide a new and deeper perspective on how the stories and characters are built.

Therefore, this monograph aims at understanding some of the layers of content presented in the film, regarding the following aspects: 1) Elements in the development of the story and protagonist (Art, Cinema, Music and Literary works); 2) The analysis of the protagonist based on monster and perversion theories; 3) The analysis of the film as a work of art and its dialogue with the contemporary art world.

The House that Jack Built has received mixed criticism. Some say it is only about sensationalism and sadism³, others think it is just brilliant⁴. But everyone agrees the film is

³ As examples, I bring the reviews written by Richard Brody and Gwilym Mumford. They are available at <<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-front-row/review-lars-von-triers-empty-repugnant-provocations-in-the-house-that-jack-built>> and <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/may/15/vomitive-pathetic-lars-von-trier-film-prompts-mass-walkouts-at-cannes>>. Access on November 9, 2020.

⁴ As examples, I bring the reviews written by Eric Kohn and Matt Konopka. They are available at <<https://www.indiewire.com/2018/05/the-house-that-jack-built-review-lars-von-trier-1201964207/>> and <<https://www.killerhorrorcritic.com/reviewsnews/review-the-house-that-jack-built-directors-cut-is-a-masterpiece-built-on-violence>>. Access on November 9, 2020.

shocking and deserves attention. Hopefully, this work will help to shed a light on these extreme opposite opinions.

2. THE FILM: LAYERS OF DIFFERENT ARTISTIC EXPRESSIONS

Lars von Trier is known for being a pioneer in creating strategies for unique and distinguished filmmaking, and regarding *The House that Jack Built*, we can notice that the director has somehow reused past strategies and based its plot elaboration on other works of art, including his own past productions. Kristeva (2002, p.2) affirms “intertextuality is mostly a way of making *history* go down in us”. In this film, Lars von Trier uses references that are not easily accessed by the great audience, which makes the plot to be read as confusing, or even worse, boring. By being an important part of the story, it was a risk taken by the director. For that reason, it is important to break down the references in the plot to make this *history* a little bit more understandable.

With that in mind, it is relevant to point out that Lars von Trier has become a sort of *persona* in the cinema universe, a challenging figure, a fact that has provided some ground for discussions:

“Lars von Trier— genius or fraud?” asks a May 2009 *Guardian Arts Diary* poll. Its subject is arguably world cinema’s most confrontational and polarizing figure, the results: 60.3 percent genius, 39.7 percent fraud. Trier takes risks no other filmmaker would conceive of, mounting projects that somehow transcend the grand follies they narrowly miss becoming, and willfully devastates audiences. (BADLEY, 2010, p. 1)

Considering this excerpt, other pieces of news and criticism that I have come across during this research, it is important to highlight that there are some aspects of von Trier’s work that may seem personal. These particularities in the director’s career could easily be associated with his work, and that is not actually wrong. As an individual that lives in the world, the artist will reflect the way he experiences life, its culture and society. Despite acknowledging that these experiences are part of one’s reading of their surroundings, the present work does not intend to reduce von Trier’s oeuvre to his biography.

Everything is connected in life, and texts and art helps us understand a great deal of these connections. Kristeva (1980) discusses how semiotics studies several *semiotic practices*. These practices are considered *translinguistic*, because they operate through and across the language. Thus, texts are defined by a trans-linguistic apparatus, which redistributes language with the objective to directly inform about anterior or synchronic *utterances*. So, for the author, the text is therefore a *productivity*, meaning

first, that its relationship to the language in which it is situated is redistributive (destructive-constructive), and hence can be better approached through logical categories rather than linguistic ones; and second, that it is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize another. (KRISTEVA, 1980, p. 36)

So, in that sense, the film is a *semiotic practice* that contains several *utterances* that can be studied to understand its place within the culture it belongs to. When the author speaks about utterances, she is speaking about novel utterances (a minimal sequence: words, word sequences, sentences, paragraphs), but the concept works and can be transposed to films as well. In *The House that Jack Built*, these utterances occur not only through the speech/plot, but also through the images and music that the director uses. This intersection of the work (given text – the film) with the utterances is called *ideologeme*: “The ideologeme is that intertextual function read as “materialized” at the different structural levels of each text, and which stretches along the entire length of its trajectory, giving it its historical and social coordinates” (KRISTEVA, 1980, p. 36). According to the author, to study the utterances of a novel (and in this case, a film) in order to understand its ideologeme, it is important to establish the typology of the utterances presented and then investigate their origins outside of the work: “To put it another way, the functions defined according to the extra-novelistic textual set (Te) take on value within the novelistic textual set (Tn). The ideologeme of the novel is precisely this intertextual function defined according to Te and having value within Tn” (KRISTEVA, 1980, p. 36). Thus, some of the films, art works, songs and literary texts used as utterances are going to be explored in order to support the reading of the film presented here.

Before starting the analysis itself, a summary of the plot of *The House that Jack Built* becomes important: the film illustrates a conversation between Jack and Verge just before and during Jack’s journey through the circles of hell, in a clear reference to Dante’s *Inferno*, the first third of the *Divine Comedy* (1320). In this conversation, Jack talks about his twelve-year long trajectory as a serial-killer, and how his psychopathy and obsessive-compulsive disorder have evolved from childhood to adulthood, a period when he also deals with his frustration as an unaccomplished engineer. Also, Jack digresses about how his love for architecture and art has helped him to overcome his compulsions. He lists artists, musicians, and historical facts as inspirations for his *art works* (as he names his murders). After becoming careless, Jack is found and killed by the police moments after achieving his great work: designing and building his own house, which is made up from the human bodies he had collected during those twelve years. In the end, when Jack glances at the Elysian Fields through a window in hell, he cries

and seems to have regretted his actions. Jack tells Verge he wants to know it all, which leads Verge to take him to the last circle of hell as an act of kindness. There, Jack has the chance to try to get out of hell by climbing to the other side of a narrow bridge. He does not manage to do so, and ultimately falls into the magma of hell.

2.1. Cinema: *The House that Jack Built* and other Lars von Trier films

Lars von Trier has written and directed more than forty films⁵. The intertextual analysis presented here will focus on some of the most famous of his films, namely, *Dogville* (2003), *The Antichrist* (2009), *Melancholia* (2011) and *Nymphomaniac vol. I and II* (2013). On a personal note, I have always been impressed by all von Trier's films I have watched. Not especially in the sense of beauty or entertainment, but by the sense of realness, the opinions implicitly expressed and the range of feelings they can provoke. No other director has had this effect on me, which has always been instigating and is ultimately one of the reasons for this work. His films lead me to reflect about certain things in a very deep way, although sometimes the process makes the watching experience unpleasant. Either in my inner circle of friends or in internet forums, it is possible to observe that the director has this particular power of making people express very different opinions, which generates the most avid discussions⁶.

So, regarding the von Triers' films I have watched, besides having provocative plots, they have a pattern of formal elements, which may be explained through the aforementioned *Dogme-95 Manifest* (2005) (annex 1, p. 86). It is expressed in the manifest why these directors are so concerned about realism in cinema. They claim that since the 1960s, cinema has become rather superficial, which leads to directors being more concerned about their own fame rather than with the quality of the story, hence their perception that cinema in general focused too much on make-up, interventions in lighting and special effects. According to these directors, this state of things affects the quality of cinema, which makes pursue a "purer state"; therefore, "Trier and the Dogme "brothers" marked out a space for independent filmmaking beyond the global mass entertainment industry" (BADLEY, 2010, p.2).

For these reasons, they have created a set of ten rules, which they named as *A vow of chastity* (annex 2, p. 88). The following of these rules made von Trier's filmmaking style easily

⁵ The von Trier filmography provided by IMDb may be found in the following link: <<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001885/>> . Access on November 9, 2020.

⁶ This regards YouTube, Filmow, IMDB and several newspapers' forums around the internet.

recognizable, since they are all related to visual aspects, in addition to giving to the films a documentary feel. Although the manifesto was written in 1995, von Trier followed its rules in just one of his films: *The Idiots* (1998). When it comes to *The House that Jack Built*, shot exactly twenty years later, all these rules were broken, as the chart below evidences:

Chart 1: Analysis of *The House that Jack Built* according to the *Vow of Chastity* rules.

<i>Vow of Chastity</i> rules	Does it occur in <i>The House that Jack Built</i> ?
Shooting must be done on location.	No. The plot unfolds in the United States of America, however, the shooting took place in European countries.
Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where this prop is to be found).	No. The scenes in hell are evidence.
The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot.)	No. David Bowie's "Fame" is used in several scenes apart from the images.
The camera must be hand-held. Any movement or immobility attainable in the hand is permitted.	Partially. There are some scenes in which the camera is totally immobile. Not only in the scenes in hell, but also in several other scenes during the incidents.
The film must be in color. Special lighting is not acceptable. (If there is too little light for exposure the scene must be cut or a single lamp be attached to the camera.)	Partially. The film is in color, however, the scenes in hell prove the usage of special lighting.
Optical work and filters are forbidden.	No. Special effects and filters are perceptible in several shots.
The film must not contain superficial action. (Murders, weapons, etc. must not occur.)	No. Jack uses a different range of weapons to kill his victims.
Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say that the film takes place here and now.) Genre films are not acceptable.	No. Although it could have happened nowadays, the temporal indication (time and place) is written on the film's synopsis. Also, the props indicate that the story occurred before the 2000s.
The film format must be Academy 35 mm.	No. It was a digital production.
The director must not be credited.	No. This is the first piece of information about the staff presented in the film.

Source: Developed by the author (2020).

It looks as if von Trier is looking for a fresh start, renewing past habits and overlooking the rules he himself had put down on paper in the past (of course, these changing paradigms are noticeable throughout his filmography over the past two decades). Nonetheless, the director's

vision is still recognizable. Those rules seem to have served the purpose of being a departure point towards the development of his directing style. Considering this notable aspect of his production, Lars von Trier seems keen on having schemes and connections between his works. Rather than following the Dogme's rules, it seems like they must have been some kind of template, like a recipe in which von Trier changes its ingredients by selecting some of the rules to break in each film. This organization is also illustrated by the fact that von Trier produces his works in trilogies⁷, and each film has its own divisions into chapters. It is like a necessity for things to be clearer and neat, just like Jack does with the houses where he practices his murders.

Jokes aside, in *The House that Jack Built*, von Trier calls these chapters "incidents". According to the synopsis presented in the back cover of the DVD⁸, the story takes place in the United States of America, in the 1970s. The film starts with a one minute long black screen, with this dialogue:

Jack: May I ask you something?
 Verge: I can't promise I'll answer.
 Jack: R... right, that's exactly what I meant. Um, are you allowed to speak along the way? I was thinking there might be rules.
 Verge: Let me put it this way. Very few make it all the way without uttering a word. People are overcome with a strange and sudden need to confess on these trips. And not all of it can be said to be of great rhetorical quality but do carry on merrily just don't believe you're going to tell me something I haven't heard before. (THE HOUSE, 2018, 00'18'' - 01'00'')

During this dialogue, sounds of drips can be heard in the background, and by Verge's line, it is possible to understand that something bad has happened, since the word "confess" is put in evidence before an explanation about how confessions are things Verge has heard a lot. Then, we have the open credit with the film title and director's name, and Jack starts telling his confidant guide about his twelve-year long development as a serial-killer.

This strategy presented in *The House that Jack Built* (*the long black screen* time and a confessional sense) is also present in *Nymphomaniac I*, which starts with eighty seconds of a black screen, subtle water dripping sounds, and eventually the protagonist (Joe) starts

⁷ Some authors classify his films into trilogies, and Lars von Trier himself refers to his productions as trilogies in several interviews, such as in <<https://www.filmcomment.com/article/lars-von-trier-interview-manderlay/>> and <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9M1314nfn9s>>. Access on September 09, 2020.

⁸ This refers to the American version, distributed by IFC Films. Internet. Available at <<https://dvdcover.com/the-house-that-jack-built-2018-r1-custom-dvd-cover/>>. Access on September 09, 2020.

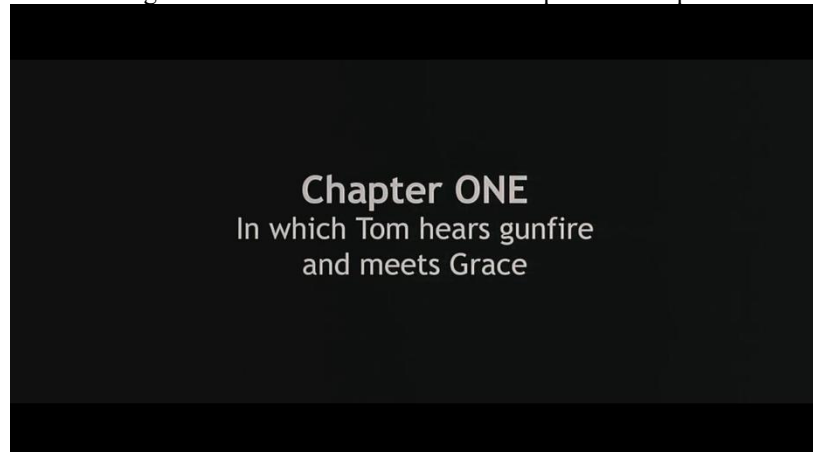
confessing her story to a sort of counselor. Lars von Trier uses it as a strategy for setting the ambiance, a device inspired by Bertold Brecht

(...) [Lars von Trier's] films are often presided over by an extradiegetic character—hypnotist/narrator/interrogator—or played out on gameboard-like sets (Odgen) as in *Dogville*, where he appropriates Brecht's V-effect to make film more interactive, to force audiences to “revirtualize” the empty space with their own mental images (...). (BADLEY, 2010, p. 14)

The dialogue of the director with Brechtian devices is long known, as it has been observed in several previous films. So, this is the moment when you turn your thoughts off reality and get yourself focused on what is going to happen on the screen. It sharpens your senses. The sound of dripping heard in the beginning of both films while we contemplate a black screen might have been a strategy to correlate *Nymphomaniac* and *The House that Jack Built* in the sense that both protagonists, Joe and Jack, have to deal with their shame. Both have the need to confess their crimes. The sound of water also can awake several different meanings in our subconsciousness; the western symbology has the water as “[t]he primeval element from which all was created, therefore an archaic symbol of the womb and of fertility; also purification and rebirth.” (HALL, 1994, p. 124). Both characters undergo an experience of purification: Joe has her body purified through the beating she suffers, which leads her to the alley where she is found in the beginning of the film to confess her story and perhaps achieve some form of forgiveness or atonement, whereas Jack goes through an art experience with death which leads him to his final purification: death itself. Both characters present their stories from a highly personal point of view, and these views contrast, even differ, a lot from common sense.

The second element in common between *The House that Jack Built* with other of von Trier's films is *the separation into chapters*. Jack divides his story into five main events, and in the other films this division is not made explicitly by the characters, although they have a connection to the cadence of the story. It is visually made in the film, as images 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 can illustrate:

Image 1: Lars von Trier's division of the plot into chapters



Source: *Dogville* (2003, 09'07'')

Image 2: Lars von Trier's division of the plot into chapters



Source: *The Antichrist* (2009, 05'45'')

Image 3: Lars von Trier's division of the plot into chapters



Source: *Melancholia* (2013, 08'13'')

Image 4: Lars von Trier's division of the plot into chapters



Source: *Nymphomaniac, Vol I* (2013, 9'33'')

Image 5: Lars von Trier's division of the plot into chapters



Source: *The House...* (2018, 01'05'')

More than suggesting an organizational structure, this strategy gives viewers the feeling of reading a book. Reading is not a passive process, for it requires imagination and interpretation. By organizing his films in chapters, von Trier appeals to our subconsciousness to understand that something different, or not as similar as other films, is going to be presented on the screen.

Another parallel that we can trace is *the usage of slow-motion*. Both in *The House that Jack Built* and *Melancholia*, von Trier uses this strategy to create something like a “moving painting”:

Image 6: Slow-motion scene



Source: *The House...* (2018, 2:17: 35 - 2:18:35)

This shot clearly refers to this painting:

Image 7: *Dante and Virgil in Hell*, also known as *The Barque of Dante*. Eugene Delacroix, 1822, 189x242.

Source: Available at < <https://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/barque-dante>> .

Access on November 09, 2020.

Which resembles this painting:

Image 8: *The Raft of the Medusa*, Théodore Géricault. Oil on canvas, 490 cm × 716 cm, 1818-19.



Source: Available at <<https://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/raft-medusa>>.

Access on November 09, 2020.

Delacroix was one of the models for Géricault's painting (FARTHING, 2010, p. 267), and both have the classical pyramidal composition from Romanticism, being *The Raft of the Medusa* one of the pioneer paintings of this art movement. In the three images, there is smoke, clouds or fire on the top left, which fades throughout the right side of the image. Also, they have a centralized raft, with men standing up on it – in a vertical line – and several bodies emerging from the water on the bottom, giving balance to the composition. Also, there is a male figure that seems to be paddling each raft, leading the group to their destination. Lars von Trier's inspiration on Delacroix's painting also encompasses the color: Jack's robe is red – for red is the color associated with hell and the devil (BIEDERMANN, 1992, p. 282); Phlegyas' cloak is blue, a color that “most frequently is seen as a symbol for things of the spirit and the intellect.” (BIEDERMANN, 1992, p. 44) and Verge's clothes are black, “the negation of worldly vanity and ostentation; (...). The black of mourning and penitence is also a promise of future resurrection, (...)” (BIEDERMANN, 1992, p. 41). The main objective of this movement was to break the Enlightenment age rationalism. The artists emphasized the exasperation of the emotions, nature's power, and human psychology. *The Raft of the Medusa* is also known for the scandal it provoked when released:

Géricault's Raft was the star at the Salon of 1819: "It strikes and attracts all eyes" (Le Journal de Paris). Critics were divided: the horror and "terribilità" of the subject exercised fascination, but devotees of classicism expressed their distaste for what they described as a "pile of corpses," whose realism they considered a far cry from the "ideal beauty" (...). Géricault's work expressed a paradox: how could a hideous subject be translated into a powerful painting, how could the painter reconcile art and reality? Coupin was categorical: "Monsieur Géricault seems mistaken. The goal of painting is to speak to the soul and the eyes, not to repel." (LAVEISSIERE S., et al. 1991)

Von Trier is also known for his controversies, and this painting, which at the time was considered a "mistake", nowadays is considered a great work from that time. Géricault invested his time to research the real story of the raft (LAVEISSIERE S., et al. 1991), and based his painting on his findings, not worrying about what the conventions of the academy would think about his production. He tried to make it as real as possible and was concerned about the feelings it could provoke. As we can see, this may also be very inspiring for the director. While travelling through hell, Jack goes past several people drowning, and either Delacroix or Géricault's paintings have the same element. Being Jack's art about death, both paintings also relate strongly to the subject.

Regarding *Melancholia*, there is a shot after six minutes and fifteen seconds of slow-motion filmed scenes:

Image 9: Slow-motion scene



Source: *Melancholia* (2011, 06'15'' - 06'38'')

Which emulates this painting:

Image 10: *Ophelia*, John Everett Millais. Oil on canvas, 76,2 cm × 111,8 cm, 1851-1852.



Source: Available at

<[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ophelia_\(painting\)#/media/File:John_Everett_Millais_-_Ophelia_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ophelia_(painting)#/media/File:John_Everett_Millais_-_Ophelia_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)>. Access on November 10, 2020.

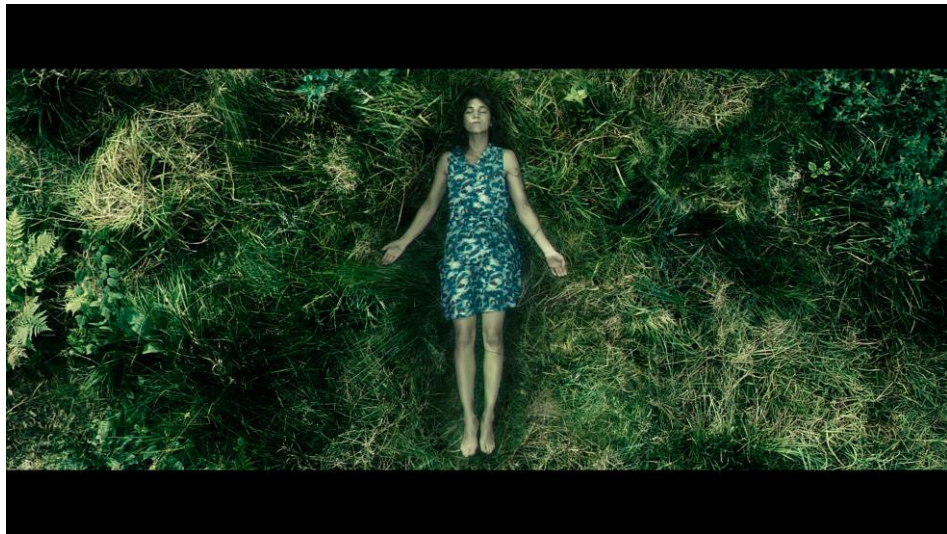
Ophelia is a Pre-Raphaelite painting, and by being so, it is part of an art movement in which artists were interested and

Inspired by the theories of John Ruskin, who urged artists to ‘go to nature’, they believed in an art of serious subjects treated with maximum realism. Their principal themes were initially religious, but they also used subjects from literature and poetry, particularly those dealing with love and death. They also explored modern social problems.”⁹

As said earlier, von Trier is deeply concerned about the reality in his films, and also the correlation to religion, love, death, and social problems are constantly represented in his works. There is a scene in *Antichrist* that also resembles *Ophelia*’s painting:

⁹ This text is an entry on Tate Britain’s official website, under “Art Terms”: a glossary organized by the institution. Available at <<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/pre-raphaelite>>. Access on November 09, 2020.

Image 11: Slow-motion scene



Source: *The Antichrist* (2009, 31'40'')

I argue that the director holds great inspiration on *Ophelia*. Based on these data, it seems like von Trier is paying his tributes to these artists by making a rereading of these works. Death is the main subject in the paintings, and a core trope in von Trier's oeuvre. As we can see, both *Ophelia*, *Dante and Virgil in Hell* and *The Raft of the Medusa* are static paintings. It is my experience, as a museum guide, that people generally become more impressed by the artist's techniques rather than the theme. Yet when people are guided to know the context of the work, and the elements that led the artist to make such a painting, they get even more impressed and interested. Also, nowadays we have the impression that size also matters. For example, it is a big disappointment to a lot of people to see the real size of Leonardo da Vinci's *Monalisa* (1503) when they finally get to the Louvre. *Ophelia* is a rather small – but powerful – painting, but *Dante and Virgil in Hell* and *The Raft of the Medusa* have a considerable size. In front of monumental paintings, and with the dynamics of the composition, one can have the impression of movement. It is possible that it may have inspired the director to create “moving paintings” on the cinema screen. Just as the book strategy, when von Trier uses this one as a way of telling the audience that they are not in the front of a mere film, but in the front of an artistic film. He seems to want people to appreciate and take their time in front of a “painting”, a fact that does not occur in a museum, since people are used to visiting museums as they visit shopping malls. This is a topic that will be discussed further ahead.

Another element in common between his films is *the use of parts of documentaries and book illustrations*:

Image 12: Book illustrations in *The Antichrist*.



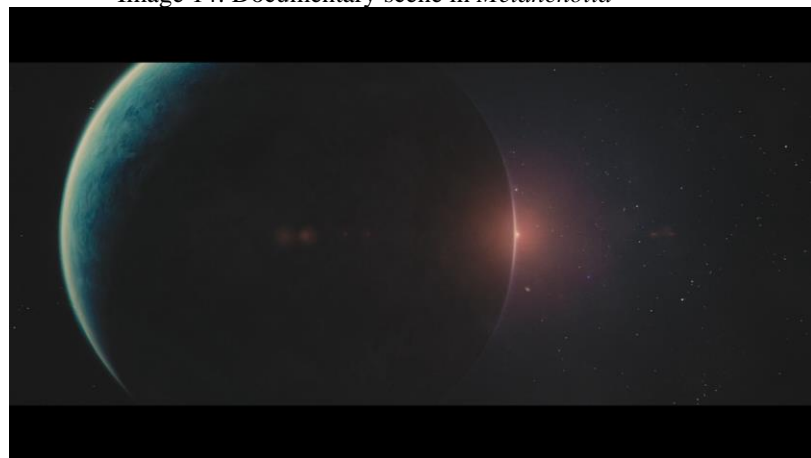
Source: *The Antichrist* (2009, 1h04'30'')

Image 13: One of the book illustrations used in *The House that Jack Built*



Source: *The House...* (2018, 1h02'24'')

Image 14: Documentary scene in *Melancholia*



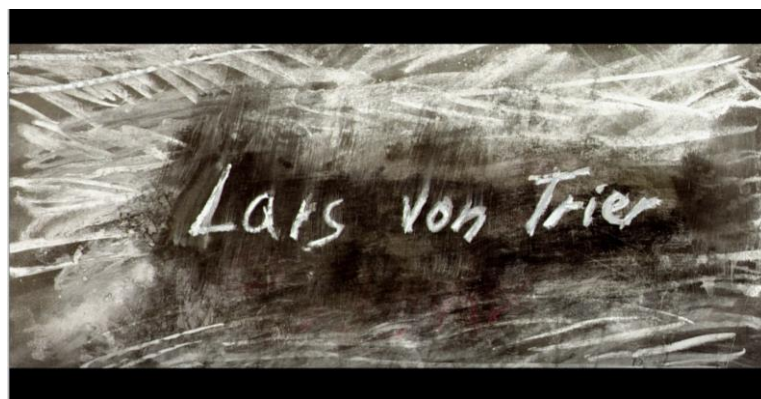
Source: *Melancholia* (2011, 01'16'')

Image 15: Documentary scene in *The House that Jack Built*

Source: *The House...* (2018, 09'38'')

Probably von Trier uses this strategy as another form to convey the idea of realness, veracity, in order to substitute his old traditions based basically on trying to film in real conditions. Besides, these images bring up the character's backgrounds. In *Antichrist*, the images are part of the woman's research (the protagonists are nameless, merely referred to as 'She' and 'He'); she researches about the evil inherent to people, especially women. The images are therefore related to witchcraft, reinforcing the ancestral notion of women being the forbidden fruit, an evil to be avoided. In *Melancholia*, several shots look like space documentaries, which reinforces the idea of the meteor being a reality in the plot. And in *The House that Jack Built*, the images function as illustrations for Jack's knowledge, thus conferring credibility to Jack's seemingly insane inspirations.

We can also find another relation between *The House that Jack Built* and *The Antichrist*. Similar *chalk drawings* are used in the separation of the chapters and illustrations of Jack's ideas:

Image 16: Chalk drawing in *The Antichrist*

Source: *The Antichrist* (2009, 00'01'')

Image 17: Animation that illustrates Jack's thoughts



Source: *The House...* (2018, 56'27'')

One possible reading of *Antichrist* is that of the mother who lost her son due to her luxury (it obviously is a sexist reading, considering the boy's father/her husband is as engaged in sexual intercourse and distracted as her when the boys dies). She undergoes a state of grief, suffering from depression, and blinded by her disease, she commits terrible acts against her own body and her husband's. She feels the need to punish the people involved in the death of her son. She tries to control this desire, but she fails. She lays the blame on her and her husband's inner desire and decides to finish the possibilities of repeating the same mistake by cutting off their reproductive organs. Chalk is a material which can be easily erased. In *Antichrist*, there is not much emphasis on it, and chalk may be a contrasting device employed to provoke tension – the ephemerality of the chalk against the immutability of the character's reality, the impossibility of returning to the past and changing the fatal event. Jack, on the other hand, is an OCD patient, and a frustrated engineer as well. He finds his escape valve in the field of art, although his inspirations are more perverse than those of a non-psychopath artist. He defends the idea that each murder is a work of art, and that his cycle of creation is a sort of therapy for him. The chalk drawing in the film serves to illustrate Jack's thoughts on how time passes, and things never change, returning always to the same point: immutability.

The pattern of utterances continues, and von Trier explicitly self-references for almost a minute in *The House that Jack Built*:

Image 18: *Europa* (1991)



Source: *The House...* (2018, 1h50'25'')

Image 19: *Medea* (1988)



Source: *The House...* (2018, 1h50'29'')

Image 20: *Nymphomaniac II* (2013)



Source: *The House...* (2018, 1h50'31'')

Image 21: *Dogville* (2003)



Source: *The House...* (2018, 1h50'37'')

Image 22: *Breaking the Waves* (1996)



Source: *The House...* (2018, 1h50'40'')

Image 23: *Riget* (1994)



Source: *The House...* (2018, 1h50'43'')

Image 24: *Antichrist* (2009)

Source: *The House...* (2018, 1h50'47'')

Image 25: *Melancholia* (2011)

Source: *The House...* (2018, 1h50'52'')

While these images appear in the film, Jack says:

Some people claim that the atrocities we commit in our fiction are those inner desires which we cannot commit in our controlled civilization. So they are expressed instead through our art. I don't agree. I believe heaven and hell are one and the same. The soul belongs to heaven and the body to hell. The soul is reason and the body is all the dangerous things, for example art and icons. (THE HOUSE..., 2018, 1h50'25'')

In Jack's words: making art and iconic works, whether artistic or not, is dangerous. In art history, the icons were images that represented deities – to burn an icon was like burning the deity itself. They were used by the authorities to instigate devotion and blind obedience. But Jack justifies his acts on the belief that hell and heaven are the same. In that sense, he is saying that it is possible to commit atrocities on the behalf of art and not getting punished. And

that's where things get interesting, since this is a film that talks about creating objects that should not be created in real life.

Based on this analysis, we can see that Lars von Trier uses his own creations as a visual strategy to provide us time to reflect about the development of the visual language in an artist's career. Besides that, in the sense that Jack has a cycle of creation and development, so it is the process of creation of many artists, filmmakers and probably von Trier himself. In this part of a dialogue with Verge, Jack explains his urge for creation, illustrated by the chalk drawings:

Verge: But what about repentance, Jack? The ones I deal with tend to repent all over the place.

Jack: I repent nothing no matter how long we have to walk, but I did think of something the other day.

Imagine a man walking down a street underneath the street lamps. Right under a light his shadow is the densest but also the tiniest. Then when he starts to move his shadow grows in front of him. The shadow becomes bigger and bigger, while it thins out and the shadow behind him from the next lamppost emerges and becomes shorter and shorter, until it reaches its ultimate density as the man stands directly underneath the light.

Let's say that the man standing underneath the first lamppost is me, when I've just committed a murder. I feel strong and content. I start to walk and the shadow, in front of me grows bigger like my pleasure, but at the same time pain is on its way, represented by the shadow behind me, from the next lamppost and at the midpoint between the lampposts the pain is so great it outweighs my pleasure. And with every step forward pleasure dissolves and pain intensifies behind me.

Finally the pain is so unbearably intense that I have to act, so when I reach the point with the next lamp in zenith, I will kill again. (THE HOUSE..., 2018, 54'55'' - 56'31'').

As we can see, *The House that Jack Built* is a story of a serial killer, but mostly about how the creation process occurs. Each artist has its own timing and urge to create. Do artists regret their creations? The limit in art creation von Trier is proposing with Jack is human death as material. If that is done, is there any other limit for art? To make the artistic process clearer to the viewers, von Trier uses the voice of the character to explain it in words, and the visual strategies to refer to the artists and works that are part of it. In this process, the various references presented help the viewer to either speculate or deeply understand its meaning.

By using his own films as part of these references, von Trier implies that he also goes through the same creative process. The pieces of past films reunited in *The House that Jack Built* are hints that those were stages the director went through in his own path, and as a result, he has abandoned almost all of his traditions and has developed new ones – being *The House that Jack Built* the most recent result of this process.

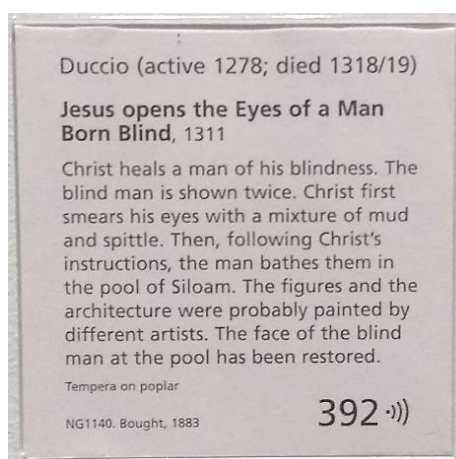
2.2. Arts: Paintings and Music

Every artist has references. In art history, this is easily noticed throughout the passage of time. The Greeks were inspired by the Egyptians; the Romans were inspired by the Greeks; the early Christian art was inspired by the Romans (JANSON; JANSON, 1996, p. 49 – 89). The cycle continues, and it does not seem to end. Just like Jack's nursery rhyme will demonstrate in the next chapter, everything seems to be connected. When we see a work of art, we can capture some of the artist's references if we know a little about the life and creative process laying on the background, which involves a range of artists, stories, experiences. But sometimes, this background information is not possible noticeable, accessible, or even necessary, in the case when a work speaks for itself.

According to Janson and Janson (1996), in brief, for the Greek beauty laid on an idealized symmetry. For the Romans, it laid on the proximity to reality, strongly associated to its political function. For the Early Christians, it was about the quality of the technique and its religious function, not the proximity of the representations to reality. For the people who consumed these arts, its purpose was clear: to adore the gods, to adore the rulers, to repress their instincts. The concept of beauty and art has changed several times, and after the Modernists, these concepts have changed much faster and in many different ways. The functions of art were not clear for many people anymore, and its purposes seem to be increasingly misunderstood.

Nowadays, to try to dribble this resistance, museums are investing a lot in the education of the visitors. Besides collecting emails and sending highlights of the importance of culture, focusing their texts on great known artists to attract the curious, a common practice adopted by museums in the present is to add a description of the work right beside it, so when a work calls the visitor's attention, the tag is already there to enlighten the reading of the work. Of course, depending on the quality of the text, it can narrow down possible readings. So most places have adopted the policy to write about basic information on these tags, which in addition to the regular information of the work – artist, technique, size, date, collection – sometimes contains some background story of the artist, some curiosities and a formal description of the work (and, in some cases, also an audio guide), as the example shows:

Image 26: A museum tag.



Source: Photographed by the author (2018).

Although it contains important information, we can imagine that there is much more information behind the work. There is a similar resource when the work of art is a film, which is its synopsis, or even its trailer or teaser. However, the same phenomenon is possible: it can give the viewer a glimpse of the story and arouse the viewer's interest, or even convey the whole plot, leaving no room for interpretations.

In *The House that Jack Built*, Lars von Trier guides the viewer to speculate. Its official synopsis does not explain clearly what the viewer may await:

Boundary-pushing cinematic visionary Lars von Trier (*Antichrist*) returns with one of his most daring, masterfully provocative works yet. In five audacious episodes, failed architect and arch-sociopath Jack (Matt Dillon) recounts the elaborately orchestrated murders—each, as he views them, a towering work of art—that define his "career" as a serial killer. Mixing pitch black humor, transcendent surrealism, and renegade musings on everything from history to architecture to cinema, von Trier fashions a radical, blazingly personal inquiry into violence, art, and the twin acts of creation and destruction. With Uma Thurman, Riley Keough, and Bruno Ganz.¹⁰

Leaving room for thoughts, it tickles curiosity. But it happens differently in the trailer. The main references and images are built in a way in which the viewer can already identify with some of the references that will be presented. It looks like a strategy: the director is concerned with the viewer's perception of the work, more specifically with the understanding of Jack's inspirations, as an attempt to bring it closer to them.

¹⁰ Text extracted from the official website of the film. Available at <https://www.thehousethatjackbuilt.movie/synopsis/> >. Access on October 20, 2020.

The way von Trier built this film, from the synopsis to the final product, can be compared to an efficient museum guide. He gives you hints and clues about the meaning, the background and objective of the work, but does not explain it. It is your job to put the pieces together and make your own conclusions about it. The director does it in two ways: through Jack and through the narrative. So, in an attempt to make this background information as clear as possible, the director shows some specific art, music, and cinema, displaying these works as huge banners on a billboard. In this monograph, I chose works deemed to be the most important ones for the analysis presented.

The first reference shown is about music:

Image 27: Glenn Gould documentary scene.



Source: *The House...* (2018, 8'50'')

Jack demonstrates a deep admiration for Glenn Gould. Considered by many as an eccentric, Gould was known for a combination of his expressive way of playing and a precise technique. The pianist stated, “I believe that the justification of art is the internal combustion it ignites in the hearts of men and not its shallow, externalized, public manifestations.”¹¹. His way of making art was inspiring for Jack, who wanted to accomplish important things in art, (like icons) and not only a “superficial art”. This correlates directly to the director’s purpose in filmmaking, stated in the *Dogme-95 Manifesto*, too. Lars von Trier also brings three more great music artists throughout the plot: David Bowie, with *Fame* (1975) – played in several shots; The Doors, with *Alabama Song* (1967), subtly remembered through Verge's speech "You want

¹¹ Quote available at the pianist’s official website <<https://glenn Gould.com/about/quotes/>> . Access on November 02, 2020.

me to show you the way to the next whiskey bar?" (THE HOUSE..., 2018, 1h 15'10''); and Bob Dylan, referenced by Jack's cue cards.

This selection of musicians seems to be not random. Although Glenn Gould is a recognized artist around the world, classical music remains considered an elite genre. He is the artist Jack mentions as inspiration and Bach's works, played by the musician, serve as illustrations to Jack's lines. It consolidates Jack's personality tendency towards an elitist taste. The paintings used as reference are also considered elitist, so Jack's art could be read as another pretentious work that nobody would actually understand. As a way to mitigate this elitization and perhaps with the intention of reaching a larger audience, and maybe in an attempt to separate the character from the creator, von Trier brought those popular musicians as a hint for those viewers who could not grasp the other references. It works as a gateway: by recognizing a layer, it may instigate the viewer's desire to discover what is behind the other clues. David Bowie, The Doors and Dylan are not mentioned by Jack, but by the author of the story, an attempt to bring the viewers closer to the one who is behind the plot.

Bowie is used as incidental music. Being one of the most known and respected artists in the world, he has been present in radio, internet, cinema, and television for a considerable amount of time. He has multiple different meanings in people's lives, and the director seems to count on his reputation. The song chosen was *Fame*, and its lyrics have a strict relationship with Jack's intentions: "Fame, makes a man take things over / Fame, lets him loose, hard to swallow / Fame, puts you there where things are hollow / Fame / Fame, it's not your brain, it's just the flame / That burns your change to keep you insane" (BOWIE, 1975). In a society of social media, YouTube and a voracious media, one can relate to that feeling and see the terrible things Jack does in order to achieve recognition, and might open ways to reflect on what people in real life do in order to achieve it.

Dylan is used as a visual strategy to describe Jack's character and other highlights of the plot – but not by Jack himself. The cue cards are the screenwriter's voice, like a narrator behind Jack, functioning as background narrative. Jack is a killer, so standing in an alley pulling cue cards off a deck does not make much sense for the storyline, but the name of the song and lyrics do:

Image 28: Bob Dylan holding cue cards in *Subterranean Homesick Blues*, 1965.



Source: Available at < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MGxjIBEZvx0>>. Access on November 09, 2020.
Frame at 0'26''.

Image 29: Jack holding cue cards in an alley.



Source: *The House...* (2018, 41'05'')

In the lyrics of *Subterranean Homesick Blues*, Dylan's poetic persona is worried about paying bribes for a policeman: "Look out kid, it's somethin' you did / God knows when, but you're doin' it again / You better duck down the alleyway, looking for a new friend / The man in the coon-skin cap in a pig pen / Wants 11 dollar bills – you only got 10" (DYLAN, 1965). In the film, the first time these cue cards appear are during the second incident. Verge says Jack suffers from OCD (Jack holds a cue card written OCD) and as the incident continues being reported, they appear again when Jack talks about his disorders/features (The cue cards show the words *egotism – vulgarity – rudeness – impulsiveness – narcissism – intelligence – irrationality – manipulation – mood swings – verbal superiority*). Then, during the third incident, there is a cue card scene with the word "Family", and after that, a countdown. Bringing these elements together allows us to understand that Jack's disorders are family-related, this

idea seems to be related to Dylan's song only in the sense that Jack is a criminal, and since the man in the song is bribed by the policeman, it gives the viewer a hint that the meeting between Jack and the authorities cannot not be avoided. Also, as the name of the song suggests, Jack is going to a subterranean place (hell) and feel sad/blue about it (the glimpse at the Elysian Fields). However, at the end of Dylan's song there are these verses: "Don't steal, don't lift / 20 years of schoolin' and they put you on the day shift / Look out kid, they keep it all hid / Better jump down a manhole, light yourself a candle / Don't wear sandals, try to avoid the scandals" (DYLAN, 1965), which is similar to Jack's death. Jack "stole" people's lives, he hid all the corpses in a freezer, and jumped down a manhole to avoid the "scandal" that would have taken place had he been caught by the police. Through this reference, von Trier gives a piece of the puzzle to understand Jack's fate, and although the reference is a known musician, the clues given are not easy to read, for the director does not underestimate the viewers capacity to put the clues together.

The Doors was used also as this narrative strategy. Verge's line is a joke about Jack's headache in hell. If we read the lyrics of the song, it says "For if we don't find / The next whisky bar / I tell you we must die" (DOORS, 1967). Jack could not understand what was happening to him, and Verge was not explicit about it. Jack must die and discover his own fate throughout the process of dying. *Alabama Song* also works as a hint of what happened in the plot and how it was developed, since it resembles the cumulative structure of *The House that Jack Built* nursery rhyme (discussed in detail in section 2.3), due to its repetition and returning to the same subject ("The next whiskey bar" / "The next little girl") while developing the story. This repetition is also brought by the reference of the house. Along the film Jack develops his story, always returning to the subject of the house. The voice of the director, present in the narrative style, is concerned about bringing the viewers closer, as Jack's voice pushes them away. The tension between these two voices opens the door for different interpretations, such as the ones in which the director is compared to his creation. If people were to connect von Trier to one of the characters, the hint was about at least connecting him to Verge, the voice of the one who knows what is going to happen to the main character – and not Jack, as some critics have done¹².

The second chosen art reference is a painting:

¹² As an example, I bring this review <<https://www.slashfilm.com/the-house-that-jack-built-review/>>. Access on November 02, 2020.

Image 30: GRIS, Juan. **Portrait of the Artist's Mother**. 1912. Oil on canvas, 55x46 cm.



Source: *The House...* (2018, 9'07'')

One can associate this painting to Cubism, and that is correct. On several reviews¹³, it is said to be a Picasso's painting. However, it is a Juan Gris painting¹⁴, called *Portrait of the Artist's Mother* (1912). The misconception can be understood since the technical features of Picasso's and Gris' works are very similar. This artwork belongs to a specific era of Cubism: Analytical Cubism. According to Farthing (2010), cubist artists stated that art was not about copying nature, but it was about being its parallel. Analytical Cubism was the first stage of the movement, where painters wanted to experience not only how our eyes and cameras capture an image, but also how the mind processes it. Therefore, "artists intellectually decomposed the

¹³ It was published by The New York Times (Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/13/films/the-house-that-jack-built-review.html>), and several other websites, such as <https://necsus-ejms.org/the-play-of-iconicity-in-lars-von-triers-the-house-that-jack-built/>, and <http://www.otroscinseuropa.com/critica-de-the-house-that-jack-built-de-lars-von-trier-el-corazon-de-las-tinieblas/>, all accessed on 07 Nov. 2020.

¹⁴ The painting is also available at: <https://www.wikiart.org/es/juan-gris/portrait-of-the-artist-s-mother-1912>>. Access on November 07, 2020.

structures in order to analyze and recreate them.” (my translation)¹⁵. The second era was called Synthetic Cubism. There, the artists were less concerned with the observation of the subject; they focused on the process of planning and structuring, using several different materials and techniques other than painting. So as to generate a spatial ambiguity present in the analytical era, cubist painters mixed the way artists gave their paintings the impression of volume during the Renaissance, and also the way Medieval painters used to flat images into a two-dimensional reproduction. In the film, this painting is linked to Jack’s first kill. The lady has her face smashed with a car jack, and the image of her face fades into Gris’ painting. At this moment, Jack begins a long explanation about what is art: “Art is many things.” (THE HOUSE..., 2018, 10’32’’), and several references are shown: Medieval architecture (Gothic Churches), Symbolism paintings (by William Blake), and Primitivism paintings (by Paul Gauguin). So, relating Jack’s “first work of art” to Gris’ painting, it is stated that Jack wants to be a sort of rule breaker, and it is implying that a subject must be read considering multiple views. Furthermore, it helps build the idea that the core of all Jack’s issues is due to his relationship with his mother, since the painting is called *Portrait of the Artist's Mother*. Instead of bringing this information explicitly, the director chooses to give this information in a veiled way. Cubism also works as a reference for von Trier’s choices of filming. The visuals of the film work as the collages from the synthetic era: the director pastes the references (images, paintings, documentary shots) in between the scenes just as cubist artists put pieces of paper on a canvas in order to make art. This is another hint on separating the creator from the creation: Jack is one thing, the way von Trier builds his filmmaking is another.

In the same sequence, some paintings by Paul Gauguin are displayed on the big screen. It is important to point out that Jack only mentions the Gothic Cathedrals and Blake’s paintings; however, all the other paintings are von Trier’s choice to explain Jack’s point of view. In that sense, Gauguin is brought forth an attempt to visually demonstrate what appropriation is. Gauguin spent five years in Polynesia, where he found great inspiration for his creations, but instead of creating something new, “Gauguin’s Polynesian oeuvre is a testament of social and psychological abuse, the crime scene of cultural rape, a manifesto of colonial oppression.” (MALEUVRE, 2018, p. 202). Here is the first of five Gauguin’s paintings presented:

¹⁵ “Os artistas decompueram intelectualmente as estruturas a fim de analisá-las e recriá-las.” (FARTHING, 2010, p. 389)

Image 31: GAUGUIN, Paul. **Rave te hiti aamu (The Idol)**. 1898. Oil on canvas, 73,5 x 92 cm.



Source: *The House...* (2018, 10'32'')

This painting is part of the Primitivism art movement from the beginning of the 1900. The objective of this art movement was to

explore tribal art through museums or looking at non eastern cultures, like from the African or from the people of Oceania. They believed that art from these ancient cultures were more moral, instinctive and honest than the academic art in which the technical abilities and classic ideals were revered. (my translation)¹⁶

This movement included artists with no academic education and was often seen as *naif*. Following the movement, Picasso also was inspired by primitive people, the African, which led him to develop the icon of Cubism, *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907). However, by using other cultures as “inspiration” for their works, those artists achieved great recognition, and the people who served as inspiration were used just as objects. This is a way of killing their culture, their soul. Then, this reference is used to enlighten Jack’s tendency to do exactly the same thing with his victims, but on another level: in order to make art, he does not culturally steal their souls, or culture, but he appropriates himself of their physical bodies. This objectification is a substantial part of Jack’s personality issues, strongly related to perversion (which is going to be discussed further in section 3.2).

¹⁶ “explorar a arte tribal nos museus ou a olhar para culturas não ocidentais, como a africana ou a dos povos da Oceania. Eles acreditavam que a arte dessas culturas antigas era mais moral, instintiva e sincera do que a arte acadêmica, na qual as habilidades técnicas e as ideias clássicas eram reverenciadas” (FARTHING, 2010, p. 342).

Overall, this discussion demonstrates that it is possible to understand a little more about the strategies that Lars von Trier used in order to assemble Jack's persona, and how it separates the character's point of view from the director's. There are several other art references in the film, however, *a priori* their reading would only confirm these thoughts. The strain between the character and the method of von Triers' filmmaking, concerning all the art references presented, brands the struggle between making a film with intentions of making people think deeper about unpopular issues and the intentions of making it closer to the public. Cubism, Bowie, The Doors are popular and are used as gateways that lead to a deeper reading of what might be considered art. The mediation of the director works as a stimulus to make people reflect about their own culture and society, and it demonstrates that the director does not underestimate the viewers perception.

2.3. Literature: From Dante's Inferno to a children's nursery rhyme

Lars von Trier constructs Jack's point of view using as strategy the referencing presented along the plot. However, the events and the construction of the plot itself are not essentially based on visual arts, architecture, or music, but in literature instead. Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* seems to be von Trier's greatest influence, since the director traces several parallels between the film and Dante's work based on the structure of *Inferno*, the first part of *The Divine Comedy*.

Dante is known, among other reasons, for the "architecture" of this poem (MUSA apud SHAPIRO, 1971, p. 61). He created the *terza rima* (tertiary rhyme: aba/bcb/cdc), and the poem has one hundred *Cantos*, divided as follows: 1 + 33 + 33 + 33. Dante was fascinated by numbers and symmetry. But this mathematical scheme is not the only important characteristic of his work, since allegory and symbolism are also vital elements. Moreover, Dante is the protagonist of his own story and Virgil, the epic poet, is his guide – although sometimes he works as a companion or acts just as Virgil, the poet (MUSA, 1971, p. 45). The question of the *Divine Comedy*'s genre is a debated question:

... because it is not an epic. Among the great works of universal literature called "epic", *The Divine Comedy* is the only one that has nothing to do with the old models. [...] Italy, the immediate heir of Latin civilization, was never "primitive"; therefore, it

did not produce a "national epic" [...], and the bourgeois Italy of the *Trecento* could no longer create a heroic epic. (my translation)¹⁷

Despite its epic poem structure, which is usually linked to tragedy “since anything that epic poetry has is also present in tragedy, but what is present in tragedy is not all in epic poetry.” (ARISTOTLE, 1996, p. 10), Dante entitled his work a “comedy”. Aristotle defines comedy as

an imitation of inferior people - not, however, with respect to every kind of defect: the laughable is a species of what is disgraceful. The laughable is an error or disgrace that does not involve pain or destruction; for example, a comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not involve pain. (1996, p. 9)

In that sense, we have Dante (the character) who is lost in the woods, an allegory for the human pains and sufferings. He has not an “elevated soul”, but his journey leads him into a greater state and a happy ending. Also, Dante (the author) uses the Italian vernacular, in a time where authors used Latin for their writing. This proximity to the popular leaves a scope for interpretation: Dante’s text was written for the people, not aristocrats. It differs from classic tragedy, which commonly has an unhappy ending and focuses on the great qualities of men:

Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable, each of its species separated in different parts; performed by actors, not through narration; effecting through pity and fear the purification of such emotions. (ARISTOTLE, 1996, p. 10)

Dante (the character) does not perform admirable actions; his propeller is only the will of saving his soul and being with his beloved Beatrice. The *Inferno* is humane: “The drama of the poem centers on one man's journey to God, and its main action is the movement of the soul toward its final goal: to become one with the Universal Will.” (MUSA, 1971, p. 43). So the action is only possible because Beatrice, his muse, intercedes in a moment when Dante (the character) was feeling lost, and due to her efforts, he is allowed to adventure himself into the journey in order to achieve salvation. *The Divine Comedy* is a lyrical work (CARPEAUX, 2009, p. 8), where the poet subjectively expresses himself about the world he lives in. Another important resource Dante has used to elaborate *The Divine Comedy* is the use of allegories, which Cândido (1996, p. 79) defines as “the "embodied representation ('verlebendige') of an

¹⁷ “... porque não é uma epopeia. Entre as grandes obras da literatura universal às quais se chama "epopeia", *A Divina Comédia* é a única que não tem nada a ver com os modelos antigos. [...] A Itália, herdeira imediata da civilização latina, nunca foi "primitiva"; por isso, não produziu uma "epopeia nacional" [...], e a Itália burguesa do *Trecento* já não pode criar uma epopeia heroica.” (CARPEAUX, 2009, p. 7-8)

abstract concept" (Art. "Allegorie", Kleines Literarisches Lexikon), through a sign, a description, a short narrative sequence." (my translation)¹⁸. As an example of allegory, each circle of hell is guarded by a specific kind of demon: in the third circle, where people who committed the sin of gluttony have their eternal rest, there is Cerberus. It is described as an insatiable beast, "His eyes are red, his beard is slobbered black, / his belly swollen, and he has claws for hands; / he rips the spirits, flays and mangles them." (ALIGHIERI, 1984, p. 122) symbolically embodying the sin that it guards. In the other circles, this pattern is followed as well.

There are several analyses that can be made if a parallel is drawn between these aspects and the events of the film. Besides scaping categorization, von Trier tells the story in a very visual, allegorical, and symbolic way as well. The forest where Dante is lost and feeling terrified in the beginning of *The Divine Comedy* is described as "dark wood": "Midway along the journey of our life / I woke to find myself in a dark wood, / for I had wandered off from the straight path." (ALIGHIERI, 1984, p. 67). He was not following the rules of what was considered right, straight, in a time where Catholicism ruled Europe and people were afraid of not living according to the *creed*. After that, Dante expresses his feelings: "but when I found myself at the foot of a hill, / at the edge of the wood's beginning, down in the valley, / where I first felt my heart plunged deep in fear," (ALIGHIERI, 1984, p. 68). Just as Dante, Jack seems insecure while talking to Verge (Virgil): "Um, are you allowed to speak along the way? I was thinking there might be rules." (THE HOUSE..., 2018, 2h13'58''), that means, a serial-killer who feared nothing during his lifetime, was feeling insecure about rules, or even *social interaction*. These two characters reflect the fears of the society they represent. This first parallel can lead to the interpretation that Jack is already entering hell as the film starts or is on the verge of doing it. Maybe intentionally, von Trier marked this fact with Jack's manner of calling Virgil – instead of calling him by his name, he calls him "Verge" during the whole story, giving a feeling of a forced intimacy or even a sense of need to be understood by a friend, a pal. In this sense, it is possible to understand that Jack was somehow experiencing the feeling of being lost even before entering it. Coincidentally, the first incident happens in the woods, but during daylight. This choice leads to interpret that the sequence of five incidents are Jack's "dark wood": he was lost, needing a guide to take him out of his misery. The woods are also

¹⁸ "Alegoria é a "representação corporificada ('verlebendige') de um conceito abstrato" (Art. "Allegorie", Kleines Literarisches Lexikon), por meio de um signo, uma descrição, uma pequena sequência narrativa."

present in the third and fifth incidents, namely the one where Jack hunts the family formed by mother and two sons, and the one where Jack wants to kill using a full-metal jacket bullet. The symmetry von Trier uses with the forest, appearing only in odd incidents (1-3-5) regards Dante's symmetry as well, and his love for the number *three*.

In the final sequence before entering hell, when Jack finally builds his house after meeting his guide "in person", this idea is reinforced by Verge's line in which he admits being with Jack since the first incident, acting like his voice of reason, although Jack never noticed or listened to him – confirming the state of mind that has blinded Jack through all those years: the narcissism, the egotism, the irrationality.

If the incidents are considered to be allegories, and Jack has problems with dealing with social interaction, we might reach the following conclusions: incident 1 involves an annoying woman, it might symbolize misogyny and *wrath*; incident 2 involves Claire, the widow who allows Jack in only when he mentions he could increase her pension, symbolizing *greed*; the third incident may be an allegory about marital institution, and the scene where the mother feeds her dead children can have a relation with *gluttony*; the fourth incident could be related to how society objectifies women, based on *lust*, and the fifth and final incident is an allegory about how men treat other men, and by planning on killing then using a single bullet, it could be linked to *sloth*. By selecting these five issues to be performed, von Trier emphasizes Jack's primary sins: *envy* and *pride*, which are symbolized in Jack himself as a man who does not want to depend on others (*pride*) and wants to be someone he is incapable of becoming (*envy*).

The seven deadly sins, for a long time disseminated through Catholic teachings, are also base for the Enneagram, a system to understand personality types that has its roots "traced to early teachings in the Judeo-Christian tradition and in early Greek philosophy." (RISO; HUDSON, 1996, p. 31). It is not possible to prove that von Trier was inspired by this system, but its similarities with the construction of Jack's persona are compelling and demonstrate von Trier's ability to understand the human mind. According to Riso and Hudson (1996), this system comprehends nine main kinds of personality (which have correlations to Jung's Psychological Archetypes) organized as numbers 1 to 9, in which each personality type has its own deadly sin as driving force. Narrowing down the theory, that means that each sin will guide a person's way of interacting with the world, leading the person to always committing the same mistakes. The aim of the system is to help people understand what number best describes their personalities, and by discovering it, the knowledge helps them achieve personal development.

The personalities are: (1) The Reformer sin: wrath , (2) The helper, sin: pride ; (3) The motivator, sin: deceit; (4) The Individualist, sin: envy; (5) The Investigator, sin: greed; (6) The Loyalist, sin: fear; (7) The Enthusiast, sin: gluttony; (8) The Leader, sin: lust; (9) The Peacemaker, sin: sloth. Each personality has an “Integration number” and a “Disintegration number”, meaning that when a person is under stress, he or she will act as his “Disintegration” number, and when this person is in a healthy mental state, he or she will act as his “Integration” number. If we take this theory to analyze Jack’s sins, we could understand he could be classified under the number “4” – the individualist, since this number is mainly characterized by the sin of *envy* and commonly linked to sensibility and withdrawing tendencies: “Want to be themselves, to express themselves in something beautiful, to find the ideal partner, to withdraw to protect their feelings, to take care of emotional needs before attending to anything else.” (RISO; HUDSON, 1996, p. 146), therefore, it is the personality linked to artists. When in stress, it goes to its disintegration number “2”. The “2” personality is linked to the sin of *pride*, and it is commonly linked to the image of the helper: “When dreams fail, become self-inhibiting and angry at self, (...), blocked and emotionally paralyzed. Ashamed of self, fatigued and unable to function. (...) Tormented by delusional self-contempt, (...) In the extreme: emotional breakdown (...)” (RISO; HUDSON, 1996, p. 146). When in growth, it goes to personality number “1”, linked to the sin of wrath and associated with the image of the perfectionist - perfectionism being one of the characteristics of the OCD disorder. So, regarding this system, it is possible to easily see these traits in Jack: By being a “4”, Jack is deeply connected to the artistic, but he is never content with his reality – he aims to be someone better, unique and special. He is bad at demonstrating his feelings. He has a deep admiration for art and bases his “work” on artists he thinks are “the greatest”. In a situation of stress, like the one when he had to stand in a front porch, being exposed, and then not managing to kill Claire due to his lack of skills, he feels deeply sorry and helps her by serving some water and food. This number is also linked to manipulation, which Jack does to all his victims. Also, in the first incident, he stops his car and tries to help the woman fix the car, so we understand he was already living in a stress condition. After being teased, Jack explodes in *wrath* - personality “1”’s deadly sin - and discovers his “artistic potential”: the connection of death to art. He develops it throughout the film, e.g. by refining his choking technique or hunting skills, his photography and sculpture expressions, and reaching its climax when he pursues the perfect bullet to kill. As we can observe, Jack’s growth number, “1”, is entirely subverted by von Trier’s plot. In growth, number “4s” are organized,

and longs to perfection: “Self-aware, introspective, engaged in a "search for self," aware of feelings and inner impulses. (...) Profoundly creative, expressing the personal and the universal, possibly in a work of art.” (RISO; HUDSON, 1996, p. 145). These motivations can be seen when Jack digresses about his artistic process, but are mainly transformed into illness - OCD - that does not get any better by developing organized ways to kill, making art or storing bodies in a freezer, which all are portrayed in a comic tone by von Trier. Therefore, by committing his crimes and perfecting himself, Jack is actually working towards achieving his better version, but in a distorted manner.

Yet, taking the classic poetic to make the analysis, the tensions between comedy and tragedy presented throughout the film are also a relevant aspect that may be related to *The Divine Comedy* and its structure. If taken as a tragic character, it is possible to see that Jack thinks he is superior, and capable of creating great things. He dominates several art references and prides himself in being “more than just an engineer”, for not being “simple” and for having an elevated taste. Although this elaborated personality indicates so, there are several moments in which Jack acts like an “inferior person”: his weakness regarding his mental illnesses are demonstrated by his cleaning compulsions and irrational decisions, such as his nervousness about the blood stains in the second incident and the bullet type in the fifth incident. Like Dante, von Trier plays with the two worlds to elaborate his work and gives his character a tragic ending through death and eternal damnation. By inspiring the plot of the film in Dante’s masterpiece, von Trier dialogues with a classic theory that is long known, but that remains at the verge of being an elitist knowledge: the tension between the elitist and the popular being presented.

Therefore, instead of making a comedy, von Trier creates a tragedy, which reinforces the notion that this film was made to show the path of a “superior human being”. Since Jack demonstrated being a monster, it is possible that von Trier tried to tone it down by using the common name Jack for the main character and giving his film the name “The House that Jack Built”. This name is a reference to the old nursery rhyme, a folk song of oral tradition, *The House that Jack Built* (annex 3, p. 89), and has been the inspiration for several children’s books, such as *The House that Jack Built*, a reread by Pippa Goodhart and Andy Parker, or versions of the text published by different illustrators, such as J. P. Miller’s version. In that sense, von Trier places himself in a level between a children’s book and one of the greatest classics. To illustrate this idea, von Trier portrays Hell in a simpler manner throughout the Epilogue, called Katabasis

(‘going down’ in Greek), without all the richness found in Dante’s poem. The director uses some references, as listed in the table below:

Table 2: Comparison between Dante’s and Lars von Trier’s representation of Hell.

The circles of hell as in Dantes’s <i>The Divine Comedy</i> , according to Musa’s notes and commentaries (1984)	The circles of hell as in Lars von Trier’s <i>The House that Jack Built</i>
<p>Canto 3 - Dante and Virgil arrive in the Vestibule of Hell, where Dante reads an inscription above the gate. “Rejected by God and not accepted by the powers of Hell, the first group of souls are "nowhere, " because of their cowardly refusal to make a choice in life. Their punishment is to follow a banner at a furious pace forever, and to be tormented by flies and hornets. (...) Next they come to the River Acheron, where they are greeted by the infernal boatman, CHARON. Among those doomed souls who are to be ferried across the river, Charon sees the living man and challenges him, but Virgil lets it be known that his companion must pass.” (p. 89)</p>	<p>There is no representation of this circle in the film.</p>
<p>First Circle of Hell Canto 4 - “The poets see a light glowing in the darkness, (...) As they come closer to the light, the Pilgrim perceives a splendid castle, where the greatest non-Christian thinkers dwell together with other famous historical figures.” (p. 97)</p>	<p>First scene of the representation of Hell: In the stretch from 2h13’31’’ to 2h14’31’’, von Trier shows a “light glowing in the darkness”: Representing the First Circle, this scene shows a shallow water, in which is projected a beam of light showing Jack’s feet. Here the first dialogue of the film is repeated, taking the viewer to the beginning of the story and evidencing the <i>in media res</i> device.</p>
<p>Second Circle of Hell Canto 5 - “(...) where for the first time he will see the damned in Hell being punished for their sins. There, barring their way, is the hideous figure of MINOS, the bestial judge of Dante's underworld; but after strong words from Virgil, the poets are allowed to pass into the dark space of this circle, where can be heard the wailing voices of the LUSTFUL, whose punishment consists in being forever whirled about in a dark, stormy wind.” (p. 111)</p>	<p>Second scene of the representation of Hell: In the stretch from 2h14’32’’ to 2h14’59’’ Verge and Jack jump into a river with algae and foam, and there is sweet music playing in the background. This scene and the next ones presented seem to have no relation to the Second Circle.</p> <p>Third scene of the representation of Hell: In the stretch from 2h15’00’’ to 2h15’26’’, Jack and Virgil jump in the air, each one inside of a bubble. A very peaceful scene. Bubbles are mentioned in the description of the Fifth Circle, as being a “sign” of the dead underground. Also having no relation to the Second circle.</p> <p>Fourth scene of the representation of Hell: In the stretch from 2h15’27’’ to 2h17’01’’, Jack and Verge are submerged in a muddy water in a dark place that resembles a sewer. The water runs strongly and they have difficulty moving. There is a buzzing sound that bothers Jack, and Virgil explains that that sound is actually the voices of the punished souls. There is no representation of Minos itself, but in this part von</p>

	Trier uses images of documentaries to illustrate people who “have searched for hell based on the sound it generates”.
<p>Third Circle of Hell Canto 6 - “On recovering consciousness the Pilgrim finds himself with Virgil in the Third Circle, where the GLUTTONS are punished. These shades are mired in filthy muck and are eternally battered by cold and dirty hail, rain, and snow.” (p. 121)</p>	Fifth scene of the representation of Hell: In the stretch from 2h17’02” to 2h17’31”, Verge and Jack leave the sewer. They walk towards the edge of an abyss, reinforcing the notion of “a verge” present in the guide’s name. Also no representations of this circle.
<p>Fourth Circle of Hell Canto 7 - “(...) the two travelers confront clucking PLUTUS, the god of wealth, who collapses into emptiness at a word from Virgil. Descending farther, the Pilgrim sees two groups of angry, shouting souls who clash huge rolling weights against each other with their chests. They are the PRODIGAL and the MISERLY.” (p. 129)</p>	Sixth scene of the representation of Hell: In the stretch from 2h17’32” to 2h18’00”, Down on the verge, they see a watermill. The image of the wheel can refer to the “souls who clash rolling weights against each other with their chests”, just as in the Fourth Circle .
<p>Fifth Circle of Hell Canto 7 - “After Virgil’s explanation, they descend to the banks of the swamp/ike river Styx, which serves as the Fifth Circle. Mired in the bog are the WRATHFUL, who constantly tear and mangle each other. Beneath the slime of the Styx, Virgil explains, are the SLOTHFUL; the bubbles on the muddy surface indicate their presence beneath. The poets walk around the swampy area and soon come to the foot of a high tower.” (p. 129)</p> <p>Canto 8 - “But before they had reached the foot of the tower, the Pilgrim had noticed two signal flames at the tower’s top, and another flame answering from a distance; soon he realizes that the flames are signals to and from PHLEGYAS, the boatman of the Styx who suddenly appears in a small boat speeding across the river. Wrathful and irritated though he is, the steersman must grant the poet’s passage, but during the crossing an angry shade rises from the slime to question the Pilgrim . After a brief exchange of words, scornful on the part of the Pilgrim, who has recognized this sinner, the spirit grabs hold of the boat.” (p. 138)</p>	<p>Seventh scene of the representation of Hell: In the stretch from 2h18’01” to 2h18’24” they go down using stairs. The wall is filled with moving bodies. They seem to be in a dark mud, which can refer to the Fifth circle.</p> <p>Eighth scene of the representation of Hell: In the stretch from 2h18’25” to 2h18’53”, Jack complains about a sour taste in his mouth. Verge suggests to show him “the way to the next whiskey bar”, a reference to The Doors’ <i>Alabama Song</i>.</p> <p>Ninth scene of the representation of Hell: In the stretch from 2h18’54” to 2h19’21” there is a slow-motion scene where Jack and Verge walk through a red scenario. There is blood running down the walls and falling into a river. In this place, there is only an object that resembles a sink, and Verge is holding a staff. This might refer to the Seventh Circle.</p> <p>Tenth scene of the representation of Hell: In the stretch from 2h19’22” to 2h19’55”, Phlegyas is represented by the man who rowed the boat, and the souls that grab the boat are also represented. This is the most accurate representation of Hell.</p>
<p>Sixth Circle of Hell Canto 9 - “But no sooner is the Pilgrim comforted than the THREE FURIES appear before him, on top of the tower, shrieking and tearing their breasts with their nails. They call for MEDUSA, whose horrible face has the power of turning anyone who looks on her to stone. Virgil turns his ward around and covers his eyes. After an “address to the reader” calling attention to the coming allegory, a strident blast splits the air, and the poets perceive an ANGEL coming</p>	Eleventh scene of the representation of Hell: In the stretch from 2h19’56” to 2h21’58”, Jack and Verge are inside of a place that resembles a tower. It has a window, and through it Jack sees the favorite scene from his childhood: the men cutting the meadow with his scythes. Verge says it is the Elysian Fields (As Virgil writes in the Aeneid, these are the representation of heaven), the sound of crickets is heard. Jack remembers the watermill and sees all his life flashing in front of his eyes. He has a moment of

<p>through the murky darkness to open the gates of the City for them. Then the angel returns on the path whence he had come, and the two travelers enter the gate. Within are great open burning sarcophagi, from which groans of torment issue.” (p. 147)</p>	<p>regret, and cries. Since it would not be possible to look at the Elysian Fields from Hell, it could be von Trier’s translation for the angel that appears in the Sixth Circle.</p>
<p>Seventh Circle of Hell Canto 12 - “At the base of the precipice, they see a river of boiling blood, which contains those who have inflicted violence upon others.” (p. 176)</p>	<p>This is the Circle in which Jack should have spent eternity, as violence has been his mainly sin. However, Vergo takes him deeper in an act of kindness, since Jack said he wanted to know about everything. The Circle has been represented earlier, not following Dante’s circles order.</p>
<p>Eighth Circle of Hell Canto 19 - “The pilgrim describes the view he had of the Eighth Circle of Hell while descending through the air on Geryon's back . It consists of ten stone ravines called Malebolge (Evil Pockets), and across each bolgia is an arching bridge.” (p. 233)</p> <p>The traitor’s circle.</p>	<p>Twelfth scene of the representation of Hell: In the stretch from 2h22'00" to 2h28'04", Vergo takes Jack to what he calls the deepest part of hell. However, Dante’s last circle is made out of ice, and von Trier’s representation shows a cliff with lava. There is a broken arching bridge in this cliff, so it is relatable to the Eighth Circle. Besides, Vergo says he should have left Jack some circles higher up, and tells Jack there is a way out: by climbing the wall to the other side of the bridge. Although advised not to do so, Jack, blinded by his pride or inspired by his regret, takes his chances but falls into the lava, where he will spend eternity.</p>
<p>Ninth Circle of Hell Canto 31 - Through the murk air they move up across the bank that separates the Malebolge from the pit of Hell, the Ninth (and last) Circle of the Inferno. From a distance is heard the blast of a mighty horn, which turns out to have been that of the giant NIMROD. He and 11ther giants, including EPHIALTES, are fixed eternally in the pit of Hell; all are chained except ANTAEUS, who, at Virgil's request, lifts the two poets in his monstrous hand and deposits them below him, on the lake of ice known as COCYTUS. (p. 353)</p>	<p>There is no representation of this circle in the film.</p>

Source: Developed by the author (2020).

As shown in the table, there is a simplification in the depiction of hell, and the director makes a selection of elements of Dante’s story, using them in no specific order. Of course, it also could be simply a poetic license taken by the director, but it is interesting to notice that the construction of the character and the choices for the construction of hell are somehow connected. Also, popular knowledge refers to hell as a place with fire – so representing hell with ice would not reach the same meaning. In the last scene, Vergo tells Jack he should have stopped some circles above the last one (referring to the seventh circle, where the ones who committed acts of violence should spend eternity), but Jack falls in the last circle, the ninth, due

to his pride (the thought of being capable to climb the walls of hell) and his envy (the thought of deserving to be at a better place than the seventh circle), being the ninth circle the one reserved for traitors to family, to nation, to benefactors and guests. Jack's sins made himself blind about his own misogyny, his own ability to love and to respect.

Moreover, the first lines of the film are the same as the ones spoken the moment Jack finishes his house of corpses and enters hell, as if to finish a circle. A circle that needed to be closed: throughout the film, Jack keeps returning to the issue of the house, highlighting his inability to conclude it. This circular construction based on repetition is not new and can be found in nursery rhymes. A nursery rhyme "can be broadly defined as short songs and verses often read or sung to, or by, young children" (GALWAY, 2017). *The House that Jack Built* is a popular British nursery rhyme transmitted through oral culture, and its narrative technique is called cumulative tale. It is characterized by a spare plot, in which the repetition of the verses and returning to the same point are the main element to build up the story¹⁹. As simple as this composition might sound, it is possible to recreate it: Lars von Trier brought a high-culture reference (*The Divine Comedy*) to a simple structure, maintaining the pattern of the tension between elitist and popular already seen in the songs studied in chapter 1.2.

In this nursery rhyme, Jack has a house that, by a chain of events, is linked to a mouse, then a dog and then to several other people and animals, until finally is linked to a horse. There is no main event that makes us understand why Jack's house is important for the plot (since it starts it) or why the horse is an important part of this circle (since it finishes it), but some ideas are suggested. The house, as chapter 3.2 will demonstrate, is a symbol of family, or in Freudian or Jungian interpretations, it represents the person herself. In that sense, the rhyme gives the idea of connection, that we are all connected to someone or something. *The House that Jack Built*, the rhyme, presents interrelations of the members of the community, and gives a different meaning to it: this is not just a house, it is a recollection of events that are part of its history. Von Trier's film echoes such idea, given that for Jack, building the house ultimately equals building himself.

¹⁹ This <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-k5ba9VMm0>> is an example of how this nursery rhyme is sung. Access on November 09, 2020.

3. JACK: THE CHARACTER'S LAYERS

"This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine."
(Prospero, *The Tempest*, Shakespeare)

3.1. Monster Theory

Monster Theory, by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996), is an essay that presents seven theses on how monsters are built. Jack represents all seven theses to different extents, and this is what this section focuses on.

One of the questions that Verge asks Jack is if he feels superior to women. During the first killings, only women are mentioned, so Verge's question "You feel superior to women and want to brag? It turns you on, doesn't it, Jack?" (THE HOUSE..., 2018, 1h39'46'') is understandable. This is answered negatively by Jack, who states that he prefers killing women because they are easily manipulated, and weaker. Jack is a misogynist character, but he does not notice it. We understand the misogynist tone to his discourse but shortening his killing to only this point of view is disregarding what Jack could also represent.

Serial-killers have been already portrayed differently in literature, cinema, and intermedia adaptations. The list with the most notorious fictional serial killers includes Norman Bates (*Psycho*, 1960), Dr. Hannibal Lecter (*Manhunter*, 1996; *Silence of the Lambs*, 1991; *Hannibal*, 2001; *Red Dragon*, 2002) or Patrick Bateman (*American Psycho*, 2000). All these killers were somehow punished, like being arrested (Lecter), or being trapped in their own minds (Bates and Bateman). On the other hand, we have some kind of "new wave" of serial-killers, such as Dexter Morgan in *Dexter* (2006 - 2013), who, despite his troubled mind, seems to have all the moral questions put together and is deified as a righteous avenger by the public. Dexter even literally gets away with murder and is somehow rewarded at the end of the series, living a low-profile, silent life in the woods. All these serial killers have different (twisted) motivations to kill, such as becoming their own mother (Bates), cannibalism (Lecter), lifestyle (Bateman) or making justice (Morgan). Jack, who is as tormented as any of them, seems to be motivated by creation and receives punishment at the end of the film.

The film portrays a small American city during the 1970s. We cannot see any characters having a street-smart posture, or any architecture features that we can relate to big cities, such as skyscrapers, shopping malls, or supermarkets. We feel a friendly, gossipy, selfish

atmosphere. Despite that, the choice somehow illustrates how things may have not changed, since all the situations presented in the film are so incredibly simple that they could still happen nowadays. If we were to describe Jack without knowing about him, we could say that he is a successful rich white man in his late 30s, who is intelligent, calm, even average. He has his own home, has bought land in order to build the house of his dreams. He is just what that society expects an average man to be, minus being married and having a family. He represents no threat to it: his first victim in the film feels at ease beside him, to the point of making fun of his manhood without fearing anything. She also hopes he can *fix* her car, a task usually associated to men. The second lady has some suspicions about him (not about the man himself, but of his intentions as a salesperson) and yet lets him inside her house, because she sees that he could help her with *money*; the third woman even considers having him as a *husband*, or partner, because she needed help with her children; the fourth is having a dependency relationship with him, and expects to be special in his life and to be just *loved* (and with this woman, he almost can connect to, since he also desires to have (a house) and be (an artist) something special). As we can see, all his victims in one way or another trusted Jack to be a partner somehow, but this role also indirectly fulfills the stereotypical men's roles in society. According to Cohen's Thesis IV, "The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference":

The monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us. In its function as dialectical Other or third-term supplement, the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond—of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within. Any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body, but for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual. (COHEN, 1996, p. 9)

With that said, we can understand that those women's needs work like open gates that allow the monster in. They allow him to enter their lives because he is the model of man that their society deems good, appropriate. He is not different from any other man and, at the same time, he is a deviation: he is the embodiment of what a man can be at his worst and has no signs of being so. He is veiled. It shows the truth of the system: because of trusting in the image of (good) men, those women ended up being deceived by a (bad) man. There is no escape from this scenario. Perhaps the scenarios presented in the film are not specifically saying that women cannot prosper without men, but Jack's existence shows how these discourses are still present in society.

Lars von Trier's small town is what Cohen calls "Ambient fear", with the small town being the source, a representation of the mistrust women have to face in their everyday life. The ambient seems to be safe and secure, however, they can count on no one. Lady one is alone. Claire has neighbors that know and care about her, but it does not ensure her safety. Jacqueline screams and no one comes to help. It looks like a condensed version of the world, in which we feel like we cannot trust anyone. Linked to this ambient, we have Jack as its monster: "The monster is that uncertain cultural body in which is condensed an intriguing simultaneity or doubleness" (COHEN, 1996, p. IX). The doubleness being represented by the thought that Jack looks like the construction of that society, but in fact he could lead to its destruction.

Cohen (1996, p. IX) also states: "I argue that the monster is best understood as an embodiment of difference, a breaker of category, and a resistant Other known only through process and movement, never through dissection-table analysis.". One could ask how Jack is a breaker of category. As any other serial-killer, Jack has mental issues and inner motivations for his killing. What gives some method to his insanity is the fact that he consciously uses killing as a therapeutic process for his OCD, and beyond that, he uses it as an art therapy, as a motivation for his creations. He wants fame, he wants to be special – and to reach it, he subverts stereotypical men's roles in society.

In Thesis I, Cohen (1996, p. 4) states that the "Monster's body is a cultural body". If we look into Jack's body, we see that he is a normal guy on the surface but has several issues on the inside. Just like several other societies already portrayed in literature – for example *The Crucible* (Henri Miller, 1953) where people follow strict rules which led them to despicable events, catalyzed through the actions of Abigail Williams, the teenager who first accuses her 'enemies' of being witches – we can see that Jack is an embodiment of a sick society and his actions are as self-centered as the people in that supposedly functional society. He fails to perceive his own misogynist actions. He wants fame and he wants to be seen for who he really is and cannot see that he is doing it the wrong way. He practices acting like a "normal person", although he is not. Not knowing what a person really is one of the things that really scares people nowadays. Just as Jack, most people even do not know themselves very well. We spend a lot of money on therapy. We do not know our neighbors. We barely say 'hello' to each other. We are afraid, and most of us are anti-social as a coping mechanism and just get along with our lives. And Jack practices his smile. We can understand and we can empathize – we are not

always in the mood to smile. Only he is frustrated with his decisions. He uses the shame of not being what he wants to be as an excuse for doing harm to other people.

The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the monstrum is etymologically "that which reveals," "that which warns," a glyph that seeks a hierophant. (COHEN, 1996, p. 4)

So, Jack's body incorporates all the fear that we have when we are walking down the streets. He embodies the fear that makes us not say 'hello'. He also embodies our own problems with anxiety and our fear of being hurt by getting involved. This becomes well illustrated by the moment when Jack tells Jacqueline to scream, calling for help, when he is about to kill her. He says nobody will care, or listen to her, because he *knows* it. Before it, she hesitates to believe Jack when he implies that he is going to kill her, and that he has already killed more than 60 people, maybe 61. Moved by fear, she manages to escape and tell a police officer, but the police officer does not believe her because he could smell her liquor breath. When Jack arrives and confirms he is a serial-killer, and tells him she is drunk, the police officer tells them to stop drinking. The absurdity is marked by von Trier in the scene where, after Jacqueline's death, Jack leaves her breast on the windshield of the policeman's car – he was just beside the crime scene. Nobody cares, just as Jack had predicted. And as it happens in the film, I would venture to say that it could easily happen in real life – it is common-sense that just a few people care enough to take part of something and actually help in a situation of domestic violence, for instance. That scene is so strong, so truthful, that really illustrates the monstrosity that Jack embodies: "Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again." (COHEN, 1996, p.4) Although Jack dies in the film, we know that he will be reborn. Not in his own body, but as another mentally sick man that society itself will create. The monster may be not the body, but the psychological deviations themselves.

In Thesis II, the author says the "The monster always escapes" (COHEN, 1996, p. 5). Applying this to this film, it could mean that no matter if the "carrier", or the "host" of the disease dies. If society itself does not change the way of living, the same circle is going to be repeated. Jack was a child that seemed not to have any strong bonding relationship with

anybody – his father and mother are not present. According to Riso and Hudson (1996, p. 152), the personality type four is “...disconnected from both parents. As children, they did not identify with either their mothers or their fathers. (“I am not like my mother; I am not like my father.”) They may have had either unhappy or solitary childhoods...”. He also does not have siblings, or at least they are not presented by the film. The only relationship he establishes with something is through his observation of the reapers who worked on the meadows nearby his house. The sound they made while cutting the grass was the only connection he had as a comfort – which can be associated to his passion for music/sounds. As we can see, that lack of human bonding was one of the factors that probably caused him to develop OCD, psychopathy and misogynist tendencies. Riso and Hudson’s theory (1996) also talks about strategies each personality develops in order to self-preserve. These strategies are represented under the name “wings”. Jack’s wings are personality numbers three and five: he wants to be the best, achieve fame, be special, be capable and intellectual. However, people usually develop one wing better than the other, and in the case of Jack, it is wing number three. The wing affects the way one behaves, and it is noteworthy that personalities 3 and 4, when under intense stress, match perfectly Jack’s behavior:

Chart 3: Jack’s behavioral chart under stress.

<p>Jack’s main personality (4)</p>	<p>9. Level of Pathological Destructiveness</p> <p>Life-Denying self-destructive “broken down” crimes of passion strangely calm suicidal parasitic</p> <p>◀ Despairing hopeless feel defeated utterly worthless dissociated desolate feel victimized</p> <p>◀ To escape their crushingly negative self-consciousness</p> <p>Basic Fear is realized: they have lost their identity and personal significance</p>
<p>Jack’s wing (3)</p>	<p>9. Level of Pathological Destructiveness</p> <p>Relentless monstrous vicious psychopathic fragmented</p> <p>◀ Monomaniacal malicious vengeful sadistic self-abandoning</p> <p>◀ To destroy whoever or whatever threatens them or reminds them of what they lack</p> <p>Basic Fear is realized: they are rejected as worthless</p>

Source: Elaborated by the author, according to Riso and Hudson (1996, p. 489-491)

Considering these traits, it is observable that in hell, Jack assumes his main personality and feels defeated, and desperately wants to revert the situation. However, it is possible that his subconscious knows that he could not reach the other side, and the act of trying is suicidal. Throughout his life, he relies on his wing in order to manage surviving: he wears his monstrous

psychopathic mask, destroying anyone. Thus, he spends his adulthood trying to achieve the same perfection of that moment, the mowing sound of the fields he contemplates in hell as mentioned in the previous section, but in a deviant way. As Jack says in the beginning of the film, he was expected to be an engineer, but he really wanted to be an architect. This also reinforces the fact that he was not supported or seen by his family. That, added to the previous childhood trauma, is also a common-sense story that our society knows well. The first incident, in which the woman teases him to the extreme, is when the serial-killer in Jack arises. He had had enough of not being seen. And if nobody sees him, this might be good reason for him to conclude there is no problem in killing. Jack says he "... is amazed by when he thinks about all the things I have done in his life, without it in any way resulting in punishment." (THE HOUSE..., 2018, 43'28''):

We see the damage that the monster wreaks, the material remains (the footprints of the yeti across Tibetan snow, the bones of the giant stranded on a rocky cliff), but the monster itself turns immaterial and vanishes, to reappear someplace else (for who is the yeti if not the medieval wild man? Who is the wild man if not the biblical and classical giant?). (COHEN, 1996, p. 5)

In that sense, the wrecking he causes, his body sculptures, his photographs, the house that he builds, the fame that he wants and achieves... Everything remains (except for the trail of blood that is miraculously erased by the rain in incident 2) except himself. He dies at the end, not only once, but twice – first when he is killed by the police officer, and then when he manages to slip his soul into the fire and vanishes in hell itself. Human and divine justice. Even with this definite, final death of Jack, we know that is not over. Verge starts the film saying "I have already heard this story, and I know this is not going to be the last". This is very scary. This perception that we have to change the whole world, that we have to make our little changes every day into a new and better society, and when we think about how long it will take and how there is not much we can do to avoid this kind of monstrosity... We start feeling small, inefficient, powerless. Among several other causes, this sense of being unimportant may have shaken people's egos, and perhaps that is the reason why many have left film theaters around the world²⁰ while watching *The House that Jack Built* and provoked many critics to write

²⁰ It happened in the session I attended, around twenty people left the film theater before the film ended, especially in the scene where Jack makes the mother feed his dead son after their hunting. It also happened in Cannes, where people left during the session, as posted here - and many other websites, as in <https://www.huffpostbrasil.com/2018/10/24/a-casa-que-jack-construiu-lars-von-trier-so-quer-chocar_a_23569657/>. Access on September 14, 2020.

negative reviews about the film, saying that is exaggerated. Black and white thinking may be one of the things that von Trier is trying to discuss by making a film like this, so it is possible that its core lies in the discussion of hypocrisy. People know horrible things happen every day, so is it so repugnant to show and discuss them through a film? The director may be questioning: Would you help Jacqueline, or would you just sit and complain about what you are watching in a film? How are you not part of this world? Lars von Trier plays with the idea that

The monster awakens one to the pleasures of the body, to the simple and fleeting joys of being frightened, or frightening—to the experience of mortality and corporality. We watch the monstrous spectacle of the horror film because we know that the cinema is a temporary place, that the jolting sensuousness of the celluloid images will be followed by reentry into the world of comfort and light. (COHEN, 1996, p. 17)

This is due to the fact he created a story with a monster which could strongly shake people's perception of mortality. The scenes are so real, and so appealing, that one can be impressed about the idea that there is a strong chance that a monster like Jack exists in the world, so the joy of experiencing a temporary situation as said by Cohen becomes just unbearable, and the light that would be expecting us outside would not be so bright as before. So, this film can provoke several different reactions and perceptions about itself and its creator, due to its capacity of provoking such strong emotions that are hard to understand and reflect on.

In Thesis III, the author states: "The monster is the harbinger of category crisis". Cohen affirms the following:

The monster always escapes because it refuses easy categorization [...] This refusal to participate in the classificatory "order of things" is true of monsters generally: they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions. (COHEN, 1996, p.6)

We as spectators of horror and terror films are used to seeing vampires, werewolves, witches, devils in those kinds of films. As much as we find them scary, deep inside we know these are creatures that do not exist (or at least we want to believe they do not exist). But a

Also, regarding the comments about the film, there is this very interesting interview with Matt Dillon, in which he describes the experience of playing Jack, and presents his professional relationship with Lars von Trier. His ideas have a lot in common with the idea of seeing things under several shades of gray: < <https://www.indiewire.com/2018/12/matt-dillon-interview-lars-von-trier-the-house-that-jack-built-1202028057/> >. Access on September 14, 2020.

serial-killer is a category of monster that is especially disturbing, since the hybrid they present is not something fantastic, but real and veiled. Usually they are represented in cinema with some visually disturbing props (such as the dress worn by a man in *Psycho* and the mask in *Hannibal*) or ways of presenting the killings (the so-called rituals), but that is not the case with Jack. His killings are more than just a ritual, or a therapy, they are meant to be works of art. They are thought to be a product of art and they follow a methodology. The methodology of his creations is based on what we are usually taught in a visual arts course: basically, you have a selection of artists for inspiration and techniques which you are going to use to express your point of view of something that might cause people to think about their lives, their feelings, or their world. Teachers make students justify and base all their works on theories, other artists, and the more different and unique the work is, the best it is. Jack draws inspiration not only from interesting theories and artists, but from the worst imaginable things, such as Nazism and Fascism, rotten techniques, and idealized classical paintings – because he identifies himself with those subjects. As previously said, it is an elitist taste, unique, and different. He lived in a world that did not see him as a person because he did not feel treated like one during childhood, and despite being disgusted by Jack's actions, we can understand the issue. We, viewers, know that this kind of person actually exists. There is no doubt that we can be really shocked by his killings, but what he *creates* with their bodies is the real disturbing matter: a smiling sculpture of a little boy, a coin pouch with Jacqueline's breast, and his house. In the film, a newspaper itself indirectly validates his art when it publishes his pictures. This lack of sensibility in publishing pictures of dead people can also be considered a sample of how that society is out of touch with themselves and reality. This is just a film, but similar things have already happened in real life (and not so much time ago as presented in the film) such as in works where artists sew dead animal parts to their own body²¹ or show sharks, cows and zebras in a formaldehyde solution (the latter is going to be discussed further in this monograph). That is validated art, and it uses death as raw material. So this hybrid of artist and serial-killer presented by von Trier is quite disturbing, since we have already seen other artists dealing with the subject in real life. It is already quite disturbing just to imagine that something like that could be accepted as art – although people do not seem to get too disturbed by dead bodies if the purpose of the display is scientific and

²¹ This work is called *Fantasia de compensação*, 2004, and it is available at <<https://www.rodriagobraga.com.br/>>. Access on August 31, 2020. There are several discussions about whether this work of art is real or not.

educational, such as the *Bodies*²² exhibition²³. This evidences the hypocritical stance of some people in relation to what can or cannot be accomplished in relation to human (artistic) creations. Thus, Jack could get away with his killing during a long time and also became reasonably famous with “his art” – something that not all the artists get the chance to experience – proving that he manages to escape due to the lack of being properly categorized. Nobody knew he was a serial-killer, but that society could, for an instant, call him an artist.

In Thesis V and VI, “The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible” and “Fear of the monster is really a kind of desire”, Cohen discusses how the figure of the monster prevents mobility, either intellectual, geographic, or sexual, by “eliminating the social spaces through which private bodies may move” (COHEN, 1996, p. 12) He also discusses how we “distrust and loathe the monster at the same time we envy its freedom, and perhaps its sublime despair” (COHEN, 1996, p. 12).

In the film, we can see the lack of mobility especially through the female characters: *Lady 1*, *Claire*, *Lady 3* and *Jacqueline*. Feminist movements have been continuously claiming several gender equality rights for women, including the right for women to come and go as they please; also, the right for social and financial independence – claims that, among several other issues, are based on the problem that the institution of marriage has caused throughout history. Considering Jack’s essence, it is arguable that he cannot handle the implications of being a man in that society: he could not be a father, a boyfriend, a handyman. Despite that, women seem to look out for him to fill those roles in their lives. *Lady 1* was looking for a helping hand to fix her car. *Claire* only agrees to Jack entering her house under the promise of helping with her pension. *Lady 3* gets involved with Jack because she wants a father to her sons. *Jacqueline* only looks for love in Jack. Cohen says “The monster also attracts. The same creatures who terrify and interdict can evoke potent escapist fantasies; the linking of monstrosity with the forbidden makes the monster all the more appealing as a temporary egress from constraint.” (COHEN, 1996, p. 17). So these examples show us that the monster which causes these women to think that they could not possibly take care of themselves, taking away their capacity of independence

²² The *Bodies* exhibition has caused several discussions worldwide, but it is still available, that means, it has not been prohibited. You can check it at <<https://bodyworlds.com/exhibitions/>>. Access on August 31, 2020.

²³ The ethical discussion involving the differences between the use of human bodies for art and/or scientific purposes will not be deepened in this monograph, since the purpose here is to understand the relations between von Trier’s work and the works of art presented along the film. However, they are an important point of discussion for further studies.

and freedom, is also the person that they wish and trust to solve their problems and, because of this inescapable circle, they have miserable ends. What at first seems to be alone a misogynist story (and under a certain lens it is – a serial killer who mostly kills women) also develops into a story on how society creates this kind of men. The monster here is like a translation of the invisible prison that women live in every day. And from the death of Jacqueline, there is a turning point in the film in which it shows the massive killing of men, and it becomes clearer that Jack's objective is not only being a killer of women, but an architect who is concerned about the material for his creations. Besides that, he is concerned with the precision, the efficiency, the recognition. Jack worries about the perfect bullet to make his killing technique more perfect, efficient, and clean. This transition is quite interesting, because it helps us understand the core of what being a man (the monster) in that society means. As Cohen states:

Every monster is in this way a double narrative, two living stories: one that describes how the monster came to be and another, its testimony, detailing what cultural use the monster serves. The monster of prohibition exists to demarcate the bonds that hold together that system of relations we call culture, to call horrid attention to the borders that cannot—*must* not— be crossed. (COHEN, 1996, p.13)

Jack reveals that that society cannot exist without men, but at the same time shows that men could be its destruction. The things that men are expected to do (being tough, practical, efficient etc.) are also things that that society forces them to do (like being an engineer instead of an architect) and could provoke irreparable damages to the men's mind. These thoughts presented do not have the intention to justify Jack's actions – they are not justifiable – but it seems important to enlighten that men also are harmed by this cultural construction.

And finally, in thesis VII, there is a discussion on how the monsters make us know our place in history. Even though the story seems to be representing another decade in recent history, we can notice that the similarities of that society with ours is strongly represented by Jack. As said at the beginning of this chapter, classical serial killers have always received their punishments, and somehow things have changed in recent years (just as exemplified with *Dexter*, the “saint” serial killer) but Jack represents not only serial killing, but also the terrible truth that society has not changed much and, besides that, he represents someone who is aware of his own mental problems, and tries to disguise them by hiding them from society as a lot of people do – although it has started to change a little in the past ten years. Nonetheless, Jack is here, returned from the past. As Cohen (1996, p. 20) says “And when they come back, they bring not just a fuller knowledge of our place in history and the history of knowing our place,

but they bear self-knowledge, *human* knowledge...”. So, Jack asks: how tolerant are you? How active are you in society? Can you see that I am the results of your society? Are you just like me? Jack “... ask[s] us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about (...) gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression.” (COHEN, 1996, p. 20).

In essence, when we take Cohen’s seven theses into account, we could come to the conclusion that Jack is a monster. They were important to make it understandable that Jack is not only a disturbed person, but an embodiment of an equally disturbed society, that is starting to get aware of their psychological problems and still has trouble in coexisting harmoniously. Concerning the visual aspects of a monster, Jack does not have any apparent physical abnormalities. He does not have fangs like a vampire, nor sewn body parts like the creature in *Frankenstein*, or even participates in a witch cult or is half-dead like a zombie: he is a veiled being. Jack has *his art*, his productions, that are as monstrous as the productions of men.

3.2. Perversion

Another important aspect in *The House that Jack Built* is the matter of perversion. Lars von Trier develops the main character by showing some aspects of his life, since childhood throughout the crucial steps into becoming an (perverted) artist. By turning bodies into a sort of bricks to his house, a hunting trophy or a pouch for his money, Jack dehumanizes his victims, turning them into objects. According to Stoller (1975, p.4), “Perversion, the erotic form of hatred, is a fantasy, usually acted out but occasionally restricted to a daydream (...). It is a habitual, preferred aberration necessary for one’s full satisfaction, primarily motivated by hostility.” To understand this concept, we should understand hostility as “a state in which one wishes to harm an object, that differentiates it from “aggression,” which often implies only forcefulness” (STOLLER, 1975, p. 4). In perversion, hostility “takes form in a fantasy of revenge (...) and serves to convert childhood trauma to adult triumph. To create the greatest excitement, the perversion must also portray itself as an act of risk-taking.” (STOLLER, 1975, p. 4).

Observing Jack through the lenses of this theory, and how the director has built the character and the plot, it is possible to have some interesting interpretations. The words used to classify Jack’s mental issues are *Psychopathy* and *Obsessive-compulsive disorder*. The term “perversion” is only used once, by Verge, when he talks about Jack: “And in the reality you

were just a terrifying perverted Satan.” (THE HOUSE..., 2018, 40’40’’), line being followed by a dialogue in which Jack shows acceptance and understanding of his own conditions – of being an OCD patient and a psychopath – but never admitting or talking specifically about perversion.

Lars von Trier wrote this story without letting the viewer understand clearly what happened in Jack’s childhood, that is, the basis to understand Jack's perversion. Probably a strategy, the things left unsaid are important to understand the lack of things Jack might have suffered as a child and which formed his personality. What we know about Jack's past is told through well pinched flashbacks. In an attempt to rebuild Jack’s personal life timeline and how it helped define his perversion, some excerpts of dialogues will be taken to illustrate this theory.

“Jack” is a very common name. Like “João” or “Maria” for Brazilians, it is a name that contains a load of meaning which we could interpret as a Jack being a common, normal, average person. Knowing he is not, this name choice could imply that the process of dehumanization and perversion was boosted by his name, too. Jack might have felt as a “nobody” during his childhood, a strong fact which contributes to the construction of the character. Besides, this strategy has already been used by the director, for example, in *Nymphomaniac*, in which the main character is called “Joe”, and in *Antichrist*, the main characters don’t have names, they are called “He” and “She”. Probably von Trier uses this strategy as a way of marking the idea that those stories could have happened to anyone, bringing a deeper sense of realism, and providing a channel for the audience to connect easily to the characters.

When asked about his childhood, Jack affirms: “Yes, perhaps, it is in any case true that I suffered from compulsions as a child. I was completely hysterical about cleaning and could never leave a room that wasn't perfectly neat and clean.” (THE HOUSE..., 2018, 11’49’’), which might confirm that his deviation started in childhood. Then, he says: “I was a very sensitive child... profoundly afraid of playing. For example, hide and seek. In the case of hide I always chose to run in near panic into a field of reeds to hide.” (THE HOUSE..., 2018, 42’31’’). Observing this line, one could ask: if a child is feeling panic, will this child run to an open field or his own house? Of course, it is expected of a child to seek the protection of another person (mother, sibling, father, grandmother...), or at least find peace in his own room. But Jack runs. It sustains the idea that Jack’s home as a child was not a place where he felt protected, safe, which led him to his obsession with building a house. Also, he affirms being afraid of

playing: was it considered wrong to play? Or was he unable to socialize? Then, Jack speaks tenderly of the men of the village he lived in:

I loved when the men from the village cut the meadows with their scythes. Back then one spoke of the breath of the meadow. Everyone working in rhythm exhaling when they mowed, and inhaling when they pulled the scythes back. It was as if the meadow lived at its fullest in my consciousness... when I listened to its breath. (THE HOUSE..., 2018, 43 '55").

The feeling of love is only felt by Jack when he can observe a sense of union, balance, repetition, where he could feel a breath and acts as an observer of reality. Unfortunately, one could not only be an observer of reality, the need of action is inherent to the human condition. Also, connection. When, as a child, Jack comprehends that this is as far as he could reach human contact, he commits his first act of perversion: he cuts off the paw of a duckling, puts it back in the water and coldly watches the animal trying to swim. Further ahead in the film, there is a flashback of Jack, aged ten, holding a super-8 camera: “When I was ten years old, I discovered that through the negative, you could see the real inner demonic quality of the light. The dark light.” (THE HOUSE..., 2018, 53'53”). Coincidence or not, as published by Lumholdt (2003) in a series of interviews, the director got his first camera (a super-8) as a present from his mother, and soon enough he was playing a part as a male lead in a children’s television series called *Secret Garden* (1967). An engineer that wanted to be an architect. An actor that wanted to be a director. This fact could be used as an inspiration for the character, and of course, has served as arguments for film critics that affirm that Jack is Lars von Trier’s alter ego²⁴. But regarding Jack, it is possible to grasp the influence that that discovery has printed on his personality – since photography was another pleasant contact with the world (in this case, through art). Without apparent support of his mother – “I am an engineer. My mother was of the opinion that becoming an engineer was the more financially viable choice, but my really big dream was to become an architect.” (THE HOUSE..., 2018, 10'56”) and clear absence of his father (never mentioned throughout the film), Jack seems to have found in early childhood that he could only count on himself and developed an intense relationship with objects. And those things that were not objects, he turned them into objects. That is how he managed to connect and feel pleased.

²⁴ As written by Wesllen Morris in this review available at < <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/13/films/the-house-that-jack-built-review.html>>. Access on November 10, 2020.

In that sense, the object of excitement is what makes a person commit acts of perversion. Stroller says: “If one’s choice of this object – man, woman, dog, part of the body, inanimate thing, whatever – is motivated by the desire to harm the object and is sensed as an act of revenge, then the act is perverse”. The duckling scene (THE HOUSE..., 2018, 44’50’’) mentioned above perfectly illustrates Jack’s development towards being a serial killer: this perverted act shows the moment when he starts seeing what is alive as an object that could be manipulated, controlled. An act of vengeance against the lack of control, lack of emotional protection and manipulation he has suffered from his parents. He lacked a house, so he felt the necessity of building one, and he actually did, but in a perverse way. And according to Jack’s acts and thoughts, it is observable that his perversion is expressed not through his murders, but through art. The murders are only part of the artistic process.

The first and second incidents in the film serve as a study for Jack. He lacked the ability to kill, he still was very tormented by OCD and had no artistic skills – although he clearly knows a lot about art history. The first lady (1st incident) is killed in impetuously. The car jack used as a weapon (of all objects that could have been used, von Trier picks one whose name is the same as his protagonist’s) implies that that was the moment when Jack realizes his excitement. Him as the object that can destroy another object as revenge, since the first lady mocks him, does not take him seriously, just as his parents did not. There are even speculations that this first murder only happened in Jack’s imagination²⁵, being the car jack a symbol of his inner desires and, perhaps, that is why the first murder presented went poorly. He carelessly rides with the victim, kills her in the middle of the street and dumps her car and body in a brook. These choices reflect the development of the character’s perversion: the will to have excitement by taking risk.

The risk-taking continues with Claire (2nd incident). Jack exposes himself at her doorway and manages to enter her house. Taken by his excitement, he tries to asphyxiate her, but she does not die. Jack deeply regrets and tries to comfort her and blames himself for not being perfect at performing the act. Despite that, he perfectly cleans the murder scene, and he photographs it. It leads us to the understanding that he had already started developing his poesis in the artistic field, but this is portrayed by von Trier as an immature, goofy process, since there is some comic relief during this part of the film: the slow motion shots where Jack imagines

²⁵ As the actor Matt Dylon says in this interview available at <<https://www.indiewire.com/2018/12/matt-dillon-interview-lars-von-trier-the-house-that-jack-built-1202028057/>>. Access on November 10, 2020.

blood stains that were not wiped after the murder. Also, during this cut, the character's perversion development shows itself through objectification, which is marked by the bodies that serve as models, mannequins. The photographs have a questionable taste: poor lighting, handmade quality, and mediocre composition. Questionable because Jack's inspiration is set in consecrated artists, from the Gothic to Modernism, in which composition and balance was an important matter, where the representation of beauty based on idealized perfection was not the most important subject (even though these ideas had changed very much over these periods) but he ends up making photographs that resemble Kitsch Art²⁶. Adding up the lack of social skills to his repressed artistic side, it is possible that he could not permit himself being part of an art school, or an artistic group in which he could develop his talents. The hint to this idea is summarized during the 2nd incident, where 1) Jack names himself as "Mr. Sophistication" – a very contradictory name given by himself and that contrasts directly with his poor photography – and 2) the second woman killed is credited as "female student" in the credits. Despite the terrible qualities as an artist, the act of photographing is "owning the thing that is being photographed. It means getting involved in a certain relation with the world which resembles itself to knowledge and, for that reason, with power." (my translation)²⁷. These were steps Jack had to take to affirm himself as a powerful person, which in his distorted mind is like being an artist. This sense of power is also worked by von Trier by the idea that the character has about fame. A distorted idea of fame, and especially recognition, that needs to be reached at any costs. By signing his pictures under that pseudonym and getting published at the local newspaper, which is a small thing compared to what an artist can reach in a career, Jack satisfies not only his will to harm but also his will of revenge by believing the media recognizes him. This idea of recognition is also supported by Jack's concept of holy forces. Since he got away with the first murder, where he parked the woman's car in a way that could be seen from the road but nobody ever found it and with the second murder, the trail of blood left by the body on the road is miraculously washed away by rain, and Jack attributes this to the divine:

The great rain! It washed away the long track from my escape. Now, I don't consider myself a decidedly devoted man of faith. Which, of course, is a totally crazy thing to say considering our present situation but I must admit... I experienced the rain, the

²⁶ To know a little more about this concept, there is this article available at < <https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/kitsch-art>>. Access on November 10, 2020.

²⁷ "apropriarmo-nos da coisa fotografada. Significa envolvermo-nos numa certa relação com o mundo que se assemelha ao conhecimento e, por isso, ao poder." (SONTAG, 1986, p. 14)

fiercest I have ever seen as a kind of a blessing. And the murder as a kind of liberation. I felt I had a higher protector. (THE HOUSE..., 2018, 39'56).

He says that he felt like he had a higher protector. As previously mentioned, Jack had a lack of protection as a child. He ran when he felt scared and did not seek the protection of his family. This divine sign helped him overcome his OCD, but not his intrinsic perversion: "The fact is, when, after several more murders I felt my OCD diminish I started to take greater chances. This time I was completely dissatisfied with the pictures, so I decided to take new ones." (THE HOUSE..., 2018, 47'30''). Moreover, at this moment the family subject is brought up in the plot, and Jack refers to family not as reality, but just as a concept: "Need? Because I never had a family? No, I can't say that it did. But the concept of family actually inspired one of my greatest works." (THE HOUSE..., 2018, 56'24'')

That dissatisfaction, clearly connected to skills development and family, led Jack to the 3rd incident, where the objectification becomes clearer. He treats his victims (the mother and her children) as targets. He uses these victims as snipers use targets to practice shooting. After killing them all, he pays homage to the trophy parade, which was very common tradition in Europe, where the animals killed during a hunt were displayed on the ground accordingly to its status:

Image 32: Documentary scene about the trophy parade.



Source: *The House...* (2018, 1h00'36'')

Image 33: The bodies in the same display as the trophy parade.



Source: *The House...* (2018, 1h10'44'')

Observing Jack's artistic process and trying to set aside the horror of the murders, it is possible to sense that this is the moment when Jack's process starts having some refinement. He has a model and makes a rereading of the work, based on reality (the hunting sprees) and art (several Baroque still-life paintings of dead animals were shown before the murder scene occurs). At this point, Jack left behind photography to dedicate himself to bigger endeavors. When Jack photographed, he was doubly violating his victims: "... there is something predatorial in the act of registering an image. Photographing people is to violate them, seeing them as they never see themselves, knowing them as they would never know themselves; it is, transforming them into objects that can be symbolically possessed." (my translation)²⁸. However, the display of the bodies evokes a common contemporary art form: site specific intervention. Here, Jack has a big monologue about how death is capable of providing the perfect material for art. Throughout the film, Jack mentions he is trying to build a house. He had tried several materials and designs, but he was never satisfied because it was not iconic. After some thought, he came to the conclusion that the problem was with the material. That made him start making sculptures with the bodies, sculpture being one of the most consecrated forms of art – obviously more than photography and interventions (which are relatively new in comparison to sculpture and other classic techniques). To demonstrate this evolution, the comic reliefs of the film diminish, and Jack does not show as many OCD episodes as before.

²⁸ "... existe qualquer coisa de predatório no acto de registrar uma imagem. Fotografar pessoas é violá-las, vendo-as como elas nunca se vêem, conhecendo-as como elas nunca se poderão conhecer; é transformá-las em objetos que podem ser possuídas simbolicamente." (SONTAG, 1986, p. 23).

At this point of the film, Jack has a long conversation with Verge, about how death provides the “divine material” for art. For him, art must be iconic. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, an icon is “a sign (such as a word or graphic symbol) whose form suggests its meaning”²⁹. Jack talks about the impact of icons in society:

What I'm getting at is this: as disinclined as the world is to acknowledge the beauty of decay, it's just as disinclined to give credit to those, no, credit to us who create the real icons of this planet. We are deemed the ultimate evil. All the icons that have had and always will have an impact on the world are, for me, extravagant art. (THE HOUSE..., 2018, 1h48'28’’).

That means that Jack only believes in an art that truly makes a huge impact on society, one that lasts for long years, decades, centuries. Things that are made to last and has a form that suggests its meaning. Being dead bodies the ultimate material, it becomes a perfect material for creating death icons (in Jack’s concept). To illustrate this, von Trier used several shots, drawings, and documentaries about the Second World War. Jack stands in a place where he believes he cannot be punished,

Some people claim that the atrocities we commit in our fiction are those inner desires which we cannot commit in our controlled civilization. So they are expressed instead through our art. I don't agree. I believe heaven and hell are one and the same. The soul belongs to heaven and the body to hell. The soul is reason and the body is all the dangerous things, for example art and icons. (THE HOUSE..., 2018, 1h50'58’’).

And that is why he makes his art without any remorse. He takes revenge at the society that had dehumanized him by dehumanizing people.

In the 4th incident, the matter of love is brought up. Verge affirms that Jack’s intention of using human bodies as material for sculptures was a sign of the need of love. Jack admits to having “a romance”, but once again the character follows the pattern of harassing the victim to achieve revenge, and for that matter, putting himself into a risk-taking situation. At this point, Jack is totally confident about his skills, and feels invincible. Jacqueline, who Jack calls ‘Simple’, is an average woman living an average life, and that Jack cannot handle. In his opinion, she is not “special”, nor does she have a deep sense of culture. This is demonstrated in the plot when Jack starts asking her questions and she is never sure about her answers:

²⁹ Available at <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/icon#learn-more>>. Access on November 10, 2020.

Jack: Have you figured out the difference between lions and tigers?
 Jacqueline: Tigers have stripes.
 Jack: And where do they live?
 Jacqueline: Africa?
 Jack: And the difference between an architect and an engineer?
 Jacqueline: Architect draws houses?
 Jack: And an engineer?
 Jacqueline: Also draws houses?
 Jack: You call that a difference? An engineer reads music, an architect plays music, if that's something your limited brain can process.
 Jacqueline: Why do you always have to be so cruel? I'm not completely stupid. (THE HOUSE..., 2018 - 1h21'48'')

Also, her name is like a female version of Jack, and that is why he refuses calling her name: he thinks they are not on the same level. Her existence simultaneously hurts his ego and fascinates him, causing “strong feelings” on him. Not being able to handle those feelings, Jack reduces her to an object, saying that she has “great tits”. He picks up this one characteristic and, according to his twisted mind, turns it into an “small icon”: he sews her breast into a coin pouch. It seems like it is another joke made by the director, since Jack acts like a cultured man, talking about art, icons and other elitist affairs, and putting himself in the same level of Nazi dictators, but actually he could not even create – by his own standards – a true icon, he is only capable of roughly sewing a piece of skin to make a poorly designed pouch.

The last incident is only a confirmation of Jack’s perversion, summed up in the incapacity to humanly relate to anyone and how his obsession had only changed its shape – the cleaning obsession has turned into a necessity of a perfect strategy to make art. Jack loses control and starts making huge mistakes, leaving trails of destruction wherever he passes. He reaches his limit, since he forgets that what he wanted, in the first place, was to build a house. As a symbol, a house is

“humanity itself, (...). We use the word "house" to refer to a family line (...). In Jungian psychology, the house is an important symbol, in dreams, for example: "There are important dreams involving the house in general . . . What happens inside it, happens within ourselves. We often are the house. Of course, Freudian psychology associates the house with the woman, the mother, in a sexual or childbearing sense; and the nature of a house is in fact more feminine or maternal than masculine.” (BIEDERMANN, 1992, p. 179)

In that sense, we have a confirmation of Jack’s childhood deviation. All his issues can be summarized in this lack of a house – being this house a psychological support or even the comfort of a parent’s hug. Since he did not have a strong model of a house, we can understand

why it was so hard for him to find a way to build it on his own. And when he finally manages to make one due to his perversion, it comes out as totally monstrous and unacceptable.

In essence, the perverse act happens in “between anxiety and boredom in a search for the right sort of risk to create excitement” (STOLLER, 1975, p. 9). After years of seeking for excitement, Jack finds it in art creation, but loses himself in it. The incidents in the film are illustrations of this circle, where the creator makes himself blind by his own idea of greatness, having no sense of respect, or what is right or wrong, seeing everything in the world as objects. But although we understand Jack’s actions are unjustifiable, at the same time we can also understand that it happened due to the environment Jack has lived his life during childhood.

4. *THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT AS A PIECE OF ART ITSELF*

Art is not about aesthetics, it is about the strange and the disturbing, presented theatrically, as an imaginary theatrical world you are being invited to explore, through one or more of any number of very diverse presentational media: paintings, music, opera, ballet, video, performance, sound, mime, whatever.

Art is meant to beguile, and to fascinate, but it has to be of a certain order of fascination and beguilement: the disturbing, the unsettling. Ordinary theatrical fascination is just plain fascination; unsettling theatrical fascination is art. (ZAAIMAN, 2015)

4.1. Relations between museums, art, and von Trier's cinema

It could possibly feel like a cliché to say that most people feel that art must be something beautiful. Not many people go to art museums, but if they do go, a lot of them try to get in touch with a beautiful thing that probably will make them feel good. I have worked in several museums in Porto Alegre for more than five years, and the recipe was almost always the same: people see the pieces of art and stand in the front of them for no more than five minutes - if the work is agreeable, and if it's not, with a blink of an eye they dismiss it and go off to the next one: "Most visitors walk through exhibitions and museums with disconcerting speed. Stopping here and there in the front of specific images before resuming walking, they do not seem prepared to analyze anything during a substantial interval of time"³⁰ (my translation). People are free to act this way, they are not obliged to think and appreciate every single work of art there is; but what is worrying is this lack of will to understand, or even worse, the artist's lack of will to be understood. If there is a particular kind of exhibition in which all of the works are not visually pleasant, or even if they are pleasant and but its significance is not accessible, people basically do the same thing: not spending more than fifteen minutes in an exhibition that would require a whole afternoon for full appreciation, or at least reflect about. On the other hand, when it comes to the classics, people tend to instantly become very interested. I have seen people standing for almost an hour in the front of a single da Vinci, Goya, Monet. Clearly such engagement is not about the knowledge the person has about the work of art itself, but it is about the underlying power of some kind of common sense "If it is a da Vinci, then it is good

³⁰ "A maioria dos visitantes passeia pelas exposições e pelos museus com rapidez desconcertante. Parando aqui e ali diante de imagens específicas antes de retomar a caminhada, eles não parecem preparados para analisar nada durante um intervalo de tempo substancial." (CORK, 2011, p.6)

and I must appreciate it”: they already know that work is important, so they at least try to understand why by looking at it.

This does not mean that people should be blamed for their lack of interest in discovering new things. Many people have understood that the purpose of art has somehow changed or is changing, and it is not only about the technique, sensations or feelings it could provoke. Zaiman (2015, p.2) points out, “in order to truly appreciate modern art, you are forced to go beyond the aesthetic sensations of the art object itself, and take an immersive, imaginative plunge into the world it is revealing.” Unfortunately, there is an impression that most people do not care much about visual arts (and it has not been the intention of this monograph to go deep into people's reasons) and they end up missing an important part of what being human means – understanding the world as a way to understand themselves. In this scenario, artists have struggled to interest people in their points of view (especially those made in established techniques such as painting, engraving, sculpture, ceramics etc.), because “the idea of having to contemplate a whole new perspective on the arts has proved hugely difficult, if not impossible” (ZAIMANN, 2015, p.2).

In that sense, it is interesting that this monograph is being written amid a pandemic. We are all living it. Imagine any small sculpture and a film of any kind in this pandemic scenario. Involving someone in a sculpture's story seems – and possibly is – much harder than in a film. It is possible to observe the impact of these two medias in today's world: a film can be seen in a theater or easily streamed at home, offering hours of entertainment. If the film is not good, sometimes people watch it just to see what is going to happen – or at least spend fifteen minutes to be sure about the verdict. On the other hand, we could have a small sculpture with an amazing story behind it, and as amazing as this sculpture can be, people cannot even see it in person, since all the museums are closed, and a photograph of it would never substitute the real experience. This also illustrates a reality without the pandemic, since most people in the world do not have access to museums or arts galleries – by lack of time, money, interest, or the feeling of not belonging. At the same time, “Our culture longs for instant visual stimuli. We are invaded, all the time, by fast and tireless situations of images that steal our attention.” (my translation)³¹. Therefore, it feels like things must be *big* to have an impact: outstanding billboards, millions of views on a YouTube channel, millions of followers on Instagram, a

³¹ “Nossa cultural anseia por estímulos visuais instantâneos. Somos invadidos, o tempo todo, por situações rápidas e incansáveis de imagens que roubam nossa atenção.” (CORK, 2011, p. 6)

hundred meters tall sculpture, a landfill large photography³², a cinema screen. If you have this, you have someone's attention.

Film directors know it, and von Trier uses it in *The House that Jack Built* as a way of exploring and making the viewers experience some art concepts through cinema. As already discussed, it was a risky strategy used by the director in order to function as a mediator of his own production. Besides presenting a tense structure, graphic images were used to endorse the psychological tension. This mix of information led viewers and critics to several interpretations, which are constantly influenced by the director's *persona*. As an example of a review, we have Álvaro Álvarez Tostado (2018), who stated:

“*The House That Jack Built* is a boring, desperate attempt from Lars von Trier to build an apologetic artistic statement to justify his persona. He literally invites the audience to judge Jack through his works, not his acts. This should come as no surprise after his infamous declarations on Hitler and the allegations of abuse and exploitation in his films, whereas the Danish director's filmography is nothing short of impressive despite some divisive features. [...] It is pitiful to witness an otherwise resourceful director rely on grotesque explicit violence as his dominant narrative strategy.”³³

This is an example of many other reviews that follow the same argument. In contrast to this judgment where the opinion is based on the biography of the director, there are some other authors such John Manoussakis, who have been writing about von Trier taking the production as the main point of consideration. The author understands that von Trier has worked under a *theological provenance perspective*, in which he develops his trilogies:

- Golden Heart trilogy: *Breaking the Waves* (1996), *The Idiots* (1998) and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000)³⁴;
- Land of Opportunities trilogy: *Dogville* (2003), *Manderlay* (2005) and *Washington* (yet to be made)³⁵;
- Depression trilogy: *Antichrist* (2009), *Melancholia* (2011) and *Nymphomaniac* (Vol. I and II) (2013)³⁶.

³² It refers to Vik Muniz's works presented in the documentary *Waste land* (2011).

³³ Available at < <https://icsfilm.org/reviews/cannes-2018-review-the-house-that-jack-built-lars-von-trier/>>. Access on November 08, 2020.

³⁴ According to < <https://www.imdb.com/list/ls063209676/>, >. Access on November 08, 2020.

³⁵ According to < <https://www.imdb.com/list/ls063206057/>, >. Access on November 08, 2020.

³⁶ According to < <https://www.imdb.com/list/ls064844985/>, >. Access on November 08, 2020.

Approaching such perspective through cinema can be considered not an easy task, and yet necessary. By always bringing on taboo themes and causing a fuss, the idea of being appealing instead of provocative is consolidated. It is possible to observe that *The House that Jack Built* does not belong to any of those trilogies, or any trilogy yet named by the director or cinema connoisseurs. In his work, Manoussakis (2020) categorized and explored one film from each trilogy, including *The House that Jack Built*. Corresponding to a theological topic, the films were said to be about (a) On Salvation (*Breaking the Waves*); (b) On Incarnation (*Dogville*); (c) On Grace (*Nymphomaniac*) and (d) On Creation (*The House that Jack Built*). By writing a story where creation is discussed, von Trier discusses both artistic and divine creation: life. The title of the film indicates the house is the main subject. In the beginning, Jack says the material is the most important item in the planning of a construction. Biederman (1992) states we are the house, in the sense that we live inside our body, therefore, it is our first and final house, our own temple. Discussing the same idea, Manoussakis (2020) states:

No temple, however, is consecrated without a sacrifice (literary, “to make sacred” from *sacer* and *facere*), that is, without the shedding of blood. So Jack offers his sacrificial victims at the altar of to *kalon*. If the Great Rain that washes away the traces of Jack’s murders—an echo from Elijah’s story in respect to both, the rain but also the slaughtering of Baal’s priests—is an omen, then it is omen confirming that the gods have looked favorably upon his “sacrifices.” (p. 8)

Therefore, to build an iconic, divine house, Jack comes to the conclusion that he had to use the divine material, the organic material of human bodies. There is no easy way to represent this idea without being cruel, and if the director had chosen to do it in a smooth way, it would have been just another representation where human lives are not given the proper respect they deserve. Killing a person in order to make art is one of the most vicious ideas one could have, and yet the feasibility is shocking. The scenes live up to that quality. It sounds easier to blame the art creator for being the monster than accepting the hard truth that the monsters are among us, closer than imaginable, and not taking action to help solving the problem.

Considering this point of view, it is possible to grasp the director’s intention in making strong images to illustrate his ideas. War and misogyny, the two subjects that stand out in a first impression of the film, have led and still lead men to do terrible things. Also, many of these terrible things were done in the name of faith, and they tend to be hidden and not discussed. It is understandable the attempt in hiding something that one is not proud of having done, however, by keeping it aside there is a higher chance of committing the same mistakes. By

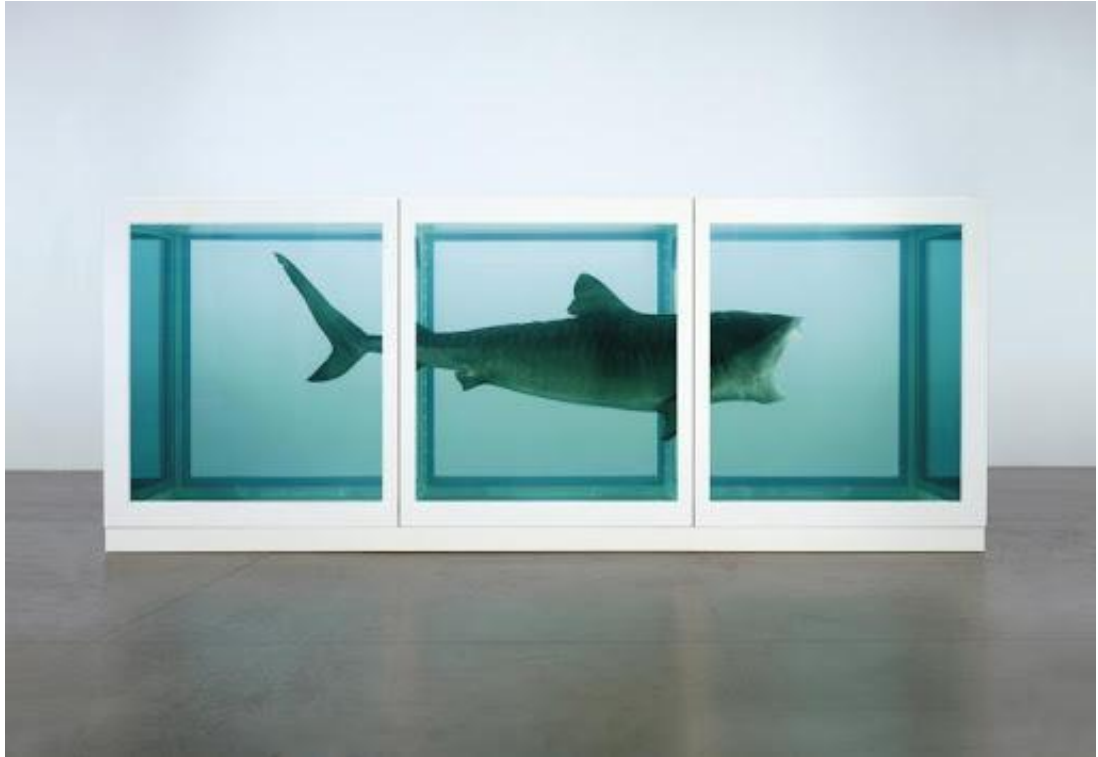
bringing these subjects to the surface is one of many roles that artists should engage in society. The cinema screen is powerful, and Lars von Trier's attempt to bring those important subjects to the public should not be taken for granted. It is a learning moment.

Thus, these themes are presented in a controlled environment, in which the viewer experiences the cruelty of life and its inevitable end, being mediated by the film, which helps building and remembering references. The immersive experience that *The House that Jack Built* provides is deeply connected to the passage of time, and it is an attempt to control the pace of digesting the images – something museums and some art works are yet not able to achieve. As a visual strategy to converge to those ideas, paintings appear as flashes, not giving enough time to look at them, reproducing the timing experience of a museum, but with a larger visual impact. It converses and contrasts with the scenes where slow motion is used. These scenes work as a timer to appreciate the visuals, providing time to reflect. The opposition of these two situations illustrates the relationship people have with art and cinema nowadays, and by doing this, the director brings these two medias closer, therefore, producing a moment to equally appreciate them.

4.2. A possible dialogue with a contemporary artist

When I first saw *The House that Jack Built*, one of the persistent ideas in my mind was “Lars von Trier is clearly trying to dialogue with Damien Hirst. Why?”. Specifically, the possibility is about a dialogue with the work *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991). Working with the idea of a superior, sublime, divine work of art, Jack's discourse is about how death can be the material to achieve great results. Hirst's work consists of a real thirteen-foot tiger shark preserved in a formaldehyde solution inside of a steel and glass vitrine tank, divided into three cubes.

Image 44: Damien Hirst, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1991.



Source: Photographed by Prudence Cuming Associates. Available at < <http://www.damienhirst.com/the-physical-impossibility-of>>. Accessed on September 07, 2020.

Jack wanted to make iconic art. This work is considered one of the most iconic images of contemporary art, and it also converses with the idea of sublime: a concept that has been studied throughout history and keeps returning to the present (WHITE, 2010). The author also states that

A key aspect of the recent resurgence of the sublime as a subject for study has undoubtedly been its relevance as an aesthetic of terrible nature, at a moment when, with growing fears about environmental catastrophe, nature has reappeared as a limit to human power, progress and wealth, something which even threatens to destroy us. (WHITE, 2010)

Regarding the same train of thought, von Trier updates the symbol used to express the idea of nature being a thread – the shark is replaced by men:

Image 45: This is the house that Jack built.



Source: *The House...* (2018, 2h18'12'').

The connection between these two works becomes clearer when their technical aspects are compared. It is interesting to notice that even though both works are made in different media, they still have similar compositions: the use of cold colors, a dead subject, the centralized position of the subject inside a rectangle divided into two columns/lines. The cold colors reflect the quietness of the moment, leading to contemplation. The subjects' centralized position combined with the division of the area into three quadrants brings a sense of balance and sophistication. The same division was made by the artists of the Renaissance in order to reach maximum balance. The clash of the balance of the composition with the baffling theme of the works is striking.

Damien Hirst is considered one of the most successful artists of Contemporary Art, almost impossible to be unnoticed by art connoisseurs. Lars von Trier has demonstrated being part of this team, especially after releasing *The House that Jack Built*. So, it is not impossible to speculate about his reference, especially when von Trier himself was planning about making a film in which *creation* is one of the main subjects. Hirst decided to make art out of dead animals and, what could possibly be the next step for art? Sculpting with actual human bodies? As previously said, the exhibition *Bodies* has already done it somehow, but its purpose is not artistic: “The primary goal of the exhibition creators, Dr. Angelina Whalley and Dr. Gunther von Hagens, is preventive healthcare.”³⁷. This exhibition is worldwide famous and has received

³⁷ Available at <<https://bodyworlds.com/about/philosophy/>>. Access on November 30, 2020.

over fifty million visitors. An important question to ask is this: the acceptance of the public would be different if the purpose of this work were merely artistic? Would an artist receive legislative permission to use human bodies with that purpose? Wouldn't it be as educational as the *Bodies* exhibition? This is a very interesting ethical discussion, and *The House that Jack Built* makes part of it. The formal elements presented by von Trier does not regard the *Bodies* exhibition, although the connection seems to be clear. The director's strategy might have been to visually associate the house that Jack built to a work that is considered *art*, specifically, to elucidate the question of what the limits of art would be – so Hirst's work seem a good fit. Jack might have been von Trier's attempt to answer to this taboo question (or at least reflect about it), and to reach maximum response, the images in the film *had to be* as striking as possible.

Zaaiman (2015, p. 5) implies that Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* is a true work of art. He states that “in order to truly appreciate modern art, you are forced to go beyond the aesthetic sensations of art object itself, and take an immersive, imaginative plunge into the world it is revealing” (ZAAIMAN, 2025, p. 2), meaning that for something to be considered as art, it should not be merely a representation of the world, an aesthetic or a crafted material. The artist must be capable of inviting us to know and experience what could be explained as a supreme expression of the world they have created. In that sense, and if to put it into simple words, Hirst exposes the viewers of his work to a meeting with death (represented by the presence of a dead shark), and the impossibility of this meeting occurring in the viewers body. Thus, this experience of meeting/experiencing death could only occur in the viewers' imagination, but never physically (as the title of the work proposes). This can lead to several different interpretations, and among them we could think that Hirst is telling us that we will never be able to physically experience death, since when we die, we cannot feel our bodies anymore. Hirst's work places death in the front of the viewer, which may cause disturbance and strangeness:

Hirst echoes Burke's fascination, for example, with the body, mortality, violence, pain and power. For Burke, such effects elicit ‘the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling’,⁵ and it is in these terms that he defines the sublime. Hirst, too, orients his production towards this maximum of affect. (WHITE, 2010)

If the shark were not real, would the work have the same impact? If the shark were a perfect sculpted material, it would still be merely a representation. It is important here to point out that Hirst has had several issues with animal protection groups and it has been published in

the media, since the animals he uses in his works (not only a shark, but other animals were supposedly sacrificed in the name of his art) do not have a clear source of provenance³⁸. As insane as it might sound, if Lars von Trier were to take the next step, and try to make art with human bodies, he would probably get a life sentence. Fortunately, von Trier did not need dead animals or dead human bodies to make a (shocking) statement.

Art is “a form of theater (...) about the theatrical moment which calls for a break with ordinary thought and invites the audience into a form of entertainment” (ZAAIMAN, 2015, p. 5). Considering that, one could say that when people go to the cinema, or to an art exhibition, they expect to be amused. One of the things von Trier did with *The House that Jack Built* was to play with the conventions of the movie theater: starting the film with what Zaaiman (2015, p. 6) names a ‘call to order’, von Trier takes off the images of the film and starts Jack’s narrative with a one-minute long black screen: people expect to see images when they go to the cinema. Then, he makes you feel empathy for the serial-killer’s disease: that is also disturbing, because people do not want to feel related to a murder. After that, the director pulls off a series of terrible, unbearable and heartbreaking violence scenes, which actually revolted film viewers to the point of leaving the theater earlier, as mentioned before³⁹. The smashing of the Lady 1’s face, the misguided suffocation of Claire, the family hunt, the mutilation of Jacqueline’s breasts are all triggers, and they function exactly like Hirst’s shark: “The afterlife of the sublime for Hirst, then, is a means to push his audience’s buttons. Hirst has thus spoken of his interest in the shark, for the ‘really powerful kind of horror’ that it produces, and as a ‘universal trigger’.” (WHITE, 2010).

This study allows the conclusion that even though there is no evidence in literature of the relations between Lars von Triers and Damien Hirst’s works, yet the similarities in technical aspects and meaning are intriguing. Being two protruding artists, they seem to bring similar speeches that consider the reality in the world today. By bringing the subject of death, the artists illustrate the human’s tendency to reflect about one of the biggest questions of life: the life and death experience.

³⁸ This is one of the articles that has been published about his issue, available at < <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4420794/Damien-Hirst-hit-claims-animals-killed-art.html>>. Access on November 08, 2020.

³⁹ Here is one of the articles that talks about what happened in Cannes: <https://us.blastingnews.com/showbiz-tv/2018/05/the-house-that-jack-built-shocks-the-cannes-audience-002576797.html> , Access on: November 08, 2020.

5. FINAL REMARKS

This monograph aimed at understanding the layers of references (utterances) present in the latest Lars von Trier film in order to understand its ideologeme. The analysis of the story and main character were the bases for this study, and to gather that information, was a challenge worth taking. The intertextual analysis of the utterances were important findings in the understanding of the differences of opinion in relation to the work and to the director. Nevertheless, this study was not able to encompass all the references, since the film has a considerable range of subjects. Further research can still provide many interesting readings, such as the ethical questions involving art creation, the misogyny of Jack's actions, the importance of photography in Jack's life or his relationships with men (the way he treated Verge, Sonny, the police officers, Grumpy, George, Glenn, S.P. and his five male final victims).

The art works presented during the film were important to understand Jack's story and intentions. He rambles on what art is and his impetus to create, leaving aside the actual reasons. These reasons are brought through the flashbacks and the things left unsaid, and also through the art brought visually and audibly by the director during Jack's speeches, which contrasted with Jack's inspirations. Also, the choices of the form of the scenes (slow-motion, black screen time, division in chapters) are devices that were chosen to provide, in this film, the experience of having a guided visit to a museum. Finally, the film does not fit in a specific genre, despite the director's well-known desire to make a genre film. When questioned about his interest in making genre films (during the filming of *Antichrist*), von Trier digresses: "I think I've written a horror film but let's see, maybe it's not. Maybe it's only horrific in the concept of the film [pause]. I am trying anyway, you know, but every time I try to [make a genre film] people tell me that it's not, but I'm trying, I'm trying." (BADLEY, 2010, p. 170).

The results of the study also point out that the main aspect that sheds light over all the findings in the reading of the artworks, songs, literary works is *tension* between opposite ideas. This tension is marked by the contrasts: Jack was not special *versus* Jack wants to be special; the plot was inspired by the structure of a cumulative tale – a simple rhythmic rhyme *versus* the plot was inspired by the structure *The Divine Comedy* – one of the greatest works of literature; Jack consumes elitist music *versus* Jack is represented by popular music; Jack is a serial killer *versus* Jack is an artist. Furthermore, the psychological and social analysis of Jack tried to illustrate how he is a by-product not only from the brains of the director, but also from our

society. Some will think it through, but it is never easy to accept or assume that our society is this sick. To watch a film showing this reality, in a nerve-wracking manner as von Trier has done, is not an easy pill to swallow, though it is necessary.

During the analysis, I tried to provide a reading based on the meaning of those utterances regarding their relation to the film, with the objective of not being biased. However, I ended up noticing the real reason why the film has provoked me to make so many questions: the method Lars von Trier adopted to develop his ideas reminded me of my job as a languages and art teacher, and I felt it deeply. Being misunderstood is an apparatus that teachers must have set from factory, and von Trier has had his own dose of disagreements. Of course, history has told different stories about teachers and Lars von Trier, and all of them have their own share of guilt. As Pink Floyd sang “We don’t need no education / we don’t need no thought control / No dark sarcasm in the classroom / Teachers leave them kids alone” (WATERS, 1979). Teachers still pay for history. Society still condemns teachers at the same amount they give them respect (maybe?). However, are not we all humans? Don’t we have a system for judging criminals? Was Jack a criminal when he was a child? Did he not pay for his choices? Is there a problem in paying for the sins we have committed and then trying to have a fresh start? I am not trying to advocate for the director, nor the character or either reduce the director’s work to this idea, but the need to talk about it in this conclusion was urgent, and it is my interpretation of what I grasped.

When you teach, you are supposed to mediate. The conduction of the students towards their own readings must be based on evidence. If there is one thing that is printed on my mind about teaching, especially regarding art teaching (but it also works for literature and language teaching) is that you should contextualize, appreciate, and practice. These three words are part of Ana Mae Barbosa methodology in Art teaching, which serves as a basis for the *Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais* (BRASIL, 1999). Guiding the viewers with several different references was von Trier's way to mediate his own creation in cinema, just as teachers do in their classes when they are teaching a new subject or when they are writing a class plan. Everything must be written and elaborated for a reason and there must be an objective. In an art class, we contextualize the works of art in order to help the students appreciate and think about them, and after that, they must practice by creating texts. That is exactly what I did when I decided to write this monograph. Lars von Trier’s mediation and invitation to practice was accepted.

However, despite of von Trier's efforts, I question myself about the efficiency and range achieved by the director's ideas.

Jack being a monster is what brought me here. Jack embodies our fears, assumptions, and anxieties; he turns at us and asks: I know I am despicable, but aren't you a little bit like me? "These monsters ask us how we perceive the world, (...). They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance towards its expression. They ask us why we have created them." (COHEN, 1996, p. 20). The Danish director built this film, and character, so that we could reflect on those questions and understand that maybe our contemporary monsters do not always look like vampires and zombies – they can resemble the ordinary and be closer than we think. If this film crosses your way and watching it becomes an unbearable task, ask yourself why.

In conclusion, the final message from *The House of Jack Built* is clear: humans must pay for their mistakes. The idea of impunity is an illusion: Jack thought he was protected by the divine, but in truth he lived a stressful, unhappy life, pursuing to equal himself to God, the creator. Being an elitist did not make him superior, it actually gave him a worst place in hell: instead of being in the seventh circle, of the ones who committed violence against others, he ended up in the ninth circle, the deepest hell, the one of the traitors and hypocrites. And it only happens because Jack's envy, his greatest sin, translated by the wish of being and having something he was not meant to be and have.

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ANNEXES

ANNEX 1 - *Dogme-95 Manifesto*, written in 1995 by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg. Available at < <http://www.dogme95.dk/the-vow-of-chastity/>> . Access on November 08, 2020.

“DOGMA 95

DOGMA 95 is a collection of movie directors founded in Copenhagen in spring 1995.

DOGMA 95 has the expressed goal of countering "certain tendencies" in the cinema today.

DOGMA 95 is a rescue action!

In 1960 enough was enough! The movie was dead and called for resurrection. The goal was correct but the means were not! The new wave proved to be a ripple that washed ashore and turned to muck.

Slogans of individualism and freedom created works for a while, but no changes. The wave was up for grabs, like the directors themselves. The wave was never stronger than the men behind it. The anti-bourgeois cinema itself became bourgeois, because the foundations upon which its theories were based was the bourgeois perception of art. The auteur concept was bourgeois romanticism from the very start and thereby... false!

To DOGMA 95 cinema is not individual!

Today a technological storm is raging, the result of which will be the ultimate democratization of the cinema. For the first time, anyone can make movies. But the more accessible the medium becomes, the more important the avant-garde. It is no accident that the phrase "avant-garde" has military connotations. Discipline is the answer... we must put our movies into uniform, because the individual movie will be decadent by definition!

DOGMA 95 counters the individual movie by the principle of presenting an indisputable set of rules known as THE VOW OF CHASTITY.

In 1960 enough was enough! The movie had been cosmeticized to death, they said; yet since then the use of cosmetics has exploded.

The "supreme" task of the decadent movie-makers is to fool the audience. Is that what we are so proud of? Is that what the "100 years" have brought us? Illusions via which emotions can be communicated?... By the individual artist's free choice of trickery?

Predictability (dramaturgy) has become the golden calf around which we dance. Having the characters' inner lives justify the plot is too complicated, and not "high art". As never before, the superficial action and the superficial movie are receiving all the praise.

The result is barren. An illusion of pathos and an illusion of love.

To DOGMA 95 the movie is not illusion!

Today a technological storm is raging of which the result is the elevation of cosmetics to God. By using new technology anyone at any time can wash the last grains of truth away in the deadly embrace of sensation. The illusions are everything the movie can hide behind.

DOGMA 95 counters the movie of illusion by the presentation of an indisputable set of rules know as THE VOW OF CHASTITY.”

ANNEX 2 - *The Vow of Chastity*, written in 1995 by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg. Available at: <http://www.dogme95.dk/the-vow-of-chastity/>. Access on November 08, 2020.

“THE VOW OF CHASTITY

I swear to submit to the following set of rules drawn up and confirmed by DOGMA 95: Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where this prop is to be found).

The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot.)

The camera must be hand-held. Any movement or immobility attainable in the hand is permitted.

The movie must be in color. Special lighting is not acceptable. (If there is too little light for exposure the scene must be cut or a single lamp be attached to the camera.)

Optical work and filters are forbidden.

The movie must not contain superficial action. (Murders, weapons, etc. must not occur.)

Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say that the movie takes place here and now.)

Genre movies are not acceptable.

The movie format must be Academy 35 mm.

The director must not be credited.

Furthermore I swear as a director to refrain from personal taste! I am no longer an artist. I swear to refrain from creating a “work”, as I regard the instant as more important than the whole. My supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and settings. I swear to do so by all the means available and at the cost of any good taste and any aesthetic considerations.

Thus I make my VOW OF CHASTITY.

Copenhagen, Monday 13 March 1995

On behalf of DOGMA 95

Lars von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg”

ANNEX 3 - *The House that Jack Built* Nursery rhyme (THE..., 1982, p. 1 - 12):

This is the house that Jack built.

This is the cat

That chased the rat

That ate the malt

That lay in the house that Jack built.

This is the dog

That worried the cat

That chased the rat

That ate the malt

That lay in the house that Jack built.

This is the cow with the crumpled horn,

That tossed the dog

That worried the cat

That chased the rat

That ate the malt

That lay in the house that Jack built.

This is the maiden all forlorn,

That milked the cow with the crumpled horn,

That tossed the dog

That worried the cat

That chased the rat

That ate the malt

That lay in the house that Jack built.

This is the man all tattered and torn,

That kissed the maiden all forlorn,

That milked the cow with the crumpled horn,
That tossed the dog
That worried the cat
That chased the rat
That ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built.

This is the priest all shaven and shorn,
That married the man all tattered and torn,
That kissed the maiden all forlorn,
That milked the cow with the crumpled horn,
That tossed the dog
That worried the cat
That chased the rat
That ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built.

This is the cock that crowed in the morn,
That waked the priest all shaven and shorn,
That married the man all tattered and torn,
That kissed the maiden all forlorn,
That milked the cow with the crumpled horn,
That tossed the dog
That worried the cat
That chased the rat
That ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built.

This is the farmer sowing the corn,
That kept the cock that crowed in the morn,
That waked the priest all shaven and shorn,
That married the man all tattered and torn,

That kissed the maiden all forlorn,
That milked the cow with the crumpled horn,
That tossed the dog
That worried the cat
That chased the rat
That ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built.