

G. Maglione (2019) Film Review: Lars von Trier (dir.) (2018) *The House That Jack Built*. Hvidovre, Denmark: Zentropa, *Crime, Media and Culture* (forthcoming)

'Hell and Heaven are one and the same thing, the soul belongs to heaven and the body to hell'.

Jack

In the section XIV of *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin argued that painting, different from the movie, 'invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations' (2015: 231). Lars von Trier's movies have always been an exception to Benjamin's maxim, prompting reviewers/spectators to produce the most varied and polarised associations. This is perhaps because, as once Deleuze said of Foucault (1999), it is always possible "to do things" with (more than to) Von Trier's works. This certainly applies also to von Trier's last release, 'The House that Jack Built', diversely interpreted by critics as a representation of misogynist/misanthropic violence, a sadic and nihilistic portrayal of our world, an acknowledgement of Trump-era chauvinism, or a complacent self-reflection of von Trier's own sense of persecution. What has particularly prompted such a profusion of interpretations is the movie's unique representation of crime and his criminal, the absence of any 'good' and overall an ironic non-story of indistinction and excess which invites an ethical and political reflection on the very idea of violence.

'The House That Jack Built' debuted at the Cannes Film Festival in 2018 after von Trier's six-year long ban, following his controversial statements about Hitler during his last appearance at the Festival. The film stars Matt Dillon as Jack, the main character, and Bruno Ganz as Verge as well as Uma Thurman, Siobhan Fallon Hogan, Sofie Gråbøl and Riley Keough in supporting roles.

The plot unfolds across three narrative lines: a chronicle of Jack's violent killing spree in the US between the 1970s-1980s, broke down in five "randomly selected" incidents recounted to an unseen listener which will materialise at the very end as Verge; an array of side conversations with Verge in between the depictions of the incidents, revolving around philosophy, ethics or the arts; and the very end of the film, a protracted scene with autonomous aesthetic features.

Jack is an engineer/architect who, at the outset, admits to Verge, to have killed approximately 60 people, female mainly but also males, and decides to describe 'randomly' five of these killings.

Four of these killings seem to repeat a monotonously similar pattern. A woman, represented as hopeless and helpless, an uninspiring daily environment as a stage of the crime scene, a violent and unmotivated killing, the disposing of the victim in a walk-in freezer among towers of pizza boxes. On this repetitive structure there are a few variations. The first victim is the only agentic character who deliberately provokes Jack, the second episode provides a snapshot of Jack's OCD and his embracing the serial killer stereotype by adopting the name of "Mr. Sophistication", whilst in the third Jack kills also the victim's children, and in the fourth he

indulges in a crude cutting of the victim's breast with a knife after she tries to get away and tell a cop who however dismisses the victim-to-be as a drunk.

In the final incident, Jack aims to kill five people detained in his walk-in freezer all with one bullet, when he realizes that the bullet is not of the type he wanted. He buys the suitable bullet, killing along the way the seller and a cop. However, when he is about to use the bullet a police car shows up before his freezer, he has to abandon his plan and run into the room within his freezer he has never managed to open.

When for the first time he opens the door he sees Verge. Verge tells Jack that he has never really created the house that he was intending to build. Using the bodies as material, Jack constructs a house out of them and when he enters the house, he sees a hole that leads down. Jack decides to go through the hole, following Verge. Here he finds a hell-like environment with a broken bridge and a dark abyss at the very bottom. The door on the other side of the bridge leads out of Hell and possibly to Heaven as Verge tells Jack. Jack then, against Verge's recommendation, tries to climb over the bridge but falls down into the abyss.

'The House that Jack Built', in Francis Bacon's words, concentrates reality while providing a shorthand of sensations (Hilton, 1985). Differently from blockbuster serial killer movies revolving around the epics of complex characters, this is a non-story around a non-subject condensing a range of sensations - disgust, indifference, emptiness - through both the medium (the way the movie was shot) and the content (the display of violence). This focus on sensations does not mean that the movie is a purely aesthetic endeavour though, on the contrary, this is a distinctively, even though not obviously, ethical and political movie.

This project to some extent resonates with the tenets of von Trier's early cinematic manifesto - Dogme95.

Dogme95 was written by Von Trier and some of his associates in 1995, aiming to identify and dictate an anti-Hollywood directorial approach to movies (Walters, 2004). The manifesto rejects the psychological portrayal of characters who become mere bundles of actions and postures dissolved in their cultural, social and political world. Dogme95 encourages to replace detailed plot with a narrative-in-the-making whilst rejecting the primacy of acting and aesthetic components over the intellectual engagement of the audience. In this framework, form and content merge, the elimination of rehearsal and hands-held camera characterise this approach, based fundamentally on freedom of shooting and acting. Dogme95, by promoting ambiguous, fragmented and embodied narratives, where form and content are one and the same, aims to stimulate the audience cognitive and affective responses, actively, ironically and subversively. This is a critique of Hollywood's dogmas of detailed and pre-set plot, psychologisation of characters, dramaturgy's primacy, that is, unambiguous and uniform product to be consumed by a passive audience.

Although Jack is not a Dogme95 movie, strictly speaking, since it does not adhere to all of its rules, it does embody some aspects of this cinematic canon which somehow have characterised von Trier's work ever since. The story is uncategorised (a combination between a cruel serial killer movie and a comedy), inconclusive (Jack's aims are constitutively unclear, perhaps also to himself), ambiguous (the dividing lines between reason and madness, good and bad are blurred). It is a non-story in which, as Guy Debord would say (1984), the image -

i.e. Jack's over-displayed violence - is revealed as deficient, aimless, exposed as such, and enigmatically shallow.

The movie, in fact, invites the viewer to engage with (more than consume) Jack's violence. Jack is a bundle of violent gestures not cohered retrospectively by a psychological characterisation. Whilst the Hollywood serial killer is a carefully styled subject, Jack is nothing but his actions, pure violence which flows unrestrained and whose apparent aim - building his ideal house - is a mere parody of itself. The criminal, i.e. the subjective presupposition of criminal actions, is absent, replaced by a chain of actions.

In this way, Jack produces a mockery of the Western inescapable link between crime and criminal, subject and action. Jack's OCD or his habit of tormenting animals during his childhood appear as a parody of the idea of crime having pathological roots. Jack self-adopted name - Mr Sophistication - is another caricature of the cultural narratives of serial killer's complex personality, while killing children or torturing his female girlfriend are excessive representations of evil, with parodic effects as well.

In the movie, Von Trier provides an explicit key to interpret Jack's violence. There are, in fact, numerous references to William Blake's view of violence as generatively linked to creativity, that is, the idea that an artist does violence producing reality, re-forming materials, imagining worlds and re-imagining himself. Accepting this key would lead the viewer to interpret the movie as a long meditation around Jack's killings as a work of art. Although it would be legitimate to follow von Trier's indication, the significance of Jack's violence from a criminological perspective, is perhaps better understandable by using Walter Benjamin's theory of violence (1996). Jack's violence appears then as "law-making" insofar as it generates a new law, expressed by the ideal house he finally builds out of his victims' bodies. On closer inspection, however, this creative power is a parody and Jack's violence ends up being violent domination for its own sake, a non-redemptive, non-transcendent, non-sacrificial violence, apparently in the name of his building project. It seems then, in Benjamin's words, that Jack merges law-making and law-preserving violence, enacting an unrestrained domination that creates and destroys itself in an endless spiral. Jack's fall into the abyss, is then a way of abandoning more than finishing this non-story, another, final, meta-representation of a subjective void.

At this point it is possible to understand why the movie has been alleged of complicity with violence. Jack cannot be blamed for his actions, he cannot be considered guilty or responsible, since he is not a subject but a mere catalyst of violence. Additionally, his violence is end-less, a movie-long 'assault that made no demands, a threat without a message' (The Invisible Committee, 2007: 25) Finally, such violence leaks from its human container dangerously approaching not only the victims but also the viewer. This does not entail that the movie is simply a nihilistic dystopia. It is, instead, an ethical and political reflection, and not in the obvious ways of Ken Loach or Michael Moore. Ethics, here, is a polemic meta-reflection on the process of constructing subjects (e.g. the criminal) out of actions (the crime), like Jack's house out of corpses, whilst politics is the ironic reflection on the consequences of this operation critical for our inscription in the legal-political order (Agamben, 2018). How could we respond to a violence uncoupled by a - deviant, vicious, alien - subject? How the concepts of individual guilt and responsibility could change if we gave up on the idea of subject so deeply ingrained in Western civilization? Would this operation perhaps entail the possibility of doing away with the very idea of penal punishment?

Would it then require a new language to think of wrongdoing, a language able to destitute violence? These are some of the normative questions raised by the movie.

Jack has the potential to encourage those interested in 'crime & punishment' to reflect on how the Western way of dealing with wrongdoing hinges on the presupposition of a subject - good or bad, normal or pathologic, deprived or depraved - behind violence, and how the very idea of a subject, in turn, is influenced by the legal-political context within which it emerges. This presupposition, as Benjamin taught us, excludes the very possibility of a critique of violence on its own, which conversely equates with accepting the possibility of violence as a social means. Ultimately, Jack does not draw any neat line between good and evil, merely reminding us of a moral problem: gazing long into the abyss (of subjectivity) may make the abyss gaze also into us.

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