

The play of iconicity in Lars von Trier's *The House That Jack Built*

Bodil Marie Stavning Thomsen

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Abstract

This article studies the function of the iconic sign and the operation of diagram-icons in Lars von Trier's *The House That Jack Built* (2018), a film about a serial killer Jack (Matt Dillon) who builds a house of corpses before being escorted to hell. What is remarkable in this film is von Trier's specific use of filmic iconicity in probing the value of Western icons in art and architecture. In voiceover digressions from the narrative action following Jack's serial killing, a comparison is made between the iconic power of murder on a grand scale (specified as genocides throughout history) and culturally valuated icons of art and architecture. The article focuses on the audiovisual icons in the film that invites the audience to diagrammatic readings and fabulation throughout and beyond the film's narrative content. After a short introduction to the iconic sign and the diagram-icon respectively, the exploration of the film takes its starting point in how Jean-Luc Godard used the iconic force of the color red in *Pierrot le Fou* (1965). Even though the significant use of red throughout *The House That Jack Built* is justified within the context of serial killing, its many reiterations also qualifies 'red' as a diagrammatic feature combining iconic elements transversally. This diagrammatic feature foregrounds the film's fabulatory and haptic levels beyond its strictly narrative content, making way for the wider philosophical comments expounded 'in the film' by the figure of Verge (Bruno Ganz). His extradiegetic voice becomes intradiegetic in the last part of the film as his body appears, acting as a guide for Jack into a version of Dante's hell.

Keywords: acousmètre, affect, Dante Alighieri, diagram, fabulation, film, film studies, haptic visibility, icon, Lars von Trier, *The House That Jack Built*, time-images

Introduction

Lars von Trier's most recent film, *The House That Jack Built*, premiered in 2018. The main character, Jack (Matt Dillon), is an engineer and mass murderer, who challenges the laws of society and gets away with it. But even though he is a criminal, his ambition is another: to become an architect and build an iconic house. Meanwhile, the film's real forger is Verge (Bruno Ganz),[1] a figure who first appears as voiceover commentary who mocks and undoes Jack's ambitions – both as a murderer and an architect/artist. Thus, Jack's useless efforts to create an iconic masterpiece of architecture while murdering forms the diegetic world commented on from Verge's initially extradiegetic voice, later integrated as a character. In this article, I intend to show that the film's transversal relations between iconic features in the diegesis and various explorations of what characterises icons on a cultural level pave the way for abstractions. It is at this level that the film articulates its assessment of Western image regimes as emphatically iconic, a quality which provides for both their aesthetic promise and their political danger.

Photographic and filmic representations have often been referred to as indexical signs, but as images they are also iconic signs. In the following reading, I will make use of Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic definitions of icon, index, and symbol. Following Peirce, the indexical sign carries a relationship with an object (a photographic print as an index of light passing through a camera lens) whereas the symbolic sign is a unifying, often arbitrary sign referring to cultural convention (a cross standing for Christianity). The icon – covering three types: image, diagram, metaphor – shares qualities with the object it resembles or imitates. My argument departs from Peirce's idea that icons can also be diagrams and establish analogue (often dyadic) relations to (parts of) an object.[2] I suggest von Trier's emphatic use of iconicity in the film creates what I will mostly refer to as diagrams or 'diagram-icons' that articulate, as already indicated, a critical assessment of iconoclicity itself. Such diagram-icons

are defined in dynamic and operational terms. They do not simply depict the (already) visible; they make visible the (hitherto) invisible.[3]

They can provide 'a viewpoint or standard according to which phenomena are seen and determined'.[4]

This article, then, is a further development in an argument that I began in my recent book Lars von Trier's *Renewal of Film 1984-2014: Signal, Pixel*,

Diagram. In that book, I studied von Trier's oeuvre of film in relation to the exploration of the material qualities of pixels and signals in film and video as well as the diagrammatic style used extensively from the mid-1990s. What has guided my non-representative reading is the immense affective impact his films have had on audiences everywhere. I was inspired by Brian Massumi's emphasis on Peirce's reading of the task of art as related to the art of creating diagrammatic abstractions. Peirce writes:

The greatest point of art consists in the introduction of suitable abstractions. By this I mean such a transformation of our diagrams that characters of one diagram may appear in another as things.[5]

Massumi explores the function of art in Marcel Proust's diagrammatic work in *In Search of Lost Time*, where the description of a madeleine cookie and lime tea leads to other diagram-icons in the text such as the grandmother's kiss and the wart on her cheek. The diagrammatic relations created by the reader leads the way for abstractions on the nature of memory and remembrance and to how these (true or not) can be virtually vivified in art. In my book, I have explored the use of diagrams employed to either regulate or rule the action (as in *The Idiots* [1998]) or to generate new ways of making the audience pay attention to or be affected by the materiality of film; or, as Gilles Deleuze suggests, film understood as 'a signaletic material'. The 'signaletic material' is Deleuze's concept for the 'utterable' in film, video, and other audiovisual modulation features (sensory, kinetic, intensive, affective, rhythmic, tonal, and even verbal) that is not formed linguistically even though it is 'formed semiotically, aesthetically and pragmatically'. [6] The signaletic material affects the nervous system directly as sense-perception. In my book, I have explored various ways in which von Trier foregrounds film as signaletic material, among which the sound design and editing in his earlier films as well as the television series *Kingdom 1 and 2*; the improvisation techniques and the alienating remediation of theatre (e.g. through chalklines on the ground) in *Dogville* and *Manderley*; or the use of symbolic tokens in *Antichrist*. Here I propose for the first time and through an engagement with *The House That Jack Built* that a particular engagement with iconicity is part of von Trier's repertoire for the creation of a signaletic materiality.

In a last preliminary remark, I would like to highlight the importance of haptic images in von Trier's films. Here I refer to Alois Riegl's definition of the haptic in relation to the optic, where an optic (long-sighted) orientation is directed toward a perspective of depth and a control of (virtual) space,

while a haptic (near-sighted) orientation is directed toward the modulations of the surface in order to take the next (actual) step. In Western art history optic perspectives have traditionally been privileged over descriptions of haptic surfaces or reliefs affording a 'touching with the eyes'.^[7] This however has slowly changed with modern impressionism and later film – also electronic and digital film – where the haptic surface level of movement and modulation prevail over depth. Lars von Trier's productions frequently use haptic images – unfocused, sepia toned, filtered, blurred, multilayered, speedy, slow, or condensed – resulting directly from his exploration of what the materiality of filmic, electronic, and digital technologies and mixtures of these bring to the expression. These haptic images – often in alteration with optic images – have emphasised and impacted audiences, provoking new forms of affective involvement with film. Thinking about spectatorship, I use the term 'affect' in reference to Baruch Spinoza's foundational definition: 'by affect, I understand affections of the body by which the power of acting of the body itself is increased, diminished, helped, or hindered, together with the ideas of these affections'.^[8] Deleuze and Guattari have usefully keyed the affect and percept of artworks into what they call 'blocks of sensation' that can preserve 'a compound of percepts and affects':

What is preserved – the thing or the work of art – is a bloc of sensations, that is to say, a compound of percepts and affects. [...] By means of the material, the aim is to wrest the percept from perceptions of objects and the states of a perceiving subject, to wrest the affect from affections as the transition from one state to another: to extract a bloc of sensation, a pure being of sensations. [...] It is true that every work of art is a monument, but here the monument is not something commemorating a past, it is a bloc of present sensations that owe their preservation only to themselves and that provide the event with the compound that celebrates it. The monument's action is not memory but fabulation. We write not with childhood memories but through blocs of childhood that are the becoming-child of the present.^[9]

Von Trier's prevailing use of haptic visuality in films blended with electronic video signals and digital pixels along with interfacial features known from videogames aims to create blocs of sensations. The filmmaker has furthermore engaged with the affordances of various genres (film noir, documentary, horror film, pornographic film, melodrama, musical, etc.) to express blocks of sensation with the common trait of exploring how haptic visuality can generate different forms of affect and percept. This is relevant to the present argument because, I will suggest, von Trier's use of iconicity in *The House That Jack Built* contributes to the creation of blocks of sensation that operate

in relative independence from the diegesis and, instead, sensorily and affectively attach to broader (cinematic) icons. As we will shortly see, one such recurring diagram-icon in *The House That Jack Built* is red, which ‘makes sense’ in relation to other iconic uses of red in film history. Therefore my reading practice in the following sections circles among and discusses various uses of red by filmmakers such as Godard, Hitchcock, and Kubrick.

The dynamic and operative character of icon-diagrams and mental images

As indicated above, icons carry pure abstractions (qualities) independent of the object they refer to (existing or not). Peirce’s example is that the color red in any sentence, picture, or film leaves an impact, a qualification of the sensory stimuli. This force of the icon is famously referred to by Jean-Luc Godard in replying ‘not blood, red’ when questioned by a journalist about the amount of blood in *Pierrot le Fou* (1965).[10] According to Richard Dienst, Godard wants to underline that ‘[b]efore it can be read as blood, it has to be seen as red’.[11] It is only afterwards that a specific interpretation (blood) is applied to the color. Meanwhile, the iconicity of red most likely produces an instant affect-qualification, expressed by the journalist’s perception of blood. I agree with Dienst that Godard wanted to explore the nature of affective reactions or ‘emotions’ in *Pierrot le Fou*. Meanwhile this is done in order to visually dissect the genre of the lovers-on-the-run film to generate mental images in displaying actions ad absurdum. The exploration of the iconic power of red to instantly signify blood and generate affect is in the ending expanded to also pay tribute to the colors blue (in Jean-Paul Belmondo’s face), yellow (the dynamite bars), along with red (Belmondo’s shirt, and more dynamite bars). In accelerating the turn-arounds of the genre, *Pierrot le Fou* becomes a burlesque, where the primary colors are extracted as percepts and affects to bear evidence to the signaletic material of film. In the context of French avantgarde a reference to Ives Klein’s blue that was the hype of the art market at the time is unavoidable. Besides Klein, François Morellet’s optical art productions should be mentioned, amongst these were *Bleu-jaune-rouge* (1956), inspired by Piet Mondrian’s famous compositions of red, blue, and yellow.[12]

Red is also the recurring icon in *The House That Jack Built*. Red is connected to Jack’s serial killings in different ways in the five murder scenes, but

it is gradually qualified as connected to the overall exploration of what signifies an iconic work of art, which also becomes clear through explicit references to iconic films by Godard, Hitchcock, Kubrick and others. In the first murder scene the accidental encounter of Jack's red truck and the red jack belonging to a woman (Uma Thurman) stuck at the side of the road with a punctured tire results in Jack smashing her face with the jack. The scene is immediately cut, and a cubist, iconic composition by Picasso ends the scene. In letting Jack's red-coloured truck dominate her red jack in the staging, and by alluding to the abundant film topic of accidental assaults and killings in her monologue, the audience has a chance to pre-empt this initial murder. In letting the modern icon of Picasso's cubist painting be the final image, another scene can be set focusing on icons as such. From this, the iconic red spills over in Jack killing an elderly woman (Siobhan Fallon Hogan), who believes in his fake explanation of a retirement benefit left by her late husband. To the film scholar this murder, stretched in length with blood in plenty, has affinity to Godard's statement on red regarding *Pierrot le Fou*, since the excess of blood gives rise to speculations on (its) meaning as such.[13] Meanwhile, the portrayal of Jack's paranoia and obsessive compulsive disorder along with his fascination of mummified, grotesque corpses can be read as an allusion to Hitchcock's portrayal of Norman in *Psycho* (1960). In both cases the actual icon in the diegesis is stretched to also possess a diagrammatic, operational character as in the first two murder scenes in *The House That Jack Built*.

In the following incident in the woods, red caps become the shooting target for Jack, who shows no mercy towards a mother (Sofie Gråbøl) and her two kids (Rocco and Cohen Day). He shoots them the same way he would bring down a fallow deer with cubs, and later he displays them as hunting trophies. This scene alludes to Michael Cimino's iconic film *The Deer Hunter* (1978), in which Robert de Niro wears a red head bandana. Before the next murder that involves psychic violence, physical torture, and a gruesome portrayal of a young woman, Jacqueline's (Riley Keough), loneliness, Jack sets the scene for a demonic play with a red toy telephone and its thin red line. The scene alludes to the metaphor of blood in Terrence Malick's iconic war film *The Thin Red Line* (1998). Jack treasures one of Jacqueline's breasts as 'a small icon' in using it as a leather purse. His next idea is to murder a group of men with a single bullet that has to be a full metal jacket in order to do the job. The reference here is clearly to Stanley Kubrick's iconic war film *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). It is impossible to ignore the diagrammatic assemblage of the icon of red that stretches throughout the film's serial murder scenes. In the

last section this assemblage contracts into a dwelling upon the iconic and haptic qualities of red, as Jack follows Verge to hell donned in a red cloak with striking similarities to the painted portrayals of Dante Alighieri. I will return to this important section of the film at the end of this article.

Including or misleading spectators' interpretations by making them work with diagrams across the narration to isolate prevailing icons as indicated above is not exceptional in film history. Before Godard, Hitchcock also demonstrated a noticeable preference for mental or relational images. Hitchcock's camera produced an alienating perspective of the relations depicted as in *Psycho*, when it captures and zooms in to an envelope with stolen money from a point of view outside the window. Hitchcock's so-called MacGuffins (here the envelope) are often irrelevant or misleading to the story but nevertheless important to attract the viewer's attention to the plot. I would state that when the voyeuristic camera-eye singles out an object to become the MacGuffin 'thing', a mental image (of the metaphor-icon type) is established from which the relations depicted can be interpreted. This image type is described thus by Deleuze:

It is an image which takes as its object, relations, symbolic acts, intellectual feelings. It can be, but is not necessarily, more difficult than the other images.[14]

In Hitchcock, mental images were primarily due to the camera's focus, movement, and scope. As such they would often produce deceptive perspectives or an awareness of the spectator's limited view, like in *Rear Window* (1954). But first of all, they produced an awareness toward the intellectual work of combining relations into a thirdness of interpretation outside of the corollary of narrative action, so to speak: 'It will necessarily have a new, direct relationship with thought, a relationship which is completely distinct from that of the other images'[15] – and, in the case of Hitchcock, has to do with spectatorship, and in particular a psychology of spectatorship.

Godard's intellectual play with new qualifications of icons in *Pierrot le Fou* is rather different from the way Hitchcock explores relations within the story. Both can however be considered in relation to Dziga Vertov's way of composing mental images. In *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), Vertov explored everyday life with a camera that both documented and took part in relations between humans and machines that were later composed into montages of their own right. The aim of Vertov's kino-eye was to make filmic practice available for everyone, and thus his camera-work and his filmic montages went together with audiences' evaluations of his films. This aspiration was

also Godard's, although his approach might have been more theoretical. As Michael Witt notes, Godard was inspired by Vertov's kino-eye from the late 1960s and on, but it is especially visible in his television production *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-1998). This inspiration includes:

[...] the dream of a quasi-scientific research laboratory in which to pursue audiovisual experiments; a deep-rooted mistrust of the application of a literary form of a narrative to cinema, combined with contempt for the conventional written script, and a quest to develop an extralinguistic visual symphonic-cinematic form; expansion of the idea and practice of montage to include every stage of the filmmaking process; the theorization and application of interval theory, whereby film poems are composed around the movements and transitions between the visual stimuli carried by individual shots; and an unshakeable faith in the camera as a scientific scope through which to penetrate the surface of reality and reveal the invisible.[16]

Lars von Trier can certainly be seen as an inheritor of some of these techniques. But unlike Hitchcock's use of the camera-work to produce mental images and Godard's semiotic exploration of the techniques of montage along with an impetus to 'reveal the invisible', von Trier is more concerned with the surface level of what images can do. It is the haptic visuality and the contribution of the signaletic material to affect and to reach other levels of meaning than the story that is the most consistent feature throughout his whole production.

The surface level of haptic images as productive of artistic creation

This engagement with surfaces is also clear in the film title's reference to the old nursery English rhyme 'This is the house that Jack built' (verses 1-4, plus verse 12):

This is the house that Jack built
 This is the malt
 That lay in the house that Jack built
 This is the rat
 That ate the malt
 That lay in the house that Jack built
 This is the cat,
 That killed the rat
 That ate the malt
 That lay in the house that Jack built

This is the horse and the hound and the horn
 That belonged to the farmer sowing his corn
 That kept the rooster that crowed in the morn
 That woke the judge 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 killed the rat that ate the malt
 That lay in the house that Jack built.[17]

The rhyme has no meaning beyond rhyming, or more correctly: the words form cumulative sentences, but they do not form a whole even though each verse refers to Jack's house. The house cannot contain anything, the animals and humans referring to it never come together. They all have different lines of flight. Even so, the nonsense adds up in only one assemblage: the rhythm of the rhyme proliferates the rhyme. The rhythm of the rhyme is the consistent feature of expression and immediately reinfuses the poem with creative energy. The rhyme advances as repetitions with a difference capturing the expressive rhythm of what I will develop as a practice of fabulation in the following section. The rhyme creates energy and speed on a surface level of language, and invites to more.

In *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze writes on the energetic forces of Lewis Carroll's writings in *Alice in Wonderland*: 'on these surfaces, nonetheless, the entire logic of sense is located'. [18] Later in the same book the surface level of nonsense is related to the production of events due to its expressive force:

The event is the identity of form and the void. It is not the object as denoted, but the object as expressed or expressible, never present, but always already in the past and yet to come. [...] Across the abolished significations and the lost denotations, the void is the site of sense or of the event which harmonizes with its own nonsense, in the place where the place only takes place (là où n'a plus lieu que le lieu). The void is itself the aleatory point whence the event bursts forth as sense. [19]

The House That Jack Built mobilises diagram-icons to similarly engage with the creative potential of the surface and, simultaneously, point to the inflationary circulation of 'iconic images' effects. In my view, this double movement constitutes the core of von Trier's engagement with iconicity. I will first address the latter aspect regarding the production of 'iconic images'. Originally planned as a television series, *The House That Jack Built* is composed around a series of murders committed by Jack. But as mentioned, the film

also and explicitly circles around the question of what it takes to produce iconic works. Jack would like to design an ascending, iconic house, but with his failed artistic ambitions he ends up building a ramshackle house of corpses. In the well-known ironic gesture of von Trier's, this becomes a morbid comment on tyrants like Hitler, Mussolini, Amin, etc., who have indeed produced iconic remembrance due to mass killings on a large scale. Meanwhile, Jack's house made of dead bodies also comments on the contemporary global demand for icons as items of branding, iconic houses for example.[20] Here, the term 'iconic' is used as a recognisable and therefore salable perceptual label that puts another 'mythologic' layer of meaning onto a sign.[21] Von Trier's concern, one might say, is that icons do not just resemble objective referents, they possess qualities in themselves. The film can thus be seen as an exploration and a critique of a whole range of ways in which icons, iconic artworks, and iconic images operate in culture. To exemplify this, let me trace the actual house shown in the film and the circuits of iconicisation it has undergone.

Von Trier asked the Danish architect Bjarke Ingels, who is famous for his 'iconic' buildings, to design the film's house of corpses. Already before the film's premiere, this house was exhibited at Charlottenborg, an art space in Copenhagen, along with other 'iconic' buildings made by the Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG), thus detaching the house from its cinematic context and placing it on the market as a recognisable stand-out artwork (see Fig. 1). On the company's website a specific icon made for each building produced by BIG can be seen (except the house of corpses) (see Fig. 2). Von Trier's gesture of inviting Bjarke Ingels to design the house can thus be seen as ironic, for with these computer icons we have reached the extreme pole of the contemporary 'iconic' as recognisable, able to circulate and to be sold. The slippage between different understandings of the 'iconic' – from the diagram-icon to pictogram of the computer interface – is important here because it traces the increased valuation of the 'iconic' as a perceptual surface as such.



Fig. 1: The house of ‘frozen’ corpses made by Bjarke Ingels as displayed in the film.



Fig. 2: The pictogram icons from the BIG homepage, representing buildings or projects made by the Bjarke Ingels Group (downloaded 22 May 2020).

But von Trier’s exploration of what icons are made of, why they work, and what they might disguise does not end there. Rather, von Trier returns us to what Deleuze called the ‘void’ in the above quote and what *The House That Jack Built* refers to as ‘the negative’. Jack states more than once that ‘through the negative, you could see the inner demonic quality of light – the dark’. In one scene, we see the infant Jack with his first camera, looking at the light that pours through a round opening (see Fig. 3). But in its negative, material version the round ingress of light becomes black, an opaque, haptic surface eliminating insight. Thus, Jack is exploring the light as something that might hide a haptic quality surpassing the actual, positive version of what we usually refer to as the image.

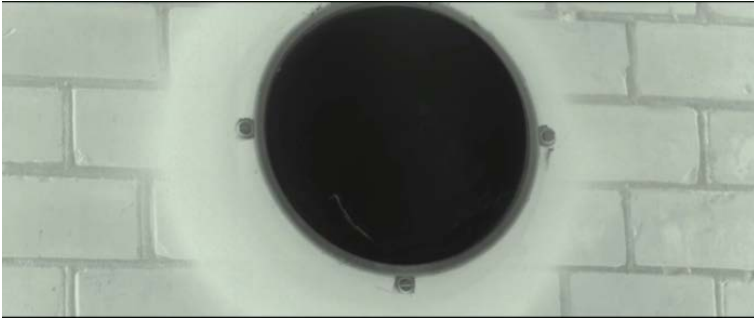


Fig. 3: The round ingress of light becomes opaque and haptic in its negative form. This haptic image acts as a signaletic material underlining the quality of icons.

This almost technical illustration explaining Jack's interest in the visual materiality of the negative – and the fact that the negative side of light is sheer darkness – leads immediately to a further exploration of the dark or haptic quality of light, only now related to Jack's depression as an adult. A monochrome black-and-white drawing of a stick man and his shadow following his nightly walk from one lamp post to the next illustrates Jack's explanation that the densest shadow under the lamp post marks where the pain is at its deepest (see Fig. 4). When the shadows in front of and behind him are of equal length, he is at ease, but when the shadow behind him grows bigger and he approaches the zenith under the lamp, the pain grows and his compulsion to murder becomes irresistible.[22]



Fig. 4: The stick man drawing illustrates the struggle between light and darkness, where darkness is emphasised as a creative force.

What is key to this explanatory section and to the film in general is that the attraction toward the opaque, black surface of the negative exceeds the attraction of the positive version of the image to which the voyeuristic drive of narration belongs. And, what is more, the dark quality of light is shown as a haptic, impenetrable surface, from which the iconic quality of the positive image stems. Thus, von Trier proposes that the haptic quality of darkness is productive of art. Accordingly, the turn toward the surfaces of diagram-icons is a technique for enduring the intervals of anxiety between (the delusion of) optic mastery. And even though he concedes that destruction resides behind the 'iconic' in the forms of anxiety, depression, and death, he does not reject the operations of the diagram-icon. This is because von Trier swears by the 'power of the false' and the force of fabulation. His discovery – that the negative, haptic visuality is the condition for the production of iconic work – is key to this.

The power of the false and fabulation in *The House That Jack Built*

As shown, the main icon throughout the film is the colour red. Red is connected to Jack's serial killings in different ways in the five murder scenes, but throughout the film its iconic quality gradually becomes more connected to the overall exploration of what signifies an iconic work of art. In the last section of the film Jack is led to Dante's hell by Verge, who now obtains a visual form to accompany Ganz' acousmêtric voice which has been 'coloring' the whole film from 'behind' the screen. The descent to Dante's hell is covered in red, and thus this section of the film becomes explanatory of the haptic-creative-negative of the iconic surfaces presented throughout the film – as well as his other films. Seeing the film in the perspective of the haptic image is actually what braces a diagrammatic accentuation of iconic value: if the red iconic structuring of the film is followed, the composition of the film is revealed as commenting on the purpose of violence and killing in fiction film. So, through the haptic quality of darkness and the red icons forming diagrams in the signaletic material, von Trier offers the audience the possibility of staying at the affective and perceptive side of sensation – and refraining from the narrative voyeurism.[23]

In *The House That Jack Built* the iconic colour of red is put into diagrammatic exchange with the acousmètre, the sound-object of Verge's/Ganz'

voice. Their decent into Dante's hell is haptic in the sense that the colours and close-ups of landscapes and faces are saturate and dense. Here, the spatialising energy of colour reaches another intensity of affect than in the portrayal of Jack's killings. The description of Jack's perpetual but unsuccessful pursuit of iconic quality in both his designs for houses and his serial killings reaches an end point when encountering the haptic function of sight 'in which the planar character of the surface creates volumes only through the different colors that are arranged on it'.[24] Deleuze continues:

It is no longer a manual space that is opposed to the optical space of sight, nor is it a tactile space that is connected to the optical. Now, within sight itself, there is a haptic space that competes with the optical space. [...] There is neither an inside nor an outside but only a continuous creation of space, the spatializing energy of color. By avoiding abstraction, colorism avoids both figuration and narration, and moves infinitely closer to the pure state of a pictorial 'fact' that has nothing left to narrate. This fact is the constitution or reconstitution of a haptic function of sight.[25]

What happens as von Trier pushes beyond inflationary 'iconic images' to explore the creative potential of diagram-icons? We have already seen that the diegesis is commented on by the extradiegetic voiceover commentary by Verge. These interruptions create intervals in the diegetic narration so that Jack can explain himself, and then carry on to act/murder within the diegesis to strive toward his 'iconic' creation. So, although the film is mostly seen as from the point of view of Jack, Verge's distant and disruptive commentary on the action undermines a voyeuristic perspective as well as a sense of cinematic realism, let alone truthfulness. In following the actions of Jack who has the mind of a psychopath, von Trier offers the spectator diagram-icons of abstraction that accumulate, proliferate, and become self-driving as the film continues so that, in the end, the film becomes a fabulation on the impasse of Western art rather than a film about a serial murderer. Von Trier falsifies the assumptions and operational principles that order our conventional understanding of iconicity. As such, *The House That Jack Built* can be seen as to activate the 'powers of the false' as explained by Deleuze.

In *Time-Image* (1989) Deleuze takes up the notion of falseness as an artistic, creative power in reference to Nietzsche, who is the first philosopher to leave behind the distinctions on moral grounds between true and false, good and evil. Deleuze's interpretation of the power of the false covers filmic compositions that succeed in creating direct images of a non-chronologic time, 'where movement ceases to demand the true and where time ceases to be

subordinate to movement: both at once'.[26] Thus, with movement and narration disconnected from truthfulness, the power of the false can positively portray virtual time, conceived here by Deleuze as a crystalline time-image that holds a potential for change. False, crystalline narration establishes 'pure optical and sound situations to which characters, who have become seers, cannot or will not react, so great is their need to "see" properly what there is in the situation'.[27] The forger would become the new 'character of cinema: not the criminal, the cowboy, the psycho-social man, the historical hero, the holder of power, etc., as in the action-image, but the forger pure and simple to the detriment of all action'.[28] The forger affects all other protagonists (investigator, witnesses etc.) and creates falsifying narration that 'shatters the system of judgement because the power of the false (not error or doubt) affects the investigator and the witness as much as the person presumed guilty'.[29]

Toward the ending of *The House That Jack Built*, Verge is shown to possess this 'nth power of the false',[30] sliding the entire narration delivered by Jack into an abyss. In an almost unperceivable manner, von Trier succeeds in making Jack's actions in the foreground slowly lose power to the advantage of Verge's/ Ganz' iconic voice becoming an acousmètre who effectively demonstrates the powers of the false, the negative-creative forces of art.[31] The film might be seen as mocking the value of art and artistic striving as such. But if perceived as a fabulation in which the time-image of Dante's hell triumphs over the movement-image of diegesis (Jack's serial killings), the film succeeds in creating 'an enduring interval in the moment itself'.[32] This creative interval of a virtual time appearing as a kind of memento mori includes the viewer and opens up for seeing the film as 'a free, indirect discourse, operating in reality'.[33] The audience can perceive Verge's voice from 'behind the veil/ screen' as a time-image where past, present and future cannot be distinguished. When the grain of his voice materialises and his and Jack's bodies are transmitted in bigger and smaller transformative versions into the virtual landscape of Dante's hell, the virtual power of time as becoming might be grasped. Such a diagram-icon is fundamentally different from the commodified 'iconic' understood as 'mere' surface. Here, the haptic surface of the image is intimately tied to 'fabulation's specific mode of becoming [which] is that of fashioning larger-than life images that transforms and metamorphose conventional representations and conceptions of collectivities, thereby enabling the invention of a people to come'.[34] Thus, von Trier takes seriously Deleuze and Guattari's proposition that the domain of art is

‘not memory but fabulation’.[35] With fabulation, the idea of meaning and narrative consistency in relation to representing time as story is left behind, and creative becoming is seen as a force to activate an experience of the ‘not yet’ of art itself, outside of narration in the traditional sense. Thus, what *The House That Jack Built* fabulates is a fundamentally different understanding and experience of cinema, grounded in the activation of diagram-icons and questioning the inflated value of ‘iconic images’.

By way of conclusion

In this article I have argued that Lars von Trier continues his renewal of cinema in *The House That Jack Built* through a singular engagement with iconicity. Assessing the value of various understanding of what an ‘icon’ can be in contemporary image culture, von Trier reproduces and rejects the increased circulation of ‘iconic’ images as optic self-evidence to push toward diagram-icons. In *The House That Jack Built*, these diagram-icons foreground a haptic function of sight – or, with Lars von Trier’s words, ‘the inner demonic quality of light’ – that has the ability to both underpin and undermine the qualitative value of icons. In other words, through the haptic perception of diagram-icons, von Trier points toward the creative potential of sensation itself as well as to the conditions (of negativity) under which icons are produced and the – potentially violent – fallout that they themselves may entail. This is also a plea to a different kind of viewing cinema.

This focus on the functioning of icons and von Trier’s appeal to the audience becomes clear in the final moments of *The House That Jack Built*, of which I offer a reading in the guise of a conclusion. Perhaps the most ‘iconic’ and lasting image of the film is indeed its very elaborate filmic animation of Eugène Delacroix’s *The Barque of Dante* (1822). Importantly, this painting is itself an elaboration of Théodore Géricault’s romantic painting *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819). The latter painting was motivated by the disastrous shipwreck of a French Royal Navy frigate. When exhibited in the Salon of 1819, spectators adhering to a neo-classical style of painting were repelled by the realistic portrayal of dying bodies and corpses. In Delacroix’s painting, the literary reference to Virgil and Dante’s embarkment to hell is a fabulation that lacks the realistic force of Géricault’s work; also, its colour-composition of red, blue, and green appeals directly to a felt sensation in the spectator’s body. The painting thus conveys another kind of realism: the realism of affects in

which an acknowledgement of the painterly composition is included. Thus, Delacroix's painting can be seen as a fabulation diagrammatically related to Gericault's iconic painting. It is Delacroix's falsification of Gericault's painting that gives rise to new images. In von Trier's remediation of *The Barque of Dante* the colours are even more saturated than in Delacroix's painting, and to this is added the specific fast-speed recordings that can sustain perception and affects as blocks of sensation in a kind of ultraslow motion.



Fig. 5: Eugène Delacroix, *The Barque of Dante* (1822), The Louvre Museum. Wikipedia Commons.



Fig. 6: Lars von Trier's remake of Delacroix's *The Barque of Dante*, in which the haptic quality of the color red is saturating the whole image. The ultraslow display of the elements arising from the fast speed recording brings blocks of sensation to the fore as well as the signaletic material of the film.

Here, the reanimation of Delacroix' painting – in conjunction with the mythological turn of the film's narration – puts the ultimate iconicity of *The House That Jack Built* into sharp relief. The haptic quality of the image is felt as 'a pictorial "fact" that has nothing left to narrate' and that requires us to elaborate the value of this icon ourselves.[36] The film closes with Ray Charles' song 'Hit the road, Jack!', which has the same kind of energetic rhythm as the nursery rhyme 'The house that Jack built'. Its power is the power of the false and fabulation. Hit the road, Jack! Go out and create your own icons – carefully.

Author

Bodil Marie Stavning Thomsen is a Professor at the School of Communication and Culture, Aarhus University. She works on media, art, and philosophy and is at present the head of the Danish research project Affects, Interfaces, Events (2015-2021). Her recent publications include *Lars von Trier's Renewal of Film 1984-2014: Signal, Pixel, Diagram* (Aarhus University Press, 2018).

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Notes

- [1] The name Verge alludes to Vergil in Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* (1995). In using Bruno Ganz' iconic voice – well-known from Wim Wender's *Wings of Desire* (1987), in the role of an angel longing for an existence on earth, and from Oliver Hirschbiegel's *The Downfall* (2004) in the role of Hitler losing his mind and the war – von Trier adds an extra dimension to Verge's role in the film. He even makes a sort of comment on his expulsion from the Cannes Film Festival after his badly phrased explanation of 'understanding Hitler' at the press conference for *Melancholia* in 2011.
- [2] The third icon-type, metaphor, is *triadic* and describes the 'representative character of a representamen by representing a parallelism in something else' (Farias & Queiroz 2006).
- [3] Hoel 2016, p. 64.
- [4] Ibid., p. 65.
- [5] Peirce 1997, p. 226.
- [6] Deleuze 1989, p. 29.
- [7] Cf. Marks 2002; Thomsen 2012.
- [8] I also refer to Brian Massumi's further elaboration of Spinoza and Deleuze's concept of affect (cf. Massumi 2011; Thomsen 2018, pp. 44-49).
- [9] Deleuze & Guattari 1994 (orig. in 1991), pp. 164-168 (author italics).
- [10] Narboni & Milne, p. 217.
- [11] Dienst 2000, p. 32 (italics in original).
- [12] Later, between 1966 and 1970, Barnett Newman produced his famous series *Who's afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* as a comment on Mondrian's color scheme, and in 2006 Robert Irwin made a huge installation piece with the same title.

- [13] Even though the spectator might not be aware of Roland Barthes' framing of the term 'the third meaning' ('a signifier without a signified'), according to the abundant reiterations and dwelling on details in Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (1944) and its further development to denote narrative deconstruction in Kristin Thompson's term 'excess', the excess is surely doing its work here (cf. Barthes 1991; Thompson 1986).
- [14] Deleuze 1989, p. 198 (italics in original).
- [15] Ibid.
- [16] Witt 2013, p. 98.
- [17] The rhyme was included in *Nurse Truelove's New-Year's-Gift, or the Book of Books for Children* (London, 1755). Lars von Trier also used the rhyme in *The Element of Crime* (1984), where the prostitute, Kim, recites it to a child.
- [18] Deleuze 1990 (orig. in 1969), p. 93.
- [19] Ibid., pp. 136-137.
- [20] For some years the expression 'this is iconic' has been used in Denmark to designate a value above the average, a sublime quality, or something of extraordinary beauty or significance. The whole film could in this vein also be seen as an ironic take on this expression that can be used to comment on anything – not just something perceived visually.
- [21] Barthes 1972.
- [22] More on this in Thomsen 2020.
- [23] With a quote from Deleuze on Francis Bacon's (as well as Turner, Monet, and Cézanne) use of colour to produce pictorial Facts, it becomes clearer where von Trier might be heading in his qualification of iconic value towards 'a haptic function of sight': '[...] when relations of tonality tend to eliminate relations of value, as in Turner, Monet, or Cézanne, we will speak of a haptic space and a haptic function of the eye, in which the planar character of the surface creates volumes only through the different colors that are arranged on it. Are there not two different colors of gray, the optical gray of black-white and the haptic gray of green-red? It is no longer a manual space that is opposed to the optical space of sight, nor is it a tactile space that is connected to the optical. Now, within sight itself, there is a haptic space that competes with the optical space. The latter was defined by the opposition of bright and dark, light and shadow; but the former, by the relative opposition of warm and cool, and the corresponding eccentric or concentric movement of expansion or contraction (whereas the bright and dark instead attest to an "aspiration" to movement). [...] There is neither an inside nor an outside but only a continuous creation of space, the spatializing energy of color. By avoiding abstraction, colorism avoids both figuration and narration, and moves infinitely closer to the pure state of a pictorial "fact" that has nothing left to narrate. This fact is the constitution or reconstitution of a haptic function of sight.' Deleuze 2003 (orig. in 1981), pp. 107-108.
- [24] Deleuze 2003 (orig. in 1981), p. 107.
- [25] Ibid., pp. 107-108
- [26] Deleuze 1989, p. 143.
- [27] Ibid., p. 128.
- [28] Ibid., p. 132.
- [29] Ibid., p. 133.
- [30] Ibid., p. 134.
- [31] The Greek word *akousmatikoi* refers to the disciples of Pythagoras, *akousmatikoi*, who according to legend listened to their teacher's voice from behind a curtain in order to better focus on his words. Pierre Schaeffer used the concept to positively isolate the listening mode enabled by modern audio technology, and Michel Chion later developed the word *acousmètre* to analyse film's ability to place focus on the sound object with 'one foot in the image, in the space of the film; he must

haunt the borderlands that are neither the interior of the filmic stage nor the proscenium – a place that has no name, but which the cinema forever brings into play' (cf. Chion 1999 [orig. in 1982], p. 24).

[32] Ibid., p. 155.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Bogue 2015.

[35] Deleuze & Guattari 1994, p. 168.

[36] Deleuze 2003, p. 108.