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## Thinking Through Images: Spectatorship, Suffering, and Philosophical Cinema in Ingmar Bergman and Lars von Trier

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**Abstract:**

*This article explores cinema as a mode of philosophical inquiry through the films of Ingmar Bergman and Lars von Trier. Moving beyond approaches that treat film as a vehicle for illustrating philosophical ideas, the study argues that both filmmakers produce philosophy through audiovisual form, affect, and spectatorship. Drawing on film-philosophy, phenomenology, and existential thought, the article demonstrates how Bergman's introspective, metaphysical cinema and von Trier's ethically provocative narratives destabilize knowledge, foreground embodiment, and confront viewers with*

*existential dilemmas. Through close readings of *Persona* (1966), *The Seventh Seal* (1957), *Melancholia* (2011), and *Breaking the Waves* (1996), the article shows how spectators are transformed into active philosophical agents. By situating these filmmakers within a shared framework of "thinking images," the study contributes to contemporary debates in film-philosophy and redefines spectatorship as an embodied and interpretive philosophical practice.*

**Keywords:**

*Film-philosophy, spectatorship, existentialism, phenomenology, cinematic thinking*

## Introduction

The relationship between cinema and philosophy has increasingly shifted from one of illustration to one of production. Rather than serving merely as a medium that represents philosophical ideas, film is now understood as capable of generating thought through audiovisual form (Frampton 6; Sinnerbrink 4). Within this framework, the works of Ingmar Bergman and Lars von Trier stand as significant examples of cinema that engages deeply with philosophical questions.

Bergman's films are marked by introspection, metaphysical inquiry, and existential anxiety, while von Trier's cinema is characterised by ethical provocation, emotional extremity, and narrative austerity. Despite their stylistic differences, both filmmakers construct cinematic experiences that challenge spectators to confront questions of faith, suffering, identity, and meaning.

This article argues that Bergman and von Trier create forms of philosophical cinema that transform spectatorship into an active process of interpretation and reflection. Their films do not simply depict philosophical themes but enact philosophical inquiry through cinematic form, positioning the spectator as a participant in the production of meaning.

## Film as Philosophical Practice

Daniel Frampton's concept of *filmosophy* provides a crucial framework for understanding cinema as a thinking medium. According to Frampton, films possess a "film-mind" that articulates ideas through visual and temporal structures rather than linguistic discourse (Frampton 7). Similarly, Stanley Cavell suggests that cinema invites philosophical reflection by presenting the world in a manner that both reveals and distances it, generating scepticism and self-awareness (Cavell 23).

Bergman's cinema exemplifies this philosophical capacity through its emphasis on silence, introspection, and metaphysical questioning. Films such as *The Seventh Seal* and *Persona* engage with themes of death, faith, and identity in ways that resist definitive interpretation. Von Trier, in turn, extends this tradition by creating narratives that confront spectators with ethical ambiguity and emotional intensity.

Together, these filmmakers demonstrate that cinema can function as a form of philosophical practice, producing thought through images rather than merely representing it.

## Epistemological Uncertainty and the Limits of Knowledge

A central feature of Bergman's cinema is its exploration of epistemological uncertainty. In *Persona*, the boundaries between two characters dissolve, creating a destabilized sense of identity and perception (Bergman, *Persona*). The film's fragmented narrative and ambiguous

imagery challenge the spectator's ability to determine what is real, thereby foregrounding the limits of knowledge.

Similarly, *The Seventh Seal* presents epistemological doubt through its exploration of faith and the silence of God (Bergman, *The Seventh Seal*). The knight's quest for certainty reflects a broader existential struggle to find meaning in a world that offers no clear answers.

Von Trier's *Melancholia* presents a contrasting yet related epistemological condition. The protagonist's intuitive acceptance of the impending apocalypse challenges rational epistemology, suggesting that knowledge may emerge through affective or existential insight rather than empirical reasoning (von Trier, *Melancholia*). These films collectively demonstrate that knowledge is contingent, unstable, and often inseparable from existential anxiety.

Drawing on Deleuze's concept of the time-image, these works suspend narrative causality and create spaces of contemplation in which knowledge is no longer grounded in action but in uncertainty (Deleuze 17).

### **Suffering, Faith, and Existential Cinema**

Both Bergman and von Trier foreground suffering as a central element of human existence. In *The Seventh Seal*, the pervasive presence of death and the absence of divine certainty create an atmosphere of existential despair (Bergman, *The Seventh Seal*). The film's iconic imagery, such as the knight's game of chess with Death, serves as a visual metaphor for the human confrontation with mortality.

Von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* similarly explores suffering through the character of Bess, whose actions raise complex questions about faith, sacrifice, and morality (von Trier, *Breaking the Waves*). Her willingness to endure pain for the sake of love reflects Kierkegaard's notion of the leap of faith, wherein belief transcends rational understanding (Kierkegaard 68).

Nietzsche's assertion that suffering is integral to human existence further illuminates these films, as both Bergman and von Trier depict pain as a condition that reveals deeper truths about the self and the world (Nietzsche 68). Through their emphasis on suffering, these filmmakers transform cinema into a medium for exploring existential meaning.

### **Ethical Spectatorship and Moral Ambiguity**

The films of Bergman and von Trier place significant ethical demands on the spectator. Rather than providing clear moral guidance, they immerse viewers in situations of ambiguity and discomfort. This aligns with Robert Sinnerbrink's argument that cinema can provoke ethical reflection through affective engagement (Sinnerbrink 72).

In *Persona*, the merging identities of the characters challenge conventional notions of individuality and responsibility, while *Breaking the Waves* forces spectators to confront

difficult questions about faith and sacrifice. These films do not offer definitive answers; instead, they require viewers to engage in ethical interpretation.

This process transforms spectatorship into a form of moral and philosophical engagement. Watching becomes an act of judgment and reflection, reinforcing the idea that cinema can function as a site of ethical inquiry.

### **Spectatorship as Philosophical Engagement**

Phenomenological film theory emphasises that spectatorship is an embodied experience. Vivian Sobchack argues that cinematic perception involves a dynamic interaction between viewer and image, in which meaning emerges through sensory engagement (Sobchack 4). Both Bergman and von Trier employ techniques that intensify this interaction, such as long takes, minimal editing, and intimate close-ups.

David Bordwell's theory of active spectatorship further supports this view, highlighting the role of the viewer in constructing meaning (Bordwell 33). However, Bergman and von Trier extend this process beyond narrative comprehension into philosophical reflection. Their films require spectators to confront questions of identity, faith, and existence, transforming viewing into a process of thinking.

### **Conclusion**

This article has argued that the films of Ingmar Bergman and Lars von Trier exemplify cinema's capacity to function as a mode of philosophical inquiry. Through their exploration of epistemological uncertainty, existential suffering, and ethical ambiguity, both filmmakers transform spectatorship into an active process of interpretation and reflection.

By situating these works within the framework of film-philosophy, the study demonstrates that cinema can generate philosophical thought through audiovisual form. Spectators are not merely passive observers but participants in a process of thinking that unfolds through perception and experience.

Ultimately, Bergman and von Trier reveal that cinema is a medium in which philosophical questions are not only represented but lived, experienced, and continually reinterpreted.

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