

The Leap of Faith and the Sacrifice of the Self: A Kierkegaardian Reading of Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves*

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Abstract- Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* (1996) has generated extensive scholarly debate regarding its treatment of religion, gender, sexuality, sacrifice, and transcendence. While previous studies have primarily interpreted the protagonist, Bess McNeill, either as a Christ-like figure or as a victim of patriarchal religious ideology, this article proposes an alternative reading grounded in Søren Kierkegaard's philosophy of existence. It argues that Bess embodies the Kierkegaardian knight of faith, whose radical commitment to divine love transcends universal ethical norms through the paradoxical movement of faith. Drawing upon *Fear and Trembling*, *Philosophical Fragments*, and *Stages on Life's Way*, the article examines how Bess's existential journey unfolds through Kierkegaard's three stages of existence—the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Particular attention is devoted to the concepts of the leap of faith, infinite resignation, paradox, and agapic love, demonstrating that Bess's sacrifice cannot be adequately understood as passive submission or psychological pathology. Instead, her actions constitute a conscious existential choice motivated by unconditional love and an absolute relation to God. Furthermore, the article explores von Trier's symbolic use of sexuality, corporeality, suffering, and the recurring motif of the church bells as theological signs that challenge institutional religion while affirming divine grace. Ultimately, *Breaking the Waves* presents transcendence not as an escape from human existence but as its deepest realization through suffering, love, and faith. By bringing Kierkegaard's existential theology into dialogue with contemporary film analysis, this study offers a new interpretation of von Trier's film, positioning Bess not merely as a tragic heroine but as an authentic religious subject whose paradoxical faith transforms both herself and those around her.

Keywords: Søren Kierkegaard; Lars von Trier; *Breaking the Waves*; leap of faith; existential theology; sacrifice; agape; paradox; transcendence; film philosophy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Since its release in 1996, Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* has occupied a unique position within contemporary cinema, provoking sustained philosophical, theological, and feminist debate. Awarded the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival, the film has been celebrated for its uncompromising exploration of faith, sacrifice, sexuality, and suffering, while simultaneously criticized for its controversial representation of female subjectivity and religious devotion. At the center of these debates stands Bess McNeill, whose radical acts of self-sacrifice have generated sharply divergent interpretations. Some scholars regard her as a victim of patriarchal oppression and religious manipulation, while others interpret her as a Christological figure whose suffering acquires redemptive significance. These contrasting perspectives reveal the complexity of

von Trier's cinematic universe, where moral certainty is consistently destabilized and religious experience is portrayed as profoundly paradoxical.

This article argues that Bess cannot be fully understood within either of these interpretative frameworks alone. Rather than reading her exclusively as a passive victim or as a symbolic representation of Christ, I propose that she should be understood through the philosophical and theological lens of Søren Kierkegaard's concept of the knight of faith. Such an interpretation allows Bess's actions to be viewed not as manifestations of irrational fanaticism or psychological instability but as expressions of existential freedom grounded in a radically personal relationship with God.

Kierkegaard's philosophy offers one of the most influential accounts of faith within modern existential

thought. Rejecting both speculative rationalism and institutional Christianity, Kierkegaard conceives faith as an intensely subjective mode of existence that emerges only through what he famously calls the "leap of faith." This leap cannot be justified by universal ethical principles or objective reason. Instead, it requires the individual to enter a paradoxical relationship with the Absolute, in which obedience to God may suspend the demands of universal morality. The paradigmatic example of this movement is Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*, whose willingness to sacrifice Isaac constitutes the highest expression of religious existence precisely because it transcends ethical universality while remaining grounded in absolute trust in God.

The central claim of this article is that Bess's existential trajectory closely mirrors Kierkegaard's description of this religious movement. Throughout the narrative, she progresses from ethical conformity to aesthetic fulfillment and ultimately toward religious existence, where unconditional love requires the complete sacrifice of her social identity, bodily integrity, and ultimately her own life. Her decisions appear irrational to both her religious community and the spectator because they cannot be explained through conventional moral reasoning. They become intelligible only within Kierkegaard's understanding of faith as the passionate acceptance of paradox.

This interpretation also challenges readings that reduce Bess's sexuality to either victimization or pathological self-destruction. Von Trier presents sexuality not merely as physical desire but as a theological language through which agapic love becomes embodied. Consequently, Bess's body functions simultaneously as the site of suffering, ethical transgression, and spiritual redemption. Her sacrifice represents neither passive submission nor self-annihilation but an existential act freely chosen in response to what she understands as God's call. In this respect, von Trier transforms the female body into the locus where eros, agape, sacrifice, and transcendence converge.

Furthermore, the film's recurring religious symbolism—particularly the absent and ultimately

miraculous church bells—serves to critique institutionalized religion while affirming the possibility of authentic divine revelation. The Presbyterian community depicted in the film embodies a rigid legalistic theology incapable of recognizing grace, whereas Bess's direct conversations with God represent a radically personal form of religious experience that challenges ecclesiastical authority. Her final vindication through the miraculous ringing of the heavenly bells symbolizes not merely her personal salvation but the triumph of divine grace over institutional judgment.

Methodologically, this article adopts a hermeneutic approach that integrates Kierkegaardian existential theology with film-philosophical analysis. By bringing Kierkegaard's concepts of paradox, infinite resignation, subjective truth, and the leap of faith into dialogue with von Trier's cinematic language, the study demonstrates that *Breaking the Waves* offers one of the most compelling modern representations of religious existence in contemporary cinema. Rather than presenting faith as certainty, von Trier depicts it as a continuous existential struggle in which love demands absolute vulnerability and transcendence becomes possible only through the acceptance of paradox.

Ultimately, this article seeks to contribute to both Kierkegaard studies and film theology by proposing that Bess should be understood as a modern knight of faith. Her story illustrates that authentic religious existence cannot be reduced to doctrinal orthodoxy or moral conformity. Instead, it emerges through the individual's courageous willingness to risk everything—including reputation, body, and life itself—in response to the incomprehensible call of the Absolute.

II. KIERKEGAARD'S EXISTENTIAL THEOLOGY: SUBJECTIVITY, PARADOX, AND THE LEAP OF FAITH

Søren Kierkegaard's philosophy emerged as a profound critique of nineteenth-century rationalism and speculative idealism, particularly the philosophical system of G. W.

F. Hegel. Against Hegel's ambition to construct a comprehensive philosophical system capable of explaining reality through objective reason, Kierkegaard insisted that the most fundamental truths concerning human existence cannot be grasped through abstract speculation. Instead, truth is realized only through subjective appropriation. His celebrated assertion that "truth is subjectivity" (Concluding Unscientific Postscript) does not imply relativism but rather emphasizes that existential truth is meaningful only insofar as it is personally lived. Religious faith, therefore, cannot be reduced to intellectual assent or doctrinal correctness; it demands an inward transformation of the individual.

For Kierkegaard, existence is fundamentally characterized by uncertainty. Human beings are finite creatures who nevertheless possess an awareness of the infinite. This tension between finitude and infinity constitutes the very condition of human existence and gives rise to anxiety, despair, and freedom. Anxiety (Angest) is not merely a psychological state but an ontological condition that accompanies the realization of human freedom. As Kierkegaard argues in *The Concept of Anxiety*, freedom reveals itself precisely through the possibility of choice, and with choice comes the unsettling awareness that one's existence can never be fully secured through reason alone (Kierkegaard, 1980).

The self, therefore, is not a fixed substance but a dynamic relation. In *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard famously defines the self as "a relation that relates itself to itself" (Kierkegaard, 1980). Human identity is not given but continually constituted through choices that determine one's relationship both to oneself and to God. Despair emerges whenever this relation becomes distorted—either because the individual refuses to become oneself or because one attempts to establish one's identity independently of God. Authentic existence, by contrast, requires the reconciliation of freedom with dependence upon the Absolute.

This understanding of the self provides the foundation for Kierkegaard's theory of the three existential stages presented in *Either/Or* and further

developed in *Stages on Life's Way*. These stages should not be understood as rigid chronological phases but as qualitatively different modes of existence through which individuals relate to themselves, others, and God.

The first is the aesthetic stage, characterized by immediacy, pleasure, and the pursuit of personal satisfaction. The aesthetic individual seeks novelty, beauty, and emotional fulfillment while avoiding lasting commitment. Although such a life may appear attractive, it ultimately leads to emptiness because pleasure alone cannot provide enduring meaning. The aesthete remains fragmented, constantly seeking new experiences without achieving existential unity (Kierkegaard, 1987).

The ethical stage represents a decisive advance beyond aesthetic immediacy. Here the individual embraces responsibility, social obligation, and moral commitment. Marriage becomes one of Kierkegaard's central metaphors for ethical existence because it symbolizes continuity, fidelity, and personal accountability. The ethical individual no longer pursues pleasure as an end in itself but seeks to live according to universal moral principles. Nevertheless, ethical life also reveals its own limitations.

Human beings inevitably encounter situations in which universal morality proves insufficient to resolve existential dilemmas.

It is precisely at this point that Kierkegaard introduces the religious stage, the highest form of existence. Religious faith cannot be understood as a simple extension of ethical life. Rather, it constitutes a qualitative transformation that introduces an entirely new relation between the individual and God. Unlike ethical duty, which derives its legitimacy from universal norms, religious existence rests upon an absolute relation to the Absolute. This relationship cannot be mediated by institutions, social conventions, or philosophical systems. It is radically personal, inward, and paradoxical.

The paradigmatic expression of this paradox appears in *Fear and Trembling*, where Kierkegaard, writing

under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, meditates upon Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac. From the standpoint of ethics, Abraham's action appears incomprehensible. Universal morality condemns the killing of one's child. Yet Abraham nevertheless obeys God's command because his relationship with God transcends the ethical sphere. Kierkegaard describes this movement as the teleological suspension of the ethical, one of the most controversial concepts in modern philosophy. The ethical is not abolished but temporarily suspended in favor of a higher religious obligation that remains inaccessible to rational explanation (Kierkegaard, 1983).

Abraham thus becomes the archetype of the knight of faith. Unlike the tragic hero, whose sacrifice can be understood within the framework of universal ethics, the knight of faith acts alone, without public justification, sustained solely by faith in God's promise. His silence is therefore essential. He cannot explain himself because the language of ethics is incapable of expressing the paradoxical character of religious existence. Faith remains irreducibly subjective.

Before becoming a knight of faith, however, one must first become what Kierkegaard calls the knight of infinite resignation. Infinite resignation involves relinquishing what one loves most while accepting the impossibility of its recovery within ordinary human existence. The knight of infinite resignation finds peace by renouncing the finite in favor of the eternal. Yet this movement alone remains incomplete. The knight of faith performs a second movement that surpasses resignation itself. Having relinquished everything, the individual nevertheless believes—"by virtue of the absurd"—that what has been sacrificed will somehow be restored through God's grace (Kierkegaard, 1983).

This double movement distinguishes faith from resignation. Resignation accepts loss as irreversible; faith simultaneously accepts loss and believes in restoration. Such belief appears irrational because it cannot be justified by empirical evidence or logical reasoning. Faith therefore inhabits the realm of paradox.

Paradox occupies a central place throughout Kierkegaard's authorship. In *Philosophical Fragments*, Johannes Climacus argues that Christianity itself is founded upon the Absolute Paradox: the eternal God enters history as a finite human being. The Incarnation cannot be comprehended through speculative philosophy because it unites two realities that reason considers mutually exclusive—eternity and temporality, infinity and finitude, divinity and humanity (Kierkegaard, 1985). The paradox does not invite intellectual resolution but existential decision.

The movement into faith consequently requires what Kierkegaard famously calls the leap. The leap should not be understood as an irrational impulse or emotional enthusiasm. Rather, it denotes the qualitative transition between fundamentally different modes of existence. There exists no continuous rational bridge between ethical certainty and religious faith. If such continuity existed, faith would become merely another form of knowledge. Instead, the leap preserves the discontinuity between reason and revelation while simultaneously affirming that this discontinuity can be traversed only through personal commitment.

The leap of faith thus presupposes freedom. Every individual confronts the possibility of remaining within the security of ethical rationality or venturing into the uncertainty of religious existence. Faith does not eliminate uncertainty; it embraces it. The believer acts despite the impossibility of objective certainty because faith rests upon trust rather than demonstration.

This existential understanding of faith radically transforms the concept of divine love. God's love is not presented as protection from suffering but as the source of a vocation that frequently entails suffering itself. Love contains within it the possibility of sacrifice because genuine love always exposes the self to vulnerability and loss. The believer therefore receives finite existence as a gift while simultaneously recognizing its fragility. Eternity and temporality remain in perpetual tension rather than being reconciled through speculative synthesis (Carlisle, 2005).

Consequently, suffering acquires a fundamentally different significance within Kierkegaard's religious anthropology. It is neither punishment nor meaningless misfortune but the existential condition through which faith becomes manifest. The Christian is not promised immunity from despair but rather the possibility of discovering divine grace precisely within despair. This inversion distinguishes Kierkegaard from both rational theology and sentimental religiosity. Authentic faith emerges where certainty disappears.

Such an understanding of religious existence provides the philosophical framework through which *Breaking the Waves* may be reinterpreted. Bess McNeill's actions repeatedly violate the expectations of both her religious community and conventional moral reasoning. Yet these actions closely resemble the existential structure Kierkegaard attributes to the knight of faith. Like Abraham, Bess cannot justify herself before others. Her decisions appear irrational because they originate in what she understands to be an absolute relationship with God rather than obedience to universal ethical norms. The paradox of her sacrifice therefore becomes intelligible only within Kierkegaard's conception of religious subjectivity, where faith is defined not by certainty but by the courageous willingness to inhabit contradiction itself.

III. BESS MCNEILL AS THE KIERKEGAARDIAN KNIGHT OF FAITH: FROM ETHICAL CONFORMITY TO RELIGIOUS EXISTENCE

Although *Breaking the Waves* has frequently been interpreted through feminist theology, psychoanalytic criticism, and Christological symbolism, these approaches often overlook the profoundly Kierkegaardian structure that underlies Bess McNeill's existential development. Von Trier constructs a heroine whose life unfolds according to a movement remarkably similar to Kierkegaard's three stages of existence. Rather than depicting a psychologically unstable woman manipulated by religion, the film narrates the gradual transformation of an individual who moves from ethical conformity

through aesthetic fulfillment toward authentic religious existence. Consequently, Bess should not merely be understood as a cinematic Christ figure but, more fundamentally, as a modern embodiment of Kierkegaard's knight of faith.

At the beginning of the film, Bess appears entirely immersed in the ethical sphere. She inhabits an isolated Calvinist community on the Scottish coast whose rigid religious practices regulate every aspect of daily life. Individual freedom is subordinated to collective morality, while female subjectivity remains almost entirely absent from public discourse. Women are forbidden to speak during church services, and religious authority is exercised exclusively by male elders who claim to interpret God's will on behalf of the entire community. Within this environment, ethical existence is identified with obedience, conformity, and submission to established norms.

Initially, Bess accepts these conventions without questioning them. She demonstrates sincere devotion to God, regularly attends church, and seeks the approval of the elders. Her understanding of morality appears inseparable from the religious discipline imposed by her community. Yet von Trier immediately introduces subtle indications that Bess's religiosity differs fundamentally from institutional Christianity. Unlike the elders, whose relationship with God is mediated through doctrine and ecclesiastical authority, Bess experiences God as a direct personal presence. Her conversations with God reveal a faith grounded not in theological certainty but in intimate dialogue. She does not merely pray; she speaks to God and, significantly, responds in God's voice. This extraordinary narrative device establishes from the outset that Bess's religious life is radically subjective.

Kierkegaard repeatedly insists that authentic Christianity begins precisely where objective certainty ends. Faith is never mediated through institutions but emerges as the individual's absolute relation to the Absolute. Bess exemplifies this principle. Although she remains externally obedient to the church, her deepest loyalty is directed toward the God who addresses her personally rather than

toward the community that claims to represent Him. Her religious experience therefore already contains the seeds of the transition beyond ethical existence. The decisive transformation begins with her marriage to Jan Nyman. Marriage traditionally represents, for Kierkegaard, the highest expression of ethical life because it embodies commitment, fidelity, and responsibility. Yet von Trier subtly reverses this expectation. Rather than confirming Bess within ethical stability, marriage becomes the catalyst for her movement into the aesthetic sphere.

Jan introduces Bess to bodily intimacy, erotic desire, and sensual pleasure. Having previously understood sexuality primarily through the prohibitions of her religious upbringing, she now discovers it as an expression of mutual love and personal fulfillment. Their sexual relationship is portrayed neither as sinful nor as morally corrupt. On the contrary, von Trier presents erotic intimacy as a revelation of human communion. Bess repeatedly thanks God for bringing Jan into her life because he has awakened dimensions of existence that had previously remained inaccessible to her. Love becomes inseparable from physical embodiment.

This portrayal closely resembles Kierkegaard's understanding of the aesthetic stage, not because sexuality is inherently immoral, but because aesthetic existence is characterized by immediacy and passionate experience. Bess embraces erotic love with extraordinary innocence. Her desire contains none of the manipulation or narcissism often associated with aesthetic seduction. Instead, sensual pleasure becomes another language through which she encounters divine grace. Von Trier thereby refuses the traditional opposition between spirituality and corporeality. The body becomes the medium through which love itself is experienced.

The accident on the oil platform radically disrupts this harmony. Jan's paralysis introduces suffering into their relationship and initiates the existential crisis that propels Bess toward the religious stage. Unable to continue their physical intimacy, Jan asks Bess to engage in sexual relations with other men and to recount these encounters to him. From every

ethical perspective, this request appears incomprehensible. The elders condemn it as sinful, the physician interprets it as psychological pathology, and even Bess herself initially struggles to understand its meaning.

At this crucial moment, however, von Trier introduces the Kierkegaardian paradox. Bess does not obey Jan merely because she submits to his authority. Rather, she gradually comes to believe that loving Jan in this impossible manner constitutes God's own command. Her actions no longer derive from universal ethical obligations but from what she understands as an absolute relationship with God. Like Abraham ascending Mount Moriah, Bess enters a realm where ordinary moral language becomes insufficient.

The analogy with Abraham is particularly illuminating. Abraham cannot explain why he is prepared to sacrifice Isaac because no ethical justification exists for his action. Likewise, Bess cannot explain why she believes prostitution may become an act of love. Her community interprets her behavior as moral degeneration because it evaluates her exclusively according to universal ethical standards. Yet Kierkegaard insists that the knight of faith inevitably appears guilty from the perspective of ordinary morality. Religious existence cannot be recognized externally because its meaning resides entirely within inwardness.

This distinction is essential for understanding Bess's sacrifice. If interpreted solely through ethical categories, her actions appear self-destructive and irrational. If interpreted through Kierkegaard's concept of faith, however, they acquire a radically different significance. Bess does not abandon ethics because she despises morality; rather, she moves beyond ethics in obedience to what she believes is a divine calling. This movement corresponds precisely to Kierkegaard's notion of the teleological suspension of the ethical.

Von Trier deliberately intensifies this ambiguity by refusing to provide objective confirmation that God has actually spoken to Bess. The spectator never receives external evidence validating her

experiences. Consequently, viewers are forced into the same existential uncertainty that characterizes Kierkegaardian faith itself. Either Bess is psychologically deluded, or she genuinely inhabits the paradox of religious existence. The film refuses to resolve this ambiguity because certainty would eliminate faith altogether.

Another striking parallel with Kierkegaard concerns the concept of silence. Abraham remains silent before Sarah, Isaac, and his servants because his experience cannot be translated into universal language. Similarly, Bess becomes increasingly isolated as her journey progresses. She loses the confidence of her family, the support of the church, and eventually even the protection of society itself. Her silence is not merely social exclusion; it reflects the impossibility of communicating an experience that belongs exclusively to the relationship between the individual and God.

This growing isolation also reveals an important distinction between institutional religion and authentic faith. The Presbyterian elders repeatedly invoke divine law while demonstrating little capacity for mercy or compassion. Their God speaks through prohibition and judgment. Bess's God, by contrast, speaks through love, vulnerability, and sacrifice. Von Trier therefore constructs two radically different theological paradigms. The church represents Christianity as law; Bess embodies Christianity as existential faith.

The conflict between these two conceptions culminates in the film's final act. By sacrificing both her body and her social identity, Bess performs the movement of infinite resignation. She relinquishes everything that defines her finite existence: dignity, reputation, sexuality, and ultimately life itself. Yet she simultaneously believes that Jan will recover through God's grace. This second movement—the impossible expectation that love will triumph despite every empirical indication to the contrary—is precisely what distinguishes the knight of faith from the knight of infinite resignation.

According to Kierkegaard, faith always believes "by virtue of the absurd." Bess never receives rational

evidence that her sacrifice will save Jan. Nevertheless, she continues because her confidence rests not upon probability but upon divine possibility. Her faith therefore inhabits the same paradox that defines Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac while believing that Isaac would nevertheless be restored.

In this respect, von Trier transforms Bess into one of contemporary cinema's most compelling representations of Kierkegaard's religious individual. She neither escapes suffering nor overcomes paradox through certainty. Instead, she embraces contradiction itself, trusting that God's love exceeds every category through which human beings ordinarily understand justice, morality, and redemption.

IV. EROTICISM, AGAPE, AND THE THEOLOGY OF THE BODY

One of the most provocative aspects of *Breaking the Waves* concerns von Trier's representation of sexuality. Critical interpretations have often reduced Bess's sexual encounters either to evidence of patriarchal exploitation or to manifestations of psychological instability. Such readings, although important, overlook the theological dimension of corporeality that structures the entire narrative. Von Trier does not portray sexuality merely as biological desire but as the embodied expression of sacrificial love. Consequently, Bess's body becomes the primary site where eros, agape, suffering, and redemption converge.

This interpretation differs significantly from the Calvinist moral framework that governs the religious community portrayed in the film. Within the Presbyterian congregation, sexuality is regarded primarily as a source of temptation and moral corruption. Female desire is systematically silenced, while religious authority is exercised through prohibition and discipline. Women remain excluded from public speech within the church, and moral purity is measured according to obedience rather than compassion. Against this background, Bess's discovery of erotic love after her marriage to Jan represents a radical theological disruption.

Rather than presenting sexual intimacy as sinful, von Trier portrays it as a form of grace. Bess repeatedly thanks God for introducing Jan into her life because, through him, she discovers dimensions of existence previously denied by her religious upbringing. Sexuality is therefore neither opposed to spirituality nor detached from it; instead, bodily intimacy becomes one of the ways through which divine love is experienced within finite existence.

This theological understanding resonates with Anders Nygren's distinction between eros and agape. Nygren defines eros as acquisitive love, directed toward personal fulfillment, whereas agape is self-giving love that expects nothing in return (Nygren, 1982). Although this distinction has profoundly influenced twentieth-century Christian theology, *Breaking the Waves* deliberately complicates it. Bess's love begins as erotic desire but gradually develops into unconditional self-sacrifice. Rather than opposing eros and agape, von Trier presents them as successive expressions of the same existential commitment. Erotic love becomes the foundation from which agapic sacrifice emerges.

Jan's paralysis radically transforms the nature of their relationship. Unable to participate in sexual intimacy, he asks Bess to sleep with other men and describe these encounters to him. From an ethical perspective, his request appears disturbing and morally indefensible. Nevertheless, Bess interprets this demand through the logic of unconditional love. Her actions cannot be understood as expressions of sexual desire; rather, they constitute acts of self-sacrifice performed in the belief that they may contribute to Jan's recovery.

Here the body assumes a profoundly theological significance. Instead of functioning as an object of pleasure or commodification, Bess's body becomes the instrument through which love is enacted. She freely offers herself not because she values suffering, but because she believes that authentic love demands absolute self-giving. Her corporeality thus acquires a sacramental dimension: the body mediates grace through sacrifice.

Linda Mercadante (1997) argues that Bess internalizes the punitive image of God represented by the elders, becoming a victim of destructive religious ideology. While this interpretation illuminates the oppressive context within which Bess lives, it does not fully account for her existential agency. Von Trier repeatedly emphasizes that Bess chooses her path despite the certainty of social condemnation. Her sacrifice is neither passive nor coerced; it is consciously embraced as an expression of faith. This distinction is crucial from a Kierkegaardian perspective, where authentic religious existence always presupposes freedom.

The increasing violence directed against Bess also exposes the profound contrast between institutional religion and divine grace. The church interprets her sexuality exclusively as sin, refusing to recognize the love that motivates her actions. By contrast, the film consistently associates God's presence with compassion rather than judgment. Von Trier thereby critiques legalistic Christianity without rejecting faith itself. Institutional religion condemns Bess's body, whereas divine love ultimately vindicates it.

This paradox reaches its culmination in the film's final sequence. Following Bess's death, the miraculous ringing of the church bells symbolizes divine affirmation rather than ecclesiastical approval. Throughout the narrative, the absence of bells reflects the community's rejection of beauty, joy, and desire. Their miraculous appearance after Bess's sacrifice signifies that authentic holiness cannot be confined within institutional structures. Grace emerges precisely where religious authority has pronounced condemnation.

The bells therefore function as one of the film's most important theological symbols. They affirm that Bess's sacrifice has transcended the moral categories through which her community judged her. The miracle does not erase her suffering but reveals its ultimate significance. Divine justice appears not as legal retribution but as the recognition of unconditional love.

Von Trier thus reverses the traditional opposition between body and soul. Rather than presenting

salvation as liberation from the body, he portrays the body itself as the medium through which transcendence becomes possible. Bess's corporeal vulnerability does not diminish her spirituality; instead, it reveals the inseparability of incarnation, sacrifice, and redemption. In this respect, *Breaking the Waves* offers a profoundly theological vision in which the body becomes the visible manifestation of invisible grace.

V. CONCLUSION

Breaking the Waves remains one of the most theologically challenging films of contemporary cinema because it refuses to reduce faith either to institutional religion or to psychological experience. Instead, Lars von Trier presents religious existence as an existential struggle in which love, suffering, sexuality, and transcendence become inseparable dimensions of the human condition. Bess McNeill occupies the center of this struggle, embodying a form of faith that cannot be understood through conventional ethical categories.

This article has argued that Bess should not be interpreted solely as a Christ figure or as a victim of patriarchal oppression. Rather, she represents a cinematic embodiment of Kierkegaard's knight of faith, whose actions are governed by an absolute relationship with God rather than by universal moral norms. Her existential journey closely follows Kierkegaard's movement through the aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages of existence. Beginning within the ethical framework of her Calvinist community, she discovers embodied love through her marriage to Jan before ultimately entering the religious sphere through radical self-sacrifice.

Central to this interpretation is Kierkegaard's concept of the leap of faith. Faith does not emerge from rational certainty but from the individual's willingness to embrace paradox. Like Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*, Bess performs actions that appear incomprehensible from the standpoint of universal ethics. She cannot justify her decisions publicly because their meaning exists exclusively within her subjective relationship with God. Von Trier deliberately preserves this ambiguity, refusing to

provide objective proof that Bess's conversations with God are either authentic revelations or psychological projections. Consequently, the spectator is confronted with the same existential uncertainty that defines Kierkegaardian faith.

The film simultaneously challenges traditional Christian understandings of sexuality. Rather than opposing body and spirit, von Trier portrays corporeality as the medium through which divine love becomes visible. Bess's body is transformed from an object of judgment into an instrument of grace. Her sexuality is neither celebrated as unrestricted freedom nor condemned as sin; instead, it acquires theological significance through the selfless intention that motivates her sacrifice. In this respect, *Breaking the Waves* redefines the relationship between eros and agape, demonstrating that embodied love may become the vehicle of unconditional self-giving.

The final miracle of the heavenly bells constitutes the culmination of this theological vision. Throughout the film, institutional religion consistently refuses beauty, desire, and mercy, identifying holiness exclusively with obedience and prohibition. The miraculous bells reverse this judgment. Their sound functions as divine recognition that authentic faith transcends legalism and cannot be confined within ecclesiastical authority. Grace ultimately belongs to God rather than to religious institutions.

Von Trier's cinematic language therefore resonates profoundly with Kierkegaard's existential theology. Both reject objective certainty as the foundation of religious life and insist that authentic faith demands personal risk, inward passion, and absolute commitment. The believer becomes a solitary individual whose relationship with God cannot be mediated by society or justified through rational discourse.

At the same time, Bess differs from Abraham in one significant respect. Whereas Abraham is prepared to sacrifice another in obedience to God, Bess sacrifices herself for another. Her paradox is therefore not only religious but profoundly ethical, revealing a conception of love in which self-giving becomes the highest expression of human freedom. Her

martyrdom does not simply redeem Jan but symbolically exposes the moral inadequacy of the community that condemns her.

Ultimately, *Breaking the Waves* demonstrates that transcendence does not lie beyond human existence but emerges within it through suffering, vulnerability, and unconditional love. Von Trier suggests that genuine holiness is recognized not through institutional approval but through the individual's willingness to risk everything for the sake of love. In this sense, Bess becomes not only a tragic heroine but one of contemporary cinema's most compelling representations of Kierkegaard's religious individual.

The dialogue between Kierkegaard's existential philosophy and von Trier's cinematic theology also contributes to broader discussions concerning the relationship between faith and modernity. In an age increasingly characterized by skepticism toward institutional religion, *Breaking the Waves* proposes that authentic spirituality remains possible precisely through subjective commitment rather than doctrinal certainty. Faith survives not because paradox is eliminated but because it is embraced.

Consequently, the film invites contemporary theology to reconsider the nature of sacrifice, embodiment, and divine grace. Rather than reinforcing traditional dichotomies between body and soul, law and love, or reason and faith, von Trier presents religious existence as an ongoing negotiation between finitude and transcendence. This perspective confirms Kierkegaard's enduring relevance for contemporary philosophy of religion and demonstrates the capacity of cinema to function as a medium of theological reflection.

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