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No Country for Women and Children: Pastoral America and Meaningful Despair in *Palindromes* and *Dancer in the Dark*

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In his seminal article comparing the filmmaking of D.W. Griffith with the novels of Charles Dickens, the Soviet film theorist and filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein argued the following in relation to two sides of American society:

> In order to understand Griffith, one must visualize an America made up of more than visions of speeding automobiles, speeding trains, racing ticker tape, inexorable conveyor belts. One is obliged to comprehend the second side of America – America the traditional, the patriarchal, the provincial. And then you will be considerably less astonished by this link between Griffith and Dickens. (Eisenstein, 1969: 198)

Thus in the latter stages of his life and career, Eisenstein writes of a key division in American culture, two "faces of America" (*Ibid*.) that contribute equally and vitally to the national psyche. "Super-Dynamic America" (*Ibid*.) represents the nation's pioneering of new technologies as essential components of a fully rationalized capitalism, with "speeding trains" and Griffith's parallel editing noted as paradigms of Western dynamism and modernity. "America the traditional" or "Small Town America" (*Ibid*.) conversely represents the pastoralism and conservatism of a nation that hangs back from such visions of the contemporary, a nation more content with established social structures and ensconced in pastoral values of family and the domestic. It is this America, as Eisenstein recognizes, that is as much an ideal in terms of national self-image as that of urban America, an image that would be borne out by the popularity of such classic genres as the Western and the infamous iconographies of small-town America in cinema and television.

Provincial America has become, however, a site of anxiety in recent cinema, such as in the films discussed below, as well as in political debates surrounding such grassroots phenomena as the Tea Party movement and the emergence of evangelical Christian political power. With America's cultural heterogeneity and liberal multiculturalism often now associated with a liberal, cosmopolitan elitism, rural or small-town America has become increasingly aligned with the patriarchal conservatism and libertarian individualism of Eisenstein's "traditional"

America. It is such perceptions that this essay seeks to analyze and nuance in relation to a broader critique of American culture's construction of women and children. This will be achieved through the example of two films produced within the last fifteen years, both of which pay particular attention to the visualization of women and children within small-town America, particularly those that are shown to come into such communities from various elsewheres. Driven by modes of address that foreground an emotionally "blank style," as described by Jeffrey Sconce in relation to the American "smart film" (2002: 359), *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) and *Palindromes* (2004) depict female characters who are at first welcomed but are eventually cast out by American provincial communities. Such despairing endings are particularly interesting in these films, however, in their ultimate refusal to privilege one side of America over another, such that both the urban and the pastoral participate in their own, discrete systems of exclusion and prejudice.

I argue thus that the nihilism of such endings speaks to the current affective climate within which American cultural politics is perceived. Both films stage problems of alterity and American social exclusionism in relation to seemingly intractable instabilities regarding the American imaginary's designation of virtue in relation to women and children. Rural or small-town America in particular remains a mythical, though problematic, topos in cinema. Its spaces belong to a cultural imaginary that extends beyond the territorial borders of America, attached to ideologies of freedom and private enterprise. Hollywood's classic genre *par excellence*, the Western, demonstrates Hollywood's dream of rural America as fertile, unoccupied expanse, an unchartered wilderness that allows man to forge his own destiny and establish private enterprise and home. The classics of the genre animate key tensions between civilization and wilderness (the Garden/Desert dichotomy), usually resolved amid elegiac nostalgia for the blank canvas of an unoccupied West and those that roam(ed) it. **[1]** At the crux of the genre is the ideal of the individual loner outlaw as paradigm of rural existence and subsistence. In *his* dismissals of social conformity and manners and adherence to a distinctly personal moral code, the outlaw stands outside the contradictions of a civilized, but tamed, America.

However, women and children in the Western remain problematically peripheral in narrative terms, owing to their conventional exclusion from the phallic violence played out along the frontier. Signifying the familial and the domestic, they exist outside the narrative scope supported by the Western, which the outlaw hero might either embrace or dismiss after the climactic accomplishment of his mission. Women and children are by contrast foregrounded and nuanced in the films discussed below. They are integral to both the domestic and violent aspects of pastoral life, while divided in terms of their ability to fit in as economic and sexual agents.

Women (and children) are both violated and violating in these films, yet their violence lacks the intentionality of the classical, phallic male hero, induced rather by chance and misfortune than by a clear mandate of justice or revenge. Indeed, in both films, violent acts on the part of women are still sanctioned and instigated by the men in their lives, nuancing therefore a more simple reversal of the usual terms regarding gendered passivity.

These films do not so much therefore condemn small-town America as defamiliarize the coordinates within which the American pastoral is conventionally framed, shifting focus from issues of religion and politics to questions of genre, gender and violence. As with the films of other chroniclers of a disturbed small-town America (perhaps most notably David Lynch through such works as *Blue Velvet* [1986] and the TV series *Twin Peaks* [1990-1991]), von Trier and Solondz deploy pastiche and parody to reveal elements of rural America that run against the grain of its idealized self-image. Borrowing from both the European art cinema and contemporary Hollywood cinema, these films are postmodern, and in some ways camp, in their "knowingness" with regards to cinematic and non-cinematic popular culture. The foregrounding of music videos, stars and cinematic genres such as the Western and the musical, has the effect, I argue, of nuancing the melodramatic aims of these films. The virtuous hero's suffering and final recognition of his or her virtue have been noted as integral to the rhetorical aims of melodrama as the "fundamental mode of American moving pictures" (Williams, 1998: 42). Such films, however, nuance this mode's well-established commitment to moral legibility and redemption by playing with the subject position produced by the spectacle of female suffering and childhood innocence. *Palindromes* seems on one hand a continuation of a nihilistic tendency in American independent cinema of the 1990s that contrasts with the affirmative mood of more mainstream Hollywood films. *Dancer*, while arguably more formally experimental in its appropriation of the musical, is also postmodern in accordance with what Jeffrey Sconce notes as von Trier's "radically *unironic*" approach, a kind of ironic doubling of sincerity that feeds ultimately into a larger aesthetic of play and productive despair. For both films therefore, rural America presents itself as a difficult and ambiguous target for critique, overlaid as it is with a matrix of contradictory investments and idealisms that mirror the indeterminacies of gendered virtue.

The Arthouse Musical: *Dancer in the Dark*

Lars von Trier's film displays all the postmodern play with textual conventions and extra-textual contexts that characterizes much of his filmmaking and marketing. At the same time, *Dancer* adheres to the melodramatic trope of women's imperiled virtue. Its jarring shifts between

musical and melodrama mark it out as a key work of "camp" too, with von Trier's use of the Icelandic pop star Bjork (as the film's heroine Selma) foregrounding intertextuality while still maintaining focus on the tragedy of the fictional character she portrays. Such stylistics earned the film much praise (and the Cannes Film Festival's Palme D'Or) yet there was also much criticism of its camp irony, such as in the following:

> For its sheer effrontery, for its browbeating melodrama and pseudo-tragedy, Lars von Trier's Dancer in the Dark has to be the most sensationally silly film of the year – as well as the most shallow and crudely manipulative. Everything about it is silly, from the faux naivety and implausibility of its plot to the secret little idiot savant smile on the face of its Victim Heroine played by Björk – a squeaking, chirruping diva turn sufficient to curdle every carton of milk within a 10-kilometre radius. (Bradshaw, 2000)

Rehearsed in the above of course are standard critical objections to melodrama – the energy of such condemnation stemming from the sense that von Trier deploys its clichéd tropes ironically, yet with still a certain degree of sincerity. The filmmaker is here understood to be living up to his reputation of self-stylized prankster, as evidenced most notably by his playful publication in 1995 of the Dogme manifesto along with fellow filmmaker Thomas Vinterberg. The film's ability to "curdle every carton of milk within a 10-kilometre radius" is deemed thus both a serious flaw and a mark of auteurist indulgence. Both "silly" and "manipulative," the film could not be written off as a Hollywood genre piece, nor did it conform to a more stable, if not by now conservative, standard of art cinema.

Dancer in the Dark was the third film in von Trier's "Golden Heart" trilogy, which also included *Breaking the Waves* (1996) and *The Idiots* (1998). The films were inspired (von Trier claims) by a book he read as a child telling the sentimental tale of a girl who goes into the woods and gives away all her possessions to animals. **[2]** Each of the trilogy's films feature then a "Victim Heroine" that sacrifices her own interests to save or help others, only to be severely punished by a society that fails to recognize such virtue. *Dancer's* central character, Selma, an immigrant to the US from Czechoslovakia, works in a factory in Washington State to save up money for an eye operation for her son, Gene, so that he will not go blind. Selma suffers from the same condition, and the film follows the deterioration of Selma's sight to blindness. Her initially friendly relationship with her landlord, Bill, meanwhile develops into an exploitative one, such that he steals her hard-earned savings in order to fund his wife's overspending. When Selma demands the stolen money back, he ashamedly exhorts Selma to kill him, and because she eventually does so under extreme duress, she is subsequently caught, put on trial, and finally executed for murder at the film's end. Although she

commits murder, her act becomes one of both compassion (Bill begs her to do it) and justified retribution, with an aura of martyrdom established around her from the film's outset.

As with other von Trier films about rural to semi-urban life in America in particular, the narrative of *Dancer* begins with the possibility that members of a capitalist society can help and support one another, even where poverty seems entrenched (a similar premise as in von Trier's subsequent film *Dogville* [2003], for instance). When Selma is not able to buy a present for Gene's birthday, Bill and Linda buy him a bicycle, a gift that Selma warily accepts despite its ostensible foregrounding of her failings as a mother. Similar goodwill is apparent in her factory work, a place where Selma becomes increasingly unable to perform her duties owing to failing eyesight. While her supervisor Norman excuses mistakes that could possibly lead to a machine breakage, Selma's friend and colleague Kathy (Catherine Deneuve) turns up to help Selma perform her night shift without being paid. However, as the film progresses, such acts of benevolence prove either insufficient to preventing catastrophe (Selma still loses her job) or indeed prove more directly instrumental to her downfall. Despite the bicycle gift, we learn only two scenes later from Bill's conversation with Selma that it is precisely such expenditure on the part of Linda that has brought him (as breadwinner) to financial ruin. A society of goodwill functions fine in von Trier's films as long as conditions remain unrealistically stable, with poor individuals shown to benefit from the kindness of more wealthy neighbors and friends. Yet it is precisely owing to the untenability of such stability, where poverty comes to dominate without any welfare on the part of the state or employers, that crime and murder start to encroach on such pastoral idylls. Bill's theft of Selma's money and his death follow as direct consequences of such changes in circumstances. That Bill is too ashamed to admit to Linda that they are broke and that this financial situation has arisen from Bill's failure to curb her consumption serves to underline failings on the part of the married couple and its traditional propagation of imbalanced gender roles. The film shows that if such an anachronistic scheme of marriage is permitted to subsist, the wider society – represented by friends, neighbors and colleagues – suffers equally if not more. While the status of American, landlord, paid employee and husband affords Bill a degree of respectability, it becomes nothing short of parasitical on those around him who fall short of such criteria. Such figures as the stranger, the immigrant or the destitute (exemplified by Selma) become subjects at risk of abuse in such conditions. In the film's courtroom scene, for instance, where Selma is put on trial for Bill's murder, the prosecuting lawyer brands Selma a communist, invoking the knee-jerk accusation of mid-20th century American society.

In such respects, as recognized of Douglas Sirk's films and other classic melodramas, the film serves as a critique of American society. It does so, moreover, while appropriating and arguably celebrating two of its principle genres: the melodrama and musical. As European art cinema, *Dancer* might be construed as another instance of anti-American rhetoric emanating from countries and filmmakers that perceive themselves as more closely aligned with socially democratic principles. As winner of the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, such a film inevitably becomes aligned with other winners that have mounted powerful ideological critiques of American capitalist society, such as Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004). However, it is precisely *Dancer*'s evocation of Hollywood melodrama and the musical that situates its project as one more of negotiation with American movie culture and its sentimentalism. The musical in particular is subject to postmodern re-appropriation in *Dancer*, in which it maintains a shallowness of affect in its incomplete validation of the genre's ideology. Selma's rehearsals for an amateur production of *The Sound of Music* (1965) are shown, like the film's musical numbers, to break up the monotony of alienated factory labor or, later on, the miseries of social isolation and rejection. While factory work imposes a crushing solitude on its workers, the rehearsal scenes show drama and music as episodes of social cohesion, support and love. Moreover, it is the musical numbers themselves that provide marked ironic counterpoint, as often with the traditional musical, to the grim conditions that surround them. In musicals such as *West Side Story* (1961), *The Sound of Music* and *Oliver!* (1968), to name but a few, musical numbers provide relief from the tense events of their plots, invoking moral legibility and utopian idealism despite the profusion of tragic events that take place around them. Moreover, the classic musical number often clearly serves a pedagogical purpose, bringing characters together romantically or socially despite their initial disagreements and conflicts. In *Dancer*, however, music serves to unite characters as a more direct counterpoint to how they interact in the film's non-musical segments. Characters in the latter sequences are either as indifferent to one another as atomized factory workers, or are more likely actively working against each other's interests, such as Linda in relation to Selma after Bill's death or the death-row officers who transport Selma to the execution room. During musical numbers, such differences become effaced in the spirit of larger ideals, where characters act with far greater compassion and express sympathy with each other's motives – emotions, however, that are later exposed as expressions of idealistic unreality in non-musical segments.

The moral legibility of the Hollywood musical thus becomes blurred, as musical escapism fails to bring people together in the non-musical episodes that follow. In the same scene in which Bill confesses his bankruptcy to Selma while she reveals her saving plans for Gene's

operation, they discuss Hollywood musicals' capacity to transport the spectator. A discourse is here foregrounded that poses music as a transcendent force over oppressive conditions (poverty for both Selma and Bill) so that they might survive psychologically. Yet when such escapism fails to prevent the theft, deceit and murder between these characters, such a discourse is at least partially shown to fail. Likewise, despite the extent to which Selma and Katherine are shown to enjoy their amateur rehearsals of *The Sound of Music*, their rehearsal space becomes a place of distrust and danger later on in the film. Informed by the police of Selma's crime, Selma's director deceptively stalls her at rehearsal so that the police have time to arrive and arrest her, underlining the way music can only be justified for its own sake rather than in moral terms. Betrayal and deceit more often than not persist in non-musical segments of the film, and we are thus confronted with the failure of moral legibility to translate beyond the formal confines of the musical number. Unlike *West Side Story*, for instance, where tragedy and music eventually precipitate recognitions of thwarted love and virtue between the two warring New York gangs, music remains interior, even delusional and psychotic, in *Dancer*, ensuring nothing but its own abstracted logic.

Closer to *Dancer*, therefore, are the revisionist musicals of Dennis Potter's TV series for the BBC such as *Pennies From Heaven* (1978) and *The Singing Detective* (1986). These programs were notable for their intermingling of grim social realism and surreal musical numbers. In *Detective*, for instance, such numbers express the writer/detective Marlowe's delusional imaginings and thus can be contrasted with the more literal bursts into song by characters of the traditional musical. Performances by the doctors, nurses and other patients surrounding Marlowe echo a similar kind of psychosis shown by Selma when she re-imagines the grim environments she inhabits as places for music, dance and spectacle. Using standards from the 1930s, *Detective*'s excursions into song both allude to the long-established escapism of Hollywood and jazz while underlining the extent to which such songs (and the imaginer's psyche) signify an irrecoverable past and utopian idyll. Like *Dancer*, therefore, such series revel in camp parody, suggesting that such musical forms can no longer be trusted as sites of genuine emotional reality. Interiorized as the imaginings of a sick man (immobilized in a hospital bed by severe psoriasis), the musical number here becomes a key symptom of a profound identity confusion and mental disorder. Such instabilities apply to *Dancer* too, such as when Bill's corpse (his head having been graphically bludgeoned by Selma) comes back to life with the onset of the song "Smith and Wesson" in order to reassure Selma about the killing. The film immediately becomes saturated with color, compared to the washed-out resolution of the film's non-musical sequences, and Selma's appearance becomes magically cleared of blemishes from her struggle with Bill. With the music still playing, Linda appears outside the

house and helps Selma escape from the police she has just called in the film's non-musical narrative, now seemingly aware that Selma needs to get the money for Gene's eye operation. With Gene himself then circling on his bicycle, singing the refrain "You Just Did What You Had to Do," the entire sequence here becomes dominated by the musical number's struggle to align the otherwise restricted and antagonistic perceptions of characters, despite the impermanence of such a condition within the actual story.

In such respects, *Dancer* appropriates and defamiliarizes the conventions of a sentimental Hollywood genre, calling attention to how the musical number in particular functions ideologically, and nuancing a simpler kind of melodramatic pathos. While Selma is certainly misunderstood and unjustly punished (as a "Victim Heroine"), it is her unhinged remove from reality (her blindness serving as a good metaphor) that motivates the musical number's entertainment function and puts the spectator in a contradictory position emotionally. The film asserts that while the number may be diverting for Selma and entertaining for the spectator, there is a price to be paid for its artificial consolations, in the form of Selma's ultimate execution. Furthermore, rather than allowing for such punishment to be perceived as the sad condition of a melodramatic universe of destiny, sacrifice and martyrdom, *Dancer* implicates the spectator him- or herself as an integral element of that unjust economy. Unless our enjoyment of the musical number is one of camp detachment, it just might be possible that we ourselves are as much part of the problem as the state apparatus that ostensibly destroys Selma. By recognizing the genre and being entertained, we are implicated in such a process at the same time as being permitted an ironic subject position. As with Sirkian melodrama, sentimental tragedy is counterposed with formal excesses in music and color, yet the latter are now foregrounded as more overt symptoms of delusion and escapism than a subtle stylistic gloss on narrative. Embodying a rather grosser kind of postmodern parody, *Dancer* invokes sympathy for Selma while complicating the extent to which identification is truly possible. Is this Bjork or a fictional character? To what extent are we supposed to sympathize with her off-kilter character? In such respects, *Dancer* certainly succeeded in distancing a fair number of critics and spectators, yet as the Cannes jury seemed to acknowledge, such a fostering of camp detachment seemed to be part of von Trier's game all along.

American Independent Cinema: *Palindromes*

If von Trier's project suggests that such experimental approaches to narrative cinema require the seasoned familiarity with modernist technique that comes with a European background, America's own thriving independent cinema has for some time also subjected the

melodramatic tradition to a kind of "smart" irony. Todd Solondz's *Palindromes* addresses issues of underage sex between children and between children and adults. In its foregrounding of children as objects of the adult gaze, the film addresses America's unstable relationship with child sexuality, and with a pastoral setting once again no longer excluded from the pervasive dysfunctions of American society. Invoking a mode of address with frequent recourse to the parodic and camp, *Palindromes* also epitomizes the "dampened affect" (Sconce 2002: 259) described by Sconce in relation to the American "smart" film, particularly in relation to its ambiguous framing of another "Victim Heroine." It tells the story of a thirteen-year old girl, Aviva, who runs away from her middle-class, suburban home once she is forced by her parents to have an abortion. The character is played by seven different actors varying in age, race and even gender, actors who play Aviva through different stages of her picaresque journey. Such experimentalism in casting problematizes the extent to which Aviva constitutes a subject. While at one level the spectrum of identification is widened, such casting also disrupts a more coherent framing of character in its failure to deliver visual continuity across narrative. The film thus undermines an immersive model of spectatorship in favor of more episodic engagements and an intensified consciousness of film form.

As a middle-class teenage girl desperate for a baby from a young age, Aviva deliberately gets pregnant with the teenage son of family friends. Once Aviva very reluctantly goes through with an abortion, and is unknowingly given a hysterectomy due to medical complications, she runs away from home, hitchhiking to an undisclosed location in the American Midwest where she ends up at a rural foster home run by evangelical Christians. This extended middle section of the film, a camp and dark parody of "Bible Belt" values, serves less, however, as validation of East Coast or more notionally (sub)urban values, than as a wide-ranging extension of the film's critique of American communal values *writ large*, where location and religious affiliation give way to a more general callousness towards child subjectivity as the key determinant of dysfunction. Both spaces, the suburban and the rural, are essentially debunked as places of ostensible security and nurture alongside such framings.

The Midwest section of the film sees Aviva initially happily accepted into a troupe of disabled orphans who have apparently found sanctuary from a cruel world, loved and cared for by their surrogate evangelical mother, Mama Sunshine. Happily going about household chores, children's games and rehearsing performances of pop music numbers for the gospel circuit, the Sunshiners' home invokes so excessively saccharine a vision of utopian innocence and moral values that an ironic perspective becomes inescapable. Typical of an evangelical-Christian dance group, the

Sunshiners appropriate the songs and performances of modern pop stars and boy bands such as Madonna, 'N Sync and Britney Spears, and redirect them in relation to Jesus. Such re-appropriations retain, however, the traces of their earlier signification in terms of sexualized lyrics ("Nobody else could ever love me this way, nobody, Jesus, but you") amidst emulation of such performers' sexualized dance movements. Jarring though it is when such numbers are performed by children, such performances are shown to be enjoyed in a particularly unironic way by their foster mother Mama Sunshine, a seemingly responsible, morally upstanding adult. Where the spectator is permitted a knowing irony in relation to the film's recourse to parody, it becomes apparent that their diegetic counterparts do not share this distance (aside from Aviva herself, who is rather more mutedly enthused). A discomforting kitschy upbeatness and innocence remains in such a scene, challenging the "smart" spectator to examine the extent to which her own sophisticated distaste might itself require qualification. If the kids are happy, the film slyly intimates, who are we to object to such an idyll with our own irony-inflected standards of taste? How is it also that spectators such as us are more sensitive to the jarring sexuality of such performances than their onscreen mother, the embodiment of Madonna-like (the Biblical one) Christian virtue?

The film thus clearly provokes the spectator to take on subject positions that it only ambiguously itself endorses, and invokes an above all postmodern loss of critical perspective. One of the world's most popular grand narratives, Christianity, is subjected to the simulacrum, its value system still expressed in terms of charity for the weak, poor and vulnerable, but now made legible through sensationalism as much as mere sentiment, via music video and modern celebrity culture. Such kitschy performances epitomize Frederic Jameson's "blank parody" (Jameson 1991: 17), conflating the pop culture of MTV video with Christian rhetoric, and clashing a shallow culture of image, fame and "bling" with the depth model invoked by melodrama and its search for moral value through story and character. Yet while both modes are subject to critique emanating from different aesthetic agendas, their fusion in some way inoculates them from criticism altogether, one apparently redressing the excesses of the other. Camp allows us here to laugh at the tacky and the grossly clichéd, while it also has the double-edged attribute of taking pop culture at more than face value, i.e. seriously.

Childhood virtue therefore also shares this double valence in the film. While its sentimentalization is suggestive of the potential for exploitation and mass-marketing, its imagery remains cloyingly sanitized, though connotative, of that which it effaces discursively. Thus, while Solondz's depiction of the suburban family and the devoutly Christian home are

constituted by children and adults participating in a carnival of sentimentalisms and clichés, they are offset by the ubiquity of the extreme, the graphically explicit and the criminal. As in David Lynch's films, Solondz has a fascination with detritus and trash as places of intensified social reality, including a scene where Aviva come across a pile of aborted fetuses dumped *en masse*. In another sequence, Aviva finds a baby doll in a dumpster with its anal orifice violated by a beer bottle. In Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, the idealized American suburban garden (complete with an absurdly artificial chirruping Robin) is similarly counterposed with the image of a human ear being broken down by hordes of insects just below the lawn's surface. With both filmmakers, then, an aesthetic is foregrounded wherein the lost commodities of Western mass culture are juxtaposed with aspects of the rotten and dead. This inevitably allows us to draw similar comparisons between the commodity form and the lost children of *Palindromes*. Despite the sunny charity of Mama Sunshine's home and its seeming epitomization of a naively sentimental goodwill among its young residents, Aviva's stay is punctuated by reminders of exchange value and imminent obsolescence. The dumpsite for aborted fetuses serves thus as a portentous symbol of the disposal economy the Sunshiners are forced to negotiate, highlighting their performances as efforts to market themselves within an image-saturated, cynical culture.

Foregrounding the instability and exchange value of children is compounded only further, therefore, by Aviva's discovery of plots to assassinate abortion doctors organized by Mama Sunshine's husband, Bo. With murder plotted downstairs alongside cruel proclamations of Aviva as a "child-whore" and "slut" in the basement of the house, the Sunshiners' homestead becomes a place of danger to be escaped. The first floor's self-consciously saccharine tableaux of childhood happiness serve as unconscious overcompensations for acts of murder and terror plotted one level below. Seen within such a scheme, the Sunshiners' performances merely efface the defilements and dogmas of a pastoral underground, even though such anti-abortion activities still proceed under the sign of childhood (pro-life) sanctity. What emerges overall, however, is a sense of instability in relation to any fixed meaning for childhood, indeterminacies that are mirrored by the extreme divergences in discourse that Aviva encounters within the different spaces of the pastoral setting.

Aviva's story calls less therefore for the recognition of an unalloyed childhood innocence and serves rather more as a pervasive questioning of how innocence (especially that of children) can be reliably represented at all. Child sexuality becomes the critical subject here, in relation to which Aviva's sexuality becomes paradigmatic. Subject to sentimentalization as spectacle and repression as morally inappropriate, child sexuality is omnipresent but still problematic for American society. Aviva's overt

sexuality makes her not the "child-whore" of radical evangelical discourse, but neither does it allow her to signify an ideal of rewarded virtue. Indeed, it is ultimately made clear that Aviva cannot herself remain a purely virtuous subject within the conditions of exchange and disposal through which her story proceeds. Surviving a variety of dangerous contexts, her life is one of chance and self-preservation, offering few opportunities for her own benevolence and altruism. In her insistences that the appointed hit man, Earl, goes through with the killing of the doctor that aborted her own fetus, Aviva's own moral compass is clearly here shown to have shifted from passive victim to retributive agent. Rather than forgive, Aviva here takes on the self-righteousness of Bo's evangelical libertarianism, resorting to murder for justice. The revenger's role might elsewhere serve to deliver moral legibility, yet here it is taken on by an underage victim of trauma who has been keeping bad company. Her actions are shown not to have the moral validity usually expected of the melodrama, whether justice is enacted or remains in the register of the "if only." We are left instead with a postmodern sense of existential uncertainty concerning a moral outcome, a state of mind symbolized indeed by the palindrome that cannot but end as it begins.

That the violent events of *Palindromes*' closing scenes turn out to constitute an unexpected tragedy (the accidental killing of the abortion doctor's daughter) serves only therefore to compound the film's evocation of chaos and chance at the expense of any sense of moral justice. With violence and moral retribution revealed as blunt, destructive instruments of justice, often instead leading to further tragedies, the film offers few indications as to where to gain a more morally legible viewpoint. The film's foregrounding of the abortion debate and its intractable moral complexities sets the tone for the entire film, wherein divisions in contemporary American society between liberal and libertarian, urban and pastoral, are underlined in terms of an ongoing reversion to aporia, inertia and palindrome. Aviva, in such respects, serves as paradigm for the film's "dampened affect," her fragmentation into several actors undermining any sense of a coherent subjectivity in formal terms, while the narrative's picaresque trajectory foregrounds a logic of chance at the expense of moral legibility.

Conclusion

The two films examined above demonstrate a postmodern framing of provincial America on the part of filmmakers who foreground violence and the role of the media in relation to a mainstay of the American mythos: the small town or community. Deploying the conventions of melodrama in particularly self-reflexive ways that foreground textuality and genre, *Dancer in the Dark* and *Palindromes* offer visions of a provincial America in crisis, leaving a sense of qualified and uncertain hope in those who

both suffer and are tainted by its inequities. Both films set the conventions of the sentimental novel (female virtue-in-distress) and classical melodrama in dialogue with contemporary popular culture: kitschy music videos in the case of *Palindromes*, the musical in the case of *Dancer*. Such negotiations underline the extent to which our media culture may be complicit in our enjoyment of the pastoral and its appeals to simplicity, innocence and homespun wisdom. What emerges in both films is a sense of irony that qualifies what might otherwise seem more conventionally melodramatic, underlining virtue's interdependence on the fluctuating economies of gender, age, place and culture.

What is lost in terms of recourse to more conventional storytelling is gained therefore by foregrounding the constructedness of the pastoral setting as a free-floating signifier within a postmodern array of images and tropes. A sense of postmodern irony, or Frederic Jameson's "waning of affect" (1991: 10) is reproduced within such films. It is a kind of irony that should be understood in excess of a mere nihilism weighed down by moral relativisms, and relates rather more, I suggest, with aspects of an "aesthetic disinterest" described by Steven Shaviro in his essay on "postmodern emotions" (2004: 140). The sympathetic melancholia of the melodramatic mode gives way to excess, to the "playful" and the "perverse," while melodramatic tropes remain as components of a now more eclectic aesthetic heterogeneity. The American pastoral setting in these films is acknowledged as a context that has connoted ideals of comfort, virtue and freedom in media culture, but which now must be combined and understood alongside signifiers of its more unconscious economies and desires. In the case of *Dancer*, such negotiations are staged at the level of genre revisionism, whereby a musical fails to live up to melodrama's redemptive coordinates. The melodramatic recognition of a woman's virtue remains confined to the diegetic parameters of the musical number and its fantasy spaces, while the grim oppression of the American pastoral in relation to the vulnerable and needy proceed unabated and in hysterical fashion. In *Palindromes*, the music video becomes equally implicated in the increasingly free-floating idealisms and iconographies that characterize contemporary media culture. Children here function as fundamentally sentimentalized objects, as understood within the rubrics of Christian pop, abstinence and organized charity, while their real counterparts are subjected to the realities of the repressed sexual economies they help to reproduce. Aviva comes thus to represent both victim and accomplice within the film's narrative logic, a figure the film is at pains to emphasize as being identity-less so as to emphasize her or his status as both child and sexual agent.

These films do more, therefore, than simplistically align American rural life with aspects of backwardness or the uncivilized, establishing rather the extent to which the problematics of provincial life both derive from,

and can be deconstructed by, representational practices. They foreground problems of articulating the nature of justice and morality in contemporary American society, expressing above all a jaded kind of affect in relation to quasi-Christian signifiers of sacrifice and imperiled virtue. In contrast to melodrama's insistence on moral legibility via recognition and validation of the classical hero's virtuous actions and sensibility, such films frame female and childhood virtue within a darker, relativistic frame. They appropriate both the art cinema's tendencies towards experimentation in style and narrative and the American "smart" film's recourse to parody and ironic intertextuality. The pastoral setting in both thus becomes unmoored from its more conventional semiotic function within America's well-rehearsed self-image and becomes subjected to the broader critiques of American capitalist society writ large. As Eisenstein recognized, "Super Dynamic" and "Small-Town" America are two sides of the same coin, a fact that film melodrama in particular has always been at pains to underscore in relation to problems of gender and the recognition of virtue.

Notes

[1] See for instance Bernstein (2005).

[2] Von Trier comments on the DVD audio commentary of *Dancer in the Dark* (New Line Platinum Series) that his father (a man he later found out not be his true father) would repudiate the sentimentality of the end of the children's book that inspired the trilogy, thus motivating von Trier to ask "Was it so stupid after all?" as a driving question of the "Golden Heart" trilogy.

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