

THE FATE OF LEO, THE GROVELLING NAZI IN *IMAGES OF A RELIEF* AND THE TRANSCENDENCE OF EVIL

Aleksandr Andreas Wansbrough

Lars von Trier's *Befrielsesbilleder/Images of a Relief* (1982) was the first student film to gain theatrical release in Denmark's history, and Lars von Trier's first film to be released in Danish cinemas. *Images of a Relief* is an aesthetic distillation of issues concerning fate, tragedy and, perhaps most significantly, issues concerning evil. Despite this, there has been a lack of thorough theoretical analysis of the film. While von Trier's film is a work probably designed to be merely provocative, *Images of Relief* artistically explores the relation between the subject and his moral responsibility with regard to the objective world. While the film offers no theoretical or philosophical solution to these problems, it nevertheless presents a radical image of human reason as being error-bound. However, although we have predestined failings, *Images of a Relief* still offers an image of liberation. The film follows a Nazi, Leo, who undergoes great, almost ritualistic, suffering before being redeemed by the divine, ascending to the heavens. The depiction of Leo almost grants him the status of a tragic hero, von Trier inadvertently presenting an affirmation of and a challenge to, Schelling's conception of tragedy as well as Arendt's notion of the banality of evil. Leo's wickedness resembles Hannah Arendt's encapsulation of evil, where evil consists in the banality of being an obedient administrator. While Arendt advocates a renewed emphasis on agency, totalitarian regimes arguably evince the limits of reason and agency and the simplicity of Arendt's response. This paper will also examine the Christian connotations of Leo's ascension, arguing that the tragic is both challenged and strengthened by the film's Christian iconography. Throughout, I will attempt to show the irresolvable conflicts within ethics, as well as to attempt to show why the tragic is both so problematic for the contemporary world but also why it is so fundamental for conceiving human conflicts and the limits of ethics.

Opening with a still image taken from stock-footage of the liberation of Denmark, *Images of a Relief* strongly intimates a sense of fate. A male, German voiceover reads a letter:

Copenhagen—1945. Darling Esther, This frightful war, which brought us together, has now separated us again. It is terrible to write that we shall never meet again. But so it must be. Don't forget

THE FATE OF LEO

that what you do for love stands above good and evil. Forever yours, Leo.

We immediately learn that two people are doomed never to meet again—or so we are led to believe. The film introduces the protagonist as the loser in history, revealing his victimhood as his fate forecloses upon him. Despite the obvious evil of the Nazis, we follow Leo's journey, fate thereby unveiling humanity's human qualities. In the first scene, we see through Leo's eyes and enter his mind, the film cutting to memories of birds that he watched and listened to as a child. The film then cuts back to Leo surrounded by decay, disintegration and agony. Von Trier adopts a sympathetic approach to Leo, separating the atomised subject from the disastrous ideology of Nazism. At one point, Leo is driven to attempt suicide, however, liberated Denmark is a hell that seems impossible to escape — his suicide fails. What one might think would be a joyous or sombre occasion from the perspective of the victors becomes hellish from the point of view of the Nazis. The film displays Nazis killing themselves, amidst cries of agony and the sound of gunshots. The images introducing Leo and his surroundings are tinted a heavy, inferno-red, with darkness overpowering the frame.

Leo's one hope to escape from Denmark appears to be Esther. However, Esther betrays him, handing him over to the 'good guys', the liberating forces that restrain Leo. Esther then takes it upon herself to stab out Leo's eyes with a wooden stake, leaving him lost in the wilderness. We are introduced to Leo by his sight, the images of the birds that he saw as a boy. The shot of Leo is of him looking through a window, his eyes accentuated by his cracked spectacles. The cracked spectacles in turn seem to emphasise the ironic play within the film between seeing and limited or distorted sight, bearing witness to humanity and refusing to see the horrible truth of one's own being. The film nevertheless concludes with some form of redemption for Leo. Having survived the hell of liberation, Leo is summoned to heaven, floating toward the clouds.

However, it is questionable whether this conclusion is convincingly redemptive. The ending may, to many audience members, appear ridiculous and even to be an obvious, perverse and shallow provocation by the director. Lars von Trier himself adds credibility to the view that his films are merely attention-grabbing ploys, stating in an interview at the time of the film's release that he was frustrated that 'people haven't gotten really mad.'¹ Unfortunately for von Trier, the film's budgetary restrictions prevent the film from always being compelling, and therefore from reaching its desired shock value. It could be that 'people haven't gotten really mad' for the very good reason that the film is not a professional work. For example, the sequence in which Leo ascends to the clouds hardly constitutes a special effect. The camera moves in tandem with Leo, the two ascending together, suggesting that the actor playing Leo and the camera are situated on a forklift. If Leo's divine elevation is intended simply as a provocation, the effect is not a very powerful one.

Furthermore, the overall style of the film is distancing rather than immersive. The lighting and colour are overt references to German expressionist cinema, but this referentiality becomes an affectation, successfully conveying the feelings of the characters only at significant points, such as in the scene of hellish Denmark at the start of the film. Von Trier, however, could have taken the narrative of *Images of a Relief* and maximised the emotional potential through a different set of techniques. In his *later* films such as *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark*, von Trier takes obviously fictitious narratives and films them in the style of documentaries. Even the hyper-fictionalised depiction of the Nazis in *Images of a Relief* could have been underplayed. Instead, *Images of a Relief* loses some of its power because it represents a strange narrative with heavily stylised imagery. Indeed, the scenes are so cloaked in expressive, expressionist darkness that one might imagine audience members squinting at the screen to make out the events. All of the images are tinted red, yellow or green, with figures barely lit. Perhaps, for this reason, *Images of a Relief* is a film that has not been subject to much analysis.

But while the implausible tropes in the film may break the dramatic content, they can also provide the very ground for the film's tragic sense. Whether intended or not, von Trier's films tend toward the ridiculous in order to convey the perverse, broken and fallen nature of humanity in the most extreme forms possible (e.g. Grace being restrained with a chain in *Dogville*, a mother sacrificing herself for her son's corrective eye surgery in *Dancer in the Dark*, Bess in heaven in *Breaking the Waves* and Leo ascending to the heavens in *Images of a*

Relief after having his eyes plucked out by his lover). The stylization of *Images of a Relief* is part of von Trier's attempt to go beyond mere naturalism, thereby creating a meta-state akin to that of mythic allegory. Von Trier stated in an interview that he detests the unpoetic nature of the then contemporary Danish film industry. Further, von Trier argues that cinema should base itself on a religious sense, aiming at essences. As with much of Modern German philosophy, the essential emerges through conflict.

A NECESSARY DIGRESSION ON THE TRAGIC

This sense of the religious forms part of the tragic message of von Trier's work. The tragic itself has a religious connotation, where human determination is set against divine power, or some force germane to divinity. According to Peter Szondi, Schelling is the first theorist of the tragic to derive the tragic from "the conflict between human freedom with the power of the objective world."² As Szondi argues, Schelling begins "a philosophy of the tragic," one that is distinguished from a mere structural and experiential analysis of tragedy.³ While Plato and Aristotle arguably created philosophical conceptions of the tragic, Schelling significantly adds a metaphysical dimension to a conception of the tragic. Schelling, unlike Plato and Aristotle, sees the human condition as a conflict between the subjective world of the agent and the restraints of the objective world outside the agent. Moreover, Schelling's account of the tragic sets the stage for subsequent conceptions of the tragic to extend to how suffering can be transcended, overcome or understood.

The tragic, at least as rendered by Schelling, is part of the problematic of human freedom⁴, which demonstrates, for Schelling, "the essence of humanity."⁵ In Schelling's Tenth Letter in *Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism* and in *The Philosophy of Art*, he claims that the tragic involves human beings discovering a way to accept their limitations and their destiny, and to will such fate. In Schelling's account of the tragic, tragic fate is a way to honour humanity, where human beings are seen as significant enough to warrant a fate. Moreover, the tragic hero is powerful enough to resist the gods' prescribed fate for the mortals. Recognising the restraints of Athenian society, Schelling argues that the Greeks could not portray the tragic hero as victorious in this contestation with divine fate in an overt way without being blasphemous. Schelling claims that through an aesthetic concession to the conservative religious and cultural order, the Greeks created a radical, though masked subversion of the sacrosanct. By being forced to adhere to customs and rituals, the Greek tragedians struck upon the truth of freedom, depicting the condition of being free in an unfree circumstance. According to Schelling, the victory of fate in Greek tragedy also signifies the victory of the human subject, as the protagonist is able to embrace his fate, rendering his arbitrary punishment to be a part of his greater freedom—being free to will the seemingly unfree. The subjective and the objective are thereby bridged through the tragic in an expression of liberation. The heroic subject subjectively wills objective constraint, thereby surmounting the objective hindrance of his otherwise calamitous circumstance.

Importantly, other philosophers and theorists, forming a single thread of the tragic, echo such a conception of the tragic. In parts one and two of his *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts*, Hegel claims that in classical tragedies, the protagonist comes to terms with his crime and wills his own punishment, thereby undergoing a purification. Schopenhauer states that, in tragedy, the Will comes to accept adverse and meaningless circumstances, becoming resigned to the cruelty of life. Nietzsche also reads the tragic as a reaction of the hero to fate, where the hero challenges the insurmountable, and must embrace it through *amor fati*. Although tragedy is understood in different ways by these and other theorists of the tragic, the continuance of the dialectic between the human and the objective world remains evident. The role and function of the tragic varies in the worldview of Nietzsche and Hegel, Schopenhauer and Schelling, but irrespective of these differences, their views of the tragic converge in relation to the tragic hero overcoming adversity through either Will or contemplation. I will thereby seek to use their ideas on tragedy, not as separate readings and understanding of the tragic, but rather as examinations of the same, recurrent theme.

THE FATE OF LEO

FATE AND THE INDIVIDUAL'S WILL: THE TRAGIC HERO AS A NAZI

Images of a Relief has strong connections to the tragic, with the eye-gauging scene almost inviting a direct parallel between Leo's experiences and the type of punishment found in *Oedipus Rex*. As with Greek tragedy, there is an ironic fate brought about by an earlier transgression. We learn that Leo took part in the removal of the eyes of a young boy, which is why Esther decides to remove his eyes. But there is another reason for his blinding. According to von Trier, the irony is two-fold in that Leo's blinding is a type of narrative justice for him being a sexual voyeur. In one scene, Leo watches Esther's intimacies with an African American soldier. Von Trier thereby cinematically conveys that Leo's perversion is his very passivity, his contentment to watch rather than intervene.

However, there is a stark contrast to be made between Oedipus and Schelling's concept of the tragic, and Leo the passive Nazi. Leo is monstrously and perversely passive, whereas in Schelling's conception of tragedy and in *Oedipus Rex*, the tragic protagonist actively resists his fate, his fate being his predestined transgression. In the encapsulating words of Paul Ricoeur, "The tragic properly so called does not appear until the theme of predestination to evil—to call it by its name—comes up against the theme of *heroic* greatness."⁶ Ricoeur here merely restates Schelling's conception of the tragic, namely that a heroic figure takes on a divine injustice. Even though it is foretold, Oedipus resists fate, attempting to avoid the murder his father.

According to Schelling, it is this resistance that leads divine forces to punish the tragic hero, whom Schelling probably models on Oedipus. While we do not see Leo's crimes, he seems to have been willing, or at any rate, compliant in his wicked deeds. There is an expository scene between Esther and Leo that illustrates Leo's defence as a defence of passivity:

Esther: Everybody's talking about what you did. The partisan boy you took last week. You ruined his eyes!

Leo: SS, they were from the SS.

Esther: He was only a child. I know you were there. Don't you see that you have a responsibility too?

Although Leo is not only a German officer but a war criminal that has taken part in the blinding of a boy, we never see Leo as an active figure or in active military service. His crime is not merely the fact that he is caught up in fate but that he does not resist it, for we never know to what extent Leo was ideologically Nazi.

In this respect, Leo seems to encapsulate a sort of passive evil, maintaining that he is not wicked but that fate itself is wicked. Leo almost becomes an example of what Hannah Arendt famously terms 'the banality of evil' where evil exists through acquiescence with a sinister plan rather than the initiation of evil. In this respect, there are vague parallels between Eichmann's defence as a bureaucrat and Leo's as a mere witness. Leo's crime is to be an ordinary instrument of power, not to be an exceptional monster. As Arendt comments in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, the evil of Eichmann lies in his very ordinariness, "that so many were like him."⁷ According to Arendt, Eichmann deserved the death penalty, not because he was a heroic villain of radical evil, but because he refused his Kantian duties to think for himself, to be an end in himself and treat others as ends in themselves.⁸ Arendt argues that "there is an abyss between the actuality of what you did and the potentiality of what others might have done."⁹ In other words, independent of whether others may have acted as we had, we still have the potential and obligation to act differently. It is worth noting that while Arendt does distinguish between the grave sin of omission and the crime of commission, and if Leo is to be believed, he is guilty of the sin not the crime, her logic could still be applied to Leo.¹⁰ Leo, after all, is banal, someone who fails to recognise his ethical duties. Indeed, neither Eichmann nor Leo recognises the gap between an individual's agency and the human and natural networks in which one is subsumed.

Esther almost mirrors Arendt's logic when she tells Leo, "You don't care what you see. You can be used. What sort of morality is that?" One might even wish to substitute Arendt for Esther, Arendt providing a powerful

condemnation of Eichmann, “Let us assume ... that it was nothing more than misfortune that made you a willing instrument in that organisation ... there still remains that you have carried out, and therefore, actively supported mass murder.”¹¹ If one replaces mass murder with blinding, Esther and Arendt’s condemnation of a Nazi are revealed to be uncannily similar. Both Esther and Arendt criticise Nazis, not on the grounds of willing evil deeds, but for complying with evil deeds. While Leo would contest that he was, in Arendt’s phrase, “a willing instrument,” it seems evident from Esther’s accusation that Leo never objected to being an instrument, and hence was, at least in part, a willing participant in war crimes through Esther’s logic.

The trouble with Leo being a tragic hero then, is not just that he is a willing Nazi, but that he is a bourgeois figure without will, who, for the vast majority of the film, seems timid and helpless. Leo takes within himself the objective requirements of his situation without posing any resistance, becoming just an object, a means to an end, an example of an unfree, instrumentalised being. In these respects, Leo differs from the tragic hero as understood by theorists of the tragic. For example, in Nietzschean terms, Leo is not a “heroic man [that] praises his own being through tragedy,”¹² but the grovelling *last man*, a cowering wretch incapable of affirming his existence.¹³ Moreover, Leo does not resemble the tragic figure who is able to embrace his punishment as theorised by Modern German philosophers. Instead, Leo attempts to escape his responsibility in a way that Hegel might claim was distinctly modern and not tragic. As Hegel observes,

The independent solidity and totality of the heroic character repudiates any division of guilt and knows nothing of this opposition between subjective intentions and the objective deed and its consequences, while nowadays, owing to the complexity and ramification of action, everyone has recourse to everyone else and shuffles guilt so far as possible.¹⁴

In other words, Hegel claims that while the heroic figure of tragedy or antiquity could take responsibility for an act that was not his fault, the modern world makes a distinction between a subject’s actions and his intentions. Hegel thereby differentiates between the times of the tragic hero and the modern world in which guilt and blame are assigned based on intention rather than mere circumstance.

Leo lacks the equilibrium of Hegel’s “heroic character” that is at one with his sense of self and the world. Leo, belonging to Hegel’s modern world, cannot see any connection between his objective deeds and his subjective intention. Here lies the paradox of Leo. Leo argues for a division between his “subjective intentions” and his “objective deed.” Yet, Leo also claims that he has no subjectivity, that he was just acting out of objective necessity. Leo, in a contradictory move, blames everyone else but himself, shuffling “guilt as far as possible.” He becomes a wretch devoid of agency and is incapable even of killing himself. In *Oedipus*, Oedipus successfully stabs out his own eyes. As Hegel observes in a way that follows Schelling’s account of the tragic hero, “[Oedipus] passes judgment on himself for the whole of these crimes and punishes himself as guilty for parricide and incest [even though] neither [was] within his knowledge nor his intention.”¹⁵ Leo, on the other hand, cannot will his own punishment. In summary, Oedipus takes responsibility for a deed for which he has no responsibility, while Leo takes no responsibility for deeds for which he was responsible. He is punished for replicating the indifference of fate.

Nevertheless, as a passive, contemplative figure of suffering, Leo embodies some of the qualities of the tragic hero as described by theorists of the tragic. *Images of a Relief* even bears some resemblance to Nietzsche’s notion of the tragic spectacle, Leo becoming a passive receptacle for tragic meaning, even through his inactivity. As Nietzsche observes,

It has been a real misfortune for aesthetics that the word *drama* has always been translated as ‘action’ ... Ancient drama aimed at scenes of great *pathos*—it precluded action (moving it *before* the beginning or behind the scene).¹⁶

THE FATE OF LEO

Nietzsche's challenge to Aristotelian narrative replaces the activity of Aristotelian tragedy with the experience of a religious ritual. Through Nietzsche's optic where tragedy involves "not ... a doing but a happening,"¹⁷ we can see how Leo might perform the function of a hero in tragic drama, undergoing ritualistic pain. Nietzsche's excision of the ethical activity and agency of the tragic agent allows the possibility for Leo to become a vessel for suffering and tragic meaning. Von Trier in part confirms such a perspective when he argues that *Images of a Relief* is about a religious longing, and an attempt to find beauty in the ugly. Identifying the film's aesthetic with the mystic, almost religious work of Tarkovsky and Herzog, von Trier argues for a poetic cinema of elemental evocation.¹⁸ Like Nietzsche's notion of the tragedian who presents us with ugliness in order to glorify life and render life sacred, von Trier's ugliness ultimately shares Nietzsche's aim of the affirmation of life. As von Trier states, "We could call it the moral of that story, if we want, in that no matter how bad things go in certain situations, there's always life underneath."¹⁹

The conclusion thereby grants Leo the status of the tragic hero when he does not deserve it, fulfilling Plato's fears about tragedy in *The Republic*, namely that tragedy can beautify ugliness and thereby dissolve distinction between the good and the abhorrent. Yet von Trier's aims are not entirely ignoble. Leo is redeemed, but only after he has been purified through suffering and recognition. A sign of his humanity is when he starts to remember his childhood and the joy he took from trying to communicate with the birds. At one point, Leo again attempts to communicate with birds in the woods, becoming childlike and regaining some of his innocence, signalling his potential for engaging with his environment. Near the end of the film, before being elevated to heaven, Leo screams when he recognises the crimes he has committed. Esther addresses Leo earlier in the film, saying "you store it up. At some time a reaction will come." She then asks coldly, "When will you scream?" The scream becomes a sign that Leo has become human, and even a symbol of universal humanity, a criminal who is also a victim who is also redeemed. Hence, von Trier describes the meaning of the conclusion to *Images of a Relief* as an expression of humanity, an expression that can be understood in terms conceived by Schelling, Schopenhauer, Hegel and Nietzsche.

With Leo's elevation to the heavens, his individuality is overcome and he rediscovers a connection with place and his surroundings. According to Hegel in his reading of *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, the hero is ultimately able to comprehend his actions and take responsibility for his deeds, 'purified from within'.²⁰ The reconciling power of the tragic can also be conceptualised in Schopenhaurian terms. As with Schopenhauer's conception of tragedy, Leo, in his final moments, goes beyond the will of imprisoned individuality. Von Trier is thereby vindicated when he says that, 'I myself regard this as a profoundly positive and humanistic ending'.²¹ His statement no longer seems merely to be a provocation. But the sentiment is still troubling, in that, as von Trier concedes, many audience members would not view his film as a beautiful statement of humanity. It is troubling to think that acts of moral ugliness such as the blinding of a boy can become part of a celebration of the human capacity for self-transformation and reconciliation.

According to von Trier, the conclusion of *Images of a Relief* is a type of "nature poetry."²² Yet to create a poetic vision concerning a Nazi remains perverse. Adorno famously banishes poets after Auschwitz in his essay "Cultural Criticism and Society" in *Prisms*.²³ However, poetry is banished not from the ideal republic of Plato but from the barbaric world of modernity.²⁴ For Adorno, Auschwitz revealed the dark core of human potentiality and fractured any hope for idealised metaphysical notions of totality.²⁵ Von Trier attempts a poetic and aesthetic confluence of the ugly and the beautiful, where the individual and his objective world converge. As Hannah Arendt points out, the Oedipus complex, which here performs the function of the tragic, can become a cliché used to excuse evil.²⁶ When von Trier states that he wants to elevate the ugly and desires to extend compassion to the Nazis, he appears to be not only harnessing Adorno's barbaric qualities of the poetic but also to be fulfilling the fears of Arendt. If read as a perversion of tragic myth, *Images of a Relief* reveals the perversity at the core of the tragic, namely the phenomenal or metaphysical redemption of a criminal.

However, Adorno does not merely object to poetry after Auschwitz, he claims that there cannot be poetry after Auschwitz. Since it would be barbaric for poetry to exist in a world that could produce gas chambers, and given

that poetry (at least in the sense that Adorno means) cannot be barbaric, poetics becomes impossible. But von Trier is not only attempting to create poetry after Auschwitz, but poetry about the perpetrators of Auschwitz. The metaphysical redemption in *Images of a Relief* thereby becomes a convoluted redemption. While largely intended by von Trier to be a simple experiential, aesthetic redemption through metaphysical imagery, the film initiates a new fusion of Christian and tragic perversity that renders a poetics possible. In order to dignify the suffering of a Nazi, von Trier aligns the perversion of tragedy with the perversity of Christianity. Ironically, given that the Christian hope for salvation can be conceptually framed as antithetical to the tragic, tragic redemption comes through the very Christian notion that forgiveness is open to everyone. By engaging with Christian iconography, *Images of a Relief* seems to challenge the notion of the tragic but also to reconstitute it, reconfiguring fate as history and the divine as a cessation of historical and earthly mechanisms.

THE TRAGIC PUT ON HOLD: DIVINE DETERMINATION AND DISRUPTION

In the lineage of the tragic derived from Schelling, the fate assigned by the Gods comes into conflict with the human agent. But at the end of the tragedy, the human reconciles with the divine. While the Gods are never depicted in *Images of a Relief*, there is nevertheless a sense of the divine and a clear example, at the end of the film, of the *deus ex machina*—a divine intervention, in this case with the protagonist lifted up into the clouds. Here the religious side of the tragic becomes unveiled, where we are saved by our contrition. Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, famously detests intervention by the divine, since divine intercession removes any sense of causal necessity.²⁷ Far from revealing divine justice, intercession is proof of divine injustice. In Christianity, Christ suspends judgment on humanity, just as von Trier ultimately wants us to transcend our judgment of Leo. The Nietzschean sentiment expressed at the beginning of the film, that acts motivated by love necessarily take us beyond good and evil,²⁸ is also a Christian sentiment where even the sinner is granted grace—we are provided with forgiveness even though we do not deserve it.

In order to understand the significance of the reconstitution of the tragic through Christianity that takes place in *Images of a Relief*, it is necessary to have a lengthy theoretical contextualisation. According to George Steiner, Christianity is antithetical to the generation of tragic meaning. If there is hope for improvement, even in a future life, the human condition cannot be tragic. Moreover, hope in Christianity can be more than the preservation of life in a future life. As Hegel observes, Christianity introduces into the world a reconciliation between subjectivity and the universal through the coming of Jesus.²⁹ The Messiah, who in Christianity accepts responsibility for a crime he did not commit, reveals the eternal possibility of salvation. Christ shows that history can be stopped, that carnage can be overcome. As Benjamin observes concerning the notion of the Jewish Messiah, the messianic allows one to believe that one can change the course of history. This potential halt to historical determinism differs from the situation of the tragic hero who tries to suspend historical mechanisms but cannot—he struggles with fate but must succumb. The tragic paradox of being guilty when one is not is sidestepped by the idea that one can deny and overcome causal mechanisms.

Images of a Relief depicts Leo as someone who claims he could not have acted otherwise. Despite his participation in abominations, the laws of nature and the world are momentarily suspended and Leo rises up to heaven, forgiven. Leo must be punished in a way that is partly averse to the tragic or the reverse of the tragic—he is punished for not resisting fate. The justice he experiences is a punishment that fits both within the Judaic proportionality of an eye for an eye and the tragic irony of Oedipus' fate. Yet, just because Leo has suffered too, does not change the fact that he was responsible for suffering, nor does it warrant his eternal salvation. Perversely, Leo even becomes a Christlike figure, someone who undergoes suffering and death to ascend to the heavens and forgive humanity its evil. According to Hegel, Christ bridges humanity and the divine, rendering the human subject universal. Leo becomes a dark symbol of human apathy that is redeemed, and shares, through divine ascension, the destiny of Jesus.

There is still a lingering sense of the tragic amidst the Christian conclusion. Leo, though not necessarily wholly willing in his crimes, must still take responsibility for what he did not entirely will. While Leo lacks any of the

THE FATE OF LEO

heroic traits assigned by Schelling to the tragic hero, Leo still undergoes part of what Schelling describes as the sublime moment of the greatest tragedies. Leo takes responsibility for a deed that he claims he did not commit. Indeed, Leo may only have witnessed the blinding of the child by the SS, we do not know for certain whether he actively participated in it. By becoming responsible for the whole suffering of the war and the brutalities committed, Leo is able to take within himself the fate that he did not actively seek. At the close of the film, there is a convergence between the sublime movement of tragic consciousness and Christian consciousness.

What the tragic and the Christian have in common is an ability to transform injustice into justice. While there is the obvious connection between predestined evil and the notion of original sin, the movement of injustice to justice in Christianity is more tragic and terrifying than the tragic. Christianity grants those who have been guilty, even wilfully guilty, forgiveness. This is almost the reverse of what is often considered 'the tragic' where the hero is unjustly punished. In the words of George Steiner, the tragic involves the protagonist and all humanity being punished "far in excess of our guilt."³⁰ The movement of Christianity, however, allows one to be rewarded in excess of what one deserves and to avoid a true proportional justice. In both instances there is a movement toward redemption. For a moment in *Images of a Relief*, the Christian and the tragic converge aesthetically. Hence, the conclusion takes on a sublime movement within our consciousness, reconciling tragic and Christian meanings. The tragic hero, who gains reconciliation with the world, and Christ figure, who suffers for all of humanity so that it may be redeemed, converge so as to open our eyes to history's scapegoats.

This redemption becomes a source of unease, even though von Trier claims that the conclusion is meant to inspire beauty:

It's pretty beautiful. That it happens to be a Nazi officer might be seen as a provocation on my part. But again, this is the moral: everywhere there is beauty and life to be found, even within the soul of a Nazi officer.³¹

Von Trier reads *Images of a Relief* as a type of reconciliation between the individual and the world, where Leo returns to the heavens. This reconciliation has a tragic quality that at first seems different to the Christian notion of being reconciled with God. In Nietzsche's conception of tragedy, the Dionysian earth nourishes us, and the individual is both dissolved and revived, not preserved in heaven. In Hegel's conception of tragedy, the protagonist experiences a reconciliation with his environment that takes place in this life. However, there is still a sense in which Christianity involves a purifying return. In both the tragic and the Christian worldview there is a recovery where we move and discover what has always been, that there is a good beyond our particular individuality. Leo thereby loses his self-centred, self-preservative instincts. Suffering in both Christianity and tragedy allows a return to a forgiving originary force.

But while the divine ascension of Leo allows for both Christian salvation and tragic redemption, the film does not have a happy ending. In the final shot of the film, we see Esther drive away in her car, troubled by her actions. *Images of a Relief* thereby confronts themes concerning the discoveries that are made when humanity confronts its predestination with evil. Schelling understood tragedy as an aesthetic solution to the mind-world division. He understood that tragedy was not a conceptual or theoretical solution to the seeming chasms between human freedom and necessity. Likewise, von Trier's *Images of a Relief* only aesthetically shows a world in which monstrous humanity can quite literally be elevated. Leo at once seems separated from the Nazi apparatus but also conforms to it. He, moreover, seems to be humane, writing a love letter to his lover, but also inhumanly passive, incapable of responding to her intimacies with another man. He is always at once monstrously free and horribly captive, becoming a symbol of human entrapment, criminality and redemption. It is doubtful that one human being in reality could represent these extremes to such an extent. But Leo reminds us of the unsolvable dilemma of the subject and the objective world and the question of real evil. Whether we see him as a tragic figure, or whether we forgive him or not, he is a symbol of humanity, and represents the most irresolvable gaps between our ethical impulses.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Ole Michelson, 'Passion is the Life Blood of Cinema,' in *Lars von Trier Interviews*, ed. Jan Lumholdt (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 10.
2. Quoted in, Peter Szondi, *An Essay on the Tragic*, trans. Paul Flemming (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 7. A translation of the original text can be found in: F.W.J. Schelling, 'Tenth Letter,' in *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism in The Unconditional in Human Knowledge: Four Early Essays*, trans. Fritz Marti (London: Associated University Presses, 1980), 192.
3. Szondi, *An Essay on the Tragic*, 1.
4. *Ibid.*, 1-10.
5. Schelling, Tenth Letter in *Philosophical Letters in The Unconditional*, 195.
6. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1967), 218.
7. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 276.
8. *Ibid.*, 277-279.
9. *Ibid.*, 278.
10. Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 45.
11. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 279.
12. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols in The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 530.
13. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra in The Portable Nietzsche*, 128-130.
14. G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art v. I.*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010), 188.
15. *Idem.*
16. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner in Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1968), 630.
17. *Idem.*
18. Michelson, 'Passion is the Life Blood,' in *Lars von Trier Interviews*, 7.
19. *Ibid.*, 10.
20. G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics v. II*, 1219.
21. Quoted in Michelson, 'Passion is the Life Blood,' in *Lars von Trier Interviews*, 10.
22. *Idem.*
23. There are parallels with Plato, in so far as Adorno and Plato both see poetry as distorting truth and both object to art being too representational. However, Plato objects to tragic poets precisely because they blaspheme and disfigure the ideal whereas Adorno's objection to poetry (which is largely using the term poetry metonymically) is on the grounds that it conceals the cruel reality of the modern world. In this respect Adorno reverses the Platonic injunction, as if to say, we need not banish poetry from ideal republics but from broken republics. For Plato's claim that art blasphemes, see Section II of *The Republic* in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (New Jersey: Princeton University, 1989), 624-630.
24. 'Cultural Criticism and Society,' in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1988), 34.
25. Theodore W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1979).
26. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 297.
27. Aristotle, *Aristotle's Poetics*, trans. James Hutton (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982), 60.
28. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil in Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1968), 180.
29. Szondi, *An Essay on the Tragic*, 16-19. See G.W.F. Hegel, *The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate in Early Theological Writings of Hegel*, trans. T.M. Knox and ed. Richard Kroner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).
30. George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), 9.
31. Quoted in Michelson, 'Passion is the Life Blood,' in *Lars von Trier Interviews*, 11.