

**ȘTEFAN BOLEA**

**A DANGEROUS MIND.  
LARS VON TRIER'S *THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT***

**Ștefan Bolea**

Babeș Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

**Email:** stefan.bolea@gmail.com

**Abstract:** In Lars von Trier's latest movie, *The House That Jack Built* (2018), the serial killer Jack may be seen as a substitute for God. Following Maurice Blanchot and drawing from Jungian psychology, I will analyze the relationship between murder and sovereignty. Jack's dream of the perfect crime is reminiscent of the Schopenhauerian project of universal crime. Taking into account the nihilistic works of Philipp Mainländer, Mihai Eminescu, Angernon Charles Swinburne, and others, I will discuss the Antinatalist predilection of non-existence over existence. I shall also examine the possibility of anti-nihilism.

**Keywords:** murder, sovereign, inferno, nihilism, universal death, Gnosticism, suicide, Antinatalism

**O MINTE PERICULOASĂ. *THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT*  
DE LARS VON TRIER**

**Rezumat:** În cel mai recent film al lui Lars von Trier, *Casa pe care a construit-o Jack* (2018), criminalul în serie Jack este văzut ca un substitut pentru divinitate. Urmându-l pe Maurice Blanchot și inspirându-mă din psihologia jungiană, voi analiza relația dintre crimă și suveranitate. Visul lui Jack privind crima perfectă ne-a amintit de proiectul schopenhauerian al crimei universale. Ținând cont de operele nihiliste ale unor autori precum Philipp Mainländer, Mihai Eminescu, Angernon Charles

Swinburne și alții, vom discuta despre preferința antinatalistă a non-existenței față de existență. Vom examina, de asemenea, și posibilitatea anti-nihilismului.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** crimă, suveran, infern, nihilism, moarte universală, gnosticism, suicid, antinatalism

## 1. The Assassin as Sovereign

*Better be with the dead  
Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,  
Than on the torture of the mind to lie  
In restless ecstasy. Duncan is in his grave;  
After life's fitful fever he sleeps well.*  
(*Macbeth*, III, 2, 19-23)

The uncanny relationship between murder and God is one of the themes of Lars von Trier's production, *The House That Jack Built* (2018). The main character, the ambitious but failed architect, Jack (exceptionally played by Matt Dillon), seems to desire to commit the absolute murder. It is no coincidence that Jack's profession mimics God's position as an architect of the universe. According to Blanchot, "when he kills, the criminal is God on Earth, for he realizes between himself and his victim the relationship of subordination" (Blanchot 2004, 28-9). According to the French biologist Jean Rostand, God may be seen as the supreme murderer: "Kill one man, and you are a murderer. Kill millions of men, and you are a conqueror. Kill them all, and you are a god" (quoted in Oeler 2009, 5). This fragment is integrated by the heavy metal band Megadeth in the lyrics of the catchy track *Captive Honour* from their masterpiece *Countdown to Extinction* (1992).

When he actively turns a subject into an object, a person into a thing, the murderer becomes the One, the Unique, a monster of maximized energy: "A Unique Being, unique among men, this is truly a sign of sovereignty" (Blanchot 2004, 22). The value stolen by the killer from his victim is magically added to his own being. The most intense power relationship that exists is the one between murderer and his victim: the latter literally becomes nothing, while the former exhausts his "flame" of being.

According to Jung, committing murder is the equivalent of a sort of psychological suicide. "The murderer wants to see blood, as if he knew that committing murder meant his own death. He is seeking to end his existence" (Jung 1988, 465). The murderer cannot be

considered to be a member of the human community anymore: He is condemned, losing his “soul” (Jung 1989, 123). Nevertheless, do murderers feel remorse or guilt for the millions tortured and killed in the last century for political reasons? Do they really possess the feeling that they have lost their souls? Or do they act as machines, not unlike Eichmann, personifying the sharp guillotine of the state? After Auschwitz, World Trade Center and all the nowadays wars covered by the media, we might have become *indifferent* to murder. We no longer recognize our essence in the other man, defying the Buddhist “law” of compassion. The causes for this phenomenon may reside in a sort of degradation of the human archetype, which was traditionally defined according to the pattern of the image and likeness (Gen 1:27) of God. However, because we live in a universe shaped by the death of God, the human subject also experiences this loss of transcendence and value, becoming diminished and derivative. Moreover, the mediatic somnambulism, and the acedia of *das Man* bring along not only inauthenticity and alienation, but also a sort of existential numbness: the anesthesia of everydayness and the depressive comedy of the social media do not disguise the fact that we have become ontological strangers like Meursault.

Furthermore, Nietzsche’s description of “the pale criminal” can be, perhaps, applied to Jack: “What is this man? A heap of diseases which, through his spirit, reach out into the world: there they want to catch their prey. What is this man? A ball of wild snakes, which rarely enjoy rest from each other: so they go forth singly and seek prey in the world” (Nietzsche 1988, 151). The devilish “ball of wild snakes” is the mark of a poisonous predator, literally creating hell with his bite. We remember here the Gnostic observation, present in the works of Cioran or Philip K. Dick, that this world is in fact hellish. It is only fitting that Lars von Trier’s may be seen as a remake of Dante’s *Inferno*: perhaps a description of the hypothetical tenth circle.

## 2. Universal Crime

Jack’s desire to commit the perfect murder (in the “fifth incident” Jack intends to kill five people with a single full metal jacket bullet)

reminds us of Caligula's desire to obliterate all mankind: "I wish that you Romans had only one neck" (Suetonius 2007, 162). The dream of a universal death (the Romantic "end of all things") is one of the tenets of post-Schopenhauerian philosophy, deriving from the preference of non-existence to existence understood as pure suffering. Inspired by the last pages of Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*, where he commented upon the Kantian distinction between *nihil privativum* (for instance darkness as absence of light) and *nihil negativum* (absolute nothingness), the German philosopher Philipp Mainländer writes that "life is hell and the sweet still night of absolute death is the annihilation of hell [*das Leben die Hölle, und die süße stille Nicht des absoluten Todes die Vernichtung der Hölle ist*]" (Mainländer 1989, 104-5). The German author, who eventually committed suicide after a mental breakdown, was exhilarated at the sight of universal death: "Nothing will be anymore, Nothing Nothing Nothing! – O, this gaze into the absolute void!" (Mainländer 1989, 151).

Philipp Mainländer and the Romanian poet Mihai Eminescu share many traits, belonging to the same post-Schopenhauerian context. In his posthumous masterpiece, *Memento mori* (1871), Eminescu imagines the specter of nihilism hovering over the dead universe:

"May death expand its colossal wings upon the world:

Only darkness is the coat of buried waste.

A lingering star extinguishes its small spring.

Deathlike time spreads its arms and becomes eternity.

When nothing will persist on the barren landscape

I will ask: What of your power, Man? – Nothing!!" (Eminescu, 1993, 125-6, trans. mine.)

Furthermore, we remember Swinburne's (2000, 139) stanzas from "The Garden of Proserpine" (1866), in which he describes, prefiguring Freud, our most intimate death drive: "Then star nor sun shall waken/ ... Only the sleep eternal/ In an eternal night". The theme of universal death is present in Lars von Trier's earlier *Melancholia* (2011), which I interpreted as a consequence of the history of 19th and 20th century nihilism (Bolea 2012, 46-7). Moreover, the work of the Danish film director can be compared to the views of certain

contemporary Antinatalist philosophers. For instance, reminding of both Eminescu and Mainländer, Jim Crawford wrote that: "I wish I were never born. I wish my children had never been born. I wish the sun would explode and crisp us all as we sleep, leaving the Earth a charred, barren, lifeless ball of nothing..." (Crawford 2010, 48). Reminding of the views on extinction presented by Thomas Bernhard and E.M. Cioran, Thomas Ligotti observed in *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*: "Our self-removal from this planet would still be a magnificent move, a feat so luminous it would bedim the sun. What do we have to lose? No evil would attend our departure from this world, and the many evils we have known would go extinct along with us. So why put off what would be the most laudable masterstroke of our existence, and the only one?" (Ligotti 2018, 36) However, we might ask ourselves if these are not just Freudian rationalizations. In other words, because our world is probably coming to an end (due to overpopulation and climate changes: will we have summer at Christmas in the northern hemisphere the following decade?) we begin to openly desire what necessarily has to happen. It is almost as if we seek alliance with a stronger enemy – the hegemonic death – against ourselves.

### **3. A Cure for Nihilism?**

The Schopenhauerian "laws" which claim that life is basically suffering, and that nonexistence is preferable to existence build the foundation of 19th and 20th century nihilism. Nevertheless, these "laws" are nothing for the ones with lust for life: "Dying was nothing and he had no picture of it nor fear of it in his mind. But living was a field of grain blowing in the wind on the side of a hill ... Living was a horse between your legs and a carbine under one leg and a hill and a valley and a stream with trees along it and the far side of the valley and the hills beyond" (Hemingway 2019, 318).

Furthermore, there are certain intrinsic qualities to life which can add meaning to existence. For instance, the experiences of personal

growth, of arriving at understanding (instead of mere knowledge), the process of “becoming who you are” can be enlightening. It is true that we are deeply flawed, that both a sort of “original sin” and a certain “fallenness” [Verfallenheit] describe our condition. Becoming aware of our own imperfection proves – not that we can correct them – that there is a certain territory inside us untainted by the inherent flaw. We are born in an ontological prison, in a planetary hospital, but maybe “inwardness” may also provide the cure. In a world of clones, with masks without faces, we have to go deeper inside. Sometimes the cure for alienation and inauthenticity is to drift further apart, and that alone is an ongoing battle. Nihilism is circular and repetitive but becoming more nihilistic gets us closer to the source of anti-nihilism. Therefore, we might ask ourselves: can a sequel to *Crime and Punishment* be written? To put it another way, would the world remain a “hell in itself” if Adam first ate from the tree of life? Is there something within us that is fit for salvation or do our murderous drives disclose our demonic nature?

## References

Blanchot, Maurice. 2004. *Lautréamont and Sade*. Trans. Stuart Kendall, Michelle Kendall. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Bolea, Ștefan. 2012. “Melancholia”. *Philosophy Now*, 91: 46-47.

Crawford, Jim. 2010. *Confessions of an Anti-Natalist*. Charelston, WV: Nine-Banded Books.

Eminescu, Mihai. 1993. *Memento mori*. Ed. Al. Piru. Craiova: Vlad&Vlad Publishing House.

Hemingway, Ernest. 2019. *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. New York: Scribner.

Jung, C.G. 1988. *Nietzsche's Zarathustra. Notes of the Seminar Given in 1934-39*. Ed. James L. Jarrett. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Jung, C.G. 1989. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. Ed. Aniela Jaffé. Trans. Richard, Clara Winston. New York: Vintage.

Ligotti, Thomas. 2018. *The Conspiracy against the Human Race. A Contrivance of Horror*. New York: Penguin Books.

Mainländer, Philipp. 1989. *Philosophie der Erlösung. Hs. Ulrich Horstmann*. Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1988. *The Portable Nietzsche*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Penguin.

Oeler, Karla. 2009. *A Grammar of Murder. Violent Scenes and Film Form*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Suetonius Tranquillus. 2007. *The Twelve Ceasars*. Trans. Robert Graves. London: Penguin.

Swinburne, Algernon Charles. 2000. *Poems and Ballads. Atalanta in Calydon*, ed. Kenneth Haynes. London: Penguin.