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Tragedy and comedy in Lars von Trier's *The Boss of It All*

ABSTRACT

Through examining conceptions of tragedy and comedy, this paper argues that Lars von Trier's film, Direktøren for det hele/The Boss of It All (2006), challenges the dichotomies of G.W.F. Hegel's and George Steiner's analysis of comedy and tragedy. For example, Hegel conceives of classical tragedy as a conflict between two characters that embody universal ideals. However, comedy, according to Hegel, concerns people who cannot live up to their ideals. Most of us cannot embody transcendent ideals, so comedy clearly resembles ordinary life more than Hegelian tragedy. As with the hero of tragedy, the protagonist of The Boss of It All divides the harmony of the good, and in staying true to his ideal, betrays himself. In this way, the film suggests a transcendent pathos that is connected with the comic failure of ordinary life. Contrary to Steiner's notion that tragedy presents an 'aristocracy of pain' and a sense that life's cruelties cannot be overcome, this reading of von Trier's film maintains that tragedy appeals to us because it indicates our desire for our surroundings to be different. This paper concludes, following Eagleton's analysis of the tragic, that tragedy is connected to hope. In so doing, I will argue that The Boss of It All, indicates that art can survive the dissolution between tragedy and comedy that Hegel claims would dissolve art.

KEYWORDS

Hegel
Steiner
Eagleton
tragedy
tragicomedy
comedy

There are a number of connections between comedy and tragedy. These 'genres' share such themes as reversals in fortune, the collision between the real and the ideal and, often, a fate obverse to the protagonist's intention. Yet, according to George Steiner, it is seldom that the tragic and the comic actually converge (Steiner 2003: 534-535). Steiner claims that the terrain of the tragicomic is a separate artistic mode incapable of encompassing works that are

simultaneously comic and tragic (Steiner 2003: 535). Although Hegel does not differentiate between this experience and the tragicomic, he pre-empts Steiner's notion that the tragicomic is a mediation. Both Hegel and Steiner are artistic elitists, and argue that art's power is limited in the modern world. The end of art thereby means the end of tragedy. In contrast, Terry Eagleton maintains that the tragic does engage with everyday life, and gains its value through this engagement. Using Hegel's notions of the tragic, the comic and the tragicomic in an analysis of Lars von Trier's film, *The Boss of It All* (2006), this paper aims to transcend the sharp distinctions made by Steiner and Hegel. I hope to show that von Trier's film is comic and tragic, and tragic through its comedy and vice versa. Further, by analyzing *The Boss of It All*, this paper argues that art's dissolution provides the opportunity for its strengthened reconstitution.

Tragedy, as Steiner notes in his essay 'Tragedy, Pure and Simple', has always held a privileged position in philosophical analysis, whereas comedy is seldom tackled by the great critics, theorists and philosophers (Steiner 2003: 534). Following in this tradition, he ventures no definition of comedy himself. He does, however, claim that in rare circumstances, an occurrence in art can be both tragic and comic at the same time, in the same manner. Steiner's example is Kafka, where there is no tragicomic mediation but rather a sublation 'of the ontological differentiations between tragedy and comedy' (Steiner 2003: 535). This sublation of comedy and tragedy creates laughter, but also continues the tragic through evoking despair.

Steiner's analysis of tragedy is paradoxical. He is a proponent of what he calls 'absolute tragedy' (Steiner 2008: 37). According to Steiner's most recent writings, tragedies must end without hope for redemption. In *The Death of Tragedy*, Steiner does state that 'there is in the final moments of great tragedy [...] a fusion of grief and joy, of lament over the fall of man and of rejoicing over the resurrection of his spirit' (Steiner 1961: 10). Although his later writings suggest a retraction of this redemptive quality, he continues to note that we reserve for the tragic a 'different intonation of *dignitas* and pathos than [...] comic counterparts' (Steiner 2003: 534). In this respect, tragedy must dignify horror, terror, sadness and complete hopelessness.

Steiner's analysis of the tragic has frequently been criticized. Although Steiner says that tragedy 'has nothing to do with social snobbery', he also insists that it is antidemocratic, favouring 'an aristocracy of pain' (Steiner 2008: 37). Eagleton argues that Steiner implicitly favours patrician values. Eagleton accuses Steiner's and other elitist readings of tragedy as a type of nostalgia for 'when men were really men and had their children served up to them in

a stew without turning a patrician hair' (Eagleton 2008a: 2). Eagleton claims that Steiner's high-minded preference for absolute, pessimistic tragedy denies any hopeful quality that the tragic may have (Eagleton 2008b: 344). According to Eagleton, Steiner's view of tragedy condemns the suffering that we all face as unimportant in comparison to the suffering of nobles. By engaging with Hegel, another high-minded theorist of the tragic, this paper seeks to sublimate tragic elitism in such a way that preserves the status and dignity of tragedy, and yet opens it up to everyday existence.

Although Hegel is an elitist when it comes to art, in his triad of tragedy, comedy and tragicomedy, there is much ground for subversion. The advantage of turning to Hegel over some other theorists of the tragic is that Hegel does provide a conception of the comic as well as the tragic and tragicomic. In the ideal classical tragedy, which Hegel claims is *Antigone*, two embodiments of right come into conflict, the family signified by Antigone, and the law signified by Creon. Classical tragedy thereby has a simple plot, where ideals collide, destroying or dissolving each other. With Hegel's reading, part of the tragic pathos of classical tragedy depends on the notion that the character betrays him- or her- self, through dividing the notion of good (Hegel 2010: 1217-128). Tragedy thereby involves dissolution and destruction. However, with this destruction comes a hope for a new, future harmony, where both ideals are recognized, reconciled and realized.

Hegel defines the comic in a specific way. Just as a tragedy is not simply a play or work that ends badly, a comedy is more than just that which elicits laughter. Rather, comic laughter must be redemptive. In the comic, characters cannot live up to their nobler ideals. Comedy, though, still involves the ideal being realized, but negatively. Comedy, for Hegel, allows us to cope with the characters' failure to realize the ideals of who they should be. The characters cannot embody noble ideals, but we nevertheless accept them and their ideals, reconciling both. However, the comic retains a critical edge. Aristophanic comedy serves as a critique for Hegel, where the shortcomings in contemporary ethics, politics and aesthetics can be revealed (Hegel 2010: 1202). Hegel claims that comedy in the modern era, on the other hand, usually degenerates into farce or irony and thereby loses the comic. With the degradation of comedy, art's meaning is lost. Comedy becomes metonymic of the disintegration between art and the ideal, where art no longer manifests ideals that progress and speak to the human spirit (Hegel 2010: 1236).

Works of tragicomedy are works that are serious and yet not as drastic and disaster-bound as tragedy, or laughter-invoking as comedy. Hegel's concept of the tragicomic comes the closest to approximating life as lived, but there is a question as to what it reveals about

life. For Hegel, dramatic poetry exists primarily through two modalities, the comic and the tragic (Hegel 2010: 1208) and this seems to demote the importance and power of what he calls the tragicomic. Although tragedy focuses on nobility, it still emphasizes universal concerns such as the family and the state (Hegel 2010: 1213). Likewise, even though Aristophanes' comedy focuses on notable personages, it nevertheless demonstrates a way to come to terms with our collective failures (Hegel 2010: 1220-121). As Hegel observes, the tragicomic functions through 'blunting both sides [of tragedy and comedy]' (Hegel 2010: 1203). Hence, tragicomedies seem to fail our inclinations for sensations and extremes. Nevertheless, Hegel sees merit in the tragicomic, claiming that tragicomedies reveal the importance of mediation, 'finding a harmony' and 'reconciling their [the characters'] opposition' (Hegel 2010: 1203).

The Boss of It All has all the elements of a comic farce, and for a brief moment a reconciliation of oppositions. Ravn, the CEO of a Danish IT company, intends to sell his company to an Icelandic businessman who hates Denmark even though Ravn knows this will result in his employees being left with nothing. However, Ravn does not wish to lose the approval of his employees, so hires an actor, Kristoffer, to play 'the boss of it all' and sign the contract for Ravn. In the film, there are two tragicomic reconciliations. First, Kristoffer puts on a performance that appeals to Ravn's sentimentality. Kristoffer is so convincing that he leads Ravn to change his mind about selling the company. However, Kristoffer still has the power to sell, and his desire to be an actor means he plays with the notion of signing the contract. The second tragicomic reconciliation occurs when Kristoffer decides against signing the contract, discovering that there is compassion in the character of 'the boss of it all'. Hence, Kristoffer is able to appease his audience – the employees who watch with bated breath as Kristoffer contemplates signing the contract. Moreover, Kristoffer's decision allows him to fulfil his wish of staying in character, adding complexity to 'the boss of it all'. In both instances, the ideal seems realized, or at least, reconciled with reality.

However, Kristoffer learns that the Icelandic businessman respects the work of his favourite playwright and theatre theorist, Antonio Gambini. Kristoffer decides to sign the contract so that he can perform Gambini's 'The Chimney Sweep's monologue' to the Icelandic businessman, a monologue that involves no speaking. The employees are forced to pack up their belongings. As they leave the premises, Kristoffer performs the 'monologue'. At the close of the film, von Trier's ironic narration is heard, as he apologizes for his movie.

This end narration contrasts with Von Trier's narration at the beginning of the film, in which he informs us that we are watching a comedy. He opens the film with a craning shot

of the building in which the drama takes place. We can see von Trier's reflection in the windows as he narrates that:

Although you see my reflection, trust me, this film won't be worth a moment's reflection. It's a comedy, and harmless as such. No preaching or swaying of opinion. Just a cosy time.

The film is supposed to be a comedy, as von Trier repeatedly reminds us, but the ending is also tragic. The film accentuates the reversals of fate and the collision between the actual and the ideal, the shared structures of comedy and tragedy. Kristoffer begins the film as a sort of scape-goat, to be substituted for Ravn's own guilt. Fate is reconstituted by contractual arrangement, where Kristoffer innocently signs a Faustian pact, becoming legally obliged to sign over the IT firm. This sense of fate is largely comic as Kristoffer struggles to find a way to escape his legal obligations. But there is nevertheless a sense of seriousness and doom about his circumstance, which in turn, increases the humour of the events. At the close of the film, von Trier's voice tells us that, 'Like you, I would like to get home, but I'd like to apologize to those who wanted more and those who wanted less. Those who got what they came for... deserve it.' The ending thereby reveals the absurdity of modern existence through the absurdity of the film, conveying both a sense of the comic and the tragic, and their Steiner-esque convergence.

Such an absurd ending may seem to conflict with Hegel, who, unlike Steiner, does not necessarily see tragedy as a devaluation of human life. If anything, the film indicates Hegel's disintegration of art, where art's modalities no longer put forth a positive expression of the Spirit. Von Trier's films are sometimes called anti-cinema, and his stylistic, arbitrary rules, a deconstruction of art, film and form. Such rules are clearly at work within *The Boss of It All*. For example, von Trier's narration is always self-referential and distanced, and only takes place over shots of the exterior of the street and building. Moreover, the interior shots are tilted in strange ways. While filming, von Trier had a computer on set to create random, slanted angles for the camera to be repositioned. The film is then off-kilter in both content and visual composition. Everything is awry and disjointed including the camera angles. The accusation that von Trier's films are pranks is readily understandable. His work evokes art's

dissolution, signifying the end of art's seriousness, and leaving us only with irony and unaesthetic spectacle.¹

However, in another way, von Trier's film becomes a test of Hegelian consciousness, where even the seemingly arbitrary can take on purposiveness, forming a distinctive aesthetic style. The strange camera angles, and frequent cuts, establish a style that unifies the film. Further, the camera angles come to create a sense of the limitations of the individuals to control their destinies. The position of the camera thereby reconstitutes a type of fate through its absence, where literal automatism takes on an artistic and ethical significance. Whether von Trier intended this technique to be a trope that critiques and manifests a capitalist logic, the framing of the images can indicate the arbitrary mechanisms of capitalist practices. Fate thereby emerges from the very challenge to fate, namely the purposeless.

In this context, von Trier's self-referential narration creates a sense of the disjointed and the interrupted, almost becoming an instance of *deus ex machina*, which both interferes with the continuity of the film but also punctuates the film, and thereby gives a greater coherence to the narrative, emphasizing the senselessness of fate. Hence, there is something dialectical at work in von Trier's film. The stylistic devices of the film mediates the seriousness of the events, adding a lightness of tone to the work but it also opens the way for a devastating conclusion, where the disjointed and arbitrary injustices of life can be revealed. By turning to Hegel, we gain a greater sense of the interplay between arbitrariness and fate, comedy and tragedy.

The Boss of It All resembles, for the most part, a Hegelian tragicomedy. It involves comic, almost Aristophanic barbs at capitalist practices, the vanity of self-important 'artists' like Kristoffer, and the arbitrariness of formulating decisions. However, although comic, the circumstances have very serious consequences beyond that which Hegel would consider comic. The employees, all shown to have weaknesses, pathologies and eccentricities, have formed an accepting and productive community, one that resembles a family or household. The rule of capitalism threatens to disrupt their community. In this way, a conception of right comes up against legal justice, embodied by Ravn, who is also a lawyer. As in Hegel's reading of tragedy, the law becomes a threat to the family. However, in *The Boss of It All*,

¹ The significance of spectacle in artistic production from Aristotle onwards has been challenged as part of aesthetic meaning. Spectacle often distracts from content, either disrupting the mood of a work or creating a false sense of illusion that masks the reality of fiction. Spectacle thereby also has political as well as aesthetic implications, where capitalism veils its social mechanisms through media, as notable Marxist theorists such as Adorno and Guy Debord have noted.

this tension is only half-tragic, for in the film, the law is not just and is separated from what is ethically important. The narrative then seems to pull between the comic and the tragic, illustrating Steiner's mediation of a work being neither fully comic nor fully tragic. At this point, it could also be said to be a Hegelian mediation of seriousness with humour.

The near-ending of the film, the point at which the film almost has a happy ending, is comic but also tragicomic. When it looks as though Kristoffer will not sign the contract, the whole circumstance is redeemed. Kristoffer is not only able to play his part, becoming pivotal in the drama, but is able to convince Ravn to change his ways. Ravn at once realizes the ideal that he has only hitherto pretended to embody, and yet his faults and his failure to attain the ideal are also highlighted. This is consistent with the comic. In another way, it is also consistent with the Hegel's notion of the tragic: that at the end of a tragedy the protagonist achieves a reconciliation with himself, his deeds and the world (Hegel 2010: 1204). Above all, this almost-ending is tragicomic due to the mediation that occurs, where the characters seem able, with the exception of the marginalized Icelandic businessman, to work out an equitable solution.

Up until the final turning point, then, the work is best described as a tragicomedy. What takes the film beyond this categorisation is the desolate conclusion in which all the employees lose their positions. This conclusion could be an example of Steiner's rare instance of a simultaneous tragic and comic event. In Hegelian terms, the ideal is revealed to us and even given to us, only to be taken away. Instead of the redemption at the end of *The Boss of It All*, the film resembles the tragic experience of the Spirit in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, in which players become 'shadowy, insubstantial picture-thoughts' (Hegel 1977: 449). In short, as von Trier self-consciously states near the end of *The Boss of It All*, 'demands must be met before we can leave the cinema and with a clear conscience forget everything we've seen.'

This dissolution of memory is not only tragic but also funny. We may even be tempted to accept Kristoffer's failings as in Hegelian comedy. The tragedy stems from the subjective liberation of Kristoffer. Hegel observes that, 'In modern dramatic poetry, tragedy and comedy are still more intermingled, because even in modern tragedy the principle of subjectivity, free on its own account in comedy, becomes dominant from beginning to end and pushes into the background the substantive spheres of ethical powers' (Hegel 2010: 1203). Hence, in Hegel's sense, the film is both post-tragic and post-comic. But there is also a preservation of the tragic and comic. As Hegel notes, the comic involves subjective liberation, but – contrary to Hegel – this subjective liberation does not marginalize the

seriousness of the conclusion. As with Kafka and Beckett, the serious issues become more so, as it is not Antigone, Creon or Oedipus who decides the fate of the employees but the capricious Kristoffer.

The 'substantive sphere of ethical powers' is not pushed to the background. The comic, tragic and tragicomic bring about an emphasis on the absurdity of the capitalist present, where CEOs are actors and actors play CEOs. The comic quality emanates from the subjective wills of corporate bosses having such a tragic power over the lives of others. This is particularly so with Ravn's unwillingness to take responsibility for his actions. Capitalism becomes a non-redemptive, irresponsible fate. But this comic superficiality is shown to go beyond corporate practices. It is tragically ingrained in the human spirit, as represented by Kristoffer's comic hubris, a hubris that leads not to his dissolution but to the dissolution of the company. Therefore, through the blurring and fusing of tragedy, comedy and tragicomedy, there is a reconstitution of the three.

Steiner sees comedy as redemptive, suggesting that life is not so serious as to be a serious disaster. Certainly, in a manner described by Hegel, there is a comic softening where we may move beyond blaming Kristoffer as an individual. He realizes his ideal only superficially and at a great cost, but it is possible to accept him. However, the film arouses our tragic sympathies as we learn about the employees' lives. For a brief moment there is a harmony between the ideal and the real, before the ideal is lost. As Kristoffer prophetically observes, 'Everything comes together for an instant only to be blown to bits by a Gambinian explosion.' For Steiner's dignified, tragic suffering, there should be no hope: otherwise the seriousness is contaminated. Yet, Kristoffer, the ultimate comic figure, is able to make some of the most tragic and dignified pronouncements without ever becoming a dignified, tragic protagonist. At one point, Kristoffer states what Steiner among many other theorists see as the 'essence' of tragedy, namely that we cannot control our lives, or in Kristoffer's words, 'We talk of free will, but we heed the machine within.'

Hegel claims in his *Aesthetics*, that there is a potential for tragedy to indicate a harmony negatively, the ideal surviving its dissolution. As Eagleton observes, the tragic indicates that we still care about the protagonists, and that we care because we envisage a better world. In *The Boss of It All* we glimpse harmony for a moment, and then witness its transience in modern life. But as both Hegel and Eagleton claim, destruction reacquaints us with what is important. In *The Boss of It All*, tragedy thereby survives comic dissolution and tragicomic mediation, heightening the three. Likewise, artistic form survives its modern dissolution, through its modern dissolution. The seeming absence of tragic dignitas and

pathos, then, turns out to be the groundwork for the dignity and pathos of Ravn, Kristoffer and the eccentric employees.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Wansbrough, A. (2013), 'Tragedy and comedy in Lars von Trier's *The Boss of It All*', *Peer Reviewed Proceedings of the 4th Annual Conference Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand (PopCAANZ), Brisbane, Australia, 24-26 June, 2013*, P. Mountfort (ed), Sydney: PopCAANZ, pp.71-79. Available from <http://popcaanz.com/conference-proceedings-2013/>.