

Art as the Free Play of Imagination for Attaining Meaning in Pain: A Comparative Study of Nabokov's "Invitation to a Beheading" and Von Trier's "Dogville"

Leili Kafi¹

Kian Soheil²

Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

This study focuses on pain as a phenomenon that deprives individuals of meaning and explores how the free play of imagination in art can defy pain and help to attain meaning. Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* (1935) and Lars Von Trier's *Dogville* (2003) are comparatively studied under the light of Elaine Scarry's notions on pain as proposed in *The Body in Pain, The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985). Both these artists and their works are the canon of debate and have been received contrasting reactions from audiences and critics. Numerous works are written in discussion of these two artists and selected works but none is on pain and no study is conducted to compare the two in one body. Besides, pain has long been a notable issue in sciences from medicine to philosophy especially in studies of trauma. But what is neglected and has recently been raised is the importance of pain as a phenomenon away from its negative aspects. Antonio Damasio, Elaine Scarry, Arne Johan Vetlesen and Saulius Geniusas are some of the scholars who have studied the phenomenon of pain to illuminate it as an experience in man's life that could attain other functions as well. Scarry argues pain not only resists language but it even destroys it. Hence, an individual experiencing pain becomes speechless, so art can articulate a language for pain, akin to an attorney representing a client.

2. Aim

The present study focuses on two works selected by the researcher from the two fields of literature and cinema; Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* (1959) and

¹ Ph.D. Student of English Language and Literature, Department of English Language and Literature, North Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran l.kafi@iau-tnb.ac.ir

² Assistant Professor of English Literature, Department of English Literature, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran (Corresponding Author) k-soheil@sbu.ac.ir

How to cite this article:

Leili Kafi; Kian Soheil. "Free Play of Imagination in Art to Make Meaning in Pain: A Comparative Study of Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Dogville*". *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature, Arts and Humanities*, 3, 2, 2023, 219-244. doi: 10.22077/islah.2023.6604.1310



Copyright: © 2023 by the authors. Licensee Journal of *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature, Arts & Humanities*. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Von Trier's *Dogville* (2003). Literature and cinema have their specific language of words and images that will undoubtedly result in formal differences, but the artistic attitude of the artist and the system of representation used to convey meaning will have similarities which is exactly the aim of this study to discover. Nabokov and Von Trier, different artists at first glance, shared notable grounds in their oeuvre. The works are analyzed to extract structural and thematic similarities to demonstrate how individuals can attain meaning in the experience of pain and what the role of imagination and art have been so far. This study can be a starting point for those interested in literature and cinema as sister arts with intricate relations and for those interested in Nabokov or Von Trier.

3. Theoretical framework and Methodology

As interdisciplinary research between literature and cinema, and through a comparative approach, this study applies Elaine Scarry's notion of pain to the two selected works. First, Scarry's definition of pain (torture) in physical and verbal acts is presented. Then disruption of meaning by pain is discussed. Third, the transformatory role of pain is explained to show how pain can embed in itself ways to pass through pain. Finally, free play of imagination (art) is discussed to clarify if and how imagination (art) can help attain meaning in pain. Through close reading, these definitions and notions are applied to the selected works and especially to their main characters, Cincinnatus and Grace.

4. Discussion

Scarry examines pain from three perspectives, emphasizing its state of inexpressibility which she calls the 'human condition'. In her definition, pain (torture) has two components, physical and verbal acts. Cincinnatus and Grace both experience physical and psychological pain accompanied by verbal pain of interrogation and threats. Scarry believes pain is able to make man's world empty of meaning as it does so with the two characters. Pain can initially silence individual's expression of pain, leaving their world empty of meaning. Pain, as is experienced (physically or psychologically) by Cincinnatus and Grace, leads to a profound emptiness. Cincinnatus's agony and Grace's silence intensify, diminishing genuine communication. Both of them undergo a transition where their thoughts about others clash with the harsh reality, resulting in a tangible experience of pain. Hence, as Scarry proposes, pain becomes a manifestation of practicing power. Cincinnatus and Grace both experience imposed pain (anticipation of execution and abuse). So far, pain, as an objectless concept, can be connected to the imagination, creating a deep relationship and means of expression and passing through pain. Based on what is discussed, the researcher conducts that pain can have transformative functions such as disrupting routines, breaking boundaries, changing perspectives, and acquiring experiential knowledge.

Cincinnatus and Grace experience disruptions in their lives due to pain, leading to shifts in their perspectives and behaviors. Therefore, pain becomes a source of unique experiential knowledge, challenging preconceived notions and fostering personal growth. Both characters grapple with the balance between imagination and reality, seeking meaning and salvation in their experiences. Nabokov and Von Trier both are stylistic in their oeuvre making use of such shared techniques as alienation, irony, gameplay and circular narrative which results in playing with the reader/audience challenging their perception. Both narratives involve stories within stories, creating a complex structure that compels the audience to reexamine details for a deeper understanding. Von Trier approaches Grace's character with minimalism as Nabokov does so by putting a surreal setting for his narration.

5. Conclusion

The two works are put under scrutiny in meticulous reading of texts. Both challenge traditional narratives, creating thought-provoking pieces that surpass political, social, and psychological messages. While not being identical in content or structure, both emphasize the subjective nature of reality. Uncertain time and place in both narratives enhance the role of imagination, freeing the works from limited meanings. Conscious selection of elements prevents self-identification, fostering diverse audience responses; both revolve around a central character experiencing profound pain with differing physical and philosophical dimensions. Both narrations maintain emotional distance, guiding the audience toward a unique experiential perspective. Stories within stories create a layered narrative, urging the audience to revisit and reinterpret. Cinema leverages visual, auditory, and narrative elements for a more tangible portrayal of pain while literature relies on the reader's imagination. Pain resists linguistic expression but flourishes in the realm of imagination, offering a vast domain for artistic exploration. Imagination, as an expansive domain, serves as a rich language for expressing and transcending pain in the realm of art.

References:

Apple Jr. Alfred (1967). "An Interview with Vladimir Nabokov." *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, VII & VIII: 2, pp. 131-140.

https://archive.org/details/sim_contemporary-literature_1966-1967_7-8_cumulative-index

Barabtarlo, Gennady (1990). "Within and Without Cincinnatus's Cell: Reference Gauges in Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*." *Slavic Review*, 4:3, pp.390–97. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2499985>. Accessed 23 May 2023.

- Boyd, Brian (2011). "The Psychologist." *The American Scholar*, 80:4, pp. 47–55. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41434988>. Accessed 6 May 2023.
- Boyd, Brian (1990). *Nabokov: The Russian Years*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Boyd, Brian (1997). "Welcome to the Block: (Priglasenie na kazn') *Invitation to a Beheading: A Documentary Record*." Edited by Julian Connolly, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, pp.140-179.
- Connolly, Julian W (1997). "*Invitation to a Beheading: Nabokov's 'Violin in a Void'.*" *Invitation to a Beheading: A Critical Companion*. Edited by Julian Connolly, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, pp.3-46.
- Dogville* (2003). Directed by Lars Von Trier, Zoma Films.
- Dominguez, Cesar. Haun Saussy & Dario Villanueva (2015). *Introducing Comparative Literature: New Trends and Applications*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Fitzsimmons, Lorna (2001). "Artistic Subjectivity in Nabokov's *The Defense* and *Invitation to a Beheading*." *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, 21:1-2. pp.55-60.
- Guyard, Marius-François (1965). *La Littérature comparée*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Habash, Nicolas Lema (2017). "Critique of Calculation: Labour, Productivity, Limits, and Love in Lars Von Trier's *Dogville*." *Revue Canadienne d'Études Cinématographiques / Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, 26:1, pp.24–44. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26532119>. Accessed 6 June 2023.
- Hall, Stewart (1973). *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*. Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.
- McCarty, Timothy Wyman (2015). "Good Readers and Good Liberals: Nabokov's Aesthetic Liberalism." *Political Theory*, 43: 6, pp.753–76. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24571696>. Accessed 6 May 2023.
- Nabokov, Vladimir (1959). *Invitation to a Beheading*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Pifer, Ellen I (1970). "Nabokov's '*Invitation to a Beheading*': The Parody of

a Tradition.” *Pacific Coast Philology*, 5. pp.46–53. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1316761>. Accessed 21 May 2023.

Scarry, Elaine (1985). *The Body in Pain, The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford: oxford University Press.

Simons, Jan (2007). *Playing the Waves: Lars von Trier's Game Cinema*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Simons, Jan (2008). “Von Trier’s Cinematic Games.” *Journal of Film and Video*, 60: 1, pp.3–13. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20688581>. Accessed 6 June 2023.

Staat, Wim (2007). “Dogville Characterized by ‘The Grapes of Wrath’: European Identity Construction through American Genre Conventions.” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, 48: 1, pp.79–96. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41552480>. Accessed 7 June 2023.

Vetlessen, Arne Johan (2009). *A Philosophy of Pain*. London: Reaktion Books.

