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# Imagination and Dwelling in *The House that Jack Built*

## ABSTRACT

This article employs a phenomenological and hermeneutic lens to examine the themes of dwelling, creative imagination, and the interplay between ethics and aesthetics within Lars von Trier's film, *The House that Jack Built*. The film follows Jack, an engineer and self-taught architect, who pursues his dream of building an ideal home while committing morally reprehensible acts (murders). He documents these crimes using negative photography, turning them into a twisted form of artistic expression. This study explores the convergence and divergence of ethics and aesthetics, drawing on a hermeneutic understanding of imagination and dwelling. It uncovers that creative imagination holds the potential for ultimate *hybris*, meaning transgression and rebellion against "the great Architect behind it all." It is a force that supplements human limitations and positions them as original, autonomous creators incapable of dwelling in a shared world. While creative imagination emerges as a force that transcends human limitations, it is also intricately linked to dwelling. It serves as a conduit for personal expression and the ability to bestow and create meaning. It becomes a prerequisite for personal identity, responsibility, and freedom. It is inherently ethical as it facilitates effective communication and the cultivation of *praxis* within the community. This ethical dimension is disclosed in *praxis* and culminates there, highlighting creative imagination as an essential human capability that enables care and dwelling.

**Keywords:** dwelling, imagination, art, ethics, *The House that Jack Built*, Lars von Trier.

## INTRODUCTION

In his renowned works on dwelling, Heidegger quotes Hölderlin: "Full of merit, yet poetically, man / Dwells on this earth" (qtd. in Heidegger, "Poetically" 216). What does this mean, and what is the relationship between dwelling and poetry or creative imagination? In this article, I will draw on the phenomenological and hermeneutic understanding of dwelling, creative imagination, and the relationship between ethics and aesthetics to interpret Lars von Trier's film *The House that Jack Built*.

*The House that Jack Built* caused outrage when it premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2018, with many audience members leaving the cinema. The film follows a man called Jack over 12 years and introduces five randomly chosen "incidents" (murders) that define Jack's development as a serial killer. The story is told from Jack's point of view. He takes photographs of his victims and considers each a work of art. Despite his clumsiness, he is fortunate in his endeavors, almost to the point of parody. He takes increasingly significant risks to create the ultimate artwork, a house made from human bodies. Despite the shock and disgust it instills in some viewers, the film raises profound philosophical questions. Understanding some visceral reactions to the portrayal of Jack's vision and actions, in this article, I will engage in a philosophical discussion rather than a moral debate and try to substantiate Jack's views on art. By using *The House that Jack Built* as a basis for reflections on the notion of dwelling, creative imagination/art, and the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, I hope to provide a deeper understanding of these ideas.



## HERMENEUTICS OF JACKS'S DWELLING

Jack, an engineer by profession, has always been passionate about architecture. After inheriting a significant amount of money, he buys land to construct his dream house. However, despite having extensive knowledge of architecture, he cannot build the house he desires. He creates several projects and begins constructing some but destroys them in disappointment and dissatisfaction with his work, primarily due to his chosen materials. Frustrated, he lives in a small apartment, obsessively working on designing his dream house. Why is Jack so obsessed with building the house? Why is he unable to build it with land, funds, and knowledge at his disposal? What does this tell us about Jack? Heidegger's understanding of dwelling may provide some insight into these questions.

For Heidegger, dwelling is not just a passive occupation of a space; it involves a sense of meaning and significance. Dwelling is a fundamental

way in which humans engage with their surroundings and establish a meaningful relationship with the world. According to Heidegger, dwelling is a complex and profound concept that includes the existential, poetic, and meaningful connection between human beings and the world they live in. It is about how we interact with and attribute significance to our surroundings, establishing a meaningful framework for our existence. "The way in which you are, and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on the earth, is *Buan*, dwelling. To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell" (Heidegger, "Dwelling" 145). The notion of dwelling concerns how humans exist in space and interact with the world and others. Our sense of belonging (including belonging to ourselves, i.e. identity) is integral to dwelling. The paradoxical nature of belonging is expressed by the feeling of home and home-coming, as well as the feeling of home-lessness expressed by the embodied meaningfulness of home and home-coming, and simultaneously the fleshly and spiritual feelings of home-lessness.



In one of the film's opening scenes, the main character encounters a woman whose car has broken down. Upon inspecting the vehicle, Jack remarks that the issue is not with the car but with the jack. "[Jack]: The issue with your jack is it's broken" (von Trier). They take the jack to a blacksmith, "a very good one," who attempts to repair it but eventually breaks down again. The jack cannot be fixed. This scene is more about the Jack than about a jack, more about Jack's character than a broken jack. We soon learn that Jack lacks any meaningful relationships or sense of purpose in his life. He lacks human emotions, longings, or fears. He is lost. He has no narrative identity and no original ideas. He is broken, homeless within his own skin. He lives in a world that does not understand him and that he does not understand:

> I went to great lengths to fake normal empathy in order to hide amongst the masses. [trying to imitate facial expressions from a magazine]: Smile. Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes. Disappointed. Very, very disappointed. I was a very sensitive child, profoundly afraid of playing. For example, hide and seek in case of hide. I always chose to run in near panic into a field of reeds to hide. (von Trier)

Perhaps Jack's obsession with building a house is an attempt to create a dwelling place that would rescue him from the fate of homelessness, find a sense of belonging, and discover who he truly is. But is he capable of accomplishing his dream?

If it were only a question of architectural or engineering skills, Jack would be perfectly capable of creating his desired house. However,

Heidegger's notion of "building" goes beyond just the physical construction of structures. It encompasses nurturing, maintaining, and inhabiting a space, shaping and forming our environment. This process of bringing forth and molding the world we live in is what building truly means. Ultimately, he draws a close connection between dwelling and constructing and caring:

> The old word *bauen*, which says that man is insofar as he dwells, this word *bauen*, however, also means at the same time to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine. Such building only takes care—it tends the growth that ripens into the fruit of its own accord. . . Shipbuilding and temple-building, on the other hand, do, in a certain way, make their works. Here building, in contrast with cultivating, is a constructing. Both modes of *building*—building as cultivating, Latin *colere*, cultura, and building as the raising up of edifices, *aedificare*—are comprised within the genuine building, that is, dwelling. . . . To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its nature. The fundamental character of dwelling is sparing and preserving. It pervades dwelling in its whole range. (Heidegger, "Dwelling" 145)



Heidegger based his concept of Care on the myth of *Cura*. This ancient Latin myth, found in a 2nd-century collection of myths edited by Hyginus, explores the ideas of vulnerability and care as being ontologically rooted in the human condition. The myth depicts humans as beings held together by Care. This is necessary because humans are divided between the spiritual (represented by Jupiter) and the bodily (represented by Earth) realms. Care helps humans reconcile these two dimensions and overcome their split condition. Heidegger's analysis in section VI of his work supports his central idea of Care (*Sorge*) as the Being of Dasein. He argues that Dasein is a Being-in-the-World (*In-der-Welt-sein*) and is active in the world as it acts. Taking care is the practical expression of this existence. The myth of *Cura* is crucial to Heidegger's argument because it expresses Dasein "primordially" (ursprünglich) and symbolically helps us understand the significance of Care as the Being of Dasein. Heidegger's exploration of care and dwelling is intertwined with his broader philosophical project, emphasizing the existential nature of human existence and the need for an authentic relationship with the world. Care and dwelling are thus intertwined: care is the foundational structure of our existence, and dwelling is how we authentically engage with our surroundings and find a sense of belonging in the world.

Crucially, for Heidegger, "[o]nly if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build" (Heidegger, "Dwelling" 158). But Jack is incapable of dwelling in the Heideggerian understanding of the notion. He does not care; he does not construct. He destroys, destructs, and murders. He states: "If glorification could demean a work, why should destruction and demolition not be able to do the opposite and create art? . . . an artist must be cynical and not worry about the welfare of humans or Gods in his art" (von Trier).

It is not only Jack that is home-less in the sense of care-less. In one of Jack's murder incidents, he reveals to his victim—a girl he calls Simple—his plan to kill her. Even more cruelly, he encourages and even helps her to scream, as loud as she can, in the apartment and then through the window. No one reacts to those terrifying screams. Jack comments on it:



> You know, maybe I'm mistaken, but as far as I can tell, not a single light has gone on in any apartment or stairwell. You know why that is? 'Cause in this hell of a town, in this hell of a country, in this hell of a world, nobody wants to help! You can scream from now until Christmas Eve and the only answer you'll get is the deafening silence that you're hearing right now. (von Trier)

Jack and Simple are not in some desolate area. On the contrary, they are inside an apartment building with many other inhabitants and cars parked outside:


**Fig. 1.** Jack and Simple.[1]

Such grimness defines von Trier's vision of contemporary society. Heidegger introduces the notion of the "fourfold," which consists of earth, sky, divinities, and mortals. This fourfold is a way of understanding the interconnectedness of various elements in the world and how they

[1] All seven screenshots included in this article were captured by the author.

contribute to the experience of dwelling. Each component plays a role in shaping the world and providing meaning to human existence:

> By a primal oneness, the four-earth and sky, divinities and mortals—belong together in one. . . . This simple oneness of the four we call the fourfold. Mortals are in the fourfold by dwelling.
>
> But the basic character of dwelling is to spare, to preserve. . . . To spare and preserve means: to take under our care, to look after the fourfold in its presencing. What we take under our care must be kept safe. . . . Mortals would never be capable of [dwelling] if dwelling were merely a staying on earth under the sky, before the divinities, among mortals. Things themselves secure the fourfold only when they themselves as things are let be in their presencing. How is this done? In this way, that mortals nurse and nurture the things that grow, and specially construct things that do not grow. Cultivating and construction are building in the narrower sense. *Dwelling*, insofar as it keeps or secures the fourfold in things, is, as this *keeping*, a building. (Heidegger, "Dwelling" 147–49)



In von Trier's dark hell, we ceased to care for our neighbors (the mortals), earth, sky, and divinities. "Cause in this hell of a town, in this hell of a country, in this hell of a world" (von Trier), it would appear that nobody wants to help because nobody *cares*. We become increasingly incapable of dwelling in the world; we merely stay on earth among the mortals, destroy nature, disrespect the sky, and disregard or even mock divinities.

## HERMENEUTIC-PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO IMAGINATION AND DWELLING

Dwelling is also connected with creative imagination (see Ricœur). For Heidegger, dwelling, related to poetry in the broader sense of artistic creation, including the technical arts of building and cultivating, is the heart of human dwelling as it brings the mysterious power of granting and making into personal expression. While Jack is aware of his psychopathic tendencies, he is convinced of one thing: that he is a true and genius artist. Jack certainly has some artistic and creative potential. He takes photos of his victims using analog photography, printing the negatives, and sees them as extravagant art. In one of his most inspiring dialogues with Verge (who is a clear representation of Virgil from *The Divine Comedy*), when commenting on his photographs, he says: "For me though, what was really sensational about the work with the photo, it wasn't the image but the negative. When I was ten years old, I discovered that through the negative, you could see the real inner demonic

quality of the light. The dark light" (von Trier). In photography, a negative is an image that presents a reversed grading of tonalities with respect to the subject. Below are some examples of Jack's works:



**Fig. 2.** The fire.

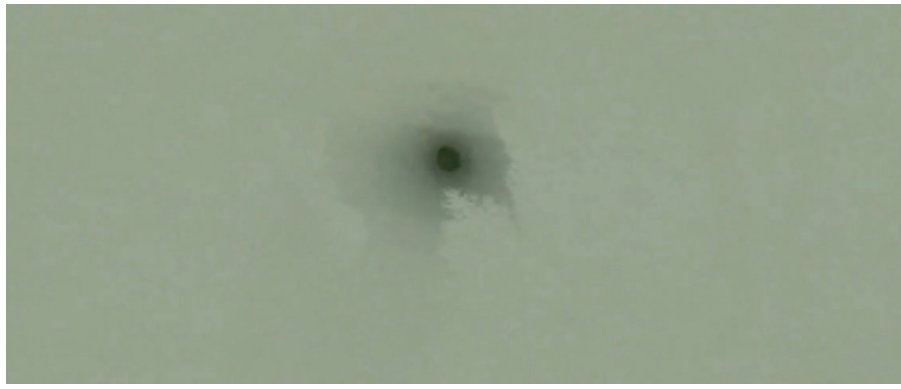

**Fig. 3.** The sun.

**Fig. 4.** Jack's victim.

This tone inversion is the direct consequence of the light-sensitive silver halide compound used to capture an image in a camera: it darkens in areas exposed to the brightest parts of the subject. Here, Jack is at his most creative. Not only by presenting but also by representing reality as he sees it through negative photography. According to classical Jungian psychoanalysis, the archetype of the Self represents a kind of fullness, the entirety of human psychic processes—both conscious and unconscious. Central to developing the Self is exploring the unconscious, closely related to his idea of the shadow. For Jung,

> Shadow is that hidden, repressed, for the most part, inferior and guilt-laden personality whose ultimate ramifications reach back into the realm of our animal ancestors. . . . If it has been believed hitherto that the human shadow was the source of evil, it can now be ascertained on a closer investigation that the unconscious man that is his shadow does not consist only of morally reprehensible tendencies but also displays a number of good qualities, such as normal instincts, appropriate reactions, realistic insights, creative impulses etc. (par. 422–23)

Jung believed that individuals and groups needed to recognize, acknowledge, and deal with their shadow elements. Failing to do so often leads to interpersonal and inter-group problems, fuelling prejudice and even sparking significant conflicts. Becoming familiar with the shadow is an essential part of the therapeutic relationship, of individuation, and of becoming a more well-rounded, whole, and colorful individual. By recording light through shadow and eventually bringing out the positive (copies, inversions, facsimiles), we can reveal certain previously unclear aspects. In this sense, the positive is a copy, while the negative is the original image, often unwanted, unintended, or suppressed. It is essential to recognize that our shadow selves hold a lot of potential, qualities, and capacities that need to be acknowledged and owned to avoid a state of impoverishment in our personality. From this perspective, shadows play a crucial role in our ability to understand ourselves.

In a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach to interpretation, one can identify aspects of oneself reflected in various forms of expression, such as literary or visual works (Wierciński 438). In the context of our discussion, we focus on interpreting the creations of an architect and a photographer. When a piece of art resonates with an individual, it becomes a means of gaining authentic self-understanding. This fundamental purpose underlies the act of engaging with literary and artistic works. It becomes a process of navigating the intricacies of our reality and the unique context in which we exist. The surprise and unexpected encounters

during the reading or interpretation signify moments when one recognizes facets of oneself within the artwork. The viewer, initially opening herself to the potential meaning of the artwork, approaches it with existential seriousness, anticipating a meaningful encounter.

According to Gadamer, an artwork expresses itself in a way that unveils something akin to a discovery, a revelation of a previously conceived idea. Every disclosure is inherently a closure, occurring simultaneously and in a dialectical relationship (Gadamer 470). Viewing photographs becomes a process of learning something new about one's experience that was previously hidden or undisclosed. Through encountering the artwork, the reader uncovers a truth waiting to be discovered, "the truth that illuminates itself in the constant dynamics of concealment and disclosure" (Wierciński 45), learning about herself in a way that may have been overlooked before. The reader recognizes this truth, expressed by the artwork, as genuine and acknowledges it in the moment of revelation. The connection between the viewer and the artwork is likened to a shared dream, the true essence of building and creation. It becomes a journey of self-understanding, transforming the act of interpreting an artwork into being interpreted by it. In this reciprocal process, the artwork resonates with the viewer, leading to a shared experience and a deeper understanding of oneself. Understanding what the artwork communicates is a form of self-encounter and self-beginning. Exposure to the artwork becomes exposure to oneself, shaping a new understanding of life. The reader's self-image is affected, but the distortion contributes to a more complex sense of oneself. Ultimately, reading becomes a means of working out one's self-understanding while interpreting the artwork. The viewer envisions potential transformations and self-conceptions in response to the artwork's gravity. This engagement with art enables a nuanced understanding of oneself and the integration of isolated experiences into the continuity of personal growth.



Viewing photographic artworks, informed by hermeneutic knowledge, emerges as a compelling approach to self-discovery and understanding. Through this engagement, viewers gain profound insights into their identities and envisage potential transformations, validating the significance of reading as a form of self-knowing and experiencing who we are. As Jack looks at his negatives, he moves closer to finding his true self and understanding who he really is or wants to be. However, we are left unsatisfied as Jack fails to delve deeper into the relationship between his artworks and his potential audience or explain his fascination with the darker aspects of life. Is it his attempt to capture the Jungian shadow that exists within all of us? Or is it his artistic exploration of the darker aspects of human nature? These questions are left unanswered, as Jack's primary fascination is with something he calls "the noble rot." This refers

to decomposition, deconstruction, and death. Jack's problem is not his appeal to the shadow but his lack of interest in the light, communication, and interpretation, mainly expressed in language. This might also be at the origin of his complete lack of empathy or ability to human connection. He tells Verge: "I loathe diagnosis you can just write down in letters" (von Trier). The following images scroll through the screen:

**Fig. 5.** Jack's view of language.

For Heidegger, on the other hand, the "poets" of finer artistic expression and especially the written word are the guides of humanity. They signal the power of making present and manifest intentionally, albeit always indirectly, the power of manifestation. What questions arise when we reflect on the phenomenology of home and its indissoluble connection to the ontological hermeneutics of human linguality formally indicated by Heidegger's famous "Language is the 'house of Being'"? (Heidegger, "Letter" 217)? Poets guide thinking insofar as the latter dwells on the mystery of disclosure. Without poetic guidance, there is no hope for any culturally renewed sense of the ultimate horizon of our collective longing. Alternatively, we may well be condemned to the barbaric anti-poetry of domination and control. Verge seems to believe this as well, as he responds to Jack:

> [Verge]: That's not fair, the letters are clear. They look after us and create boundaries between good and evil, and they carry religion. [Jack]: Religion has ruined human beings because your God teaches people to deny the tiger in themselves and turns us all into a throng of slaves too shameful to acknowledge it. [Verge]: Oh, Jack, you should have read the right letters in your life, but you didn't want to. (von Trier)

Jack goes by the nickname "Mr. Sophistication," which may refer to a philosopher or sophist who uses clever but false arguments that lack strong foundations. Through his conversations with Simple, it is clear that

he despises anything ordinary or commonplace. He strives for the sublime, but not in the sense described by Kant, for whom sublime experience of imagination is not found in nature but within our minds and is directly related to performing a particular negation in its face:

> All we are entitled to say is that the object is suitable for exhibiting a sublimity that can be found in the mind. For what is sublime, in the proper meaning of the term, cannot be contained in any sensible form but concerns only ideas of reason, which, though they cannot be exhibited adequately, are aroused and called to mind by this very inadequacy, which can be exhibited in sensibility. (Kant 99)



According to Kant, the sublime is found in our response to terrifying things rather than the terror itself. Kant argues that when our own position is secure, frightening events become attractive, and we label them sublime because they elevate the soul above ordinary concerns, revealing a unique power of resistance. The sublime, involving fear, awe, and pleasure, is a nuanced aesthetic experience beyond mere terror, connected to encountering vast, powerful, or incomprehensible phenomena. It is not mere terror that is sublime but our imaginative response to it. The potential for *transcendence* must be awakened in us.

On the other hand, Jack's art is a presentation that is not mediated by imagination, "a fiction without the comfort of the fictitious; a signified naked of its signification; a presentation without representation" (Manoussakis 295). He believes in his capacity to adequately *present*, rather than creatively or artistically *re-present* terror. He argues that our aesthetic admiration should be directed at the raw and unfiltered depiction of evil rather than a more subdued portrayal that has been imagined and artistically created: "Some people claim that the atrocities we commit in our fiction are those inner desires which we cannot commit in our controlled civilization. I don't agree" (von Trier). Nevertheless, as Bachelard argues, the artist's creative imagination and language do not work to present reality; the creative artist's unique capacity to create works beyond reality is essential. "Imagination is not, as its etymology would suggest, the faculty of forming images of reality; it is rather the faculty of forming images which go beyond reality, which sing reality" (Bachelard, *Poetic Imagination* 15).

Bachelard suggests that an artist's imagination and language are not limited to merely depicting reality. Rather, their true potential lies in creating works that go beyond reality, in "deforming the images offered by perception, of freeing ourselves from the immediate images" (19). True artistic creation does not just present life or death but opens up the possibility of a new life or a good death. This is because art is essentially an aspiration towards

new images. Bachelard believes that poetry plays a crucial role in mediating between art and reality. He emphasizes the importance of poetic imagination and reverie in creating a dynamic interplay between the two. Poetic images have immense power to shape our perceptions and experiences, allowing us to understand reality beyond empirical observation. Poetry can help us connect with the deeper, symbolic dimensions of the world, making the familiar unfamiliar and revealing hidden dimensions of reality. Bachelard is particularly interested in the intimate connection between the human psyche and the spaces we inhabit. He suggests that poetry can illuminate the subjective experience of space, transforming it into a poetic, imaginative reality that goes beyond the physical characteristics of the environment. By engaging the imagination, fostering reverie, and creating poetic images that deepen our understanding of the world, poetry plays a crucial role in mediating between art and reality.



From this perspective, we can ask critical questions about Jack's authenticity as an artist. It raises doubts about whether Jack embodies an artist's essence according to Bachelard's perspective. The passage prompts the reader to consider the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of Jack's artistic expression. The relationship between ethics and aesthetics becomes a central concern in evaluating the nature and value of Jack's artistic endeavors.

## THE (IM)POSSIBLE RELATION BETWEEN ETHICS AND AESTHETICS

The ancient Greeks believed that ethics and aesthetics were interconnected. The three transcendentals—Beauty (*Kalon*), Truth (*Aletheia*), and Good (*Agathon*)—were considered to be indivisible. Plato, although not directly, speaks of this unity in his Dialogues, particularly in *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. Beauty is True and Good, Truth is Beautiful and Good, and Goodness is True and Beautiful.

However, this view changed throughout philosophy and art history, particularly due to challenges posed by early 20$^{th}$-century avant-garde movements. One of the most notable challenges to this viewpoint was presented in the form of the film *The Andalusian Dog*, created by Salvador Dali and Luis Buñuel in 1929. The film lacked a narrative structure or logic and aimed to evoke horror, repulsion, and shock in viewers. In his autobiography, Buñuel described how the Surrealist movement influenced *The Andalusian Dog*:

> We all felt a certain destructive impulse, a feeling that, for me, has been even stronger than the creative urge. . . The idea of burning down

> a museum, for instance, has always seemed more enticing than the opening of a cultural centre or the inauguration of a new hospital. What fascinated me most, however . . . was the moral aspect of the movement. . . . It was an aggressive morality based on the complete rejection of all existing values. We had other criteria: we exalted passion, mystification, black humor, the insult, and the call of the abyss. Inside this new territory, all our thoughts and actions seemed justifiable. (107)

Von Trier's film reopens the debate on whether ethics and aesthetics should be considered together and which is more important. Jack takes a clear stance.

> [Jack]: Do you know Blake's poems about the lamb and the tiger? . . . God created both the lamb and the tiger. The lamb represents innocence, and the tiger represents savagery. Both parts are perfect and necessary. The tiger lives on blood, and murder kills the lamb. And that is also the artist's nature.
> [Verge]: You read Blake like the devil reads the Bible. After all, the poor lamb didn't ask to die in order to become even the greatest art.
> [Jack]: The lamb has been bestowed with the honor of living forever in art, and art is divine. (von Trier)



For Jack, then, beauty is divine. *Kalon* stands above all else, and those who do not understand it belong to the human herd.

Kierkegaard suggested that human life can be divided into three stages: aesthetic, ethical, and religious. In the aesthetic stage, individuals live like artists, seeking beauty and salvation. They consider art as a religion and create it for its own sake. To them, beauty is the highest and only value. In this stage, Kierkegaard's artist sees human beings as works of art and turns them into objects of admiration. The artist throws them into tragedy to make them even more admirable, and so does Jack. Kierkegaard poses a question to us: can beauty save us? Let's consider its relation to other humans. We admire their beauty, but as we get closer to them, we lose sight of the stunning view. Beauty keeps us at a distance. Kierkegaard discusses this topic in *The Seducer's Diary*, which describes the relationship between the artist and the work of art, Johannes and Cordelia. Johannes seduces Cordelia, becomes engaged to her, gets too close to her, loses the stunning view, and then breaks off the engagement to restore it. Driven to a state of misery, Cordelia becomes his work of art. The abandoned Cordelia is in despair, but only now, in her desperation and from the distance, is she truly beautiful. Doesn't that justify the artist? Johannes receives a letter from Cordelia:

> Johannes, Never will I call you "my Johannes," for I certainly realize you never have been that, and I am punished harshly enough for having

> once been gladdened in my soul by this thought, and yet I do call you "mine": my seducer, my deceiver, my enemy, my murderer, the source of my unhappiness, the tomb of my joy, the abyss of my unhappiness. I call you "mine" and call myself "yours," and as it once flattered your ear/ proudly inclined to my adoration, so shall it now sound as a curse upon you/a curse for all eternity. Do not look forward to my planning to pursue you or to arm myself with a dagger in order to provoke your ridicule! Flee where you will, I am still yours; go to the ends of the earth, I am still yours. Love a hundred others, I am still yours—indeed, in the hour of death, I am yours. The very language I use against you must demonstrate to you that I am yours. You have had the audacity to deceive a person in such a way that you have become everything to me, so that I would rejoice solely in being your slave. Yours I am/yours, yours/your curse. *Your Cordelia* (Kierkegaard 15–16).



Johannes does not respond to the letter. As an artist, he considers Cordelia's letter a work of art. Cordelia's letter is beautifully written; it *is* a work of art. Johannes, in a sense, is its co-author. Kierkegaard examines the nature of evil and considers that the aesthetic relationship between human beings is one of its forms. It is the act of aesthetic wandering around human beings. This wandering cannot be transformed into loyalty or lead to a complete separation. It drifts in the aesthetics that disregard the pain of the other. "It is one of the forms of modern evil" (Tischner 98, translation mine).

Is there any relationship between ethics and aesthetics in our contemporary understanding of art? For von Trier, there is a connection between ethics and aesthetics, or at least between ethics and imagination. At the end of *The House that Jack Built*, Verge guides Jack to Dante's Hell, where he is meant to reside in one of the upper circles (probably the seventh, which is for violent murderers). In Canto XII of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Virgil tells Dante when they enter the seventh circle: "But now look down the valley. Coming closer you will see the river of blood that boils the souls of those who through their violence injured others" (Dante 178–79). However, Jack ends up at the very bottom of hell, reserved for traitors. We will revisit this question and explore why Jack ultimately ended up there. To do so, we must delve more deeply into the notion of creative imagination.

## DWELLING IN CREATIVE IMAGINATION

Bachelard speaks of the "ultimate poetic depth of the space of the house" (Bachelard, *Poetics of Space* 6) within which we dwell and which dwells in us. Dwelling is directly related to the notion of creative imagination,

creative dwelling, and creative creation of the dwelling space. Jack sees himself as a particularly original architect, thus as the one who creatively creates spaces. And yet, he seems absolutely disinterested in what Jeff Malpas sees as the essence of architecture, namely "[t]he relation between architecture and the human being" (11). In his aspirations to become an architect, Jack compares himself to "the great architect behind it all" (von Trier). As he explains to Verge: "The old cathedrals often have sublime artworks hidden away in the darkest corners for only God to see or whatever one feels like, calling the great architect behind it all. The same goes for murder." What is most important in architecture, for Jack, is the *material*: "I often say that the material does the work. In other words, it has a kind of will of its own, and by following it, the result will be the most exquisite." As disturbing as it is, after a series of as many as sixty-one murders, Jack finally finds the *material* for his perfect house, that is, human corpses (all of which he kept in a walk-in freezer). He finally fulfils his dream to create a work of art, a place of dwelling, out of murdered human beings:



**Fig. 6.** Jack's house.

However, in any work, human creation is never *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) but instead is conditioned by the givenness of the already-created world, which human creation alters, refigures, and reinterprets. Mr. Sophistication is not satisfied with the inert, created matter. He requires a different kind of material—divine material—that is proper only to divine creation.

In the Genesis story of the creation of Adam, God created man in His own image and likeness. For Richard Kearney, this means that God "risked allowing man to emulate Him, to set himself up as His rival, to supplant Him in the order of creation" (69). Genesis reveals that creative

imagination holds the potential for transgression—a force supplementing human limitations and positioning individuals as autonomous creators. In the realm of imagination, we can create or dismantle without constraints. Although not directly related, the Biblical story of Adam bears similarities to the Hellenic myth of Prometheus. They both "hang between heaven and earth, between a world of paradisal freedom and a world of bondage" (Frye 207), rebel against the divine order, dismantling the established harmony of nature. Both Prometheus and Adam are depicted as benefactors of humanity, yet also instigators of illegitimate desires to substitute their creations for the original divine act of creation. It enables a world where humans, having assumed the roles of gods and demigods, perceive their own imaginations as divine. Plato exposes the limits of the stolen "wisdom of practising the arts" in his *Protagoras* dialogue (19). For him, the bestowal of divinity to humanity also sowed discord between humans and the gods. Despite significant distinctions, the biblical narrative of Adam's fall and the Greek myth of Prometheus' theft depict the acquisition of imagination as an offence against the gods. Ancient philosophers caution against the peril of unchecked imaginative power, considering it the breeding ground for human *hubris*. They perceive imagination not as a productive force but as a mimetic capacity that should remain subordinate to reason. The unrestrained feeling of omnipotence in imagination is seen as a basis for arrogance. When imagination is pursued for its own sake, it may lead to a detachment from reality, fostering overconfidence. When divorced from reason, imagination risks becoming a destructive rather than a constructive force.

On the one hand, imagination promises to address humanity's sense of lack; on the other, it imparts the stain of the original transgression (whether Adam's or Prometheus') to all subsequent generations. In essence, imagination serves as a power that supplements the human experience of insufficiency, positioning humans as original creators. Yet, because imagination operates in the realm of art rather than nature, it cannot entirely escape the awareness that it is an imitation of the original act of a divine maker (such as the biblical Yahweh or the Greek Demiurge)—an act deemed lawful. All traditions share the conviction that "[i]magination can never forget that its art is artifice, that its freedom is arbitrary, that its originality is a simulation, repetition, mimesis" (Kearney 76). On the other hand, Jack usurped himself the right to use the divine material—human beings—and think of himself as an original creator in his own right.

When Verge takes Jack to Hell, despite belonging to one of the upper circles of Hell, Verge shows him the entire structure, including the deepest part of Hell, which features a mysterious broken bridge:

**Fig. 7.** Jack and Verge on the bridge.



The following dialogue occurs:

> [Verge]: That's how deep the deepest hell goes. It's actually not here I'm to deliver you, however improbable that may sound, but a couple of circles higher up. I took you down here as a kind of a favor because you did after all give me a little to chew on with your story, and I understood that you wanted to see it all. When you are done looking, we'll turn back.
> [Jack, pointing to the broken bridge]: Where does that path lead?
> [Verge]: On the other side. It leads out of hell and up. As you can see there was once a bridge but that was before my time.
> [Jack]: Isn't it possible to climb all the way around? This way, and make it over to the other side?
> [Verge]: Quite a few have tried, but I have to say, never successfully. I wouldn't recommend it, but the choice is entirely yours.
> [Jack]: I'll take my chance.

The film's ending portrays that Jack never shows remorse for his actions and continues to believe in his divine abilities to outsmart God and gain access to paradise. However, his attempt proves futile, resulting in his descent into the deepest layer of the ninth circle of hell. The upper layer of the circle is where the Giants reside. Canto XXXI delves into the theme of pride among the Giants. Their rebellion against their gods is a profound manifestation of Envy and Pride. Nimrod, driven by envy for God's dominion, attempted to construct a tower to Heaven, while the Titans, except for Antaeus, rebelled against Jove. The Fallen Angels, spurred on by pride and envy, also revolted against God. Dante vividly depicts the menacing amalgamation of qualities embodied by the extreme wickedness of the Giants and others in the Ninth Circle: "for when the faculty of intellect / is joined with brute force and with evil will, / no man can win against such an alliance"

(Dante 355, Canto XXXI).[2] However, the deepest layer of the ninth circle is reserved for traitors like Brutus and Cassius, and Judas, the worst of them all, is in the deepest of depths, chewed on by three-headed Lucifer himself. Perhaps von Trier, depicting Jack's fall into the deepest layer and meeting with Lucifer, supplements Dante's vision with his commentary on art and creative imagination, suggesting that it is not traitors but those who see themselves as divine creators and use their creative imagination for destructive purposes (like the Giants) that commit the worst form of *hubris* and will dwell in deepest hell.

## IN LIEU OF CONCLUSION



The story of creative imagination does not have to end here. Although imagination carries within itself a threat of transgression and *hybris*, it is also a space of possibility where we discover who we can be and where we can live. Creative imagination is a condition of responsibility because it allows us to form ourselves as a perduring identity over time, capable of fulfilling commitments and pledges to others. However, this self-constitution is not an autonomous act of an isolated self since it requires creativity and receptivity to others' narratives. Imagination influences communication and ethics in a cathartic way because it allows us to imagine what it is like to be someone else and to see the world through their perspective. This ability to imagine oneself as another is a crucial ethical ability. This invites further reflection on the possibility of bringing together ethics and poetics in light of the hermeneutic understanding of imagination. We typically understand *poiesis* as creation and *praxis* as action. However, for Bachelard, whose work has been described as "herméneutique réductrice" (Lamy 254), *poiesis* indicates a sense of bringing something new into existence when dwelling in the creative imagination. Dwelling in art leads to education, formation, and transformation of one's soul or Being. As Kearney suggests, *poiesis* can serve ethics because creative works invite us to enter their otherness and recognize ourselves in them, putting ourselves into question and losing ourselves to find ourselves. *Poiesis* is pivotal to our capacity to set our motives, goals, and actions accordingly, and it is essential to effectively communicate and cultivate *praxis* in a community because "praxis is not only disclosed in poiesis: it also finds there its end" (Drapało 489). By acknowledging its end in the realm of action, *poiesis* can

[2] In the original, we can read: "che' dove l'argomento de la mente s'aggiugne al mal volere e a la possa, nessun riparo vi puo far la gente." This raises questions about the direct correlation between the intellect and "the argument of the mind," which, although interesting, goes beyond the scope of this paper.

become a guarantor of responsibility. Imagination is inherently ethical. Art does not have to be conventionally beautiful or speak of the good, but it cannot promote evil if we care about the world that we dwell in.

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