Engelska vägg- och verkstexter

DESCENDANT

CURATED BY LARS VON TRIER

10 OKTOBER 2026 – 24 JANUARI 2027

For more than forty years, Lars von Trier (b. 1956) has been radically renewing the art of cinema. Known for his unusually international outlook, the noted Danish film director has challenged conventions, re-interpreted genres, and succeeded in combining artistic experimentation with broad appeal. *Descendant* is curated by Lars von Trier and unfolds the bank of images that has shaped him over the years, nourishing his creativity and films. Trier has selected the works on display, and they constitute – in his own words – the 'family' from which he is descended.

The selection consists of works that Trier has felt a magical attraction to since his youth, especially *Five Portraits* (1901) by Vilhelm Hammershøi here at the Thiel Gallery. This painting is the centrepiece of the exhibition, giving rise to narratives through links to other works and the texts by Trier.

Along with Hammershøi, the exhibition features works by a variety of artists, including Caspar David Friedrich, Paul Gauguin, Carl Fredrik Hill, Edvard Munch, Ejnar Nielsen, August Strindberg, Rudolph Tegner, Jens Ferdinand Willumsen and Trier himself. Another artist with a seminal influence on Trier is Per Kirkeby, who contributed visual elements to his films *Breaking the Waves* (1996), *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) and *Antichrist* (2009).

Trier will be seventy in 2026. We are delighted to celebrate one of the world's leading film directors, with an exhibition that highlights his sources of inspiration and shows that he, like all great artists, stands on the shoulders of others.

The exhibition was produced in collaboration with the Willumsen Museum in Frederikssund, Denmark, where it was shown in the summer of 2026.

Rum 1 (väggtext, en skylt för varje språk)

CURATOR'S NOTE

In this premature note I will try to get as close as possible to a final concept. I envision the entire project as something that is, for me, genuinely joyful. I have intimations of something grounded in what I know – and perhaps especially in what I do not know. We are working with a group of artists from the years around 1900. I will suggest which works I have in mind, but of course I am entirely prepared to yield if these cannot be obtained.

Imagine an exhibition whose obvious centre is Vilhelm Hammershøi's major work *Five Portraits* (1901), portraying Thorvald Bindesbøll, Karl Madsen, Jens Ferdinand Willumsen, Carl Holsøe and Svend Hammershøi. Of these, until now I have only had any real connection with Bindesbøll, Willumsen and Svend Hammershøi – to say nothing of the greatest inspirer of them all, who is, of course, the painter himself: Vilhelm Hammershøi.

At the age of nineteen, an amateur curator with vastly inadequate knowledge (me) set out for Stockholm with the sole purpose of seeing *Five Portraits* and, in the process, also the Thiel Gallery building itself. Hammershøi's masterpiece exerted an almost magical pull on that young man. And I did indeed note that this picture was far removed from the rest of Hammershøi's work, such as the interiors – not least due to the strange coffin-shaped table around which the five sitters were gathered.

I mention the young 'curator' because the exhibition this text concerns may, at heart, be conceived as something that in truth has more to do with the curator than with the – mostly – sublime works it contains. One might see the exhibition's selection and method as a kind of unveiling of the curator's leech-like artistic relationship to the 'family' he has himself largely defined and lived off. Hence the title of the exhibition: *Descendant.*

Let us, as a courtesy, refer to the curator in what follows as Trier. The forces that drew the young Trier to the Thiel Gallery were, of course, triggered by earlier events, among which it is essential to mention the British director Peter Watkins and his utterly overwhelming impact on Trier by way of his television film *Edvard Munch* (1974). The film – which would later influence that self-same Trier precisely as 'film', but which at first affected him through its subject matter: Edvard Munch's life and art – was the snowball that, quite explosively (if one can say such a thing about snowballs), sent Trier straight to the local paint shop (where, among other things, he became acquainted with the intricacies of stretcher frames and other technicalities of traditional work in the visual arts).

Trier tore through every last -ism at breakneck speed without ever showing the faintest hint of talent. During his brief Expressionist phase he used, to a hysterical degree, the shafts of his brushes far more than their bristles – those actually intended to spread paint – in order to scream the pain of his tormented soul out into the 'wondering' (for which we may read: indifferent) world.

Happily, very little tangible evidence of Trier's alleged early artistic activity survives. There does, however, exist a self-portrait entitled *On the Way to Zarathustra* (1975). The picture is believed to

be in the portrait collection at Frederiksborg Castle in Hillerød. It ended up there after a dubious barter between the film production company Zentropa and the museum, and, legally speaking, the ownership presumably remains mine. I mention this only because one might imagine the picture being included as a detail within the exhibition, and it ought to be possible to get hold of.

My idea is to indulge myself with a collage of images which, together, represent my youthful – naïve, if you like – love for primarily Nordic artists and their followers. A kind of interwoven tapestry of images which can be viewed both as a whole and in detail by following one or several threads in order to, ideally, grasp the 'plot': that is, the curator's, or Trier's, story and the tapestry's impact on it.

Besides Willumsen, other relevant artists, subjects, or commentators might, off the top of my head, be – or not be: Munch, Strindberg, Dr Jacobson, Hammershøi, Hill, the curator himself, Nietzsche, Dreyer, Kirkeby, Gauguin, Nielsen, Tegner, etc. As you can see: famous names, no geeky obscurity, and, more often than not, the familiar works by the familiar. No refinement and no in-depth expertise to offer hints only to the few initiated, or signal why these (banal) choices and connections have been prioritised … only the curator's love, absorbed in his youth, sets the boundaries that include and exclude!

Lars von Trier, Ørholm, Denmark, 21 April 2024

Rum 1 (på Triers Mindmap, svensk och engelsk väggtext, en skylt)

While curating this exhibition, I devised a structure in which the works are linked – according to my entirely personal preferences – by lines criss-crossing in every direction. It is entirely up to the audience to decide whether they find value in the threads that, for me, connect these artists and works.

The exhibition also includes a certain amount of text about the artists. Here, I share all the stories I know about the works, whether anecdotal or factual.

Rum 2 (svensk och engelsk väggtext, en skylt):

HAMMERSHØI

Per Kirkeby once said that whenever Vilhelm Hammershøi was short of cash, he painted some of those women seen from behind. They were easy to sell and gradually became his trademark. The models were his wife, Ida, or his sister, Anna.

Hammershøi, of course, had enemies as well as admirers. What he painted was simply not *comme il faut*, and the enemies were in the majority. Like all good art, it did not fit its own age. His flat on Strandgade in Copenhagen was a constant source of inspiration, and he depicted its interior time and time again. An unusual departure from his typical subject matter is *Five Portraits*, painted fifteen years before his death. It depicts five artists, with J. F. Willumsen as the most striking of them all; he looks straight out at us. The table around which the five artists are seated is unmistakably coffin-shaped and, to me, a symbol of death's perpetual presence. Hammershøi himself died young, at the age of fifty-one, without recognition. Much later, when people began to see his pictures as photographic and as manifestations of a *Nordic noir* sensibility, he became immensely popular.

Many of his landscape paintings show scenes from the area around my childhood home: Gentofte Lake, the Eremitage, and Kongevejen (The house Skovlyst, where Strindberg spent a summer during the same period, was located there as well).

Rum 3 (svensk och engelsk väggtext, en skylt):

ORIGIN STORY

My father was a Social Democrat. My mother, my brother and I were communists, based on the general principle that one gives according to one's ability and receives according to one's needs. My mother even considered calling me Tito after a journey to what was then Yugoslavia, ruled by the ardent communist and dictator Josip Broz Tito. My mother had a strained relationship with her own father, which culminated when, in a rage, he smashed her collection of Bertolt Brecht records. On the other side of the family – the Trier side – I particularly cherished the culturally Jewish element, and the pervasive sense of humour. It was a way of being in the world to which I still feel connected.

My first wife's mother was, allegedly, the only person in Denmark who was allowed to convert to Judaism. She was supposedly so insistent that the rabbi eventually gave up and let her do it. We shared an appreciation of Judaism; for example, she had me perform the Hanukkah ritual.

As my mother lay dying, she told me that my father was not my "real" father. In fact, my father was a Mr Hartmann who had been her boss at the Ministry of Social Affairs. He belonged to a family that included the composers J. P. E. Hartmann and Niels W. Gade, two of the central figures of Danish National Romanticism. Hartmann's death is said to have filled Kongens Nytorv in Copenhagen with mourners.

The entire family had apparently known the secret. I asked my mother whether Ulf, whom I had believed to be my "real" father, knew. 'I don't know,' she replied, 'He never said very much, you know.' My mother told me I ought to seek out my biological father, that he was a wonderful man, and that we would get on very well together. So, after her death, I did just that. The only thing he said when we met was: 'I obviously assumed your mother was taking precautions. I do not acknowledge you as my child, and any further correspondence must go through my solicitor.' I promised him I would keep his secret as long as he was alive. After his death, I asked Peter Schepelern, PhD i film and media studies, to write an article telling the whole story so that my biological half-siblings could seek me out – or not – as they pleased. Thankfully, they did, and they turned out to be wonderfully welcoming.

Rum 3 (svensk och engelsk väggtext, en skylt):

MUNCH

In Edvard Munch we have an artist who, in his own time, went against almost every prevailing norm. He painted not what he saw, but what he felt. At the time, this approach, which appealed to me very directly, and which later almost became a cliché in the story of modernism, was seen as a full-on assault on the established view of art. In 1890s Berlin, Munch was part of a scene that also included August Strindberg. It was the great age of the artist bohemian, a time when the link between genius and madness was cultivated almost religiously. For the bourgeoisie, this scene was an offensive provocation, culminating in 1892 when an exhibition of Munch's work was closed down after only a week. The works were described as an outright insult to art.

The fact that the scandal-ridden Munch became something of a national treasure later in life is perhaps one of the small ironies of art history. And the irony does not stop there. After Hitler came to power in 1933, the Nazis seized around eighty of Munch's works from German museums. Several of them were shown in the propaganda exhibition *Entartete Kunst* in Munich in 1937 as examples of so-called degenerate art – so essentially, they served as cautionary exhibits, examples of what not to do.

Rum 3 (verkstext på svenska och engelska, med verksinfo om Det sjuka barnet på samma skylt?):

When you look at Edvard Munch's life from the outside, it's tempting – perhaps far too tempting – to read his art biographically: take, for example, the loss of his mother when he was five, and of his sister Sophie when he was fourteen, both of them dead from tuberculosis. Eight years after his sister's death, he painted *The Sick Child*. Here the dying girl sits with the family's carer, Aunt Karen, by her side. Munch would return to that motif again and again.

Rum 3 (verkstext på svenska och engelska med foto av en teckning)

In 1908, Edvard Munch spent seven months in the clinic of the Danish psychiatrist Daniel Jacobson in Frederiksberg, Copenhagen. Most of the works by Munch included in this exhibition date from the period before that breakdown, since Munch's treatment proved highly destructive to his artistic practice. After his stint in the clinic, he became a kind of Norwegian counterpart to Carl Larsson: idyllic and decorative – with the exception of the powerful *The Sun*, which was developed for the aula at the University of Oslo.

Edvard Munch
Munch at Dr. Jacobson's Clinic
1908–1909
Pen on paper, 13,7 x 21,2 cm MUNCH, Oslo

Inscribed: "Professor Jacobson electrifies the famous painter Munch and brings male positive and female negative strength into his frail brain."

Rum 4 (väggtext, en skylt för varje språk?):

STRINDBERG

Let me also – almost inevitably – mention August Strindberg, the author of works such as *Miss Julie*, which has haunted European stages for more than a century. Less well known, perhaps, is the fact that Strindberg also painted. Or rather: that he painted a great deal. The result was a body of work full of a ferocity that still feels startling today. Many have pointed out a certain affinity with J. M. W. Turner, whose paintings Strindberg knew and admired. Both artists share a fascination with nature's extreme forces – with the sea and the sky in their most dramatic forms.

Strindberg's marriages and love affairs became an almost inexhaustible source of inspiration for his writing, accompanied by a sustained – and often quite brutal – critique of women. The irony, of course, is that he himself was married three times to women with artistic careers of their own.

One thing that runs through August Strindberg's work is the way he – like Edvard Munch – turned his own crises into artistic material. His mental breakdown was not hidden away but, on the contrary, written straight into the work. A good example is the book *Inferno*, in which he describes an attempted suicide that involved wading out into the cold sea on an October day and afterwards lying down on chilly rocks in the freezing wind in the hope of catching a severe pneumonia that would bring his beloved to visit him before death set in. The actual outcome was not dramatic death, just a common cold.

In the 1890s, Strindberg corresponded with Friedrich Nietzsche, whose ideas about will, chaos and creation clearly influenced him. At the same time, he wrote about the role of chance in art – about the way the unforeseen can play a decisive part in the artistic process. Seen in retrospect, this idea anticipates Surrealism's notions of automatism.

Strindberg's stay in Denmark was one of the more prolific periods of his life. It was here that he wrote *Miss Julie* and *The Father*, and he completed *The Confession of a Fool* as well. By the time he arrived in Copenhagen, his fame was already so great that the following year he could be seen as a wax figure in the so-called Scandinavian Panopticon on Vesterbrogade – a sort of waxwork cabinet of fame. And yet Strindberg did not exactly feel cherished by the city's intellectual circles and referred to them in a letter to the writer Axel Lundegård as 'the faecal hell of Copenhagen'.

The amateur curator also had a brief personal encounter with Strindberg, when, at the age of nineteen, I sought out the country house in Holte where he had stayed in the summer of 1888. The visit resulted in an article in the local paper entitled 'On the Edge of Madness in Holte'.

Rum 4 (verkstext på svenska och engelska med verksinfo om…?):

Most of August Strindberg's paintings were made in the period 1892 to 1905. After 1905, he more or less stopped painting. Not necessarily because his inspiration dried up, but perhaps because the theatre and literature exerted a stronger pull. Strindberg himself explained that he deliberately chose a canvas format modest enough to enable him to finish a painting in two or three hours – that is, before the inspiration had time to vanish. He often worked with a palette knife and claimed he did not even own any brushes.

Rum 4 (svensk och engelsk väggtext, en skylt):

HILL

For me, the most striking aspect in Carl Fredrik Hill is the sheer madness and the naïve style. There's something in his pictures that reminds me of the children's book *Babar the Elephant*, which I had when I was a child.

At the age of twenty-nine, in 1878, Hill developed an incurable mental illness that continued to affect him for the rest of his life. Before that, he had shown a great talent for Impressionist landscapes, painting lots of flowering apple trees. But in the later drawings, made during his illness, all boundaries seem to disappear. During his hospitalisation, Hill revisited his old works and copied elements from them. He would take a luminous apple tree and redraw it in black chalk as an abstract form.

His pictures are teeming with animals, and the elephant holds a special place in them. It turns up again and again. The connection to elephants is underlined by the fact that Hill kept an ivory paper knife on his desk. I was especially taken with a drawing in which the elephant carries its young on its back. It is unlikely that Hill ever saw an elephant in real life; he drew from illustrations in journals and books. Hill had a large library, which included books by Jules Verne, such as *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*.

Rum 4 (verkstext på svenska och engelska med verksinfo om Friedrich teckning):

The German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich studied for a time at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen. He then settled in Dresden. Among his most famous works is *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* from 1818. Willumsen's female mountaineer bears certain similarities to this work. In both pictures, nature is sublime, and the human figure stands alone and reverent before its forces.

Friedrich was celebrated by the Nazis as part of German National Romanticism. Only long after the Second World War was he rehabilitated.

The drawing in the exhibition first belonged to Denmark's King Christian VIII and has since been passed down from monarch to monarch. Although I am a republican, I appreciate King Frederik lending us the drawing.

Rum 5 (svensk och engelsk väggtext, en skylt?):

GAUGUIN

When Paul Gauguin died in 1903 in the Polynesian archipelago, he had already been forgotten in his homeland. He spent his final years isolated and syphilitic in the house he had nicknamed the House of Pleasure, all the while taking ever more potent doses of morphine.

When Gauguin painted the portrait of his sleeping four-year-old daughter Aline some twenty years earlier, the situation was quite different. Gauguin had abandoned his career as a stockbroker in favour of art: art that was to be wild, unrestrained and in defiance of all the norms of the age. At times he painted without pause – he could easily produce a picture a week – but there were no buyers for them.

Paul Gauguin had married a Danish woman, Mette Gad, and for lack of money the family moved from Paris to Copenhagen. This he soon regretted. Like August Strindberg (and Bertolt Brecht), he detested the Danes, whom he considered hopelessly ignorant when it came to art, boorish, peasant-like and hypocritical. He deplored everything from Danish taste in interior decorating to their methods of child-rearing. In letters home to his friend Camille Pissarro, he wrote that every day he contemplated going up into the attic and hanging himself. However, as a devout Catholic, he never followed through on that particular threat.

The Danish art historian Karl Madsen, who appears in *Five Portraits*, was one of the few people with whom he felt in tune, and the progressive author Edvard Brandes was one of his scarce admirers. A few years later, Gauguin left his family and Denmark for good. Back in Paris, he asked Strindberg to write the foreword for a catalogue, but Strindberg refused, as he disliked Gauguin's paintings. Gauguin instead printed Strindberg's written refusal in the catalogue.

Gauguin began to think of himself as a *sauvage*, a creature with more in common with exotic Tahiti than with bourgeois Paris. As an artist he rejected conventional morality and drew up his own rules, which, among other things, allowed him to enter into relations with very young girls. For that and other reasons, both he and his art have been repudiated in recent years. To which I obviously object.

Rum 5 (svensk och engelsk väggtext, på en skylt):

TEGNER

Rudolph Tegner seems to have come about thirty years too late to the party with his heavy symbolism and pathos, a bit like Rachmaninoff. They were both deeply unfashionable, far removed from the avant-garde.

In the 1890s, Tegner lived in Paris on very little money and with huge ambitions. In his studio he worked on the colossal sculpture *The Great Man*, which ended up nearly seven metres tall.

He was not entirely alone. The sculptor Niels Hansen Jacobsen had left his owl with him for the winter. By day it sat in its cage and slept, but at night it came alive and had to be fed horsemeat. In time the two became so comfortable around each other that the owl would casually perch on Tegner's head while he sat reading *The Divine Comedy*.

In 1896, *The Great Man* was finished. To get it out of the studio, Tegner simply sawed it into several pieces. The sculpture was later shown alongside the works *Our Time* and *The Future*, in which the woman symbolises the Whore of Babylon, and the man represents the spirit's triumph over her tyranny.

Tegner was not especially loved in Denmark. In France, by contrast, he received great acclaim; his grand, pathos-laden mode of expression appears to have found a firmer foothold there. In his memoirs, he concludes with a remark that – all things considered – seems remarkably apt: 'Criticism has never been able to kill that which is meant to live, and, above all, praise has never brought alive that which is destined to die.'

His museum in Dronningmølle, situated in a landscape that Tegner described as 'a harsh Siberia', was completed in 1938. It is a monumental concrete building – the first of its kind in Denmark – and was designed by Tegner himself. That the project was realised at all was due in large part to his wife, Elna Tegner, who financed it with her inheritance from her father, a wealthy shipowner. The museum also serves as a mausoleum: Tegner is buried beneath the floor, while Elna – at her own request – is interred in the plinth of the statue *Apollo*.

Rum 5 (verkstext på svenska och engelska med verksinfo om Mot ljuset):

In the early 1900s, Rudolph Tegner got the commission for the monument to Niels Finsen, a scientist who explored the healing power of light. The monument was originally meant to stand by the Finsen Institute but was too large and was instead placed at the junction of Blegdamsvej and Tagensvej, close to Rigshospitalet in Copenhagen.

Like so many others at the time, Tegner stayed at a sanatorium in Davos, Switzerland – the very place that inspired Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain*. There, the doctors told him to take half an hour of sun in the garden every day. It was during one such session that the idea for the sculptural group *Towards the Light* arose.

Tegner also turns up in a rather different context: in *Epidemic* there is a scene in which I myself climb up onto the sculpture and sit on the head of one of the female figures. The figure was modelled on Julie Jensen, who was Carl Th. Dreyer's mistress.

Rum 5 (verkstext på Svenska och engelska med verksinfo om denna målning):

FEAR OF NATURE

Total annihilation has always interested me. In *Melancholia*, the world comes to an end. In J. F. Willumsen's *After the Tempest*, the same apocalyptic scene plays out. In its most extreme form, such ideas of annihilation are comparable to Nazism's concept of the *Endlösung*, a fact that made me deeply unpopular when I mentioned it at Cannes at the premiere of *Melancholia*. After that, a judge in Graz had to assess my political affiliation. My wife at the time, Bente, suggested that I should mention in my letter to him that all four of my children had Jewish first or middle names. I thought that was laying it on a bit thick, but I put it in anyway. And, as it turned out, that very point decided the matter. I am not a Nazi, obviously, but a communist (in the sense of: from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs) – and a nudist too, thanks to my mother's first boyfriend.

Rum 5 (verkstext på svenska och engelska med verksinfo till hatten/affischen?):

With Carl Th. Dreyer I feel an almost sacred kinship. He was a pioneer, and I have a particular fondness for the films that were dismissed as failures in his own day: *Vampyr* and especially *Gertrud*.

Dreyer would easily write 500 pages and then edit them, cutting away relentlessly. The same went for the set designs. He would ask his set designer to bring in all sorts of things, only to have most of it removed again. The pared-back rooms, the white light and the melancholic atmosphere in Dreyer's films are very much drawn from the paintings of Vilhelm Hammershøi, whom he admired.

My personal admiration for Dreyer is expressed in several ways, for instance in the fact that I hired his cinematographer, Henning Bendtsen, for my own early films. I also owned his tuxedo (which I got from Bendtsen and wore in Cannes), and I still have his hat.

The large number of major female leading roles in Dreyer's films was unusual at the time, and that is one thing I myself have learnt from him. The original title of *Breaking the Waves*, incidentally, was *Amor Omnia* (Love All), a direct reference to the final scene of *Gertrud*.

Rum 5 (verkstext på svenska och engelska med foto av Monoliten):

At the Vigeland Museum in Oslo I saw *The Monolith*, which, like all of Gustav Vigeland's work, is deliciously megalomaniac. The almost seventeen-metre-high phallic column consists of 121 human bodies clinging to one another. Vigeland himself said that the column was his life and his religion. There is a connection between *The Monolith* and the tangled bodies on the forest floor in *Antichrist* – I nicked them from there.

There is another side to Vigeland as well. He has been accused of promoting an idealised image of humanity that has later been associated with notions of 'Aryan superiority'. Unlike Edvard Munch, he never officially denounced Nazism. On the contrary, he invited the occupying power into his park, and there are accounts suggesting that he tried to establish contact with Adolf Hitler through the writer Knut Hamsun, the author of *Hunger*. Hamsun had given his Nobel Prize in Literature to Goebbels in the hope that he would pass it on to Hitler, whom Hamsun admired. His fascination with Nazism made him intensely unpopular in his homeland. My ex-wife's father drove Knut Hamsun's wife to the subsequent trial.

Rum 5 (verkstext på svenska och engelska med verksinfo om nämnda målning):

The Blind Girl, Gjern became Ejnar Nielsen's breakthrough work. His career gathered pace after that. He became famous for the sombre quality of his art and was nicknamed 'the painter of death and horrors'. Nielsen often painted landscapes that mirrored inner mental states, as in the case of the blind girl.

Rum 5 (verkstext på svenska och engelska utanför runda rummet med verksinfo):

It all began with Munch. Not the painter, but with the 1974 film about the painter Edvard Munch by the British director Peter Watkins. At first the influence was not so much cinematic as existential, because the film awakened in me a budding awareness of the artist figure as something other, and more, than merely a craftsman. Later, of course, the cinematic devices left their mark on me too: actors looking straight into the camera, interviews in the middle of the narrative, the break with illusion. Not to mention the amateur actors and the many dialects.

Korridoren (svensk och engelsk väggtext):

KIRKEBY

The idea behind the opening of *Dancer in the Dark* was that there should be a curtain. I loved that feeling you used to get when you watched feature films back in the old days: first came the overture, then the curtain opened, and then the film began. That was the idea. American audiences, however, were not on board with it at all because they simply didn't know that tradition.

Dancer in the Dark is about going blind. Per Kirkeby made a series depicting how he imagined it might feel to go blind. Later, his own eyesight deteriorated to such a degree that he had trouble recognising faces and even his own paintings.

Per was a geologist, you know. For millions of years the Earth was a place of bacterial mats. There's a striking connection between those forms and Per's pictures, even if he himself wouldn't admit it.

Korridoren (svensk och engelsk väggtext, en skylt med foto):

NIETZSCHE

We can hardly avoid mentioning Friedrich Nietzsche. His philosophical ideas about the will to power, slave morality and the elevation of the Übermensch were crudely distorted by his sister and passed on to Hitler. Long before Hitler, though, Nietzsche was a major source of inspiration for many artists, including Nordic ones such as Willumsen, Munch, Strindberg, Vigeland and Tegner. Strindberg became his first international disciple – he wrote fan letters to Nietzsche. What fascinated Strindberg were Nietzsche's ideas on how the strong survive and the weak must perish, his ideals of freedom.

Nietzsche's rejection of bourgeois norms was also reflected in his private life. In 1882, he formed a close intellectual and personal fellowship with the Russian-Jewish writer Lou Andreas-Salomé and the Jewish philosopher Paul Rée. Both Nietzsche and Rée were deeply fascinated by Lou Andreas-Salomé. Nietzsche went so far as to propose to her twice but was flatly rejected both times. Instead, she suggested something else: a community in which the three of them could live and work together as free thinkers.

This ménage à trois is also the subject of the 1977 film *Beyond Good and Evil* by the Italian director Liliana Cavani (of *The Night Porter* fame) in which, among other things, a bottle is inserted into Rée's backside. The film recreates the famous photograph of the three of them taken in Lucerne.

Nietzsche was hated and reviled as a right-wing misogynist by the various communists who were regular visitors to my childhood home. But my own fascination with Nietzsche was at its height at nineteen, when I visited the Thiel Gallery in Stockholm. The self-portrait I submitted with my application to the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts was titled *On the Way to Zarathustra*, after Nietzsche's book. I made my way in awe and reverence up the stairs to the top floor, where Nietzsche's death mask was displayed in a small room. As the original death mask must always remain there, resting on a small cushion in a glass case, the version shown in the exhibition is an exact replica made from a 3D scan.

Korridoren (svensk och engelsk verkstext med verksinfo om Lasøe):

I first came across Per Kirkeby through the Danish Film Institute. He was involved in film work himself at that time (he was on the board, and we had a spectacular falling-out). Much later, and perhaps more to the point, our paths crossed again through my producer Vibeke Windeløv, his wife at the time, who has always had a certain knack for forging connections. Vibeke looked after Per's finances. Once, she asked a German gallerist how one makes a great deal of money. The answer was brief: 'One must spend a great deal of money.' She carried that principle straight over into our collaboration, and I have benefited from that to some extent.

When people ask me what I think of Per's art, my answer is: I learned to like it over time. Not that I've got anything against abstract painting, but my way into art has always been somewhere else. Still, it has always been obvious to me that his works carry a weight, a quality you just can't ignore.

Korridoren (verkstext på svenska och engelska med verksinfo om självporträttet):

The self-portrait should preferably be shown in a broom cupboard or some similar space in the exhibition. It is not really art compared to the works it will be hanging alongside – which are, after all, the very finest according to my taste: Munch, Hammershøi, and so on. So, we should not pay too much attention to it.

I've been heavily criticised for the fact that the drop of blood is on the wrong side, but I envision this as a moving image, where the young Lars – the pretentious Lars – has just looked down to the left before turning his head towards the camera. I applied to the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts with this picture – so, there's clearly a very good reason I didn't get in.

Korridoren (verkstext på svenska och engelska med verksinfo om Scherfigs målning):

The writer and artist Hans Scherfig and my mother were friends. We used to visit his house, and he once gave me a tortoise, Bosse. Scherfig was a biologist and a communist and dressed the part. His writings include a small pamphlet entitled *The Pond*, in which he compares the ecosystem of a pond with capitalist society. Later, he received the Academy's prize and remarked that he felt the joy a drowning man must feel on being thrown a lifebuoy after having struggled ashore on his own.

Before my brother died, he made me promise that all the Scherfig paintings in the family would be sent to Cuba through a communist friendship association. I kept that promise – almost. With a slight sense of guilt, I kept one picture that had hung in my mother's room. That is the one now hanging in the exhibition.

Korridoren (verkstext på svenska och engelska till barnporträttet av Trier):

The artist Elisabeth Karlinsky painted portraits of me and my brother when we were children. She had trained at a school of painting in Vienna and was married to Hans Scherfig. Later, she was not that keen on the self-portrait of mine shown here in the exhibition. She found it pretentious, though she did feel it possessed a certain pictorial imagination. My brother was embarrassed by everything I did. By the painting and a life mask I had cast. He believed it was all manifestations of extreme egocentrism. He was probably right.

Filmrummet/städskrubben (väggtext på svenska och engelska, en skylt):

WAGNER

I once told a newspaper that, if I were ever to do opera, it would have to be *The Ring* (*The Ring of the Nibelung* by Richard Wagner). Two days later, an invitation arrived from Bayreuth, where the Wagner Festival is staged every year under the direction of his descendants. They had been accused of being too old-fashioned and so came up with the idea of asking me to create a new production. In contrast to the general tendency of the time, in which the director presumes to know better than the work, I intended to stage it as Wagner had conceived it.

In order to immerse ourselves as fully as possible in the task, the Icelandic scenographer Karl Júlíusson and I spent the night on the stage at Bayreuth. Meanwhile, Wolfgang Wagner, the grandson, and his wife, who was also his secretary, proceeded to get drunk. At one point they came in to us and said: 'You probably think we're dreadfully wicked.'

The lighting was to be gas lamps, as it had been in Wagner's day. As soon as electric light flooded the stage, it was dreadful to look at, whereas gaslight created a mysterious atmosphere. Wagner hated singers for their acting. What he wished to convey to the audience was the pure musical experience.

After two years' work on *The Ring*, I realised that the family had no intention of changing anything at all. Wolfgang Wagner even called my production *entartet*. Werner Herzog had been treated in much the same way a few years earlier, when he wanted live horses on stage. Wolfgang's secretary-wife boasted of having thwarted this.

Wagner's music appears in several of my films, including *Melancholia* and *Nymphomaniac*.
In my view, Wagner was an opportunist. He was bankrolled by the Bavarian king Ludwig II, who, among other things, built Bayreuth and Neuschwanstein Castle, on which Walt Disney's fairytale castle was modelled. He eventually became such a drain on the Bavarian regime's finances that they allegedly killed him.

I find Wagner highly disagreeable, not least because of his antisemitism, which Nietzsche also detested.