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## **The Passion of *Antichrist*, or How to Educate Your Therapist**

Although he has directed a number of films with different types of protagonists, Lars von Trier is mostly known for bringing scandal into the world by means of obsessively indulging in images of suffering self-sacrificing women. Although the last of them, Grace in *Dogville*, no longer suffers to her death but in an ironic gesture (on the part of the director, not the protagonist), slaughters the whole population of the small town that has caused her misery, the impact of her hyperbolic retaliation is very much neutralized by the Brechtian convention of the movie. Moreover, her behaviour can be treated as a playful metanarrative shift into conventions of another genre – a Tarantino-like gangster movie.

The violent woman returns in *Antichrist* – and with a vengeance: this time there are no formal gestures to contain the mayhem of the climax and the violence is sometimes traumatic.<sup>1</sup> This was undoubtedly one of the reasons why the film was unanimously denigrated by the critics present at its screening in Cannes: because they could not locate any clever distancing mechanisms to contain the “seriousness” of represented violence, they automatically conceived of the entire film as a violent and disgusting trick that von Trier performed at their expense. What makes this reaction strange is what had happened in the same place nine years earlier: von Trier was awarded the Golden Palm for *Dancer in the Dark*, a film in which a woman rather than crushing a man’s genitals with a piece of wood, smashes his head into a pulp with a box. There is more violence in this movie, including the final execution, but this did not seem to bother the critics perhaps because all of it takes place in the familiar space of female self-sacrifice and is additionally inoculated

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<sup>1</sup> Students have told me they heard men moaning in the cinema during the scene of the protagonist’s emasculation.

by the musical convention. Although the very title of *Antichrist* suggests the genre of horror, this time such a mild gesture was seemingly not enough. But perhaps the very unanimous denigration by the people who otherwise do not mind *Saw* (because it is supposedly “more honest” in its violence!<sup>2</sup>) is symptomatic and indicates that the traumatic impact of the film cannot be so easily written off. But how is it written off?

The conventional reading of the plot by most of the disgusted critics – the reading undoubtedly (and perhaps slyly) provoked by von Trier himself – goes more or less thus. After a supposedly accidental death of the boy for which his mother feels guilty, her husband, a psychotherapist, takes her to a cabin in the woods and during the therapy a monster awakens in the woman. She is the author of an unfinished academic thesis on the persecution of witches and now it is she who turns into a witch crushing his genitals with a piece of wood, drilling a hole in his leg, battering him with a shovel, and stabbing him with scissors. Trying to save his life, he attempts to run away, but finally strangles her and burns her dead body at the stake. Such a summary necessarily brings with it all kinds of knee-jerk accusations because if we follow it, we find ourselves in the realm of familiar clichés: he, the therapist, on the side of intellect, rationality, distance and spirit; she, his wife, on the side of sentiment, unreason, nature; and all of these served in the Weiningerian sauce of Woman as an insatiable sexual monster, an emotional vampire whose sole aim is to drag Man from the heights of pure spirituality into the mire of fornication. But is this really so simple? Should not such an unanimous decision to treat the movie as pseudo-profound trash be rather seen as a symptom, and not only of intellectual laziness?

The film starts with the “Prologue” in slow motion and black and white, in which She (Charlotte Gainsbourg) and He (Willem Dafoe) engage in making love while their child opens the baby-gate, climbs the table, and falls out of the supposedly accidentally open window – the climax of lovemaking comes at the moment the child hits the ground. The soundtrack to the prologue does not include any naturalistic sounds; everything happens to the aria taken from Handel’s *Rinaldo* whose lyrics are as follows: “Lascia ch’io pianga/mia cruda sorte, / e che sospiri la libertà. / Il duolo infranga queste ritorte / de’ miei martiri sol per pieta” (Let me weep/my cruel fate, / and let me sigh for liberty. / May sorrow break these chains / Of my sufferings, for pity’s sake).

If we take the lyrics into consideration, the first thing which comes to one’s mind is that they do not really fit the images we are watching.

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<sup>2</sup> Tadeusz Sobolewski, “Lars, różnij uczciwie!,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 29 May 2009. [http://wyborcza.pl/1,75475,6662512,Lars\\_rznij\\_uczciwie\\_.html](http://wyborcza.pl/1,75475,6662512,Lars_rznij_uczciwie_.html) (6 March 2010).

This is especially obvious, because the prologue is shot in a deliberately “idealizing” manner, with exquisite black and white photography and breathtaking lighting, with fairy tale snow falling outside the window, etc. Apart from the very beginning, when we see Dafoe’s face in the second shot, in the prologue the camera focuses mostly on Gainsbourg’s face, from time to time cutting to either the child or some inanimate objects in the flat.<sup>3</sup> Even if at first we may tend to assign the sorrow that is mentioned to the mother’s feelings after the fatal accident, firstly, sorrow is too mild a word to describe her out and out depression we witness later in the film and, secondly, what about the chains which restrain the singer and prevent her from experiencing liberty? Moreover, in the very exposition of the couple themselves, after we see the first shot of Dafoe’s hand turning on the shower, the second shot of Dafoe’s face, the third shot of Gainsbourg’s face, the fourth shot of steam and bathroom vent, in the fifth shot we notice three figurines symbolising Grief, Pain, and Despair, which make the nature of the chains and longing for liberty perhaps a bit clearer. However, if Pain, Grief, and Despair are not caused by the death of the child, but only reinforced by it, the above mentioned understanding of the meaning of the therapy to follow has to be reconsidered. If what is conventionally understood as the cause of everything that happens in the film (the death of Nic<sup>4</sup>) is not really the cause, perhaps everything in such a simplistic (to say the least) interpretation is based on shaky foundations? Perhaps the “unearthly” beauty of the prologue in which a messy accident is turned into an exquisite aesthetic spectacle (another internal contradiction of register as in the case of the lyrics of the aria and the images) is there to gesture to the falsity of the smooth surface of happy family life so far? Because if we ask a question – would they have lived happily if the child had not fallen out of the window? – the only possible answer is negative. Why?

The very moment the film switches into its “proper” dark, blue, and then greenish mode – the mode it will maintain until the “Epilogue,” which returns to Handel’s aria and to black and white photography – we find ourselves in the space of conflict which seems to be a continuation of the permanent situation in the couple’s relationship. Just after we get the necessary information that she is on sedative medication and

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<sup>3</sup> The very word *libertà* (freedom, liberty) is most of the time juxtaposed with the shot of Gainsbourg’s face and her opening of the mouth as if she sung the word herself. The way the shots are connected with the lyrics is itself rather telling. From the very beginning: Let me weep (Dafoe’s hand turns on the shower – water is coming) / my cruel fate (Dafoe’s face), / and let me sigh for liberty (Gainsbourg’s face, a bathroom vent hole), etc.

<sup>4</sup> The orthography as in the credits.

has been in the hospital for a month, he engages in the typically male struggle for mastery with her doctor by criticizing severely his diagnosis (“Wayne says that my grief pattern is atypical”), to which her reply is: “Stop it please! Trust others to be smarter than you. Just for once.” In the following scene (probably his next visit) she becomes even more cross, accusing him of meddling because of his megalomania: “Dr. Wayne says you want me back home. You couldn’t leave it, could you? You had to meddle.” And a moment later:

She: Wayne knows you’re a therapist. He says you shouldn’t treat your own family.

He: In principle I agree, but...

She: But you’re just so much smarter, aren’t you?

He answers precisely with a “smart” change of register saying “I love you,” whose narcissistic meaning quickly comes to the fore as it turns into a self-confirmation: “No therapist can know as much about you as I do.” To this she falls back on her pillows and closes her eyes in disgust. *This* is the real beginning of the plot, emphasized by the first disturbing shot: a slow forward movement of the camera ending with the extreme close-up of the decaying green stalks of flowers (his gift) in a transparent vase accompanied by electronic noise.<sup>5</sup> From now on we will witness a narrative in which his initial position of extreme arrogance will be gradually undermined until it disappears completely.

The next sequence, taking place after they return home, is the continuation of the setting up of the narrative. The space of home is not different from the sterile, impersonal and cold (bluish) interior of the hospital. At least as far as colours are concerned, we are still within the same cold space in which she is submitted to his will and made to throw her medications into the toilet bowl after which she goes through a physical bout of depression. Moreover, the conflict we have already witnessed in the hospital gets more substantial for us as she starts to challenge him. Because this seems to be the beginning of a new stage in their relationship, she does not really know how to make such a challenge; so she starts with conventional hysterical complaints accusing him of lack of “feelings”: “You’ve always been distant from me and Nic. Now that I come to think of it [...] very, very distant”; “You’re indifferent to whether your child is alive or dead.” These typical conjugal accusations are

<sup>5</sup> As we have noted, the death of the child and the lovemaking of the prologue, including the extreme close up of the copulating genitals, were shot in an “aesthetic” manner preventing them from disturbing the audience (unless somebody is shocked by the very sight of a penis).

no longer accompanied by anger or disgust (as they were in the hospital) but with a sarcastic smirk: “I bet you have a lot of clever therapist replies to that, haven’t you?”<sup>6</sup> But we also learn something more important in this conversation: she used to be “smart” or “intellectual” herself.

The previous summer she and Nic retired to a cabin in the woods (called Eden by them) where she tried to complete her academic thesis. In other words, there used to be some kind of intellectual competition between them, which now resurfaces in her remembering him calling her subject “glib.” We do not know yet that the thesis was called “Gynocide” and that it dealt with the prosecution of witches, but this knowledge must have been in his possession, because without knowing the subject he could not have commented on the thesis in such a disparaging manner. Therefore, in the later part of the film, his visit to the attic of the cabin, where he finds her notes and images of tortured witches from old books, cannot be taken as any kind of discovery on his part. Moreover, we also learn that she abandoned the thesis (and therefore competition on this level) as “all of a sudden, it was glib. Or even was some kind of lie.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, what we are presented with is an image of the woman “who does not have it” in both registers in which she is conventionally inscribed – or perhaps it would be better to say: she inscribes herself – by the patriarchal ideology in order to be neutralized: as a Mother (completing his competitive professional achievement with the domestic space of relaxation) or a Professional (competing with him by writing a feminist thesis). She lost the child and she abandoned the thesis; therefore he is no longer a phallic woman (a woman “who has it”).<sup>8</sup>

What is the place of such a non-phallic hysterical woman within the patriarchal space? We have already seen her in the hospital under sedation, which is one way of treating her. But back at home she comes into her own in the anxiety attack, which happens after the aforementioned conversation. In a sense, it is a continuation of the conversation in which she summed up their relationship so far, saying “I never interested you until now that I’m your patient.” What makes her so interesting all of

<sup>6</sup> Actually, he does have a clever therapist reply to that: “Okay, can you give me some examples?” She mentions the previous summer with Nic without being too specific but we learn later that she made the child wear his shoes the other way round, which he learns from photographs. These photographs must have been taken by him, so he was, in fact, distant, because he did not notice.

<sup>7</sup> If one needs a clear example of hysteric challenging, one can find it in an exemplary state in this conversation. When he says that he was “distant” in Eden because he wanted “to honor [her] wish. [She] wanted peace to write,” her answer is unmistakable: “Perhaps I didn’t mean it.”

<sup>8</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller, “On Semblances in the Relation Between the Sexes,” in: *Sexuation*, ed. Renata Salecl (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 21.

a sudden? Precisely the thing that she now suddenly becomes – she is no longer somebody transparent to him; she is turned into an enigma, a riddle. She has become a challenge to his knowledge and a specimen of study towards which professional distance must be maintained.

As we have noted, this self-assuredness is precisely what she tries to challenge by undermining the laws of discourse he believes he is a master of (for instance, she says: “I said it but perhaps I did not mean it”). Another way of corrupting his position would be to make him break *another* rule of professional conduct connected with distance – which in the film is expressed ironically by him: “Never fuck your therapist.”<sup>9</sup> At first, he resists precisely by taking the professional position (“I know it distracts you, but it’s not good for us. Do the breathing”), but after some more extreme behaviour on her part she succeeds. If one takes into consideration the way their relationship works now, it is easy to see that the source of her challenges is the discourse of the therapist – it is his suggestions that she uses to turn them against him. So far we are on the simple level of the challenge, the level he knows quite well how to deal with. But soon things become complicated.

The self-assured “smartness” of the therapist is founded on his belief in professional knowledge, that is, in logic functioning by means of chains of causes and effects. In other words, for him anxiety, which is traditionally described as a feeling of fear which does not seem to have the cause, is just a surface phenomenon which hides the actual cause of fear. Professional knowledge and reasoning should allow one to identify it. “What is the situation you fear the most?” asks the therapist to focus on some displaced object and put it to work in order to get to the real source. But the answer she gives could have been expected: “But I don’t know what I’m afraid of. [...] Can’t I just be afraid without a definite object?”

So far she has been challenging him simply by suggesting that he cannot know everything. But this was no real challenge because such an undermining of the master’s discourse can go on forever: the therapist knows he does not know everything – but *not just yet*. In order to destroy this logic something else has to be done to it. Therefore – when he insists on her coming up with something definite, not just questioning his statements – she rises to the challenge. As an answer to his “If you can’t tell me what you’re afraid of, maybe it would be easier for you to tell me where you’re afraid?” she names “the woods” and finally “Eden” where she wrote and abandoned her thesis on witches. Therefore, on the one hand, we have here his scenario, a therapeutic-psychological one of setting

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<sup>9</sup> The first rule that was broken was: “never treat a member of your family.”

on the inner journey in order to find her truth (because the knowledge of what she is afraid of is supposed to be the key to open all other secrets). On the other hand, a stage is set by her: she picks up a fragment of everyday reality and proclaims it a prohibited zone, therefore establishing a limit which separates the quotidian from the phantasmatic space, the space of challenge.<sup>10</sup>

This is emphasized by the very next scene which consists of nothing more than the woods as seen through a moving train window. The moving image of foliage which gets progressively darker and blurrier becomes a kind of screen on which for a split second and from time to time we see screaming faces (hers and his) or two naked bodies falling (or blown by wind, as it were) and finally her blurred visage as it naturalistically reflects in the train window from the inside of the carriage. The separation between the zone and the rest of the world is even more emphasized by other devices von Trier uses. As the audience, for the first time we see the prohibited zone as she finds herself there *under hypnosis* (“in her head”) and she speaks about entering Eden as “walking into darkness.” Then, when we see the couple’s car “really” driving into the forest, the neutral image becomes distorted as if the woods started to pulsate with a strange kind of life of their own – a clear indication of a bend in space as we enter into another dimension – the space of fantasy. But whose fantasy?

At first it might seem that the fantasy is hers because it was she who set up the limit of the prohibited zone. But it is the zone created for him and all the strange things we see there are the things encountered by him as the answer of his fantasy to her provocations. This is clearly visible in his dream of the falling acorns turning into growing oak saplings that is an (involuntary) response to her traumatic story about the cry of all the things that are to die and Nature as “Satan’s church.” In this respect, one has to postulate that all the “magic” things that we see in Eden are precisely “objective correlatives” of the distortions his fantasy produces.

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<sup>10</sup> Tarkovsky speaks about the creation of the zone in *Stalker* in a similar way (as quoted in Slavoj Žižek, “The Thing from Inner Space,” in: *Sexuation*, pp. 238–239), but of course the meaning of the zone there is exactly opposite: it is the space in which hope can be refound. The dedication of *Antichrist* to Andriei Tarkovsky was another cause of scandal at Cannes – Tarkovsky, this most “spiritual” of directors, was commemorated with the film, which to many seemed pornographic and disgusting. There is no doubt that the dedication is (deservedly) ironic but the film does connect with Tarkovsky at least in three ways: the already mentioned establishing of the zone, the central place of a cabin in the woods (the Russian *dacha*) in Tarkovsky’s universe (with the opposite meaning of rootedness and spiritual peace) and the bluish and greenish images of nature – in the state of decay, as it were.

These are predominantly the three strange animals he encounters.<sup>11</sup> As they are supposed to symbolize Grief (the doe), Pain (the fox) and Despair (the crow), already such symbolic status makes their “objective” status problematic. Moreover, it is only he who sees the animals and they can be taken as objectified images of her within the space of his fantasy. This is perhaps the most obvious with the first image. Just after they enter the prohibited zone, when she falls asleep on the way to Eden, he encounters a doe with a dead foetus hanging out of her genital parts – an clear image of the persisting dead child trauma on her part (Grief). The fox tearing its own entrails apart (Pain) can just as well be conceived of as another representation of what she does to herself. Moreover, it is the fox which speaks and we know very well that language is his (the therapist’s) domain.<sup>12</sup> We will return shortly to the crow, which finds what others are looking for, gets punished for it, but keeps resurrecting.<sup>13</sup> All in all, these images can serve as a mocking proof of one of his sentential (and very American) therapeutic commonplaces: “Remember: what the mind can conceive and believe, it can achieve.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> And two phantasmatic scenes: one of making love to her outside the cabin among the roots of the tree which becomes “humanized” as some of its roots turn into (dead?) human hands, and another (of which the former one seems to be a prefiguration), in which, as he leaves it, Eden is strewn with dead male bodies. Both of the scenes should be taken as products of his fantasy. In the first case, this is emphasised by a switch to a different plastics of the image, to the electronic noise and by means of a close up on the back of his head (as in the close up on the back of her head when she heard the cry “which was not there”). The second scene takes place when, after strangling her, he leaves Eden understood as the space of patriarchal fantasy – the dead male bodies obviously stand for all the male “victims” of the ultimate product of the patriarchal phantasmatic space, the Witch.

<sup>12</sup> It was reported that the critics in Cannes laughed at this talking fox – unknowingly undermining the seriousness of their own becoming-witch interpretation. Moreover, in response to her story of the crying acorns he says: “It’s all very touching if it was a children book. Acorns don’t cry. You know that as well as I do. That’s what fear is. Your thoughts distort reality, not the other way around.” But whose thoughts distort reality if it is he who sees the (talking!) animals? And we know that these images do come from, if not a children’s book, at least from a child’s toy: in the prologue, for a while we see the couple making love on top of Nic’s toy which includes the images of the three animals.

<sup>13</sup> One may also note that Dante is at first prevented from embarking on his learning journey (which starts with Hell) by three animals (panther, lion, she-wolf) which symbolize three bad inclinations which make contrition and therefore reformation impossible. But in the inverted realm of *Antichrist*, the animals (as figurations of different aspects of her) are precisely the forces which enable reformation.

<sup>14</sup> And yet, at the same time, it is *his* Grief (for her or for his inability to help her), *his* Pain (physical abuse at her hands), and *his* Despair (he thinks she is going to kill him). Everything in the space of his fantasy has this double inscription: his (it is his fantasy) and hers (she uses it for her purposes).

That his mind produces everything that happens in Eden can also be seen in how whatever she does is guided by what he says to her. The first part of their stay in Eden takes place after, in the hypnotic trance, he made her “melt into the green,” that is, Nature, and Nature as “everything that was beautiful about Eden [but which] was perhaps hideous”<sup>15</sup> is the predominant motif of this part in which nothing truly violent happens yet. The “evil” things commence after another therapeutic session in which he suggests that rather than being critical towards the sources and materials of her unfinished thesis, she internalized the accusations that women are by nature evil. After this, as if in answer to his cue, she turns into a “monster” violently masturbating in the garden, crushing his genitals with a piece of wood, drilling a hole in his leg, screwing a grindstone to it, and burying him in a foxhole. All of this is taken as her psychotic transformation into a witch caused by her former studies and the trauma of Nic’s death. But is this irrational (and therefore supposedly feminine), meaning is turning into a witch so irrational after all?

Firstly, if we take nature into consideration, it is definitely on the side of rationality understood as laws and the cause and effect chain. In fact, nature is the very model of such laws, the very opposite of “female irrationality.” It is not natural laws that she could have learned by studying the treatises on witches. So what could she learn from them? It is not very difficult to see what all the texts she encountered while studying gynocide amount to: they were all projections of fantasies about women that a supposedly rational, orderly and all-powerful patriarchal discourse produced. In other words, such a discourse in the image of the powerful and destructive witch produces its own symptom, that is, a place in which patriarchal discourse stumbles over itself, or encounters its internal limit in the image of the abyss of annihilation. This is the crucial point, because, if things are really this way, it is enough to reinforce this phantasmatic image for the patriarchal discourse to collapse. In other words, all female strategies to get “more substantial” by becoming phallic are in advance doomed to failure as they are always already inscribed in the discourse of phallic domination and the only radically subversive strategy turns out to be a refusal to become “oneself” (the inner journey for one’s truth – always already predetermined by the male gaze) and becoming “nothing” instead, that is, an incarnation of the male fantasy in all its violence.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Perhaps this can also be taken as a comment on their marriage because Eden seemed to be (to her) also the scene of the dissolution of the relationship between Him, Her and the child.

<sup>16</sup> Žižek, “The Thing from Inner Space,” p. 232.

This is exactly what happens in Eden. She begins as famously “passive”; that is, no causal chain is initiated by her – everything that happens has the source in his instigations which, however, materialise with a certain surplus as the reaction but also a challenge to his arrogance. Moreover, the challenge is now posed explicitly. One day he tells her that because she experienced something she could not explain rationally (a cry she heard in Eden), she tied the emotional event (the cry was not real) and the place (Eden). This is another of his cause-and-effect rationalizations (and a hidden accusation of the lack of rationality on her part) to which she answers: “You shouldn’t have come here. You’re just so damn arrogant. But this may not last. Have you thought of that?”

The conflict comes to a head with his claim: “The evil you talk about is an obsession. Obsessions never materialize. It’s a scientific fact. Anxieties can’t trick you into doing things you won’t do otherwise. It’s like hypnotism. You can’t be hypnotized into doing something you wouldn’t normally do, something against your nature.” This starts the series of the already mentioned violent acts (with the characteristically hysteric scenario: outbursts of violence interchanging with short spells of submission and meekness<sup>17</sup>) which come at the end of Chapter Three, entitled “Despair.” When the film switches into the fourth chapter, entitled “The Three Beggars,” he lies exhausted on the floor of the cabin and asks her “Did you want to kill me?”<sup>18</sup>

She: Not yet. The three beggars aren’t here yet.

He: The three beggars? What does that mean?

She: When the three beggars arrive, someone must die.

He: I see.<sup>19</sup>

But as usual he does not and neither do we, the audience, attached to his perspective, because he understands that it is he who must die, even though after a while what he sees outside the window is a night sky with unknown constellations (the Doe, the Fox, the Crow). He can

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<sup>17</sup> These are precisely the masks invented by the patriarchal discourse itself: the angel (in the house) and the witch (out in the woods).

<sup>18</sup> He lies precisely in the same position we saw her lying in the grass in her hypnotic trance just before he made her “turn green.”

<sup>19</sup> This is a semi-repetition of a scene from the beginning of the film:

She: And all of a sudden, it was glib. Or even was some, some kind of lie.

He: I see.

She: No, you don’t see. You see a lot of things, but not that.

In fact he has seen lots of strange things in Eden but he has not realised their meaning yet.

recognise them because it is not the first time they are seen by him. In fact, he encountered the map of the night sky with such constellations in the attic of the cabin among the papers she gathered for her thesis; that is, he saw these constellations within the space of what he called her obsession, the space of *gynocide*. Therefore, it is not only that the obsessions have materialised – also, the specialist in interpretation does not understand the meaning of such materialisation, because it is not him who has to die as the ones who are executed within the space of gynocide are women.

Here we can return briefly to the matter of the crow, which he finds and kills in the foxhole and which is resurrected to show him where the wrench is, so he can release his leg to be able to kill her. Within the process of his “education,” the crow can be seen as just another incarnation of her (like the doe and the fox), but this time incarnating her intentions within the space of gynocide proper – she (the crow) helps him to free himself so that he is able to do something “irrational,” to experience subjective destitution. This is emphasised even more by the second of the two most traumatic scenes for the audience – her clitoridectomy. Apart from being a symmetrical gesture to his emasculation in the woodshed, it is a clear signal of what will happen. So far within the space of the patriarchal fantasy which Eden is, she has been a challenger for which purpose (and guided by him) she has gradually turned herself into the image of the female monster, the Witch – in other words, the all-powerful uncastrated Woman, the incarnation of all threatening Weiningerian male fantasies.<sup>20</sup> Therefore the meaning of her “castrating” herself can only be understood as a gesture in which she symbolically renders herself powerless so that the gynocide scenario can be fulfilled.

And this is precisely what takes place: whatever the nature of “scientific facts,” he does something “against his nature” (which the science of therapy teaches us one cannot do in a fit of anxiety) and “passionately” (his calculating distance gone) strangles her.<sup>21</sup> What happens before the act of strangling is of crucial importance: he experiences exactly the same bout of anxiety which she experienced in their apartment at the beginning of the film after her release from hospital – for emphasis, the scene is shot by von Trier exactly in the same way, only the protagonist is different (“The main part of anxiety is physical: dizzy spells, dry mouth, distorted hearing, trembling, heavy breathing, fast pulse, nausea...”).

<sup>20</sup> Because the uncastrated Woman is an inconsistent male fantasy, we have such an inconsistency in the image itself: the all powerful Woman is all powerful precisely because she cannot control herself; she is at the mercy of her irrational female “substance.”

<sup>21</sup> This is a very ambivalent scene – it almost seems a distorted (“de-idealised”) and displaced (their genitals are destroyed) image of the sexual intercourse of the prologue.

What does he encounter in the attack of anxiety whose effect is the irrational act? He encounters precisely nothing, in other words a break in the chain of causes and effects, a suspension of Nature as the “truth” of female depression. He has set out on a journey to find the substantial cause of anxiety, the therapeutic truth as the achievement of the compulsive rational mind, but what he finds in the place of truth is the gaping void in the shape of the traumatic event, that is, the cause as something forever absent from the symbolic order. In other words, he has learned but she had to die so that he learned. Therefore we are ultimately not so very far from von Trier’s constant motif of self-sacrificing women. But what has he learned?

What we have in the epilogue is the return to Handel and black and white photography; the three animals present themselves again but this time there is no threat connected with them; they are exemplarily serene and semi-transparent.<sup>22</sup> With her death and his transforming experience (identification with the void), his phantasmatic space has been traversed, so the forest (which has stood for such forbidden space so far) is no longer threatening either – it becomes a space of streaming sunlight and nourishment. Moreover, in the last event crowds of women surround him from all sides. This happens in the sunlit forest and the women, although faceless,<sup>23</sup> are definitely not threatening but quite ordinary. Therefore the only thing they can symbolize is precisely his having traversed the violent patriarchal fantasy and his ability to enter the new post-patriarchal dispensation of encountering women differently, not just as symptomatic products of his imagination.<sup>24</sup> This “ordinariness” should be conceived against the prologue in which we have the representation of the (also visually) idealised couple as functioning under the aegis of the image of the imperious phallus (“forced” on the audience as the “outrageous” close up on his “performing” genitals which take up the entire screen). What we have here is precisely the (fake) triumphant image whose function is to prevent us from seeing something else in the constellation (of the supposedly ideal marriage) and what we see together with him in the moment he finds himself within the space of gynocide in the cabin: he sees Nic falling out of the window (as in the prologue) while the doe (Grief) can be seen as already present in the family apartment.

<sup>22</sup> Since she is dead the animals are reconfirmed as being his projection of her.

<sup>23</sup> “Facelessness” is not a sign of threat in the film as, apart from her and him, at Nic’s funeral all figures’ faces are blurred just like the faces of the women in the final scene.

<sup>24</sup> Thus both in the three animals and the women, we have her (or rather the image of a woman) “resurrected” in the third “ordinary” modality: neither idealised (the prologue) nor demonised (the body of the film).

Sławomir Masłoń

### **Pasja *Antychrysta* albo edukacja pewnego terapeuty**

Streszczenie

Artykuł poświęcony jest filmowi *Antychryst* Larsa von Triera, którego prezentacja w Cannes wywołała skandal w przeciwieństwie do nagrodzonego Złotą Plamą kilka lat wcześniej filmu *Tańcząc w ciemnościach*. Choć na pierwszy rzut oka tak różne, oba filmy wykazują liczne zbieżności i należą do głównego nurtu tematyki utworów von Triera, traktującego o fantazjach kobiecości. Tezą artykułu jest to, że gwałtowna reakcja publiczności, a przede wszystkim krytyki, na treść utworu jest nieuświadomioną obroną przed tym, czego nie chciano w filmie dostrzec (czyli ma ona wartość symptomatyczną). Chcąc uniknąć analizy powodu tych gwałtownych reakcji, zinterpretowano film jako bzdurną weiningerowską historyjkę o wojnie płci, okraszoną przemocą i pornografią, zapominając o tym, że centrum konstelacji przedstawionej w *Antychryście*, czyli Wiedźma, to tylko inne wcielenie typowej bohaterki von Triera, za każdym razem uosabiającej idealny obraz kobiety wyprodukowany przez patriariat. Von Trier posłużył się tym obrazem z wirtuozerią, wpisując go w swój wielokrotnie powtarzany schemat kobiety składającej z siebie ofiarę. Zatem w *Antychryście* Apokalipsa to w rzeczywistości Pasja. Jednak tym razem reżyser pozbawił film jakiegokolwiek sentymentalnego kontekstu, który obecny był na przykład w *Przełamując fale* czy *Tańcząc w ciemnościach*. Jak wskazuje reakcja krytyki i publiczności, patriarchalna fantazja pozbawiona takiego kontekstu to czysta trauma. Pokazanie, że tak właśnie jest, to niekwestionowane osiągnięcie von Triera.

Sławomir Masłoń

### **Die Passion des *Antichrist* oder die Bildung eines Therapeuten**

Zusammenfassung

Das Essay ist dem Film *Antichrist* von Lars von Trier gewidmet, dessen Vorführung in Cannes im Gegenteil zu seinem früheren mit Goldener Palme ausgezeichneten Film *Tänzerin im Dunkeln*, einen Skandal auslöste. Beim ersten Anschein sehr unterschiedlich, zeigen die beiden Filme mehrere Übereinstimmungen auf und gehören der Hauptströmung der von den Fantasien der Weiblichkeit handelnden Werke Triers. Die Verfasserin stellt die These auf, dass solch eine heftige Reaktion des Publikums, und vor allem der Filmkritiker, auf den Filminhalt eine unbewusste Verteidigung davor ist, was man in dem Film nicht wahrnehmen wollte (sie hat also eine symptomatische Bedeutung). Um auf den Grund der heftigen Reaktion nicht zu gehen müssen, hat man den Film als eine sinnlose, durch Gewalt und Pornografie gekrönte Weiningers Geschichte über den Geschlechtskampf interpretiert, die Tatsache nicht beachtend, dass das Zentrum der im *Antichrist* dargestellten Konstellation bildende Hexe, nur eine andere Verkörperung der typischen Heldin von Triers ist, also der Frau, die ein durch Patriariat geschaffenes Idealbild personifiziert. Lars von Trier bediente sich des Bildes meisterhaft, indem er es in sein mehrmals wiederholte Schema der sich selbst opfernden Frau hineinpasst. Die in dem *Antichrist* geschilderte Apokalypse ist also in Wahrheit eine Passion, doch der Regisseur

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hat dem Film diesmal jeden sentimentalen Kontext weggenommen, der beispielsweise in den Filmen *Breaking the Waves* oder *Tänzerin im Dunkeln* zum Vorschein kommt. Die Reaktion der Kritiker und des Publikums zeugt davon, dass patriarchale Phantasie ohne den Kontext nur reines Trauma ist, und das wurde von Trier unzweifelhaft erfolgreich dargestellt.