VIOLENT AFFECTS: NATURE AND THE FEMININE IN LARS VON TRIER'S *ANTICHRIST*
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[Of all my films] Antichrist comes closest to a scream.
Lars von Trier

INTRODUCTION / INVITATION: "THE NATURE OF MY FEARS"[1]

Lars von Trier's 2009 film *Antichrist*, produced by the Danish company *Zentropa*, tells a story of parental loss, mourning, and despair that follow, and ostensibly result from, the tragic death of a child. The film stars two protagonists, identified by impersonal gendered names as She (Charlotte Gainsbourg) and He (Willem Dafoe). This generic economy of naming suggests that *Antichrist*, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the eschatological signification of its title, is a story of origins. *Antichrist* stages a quasi-religious return (within the Abrahamic tradition) to a lapsarian space where the myth of the female agency of the originary transgression,[2] and the subsequent establishment of human separateness from nature, are told by von Trier as a story of his own psychic introspection. In the words of Joanne Bourke, professor of history at Birkbeck College known for her work on sexual violence and on history of fear and hatred, *Antichrist* is a re-telling of the ancient Abrahamic mythology framed as a question "what is to become of humanity once it discovers it has been expelled from Eden and that Satan *is in us*."[3] This mythological trope grapples with the other-than-human presence, as a demonic or animalistic trace, found at the very core of the human.[4]

At the premiere of *Antichrist* at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival, von Trier welcomed the audience with the words: "I would like to invite you for a tiny glimpse behind the curtain, a glimpse into the dark world of my imagination: into the nature of my fears, into the nature of Antichrist."[5] What seems to be at play in this cryptic invitation is the effect of ambiguity set off by the polysemic play of the word "nature." The operation of the figures of nature in *Antichrist* is ambiguous both in the sense of double signification, and as a mark of uncertainty or dubiety regarding the protagonists' motivations and identities. First, nature means a character, an essential disposition or appearance of a subject (both human and non-human), as in the proverbial phrase "the female nature." Second, nature refers to the category of the physical world, which includes animals, plants, and landscapes, and which is conventionally contrasted, often in dualistic terms, with the symbolic of the human-made world ("civilisation" or "culture"). In *Antichrist*, this latter meaning of nature is synonymous with *wilderness*: the world of nature includes other-than-human phenomena and living beings that the female protagonist invokes through a collective metalepsis. She names it, in a fearful whisper, as "the woods." The symbolism of nature is doubled when, prior to the couple's departure to their cabin in a forest, in a grief therapy session She identifies "the woods" as an object of her anxiety. In *Antichrist* the polysemy of nature establishes

a set of complex (though non-homologous) semantic connections between the discourses of gender and the discourses of species. The interplay between the multiple socio-cultural idioms of gender and species in the film inspires a post-humanist reading of the subjective constructions in *Antichrist* in the light of its affective and performative impact, which is, perhaps, nothing short of 'traumatizing.' By the reference to the psychoanalytic concept of trauma I don't mean to reduce the interactions between the protagonists to the effects of the shock of their child's death, or to suggest that *Antichrist* is a study of the psychic operation of grief.[6] Rather, I suggest that the titular 'violent affects' in the film fuel its traumatizing effects insofar as the depictions of physical, psychological, and structural-linguistic violence in *Antichrist* resist the transformation of the violent image into a consumable product of cinematic entrainment.[7] 'Traumatic' refers here not only to the psychic experience of the child's death by his mother, but also to the cinematic structure centered on un-sutured representations of horror in human existence. As such, *Antichrist* (as perhaps all von Trier's movies) aims to achieve a particular visceral response of its audience. This film's 'traumatic' quality is a site where the viewer confronts her/his own pleasure at the sight of another's pain,[8] as well as her/his desire, shared with the male character of *Antichrist*, to relate to the world through economies of rationality and calculation. As Nina Power has aptly suggested, *Antichrist* undermines "the unthinking acceptance of modern rationality" and the (masculine) facades of "caring liberal humanism," by depicting scenes of "cosmic misalign[ment]" between its hierarchically ordered categories—man and nature, and woman and man.[9]

The reactions to *Antichrist* in European press were a curious mixture of outrage, scandal, and open dismissal. Nothing demonstrates better this sense of public indignation and apprehension than the infamous press conference at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival, when von Trier was asked by one of the journalists to explain and justify (or, in von Trier's interpretation, "to apologize for") *Antichrist*. At stake in the journalist's call, and in numerous subsequent critical discussions of the film, has been the alleged lack of clarity of 'message' and of 'authorial intentionality,' but also, and perhaps more importantly, it is a way of questioning the ethics of this film. This criticism has been articulated in particular from a standpoint of the gendered identification of von Trier's cinematic production as misogynous, and as such involved in "psychically and socially normative genderings"[10] that legitimize sexual violence and cruelty, and that stage a spectacle of debasement and destruction of women's bodies.

Such critique points to the deliberate elimination of critical distance in von Trier's films, as well as to the lack of clarity around the questions of political responsibility in his work.[11] For example, contributing to a collection of opinions about *Antichrist* published in *The Guardian*, journalist and feminist activist Julie Bindel said, rather tersely: "watching this film was like having bad sex with someone you loathe—a hideous combination of sheer boredom and disgust." For Bindel *Antichrist* makes no contribution to understanding why sexual "cruelty and brutality is inflicted by some people on others." Rather, this film represents violence and cruelty, in an obscene and pornographic fashion, for "the purposes of gruesome entertainment" and Sadean enjoyment.[12]

The emphasis on the film's sexually explicit and violent images, including the infamous scene of the self-inflicted clitoridectomy, fails to shape an understanding of what is at stake in the public outrage, unease, and anxiety caused by *Antichrist*. I suggest that such interpretative engagement with von Trier's cinematic text must account for its performative and, in turn, affective aspects—and, accordingly, to consider this film as *a work of trauma*.[13] In this context, my assumption is that *Antichrist* is a testimony to the continuing influence of the *Dogme95 manifesto* on von Trier's film-making (even if it also constitutes an obvious departure from, or reinterpretation of, the tenets of *Dogme95*).

Dogme95 was formed as an artistic and political protest against what its creators, Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, considered cinematically *unreal*, such as the "technologically advanced film editing and the Hollywood ideological, economic, and aesthetic representations."[14] The manifesto proposed instead a turn from the "fictional film narrative towards the framings of documentary film within traditional cinema" in a search for an "authentic" cinematic experience. As Linda Badley suggests, referring to J.L. Austin's theory of illocutionary and perlocutionary functions of language, the *Dogme95 manifesto* created a "performative space" for

the achievement of cinematic effects of "'pure' … emotion and provocation."[15] Badley situates the manifesto in the context of wide-ranging cultural and artistic responses to postmodern "irony, regress, and dispersal," which, under the heading of "the return of the Real,"[16] seek to produce "an affect, 'an aesthetic experience of transcendence' in which subject, sign, and thing come together."[17] By "bracket[ing] off the space for an ostensive narrative act," von Trier has thus "encouraged … identification with the character" in the pursuit of a cinema that "resists deconstruction."[18]

In "Making Waves: Trauma and Ethics in the Work of Lars von Trier," Caroline Bainbridge argues for the centrality of affect and trauma both as a *subject* and as a *form* in von Trier's cinema.[19] Numerous critics have pointed out that trauma has been von Trier's primary aim in urging particular *response* from his audiences by "induc[ing] emotional, ethical, and intellectual distress."[20] Focusing on the "Europa trilogy" and on the "Goldheart trilogy," Bainbridge suggests that the tropes of trauma and affect enable in von Trier's cinema critical interrogation of the "ambiguities and ambivalences around [any binary formations] of good [and] evil, guilt [and] innocence." Rather than rendered as oppositional and clearly separated categories, they function in von Trier's work as excessive, mutually penetrating, and reciprocally contaminating spaces. Von Trier's post-*Dogme95* cinema flags the inter-connection between the "ambiguities and ambivalences … central to his narrative forays and the gender of his protagonists."[21] In *Antichrist* this aspect is perhaps most striking in regard to its depiction of the intricate interrelation of love and violence in the figuration of the female character. In contrast to the Christian imaginary of love as a redemptive or sacrificial site that resists and counters violence, for Her violent acts become an expression of the erotic (and perhaps, as it is suggested at the end of the film, also maternal) attachment.

The approach to a cinematic image as a "performative space" (suggested by Bainbridge) is highly pertinent to *Antichrist*. Instead of offering a narrative engagement with the subject of grief and mourning, the film seems to *enact* it at the level of affective transmission, impression, and permeability.[22] As Gillian Wearing poignantly observes, *Antichrist* is a deeply "visceral film," almost "suicidal," in its demonstration "how depression, dislocation, and desperation *feel*," rather than *what they are*.[23] For Wearing this subjective experience of intense affectivity makes *Antichrist* "close to [a] painting," in the ways that it "plays with the abstract, the real, and the unreal." These sensuous and affective operations in *Antichrist* are highly gendered, which, however, as Wearing and Bourke agree, is not synonymous with their *feminisation*. Rather, the mournful affects of the parental grieving are "articulated [both] through violence (female) or close sterility (male)."[24] A few commentators have in fact suggested, contrary to the dominant line of feminist criticism, that *Antichrist* is a misanthropic, rather than misogynic, film.[25]

These suggestions lead me to draw a connection between, on the one hand, the affective figurations of femininity and masculinity and the provocative (traumatizing) effects of the film and, on the other hand, von Trier's accompanying disclosures of his personal and psychic life. Von Trier has revealed that he embarked on the production of *Antichrist* after a two-year-long severe depression. He has also explicitly acknowledged the therapeutic psychic effects of the process of film-making.[26] In a statement titled "Director's Confessions" von Trier discloses:

> The work on the script did not follow my usual modus operandi. Scenes were added for no reason. Images were composed free of logic or dramatic thinking. They often came from dreams I was having at the time, or dreams I'd had earlier in my life.
> Once again, the subject was "Nature," but in a different and more direct way than before. In a more personal way.
> The film does not contain any specific moral code and only has what some might call "the bare necessities" in the way of a plot.
> … I can offer no excuse for *Antichrist*.[27]

How does the idea of an artistic work that *one cannot offer an excuse, or apology, for* frame von Trier's enigmatic "welcoming words" at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival (to "a tiny glimpse behind the curtain … into the nature of [his] fears")? I suggest that in the process of offering a testimony to a psychic collapse and destruction, *Antichrist* also becomes a work of secretive and intimate self-disclosure.[28] As a type of speech act (Badley's "performative space"), this disclosure identifies itself as a "confession" where the uttering subject *makes oneself known* in the act of avowal or acknowledgment, as well as professes some unknown culpability, or transgression. Von Trier's "welcoming words" at the film's premiere are a gesture of invitation, predicated not as an option (something the spectator may or may not do), but as a forceful and ineluctable condition of engagement with *Antichrist*. Through this welcoming speech, von Trier indicates to the viewer that she/he has left the privileged site of cinematic spectatorship and is being interpellated into a position of a subject that "glimpses" secretly, and, perhaps, not without shame, into what is necessarily hidden from the public view. The audience is thereby challenged to break with the economy of the rational and the calculated, or what von Trier codifies in the male protagonist of *Antichrist* as the "neatlessness of rationality."[29] In an interview with the Danish *Politiken*, Charlotte Gainsbourg confirms that "it was my character that Lars has personally identified with. He was very close inside the life of my character and my feelings, my vulnerability, … my anxiety attacks were his. It was [von Trier] that was *her*."[30]

It is in this context that I read *Antichrist* as a very personal and revealing film –interwoven with idioms and images that document von Trier's struggle with serious psychic disorder, and highly informed by his experience of cognitive-behavior and exposure therapy, shamanism, and Jungian psychoanalysis. What approximates best that cinematic experience is perhaps a figure of a *retrogressive journey*, which parallels the journey that She and He undertake in the film: it is a simultaneous movement *backwards* (into the pre-lapsarian space) and *inwards* (into the psychic world structured by grief).

Many of von Trier's earlier works have been discussed for their invocation and construction of complex gendered allegories, including films in the "Europa trilogy" (*The Element of Crime/Forbrydelsens element*, 1984; *Epidemic*, 1987; *Europa*, 1991), the "Goldheart trilogy" (*Breaking the Waves*, 1996; *The Idiots/Idioterne*, 1998; *Dancer in the Dark*, 2000), and the incomplete "U-S-A trilogy" (*Dogville*, 2003; *Manderlay*, 2005). Incorporating a rich register of literary, mythological, and theological allusions and references, and often centered on figurations of the feminine, von Trier's (post-)*Dogme95* films have inspired philosophical and theological readings, and met with critical response of feminism. A question that arises with *Antichrist* is whether it also provides grounds for philosophical discussions. It is, after all, a testimony to private suffering and struggle with mental disorder, which demands transformation of the viewer's reflective gaze into an ephemeral and secretive glimpse; that deliberately situates itself outside the platform of public dialogue and critique. What are the semantics of von Trier's new female figuration—so different from his earlier self-abnegating, and self-sacrificial Christ-like heroines? As I argue, von Trier's female protagonist in *Antichrist* initiates a radically different gendered imaginary register, and marks a departure from his soteriological preoccupations in a direction of non-redemptive, non-sacrificial, and non-transcendental violence. At issue here is a construction of non-homologous idioms of gender/nature that reinforce each other in a tale of violence, which focuses in both a pre-lapsarian and apocalyptic sense, on the formation of a subject that resists "all forms of victimization."[31]

GENDER/NATURE IN EDEN

In contrast to those interpretations of *Antichrist* that have, often quite productively, positioned von Trier's film against the background of the genre of horror films,[32] my reading relies on strategies that throw into relief its *pornographic* aspects. The reason is that it is the affects of *lust* and *desperation*, rather than *fear*, which becomes operative in the film and thematise its subject of parental loss and grief. In her essay "The Pornographic Imagination" Susan Sontag investigates the transgressive spark in pornography through a well-known dissociation of the pornographic from the erotic or the sexual. Instead, she purports an intimate connection between pornography and death, which she finds in Bataille's "erotics of agony." In exploring the sexual expression as morbid in its tonalities, Bataille "exposes in extreme erotic experience … its subterranean connection with death," which is

being conveyed not through "devising sexual acts whose consequences are lethal, littering his narratives with corpses," but by "invest[ing] each action with a weight, a disturbing gravity, that feels authentically 'mortal'."[33] For Sontag, in its conflation of the "self-transcending" with the "self-destructive," transgressive literature is indebted to religious vocabulary inasmuch as it operates within the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane. It points to "something more general than … sexual damage," namely "the traumatic failure of modern capitalist society to provide authentic outlets for the perennial human flair for high-temperature visionary obsessions, to satisfy the appetite for exalted self-transcending modes of concentration and seriousness." The pornographic "poetry of transgression" testifies to certain truths "about sensibility, about sex, about individual personality, about despair, about limits," and engenders *knowing* insofar as "he who transgresses not only breaks a rule, [but also] goes somewhere that the others are not; and he knows something that the others don't know."[34]

Notably, the inscription of the plot of *Antichrist* within the horror genre collapses incessantly throughout the movie, subverted *as if* from within. This happens, for example, when the horrific effect disintegrates at the encounter with the comical, or the grotesque, gesture as in the case of the figure of a talking fox. The fox is one of the three "animal-messengers" in the film: he appears to utter the line "chaos reigns." When asked about the (intended) comical function of the fox, von Trier not only insisted that "we take the fox seriously," but associated it with attributes of intentionality and agency—the fox comes into the film from the psychic space of a dream, or a trance, by its own demand:

> [Interviewer] Is the fox a joke?
> [Lars von Trier] No, it comes from these Shamanic journeys that I did. … You have a drum beat and you go into a trance that takes you into this parallel world. And there, I talked to this fox and it demanded to have a line.
> [Interviewer] Did he say anything else?
> [Lars von Trier] Well, the first fox I met was a red fox. And it started to split itself to pieces. And afterwards, I met a couple of other foxes. Silver foxes with little cubs. And they said to me, 'Never trust the first fox you meet.' So it was interesting.[35]

The shared characteristic of the three "animal-messengers" in the film is their cross-species appearance in that they acquire features, which position them outside of the specificity of their genus: the *talking* and *self-consuming* fox; the *undying* raven; and the prancing deer with an attached dead fawn. The figures also represent the three organising affects of the film: grief, pain, and despair (as well, these are names of figures of three beggars in the son's room, and the titles of three chapters in the film). The figures are phantasmagoric creatures of nature. Insofar as the animals are "messengers" that signify knowledge inaccessible to the masculine subject, they throw into question the epistemological privilege of the human.[36] At the same time, they all contain a disturbing reminder of their *un-nature-like-ness*. They are characterised by an idiosyncratic symbolic surplus in that their cross-species appearances exceeds any representational function, and seem to serve as a pure demonstration, as W.J.T. Mitchell puts it in a different context, of the "irreducible plurality and otherness of nonhuman or posthuman life forms."[37] Bodil Marie Stavning Thomsen suggests that the animal figures in *Antichrist* are strongly *totemistic* as they constitute a link between the human subject and cosmos, or "the forces of nature."[38] Notably, their cross-species formation and their symbolic excess structure an encounter with what cannot be contained within the episteme of the human universe, and, as such, their sight is *unbearable;* in the encounter with the animal-messengers He finds himself dangerously proximate to the site of repulsion or abomination.[39]

In addition to its contamination of the comical, the horrific effect of the film also collapses by the force of sublime aesthetisation. One of the striking scenes in the film depicts the protagonists' sexual intercourse at the undergrowth of a tree with roots and branches transfiguring into human hands and arms. In this scene, the naked female body remains hidden from the audience's view behind the male. Then, as the camera recedes, a sudden transformation becomes apparent: the roots and branches change into arms in a hybrid and dynamic constitution of a human-dendrological form. The connection between the arms and the roots is both metonymic and metaphoric—i.e., it invokes a primal relation of proximity (shared space) and a relation

of resemblance (shared beginnings).[40] It points to a *within-ness* or *inside-ness* of the human and the other-than-human in their mutual permeability: as Thomsen argues, at issue is an "experience of nature as something 'within', and not only as something situated beyond our own corporeality."[41] The naked bodies of the couple and the naked arms/roots are cross-coded within the economy of alienation and abandonment. In spite of its representation of intimate connectivity and permeability of bodily boundaries (in sexual penetration and in the hybridal incorporation of the human and dendrological forms), the scene also communicates a *failed* gesture of connection with another in the subject's desperate grasping, or holding on, or encountering another's body.

To use a term from the formalist study of folk tale morphology, *Antichrist* starts with a moment of "absentation" (in a formal analysis of folktale morphology, the concept of absentation describes a narrative stage where the represented world, as a seemingly coherent and harmonized unit, is infringed or interrupted). In the moment of absentation a foreign element or an event (here, the tragic death of the child) ruptures the space of safety of the homely environment (located in the urban setting, in *Antichrist* it is not only the assumed security of the family unit, but also the illusory human safety *from nature*). It is the "traumatic point of departure and … the turning point of the film."[42] In an opening slow-motion black-and-white series of images, accompanied by an aria from George Frideric Handel's *Rinaldo* (*Lascia ch'io pianga mia cruda sorte*, "Let me weep over my cruel fate"), the toddler son of She and He climbs on a window and falls to his death, while his parents, inattentive to their son's whereabouts, are indulging in sexual intercourse. Referring to the black-and-white images, Thomsen has suggested that the viewer encounters here "how haptic visual organisation dwells with modulations on the surface of the image" (following Deleuze and Guattari, Thomsen understands the haptic as the "specific sensation of how it feels to touch what is [being looked at].")[43]

In the wake of the child's death, She becomes overwhelmed with sorrow (and is sedated), and He, who, as it happens, is a cognitive-behavioural therapist, takes upon himself the task of healing his partner. He "tackles" her anxiety and fear in sessions of exposure therapy. He is a rational, calculated, and disengaged man, who forces her to give up the sedatives, and to subject herself to the therapeutic regime of habituation (repeated exposure to her anxiety-inducing objects) and cognitive dissonance (confrontation with her conflicting feelings). In a pivotal therapeutic moment, She names "the woods" as her anxiety object:

> [He] Let's make a list of things you are afraid of.
> [She] The woods.
> [He] What scares you about the woods?
> [She] Eden.[44]

She and He own a cabin in the woods, which is called "Eden." This is where they spent the previous summer with their toddler son, while She was working on a postgraduate dissertation on mediaeval witch-hunts and demonisation of women in the Middle Ages. Following the critical moment of identification, She and He travel from the urban space of their (now traumatically disrupted) home into the wilderness of their cabin Eden. In the discourse of a formalist folktale morphology, this initiates a stage of "interdiction"—a warning addressed to the protagonists ("don't go there," or "don't do that,") which is ignored and violated.

The couple's entry into the woods initiates the cinematic restaging of the myths of origins. Spatially removed from civilisation, society, and its laws, She and He enter the place of Eden, which constitutes another pivotal ambiguity in the text of *Antichrist*. Within the gendered parameters of the Abrahamic myth of originary transgression, Eden demarcates a pre-lapsarian space of perfect relations and communication between the human and the other-than-human (both divine and animal), as well as a stage for a destruction of that halcyon coexistence. But there is also another signification of the paradisiacal space in *Antichrist*, which points to the Greek notion of *paradeisos*, from an Old Iranian source, *pairidaeza*, meaning "the enclosure of nature," or "garden [park] surrounded by walls."

The destination of the couple's journey—Eden in the woods—is a place that operates upon a figure of a double "enclosure." The space of the "woods" depends on the demarcation of the border between nature and the human realm of civilisation, society and law, and, analogously, the space of the cottage is carved out for the human subject within (and thus as an enclosure from) nature. Just as the Abrahamic myth of originary transgression presupposes a spatial category of the outside (the place of humanity's banishment and abandonment), the couple's cottage, Eden, operates upon a doubled figure of the wall. Importantly, though, the enclosing and demarcating wall appears fractured and pervious, which, at the ontological level, suggests profound incongruities and "contaminations" of the categories at hand, and, at the political level, problematises any strict separation between the human and the other-than-human subjects as a work of, to use a term from Giorgio Agamben's book *The Open*, "anthropogenic machine."[45] To continue with the Agambenian vernacular, the various and multiple implosions of these demarcations or separations in *Antichrist*, create curious "zones of inseparability" or "indistinction" between the human and other-than-human, which in turn produce a response of disorientation and dislocation. While Sontag's modernist and aestheticist essayistic preoccupations are not aligned with my mythic reading of *Antichrist* that draws to the surface its post-humanist capital,[46] it might be potentially productive to note that Sontag attributes the disorienting and dislocating effect to the pornographic genre. As Sontag writes (in a way that bears a resemblance to some of the contemporary conceptualiations of affect)[47] "the singleness of pornography's intention is spurious [since t]he physical sensations involuntarily produced in someone reading [a pornographic] book carry with them something that touches upon the reader's whole experience of his humanity—and his limits as a personality and as a body."[48]

Wayne Tunnicliffe, the curator of an exhibition *Wilderness: Balnaves Contemporary Painting* at NSW Gallery, suggests that in being constituted as an "outside" of the human realm, the figure of wilderness in the Western imagination has been "a place in which the known world gave way to unmapped and uncultivated land, terrain that offered … the benefits of discovery and transformation and the risks and fears of the hazardous and the unknown."[49] Wilderness also inhabits edges of our consciousness, "a world where disorder rather than religious, royal, or secular law might reign." This "potential lawlessness and bestial wildness" enables "ways of thinking outside the everyday and of giving imaginative form to the previously inconceivable."[50] In *Antichrist*, the other outside of the cottage (Eden) is instituted as a site of protection from nature provided by the cottage, which is, however, *always already* profoundly compromised. The cottage appears to be under the relentless pressure (if not a siege) of nature: acorns fall with a disturbing noise on the veranda; the roof leaks; He wakes up one morning with his hand covered by thistles. There is a homologous relation between, on the one hand, the construction of Eden through its separation from wilderness (compromised by the centripetal force of nature) and, on the other hand, the mechanisms of psychic defense that She displays, and which are akin to an ultimately porous dam, stopping the flood of her visceral response to the death of the child.

One of the therapeutic exercises devised by the male protagonist is to make Her *touch* certain items associated with nature, and thus experience its unprotected and unmediated immediacy and tangibility. In the final and most confronting exercise, He makes Her visualize her own surrender to, and dissolving in, nature. This obliterates not only the protection offered by the walls of Eden, but the most personal boundary of all, her own skin. She is lying in grass, which splits and separates at the touch of her body. The positioning of Her body bears a striking resemblance to a corpse in coffin, as well as to medieval Christian figures of female saints in a pietistic gesture of complete surrender to the divine. Both references illuminate this experience as proximate to dying (either as a transitional or unifying figuration of the body). This re-inscribes the feminine subject of the film through a relation of submission or capitulation to nature (wilderness) to the point of inseparability and indistinction from it. The scene of her bodily surrender to wilderness or, in Deleuzian language, "becoming nature," marks a moment of breakthrough in her therapy (it is thus telling that von Trier saturates it with both deathly and saintly connotations; the female subject seems to once die in, and transcend, the masculine rationalistic and psychological discourse). Viewing the scene from the perspective of the male protagonist, it appears to signify an overcoming of psychic indisposition. However, the scene also operates as a surprising narrative hinge: it is when the interdiction is violated—and the villain enters the story.

The first identification of the villain is made in a subsequent therapy session when She makes a demonic reference in an unanticipated constative sentence: "Nature is Satan's church." What is interesting about this statement is its unclear intentional status. Within the discourse of cognitive therapy, by unlocking her repressed memories and emotions, She is accessing, at the level of consciousness, a triadic nexus of nature, demonic force, and the death of the child. This nexus forms a connection between three, thus far separate, psychic events: the inscrutable and threatening surroundings of the forest; her readings in the history of religious misogyny; and an accident when She loses the child in the woods a year before his death (codes as a proleptic traumatic event, which foreshadows and prefigures his demise).

However, the inconclusive and ambiguous signification introduces into the cinematic plot a new possibility. Contrary to the beliefs of the male protagonists, who interprets the words "Nature is Satan's church" as a confirmation that She rationalizes and regains control over her traumatic memories, this odd statement is interpreted as a disclosure of a secret knowledge, which introduces demonic element into their relations. Similarly to Sontag's "pornographic knowledge," the statement gestures beyond, and thus disrupts, the rational therapeutic discourse. Rather than being constative or representative of certain traumatic entanglement, her speech becomes a linguistic performance, or a metaphysical enactment, which creates an immediate change of the ontic status of the female subject. As such, the statement resembles a magical speech act as it brings into existence a *new* reality by the force of the linguistic appearance. It remains unclear how She has gained access to this knowledge, or what is the source of its revelation, and what exactly is the position of epistemic power that She comes to inhabit in the act of magical utterance. The unresolved and cryptic status of this single statement in the film institutes ambiguity regarding her cosmological position vis-à-vis the natural and the demonic realms, which coincide in the statement "Nature is Satan's church." What is enacted and established, rather tentatively, and what spurs violent events in the subsequent part of the film, is thus the nexus of indistinction between the natural, the demonic, and the feminine. In other words, in this scene both the natural and the demonic are coded *in relation to* the gendered corporeality of the female protagonist.

From the perspective of how the male subject operates in *Antichrist* (i.e. as representative of myopic and reductive ways of perceiving and ordering the world), this gendered indistinction between the human and the non-human (natural/demonic) is significant insofar as von Trier's coding of the masculine topos in the film must ultimately capitulate vis-à-vis the powers and threats of femininity—that is the uncompartmentalised realm of nature, gender, and sacrality. At one level, von Trier returns here to a theme already explored in the "Goldheart trilogy," which is that gendered relations reflect particular ways of ordering and disciplining profoundly incompatible worlds and are framed by historically-situated forms of violence. At another level, however, *Antichrist* drives further the exploration which was already initiated in *Dogville*, with its female figuration of an apocalyptic and justice-oriented violence.[51] The violence that She undertakes in *Antichrist* is not unlike the Benjaminian "divine violence,"[52] as it rebels against any forms of gendered victimization, and seeks to intercept and cancel the rationalizing powers of masculinity.

DEMONIC AMBIGUITIES

What makes *Antichrist* quite unlike a conventional horror film is, *inter alia*, the lack of clarity about the villainous intent, or demonic agency, of the female protagonist. There is only an accumulation of hints, insinuations, and possibilities. *She can always be otherwise*—never unambiguously demonic, but always also a grieving and traumatised mother.

This aporetic coexistence of (seemingly) incompatible scenarios is maintained even in moments that position Her as the character of the "evil mother." First, in a scene that bears a striking example to folk tales about the evil step-mother, He discovers, in the pictures of their toddler, taken approximately a year before the accident, that She might have been deliberately mixing his right and left shoes. This had led to his tarsal disfigurement, causing discomfort and instability, and ultimately compromising his ability to walk (which might have contributed to the son's fatal accident). The autopsy report indicates that the bones in toddler's feet were

deformed. Second, towards the end of the movie there is a flashback to the initial slow-motion and black-and-white scene—the simultaneous scene of the parents' love and the child's death—in which (now) an additional element is supplied. Engaged in a sexual act, in a supine position on the floor, She turns her head and is not facing her partner (who is oblivious to the toddler climbing the window), but turned to the side. Gazing straight at the camera, through the open door She sees the child climb the window and fall.

Thomsen argues, in reference to that opening scene, that:

> This endlessly beautiful series of virtual time, which is presented to the spectator at the beginning of *Antichrist*, … is shown as mythical time towards the end. It is a non-individual time, a non-anchored, non-materialised, anti-sensory-motorical time …. As the two pictures of the woman's being—possessed with her eyes closed or aware of what is happening with her eyes open—exist side by side, *Antichrist* makes it impossible to know what is true and who is guilty.[53]

In that scene there remains, Thomsen argues further, a "built-in doubleness: because all peaks of present cannot be true at the same time, but on the other hand, they remain intertwined to a degree that makes it impossible to make a distinction between them."[54] She oscillates between the possible identifications, or interpretations, of the evil mother and demonic vehicle—witch or maenad; a promiscuous woman, who remains unrestrained and uncontrollable in her sexual and aggressive allegorisation of nature and wilderness ("she puts her own lust as before her feelings as a mother");[55] mad with uncontrollable grief for the loss of her child and with anxiety for being abandoned by her partner; and a self-punishing, self-abnegating, and self-mutilating woman. The significance of this new gendered figuration of ambiguity in von Trier's cinema, or, as Thomsen puts it, its "virtuality" or "potentiality," is that it articulates a particular *dogma* of *Antichrist*: She must ultimately remain indeterminate, uncategorised, and in possession of the multiple possibilities. She must remain un-disciplined by the linear ordering forces of masculinity, which, perhaps, the viewer comes to recognize as integral to her/his own desire vis-à-vis Her pornographic "non-identity."[56]

IN CONCLUSION, TRINITY OF VIOLENCE: BESS, GRACE, SHE…

Read as von Trier's re-telling of the myth of originary transgression and of the founding operations of violence, *Antichrist* forms an interesting dialectic with the gendered thematic of power and alterity in von Trier's earlier films,[57] especially in regard to the sacralised femininities in *Breaking the Waves* and *Dogville*. Both Bess and Grace are "idealist outsider[s]," who are also indicative of a striking "excess of virtue," and who are "summoned into being as the fundamental invention that consolidates group identity."[58] These female figurations have a key place in communal relations of power, which gradually "shade, or even explode, into sadism." In *Breaking the Waves*, the Christ-like Bess, in her loving surrender to another, transgresses the community's law and practices self-sacrificial giving and patriarchal devotion, to the point of her abnegation and death. In *Dogville*, Grace ultimately defies the vortex of self-sacrificial love, and undertakes an "enigmatic and excessive" gesture of divine violence (as Costica Bradatan suggests, she becomes a gendered embodiment of *Deus ludens*).[59] Through her enactment of apocalyptic violence, Grace "breaks the cycle of envy, hatred, and inequality [perpetuated in] all stable and regulated social exchange."[60]

In von Trier's (not-quite) horror film, Bess and Grace encounter the Anti-Christ of Her. Through an "untamed erotic and aggressive aesthetic without redemption"[61] von Trier creates a radically different heroine, which is partly, due to her strong connectivity to—and, indeed, an *indistinction* from—the other-than-human (natural/demonic) subject. Located within the prelapsarian space of wilderness and Eden, She is situated beyond the rationalizing and therapeutic laws of patriarchy. She evades the powers of masculine discipline, thus remaining untouched by its work of structural-linguistic violence and does not internalise and exhibit Nietzschean "bad conscience." Compared to Bess and Grace, She is *beyond* the possibilities of sacrificial destruction of the body for the "preservation, protection, and healing [of] the body of another,"[62] which was so central to von Trier's earlier renditions of femininity and its redemptive and salvific promise.

The reading of *Antichrist* offered in this paper as a performance and an affective transcoding of gender and species, points to its generative potential in subverting the larger economy of not only masculine, but also anthropocentric domination. As such, this reading dovetails with Gordon's attempts to complicate the feminist critique of von Trier's cinema as "oppressive," by questioning whether there can be any "easy distinction between objects that are either 'good' or 'bad' for feminism."[63] Suzy Gordon shows that in the case of Bess from *Breaking the Waves*, just as love and violence form non-oppositional spaces, but are interconnected and cross-fertilising, so do gendered subjectivity and gendered dispossession mutually sustain each other. As Gordon convincingly argues, in *Breaking the Waves*, Bess' "love can barely conceal the violence and aggression that sustains it," as "the film depends as much on Bess' belief in her destructive powers as on her powers of reparation."

In his demonising and animalising figurations of female subjectivity in *Antichrist*, and in his provocative rendition of the transgressive origins of the human subject, von Trier makes an artistic, and, I suggest, politically significant, gesture, which could be described, with some intended exaggeration, as an experiment in countering an anthropocentric cinematic perspective. This paper has interpreted *Antichrist* as the product an of non-anthropocentric cinematic imagination not because of any sacred, mysterious and metaphysical *conjunction* between the human and the other-than-human in the figure of Her, but because of its poignant demonstration of what is at stake—subjectively, ethically, politically—in drawing a *separation* between these two. The significance of the female figuration in *Antichrist* rests in her uncompromising resistance to any forms of violence and victimisation implied in this separation. Notably, the acts of destruction and mutilation that She undertakes (and undergoes) in the film *do no redemptive work* and *offer no salvific promise*, but they also point beyond (by a way of confronting) the Sadean pleasure of the spectator. These acts of violence do not signify any outside of themselves, or outside of the immediacy of their execution. She becomes an ethical agent in a different sense than the female characters in von Trier's earlier films, insofar as She asserts herself as free from the forms of self-victimising and self-destructive love that were co-constitutive of the "Christ" of Bess. She is an Anti-Christ not in being an adversary or oppositional relation to Christ,[64] but in a literal sense of coming "in the place of" Christ. If Bess is an emancipatory promise, She is its fulfillment. She subjects herself to violence, commits violence as a site of resistance and of love, and undergoes transformation through violence, while denying femininity as a site of redemption.

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NOTES

1. Many thanks to Robert Sinnerbrink for fascinating discussions of von Trier's *Antichrist*, and for his useful comments on the earlier version of this paper. I also want to thank those who gave comments and raised questions at the occasion of presenting this paper at the 2010 conference of the Australasian Society for Continental Philosophy in Brisbane (Geoff Boucher, Simone Drichel, Fiona Jenkins); and at the 2010 In-House Conversations at University of Western Sydney (Emilian Kavalski, Mridula Nath Chakraborty, Gerda Roelvink, Allison Weir); as well as the editors of the special issue, Marguerite La Caze and Martyn Lloyd, and the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful and helpful comments.

2. For (critical) theological readings of von Trier's cinema see: e.g. Linda Mercadante, "Bess the Christ Figure?: Theological Interpretations of *Breaking the Waves*," *Journal of Religion and Film*, 5.1, (2001); Michael P. Murphy: "Breaking the Waves," in Michael P. Murphy, *A Theology of Criticism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 91-126; Carleen Mandolfo, "Women, Suffering and Redemption in Three Films of Lars von Trier," *Literature and Theology*, 24.3, (2010): 285-300.

3. Joanna Bourke in Xan Brooks, "Antichrist: a Work of Genius or the Sickest Film in the History of Cinema?" *The Guardian*, July 16, 2009, accessed on 27 March 2011 (*my emphasis*).

4. Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites. American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 17 (*my paraphrase*).

5. Lars von Trier at http://www.antichristthemovie.com, accessed on 26 Dec 2009.

6. The films of Lars von Trier are interpreted as belonging to the 'anti-psychological' tradition of cinema in that his protagonists' actions and motivations resist psychological explanation, and figure instead as projections of mythological and theological allegories.

7. I thank one of the reviewers for pointing this representational dynamic in von Trier's film. The argument that von Trier's films raise questions about the stakes of the contemporary medialisation of violence in all its diverse genres and forms, suggests their proximity to what has been at the heart of, for example, Michael Haneke's cinema. For an in-depth exploration of the "traumatizing" quality of *Antichrist* see: Robert Sinnerbrink, "'Chaos Reigns': Anti-cognitivism in Lars von Trier's *Antichrist*" in Robert Sinnerbrink, *New Philosophies of Film. Thinking Images*, (New York: Continuum, 2011).

8. See for example: Angela Tumini, "Eros and Thanatos: The Murderous Struggle of Pain and Desire in Gabriele D'Annunzio's *Triumph of Death* and in Lars von Trier's *Antichrist*," in Jane Fernandez, ed., *Making Sense of Pain: Critical and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2010), 165-172.

9. Nina Power in "Antichrist: A Discussion," *Film Quarterly* 22 May 2011.

10. Suzy Gordon, "*Breaking the Waves* and the Negativity of Melanie Klein: Rethinking 'the Female Spectator'," *Screen*, 45.3, (2004): 206-225.

11. Gordon "*Breaking the Waves…*" (*my paraphrase*).

12. Julie Bindel in Xan Brooks, "Antichrist…"

13. In approaching *Antichrist* as a trauma film I am particularly indebted to Robert Sinnerbrink's reading of its affective force.

14. Govedic, Natasa, "What a Wonderful Fascism: Claiming the Real in Lars von Trier and Dogma 95," *Filozofski Vestnik*, 23.3, (2002)" 167-178.

15. Linda Badley, *Lars von Trier*, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 6.

16. Foster Hal, *The Return of the Real: the Avant-garde at the End of the Century*, (Cambridge: the MIT Press, 1996).

17. Badley, *Lars…*, 15.

18. Badley, *Lars…*, 16.

19. Caroline Bainbridge, "Making Waves: Trauma and Ethics in the Work of Lars von Trier," *Journal for Cultural Research*, 8.3, (2004): 353-370.

20. Badley, *Lars…*, 6.

21. Bainbridge, "Making…" 353. See also Gavin Smith, "Imitation of Life," *Film Comment*, 36.5, (2000): 22-26.

22. For the theoretical cross-coding of affect and transmission on which I draw conceptually see: e.g. Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

23. Gillian Wearing in Xan Brooks, "Antichrist…"

24. Joanne Bourke and Gillian Wearing in Xan Brooks, "Antichrist…"

25. Joanne Bourke in Xan Brooks, "Antichrist…"; Badley, *Lars…*

26. Numerous authors have noted the connection between von Trier's cinematic work and his (often mythologized) public identity in narratives of psychological damage, anxieties, moments of crisis and traumatic personal history. Badley notes in particular the importance of therapy and psychoanalysis in the "myth of Lars von Trier" as he "uses therapeutic language to explain himself to himself and to others." Badley, *Lars…,* 6.

27. Lars von Trier, "Director's Confession," at http://www.antichristthemovie.com, 9 May 2009, accessed on 26 Dec 2009.

28. The statement also makes reference to Strindberg's creative psychosis as von Trier's artistic inspirations.

29. Joanne Bourke in Xan Brooks, "Antichrist…"

30. Charlotte Gainsbourg, "De overlevede Antikrist - og von Trier," *Politiken*, 23 May 2009 (*my translation, emphasis in original*).

31.Carleen Mandolfo, "Women, Suffering and Redemption in Three Films of Lars Von Trier," *Literature and Theology*, 24.3,(2010): 285-300, 290.

32. See: e.g. Robert Sinnebrink, *New Philosophies of Film: Thinking Images*, (New York: Continuum, 2011).

33. Susan Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will*, (London: Picador, 1969).

34. Sontag, "The Pornographic…"

35. Lars von Trier in Jonathan Crocker, "RT Interview: Lars von Trier on *Antichrist*," *Rotten Tomatoes* 29 July 2009.

36. Cary Wolfe, "Introduction," Cary Wolfe, ed., *Zoontologies*, (Minnesota: Minnesota University Press, 2003).

37. W.J.T. Mitchell, "Preface," Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites. American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

38. Bodil Marie Stavning Thomsen, "*Antichrist*—Chaos Reigns: the Event of Violence and the Haptic Image in Lars von Trier's Film," *Journal of Aesthetic and Culture*, (2009): 1-10, 3.

39. I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for suggesting reference to the idea of abomination.

40. Cf. Nina Power in "Antichrist: A Discussion."

41. Thomsen, "*Antichrist…*" 9.

42. Thomsen, "*Antichrist…*" 1.

43. Thomsen, "*Antichrist…*" 1.

44. Lars von Trier, dir., *Antichrist* (2009).

45. Giorgio Agamben, *The Open. Man and Animal*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

46. Many thanks to the anonymous reviewers for helping me to spell out the dialectical connections and tensions between these two interpretative approaches.

47. See e.g. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, "An Inventory of Shimmers," Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Duke University Press, Durham, 2010).

48. Sontag, "The Pornographic…"

49. Wayne Tunnicliffe, *Wilderness,* (Sydney: NSW Gallery, 2010).

50. Tunnicliffe, *Wilderness…*

51. Mandolfo, "Women…"

52. Benjamin, Walter, "Critique of Violence," Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, eds., *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004).

53. Thomsen, "*Antichrist…*" p.9.

54. Thomsen, "*Antichrist…*" p.8.

55. Thomsen, "*Antichrist…*" p.9.

56. Thomsen, "*Antichrist…*" p.9.

57. See: e.g. Brian Michael Goss, *Global Auteurs. Politics in the Films of Almodovar, Von Trier and Winterbottom*, (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2009).

58. Goss, *Global...*

59. Bradatan, Costica, "'I Was a Stranger, and Ye Took Me Not In': Deus Ludens and Theology of Hospitality in Lars von Trier's *Dogville*," *Journal of European Studies*, 39.1, (2009) 58-78.

60. Nobus, Dany, "The Politics of Gift-Giving and the Provocation of Lars von Trier's *Dogville*," *Film Philosophy*, 11.3, (2007): 23-37.

61. Bourke in Xan Brooks, "Antichrist…"

62. Mcloughlin, Becky, "Playing Ball with God: Breaking the Law in *Breaking the Waves*," *Textual Ethos Studies*, 26, (2005) 85-100.

63. Gordon "*Breaking the Waves*…"

64. Nina Power in "Antichrist: A Discussion" even suggests that "[i]n some respects, *Antichrist* is a misleading title, implying a simple reversal of the Christian opposition between good and evil."