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Gitte Buch-Hansen

Lars von Trier's Antichrist, the Bible, and Docetic Masculinity

Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009) has been criticised by feminists for its perceived misogyny. This interpretation ignores the long afterlife of the biblical figure of the Antichrist, which is more complex than its traces in contemporary popular culture would suggest. Reading the film into the reception history of the Antichrist, drawing on both contemporary scholars and Friedrich Nietzsche—whose virulent critique of Christianity, *Der Antichrist*, has long been on the director's bedside table—I argue that von Trier uses the figure to paint a scathing, even shocking, critique of masculinity as inscribed in the creeds of the early Church. The three interrelated poles of my analysis—the biblical, the aesthetic and the Nietzschean—all point in the same direction: *Antichrist* is not a film about the dangerous female psyche, but about a masculinity that has gone astray—or, to borrow a term from theological discourse, become "docetic."

Gitte Buch-Hansen is Associate Professor of New Testament Exegesis in the Faculty of Theology, at the University of Oslo.

Prologue

A hairy arm stretches forward and opens the tap in the shower. Then we are presented with the whole person, we see His face, intense but open. Is this a photograph projected onto the screen or is the motion simply too slow for us to register? We see Him seeing someone: Her. The water pours down on Her introverted face. Slowly she lifts Her eyes. The picture changes; it is a moving image, after all. We see Him seeing Her glancing at Him. We watch Her face, Her excitement, Her pleasure. We watch His neck, His back, His buttocks; we sense and then see, in graphic detail, His penetration of Her body.

The Prologue to Lars von Trier's 2009 film *Antichrist* introduces the characters of the story: an unnamed couple, a He and a She[1] having sex in a bathroom. The scene is shot and composed very deliberately in stark black and white (Figure 1). Everything is shown in extreme slow motion, even the penetration, which is displayed in pornographic close-up. The sound design, however, is not the heavy breathing of porn movies. Instead, Händel's aria "Lascia ch'io pianga" ("Leave me to weep") from the opera *Rinaldo* accompanies the couple's wet, weightless movements. While the parents are wrapped up in each other's bodies, their toddler wakes up. In the same slow-motion style, the boy leaves his bed, pushes the baby-gate aside, gazes upon his parents' pleasure and returns to the playroom. Does She see him? The film implies that she might. Outside it is snowing. The child climbs a chair in front of a half-open window and pushes his teddy bear out into the night. His delight at the falling toy between the snowflakes blends with the orgiastic pleasure of his parents—and he follows the bear in its descent to the frozen sidewalk below. This is the horrifying, pleasurable, beautiful beginning. This is the Fall.

Introduction

Von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009) is a psychological drama about the couple's different responses to the loss of their child. Whereas the woman (played by Charlotte Gainsbourg) is paralysed by grief and guilt, her husband (Willem

[1] In the film, neither of the two main characters are given names; however, in all of the publicity material related to the film they are known as He and She. *Antichrist*, dir. Lars von Trier, 108 min. (Zentropa Entertainments, 2009). All images from the film are frame captures from the DVD release.

Figure 1

Dafoe) uses his skills as a cognitive therapist to cope with the situation. In spite of warnings, the couple gives up on professional psychiatry and leaves their unnamed city for a therapeutic holiday at Eden, their cabin in a distant forest. As is perhaps to be expected, the therapy goes disastrously astray and turns into a nightmare of violence, ending in murder. Critics have taken the film to task for being psychologically unrealistic, but if *Antichrist* had remained within the scope of the realist drama, it could have been just another film on a well-known theme.[2] But when a fox feeding on its own intestines addresses the man and tells him in a human voice that "Chaos reigns" at the end of the film's second chapter, "Chapter Two: Pain (Chaos Reigns)," the realism cracks. The film turns into a symbolic piece of art that mingles this particular story with the grand narrative of historical misogyny. When the woman is burned at the stake outside the cabin, at the end of the film, the scene abounds with references to Carl Theodor Dreyer's iconic films *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928)[3] and *Day of Wrath* (1943).[4] Thus the couple's therapeutic project is inscribed into the history of the Inquisition, with its exorcisms and witch-burnings, while the biblical narrative of the Fall reverberates in the disaster at von Trier's Eden.

[2] The theme is excellently treated in, for example, Todd Field's *In the Bedroom*, 130 min. (Eastern Standard Film Company, 2001).

[3] *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, dir. Carl Theodor Dreyer, 110 min. (Société générale des films, 1928).

[4] *Day of Wrath*, dir. Carl Theodor Dreyer (uncredited), 97 min. (Palladium Productions, 1943).

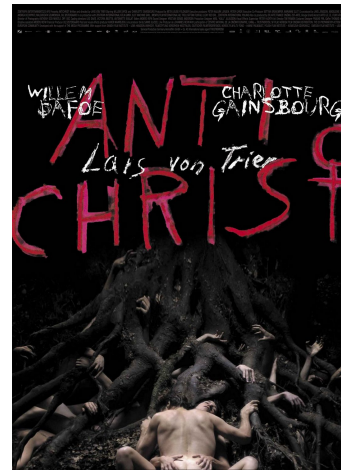

Figure 2

Antichrist confirmed many feminist critics in their judgment of Lars von Trier and many argued that the film was yet another movie determined by von Trier's personal misogyny.[5] The use of the sign for the female (♀) as a letter in the title, as it appeared in many advertising images (Figure 2), forced the identification of the label *Antichris*♀ not only with the film's female protagonist, but with women in general. The director of the Danish Centre for Information on Gender, Equality and Ethnicity (*Kvinfo*), Elisabeth M. Jensen, declared that the film "confirms and legitimizes sexual violence against women" and was, in addition, "an assault … a kind of cultural sexual harassment in public space."[6] Scandinavian feminists applauded Jensen's review of the film: "The final murder of the woman is depicted with a pornographic love-making camera. With the very same gaze that in the beginning of the film exposed the couple's intercourse, the strangulation allows

[5] The victimisation of the female characters in von Trier's Golden Heart Trilogy—*Breaking the Waves*, 159 min. (Argus Film Produktie, 1996), *The Idiots*, 117 min. (Zentropa Entertainments, 1998) and *Dancer in the Dark*, 140 min. (Zentropa Entertainments, 2000)—have especially attracted feminist critique. These critics argue that the films' martyring of the female protagonists canonises conservative gender politics. Their victimisation traps these women in a catch–22 between selfish desire and self-sacrifice. Seemingly, the healthy middle course that allows women a subjectivity of their own is not an option in von Trier's films. Although a number of film critics have seen the female characters in the Golden Heart Trilogy as Christ figures, feminist theologians have been reluctant to accept the identification. Arnfríður Guðmundsdóttir argues that von Trier's film "exemplifies what feminist theologians have justly labeled an *abuse* of the cross, that is, when the cross of Christ has been used to justify the suffering of the powerless in the past, which have so often been women" ("Female Christ-figures in Films: A Feminist Critical Analysis of *Breaking the Waves* and *Dead Man Walking*," *Studia Theologica* 56, no. 1 (2002): 35).

[6] Elisabeth Møller Jensen, "Brænd heksen!" *Forum*, June 22, 2009, http://www.kvinfo.dk/side/562/article/892, my translation. As well as being a review of von Trier's film, "Brænd heksen!" ("Burn the Witch!"), published in the Danish liberal newspaper, *Politiken* (June 23, 2009), is a comment on the Nordic midsummer tradition of celebrating Sankt Hans (Sancta John) with the symbolic burning of witches.

Figure 3

the audience to enjoy how life is squeezed out of the wicked woman."[7] Reviewers—male and female alike—criticised the film as intentionally provocative and unnecessarily violent, and the film was said to be the work of a monstrous (if still intelligent) mind. Elizabeth Castelli concludes that

> *Antichrist* is an instance of torture porn, but with the narrative twist that She is the captor, the author of grotesque acts of violence, and the perpetrator of sexual mutilations. The result is a blend of sophomoric gender politics, cinematic mastery, and a certain shrewd knowingness that generates reactions and dismisses them in the same gesture.[8]

The reviews of the film seemed written in the same splattering blood that shockingly interrupts the film's cool, blue-green tone as the woman mutilates her husband's genitals and later her own. In fact, for many critics, only the exceptional visual quality seemed to distinguish the film from the genres of pornography and horror, or even the "splatter" sub-genre of horror films.

Antichrist oscillates between the now-infamous scenes of sex and violence and beautiful, dream-like sequences, as when She moves like a fairy though the misty, blue-green forest surrounding the cabin at Eden (Figure 3).

[7] Maria Sveland and Katarina Wennstam, "von Triers dogmatiska kvinnohat," *Dagens Nyheter*, July 28, 2009, my translation, http://www.dn.se/kultur-noje/debatt-essa/von-triers-dogmatiska-kvinnohat-1.919438.

[8] Elizabeth A. Castelli, "Slouching Toward Copenhagen: Elizabeth A. Castelli on Lars von Trier's Antichrist," *Artforum International*, October 2009, no. 2, 81–82.

The dream-like sequences bring the atmosphere of Caspar David Friedrich's (1774–1840) symbolic paintings into the film. In fact von Trier has admitted that—although he personally hates the genre—*Antichrist* is a symbolic film.[9] As in Friedrich's enigmatic Romantic landscapes, the dreamy images from the forest around Eden project the inner experience of … well, of whom? Of the woman? Or of the man? Of von Trier himself? This was the tricky question facing critics and audiences in the wake of the opening night at the Cannes Film Festival in 2009, where *Antichrist* had its debut. The film was awarded an *ad hoc* anti-prize by the Ecumenical Jury, which hands out a prize to a Cannes film that celebrates spiritual values. The Jury proclaimed the film as "the most misogynist movie from the self-proclaimed biggest director in the world."[10] Did von Trier deserve that prize?[11] Was he just screening and dis-

[9] Von Trier has been exceptionally open about this film—see e.g., Peter Schepelern's interview in the Danish film magazine *Ekko*, May 2009, http://www.ekkofilm.dk/interviews.asp?table=interviews&viewall=true&id=102.

[10] "'Anti-prize' for Lars von Trier's 'misogynist' movie," *France 24*, May 24, 2009, http://www.france24.com/en/20090524-lars-von-trier-antichrist-misogynist-movie-prize-cannes-film-festival-ecumenical-jury.

[11] Scholars of religion/theology differ in their assessment of von Trier's films, especially the Golden Heart trilogy. A few critics have claimed that the films' sympathy with the female characters has a critical ring to it. For example, Kyle Keefer and Tod Linafelt interpret von Trier's film in light of Georges Bataille's analysis of the relationship between Eros, death, and sacrifice, drawing attention to the fact that Bataille was critical of institutionalised sacrifice: "because the sacrificial victim must be something or someone from within the community that is carrying out the sacrifice and must be of value to that community, the act of sacrifice becomes for Bataille an act of recklessness, an act that depletes the life of the community" ("The End of Desire: Theologies of Eros in the Song of Songs and *Breaking the Waves*," in *Imag(in)ing Otherness: Filmic Visions of Living Together*, ed. S. Brent Plate and David Jasper, American Academy of Religion Cultural Criticism Series 7 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 57). Irena S. M. Makarushka refuses to see Bess as a martyr; instead she argues that, "von Trier's eroticization of Bess's religious faith as well as his sacramentalization of her sexual intimacy with Jan affirms the transgressive nature of Bess's goodness as it condemns the self-righteousness [*sic*] dogmatism of the church elders" ("Transgressing Goodness in *Breaking the Waves*," in Plate and Jasper, ed., *Imag(in)ing Otherness*, 78). However, Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele find that "Bess and Selma stay safely within the boundaries of such traditional female roles as nourishing woman, submissive wife, and sacrificing mother" ("The Tyranny of the Martyr: Violence and Victimisation in Martyrdom Discourse and the Movies of Lars von Trier," *Queen: a Journal of Rhetoric and Power* (2003): 18, http://www.ars-rhetorica.net/Queen/VolumeSpecialIssue4/Articles/PennerStichele.pdf). Alyda Faber is likewise critical of these attempts to find subversive potential in von Trier's films. She draws attention to Julia Kristeva's understanding of the "phallic idealization of Woman" as "her embodiment of the undomesticated 'outside' of culture" ("Redeeming Sexual Violence? A Feminist Reading of *Breaking the Waves*," *Literature & Theology* 17, no. 1 (2003): 66). Consequently, but against Makarushka, she sees nothing "transgressive" in Bess's "ab-

seminating his own alleged misogyny? Or is he unveiling and criticising the misogynist gaze of our time and history?[12] These questions can be reframed in terms of the film's title: to be or not to be the Antichrist … To whom does the film give the label "Antichrist"? Although critics—male and female alike—have univocally seen the woman as the obvious candidate, the answer is not that straightforward if we take the biblical sources of the concept of the Antichrist into consideration. Furthermore, if we also take into account the long cultural reception of the figure of the Antichrist, the answer becomes even more complicated.

Throughout history, the Antichrist has been an overwhelmingly negative figure, but in Nietzsche's critique of Christianity the figure is reinterpreted polemically and given a positive value. Consequently, reading the film through Nietzsche's reception of the biblical figure, She may still be labeled "Antichrist," but now this label can acquire a positive ring. In fact, von Trier, who generally refuses to comment on his films, has in the case of *Antichrist* provided an interpretive key: *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche's criticism of Christianity, was on his bedside table while he was working on the manuscript.[13]

jected" behavior. She also argues, again with Kristeva, that Keefer and Linafelt neglect the misogyny implicit in Bataille's theory of Eros: the erotic powers of "transgression, fleshly ecstasy, bodily disintegration" are gendered female and when a society attempts to bring these forces under control, it is the female body that is sacrificed: "They [Keefer and Linafelt] fail to observe [that] … von Trier, like Bataille, leaves gender differences as though they cannot be undone" (62). However, this observation is precisely where I think that *Antichrist* differs from von Trier's earlier films: this is a film about masculinity and its urgent need of being "undone."

[12] Bodil M. Stavning Thomsen ("Antichrist—Chaos Reigns: the event of violence and the haptic image in Lars von Trier's film," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 1 (2009): 6), on the one hand, agrees that the film's link between victimisation and the female character is problematic, but then, on the other, suggests that *Antichrist*—as well as von Trier's other films—should be seen as analytical and diagnostic:

> That the man/the devil kills in cold blood in the very moment that she regrets what she has done, and that (as almost always in patriarchy) the victim is female, is what is most unsupportable about the film. This is without any doubt also the most important cause for the feminist criticism, which has arisen in many countries. But it might also be regarded as Trier's commentary to our times, when women as well as other manifestations of the Other are killed and sacrificed, just like in the time of the witch trials—without any new order of society arising to replace it.

[13] Peter Schepelern, "Hvisken og Råb," (Interview with Lars von Trier), *Ekko*, May 2009, http://www.ekkofilm.dk/interviews.asp?table=interviews&viewall=true&id=102.

Where von Trier's films begin and end is a matter of ongoing debate; all the fuss that the director creates around his films inevitably functions as a form of stage directions, which are difficult to ignore.

In this article, I shall argue that von Trier's *Antichrist* is not a film about the female psyche; rather it should be seen as a film that is critical towards forms of masculinity which have lost their relation to the body and have, to use a term from theological discourse about the Antichrist, become "docetic." In line with Nietzsche's Antichrist, the film critiques the role Christianity has played in the formation of a deeply misogynist culture. Von Trier's *Antichrist* is a sophisticated film, with regard to content as well as form. In order to come to terms with this complexity, I am approaching the film from three different perspectives. In the first part, I analyze the film's aesthetics. I examine how the choice of genre(s) and von Trier's deployment of cinematic language interact with the audience and with the film's themes. In the analysis, I have recourse to Slavoj Žižek's account of the gaze in different filmic genres and to Gilles Deleuze's concepts of *haptic* and *optic* imagery as these are developed into an aesthetic theory of haptic criticism by Laura Marks in her fine 2002 book *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*.[14] In the second part, I take a close look at the biblical concept of the Antichrist and examine its relation to the historical heresy of Docetism. Here I engage with Virginia Burrus and her deconstructive reflections on the formation of Christian dogmata in her book *Begotten, not Made: Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (2000). From this perspective, I offer a symbolic re-interpretation of the couple's therapeutic trip to Eden. Homi Bhabha's concept of the *enunciatory present*, as introduced in his book *The Location of Culture* (1994) proves very useful in this part of the analysis. In the third part, I examine how von Trier's hint that *Antichrist* owes a debt to Nietzsche may shed light on the film's aesthetics and semantics. These three approaches—the analyses of the film's cinematic language, its biblical echoes, and its philosophical references—are three riffs on the same theme; the analyses converge in the same idea, namely that the *Antichrist* is a film about the fatal formation of masculine identity that is particular to the Christian tradition as it relates to the figure of the Antichrist.[15]

[14] Thomsen also uses Deleuze's cinematic concepts in her analysis of the film.

[15] One cannot help seeing the casting of Willem Dafoe, who played Jesus in Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, 164 min. (Universal Pictures, 1988), as part of the fuzzy stage directions that von Trier provided for *Antichrist*'s audience. Scorsese's Jesus was a kind of anti-Christ in the sense that he rejected God's plan for salvation in favour of the life of an

Part I. The aesthetics of *Antichrist*

In spite of their different interpretations and evaluations of *Antichrist*, critics have universally praised the film's exceptional visual quality. Few, however, have been capable of putting the aesthetic impression into words (apart from "beautiful," "impressive," and, of course, "disgusting"), and analysing the way the film affects its audience. Even fewer have tried to explain how the film's visual qualities interact with its symbolic universe.[16] Slavoj Žižek's Lacanian analysis of the cinematic gaze may shed light on the role of the gaze in the film's Prologue while Laura Marks's Deleuzian theory of haptic visuality may prove illuminating with regard to the function or effect of the film's extreme close-ups, slow-motion sequences, and its use of images of microscopic organic material.

Slavoj Žižek: the cinematic gaze

In the film's Prologue, we see Him seeing Her glancing at Him (Figure 4). We watch Her face, Her excitement, Her pleasure. We see His neck, His back, His buttocks; we sense His penetration of Her body. The orchestration of sight plays an important role in the opening of the film, but what is at stake between the couple and between the screen and the audience?

In his 2000 article "Looking Awry," Žižek suggests that Lacan's psychoanalytical distinction between gaze and seeing may be useful in analyses of film.[17] According to Lacan, the psyche that characterises the healthy person is capable of managing the small-scale schizophrenia in which a person sees him- or herself as the object of another's gaze. The continuous negotiation

ordinary man in an extended family with the various Marys of the Gospels. Confronted by the apostle Paul, who preaches "Christ crucified and resurrected," Scorsese's Jesus confesses: "I live like a man now. I work, eat, I have children. I am enjoying my life. For the first time, I'm enjoying it. So don't go around telling lies about me." However, in the end of Scorsese's film, as at the ending of the Nikos Kazantzakis novel from which it is adapted, Judas suggests to Jesus that the Devil has played a trick on him and that it is Jesus who has betrayed God's plan for humanity. Jesus, filled with regret, leaves his family behind and returns to Golgotha outside a burning Jerusalem. He asks God to receive him as his (prodigal) son and is crucified. After a brief and imaginary sojourn as an anti-Christ figure, the carpenter from Nazareth becomes Paul's Christ and John's divine λόγος.

[16] Thomsen, "Antichrist—Chaos Reigns" provides one interesting exception to this tendency.

[17] Slavoj Žižek, "Looking Awry," in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Robert Stam and Toby Miller (Malden: Blackwell, 2000), 524–538.

Figure 4

of one's own seeing with the other's gaze constitutes the make-up of socially healthy persons. Whereas the psychopathic psyche identifies the gaze of the other with *his* own seeing, the imbalance is changed in the perverse psyche who cannot but mirror *herself* in the gaze of the other. The gendering is intended, since psychopathy is predominantly a male malfunctioning while the neurotically perverse psyche is primarily a female failure. In the end, seeing without the other's gaze is the privilege of the omnipotent and omniscient divine λόγος. The psychopath who cannot imagine that a different perspective on shared events exists, aspires—however falsely—to the godly way of seeing.

In a conventional narrative film, the story is generally told and the film shot from a specific point of view. The audience sees someone watching something; they only get the story at second hand, so to speak. When we

feel absorbed in a movie, it is because we are capable of incorporating the gaze of the film and identifying with its point of view; in the case of such identification, the viewer does not feel the displacement between the cinematic gaze and their own seeing. According to Žižek, pornographic movies are characterised by the collapse of gaze and sight.[18] In porn and "splatter" movies there is no gaze, no point of view—only the naked act of seeing. It is this collapse of gaze and seeing that distinguishes the thriller from horror/splatter and the romance from pornography. In the thriller and the romance, meaning originates from scenes that are only implied by the cinematic gaze, but not shown or seen explicitly. In horror movies and in pornography, Žižek argues, the opposite is the case. Everything is shown and there is no meaning apart from the fact that someone is watching what takes place on the screen. In porn and horror films, the cinematic real belongs to the real-time viewer; any attempt to add a story always appears awkwardly out of place.[19]

Cineastes have pointed to the parallel between *Antichrist*'s Prologue and the famed shower scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*.[20] In *Psycho*, the woman's body is penetrated in the shower by her murderer's (phallic) knife; in *Antichrist*, the female body is penetrated by her husband's (murderous) phallus. The obvious intertextual allusion suggests that somehow this man will also be her murderer. But from an aesthetic point of view the two scenes differ greatly. In Hitchcock's film, we only watch the murder indirectly, in the shadow projected onto the wall; in *Antichrist*, the audience is forced to watch, first, the penetration and, later, the killing in close-up. The pornographic and horrific scenes in *Antichrist* have—perhaps rightly—been criticised as the director's provocation of his audience. However, there is more to it than simple bad-boy behavior. It is, indeed, "a kind of cultural sexual harassment in public space."[21] It *is* a kind of rape: the pornographic opening penetrates the audience's eye by forcing the cinematic gaze into it—and there is no "second hand" to brush it aside. In the opening of the film, we dwell on the photographic portrait of the male protagonist long enough to relate to him. In the following clips, the camera forces us to identify with him; we see His neck, His back, His buttocks. We are forced into His body, forced to see with His eyes, to sense with His skin.

[18] Žižek, "Looking Awry," 524.

[19] Ibid., 526.

[20] *Psycho*, dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 109 min. (Shamley Productions, 1960). See Christian Braad Thomsen, "Antichrist på briksen [*Antichrist* in Psychoanalysis]," *Politiken*, August 17, 2009, http://braadthomsen.tripod.com/id182.html.

[21] Jensen, "Brænd heksen!"

The Prologue may be seen as von Trier's hermeneutical guide to the film. Here he reveals the viewpoint of *Antichrist*'s cinematic gaze: he wants us to identify with the male gaze—and more than that: he forces the psychopath's monolithic way of seeing onto us. The audience (at least those who did not leave the cinema) are—if they accept the contract as von Trier is masterfully offering it—going to see the film through the omnipotent male gaze.[22]

Laura Marks: Haptic visuality and criticism

In his essay "Mother (Nature) Will Eat You: Lars von Trier's *Antichrist*," Brent Plate describes the visual quality of the *Antichrist* and the effect that the film had on him:

> Like Riefenstahl's *Triumph* [*of the Will*], Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* is a beautiful film. Ultra slow-motion flashbacks and intercuts reminiscent of a Bill Viola video; high-contrast, black-and-white lovemaking; textured, hypnotic, surrealistic scenes of humans intertwined with nature; and extreme close-ups of human eyes, bamboo in a glass vase, and unkempt hair … all make a film that is impossible to get out of one's sensual body.[23]

In *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, Laura Marks tries to come to terms with the common experience that sometimes a film is "impossible to get out of one's sensual body." Leaving the cinema, the well-known city suddenly appears foreign and strangely overwhelming; the senses are on the alert: people speak loudly, traffic lights signal brightly, cars move quickly—and one becomes extremely aware of one's bodilyness and vulnerability. But what is

[22] Reluctantly, von Trier accepted the decision of Zentropa's producer Peter Aalbaek Jensen to make a "Catholic" cut in which the most provocative scenes—the Prologue's intercourse and the scenes of sexual mutilation—were removed in order to satisfy the censors of the more "prude markets like southern Europe, Asia and the United States, where you can't show a naked man from the front." See "Lars von Trier agrees to cut his 'Antichrist' to avoid censorship," *France 24*, May 23, 2009, http://www.france24.com/en/20090520-lars-von-trier-agrees-cut-antichrist-avoid-censorship-. If my analysis has something in it, the subjection of the Prologue to censorship will change the film and undermine its basic theme.

[23] S. Brent Plate, "Mother (Nature) Will Eat You: Lars von Trier's Antichrist," *Religion Dispatches*, October 28, 2009, http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/culture/1956/mother_(nature)_will_eat_you%3A_lars_von_trier's_antichrist/.

it in film that—to use a phrase coined by Marks—is capable of inducing "thinking with your skin"?[24]

Marks's starting point is Deleuze's distinction between "optic" and "haptic" imagery.[25] Haptic imagery consists of near-sighted observations capable of conveying the sensation of the object observed. Optic images are long-sighted observations oriented towards the spatial organization of the objects in view.[26] Whereas optic images document an event of the past, haptic visuality restrains the viewer in the present by situating him or her in the physical experience of the observed event. Both modes of imagery have their own potential and their own inherent limitations. If films dissolve into the haptic images common in avant-garde video, there is nothing to identify with. The experience is aesthetic without the involvement of the viewer's emotional repertoire—as in the analysis of pure form. If the film tells the story in optic visuality, as if it was a documentary, we may relate to the figures in the film—sympathise with them or rebel against them—but without being really *touched*. In order to engage the audience, the film must oscillate between the two kinds of visual language. Marks explains: "Optical perception allows us to symbolize, to give every object a name, and for the same reason it blinds us to the richness of sensory experience. Haptic perception allows us to experience in detail, but not to take a distance from experience in order to define it."[27] Consequently both perspectives are needed:

> Haptic criticism is mimetic: it presses up to the object and takes its shape. Mimesis is a form of representation based on getting close enough to the other thing to become it. Again, the point is not to replace symbolization, a form of representation that requires distance, with mimesis. Rather it is to maintain a robust flow between sensuous closeness and symbolic distance. (xiii)

[24] Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 18. See also Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

[25] The term *haptic* comes from the Greek term ἁπτός which denotes the "subject to the sense of touch." The term is derived from the verb ἅπτω which means: "to touch, affect," and "to grasp with the senses, apprehend, perceive" (*Liddell-Scott Lexicon*, 9th ed. *s.v.* "ἁπτός," "ἅπτω").

[26] Deleuze develops the terms *haptic* and *optic* in order to come to terms with the aesthetics of Francis Bacon's paintings. See Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (1981; New York: Continuum, 2003).

[27] Marks, *Touch*, 12.

The list of the visual effects in *Antichrist* which Plate provides are—although he does not categorise them as such—examples of haptic visuality. Marks's analyses in *Touch* may help us to understand the profound effects of this kind of imagery. Some central examples from the film may suffice. First, the close-up of the penetration in the opening scene goes much closer than ordinary pornography; in fact, so close that the black-and-white image is almost transformed into abstract form. The unexpected change of focus leaves our mind at an impasse, and before we are able to push back the experience into the symbolic, the slow-motion composition stimulates us to "think with the skin." Marks explains how the disorientation and the momentary sidelining of the symbolic create an opportunity for sensual perception:

> The erotic relationship I am identifying in haptic cinema depends on limited visibility and the viewer's lack of mastery over the image. Haptic visuality suggests ways that pornography might move through the impasse of hypervisuality that … seems to hinder rather than support erotic representation. (15)

Whereas ordinary pornography works by the aid of identification and fantasy, von Trier's opening seduces us to "think with the skin" (male skin—I think).

Let me provide another example. The couple is in the midst of a discussion about the usefulness of psychiatric treatment and medication, when the camera interrupts their conversation with a long extreme close-up of the bamboo stalks in a vase by the woman's bedside at the hospital. As if the film was shot through a microscope, we contemplate an image of unidentifiable green stalks, which dissolves into a blurry and indistinct image (Figure 5). While our brains try to figure out the image, the sensation of an ominous decay is transmitted to our bodies. Again, when we listen to the couple's dialogue, we are aware that forces are at work under their (and our) skin that may be controlled temporarily by medication—but what will happen if they are unleashed?

This close-up technique is repeated when the couple arrives at Eden. The camera pans across the trees with leaves moving—gently or with sinister intent?—in the wind, but then zooms in to find the microscopic processes of life and death that take place in all that green. The bodily feelings and awareness evoked by this kind of imagery become the mood in which the more narrative sequences of the film are absorbed. When at Eden, the couple begins a series of cognitive exercises and therapeutic conversations. In one, She

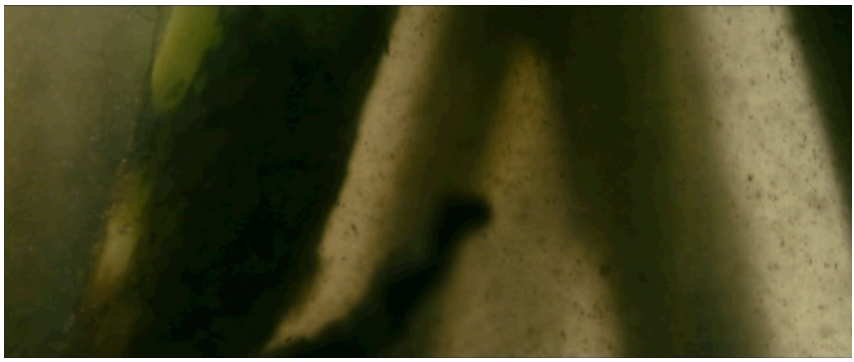

Figure 5

tells her husband about an experience that she had the previous summer at Eden: "I heard a sound" she explains—and then her experience is shown in a flashback. While the woman sits working, we hear the crying of a child. She hastens out of the cabin only to find her son Nic happily playing at the floor in the workshop. Her husband reflects therapeutically on the experience and concludes that the crying was not real. His explanation makes the woman furious and she starts beating him. "You should not have come here," she warns him, "you are so damned haughty, *but that won't last long*." We listen with the bodily unrest created by disturbing close-ups and sense that something really sinister is soon to happen—but what? Marks describes how this erotic oscillation between haptic and optic imagery is capable of implanting a film under the skin:

> Like the Renaissance perspective that is their progenitor, cinema's optical images address a viewer who is distant, distinct and disembodied. Haptic images invite the viewer to dissolve his or her subjectivity in the close and bodily contact with the image. The oscillation between the two creates an erotic relationship, a shifting between distance and closeness. But haptic images have a particular erotic quality, one involving giving up visual control. The viewer is called on to fill in the gaps in the image, engage with the traces the image leaves. By interacting up close with an image, close enough that figure and ground commingle, the viewer gives up her own sense of separateness from the image. (13)

In her theoretical reflection on haptic visuality, Marks draws attention to the fact that the sensual materiality of an event cannot be reduced to symbolic representations without the event being lost to the past. However, this loss is ambiguous. On the one hand, the filing of unpleasant events in the archive of the past is important and necessary, but if, on the other hand, the symbolic archiving becomes too efficient, we may lose the sense of being alive. Instead of being immersed in the world, the world moves into our head. On the one hand, as Marks explains: "Materiality is mortality. Symbolization, or the abstraction of communication into information, is an attempt to hold mortality at bay" (xi). Yet, on the other, if one remains always at the optical distance, one is at risk of dying "the death of abstraction" (xvi).

This observation is in line with recent work on the cognitive dynamics involved in trauma-related depression. In traumatised persons, the immediate sensual experience of everyday events is lost and he or she lives in a symbolic representation of the world that is fixed by the trauma. Before the representation can be reworked through cognitive therapy, it is necessary for the traumatised person to regain his or her bodily awareness. In severe cases, cognitive therapy focused on the representations alone may even aggravate the trauma and deepen the depression.[28] Whereas the figure of He in *Antichrist* as a cognitive therapist insists that the key to healing is a reworking of his wife's representation of the accident, the different perspective on trauma and depression points in another direction and suggests that it is the ability to immerse oneself in the body and in the physical world that must be restored first. Gentle touch, conscious breathing (as in yoga and other meditative techniques), listening to the sea or the singing of birds, or gardening prove healing in cases of trauma and extreme stress.[29]

This brings us back to *Antichrist*. The woman appears to be intuitively aware that she is in need of sensual restoration. This, however, puts the couple's coping strategies on a collision course. When she cuts off the conversations and tries to seduce her husband, he refuses her and understands

[28] Lars J. Sørensen, *Smertegrænsen: Traumer, tilknytning og psykisk sygdom [The Pain Threshold: Trauma, Attachment and Psychological Disorder]* (Copenhagen: Danske Psykologisk Forlag, 2005). Sørensen draws on the work of Peter A. Levine on somatic experiencing, see e.g. *In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2010).

[29] For a contemporary theological perspective on the perceived limitations of cognitive therapy in cases of extreme stress, see Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

her invitation as an attempt to break off the therapeutic process. It is an evasive manoeuvre, indeed, but (maybe) a healthy one. Whereas She gradually comes to terms with the fact that she—as she states herself—is "part of the green" and finally declares herself healed, He becomes more and more frightened by his bodily vulnerability. With its haptic images, *Antichrist* succeeds in communicating to its audience the feeling of being touched by nature—for good: being alive; and for evil: being subjected to decay and death.

To conclude this section: as already stated, von Trier has admitted that *Antichrist* is a symbolic film. The symbolic motif may, just as easily, be deduced from the film's *mise-en-scène*. Whether it is the pornographic and horrific close-ups, or the adventures into a green world of misty landscapes, or images of blurry biological processes, the cinematic language communicates the same message. To return to my central argument, in spite of the fact that reviewers have discussed and scolded von Trier's analyses of female psychology, *Antichrist* is first and foremost a film about the male experience of his own bodily nature and the processes of life and decay to which he is subjected and which lie beyond his cognitive capacity to control. *Antichrist* is a film about the sacrifice that the male subject must commit in order to identify with the pure rationality of divine λόγος (to speak biblically): his corporeality, which determines his particularity; his procreating body, which relates him emotionally with other beings; his desiring body, which betrays his interdependency. In one of the couple's therapeutic sessions, the man introduces a dichotomy between human nature and rationality and suggests that the couple switch roles. The exercise presupposes the hierarchy and gendering of the two positions: in order to become a sound human being, the man's bodily nature—his particularity, his emotions, his desire—must be overcome. Addressing His *phobia*, She prophetically responds: "Nature is Satan's Church!" The film's oscillation between optic and haptic imagery simultaneously illustrates this theme and situates the audience bodily in the history that it is going to take issue with. As we shall see in the next section, an analysis of the biblical figure of Antichrist points in the same direction: this is a film about the male λόγος and its (problematic) incarnation.

Part II. The biblical Antichrist and docetic masculinity

To get a quick impression of the public understanding of the figure of the Antichrist, Google may perhaps be a useful tool for consultation. For the last couple of years, the American President Barack Obama and the Al-Qaeda

leader Osama bin Laden have been the main candidates for the contemporary Antichrist—both are often depicted with horns on their foreheads as an indication of their alliance with the Devil and as incarnations of evil. This use is wholly in line with the Bible, in which the Antichrist is primarily a mythological figure and an end-times omen in the apocalyptic tradition, and secondarily a slanderous way of naming one's opponent.[30] In fact, it is only the small Johannine letters that feature the Antichrist. Other texts have similar hypostatic figures, but these have tended to be absorbed into the figure of the Antichrist over time. The historical recipients of the Johannine letters saw the Antichrist as a mythological figure whose coming signified the end of times:

> Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us. (1 John 2:18–19)[31]

The author, however, transforms this expectation and uses the name polemically against his opponents: the person who does not believe that Christ came in flesh is against the Christ—consequently, this person represents the Antichrist: "Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh; any such person is the deceiver and the Antichrist!" (2 John 1:7). In the Bible itself, the Antichrist label belongs to a very specific conflict around the Johannine community. In the exegetical commentaries, the so-called Johannine secessionists are seen as proponents of a Platonically-inspired Gnosticism that rendered the idea of divine incarnation scandalous and impossible.[32] In order to communicate with human beings, so the opponents reasoned, the transcendent λόγος appeared

[30] The following analysis builds on the work of my New Testament colleague Geert Hallbäck at the University of Copenhagen. Hallbäck prepared an analysis of the Biblical Antichrist motif for a seminar (http://www.teol.ku.dk/afd/csbb/afholdte_arrangementer/dokument3/) about von Trier's *Antichrist* at the Centre for Study of the Use of the Bible in Art and Culture, in the faculty of Theology, University of Copenhagen, October 30, 2009. See http://www.teol.ku.dk/afd/csbb.

[31] All biblical texts are cited from the New Revised Standard Version.

[32] See Klaus Wengst, *Häresie und Orthodoxie im Spiegel des ersten Johannesbriefes* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1982); Hans-Josef Klauck, "Internal Opponents: The Treatment of the Secessionists in the First Epistle of John," in *Truth and Its Victims*, ed. Wim

as if he was in flesh—yet, the flesh remained an outer appearance—the body of Christ was only a phantom. As is well-known by theologians, the Greek word for appearance, δοκέω, became the name with which the Church Fathers addressed this heresy: those who denied the incarnation were *Docetists*. Below, we shall return to this since the label could—from a deconstructive point of view—also be applied to orthodox Christianity.

During the early centuries of the Christian Church, the mythological Antichrist was developed by the aid of a mosaic of biblical material—primarily borrowed from the apocalyptic writings. The Antichrist was identified with the "desolating sacrilege" in Jesus's apocalyptic speech in Mark's Gospel: "But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains" (Mark 13:14). The figure also incorporated elements from the dragon's allies—the horrifying animals from the sea and the earth—in the apocalyptic warfare between Satan and the Archangel about the Messianic child in Revelation 12. In the Markan Apocalypse and also in Revelation, the Satanic allies persecuting God's children refer to the worldly power of Rome. But when Christianity itself became an ally of the imperial power, the political dimension of the Antichrist was left behind and the figure was reinterpreted in light of the warning given in Second Thessalonians against the "apostasy" in which "the man of lawlessness" and "the son of destruction" opposes and exalts himself above "every so-called god or object of worship and takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God" (2 Thess 2:3ff). The Antichrist was no longer to be found *outside* the Christian community, but represented (again) heretical developments *within* its own borders.

It was in line with this interpretation that during the schismatic years of the Reformation, Martin Luther identified the Pope with the Antichrist.[33] During the English Civil War (1642–1651) *all* of the parties involved were branded "Antichrist" by their enemies. The religious dissidents escaping the Church of England carried the name with them to the New World and founded a tradition of labeling everything that they found threatening to their Christian lifestyle "Antichrist." The figure of Antichrist became even-

Beuken, Seán Freyne, and Antonius Gerardus Weiler, Concilium 200 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 55–65.

[33] From the *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate* (August, 1520) onwards, Luther played the Antichrist card against Rome. *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (October, 1520), for example, hinges on the argument that the Pope is the Antichrist.

tually a secular hypostasis of Socialism, of Darwinism, jazz, liberal theology, feminism, etc. According to feminist critics, von Trier has taken up this tradition and named his female *phobia* Antichrist. However, I shall argue that it is the controversy about Docetism that proves illuminating to our understanding of the film, its title, and its place in the reception history of the figure of the Antichrist. But this presupposes a deconstructive approach to Early Christian orthodoxy.

Docetism and masculinity

In *Begotten, not Made*, Virginia Burrus analyses the formation of orthodox Christian faith from the perspective of French feminism. She looks at the role and performance of manhood inscribed into the creeds of the early Christian Church. Referring to Athanasius's interpretation of the Nicean Creed, she observes how his "theological writings exhibit overall a striking preoccupation with the boundary between the created and divine realms, as well as the frontier zones of human possibility."[34] Consequently, in Athanasius's influential interpretation, the masculine language of the first Christian creed simultaneously fixes the confines of manhood and the bifurcation of the cosmos:

> The Nicene Creed came to function as the touchstone of a newly crystallizing orthodoxy that would eventually both fix the masculine terms of theological language and pull down the cosmic veil separating the transcendental triad of Father, Son, and Spirit from material creation.

In spite of Athanasius's strong emphasis on the incarnation, the parallel emphasis on the Platonically-inspired bifurcation of the cosmos renders the incarnation an unimaginable event that in the end must be left to the category of paradox. In opposition to the apostle Paul and Origen, who account for Christian faith in Greek cosmological categories, the faith of the orthodox Fathers did not adhere to this kind of "scientific" understanding. Burrus explains:

> The specific incarnational emphasis of Athanasius's Christology and theory of human salvation seems to require that we

[34] Virginia Burrus, *Begotten, not Made: Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 37.

> imagine the Logos and flesh of Christ, life-sustaining Word and otherwise-moribund body, as intimately interwoven, almost as two aspects of the same entity—"a life wound closely to a body" and "a body wound closely to the life" … *even as the sharply dualistic cosmology in which that Christology is framed makes the imaginative leap nearly impossible*.[35]

As history has documented, the paradox of faith could not suppress the dualism on which the Nicene Creed rested. In spite of the Creed's confession to the opposite, the bifurcation of the cosmos continued to keep a docetic Christology alive:

> However, such a revelation remains *paradoxical*, taking the form of a *negation* that, with every assertion of the almost unimaginable *miracle* of a mediating embodiment of Logos, *heavily reinscribes the irreducible difference of divinity*.[36]

Athanasian Christology has important soteriological and anthropological implications. Systematic theologians have always insisted that Docetism was incompatible with salvation, but Burrus argues that this has not actually been the case. The re-inscription of the "irreducible differences of divinity" in Anthanasius's "covertly" docetic Christology corresponds to a docetic understanding of manhood:

> The partly repressed representation of a Christ who only "seems" (deceptively) to have anything of humanity in his nature may stand in for a man who only "seems" to be compromised by materiality. On this reading, the lying Christ uncovered in Athanasius's veiled text exposes a truth about a human subjectivity erected upon a deception—*the denial of the body*—that nevertheless begets it own realities, and Docetism (as an indirect strategy for telling the truth about a powerful lie) proves far from incompatible with the assertion of Christ's exemplary role.[37]

[35] Ibid., 42, emphasis in original.
[36] Ibid., 44, emphasis added.
[37] Ibid., 44, emphasis added.

Within the structures of Christian theology, the consequences are profound: as long as the Christ is caught in the docetic trap by a bifurcated cosmology, man's body cannot be subjected to salvation. To be saved, man must transcend his body and everything that is related to his bodily being in the world. The attraction of asceticism in the early Church supports this understanding. Inevitably, salvation becomes a process of transubstantiation (in reverse) in which true manhood entails bodilessness. The tradition has understood salvation as the installation of the divine image in man; consequently, as Burrus explains, salvation becomes a "process of transubstantiation that constitutes a suppression or supersession of the materiality created *ex nihilo*, making way for the acquisition of something essentially 'other'." The Christological magic, "This is my body"—according to Burrus "a powerful lie"—corresponds to the anthropological and soteriological spell: "This is *not* my body"—according to Burrus another powerful lie (46). The labeling of the opponents' Christology as Docetic appears to be a diversion which camouflaged the fact that the Church Fathers' worldview suffered from the same flaw. Inevitably, the cosmological dualism, in which God—and the Trinity—was claimed to transcend the material world, resulted in a thoroughly dualistic Christology, soteriology, and anthropology. In a world permeated by gender politics, it was unavoidable that these dualisms came to be gendered categories. The divine was linked with the immaterial λόγος—that is, with rationality and control—and was gendered male; the material creation was linked with the body and with desire—and was gendered female. But as the Bible identifies the proponents of Docetism as Antichrist, the Church Fathers, and others who deny the fact that human life is bound to the physicality of the body, deserve the label, too.

The story of the creation of human beings in Genesis 1–3 may—when read from a deconstructive and post-colonial perspective—be seen as part of the same power struggle in which the hegemony of this (male) perspective on gender is established.

Eden—in *Antichrist* and in Genesis

In the diegetic world of the film, She spent the previous summer at Eden alone with the child. She intended to finish her thesis, but somehow she did not manage the project. Suddenly, the thesis appeared "glib" to her—maybe because her husband saw it that way—at least, that is what she herself suggests. As the man enters the attic of the cabin one day, he finds the left-

overs from his wife's failed project. On the wooden walls, prints from the so-called *Teufelsbücher* hang. *Die Teufelsbücher* were popular—perhaps not unlike comic book—versions of the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486).[38] The pictures demonstrate how witches were identified, interrogated and annihilated. The main purpose of the *Malleus Maleficarum* was to refute skepticism about the reality of witchcraft. The book established that, due to their lower intellect and uncontrollable bodily desires, women were more liable to Satanic influence than men.[39] Although the Catholic Church dissociated itself from the book, it could not prevent the book from becoming the manual for the persecution and trial of witches throughout Renaissance Europe.[40] In the attic, He also finds his wife's notebook, which reveals the title of her thesis on its front page: *Gynocide*. He looks through the book; page after page, the woman's handwriting becomes more and more distorted, finally disintegrating into meaningless scrawls. Half of the book consists of empty pages.

Most reviewers see the name of the couple's cabin, Eden, as a hint to the narrative of the Fall in Genesis 2–3. The reference has been understood by many interpreters—feminists as well as their critics—as an indication that von Trier agrees with Adam and the authors of *Malleus Maleficarum* in blaming Eve for the Fall; after all, it was Eve whom the serpent was able to trick. But this is a superficial and traditional interpretation of the biblical narrative. The story of the Fall may also be read as an etiological myth about the social construction of gender: the male and the female lots come into being as the divine sanction of Adam's and Eve's disobedience. The man is to "eat by the sweat of his face"; the woman is "to bring forth her children in pain," and "while her desire shall be for her husband, he shall rule over her." If we apply a post-colonial perspective to the creation story, this interpretation may even go a step further.

The Garden of Eden, before the Fall, is what the Indian-American literature scholar and post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha has called a "third space," a no man's land between two well-defined domains or categories.[41] Genesis 1:27 may be interpreted in this light. Literally, the text states that on the sixth day, God *first* created the human being in his likeness, and

[38] See Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (London: The Women's Press, 1979), especially "European Witchburnings: Purifying the Body of Christ," 178–222.

[39] The English translation of Malleus Maleficarum by Montague Summers (1928) is available at http://www.sacred-texts.com/pag/mm/.

[40] Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, 178–222.

[41] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 38–39.

only then he created them male and female.[42] The Fall and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden represent the "enunciatory present"—again one of Bhabha's term—that is, the moment when the differences come into being. In its rewriting of the creation story, the Prologue to John's Gospel hides the indeterminacy of the beginning by postulating that the λόγος was in the beginning. It is, however, only through the expulsion or abjection of the facets with which the λόγος did not want to be identified that the Johannine situation was reached. John's Prologue hides the fact that the process through which the λόγος comes into being is contingent and negotiable. The self-referential identity of the λόγος can only be upheld as long as the truth about the beginning remains hidden. Therefore, the return to the *enunciatory present*—that is, to Eden—is *sacrilegio*. However, the deferred and abjected beings will keep on returning as specters from the scene of the original crime and haunt the self-referential stability of the λόγος. In *Antichrist*, these specters return in the form of perverse or injured animals. In von Trier's film, corporeality is not negotiable.

Before the couple leaves the city for Eden, the female character warns her husband: "You should not underestimate Eden," suggesting in this interpretation that a re-opening of the negotiation of gender positions may be a risky, even violent affair. Nevertheless, the couple returns to Eden's no man's land in order to relieve, revive, and renegotiate the Fall into the frail order of gender. In the therapeutic process, the (sweat-)working He explains to his wife that She must confront the source of her fear to learn how to cope with it. Obediently, she does so. Repeatedly, she invites him to have sex with her in order to replay the scene of the original crime and renegotiate the gender roles—and the guilt. However, her husband refuses to accept his own corporeality and share the emotions that originate with it—including the guilt. Symbolically, but quite effectively and physically, the woman sets him on a par with herself by erasing the source of all difference: she mutilates the genitals of both of the inhabitants of Eden. Reviewers (male, in particular) have seen her as a nymphomaniac, but from a deconstructive and post-colonial point of view, She is much more complicated. Seemingly, the fascination with the forbidden fruit has prevented reviewers from seeing what

[42] There is an immense amount of feminist scholarship on Gen 1:27. It is beyond the scope of this article to engage with all of this material. Whereas second-wave feminism insisted on a reading in which men and women both were created in the image of God, third-wave feminists have been more open to a queer interpretations in which the first human being was seen as both male and female.

truly happened in the Eden of *Antichrist*.

Reality is a product of our consciousness, or so the cognitive therapist instructs his client (and wife). But what happens to the unconscious and abjected thoughts? What kind of reality do they construct? The woman suggests an answer: nature *becomes* Satan's Church. Nature becomes the place of the chaotic, uncategorised miscarriages of the mind. The therapy that takes place at Eden is an exorcism that has the idea of pure reason as its beginning and the purification of the masculine λόγος as it ultimate goal. From the beginning to the end, the therapy is a male project.

Throughout history the narrative of the Fall has been written on female bodies. Instinctively, the woman knows that she will be yet another page in λόγος writing his own history: "It is physical. I can't stand it," she groans in despair. She can no longer bear the miscarriage of pain and guilt that the λόγος has bestowed on her and installed in her body. The therapeutic exorcism that takes place in Eden may be seen as the unavoidable conclusion that the woman was too afraid to write in her thesis on *Gynocide*. The horrific truth is that the story repeats itself.

Part III. Nietzsche's Antichrist—the sacrifice of Dionysus

Epilogue: Catharsis

"Working at my thesis," She tells her husband, "I recovered something in my material. If human nature is evil; evil must be part of me, too." Suddenly She breaks off the conversation and invites her husband for sex, and during the act, she asks him to beat her. When he refuses this request twice, she concludes that he does not love her and disappears into the forest. When he finds her masturbating desperately at the forest floor, he—desperately, too—obliges her request. While the couple copulate, arms and hands of hidden bodies appear between the roots of the trees as if human beings were alive deep in the forest ground. The film's iconic poster (Figure 2) is taken from this point in the narrative. Quoting from the *Malleus Maleficarum*, the woman makes the man aware of the sisters from Ratisbon who were capable of bringing forth a hailstorm.[43] Later in the film, the woman screams and her

[43] After torture the Ratisbon sisters admitted having been in contact with the devil and having had intercourse with him for decades. See *Malleus Maleficarum* Part 2, Chapter XV, "How they Raise and Stir up Hailstorms and Tempests, and Cause Lightning to Blast both

Figure 6

own voice proves capable of stirring up a hailstorm. Seemingly, the therapy has turned into a witches' sabbath with the man in the double role of exorcist and devil. Who is She? Who is He? Back in the cabin, the man warns his wife against identifying with the depiction of the female characters in the medieval material she has studied—but too late.

In the film's Epilogue, after strangling his wife and burning her corpse, the man leaves Eden. Shot in soft-focus black and white, nature now appears mild, prosperous—indeed, cleansed (Figure 6). The threatening chaos disappears as the flames consume the woman, visually implying that the exorcism has been successful. As He struggles back toward civic life, the ghostly bodies that belong to the arms hidden among the roots in the forest ground rise and faceless women ascend the mountain to the words of Händel's aria:

> Leave me to weep
> over my cruel fate
> and let me sigh for liberty.
> May sorrow break
> the bonds of my anguish,
> if only for pity's sake.[44]

Reading these final images through the lens of the gendered Fall, *Rinaldo*'s Armida voices the mute, re- and ab-jected women of the past (Figure 7).

Men and Beasts," http://www.sacred-texts.com/pag/mm/mm02a15a.htm.

[44] Rinaldo, *Lascia ch'io pianga*, HWV7, Georg Friedrich Händel, in *Antichrist Press Book* (2009), 4, http://www.trustnordisk.com/film/2009-antichrist.

Figure 7

Angela Tumini reaches the same conclusion:

> Von Trier sees the nature of man as dualistic. The female force of nature is within the man himself and can stir up some devastating forces resembling the one of a mythological and bloodthirsty harpy. The "She" that "He" confronts lives within him, and in order to return to his oneness he must kill his ego. The women we see walking past the male protagonist in the last scene are not outside of him but within him, and they are made into the symbol of redemption through the sacrifice of the female protagonist.[45]

Nietzsche's *Antichrist* and Lars von Trier's *Antichrist*

The film's therapeutic exorcism, in which the male λόγος reestablishes its hegemony, brings yet another historical use of the Antichrist figure to the mind; namely, Nietzsche's Antichrist. In an essay entitled "An Attempt at Self-Criticism," published as a preface to the 1886 reissue of his early work *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872), Nietzsche suggested that, as the opposite of Christian morality, the god Dionysus might also be called

[45] 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 *Making Sense of Pain: Critical and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Jane Fernandez (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2010), 169.

Antichrist.[46] In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche discusses the interdependence of the Apollonian and the Dionysian aspects of culture:

> These two tendencies run parallel to each other, for the most part openly at variance; and they continually incite each other to new and more powerful births, which perpetuate an antagonism, only superficially reconciled by the common term "Art"; till at last, by a metaphysical miracle of the Hellenistic will, they appear coupled with each other, and through this coupling eventually generate the art-product, equally Dionysian and Apollonian, of Attic tragedy.[47]

Apollonian culture is characterised by well-defined boundaries; sculpture is Apollonian art and the rational and abstract thoughts of e.g. philosophy characterise the Apollonian mind. However, the Apollonian culture can only be upheld through the repetitions of the rituals of the Dionysian cult. In the tripartite ritual of *ecstasy*, *enthousiasmos* and *mania*, the dark but creative powers of will and desire are simultaneously celebrated and brought under control, and the social body is cleansed of the potential threat of unbound Dionysian forces. However, without the chaotic, ground-breaking power of Dionysus, a culture becomes rigid, fearfully on guard against anything that may threaten its orderly systems:

> Let us imagine how into it [i.e. into Apollonian culture] there penetrated, in tones ever more bewitching and alluring, the ecstatic sound of the Dionysian festival; let us remember that in these strains all of Nature's excess in joy, sorrow, and knowledge become audible, even in piercing shrieks; and finally, let us ask ourselves what significance remains to the psalmodizing artist of Apollo, with his phantom harp-sound, once it is compared with this demonic folk-song! The muses of the arts of "appearance" paled before an art which, in its intoxication, spoke the truth.… Excess revealed itself as truth. Contradiction, the bliss born of pain, spoke out from the very heart of Nature. And so, wherever the Dionysian prevailed, the Apollonian was checked and destroyed. But on the other hand, wherever the

[46] Thomsen, "Antichrist—Chaos Reigns," 2.

[47] Friedrich W. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, trans. Clifton P. Fadiman (1927; New York: Dover, 1995), 1.

> first Dionysian onslaught was successfully with-stood, the authority and majesty of the Delphic god exhibited itself as more rigid and menacing than ever.[48]

Needless to say, the Greeks associated the Apollonian form with the male and the Dionysian energy with the female.

In *The Antichrist*, written in late 1888 but not published until 1895, Nietzsche developed the idea from his 1886 "Attempt at Self-Criticism": in contradiction to the Greek culture of tragedy, Christianity represented the Apollonian "psalmodizing" culture that feared and defied Dionysus's creative power.

As noted above, von Trier has revealed that Nietzsche's *Antichrist* was on his bedside table while he was working on the manuscript.[49] Inevitably, this suggests that the spelling of the film's title *Antichris*♀ with the sign for the female instead of the "t," in line with Greek thinking, associates the female with the Dionysian forces, but also that, in line with Nietzsche's analysis, this is meant as something positive. In the film's female protagonist "Nature's excess in joy, sorrow, and knowledge become audible"—"even in piercing shrieks" as her desperate scream brings forth a hail-storm—while the man as "the Delphic god exhibited itself as more rigid and menacing than ever."[50] The coupling of the aspects may bring forth something sublime, in the film symbolised by the child, but when at odds, it is either chaos or Christianity.

In line with Nietzsche's "Curse upon Christianity,"[51] von Trier's film can be seen as a criticism, maybe even a condemnation, of a Christianity that has become docetic. The problem was, so the theologians of the early Church explained, that the docetic Christology implied that only the divine part of man—that is, the reasoning part of his soul: his spirit—was saved. But the history of the Church reveals that the Fathers' objections were at best disingenuous. The medieval witch-hunts demonstrated that, in practice, the docetic Christology did not pose the Church any problems—on the contrary: Docetism is a gendered heresy that reserves the salvation for the masculine part of the mind-body dichotomy and, as such, sanctions and sanctifies the

[48] Ibid., 12.

[49] Thomsen also cites an interview published by the Danish Film Institute, in which von Trier stated that he has kept Nietzsche's *Antichrist* on his bedside table since the age of twelve. (Thomsen, "Antichrist—Chaos Reigns," 1.)

[50] Ibid.

[51] Nietzsche's sketch for the title page of *Der Antichrist* added the subtitle *Fluch auf das Christentum* ("Curse upon Christianity").

values related to (the Apollonian) masculinity. Von Trier's *Antichrist* may thus also be seen as a criticism of a Christianity that has not taken it own writings and dogmata seriously. So who is the Antichrist? After all, it was the person who denied the corporeality of the λόγος that was called Antichrist by the Johannine author. As long as this practice exists, the cross and the sign for the female will merge: *Antichris*† = *Antichris*♀.

Though it disappeared quickly from the attention of the wider public, von Trier's *Antichrist* has been analysed by a number of film critics and scholars; however, there are elements of and approaches to the film that remain largely unexplored. If we approach the film from the perspective of reception history and focus our attention on the relationship between the film's title and the biblical concept of Antichrist, we can come to a more complex understanding of the film, particularly as it relates to matters of gender and sexuality. With such an approach, the misogynistic edge that many critics saw in the film is dulled and it becomes possible to view *Antichrist* as a film deeply and seriously engaged in both gender politics and religion. But a reception-historical analysis offers more than that, in that it allows us to draw the proper attention to the ways in which the biblical roots of the Antichrist figure continue to play out in contemporary culture. In the final analysis, it is not too much to argue that von Trier's *Antichrist* belongs to a long line of works deploying the figure of the Antichrist as a way to criticise the Christian tradition's treatment of gender. Properly understood, the film helps to shed light on the potentially dangerous Docetism inherent in the Christian Church's history and dogmata.