Lars von Trier’s Trinity of Negativity: Nature, Chaos, and Downward Momentum in *Antichrist*

Written by:
Meghan Newton
The Department of English, University of Colorado at Boulder

Primary Thesis Advisor:
Dr. Jeremy Green, Department of English

Thesis Defence Committee:
Dr. Jane Garrity, Department of English
Dr. Robert Nauman, Department of Art and Art History

Defended on April 6, 2015
Abstract

This thesis explores the dense symbolic world of Lars von Trier’s *Antichrist* through theories of the grotesque. I will argue that *Antichrist* confronts a repressed cultural ideology regarding dangerous femininity that continues to inform modern Western culture. By recreating the Biblical fall in the fictional realm of “Satan’s church” von Trier exposes the historical gendering of the threatening aspects of nature—chaos, death, and evil—as feminine in Christian theology. But, while this distorted Christian creation myth frames the story, the interaction between the two protagonists, “He” and “She,” reflects familiar discourses of modern gender politics. *Antichrist* exposes the underlying cultural anxiety around women’s bodies that continues to motivate modern sanctions on female sexuality and reproduction as echoes of archaic, misogynist perceptions of femininity. Von Trier uses the female grotesque motif to confront this cultural anxiety around female sexuality, rather than to promote it. *Antichrist* inverts Christian iconography and myth to subvert the hierarchical gender roles that Christianity has historically helped to construct.
Introduction

“If it were a film—life—a very well written film that is…now, that would really be a horror film of substance”¹

Von Trier’s statement here, taken from an interview in 2007, is purely hypothetical, but suggests that life itself may be a profound source of horror. Cynical as this may be, most would admit that the idealized notion of a purely beautiful world doesn’t always hold up to the realm of human experience and suffering. But, perhaps suffering with the “conclusion that it’s really a nasty idea, life,” as von Trier does, is just asking too much of the average individual (Badley, Interview 2007). When presented with the tremendous complexity and volume of the world of experience, humanity has again and again felt the need to sort, label, and repress the pieces of the world that otherwise seem too chaotic. In the Western world, Christianity has played a large role in taking on this meaning-making project, and its patriarchal motives have left an imprint on modern thought that persists in parts of society today. In Antichrist, von Trier exposes a repressed patriarchal anxiety toward female nature through a grotesque inversion of the Christian theology that has historically contributed to cultural female marginalization; the resonance of the discourse Antichrist presents, as both archaic and strikingly familiar in a modern context, speaks to the role that female subjugation has played in the construction of Western identity.

Von Trier is no stranger to controversy, but Antichrist’s premiere at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival likely marked the biggest scandal of his career thus far. The response from the audience was harsh; the film was booed, laughed at, and generally

¹ Lars Von Trier Interview, October 2007
dismissed by many of the attendees; reviews ranged from calling *Antichrist* “an abomination” to the, not much more articulate, review that it was “a big-fat art film fart” (theguardian.com). In fact, during a press conference for the film, one Daily Mall columnist went so far as to demand that von Trier “explain and justify” making the movie at all. As one would expect, von Trier declined to justify, or as he put “apologize for,” *Antichrist* (Zolkos 178). But if the critics simply thought it was a bad film, one has to wonder why it was so upsetting, if it was just plain inferior work. What was at stake for viewers that caused *Antichrist* to receive so much bad press in the first place?

The overwhelming negative reception of *Antichrist* has been that it sympathizes with, or at least is too ambivalent in its representation of, misogynistic views. However, for nearly every critic that argues this, there are as many critics who argue the opposite. Aside from drawing the attention of film and literary theorists, *Antichrist* has also piqued the interest of scholars of theology and even studio artists. In an interview with The Guardian, artist Gillian Wearing describes her reaction to the film: “This is film as art. It’s not trying to be reasonable, and I find it quite close to a painting in the way it plays with the abstract, the real, and the unreal.” As reflected by Wearing’s description, *Antichrist*, is an extremely dense and symbolic film, on a level that is somewhat atypical for the film medium. As a result, its meaning resists reductive interpretation; yet critics seem to label the film as representative of one of two opposite messages: misogynist or feminist. Perhaps, this urge speaks to the way audiences have become accustomed to interpreting films as promotional messages, which they either find agreeable or do not.

Von Trier’s interest in doing the opposite of what Hollywood cinema does did not begin with *Antichrist*; in fact, it’s an endeavour you’d likely find documented somewhere
in Denmark’s history books\(^2\). “The Dogma 95 Manifesto”, considered “von Trier’s brainchild,” caused its own scandal when released during a prominent film festival in Paris in 1995 (Hjort 49). Historian Mette Hjorte describes the event in her book, Small Nation, Global Cinema:

With his characteristic sense of spectacle and provocation, the only invited Danish filmmaker, Lars von Trier, indicated a desire to part depart from the program, proceeded to read the Dogma 95 manifesto and so-called Vow of Chastity aloud, threw copies of the red leaflet into the audience, and, having declared himself unable to reveal any further details, left the theatre (34).

After reception, the “Dogma 95 Manifesto” became the antithesis to the Hollywood model of filmmaking and a symbolic protest to “Hollywood’s non-reciprocal relations to other film cultures” (Nestingen 229). The manifesto’s “Vow of Chastity”\(^3\) restricted the use of modern technology to produce films so as “to force the truth out of [their] characters and settings” (“Dogma 95 Manifesto”). Although Antichrist does not (by any means) adhere to the technical rules set out by the Dogma 95 Manifesto, it still embodies the spirit of radical alternative cinema that the manifesto envisioned. The manifesto also, as many of von Trier’s films do, plays with theological concepts (dogma and chastity) in a somewhat subversive way.

---

\(^2\) Von Trier’s Dogma 95 film The Idiots (1998) was nominated for inclusion in the the Danish Ministry of Cultures “canon” for “nationalizing [Danish] culture” (Badley 2).

\(^3\) The Dogma 95 Vow of Chastity consisted of the following rules: “1. Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in. The sound must never be produced apart from the image or vice-versa. 2. The camera must be handheld. Any movement or mobility attainable in the hand is permitted. 3. The film must be in colour. Special lighting is not acceptable. 4. Optical work and filters are forbidden. 5. The film must not contain superficial action. 6. Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. 7. Genre movies are not acceptable. 8. The film format must be Academy 35mm. 9. The director must not be credited.”
Antichrist tells a familiar, but tragic tale of parental loss and the subsequent grief and suffering that follows; but it does so in a world distorted by primal darkness and the omnipresence of evil. Historian Joanna Bourke describes the question the film poses as “an ancient one: what is to become of humanity once it discovers it has been expelled from Eden and that Satan is in us” (theguardian.com). Von Trier is hardly subtle with Antichrist’s allusions to the Biblical fall in Genesis; the two main characters, only named in the credits as He (William Defoe) and She (Charlotte Gainsbourg), and the primary setting of the movie in “the garden near Eden” pretty obviously provide a symbolic reading, or re-envisioning, of the Genesis story (Antichrist). The portrayal of the fall in Antichrist is not treated as a single event, but rather one that literally and symbolically repeats itself and becomes a permanent state of being.

Antichrist, opens with an extremely stylized prologue that depicts the most resonant instance of “the fall” in the movie. As He and She are filmed making passionate love in various locations in their apartment, their only child, Nick, wanders out of his crib and to an open window. Juxtaposed against the couple’s moment of orgasm Nick stands on the windowsill holding his teddy bear, before slipping, and falling to his death. The remainder of the film is separated into four chapters, “Grief,” “Pain (Chaos Reigns),” “Despair (Gynocide),” and “The Three Beggars” (Antichrist). The chapters chronologically follow the couple after Nick’s death, beginning with Nick’s funeral and then the discovery that She has been placed in a hospital because of her intense grief. He, disagrees with the treatment being administered to his wife in the hospital and decides to remove her and treat her himself. Meanwhile, He doesn’t seem to be grieving the death of his child himself; we see him cry once during Nick’s funeral, and for the rest of the film
he shows nearly no emotion. Instead, he focuses all of his attention and efforts on his
plan to cure her of her depression, which is at best ineffective, and at worst a death
sentence.

The location for her therapy, Eden, was determined based on her fear of that
setting, which she connects to an event that occurred during her work on a thesis project
called “gynocide” (Antichrist). Once arrived in Eden, He engages her in a series of
psychological exercises, that are themselves very symbolic, and reveal something much
darker happening between the two of them. Throughout this process, the psychological
stability of both of them becomes suspect as her manic behaviour intensifies and He
experiences a series of disturbing hallucinations. Eventually, the relationship becomes
violent, and after a painfully long series of brutal acts She commits against her husband,
He strangles her to death and torches her body, symbolizing another symbolic recreation
of Christianity’s dark past as well as the topic of She’s thesis: gynocide and the burning
of witches.

There are many important details that this summary omits that my later close
readings will, but before delving into specific scenes, I want to return to my argument
that Antichrist uses the grotesque to expose a politically repressed fear of female
sexuality. Before elaborating on how Antichrist employs the grotesque, I would like to
clarify the meaning and function of the grotesque as a genre. Defining the grotesque can
be challenging as, by its nature, it is ambiguous and resistant to categorization, and thus
to language as well. However, through surveying grotesque works of art and literature
throughout history and observing “certain recurrent notions”, critic Philip Thomson
provides a useful working definition. He defines the grotesque as “the unresolved clash of
incompatibles in work and response” adding that “it is significant that this clash is paralleled by the ambivalent nature of the abnormal as present in the grotesque” (Thomson 27). The presence of abnormality in grotesque works say more about normality, and the dangers of normative thinking, than it does about the status of what it abnormal.

Interacting with grotesque forms can place the reader in a disconcerting place of uncertainty of meaning, but “this is not just uncertainty for the sake of uncertainty” as it is a necessary step toward understanding the significance of the paradox being presented (Edwards & Graulund 3). In his in depth study of the origins of the grotesque, On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature, Geoffrey Harpham describes the function of allowing oneself to (temporarily) exist in a state of non comprehension and confusion:

While we are in the paradox, before we have either dismissed it as meaningless or broken through to that wordless knowledge (which the namelessness of the grotesque imagery parodies), we are ourselves in ‘para,’ on the margin itself. To be in ‘para,’ then,” is a necessary preludial condition which dissolves into the act of comprehension (20).

Although some of this insight may seem excessively abstract, the effect Harpham describes becomes much more tangible in the context of specific grotesque works and the socio-historic context they emerge from. Although works of the grotesque rely on “the materiality of [their] relation to the world around” to induce a grotesque effect, they also deal with that which has been “estranged, defamiliarized, and dislocated” (Edwards &
Graulund 12). So, as Harpham describes, allowing oneself to exist in “the margin itself” leads to a better understanding of “the center” or of conventional, normalized thinking.

The particular subject that grotesque art work aims to expose varies, but it nearly always “refers to aspects of human experiences that we have denied validity to, that we have rejected, excoriated, attempted to eliminate and image as a distorted aspect of reality” (Yates 40). However, these realities still “belon[g] to our world” they can only be “literally and metaphorically hidden” but “cannot be destroyed” (Yates 40–41). The grotesque has been described as taking place on the margin but teaching of the center, by reminding that the two modes are always inextricably linked (Harpham 79). The desire to “ceaselessly orde[r] and re-orde[r] the world” and tendency to “assig[n] hierarchies of meaning” is an ancient one, but the manifestations of our ancestors’ attempts continue to inform many modern belief systems (79). Theology, and particularly Christianity, has played an enormous role in the construction of hierarchical meaning, which evolved in to many of the normative “high” and “low” categories that still influence much of modern Western thought today.

Religious historian, James Luther Adams, regards the grotesque as in direct conversation with (at least) three archetypal Christian myths that aim to answer the question: “What are we to do when faced with the absurd and chaotic in history” (Yates 50)? Adams argues that the following Christian myths have played the largest role in informing future responses to this question:

The myth of creation that maintains that God overcame ‘the chaos by originally giving it form.
The myth of the fall that represents humanity’s fall into life, into consciousness from the undifferentiated state; humanity’s fall from innocence into conscious awareness and participation in the ambiguities of good and evil.

The myth of redemption that asserts God will overcome the chaos a second time by reaching down to pluck the human being from the mire of human evil and suffering and ‘deliver the person from evil’ (Yates 50-51).

Grotesque art interrogates the meanings of these myths by creating a reality that both represents and undermines these answers as satisfactory in explaining the presence of chaos, human suffering, and evil in the world. Antichrist’s grotesquerie speaks most prominently to “the myth of the fallenness of life,” but in doing so presents its own critique of the other myths as well (Yates 54).

The legacy of the myth of the fall was felt especially by women. In fact, during the period of witch hunting in North America, Eve’s transgression in the myth of the fall was used to support the Christian church’s specific targeting of women. One (of the many) anti-women passages included in the Malleus Maleficarum very bluntly explained the inferior nature of women, writing “[w]hat else is a woman but a foe to friendship, an inescapable punishment, a necessary evil, a domestic danger, a delectable detriment, an evil of nature, painted with fair colours” (Miles 83). This figuring of woman as inherently “evil” yet “delectable” recalls the role of Eve in the garden of Eden as the temptress, and was historically used to justify oppression and even violence against women (Miles 84). Antichrist’s She internalizes these anti-women arguments and becomes the archetypical symbol of female perversion.
Feminist and literary theorist, Julia Kristeva, took a particular interest in the historical role of women’s bodies in defining the sacred in Christian mythology through their abjection. In her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, she writes,

> When a woman ventures out into those regions [of abjection] it is usually to gratify, in the very maternal fashion, the desire for the abject that insures life (that is, the sexual life) of the man whose authority she accepts […] The eroticization of abjection… is it an attempt at stopping the hemorrhage: a threshold before death, a halt or a respite (54-55).

She identifies female bodies as abjected from the Christian concept of sacredness largely due to the treatment of women’s maternal functions in the bible, especially mandates to “purify” them after childbirth in Leviticus (102). Kristeva also finds in Leviticus a conflation between the maternal and death.

In Literary critic Diane Jonte-Pace’s essay, “Situating Kristeva Differently: Psychoanalytic Readings of Woman and Religion” she investigates the treatment of women in early psychoanalytic theory, in the writings of Freud, D.W. Winnicott, Jacques Lacan, and finally Kristeva, and finds a persistent “gendering of absence” (22). Jonte-Pace describes that “psychoanalysis theorizes a gendered absence: it creates woman as the privileged paradigm for absence, lack, or death,” but reminds that “the linkage itself is an ancient one” (14). She then points to many Christian teachings that equate femininity with death, such as labelling the female body as a “white sepulcher” or calling it “the devils gateway” (14). Kristeva’s theory of abjection has been incorporated into theories on the female grotesque, such as the work of Mary Russo, which I will incorporate into my later close readings of *Antichrist*. 
Antichrist represents an eruption of modern notions of reason and order by revealing that these ideals are defined by what they abject: chaos, suffering, corporeality, and death—each of which has historically been gendered feminine. The reality of these aspects of existence have been marginalized and repressed in modern Western culture. It is not uncommon for an individual to be comforted after a tragedy or encounter with human evil with the words “sometimes bad things just happen to good people” or “everything happens for a reason.” This is just a modern way of deferring the difficult questions life poses to some power beyond our comprehension in much the same way that Christianity created theological answers sought by our ancestors that posed the same questions. But, these questions will never be completely erased from human consciousness because the reality of existence is that it encompasses good and evil, vitality and death, high and low, all at once—and any meaning we ascribe to any aspect of being human is only to make ourselves feel more comfortable with the whole process.

Christianity has historically struggled to provide answers to the theodicy dilemma, or the question of evil in a benevolent God’s world, which hold up against ethical scrutiny and logic (Tooley, 2002, 7.5: Religious Theodicies). Antichrist exposes that modern thinking is not so radically different from the Christian teachings of Western culture’s past; the hierarchical value system interpreting existence has only taken on a new form, with gender connotations of its own.
The Fall: Ambiguous Reality in *Antichrist’s* Prologue

“Woman are still on their knees before an error because they have been told someone died on the cross for it. Is the cross, then, an argument?”

*Antichrist’s* prologue creates its own point of original sin by tying Nick’s fall to She’s paralysing experience of guilt and psychological suffering. The ambiguous nature of the prologue embodies the conflicting nature bestowed on humanity after the Biblical fall and the questionable status of sexuality as either an expression of love or a primal sin. The black and white sequence depicts two extremely emotionally disparate acts: It cuts between He and She making love and their son, Nick, as he gets out of his crib, grabs his teddy bear, and wanders to an open window where he tragically falls to his death. The sequence is accompanied by George Frederic Handel’s aria “Lascia ch’io piango,” which translates to “Let me Weep” (Buch-Hansen 140). The tragic tone and content of the piece adds another, somewhat incompatible, dimension to the prologue because it is paired with such an intense depiction of sexual pleasure. Handel’s piece also carries high intensity, but its lyrics depict sadness and suffering. The section von Trier uses in the prologue translates as follows:

Leave me to weep
over my cruel fate
and let me sigh for liberty.

May sorrow break
the bonds of my anguish

---

4 Nietzsche’s *The Antichrist* pg 29
if only for pity’s sake (Buch-Hansen 140). Already, there is a disparity between the images featured and the content and tone of the music that accompanies them (Sinnerbrink 165). Even before we see Nick wander out of his crib, the tone of the music alerts the viewer that something is very wrong.

The disconnect between the tragic tone and lyrics of Lascia chi’o Pango and the intuitively positive event of a sexual encounter between two married adults becomes slightly less puzzling when you scrutinize the body language and power dynamics of the scene. Lyrical phrases from the music, such as “cruel fate,” “sigh for liberty,” and “bonds of my anguish,” at first seems inappropriately paired with the act of making love; especially given the close up shots of Gainsbourg’s character expressing obvious pleasure. The lyrics also embody a sense of isolation as the first words are “leave me to weep,” which creates another contrast between sexual intimacy and the pain of loneliness (Buch-Hansen 140). But, perhaps the most important conceptual element introduced by these lyrics is the notion of imprisonment and subjugation. With those concepts in mind, reading the body language of He and She reveals a power dynamic colored by male dominance.

The gaze created by the camera seems to identify with Defoe’s character and thus accentuates the ways in which he is the one in control of the sexual encounter. This is established immediately as he is the one who turns the water in the shower off to initiate sex, he moves her to the various locations in the house where they make love, and he is always pushing her against something and generally dominating her during the act. When the camera does focus on She, her expressions are purely reactive; that’s not to say she’s not enjoying the encounter, but she’s not the one defining the interaction. Pretty much
any snapshot of her taken from the prologue illustrates this dynamic:

![Figure 1](image1)

![Figure 2](image2)

![Figure 3](image3)
These images have been used by some as evidence that the film is misogynistic, which holds some truth, but in the context of grotesque art these depictions hold a greater significance than the simplistic reading of the film as anti-women. One relatively mainstream film critic, Miles Hardman aptly describes *Antichrist* as “so misogynistic it almost comes out the other end as a commentary” (letterboxd.com). Although Harman isn’t exactly a von Trier fan, his insight here highlights the possibility that the film can be both “misogynistic” and a “commentary,” and perhaps unintentionally, discourages insisting on only reductionist interpretations (letterboxd.com). This uncertainty in meaning is further complicated by the strangely stylized, artistically beautiful depiction of Nick’s death (Sinnerbrink 165).

Nick’s fall is symbolically foreshadowed in virtually all of the sex scenes between his parents that take place in the prologue. First, the baby monitor comes into focus during a moment of passion between He and She and they seem oblivious to any potential sound coming from it. Then, as seen in the second photo from page three, Nick’s toothbrush is knocked out of its cup and falls (*Antichrist*). And finally, Nick passes the room where his parents are copulating and looks mysteriously into the camera. This particular snapshot shows the extremely uncomfortable juxtaposition of childhood innocence and a kind of primal sexuality:
This deranged family portrait invokes what Harpham describes as “metaphor[s] of co-presence” which “harb[our] the essence of the grotesque, the sense that things that should be kept apart are fused together” (11). The transition from the moment Nick witness the couple’s copulation to him being drawn to the open window connects his physical death to a kind of psychological death that occurred upon that witness. The relationship is reinforced by the cuts between shots of Nick falling through the air and close ups of He and She as they are lost in orgasmic oblivion.

This visual equation of sexual pleasure with death and loss confuses the ontological relationship between creation and destruction (Harpham 9). Von Trier creates an undeniable closeness between the sublime act of sex and an unapologetically cold depiction of loss of life. This juxtaposition ascribes an uncertainty to human nature that is amplified by sexuality: “Sex dramatizes the incongruity of the human: straining for sublimity, we ape the beasts” (Harpham 10). This insight recalls one of the fundamental paradoxes of humanity: reconciling our physicality with our higher capacities for reason,
emotion, and connections such as love. Antichrist’s sublime depiction of the couple’s state of pure ecstasy during sex both alerts the viewer to the disembodying potential of sexuality, yet also emphasizes the physical aspects of the act, which connect it to death. These physical elements have historically and theologically been gendered feminine due to women’s perceived connection to nature because of menstruation and childbirth; the resulting patriarchal discourse placed female sexuality as a direct threat to male reason. The prologue’s intense symbolism connects metaphysical questions of existence to modern gender roles by placing these conflicting elements in conversation with one another in a dark, metaphorical statement.

The aesthetic beauty of the black and white sequence paired with Handel’s tragic opera piece create a surreal, dream like, depiction of Nick’s death that brings into question the reality of the events depicted. Film philosopher, William Sinnerbrink, argues that the effect of these elements “cast doubt on the veracity of the tragic event” and “what we see is less an exposition of the background plot than a fantasmatic version of events distinctively coloured by the character’s subsequent experiences of trauma” (165). The close up shot of the “three beggars” figurines--“pain,” “grief,” and “despair”--support reading the prologue as a symbolic depiction of the emotional trauma attached to the memory of Nick’s fall. This insight also helps explain why the depiction of Nick’s fall is so saturated by images of the couple’s sexual oblivion in the moments before Nick dies: It’s a memory that carries an extreme sense of guilt. The aesthetics of the remainder of the film sharply contrasts the surreal, dream like prologue--perhaps suggests that the two representations could not belong to the same reality.
Outside but Also Within: Grotesque Power Inscriptions on She’s Body

“Grief,” Antichrist’s first chapter, opens from the cinematic perspective of the dead child, looking out the back window of his hearse on the way to his own funeral. The camera pans up from the coffin and out the window where He is shown crying and She looks mentally distant. When She suddenly collapses to the ground the faceless group of attendees of the funeral gather around her before the scene quickly cuts to her lying in a hospital bed one month later. She is disoriented and seems to be heavily medicated as her doctor thinks “[her] grief pattern is atypical” (Antichrist). Against her doctor’s advice, He adopts the role of her therapist and checks her out of the hospital.

The technique He undertakes for her psychological recovery reflects his desire to take control of She’s psyche and actions, and the resulting dynamic reflects patriarchal values. When She becomes sick and He removes her from the hospital, He establishes a doctor patient dynamic that she never verbally consents to, and in fact resists throughout. When she learns of his plan to take over her treatment, she protests saying “You couldn’t leave it, could you? You had to meddle” (Antichrist). Once He starts his attempt to cure her, He is met by her hostile words and resentment. Their relationship recalls Foucault’s notion of “grotesque mechanics of power” that are “typical of arbitrary dominion” (Edwards & Graulund 29). Because we hear She remark that “[he] [is] not a doctor” his decision to exert control over She by adopting a position of power appears to be an example of Foucault’s “arbitrary dominion” (Antichrist). Foucault classifies grotesque power as the kind of power that “is fluid” and that “exceed[s] the control of individuals or groups… a force that eludes boundaries and controls” (Edwards & Graulund 29).

Understanding the nature of the function of power in Antichrist in this way lends insight
to the function of the story as a micro-example of a much larger, more pervasive system of patriarchal control.

The grotesque body acts as a canvas for “inscriptions and effects of power” as it is the object directly influenced by systems of control (Edwards & Graulund 29). This dynamic is played out in Antichrist as we see, pretty literally, his words and diagnoses laid out over her physical body. Take the two depictions of She’s physical experience of anxiety after returning home from the hospital and discontinuing her (unknown) medication. Both sequences depict the exact same images: The camera zooms in on her eyes as they flicker erratically and then pans across her pulsating throat, her sweaty chest and pronounced heart beating through her skin, a vein throbbing in her neck, her slightly open dry mouth, and ends with a shot of the back of her head. There is no audio accompaniment in the first sequence except the faint sound of her heart beating. It ends abruptly as we see her in bed experiencing a panic attack of some kind, which he helps her come out of. The next time this sequence is depicted, He narrates the events, ascribing his own words over her experience. The following two shots include the subtitles with his commentary:
This scene illustrates the dynamic of power that persists in Antichrist in which She is the subject of his power and control. The doctor/patient dynamic that he establishes places He as the possessor and distributer of knowledge while she is merely a recipient of his beliefs.

As part of her therapy, He engages her in a variety of “exercises” which involve his attempts to gain control of her psyche so as to steer it in the direction of his treatment plan. The ultimate goal of his therapy is exposure and to eliminate her fear. To document the process, He draws out a pyramid shaped diagram and leaves a blank space at the top to eventually represent, what he believes to be, the ultimate source of her fear. In the early stage of this therapeutic project He asks her “Where would you feel most exposed?” and “What would be the worst place” (Antichrist). Her first response that seems to satisfy him is “the woods,” to which he replies “it’s funny because [She was] the one who always wanted to go into the woods” (Antichrist). The symbol of the woods has served as a metaphor for female sexuality in literature as old as early fairy tales. The fact that She
apparently used to enjoy the woods implies that losing Nick has changed her understanding of her own sexuality; something that doesn’t come as a surprise given the connection established in the prologue between her sexual experience and the traumatic loss of her son. The association between the woods and the subject of female sexuality is further reinforced when they are located at “the garden near Eden” (*Antichrist*).

Kristeva’s theory of abjection in the realm of the sacred is useful for speculating the significance of *Antichrist*’s allusion to the Garden of Eden of the Genesis accounts of the Old Testament. Kristeva writes, “[a]s abjection—so the sacred” and argues that abjection always “coincides with the sacred since [the sacred] sets it up” (17). She also addresses Christianity in particular and argues that the concept of Christian sin becomes a “dialectic elaboration” when it “becomes integrated into the Christian Word as a threatening otherness—but always nameable, always totalizable” (17). In the biblical tradition, the Garden of Eden is understood as the site for “the fall” of humanity and the origin of sin, which all of the descendants of Adam and Eve must suffer for. Eve, for being the temptress behind humanity’s original transgression, receives the punishment that “in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over thee” (*King James Bible*, Genesis 3:16). This passage resonates in the context of the dynamic between He and She in *Antichrist*.

Interestingly, in the past She has used their cabin in Eden to work on a thesis on “gynocide,” or the history of violence against women. The viewer first learns about the project when She admits to He that she never actually finished it. Although He denies ever criticizing her project, She says He would always describe her subject as “glib”. She recalls, “all of a sudden it was glib. Or even worse… some kind of lie” (*Antichrist*).
is the first hint She provides of her identification with the content of the texts she had spent the summer working on; the goal of her thesis was to critique them but she ultimately came to identify with some of the arguments used to support gynocide. I would like to try and classify this process as what Kristeva calls “the interiorization of biblical separation” because her identity crisis occurs in Antichrist’s fictional Eden (116).

As a result of She’s intense focus on the documents associated with the religious persecution of witches, She begins to internalize the phobia around feminine nature that the texts promote. Kristeva describes a similar process she observes in which through “interiorization, defilement will blend with guilt, which already exists on a moral and symbolic level in the Bible” (116). The result for Antichrist’s She is an extreme destabilization of her identity in favour of the representation of women in the texts she studies, which depict women as inherently evil. During one exercise, He confronts her for adopting these beliefs and she remarks, “women don’t control their own bodies, nature does” (Antichrist). In the context of von Trier’s world in Antichrist, nature is much more than the benign flipside to civilization—it seems harbour evil and malevolence. Although the fact that She is embracing the material she was meant to critique apparently infuriates He, nearly all of the psychological exercises he has done with her up until this point in the film have actually encouraged her to identify and embrace her connection with nature.

During their train ride on the way to Eden, He does a therapeutic exercise with She in which he guides her through a psychic visualization and dictates each move and thought. He asks her to visualize going to Eden, but when She arrives at the cabin he prohibits her from going inside, insisting “the outside is what [she’s] afraid of”
(Antichrist). He then tells her to lie down on the grass, and after some resistance, She complies. Then the following conversation ensues:

He: Now will you do what I ask?

She: Yes. What do you want me to do?

He: I want you to melt into the green. Don’t fight it… just…. Turn green

(Antichrist). As he tells her what to the depiction of her visualization takes on a distinctly grotesque style. The follow stills from this scene show how the image evolves in accordance with his instructions:
Figure 7. Image compilation from Maynard’s Horror Movie Diary, created by Maynard Morrissey
This image acts as a metaphor for his imposition of his own understanding of femininity to her psyche. The image produced through this interaction is grotesque in its depiction of the body as “blended with the world, with animals, with objects” (Bahktin 27). The image also seems to symbolize death, as “the positioning of Her body bears a striking resemblance to a corpse in a coffin” as she becomes consumed by the earth around her (Zolkos 183). Continuing with that metaphor, becoming one with the earth and “turning green” could be understood as acceptance in death, or the flip side, acceptance of ones mortality (Antichrist). Literary critic, Magdelena Zolkos, points out that the image also resembles “medieval Christian figures of female saints in a pietistic gesture of complete surrender to the divine” (183). The effect of the multitude of symbols and allusions at play in these images disrupts the narrative progression thus far by questioning the innocence of intent and implications of His plan to heal her in Eden.

The juxtaposition of all these elements in one frame, depicting such a range of meanings, creates a collage of the fundamental categories humanity depends on. John Ruskin argues that “a fine grotesque” is “expression in a moment, by a series of symbols thrown together, in a bold and fearless connection, of truths which it would have taken a long time to express in any verbal way” (114). As the image develops of She sinking into the earth we have symbols of divinity, death, separation, absorption, and unification all happening at once; but they don’t lead to just one meaning. Harpham elaborates on the potential of grotesque metaphors to allow the “mind [to see] the far and the near, the concrete and the abstract, the sacred and the unclean, on the same plane” (160). Perhaps the beauty of this kind of metaphor is that it creates a symbolic network that encompasses
the pieces of reality that we try to keep logically separate from one another and places them all on the same plane of existence.

This scene also marks a pivotal point in the relationship between She and He because his thoughts are invading her psyche. This interaction is intimate in a very different way from any previous interaction between them because She allows him to control her mind. Slovaj Zizek’s theory of the pathological psyche suggests that a disturbed psyche struggles to negotiate its own seeing with the gaze of the other (Buch-Hansen 124). As we already know that She suffers from an “a-typical grief pattern” her psyche is likely vulnerable to this confusion of self and other (Antichrist). Harpham identifies the relationship between a metaphor and its literal reference point as fundamentally grotesque. He writes, “considered referentially, metaphors are grotesques; they parody themselves” (157). So, while the metaphor of She becoming the grass is meant to portray a kind of psychological transcendence it simultaneously parodies the therapeutic exercise happening on the train, but in a serious rather than sarcastic way; with He as her guide, She loses herself in the rhetoric He feeds her. When they are finished with the exercise, the camera’s focus turns to the trees, where flashes of Her tormented face appear, bringing into question how calming the therapeutic exercise really
was.

Figure 9

Thoughts Distort Reality, or the Other Way Around?

The majority of the chapter “Pain (Chaos Reigns)” actually depicts He’s declining mental health. On their way to Eden, He experiences his first hallucination and we meet the first of “the three beggars”. While She takes a nap, He wanders off and encounters a deer that has apparently miscarried. The lifeless fawn hangs out of the deer’s body, marking one of Antichrist’s many symbols that conflates death with the maternal. When She wakes up from her nap, she finds him lying in a small meadow staring at nothing but plants and the grass. The fact that the deer reappears multiple times in the movie, including during a flashback to Nick’s fall, combined with its obvious connection to the recurrent “three beggars” motif, makes it an obvious hallucination.

Fascination and fear of the maternal has its cultural roots in Christianity but has also influenced some early psychoanalytic theory. Arguably, the legacy of the attention given to the strangeness of maternal bodies is a cultural mysticism or taboo around motherhood. Perhaps, the current debate around public breast-feeding is one modern
example of this cultural “fear of [the archaic mother’s] generative power” (Edwards & Graulund 33). For Kristeva, the general anxiety around the feminine reflects an engrained fear of the maternal body. The perceived necessity to place prohibitions on the maternal body reflects an “instability of the symbolic function” of maternity (Kristeva 14). Freud describes the uncanny redoubling associated with maternal reproduction:

In other words, there is a doubling, dividing, and interchanging of the self. And finally there is the constant recurrence of the same thing—the repetition of the same features or character traits or vicissitudes, of the same crimes, even the same names through several consecutive generations (Freud 9).

The process of reproduction embodies instability of identity for both the mother and her child. What persists for the child is a fear of reincorporation into the mother and a negation of selfhood (Edwards & Graulund 35).

The deer in Antichrist symbolizes the confusion of borders between mother and child while also signifying the repressed trauma of Nick’s death. Because He has allocated all of his attention and efforts toward Her therapy, He has not grieved for the loss of his son. We see him cry once at the funeral, but after that never again; not even when he discovers that his wife may have been abusing their child. But despite his attempts to repress the traumatic memory, He seems to project elements from his tormented psyche into the world around him, many of which symbolize a dark ambivalence toward nature.

He encounters the second of “the three beggars,” a self-mutilating fox who looks up at him and announces “Chaos reigns” (Antichrist). The fox is associated with feminine symbolism because of “the old fox hole,” which she describes as a great source of fear
The fox hole is essentially a cave, which recalls the archaic bodily metaphor of the “cavernous female body” (Russo 1). The fact that the cave’s occupant is a dying fox, whose insight on life is “chaos reigns,” certainly builds upon Antichrist’s symbolism of femininity as an uncontrollable death drive. The cultural construction of female nature as chaotic placed women in conceptual opposition with men; in response, the Western patriarchal order spent centuries implementing systems to control the ‘unpredictable’ female gender.

The therapeutic program He creates for She reflects normative, patriarchal level of attention that has been given to the task of controlling women in Western societies:

If women have been marginal in the constitution of meaning and power in Western culture, the question of women has been central, crucial to the discourse of man, situated as she is within the literary text, the critical text… and social texts of all kinds as the riddle, the problem to be solved, the question to be answered (196).

Antichrist’s He adopts exactly this kind of approach to cure his wife of her mental ills. To him, his wife is one big riddle that he is anxious to solve; but inevitably the riddle He approaches is also of his own nature—of how to reconcile reason with the chaos within. But He frames the “question to be answered” as the cause of her mania, which he believes to be her greatest source of fear (196).

By denying the reality of Her own reflections on her experiences, His therapy functions as a violation of her identity, which ultimately contributes to her psychotic break. When she admits that “[She] [has] been afraid of [Eden] before” she tells Him a story about hearing Nick screaming but finding him happily playing with his toys
(Antichrist). He is quick to begin convincing her that “the scream wasn’t real” and goes on about why: “If the danger were real, [her] fear would have save[d] [her] life, because [her] adrenaline would be used for fight or flight.” He finally concludes that “what [she’s] experiencing is panic, nothing more” (Antichrist). His reductive reaction does not consider the weight of that memory for her and by dismissing it, as essentially not real, he denies her ownership of an experience that has clearly had a profound impact on her psyche.

The discourse between He and She embodies Foucault’s notion of grotesque power. Foucault “call[s] grotesque the fact that, by virtue of their status, a discourse or an individual can have effects of power that their intrinsic qualities should disqualify them from having” (14). Remembering that “[He’s] not a doctor” and that her actual doctor cautioned that “[He] shouldn’t treat [his] own family” his status as her therapist is suspect, especially given the level of resistance She exhibits towards him (Antichrist). Despite the fact that He admits to not being a medical doctor he preaches the rhetoric of psychology and science as if his words are undisputed truths. His discussion of the function of her “adrenaline” and the “fight or flight reaction” is reminiscent of Foucault’s notion of judicial systems exercise of power based on “the parody[ing]… of scientific discourse” (13). The dynamic between He and She parallels the institutional relationship Foucault describes, on the (false) basis of his connection to science, He is allowed totally control over She and is ultimately the one with her life in his hands.

During the moments that She chooses to open up to him He is completely dismissive of what she says and at times even mocks her. His response to her confession
about Eden, which in some ways is actually very beautiful and profound, is particularly belittling. She recalls

The acorns fell on the roof vent. They kept falling and falling… and die and die… and I understood that everything that used to be beautiful about Eden was perhaps hideous. Now I could hear what I couldn’t hear before: The cry of all the things that are to die (Antichrist).

This revelation points to the profoundly pessimistic view of nature as a kind of constant grim reaper in life, while also alluding to the cultural association of demonic nature as feminine. He fails to see any insight in her statement and mocks her, telling her “that’s all very touching, if it was a children’s book.” But her “children’s book” worthy statement actually reflects one of the fundamental paradoxes of the human condition (Antichrist). Harpham argues that the grotesque has the unique potential to “give us a clue into our own situation in this world—a clue to the balance, or lack of balance, that is our lot, and insight into the world as a world of darkness and light, of corruption and renewal, of death, and birth” (Yates 35). Antichrist disrupts this notion of “balance” as a fantasy of modern thinking that reduces existence to fallible categories. Despite He’s dismissive attitude toward her revelation, his system of reason is falling apart in Eden as death’s omnipresence begins to torment his psyche.

Despair: Gynocide

“Woman is the gate of the gevil, the way of evil, the sting of the scorpion-- in a word, a dangerous thing.”5

5 Saint Jerome Quote, cited in Hugh Fogelman’s Christianity Uncovered, pg 114.
After his strange conversation with the fox, He decides to venture into the cabin’s attic, which apparently functioned as She’s study to work on her thesis the previous summer. The room is decorated with various, somewhat grotesque art works that depict instances of violence against women, especially torture. The study itself takes on the form of a kind of grotto—It is dark with apparently no installed lights (he uses a lamp to see in there) and features strange and disturbing art. Historically, the grotto, or the cave, historically was used as a sacred space for rituals in which “the mysteries of the fatality/fertility complex, and of virtually every other aspect of primitive religion, were celebrated” (Harpham 84). The art works excavated from these caves were found to be strange and grotesque in their ambiguity. But after decades of scrutiny, historians were able to decipher some cave art and connect the content to the known facts about the communities residing there at the time. Harpham describes some of the strange imagery of “large beasts, hybrid human-animal forms, pregnancy and death” as “inventor[ies] of the concerns of their creators” (85). In the context of the subject of She’s thesis, the gruesome scenes in the art work He finds in her study can be understood as a representation or documentation of the concerns of the perpetrators of gynocide that motivated witch hunting.

While being cautious not to generalize, I’d like to connect the phenomena of witch hunting to a few cultural binaries: Good/evil, sacred/ demonic, and of course man/woman. The practice of with-hunts violently reinforced these binaries and feminized the concept of evil. Two of these three binaries contain a high, or positive element set against its opposite low, and negative element; the gender binary of man/woman does not contain an inherent value distinction, but the threat that feminine power posed to the
patriarchy demanded the construction of hierarchical gender definitions. On the basis of woman’s connection to nature, via childbirth, menstruation, etc., women were equated with a “carnal lust” that renders them more likely to conspire with the devil; this was largely the logic, as expressed in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, that motivated the witch hunts (Thurston 54). Thus, any persecution of women identified as witches was considered to be part of the greater war of good versus evil, God’s work versus the devil’s work. To She’s vulnerable psyche, the misogynist teachings of the historical artefacts of gynocide ring true, and sadly she adopts a misogynist understanding of herself to the point of self-destruction.

*Antichrist*’s depiction of She as a long time sufferer of mental illness suggests that it may have been impossible for her to maintain a critical distance from the texts she set out to study for her thesis. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, Buch- Hansen argues that one key characteristic of a compromised psyche is their inability to “imagine that a different perspective on shared events exists” (124). The association between She’s psychological deterioration and her work on gynocide is exemplified through the pages of her journal. The first page we see presents content that reads as an objective commentary on the differences between mainstream and traditional witches, but as the pages go on any such critical tone disappears. In her discussion of the “devils marks on [witches]” she describes: “sometimes [the devil’s marks] [are] invisible and [can] be detected by pricking the accused all over with a sharp instrument” (*Antichrist*). This statement is devoid of any kind of assessment of this irrational practice; there is not even a lone adjective, or shift in voice to question her belief in this statement. Meanwhile, her writing is increasing in size and decreasing in legibility, until finally turning to scribbles:
This image reaffirms the suspicion that She’s mental illness has been an ongoing element in her life, and suggests that Nick’s death may have only exacerbated an underlying condition. The next exercise He engages her in sheds light on just how unstable her identity has become.

The role-playing exercise they do immediately after his investigation of her study illustrates the identity fluidity, and even confusion, that characterizes their relationship. He explains that his role will be “all the thoughts that provoke [her] fear…. all the things that [she] calls nature” and her role “is rational thinking” (*Antichrist*). His description of nature is very telling in its expression of his own understanding of human nature as inherently dangerous and threatening toward women:

She: Okay Mr. Nature, what do you want?

He: To hurt you as much as I can… by killing you.

She: Nature can’t hurt me. You’re just the whole greenery outside.

He: No, I’m more than that… I’m outside, but also within…. I’m the nature of all human beings.
She: Oh, that kind of nature…the kind of nature that causes people to do evil things against women.

He: That’s exactly who I am (Antichrist).

His identification as “the nature of all human beings” paired with his expression of a desire to kill and “do evil things against women” brings into question his own assumptions about female nature. His assertion that the nature He represents is “outside, but also within” affirms his perceived connection between earthly elements, as symbolized by “the greenery outside,” and female nature (Antichrist). Given his commitment to exposure therapy for her treatment, it wouldn’t be a stretch to say that by assuming the role of nature He is trying to represent a source of She’s fear, maybe the greatest source. However, in doing so, He inevitably inserts his own assumptions and beliefs into the rhetoric He uses to describe what He thinks she feels. The result is a performative explanation of all of his assumptions about her.

What unfolds during the remainder of the exercise can be read as an example of double inversion. A double inversion is an instance observed in Patrick McGrath’s novel, The Grotesque, in which a “first inversion is cancelled out by the second” (Edwards & Graulund 9). The purpose behind portraying something with such a circular logic is to “suggest that the grotesque has the power to eliminate borders” and “can reveal how the boundaries between the ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ are fluid, not fixed” (Edwards & Graulund 9). While the concept behind the exercise itself represents an (admittedly elementary) investigation of the possibility of fluid boundaries, the exchange of words provoked by the exercise illustrates the instability of identity as that which is “outside, but within” (Antichrist).
The initial constructs of the game set out traditional binaries of woman to nature versus man to reason pretty directly; but as the level of adherence to the roles the exercise sets out becomes unclear, these boundaries become blurry. The initial inversion takes place when they take on a role that is considered to be oppositional to their nature: He becomes nature, and She becomes rational thinking. Obviously, this distinction reflects misogynist beliefs, so it’s important to side-note that He was the one who created the exercise; asking her to play the “role” of rational thinking implies that the practice is not something She is generally familiar with.

The discourse that transpires during the exercise doesn’t neatly fit within the constructs of “rational thinking” or “nature,” and in effect demonstrates the instability of that binary (Antichrist). When She is apparently playing her role as a rational thinker in the exercise, She explains that “[she] discovered something else in [her] material than [she had] expected…If human nature is evil, then that goes as well for…the nature of all the sisters. Women do not control their own bodies—Nature does” (Antichrist). As she is speaking the shot changes from observing their conversation to focusing on a group of artworks from her study. It then zooms in on one particularly grotesque piece:
This animalistic, demonizing depiction of the female body symbolizes the dangerous potential of the view she expresses about female nature. If the viewer is to assume that her words are still meant to represent the role of rational thinking, it doesn’t seem to fit. But, historically, this kind of logic has been used to justify the persecution of witches, so in a way it’s not so shocking that she may associate this argument with rational thinking, given the subject of her studies.

Although He presents the exercise as “role playing,” rather than a complete role reversal, the roles He assigns (nature versus rational thinking) have obvious gender connotations. Because both She and He adopt the stereotypic nature of the opposite gender, the aim of the exercise can be read as an inversion or “putting something in reverse order or arrangement” (Edwards & Graulund 8). But, as the exercise continues, they seem to come full circle and back to occupying roles associated with gender stereotypes of man/reason and woman/nature. Although what She says about the evil
nature of “the sisters” at face value seems irrational, She actually presents her argument in a very logical manner; She even uses the traditional “if, then” structure, and it’s a valid argument (in the logician’s sense). Her supporting reasons, such as “women don’t control their own bodies,” are less convincing, but speak more to how vulnerable her psyche must have been to abandon her beliefs so easily (*Antichrist*). His reaction to her admission demonstrates his patriarchal disposition and dismissive attitude toward his wife:

> The literature that you used in your research was about evil things committed against women, but you read it as proof of the evil of women? You were supposed to be critical of those texts, that was your thesis. Instead you’re embracing it. Do you know what your saying? (*Antichrist*).

This deviation from the original intent of the role-playing represents the second inversion of He’s character and in effect reveals his underlying belittling attitude as a quality associated with his original, pre-inversion position (his identity). Her second inversion takes place when she responds “Forget it. I don’t know why I said it,” which represents her submissiveness in their relationship and also her tendency to internalize his opinions about her (*Antichrist*). When he questions her mental functioning here, She quickly affirms his suspicion by admitting that she’s not thinking straight. The identity confusion that takes place during this exercise symbolizes the fluidity of socially constructed borders and represents a reality in which everything is always “outside, but within.”

> The next scene takes the concept of boundary fluidity that the discourse from the exercise explores and represents it aesthetically. After the exercise the scene changes to their bedroom where they are having sex, and she is sobbing. She asks him to “hit [her]”
and when He refuses, She runs out of the cabin, naked, and begins to masturbate at the foot of a tree (*Antichrist*). What makes this scene so disturbing is not necessarily her masturbation but the sort of frantic mania she seems to be experiencing; this conflation is not accidental as it represents an archaic notion of female sexuality as inherently excessive. The *Malleus Maleficarum*, which She likely studied as part of her thesis, echoes the words of Church Father Saint Jerome as he explains that the nature of all women is characterized by “insatiable” sexual urges:

> It is not just the harlot or adulteress who is spoken of; but woman’s love in general is accused of being ever insatiable; put it out, it bursts into flame; give it plenty, it is again in need; it enervates a man’s mind and engrosses all thought except for the passion which it feeds (Miles 95).

This kind of sexuality does seem applicable to *Antichrist*’s She, but to the point that she becomes a kind of caricature of this sex crazed, fallen woman. This image is symbolized, for all of its grotesqueness, when He finds her masturbating and initiates sex.

The sex scene at the base of the tree really brings together all of the grotesque symbols and concepts involved in *Antichrist* so far into one, disturbing sequence. As He begins having sex with her, she exclaims that “[the] sisters from Ratisbon could start a hail storm” (*Antichrist*). The camera then shifts its focus to “a well-known drawing of two women, Agnes and Anne from Ratisbon, condemned for witchcraft” (S. Thomsen, Article I). The significance of her statement about these women is that it indicates the presence of something evil and demonic. The *Malleus Malafecarum* regards the hail storm as “an initiation to a relationship with the devil” (S. Thomsen, Article I). So, at least symbolically, She introduces a demonic element to this scene. Paired with this sense
of evil presence are a variety of other symbols that point to both the “high” and “low” elements of life.

His decision to join She at the base of the tree and have sex with her is framed as an act of love. Initially, when She demands that He hit her during sex and He says “[he] do[esn’t] want to” she says that “then [he] do[esn’t] love [her]” (Antichrist). So, when He does as She wishes and slaps her in the face during sex, it is perhaps motivated by a desire to prove that He does love her. However, this framing of the sexual encounter is contrasted by the brutal physicality of the scene. The viewer is visually confronted with the details of the body during sex—the way the skin on his back wrinkles with every thrust, her fingers digging into his buttocks, and a close up on the greasy nape of his neck. The effect of this intense focus on the body is to expose the conceptual dissonance between the ideal of human love and the means by which we express it. D.H. Lawrence explains rather eloquently his view on the nature of the sex/love paradox:

To have created in us all these beautiful and noble sentiments of love, to set the nightingale and all the heavenly spheres singing, merely to throw us into this grotesque posture, to perform this humiliating act, is a piece of cynicism worthy, not of a benevolent Creator, but of a mocking demon (Harpham 13).

His dramatic word choice that describes sex as “grotesque” and “humiliating” brings into question the origins of this negativity around human sexuality. His critique that the foulness of human sexuality could not possibly be attributed to “a benevolent Creator” suggests that the institution of religion played some role in creating this dichotomy (13).

In The Grotesque in Art and Literature: Theological Reflections, grotesque theorist Wilson Yates describes the potential of the grotesque to invoke the “myth of the
fallenness of life” (54). According to the myth, because of Adam and Eve’s
transgressions in the garden of Eden humanity is forever doomed to an imperfect
existence subject to “existential ambiguities and vulnerabilities, anxieties and
propensities for evil” (Yates 54). The legacy of this myth is the “we [humanity] deny the
unity of creation” and “deny the ambiguities of life, seeking a way of being that is
controlled and perfect” (54-55). To deal with humanity’s sinful nature, religious and
cultural institutions create normative labels, taking the form of “alienating dualisms of
body and spirit, male and female, [and] the individual and community” (54). The
grotesque holds the potential to debunk the culturally constructed façade of order and of a
rational world that fits neatly into man-made categories.

*Antichrist* functions as a grotesque disruption to the illusion of order in an
imperfect, “fallen” world and connects this illusion to the Biblical fall. Grotesque works
that recall the “myth of the fallenness of life” often address the fundamental points of
anxiety around the human condition. Such works “treat mortality and death, bodily
processes, sexual behavior, fecundity and birth, war and violence, distortions and denials
of natural and human form” (Yates 57). *Antichrist* deals with many of these subjects, in
some cases all at once. The scene depicting He and She copulating on the tree as arms
reach out from the roots and surrounding dirt grotesquely depicts of the aspects of
existence that culture tries to keep separate as one, writhing unity. The following still
from this scene provides a glimpse into this twisted depiction of the fabric of life:
Figure 12

The next time we see the couple, He antagonistically lectures She in a manner that exposes his patriarchal disposition as hardly subtle. She is looking particularly exhausted and weak as He lectures her about historical violence against women; suddenly, He is the expert and she knows nothing. His statements in this encounter are as ironic as they are reductive and simplistic. For example, His assertion that “it’s a scientific fact” that “obsessions never materialize” given the fact that the subject of his obsession with “the three beggars” has been materializing before his eyes in the forms of dying/dead animals (Antichrist). And then, foreshadowing his future behaviour, his argument that “anxieties can’t trick you into doing things you wouldn’t do otherwise… something against your nature” doesn’t exactly hold up when He murders his wife and sets her body on fire after seeing “the three beggars” materialize (Antichrist). She tells him that “when the three beggars are here, someone must die” so the fact that they all materialize by her bloodied body moments before He strangles her to death implies some sort of connection (Antichrist). The echoes of this conversation on the later events in the film undermine his self-ascribed virtue of rationality as the system of reasoning He promotes violently falls
apart and self-destructs.

Figure 13

The Birth of the Female Monster

Any disturbing imagery featured before the final twenty minutes of Antichrist is basically relaxing in comparison to the film’s violent endings. But something changes in She’s character that causes her to break psychologically and turn to extreme violence, and it happens immediately after She is faced with the reality that she treated her son abusively. When She discovers his autopsy, which He has kept a secret until now “because [She] wasn’t feeling well,” He explains to her that Nick’s autopsy showed “a slight deformity, of the bones in his feet” (Antichrist). He then shows her a polaroid of Nick playing with his shoes on the wrong feet and asks: “Are you aware that you put Nick’s shoes on wrong in this picture” (Antichrist)? She attributes the mistake to “a slip of the mind that day” but shortly after we see He flipping through photo after photo and all of them show the shoes have been put on the wrong feet (Antichrist). This conversation prompts some kind of revelation for He about the source of She’s greatest fear, so He rushes out of the cabin and into the shed to finally complete his pyramid and solve the
riddle of his wife’s mysterious psyche. Moments before She attacks him with some kind of blunt object, He writes “Me” at the top of the pyramid and concludes that She is her own greatest fear.

Figure 14

The connection between the violence that ensues and this revelation speaks to the profound amount of guilt this realization may have had on She’s psyche, and also her intense frustration with his need to label her. When we first met She in the hospital she was tormented by her feelings of guilt and sense of responsibility for Nick’s death, that perhaps, was her greatest fear. Realizing that this fear may actually be true could be an uncanny experience for her in which She “encounter[s] [Her] most intimate fears” (Edwards & Graulund 6). The subsequent identity flux that this return of a repressed memory would have caused explains the violently manic state that overtakes her.

Mary Russo’s theory of the “female spectacle” in the grotesque provides a useful framework to interpret the spectacle of violence that transpires in Antichrist. Russo’s notion of the female spectacle reflects the historical phenomena of “the figure of the female transgressor as public spectacle” (61). The persecution of witches, their trials and
even some executions, were treated as a public events because witch-hunting was considered to be in the interest of public safety. The modern female spectacle obviously takes on a different form than public with burnings, but still reflects a fascination and underlying fear of the power of female sexuality. It is easy to find an image of the seductive, hyper-sexualized woman in modern pop-culture, and we are in fact confronted by this image in advertisements all the time. But this idealized, depiction of feminine power ignores the complicated past of the female spectacle acting as a normative warning of how not to behave, and since facilitated by men, a warning coloured by their own assumptions about women. Unfortunately, Antichrist’s She lacks the stability of mind to read the texts promoting gynocide critically and becomes a modern manifestation of archaic misogynist beliefs; but perhaps in doing so questions whether it is hypocritical to fetishize women’s bodies the way popular culture does while ignoring the history which has informed the construction of female sexuality.

The violence that unfolds basically reaffirms all the cultural reasons that men have historically feared woman: she is evil, she will castrate you, and she will try to kill you. During one conversation earlier in the film, He admits to her that He has “been having a lot of crazy dreams” to which she replies “Freud is dead, isn’t he” (Antichrist)? Ironic, given the later scene, when she smashes his genitals with a large log, symbolically castrating him. Psychologist Stephen Diamond explains the female gendering of the castration complex in his book Anger, Madness and Daimonic: The Physical Genesis of Violence:

[I]t should be noted that the dread of castration, and the overwhelming anxiety that accompanies it, is engendered at first by the boy’s initial interest in the
opposite sex (mother). This powerful early association between sexual feelings for females and fear of castration (castration anxiety) remains in the boy into manhood, manifesting most often in an unconscious fear of women and of the ‘feminine’ in general (36).

The fact that He is the one who decides that She is the greatest source of her own fear of course reflects his own perception of her as dangerous. The violence She commits against him can be seen as a materialization of the way He sees her in the moment he completes the pyramid: delusional, perverse, and violent. Her perversity especially comes out in her decision to masturbate him while He is still unconscious.

The disturbing scene in which She masturbates He until he ejaculates bloods further builds on Antichrist’s symbolic representation of fear of the feminine for woman’s generative and destructive power. His ejaculation embodies procreation and death, much in the same way that a woman’s menstrual blood does. In this sense, She has gone one step beyond castration and is enacting the male fear of female reproduction on his reproductive organs. Then, in a symbolic role reversal of the power dynamics leading up to this moment, She drills a hole in his leg before inserting a pole into his leg and attaching a grindstone to immobilize him. All three of these violent actions can be understood as materializations of the various facets of the castration complex: through castration man loses control of his sexuality and thus foregoes control of their bodies to women, whose intentions man suspects. The association between this anxiety and fear of the maternal is symbolically illustrated when He hides from her in a cave and She sits on
This scene also can be read as a grotesque inversion of the discovery of Jesus’s empty tomb as described in the gospels. In all four accounts of the discovery in the Gospels, attention is given to the fact that the stone enclosing Jesus’s tomb had moved during the process of his resurrection. In this scene of Antichrist there is also a stone, but as He crawls deeper into the earth the stone moves to close off the entrance of the cave rather than open it. Although it is some kind of miracle that He is still alive given his
injuries, it doesn’t appear that He dies and comes back to life (he consistently shows signs of life). However, the raven he discovers in the cave does seem to come back from the dead. There aren’t many (or any) ravens that could survive after their body is smashed over and over again by a large stone. Also, there is a moment that the raven appears dead because it stops screeching, in which He is able to relax, but only moments later it begins screeching again; it also appears alive and well in the last scene of the film when it joins the deer and the fox by She’s unconscious body (it just won’t stay dead).

Although the raven appears in various contexts in the Bible, it is most resonant as a symbol of Satan, especially in the context of the Genesis creation myths (Freeman 15). In the story of Noah’s Ark the raven is sent out to see if the floodwaters had receded enough to leave the ark, but instead flies relentlessly “back and forth until the water had dried up from the earth” (Genesis 8:7). This vagrant quality is described in Daniel Defoe’s *History of the Devil* as also belonging to Satan, who’s “confined to a vagabond, wandering, unsettled condition” (Freeman 16). So, Antichrist’s portrayal of the raven as the figure that is resurrected in the symbolic tomb, completely inverts myth of the resurrection of Jesus and instead communicates Satan’s resurrection, or his immortality. Because the raven’s cries help She find He in the cave, She is again implicated as having a particular connection to the demonic that He does not.

In the context of the setting as representative of original sin, this inversion of the resurrection of Christ reinforces the legacy of female guilt established by the Biblical fall. Her decision to perform a clitarectomy on herself symbolizes an example of what Russo describes as “the female psyche” that “identif[ies] with misogynistic revulsion against the female body and attempt[s] to erase signs that mark her physically as feminine” (2). This
scene has been regarded as inexcusably graphic, as if the practice is unheard of in the modern world; but it’s not. And although the practice is considered by many to be “the invisible hand of patriarchy” the practice itself is usually distanced from men, as it most often inflicted on and by women (Monagan 160). As Antichrist’s She prepares to make the cut, the viewer accompanies her in a flashback to Nick’s death that implies that she may have actually witnessed him approach the window and fall. But this depiction, like the first, is unreliable as it is clearly colored by her guilt. She attributes her sexuality as the reason for Nick’s death and so decides it must be destroyed. But sadly “none of it is any use” because He murders her anyway (Antichrist).

The long-winded strangulation scene aesthetically recalls the intense focus on the couple’s sexual encounter from the prologue, particularly the attention to She’s facial expression in both scenes. The feeling of ecstasy that her face expresses in the prologue darkly communicates the same sense of disembodiment that occurs as She loses consciousness during strangulation, thus tying the murder to her sexuality. The conflicted look She gives him right before the attack also recalls her seductive expression in the shower before He begins to engage her in sex. The relationship between the two encounters lends insight to the tenuousness of love and also of identity. Here we have Mr. Rational who set out to heal his wife because “[He] loves [her]” and “nothing hurts more than to see the one that you love subjected to mistakes and wrongs” murdering her in cold blood (Antichrist). Yes, her acts of violence are inexcusable, but the entire spectacle of violence sheds light on the implicit violence of patriarchal domination.

In the end, even He (Mr. Rational) is not able to protect the boundaries of his psyche and ultimately becomes just an extension of She’s obsession with gynocide and
evil; which is of course itself a fundamentally patriarchal phobia to begin with. He is the one who witnesses her obsessions materialize in nature, and He murders a woman who embodies all the anti-woman teachings of the gynocide texts He finds so preposterous—a pretty solid example of “be[ing] tricked into doing something [one] wouldn’t ordinarily do, something against [ones] nature,” which He previously assured her is impossible (Antichrist). But He and She’s constant role reversal throughout Antichrist, whether in exercises, during sex, or in thought confusions, has been so constant that any sense of their permanent “natures” has been completely lost; they don’t have just one nature.

**Satan’s Church**

Antichrist’s epilogue is highly symbolic and reinforces the absurdity of the fact that He has just burned his wife’s corpse given the context of Eden, gynocide, and the killing of witches. But the symbolism is dark and promotes a kind of irony that certainly isn’t funny. The black and white, slow motion scene portrays He walking across (and presumably leaving) Eden, but beneath his feet are nude female bodies in writhed, disturbing forms:

*Figure 17*
It is almost difficult to make out He in this shot as he walks away from the tree, mimicking and reversing one of his exercises with She that He did during their train to Eden. Aside from its aesthetic representation of He’s contribution to the historical killing of women, it also symbolizes humanity’s fate after they are expelled from Eden: they walk with death and evil—in “Satan’s church” (*Antichrist*).

The mixture of tragedy with horror in *Antichrist* reflects the limits of rationality and modern thinking to explain a reality experienced primarily as ambiguous. Von Trier doesn’t isolate the low from the high, the sacred from the fallen, or the living from the dead that challenges the viewer. In his re-envisioning of the Biblical fall in a modern contexts von Trier exposes the “alienating dualisms” and “distort[jion] [of] the goodness of our [human] sexuality, subjecting it to guilt and shame, violence and repression” that Christianity set up (Yates 55). But the pervasive question of nature as a descriptive category to organize reality persists in modern thinking; and the historical role of female nature as the scapegoat for representing the demonic other to masculinity can still be observed in discourses today. The modern hesitance to trust women over men is evident in relevant victim blaming rhetoric around sexual assault cases, in which outsiders often assume a victim must have ulterior motives for making the report—woman are always out to get men, right? Because after all who could trust “anything that bleeds for five days and doesn’t die” (this bumper sticker is currently for sale on Amazon.com)? This archaic connection between femininity and death persists in the way we understand female nature and perpetuates the cultural anxiety around women’s bodies and their sexual power.
Antichrist exposes the alienating dualisms that rational thinking has taken from Christian theology into a modern world where they don’t belong. At Antichrist’s premiere, von Trier told the audience that the movie was an invitation “for a tiny glimpse behind the curtain” and “into the nature of [his] fears” (Zolkos 177). Although most of what von Trier says about himself is suspect at best given his commitment to being a trickster figure on the side, I like the idea that Antichrist is a glimpse into something hidden; perhaps the movie’s unsettling impact lies in its portrayal of “something which ought to have remained concealed but which has nevertheless come to light” (Freud 13). The psychological turmoil the film embodies mirrors the destabilized identity caused by the return of the secret of patriarchal culture. But, the beauty of the uncanny grotesque is that its subject matter isn’t limited to the human psyche, and it usually depicts a culturally repressed memory or belief that is as threatening to cultural identity as Freud’s return of the repressed is to the human mind.
Conclusion: Von Trier’s Crusade of Transgressive Women

Antichrist’s depiction of the origins of patriarchal female phobia sets up the radical protagonist of his most recent film Nymphomaniac I&II (2013-14). Joe is a sex addict, or as von Trier names her (in his typical anti-politically correct way) a nymphomaniac. She is the cultural other of modern society because she rejects the idea that love has any meaning and instead embraces sexual pleasure and disregards any notions of morality. Joe has been said to be a culmination of all of von Trier’s female protagonists because of her pure cynicism regarding herself and humanity in general. But her personal self-hatred is pretty clearly connected with her sexuality, much like Antichrist’s She.

However, Nymphomaniac I&II has a very different, playful and comic, tone from Antichrist. The film could also be interpreted through theories of the grotesque to better understand the blending of comic and horrific elements to satirize modern gender politics. Like Antichrist, Nymphomaniac incorporates theological questions, and especially provokes the idea of Christian sin. At one point one character questions why Joe would let the “worst aspect of religion as the concept of sin…survive beyond religion” (Nymphomaniac Volume I). Relevant to this question is the question of evil that Antichrist poses; both films seem to imply that these polarizing concepts have only been re-conceptualized by modern thinking and that the effects continue to marginalize women’s experiences in more covert manner.

Von Trier’s Breaking the Waves (1996) features a much more approachable female lead, Bess, who finds herself stuck between the Christian virgin/whore dichotomy and struggles to find her own identity and to “be good.” Bess is a strict catholic woman,
but when her husband, Jan, suffers a tragic accident and becomes severely brain damaged her relationship with the church changes. Since Jan can no longer make love to Bess, he asks her to have sex with other men. Bess becomes convinced that doing as Jan asks is part of God’s plan to restore Jan to good health. During one of her sexual encounters she is stabbed repeatedly and eventually dies in the hospital. Both Bess and Antichrist’s She lose their lives in their struggle against dualistic patriarchal thinking, but Nymphomaniac’s Joe does not.

Through Joe’s long (the two volumes total near five hours) reflection on the events of her life, she finds that telling her story has given her strength and that she “may be happy after all is said and done” (Nymphomaniac Volume II). But when she shuts off the lights to go to sleep, her new friend, Seligman, re-enters her room to try to rape her. She then pulls out a handgun and kills him with one shot. Did he really deserve that? Maybe not, but like Antichrist, Nymphomaniac demonstrates that patriarchal domination creates a violent cycle that can result in tragic outcomes. In The Female Grotesque, Russo writes, “women and their bodies, certain bodies, in certain public framings, are always already transgressive—dangerous, and in danger” (60). Von Trier’s films work to expose this fact as prevalent to Western culture by writing the story of patriarchal domination directly on the bodies of the women who internalize its discourse. She, Bess, and Joe all react differently to the pressures of Christianity and patriarchy to have a certain “nature,” but the commonality lies in their self-destructive desires and feelings of inadequacy—this is the “nature” bestowed on the female gender from centuries of subjugation in patriarchal societies.
Works Cited


*Nymphomaniac Volume I*. Dir. Lars Von Trier. Zentropa, 2013. DVD.

*Nymphomaniac Volume II*. Dir. Lars Von Trier. Zentropa, 2014. DVD.


