Lars von Trier's *Antichrist*: Natures, Couples, Rules, Games

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Caroline Bem The face-to-face is a specific form of encounter—arguably its most rudimentary form—because it is rooted in "twoness." The French philosopher Alain Badiou writes that love—the love of the amorous couple—relies primarily on the exploration of the world through difference and not through identity. For Badiou, love is a project which includes sexual desire, the birth of a child, and a wealth of other events but of which the primary goal is to experience the world as a two, through the eyes of difference (the ontological difference between the two persons who constitute this "two.") The birth of a child, for Badiou, signifies a resolution of the dialectic of the couple's twoness, but in *Antichrist* the suicide of the child puts an abrupt end to the triadic structure of the family. As the film begins, the couple is instantly returned to that original state of twoness; from now on, it is within this claustrophobic space of difference that the action will unfold. This is emphasized, for instance, by the fact that, apart from the child in the opening sequence, all faces beyond those of the two central characters of *Antichrist* have been digitally blurred: the man and the woman are alone in their twoness at the funeral, in their apartment, on the train, in the woods, in their house, in the world.

To date, *Antichrist* is von Trier's only film which centers on a couple instead of complex group dynamics. It harks back to a range of films—several of which by Ingmar Bergman but even Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* might qualify—where a prolonged face-to-face between two characters ends in transference and/or mutual violence and disaster. In *Antichrist* the

analyst/patient analogy is even stronger because of the man's profession and, to return to Badiou's claim, the couple ultimately fails because of its intrinsic difference as exemplified in the destruction of both sets of sexual organs at the end of the film.

From this perspective, in which ways does *Antichrist* differ—possibly even mark a radical break—from von Trier's previous films?

Jan Simons All films of Lars von Trier differ from his previous films, while continuing or taking up again other aspects. The visual style of *Antichrist*, for instance, is in many respects reminiscent of his film *Europa* with the big difference that the special effects in *Europa* were shot in a "documentary" fashion—that is, they were created on the set and not added during postproduction—whereas the sometimes documentary style in *Antichrist* is created with advanced digital technologies and computer-controlled cameras. The same applies to the film's content. In *Antichrist* von Trier explicitly deals with a couple, but he did so too already in *Europa* (Leopold Kessler and Katharina Hartmann) and in *Breaking the Waves* (Jan and Bess). In *Europa*, Katharina, who exists within the context of chaotic post-war Germany where everybody ruthlessly pursues their own interests, eventually turns out to be "Werewolf" (part of a postwar Nazi resistance group), whereas the woman in *Antichrist* discovers that she is part of "nature" where "chaos reigns." In both films it is the man who "misreads" the "nature" of these female characters (Leopold falls in love with Katharina and is eventually abused, and the Dafoe character in *Antichrist* assumes that the Gainsbourg character has a "rational" and "critical" view on the subject of her thesis). And one could argue that in *Breaking the Waves*, as well as in *Antichrist*, the women ascribe a therapeutic and healing effect to sexuality: Bess starts to have promiscuous relationships

with other men because she thinks that this will cure Jan's paralysis, while for the Gainsbourg character sex is a means to overcome grief and to prevent the relationship with the Dafoe character to fall apart (for him it is the reverse: at one point he says that sex should not be part of a patient-therapist relationship). And although there certainly is some Freud-debunking in *Antichrist*, one should not forget that the parental sex witnessed by the child in the film's prologue can also be seen as the 'cause' of the child's death, and there is certainly a ring of Freud's famous case study of the Wolf Man. And what about the rather explicit Oedipal theme of the left and right shoes put on the child's inverted feet by the mother?

The Dafoe character in *Antichrist* is not the first perpetrator of gynocide in von Trier's films. In *Dogville*, Grace is almost literally exhausted to death by the inhabitants of Dogville, in *Dancer in the Dark* the Björk character is killed by male juridical wrongdoing, in *Breaking the Waves* Bess is killed by (male) selfrighteousness, in *The Idiots* Karen is eventually abandoned and left to her own, non-existant devices by the community of *spassers*. One could argue that gynocide is one of the main themes of von Trier's films. Moreover, in his very first film *The Element of Crime*, the main character Fisher eventually kills the Vietnamese prostitute Kim, acting out of identification with his "super-ego," his former mentor Osborne, just as the Dafoe character in some way seems to act out of over-identification with a "super-ego"—the law of "nature"—that drives him to stop the reign of chaos. That is the tragic fate of most of von Trier's heroes: in order to survive they have to play by the rules of the—often cruel—game, or die: "punish or perish," in the case of Grace in *Dogville*, "commit a crime in order to solve one" in *Element of Crime*, and act like "Satan" in order to become a Savior, it seems, in *Antichrist*—one should take the title of the film quite seriously.

Antichrist contains and remixes quite a lot of themes and elements of von Trier's previous films, and rather than a radical break I would be tempted to consider it as their ultimate culmination, summary and conclusion. That is also why it is probably also his most "philosophical" film up to date. As I have argued in my book, *Playing The Waves*, at the most abstract level one can consider von Trier's films as moves in what is called in game theory "an infinite prisoner's dilemma." The upshot of this game, for which a multitude of strategies have been tested in two computer tournaments organized by Robert Axelrod in the 1980s, is that the best strategy a player can adopt is TIT FOR TAT, that is, cooperation must be reciprocated with cooperation, and defection with defection. Most of von Trier's protagonists are naïve "nice" players who, going by the outward appearances and behaviors of the other players, trust the latter to be "nice" as well, but find out the hard way that other players are on the contrary "mean" and eventually betray the protagonist. Most of von Trier's protagonists perish with the exception of Grace in *Dogville* who learns eventually—she takes the lessons from her gangster daddy at heart—that TIT FOR TAT (or "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth") is the rule of the game.

In *Antichrist*, there are two seemingly "nice" players who have a collaborative relationship: he is a therapist who wants to help her to overcome her grief and fears, and she accepts his guidance and in return offers him her love (and body). But, as in every game, they cannot be completely sure of each other's strategies: she doubts his love for her, calls him an arrogant bastard, and accuses him of having been "a distant husband and father." He replies that he has kept some distance because he thought she wanted 'peace' to write her thesis, and gradually finds out that her interest in the history of gynocide is quite different from what he assumed. And then there is the discovery of the

mutilation of the child's feet by the mother. Again, in spite of its anti-Freudian flavor, the film presents us with a symmetrically reversed Oedipal scheme: instead of the son killing the father to obtain the mother, we have a mother crippling her son and causing—or at least not preventing—his death in order to keep the father for herself, which makes her a "mean" player from the start (without the father—and us, spectators, knowing this, of course). So there are a number of misunderstandings and misreadings from the start, which all boil down to the question how to know whether the other is a "nice" and collaborative or "mean" and defective player.

Whereas in previous films the play ground was a community of seemingly nice but actually mean players, the arena in *Antichrist* is "the woods" or nature—which certainly gives the film a philosophical and metaphysical, if not mystical allure. The woods are chosen by the couple for therapeutic reasons: it is the place where she experiences fear most. But although they go into the woods to help her overcome her grief and fear of nature, it is she who turns out to be most "at home" in nature: she has to reassure him that the sounds he hears are just falling acorns, he gets bitten by insects, and it is he who discovers the dark and chaotic aspect of nature in his encounters with deer, foxes, and prey birds who not only give birth to but also devour their offspring, a striking parallel to what he learns about his own wife. The Dafoe character, then, is the rational but "naïve" stranger in this "natural" environment who gradually finds out that "the rules of the game" are quite different from what it seems ("chaos reigns" as the fox announces to him). She, on the other hand, overcomes her grief and fear for nature, not by adopting a rational stance, as her partner/therapist wants, but by identifying with—or should one say, by "assuming" the "evil" of her nature that she was afraid of. She, then, becomes a "mean player" who anticipates the presumed "mean"

behavior of her partner (she literally expects him to "defect" her) by driving a steel pen through his leg and attaching a millstone to it. The Dafoe character, then, is forced to adopt a TIT FOR TAT strategy and to become a mean player as well, an Antichrist so to speak, in order to become a Savior.

In game theoretical terms, one could summarize the "thesis" of *Antichrist* by saying that if there is no possible way of knowing the other's strategies (which are constituted and motivated by experiences, perspectives, intentions, expectations, desires, and all sorts of things others couldn't even know about), "evil" (mean strategies) is the "nature" of the game, because uncertainty and ensuing distrust will be the players' ultimate driving force. The basic "philosophy" of *Antichrist*, which is also the underlying view of all of von Trier's films and also explains the logic underlying the prisoner's dilemma, is the ancient Roman proverb, "homo homini lupus" ("man is a wolf to man"). This explains, for instance, the motif of the werewolf in *Europa* and the reference to the Wolf Man and much of the animal symbolism in *Antichrist*. But, again, in spite of reverences to Freud, von Trier's world view seems to be Hobbesian rather than Freudian.

Since "nature" is in this film embodied by the Gainsbourg character (who also explicitly confirms that if human nature is evil, the nature of women must be evil as well), one could argue that *Antichrist* is perhaps von Trier's most misogynist film as well. In most of his previous films, however, evil or "meanness" was incarnated by male players ('Daddy's law' in *Dogville*, the male population of Bess's island, the male neighbor in *Dancer in the Dark*, Osborne in *Element of Crime*, etc.). Moreover, in *Antichrist* the acts of genital mutilation quite literally erase the sexual difference between both players who each for their own reasons turned into "mean players."

So, instead of seeing *Antichrist* as a radical break with his previous films, I'm tempted to see the film as a summary and conclusion of his previous work. This status might explain its rather pompous and mystical sounding title, its high level of abstraction, its mystical historical background, and its monumental setting in nature. As if von Trier wanted to emphasize with all available means that this is indeed Philosophy in Film (but, as always, tongue in cheek – I would not be surprised if this is von Trier's parody of the now very fashionable historical kitsch found in *The Da Vinci Code*, or earlier in *The Name of The Rose*, and now in *Pope Joanna*).

C.B. In 2007, you published *Playing the Waves: Lars von Trier's Game Cinema*. In this book, you analyze von Trier's films from the perspective of game theory. You identify a recurring pattern where most of his films set in scene a singular, usually female, character who most frequently comes to a community into which she seeks to integrate herself. From the perspective of game theory, she is faced with a number of choices. She usually suffers from some form of internal weakness (madness, a physical disability, or extreme naïveté) which leads her to choose unwisely and ultimately leads to her demise (or exclusion from the game, in your terms). You identify *Manderlay* as the only example of a victorious outcome for the main character. The interest of your perspective on von Trier's films lies in the idea that characters and narrative unfolding are guided by sets of possibility rather than the auteur's vision, strictly speaking. It tallies well, I think, with the emphasis von Trier himself has placed on the elaboration of rules for his films (the Dogme 95 manifest, *The Five Obstructions* e.g.). The focus is thus shifted from narrative

trajectories or character evolution *per se*, to the rules which govern them and the space for development allowed within these specific sets of rules.

There are many ways in which *Antichrist* functions well within the paradigm you have identified. Charlotte Gainsbourg's character is weakened by grief (understood as mental disorder by her doctor while her husband seems to be more of a follower of Kübler-Ross' "five stages of grief" theory) and, over the course of the film, her relation to her husband evolves into a power struggle which culminates in a series of acts of physical violence. In conversation with Stig Björkman, von Trier references a children's book, *Guld Hjerte*, as the creative starting point for *Breaking the Waves*. In this book, a small girl walks into the woods with her pockets full of breadcrumbs and other items, yet when she leaves the woods she is naked and has given away all she possessed. In the interview, von Trier claims that this children's book has always exemplified martyrdom for him, in all its implications. Like Guld Hjerte, Gainsbourg's character ends up naked in the woods, yet she struggles against the sort of female martyrdom she has been studying. What she has given away is good faith: she has attempted to save herself and her couple, to yield to the knowledgeable, contemptuous power of her husband. Instead of accepting her fate however, she follows the lead of some of von Trier's more recent heroines by seeking revenge, only to ultimately lose by falling victim to her own remorse.

The two characters of *Antichrist* do not have names. There is a sense of reduction, of abstraction almost, which is greater in this film than in any of von Trier's previous ones. What do you think of the application of game theory to von Trier's latest opus? Who directs the destiny of his characters: is it himself, the director, or does it derive from a rigid set of rules and conventions? Are characters and stories primarily derived from the range of

possibilities logically available to a character? In other terms, are von Trier's films based on predictable outcomes, and what is the place of the author's or director's voice from this perspective?

J.S. I think I have already partly answered this question in my answer to your first question. The destiny that directs the characters in *Antichrist* is, I think, "nature" or "chaos" which in *Antichrist* stands for an immoral, selfish and ruthless drive for survival. In that sense, human nature is, according to this film, "Antichristian" (or Christ is unnatural). On a more abstract level—since "nature," "love," "possession," etc., are just "colorings" of a more abstract game structure, just as the story of the prisoner's dilemma itself is a more lively and dramatic presentation of an underlying abstract and logical problem), it is the logic of the game that directs the actions of the players: as I tried to explain above, the basic question of the prisoner's dilemma is how to make sure I can trust the other to collaborate with me. This paradoxical formula, which is eventually an unanswerable question, is the bare bone of all of von Trier's films, and it has been developed to its extreme in *Antichrist* where the underlying uncertainty and distrust unavoidably leads up to mutual defection and destruction.

This is also the lesson to be learned from the fairy tale *Guld Hjerte* you referred to and that inspired von Trier for his 'trilogy' *The Idiots*, *Breaking The Waves*, and *Dancer in The Dark*. The female protagonists in the fairy tale as well as in these films are 'nice' players who offer and expect to be reciprocated with collaboration but instead get ruthlessly physically and economically exploited and sexually abused by the other "mean" players who take advantage of their naïve kindness (often associated in von Trier's films with some kind of mental or perceptual disorder, like grief, psychiatric problems, blindness). It is

Grace in *Dogville* who eventually abandons her purely nice strategy and accepts 'dad's law', that is, TIT FOR TAT, an eye for an eye…. However, as I tried to explain above, there is no uniform and unequivocally gendered distribution of nice and mean strategies in von Trier's films. In *Europa*, for instance, Leopold Kessler is the gullible nice player who falls victim to a female 'werewolf', and one could argue that in *Antichrist* the Dafoe character starts out as the nice player who—as Kessler—finds out that the woman is a 'werewolf' (apparently nice but really selfish, ruthless, and cruel) and, as Grace in *Dogville*, learns that he has to comply to the cruel laws of nature himself in order to save his own life (and maybe redeem mankind from "evil"). Moreover, in all other films, the communities of mean players into which the 'nice' protagonists enter consist of male as well as female players: one should only think of the Lauren Bacall character in *Dogville* to realize that she is no less "tough" on Grace than her male fellow inhabitants of the village. Although the Gainsbourg character makes the "philosophical" and metaphysical discovery that if human nature is evil, the nature of women must be evil too, this was already true for male and female characters in von Trier's previous films. The correct translation of the ancient roman proverb *homo homini lupus*, then, should be: humans are wolves to humans.

In as far as von Trier's films keep elaborating on the basic structure of the (infinite) prisoner's dilemma, it looks as if his films will have predictable outcomes indeed: punish or perish, revenge or defeat, survival or death. Of course, this basic structure can receive many unpredictable 'colorings' and von Trier has always succeeded in surprising his audience with completely new visual styles, cinematographic approaches, and apparently new settings and themes, to the extent that the very consistent continuity of structure and

narratives in his films has hardly been noticed at all. This diversity certainly testifies to the director's inventiveness and creativity.

But it should also be said that this choice of theme, what I call the infinite prisoner's dilemma, and the very pessimistic world view it entails, is certainly not everybody's choice but a very distinct and distinctive trade mark of von Trier as an "author."

C.B. In various interviews surrounding the release of *Antichrist* von Trier mentioned his state of mind at the time of making the film. He claimed that this film saved him from depression, and he also talked of *Antichrist* in terms of a critique of the behaviouristic turn in psychology. From a certain perspective, most of his recent films focus on one aspect of US society: the death penalty and the judicial system in *Dancer in the Dark*, colonialism and slavery in *Dogville* and *Manderlay*, corporate thinking in *Direktören för det hele* even though it is not set in the US, and the rejection of Freudian psychoanalysis in *Antichrist*. It seems to me that each of these areas are of particular interest to von Trier because they are hinged on binary, dualistic power-relations.

If *Antichrist* is von Trier's first film to deal explicitly with the couple, its main mark is that it equates the amorous couple to that constituted of the therapist and the patient. What is his specific purpose when creating such an analogy? (Clearly, he is less interested in a formal transfer of identity than Bergman in *Persona* for instance). Is his own specific brand of formalism located in the use of dualistic oppositions which derive from the sets of rules (the playing of games, in other terms) previously discussed?

J.S. *Antichrist* does not only deal with an amorous couple and therapist-patient relationship but also, and maybe even more importantly, with a father-mother-child relationship. Not only are there numerous flashbacks to the child, but every animal in the film is giving birth, has given birth or is devouring its offspring. As I said before, in spite of a certain anti-Freudian flavor, there is a reversed Oedipal triangle that forms the basis of the relationship between the two protagonists (the mother mutilating and causing the death of the child because she wants to keep the father for herself). The law of nature, "chaos reigns," literally represented by the animals who devour their own offspring, says that your own survival prevails over the survival of others (charity is very rare in nature), even over that of your own offspring. This "law" governs the behavior of the Gainsbourg character, too, who, as the editing suggests, watches her child climbing through the window while she is making love to her husband. That this is her true nature and the fear of its awful truth that the Gainsbourg character has to discover for herself (in the beginning she doesn't know what she is afraid of) and which the husband as a therapist wants to overcome. The reason why von Trier chooses a therapist/patient relationship has to do, I think, with the fact that both a therapist and a game player face the same question: what goes on in the other player's/patient's mind? And both, of course, try to control the other's mind by 'therapy' (practiced in games in *Antichrist*) or by calculating the other player's most rational move (once parodied in "I think that you think that I think that you think that I think…"). However, the problem is that one never really knows what goes on in the other's mind, which is why rational, enlightened psychology is eventually helpless when confronted with "the laws of nature" and playing always maintains an element of gamble.

And a therapist/patient relationship is also one of trust: the patient has to rely on the knowledge, skills, sincerity, and authority etc. of the therapist and the therapist has to trust the patient to share her thoughts, desires, fears, memories etc. In that sense, a therapist/patient relationship is a kind of a collaborative game, as demonstrated in the film itself when the Dafoe character sets up a "little exercise" for her to walk through the grass from one stone to another, or when he proposes a "role playing game" in which he will play "nature" and she will play "reason" (an obvious reversal of roles). However, since it is impossible to know the other's thoughts, it is also impossible to trust the other completely, and that's why in the films of von Trier therapies are doomed to fail.

This may all look like a mockery of fashionable psychotherapies that have substituted Freudian psychoanalysis in the USA. But in spite of the references to Freudian motifs and themes in *Antichrist*, and the mockery of modern psychotherapy—which he already parodied in *The Idiots* in which he showed that all role playing and simulation is nothing but a game—it is hard to see this film—or any of von Trier's other films—as a plea for Freudian psychology. In all of his films, including *Antichrist*, sexuality, for instance, is intricately caught up in a *quid pro quo* economy of exchanges. In *The Element of Crime* there is the prostitute Kim who offers sex for money, in *Europa* Katharina makes love to Kessler in order to lure him into placing a bomb in his train (without him knowing that, of course), in *The Idiots* sex is part of the competitive game of *spassing*, in *Breaking The Waves* Bess sleeps with other men in order to promote Jan's healing, in *Dogville* the sexual abuse of Grace is part of the 'quid pro quo' as the male inhabitants of *Dogville* understand this agreement, and in *Antichrist* the Gainsbourg character forces her body upon the Dafoe character in order to gain and maintain his loyalty and support.

Sexuality is, in all of von Trier's films, very instrumental and a means to often very different ends.

Von Trier's attitude towards psychotherapy and psychology is probably best demonstrated in *The Idiots*. In this film, the *spassers* simulate mental disorders and handicaps through alteration of their outward appearances and "acting." They do so not because they want to "identify" with the mentally handicapped or because they want to "represent" their interests in society, but simply because they like to play a game in which they challenge each other to go as far as possible in shocking passersby, colleagues and eventually their own families. The game shows that outward appearances and symptoms from which most people infer psychological states of mind, intentions, feelings, motives, desires, etc. are very deceptive and only conceal the ultimately selfish motivations of the actors. This is the lesson all of von Trier's protagonists learn: since there is no way of knowing the ulterior motives of another person, assume that they only act out of ruthless self-interest. Or, in game theoretical terms, assume that others act "rationally," that is, that they will try to maximize their pay off with all means.

Again, the worlds of von Trier are Hobbesian, rather than Freudian. Of course, the Freudian cure can be analyzed as an economy of exchanges as well, because the cure aims at a 'transfer' of identities, images, desires. And the cure itself is part of a *quid pro quo* exchange, because after each session Freud's patients had to pay in cash: a 'real' transfer in exchange for a 'symbolic' transfer, as Freud himself was well aware. In von Trier's films, however, the symbolic transfers always seem to falter, because the 'hard' ones always prevail. And the hard ones are ultimately driven by "selfish genes."

If *Antichrist* can be considered a summary and conclusion of von Trier's previous films, I think it is because it presents a very bleak vision on "human

nature" that is better to be understood in the rather pessimistic terms of game theory than in those of enlightened psychology or rational philosophy. After all, game theory has been successfully applied to fields such as evolutionary biology where there is not much room for emphatic psychology either.

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