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Nature's Horror and Grand Style in Lars von Trier's "Antichrist"

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The Sovereignty of Aesthetic Experience: indifference towards self-preservation

A famous passage from Theodor W. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* reads as follows: "The expression of artworks is the nonsubjective in the subject... This ambivalence is registered by every genuine aesthetic experience, and incomparably so in Kant's description of the feeling of the sublime as a trembling [*Erzitternden*] between nature and freedom".¹ Here, Adorno's characterization seems to capture something crucial in Kant's original thought. Kant indeed associated the feeling of the sublime with a "tremor" (*Erschütterung*), with "a quick alternation between repulsion and attraction" experienced by a subject in relation to the same object. The (sublime) object is at odds with the sensibility of the subject, but accords with his reason (or what Adorno calls freedom), which is irreducible to sensible experience.²

The issue smells of old-fashioned philosophical idealism, but is still relevant to post-structuralist thinking. While Adorno emphasized the nonsubjective in the subject, Gilles Deleuze emphasized the inorganic. According to him, the sublime has to do with a "faculty of thought" by which we feel superior to what menaces us *qua* merely organic beings. It enables us to share a kind of "spiritual destination" having to do with freedom as much as with nature, but going beyond these concepts as they are traditionally understood, and connecting "spiritually" organic and inorganic beings.³ Not specifically in relation to the notion of the sublime, but also in reference to the *Critique of Judgment*, Jacques Derrida notes that "every aesthetic experience" requires an "indifference" towards "the existence" of the object with which it is concerned.⁴ Again, this indifference concerns not only the object actually, but also and mostly the subject: in an aesthetic experience, "I'm not concerned with myself in what matters my own existence..." [*je ne m'intéresse pas, surtout pas à moi en tant que j'existe*].⁵

That aesthetic experience implies an indifference towards self-preservation and existence is a point that is not merely philosophical. It has been defended as well by artists, especially the avant-garde. Both in his notes about aesthetics and in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, James Joyce, for instance, defended that the

feelings excited by proper works of art are diametrically opposed to Darwinian preservation drives related to what is beneficial to a person and the human species: “the true and the beautiful are spiritually possessed, the true by intellection, the beautiful by apprehension; and the appetites which desire to possess them, the intellectual and aesthetic appetites are therefore spiritual appetites”.⁶ What he means here by “spiritual” is “static”, that is, something radically different from any emotional urge leading to automatic responses aiming to preserve or foster one’s own physical integrity. In the voice of Stephan Dedalus, Joyce explicitly says that the spiritual cannot be explained in Darwinian terms of a struggle for survival. It would be unintelligible to a person who believes, for instance, that every “quality admired by men in women is in direct connection with the manifold functions of women for the propagation of the species”.⁷

Also in the French literary avant-garde tradition, instead of favoring the struggle for life, aesthetic experience has been viewed as a kind of exhilaration (*ivresse*) that takes a person *out of herself*, out of her ordinary habits, out of the boundaries of a merely “physical” existence, where objects are clearly demarcated from each other and the subject. A celebrated example of this would be the unexplainable joy that overwhelms Marcel Proust’s narrator on the day he enters the Guermantes’ hotel so absent-minded that he almost gets run over by a car. This joy assembles together all the happiness felt by the narrator in different moments of his life, and makes him indifferent to death.⁸ As Samuel Beckett says, in Proust’s aesthetic experiences “what is common to present and past is more essential than either taken separately... thanks to this reduplication, the experience is at once imaginative and empirical, at once an evocation and a direct perception, real without being merely actual, ideal without being merely abstract, the ideal real, the essential, the extratemporal”.⁹

In view of the family of ideas discussed above, it is possible to see the Achilles’ heel of much of the criticism that has been written about Lars von Trier’s *Antichrist*. By letting themselves be overwhelmed by the (psychological) depression of the characters, critics reacted with resentment, judging the movie entirely on the ideological level of its supposed misogyny. But esthetical experience is sovereign: it does not have to be politically correct, and does not have to provide a key for meaningful praxis.¹⁰ What follows connects this maxim to the more general problem of cultural nihilism, discussing how aesthetic experience is able to handle it. A film such as Lars von Trier’s *Antichrist* is not so much the result of cultural nihilism, but rather a legitimate way of answering to it.

Cultural Nihilism: is there any way to deal with it?

A situation of cultural nihilism is believed to be reached when all traditional available values get unmasked as strategies for the self-preservation of individuals and their species. This puts under suspicion not only the values in question, but the very idea of individuality and subjectivity. Max Horkheimer, for instance, charac-

terized the nihilism of twentieth-century industrial societies as follows: “the total transformation of each and every realm of being into a field of means leads to the liquidation of the subject who is supposed to use them. This gives modern industrial society its nihilistic aspect”.¹¹

He went on:

As the end result of the process, we have on the one hand the self, the abstract ego emptied of all substance except its attempt to transform everything in heaven and on earth into means for its preservation, and on the other hand an empty nature degraded to mere material, mere stuff to be dominated, without any other purpose than that of this very domination.¹²

In an even more radical understanding, following Nietzsche, Heidegger recognizes that nihilism means that there is nothing left to put in the place of what we have lost, simply because *this very place* is not available anymore.¹³ In connection with this process, and if one would like to characterize (occidental) nihilism as the result of an exhaustion of traditional religious, particularly Christian, values, one should note, as remarked by Jean-Luc Nancy, that in continuity with theism, “atheism goes on, in a way that is quite paradoxical, to shut off the horizon” [*fermer l’horizon*].¹⁴

Aesthetical experience might provide a solution to this dilemma exactly to the extent that in it one can truly ignore self-preservation. One can then go beyond the mere proposal of new ideals, which is always “incomplete nihilism”, and inevitably sounds like something flawed and demagogically cheap.¹⁵ As Jacques Derrida says: “A future can be anticipated only as absolute danger. It is what breaks up with normality, and can only be announced... in terms of monstrosity”.¹⁶ One should add, perhaps, that such a monstrous experience can only *be effective* under the limits of what is traditionally called relatively autonomous aesthetical experience.¹⁷ In this way, and paradoxically, the more nihilistic art appears to be, that is, the less it is directly concerned with values that are taken to be the most significant ones from our perspective — the less it is directly concerned with the meaning, or even the significance of these values —, the more it can truly reassess the nihilistic conditions of our situation.

In a realm that is not immediately concerned with praxis, the artist can deal with things that appear to be, from all points of view, distant and menacing, connecting with them in a way that transfigures reality into something more significant than a perpetual struggle for existence. According to Heidegger, since the Greeks, the essence of “grand style” has always been the following:

Truly grand is not what merely holds down and suppresses its sharpest antithesis, but only what is able to transform its antithesis in itself, in a way that the antithesis does not disappear but is assimilated and comes to its essential unfolding.¹⁸

Juxtaposition of horror and lyricism

One might argue, however, that a movie like *Antichrist* is tolerated only to the extent that Lars von Trier is considered a subject, and individual *par excellence*, a genius (a man taking the place of the gods, the stars, a man to whom the public allows everything). This argument could certainly explain the afterlife of a movie like *Melancholy* (2011), in which the director speaks up for an empty void with the utmost clarity, as if he were the disenchanting master not only of mankind but of the universe itself — the prescient guardian of an ultimate natural truth, which only the last man (but still a man) would be able to bear. But *Antichrist* is the very contrary of that. It is opaque. As much as everything ends suddenly and unexpectedly, but *definitely*, in *Melancholy*, in *Antichrist* everything is left indefinitely suspended and vague. We can not get from *Antichrist* “only what we truly deserve” (von Trier, *The boss of it all* 2006), but always more than that with which we could clearly finish.

It is impossible to deny that some passages of *Antichrist* are exaggerated, pathological, bordering on bad taste. But anyone who merely focuses on these exaggerations is going to lose what is more fundamental to the movie, including what makes it truly horrible. As much as there are violent and macabre images, chiefly in its final sequence, there are extremely beautiful and lyric ones. It is in the juxtaposition of both things (as it happens in what Heidegger calls grand style) that the work emerges itself, beyond the malaise surrounding the public, the critics and the director. By aligning these two contradictory effects, the movie clamps itself to a force that spins ordinary dichotomies such as pleasure/pain, inner/outer, human/animal, organic/inorganic (arriving at Adorno’s nonsubjective in the subject, and Deleuze’s destination of organic and inorganic matter).

Accordingly, the martyrdom of the main character cannot be reduced to an expression of her inner state of guilt, caused by the death of her son. And nor is it a manifestation of a supposedly unconscious sadistic desire, a subjective perversion. Much on the contrary, the deliberate cultivation of the feet’s deformity of a child who will, perhaps joyfully, commit suicide is a sign of a force that in the movie and with the movie extrapolates the psychological dimension of its characters. This is why the noble prospects of the husband, his intentions to cure the depression of his wife without medication, by understanding her fear, are doomed to failure. When the cure happens it is unexpected and comes apparently from nowhere, while the whole scenario, the movie itself, had suddenly and radically become transfigured. The cure is so disconnected from discursive thinking that the man, puzzled by it, dislocated and strained, instead of being happy starts to get ill himself. What is at issue here defies the inner realm of consciousness, the subject’s intention and his ability to follow a purposeful planning.

It might be paradoxical and very difficult to follow but it is truth: guiltiness in *Antichrist* cannot be circumscribed to any psychopathological or even to a psychological milieu. It testifies to something that *crosses* a specific family in direction

to many other human families. It would point to what they would all share in terms of a traumatic phylogenetic experience: the price of cultural emancipation from animality. But *Antichrist's* guiltiness goes even beyond this only too well-recognized psychoanalytic cliché. It connects the family, and human family with animals, and, in the end, with what is inorganic. Everything, including inorganic matter, suffers, that is, struggles not exactly to survive, but to express itself. We have the screams of the main character (“where are you? Bastard!”) collapsing with the unpleasant croaking of a raven. We have the glades sheltering deer that are calving, and also foxes devouring the entrails of their own cubs — foxes who speak like humans and say: *chaos reigns*, while a fearful rain of nuts makes the roof tremble (and this tremble is just another scream, or perhaps a roar: the backdrop of meaningful language). What the woman fears is simply “the woods”, something that is not human, and is not merely in the realm of animals or plants. It is, most of all, something that she cannot conceptualize. She might as well use other names the meaning of which is even more obscure: Eden and Satan’s Church. Taken together they are plainly contradictory.

Antichrist is not the first movie in which Lars von Trier deals with the topic of witchcraft, this dreadful inversion, from a modern point of view, of what we moderns call nature and its laws. In 1988, he directed *Medea*, from a Carl Theodor Dreyer’s script. In this movie there was also the death of two children, which was a kind of almost joyful suicide, intermediated by the mother: the older brother helping to hang the younger one, before being hanged as well. It is clear in both movies that what is really disturbing in such scenes is not horror itself, but the fact that horror is nonchalantly propped up by what is traditionally, at least in Occidentalized societies, the symbol *par excellence* of innocence, a blond child. In the case of *Antichrist*, the child is always calm and smiling. Before climbing to the table and jumping from the window, she knocks down the statuettes of the three beggars (pain, grief, and despair) who are on her path. (That is, her action is not motivated by, and is even unconcerned with pain, grief, and despair.) When she jumps, her face mixes with the rapturous expression of her parents making love. The fall is soft like the one of a snowflake, of a teddy bear in the snow.¹⁹

Any ideological analysis of these movies (Lars von Trier’s *Antichrist* and *Medea*) is going to be garbled if one does not recognize, from the beginning, what is boldly attempted in them, *i.e.*, a meddling with dimensions of nature not amenable to humanization. This meddling ends up by dissolving the way we naturally sort nature, and borders what could be called the praeternatural or supernatural (that menaces us). What critics derided as misogyny is actually an engagement with the feminine in its most challenging aspects. Woman is not an original totality to which man might finally return, and neither is it something that man could emancipate. The husband complains to his wife: “the literature you studied in your research was about evil things done 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 embraced those texts!” The public might have already seen

something similarly vicious, although more subtle, in the character of the witch represented by Lisbeth Movin in Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Vredens Dag* (1943), also a Danish director.

These movies rescue what is residual in modernity, its archaic, insolvable riddles and labyrinthine roots. But they rescue these dregs not by representing, that is, not by uprooting them. The rescue is done by calmly retreating to modernity's most stubborn shadows while keeping the surface of the grave, its headstone, opened. What one hears from the depths sounds like the most eschatological horror. Mozart's *Queen of the night* might have worked well enough. But since horror is juxtaposed with lyricism, what we get is nothing but Handel's most lyric prayer: *Lascia ch'io pianga, mia cruda sorte, e che sospiri la libertà. Il duolo infranga queste ritorte de' miei martiri sol per pietà*. What could be the meaning of all this? It is certainly not at hand, and it sustains, and even *preserves* everything, but in a puzzle of irreducible differences (again, this is similar to Heidegger's idea of a grand style).

Disengagement of visual and audio elements from their narrative function

Even if *Antichrist* could be reduced to its misogyny, to its degenerate and obscene ideological aspects, the audio and visual elements of the movie disengage from the narrative. They have to be considered separately, because they have not a merely illustrative, accompanying function. The movie underpins processes such as the ones Michel Chion calls "reducible hearing": "the hearing that aims at qualities and forms that are proper to sound itself, independently from its causes and meaning".²⁰ But the movie also shows how, on the other hand, these processes actually deconstruct what Chion would like to save as an "intersubjective sphere".²¹ One could say that many of *Antichrist's* sounds have the nature of the celebrated alarm clock in Ingmar Bergman's *Face to Face* (1976), whose increasing and intensive tick-tack ends revealing, as says Chion, "the horror of the silence that surrounds" the main character of the movie (again, a depressive woman).²² But the horror of *Antichrist's* sounds and images is more conspicuous and insidious, because it challenges any semantic explanation in terms of psychopathology and affects the very materiality of the film. In this sense, it is much more similar to Bergman's *Persona* (1966).

In *Persona*, along with the burning of celluloid, there is also a blurring of faces, still identifiable: the juxtaposition of the countenance of Elizabeth Vogler and Sister Ana. In the blurred faces of Lars von Trier women (climbing the mountain in the end of the movie), identity is, more than blurred, irretrievably rubbed. These faces are not a visual unfolding of the idea of excess. They are icons of meaningless excess itself, that is, images the significance of which always implies a local conceptual deferral. It would be incorrect to say that the movie represents a totally disenchanted conception of nature. It fights to be disenchanted nature itself. Many other passages illustrate this point. The shooting of the entourage in the burial of

the child is done from behind the glass of a window, in a way that many glares interfere with the image of the characters. All the dialogues of the movie are punctuated by *nouvelle vague* disturbances such as the use of abrupt angles, unusual framing, instability of the camera and its focus. The rudimentary character of the openings of the movie and its chapters, in which the titles are displayed over a background of heavy brushstrokes, can also be understood in this way. In them the movie reverses to painting, as in many other passages, as when the woman imagines herself crossing a bridge in the forest. This process is similar to what happens, inside the story, to her thesis, which reverses to scribble as it is progressively leafed by the husband in a scene.

The fact that *Antichrist* was dedicated to Tarkovsky is just one of the many links connecting this movie to the unprecedented and till nowadays unparalleled visual and audio aesthetic experiences created in film by the Russian director. All the prolog and other similar passages of *Antichrist* are like certain passages of *Zerkalo* (1975), in which the flux of images is decelerated by intensifying the unfolding in time of texture details. Sound effects are sometimes like tactile vibrations capturing the watcher and bonding him like a frame to hypnotic shots, most of them of the immobilized look of a character. They can also be irritating and bristling. In all cases they are rather the product of skillful handicraft than special effects: harsh noises made by the wind hitting the foliage of trees, water running, animals trembling, machine feedbacks. As much as with Tarkovsky, the natural resources of locations are thoroughly explored. And what in this way is underlined is not only the material, but even the metaphysical reality of image and sound. One finally breaks with a naturalistic approach *to sound* which, according to Chion, has rarely been abandoned in cinema, even in the case of those directors that in the 60's and 70's made a cogent criticism of the naturalism of the image.²³

Visually we have things like the movement of suspended particles in a flower vase over the table in a hospital's room. Light and shadow progressing over twisted branches, twigs, and roots. The dense, compact landscape of pine trees in a mountain superposed to the hairs in the back of the head of a character. Lars von Trier was able to profit even from the physical idiosyncrasies of the actors: Dafoe's wrinkles, Charlotte Gainsbourg's tenuous and flame-like body. It is not troubled characters, not a meaningful epopee that we get in the end, but specters: the immemorial pitiful gesture of Orpheus rescuing Eurydice as she unavoidably retreats to her shadow.

Endnotes

- ¹ T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, 1997), pp. 113; cf. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt, 1973), pp. 173.
- ² I. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Frankfurt, 1974): § 27, p. 181.
- ³ G. Deleuze, *Cinéma 1* (Paris, 1983): 79-80.
- ⁴ J. Derrida, *La vérité en peinture* (Paris: 1978): 51-52, cf. 46-47.
- ⁵ Ibidem, *La vérité en peinture*: 55.

- ⁶ J. Joyce, *Occasional, Critical, and Political Writing* (Oxford, 2000): 105.
- ⁷ Ibidem, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London, 2000): 226.
- ⁸ M. Proust, *Le Temps retrouvé* (Paris, 1990): 173-74.
- ⁹ S. Beckett, *Proust*, in Samuel Beckett, *The Grove Centenary Edition. Volume IV. Poems, Short Fiction, Criticism*, Paul Auster (Editor), (New York, 2006): 544. In connection with this issue, Gilles Deleuze has emphasized that what is truly at stake in the so-called involuntary memory experiences described by Proust is not psychological remembrance, but something extrapolating the realm of natural perception. The *madeleine's* experience is aesthetically relevant because it points to a world which is at the same time more essential and elusive than the ordinary one in which we struggle for existence. See G. Deleuze, *Marcel Proust* (Paris, 1964): 24; cf. 7-19, 36-40, 82-91.
- ¹⁰ C. Menke, *The sovereignty of art: aesthetic negativity in Adorno and Derrida* (Cambridge, 1998): 164, 241-42, 254. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris, 1967): 383. Julia Kristeva has also defended a position according to which poetry, as much as "magic, shamanism, esotericism, carnival... underline the limits of socially useful discourses, bearing witness to what they repress: the process exceeding the subject and his communicative structures". *La révolution du langage poétique* (Paris, 1974), p. 14, 43-83, 203-04. See also Giorgio Agamben, *Stanze* (Torino, 2011), pp. 58-60.
- ¹¹ M. Horkheimer, *The eclipse of reason* (New York, 2004): 93. For a more contemporary author with a similar perspective, see Bernard Stiegler, *Mécréance et discédit: La décadence des démocraties industrielles* (Paris, 2004): 59-60.
- ¹² M. Horkheimer, *The eclipse of reason*: 97.
- ¹³ M. Heidegger, *Nietzsche* (Pfullingen, 1961): vol. 1, 240-41, 499-500; vol. 2, 87, 277-278.
- ¹⁴ J.-Luc Nancy, *La Déclosion (Déconstruction du christianisme, I)* (Paris: 2005): 32.
- ¹⁵ M. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*: vol. 2, 280-82. Cf. Heidegger, *Schellings Abhandlung Über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit (1809)* (Tübingen, 1971): 28; Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie* (Paris, 1962): 78-79, 200-201; Nancy, *La Déclosion*: 43-44.
- ¹⁶ J. Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris, 1967): 14.
- ¹⁷ C. Menke, *The sovereignty of art: aesthetic negativity in Adorno and Derrida*: 241-42.
- ¹⁸ M. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*: vol. 1, 159. Cf. Pierre Klossowski, *Nietzsche et le cercle vicieux* (Paris, 1969): 359-63; cf. Agamben, *Stanze*: 33.
- ¹⁹ The ambiguity of the "topic" (of the suicide of child) has been famously explored also by Rossellini, of course, both in *Germania Anno Zero* and *Europa 51*. For an analysis, see for instance André Bazin, *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* (Paris: Cerf, 2011): 360.
- ²⁰ M. Chion, *L'audio-vision: son et image au cinéma* (Paris, 2011): 28.
- ²¹ Ibidem, *L'audio-vision*: 29.
- ²² Ibidem, *L'audio-vision*: 51.
- ²³ Ibidem, *L'audio-vision*: 82; cf. 99-100, 105, 107, 130-32.

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Nature's Horror and Grand Style in Lars von Trier's *Antichrist*

This essay brings forward and analyzes some constitutive elements of Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* that enable an understanding of its alleged morbidity and misogyny in terms of the sovereignty of aesthetic experience and its relation to the problem of cultural nihilism. These elements are the followings: the juxtaposition of horror and lyricism, and a corresponding archaic understanding of nature; the disengagement of visual and audio elements from their narrative function, and a corresponding deconstruction of the representational character of the movie itself.