

FEMININITY AND GENDER IN LARS VON TRIER'S *DEPRESSION TRILOGY*

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ABSTRACT

Both praised and criticized, Lars von Trier's *Depression Trilogy*—a film trilogy that includes *Antichrist* (2009), *Melancholia* (2011), and *Nymphomaniac* (2013)—provides an exploration of femininity and gender roles. This study explores how von Trier depicts the binary genders through their traditional roles while constructing a particular femininity in his female characters. Certainly, von Trier's construction of the female characters is problematic on many levels: the projection of the director onto the female subject, their hypersexualization, or the victimization as part of the director's process of creation are just a few. By analyzing the depiction of the female protagonists of the collection, who stand in opposition to their male counterparts, I demonstrate how in many instances von Trier's subversive construction of his female protagonists is flawed and falls short of any feminist statement the director may be trying to attain. Thus, the goal of this study is to examine the ways in which von Trier constructs this flawed femininity that seems to promote gender distinction and a patriarchal view of women that endorses misogyny. In doing so, this study also points at the aesthetic and artistic value of the director's *oeuvre* and the amplitude of interpretations of von Trier's works.

Keywords: Lars von Trier, *Depression Trilogy*, *Antichrist*, *Melancholia*, *Nymphomaniac*, femininity, gender.

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FEMININITY AND GENDER IN LARS VON TRIER'S *DEPRESSION*

TRILOGY

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

THE PROVOCATEUR, THE WOMEN, THE CONTROVERSY

Born in Copenhagen in 1956, Danish film director and screenwriter Lars von Trier has been a prolific and controversial filmmaker whose career spans almost four decades. Perhaps his most important awards are the Palme d'Or for *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), the Grand Prix for *Breaking the Waves* (1996), and the Prix du Jury for *Europa* (1991) at the Cannes Film Festival. Both Charlotte Gainsbourg and Kirsten Dunst won the Prix d'interprétation féminine for *Antichrist* (2009) and *Melancholia* (2011) respectively also at Cannes. The auteur's 2003 tragedy film *Dogville* competed for the Palme d'Or at Cannes Film Festival.

Both celebrated and criticized since his early films, von Trier's cinematic *oeuvre* is characterized by the combination of aesthetic and moral provocation. But what is provocation? Provocation in his films could be defined thus:

Provocation is an active stance, a relational performance, demanding an active response: a deliberate, intentional, concerted effort to 'force' the recipient—the viewer or critic—into an effectively charged response, using means that are confronting or confusing, surprising or shocking, dissonant or disturbing. Forms of provocation in cinema can be typically moral-psychological (explicit depictions of violence, for example) or aesthetic-cinematic (von Trier's depiction of unsimulated sexual acts within a fictional narrative film).¹

The director's provocation is seen throughout his films, perhaps more clearly in his *Depression Trilogy*. Von Trier's juxtaposition of violence, sexual imagery, and trauma in the form of grief, depression, or anxiety—thus combining the three body genres Linda Williams proposes; that is, melodrama, horror, and pornography—further accentuate his provocation.² But not only that, by juxtaposing the

¹ Robert Sinnerbrink, "Provocation," in *The Global Auteur: the Politics of Authorship in 21st Century Cinema*, ed. Seung-hoon Jeong and Jeremi Szaniawsky (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 96.

² Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1991).

aforementioned elements with philosophical and theological interrogations, the director provokes the audience while at the same time eliciting the viewer's self-reflection. As Thomas Elsaesser puts it,

[T]o connect film with thought is to imply not just a different language and new concepts, but — by way of a new taxonomy or classification system — to assert that *cinematic thought may be the name for a new ontology of cinema* ... Cinema in its capacity to record and store, to replay and manipulate, to stage and to edit the perceptible worlds, may well be thought of as both forming and performing *life*.³

Yet, the filmmaker's films do not do philosophy in a conventional sense but rather deploy and subvert the philosophical ideas present in his cinematic universe. In other words, "with their disconcerting combination of irony and sincerity, playfulness and trauma, philosophical pretentiousness and artistic game-playing . . . von Trier's work [is] a perverse and provocative case of cinematic anti-philosophy."⁴ These distinctive features of von Trier's cinema are not problematic *per se*, the problem is that he explores them through the portrayal of female figures who are victimized so as to create a spectacle for the audience's entertainment.

These depictions of women and femininity, for many, serve as proof of the director's misogynistic attitude. Throughout his career, the filmmaker has provoked the audience through the female figure. Starting with Bess in *Breaking the Waves*, Selma in *Dancer in the Dark*, Grace in both *Dogville* and *Manderlay* (2005) to She, Justine and Claire, and Joe in the director's *Depression Trilogy*. What these women have in common is that they are victims of a series of events that undermine their gender and eventually break them through humiliation, rejection, and even death. Von Trier's *Golden Heart Trilogy* explores the 'golden heart' of the film's female

³ Thomas Elsaesser, "Film as Thought: the 'Film and Philosophy' Debate," in *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy: Film as Thought Experiment*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), 38–9 (italics in original).

⁴ Sinnerbrink, "Provocation," 100.

protagonists and how these are corrupted by society, religion and patriarchy. In *Breaking the Waves*, for instance, Bess's religious community corrupts her into thinking that God speaks to her. Through His voice—or rather Bess's own voice for she answers to herself for Him, Bess's voices the religious criticism of her behavior and urges herself to self-sacrifice for his lover, Jan. Bess's sexual humiliation is caused by Jan and his masturbatory fantasies that eventually bring her to her demise. In *Dancer in the Dark*, Selma sacrifices everything for her son's sake and ends up victim of a patriarchal society that condemns and executes her for a crime she is forced to commit. Later, in the director's *USA: Land of Opportunities* films—a trilogy still in the making, Grace is also abused by a society that takes advantage of her. In *Dogville*, the clichéd Grace turns a martyr to the American dream, just like Selma, but in this case, she turns from innocence to retribution, which is hinted, but not achieved, both in *Nymphomaniac* and *Antichrist*.

In the *Depression Trilogy*—or as Robert Sinnerbrink calls it Trauma Trilogy⁵—von Trier explores the traumas of three female protagonists that by the end of the films bring them to their destruction. Von Trier explores the experiences of the female protagonists of these films by looking at their mental states and their effects on the protagonists. The author also questions the cultural context in which these states emerge by tackling moral and philosophical questions to explore, for instance, the relationship between the mental states and gender.⁶ Hilary Neroni argues that von Trier “depicts the women's neuroses through their bodily and emotional responses to patriarchy.”⁷ Indeed, the women's traumas prompt neuroses that entail actions which could be read as rebelling against patriarchal restrictions. These neuroses are induced

⁵ Sinnerbrink, “Provocation,” 100.

⁶ *Ibid*, 100

⁷ Hilary Neroni, “Lars von Trier's Fantasy of Femininity in *Nymphomaniac*,” in *Lars von Trier's Women*, ed. Rex Butler and David Denny (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 217.

by the repressed trauma men, as part of a patriarchal society that have historically oppressed women, cause. For the Danish director, it seems that the goal of the destruction of his female characters is the self-reflection of the audience: “This is the pacifying, Apollonian effect of [film]. Something is given not so much to the gaze as to the eye, something that involves the abandonment, the *laying down*, of the gaze.”⁸ In his process of creation, von Trier destroys women for the sake of art and its culmination in the film form. Indeed, for some, von Trier’s provocation is responsible for the forcing of the audience to engage in the interpretation and the philosophical reflection of his work.⁹ But, is this the only way the director knows how to engage his viewers, through the maltreatment of female characters? Von Trier has repeatedly emphasized that his female characters are self-portraits of himself: “Those characters are not women. They are self-portraits.”¹⁰ As problematic as this is, the female characters are nonetheless female-gendered and the provocations of the director in the films make any interpretation of their actions difficult to sustain. In *Antichrist*, for instance, von Trier treats themes such as feminism and misogyny ambiguously so it is difficult to place him on any side.

The director’s *oeuvre* has been criticized since the release of *Breaking the Waves* (1996). Most of the criticism lies in the director’s pushing the female characters to limits that makes the director’s intentions indiscernible. Why is he making her go through that? Why is he showing that? Why is she *doing* that? Helena Bonham Carter, who originally had been cast to play Bess in *Breaking the Waves*, left the set before

⁸ Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jaques-Alain Miller and trans. Alana Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 101.

⁹ Tarja Laine, “Mea Maxima Vulva: Appreciation and Aesthetics of Chance in *Nymphomaniac*,” in *Lars von Trier’s Women*, ed. Rex Butler and David Denny (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 243.

¹⁰ Linda Badley, *Lars von Trier* (Urbana, Chicago, Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 70.

shooting because of the nudity required by the role.¹¹ As expected, this behavior escaped the realm of fiction into reality. Although one should give the director the benefit of the doubt, singer and actress Björk, who starred in von Trier's 2000 melodrama *Dancer in the Dark*, recently spoke up on the sexual harassment she suffered "with a Danish director."¹² What is clear is that von Trier's roles for women require a lot. Other controversial instances include the banning of the director from the Cannes Film Festival for making some remarks regarding Hitler and von Trier's sympathy for the dictator. It is clear that von Trier is a peculiar character, a charlatan that provocatively proclaimed himself as "the best film director in the world."¹³ As the director himself responded to a journalist inquiring about *Antichrist* at the Cannes Film Festival while promoting the film: "I can't justify myself . . . I think it's a very strange question that I have to defend myself . . . I haven't done it for you or for an audience. I don't think I owe anybody an explanation." And that is one of the biggest problems of his *oeuvre*, namely that it is difficult to justify the imagery the director depicts. For him, the suffering and non-redemption he makes his female characters go through is justified as part of the director's process of creation of his art piece.

In this thesis, I look at von Trier's *Depression Trilogy*, the director's latest trilogy to the day of writing.¹⁴ Just as von Trier's previous trilogies, the *Depression Trilogy*—formed by *Antichrist* (2009), *Melancholia* (2011), and *Nymphomaniac* (2013), share many elements. The thesis tries to shed some light on the similarities and differences of the three films and the depiction of the female characters, the

¹¹ Jack Stevenson, "Lars von Trier: Pornographer?," *Bright Lights Film Journal*, January 31, 2004, brightlightsfilm.com/lars-von-trier-pornographer/#.Xhe2dC1DnX8

¹² Björk, "In the spirit of #metoo," Facebook, October 17, 2017, facebook.com/bjork/posts/10155782628166460

¹³ Eugene Hernandez, "Von Trier: 'I Am the Best Film Director in the World,'" *IndieWire*, May 18, 2009, indiewire.com/2009/05/von-trier-i-am-the-best-film-director-in-the-world-70442.

¹⁴ Although it is not confirmed, von Trier's latest *The House that Jack Built* (2018) could be the first installment of a new trilogy.

gender roles in the films and the overall exploration of femininity. To do so, the thesis is divided into three main chapters which analyze *Antichrist*, *Melancholia*, and *Nymphomaniac*. In turn, every chapter is subdivided into four sections. The first of these looks at the gender roles of the film; namely, the male characters and the female characters and their gender roles in the films; the second looks at the role of nature and the female figure and its connection; the third explores what could be considered the major theme of the film in question namely the monstrous feminine, melancholy and nymphomania; finally, the fourth looks at the final act the female character performs and its implications. In the three films of the trilogy, the women characters demonstrate overwhelming power and psychological depth which exposes the flaws, weakness, and sometimes toxicity of their male counterparts. In any case, von Trier explores these issues through the depiction of women as evil which forces the audience to vilify them. Von Trier creates a spectacle around the female body in order to provoke the audience and turns the female characters into victims who suffer great violence. The filmmaker's ambiguous treatment of his female characters makes him stand in a middle ground between feminism and misogyny. On the one hand, he empowers the female protagonists and portrays them as victims of a patriarchal society which generates the empathy of the spectator; on the other, the author vilifies the women which, in turn, perpetuates a misogyny when forcing the audience to judge their actions.

I draw namely from philosophical and psychoanalytical theories and figures such as Lacan or Freud to which my analyses of gender roles, women, and femininity in the *Depression Trilogy* are indebted. The intent of this thesis is not to offer a definitive answer to the question of whether von Trier is a misogynist or a feminist but rather an attempt to analyze the director's depictions of women and gender in his

latest trilogy and to show the amplitude of its analysis through the exploration of some aspects I deem significant and interesting for further study. Of course, the reader is encouraged to form their own opinion regarding the intentions of the director.

2. ANTICHRIST

HE AND SHE: GENDER ROLES AND THE MODERN ABRAHAMIC MYTH

From the onset of *Antichrist*, the unnamed He (William Defoe) imposes his rationality on the unnamed She (Charlotte Gainsbourg):

SHE: Wayne knows you're a therapist. He says you shouldn't treat your own family.

HE: In principle I agree, but...

SHE: But you're just so much smarter, aren't you?

Antichrist explores gender roles through the examination of the relationship of two characters and their troubled marriage and how both experience grief. To explore the psychological battle of the two sexes,¹⁵ von Trier incorporates theological questions by not only referring to the biblical Fall of Man but also to the Abrahamic Myth of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The un-naming of the protagonists—She and He—serve as evidence to support the film as a modern re-telling of the debarment of Adam and Eve so as to tackle the postmodern family relation.¹⁶ The name for the film world, moreover, clearly points at the original lapsarian space, the evocative Eden, represented by a cabin in the woods, rather than a garden, which allows, nevertheless, the exploration of the original sin. The film explores what in the Christian belief is the state in which humanity has existed since the fall of man; that is, the disobedience in consuming the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil that stemmed from Adam and Eve's rebellious acts in Eden. In addition, the film stresses the fundamental failure of the human condition through the re-telling of the ancient

¹⁵ Sinnerbrink, "Provocation," 98.

¹⁶ David Denny, "A Postmodern Family Romance: *Antichrist*," in *Lars von Trier's Women*, ed. Rex Butler and David Denny (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 172; For Gitte Buch-Hansen the couple's return to Eden suggests the "reliev[ing], reviv[ing], and renegotiat[ing] [of] the Fall into the frail order of gender." "Lars von Trier's *Antichrist*, the Bible, and Docetic Masculinity," *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 1, no. 1 (2011): 138.

myth framed as the wondering of what humanity is going to become “once it discovers it has been expelled from Eden and that Satan *is in us*.¹⁷”

In the film, She and He embark on two different journeys. On the one hand, they undertake a “retrogressive journey;” that is, a journey backwards into a prelapsarian space; moreover, inwards, into the nature of their psyche through the experimentation of grief.¹⁸ Due to its emphasis upon the emotional journey of its protagonist rather than its graphic content seen throughout, the film moves from the mere torture spectacle of films such as Eli Roth’s *Hostel* (2005) or John Stockwell’s *Turistas* (2006),¹⁹ to occupy a place between melodrama and horror. In any case, the graphic content of the film plays a big role in the film as a way for von Trier to start the provocation seen throughout the trilogy. In the prologue of the story, a purely visual slow-motion black-and-white series of images are accompanied by George Friederic Händel’s aria *Lascia ch’io pianga mia cruda sorte* (‘Let me weep over my cruel fate’) from his opera *Rinaldo*. Images of the couple having passionate sex in the shower and later in bed are juxtaposed with the couple’s son—Nic—pushing the baby-gate open and wandering the house to see a half-open window which the boy climbs and from where he falls to his death. An association is established between sex and death; in other words, the disassociation of the primal scene as a medium for life in place of sex resulting in a nightmare. Von Trier emphasizes the idea by focusing on the ecstasy the woman is experiencing through close shots of her orgasmic countenance amidst the act while shifting to the falling boy: his face disengaged,

¹⁷ Magdalena Zolkos, “Violent Affects: Nature and the Feminine in *Antichrist*,” in *Lars von Trier’s Women*, ed. Rex Butler and David Denny (New York: Bloomsbury Academics, 2016), 141 (italics in original); note how the reference to women being “false in legs, in thighs, in breasts, teeth, hair and eyes” made by the She character also point at the origin myth and the creation of Eve through Adam’s rib. It is also worth considering Lacan’s notion of the ‘object *a*’ and Sigmund Freud’s ‘lost object’ in relation to the aforementioned and the topic of gender. These concepts perfectly adequate to the male castration at the end of the film.

¹⁸ Zolkos, “Violent Affects,” 145.

¹⁹ Amy Simmons, *Antichrist* (Auteur, 2015), 26.

clueless of what is to come, first his teddy bear coming down and then the child. The sublime aestheticization of the moment together with the aria adds to the uneasiness the spectator feels while witnessing the scene and feeling in their own skin the vulnerability of the little boy.²⁰ In Biblical terms, the fall from grace by succumbing to temptation results in the depravity that causes the child's death. She blames herself for the boy's death and their moment of absence: "I could have stopped him" she says "What about me? I was there, too" the man replies.

The couple improvises a treatment by going to their cabin in the forest. They travel to Eden by train and after hiking through the woods they get to the place. In Eden, the human and the natural, or "other-than-human" to use Zolkos' terminology, coexist in perfect harmony, a virgin place demarcated from the external world—materialized in a footbridge, characterized by destruction and evil, a destruction which the couple bring to the halcyon space.²¹ This singular Eden captures the hermeticism of the film, in the sense that the spectator is forced to accept its rules and agree to its enigmatic nature.²² Just as in other von Trier's films, one feels dislocated and the disassociation permeates the action and setting, forcing the viewer to play by the film's rules. In a sense, the film's setting seems permeable; in other words, it allows those banished—Her and Him—back inside. By entering the prelapsarian space, the couple turns the space upside down and the boundary between "human and other-than-human" gets blurred.²³

²⁰ In "Provocation and Perversity" Sinnerbrink offers a detailed description on the combination of aesthetic and moral provocations in von Trier's *Depression Trilogy* by the juxtaposition of ideas such as sex and death seen in the prologue to *Antichrist* "as a way of inducing thought through moving images," 97. Note how this juxtaposition is similarly used in the prelude to *Melancholia*; also, see Buch-Hansen exploration of the haptic image in "Lars von Trier's *Antichrist*," 126–31.

²¹ Zolkos, "Violent Affects," 149.

²² Sinnerbrink, "Provocation and Perversity," 103.

²³ Zolkos, "Violent Affects," 150.

The natural world surrounding the couple is hostile from the very beginning: “The ground is burning” She says. Although she gets a small scorch on her foot, the rivalry between ‘human’ and ‘natural’ is clearly seen in His relationship with nature, illustrated by a scene where He wakes up one morning to his hand covered with thistles. In a sense, Eden seems to enclose a safe space within; that is, the cottage. Yet, the power-struggle of nature as a reaction to the state of the couple’s relationship is seen in the cottage being under siege throughout the film: a roof leaking, acorns constantly falling on the cabin... Certainly, the entering of the ‘sinful’ couple into the halcyon space represents a threat. Von Trier’s preoccupation with modernism and romanticism is yet again explored. Here, Von Trier might be making a statement on progress and urbanization and the battle between human life and nature.²⁴

Buch-Hansen remarks that the use of the figure of the antichrist in the female protagonist, rather than being a commentary on the dangerousness of the female psyche is a critique of a masculinity gone astray.²⁵ In the male protagonist, von Trier codifies rationality and calculation.²⁶ Contrary, as will be explored, the female subject understands the other-than-human force of nature as part of the disorder of life. Certainly, the disorder of the natural world surrounding the cabin is analogical to the collapsing of her marriage. As Zolkos argues, the male protagonist of the story “operates . . . as representative of myopic and reductive ways of perceiving and ordering the world”; the ‘non-humanity’ or the inability to engage with emotion and to understand the supernatural of the male protagonist, thus, “capitulate[s] . . . the powers and threats of femininity” in the form of “nature, gender and/or sacrality.”

²⁴ Simmons, *Antichrist*, 34.

²⁵ Buch-Hansen, “Lars von Trier’s *Antichrist*,” 115; similarly, through her analysis on the gaze in *Antichrist*, Buch-Hansen concludes that “[von Trier] wants us to identify with the male gaze—and more than that: he forces the psychopath’s monolithic way of seeing onto us,” 126.

²⁶ Zolkos, “Violent Affects,” 142.

Von Trier, again, since the director already explored it in the *Golden Heart Trilogy*, “demonstrates that gendered relations reflect particular ways of ordering and disciplining profoundly incompatible worlds and are framed by historically situated forms of violence.” In addition, *Antichrist* shows a “female figuration of an apocalyptic and justice-oriented violence” that von Trier already explored in *Dogville*.²⁷

Let us turn now to the relationship of the couple. His relationship to Her is a patronizing one. He forces Her to give up the sedatives and turns her into the object of his therapeutic exercise based on cognitive exposure. Even though the beginning of the film raptures the domestic space and results in the conflict of the story, it is clear that their relationship is fractured even before the onset of the action seen in her reproaching his role in the family: “You’ve always been distant from me and Nic,” or in the flashbacks throughout the film that point to a previous problem and dramatize the scene.²⁸ In any case, the husband and wife fall apart when being unable to connect with each other, or to use Denny’s wording, when they cannot “[make] sense of the lost object;” that is, the dead son.²⁹ This seems to be a crucial matter explored throughout the trilogy and in older films by the director. Namely, the disconnection between the male and female characters and, more interesting, how the men exercise power over women due to the patriarchal system of power. For instance, in *Breaking the Waves*, Bess’s humiliates herself in order to fulfil Jan’s masturbatory fantasies and is later hospitalized for this. In the end, she self-sacrifices so Jan can live. Similarly, Selma is imprisoned for a crime a man forced her to commit and in order to save his son.

²⁷ Zolkos, “Violent Affects,” 152.

²⁸ Denny, “A Postmodern Family Romance,” 160.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 162.

Contrarily to the female protagonist, He sees nature in Cartesian terms, as “an object that is governed by its own rules,”³⁰ as wilderness. This is illustrated by the apparition of the anthropomorphic animals that represent a knowledge he is unable to define, which Zolkos reads as a kind of knowledge which is only accessible to the female subject.³¹ The sight of these animals is only witnessed by the male, perhaps suggesting the need of corporality and tangibility the man needs in order to believe and interpret his reality in non-binary terms. Whereas the woman is already familiar with *The Three Beggars*, through her studies of witchcraft, the man is only educated in psychology and thus they manifest themselves to him.³² Interestingly enough, the manifestations of the animals are grotesque, and they disorientate the character played by Defoe: a self-consuming fox, a deathless raven, and a deer still attached to its stillborn fawn. The abominable images of the three creatures may suggest humankind’s intrinsic proneness to the diabolical; or, since it is Him who beholds them, man’s inclination to perversion. This may explain why these messengers speak like human beings for it is only through the human voice that He can understand their message. At the end of chapter two, “Chaos Reigns,” the fox the man encounters while out walking has to utter those words for him to understand the uncontrollable and disordered nature of nature itself. In this way, as Zolkos points out, von Trier throws into question the privilege of the human race;³³ in other words, the cognition of the human being fails to understand nature so that nature, being in a superior stratum, needs to adopt the human medium of speech to interact with the male. Similarly, Simmons reads these visions as the materialization of the man’s repressed

³⁰ Denny, “A Postmodern Family Romance,” 167.

³¹ Zolkos, “Violent Affects,” 148.

³² Bodil Marie Thomsen, “*Antichrist*—Chaos Reigns: the Event of Violence and the Haptic Image in Lars von Trier’s Film,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 1:1 (2009): 3.

³³ Zolkos, “Violent Affects,” 148.

emotions,³⁴ perhaps suggesting that the refusal of the natural laws—like the feeling of grief in his wife—in favor of an analytical attitude brings destruction and chaos. Interestingly, this is also seen in other images of Eden, namely “phallic imagery [that] comes in the form of erect, yet lifeless white tree trunk, an indisputable symbol of death and infertility” or acorns falling like “spilled sperm to the ground.”³⁵ However, nature’s attempts to redirect the male protagonist are in vain. It is Him who strangles the woman and burns her body on a pyre outside the cabin. This final act of violence might be pointing at the struggle of reason or rationalism—embodied by the man, and romanticism—in the woman’s character.³⁶ Indeed, by means of looking into the Christian opposition between good and evil and the original sin, the film explores other themes such as misogyny,³⁷ illustrated by the final imagery of the “dead sisters”—faceless women emerging from the forest—hunting the man as he attempts to escape the scene. As Sinnerbrink affirms,

the film’s ambivalent conclusion hints that the cognitive therapy that was supposed to cure Her of depression was itself a kind of violence or will to control. His misguided therapy unleashes a latent misogyny that leads Him to act out yet another historical repetition of the cycle of persecution, conflict and violence that is the history of Western culture’s (masculinist) attempts to rationally master and control (internal and external) Nature.³⁸

Indeed, the therapy that She undergoes by her husband’s hand is a type of exorcism to reject the idea that “Nature is Satan’s Church;” in other words, that “[n]ature becomes the place of the chaotic, uncategorized miscarriages of the mind.”³⁹ The misogyny in the film seems to be the result of the man’s failure to impose the reason and

³⁴ Simmons reads it through the Freudian notion of the uncanny or ‘unheimlich,’ 34.

³⁵ Simmons, *Antichrist*, 36.

³⁶ Sinnerbrink, “Provocation and Perversity,” 101-2.

³⁷ Simmons, *Antichrist*, 22; Buch-Hansen reads the anti-misogynistic message of the film through the critique the film makes of the role Christianity has played in the construction of a misogynist culture, in line with the concept of the Antichrist introduced by Nietzsche, 122.

³⁸ Sinnerbrink, “Provocation and Perversity,” 104.

³⁹ Buch-Hansen, “Lars von Trier’s *Antichrist*,” 139.

rationality that he embodies onto the chaos of nature represented by Gainsbourg's character. Again, this is a rather reductive and essentialist claim that is, in itself, problematic. Sadly, von Trier's (ab)use of stylization together with the cryptic imagery of the film, makes one reflect on the (anti?)misogynistic semantics of the film and to ask von Trier, just as a columnist Baz Bamigboye did, to "explain and justify."⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Quoted in Scott Roxborough, "Lars von Trier Speared over Antichrist," *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 18, 2009, hollywoodreporter.com/news/lars-von-trier-speared-antichrist-84190; Denny makes similar remarks: "Does [von Trier] not simply take the genre coordinates of horror and stylize them in a way that protects him from such a judgment;" nevertheless, he argues for the director's use of the genre conventions of pornography, horror, and melodrama as "a device to draw the spectator in, to essentially set us up to confront our own complicit and voyeuristic participation with these genre conventions," 163. Consider these ideas in *Nymphomaniac*.

TURNING GREEN: NATURE AND THE FEMALE SUBJECT

The exploration of the myth of female agency and the distinction between ‘human’ and ‘natural,’ as Zolkos remarks, serves von Trier to explore his own psyche.⁴¹ In “Director’s Confessions” von Trier talks about the inspiration after a two-year-long severe depression, the oneiric origin of some of the ideas for the film and how “it lacks logic or dramatic thinking” and how he once again approaches nature but now in a “more personal way.”⁴² In an interview with the liberal Danish newspaper *Politiken*, Charlotte Gainsbourg stated that “it was my character that Lars has personally identified with. He was very close inside the life of my character and my feelings, my vulnerability . . . my anxiety attacks were his. It was *him* that was *her*.”⁴³ From the outset of *Antichrist*, von Trier draws a link between nature and the female body as an expression of Her state of mind so as to satirize the modern psychiatry He represents.⁴⁴

Following the scene when one can observe the couple walking behind the hearse at their son’s funeral, *Antichrist* focuses on the unorganized nature present in the hospital room where She is resting after her collapsing at the service. A slow zoom into a water vase holding bamboo stalks for the grieving mother exposes the director’s “paranoid, hypnotic and misanthropic vision of human life behind the curtain, as a creeping, crawling chaos” when rather than focusing on more alive aspects of the plant, the camera closes in on the stems and what it nourishes them; that

⁴¹ Zolkos, “Violent Affects,” 141.

⁴² Quoted in Zolkos, “Violent Affects,” 145; Von Trier made similar remarks in an interview for *Time Out* magazine, commenting that “[t]his film was intended to not be too thought out. Some of my other films have been very controlled, and I really like films that are open. I have never made films that are so open to interpretation, and so yes, it was intentional with *Antichrist*” (David Jenkins, “Lars von Trier Discusses *Antichrist*,” accessed June 2019, timeout.com/london/film/lars-von-trier-discusses-antichrist-1).

⁴³ Quoted in Zolkos, “Violent Affects,” 145 (*italics in original*).

⁴⁴ Sinnerbrink, “Provocation,” 99.

is, dirty water made out of a disorganized organic material which foreshadow the decay and disarray of nature to be followed in the film.⁴⁵ As noted, the female protagonist embodies characteristics traditionally attributed to nature while the male character embodies those contrary. It is true, however, that this is rather reductive and an argument that seems to develop both in *Melancholia* and in *Nymphomaniac*. Zolkos argues that in *Antichrist* “the world of nature includes other-than-human phenomena and living beings that the female protagonist invokes through a collective metalepsis.”⁴⁶ This is seen in the apparition of the Three Beggars (the fox, the deer, and the raven) that only the male protagonist witnesses.⁴⁷ Zolkos also reads the resistance of the cabin as the mechanisms of defense She displays when faced by the therapy she is forced to undergo instead of naturally responding to the death of her son.⁴⁸

The un-named female protagonist identifies Eden as the source of her anxiety. He asks her “What scares you about the woods?” to which She replies “Everything.” The therapeutic exercises the male character devises for his wife involve being in contact with nature and experiencing its unmediated physicality.⁴⁹ By agreeing to these exercises, she is accepting His rational thinking; that is, that nature cannot harm or burn one but is governed by logical rules.⁵⁰ Yet, the way she really perceives nature “expos[es] [humankind’s] ultimate meaninglessness before our own self-importance and health:”⁵¹ “Oak trees grow to be hundreds of years old. They only have to

⁴⁵ Simmons, *Antichrist*, 32; Buch-Hansen analyzes this scene through the haptic visuality: “while our brains try to figure out the image, the sensation of an ominous decay is transmitted to our bodies,” 128.

⁴⁶ Zolkos, “Violent Affects,” 142.

⁴⁷ Denny points out that use of supernatural elements is utilized so as “to mock man’s pretentious relation to nature and, therein, gestures to a gap within the human and nature relation that cannot be sutured,” 168.

⁴⁸ Zolkos, “Violent Affects,” 150-1.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 151.

⁵⁰ Denny, “A Postmodern Family Romance,” 167.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 168.

produce one single tree every hundred years in order to propagate. May sound banal to you but it was a big thing for me to realize that when I was up here with Nic.”

Another example of He regarding her perception of nature as illusionary takes place when She tells her husband about an experience she had the summer before: “I heard a sound.” Through a flashback, we see the mother working on her project followed by the crying of a child. When she gets up and finds Nic—after looking for him in the woods, the boy is playing on the floor of the workshop, the crying still ongoing followed by a still shot of the landscape. He reflects on the experience and concludes that she imagined the crying. In response, the woman, infuriated, tells him that “you shouldn’t have come here” and that “you’re just so damned arrogant, but this may not last,” a sign of the violence to come. Moreover, she herself suggests that her thesis on witchcraft and historical gynocide was “glib,” perhaps because her husband thought of it as such.⁵²

Although she refers to nature as the object of her anxiety by placing Eden very high in the pyramid of her fears, after the husband/therapist makes her embrace it, it is clear that Eden does not want to harm her. On their way to Eden, He makes her surrender to nature by imagining herself in the scene: “I want you to melt into the green. Don’t fight it. Just, turn, green.” Her dissolving into and synthesis with the grass, as Zolkos argues, “re-inscribes the feminine subject through a relation of submission or capitulation to nature (wilderness) to the point of inseparability and indistinction from it.”⁵³ The use of haptic images serve to communicate the force of nature as a benevolent force—Her becoming one with nature when lying on the grass, or as an evil power that entails death and decay.⁵⁴ Indeed, the connectivity of the

⁵² Buch-Hansen, “Lars von Trier’s Antichrist,” 136.

⁵³ Zolkos, “Violent Affects,” 151.

⁵⁴ Buch-Hansen, “Lars von Trier’s Antichrist,” 131.

female subject with the prelapsarian surroundings point at Her resistance to the human laws He embodies, thus, her distancing from civilization, and the patriarchy it represents.⁵⁵ This may suggest that by associating nature with the female character, the environment serves as a liberating force for the female character to overcome patriarchy and rebel against the toxic masculinity she experiences through her husband. Perhaps, through her research on witchcraft and gynocide, the woman has acquired magical powers and she is capable of controlling the forces of nature. This would explain why she seems unaffected by the hostility of nature. The burning at the stake of the final scene together with many other instances throughout the story inscribe the story told in *Antichrist* in the history of the Inquisition and the grand narrative of historical misogyny epitomized by the witch-burnings.⁵⁶ Going back to the imagery the grass scene offers, it is important to mention Her position on the grass. While she is “melting” with the greenery, she adopts a virginal position with her hands facing up as if a religious moment were taking place. Later in *Nymphomaniac*, Joe experiences a similar moment which also has religious connotations.

In any case, She says that “nature is Satan’s church.” After that, He writes ‘Satan’ at the top of the pyramid of her fears. The shot shows how he had previously written down and later crossed out the word ‘Nature,’ perhaps after she shows that she is not afraid of nature by running around in the woods, jumping on the creek or putting her arm inside the foxhole. After jotting it down, he dismisses the idea by crossing it out. After finding her research on witchcraft he proposes an exercise of

⁵⁵ Zolkos, “Violent Affects,” 154.

⁵⁶ Buch-Hansen, “Lars von Trier’s *Antichrist*,” 117.

role-playing where his role is to represent nature while she plays the part of rational thinking:

I'm nature of all the thing you call nature./ Okay Mr. Nature. What do you want?/ To hurt you as much as I can./ How?/ How do you think?/ By frightening me?/ By killing you./ Nature can't harm me. You're just all the greenery outside./ No. I'm more than that./ I don't understand./ I'm outside, but also... within.⁵⁷/ I'm nature of all human beings./ Oh, that kind of nature. The kind of nature that calls his people to do evil things against women./ That's exactly what I am./ That kind of nature interested me a lot when I was up here. That kind of nature was the subject of my thesis. But you shouldn't underestimate Eden./ What did Eden do?/ I discovered something else in my material than I expected. If human nature is evil. Then that goes as well for the nature of.../... of women... female nature./ The nature of all the sisters. Women do not control their own bodies. Nature does...

The use of the female sign (♀) in the stylization of the title of the film, seen in the poster, in other advertising images, and in the title still at the beginning of the film, “forced the identification of the label *Antichris*♀ not only with the film's female protagonist, but with women in general, which supported the claims on von Trier's personal misogyny.”⁵⁸ In any case, Von Trier has publicly commented that the name for the film comes from Friedrich Nietzsche's work *The Anti-Christ* (1888) a controversial work against Christianity. Even though the director insists that he has never read it—although having been on his bedside table for forty years⁵⁹—it is argued that Nietzsche has clearly influenced the filmmaker, namely the impact of Nietzsche's previously mentioned title and *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872) and its ideas on aesthetic theory as the justification for existence and the world. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, reissued in 1886 with the subtitle *Or: Hellenism and Pessimism*, Nietzsche explores the dichotomy between the Dionysian and the

⁵⁷ Zolkos argues that “[b]oth nature and the demonic are found *within* the gendered corporeality of the female protagonist,” 152.

⁵⁸ Buch-Hansen, “Lars von Trier's *Antichrist*,” 117.

⁵⁹ Simmons, *Antichrist*, 21; Buch-Hansen, “Lars von Trier's *Antichrist*,” 115; Thomsen, “*Antichrist*,” 1.

Apollonian; that is, reality as a disorganized chaos and undifferentiated by forms and reality as order with distinct forms. Thus, Nietzsche identifies Dionysus with the natural or anti-Christian in opposition to the Apollonic order. Additionally, there is another opposition, and more interesting for this section; that is, the opposition between male and female and the embodiment of the Dionysian motif in the female figure through the Dionysian cult; namely, religious ecstasy, ritual madness and finally, catharsis.⁶⁰ In *The Birth of Tragedy*, as Oppel notes, Nietzsche defined nature, music, and myth thus the Dionysian, in feminine terms: “nature is a woman; music is a mother; Sphinx is a female virgin, a myth, and a symbol of nature.”⁶¹ Nietzsche’s ideas in his 1886 “Attempt at Self-Criticism,” later developed in *The Anti-christ*, related Christianity with the Apollonian culture and the Dionysian with the mythological figure of the Antichrist in the apocalyptic tradition. The spelling of the film, thus, apart from suggesting the association of the female figure with the Dionysian forces, may also point at a positive connotation of the term as oppositional to Apollonian tradition thus Christianity.⁶² Buch-Hansen concludes that the film deploys the figure of the Antichrist in order to criticize the Christian tradition’s treatment of gender: “[p]roperly understood, the film helps to shed light on the potentially dangerous Docetism inherent in the Christian Church’s history and dogmata.”⁶³

⁶⁰ Thomsen, “*Antichrist*,” 2; Buch-Hansen, “Lars von Trier’s *Antichrist*,” 140-144.

⁶¹ Frances Nesbitt Oppel, *Nietzsche on Gender: Beyond Man and Woman* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 63; note the use of the chilling and eerie compositions by Kristian Eidnes every time nature reveals itself. To draw from Nietzsche’s ideas, “[t]he Dionysiac, with the primal pleasure it perceives even in pain, is the common womb from which both music and the tragic myth are born,” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 114.

⁶² Buch-Hansen, “Lars von Trier’s *Antichrist*,” 142.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 143.

“HIT ME SO IT HURTS:” THE MONSTROUS FEMININE

Before She goes ‘mad’ and after finding out that she had been putting his son’s shoes intentionally in the wrong feet, He concludes that what she is most afraid of is neither nature nor Satan but herself.⁶⁴ Denny reads the depiction of nature and how it relates to the female character as the source for the protagonists inherent ‘evil,’ as voiced by herself.⁶⁵ The woman self-blames over the death of the child and finally embraces the belief that women are innately vile: “If human nature is evil, then that goes as well for the nature of... The nature of all the sisters.” It is important to pay attention to Her pause and His intervention. In the middle of her utterance, the man interrupts her to ask “Of the women? Female nature?” Behind the obscure and the grotesque, *Antichrist* addresses gender issues through the depiction of a depressed female figure turned into a monster. The connection between gender and nature is reinforced in the film through the formation of a female subject that defies gender victimizations thus resisting the powers of masculinity.⁶⁶ She resists the victimization by incarnating what has historically been explored in literature and depicted in cinema until today, namely, the monstrous feminine or mad woman. *Antichrist*’s explicit images of physical and sexual violence illustrated by the genital mutilation the female protagonist performs at the end of the film, have been seen as von Trier’s perceived misogyny.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, critics have dismissed the director’s apparent misogyny due to the enjoyable cinematic art he produces, claiming that the director’s personal traits

⁶⁴ Note how, as Thomsen points out, this is voiced by the male character but not written, instead He writes “ME,” as she notes, “this subtlety, where the personal pronoun ‘ME’ of course also includes himself, as it as linguistic sign includes the person speaking and generally is gender neutral, thus clearly indicates that the symbiosis has reached a disabling stage,” 5.

⁶⁵ Denny, “A Postmodern Family Romance,” 167.

⁶⁶ Zolkos, “Violent Affects,” 146.

⁶⁷ Bonnie Honig and Lori J. Marso, “Introduction: Lars von Trier and the ‘Clichés of Our Time,” in *Politics, Theory, and Film: Critical Encounters with Lars von Trier*, ed. Bonnie Honig and Lori J. Marso (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 9.

should be kept separated from his art.⁶⁸ By the same token people dismiss other artists' ideologies in favor of the unparalleled beauty and value of their art.

Elbeshlawy, remarks that Lars von Trier's cinema represents the director himself and that "its artistic beauty seems to be intrinsically mixed with its perceived misogyny."⁶⁹ Yet Elbeshlawy acknowledges Rob White and Nina Power's discussion on the film, when White argues that "[c]alling *Antichrist* 'misogynist' is an opt-out from serious engagement . . . Maybe a better way of approaching the film's gender politics is to observe that she is much the more interesting of the film's characters . . . In their Battle of the Sexes, his is outmatched[.]"⁷⁰ Whether von Trier is a misogynist or not, some aspects regarding horror and violence should be examined.

Von Trier himself admitted that of all his films "*Antichrist* comes closest to a scream."⁷¹ *Antichrist* recalls films such as *The Brood* (1979) or the more recent *The Babadook* (2014) in its treatment of women's violence, madness and maternity.⁷² Although the film contains graphic scenes of violence evocative of the horror genre,⁷³ it is true that it does not rely on fear like any other horror film, but rather uses affects such as desperation, lust, and grief⁷⁴ through haptic images.⁷⁵ Just as Nietzsche found

⁶⁸ Ahmed Elbeshlawy, *Women in Lars von Trier's Cinema 1996-2014* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 135.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 136.

⁷⁰ Rob White, "Antichrist: A Discussion," *Film Quarterly*, December 1, 2009. filmquarterly.org/2009/12/01/antichrist-a-discussion.

⁷¹ Xan Brooks, "Antichrist: a Work of Genius or the Sickest Film in the History of Cinema?" *The Guardian*, July 16, 2009. theguardian.com/film/2009/jul/16/antichrist-lars-von-trier-feminism.

⁷² Janice Loreck, *Violent Women in Contemporary Cinema* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 18.

⁷³ *Antichrist* is part of the so-called "New Extremity," a term coined by *Artforum* critic James Quandt to describe a series of transgressive films by French directors that emerged in the late 1990s: "cinema determined to break every taboo, to wade in rivers of viscera and spumes of sperm, to fill each frame with flesh, nubile or gnarled and subject it to all manners of penetration, mutilation, and defilement," 18 ("Flesh and Blood: Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema," in *The New Extremism: from France to Europe*, ed. Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

⁷⁴ Zolkos, "Violent Affects," 146.

⁷⁵ Badley notes that the "degraded close-ups (a pulsing throat, trembling hand) [are used] to express anxiety in haptic terms, distorted, high contrast static images for hallucinatory 'visualizations,' and *vérité* body horror," 144; it is important to point out that through these images von Trier forces the spectator to take the role of therapist in analyzing the woman's symptoms thus one becomes part of the

in classical Athenian tragedy an art that had the power to affirm one's existence, Zolkos argues that "the 'violent affects' in the film fuel its traumatizing effect . . . it forces its viewers to confront their own derivation of pleasure from the sight of another's pain."⁷⁶ In *Antichrist's* Prologue one finds the first instances of violence against the female subject. It is argued that the scene parallels that of Alfred Hitchcock and his famous shower scene, where instead of a knife, the woman's body is penetrated by the man's murderous penis suggesting the violence to come by the man's hands: her assassination.⁷⁷ Like in many horror films, the woman embodies the role of victim killed by a male figure which could be read as a patriarchal force. In addition, while the couple are in their apartment in Seattle, the woman wakes up one night and has an anxiety attack. She goes to the bathroom and starts hurting herself by hitting her head against the toilet. After the man makes her stop and brings her to their bed, the couple have compulsive sex.⁷⁸ This scene not only brings to mind the prologue of the film and the juxtaposition of sex and death (violence) but foreshadows the violence to come. In a following scene, for instance, she bites him in the nipple, again, anticipating the castration at the end of the film. Indeed, the woman is constructed as a hysteric product of the historical misogyny she is familiar with through her studies. In her research, she analyzed gendercide by closely examining the killing of witches. She studies the *Malleus Maleficarum*, a thorough treatise, first published in 1486, that endorses the extermination of witches. Through her studies, She is worshipping the Dionysian forces which the protagonist relates to the historical

irrational task the man performs. In doing so, as Loreck also notes, von Trier makes the spectator accomplice of the man's actions to, perhaps, elicit some kind of reflection (Loreck, 24).

⁷⁶ Zolkos, "Violent Affects," 142.

⁷⁷ Buch-Hansen, "Lars von Trier's *Antichrist*," 125.

⁷⁸ Note how, according to Buch-Hansen, the compulsive sex scenes throughout the film point at the replaying of the original sin and a "renegotiat[on] [of] the gender roles—and the guilt," 138. Yet it also perpetuates the idea of the lusty woman in need of a male figure to satisfy her urges. This is emphasized by the woman's gaze in the flashback scene to the Prologue copulation scene.

violence inflicted to women because of the inherit 'evil' that caused man's original sin.⁷⁹ After She has embraced the idea that women are inherently evil, one has the first scene of sadomasochistic sex:

If human nature is evil. Then that goes as well for the nature of.../... of women... female nature./ The nature of all the sisters. Women do not control their own bodies. Nature does. I have it in writing in my books./ 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 you're saying?/ Forget it. I don't not know why I said it. I can't work anymore now. Hit me./ What?/ Hit me so it hurts./ No./ Hit me, please./ No!/ I can't stand it./ I don't want to. I don't want to./ Then you don't love me./ Okay. Maybe I don't love you.

For our purpose, it is interesting to look at the scene that follows the above dialogue which serves as the marketing image for the film. After the man refuses to hit her, she runs away to the woods and masturbates at the undergrowth of a tree. More interesting, when the man finds her and the couple start making love, the roots and branches of the tree undergo a physical transformation, adopting a dendrological form, materializing in the shape of hands and arms which point to the liaison between the human—the woman, and the natural or Dionysian. The roots of the tree being the limbs of the women that have been killed throughout history. Thomsen reads this scene in light of the bacchanalia of Dionysian cult or a kind of Witch Sabbath “in order to feel the limits of her body—or perhaps the inverse, to unite with a collective, Dionysian body[.]”⁸⁰ During the intercourse, She utters “the sisters from Ratisbon could start a hailstorm,” a reference to Agnes and Anne from Ratisbon, condemned for witchery; in the film, a “hailstorm” in the form of violence that her words ensue. For Zolkos, the scene at the base of the tree communicates “a *failed* gesture of

⁷⁹ Thomsen, “*Antichrist*,” 3.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 4.

connection with another [He] in the subject's desperate grasping, or holding on to, or encountering, another's body."⁸¹ Zolkos argument brings one back to the loss of symbiosis between He and She, supported by what He thinks is the ultimate fear of his wife, a written "ME" but uttered "herself" by the man. The film suggests a displacement in the man's subjectivity and that man's nature is by definition dualistic; that is, rational/chaotic or Apollonian/Dionysian. In order to return to his single nature, the man has to confront and kill his ego. The women at the end of the film, as Tumini concludes, "are not outside of him but within him, and they are made into the symbol of redemption through the sacrifice of the female protagonist."⁸² In any case, a flashback of the introductory scene in the last scene points at another direction, namely that, amidst the intimacy of the scene, She opened her eyes seeing their child but choosing not to do anything thus reinforcing the idea that She is the one to blame for the incident that followed which supports the intrinsic evil of the female figure She embraces.

This is the main problem with *Antichrist*, namely the various interpretations one could draw from the female character's actions. She starts as a victim of a psychotherapeutic exercise carried out by her husband, as noted before, suggesting the oppressiveness of the masculine. However, She, then, oscillates to a completely different identification; that is, that of promiscuous woman who asks her husband to hit her and shows a misogynistic behavior herself when she embraces the idea of womanhood as synonym of evil and when she finally self-mutilates. Moreover,

⁸¹ Zolkos, "Violent Affects," 148.

⁸² Angela Tumini, "Eros and Thanatos: the Murderous Struggle of Pain and Desire in Gabriele D'Annunzio's *Triumph of Death* and in Lars von Trier's *Antichrist*," in *Making Sense of Pain: Critical and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Jane Fernandez (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2010), 169; Thomsen reaches a similar conclusion, in killing her, "the Apollonic conquers the Dionysian, but here, it is more than doubtful whether the man will ever be able to build up any human order again" and that "the man becomes a Dionysian, demoniacal figure which—just like nature—breaks with all forms of a linear, temporal order and which exists in all chaotic space-in-between in the peaks of present of the event," 6, 9.

flashbacks like the one previously mentioned or another where she forces his child to walk with its right foot in its left boot and the other way around, force the spectator to question her role as mother and to ultimately blame her for the death of the little boy. This is precisely why the film may seem to embrace the misogynist message of womanhood as evil⁸³ and the reason why the Jury at Cannes proclaimed the film as “the most misogynist movie from the self-proclaimed biggest director in the word,”⁸⁴ making clear that the film could, clearly, be read as misogynist.

⁸³ Loreck reaches the same conclusion: “In ending so violently and with few conclusions about the ‘true’ cause of the woman’s illness, *Antichrist* could be accused of ultimately representing the violent, hysterical woman as an unsolvable enigma — an unresolved conundrum with which to undermine masculine authority,” 23.

⁸⁴ France 24, “‘Anti-prize’ for Lars von Trier’s ‘misogynist’ movie,” May 24, 2009, france24.com/en/20090524-lars-von-trier-antichrist-misogynist-movie-prize-cannes-film-festival-ecumenical-jury.

HER ACT: THE (FE)MALE CASTRATION

In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Lacan summarizes the relationship between the subject and the object of desire with “I love you, but, because inexplicably I love in you something more than you—the *objet petit a*—I mutilate you” which perfectly explains Her final act of (fe)male castration which, in turn, is allowed by the lack of morality in the film.⁸⁵ Bunch argues that “[w]hen there is no God, and no ultimate belief system, morality becomes a relative concept, open to interrogation” which he remarks is what von Trier does in *Antichrist* through the exploration of nature and its power-struggle.⁸⁶ Von Trier himself claims that the film lacks a moral code and that it uses a basic plot structure.⁸⁷ Bringing back Nietzsche’s ideas on aesthetics and art, the lack and economy of the elements the director mentions is precisely what justifies the examining of philosophical and psychological matters which, given the framework, can be neither ethically nor morally questioned because they exist in its own as an example of great art which justifies its existence. Von Trier’s criticism on his treatment of women, namely the torment she forces them to go through, is not justified by their violent acts toward their male counterparts but rather justified on their own, as a necessity in existing as part of the artist’s creation. Bunch reads the imagery of the crow in the final scene as a big black feather pen in the grass as the instrument for the creation of the work of art—the film, when the unnamed male protagonist, embodying the figure of the artist or *Übermensch*, walks down from the mountain after killing Her in the final scene, “detached and free from

⁸⁵ Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, 263.

⁸⁶ Mads Bunch, “Behind Idealism: the Discrepancy Between Philosophy and Reality in the Cinema of Lars von Trier,” in *Evaluating the Achievement of One Hundred Years of Scandinavian Cinema: Dreyer, Bergman, von Trier, and Others*, ed. John Tucker (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2012), 212.

⁸⁷ Von Trier quoted in Zolkos, “Violent Affects,” 145.

religion, sexual morality, and family values.”⁸⁸ Of course, to most, von Trier’s end does not justify his means and as Zolkos argues, the director’s post-Dogme 95 films—in this case *Antichrist*, not only have inspired theological and philosophical readings but have had to face feminist readings and critical responses. In any case, Zolkos argues that the story constitutes an exploration on human grief and mental disorder; yet, what is new is the transformation from a “Christlike heroine” to a “radically different gendered imaginary register” a “departure from his soteriological preoccupations in a direction of non-redemptive, non-sacrificial and non-transcendental violence.”⁸⁹ However, it could be argued that later on with Joe (*Nymphomaniac*), von Trier seems to further explore this new kind of Christlike heroine, one whose subjectivity is fragmented and escapes the binarism of gender in, certainly, a non-redemptive way that only brings destruction to the character and communicates the impossibility of the endeavor.

As argued, through chapters three and four, “Despair (Gynocide)” and “the Three Beggars” the She protagonist falls into madness and hysteria which is channeled through violent affects and culminate with the male castration she performs after she binds her husband’s thigh to a grindstone and when, delirious, she self-mutilates by removing her clitoris with a pair of scissors. In his study,⁹⁰ Mads Bunch explores the castration anxiety motif present in von Trier’s work and how this apprehension not only permeates his male characters but determine his violent actions inflicted on the female characters in their battle of the sexes.⁹¹ To understand the

⁸⁸ Bunch, “Behind Idealism,” 212-3.

⁸⁹ Zolkos, “Violent Affects,” 146.

⁹⁰ The study explores the relationship between von Trier and its major influence, Swedish August Strindberg, best known as a playwright, who apparently had misogynist opinions. See Anna Westerståhl Stenport, “Introduction: the International Strindberg,” in *The International Strindberg: New Critical Essays*, ed. Anna Westerståhl Stenport (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), 8.

⁹¹ Mads Bunch, “Castration Anxiety and Traumatic Encounters with the Real in the Works of August Strindberg and Lars von Trier,” in *The International Strindberg: New Critical Essays*, ed. Anna Westerståhl Stenport (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), 51; similarly, Denny insists on

subject matter, Bunch draws from Slavoj Žižek's theoretical framework—who in turn takes some of Lacan's ideas to develop his theory. For Lacan, the psyche can be divided into three major structures that control one's life and desires: the Real, the Imaginary Order, and the Symbolic Order or big Other. The Real could be described as a state of fullness and completeness found in neo-natal children which is lost once one enters into language. In the imaginary, one finds the fantasies of desire or a movement toward the lack that Lacan thought defined the human subject. Finally, the symbolic order happens when the subject enters language and accepts the dictates of society and being able to deal with others. Interestingly, this acceptance is related to the Oedipus complex and the acceptance of the Name-of-the-Father that represent the laws that control the subject's desire and overall communication.⁹² As Lacan argues, "[t]he father, the Name-of-the-Father, sustains the structure of desire with the structure of the law."⁹³ In this vein, the male horror fantasy of castration is in the realm of the imagination and in *Antichrist* connected to the realm of the Real through the neurotic fear of losing His phallus and thus his position in the symbolic power system.⁹⁴ The archetypal imaginary nightmare suddenly turns real Real—in the form of a horrible scenario product of our most inner fears, in *Antichrist*, "that the woman we love has molested and killed our child and now wants to kill us."⁹⁵ Interestingly, as Bunch mentions, this could also be applied to the female protagonist, for her worst-

reading these violent acts in light of the Oedipus complex, for him, many Oedipal themes appear in the film: "the primal scene as a dramatic staging of the triangulation of desire that is brutally resolved by the death of the son; the images of Nic with his boots on the wrong feet as restaging the Oedipal drama wherein Jocasta is ordered to kill her son but instead pierces his feet and has them bound to a tree out in the desert; the scene of vengeance where She rejects the paternal metaphor by castrating it . . . ; and the final image of She castrating herself, an act that calls to mind Oedipus tearing out his eyes," 169.

⁹² See Jaques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002).

⁹³ Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concept of Psychoanalysis*, 34

⁹⁴ The theory of castration derives from Sigmund Freud and was later developed into a general theory about the sexes by Jacques Lacan and, developed even more by Žižek.

⁹⁵ Bunch, "Castration Anxiety," 62.

case scenario of the Imaginary would involve her child dying amidst an orgasmic moment and then going hysterical and self-mutilating.⁹⁶ As Bunch notes von Trier “transgresses the common idea that nightmares should stay where they belong: in the realm of the Imaginary,” if not, a film as provocative and disturbing film originates.⁹⁷

But what is von Trier trying to achieve with Her final acts of castration and self-mutilation? On one level, her ‘lacking’ nature makes her the man’s threat and by castrating him, She destroys the authority the man represents. As Freud argues, the woman is always responsible for the girl’s lack of a penis.⁹⁸ Contrarily, the female character does not suffer the anxiety of castration as the man does. In other words, she is not threatened by it because she already lacks the phallus but she blames her mother—thus her gender—for its deficiency: “She feels herself at a great disadvantage . . . and falls a victim to *penis-envy*.”⁹⁹ The women She refers to late in the film are “false in legs, in thighs, in breasts, teeth, hair and eyes” and indeed also false, or lacking, in genitals: “castration does not signify that man has it and woman doesn’t, but that the phallus, in its very presence, incarnates the lack.”¹⁰⁰ Linda Williams argues that when the girl-victim of film attacks back by grabbing the phallic element—in the form of knife, ax or chain saw, the woman is empowered and takes on the role of the monster-killer—in the form of man, so the viewer’s identification “shifts from an ‘abject terror gendered feminine’ to an active power with bisexual components. A gender-confused monster is foiled often symbolically castrated by an ‘androgynous’ ‘final girl.’”¹⁰¹ On another other level, as one can see toward the end of

⁹⁶ Bunch, “Castration Anxiety,” 62.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 68.

⁹⁸ Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (New York: Carlton House), 170.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 170.

¹⁰⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*, ed. Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 7.

¹⁰¹ Williams, “Film Bodies,” 7.

the film, the character played by Gainsbourg performs clitoridectomy in perhaps one of the most graphic shots in contemporary cinema thus pointing at another meaning, perhaps, that she ends up “perceive[ing] her body as a material existence that escapes her subjectivity”¹⁰² while reinforcing the idea of the interconnectedness of both the male and the female character thus a loss of subjectivity. It is crucial to point out that this is Her third castration. The first being the castration of her phallus due to her biological gender and the second, as Fred argues, the castration that the losing of her son entails. In other words, the boy had brought “her happiness [which] is great indeed when this desire for a child one day finds a real fulfilment; but especially is this so if the child is a little boy, who brings the longed-for penis with him.”¹⁰³

Williams argues that horror and porn movies together with melodramas constitute what she calls “body genres” for on one level, the female body functions as the embodiment of the sensations and emotions of pain, pleasure, and fear; at another level, the spectator is caught up in a kind of mimicry of that emotion or sensation.¹⁰⁴ It could be argued that *Antichrist*—and *Nymphomaniac*—displays the characteristics that define Williams’s body genres. Pornography and horror are two systems of excess, pornography being the lowest in cultural esteem.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, pornography, as Williams argues, is today deemed more excessive for its depiction of violence rather than for the images of sex.¹⁰⁶ Violence and sex are thus closely related and von Trier creates a spectacle around it, depicting the vulnerability of the female body in a raw manner. For Williams, “horror is the genre that seems to endlessly repeat the trauma

¹⁰² Angelos Koutsourakis, “The Illusion of Identity in Lars von Trier,” *Pop Matters*, April 26, 2010, poppmatters.com/124428-the-illusion-of-identity-in-lars-von-triers-antichrist-2496201138.html?rebelltitem=1#rebelltitem1.

¹⁰³ Freud, *New Introductory*, 175.

¹⁰⁴ Williams, *Film Bodies*, 4.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 3.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 2.

of castration as if to ‘explain,’ by repetitious mastery, the originary problem of sexual difference. And melodramatic weepie is the genre that seems to endlessly repeat our melancholic sense of the loss of origins—impossibly hoping to return to an earlier state which is perhaps most fundamentally represented by the body of the mother.”¹⁰⁷ *Antichrist* could be perfectly described in these terms. When She castrates Him the enigma of sexual difference comes to an end. Furthermore, the return to origins through the fantasy of the family romance entails a discovery of the origin of the subject, “an origin which psychoanalysts tell us cannot be separated from the discovery of sexual difference.”¹⁰⁸ For Marso, *Antichrist* “moves us to want to feel our way, in solidarity with She and von Trier’s other suffering and vengeful heroines, beyond patriarchy.”¹⁰⁹ What makes von Trier’s post-Dogme 95 different from his previous films is the liberation the acts the female protagonists perform provide. For Denny, Her act is an act of freedom, and rather than feeling guilt for what has happened, in castrating herself, She “move[s] from an impotent acting-out . . . to an act that frees her from a symbolic deadlock, and which opens up a different relation to the law.”¹¹⁰ It is worth noticing that according to Freud, for Her to become maniac, her “ego must have got over the loss of the object (or [her] mourning over the loss, or perhaps the object itself)” and that in turning ‘mad,’ She “demonstrates [her] liberation from the object which was the cause of [her] suffering, by seeking like a ravenously hungry man [woman] for new object-cathexes.”¹¹¹ It could be said, then,

¹⁰⁷ Williams, “Film Bodies,” 11.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁰⁹ Lori J. Marso, “Must We Burn Lars von Trier?: Simone de Beauvoir’s Body Politics in *Antichrist*,” in *Politics, Theory, and Film: Critical Encounters with Lars von Trier*, ed. Bonnie Honig and Lori J. Marso (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 64.

¹¹⁰ Denny, “A Postmodern Family Romance,” 176.

¹¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*, ed. Leticia Glöckler Fiorini, Thierry Bokanowski, and Sergio Lewkowicz (London: Karnac, 2009), 255.

that she has overcome the grief for the death of her child, a grief product of a social expectation—motherhood—she might never desired.¹¹²

¹¹² Note how this is again explored in *Nymphomaniac*.

3. MELANCHOLIA

STRONG WOMEN AND SUICIDAL MEN: GENDER FACING APOCALYPSE

Contrarily to *Antichrist*, which faced wide criticism and was generally perceived as misogynistic, *Melancholia* was hailed by some for its feminist content.¹¹³ The claims of *Melancholia* being read as a feminist text are supported by the identification the spectator is forced to establish with one of its protagonists, Justine (Kristen Dunst). In *Melancholia*, Justine rebels against social customs like marriage and its rituals, and overall, against “the patriarchal order, capitalism and all forms of control.”¹¹⁴ Indeed, the spectator identifies with the figure of non-conformity Justine embodies. Just as *Antichrist* explores the distinct gender roles in He and She, *Melancholia* draws a clear difference between the female and male characters depicted in the story. *Melancholia* looks at how women and men face the ensuing catastrophe—the approaching asteroid Melancholia—in different ways. In general terms, it could be argued that while men resist it and even show suicidal behaviors, women accept the consequences of the collision, namely the finality of all things. As Koutsourakis puts it, Justine’s melancholia “becomes a force of negation of the prevailing bourgeois normativity, making her welcome the end of the world.”¹¹⁵ Not only that but the men in the film embody the lavishness of a capitalist culture Justine feels alien to in what seems to be a critique of capitalism and modernism. Whereas *Antichrist* takes place in a cabin in a forest known as Eden, reminiscent of the halcyon setting of the Abrahamic myth, *Melancholia* takes us to the final book of the New Testament, or the Apocalypse. Yet,

¹¹³ Elbeshlawy, *Women in Lars von Trier’s Cinema*, 155.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 157.

¹¹⁵ Angelos Koutsourakis, *Politics as Form in Lars von Trier* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 43.

in *Melancholia* a ‘new heaven’ and ‘new earth’ do not replace the old heaven and old earth, instead the film explores the vanishment of humanity offering no alternative to the annihilation entailed by the collision, suggesting, once again, a nihilist reading.

From the outset of the film the men struggle when it comes to problem-solving and fail at power relations. This is illustrated with Michael (Aleksander Skarsgård) attempting to get a long limousine through a turn in the road. After several failed attempts to drive the limousine through the road, Justine takes the steering wheel and is able to fit it through, suggesting, as Nicoli notes, that Justine represents “the driving force” of the film.¹¹⁶ Another instance is to be found when Michael is carrying Justine to their room after the reception and cannot figure out how to fit her through the door. Another interesting character is Justine’s boss, Jack (Stellan Skarsgård), a greedy and ruthless man who represents the excess of capitalism. Throughout the night, he pushes Justine to create a tagline for a campaign based on Bruegel’s *The Land of Cockaigne*.¹¹⁷ In his speech, he remarks:

Where’s my tagline? You were always great in coming up with a tagline in a hurry. What happened? Did your emotional life suddenly take over? Did finding the man of your life render you unable to work? I’m just asking because if I were to choose between a woman for my dear friend Michael and an employee... I would always choose the employee.

With his words, Jack proves to be first a businessman and then a friend or, in other words, to be a capitalist rather than a romantic. Indeed, as Honig puts it, “the film mocks the neoliberal assumption of the 24/7 workdays.”¹¹⁸ After these words, Justine is promoted to art director but it is later in the film when it is revealed that Jack has

¹¹⁶ Kim Nicoli also notes that the scene communicates that “neither she nor nature, in whatever guise it takes [the rogue planet], ultimately can be steered,” in “Freedom in Oblivion: Post-Feminist Possibilities in Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia*,” *Kimnicoli.com*, accessed July 2019.

¹¹⁷ Note how Justine rejects the idea of the mythical land of excess and extreme luxury. Yet, she embraces the not-so flattering depiction by Bruegel in the artwork; that is, a critique of some of the seven deadly sins, including gluttony, sloth or greed. This is illustrated when she opens one of the art books to find the painting and she uses it in place of a modernist one.

¹¹⁸ Bonnie Honig, “Public Things: Jonathan Lear’s ‘Radical Hope,’ Lars von Trier’s ‘*Melancholia*,’ and the Democratic Need,” *Political Research Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (2015): 629.

brought his nephew Tim to “get that damn tagline out of you tonight.” When they face each other in a later scene, Justine tells Jack: “I hate you and your firm so deeply I couldn’t find the words to describe it. You are a despicable, power-hungry little man, Jack.” It looks as if Justine already knows what is to come and plucks up the courage to face Jack and to tell him how she really feels about him, in other words, the proximity of the end of everything liberates Justine of her expected behavior and obligations to her boss.

Perhaps the most interesting male character of the text is Claire’s husband, John (Kiefer Sutherland) who, throughout, resents having to pay for the wedding in spite of being wealthy. John reproaches Justine for the cost of the wedding and for not looking happy: “You’d better be goddamn happy.” John is the only character who is excited about the ‘fly-by’ of the planet which has been predicted by scientists. Contrarily, Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg) is scared by other predictions involving what the Internet refers to as ‘dance of death’ ending with Earth being hit by the heavenly body. This clearly illustrates the dichotomy between science and mysticism.¹¹⁹ John and Claire disagree on Melancholia’s intentions:

JOHN: Claire, look at me. Sweetheart, you have to trust a scientist.

CLAIRE: They say it will hit...

JOHN: No, they don’t, that’s not true. Not the real scientists. Now, the prophets of doom they’ll write whatever they can to attract attention. But the real scientists, all of them agree. Melancholy is just gonna pass right in front of us. And it’s gonna be the most beautiful sight ever.

Whereas Jack places his faith in the false promises of scientists, Claire shows a more pragmatic attitude by fearing what her eyes are witnessing—the rogue planet—thus not avoiding reality. When Melancholia passes by before coming back to collide with Earth, Jack raises a toast “to life” which infuriates Claire: “So you’re saying that our

¹¹⁹ Note this dichotomy is also explored in *Antichrist* through He and She.

lives were in danger? / No, I'm saying that when dealing with science and calculations of this magnitude... you have to account for a margin of error." When *Melancholia* does revolve back toward Earth, John commits suicide with a bottle of sleeping pills that Claire had previously bought for their son Leo and herself in the event of the catastrophe. It would be erroneous to read his death as the man's inability to face the end of the world. Instead, in his miscalculations, John fails at protecting his family and is exposed as a fraud. Indeed, science, in *Melancholia*, is relegated to a lower stratum, illustrated with the wire ring-on-a-stick that Claire uses to reassure herself that *Melancholia* is revolving away.

Men are depicted as buffoons and caricatures of male roles. Although Claire and Jack's son Leo (Cameron Spurr) lacks the emotional depth of the female characters of the film just as the rest of the male characters, he is the only male character who has some kind of control in line with the female protagonists. Indeed, this is explained by his condition of child rather than man. As Nicoli points out, Leo's creation of the aforementioned wire-on-a-stick instrument points at the failure of science—John's high-tech telescope—to forecast the moving of the planet and thus the annihilation of the world.¹²⁰ Indeed, as Shaviro puts it

[i]n *Melancholia*, then, von Trier abandons his previous gender dichotomies; he no longer presents his female protagonist either as a helpless sufferer (the victimized- feminine), or as the embodiment of "evil" (the monstrous- feminine). This shift allows him to envision the end of the world, without resorting to the brutal theatrics of sublime spectacle found in *Antichrist* and his earlier movies. *Melancholia* presents a deflationary vision of "the truth of extinction"; and it makes us aware of a universe that is not centered upon, or necessarily correlated with, humankind. In this way, it can rightly be described as a "speculative realist" film.¹²¹

¹²⁰ Kim Nicolini, "Freedom in Oblivion," 19.

¹²¹ Steven Shaviro, "MELANCHOLIA, or, the Romantic Anti-Sublime," *Sequence* 1.1 (2012): 37.

Although, Shaviro is right when stating that von Trier abandons the victimization present in, for instance, *Antichrist*, he only does so in *Melancholia* since *Nymphomaniac* further victimizes its female protagonist. In the same vein, some gender dichotomies are still explored in *Melancholia*, namely the ones dealing with science and nature or rationality and emotion as previously seen and others which will be further explored.

“THE EARTH IS EVIL:” NATURE AND FEMININITY

One commonality in von Trier’s *Depression Trilogy* is, as Jovanovic indicates, the exploration of man as a natural being rather than a social animal.¹²² Von Trier exposes the faults of man as social being in his male characters—He in *Antichrist* or Jack in *Melancholia*, while exploring the notion of man as natural being through his female heroines. Nevertheless, the female characters seem to draw attention to the evil nature of the natural world. In *Antichrist*, She stated that “Nature is Satan’s Church” when She referred to the natural and chaotic nature of Nature. In the same vein, Justine voices that the “Earth is evil” when she talks to Claire about *Melancholia*’s path toward Earth. In her words, she is implying that *Melancholia* will indeed collide with Earth and that there is no other way around it: “We don’t need to grieve for it . . . Nobody will miss it . . . All I know is life on Earth is evil.”¹²³ But, what about life on other places? Justine clairvoyant visions do not conceive an alternate Earth: “I know we’re alone . . . Life is only on Earth and not for long.”¹²⁴ Heikkilä is right when she states that *Melancholia*’s nature—depicted in the immaculate golf courses and gardens of Claire and John’s estate—opposes the emotional chaos inside the character’s psyches.¹²⁵ However, in the same vein *Antichrist*’s Nature mirrored the conflict between the man and the woman by showing hostile responses toward the couple and, particularly, the man, *Melancholia*’s nature shifts and reacts to the planet’s approach by the end of the film through its display of a variety of weather

¹²² Nenad Jovanovic, *Brechtian Cinemas: Montage and Theatricality in Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Peter Watkins, and Lars von Trier* (Albany: Suny Press, 2017), 200.

¹²³ Note, again, the misanthropy in Justine’s words.

¹²⁴ In Rob White’s “Interview with Manuel Alberto Claro,” *Film Quarterly*, July 11, 2012, Claro points out that the images in the prologue of the film are Justine’s visions, “the first ten minutes are her viewpoint.”

¹²⁵ Martta Heikkilä, “The Ends of the World in Lars von Trier’s ‘Melancholia,’” in *The End of the World: Contemporary Philosophy and Art*, ed. Marcia Sa Cavalcante Schuback and Susanna Lindberg (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 194.

changes: from rain to hail. Yet, the first image of Nature as Evil is, of course, the approaching planet Melancholia. In the prologue, also, one can find other imagery concerning Nature and its force. For instance, Claire struggling to cross the golf course or Justine, wearing her wedding dress and trying to escape the clinging vines as a metaphor for the protagonist's defiance of the social conventions of the modern society. Moreover, Justine already shows a connection with Nature in the prologue: she opens her eyes to falling birds as if killed by her gaze, her with her arms open to a swarm of insects, or her display of magic powers when creating lightning with her fingertips, suggesting a connection between the natural force of the asteroid and herself.

The relationship between Nature and femininity is explored through many aspects. The supernatural, as previously depicted in *Antichrist*, is explored through Justine's character, namely in her display of clairvoyant powers. This is illustrated when Justine and Michael finally arrive at the reception and bid at the wedding bean lottery. Whereas Michael bids two million and six beans as the total number of beans in the bottle, which is not only an odd number but rather unlikely since the beans are in a medium-size glass bottle, Justine gets the number right, already suggesting clairvoyant powers and serves as an argument to convince Claire of her knowing things that are going to happen, namely the crash: "I know things." Moreover, both Claire and Justine show a closer connection to the horses of the estate. In her visit to her horse—Abraham¹²⁶—Justine states that "I'm his mistress. I'm the only one who can ride him." On the other hand, Claire's anxiety is paralleled in the horses which get nervous as the planet approaches the Earth. Interestingly, the horses calm down when

¹²⁶ Note how the horse's name references Abraham, the common patriarch of the Abrahamic religions seen as example of ideal human behavior. Nonetheless, in the use of the feminine pronoun, we learn that the horse is actually a mare. Yet, in a later scene Claire uses the masculine pronoun to refer to the horse.

Melancholia starts its way back toward Earth. Justine acceptance of the collision and the end of it all is, again, paralleled in the horses which, Justine notes, “[have] calmed down.” Another aspect to note is Michael’s present for Justine. Michael gives her a photo of a farming landscape and tells her that that is his present: “I found a plot of land. They call it Empire apples. They’re bright red and very sweet . . . In ten years’ time, when the trees have grown you can sit in the shade, in a chair. If you still have days when you’re feeling a little sad... I think that will make you happy again.”¹²⁷ This suggests Michael’s ability to see through Justine and to understand how connected she is to Nature and the power it exerts on her. Furthermore, Justine’s scene where she replaces the modernist paintings by Russian avant-garde artist Kazimir Malevich in place of romantic ones such as *The Hunters in the Snow* (1565) by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, John Everett Millais’ *Ophelia* (1851-52), or Caravaggio’s *David with the Head of Goliath* (ca. 1610), again, emphasize the notion of femininity related to nature rather than logic, reason, or, in the film, male lavishness and capitalism. Another display of the connectedness of femininity and Nature takes place when right after the fly-by, Claire starts to be out of breath, John argues that is because Melancholia is taking part of the Earth’s atmosphere. This, however, only affects her.

Let us now turn to, arguably, the most interesting scene on nature and femininity. That is the scene where Justine leaves her room at night and enters the woods. Claire follows her and finds her lying on a riverbank, her naked body illuminated by the light Melancholia irradiates. It is clear that, Melancholia represents Justine’s object of desire—*objet petit a*. The scene communicates a symbiosis between Justine and the planet. Moreover, Justine chooses to lay naked on the grass

¹²⁷ Note how the forest in *Nymphomaniac* plays a similar role for Joe.

of the riverbank emphasizing the interconnectedness of her female body and nature and the cosmos. In what it could be called their personal ‘dance of death,’ Justine lustfully caresses¹²⁸ her body while looking up to the celestial body as if making love to it, as if a courtship with the homicidal planet were taking place, her expression complicit and almost orgasmic. Since pre-Socratic times, melancholy suggested the connectedness of the individual’s state of mind and physicality with her surroundings, the unity of the microcosm and the macrocosm due to the communality of the elements man and universe share.¹²⁹ Heikkilä points out Justine’s connection to the planet depicted through the setting of the film. Indeed, the film takes place during the fall to which Saturn, thus melancholy, was associated, “tying psychology and landscape together,”¹³⁰ which is also seen in the weather changes mentioned earlier. Furthermore, the symbol *a*—which was one of the first algebraic signs which appeared in Lacan’s work—also denotes the little other (for the French word *autre*, or ‘other’), unlike the big Other, which designates radical alterity, the little other, “is not another at all, since it is essentially coupled with the ego, in a relationship which is always reflexive, interchangeable.”¹³¹ Thus Melancholia symbolizes Justine’s reflection and projection of her ego. In other words, Melancholia signifies her desire to break free from her subjectivity. In the aforementioned scene, she worships Melancholia and urges it to collide, to break her free as if she herself were colliding with Earth and her reality.

¹²⁸ In “Comedy of Abandon: Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia*,” *Film Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (2012): 24, Marta Figlerowicz claims Justine is masturbating, although in the film it is not clear; yet, it fits the point.

¹²⁹ Heikkilä, “The Ends of the World,” 189.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*

¹³¹ Jaques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 2: the Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955*, ed. Jacques Alain Miller and trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 321.

A DROWNING OPHELIA: MELANCHOLY IN THE FEMALE SUBJECT

Just as von Trier projected himself onto Her in *Antichrist*, he does the same with Justine and Claire through the exploration of melancholy and depression, and anxiety and hysteria. This is once again problematic from a feminist point of view, as Badley argues, since the performance and exploration of ‘the feminine’ inevitably implies the displacement of the female subjectivity taking its place and thus repressing it.¹³² In any case, the spectator identifies with Justine not only on a gender level but in her burden of being and also with her breaking free from her subjectivity, “from ideologies and false identities, and from the absurdities of society and its ridiculous conventions.”¹³³ On the other, Claire embodies the hysteria and anxiety entailed by the approaching planet Melancholia, a similar hysteria depicted in *Antichrist*. One may see the film as an attempt to show how neoliberalism creates melancholics, as Honig argues, “we are all just going through the motions of everyday life, not attuned to the devastation that surrounds us,” a neoliberal devastation that has already taken place.¹³⁴

Whereas *Antichrist*’s prologue uses Händel’s aria *Lascia ch’io pianga* not only to accompany the black-and-white and slow-motion imagery of the sequence but to add to the motifs of loss and subjectivity (“let me weep over my cruel fate, and let me sigh for liberty”), *Melancholia* opens with Richard Wagner’s overture to *Tristan und Isolde* (1865) as the prelude of the film to foreshadows the end of it; that is, the collapse of the rogue planet Melancholia with Earth and includes many of the motifs

¹³² Badley, *Lars von Trier*, 70.

¹³³ Elbeshlawy, *Women in Lars von Trier’s Cinema*, 157; just as Justine defies social convention, in Justine and Claire’s mother, Gaby, played by Charlotte Rampling, she claims that “Yes. I wasn’t at the church. I don’t believe in marriage . . . Enjoy it while it lasts.” Her jadedness and outspokenness eventually leads her to being thrown out of the house.

¹³⁴ Honig, “Public Things,” 629.

explored throughout von Trier's story. In his interview with *Melancholia's* cinematographer Manuel Alberto Claro, who also worked with von Trier in *Nymphomaniac* and his latest film, *The House that Jack Built* (2018), Claro explains that "these extremely slowed-down images have the quality of anxiety sometimes, and I think it's the case that sometimes the world seems like this to Lars himself."¹³⁵ The sequence starts with a close shot of Justine's face slowly opening her eyes to a rain of dead birds falling from the sky, indicating the dying nature result of the end of the world. Then, there is a far-away shot of what seems to be Claire playing with her son in front of a sundial which casts two different shadows: one for the sun and the other for the asteroid which tackles the theme of the expiration of human life fixed by the passing of time. Followed is a shot of Bruegel's *The Hunters in the Snow* (1565) being burned.¹³⁶ Then, we are introduced to the planet Melancholia, portrayed as a blue giant heavenly body similar to the size of Jupiter. Yet, *Melancholia* compares more to Saturn. Saturn has long been considered the planet of melancholy and that of creativity¹³⁷ and the artists and closely related to Western philosophy and medicine. In German Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer's *Melancholia I* (1514), melancholia is personified by a winged female, holding her head with her hand and disconnected from her surroundings just as Justine during her wedding reception.

The first image of the planet, which had been hidden behind the sun, eclipses the red supergiant star Antares, the brightest object in the constellation of Scorpius that can be seen in the night sky with the naked eye. Other images include that of Claire carrying her child in her arms while struggling to walk through a golf course

¹³⁵ Claro in "Interview with Manuel Alberto Claro" by Rob White.

¹³⁶ This foreshadows Justine's scene where she replaces the modernist paintings by Russian avant-garde artist Kazimir Malevich in place of romantic ones.

¹³⁷ For Sinnerbrink in "Provocation," 105, "*Melancholia* attempts to reclaim the romantic association of melancholia with prophetic vision and artistic genius . . . it evokes melancholia as an aesthetic, anachronistic yet historically resonant mood expressing contemporary cultural-historical anxieties[.]"

suggesting the impossibility to escape from the disaster or in other words, the feeling of fear and anxiety in the female subject; the image that serves as the marketing poster for the film; that is, Justine wearing her bride's clothes while holding a bouquet of flowers and falling into a brook, clearly referencing Ophelia's death. Queen Gertrude reports that: "When down her weedy trophies and herself / Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide, / And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up, / Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds / As one incapable of her own distress" *Ham.*

4.7.174-8.¹³⁸ In a way, what seems to encapsulate the feeling of melancholia, depression and anxiety more effectively is *Melancholia* itself, and its imminent collision with Earth which is explored through the different protagonists of the story.¹³⁹ Indeed, *Melancholia* subjects Claire and Justine to an existential problem, making them the protagonists of the story. Certainly, this is supported by the division of the film in two different parts titled 'Justine' and 'Claire' respectively.

Just as She breaks away from the burden of patriarchy by castrating Him and in turn castrating herself so as to negate her female subjectivity, Justine's embrace of the rogue planet's collision with Earth suggests the breaking free of her subjectivity in the modern world thus escaping the capitalism and social conventions seen throughout the film. From the outset of the film, Justine shows a disinterested attitude toward her reception. Justine arrives late but Claire makes sure Justine wants the wedding to go on: "So you want this?" to which Justine replies "of course." Nevertheless, even though Claire states that "this is very much not my project," it is

¹³⁸ Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. Philip Edwards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹³⁹ Note how the beautiful aesthetics of the prologue negate the content of the film; that is, the imminent end of humankind. The classical score rather than communicate loss communicates triumph, perhaps fascist triumph? It is Wagner's music, a well-known anti-Semitic figure, which is used. If so, is von Trier supporting fascism?: "I understand Hitler," he claimed at Cannes Film Festival in 2011. In any case, note the romanticism of the piece, "We are using Wagner in *Melancholia*. It is all very romantic" said von Trier (Koutsourakis, *Politics as Form in Lars von Trier*, 199).

clear that she is the only one interested in celebrating the wedding when instead of going straight in, in spite of being two hours late already, Justine goes to the stables with Michael to pay a visit to her horse, Abraham. Throughout the film, Justine shows an attitude against social convention. This is illustrated, for instance, when at the wedding reception she passes the platter the wrong way: “the tray must go left to right,” the Butler informs. Moreover, Justine’s mother’s (Charlotte Rampling) speech on the meaninglessness of marriage triggers Justine’s withdrawal from the whole affair.

At one point, she leaves the reception and Wagner’s prelude starts playing, suggesting the imminent apparition of the celestial body. She drives through the golf course on a golf cart and gets off in order to urinate in the eighth hole of it, she, then, looks up to the starry sky to find the missing Antares. At another point she takes Leo to sleep and takes a little nap. When Claire finds her and asks what the matter is, Justine expresses her feelings: “I’m trudging in through this... Praying really hard. It’s clinging to my legs. It’s really heavy to drag along.”¹⁴⁰ After the conversation, Justine even takes a bath while the attendees wait for her to show up and cut the cake. Another example of Justine defying her expected behavior is illustrated when Michael mentions having “a little swing hanging from one of the trees” in the land he has bought to what Justine answers “We’ll talk about that when the time comes,” manifesting her doubts on the commitment on marriage and becoming a mother. Indeed, in a scene where the sisters talk, Claire seems to read through Justine and claims that Justine is pretending to be happy. In the same vein, Justine admits to her mother that she is “frightened,” perhaps because of the commitment of marriage and

¹⁴⁰ Note how this is visually represented with a slow-motion shot in the prologue where one can see Justine struggling to walk, her legs ensnared by weblike tendrils.

everything it entails. The idea of Justine being incapable to commit to marriage is illustrated after she tells Michael that she needs a moment in the bedroom before having sex. Justine goes out to the golf course and Tim, Jack's nephew, follows her. When he greets her, Justine pushes him and he falls on the floor, then Justine sits on him and the couple have sex on the golf course. The socially reprehensible scene presents Justine as an unfaithful newlywed who is adulterous hours after the marriage ceremony. Nonetheless, if *Antichrist* von Trier made Gainsbourg's character cut off her clitoris, Justine cheating on her spouse is the only act the audience can judge.¹⁴¹

Furthermore, when Claire and Justine go for a ride on horseback, Abraham will not cross the bridge¹⁴² and Justine starts to hit her. Just as the footbridge in *Antichrist* denoted a demarcation between the external and the internal world of the characters, in *Melancholia* it may signify a similar insulation from the outside world. For Elbeshlawy, "[w]hat Justine wants to cross is not just the border of John's estate but the phantasmic border between reality and the real, the delicate screen which stands between the subject's symbolic world and the utter void the screen conceals."¹⁴³ Justine, as Žižek puts it, in her melancholy interprets the object's lack as previously lost and that "[Melancholia's] emergence coincides with its lack, that this object is *nothing but* the positivization of a void or lack"¹⁴⁴ and it is precisely that what she needs to break away from her subjectivity, as Koutsourakis mentions, a way to end with everything, and perhaps, start from the beginning.¹⁴⁵ *Melancholia* represents a way to recover the lost object of Earth as in a prelapsarian time, free of

¹⁴¹ Figlerowicz, "Comedy of Abandon," 22.

¹⁴² Note how the golf cart stops working when Claire tries to cross the bridge when trying to escape the collision with Leo.

¹⁴³ Elbeshlawy, *Women in Lars von Trier*, 169.

¹⁴⁴ Slavoj Žižek, "Melancholy and the Act," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 4 (2000): 660 (italics in original).

¹⁴⁵ Koutsourakis, *Politics as Form in Lars von Trier*, 187.

social conventions and obligations, to recuperate the romanticism.¹⁴⁶ In the same vein, in their first ride, when Claire looks up to the red star missing from Scorpio after Justine informs about its disappearance, Claire's face communicates a "sense of loss" which "corresponds precisely with the melancholic position"¹⁴⁷ and not being able to designate the object of the subject's melancholy.

In *Antichrist*, it is She who embodies hysteria, in *Melancholia*, there is a shift from the feeling of melancholia in the first part of the film, to that of hysteria depicted in the character of Claire toward the end. Melancholy has long been associated with the bringing about of frenzy or 'mania' in the melancholic subject, understood in artistic and ethical terms. As Heikkilä points out, "[i]t appears also as a source of creativity, which has its origins in a deep awareness of the mutability of life and the cycle of birth and death."¹⁴⁸ For Claire, the threat Melancholia represents, triggers her anxiety or 'mania' of losing her son when everything she knows is set to disappear. Part Two, entitled "Claire," opens after Claire looks at the sky in search for Antares after Justine has announced its vanishing. At this point, Justine is unable to take care of herself, becoming almost catatonic, and Claire has to bathe and feed her. Justine is so out of herself that what Claire's suggests is her favorite dish, meatloaf, "tastes like ashes." Whereas Claire is gripped by fear, the melancholic Justine seems to recover from her melancholia as Melancholia approaches Earth; Justine tells Claire that "if you think I'm afraid of a planet, then you're too stupid." Koutsourakis notices how "Justine is no more a melancholic postmodern Ophelia . . . but now she turns into a

¹⁴⁶ As Sinnerbrink argues in "Provocation," von Trier's *Depression Trilogy*, "enact[s] and subvert[s] the ongoing cultural-philosophical dialectic between romanticism and rationalism by combining moral provocation, game-playing, and philosophical satire in a manner that is at once critical and ambiguous," 101.

¹⁴⁷ Elbeshlawy, *Women in Lars von Trier*, 161.

¹⁴⁸ Heikkilä, "The Ends of the World," 189–90.

vengeful Electra, celebrating the doomsday.”¹⁴⁹ When Claire finally witnesses Melancholia’s fly-by, she starts feeling anxious. This preoccupation plays a big role in the second part of the film. When Justine claims that Melancholia is, indeed, going to hit the Earth, Claire’s world collapses: “But where would Leo grow up?” As Peterson puts it, “Claire can accept her own death perhaps, but she cannot contemplate the death of her son, who must survive as the sign and trace of her own immortality.”¹⁵⁰ On one level, Claire’s words communicate the realization of the disappearance of what Lacan’s identified as *objet petit a*, for her, the desire for a future for her son. At another level, Claire becomes cognizant of the inability to fulfill what Freud outlines as the four versions of narcissistic love. According to Freud, a person may love according to “what he himself is,” “what he himself was,” “what he himself would like to be,” and “someone who was once part of himself.”¹⁵¹ In her reading of Freud, Grosz points out that “[i]n loving the child, the narcissistic woman satisfies all for variations simultaneously: she can love herself as mother and nurturer of the child; the child is what she herself once was, and represents a chance for the mother to vicariously relive her lost opportunities through the child; and the child was once literally a part of the mother’s body.”¹⁵² The problem with Claire is that she will no longer be capable of taking care of Leo and, at this point, she defines the object of her anxiety when realizing that the future she desired for her son will no longer be attainable. Leo represents the messianic figure that embodies the archive and the memory of the human race, as Edelman puts it, “the Child has come to embody for us

¹⁴⁹ Koutsourakis, *Politics as Form in Lars von Trier*, 43.

¹⁵⁰ Christopher Peterson, “The Magic Cave of Allegory: Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia*,” *Discourse* 35, no. 3 (2013): 407.

¹⁵¹ Sigmund Freud, *On Narcissism: An Introduction*, ed. Joseph Sandler, Ethel Spector Person, and Peter Fonagy (London: Karnac, 2012), 20.

¹⁵² Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 203.

the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust.”¹⁵³ However, Leo does not survive to engender the future he represents.

Claire holds a neurotic position and fears that the end of the world is imminent and acts accordingly. She hurriedly takes Leo amidst the breakfast she herself has prepared and tries to escape the estate on a golf cart. The spectator identifies with Claire’s anxiety and the final image of Claire’s trembling body and her covering her ears with her palms in an attempt to protect herself from the collision. In a final scene, Claire wants the three of them to be together “outside on the terrace” while having a glass of wine and playing Beethoven’s Ninth. Claire clearly wants to be surrounded by two of the pinnacles that define human culture and heritage. Regarding the plan, Justine thinks “it’s a piece of shit . . . Why don’t we meet in the fuckin’ toilet?” Justine’s words could be read as nihilist when addressing the meaninglessness and purposeless nature and lack of intrinsic value of human life, thus a modern mindset contrarily to Claire. Put it differently, as White notes, “[t]he notion is that Beethoven’s work comes out of the same barbarous ‘high culture’ (and high science) that produced industrial capitalism and industrial murder.”¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, ed. Michèle Aina Barale, Jonathan Goldberg, Michael Moon, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 11.

¹⁵⁴ Rob White, “Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia*: A Discussion,” *Film Quarterly*, January 10, 2012.

JUSTINE'S ACT: THE MAGIC CAVE

Melancholia clearly references the Armageddon or apocalyptic films, however, what is interesting in von Trier's approach is that the film seems not to offer an alternative to the total destruction of the planet or a hint of hope, rather, the film's final shot, a black screen that prolongs a few seconds after the closing image of the crash, suggests the end of everything one knows. The preoccupation with the survival of the human race—which is particular of the genre—is voiced only by Gainsbourg's character and plays a secondary role in the film. Von Trier himself has stated that *Melancholia* "to me it's not so much about the end of the world; it's a film about a state of mind."¹⁵⁵ That state of mind is, of course, modern-day 'depression,' known in the past as 'melancholia.' So, from the very beginning of the film, as Peterson argues, the spectator is invited to interpret the film in this regard, not as a Hollywood depiction of the end of the world but as an exploration of a state of mind.¹⁵⁶ In the prologue we see Leo¹⁵⁷ and Justine getting some pieces of wood ready to build a "magic cave" which they, together with Claire, will use to protect themselves from the planet. In the scene where Justine is tucking Leo to sleep, Leo asks her: "When are we gonna build caves together?" The magic cave, a wooden teepee on the lawn of the estate, point at a way to face the apocalypse: "Is that something everybody can make?" asks Leo "Aunt Steelbreaker can" replies Justine. Whether or not she is the only one who can, she is the one who does. In the last scene of the film, Justine guides Leo, her little nephew, to a shelter made out of wood sticks. Later, Justine takes Claire to the shelter, comforting her at all times. Justine, then, places the last wood stick from the inside of

¹⁵⁵ Quoted in Peterson, "The Magic Cave of Allegory," 401.

¹⁵⁶ Peterson, "The Magic Cave of Allegory," 400.

¹⁵⁷ Leo is using a knife to get the wood ready. The knife is probably the dagger the boy gives Justine when they arrive at the reception.

the shelter. Then, the camera captures the three different expressions through close-ups from a variety of angles: Justine's indifference (or joy), Leo's ignorance, and Claire's terror.¹⁵⁸ Wagner's overture to *Tristan und Isolde* plays its highest notes in a crescendo which is juxtaposed with Claire's increasing desperation while holding Justine and Leo's hands. Claire looks at Justine in the eye while the latter seems unconcerned by Melancholia yet somehow empathizing with Claire, displaying a kind of sorry in her eyes as the blue planet collides with Earth and devastates it. Justine's act of building the "magic cave" could, indeed, be read in several ways.

At one level, is Justine really empathizing with Claire and her worry for her son and herself or rather feeling sorry for her clinging to the mundane and the social conventions thus Claire's role of wife, mother, and woman? Claire's trembling body and her covering her ears with her palms in an attempt to protect herself from the collision or her offer of a social ritual with a glass of wine in the terrace while listening to Beethoven's Ninth illustrate the aforementioned point. It is true, however, that Justine is, indeed, empathizing with Claire and, even though she refuses Claire's offer, she builds the cave which, clearly, will not protect them from the collision but which will foster the illusion of the cave as a safe space where Leo can survive and live on. Peterson agrees when he points out that "[Justine's] willingness to construct it manifests an unusual display of courage, calm, and above all compassion for her nephew and sister who are utterly terrified of the impending doom."¹⁵⁹ Indeed, Justine's true act of kindness is the building of the shelter.¹⁶⁰ To put it in Levinasian terms, one's subjectivity emerges in the response to the Other's call, understood as the

¹⁵⁸ In "Interview with Manuel Alberto Claro," the cinematographer explains how "[i]n *Melancholia*, the camera is very close and responsive when it's right for the psychological moment, when stuff is happening between people."

¹⁵⁹ Peterson, "The Magic Cave of Allegory," 403.

¹⁶⁰ Nina Power, "Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*: A Discussion," *Film Quarterly*, January 10, 2012.

counterpart of the self. For Lévinas, morality lies in the Other. The face of the Other “summons me, calls for me, begs for me, as if the invisible death that must be faced by the Other, pure otherness, separated in some way, from my whole, were my business.”¹⁶¹ Claire’s “naked face,”¹⁶² showed in detail through the camera’s close-ups, indeed, begs for “[Justine’s] responsibility”¹⁶³ which she exercises when building the cave and in the humane act of holding her hand. For Honig, Justine’s aim when building the “magic cave” is, obviously, not survival but rather “to face reality in a way that has some redemptive authenticity.”¹⁶⁴ In doing so, Justine exhibits the humanism she seemed to lack throughout the film, “find[ing] a way to act, to relate to others, even to heal.”¹⁶⁵ At another level, the final image of the two woman and the little boy communicate the breaking away from the nuclear family, perhaps another ambiguous feminist statement.

In the *Depression Trilogy*, the shift from ‘the masculine’ to ‘the feminine’ is clear. As Badley puts it, von Trier moves “from protagonists who are failures to protagonists who are successful.”¹⁶⁶ Although this is difficult to say for Her and for Joe, the ending of *Melancholia*, although misanthropic, as previously mentioned, points at this direction. Justine, Claire and Leo face the apocalypse in a more romantic and Christian humanist ethic based on love.¹⁶⁷ The martyred femininity of von Trier’s *Golden Heart Trilogy* heroines such as Bess in *Breaking the Waves* and Selma in *Dancer in the Dark* is replaced in *Melancholia* by a communal martyrdom, that of humankind. Yet, as Grace in *Dogville*, Justine and Claire’s act when embracing the

¹⁶¹ Emmanuel Lévinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy,” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (New Jersey: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 83.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ Honig, “Public Things,” 630.

¹⁶⁵ James Martel, “Against Thinning and Teleology: Politics and Objects in the Face of Catastrophe in Lear and von Trier,” *Political Research Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (2015): 646.

¹⁶⁶ Badley, *Lars von Trier*, 71.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

end of the world may point at the justice-oriented kind of redemption also present in the first instalment of von Trier's *USA Trilogy*, in this case, the revenge of the world against the transgressions of humankind.¹⁶⁸ *Melancholia* may posit the question of the possibility to change, and, in turn, right our wrongs. Koutsourakis reads the end of the film as "suggest[ing] in a controversial way that the world can [indeed] be changed, provided that we belligerently do away with the present conformism and banality."¹⁶⁹ Although one could agree with Koutsourakis, it seems easier to lean towards a more pessimist reading of the final scene. In killing the melancholic Justine, the anxious Claire, and Leo, who embodies the future of the human race, von Trier does not offer an alternative to the destruction of the world and humankind, rather emphasizes the distrust toward the human race. For Sinnerbrink, "what we find in the film is an ironic critique of a destructive rationalist optimism: that given our irrational faith in the myth of progress, and destructive fantasies of controlling nature, the only foreseeable end is a scenario of world-destruction."¹⁷⁰ This is, perhaps, why von Trier calls *Melancholia* "the happiest ending [he's] ever made."¹⁷¹ On the one hand, at the end of the film, the spectator—through her or his identification with Justine, Claire and the little boy—is judged by his or her sinful acts toward Earth and to each other yet; on the other, he or she is redeemed and liberated from one's subjectivity when witnessing the end of everything we know.

¹⁶⁸ In "Women, Suffering and Redemption in Three Films of Lars von Trier," *Literature & Theology* 24, no. 3 (September 2010): 1, Carleen Mandolfo examines three films by the director: *Breaking the Waves*, *Dancer in the Dark*, and *Dogville*. She argues that whereas the first two explore sacrificial notions by gendering von Trier's Christ figures as females who sacrifice themselves for men, *Dogville* introduces a "justice-oriented, rather than sacrificial, model of redemption." To do so, she draws from Judeo-Christian models of salvation.

¹⁶⁹ Koutsourakis, *Politics as Form in Lars von Trier*, 43.

¹⁷⁰ Sinnerbrink, "Provocation and Perversity," 107.

¹⁷¹ Figlerowicz, "Comedy of Abandon," 26.

4. NYMPHOMANIAC

A GAME OF GENDERS: LOGIC AND EMOTION

Von Trier uses Rammstein's 2009 "Führe Mich" ("Lead Me") to open *Nymphomaniac*. The lyrics focus on two lovers being together: "Two souls in one heart." More interestingly, the lyrics communicate a kind of power-relation between the lovers: "You die when I want you to." Indeed, this line foreshadows the power men exert over women in the film which is clearly illustrated by the sadomasochist scenes during the second volume. Von Trier's choice of the song is probably provocative. In *Melancholia*, Von Trier uses Wagner's overture to *Tristan und Isolde* to communicate a loss of triumph and to convey the romanticism of the film. The use of a well-known anti-Semitic figure did not ban the director from the Cannes Festival but his remark about understanding (sympathizing with?) Hitler did. The use of the song in *Nymphomaniac* is provocative because the German band Rammstein have also encountered controversy for using Nazi imagery in their shows and videos. After the controversy at Cannes, von Trier deliberately provokes once again by using the song in the first scene of the film and in its trailer. Perhaps neither of them are actually Nazi sympathizers but trying to undermine the ideology by making it absurd and, mostly, entertaining. Von Trier's "cinema of cruelty,"¹⁷² present in the *Depression Trilogy*, indeed provokes the spectator with moral dilemmas. In *Nymphomaniac: Vol. I* and *Vol. II* von Trier's does it through the account of a nymphomaniac woman, Joe (Charlotte Gainsbourg), and a series of episodes that

¹⁷² Truffaut's concept of "the cinema of cruelty" which he used in honor of Bazin, describes the aesthetic subversion to morally provoke the audience. Bazin found these traits in the works of Erich von Stroheim, Luis Buñuel, and Alfred Hitchcock, among others. See André Bazin's *The Cinema of Cruelty from Buñuel to Hitchcock*, ed. François Truffaut and trans. Sabine d'Estrée (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2013).

constitute the protagonist's life. This provocation is seen throughout the film, but it is in the second volume of the film, when the film turns into a sadomasochistic tale, that it is more evident. To do so, von Trier again clearly separates the genders. Men, again, display more Apollonic features while women display Dionysian. Although the dichotomy is again present, the genders are inconstant, and their traditional roles are thus blurred throughout the film. As Freud pointed out, "what constitutes masculinity and femininity is an unknown element which is beyond the power of anatomy to grasp."¹⁷³

While Rammstein is playing in the background, the spectator is introduced to Seligman (Stellan Skarsgård)— "what a fucking ridiculous name" Joe says—who will later find Joe and at the end of the film will try to rape her. The industrial metal sounds of the song start to play when the camera, after showing Joe's body lying on the cold winter ground, cuts to Seligman getting ready and follows him going to the local corner store to buy some milk. Seligman rescues Joe from the street and the cold weather and takes her to his apartment. Seligman acts as a parent and nourisher to Joe. He provides a shelter to Joe and feeds her, acting as a sort of caretaker to the wanderer Joe. The audience sees in Seligman a father figure who claims that when he was young, he worshipped Izaak Walton's *The Complete Angler*, a book on the different kinds of recreation including fishing, which Seligman fancies. For Seligman, the book represented a "romantic nature bible." Just as Leo in *Melancholia*, Seligman was once a little boy in between the rational thinking of man, illustrated by Him in *Antichrist*, and the female romanticism of Justine in *Melancholia*. This could be explained by Seligman's condition of virgin which due to his asexuality makes him stand in a middle ground between the two binary genders, as if Seligman were a

¹⁷³ Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, 156.

genderless agent. Throughout Joe's recount, Seligman feels discomfort with some of her terminology. When she uses the word 'cunt,' Seligman shows his discomfort with the term. However, when Joe replaces it with Pandora's Box, Seligman prefers the first term. In doing so, first, Seligman refuses to accept the language of the body, thus repressing his own sexuality. In refusing the second term, Seligman shows the rejection of the idea of the female sex as cursed by seeing Joe's actions as rooted in a cultural context. Seligman insists that he does not understand Joe's self-hatred. In any case, the erudite Seligman is now a grown-up man and resembles the men in the other films in his rational thinking by analyzing Joe's narrative from a more detached perspective. To do so, von Trier uses philosophical satire, a technique that characterizes the director's *oeuvre*.¹⁷⁴ For instance, when Joe recounts her experience losing her virginity and how the boy Jérôme penetrated three times in the vagina and five in the anus, he interprets the numbers 3+5 as Fibonacci numbers; the train incident as a calculated predatory technique; or the chant of "The Little Flock" as being made of the interval of the music notes as a triton or the devils interval which was banned from music in the Middle Ages. Music is, again, paralleled with Joe's narrative thus the idea of music as female.¹⁷⁵ Another instance is when, at the end of *Vol. I*, Seligman talks about Bach's polyphony in analytical terms while Joe connects it to her sexual encounters and the men's moans, something more emotional and tangible. Indeed, Seligman's asexuality makes him interested in the philosophy behind Joe's story rather than by the stories themselves. It is important to point out that, although Seligman acts as therapist he fails at being a good one—just as Defoe's character in *Antichrist* who attempts to analyze the character played by Gainsbourg,

¹⁷⁴ Sinnerbrink, "Provocation and Perversity," 111.

¹⁷⁵ See Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*.

Seligman “impose[s] his interpretations on Joe rather than acting as a barrier that can elicit Joe’s own interpretation, her own realization.”¹⁷⁶ In a sense, von Trier seems to be making a statement on the oppression of women by presenting a female subject whose autonomous agency he himself is restraining.

Joe’s father (Christian Slater) also serves to illustrate the indistinction between the genders in *Nymphomaniac*. Joe’s father, contrary to his mother who fails to understand her daughter, seems to accept his daughter’s nymphomania from an early age. Joe points out that even though her father “preferred the empirical sciences,” he appreciated nature and even used poetic terminology to refer to it. Indeed, Joe recalls her father teaching her the different trees in the forest and how he would use tales and myths to describe the different characteristics of the trees he would talk about. In the following passage, Joe’s father uses Norse mythology to address scientific matters. While Joe, as a little girl, and her father are taking a walk in the park and admiring the nature of their surroundings, the father informs her about the ash tree:

When the ash tree was created it made all the other trees in the forest jealous. It was the most beautiful tree. You couldn’t say anything bad about it. It was the World Tree in Norse mythology. Remember, Odin, he hung from the ash tree, Yggdrasil, for nine days in order to gain insight. The ash tree had the strongest wood. Then in the winter when the ash tree lost all of its leaves, all the trees noticed its black buds, and started laughing. “Oh, look. The as tree has had its fingers in the ashes.” See? You can always tell the ash tree in winter by the black buds.

Just as He in *Antichrist* or John in *Melancholia* who represent rational thought, Joe’s father was a man of science. Although being a doctor, he does not fail to understand her daughter and while Joe describes her mother as a “cold bitch” he remembers her father with fondness. Joe’s antagonism to her mother, as Freud explains, is to be found in the mother’s “forbid[ding] pleasurable activities centering round the genital

¹⁷⁶ Neroni, “Lars von Trier’s Fantasy,” 220.

organs—often with an accompaniment of harsh threats of every indication of disapproval[.]”¹⁷⁷ Indeed, the mother has become a rival who gets everything from her father she herself wants for her own. The woman, according to Freud, never fully overcomes her Oedipus-complex and “remains in the Oedipus situation for an indefinite period, she abandons it late in life, and then incompletely.”¹⁷⁸ Von Trier seems to point at this through the character of Joe and her connection to her father and alienation from her mother.

The third male character worth mentioning is Jérôme (Shia LeBeouf), who, again, challenges gender roles in the film. When the audience first meets the young Jérôme, he objectifies Joe and serves as the epitome of a lustful teenager lacking emotional sensitivity. The encounter between Jérôme and Joe takes place when Joe is determined to lose her virginity and Jérôme forces her to have anal sex. The objectification of the female body is clear; Joe states that “he turned me over like a sack of potatoes.”¹⁷⁹ Joe’s first sexual encounter is, indeed, unusual. Joe voices that “I never forgot those two humiliating numbers,” making reference to the three instances of vaginal intercourse and the five instances of anal intercourse. Jérôme, who later in the film turns out to be Joe’s boss is presented as the epitome of someone who has ended up in a good job due to his family ties. Jérôme cannot access Joe sexually, so he exercises his authority as boss. Furthermore, Jérôme is later on seen less ‘manly.’ When Seligman brings Joe rugelach served on a plate with a cake fork, Joe starts a discussion over the lack of masculinity in men using cake forks to eat pastry. For Joe it feels “feminine,” for Seligman and for Jérôme “practical.” It is interesting to see

¹⁷⁷ Freud, *New Introductory*, 168.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 177.

¹⁷⁹ Note how later on, when Joe starts falling in love with Jérôme, she objectifies herself by stating that she wanted to be “picked up and put down, again and again. I wanted to be treated by his hands according to some sophisticated principle that I didn’t understand.”

how in a later scene, right before she is fired by the actual owner of the company, Jérôme's uncle, he is seen eating rugelach without a fork, as indicating the authority as synonymous with manliness. In any case, not only Jérôme fails at courting Joe but fails at performing activities that have traditionally been considered masculine. For instance, in a scene, Jérôme seems unable to park his car when driving with Joe thus failing at problem-solving. Instead, just as Justine being able to drive the limousine through the difficult turn in the road, Joe parks the car easily. A superposed mathematical formula communicates Jérôme's failure and Joe's success understanding of physics. The incident makes Jérôme feel less manly, perhaps because he has failed at this traditionally masculine activity. A similar incident takes place after Joe and Jérôme's first sexual encounter when, before leaving the boy's house, she turns a screw and fixes the moped the boy had been struggling to fix for hours pointing at her problem-solving skills. With the later train scene, von Trier exposes the weakness of the heterosexual man to women. B, the protagonist's adolescent friend, and Joe engage in a contest involving having sex with a large number of passengers who are riding a train. Joe feels indifferent while she has sex with all the men: "I discovered my power as a woman."

The relationship between Joe and Jérôme during the second part of the film serve as a good example to illustrate the lack of separation of the genders. Joe starts neglecting her child when she seeks masochistic pleasure. The zenith of Joe's negligence takes place when von Trier offers a repetition of *Antichrist*'s opening scene: Joe's son—Marcel—waking up by lights, leaving his crib and almost falling off the balcony while Händel's aria plays in the background. The scene is cross-cut, this time, with images of Joe waiting to get spanked. Jérôme prevents the boy from falling off, underlining the incompatibility of family life and Joe's condition. It could

be argued that Joe is ‘failing’ at adhering to the expected behavior assigned by her gender contrarily to Jérôme who acts as carer and nourisher.¹⁸⁰ It is true that one could read Joe’s negligence as her response to her imposed motherhood, which, perhaps she never sought. For those who watched *Nymphomaniac*’s uncut version this is clear. The director’s cut offers a graphic scene where Joe performs abortion herself using the knowledge she had from medical school. Joe aborts the fetus in the kitchen. An interesting combination is happening in this scene. Joe is using the scientific knowledge in a space traditionally related to the feminine to perform the abortion thus liberate herself from the burden of motherhood. In any case, von Trier’s depiction of the negligence scene and of the abortion one, could portray Joe as a ‘bad’ mother or ‘bad’ human being as uttered by the protagonist.

Indeed, Joe seems to lack emotions due to her condition of nymphomaniac, but it is not always the case. When the protagonist narrates her encounters with men in her early twenties, she would lie the men she had sex with by saying that she had never had an orgasm before so as to make men feel good and, perhaps, fulfilled as men: “You don’t know how happy that makes me” one man answers. “The Little Flock” and its motto “Mea Vulva Mea Maxima Vulva” resembles the SCUM. Just as SCUM, the Little Flock had a rebellious purpose: “You said you were rebellious. What did you rebel against?” As Joe tells Seligman, the group rebelled against love. They were not allowed to have boyfriends or experience love of any kind from males. Joe mentions that she is not sentimental which moves away from the other female characters von Trier has created. Joe seems to think of her humanity in terms of her condition of nymphomaniac rather than a sentient creature. Nevertheless, Joe starts to

¹⁸⁰ Note how in *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Freud points out the alteration of gender roles in the animal world: “The functions of caring for the young, too, and of rearing them, which seems to us so essentially feminine, are not, among animals, always associated with the female sex,” 156.

fall in love with Jérôme thus failing at being an emotionless being and stops having sex with men altogether. Indeed, on one level Joe fails at following the precepts of her SCUM-like manifesto when developing feelings for Jérôme. As voiced by Joe, “even the strongest couldn’t stay true to our manifest.” Note how this resembles the Dogme manifest that von Trier himself signed and did not follow, again a connection between the filmmaking process and the director himself. At another level, Joe succumbs to the patriarchal society she lives in which is illustrated when, as uttered by herself, she starts to humiliate herself on purpose so Jérôme would notice her. This is illustrated in a scene where she again parks the car the couple are driving but fails to do so, intentionally crashing the car. Joe, contrarily to Justine, fails to exercise the driving force she used to have and relegates herself to a lower stratum. Certainly, love seems to hurt her: “this idiotic love . . . I felt humiliated by it.” Interestingly, when Joe starts developing feelings for Jérôme, she takes up walks in her ‘childhood forest,’ as if she needs to connect to her father thus men. Joe thinks love regulates and controls society: “For me, sex was just lust with jealousy added. Everything else was total nonsense. For every hundred crimes committed in the name of love, only one is committed in the name of sex.” This reasoning is what makes Joe pursue a higher education and start studying medicine like her father.

It is clear that the sensibility and Dionysian features that characterize She and Justine seem at first not to adhere to Joe’s reasoning. In a similar vein, the Apollonian elements that distinguish the male characters in *Antichrist* and *Melancholia* are no longer as distinct in the male characters in *Nymphomaniac*. The gender ambiguity of Joe’s very name points at this. Joe embodies both sides of the spectrum of gender. In a sense, von Trier seems to point out at the insignificance of gender when portraying a female character that does not adhere to neither side of the spectrum. Or perhaps, a

new subject that breaks free from gender expectations. This is clearly illustrated by the orgasmic episode Joe has on a mount when, as a little girl, she is lying on grass and levitates. The retelling of the transfiguration of Christ but with a female subject points at the divine radiance of Joe as a nymphomaniac subject. In other words, similarly to the transfiguration of Jesus, Joe's transfiguration points at the connection between nature and God or the temporal and eternal and Joe as bridge between heaven and earth. Joe is thus depicted as a new Christ-like figure who should be listened to as she has been exalted by God himself.

“I’VE ALWAYS DEMANDED MORE FROM THE SUNSET:” NATURE AND THE FEMALE FIGURE

Nymphomaniac starts with close shots of rain dripping down a wall or hail and snow falling on urban elements in an alley. After the calmness of the sound of these natural elements—again arranged by Kristian Eidnes Andersen, *Nymphomaniac*’s music shifts to “Führe Mich.” The abruptness of the sudden shift suggests a violence toward the lying body of Joe and a disruption of the natural elements of the previous scene. The audience is then introduced to Joe who describes herself as a nymphomaniac. The word ‘nymphomania’ comes from the Latin *nymphaea* (bride, young lady, young wife), also used to describe the inner lips of the vulva, and the Late Latin words *mania*. Consequently, the nymphomaniac subject is related to the lustful female figure. Inspired by a fly-fishing hook in the hall behind her, Joe opens her story: “to begin with the bait, I discovered my cunt as a two-year-old.” Joe relates her vagina with the fishing bait or nymph hung on the wall.¹⁸¹ When she explains to Seligman how she explored her sexuality, she establishes a simile between herself and a frog in a game she used to play with her friend B. The play involved herself stimulating her genitalia. Images of frogs intertwine with the girl’s activity. In spite of the previously mentioned distinction of genders, which in *Nymphomaniac* is not as clear, the female body is once again compared to the natural world or the Dionysian or anti-Christian opposed to the Apollonian or rational and Christian. Indeed, Joe’s connection to nature through elements such as trees or animals is clear throughout the film.

¹⁸¹ Note that the fishing bait serves as one of the marketing images for the theatrical release poster of the film.

In the first chapter, “The Complete Angler,” Joe narrates an event where Joe and her friend B seduced men on a train. Von Trier visually intertwines the idea of women as bait and the actual fishing bait on the wall. When Joe and B step foot on the train and start looking for man, they are “reading the river” as Seligman points out. The men on the train become the fish or preys of the women who represent the fishing baits or nymphs. Later on, Joe compares one of her sexual partners to a tiger which “was in charge” and parallels their sexual encounters with a tiger looking for a prey where Joe becomes the prey. In any case, Joe embodies the predator throughout the film. As mentioned, Joe also embodies Apollonian qualities and shows a practical attitude when dealing with the circle of men she has built up. She invents a method to answer to the men she has sexual encounters with since she lacks empathy and she is not emotionally attached to the men. Her method, based on chance, either results in a loving answer, rejection or not answer at all. Joe unintentionally causes conflict with one of the men which culminates in the men leaving his wife. The episode, however, does not affect Joe at all: “You can’t make an omelet without breaking some eggs.” It is clear that for Joe, her Machiavellian ends justify her means, just as for von Trier. At this point Von Trier has forced the audience to decide on the bad nature of Joe and align with the protagonist’s words when she says that “I’m just a bad human being.” In any case, Joe seems not to consider her acts as sinful *per se* but perhaps sinful in the sense that they have damaged other people. As Joe puts it:

Perhaps the only difference between me and other people was that I’ve always demanded more from the sunset. More spectacular colors when the sun hit the horizon. That’s perhaps my only sin.

In a late episode, a young Joe is laying on grass as if becoming one with nature. The little girl and the grass are indiscernible. The image is analog with that of Her laying on grass which suggests the liberating force it exerts on the female character to

overcome the laws of patriarchy ruled by the logic He represents. The grass, a creek, and the animals in the wood add to the orgasmic moment Joe is experiencing, a blasphemous retelling of the transfiguration of Jesus on the mount as pointed out by Seligman. Nature thus helps Joe experience her sexuality and later regain it when she loses sexual pleasure.

Keeping a big circle of men is for Joe stressful and nature seems to bring her peace. Joe reveres the herbarium her father and she made and it serves as a way for her to get away from the world. Previous to that episode, Joe takes up walking in the forest after she starts developing feelings for Jérôme: “I took the same walk again and again.” Her monotonous walks in the park are later paralleled by the movements of a caged animal. Joe seems to be fighting her emotions for “love distorts things” and is something she never asked for. Interestingly, Joe takes up walks in her childhood forest where she shared little moments with her father. They both would go there and listen to the sound of the wind caressing the branches of the trees. Then her father would illustrate her in the nature of the trees. Her action seems to communicate a longing to be with her father as if that would liberate her from the burden of love. In other words, for Joe the forest embodies the Apollonic features of her father that can help her overcome the feelings of love she is experiencing. In a way, it seems as if Joe comes to realize that love is what is missing in her life. Simultaneously, the forest exercises its Dionysian nature by soothing Joe. The strong attachment between Joe and her father is seen throughout the film and exemplified with Joe’s connection to the forest. It might be that Joe is so fond of the forest because she is sexually attached to it. Certainly, nature and the phallus are clearly connected in the film, just as in *Antichrist* and the image of the phallic-like trees or the falling acorns representing wasted sperm. At a point, she compares her “cunt” to the automatic doors found at

supermarkets further objectifying her body. Interestingly, this objectification “gave [Joe] an opportunity to develop [her] morphological studies from knees to genitals.” Then a sequence of photographs of man’s genitals is shown while Dmitri Shostakovich’s “Jazz Suite Waltz No. 2” plays in the background, another of von Trier’s provocations as the continuation of Joe’s studies on leaves but this time with genitals. Nature has often been defined as a source of life, so it is not unusual for it to be compared to sexuality. Then, if the forest embodies sexuality and the paternal figure for Joe, then Joe might be sexually attached to it.

From the onset of the film this is clear. Joe is full of regard for her father while she is hostile toward her mother, a kind of acting out of Freud’s Electra complex. As Freud points out, “the father has become the little girl’s love-object, and it is from him that, in the normal course of development, she should find her way to her ultimate object-choice.”¹⁸² When the girl makes her father the object of her choice, she wants to possess him. Indeed, this may result in one’s sexual object which often takes place with women and is, as Freud argues, characteristic of femininity. Certainly, Joe’s father becomes her ultimate sexual object. This is illustrated by the connection of nature and sexuality that has been mentioned earlier. Another interesting episode that sheds light on this matter takes place when Joe visits her dying father who is at the hospital. During one of his father’s delirious episodes and throughout her stay, Joe has sex with various men. This could be explained by the fact that it is what comforts her in that moment of emotional pain. Perhaps more shocking—a final evidence of the ‘bad’ nature of Joe, she becomes sexually aroused while witnessing the dead body of her father: “It was very shameful.” Joe’s sexual object is gone, and she will never be

¹⁸² Freud, *New Introductory*, 162.

able to retrieve it. Joe's "father-fixation" is, indeed, clear.¹⁸³ While Seligman tries to analyze the incident from a medical point of view—"It's extremely common to react sexually in a crisis," Joe is convinced at this point, that she is a terrible human being. The configuration of the shot depicting vaginal fluid streaming down Joe's leg and the image of her dead father further urges the audience to vilify Joe.

Nymphomaniac's shot of Joe standing in front of a single tree on top of a rock symbolizes Joe in a society that does not understand her and where she is a sexual outcast. As Seligman is able to interpret by the end of the film, "You wanted more from life that was good for you . . . You fought back against a gender that had been killing and mutilating millions of women." Through Seligman, von Trier seems to make feminist statements. In any case, it is true that von Trier presents Joe's behavior, explored through her flashbacks, as inherent to the protagonist nature and gender. Von Trier, again, treats the themes of feminism and misogyny—like he did in *Antichrist*, ambiguously, so *Nymphomaniac*, as Neroni puts it, "may take up neither Joe's nor Seligman's position, and instead make clear its position through the variegations of their interaction within the film form itself."¹⁸⁴ Indeed, the viewer is encouraged to draw their own conclusions of the ambiguous game in which they have participated.

¹⁸³ Freud, *New Introductory*, 163.

¹⁸⁴ Neroni, "Lars von Trier's Fantasy," 222.

VIOLENCE AND EMOTION: SADOMASOCHISM AS PERVERSION

Von Trier insists that, in his films, he does not depict ‘women’ *per se*, rather he insists on not reading the female characters as women but rather as self-portraits. For Badley, “his films are psychodramas in which gender roles are metaphorical projections in a role-playing project whose core is an urgent identity politics.”¹⁸⁵ If that is, indeed, the director’s intention, it is problematic on many levels. On one level, the association between himself and the feminine neutralizes the female’s story in his projection onto, in this case, Joe. On a second level, the depiction of Joe in many instances of the film—being beaten and humiliated, for instance, reinforces stereotypes of male masochism and supremacy and female victimization. Badley notes that through the performance of gender, von Trier explores the extremes “of sadism and masochism in self, culture and politics.”¹⁸⁶ In any case, while doing so, he forces the viewer to question the true intentions of his films, and *Nymphomaniac*, due to its graphic content, in particular. In line with Linda Williams’s ideas, *Nymphomaniac* could be described in terms of sadomasochistic pornography. In the film, Joe’s victimization “is a celebration of female victimization and a prelude to female victimization in real life.”¹⁸⁷ It is true, however, that, as von Trier himself described it, *Nymphomaniac* is a bad porn film. That is because it is not. *Nymphomaniac* is best described as a melodrama yet displaying aspects found in pornography thus making clear the connection Williams proposes. The pornographic element in the film further plays a role in the provocative element of it, namely that by using mainstream actors perform simulated sex scenes—through digital editing techniques using body doubles

¹⁸⁵ Badley, *Lars von Trier*, 70.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 71.

¹⁸⁷ Williams, “Film Bodies,” 5.

performing real sex, the film defies the restriction on simulated sex in mainstream and art films.¹⁸⁸

From the onset of the film, Joe urges Seligman, thus the audience, to vilify her, to read her acts as proof of her inherent evil, as evidence of her being a bad human being, as voiced by Joe herself. Joe blames herself for what has happened to her, stating that “I am a bad human being.” For Joe, her condition of nymphomaniac from an early age is sinful and has destroyed her life. Joe’s thoughts on her condition of nymphomaniac are in line with a reading of Freud regarding sexuality as perverse. Freud describes perversion in sexual terms using the term to describe abnormal sexual behaviors such as sodomy, fetishism, sadism, or masochism. As Freud puts it, “[i]n no normal person does the normal sexual aim lack some designable perverse element.”¹⁸⁹ Perhaps more interesting is Freud’s ideas on the polymorphous-perverse disposition which for the psychoanalyst is innate in children. Freud argues that under the influence of seduction, children may become polymorphous-perverse, yet he points out that “no seduction is necessary to awaken the sexual life of the child, awakening may come on spontaneously from inner sources.”¹⁹⁰ Freud argues that a child might be misled into all kinds of perversions mostly because those mechanisms against sexual transgression—such as morality and shame or loathing, are still developing. What might strike one the most, yet, is that Freud goes on to compare the transgression of the child to the female figure:

In this respect the child perhaps does not behave differently from the average uncultured woman in whom the same polymorphous-perverse disposition exists. Such a woman may remain sexually normal under usual conditions, but under the guidance of a clever seducer she will find pleasure in every perversion and will retain the same as her sexual activity. The same polymorphous or infantile disposition fits the prostitute for her professional

¹⁸⁸ Neroni, “Lars von Trier’s Fantasy,” 227.

¹⁸⁹ Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. A. A. Brill (New York: Global Grey, 1920), 27.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 50.

activity, and in the enormous number of prostitutes, even if they do not follow this calling, it is absolutely impossible not to recognize in their uniform disposition for all perversions the universal and primitive human.¹⁹¹

A misogynistic interpretation of Freud's statement is clear. Is that "clever seducer" Freud mentions a man, a woman, or women themselves? Is Freud trying to argue that women are more prone to sexual perversities? Although by the end of his statement he compares it to any human being, Freud first compares the polymorphous disposition with the female prostitute as if it were the epitome of sexual transgression. Interestingly, Jonathan Dollimore links the idea of perversion to Christian theory. Satan, in his nature of "clever seducer," to use Freud's terminology, created a perverted kingdom where Eve acted as his first pervert. For Dollimore, Eve thus "signifies that terrible deviation from the religion to the false"¹⁹² or rather the divergence from a normal sexual behavior to an abnormal one. Perversion, for Dollimore, subverts that what it originates from. Namely, that "we are created desiring that which is forbidden us."¹⁹³ In other words, that humankind is naturally evil: "the evil act, the transgression of eating the forbidden fruit, was committed only when those who did it were already evil."¹⁹⁴ In any case, in *Nymphomaniac*, Joe is seduced by herself from an early age to explore her sexuality: "At an early age, I was mechanically inclined [to sex.]" Yet someone who played a big role in Joe's exploration of her sexuality is her friend B, who "always came up with the ideas." B functions thus as Joe's "clever seducer." Interestingly, B is also a woman.

Throughout the film, Joe tells her life story from a moral point of view while Seligman insists on reading her actions from a scientific angle or merely as episodes

¹⁹¹ Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 50.

¹⁹² Jonathan Dollimore, "The Cultural Politics of Perversion: Augustine, Shakespeare, Freud, Foucault," *Genders*, no. 8 (Summer 1990).

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ St. Augustine quoted in Dollimore.

that should not be deemed bad. Seligman utters that “I don’t understand this self-hatred” when Joe tries to persuade him to read her actions as sinful and morally wrong. For Seligman this is not the case. He does not conceive sexual acts in children—or adults for that matter—as sinful but normal behavior. Yet, Joe tells Seligman that she does not think that children in general are sinful but only herself. Once again, von Trier insists on reading this female character as evil—just as Her in *Antichrist*: “If human nature is evil. Then that goes as well for the nature of . . . all the sisters.” When narrating scenes that are socially unacceptable such as masturbating in a public place or seducing men on a train and having sex as a way of playing around, the spectator is forced to feel disgust—or feel that she is “gross” to use Williamson’s terminology, and to judge Joe for her nature of nymphomaniac, as if her condition were of her choosing. This is illustrated during the episode when Joe is taking care of her father at the hospital and leaves the room to have sex with a stranger man who works at the hospital. Scenes of Joe having sex with men and shots of her agonizing father are then interwoven. Indeed, Joe deals with her father’s delirium through having sex. This is further emphasized with Joe oedipal attitude when lubricating while witnessing her father on his deathbed. The two motifs of the scene—sex and death, indicate the interconnectedness of the two elements. The juxtaposition of death and sex has been pointed out in the opening scene of *Antichrist*. Von Trier forces the spectator to establish a connection between Joe’s moment of orgasmic ecstasy—or *jouissance*, with the figure of the dead parent. The unpleasantness of the imagery makes the viewer further condemn Joe for her acts. Von Trier thus may force the audience to deem the ecstatic Joe as a perverse human being.

In “Chapter Three: Mrs. H,” Joe tells the story of her involvement in the disruption of a family. Once again, the narrative makes Joe embody the ‘bad guy’

when the wife of the man she is seeing visits her with her children and makes remarks about the trauma the children will have to overcome in the future: “You should try to memorize this room. Especially the bed. It’ll stand you in good stead later in therapy.” When the situation gets uncannier, after another of Joe’s lovers shows up at the apartment, Joe admits in front of the wife and the boys that she does not love the boys’ father. At that point, the wife cannot believe what Joe is saying and points at how cruel Joe is. When Seligman asks Joe how the incident affected her Joe herself says it did not and again points at the fact that she is an addict out of lust rather than out of need, further victimizing herself.

Interestingly, the apparatus that once gave her sexual pleasure is now useless: “I can’t feel anything.” It seems as if once Joe reunites with Jérôme and finds love she is punished for her actions. For Tarja Laine, “her nymphomania is an open strategic game that defies any form of social control telling her how to express her sexuality. This is why it is significant that Joe loses all sexual feeling as soon as she falls in love.”¹⁹⁵ At this point, the audience knows that the Joe’s story is about to get even more unfortunate. Joe’s downfall has begun. Her fall is depicted as a fall on water accompanied with Wagner’s *Das Rheingold* and the descent into Nibelheim, her body melting together with the sea. To find a remedy to her new condition Joe seeks help of a sadistic men who runs an underground business, a kind of therapy involving physical violence toward those women he sees. According to Freud, society forces women into passive situations so they cannot exercise their aggressiveness or active role. As Freud points out, “[t]he repression of their aggressiveness, which is imposed upon women by their constitutions and by society, favors the development of strong masochistic impulses, which have the effect of binding erotically the destructive

¹⁹⁵ Laine, “Mea Maxima Vulva,” 236.

tendencies which have been turned inwards. Masochism is then, as they say, truly feminine.”¹⁹⁶ It could be argued that Joe not only seeks masochistic activities so as to feel sexual pleasure again but to liberate from the burden of her gender. As Neroni has correctly put, a “patriarchal society, von Trier contends through the film, dictates that women can desire only within the bounds of acceptable behavior (both in the way they desire and whom they desire.) However, Joe repressed this social restriction, which led to an excessive sexual desire that could find little satisfaction without increasingly excessive sexual exploits.”¹⁹⁷ In any case, this liberation is never achieved and Joe’s “holes” are never filled so she will never be fulfilled and the figure of non-conformity, which von Trier seems to point out should break away from patriarchy, is then ill-fated and destined to self-annihilation.

¹⁹⁶ Freud, *New Introductory Lectures*, 158

¹⁹⁷ Neroni, “Lars von Trier’s Fantasy,” 218.

JOE'S ACT: SHOOTING THE PHALLUS

Nymphomaniac's end titles are accompanied by Charlotte Gainsbourg's cover of Jimi Hendrix's 1967 song "Hey Joe:" "Yes, I did I shot her . . . I'm going way down south / Way down where I can be free." This cross-cinematic reference plays right after perhaps one of the rawest scenes in von Trier's *Nymphomaniac*. Rather than being raw because of its graphic content (like the abortion scene available in the director's cut), the final scene is raw because of the pessimism it evokes.¹⁹⁸ Once Joe has told the entire narrative of her life as a nymphomaniac woman, Seligman approaches Joe's bed in the night. Seligman is masturbating in what seems to be an attempt at raping her. Joe quickly grabs the gun sitting on her bedside table and shoots the old man. Seligman's final act points at the perversity Freud mentions. It seems as if von Trier is pointing out what an actual abnormal sexual behavior looks like; namely, Seligman's attempt of sexual assault serves as testament of the transgressions and perversities. Joe may be looked as a victim of a society, a society that oppressed and victimized her for her sexual conduct; Seligman becoming the idea of patriarchy that subjugate women. It is interesting how the two main characters of the story are so different. Not only they personify the two binary genders of female and male—although as one has seen these are not clearly demarcated in the film, but they show opposite sexualities. The pairing of a nymphomaniac woman and an asexual man makes Seligman, as voiced by himself, "the best judge you could give your story to." And this is what hurts the most by the end of the film. Namely that Joe opens herself to someone who at the end of the story objectifies her just as much as the rest of men: "But it can't

¹⁹⁸ Note how with the episode of the pedophile man, von Trier points at the perverse nature of men instead of women. Joe takes pity on him and fellates him: "I had just destroyed his life." For Joe, "he was carrying the same cross as myself. Loneliness. We were both sexual outcasts."

matter to you, you've fucked thousands of men." As has been put, Seligman's "moral humanism, pedagogical ethics, and philosophical tolerance is brutally exposed and negated by the film's deflationary denouement."¹⁹⁹ Certainly, the phallus is for Joe both the object of her pleasure and that of her anxiety, just as Eden was for Her both the source of her anxiety and driving force. At the same time, the planet is for Claire the object of her anxiety and for Justine what liberates her from her subjectivity. By shooting it, thus rejecting it, Joe rebels against the patriarchy that oppressed her throughout her life.

First, let us go back a little. When Joe starts attending therapy, she follows the advice of her therapists: hiding everything phallic-like around her house, painting mirrors to avoid any stimuli related to the human body, and even wearing gloves so as to hide her fingers and thus prevent masturbation. However, this does not last for long and by the end of the film she has embraced her nymphomania. In one of the meetings she attends to treat her sex addiction, Joe tells the other members of the group and the therapist:

Dear everyone, don't think it's been easy, but I understand now that we're not and never will be alike. I'm not like you, who fucks to be validated and might just as well give up putting cocks inside of you. And I'm not like you. All you want is to be filled up and whether it's by a man or by tongs of disgusting slop makes no difference. And I'm definitely not like you. That empathy you claim is a lie because all you are is society's morality police whose duty is to erase my obscenity from the surface of the earth so that the Bourgeoisie won't feel sick. I'm not like you. I am a nymphomaniac and I love myself for being one, but above all, I love my cunt and my filthy, dirty lust.

Before proclaiming pride in her sexuality, Joe has seen her reflection of her younger self in the mirror. This vision prompts Joe to say those words because it serves as a reminder of her younger self and how these 'sexual transgressions' were natural and part of herself from an early age. The connection between adult female and the young

¹⁹⁹ Sinnerbrink, "Provocation and Perversity," 111.

female is clear and Joe embraces these ‘perversions’ that Freud understood as normal in the child. In this moment, as Hilary Neroni points out, “Joe heroically embraces her symptom as the truth of her identity, but it doesn’t lead to the dissolution of her nymphomania or alienation.”²⁰⁰ Indeed, just as Justine refuses the term ‘depression’ for her condition and embraces her melancholy, Joe embraces her nymphomania instead of the clinical term ‘sex addiction.’²⁰¹

Neroni points out how through Seligman, the director voices that “[w]hether the viewer sees her in a positive or negative light . . . the viewer should at the very least also consider her actions as having meaning, as a response to a society that constricts her identity.”²⁰² When Seligman reveals himself to be just like the other men Joe has met throughout her life, the analyses he has carried out of Joe’s tales are negated, revealing himself as “one more force that Joe needs to escape from.”²⁰³ And she does. She shoots the old man and escapes the place. In any case, while it is true that von Trier points at the limits of a patriarchal society that restricts a woman’s sexuality, deeming her a sexual outcast, he offers a femininity that has no place in society. Certainly, throughout the film Joe struggles to fit in a society that naturally rejects her. When she is having her son, Marcel, she describes the noise from the instruments ringing out “in a chord like the one from the Little Flock;” that is, satanic. She goes on to describe the “disgust” she felt during the moment of labor and how “I could’ve sworn I saw him [the baby] laughing.” Seligman points out the omen of the laughing son. What this moment communicates is Joe’s rejection of motherhood, something alien to her nymphomania. Later on, Joe describes her relationship with Marcel and her constant feeling of “having been found out.” This is particularly

²⁰⁰ Neroni, “Lars von Trier’s Fantasy,” 230.

²⁰¹ Sinnerbrink, “Provocation and Perversity,” 109.

²⁰² Neroni, “Lars von Trier’s Fantasy,” 219.

²⁰³ *Ibid*, 221.

interesting if one takes into account Lacan's exploration of the gaze. For Lacan, the gaze refers to the object of our eye's look looking back at us. The feeling has an effect similar to the castration anxiety; that is, the integral part of one's psychosexual development that both Lacan and Freud saw as crucial and which is related to the Oedipus complex. As previously mentioned, Freud argues that this complex continues developing in women and explain their sexual transgressions during adulthood. Interestingly, Joe becomes the child and Marcel the adult, seeing through Joe's transgressions and trying to put a stop to her sexual activities. Joe is coming face to face with the conventions and the laws that rule the society, in this case, motherhood. It is as if Marcel were imploring Joe to be a mother and stop being a nymphomaniac.

In any case, Von Trier does not offer any alternative for Joe to find fulfilment in the condition she embraces. Joe, however, finds only destruction. As Nori puts it, "von Trier's female characters neither conform nor rebel against social expectations. Instead, they are afflicted with excessive emotions and desires that make them unable to escape and unable to conform."²⁰⁴ Joe's actions do not threaten the system that deems her behavior abnormal. What is more, her story prompts Seligman to become an enemy to Joe by the end of the film as if communicating the refusal of a different type of sexuality. Moreover, by not allowing Joe to find fulfilment, von Trier is falling prey to patriarchy, just as Seligman, repeating the male fantasy of female sexuality as limitless.²⁰⁵ "Fill all my holes, please" Joe utters when she is left lying on the ground. Furthermore, as pointed out, one of the problems of the film is that throughout the film nymphomania is compared to female sexual power.²⁰⁶ By shooting Seligman, von Trier makes Joe prove her argument of being a bad human

²⁰⁴ Neroni, "Lars von Trier's Fantasy," 216.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 229-230.

²⁰⁶ Linda Williams, "CINEMA'S SEX ACTS," *Film Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (2014): 22.

being. Joe does not accept Seligman's feminist justification for her actions: "I wanted to kill a human!" As one sees at the end of the film, she does kill a human being and just as the Joe in Jimi Hendrix song, "[t]his female Joe, too, has no place to go. She has been manipulated through contrived and clever machinations of plot to commit a version of the crime she thought she had escaped."²⁰⁷ Indeed, von Trier has played with Joe since the very beginning, creating an illusion of the salvation for the protagonist or way out that never comes.

²⁰⁷ Williams, "CINEMA'S SEX ACTS," 22.

5. CONCLUSION

THE HOUSE THAT VON TRIER BUILT

If the *Depression Trilogy* was not enough to burn von Trier at the stake for being a misogynist, his latest film *The House that Jack Built*, further condemns the director. In what seems to be an autobiographical work and a statement on the filmmaking process, von Trier creates an intellectual psychopath named Jack (Matt Dillon) who terrorizes and kills women. Jack proclaims himself as “an engineer.” In the film, the house that Jack is building is a house of murdered women that serve as an allegory for the director’s *oeuvre*. Death is juxtaposed with the idea of creative composition throughout the film. Do the ends of the artistic piece justify its means? For provocateur von Trier it does, just as for Jack. When Jack tells the episode of how he killed a mother and her two children, he tells his interlocuter: “Don’t look at the acts, look at the works.” Jack’s interlocuter, Verge—short for Virgil who later in the film will walk him all the way down to hell—asks him about his preference for women:

VERGE: Why are they always so stupid?

JACK: Who’s stupid?

VERGE: All the women you kill strike me as seriously unintelligent.

JACK: Come one. I’ve also killed men.

VERGE: But you only talk about the stupid women, unless you think all women are stupid.

JACK: Well, the stories I’ve told were selected at random, but...

VERGE: You feel superior to women and want to brag? It turns you on, doesn’t it, Jack?

JACK: No, no, but women are easier. Not physically, they’re just easier to work with. More cooperative.

VERGE: To kill, you mean.

JACK: If you like.

Jack might have murdered as many men as he has killed women, but he chooses to tell the stories that involve women. Verge personifies the audience and critics that have criticized and passed sentence on the director while through Jack von Trier

might be verbalizing his defense (I've also made men suffer in my films!). The truth being that women are the ones who suffer a greater deal than men, their suffering worthless. Moreover, for Jack women are the key element in his artistic piece just as the female characters are for the director, an essential piece onto whom von Trier portrays himself with all the problematics that that entails.

It is true that the director's *Depression* films focus in its entirety on female protagonists. *Antichrist*, *Melancholia*, and *Nymphomaniac* follow the female characters from beginning to end whereas the male characters are relegated to supporting roles. The story of these films revolve around the female protagonists and is told through their eyes. But not only that, these female protagonists are normally the only characters who show integrity and a humanism that their male counterparts lack. The female characters show human qualities that demands the spectator to engage emotionally with them in order to understand their emotional depth. Joe, She, and Justine are oppressed throughout the films by being invalidated not only by other men but also other women. They are destined to fail for their feelings and desires lead to their debarment from society. For instance, by the end of *Nymphomaniac*, Joe becomes a social outcast for embracing her sexuality. Moreover, the female protagonists of the trilogy are judged for not conforming to their assigned gender roles, namely, those of mother and wife. The climax of the films comes in the form of rebellion against the society they live in, a retaliation or an act that has given rise to a heated debate on the intentions of the filmmaker. This makes sense because von Trier is a provocateur who, instead of providing answers, asks more questions through his provocations which are fueled by the anti-philosophy the director embraces. The lack of logic or reason in his films spring from the anti-philosophy he practices in order to jump barriers that mainstream cinema fails to overcome. The author's use of anti-

philosophy involves the combination of elements that disconcert the audience to make political statements, in this case regarding gender and femininity. The author's particular use of philosophical motifs in the conventional sense combined with other more ironic and ludic ones allow him to make a gender commentary with all the problematics that have been raised throughout the thesis. Given the provocative nature of the director, Von Trier is not afraid of taking this path and he does. As argued, this radical position makes films such as *Antichrist* or *Nymphomaniac* be at once misogynist and feminist texts. It seems that von Trier's texts try to defend a feminist position but fail, at least in the conventional fashion, to do so. The director's use of violent affects that his female characters deploy may serve as evidence of von Trier's misogyny. The director plays with this idea and leaves the question open to interrogation, which has become a distinguishing feature of his work.

Apart from the gender commentary found in his films, Von Trier's *Depression* films further explore the artistic aim one can find across the director's filmography. His films offer "a subversive aesthetic critique applied to cinema itself, both mimicking and distorting, affirming and negating, the inherited tradition of (European) modernism (via a meditated romanticism) in a ludic, ironic, and 'philosophical' manner . . . an ambiguous yet necessary strategy for a filmmaker dealing with the difficult legacy of modernism."²⁰⁸ In *The House that Jack Built* this is even more evident. Joe, Justine and Claire, and She work as pawns in the director's disturbing game. Just as pawns, they represent the weakest element of the game. Von Trier plays with them throughout his films and victimizes and humiliates them for the sake of his work. Von Trier deals with the topics of feminism and misogyny ambiguously so one never knows where he stands. In the director's defense, it should

²⁰⁸ Sinnerbrink, "Provocation and Perversity," 111.

be point out that most scholars studying his *oeuvre* claim that the director portrays rather than endorse misogyny in his films. Certainly, the women in the trauma films reject their roles in society and try to break free from the confinements of heteronormative family life. And this is the big issue, that they *try*. In the process, these women suffer and eventually they do not achieve this liberation from their gender. A liberation von Trier hints at but never sees the light. So, all the suffering, victimization, and misogyny von Trier is trying to, perhaps, criticize, somehow shoots right back at him.

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