

The Lacanian Real in Lars von Trier's Antichrist

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Laced with analogies between the ominous forest and the abhorrent depths of the human mind, Lars von Trier's film *Antichrist* (2009) is marked by the nauseating grotesque of sexual cruelties, interpreted here through the Lacanian concept of the Real. The purpose of this essay is to explore the intrusion of the Real into the film's scenes, events, characters and their relations, with focus on the grotesque moments. These elements are analyzed through the film's main thematics revolving around evil, nature, the unconscious and the feminine. The main question is: How does the Real manifest itself in the film, and how does it resonate with the grotesque? I will make a brief introduction to the film, the concept of the Real, the grotesque, and their relation. The subsequent analysis will be structured around the female protagonist, starting from her grotesque actions and ending up with her relationship with nature, evil, and the male protagonist.

The film, the Real, and the grotesque

Combining elements of drama and horror, the film, *Antichrist*, tells the story of a grieving couple— a woman (Charlotte Gainsbourg) and a man (Willem Dafoe)— who, after the death of their child, retreat to a remote cabin in the forest. The therapist husband intends to treat the wife's depression himself; to make her confront her fears in the woods. However, the grieving process takes a new direction, as she manifests increasingly violent sexual behavior. As a constellation of mysterious symbolism, philosophical discussion and acts of cruelty, the journey develops as a quest into the darkest sides of human nature.

The Lacanian concept of the Real is part of the triadic structure of the psyche, including the three registers of the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real. In tension with the Real, the Symbolic order is the domain of language and culture, rules and the Law. The Real represents a pre-Symbolic state of fullness and authenticity that is irrevocably lost through the infant's entrance into language. As an undifferentiated state without categories, it presents no sense of separation between the subject and the external world, the infant and the mother. Importantly, the Real resists symbolization, representing 'the impossible,' the un-representable

and the unknown, characterized by fundamental inaccessibility. However, the Real cuts into the Symbolic order, manifesting itself through traumatic gaps and ruptures in it, through the bodily and the materiality of our existence. It is perceived as traumatic, as it threatens the way we normally perceive 'reality,' depriving us of the Symbolic that structures our meaning making practices. As Lacan (2004) suggests, "the real is that which always comes back to the same place – to the place where the subject in so far as he thinks, where the *res cogitans*, does not meet it" (p. 49). The Real can also be conceived as the lack at the core of our being, the void of the lost fullness we constantly try to fill out (Homer, 2005). An affiliated concept relevant to the topic, *jouissance*, is a mode of 'pure' enjoyment in the Real, referring to an amalgam of pain and pleasure. Related to insatiable desires, *jouissance* is experienced rather through its absence or insufficiency, the meager satisfaction obtained being never enough.

As for the notion of the grotesque, its main characteristics include category violation, certain reaction of the viewer, and metamorphosis with transgression of body limits. Firstly, the grotesque can be structurally determined as a deviation from cultural norms, a surplus that cannot be unequivocally categorized, referring to "a being that violates our standing or common biological and ontological concepts and norms" (Carroll, 2009). The reactions the grotesque may elicit in the viewer include horror or disgust, comic amusement, and awe or surprise (Carroll, 2009, Kayser, 1981). Finally, the idea of metamorphosis stems from Bakhtin's (1984) view on the grotesque as a phenomenon in an incomplete transformation, intertwining death and birth, growth and becoming. Bakhtin's conception of the grotesque body is based on the surpassing of body limits, with emphasis on the bodily excrescences and orifices that enable communication with other bodies and the world.

The grotesque is affiliated with Lacanian theory, specifically to the Real. For example, there are certain similarities between the Real and the grotesque as portrayed by Kayser (1981), who sees the grotesque as an 'estranged world' that has become strange and alien, as something incomprehensible and inexplicable, abysmal and ominous, entailing a tension between the familiar and the unknown. Moreover, the attributes of deformation, disfiguration and decenterment commonly associated with the grotesque expose the nature of the Lacanian subject, disembodying itself, and demonstrating the impossibility of a unified being (Yuan, 1996). The Lacanian subject may be characterized as grotesque, as it is hysterized by the lack, the impossibility of the Real, accounting for the subsequent grotesque transformation (Yuan, 1996).

In the film, *Antichrist*, the Real and the grotesque coincide already in the initial fundamental event: the death of the child who falls out of a window while the parents are having sex. This represents the first major moment of the Real, an extremely traumatic rupture, an object of anxiety *par excellence*. It also depicts a Freudian primal scene, whereby the child witnesses a sex act between the parents, creating a repressed trauma for the child. At the same time, falling – here explicitly associated with death and sexuality – is a grotesque event, as it involves a downward movement towards the ground, assimilated by Bakhtin (1984) to the lower body and reproductive organs, to degradation, death and rebirth.

Similarly, the woman, as the focal character of the film, is a grotesque subject: profoundly derailed and metamorphosing, having grotesque desires and performing grotesque actions. At the same time, she is the Lacanian subject of the unconscious, a lacking subject who has lost her being (Homer, 2005). After the initial loss, the woman becomes depressed and anguished, suffering from a tremendous sense of guilt for the tragic death of the child. She also becomes phobic of the forest around their cabin. Significantly, her sense of lack finds an expression in excessive sexual activity. As Lacan (2004) suggests, “sexuality is established in the field of the subject by a way that is that of lack” (p. 204). Altogether, in the film, the Real is configured through the overwhelming anxiety, mysterious transformation, and senseless actions of the woman.

The woman’s grotesque actions

The woman’s conversion from a reproductive loving mother into a destructive ferocious beast converges the idea of grotesque metamorphosis, its endless cycles of birth and death. At the same time, the woman is an embodiment of the Lacanian subject, having no permanence or consistency, and never emerging as a stable and complete entity (Homer, 2005). A decisive moment of the woman’s metamorphosis is depicted in the scene where the man refuses to hit her during sex. She rushes into the forest, lays herself down under a tree and begins masturbating frantically, encircled by the rootstock of the tree, as if merging with the wild forest, no longer afraid of it. When the man joins her, consents to hit her and they have sex, their bodies seem a fusion of white flesh against the dark soil. In a dreamlike vision, they are suddenly surrounded by a profusion of white human arms emerging from the rootstock, as of buried people, in flesh but lifeless. This pivotal image dramatically bounds together the forest,

the man and the woman, the collective grotesque body, and the union of violence, sexuality, and death.

The actions grotesquely transcending the body limits are explicitly shown through intercourse, realistic depiction of genital violence and mutilation, emergence of body fluids, piercing of a leg, and killing and burning of a body. The grotesque actions resist symbolization insofar as they remain unfathomable and disturbingly shocking for the viewer. The woman's unrestrained actions also correspond to Lacanian unconscious desires and fantasies. In the film they are apparently devoid of the filtering layer of Imaginary fantasies and their defensive processes. Her actions attest how the actual fulfillment of a primal fantasy turns it into a nightmare, unveiling its abhorrent, grotesque nature.

The woman's sexuality is depicted as grotesquely excessive: frenzied and hysterical, lascivious and nymphomaniac, masochistic and sadistic. It takes increasingly destructive forms, intertwining with bloodthirsty and murderous behavior. She turns into a representation of *vagina dentata*, a woman equipped with a bestial or vampiric sexuality that is devouring, enigmatic and castrating for men (Ross, 2009). Destructive sexuality relates also to Lacan's idea of a single drive that is necessarily a death drive and also sexual in nature, associated with the Real and with *jouissance* (Homer, 2005). For Lacan (2004), the splitting of a being, observable in mimicry,

comes into play, quite obviously, both in sexual union and in the struggle to the death. In both situations, the being breaks up, in an extraordinary way, between its being and its semblance, between itself and that paper tiger it shows to the other. (pp. 106-107)

In the film, the ultimate connection between sexuality and death is expressed in the grotesque paired image of the woman's orgasmic face of the beginning and her dying face of the end, mouth opened, reminiscences of a primal scream. The woman's sexualization and demonization is enacted through grotesque actions, reflecting what Kristeva (1982) calls "the abject or demoniacal potential of the feminine" (p. 65). For Kristeva, the notion of abjection refers to the simultaneous feeling of repulsion and attraction towards the body's inside and body fluids, associated with the maternal body. Eventually, abjection represents the process of separation, entailing a yearning for the undifferentiated pre-Symbolic, but also presenting a threat to identity. In the film, the woman is increasingly inclined towards the abject, re-enacting the process of separation.

The woman's actions culminate in the horrifyingly grotesque moments when she suddenly crushes the man's penis with a log, the man losing his consciousness, and after that she ejaculates him. As a veritable eruption of the Real, a mixture of sperm and blood spills out of his penis: procreation turns into death, blemishing the woman's shirt, creating a concrete stain. This hostility could be seen as a symbolic attack against the phallus, representing paternal authority, cultural order, and its systemic oppression. With this act, these values are literally surmounted by the feminine, natural chaos, and instinctual release. This opposition is reflected in the split, described by Kristeva (1982),

between, on the one hand, the body's territory where an authority without guilt prevails, a kind of fusion between mother and nature, and on the other hand, a totally different universe of socially signifying performances where embarrassment, shame, guilt, desire, etc. come into play – the order of the phallus. (p. 74)

The phallus becomes thus the focal point of the woman's lack, desire and guilt.

For Lacan, the phallus is the central organizing signifier of lack and sexual difference, the 'original' lost object of desire that we always search for, but never had in the first place. The phallus represents the rupture of the mother-child dyad and the fundamental splitting of the subject itself (Homer, 2005). The woman's attack is thus targeted not only at the Symbolic order and the Name-of-the-Father, but also at the original lack for which the phallus is the signifier. Regarding castration, from a Lacanian perspective, it is a symbolic act that entails the cutting off of one's *jouissance* and the recognition of lack (Homer, 2005). For the woman, the literal castrative attack might be a way to disable her own *jouissance*, reaffirmed by the subsequent self-castration. Moreover, to fill the primary lack, femininity involves the masquerade of being the phallus. In a concrete way, by knocking the man out and appropriating the organ for herself, the woman enacts a fantasy of fullness enabling her, for a fleeting moment, to be the phallus.

Another constitutive grotesque action is the woman's act of drilling a hole into the unconscious man's leg, inserting a metal bar into the hole, and attaching a heavy grindstone to it. This burden, binding the man to the ground, can be seen as a metaphor of the vanity to resist the inevitable, the impossibility to escape the Real. The woman, as a grotesque subject, is characterized by a narcissistic desire for a symbiotic closure with the other, and the impossible reunification with this other (Yuan, 1996). In a concrete manner, the heavy weight expunges the man's autonomy, annexes him to the woman, as if suturing the fissure of a split

subject. For the woman, yet something else is needed for the ultimate resolution of the unbearable conflict of enjoyment and guilt, this time involving her own body. The conflict reaches its final culmination in the grotesque self-castration of the woman: re-enacting the initial scene of the child's falling and her sexual enjoyment, she masturbates and finally cuts off her clitoris with a pair of rusty scissors.

The woman, nature and evil

In the film, *Antichrist*, the woman is assimilated with nature, eventually even merging with it. Her metamorphosis from a 'civilized' person into a 'savage' creature translates into the breakdown of the Symbolic order, and the escalation of the domain of the Real. The film's focus is clearly on the repulsive side of nature. Significantly, the forest is depicted as a hostile and frightening place with disgusting features. An illustrative image is the nestling falling from the tree to the ground, instantly covered with bustling voracious ants, only to be caught a moment after by a big bird mauling it to pieces and devouring it. Similarly, a deer is presented with an aborted fetus hanging from the animal in an amniotic sac. The film's pivotal grotesque representations, coinciding with the Real, refer to nature's arbitrariness and hostility, alien and mysterious character. Ambiguously, the forest is at times depicted as stunningly beautiful. In dreamlike visions, it contains masses of lifeless, yet unblemished human bodies lying on the soil, and a self-disemboweling fox uttering the words "chaos reigns".

The ultimate referent of this nature seems to be the human mind, or the unconscious. The forest could be seen as a representation of the Thing, unknowable in itself, a *no-thing* that owes its existence to the desire that constitutes it, filling the void at the core of subjectivity (Homer, 2005). The forest as the Thing acts thus as a chimeric mirror of the characters' emotions, fears and desires. As an *extimate* Thing, it is both inaccessible and intimate, internal and external to the subject's reality (Libbrecht, 2001). It is thus ambiguously inside the characters, and yet clearly outside, 'out there'. As a metaphor of the human mind, the forest represents also the encounter with a repulsive Real, in Lacan's words an ugly "gift of shit", revealed by the dissipation of the Symbolic-Imaginary veil of fantasies (Johnston, 2002). This is crystallized in the woman's comment about the forest: "everything that used to be beautiful about it, was perhaps hideous."

This nature, in its interaction with human bodies, is also affiliated to the Bakhtinian conception of the grotesque body transgressing its boundaries. The grotesque body is blended with the world, with animals and objects. It is a cosmic and universal body that can merge with natural phenomena, with mountains, seas, stars, and the entire universe (Bakhtin, 1984). Accordingly, the woman's body is a grotesquely rebellious body surpassing its own boundaries. It is united with the man's body, with the forest and the collective female body of the dreamlike visions.

In the film, the relation between the woman and nature is, firstly, symbolic or culturally constructed. The widespread historical convention of assimilating the feminine to Mother Nature is based on the life giving and nurturing aspects they allegedly share. Also the film reproduces such cultural categorization and conceptual dualism, as the male represents mind, reason and culture, and the female stands for body, emotions and nature. In the anti-female tradition, this idea has evolved into assimilating the feminine with evil, death, witchcraft and dangerous powers, based on the archaic fear of women's life-giving power. With its culturally determined misogynistic symbolism, the film explores precisely this contradictory myth of women, seen as treacherous and evil, but also more empathic and nurturing 'by nature.'

The woman is also iconic to nature on the conceptual level of the signified, imitating the logic of nature. She becomes an actual embodiment of nature's uncontrollable powers, of the unknown within nature. On the level of the signifier, the iconic relation is supported by some dreamlike scenes providing implicit claims: in one of them wild animals gather around the woman, represented thus as one of these creatures. In another one, the woman, while going through a therapeutic exercise of lying on the grass, gradually merges with it, turning all green herself.

This union translates also into sexual difference. Despite the nature-culture division's apparent pertinence within the logic of the film, it is noticeable that, for Lacan, sexual difference is not reducible to either nature or culture but appears instead at the point of their intersection, as a left-over of their unity (Homer, 2005). According to Lacan's formulation, "the woman does not exist", which refers to the idea that she is 'not-whole', thus not altogether subject to the Symbolic order. Because of that, she has access to something more than men. Also in the film, it is the woman that gets to represent that which is beyond the Symbolic. It is as if the woman had access to some unknown knowledge, beyond the reach of

rational thought and modern science, like the persons scientifically qualified as ‘mentally ill’ who ‘just know’. For example, she is somehow aware of the ‘imaginary’ star constellation, the *Three Beggars*, composed of *Pain*, *Grief* and *Despair*, and ‘just knows’ that its apparition coincides with someone’s death, as will happen. In psychoanalytic theory, truth can only emerge in contingency, come out in the fall of knowledge, implying an encounter of radical Otherness within oneself (Tavin, 2010). Constituting an epistemological final ‘proof’ of the woman’s contingent knowledge, the man also sees the constellation in the sky, and then is forced to encounter the Otherness within himself. Besides nature, the woman is associated with evil, as opposed to the apparent goodness of the man. With the viewpoint of the woman, it is however made evident that civilization, morality and the Symbolic do not account for all sides of subjectivity. The acculturation and repression are doomed to fail with the ‘return of the repressed’.

In *Antichrist*, the misogyny is explicitly referred to through the subject of the woman’s unfinished thesis, *Gynocide*, and the grotesque imagery of hunted and tortured women as part of her research material. Associated with witchcraft, she finally enters the ‘sorority’ of persecuted women by experiencing their fate: tortured (by herself), killed and burned in a bonfire. This sorority is materialized in the crowd of women with blurred faces, heading for the cabin to rejoin their sister, as shown in the man’s final vision in the woods. Representing a gloomy version of the Bakhtinian gay and gracious grotesque body, this crowd constitutes a collective female body, fundamentally cosmic as surpassing the individual level, the limits of life and death – and the boundary separating reality from the Real. However, contradicting the misogynistic vein – as in many other von Trier’s films – it is the woman who gets to be the protagonist and the author’s alter ego, the more complex and fascinating character. By abandoning culture and the Symbolic, the woman rejects also the paternal rules, refusing the traditional role of a nurturing woman. Moreover, despite her overflowing sexuality, the woman is not sexually objectified, but on the contrary presented as an active subject, instrumentalizing the man for her pleasure. Altogether, the film plays on the ambivalence of simultaneously being misogynistic and emancipatory, emphasizing the woman’s active role, aggression and open sexuality, her nonconformity and rebellion.

Beyond biological essentialism, Lacan’s conception of sexual difference is defined not merely through phallus, but through the distinction between phallic *jouissance* and feminine *jouissance*. The former is characterized by disappointment, a sense that our desire has not been

fully satisfied. The latter, that Lacan calls 'Other *jouissance*', is something beyond the Symbolic, difficultly explicable, but involving an experience of unspeakable ecstasy. For Lacan, femininity and masculinity are thus not biologically given, but indicate two subject positions, and two types of *jouissance*, that are available to both men and women. (Homer, 2005). Also in the film, the couple's gender and sexual roles are subverted and confused, like Kubrick's *The Shining* turned upside-down. The woman's sexuality is endowed with features that psychoanalytic theory associates with male sexuality. It is displayed as self-centered, masturbatory and nonreciprocal, in accordance with Lacan's idea that "there is no sexual relationship" (Tuck, 2010). The meaning imposed on this autoeroticism is the insatiability of desires, the sense of alienation and lack. Altogether, quite ambiguously, the woman assumes elements from both the phallic unsatisfactory and the feminine unspeakably ecstatic *jouissance*, represented by her utterly orgasmic face.

The woman and the man

The couple's conceptual character, or status as empty signifiers, is attested by the fact that they are unnamed throughout the entire film. In their relationship, the role assigned to the man is a helper, a mirror image of the woman, or in Lacanian terms, the Other within the Symbolic order. This is underlined by the choice of his profession, a psychotherapist, trying to bring the uncontrollable into control, elements of the Real onto the Symbolic level. An advocate of reason and order, he pushes the woman to confront her deepest fears, to unfold the darkest sides of her mind. In doing this, he resorts to scientific knowledge, practices and reasoning, symbolized by the triangular diagram he draws in order to schematize the woman's fears. But he fails: the Real resisting symbolization. For Lacan, anxiety and suffering cannot be entirely put into language, as there remains always a residue, an excess that is the Real (Homer, 2005).

The woman's ensuing hostility is sharply contrasted to the apparent kindness of the man. Despite certain emotional coldness, he represents to the woman a loving husband, a source of security, the prospect of healing, the possibility of a new child, and a future. The woman is the problem, the man the solution, but apparently not the one that she wants. In the narrative structure of the film, what could be expected is a painful but purgative healing process of the woman, leading to a liquidation of the initial misfortune. However, neither the child nor the sane woman is ever found. The irremediable, unfulfillable lack persists. The woman realizes that the man, or no one ever, will be able to fill it out. Perhaps she discovers

the deception of love that Lacan (2004) refers to, between the analyst and the analysand who says: “I love you, but, because inexplicably I love in you something more than you – *the objet petit a* – I mutilate you” (p. 268).

Between the couple there could be an even more profound intermingling of subjectivities. Considering the volatility of their roles, their bodily and sexual affinity and even certain congruence of their physical appearances, the woman and the man could be viewed as the two sides of a single human being. Representing the Symbolic and the Real, they could be the constituents of subjectivity. For Lacan, the subject is the gap that opens up between the Symbolic and the Real (Homer, 2005).

Presented as signifiers acquiring value only in their mutual relation, they could also represent the self-Other opposition, the woman standing for the self, and the man for the necessary Other. In Lacan’s thinking, our sense of self is reflected back by the Other, with whom we identify. Self is always defined in terms of Other, and thus, paradoxically, self is Other. The illusion of a coherent identity pertains to the Imaginary order, and marks the child’s emergence from a matriarchal state of nature into the patriarchal order of culture. (Chandler, 1994) Also in the film, the borders of identity are blurred as the woman abandons the Symbolic order, loses her Imaginary sense of a coherent self, and approaches the realm of the Real, in which the subject has no clear boundaries between oneself and the external world. Targeted both at the man and herself, the grotesque double castration as self-punishment is necessary, since self is remerged with Other, made of the same flesh.

Conclusion

Altogether, *Antichrist* seems a surprisingly literal embodiment of Lacanian theory. For example, the relation of the couple compares to that of the analyst and the analysand, to the self-Other opposition, and to a gendered Symbolic-Real division. Moreover, castration is performed literally and the phallus is concretely attacked, lack refers to the actual loss of the mother-child dyad, *jouissance* to sexual enjoyment, and so on.

In its grotesquely concrete manner, the film expresses the failure of the Symbolic in face of the Real, displayed as repugnant, yet irresistibly alluring. This failure reveals the open wound of the fundamental lack, concretized in the death of the child and the loss of mental sanity. It is as if the woman, with her sexual and violent grotesque actions, would desperately endeavor to rejoin the lost fullness of the Real. For her, sexuality entails the impossible fantasy

of reaching the pure Otherness of the Other, but it fails her, pushing her to increasingly violent, abject experiments.

While the woman represents the lack of the Real, the man embodies the lack of the Symbolic, standing for the rationalist scientific worldview and logocentrism, its arrogance and violence. Despite his profession, the man underestimates the power of the unconscious, and disvalues fear as experienced by the woman, calling it irrational and 'only' panic. He states that it is 'a scientific fact' that obsessions don't materialize, but he is proven to be terribly wrong, as just the opposite happens, and the woman identifies with what she fears the most.

What, then, is the woman's biggest fear? It is neither nature nor evil, but, as the man finally discovers, 'herself,' referring to the unknown within herself, the unconscious. It is the most dreadful thing, as it can neither be escaped nor attained: it will always remain beyond the reach of language and the Symbolic, not clearly inside or outside, but within the subject's relation to the outer world. The film's emphasis is on the destructive side of the Real. The meager regenerative aspect is represented by the evolution of the man's scientific mind, learning a lesson about the power of the unknown. For the woman, the initial ruptures grow into a huge abyss of the Real, into which she eventually drowns. Behind the repulsive manifestations, the woman's mind and the film's symbolism remain ultimately obscure, making the entire film twirl around the unknown, the void of the Real.

To represent this, the grotesque is needed, as it is able to turn abstract, unfathomable ideas into concrete images and events, to make the world understandable through the bodily and sensuous dimension of life. In the film, the grotesque gives thus a sensible form to the invisible forces of the unconscious, of guilt and anxiety, the eruptions of the Real. Perhaps nothing less extreme and ambiguous than the grotesque could level the deepest emotions and anxieties, the ultimate questions of life and death. What could be a more adequate expression of guilt for prioritizing one's sexual enjoyment over the child's safety than brutally cutting off one's clitoris? At the same time, the grotesque provides a perspective of liberation: it is easier to conceive a material thing than an abstract, nameless anxiety. Anchored in the materiality of our existence, a grotesque sign represents something that cannot be represented, providing the closest possible representation of the unrepresentable.

Claiming kinship with the Real, the grotesque embodies lack, as it itself lacks form, organization and integrity, violating cultural categories, norms and taboos. In the film, grotesque atrocities also enfold morbid fantasies originating in the Real, such as the pernicious

allure of vampiric female sexuality, the temptation of brute bodily action instead of futile civilized talk, and the fantasy of unbridled sexuality and aggression with utter disregard of the consequences, reflecting the idea of *jouissance*.

Ideologically, the film exposes the fragility of the Symbolic, easily swept away once the illusion of life's normality and integrity has been broken. Torn by the ultimate feelings of pain, grief and despair – represented by the *Three Beggars* – the thin layer of civilization is reduced to bare instincts and emotions emerging from the Real. To express this, the film's logic is undeniably gendered. The woman is the epitome of existential transformation, a return to the undifferentiated chaos. The woman representing the abominable fantasy, however, it is the man who represents the miserable reality, the cultural legacy of authoritative oppression.

Finally, the concept of an "Antichrist" represents a failed attempt to symbolize the Real, to domesticate it by naming, illustrating the yearning for concrete entities with a definite meaning. However, in the film's desolate world, there is only the immanent, abhorrent Thing, and behind all atrocities, a profound sense of meaninglessness. With all its grotesqueries and eruptions of the Real, the film expresses a recognizable experience of the present state of the world, something about our culture's fears and fantasies, vulnerabilities and repressions.

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