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4 May 2012

Pro-misogyny

Many negative things may be said about Lars Von Trier's film, Antichrist. The sex scenes in the film truly are gratuitous and in one case nauseating. The violence is needlessly graphic. Many would consider the film's scenes that are without sex or violence to be extremely boring. Most of the bad things one may say about this film can be said of many films. What really sets Antichrist apart from other films is its pervasive misogyny. Despite the feminist progress made over the past several decades, Antichrist proves that misogyny is alive and well by reinforcing several gender stereotypes and from its overall message that women are inherently evil and deserve to be punished.

The only characters in the film are a nameless married couple and their son, Nic who dies in the first scene. Lars Von Trier contrasts their behavior and attributes to illustrate his view of the differences between men and women. The namelessness of the couple enforces the idea that the man represents men in general and the woman represents women in general. Throughout the film, the man's behavior and attributes are better than the woman's.

The man is portrayed as being much stronger than his wife. After their son dies, he shows an understandable amount of grief during the funeral scene, but shows no more bereavement for the rest of the film. The woman, however, faints at the funeral and spends about a month in the hospital for psychiatric care. While grief is not her primary psychological problem at the end of the film, she never recovers from the tragedy. Even after the woman viciously attacks her husband, he is possibly weaker only in the physical sense as she is insane at that point.

In Owen Gleiberman's review of the film, he says "It doesn't take us long to see where their healing is headed: to a war of patriarchal control and 'unreasonable' feminine rage" (43). While most of their interaction might not be characterized as a war, the man does exert patriarchal control. He happens to be a clinical psychologist and is unsatisfied with his wife's care at the hospital. He takes her home to treat her himself, despite her protests. Whenever they disagree, the woman generally gives in to him, and it appears as if the man is in fact usually right. The film deliberately makes his patriarchal role seem natural and proper.

The man is portrayed as calm, collected, sane, rational, and only moderately emotional. The woman, however, is very emotional, irrational, needy, impulsive, and eventually insane. In practically all their conversations, the man speaks using overly logical and analytical language. His words and actions are always for the sake of solving problems. The words and actions of the woman, however, are generally for the purpose of gaining his attention and serving her emotional needs.

After spending some time at home, the couple spends the rest of their time at a place called Eden. In Christian and Jewish mythology, Eden is where Eve leads Adam astray, leading to the fall of mankind. Depending on how one interprets the end of the film, the Eden in the film is where the woman either leads or nearly leads the man to his downfall. This setting and its symbolism further highlight the film's misogyny.

Via the representation of the woman, womankind is associated with nature and evil. This leaves the viewer to infer that mankind is associated with civilization and good. Before leaving for Eden, no violence takes place, and while she is overcome with grief, the woman retains her sanity. However, after going to Eden, the woman gradually loses her sanity and becomes violent. At about fifty-one minutes into the film, the woman declares "Nature is Satan's Church" (Antichrist). Later, about one hour, four minutes, and forty-one seconds into the film, during a therapy session, she states that "women do not control their own bodies; nature does" (Antichrist). In the same conversation she implies that her research lead her to conclude that

women are evil. Her statements are somewhat vague. However, through the man's interpretation of her words, Von Trier makes sure the man spells out for the audience what would otherwise be left to be inferred.

The film's sex scenes symbolize the association of man with civilization and women with nature while also conveying the idea that women deserved to be punished. When having sex at home, presumably not in a rural setting, the man is on top. When having sex at Eden, away from civilization, the woman is always on top with one exception. During the first sex scene at Eden, the woman is initially on top. She demands that her husband to hit her. When he refuses, she goes outside to masturbate. Only after he goes outside and hits her does she allow him to continue having sex with her. When he continues to do so, he is on top. This conveys the idea that it is natural and proper for man to be in a position of dominance and to inflict violence against women.

The remainder of the film confirms that the woman, and by association all women, are evil and deserve punishment. She attacks him several times, the worst of which is a sex scene that ends with the woman smashing the man's testicles, drilling a hole through his left leg, and attaching a grindstone to that leg by forcing its center shaft through the drilled hole. Only after the man chokes the woman to death is he safe from her. Chris Tookie says that "The audience's sympathies are clearly meant to be with the male suffering the violence, at least up to the point when he turns the tables" (Tookie par. 22) In contrast to the fury of her attacks, the man is sorrowful and without malice when he chokes the woman. Afterwards, he burns her body in a way that resembles the disposal of witches. Perhaps the main idea of the film is that women need guidance and occasional punishment from men in order to behave appropriately, and because the man was initially only willing to provide guidance, his wife's condition deteriorated to the point where her destruction was required.

Not everyone agrees that Antichrist is a misogynistic film. Heidi Laura, a consultant hired by Von Trier for this film said, "As I moved through the sources, I realized that the age-old

dichotomy between supposedly rational man and supposedly wild and uncontrollable women, ruled by impulse and desire, has never left us" (Nissim, sent. 4) There is nothing wrong with exploring the general differences between men and women. However, this does not excuse Von Trier's attempt to these confirm gender stereotypes. Also, the idea that Von Trier is conducting a healthy exploration of the differences between men and women is incompatible with the film's overtly misogynistic symbolism and its idea that women are evil and should be punished.

In attempt to either defend Von Trier or give readers a balanced view of him, Sheila Johnston says, "It can't be denied that he creates compelling parts for women" (par. 2). While the film does give Charlotte Gainsbourg, the actor playing the part of the woman, an opportunity to demonstrate her acting skills, this is hardly a justification for the film. This is almost akin to justifying derogatory, stereotypical black roles in films from the early twentieth century by saying that they provided acting roles to black actors. Johnston also says that "In Antichrist, Gainsbourg, an unconventionally beautiful actress in her late thirties, is writing a PhD thesis on witchcraft. [Von Trier] pays his women the major compliment of taking them seriously" (par. 8). What Von Trier really does in Antichrist is to allow the woman to pretend she is sophisticated and civil before allowing her to devolve into her natural uncontrollable state.

Despite the misogynist message of Antichrist, it is not likely to corrupt many minds. The misogynist symbolism will be beyond the grasp of many viewers. Many will be too repulsed by its shocking sex and violence to consider the film's message. Those who agree with the message already have corrupt minds. However, it is important that this film is seen for what it is. While no legal actions should be taken to censor films like Antichrist, its critics should feel free to not hold back when denouncing this film.

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