Cinematic Asylum:
The Feminist Value of Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* and the Strategy of Artistic Excess

I'd like to make the case for the feminist utility of strategies of artistic magnification. By magnification I mean taking artistic styles, themes, or representations and rendering them in their most absolute, extreme forms by way of exaggerating the tropes and motifs inherent in the cultural objects or practices at issue. Though similar to camp, magnification differs in that it is not a celebratory re-appropriation, but rather a serious attempt at recreating the same systems of signification of certain cultural objects or practices, and then hyperbolizing their signs so that we may explicitly view certain cultural meanings and messages that up to now have only been implied. It is often the case that a serious and excessive artistic magnification of a piece or practice of media gives rise to much controversy; it is with this controversy that this strategy gains much of its power, for not only does it bring attention to the issues the artistic "magnifier" is trying to expose, but it brings notice to the ways in which the excessive object deconstructs and delegitimizes the "mainstream" object and its often-covert means of cultural signification.

There is a recent artistic tradition emanating mainly from central Europe that visibly demonstrates this social/artistic strategy. Certain writers and filmmakers (among them Michael Haneke, Lars Von Trier, and Elfriede Jelinek) have generated international controversy by bringing politically-potent and challenging ideas to their absolute extremes, often in the form of hyperbolizing the acts or

persons that have laid the foundations to the debates at hand. These artists are invariably accused by some of adhering to the viewpoints of the often ugly, unfair, and violent subjects that they are embracing with the full weight of their artistic mediums. Regardless of the veracity of these critiques or of the true intents of the artists (which one will never truly know), I believe these over-the-top, heavy-handed artistic excesses can nonetheless assist us in bringing to the surface problematic ways of thinking and representing that can be found throughout our seemingly innocent "light" media and expose the relations of power being covertly built up in them.

I plan to use Lars von Trier's 2009 film *Antichrist* to demonstrate how this strategy of artistic magnification can be used as a feminist critique of certain patterns present in American media. Specifically, I would argue that *Antichrist*'s hyperbolization of the love and monster film genres provides us with a clear view of a gender regime operating in popular mainstream American films. *Antichrist* not only gives us this regime in its most explicit form, but also illustrates the justification, the means, and the effects of this covert oppression of women operating at a time that many dangerously label as "post-feminist."

The term "post-feminism" has taken on a range of meanings over the last two decades, but Angela McRobbie uses it to explicate a trend in modern mainstream media that is simultaneously quiet and pervasive. Post-feminism is a viewpoint held by media producers and consumers alike, she says, which "positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality has been achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which

emphasize that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force" (McRobbie 255). Thus the "post" signifies the fact that feminism is a relic of the past, that women today are free to choose whatever they'd like and can avoid being censored by the constraining regime of feminism. McRobbie argues that the effect of this is a latent construction of a new "gender regime." She herself remarks that it "might seem heavy handed" to argue, as she does, that this new gender regime is being constructed mostly in the form of light, seemingly nonpolitical entertainment, but she reminds us that "relations of power are indeed made and re-made within texts of enjoyment and rituals of relaxation and abandonment" (McRobbie 262). The challenge then becomes how we go about bringing to the surface these new relations of power when they are concealed in such mild-mannered entertainment.

I believe *Antichrist* provides a solid example of how artistic magnification can be used to expose new gender regimes in a world increasingly seen as post-feminist. It is clear from the outset: *Antichrist* wears its excessive misogyny on its sleeve. Listed in its credits is a "misogyny researcher." The "t" in the "Antichrist" title font is the symbol for women. Its deranged villain is not only a woman, but a character written to represent all women (her name in the script is simply "She"). She terrorizes her caring, rational husband (in one instance smashing his penis with a log and screwing a weight to his leg), consciously allows her child to fall to his death while she indulges in sexual pleasure, and preaches in favor of crimes against women (remarking during a therapy session with her husband that it is the "natural evil" of women that has caused so many crimes throughout history to be committed against them). The film even won the first ever anti-award at the Cannes Film

Festival for being "the most misogynist movie…[1]." *Antichrist* so explicitly attempts to be anti-women, and goes so far to emphasize the fact that this is so, that at times it would seem about to enter the realm of the absurd and the satirical, if only it wasn't so terrifying and heavy. But I would argue that this misogynistic representation of women is a result of the film's magnification of the representation of women in the mainstream love and monster film genres.

I'll use "love film" to refer to romantic comedies, romantic dramas, and other films that use love as the primary driver of the narrative and "monster film" to refer to films of the horror genre in which the narrative is primarily driven by people being chased and killed by some insane evil thing, person, or force. These two genres of mainstream American films—in which women typically play the biggest roles— present us with seemingly contradicting situations: Woman as an object of love and Woman as an object of insanity (whether she is the insane monster itself, or the girl who gets herself killed by doing something terribly foolish). *Antichrist* takes the cinematic tropes of both the love film and the monster film, brings each to an excessive stylization, and spirals them together, a process manifested along the way by the female lead's sensational bipolarity. Because of this, we are simultaneously able to see a more covert cultural signification process operating in these genres—one that, as I hope to illustrate, represents women as child-like subjects who cannot exercise proper control of their bodies unless they subject themselves to the control and disciplinary regime of men. *Antichrist* shows us these genres' justification of this subjectification of women, the suggested means in which

[1] "'Anti-Christ' gets 'anti-prize' at Cannes." *breitbart.com.* May 23 2009.

this subjectification should happen, and the ultimate effects of this on a female character who becomes lucidly aware of this structure of domination.

The Justification:

The love film shows us women as objects of passion and the monster film shows us women as objects of insanity. But as Foucault points out, it is inherently understood in Reason-driven Western culture that "the possibility of madness is… implicit in the very phenomenon of passion" (*Madness & Civilization* 88). To be in the throes of passion is to not have total control over one's body. A body not in control is something insane, mad—a deviation from the rational norm that must therefore be regulated. Female passion in love films is simply madness that is regulated by the heterosexual, monogamous love of a man. Before she becomes "whole" at the end as she embraces her one true love, the woman in the basic mainstream love film spends the majority of the time anxious, making mistakes, not fitting in, and occasionally taken by irrational fits of passion—small signs of madness. We can see this basic structure in almost all of the highest-grossing love films over the past two years, including: *Valentine's Day, Killers, When in Rome, Life as We Know It, The Back-Up Plan, Leap Year, Letters to Juliet, The Ugly Truth, The Proposal,* and *He's Just Not That Into You*, to name a few.

In short, the women in both genres are relegated to the realm of the naturally-mad, whether subtly in the form of passion in the love film, or overtly in the monster film as either the victim whose own insanity and foolishness gets herself killed, or as the insane killer (as in *Cry Wolf*, *The Uninvited, The Ring,* and

High Tension). *Antichrist* gives us both portrayals. For the first half of the film, we are presented with a female character who is obsessed with passion to such an extent that she frequently and almost violently forces sex with her husband. She is constantly trying to please him in any way she can, but often goes so far that he needs to physically stop her. For the last part of the film, the female character embodies the role of the insane monster. She tortures and mutilates her husband's body, chases him as he tries to escape, and ignores all his attempts at reaching her capacity for reason or compassion. We are left with a representation of the female character as someone who does not have the ability to control her own body—someone who is essentially a misbehaving child.

It is this fact that is used as justification for the control of women. For, as Foucault points out, modern madness is "a minority status, an aspect of [reason] that does not have a right to autonomy, and can live only grafted onto the world of reason. Madness is childhood" (252). Thus, as *Antichrist* makes obvious, women in these genres are subtly transformed into child-like creatures who must be tamed and controlled to keep order in society.

The Means:

Women are subsequently controlled in this gender regime when the woman herself exercises "proper" control over her own body. In the love film, it her offering up her body to a man, realizing that it's what she "wanted" all along. In the monster

film, it is the monster destroying her body because she did something foolish with it (like walking into a dark basement) or her, as monster, being destroyed because insanity can never win out in our society of reason. In short, both types of films convey a sense of the proper use of the female body; the love films shows a woman struggling to get there; the monster film shows what happens when a woman does not exercise proper control. In both these genres, the disciplining of the female body is shown to need to take place internally. The woman needs to examine what it is that she is doing, how it is wrong, and what she needs to do to fix it. This is the central plot to many love films—the "I'm not as happy as those other women—what is it I'm doing wrong" question. The monster film acts as a warning, depicting the punishment for what happens when a woman breaks the rules. This process is a manifestation of what Foucault calls the "age of the infinite examination and… compulsory objectification" (*Discipline and Punish 189*). We control our bodies to fit in line with whether we are "passing" both external and internal examinations of how we are conforming to the norms of society. The examination is a "normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify, and to punish" (184). Our social standing, agency, and identity all hinge on how ability to constantly examined how we are fulfilling certain norms. What's more is that the examination is increasingly becoming internalized. As McRobbie suggests, "individuals are increasingly being called upon to invent their own structures," using "self-monitoring practices (the diary, the life plan, the career pathway)…" (260). Thus, a common motif of many modern love films is the use of narration sourced from a

constantly self-examining journal or diary (i.e. *Bridget Jone's Diary* and *Sex and The City*).

Antichrist makes this means of conditioning explicit. Toward the beginning of the film, the female character is trapped in a mental health facility, under constant surveillance and heavily drugged. This is brought on by a bought of depression and an inability to take care of her body, ostensibly caused by the loss of her child. She is continually examined, both by the doctors and her therapist husband. She is trapped here until she is "normal again"—that is, until she is able to examine and normalize herself on her own. When this doesn't seem to be working, her husband brings her home and begins to administer therapy himself. But this leads to fits of passion, as she literally forces her naked body onto him on multiple occasions, always against his will (though he never puts up much of a fight). He then decides to bring her to an isolated cabin in the woods and administer therapy there. Though there are no locked doors or barred windows, this situation is just as prison-like as the mental hospital: she has no escape from the constant surveillance of this man trying to make her sane. Again, his goal in his therapy sessions is, like the mental physicians in the hospital, to help her be able to self-examine and discipline herself in the proper use of her body. She must give in to the demands of the rational man and submit herself to internalizing his disciplining regime. In the end, she fails at doing this, and consequently goes completely insane and is finally killed by her husband/therapist/man. The last section of the film, however, represents a departure from simply illustrating this means of disciplining; instead, it offers a look at what might happen when a female character becomes totally aware of the

structures of domination she finds her body trapped in. Nonetheless, *Antichrist* reminds us that the love film and the monster film are continuations of each other, conveying a disciplinary message of men to women: Your bodies are meant to love us. If you don't, you will go crazy and we will have to kill you.

The Effect:

Julia Kristeva writes of the *abject* as something that is at once intimately intertwined with one's existence and yet repugnantly pushed away. It is not foreign to *me*, and yet "it cannot be assimilated"—it is fundamentally opposed to "I" (Kristeva 1). The act of abjection, then, involves a complex process in which "I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself*" (3). This is how *Antichrist* ends; the female character undergoes a violent abjection of her own body. She becomes lucid to the disciplinary processes at work on and around her body and subsequently abjects it—as it is simultaneously the thing that gives her pleasure and the thing that is used to subject her. Here we see a manifestation of the fundamental disunities at the heart of abjection: her *own* body that is simultaneously not at all her own; this body that brings her pleasure but is also a sign of so much pain suffered by women at the hands of men (it is not a coincidence that she had been writing a thesis on crimes against women before the beginning of the film). Thus, the gruesome scene in which she cuts off her clitoris and later allows her husband to choke her to death.

In showing this abjection, *Antichrist* subtly separates itself from being solely an exaggeration of the love and monster genres and goes a step further; it presents

us with a twist: what might happen when a female character in these genres becomes aware of the systems of domination subjectifying her. Furthermore, the film ends on a very oblique note: an image of the male character on a hill surrounded by hundreds of faceless women. Might this be a dream—his dream of world of perfectly disciplined female bodies? No faces, no inner selves, no identities: just bodies; bodies to be put to use.

In the end, I would argue that *Antichrist* and other similarly excessive and controversial works of art can have much feminist value to offer. First, on a basic level, they provide a valuable complexity to the discourse—something feminism itself has championed. Analysis can tend to boil things down to the black and white, to the good or the bad, the enlightened or the ignorant. Yet *Antichrist* provides a paradox: an outwardly despicable rendering of women set against the backdrop of immensely beautiful images and stirring acting, brought to us by people revered in film circles for their artistry. By bringing the complexity and paradoxes to the forefront, a film like *Antichrist* begs us to reexamine some of the binary simplifications we place on controversial subjects and challenges us to dig deeper into things in order to reveal the matrix of contradictions often involved. Secondly, a film such as *Antichrist* provides an invaluable magnification of socially controversial subjects. While one anti-patriarchy artistic strategy of feminism consists in rewriting or creating anew something previously oppressive, another route I'd argue for is illuminating, via exaggeration, the structure of domination of the existing patriarchal order. I believe *Antichrist* can be used in this way—it magnifies the tendency of mainstream American love and monster films to represent women

as innately insane and thus in need of being disciplined by a rational male figure. In a culture where the gender regimes are so often "made and re-made within texts of enjoyment and rituals of relaxation and abandonment," this artistic magnification is crucial in exposing and delegitimizing the lurking signifiers of oppressive schemes of normalization.

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