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## Provocation by Space: Shocking Images of Forest in Lars von Trier's *Antichrist*

**Abstract.** Rather than shocking images *in* the forest, this paper attempts to analyse the shocking images *of* the forest in Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009) and the role of space in creating an affection-image. In this film, von Trier seems to have reached a culmination of his aesthetics of sensation in the way Gilles Deleuze understands it. In contact with the spectator, as Deleuze suggests, the art should function as a force, intensity, as a sensation, that way addressing the nervous system rather than the brain. The French philosopher compared film image to canvas paintings that can communicate directly the vibration and resonance created by the movement. In *Antichrist*, von Trier painted the sensation of the forest on his film canvas, making it a legitimate character of the film. Instead of being just a backdrop, von Trier's forest steps forward, occupying most of the screen space, but also overruling the two main characters of the film. Foreground and background therefore blend together, causing the shocking actions of the characters to be perceived mainly as an integral part of the overall horrific atmosphere, not carrying the value of shock on their own.

**Keywords:** Antichrist, Lars von Trier, affection-image, Gilles Deleuze, film space.

He: If you can't tell me what you're afraid of, maybe would be easier for you to tell me where you're afraid. Or where do you feel most exposed. What would be the worst place. Apartment? The street? A store? A park? Listening to someone maybe?

She: The woods.

(*Antichrist* 2009)

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Even though Lars von Trier's oeuvre is marked by quite various aesthetic choices, the one thing that justifies them all is the director's constant desire to outdo himself and surpass the restrictions imposed by a stagnant film practice. While trying to achieve the visibility

of “the joy of creation in every frame of a film” (Bainbridge 168), von Trier never neglected his audience’s reaction to it. The urge to provoke their moral judgements with his stories made him look for the ways to induce a strong emotional reaction in them, as a way of getting his message across. Even in the manifest released in 1990 to accompany his film *Europa* (1991), von Trier exclaimed: “Just give me one single tear or a drop of sweat and I would willingly exchange it for all the ‘art’ in the world” (Bainbridge 169) This kind of affective reaction to film that von Trier craved for even then became his ongoing motive for rethinking film form and style and their possibilities to help him achieve it.

Another source of inspiration appears to be a dialogue von Trier is trying to establish with himself through his films. *Antichrist* (2009) and *Melancholia* (2011) are part of von Trier’s Depression trilogy which was named after and inspired by the condition von Trier was experiencing at the time of making of these films. But biographical motivation for their creation doesn’t necessarily decrease the value of their aesthetic formulation, as Torben Grodal claims. According to him, “the impact of the films is based on the degree to which they cue viewers into resonating with the films’ emotions and the films’ aesthetic control procedures in relation to the emotions” (52). Prologues of *Antichrist* and *Melancholia* Grodal describes as a ritual that both von Trier and his audience are taking part in, “a way of sharing the anxiety and trying to wrap the pain and panic in an audio-visual aesthetic that may control it. Its acoustic and visual distress vocalization may even provide some soothing opiates for the separation panic and existential angst of both the director and the audience” (Ibid.).

The blast of life coming from the screen and the physical experience of the magic of film that works its way through the body von Trier considered the only reward the filmmaker could hope for and the only excuse for making the audience suffer. French philosopher Gilles Deleuze gave the same credit to the works of art, claiming they possess the capacity to put a spectator in movement *in-place* through sensation. Deleuze relies on the meaning Paul Cézanne gave to sensation, as something lingering between the facile, the cliché and the sensational, the spontaneous. “Sensation is not in the ‘free’ or disembodied play of light and color”, as Deleuze summarizes Cézanne’s lesson, “on the contrary, it is in the body, even the body of an apple. Color is in the body, sensation is in the body, and not in the air. Sensation is what is painted. What is painted on the canvas is the body, not insofar as it is represented as an object, but insofar as it is experienced as sustaining this sensation” (*Francis Bacon* 35). The sensations are experienced as affects within the body that “immediately act upon a nervous system” (*Francis Bacon* 34). For Deleuze, colour is the affect of the art of film as well as the art of painting. “In Antonioni, colour carries space as far as the void, it effaces what it has absorbed.” (*Cinema 1* 119) At the same time as emptying it, Antonioni fills it with potential which is the imperative of affect. Not only colour, but also shadows, darkness and light, all play the role of reaching the affective. They turn the space into *any-space-whatever*, offering a sense of an alternative

and a spiritual decision. In Deleuze's film aesthetics space itself becomes a carrier of affective qualities. As Clair Coolbrook notes, what one perceives when looking at Deleuze's any-space-whatever is "a power as such, a power to be seen, an extended quality that is not located in *this* space, but is 'a' space" (qtd. in Martin-Jones 135). The image encourages the spectator to give in to its powers while his movement in-place turns into a transcendence from physical to the spiritual. This movement of thought Deleuze has in mind, as David Norman Rodowick explains, is not directed toward a predetermined end, but "toward the new and unforeseen in terms of what Bergson calls the Open or 'creative evolution'" (85). Pure optical and sound situations that are neither the result of an action, nor they resolve into one, become the pieces of a crystal-image that supports indiscernibility of the real and the imaginary, and the present and the past. As opposed to a movement-image that creates a stable spatio-temporal coordinates and the image of world as total and true, crystal narration of the time-image questions this veracity. Its power is the power of the false, where "thought moves not as an expanding spatial image but in time or as temporality, a becoming rather than a being". (Ibid.)

In *Antichrist*, von Trier brings forest space to life, turning it into an autonomous character of the film. Capable of crying, or absorbing the characters that inhabit it, his forest becomes anthropomorphised, capable of expressing a character of its own while von Trier holds us in suspense whether its space is a visualization of his female character's inner state, or the cause of it. The director achieves this primarily by stressing the affective qualities of its soundscape that denies any similarity to real life experience. Like with Deleuze's crystal-image, a distinction between true and false is left to us to draw. This paper aims to analyze the aesthetics von Trier employs in *Antichrist* to achieve this, as he guides us on our way from affective reaction to images on the screen toward their meaning.

Always located somewhere between objective reality and his characters' personal perception of it, von Trier's stories couldn't be interpreted without considering the presence of the invisible, irrational aspect of life. Whether liberated from any stable spatio-temporal coordinates, or freed from human presence and becoming a sole substance of the frame that calls for a metaphorical reading, space is given an important narrative role in this respect, proving its close relation to psychological worlds of von Trier's characters. 'Nature versus mind' becomes a recurring theme in his films, provided that we understand nature in a broadest possible sense like von Trier does. For him, the nature is primarily a metaphor for the jungle in which his characters are forced to struggle for survival. "Had it been people instead of trees and animals, it would have been a Hieronymus Bosch image, humanity as a battlefield... In *Europa* nature, the jungle was a wartorn Europe, and in penetrating it the humanist ends up succumbing to its laws" (Hjort and Bondebjerg 215-216). But this metaphor of nature is not always hidden behind the story. Images of nature overwhelm the screen ever since von Trier's graduation film *Images of a Relief* (1982) in which forest becomes

the place of self-realization, a place capable of reviving the memories of childhood. Throughout his oeuvre, von Trier asks us to consider the meaning of such images in complete unity with the characters that inhabit it. While dramatic wind blows and crashing waves in both *Medea* (1988) and *Breaking the Waves* (1996) impeccably reflect the inner turmoil of von Trier's protagonists, in his last trilogy the director finally moves into the mind of his female characters, causing the estrangement of space from its worldly values. Strong connection between the setting and mental images typical for fairy tales is especially evident in *Melancholia* (2011). Against the extremely cultivated landscape of the golf course stands the untamed forest that prohibits entrance to anyone that comes its way. And even though von Trier doesn't take us inside its space, the feeling of fear its presence evokes in us comes as a reflex to the iconography revealed in his previous film *Antichrist*. Affective imagery of the forest and the horror experienced by the characters inside its space, persist in our memory ever since as an assurance of its immeasurable force. The forest in *Antichrist* becomes the point where the past and the present meet, a manifestation of collective unconscious deeply rooted in all of us. By choosing not to give his characters personal names, but rather refer to them in terms of their gender – as He and She, by giving the forest name Eden and using a common fairy tale setting, von Trier gives his story a timeless, universal character. Provocation by space becomes the primary mean von Trier applies in this film, as he continues to pursue his mission to tell people stories they don't want to hear.

After a poetic prologue of *Antichrist*, in which we witness the tragedy of a couple losing their child, von Trier wakes us from this dreamlike state, bringing us back to the reality of the emotional horror expected to follow this terrible ordeal. In order to help his wife cope with grief, the husband, a psychiatrist, decides to take her back to the forest house where she used to spend time with their son, and make her rationalize the overwhelming fear of this place that is now possessing her. Her previous visits to this house were marked by her research on gynocide, which, as we'll soon find out, made a crucial influence on her understanding and eventually embracing the role that history written by men assigned to women.

As Bruno Bettelheim explains, in fairy tales whose story revolves around two characters, those characters should be understood as two aspects of human psyche, of man's animal and human nature that fight for predominance throughout his life. As such, they shouldn't be considered separately, because it is only their unification that can bring happiness and lead to fairy tale's happy ending (Bettelheim). If we consider von Trier's characters in such manner, then the space they occupy should be interpreted not as a physical phenomenon, but rather as a space of human psyche in which its different aspects embodied in film's characters are competing against each other. That He, a psychiatrist and a man of reason, stands opposed to the irrational nature of his wife, von Trier gives us clue when he chooses to reveal a segment omitted earlier from the opening sequence. His female character's look toward

her child approaching the open window explains her feeling of guilt, but also her acceptance of historic belief in carnal and evil nature of women. In order to satisfy her sexual drive, She chose to make an oversight, even though being aware of the tragic outcome awaiting her child.-

Succumbing to this new role of the bringer of death She now believes she is destined to play, changes her perception of things, which is made obvious in the film through her experience of forest. She starts to hear what she has never heard before, as her husband tries to find rational explanation for her condition. At first he encourages her to visualize the forest, as a method that will help her embrace her own unconscious. In her visualizations, she is walking through the forest in slow motion, describing it as a soundless landscape where everything stays hidden and the trees have strange personality. Our assumption that wondrous atmosphere of Eden is a reflection of her inner world is confirmed when the sound of water stream intensifies as her feeling of discomfort while crossing it rises. Or in the scene in which she is facing the fear of walking the ground she claims is burning, film's sound texture moves away from the naturalism and steps in as a reflection of the unease that she is feeling. That is why we are invited to read a detail of her bare feet stepping on the thorny grass that follows as her visualization of this act, and the wondrous atmosphere of the forest as her subjective vision of this space.

Her husband's advice that mind can control fear has a positive effect for a short while, but both of them gradually succumb to the feeling of horror Eden evokes in them. Although not verbally, the forest communicates with the two characters, and we can even say that it acts as a narrator so often present in von Trier's films. Its atmosphere, sounds and behavior condition the way two characters think, feel and act, often echoing the emotional and mental breakdown they are enduring. In addition to this, von Trier grants his forest an ability to express its own personality and its own emotions. Instead of being just a backdrop, it steps forward occupying most of the screen space, but also overrunning the two main characters of the film. A wide shot of the forest demonstrates its impressive voluminosity that looks as though swallowing both the road leading to it and the approaching car carrying our main characters. Also, a high-angle shot of their son playing among the tall trees that cast shadows over him, proves again its superiority over the human presence. Foreground and background therefore blend together, causing the shocking actions of the characters to be perceived mainly as an integral part of the overall horrific atmosphere, not carrying the value of shock on their own.

But it is primarily the soundscape that enables von Trier to build the character of his forest, along with the tension of his story. What frightens his female character the most is the expanding sound of a child's cry and the eventual realization that she is unable to trace its source. Her desperate look toward the sky in search for an answer is followed by a wide shot of the forest covered by this crying sound wandering over the screen surface, as Michel Chion would describe it. At first acousmatic, in the

sense that denies us the information about its nature, it serves as a mean to achieve dramatic effect and prolong the suspense that would be relieved by the sound's eventual visualization. But in case of *Antichrist*, Chion's term *the visualized sound* as the sound "accompanied by the sight of its source or cause" (72), is perhaps not the right description of what follows, since the image of the forest was present on the screen all along. What comes as a surprise is purely the perception of it as the sound source that defies any real life experience. Improbability of the connection between sounds that are heard and forest as their originated source becomes the point of departure between image and sound, and consequently real and imaginary. That way, von Trier achieves the effect of *defamiliarization*, or liberation of perception from automatism as Victor Sklovskij describes it, that calls for reactivation of our attention. Long duration of the shot exposing forest as the sound source disrupts the established rhythm of the film, that way additionally stressing the affective charge coming from the screen. Contemplative quality of this image creates lyrical experience which cues the viewer to extract it from its normal context and assign it a higher meaning. For Gilles Deleuze, this temporal experience of image enables it to open itself up toward a spiritual dimension, blurring the line between physical and spiritual, and real and imaginary. Ambiguity of these categories is the main characteristic of Deleuze's crystal image in which both sound and the visual image can carry a distinction between the real and the imaginary, or the alternative of the true and the false, as long as "a sequence of audio-visual images necessarily makes the distinct indiscernible and the alternative undecidable" (*Cinema 2* 250). For Deleuze, the result of this is the disappearance of out-of-field space and off-screen voice, because "the sound image is born, in its very break, from its break with the visual image" (*Cinema 2* 251). They are no longer two autonomous components of a single audio-visual image, but two heautonomous images with an irrational cut between them.

In one of her lines, von Trier's female character reveals this sound experience of Eden as crucial for the terrifying feeling it induces in her. "Now I can hear what I couldn't hear before – a cry of all the things that are about to die." To produce the same feeling in his spectators, von Trier creates a symbioses of music and ambiental sounds in order to redesign the sounds of nature as we know them and make them applicable to his forest only. The way von Trier builds the sound image of *Antichrist* resembles the principles Andrei Tarkovsky and his composer Eduard Artemyev followed while working on *The Mirror* (1975). As Tarkovsky explains, "we wanted the sound to be close to that of an earthly echo, filled with poetic suggestion – to rustling, to sighing. The notes had to convey the fact that reality is conditional, and at the same time accurately to reproduce precise states of mind, the sounds of a person's interior world" (162). Hyperbolisation of the wind, rain or water streaming sounds in Tarkovsky's film and constant presence of a disturbing monotonous tone that underlines all other sounds, correspond to the techniques von Trier employes in his film to achieve the sinister atmosphere of Eden. Not without a reason, von Trier

finishes his film with a dedication to this famous Russian director. House in the woods, family atmosphere and prominent mother figure as common motifs of Tarkovsky's oeuvre, mark von Trier's landscape as well, although acquiring a completely different emotional interpretation. This goes for the image of time too, the fusion of different time strains that both directors create with masterly skill. In *Antichrist*, von Trier's image succeeds in embracing past, present and future in a single shot, expressing the force of time with expressive force of its visual representation.

In order to do this, von Trier relies on a well known topography and meanings inscribed in it by fairy tales, myths and legends that speak to something deep inside of all of us. By encouraging us to a symbolic reading of film's spaces, he manages to take his story to another level. Both the house and the forest widen their meaning when von Trier reveals to us their hidden aspects. An attic that hides a collection of books and drawings about gynocide becomes a place of knowledge, a conscious aspect of this overall metaphor of human psyche that *Antichrist* stands for. But the true key to the story's meaning is hidden in the space that lies below, just like fairy tales thought us to read the meaning of the basement as the space of subconscious. In *Antichrist*, the existence of such space is suggested by the massive tree roots, appearing from underneath the ground surface. From the detail of the rooted plant in a glass vase that occupies his female character's attention at the beginning of the film, to a large oak tree trunk that serves as the setting for some later scenes, von Trier keeps reminding us throughout the film about the presence of this invisible force that hides behind the visible reality. When he uses this setting for two main characters' sexual act and decides to enrich this already powerful image with unidentified human extremities intertwined with the knotted roots, we can't help but think of this pictorial unity in metaphorical terms.

Film's epilogue brings further development of this iconography. After killing his wife in order to save his own life, von Trier's character leaves the forest followed by dozens of women. With their faces blurred, these women don't provoke us to think in terms of their identity, but only in terms of their gender, as was the case with the main characters of the film. Like in a fairy tale ending Bruno Bettelheim talks about, von Trier's fairy tale gets its closure when the man, as reason personified, conquers carnal nature embodied in his wife. At the same time, this kind of ending proves that behavioral code by which men kill women while making them believe they are the bearers of evil, through history became equally imprinted on both genders, existing still in their collective memory. Women leaving the forest at the end of the film, whose extremities, as we are free to believe, were intertwined with the roots of a hundreds of years old tree, belong to this space of collective memory that the massive roots personify. Their eventual rise to the surface reminds us of that, proving their existence as a burden men are condemned to carry.

This collective memory is exactly what British historian Simon Schama has in mind when he talks about the past always being present. "Before it can ever be a repose for

the senses”, he claims, “landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock” (6-7). Schama explains that the reason forest appears as the common topography of the tales of brothers Grimm and German literature in general, is deep connection its landscape has with German history. Therefore, in German literary texts, forest becomes a point where patriotism, religion, past and future intersect. This relation between our perception and past also inspired Gilles Deleuze to look for this *archeology of the present*, as he calls it, in moving images. Like he proclaimed, “the visual image becomes *archaeological, stratigraphic, tectonic*. Not that we are taken back to prehistory, but to the deserted layers of our time that bury our own phantoms” (*Cinema 2* 243-244). The invisible forces become visible, as the images obtain both pictorial and sculptural qualities, like he thought rocks on Paul Cézanne’s canvases express their tectonic and geological power. This materialization of sensation that Cézanne achieved is exactly what Deleuze searched for in film art, considering it a criteria for both still image of canvas and the moving image of film. Pictorial and sculptural qualities of von Trier’s forest correspond perfectly to Deleuze’s notion of painting the sensations as a way of reaching the affective. Through its shapes and colors, its acoustic and visual impressiveness, von Trier’s film canvas, as Deleuze and Guattari would describe it, “vibrates, clenches or cracks open because it is the bearer of glimpsed forces” (*What is Philosophy* 181).

Still, what differentiates von Trier’s aesthetics from the principles of Deleuze’s aesthetics of sensation is the notion of meaning. Deleuze abandons Saussurean division of the sign into two constituent parts – material signifier and conceptual signified, for the sake of situating the meaning in the exact moment of contact between a spectator and a work of art. Unpredictability of it stems from the film’s pursuit of affective, that opens large spaces for interpretation and gives greater freedom to spectator’s reasoning. With *Antichrist*, von Trier manages to control this unpredictability by making allusions to archetypal motifs that dwell in all of us. By adopting the mythic topography that already carries a multitude of meanings in itself, von Trier provokes both our mind and our emotions, creating a unique unity of affect and thought so typical of the aesthetics of sensation he persistently develops through his films.

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