Amy Simmons, *Antichrist* (Leighton Buzzard: Auteur Publishing, 2015)

Antichrist (2009) is arguably Lars von Trier's most controversial film, and a detailed examination of it is an appropriate addition to Auteur Publishing's 'Devil's Advocates' series of monographs on horror cinema. In her book *Antichrist* (2015), Amy Simmons has crafted a close study of this film, where 'themes such as misogyny, maternal ambivalence, madness and lust permeate a ruptured dreamscape' (p. 22). She pronounces von Trier to be the most important Danish director since Carl Theodor Dreyer, pointing out the skill with which he transcends genres, with his films crossing conventional boundaries between realist, art house, and Hollywood. Simmons's *Antichrist* explores von Trier's aesthetic, as well as his psychological and philosophical concerns, tying them together in an admirably succinct and compelling style.

Antichrist is an enthralling and distressing two-hander, with Willem Dafoe and Charlotte Gainsbourg playing the unnamed characters 'He' and 'She'. The film follows the married couple as they deal with the death of their child, who we see fall from their apartment window while they are having sex, in the dialogue-free, black-and-white, slow-motion prologue. Von Trier's *Antichrist* is divided into four 'chapters', bookended by the aforementioned prologue and an epilogue; however, within this apparently ordered structure, the narrative that unfolds is profoundly unstable, marked by the fracturing of time and space, and of the self. Simmons explores how von Trier's destabilised narrative mode reflects the ways that trauma can disrupt conceptions of identity and memory. The complex issue of identity is represented by *Antichrist*'s refusal to name its characters, which allows them to be defined almost entirely by their actions and emotions on screen, and to reflect broad ideas relating to gender and social norms, rather than simply individual psyches. She is as passionate and emotional as He is cold and clinical; when She breaks down, He takes command of her physical and psychological care. Simmons asserts that He represents patriarchal authority — he demands complete control of her body and her life — and, in response to his cruel manipulation, She rebels. There is a painful intimacy to the representation of this relationship, and in considering Dafoe and Gainsbourg's raw and affective performances, Simmons is careful to acknowledge von Trier's reputation as a punishing director[1], subjecting both his characters and actors 'to his artistic and narrative

[1] See Pat Dowell, 'Lars von Trier: A Problematic Sort of Ladies' Man?', *NPR*, 6 November 2011 <http://www.npr.org/2011/11/06/142026288/lars-von-trier-a-problematic-sort-of-ladies-man> [accessed 11 September 2017].

tyranny' (p. 9). She also notes the oft-mentioned influence of von Trier's psychological breakdown while making the film on his portrayal of mental illness (p. 16).

As this suggests, Simmons situates *Antichrist* in the context of von Trier's work as a whole, and provides an especially useful consideration of the evolution of his use of female characters who are defined by their suffering. 'The female character's misery', she points out, 'is often generated directly or indirectly by misguided and controlling men' (p. 10). The (mis)treatment of She is central to much of the widespread criticism of *Antichrist*, which is notable for its savage emotions and brutal actions.[2] Simmons addresses this criticism, starting with the scandal following its premiere at Cannes in 2009 and the sustained outrage following its wider release. This includes a discussion on the accusations that *Antichrist* is misogynistic, and that, as in much of his work, the female characters are mistreated by men and denied agency (pp. 10-11). However, Simmons urges us to look past the overwhelming and deeply unsettling violence — including the controversial and horrific scenes of mutilation. She works to convince us that, beneath the surface, *Antichrist* offers a 'genuinely radical and unflinching account of human relationships' (p. 11). She explains that, precisely because the film is *about* misogyny, it serves to emphasise von Trier's criticism of patriarchal society and functions as a progressive study of gender politics. For Simmons, the character of She is therefore drawn as both a sympathetic victim and a 'radically diverse heroine' (p. 15). Indeed, Simmons posits that many of the negative reactions to the film are in fact responses to the way that the character of She actively resists conventional cinematic representations of women.

Extending this defence of von Trier's and the film's feminism, a particularly apt part of Simmons' exegesis is her consideration of the complex and deeply uneasy depiction of motherhood in *Antichrist*. Underlying the grief of She, there emerge indications of her hostility towards her child, and an implication that his death was, if not deliberate, then encouraged. Simmons proposes that the suggestion that She hurt her child implies a rebellion against a culture that insists She be a mother first and above all else. The film subversively draws attention to her subjectivity, highlighting the violent conflict between a woman's role as a mother and other aspects of her identity, specifically She's role as a scholar and as a sexual being. In her discussion of femininity and social conventions, Simmons also turns briefly to Barbara Creed and the anarchic potential of the monstrous feminine, via Julia

[2] See Xan Brooks, '*Antichrist*: A Work of Genius or the Sickest Film in the History of Cinema', *Guardian*, 16 July 2009 <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/jul/16/antichrist-lars-von-trier-feminism> [accessed 11 September 2017].

Kristeva and the obvious abjection that features in the film. She suggests that 'von Trier does not need to create actual monsters, because he is making a statement about the monstrosity placed onto the meaning of femininity itself' (p. 80).

In addition to focusing on gender, Simmons includes an in-depth exploration of von Trier's use of allusion in *Antichrist*. Specifically, she excavates the layers of symbolism in the film, not only the immediately obvious reference to Christianity in the title (though she points out that it originated directly from Friedrich Nietzsche's 1888 book *Der Antichrist*) and in the setting, which is called Eden, but also to myth, folklore, and witchcraft. Simmons aligns *Antichrist* with Swedish films about witches, notably *Häxan* (Benjamin Christensen, 1922) and Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Day of Wrath* (1943). She also considers *Antichrist* alongside Nicholas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* (1973), with its similarly evocative study of a parent grieving after the death of a child and experiencing strange visions; and David Cronenberg's *The Brood* (1979) and Andrej Zulawski's *Possession* (1981), with their study of madness and deteriorating relationships. Simmons draws a surprising connection between *Antichrist* and the Australian New-Wave films *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Peter Weir, 1975) and *Long Weekend* (Colin Eggleston, 1978), characterised as they are by mythic landscapes that are imbued with images of femininity, sexuality, and transgression. She also explores connections beyond cinema, including the Swedish plays of August Strindberg (who, von Trier has asserted, exerted a strong influence on *Antichrist*), such as *The Father* (1887). She further points to a connection with the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch, Henri Rousseau, and Thomas Cole. This reference to fine art is especially apt here, as it allows for the discussion of haptic visuality. These works offer 'the spectator an intimate sense of surface and touch' (p. 24), highlighting the extent to which von Trier encourages the engagement of all five senses in those watching the film.

Simmons equally works to situate *Antichrist* within the horror genre, exploring how von Trier combines the fantastical with the realist tradition. The film abounds in tropes familiar from horror films: a remote location (specifically, a cabin in the woods), a psychotic woman, and body horror. The supernatural elements tie the film into the sub-genre of natural horror, with the woods and its creatures seeming strange and dangerous. Simmons specifically positions the narrative as one that is enacted in a gothic space, a place where the familiar is made strange and the truth hidden in 'an entangled mess of questions, issues and incongruities' (p. 22). Interestingly, she also suggests a literary link to the unreliable narrators in the works of Edgar Allen Poe. In particular, Simmons highlights von Trier's interest in

folklore, describing the film as a dark fairy-tale. Witchcraft is a persistent thread throughout *Antichrist*: She believes herself to be evil, a witch to be burnt (p. 41). Simmons points to the precedent of witches in forests that is referenced here, as well as the inclusion of the 1487 witch-hunting manual *Malleus Maleficarum* from She's unfinished thesis. This is a persuasive consideration of the connection between the horror genre and folklore, which further serves to emphasise Simmons's insistence that *Antichrist* is a 'densely layered film in its employment of a symbolic vocabulary' (p. 21).

In her description of *Antichrist* as exposing emotions as if they are bleeding wounds (p. 11), Simmons points to how von Trier blurs the line between external horror and internal conflict. It is conflict that dominates the film, between emotion and intellect, autonomy and social conventions, and the perspectives of He and She. Simmons uncovers multiple layers in *Antichrist*, and, importantly, re-evaluates von Trier's representation of women as complex and powerful, opening a space for a broader study of the visual and philosophical potential of the horror genre.

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