Antichrist—Chaos Reigns: the event of violence and the haptic image in Lars von Trier’s film

Bodil Marie Stavning Thomsen*
Scandinavian Department, Faculty of the Humanities, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark

Abstract
Lars von Trier’s film, Antichrist (2009), is in this article seen within the philosophical framework of Friedrich Nietzsche’s The Anti-Christ (1888) and the filmic inspiration of Andrey Tarkovsky’s The Sacrifice (1986). The overall question of the Dionysian orgy, sacrifice and rebirth of nature is also related to the negative picturing of the woman and the devil (Antichrist) in Malleus Maleficarum (1486), that form a central reference for the imagery in the film. Trier’s composition and use of the haptic image as a denominator of a virtual time, where an eternal return of the same might take place, is finally seen as an aesthetic comment on the contemporary real-time control of media.

Keywords: Lars von Trier; Antichrist; Friedrich Nietzsche; Andrey Tarkovsky; Dionysus; the haptic image; real-time images; the eternal return of the same

In Lars von Trier’s Antichrist (2009), the “t” in the very first title sequence is replaced by a female sign. This obvious symbol will offer the first thread of interpretation in the following. This particularly because Trier has explicitly stated that with this film, he has made what he always hated most: a symbolic film. The title Antichrist obviously refers to Nietzsche’s polemical pamphlet against Christianity, The Anti-Christ (1888), which Lars von Trier according to his own statements has had on his bed-side table since the age of 12.

The second thread of interpretation is compositional and takes the very last image of the film as its point of departure, where Trier dedicates his film to Andrey Tarkovsky (1932–1986). Several of Tarkovsky’s films may have inspired Trier aesthetically, but on a compositional level The Sacrifice (1986) in particular offers the most explicit dialogical framework for the motives in Antichrist. With these two threads as my point of departure, one philosophic and the other cinematic, spanning over 100 years, I will sum up the article by interpreting the signification of the haptic images in the film. The term “haptic” is used in accordance with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s (Deleuze & Guattari 1988) use of Alois Riegl’s definition (Riegl 1901/2), where the point is that a near-sighted observation may contain a specific sensation of how it feels to touch what is actually being looked at. This may be true of woven tapestries, mosaics, fabric, but also material qualities in paintings as well as visual traces of the medium in film, video and digital images, where the haptic view may be identified. This view, or this way of composing, differs from the optic, which is rather associated to a spatial, long-sighted visual organisation in depth, like in the central perspective of the renaissance. The dominating black-and-white series of images in the introduction to Antichrist, which contains the traumatic point of departure and turning point of the film, develops in the most beautiful way how haptic visual organisation dwells with modulations on the surface of the image.

Friedrich Nietzsche published The Anti-Christ as a polemical pamphlet immediately prior to writing...
Ecce Homo (published in 1908), in which he called himself “Dionysos against the crucified” (Thielst, 8). Before The Anti-Christ, On the Genealogy of Morality (1887), Beyond Good and Evil (1886), and Thus spoke Zarathustra (1885) had been published. They all more or less related to The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music (1872), which in a new edition from 1886 got a new subtitle (Or: Hellenism and Pessimism) and a new introduction. In this new introduction, Nietzsche wrote that he had taken the liberty to make Dionysos the opposite of Christian morality, and thus give Anti-Christ the name of Dionysos. After The Anti-Christ, Twilight of the Idols was published in the end of January 1889, which also concluded his oeuvre.

A couple of weeks before the publication, Nietzsche had collapsed in public in a street. He never got over this psychic collapse. In this context, it is most important to note that Nietzsche identifies Dionysos with Anti-Christ, a character which in Michel Maffesoli’s L’Ombre de Dionysos: contribution à une sociologie de l’orgie (1985) has been brought to life within a sociological context.

Nietzsche confers on Anti-Christ the untamed natural, Dionysic forces that in Greece in the antiquities constituted the dark side of the Apollinic order. Where Apollo, the god of sculpture, represented structure, marked boundaries, plastic forms, images, conscience, thought and concepts, all that would contribute to what we today with one word call “individuation”, Dionysos, the god of wine, represented the unbound, timeless, the lack of image and reflection, music, intoxication, but also will, which interestingly enough is physical, not metaphysical. In the new introduction to The Birth of Tragedy 1886, Nietzsche wrote, as already mentioned, that he had taken the liberty to make Dionysos the opposite of Christian morality, and thus give Anti-Christ the name of Dionysos. But in addition to this opposition there is yet another opposition, namely that of male and female, as the Dionysian motif in Nietzsche is more conventionally feminine than masculine, as several scholars have noted (Oppel).³

Nietzsche’s preference for a female symbol in relation to the Dionysian figure is confirmed to a certain extent in the ecstasy of the Dionysian cult, which liberates man from himself, including from his gender. In addition, the Dionysian character, balancing between fantasy and reality, was portrayed as both male and female already in the Greek antiquity. Or rather: the more the cult develops, the more female traits are added to the Dionysian character.⁴ There are three ritual phases in the celebration of the Dionysian cult: first the wine, which is inhabited by the god, is consumed from specific Dionysian cups. Thereby, the consumer becomes in turn inhabited by the god and falls in ecstasy, “exits himself”, to give place to the god who in enthousiasmos enters the person. Then, mania also occurs, a maniac rage, where the person loses himself and becomes one with the group of maenads, as the god instead takes the place. This momentaneous rage manifests itself by a furious dance. Finally, the person reaches harmony and happiness, a forerunner of the katharsis in the tragedies, which is the reason why Dionysos also became god of the theatre and in the tragedies held the commenting function of the chorus.⁵ Frances Nesbitt Oppel notes, that Nietzsche in the Dionysian character also includes the maenads, the women which were in majority among the practitioners of Dionysian cult. According to Oppel, they represent the pain, passion and ecstasy associated with childbirth. Like intoxication, pain, passion and ecstasy crosses and breaks down borders (Oppel, 73). The Dionysian character and cult are namely also associated with nature, which brings life as well as death; the very anti-thesis of edification. The Dionysian cult thus also signifies the non-aesthetic, natural sense, which is supposed to balance the Apollinian aesthetic and conceptual way of conceiving the world.

To return once again to Trier’s Antichrist, which in its title includes the female sign (which in Denmark is synonymous with 1970s feminism), it is striking that we here, too, after the introduction find a division in three parts: (1) Sorrow: represented by the deer which carries a yet unborn or dead fawn; (2) Pain: Chaos Reigns, represented by the fox which eats its own inner organs; (3) Despair: Gynocide, represented by the raven which does not want to die. But where the two first of these chapters without difficulty can be related to different stages in the psychoanalytic therapy to which the man subjects the woman, the third chapter, Despair: Gynocide represents the very opposite of psychic healing in an individualistic psychological perspective. But this chapter also opens for a view of the film in a wider perspective, where it concerns the social “corpus” and the cathartic form of purification, which the
tripartite Dionysian cult once staged. Desperation and despair are the points of departure for many kinds of unbridled or violent ritual behaviour in many cultures. Ritual forms of behaviour, which are often practised by young people, for example, in the form of wild parties, may with a German expression be called “zwecklos aber sinnvoll” (without objective, but meaningful; Maffesoli, 144). Maffesoli underlines, that it is the cyclic time of nature or (with Nietzsche) the eternal return, which is the magical centre of the rituals (Maffesoli, 48). Because it is this cyclic time that the Apollinian reason, and later Christianity, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and even Marxism wants to dominate and replace by a continuous, linear time that can be controlled. The eternal return contains a Dionysian affirmation of life, as in the cyclic ecstasy all values are overthrown and reevaluated. This event is always one and the same, an affirmation of life. Nature is thus not only cosmos, but just as much chaos and chance. This is also true of social life, which in all societies and cultures has been regulated by totem and taboo. In many societies, animals, stones or pieces of wood constitute such totems, which suggest a link between the individual and cosmos (Maffesoli, 49). These totem-figures appear in Antichrist as well as in Tarkovsky’s The Sacrifice, to which I will return.

In Trier’s Antichrist it is the man (Willem Dafoe) who sees the totem-animals in a kind of visions affecting his interpretation of reality. But the woman (Charlotte Gainsbourg) is already through her studies of witchcraft rituals familiar with The Three Beggars: the deer, the fox and the raven. As the man is educated in the psycho-analytic tradition, where the word is supposed to pave the way for reason and insight, for the time being they only offer to the spectator the image of his wondering. Though, as will later become apparent, The Three Beggars anticipate the course of the events; however, it is only towards the end of the film that they offer some kind of meaning. Through the image of the self-consuming fox, introducing chaos in the garden of Eden at the end of the chapter “Pain”, there comes rain, then twilight and finally darkness falls. Both in Greek and Roman Dionysian cults and in the Witch Sabbaths centuries later, night is worshipped. After the man has discovered the thesis on witch-trials that the woman has left unfinished in the attic, he chooses to confront her with what from the horizon of his Apollonian reason looks as a psychic collapse, an obsession or even worse: a worship of Dionysian forces. Finally, he has discovered something concrete, a reason that has consequences. And from now on, things accelerate with unforeseen rapidity. The female, anti-Christian rage develops in a way that profoundly transforms not only the characters, but also the body of the film. Thoughts and fantasies materialise with furious speed in actions, in materialisations of time passing or, borrowing a concept from Gilles Deleuze, in “peaks of present” [points de present] (Deleuze 1989, 129f). The “point of no return” in the film is created when the man stages a kind of play where his role is to represent nature, which releases her anguish, whereas her role is to behave rationally. The dialogue unfolds as follows:

I’m nature, all the things, that you call nature./ Ok, mister Nature. What do you want/? To hurt you as much as I can./ How?/ How do you think?/ By frightening me/? By killing you! Nature can’t harm me. You’re just the all greenery outside./ No, I’m more than that./ I don’t understand./ I’m outside, but I’m also ... within. I’m nature of all human beings./ Oh, that kind of nature. The kind of nature, that causes people to do evil things against women./ That’s exactly, who I am./ That kind of nature interested me a lot, when I was up here. That kind of nature was the subject of my thesis. But you shouldn’t underestimate Eden./ What did Eden do? I discovered something else in my material, than I expected. If human nature is evil. Then that goes as well for the nature of ... of women ... female nature./ The nature of all the sisters. Women do not control their own bodies. Nature does ... Here, the forces of nature are related by the woman to society’s violence against women, which is also related back to the garden of Eden, to Paradise, the cause of man’s original sin and thus to Eve’s liaison with the worm. Precisely this was a central point in the witch-trials as well as in Malleus Maleficarum (Kramer), which was published in Latin in Germany in 1486. The book, that in Danish was called Heksehammeren (The Witch-Hammer), also offered the canonical background for the over 1000 witch burnings that took place in Denmark (the last of them on Falster in 1693). In the chapter “Despair”, this book serves as a direct source of inspiration for a number of
powerful images. First of all, there are the pictures from the thesis, which reproduce some of the most well-known illustrations of witchcraft and witch burnings, but soon after the dialogue quoted above, the same kind of images start to materialise directly on screen, in the film itself.

During the nocturnal act of intercourse, where the woman wants to feel the violence, the body, the pain in order to feel the limits of her body—or perhaps the inverse, to unite with a collective, Dionysian body, she leaves the shared bed and masturbates outside, in nature, at the foot of a huge tree with giant roots. When the man interferes, he appears and acts as a devil though it is impossible to say who initiates whom into the devilry. A kind of Witch Sabbath takes place during the intercourse by the roots of the tree, from which a number of hands slowly appear. This scene more than suggests the kind of fantasies of orgies, which Maffesoli sees as a derivation of the bacchanalia of Dionysian cult:

The fantasy of witch sabbaths and black masses is another form which draws on Dionysian cult. Here, he becomes demoniacal. It of course the sabbath which remains the model of the genre, with the goat in the centre, impersonating the evil, unrestrained devil which also evokes Dionysos or the god Pan. In the idea of the sabbath and in the pictures representing it orgiastic ceremonies have a particular place; a naked woman is admired or a young virgin is ritually deflowered, actions initiating unrestrained debauchery devoted to the god of evil, the devil impersonated. (Maffesoli, 145)

The image of the woman masturbating and the man participating is intoned by a demoniacal grunting, but the interesting thing is, that Trier in the middle of the orgiastic act makes the woman refer to Malleus Maleficarum, as she says: “The sisters from Ratisbon could start a hailstorm”. And a well-known drawing of two women, Agnes and Anne from Ratisbon, condemned for witchcraft, is shown in a glimpse on the screen. In Malleus Maleficarum, which by the way uses the term Antichrist synonymously with the devil, the phenomenon of hailstorms plays a central role. The story about the two condemned witches is an ill-concealed reference both to masturbation and to the intercourse that results from woman’s lust. The hailstorm in Malleus Maleficarum is interpreted as an initiation to a relationship to the devil, as the witch becomes a helper, who may reinforce the devil’s deeds. The devil materialises, in particular, through water and air and through their mixing in, for example, mist or hail.

On the day following this nocturnal orgy the man tries to teach the woman that good and evil has nothing to do with therapy, and that the form of natural evil which is fantastically envisioned in the Sabbath, is an infatuation or an obsession which cannot materialise itself in reality. The same is true of the anguish, he says, that even not during hypnosis may make you do things you wouldn’t normally do. Shortly hereafter, however, he falls prey to his own ideas, as the woman finds the autopsy report, which he and the spectator are the only ones to have read and seen. In a flashback, he fixes himself on the enclosed X-ray, which shows a little deformation by the ankle. But the woman never sees this picture. Instead, she is presented for photographies of Nick with his boots reversed, as if it were an interrogation and not a conversation. The X-ray is thus replaced or superposed by the photography with which she is confronted, which seems to suggest to the spectator that she has acted consciously. But (like the man) we keep the memory of the X-ray as the hidden truth, where the mother’s tormenting of the boy is the cause of his fall. For the cloven hoof of the devil adds fantastically to the X-ray, which thus appears as a foregrounded element in the picture.

Following this, the spectator follows the man walking through the mist, which in Malleus Maleficarum is designed as the devil’s preferred medium of transportation, towards the laboratory. Here, the spectator is also presented to several images of Nick with reverse boots. In another flashback, the man/spectator actually “sees” the woman force the child to walk with its right foot in its left boot and vice versa. This idea of the intentional evil from the woman hereafter functions as a cause-and-effect relation which may legitimate the following actions, which all follow the logic of the action image, where a situation leads to an action which again leads to a new situation. To this imaginary “proof”, however, yet another superposition is added of a more deconstructive kind, this time through an ambivalent expression. The man has hidden his psychological analysis in the form of a drawn triangle on a sheet of paper, where he has earlier noted possible causes to the anguish of the woman. Now, he
finds it in the laboratory, where he had put it away. In the lower part of the triangle, he has written “leaves” and “trees”, over that “forests”, then “Eden (the garden)” and in the upper part “nature” and “Satan”, which are both crossed over, all in Lacanian style. Now, he writes “ME” in quotation marks, and at the same time he says “herself” in a loud voice. This subtlety, where the personal pronoun “ME” of course also includes himself, as it as linguistic sign includes the person speaking and generally is gender neutral, thus clearly indicates that the symbiosis has reached a disabling stage.

If this is related to the intricate ways in which Malleus Maleficarum passes its judgements, it means that it is impossible to separate the object of desire or anguish from the desiring or anguished subject. The difference between you and I, woman and man, “herself” and “me” are eliminated, when the witch is appointed the instrument of the devil and so to speak has to take on this shape, as she is the object of projection for ordinary men and woman, for their individual desire and their social anguish of any kind. Any possible restoration of the love relationship between man and woman in the film is eliminated by this displacement between “me” and “herself”, in favour of the question who is the object of desire or anguish, and who thus carries the guilt. From this point onwards, the struggle between good and evil takes place within the regime of violence and suffering, which has replaced the ecstasy and insanity of the Dionysian cult. In Malleus Maleficarum like in the chapter “Despair” in Antichrist, the man and the woman can thus—with a medieval expression—transmigrate to devil and witch and back again in no time. Time is cancelled, as we are in an absolute or immediate time, which again according to Malleus Maleficarum is typical of the devil: he himself knows the innermost thoughts and operates with the velocity of light. Hereby, the film operates within the regime of violent ecstasy, where the woman seeks to exorcise the devil as she bruises his genitals (so that his penis ejaculates blood), links him to a grindstone and buries him living. In the last scene, the sado-masochistic relationship becomes quite manifest: she hates and loves him, she wants to kill him and longs for him. She calls for him and asks for his help, so that she can kill him. She wants to get him out of his hiding-place, and when she fails, she buries him and calls him a bastard. The chapter ends with the man finding his third totem-animal, the raven, buried in the fox’s grave. When he frees the raven, it reveals his hiding-place, and he tries to kill it without any luck.

In the next chapter, The Three Beggars, the three totem-animals gather, which each in its own way has influenced the development of the action through the deadly, contingent and chaotic “un-nature”, which characterises the Dionysian and demoniacal natural forces. The birth-giving deer, the self-destructive fox as well as the eternally returning raven all belong to the Dionysiac-cyclical understanding of time, which threatens chronological—linear time. As all totem-figures, they may also function as talismans, which they actually do in the first scene of the film, where three human figures with the names sorrow, pain and despair, stand by the bed of the child. The figures of the puzzle, which in a menacing way falls out of their templates during the intercourse of the parents, also happen to represent the deer, the fox and raven. Looking back at the introduction to the film, one may hesitate whether these figures actually keep the devil away or if on the contrary they invite him to enter. This happens as the last scene includes a “fake” flashback of the introduction scene, representing the woman who during the intoxication of orgasm actually opens her eyes and sees the child, but chooses not to see. In other words, she prefers the pleasure of orgasm to her obligations as a mother. Immediately after, the child climbs a chair, waves The Three Beggars away and moves, full of confidence in its own force, towards the open window. As already mentioned, the flashback is explicitly misleading, as the woman, if one looks again at the introductory scene, does not open her eyes. But nonetheless, it could be a question of a memory or a vision, and again, there is a suggestion of the woman as being false, which is underlined by her cursing herself: “A crying woman is a scheming woman”, which is followed by a string of words: “false in legs, false in thighs, false in breast, teeth, hair and eyes”, which does not leave much to wish for St. Paul. Then, the woman in the chapter “The Three Beggars” is offered in the same way as in Carl Th Dreyer’s Day of Wrath (Vredens dag, 1943), where the woman acknowledges her guilt as a witch, as she has given priority to her own carnal lust over her obligations as wife and
mother. In Trier she first injures herself, as she performs a female circumcision (type II: excision or clitoridectomy) with a pair of scissors. Her cry calls for the devil, and the constellation representing The Three Beggars, sorrow, pain and despair, shows itself to the man. After this, the hail follows, where the devil and the fox materialise. According to Malleus Maleficarum, the devil, who has animal instincts, may appear in the guise of an animal (the fox and the worm in particular are mentioned). Finally, the cry of the raven from below the floor-boards reveal where the woman has hidden the tools. The raven thus becomes the helper of the man, his enlarged memory. As the man frees himself from the grindstone, the woman attacks him with a pair of scissors. The panic and anguish overwhelms him (like earlier the woman) in a series of black-and-white close-ups of pulse, pupils wide-open and trembling fingers, and he makes the process short and suffocates her. Then he burns her as a witch at the stake. That the man/the devil kills in cold blood in the very moment that she regrets what she has done, and that (as almost always in patriarchy) the victim is female, is what is most unsupportable about the film. This is without any doubt also the most important cause for the feminist criticism, which has arisen in many countries. But it might also be regarded as Trier’s commentary to our times, when women as well as other manifestations of the Other are killed and sacrificed, just like in the time of the witch trials—without any new order of society arising to replace it. This chapter ends by the man moving extremely slowly, passing by the dead tree, and the landscape transforms at each of his movements, so that finally, it only consists of naked human bodies. The hands, which materialised for the first time at the intercourse by the roots of the tree, now instead appear as naked bodies or corpses coming out of the ground.

In the epilogue, we see the wounded man/the devil walking with his crutch in the nature outside the cottage. He collects berries, which he eats with delight, discovering the traces from the eagle’s meal, shown earlier in the film. The eagle ate his own offspring, which had fallen or been pushed out of the nest. A (possibly demoniacal) smile cruises his lips, as he turns around and sees The Three Beggars materialise out of the grass. Here the violent cycle of nature is more than suggested: like the eagle in nature eats its own offspring, Satan, Antichrist and Dionysos also live off their own descendants. This—that we are condemned to die in order to make life go on—is the terrible truth of Anti-Christ. Around him gather a flock of faceless women, who could be interpreted as maenads or witches. In any case, the Dionysian or demoniacal order of nature has been strengthened at the end of the film. With an expression from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, one could say that the transformation that has taken place with the man “becoming woman” is an acknowledgement of the forces of life at the cost of the primal scenes of both psychoanalysis and Christianity. The psychoanalytic primal scene is short-cut already in the start of the film, where the lust which lights up both man, woman and child gives the whole film an affirmative force—strengthened by the piece of music from Georg Friedrich Händel’s Rinaldo: “Laschia ch’io pianga”—despite its tragical end. And the Christian primal scene, which is probably evoked in sight of a confrontation with nature (the garden of Eden), is not followed by an exclusion from paradise, after which the work with cultivating the ground and all other edifying things may take place within a religious longing for a return to a paradise beyond.

Both the striations (Deleuze & Guattari, 2005, 617f) of the earth (with a religious frame of reference) and the striations of conscience (with a psychological frame of reference) are rejected as strategies in Antichrist. It is documented on the spot that lust, just like anguish, are potent natural forces that may subvert Reason, the Church, Enlightenment, etc. The killing of the woman has the character of a sacrifice, where the man who, as we have seen, is the central character of the film, may himself become an Antichrist and discover his own nature in “becoming woman”. Out of chaos emerges something new. Generally, the Apollinic conquers the Dionysian, but here, it is more than doubtful whether the man will ever be able to build up any human order again. On the contrary, he has become the new demon, or perhaps a Dionysian god, who picks the wild berries of the forest and has become the new attraction among maenads and witches. The edifying part resides elsewhere. What is being shown in the final scene is a (with Deleuze and Guattari) nomadic, smooth and haptic space, to which I will soon return. Before that, however, the expressive picture of the devil, as he appears in
God’s blessed garden, from *Malleus Malleficarum* has to be cited:

[...], but the wild wild-boars of the forest, by which is meant any form of heathendom and heresy, has eaten and plundered it, has ruined the beautiful fruits of faith and has planted wild thorn berries among the vines and the intriguing worm, the evil enemy of our human race, who is Satan and the devil, has breathed his poison and empoisoned the fruit of the vineyard with the heretical plague. (Kramer, 156)

This text could—just like Dante Alighieri’s description of the descent to hell in the *Divine Comedy*—have inspired the last scene of the film.

### II

The shooting of Andrey Tarkovsky’s *The Sacrifice* was made in 1985, during his exile in Sweden. Tarkovsky, who was a great admirer of Bergman, used in this film some of his actors and filmed on the island of Gotland. *The Sacrifice* became Tarkovsky’s last film, as he was diagnosed with cancer shortly after the shooting. He took part in the editing from his sickbed and died in Paris in 1986. The idea of the film, however, was—according to the extra material in the DVD edition—written down already in 1978. Tarkovsky wrote:

There are two types of dreams: In one of them, the dreamer controls the action: He controls what happens and what will happen: He is a demiurge. In the other, he is incapable of getting control—and becomes the victim of violence, against which he cannot defend himself. It all results in pain and anxiety. (*The Sacrifice*, disc 2)

The original script for *The Sacrifice* stems from 1983, and it consists of “the witch”, “the sacrifice” and “a son who is not allowed to speak” (*The Sacrifice*, disc 2). In the end of the film, where the son has reacquired the capacity to speak, he utters: "In the beginning was the word—what does that mean, Dad?" Here, the son speaks within the tradition, which is deconstructed throughout the film by means of the father’s, Alexander’s, liaison with the witch Maria, and the following reversal of all norms and values. In other words, it is the father who destroys the Apollinian values, which he himself has practiced throughout a lifetime.

This in favour of the Dionysian values, which offer him another approach to the senses, and which allows him to cancel linear time. Through this act, the father preserves his son’s innocence, as he wards off a war, so that everything will remain as it used to be, even tradition. In return, he goes out of his senses and has to leave “normal”, bourgeois respectability behind. He, who is tired of being an actor, philosopher, aesthete and literary critic, listens in the beginning of the film to the postman and nomad Otto. Later, we learn that Otto also collects real but inexplicable events, where an earlier event suddenly materialises in what we call “the present”. It is his story about Nietzsche’s *Thus spoke Zarathustra* and of the eternal return, which leads to the first sequence of vertically filmed black-and-white images of chaos, in Alexander’s vision anticipating both the war and the possible death of the son.

When the bombers first intone the war, Alexander panics, and his first impulse is to shoot his son to save him from the Apollinian catastrophe. But he reflects for a moment, and instead prays to God for the first time in his life. He asks for the cancellation of war, in order to save his son. If God hears him, he promises never to talk again. But Otto calls on him and tells him to visit Maria the witch and spend the night with her. In the sexual, orgiastic attachment, Alexander and Maria together succeed in surmounting their fear for the future, so that the potential violence is never realised. At the end of their sexual intercourse, where the couple are floating in the air, high above the bed, Alexander’s vertical vision of chaos in black-and-white is repeated—but with important changes. Now, the vision is filled of people, and in the last image, the son is shown sleeping peacefully on his pillow.

This picture of the time of the intercourse, where past, present and future co-exist in a virtual, simultaneous time-space, could with Deleuze be called “pure” or “virtual”. According to Deleuze, this time is possible to picture in what he calls the peaks of present in the time image (Deleuze, 95f). Here, the actual, passing present is de-actualised, and “the chronological-successive temporality is replaced by an “inner time of the event”, as the virtual event frees itself from given spatio-temporal coordinates, which would identify its place.
within a chronological and causal chain of events” (Nielsen, 46).

All peaks of present—the present of the future, the present of the present and the present of the past—become simultaneous, and with this simultaneity, the possibility to create a coherent story is lost. In return, it becomes possible to dive into the singular peaks of present events or images, or rather: to investigate the space in-between the singular points of the event, so that it may be perceived as a whole or as a continuity in time. Deleuze explains this (with reference to the stoics) in a way highly relevant both to Antichrist and The Sacrifice:

An accident is about to happen, it happens, it has happened; but equally it is at the same time that it will take place, has already taken place, and is in the process of taking place; so that before taking place, it has not taken place, and, taking place, will not take place...etc. (Deleuze, 97)

In The Sacrifice, Tarkovsky creates such a pure, virtual time, which is shown on the surface of the screen, so that the singular elements of the picture may be sensed haptically, as if they could be touched—both in the visions in black-and-white and through the bodies floating in space.

For Alexander, it becomes possible to get rid of the traumas of the past, and thereby the fear of the future, as he with the witch becomes aware that any time virtually has several possible realisations. In his happiness over this newly found liberty, Alexander burns down the past in the form of the beautiful family mansion. He enjoys the anti-aesthetic chaos and accepts its costs: the exile as well as into the haptic images, manifested through visible pixels on the surface of the screen in Riger I and II (1994 and 1997), Trier transforms the film medium to document the becoming of time images, in order to make it alike the transmission in real time that we

III

To return for the last time to Trier’s Antichrist, the inspiration from Tarkovsky is clear. The low-flying bombers in The Sacrifice are turned into the falling acorn in Antichrist, as well as into the hailstorm in the end of the film. The song of the witch is turned into the many strange sounds of nature (the phantastically weeping child included, who according to Malleus Maleficarum is the expression of pure devilry). The forest, the dead tree, the wooden house, the witch and the burning, which initiates a new order, are all symbolical ingredients which Trier re-enacts from The Sacrifice. But Trier’s dedication to Tarkovsky at the end of Antichrist is probably mostly due to the visual compositions. For Trier develops the potential which Tarkovsky introduces when he lets the spectator sense the inner, virtual dimension of the events through the peaks of present in the time image. These contain a built-in doubleness: because all peaks of present cannot be true at the same time, but on the other hand, they remain intertwined to a degree that makes it impossible to make a distinction between them. If both these virtual forms of time—the sheets of past and the peaks of present—appear in series (instead of in empirical sequences, which would be “normal”), they may so to speak express time as force, as something to come or “becoming” (Bogue, 148–49). And thus, we get a temporal sign (chronosign), which (with Nietzsche) may act as a the power of the false, because it is a force of becoming, of metamorphosis and transformation, which constantly gives away fixed, stable, “true” identities as “false” (Bogue, 149).

Within the concept of “the power of the false” in Deleuze, we find once again Nietzsche and his idea of falseness (beyond lies and truth) as the Dionysiacal force. Neither Tarkovsky, nor Trier support a classical opposition between truth and falseness, but through the power of the false they create a force of transformation within the very filmic material. It is the force of creative becoming, which meets us on the sensory level in the haptic images, dealt with in a quite specific way within Trier’s filmmaking. Not unlike the way of dealing with haptic images, manifested through visible pixels on the surface of the screen in Riger I and II (1994 and 1997), Trier transforms the film medium to document the becoming of time images, in order to make it alike the transmission in real time that we
are familiar with from electronic or digital images (Thomsen 2010). In this haptic form, he creates one of the pure forms of virtual time—the peaks of present—a Dionysian celebration of time as becoming and as continuous transformation. The haptic could thus designate this; that the medium and its temporal form might be made visible on the surface of the screen. The temporal peaks of present may thus be sensed directly and temporally on the screen surface, so to speak before the reflexive dealing with what is seen actually sets in. The interest in the texture of the haptic surface is visible in most of Trier’s films, which also often thematically deals with psychic borderlines, with hypnotic stances and demonic witchcraft, which all affect the classical function of the screen as interface for the insight of the spectator.

In the prolongation of this discussion, we will return to the question whether the beginning and the end of the film, which both are developed as haptic or black-and-white peaks of the present, are interrelated. In the end, where the woman at the same time confirms her identity as a witch and regrets her sin, as she put her own lust before her feelings as a mother, a flashback appears to the initial event, which in a first glimpse seemed to be avoiding questions of guilt, responsibility, truth or falseness. This flashback of the woman with open eyes, aware of what is happening, does not—as mentioned—respond to the introductory scene of the woman, who gives herself away with her eyes closed. Thus, there is no question of a reconstruction of an empirical sequence. However, the question concerns a “false” flashback, where she (who has all the time remained the very cause of the man’s therapy) returns to and revives the event from within; corresponding to the experience of nature as something “within”, and not only as something situated beyond our own corporeality. In this scene, she admits that she cannot live with her guilt, and therefore, she chooses her own destiny. In the same way as Alexander turns his back to the educational, aesthetically formational world, and fully aware of what he is doing turns into madness in Tarkovsky, woman in Trier is facing her own annihilation. Because both of these worlds cannot be co-existing, at least if one is supposed to really judge between false and true. Some of its virtual capacity has to be actualised, in order to become form: identity or non-identity. In the same moment as the woman rejects her own existence as identity, and is sacrificed as a human being, the man becomes a Dionysian, demoniacal figure which—just like nature—breaks with all forms of a linear, temporal order and which exists in all chaotic spaces-in-between in the peaks of present of the event.

It is this endlessly beautiful series of virtual time, which is presented to the spectator at the beginning of Antichrist, and which is shown as mythical time towards the end. It is a non-individual time, a non-anchored, non-materialised, anti-sensory-motorical time, in spite of the fact that what we see most of all is bodies. This time, both Tarkovsky and Trier choose to make visible and sensible through the haptic image, materialised through the surface of the screen and negating depth. The haptic image is the permanent transformation of the Dionysical or anti-Christian, which creates metamorphoses without finding rest in a given, aesthetic form or a final, self-identical story. Perhaps it is just therefore that this film cannot be dispatched, and no one wants to know about the judgement of others. Just like the man sees the woman as possessed and does not include himself in the “ME” pronounced as “herself”, the woman sees the man as objectifying, or as the devil himself. As the two pictures of the woman’s being—possessed with her eyes closed or aware of what is happening with her eyes open—exist side by side, Antichrist makes it impossible to know what is true and who is guilty. But inversely, the spectator may become aware that truth is something created, as the event is developed in actual time. And it is here—right at the core of the event itself—that the most problematic and most violent transformation may take place within different relations, such as between two people:

Two people know each other, but already knew each other, and do not yet know each other. Betrayal happens, it never happened, and yet has happened and will happen, sometimes one betraying the other and sometimes the other betraying the first—all at the same time. (Deleuze, 98)

This last passage may answer to the query why the Antichrist of the title is written with a woman’s sign. Because woman (just like feminism) picks her force in the transformational potential of nature and the social, and hereby seeks to create a haptic “counter-violence” or a smooth space, which
may counter-balance an Apollinian strive or a thoroughly organised, optical space. And the eternal struggle between Dionysical and Apollinian forces take place on all levels of social space, where the Dionysical or anti-Christian shadow, as Maffesoli calls it, is the most traditional when it comes to stake. Because even though collective forms of “orgies” may cause panic and transgress boundaries, “the Dionysian wisdom, even in its most chocking forms, remains the lesser evil” (Maffesoli, 102). This insight could to a large degree also be said to be true of Lars von Trier’s *Antichrist*.

**NOTES**

1. According to an interview in *Filmmagasinet Ekko*, http://www.ekkofilm.dk (accessed May 2009).
2. According to an interview in Film#66, DFI, http://www.antichristthemovie.com/?cat=6&language=da (accessed May 2009).
3. This is probably the cause of Nietzsche’s schizophrenic view of woman. He is not in support of real women—especially not if they are learned. On women’s importance to Nietzsche and Nietzsche’s importance to (post)feminist philosophy, see Thomsen (1985).
4. Cf. *The exhibition Dionysos—Verwandlung und Ekdystase 2008-09*, Museumsinsel Berlin.
5. On the cult and on Dionysos’ significance for the theatre, see Hjortsø (1984).
6. The deer or hart was during the middle age synonymous with all wild animals in nature. Shakespeare’s (1602) plays with the homophony between heart and hart.
7. The fox has been interpreted mythologically since prehistoric times. It has designed both intelligence and slyness, but has also in the guise of the werewolf and other creatures combining animal and human traits been both treated as divine and as demoniacal.
8. The raven may be associated with Odin’s ravens, Hugin and Munin, in which Nordic mythology designed recollection and memory, as they flew out every morning and returned every evening with news from the outside world. But the raven also connotes Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Raven* (1845), where the Raven with its eternal refrain “(N)evermore” forebodes the narrator’s death. The last lines read: “And the raven, never flitting/still is sitting, still is sitting/On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;/And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon’s that is dreaming,/And the lamp-light o’er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor:/And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor/Shall be lifted-nevermore!”
9. Jacob Bøggild mentions two films by Roman Polanski as possible sources of inspiration for The Three Beggars: *Repulsion* (1965) and *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968) (Bøggild 2010).

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