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Anti-Christ: Tragedy, Farce or Game?

Jan Simons

Lars Von Trier's film *Anti-Christ* (2009) gave rise to many controversies, contradictory responses and ambivalent feelings, perhaps best summarized by the *Detroit News* critic Tom Long: ‘*Anti-Christ* is probably the best film ever that you’d recommend to absolutely no-one’ (Long 2009). Although most critics praised the stunning visuals of the film, rightly accredited to Von Trier’s long time cinematographer Anthony Dod Mantle, there is an almost unanimous consensus that Von Trier designed the narrative of a couple who retreat in the woods to overcome the grief for their toddler’s death only as an excuse for presenting images of nudity and steaming sex, ‘money shots’ of an erect penis ejaculating blood and an auto-circumcision of female genitalia in full close-up. As the UK *Independent* reviewer Anthony Quinn, usually not averse to Von Trier’s movies, sums up, ‘It assaults the eye like fragments of a nightmare, its impact undeniable but its meaning largely unfathomable: as with so much of this director's output, the principal motive is to affront’ (Quinn 2009).

More serious scholarly efforts have been made to make sense of Von Trier's *Anti-Christ*. Bodil Thomsen, for instance, tries to trace a number of themes and motives in Von Trier's movie through Nietzsche and Tarkovsky all the way back to the ancient Greek cult of Dionysus and medieval witchcraft cults (Thomsen 2009), while explaining Von Trier's 'haptic' visual style in terms of Deleuzian concepts like 'the power of the false' and 'peaks of present'. Angelina Tumini analyzes how Von Trier and the Italian novelist Gabriele d'Annunzio almost a century before him both 'discover that it is impossible to address evil without perpetuating it' and reveal human nature 'as dark, broody, and often utterly perverted, especially when dealing with the question of relationship between the two sexes' (Tumini 2010).

The journalistic and academic responses to Von Trier's *Antichrist* aptly reflect the opposite postures of 'purity and provocation' (Hjort and MacKenzie 2003) and 'authenticity and artifice' (Bainbridge 2007) between which Von Trier is supposed to oscillate, if one is to go by the titles of two of the very few academic books on Von Trier's films (that is, his films produced and released before the time of publishing of these studies). For film critics Von Trier is often nothing but a provocateur who creates scandals with his films 'to advertise one and only one item: Von Trier himself as a directional value on the cultural stock market' (Willemen 2000), whereas for some academics Von Trier is no less than a film-philosopher.

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Both journalistic and academic approaches have in common, however, that they tend to respond to individual films – or sometimes a spectacular accompanying event like the launch of the Dogme 95 Manifesto in Paris in 1995 – and their themes, motives and visual styles that subsequently either get described as yet another attempt to *étaper la bourgeoisie*, or become the object of what David Bordwell once called 'symptomatic interpretation’, that 'reads' certain features of films as markers of an underlying philosophical, ideological, or psycho-analytical system of reference (Bordwell 1989, 71-104). This approach even prevails when all of Von Trier's films are discussed in book length studies, with the almost inevitable result that the selection of philosophies that are applied to Von Trier's œuvre is almost as varied and heterogeneous as the styles and stories of Von Trier's films themselves (Bainbridge 2007; see Goss 2008).

These symptomatic readings can, of course, throw an illuminating light on certain features of Von Trier's films, and yield surprising and often deep insights into these films, their narratives, their particular cultural and philosophical genealogies and the cinematographic heritage they draw upon. But they also often follow the trails that have been carefully spread through the films themselves or in paratextual materials like press maps, interviews, or 'making-ofs'. Von Trier often delivers his films with a manual for their interpretation. *Antichrist* is no exception: the very title of the film and its dedication to Tarkovsky is for many critics a signpost that sets them on a cultural and philosophical treasure hunt along philosophers, artists, and writers such Nietzsche, d'Annunzio, Freud, Tarkovsky, Dreyer, and whole traditions of occultism and witchcraft. There is, or course, nothing wrong with these hermeneutic exercises that often only help to increase our understanding of these films. But enlightening as these interpretations may be for each of Von Trier's movies separately, they also tend to obscure the logic and consistency of the 'system von Trier' of which all of his films are instantiations, but which is probably not so easy to grasp because it is , as I have argued elsewhere (Simons 2007) 'digital' rather than cinematographic, and Von Trier's strategy is ludic, rather than philosophical.

Philosophically and aesthetically inspired approaches also tend to overlook the obvious fact that Von Trier is, first of all, a filmmaker, and that his movie *Antichrist* has a very famous cinematographic predecessor as well: *The Antichrist* was the working title of the classical horror movie *The Omen* (Richard Donner, 1976), which, like Von Trier's movie, told a story about a father, a mother, and a doomed child. As will be argued later, this Hollywood predecessor suits the Von Trier system as good, if not better, as the often cited cultural, artistic, and philosophical references.

What, then, is this system of which *Antichrist* is yet another instantiation? First of all, it is *digital* because it consists of a (finite) number of elements
and relations that can be 'rendered', that is actualized and visualized in an almost infinite number of ways. It consists, and this is where the ludic comes in as well, of a number of abstract rules that jointly define what computer scientists and game theorists call a vast, almost infinite state space of possible configurations (see Holland 1998), that, moreover, can be visualized in an almost arbitrarily wide range of variations. This applies, for instance, to games like chess that consist of a finite set of rules, pieces, and a board that can evolve into an infinite set of configurations, and can be represented in a wide variety of ways, ranging from purely mental representations via alphanumerical notations (as in, for example, news paper reports of chess matches or in an exchange of moves through e-mail), to the most baroque and spectacularly designed pieces. The latter is what computer game designers call the 'colouring' of a game: the algorithms that define a war game, for instance, can be visualized as a Napoleonic battle, a battlefield in WWII, or a purely imaginary, 'virtual' war (like the First Gulf War was, according to Baudrillard).

This digital and ludic system – or 'diagram' as Deleuzians would call it – has a few far-reaching ontological implications, that also affect Von Trier's conception of what film is, that are quite far removed from the ideas of the French film critic and theorist André Bazin who raised that very question, and with whom Von Trier got aligned by some critics after the launch of the Dogma Manifesto (Conrich and Tincknell 2000). If film is to represent reality, and the perceptible reality is just one contingent and accidental actualization of an infinite number of other possible ways in which the elements and relationships that constitute the real virtually could have been 'rendered', then the perceptual real is co-existent with the accidentally not actualized, and no longer actual past and not yet actual future virtual 'possible' worlds, and it is the task of the filmmaker not to 'objectively represent' reality, as the Bazinian aesthetics prescribes, but to make the virtual visible in the actual. In this digital system, the actual becomes virtualized (as on just one contingent actualization out of an infinite state space of possible actualizations) and the virtual becomes actualized (made present in the real).

This digital system is key to the styles Von Trier has adopted and developed in all of his films in which he has basically adopted two strategies to virtualize reality. In The Element of Crime (Forbrydelsens Element, 1984) and Europa (1991) all scenes where shot in the dark (all actions take place during the night) and only made visible through light sources or reflections actually present in the image, such as bulbs, lamp posts, pools and ponds, tv screens, lamps of cars and trains, torches, etc). These films were, in a very literal sense, 'written with light', as if they were the cinematographic compendium of the exhibition Les Immateriaux, co-curated by Jean-François Lyotard in the Centre Pompidou in 1984 (Lyotard 1984).
Moreover, all special effects of these films were created on location and not in these films' postproduction: out of the real a physically impossible, purely cinematographic world was created with purely cinematographic means (Simons 2007).

Von Trier's second strategy consists of what in contemporary digital culture would be called sampling and re-mixing. Especially Europa, but also The Element of Crime and the third film of this, Von Trier's first, trilogy – his films always come in threes – Epidemic (1987), Von Trier retrieves and mixes an eclectic collection of genres, styles, images, motifs, icons, and narratives from a virtual database that constitutes what might be called Europe's visual collective memory. History, in this film, consists of a dynamic and always shifting mix of images and the working of the imagination, rather than being an factual and objective account of a canonical series of events. Moreover, The Element of Crime and Europa are also in a more literal sense a mental journey, since the protagonists and spectators of these films are addressed by the hypnotising voice of a psychiatrist in the former, and the hypnotising voice-over of Max von Sydow in the latter. In Antichrist Von Trier, again, samples and mixes imagery and styles from genres as divers as horror, porn, melodrama, suspense thriller, fantasy, documentary, art cinema, as well as references to filmmakers and playwrights such as Dreyer, Ibsen, Strindberg, Bergman, Tarkovsky (to whom the film is dedicated, as already mentioned), Kubrick, Buñuel.

This strategy of virtualizing the real by constructing it out of collective memories and shared representations derived from the images, sounds, and stories that circulate through and at the same constitute a culture and a history, can also be inverted, as Von Trier does in Epidemic and his later films like Dancer in the Dark (2000), Dogville (2003) and Manderlay (2005), and probably most radically in The Idiots (Idioterne, 1998). In Epidemic Von Trier introduces the 'Kafka-method': taking Kafka as his example, who had never visited America but wrote his novel of that title on the basis of information he received from his uncle who had moved there, Von Trier and his pal – and scriptwriter – Niels Vørsel conjure up a mental representation of Atlantic City, that Niels only knows through the film The King of Marvin Garden (Bob Rafelson, 1972), without having to travel there, by inviting teenage girls from that city to start a correspondence with them. In Dogville and Manderlay Von Trier encourages the spectators to fill in the almost bare stages on which the sets of these films are only 'metonymically' suggested by chalk lines and just a few props with images of America in the Great Depression they know from countless movies, tv-programs, documentaries, pictures, newspaper stories. In Dancer in the Dark the almost blind Selma is imagining the visuals of a movie in a theatre on the basis of the film's sound track and the verbal description of the
images that her friend Cathy whispers in her ears. The film itself is set in a nondescript, almost timeless landscape and village. Again, these films virtualize the real and actualize the virtual but this time by not showing, but actively mobilizing the elements of a collective cultural memory. They provide a scaffold for the imaginative work of the spectator.

The Dogma Manifesto, though generally received as a wake-up call for unadorned realism in the cinema as a counter-dose to the special effects driven Hollywood blockbusters that overtook the cinemas in the nineties of the previous century (Hjort and MacKenzie 2003), can be regarded as the theoretical underpinning of these digital and ludic strategies. Rather than championing an aesthetics of filmmaking, the 'ten commandments' of the 'Vow of Chastity' lay down the rules of a game: they create a number of unnecessary obstacles a filmmaker must overcome in order to gain the honorary title of 'Dogma filmmaker'. These rules don't specify any privileged subject matter or ideological stance the filmmaker should hold, but rather a number of 'don'ts' that are designed to make life for the filmmaker much less easier than it needs to be with the current state of technology and skills. As game rules always are, they are arbitrary – Von Trier exchanged them for a completely different set of rules for his next film after The Idiots, Dancer in the Dark which was a musical - and pointless outside of the game. The gist of the game is that filmmakers are not allowed to use any special props, costumes, special lightning, or sounds and effects created in postproduction, but are only allowed with the objects they find on the set. Filmmakers, actors, and spectators alike, that is, are forced to use their imagination and create fictional, imaginary worlds out of the objects they find on the spot, like children who use a broomstick to simulate that they are riding a horse. Children's game play consists to a large extend of simulation – or mimicry as the French anthropologist of games Roger Caillou called it (Callois 1979, 8) and as famously described by the art historian E. H. Gombrich (1963, 2) – and turning filmmaking into a childishly innocent gameplay is what Dogma intended to do (Simons 2007).

The Idiots is, of course, all about gaming and simulation: the members of the community challenge each other to go as far as possible in simulating the behaviour of 'idiots' in public and semi-public spaces, without 'identifying' with their 'models' or without seeking to represent their interests in any way: spassing is just fun, but in as far as this film can be seen as the cinematographic equivalent of the Dogma Manifesto, it also shows that for

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2 This is nicely demonstrated in the Dogma#4 movie The King is Alive (Kristian Levring, 2000) in which a group of tourists stranded in the Gobi desert start rehearsing a Shakespeare play and use the objects they find on the spot as props and costumes. Another example can be found in the Dogma#3 movie Mifunes Sidste Sang (Mifune's Sixth Song, Søren Kragh-Jacobsen, 1999), where the protagonist uses kitchen utensils like pots and pans to impersonate a Japanese samurai for his little mentally retarded brother.
Von Trier cinema is all about simulation, rather than representation. And again, each event or action is just one possible actualization of a virtually infinite variety of possibilities. In this film, this virtual infinite state space is made visible through a method of non-continuous editing, that mixes takes of several executions of the same scene in which actors may appear in completely different places or attitudes, thus emphasizing that any version of the scene is as good as any other, and each is taken from an infinite virtual space of 'possible worlds'. In Antichrist, on the other hand, the virtual is made visible not through editing or by creating special effects on the set, as in Europa, but by digital means, eschewed in his previous films, that allow for the interpenetration of the outer world of images and sounds by the inner world of intense perception, concentration, fear, or confusion that alter sensation and experience of space, time, light, sounds, smells, and touch, or, in the words of Bodil Thomsen (2009), transform the film image into a 'haptic image'.

In the 'Von Trier system', a scene is nothing but the contingent and accidental actualization – or simulation - of an abstract model that consists of a number of entities and relations that can be varied along a number of parameters. The role of the director in this digital system is comparable to the role of a scientist who sets up an experimental model, or the computer artists who feeds her computer with a set of data and algorithms, feeds the model with a number of variables, and then waits and sees what happens: in this system the director is an allegorist, rather than an author.3 Von Trier notoriously lets his actors endlessly improvise situations in, for instance, various moods (see Stevenson 2002, 90-92). This 'digital' system is, therefore, also a ludic system, because the model is varied according to rules or algorithms. The Vow of Chastity, that accompanied the Dogma Manifesto, is a prime example of rules for the film game, but Von Trier has written similar manifestos or notes for each of his films in which he laid down a number of rules to which he obliged himself to comply during the making of that film (often made available in press materials but hardly ever noticed). But, maybe more importantly, the stories are also rule bound or algorithmic, not only in the general sense that every story is structured by what narratologists would call a 'narrative structure' or 'narrative logic' (Genette 1972, 71 ff.), but in the more strong sense that all his films are variations of the same story: 'My story is practically the same every time.'

3 An algorist is an artist who produces 'algorithmic art'. 'The general pattern was: the artist created the algorithm and then the computer executed the steps to create the image'. (Wilson 2002, 313).
I’m well aware of that by now’. Von Trier stated himself in an interview in 2009.4

The protagonists of all of his films enter an environment they don't know (or is a 'stranger' in their own community herself, like Bess in Breaking The Waves [1996]), and are confronted with the question whether or not they should trust and cooperate with the inhabitants they encounter, and up until Grace in Dogville (2003) they all learn the hard way that trust and cooperation is rewarded with deception, exploitation, physical and sexual abuse, and even death. Only Grace in Dogville learns from her father that the rule of the game is 'punish or perish’, that is, 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth’. However, rather than being variations of the same story, the stories of his films are themselves various executions of the same underlying logical model, that in the disciplines of mathematical and economical game theory has become famous as 'the prisoner's dilemma’.

'The prisoner's dilemma' owes its name to a story the mathematician Albert W. Tucker invented in order to make the logical problem of cooperation or conflict more accessible, but, as in Von Trier's movies, the same model underlies many real life and fictional situations, such arms races, climate change, or multi party problems such as the 'tragedy of the commons’. The harsh lesson of the prisoner's dilemma is that mutual defection is a more rational strategy than mutual cooperation, because, although mutual cooperation yields a higher pay off for both players, it also contains the risk that one of the players will be tempted to defect in order to cash in the maximum pay off and leave the other player with 'the sucker's bonus’, as it is called in game theory. As in each of Von Trier's movies separately, the prisoner's dilemma is a one-off game, in which the players only get one chance to choose whether they'll 'cooperate' or 'defect’. In the one-off version of the game, defection is the most 'rational' strategy (in game theoretical terms it generates a Nash equilibrium in which none of the players can do better by choosing an alternative strategy [Osborne 2004, 13 ff.]). Things change, however, once the prisoner's dilemma is transformed into a game that is repeated endlessly without the players knowing when it will end. In Robert Axelrod's famous computer experiment in which a great variety of strategies were tested in an infinitely repeated prisoner's dilemma, it turned out that TIT-FOR-TAT strategy prevailed, which tells the player to start by offering cooperation, and then 'doing whatever the other player did on the previous move' (Axelrod 1984, 13). Taken together, Von Trier's films can be seen as an infinitely repeated prisoner's dilemma, in which in each movie the protagonist's strategy is tested, and in which eventually Grace discovers a 'tit-for-tat’ strategy.

As a model, the prisoner's dilemma can be tested in various circumstances, as happens in Von Trier's movies. For instance, whereas in most other films the protagonist is a stranger who enters a community of, as it turns out, mostly 'mean players', the mentally disturbed Bess in Breaking The Waves is the single 'nice player' in a community of 'mean players' who introduces another 'good player', Jan, into the community with whom she intends to form a couple. But since in a community of 'mean players' defection is an 'evolutionary stable strategy' that cannot be invaded by alternative strategies, this couple of 'good players' is doomed to fail (Simons 2007, 195). The model can also be varied in scale. In Manderlay (2005), for instance, the prisoner's dilemma is transposed to the scale of social systems at large, embodied by 'Ma's Law' that ruled the plantation Manderlay until the arrival of Grace and 'Dad's Law' that Grace attempts to impose after having taken over the plantation. 'Ma's Law' is a utilitarian system of justice in which each member of society receives his or her share of the community's welfare according to need and contribution measured to skills and capacities, and 'Dad's Law' an egalitarian social contract in which each member gets an equal chance of acquiring as many goods as he or she desires. Cooperation and defection of the prisoner's dilemma reappear in this film as the conflict between (forced) cooperation in a welfare state ('communism') on the one hand, and unbridled competition ('capitalism') on the other (Binmore 2005, 29 ff.). In Antichrist, the prisoner's dilemma gets played out in the relationship between a couple.

The 'Von Trier system' is not only digital, ludic, and algorithmic, but it also appears to be a systematic exploration – through 'simulations' of the logical model of the prisoner's dilemma. How, then, does Antichrist fit into this system? This film, that tells a story about a couple that retreats in the woods to overcome the grief over their toddler's accidental death, seems quite remote from Von Trier's previous films. The couple retreats from society, rather than entering an unknown environment (the cabin they occupy is called 'Eden', which suggests a paradisiacal rather than hostile environment, and the aim of the journey is healing rather than hurting. Moreover, the relationship in Antichrist is triadic rather than dual, since the death of the toddler is not only the reason for the journey into the woods, but also the major catalyst of the catastrophic events that will develop in the course of the movie. The triadic relationship between father, mother, and (male) child, is, of course, the classic model of the Oedipal relationship as described by Freud, and the movie makes quite an explicit reference to this model when He (the nameless male protagonist played by Willem Defoe) discovers polaroid pictures of his sun on which the child is wearing its shoes on the inverse feet and a flashback shows how She (Charlotte Gainsbourgh) deliberately puts the shoes on her son's wrong feet, thus causing the mysterious mutilation of the child's feet that were revealed to the father in
X-ray pictures. As is well known, Oedipus means 'swollen foot', after the mutilation that King Laos, the father of Oedipus, inflicted upon his sun by having his ankles pinned together. If one adds to this the also quite obvious reference of the opening scene to the 'primal scene' of a child witnessing his parents having sex, as described by Freud in analysis of 'The Wolf Man' (Freud 1924), and that He is a therapist, and one is tempted to conclude that Antichrist is based on a psychoanalytical rather than a game theoretical mould.

However, as in any model, and, for that matter, in any myth, the entities and relationships of the Oedipal triangle can be permutated and commutated, as Lévy-Strauss would call these operations in good old-fashioned structuralist parlance. In the logic of Von Trier, the Freudian version of the Oedipal myth is, as the ancient myth itself, just one of the possible actualizations of the vast number of virtual configurations this model can take. Antichrist's cinematic predecessor, The Omen, shows another variation. Whereas in the ancient myth the sun Oedipus unknowingly kills his father, Laios, and marries his mother, Iocaste, in The Omen the father (Gregory Peck) finds out that the child that he, without the mother knowing it, substituted for his stillborn son is the incarnation of Satan and sets out to kill him. And whereas in the ancient myth Oedipus is unknowingly the incarnation of evil and in The Omen Damien (Harvey Stephens) very well knows that he is Satan, in Antichrist the child is an innocent 'infans'. Patricide becomes infanticide, and this transformation correlates with a couple of other reversals: in the ancient myth Laos banned Oedipus from his court in an attempt to prevent the forecast come true, but in The Omen the father takes the child into his home, and in the ancient myth Iocaste is not aware that her new husband is her son (which he doesn't know either), whereas in The Omen the mother doesn't know that her child is not her son of her own flesh and blood.

In Antichrist these permutations and commutations are taken a few steps further. As already mentioned, the mutilations of the feet are inflicted not by the father, but by the mother. Moreover, although the child has not literally been killed by either of them, a flashback of the tragic event reveals, later on in the movie, that the mother was watching her child climbing out of the window while she was having sex with the father, and did nothing to prevent it from falling. The active infanticide by the father in The Omen becomes passive non-intervention on the part of the mother in Antichrist. The incestuous relationship between Oedipus and his mother Iocaste in the ancient myth becomes an 'incestuous' relationship between He and She in Antichrist, since, as He admits himself, it is 'unethical' for a professional therapist to entertain a amorous and sexual relationship with a patient (it is an 'excessive' relationship), and, in another twist of the Oedipal myth, although He proposes to Her that they will abstain from sex during her
therapy, she almost literally enforces herself upon him. But maybe the most radical transformation of the model consists of a generational and gender reversal of roles: in both the ancient myth and *The Omen* the child is the bearer and harbinger of evil, but in *Antichrist*, the incarnation of evil is the mother, who mutilates her son's feet, who doesn't intervene when he threatens to fall out of the window, and who has an unusual interest in witchcraft and occultism. In fact, She had concluded herself from her study of the history of gynocide that if human nature is evil, the nature of women must be evil, too. The most important twist of the model of the Oedipal triangle that provides the linchpin to the 'Von Trier system' is that it is not the son who rivals with the father over the possession of the mother, but that in *Antichrist* it is the mother who rivals with her son over the possession of the father. Other transformations correlate with this one: in the ancient myth it is Oedipus who mutilates himself by piercing his eyes (interpreted by Freud as self-castration), whereas in *Antichrist* it is the mother who mutilates her own genitals. The final twist *Antichrist* gives to the Oedipal model is, of course, that the father does not kill the child, but the mother, but here the logic of the prisoner's dilemma has already stepped in.

The rationale of the prisoner's dilemma is, after all, not that it is recommendable to defect on other players, since, after all, both players would benefit more from mutual cooperation than from mutual defection. The dilemma both players face is that both know that mutual cooperation would be to the benefit of both, but that unilateral defection would yield the defector with the maximal pay-off and the collaborator with the worst. Since the players do not know each other's considerations and intentions, logic dictates each player to defect since that will at least guarantee each players the less worse pay off of a lighter sentence (in the case of classical story about two prisoners, but in an arms race this would be the higher cost of maintaining expensive weapons which is still preferable to total annihilation by the enemy), and in the best case scenario (if the other player collaborates), the maximum pay off. Anyway, by choosing to defect, a player does not make him or herself dependent on the choices of the other player. The lesson of the prisoner's dilemma is, that when in doubt or in ignorance about the motives and intentions of the other players, one must assume that other players will act 'rationally' and will seek to serve their own selfish interest as much as possible. The best each player can do, then, is to pursue their own self-interests as good as they can.

It is this logic that starts off and fuels the couple's descent into hell. They start off as a cooperative pair of players: He wants to help Her to overcome her fears, and She wants his love and attention. Their problem is, however, that they are not sure of each other's motives and intentions. She accuses Him of having been 'a distant husband and father' and fears that He will eventually leave Her ('Bastard, why did you leave me!' she shouts in the
final part of the movie). In the Freudian logic of the familial triangle, She
sees her son as a rival for the love of the father, whose love for her she
doubts. In the logic of the prisoner's dilemma, She cannot – or anyway, isn't
– sure whether he will keep on 'collaborating' with her, or eventually 'defect'
on her. He, on the other hand, gradually discovers that She instead of
looking for 'peace' to write her thesis on the history of gynocide, has drawn
t entirely different conclusions from what he had expected, and, more
importantly, that She was responsible for the mutilation of their son's feet
and possibly for his death as well. And, like Grace who discovers in
_Dogville_ that defection can only be answered by defection (and worse), He,
though collaborative initially, finds out, too, that defection can only be
responded to with defection: like the father figure in _The Omen_, the father
figure in _Antichrist_ also learns that evil can only be beaten by evil. Just like
collaborative players are forced to become defectors in the game of the
prisoner's dilemma, the good willing fathers in both films are forced to
become evil-doers themselves.

Interestingly, the conclusion She draws from her studies of gynocide about
evil human nature converges with the basic assumptions underlying
classical economic and mathematical game theory and theories of social
justice like those of John Rawls (1972) and John Harsanyi (1977). These
theories assume that human agents are endowed with an ultimately selfish
nature that, when left to themselves, will lead them into a Hobbesian 'state
of nature' in which there is 'a war of every man against every man' and life
is (in)famously 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short'. This is exactly
nature as it reveals itself to the couple in the course of the film. Nature is
place the couple go to, because that's the place where She experiences her
fears most, and where She eventually fully embraces her 'evil nature'.
Although as a rational (in the sense of scientific, logical, and sensible, and
not in the game theoretical sense) therapist he assures her that her
perception of nature of distorted by her fears, She eventually has to reassure
him that the noises he hears during the night are 'just falling acorns', and
He, but not She, gets bitten by insects. His perception and experience of
nature, that is, becomes gradually affected by his own uncertainties and
doubts about Her, and his gradually becoming aware of Her 'evil nature' is
accompanied by his perceptions of deer, prey birds, and foxes who kill and
devour their own offspring. Eventually, in what is without any doubt the
most hilarious scene of the movie, the fox warns Him that 'chaos reigns',
thus confirming that He and She have descended into a Hobbesian state of
nature.

_Antichrist_ is yet another output of the Von Trier system, that this time has
moulded one classical model, the Oedipal triangle, into another one, the
game theoretical model of the prisoner's dilemma, in the process
transforming ('permutating and commutating') both algorithmically
('systematically') and rendering the model by sampling and mixing visual styles, references to other movies, genres, art works, legends, and philosophies that circulate in contemporary postmodern (or post-postmodern) culture. Although it is quite legitimate to follow these intellectual signposts in the film, one also wonders if the film cannot also be read as an ironic comment to contemporary pop-psychology and its pseudo-historical references to the history of gynocide, occultism and witchcraft as a pastiche of the recent vogue of pseudo-historical kitch in cinema and literature, as represented by movies such *The Name of the Rose* (Arnaud, 1986), *The Da Vinci Code* (Ron Howard, 2006), or *Pope Joan* (Sönke Wortmann, 2009), and the novels of Dan Brown and Umberto Eco. This plethora of references are, of course food for thought for philosophers, film critics and theorists, but in the system Von Trier they are ultimately the coloring of an abstract, logical and algorithmic model that is built on the one recurrent assumption in Von Trier's movies: *homo homini lupus*.\(^5\)

\(^5\) The wolf is a recurrent motif in Von Trier's films. In *Europa*, for instance, Katherina turns out to be a 'Werewolf', that is, a member of a Nazi-resistance group of that name. The dog Moses in *Dogville* is a not so remote family member of this canine creature, and the opening scene of *Antichrist* is obviously an allusion to Freud's case study 'The Wolf Man'. The name of the 'Dogma' movement was obviously chosen with the canine species in mind, as may be inferred from the logo on Dogma's now defunct website that sported the rear of a dog. See also Fibiger (2003).
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