



LARS VON TRIER, THE ACKNOWLEDGED FILM DIRECTOR WITH A PESSIMISTIC OUTLOOK, A TROUBLED MIND AND A SPECIAL FLAIR FOR ALL THINGS GRIM AND GHASTLY, HAS LET SAGA HAVE A SNEAK PEEK OF A SERIES OF STILLS SHOT DURING THE FAR-FROM-PAINLESS WORKING PROCESS ON HIS LATEST FILM, ANTICHRIST.

“FILM FRENZY”

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A married couple lose a child. The wife develops what a psychologist would call an atypical grief pattern. The husband, a therapist, treats her. They travel to a remote cabin, Eden, where things – to put it mildly – do not turn out quite as expected. “It reminds me a bit of a therapy session I went through,” von Trier says. “I’ve been struggling with depression for three years, and I guess I’m still fighting it now. I look back on the period of filming in Germany as truly exhausting and I can’t claim that I gave 100 percent. I simply didn’t have the physical or mental stamina for it.”

One might wonder why von Trier continues his troubling work. The answer is simple: he views filmmaking as both artistic and therapeutic. “I commit myself

to the task, because part of my cure is to do something structured. To plan your days so that you don’t just spend the whole day staring into the wall. And the film work is structured enough to have a therapeutic effect.”

To von Trier however art itself cannot work as the complete cure. An important part of his outward image stems from his creative yet neurotic mind, a trait he shares with fellow artists. “Some of my favorite artists have suffered mentally,” he says. “I think it’s due to a sensibility that makes you feel a lot of pain, but still enables you to contribute with something that others can appreciate. Scientists believe that a large part of our brain activity serves to limit our impressions. My theory is that these artists have a filter that’s

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somewhat malfunctioning, which is both good and bad. You may feel frightened by all the impressions you internalize, but you can pass them on to others, where the filter is more fine-tuned.”

At times it appears like there is so much gasoline on von Trier’s phantasmagoric bonfire and such darkness in the recesses of his mind that he does not always realize how relentlessly gruesome and merciless his tales can seem to outsiders. With *Antichrist* as a therapeutic tool and himself as the intended audience, he has created his most somber and demonic work to date. In Cannes, an advertising pilot – a devout Catholic – refused to write the title of the film with smoke in the sky as he thought it was blasphemous.

“Well, I’m not the only one with a taste for evil,” says von Trier. “It has been a favorite theme for generations, it’s always exciting. From an early age we enjoy scaring ourselves with gruesome and inhuman fairytales. Why we do it, I don’t know. But I have some rather pessimistic tendencies, so to me all this scary stuff comes easily.”

It is an almost unbearable situation to imagine: A depressed, neurotic von Trier in a German forest. Cranes, floodlights, smoke machines, cameras and cables. Two actors, a pet deer, a crow and a fox, animal trainers with treats in their pockets; painted trees à la Antonioni and a dramatic menage à deux à la Strindberg.

“As a director you must try two things: To make a film with only one setting and a film with just two actors,” says von Trier. “When I was young, I used to read a lot of Strindberg and I was fascinated by the struggle between man and woman that is central to his stories. There is certainly a cadeau to him in my film. It’s very explicit in terms of sex and violence, so the actors had to deal with a bit of everything. I have worked with Willem before and he’s a very nice guy. Charlotte we cast after having been through a lot of actresses who weren’t too keen on being naked. In private she’s very shy, but in the film she really opens up, and that was impressive to see.”

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Antichrist is a film that even von Trier himself “has a hard time understanding.” In order to avoid any moralizing, he is reluctant to analyze the film for the audience. And should he one day feel the urge to do so anyway, all he has to do is to turn on the inner dialogue. “I think of myself as the audience,” he says. “I try to create the best films in the world and usually, in my opinion, I succeed in doing so. It’s like a working method, and I believe that it can be applied to all areas of life. The contentment and joy of living might be missing from other aspects of my life – but that’s a different thing. *Antichrist* may not be a real horror movie, but at least it’s my version of one. Every time I attempt to nail a genre, I fail. I am a strong opponent of boxed-in thinking and you always meet resistance when you try to break the limits. *Dancer in the Dark* was created on the notion that the Oscar committee usually nominates just one musical a year, so the odds are pretty good in that category. But they must have called my bluff, because all of a sudden it wasn’t a musical anymore. And if *Dancer* wasn’t a musical, perhaps this isn’t a real horror movie.”

