

## “ANTICHRIST” (DVD/Blu-ray Review)

Written by Scooter McCrae

Friday, 17 December 2010 13:29

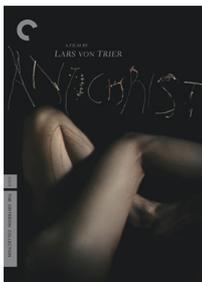
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Lars von Trier’s *ANTICHRIST* (now available on Blu-ray and a two-DVD set from Criterion) is a divisive film of undeniable power that, depending on your point of view, either squanders a powerful theme in a miasma of pretentiousness or brings a steadfast artistic gaze upon the examination of almost unbearable grief and guilt. Is it simply an exercise in audience provocation, or an emotional raw wound being examined and healed before the eyes of viewers?

The gross oversimplification of most of the story details immediately mark the film as allegory: a nameless couple (played by Willem Dafoe and Charlotte Gainsbourg) lose their innocence with the death of their child and go to a cabin in the forest called Eden in order to work through their feelings of guilt and resentment. In between lots of pseudopsychological mumbo jumbo seemingly meant to point a laughing finger at the entire psychiatric profession, magical realist nuts fall from the trees, animals say the darndest things and no genitalia shall be spared.

Lest I appear to be derisively critical of the film up front, I actually like it quite a bit and admire the slippery way that it undulates between absurdity and discomfort—a rare and difficult achievement. This tightrope-walking act sometimes comes dangerously close to undermining the entire house of cards that the enterprise is built upon, but such cinematic bravery is to be admired in an era where most moviemakers slavishly ape the patterns of the hundred years of filmmaking that have come before without making any noticeably new contribution to the creative matrix.



As this is a Criterion release, the transfer is beyond reproach—a solidly rendered, 16x9-enhanced affair with details in the deepest shadows and richly saturated colors. The audio is equally compelling, delivering an engulfing soundscape of disturbing sonic atmospheres,

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lingering silences before a sudden aural storm and music that often sounds like electronically amplified ambience gone bonkers.

And of course, there are plenty of supplements. Most of them are quite good, but unfortunately there's one supplemental feature I'm going to have to rake over the coals before moving on to the good stuff.

The audio commentary is almost unbearable, one of the worst this reviewer has ever tried to sit through—and had it not been for the sake of writing this review, I would have turned it off at the 10-minute mark and never returned to it. Von Trier is evasive about discussing meaning and the art of his craft, but the moderator (“film scholar” Murray Smith, according to the packaging)—a professor whose level of pretension is practically a parody of the kind of academic whose head is deeply embedded in his ass—just keeps on trying to press the director about the kind of cutely worded art-school minutiae that should cause even the most patient listener to snort derisively every couple of minutes.

It's truly embarrassing to experience, and if you like the film at all, this track should be avoided at all costs. About 26 minutes in, von Trier even states, “99 percent of what is happening in teaching films in university are fine, but it has nothing to do with the reality of making films”—which you think would be enough to startle his interlocutor into cutting out all the grand-poobah bullshit, but alas, the comment goes by unnoticed and the pretension keeps on going for another 80 minutes. Sigh.

Speaking as a genre fan, what's most annoying about a commentary like this is how it goes out of its way to ignore the very genre it seems to be wallowing in. Yeah, I get it—there are shots that reference the films of Andrei Tarkovsky and emotional moments right out of an Ingmar Bergman film, but when the moderator bends over backwards to point out these moments without mentioning those that appear to be visiting from Dario Argento or Lucio Fulci films (i.e., Dafoe punching a hole in the floor to pick up the wrench in the dirt below, which feels like a lift from *INFERNO*, or when he pokes his finger through the hole in his leg in a moment reminiscent of any number of Fulci flicks). But what else would you expect from a “film scholar” who thinks that Richard Fleischer directed *IN COLD BLOOD*, when it was in fact Richard Brooks? Really, he does make this mistake on the commentary without retracting it.

However, the rest of the supplements are a treasure trove of material that actually let us experience a taste of the process behind von Trier's artistic technique—proving once more that

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when it comes to making art, talking about it is just bullshit, since it's one percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration. This is something most academics who teach film will never understand, and an example of why these folks shouldn't humiliate themselves on audio commentary tracks.

Point made and belabored, so I'll move on now.

These extras begin with separate interviews with the director and the film's two stars. Von Trier goes first, spending about five minutes tossing off a bon mot or two while looking a bit squirrely—after all, he made his movie and it seems obvious he's said as much as he wants to say about it, so I can't hold his reticence against him at this point. However, the 44-minute chat with Gainsbourg is wonderful; the unconventional beauty discusses the moviemaking process and how unsatisfying certain aspects were (von Trier would often have them try every possible permutation of a scene without giving the performers a feeling of having accomplished something definitive), but overall finding a sense of completion amidst the hurly-burly of production. Unlike a lot of actors who talk on and on about their movies without really saying very much, her observations are illuminating, and reveal so much about her own process and how her co-star and director worked with each other to be an affecting listening experience. Then there's an 18-minute interview with Dafoe, who not only proves to be charming but, according to his recollection, was an integral part of the film being made at all.

The most substantial supplement is a seven-part collection of featurettes running about eight to 12 minutes each (totaling more than an hour) that breaks down the making-of material into categories and examines in detail the visual design, sound design and music, makeup FX and props—as well as the difficulty of working with animals like a deer and a fox, and even women (sorry, but there is a section that focuses on the mistreatment of women throughout history, so I thought I could make this lousy joke). It's more interviews interspersed with designs and props than actual production footage, but it's still very interesting and brings the production details into greater focus. There *is* footage interspersed from the test movie that eventually became ANTICHRIST with two other performers that was as much a camera tryout as a litmus test for von Trier's filmmaking and psychological mettle.

There's a particularly revealing moment I stumbled across while watching one of the featurettes, focusing on the recording of the beautiful piece of Handel music that opens the movie and plays in contrast to the tension that develops on screen via the intercutting between the couple having sex and their child climbing onto the window ledge in their apartment. The soprano who sings the aria is talking to von Trier after the recording session, and mentions that she's glad she doesn't know exactly in what context the music will be used—as she's a mother of two children

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and suspects something less than healthy will be happening as she sings. Von Trier counters that he has four kids of his own at home, and then quips offhandedly: “It’s only the childless who are sentimental.” And suddenly, in a flash, the whole film makes a little more sense. As always, it’s the offhand, unguarded comment that says a lot more than hours of prepared pontification.

There are three separate featurettes covering the world premiere of ANTICHRIST at the Cannes Film Festival in 2009. The first is a seven-minute overview of the sheer stupidity and excesses of festivals like these (including a brief and absurd shot on an airplane flying over the beach with a banner for the movie) with a tantalizing taste of the obnoxiousness of the press who bombarded von Trier and his performers with questions that were more like attacks. Here we also get to see von Trier’s famous and oft-quoted smart-ass reply, “I am the greatest living film director”—and when you see him say it, you see just how funny a screw-you to his detractors it was. Both Dafoe and Gainsbourg get separate EPK-style interview segments that were also shot at Cannes, and while not much new is revealed, they reveal textbook examples of how differently two talented performers practice their craft—he’s quite technical and precise, while she speaks more of emotional involvement and abstract feelings of horror.

Finally, there’s a beautifully designed 30-page booklet that contains an insightful essay by yet another film scholar, Ian Christie. The essay is judiciously spread out among all the pretty pictures from the movie—which are very attractive, yes, but it’s a pity there wasn’t more space allotted for perhaps additional critical opinions or an even more in-depth dissection of the film.

The most fascinating thing about the experience of going through all this material is discovering just how despised the horror genre is by the people who worked on ANTICHRIST, which by my definition is most definitely a horror film. How bad is that denial? Well, while everyone goes out of their way at one point or another to say they don’t think they’ve made a “horror movie,” they also seem more disturbed by being associated with such a disreputable genre than they are by the fact that there’s hardcore sex footage in the movie—indicating that there’s less shame to being associated with pornography than with *horror*. Which is really sad, when you consider that 30 or 40 years ago, there’s no question that ANTICHRIST would have been considered (in many ways) a typical example of the European art/horror tradition—not unlike a classic like DON’T LOOK NOW, a film that this one shares quite a number of thematic similarities with.

Then again, in the last decade, the whole notion of what a horror film is has degraded so rapidly—little but shitty remakes by mostly no-talent hacks and brain-dead throwbacks that romanticize slasher and creature-feature pabulum that was considered junk the first time around—that I’m saddened to say I understand their unwillingness to be associated with our beloved genre. Which is as big a pity for them as it is for us, don’t you think?

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MOVIE: 

DISC PACKAGE: 

{comments on}