

**(Wo)man vs. Nature: The Connections Between Humans and the Natural World in Lars
von Trier's *Antichrist* and *Nymphomaniac***

by

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Abstract

In this research project, I have analyzed two of Lars von Trier's films in relation to the interactions between humans and the natural world. These two films, *Antichrist* (2009) and *Nymphomaniac* (2013), parts one and three of von Trier's Depression Trilogy respectively, are often critiqued as having misogynistic undertones without being given credit for much anything else. However, when analyzed from the angle of nature and animal theories, I assert that von Trier has made incredible contributions to these fields. The research questions I analyzed in relation to these theories are that of: humans, animals, and their interactions and similarities; animal agency within these films; and the ways in which nature functions within these films especially in relation to human characters.

The design of study that I used to complete this project is based on theoretical analyses and close analyses of multiple scenes from both films. Through this, content as well as stylistic elements are used to negate previous scholarship and add new developments. Previous scholarship has often labeled humans as above animals on a hierarchical level. This is not only according to scientists, but also philosophers and theorists. Many, like Anat Pick, even agree that animals no longer have agency, but gain a certain level of agency through humans that they would not be able to have otherwise. Nature too, often labeled as a caring, female force, has succumb to assumptions that may not be true, at least not anymore. Through my research in relation to von Trier's two films, I have noticed that these past assumptions have changed, if not become entirely false. Major trends I have noticed in his films are the equal playing field between humans and animals through their similar behaviors, true animal agency, and how nature can become an oppressive, patriarchal force.

My interpretations of these trends favor negating previous scholarship. In both *Antichrist* and *Nymphomaniac*, different views of nature are shown, which leads to nature being fluid rather than either caring or wrathful. Nature, especially in *Antichrist* takes on a patriarchal role which has not been seen much in film before and serves to prove that the character, named She, cannot live not because she is a woman and von Trier wants to punish, but to say that the patriarchal structure around her demands it and leads the viewer to question what must be done. The animals in this film also possess agency, clearly acting on their own accords and holding power over humans. The animals in *Nymphomaniac* clearly relate to the human characters in order to show that the actions they take, while seeming unbelievable, are merely just humans acting on their primordial desires. It is through these interpretations that I will assert that Lars von Trier's two films are not meant to be analyzed through a solely feminist framework as they usually are, but through frameworks of animal and nature theory as well in order to understand why the actions in the films take place and what von Trier is trying to say.

Introduction

The path that this project will be taking examines the subject of animals and nature in relation to humans and human behavior within Lars von Trier's two films *Antichrist* (2009) and *Nymphomaniac* (2013). Within this, theories of nature and animal representation in media and ideas of the role of the women in each film will come into play. One of the main points of interest is the question of whether or not animals and nature have agency within these films, or whether they are something to only be observed by the humans. Another point of interest is the connection between characters in the film and animals themselves. Through examining these points, I will come to a conclusion about the roles and connections between animals and nature within these two films and show that there is a deep connection between humans and animals and that animals have a bigger part to play in these films than simply being there to be observed.

Within the theories of nature and animal representation, one of the most discussed questions is whether or not animals hold agency in the films in which they are being depicted. Most often in scholarship, it is argued that animals do not have agency, or at least they do not on their own. Anat Pick, in the chapter "Cine-Zoos" in her book *Creaturely Poetics*, talks about the dynamics of human-animal relations within film. She calls the animal the "object of study," and quoting John Berger, writes "animals are always the observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance" (Pick 104). These statements are interesting on a few levels. First, it is easy to agree that animals are usually the organisms being observed in film in relation to the humans who are the observers. This can be connected to *Nymphomaniac*, as Joe, as well as one of her lovers, has been compared to animals by herself and Seligman. Seligman compares Joe to

behaving like a lure in fly fishing, with the men acting as the fish. Later, she compares herself to a caged lion in that she walks back and forth along the same path every day, much like a zoo animal. Another instance is when she compares a male lover to a large wild cat who stalks out its prey. In this way, the animals being mentioned are the ones who have been observed and categorized to have certain traits and, in turn, are identifiable with certain traits within Joe and a particular lover. However, it is hard to believe that the fact that animals can observe humans has lost its significance, nor is it easy to believe that the agency of the animal is only given by its human observer as Pick reiterates. This is especially the case in *Antichrist*, specifically in the animal characters that make up the “Three Beggars,” which are a deer, crow, and fox. There, three animals give gruesome and dominating appearances to He on three occasions, with She being present for one of them. These animals, and the in-film lore surrounding them, being supernatural creatures that signal death, make themselves known as creatures with their own agency and purpose. In this way, nature and animals dominate over human life in this film, which is something that is not necessarily present in Pick’s chapter. Though movies have usually used animals in the way Pick describes, it seems that *Antichrist* adds a strong counterpoint to her ideas and can show the amount of agency that animals can have in film.

Another source that examines the relationship between animals and their agency is Susan McHugh’s “Animal Gods in Extinction Stories: *Power* and *Princess Mononoke*.” In this book chapter, Susan McHugh discusses human-animal relations as they pertain to god-like animals, specifically those in the film *Princess Mononoke* and the novel *Power*. This text is a great way to talk about *Antichrist*, as the animals shown in this film act almost as figures giving omens to the human characters. In the opening paragraph, McHugh states that “animal gods in contemporary

fictions are being depicted as dying,” which is a direct correlation to the Three Beggars in *Antichrist* (McHugh 205). The first animal to be seen is the deer, representing grief, as its stillborn still hangs from its body. Already, this theme of animals being depicted as dying is already at play as a baby animal is dead, which is meant to be observed by He. The crow is also seen later in the film, as He is trying to escape from She. The crow is in the cave that He finds, and when it begins making noise, which would give away his location, he begins to try to kill it. Again, this godlike animal is shown to be dying, but this time at the hands of a human. The most visceral of these animals, though, is the fox. As He comes across it in a grassy clearing, the fox is shown to be bloody and disemboweling itself before saying in English “Chaos Reigns.”

This act of an animal dying leads in to the next point that McHugh makes, which is that “the deaths of divine figures signal doom for the systems that these creatures were once imagined as protecting” (McHugh 205). The Three Beggars all seem suited to be in the environment in which this film takes place. As She, through her studies, classifies these creatures as having some kind of divine aspect, it is not hard to connect them to having watched over the land at some point, disconnected from each other due to their differences in species. Yet when they come together, as She explains, someone will die. The coming together of three very different animals signifies a doom, as McHugh writes, for these animals would not all come and sit together under ordinary circumstances. It is in this way that they can be seen as having some godlike aspect, as they have the agency to form decisions on when is the right time to come together and give an omen.

Another point that McHugh brings up is what exactly these animal gods relate to. She writes that it is interesting that these animals “[become] entangled with cultural extinctions”

(McHugh 205). The cultural extinction, albeit through a different lens as it is not a complete extinction, but rather the large scale idea of one, in *Antichrist* is the gynocide of women that She is writing her dissertation on. The placement of these god animals signal an extinction of some aspect of culture. In this case, these animals signify the systemic oppression, removal of agency, and murder of women throughout time. These animals signal to her that she *must* die due to the evil nature of the patriarchy that surrounds her. This, however, does not mean that these animals are complicit in this act. McHugh writes that god animals can “foster sympathetic engagement with past tragedies,” meaning, that these animals are aware of this systematic torture of women, yet they can be sympathetic to She at the same time that the audience can through the torture that She must endure (McHugh 207).

One issue that McHugh writes, though, is the lack of believability that animal gods have within the presence of humans, which directly relates back to Pick’s ideas of animals being there to be observed. She writes that “animal gods are all too readily ignored” (McHugh 207). In the film, as She tells He of the Three Beggars, he writes it off as nonsense and another sign of her deteriorating mental state brought on not only by the death of their son, but also her wayward studies. Even as He witnesses each of the Three Beggars, he still still thinks the idea is unfathomable. It is not until the Three Beggars come into the house and sit together while She is in a frenzy that He realizes that these animals symbolize the omen that She was talking about all along, but by this time it was too late to stop the inevitable.

These two sources work well for this theme that is being explored in this project, as they both offer interesting insights into the agency, or lack thereof, of the animals being presented in these films. While Pick’s analysis of animals in media is far more passive, it offers a good

jumping-off point to make a counter argument using McHugh's essay. McHugh, it seems, while not directly writing about these films, brings up great points on the role of the divine animal in movies, showing that animals are perhaps far more important in film than just being there to be seen.

While the animals in these films may have agency, the connection between them and the characters in the films still needs to be explored. One source that explores this is Roman Bartosch's "Ghostly Presences: Tracing the Animal in Julia Leigh's *The Hunter*." While this chapter ends with an analysis on a specific novel, the questions that Bartosch discusses pertaining to human-animal interactions is very useful in my project. Early on, Bartosch examines the idea of the human becoming animal, where he writes that "those who cross the species barrier do that at their own peril" (Bartosch 260). This directly relates to Joe's character in *Nymphomaniac* in two instances, both of which were mentioned earlier with Pick's chapter. The first is in the first chapter of the film, titled "The Complete Angler." This chapter shows a young Joe on the train with her friend B as they have a competition to see who can have sexual intercourse with the most men on the train ride. As she tells Seligman this story, he compares it to the methods of fly-fishing, in which the lure is made to "dance" a certain way depending on the way the fish are acting. In this way, Joe is becoming the fly, or lure, that the men/fish will try to catch. While this may all seem like fun and games, in the shots of the intercourse happening, von Trier chooses to show Joe with a blank expression, or, showing her "peril," as Bartosch writes.

The second time Bartosch's quote relates to *Nymphomaniac* is where Joe is talking to Seligman about her walks. In this scene, Joe describes that she found comfort in taking walks

outside. These walks always occurred on the same route, and became not only very repetitive, but a part of her own nature. She then goes on to tell Seligman that she felt like a caged animal, as an image of a lion in a cage at a zoo is shown. The lion paces back and forth in the cage just as Joe paces back and forth on the same walking route. This is another case where becoming like an animal has proved to be a peril, as Joe states that this made her feel like a caged animal waiting to die. The same feeling that a caged animal may have is the same feeling that Joe acquired, as she walks along the same route; the only route in which she feels she can occupy, just as a cage is the only space a zoo animal can occupy. In this way, Joe's comparisons to animals highlights another argument that Bartosch writes, which is that "human and nonhuman bodies and meanings [can be] brought into a mutually shaping relationship," as becoming like these animals has shifted Joe's perception of herself (Bartosch 261).

Later in the chapter, Bartosch talks about the role of the environment and animal in relation to the human. Bartosch quotes Fellez in his point, saying "'Indeed,' Fellez maintains, it is in 'aesthetic experience [that] the subject and object are not entirely separate, for such experience is grounded on the shared origin of observer and observed, their natural connectedness' (emphases original)—a sense of kinship, as it were" (Bartosch 263). This quote can be attributed to *Antichrist*, as the eeriness of the nature around Eden is felt and observed by both the animals and He and She. While one could easily write off the animals being a part of the evil nature, the agency of the animals and the humans make it so that they are both relating to each other in that they observe the evil around them all. The animals, specifically the Three Beggars (Deer, Fox, and Crow), serve as warning signs to the humans in the film, as they signify the beginning of the end in that She's research tells of them coming when someone will die. Just

as the humans observe the animals, the animals observe the nature and the human's presence, thus creating a connected kinship as Bartosch writes.

Bartosch's ideas correlate to an idea presented by Anat Pick, where she writes that the agency of an animal is through its human observer (Pick 109). This idea not only connects to the first theme, on animal agency, presented in this literature review, but also the theme of the connection between the animal and the human. In order to Joe's story to be understood in a new, understandable and "natural" way, her connection to animal habits must be explored to connect her further to the world around her. This connection makes her acts not only more believable, but also more in tune with the behavioral aspects of animals and nature.

Nolan Boyd, too, in his essay "'Nature Is Satan's Church': Depression and the Politics of Gender in Lars von Trier's *Antichrist*," connects the character of She with the natural world around her in order to show that perhaps She is not, in fact, as evil as many viewers perceive her to be, but rather that nature itself has innate "evilness" when connected to the patriarchy. Boyd states that "From the first [scene], it seems, von Trier is aligning our spectatorial position, and thus our intellectual sympathies, with She," as the viewer sees her melancholia firsthand (Boyd 2). In doing this, Boyd also talks about Freud's writings on melancholia and mourning to put She's suffering into perspective for the viewer. Boyd quotes Freud, who states that the melancholic person puts on an air of worthlessness to their outside world, which directly relates to She's self-loathing (Boyd 4). And while many other writers have connected the idea of nature being evil with She, which sets a misogynistic tone for the film, Boyd turns this around, saying "'Mr. Nature' is human nature, gendered male, 'the kind of nature that causes people to do evil things against women,' the kind of nature that controls women's bodies" (Boyd 8). Here, Boyd

makes the argument that He is taking the role of nature that She is saying is evil. In this way, She again becomes a victim of the patriarchal system, as the environment is actively trying to repress her. This is a very important view to explore in relation to the connection between humans and nature, as most critics are quick to write off *Antichrist* as inherently misogynistic, mostly due to nature and its malevolence being connected with She, when it does not necessarily need to be read that way, especially when the viewer's perspective is aligned with She and her battle against nature's patriarchal system. This also sets a precedent for the role of nature and animals within this film and *Nymphomaniac*, where nature is not inherently connected to women and thus women cannot be labeled as evil or immoral due to how the nature around them is working.

These sources not only provide starting points for the research of the connections between animals, nature, and humans in these two von Trier films, but also, as Boyd shows, how the evil or immoral characters may only be evil at first glance. Upon further inspection, Joe acts out of the system she was born into, and through her connection with animals is able to place herself in sympathy with the viewer. This is also the case with She, as perhaps seen as the most demented character, is perhaps only behaving this way because of the strains put on her by the patriarchal system around her, which is symbolized through nature.

By analyzing and incorporating these sources into my project, I will show that animals and nature do, in fact, have agency like the humans in this film. This will be shown by using the sources by Pick and McHugh, where animals are either seen as having no agency, or, as McHugh writes, an almost divine agency when they are in films. By showing this, the animals in the films will have be put on a new tier, equaling the humans, rather than being lower on the scale or even, and Pick writes, just there to be observed. I will also incorporate Boyd, Bartosch, and Pick's

pieces to show the grand connection between nature, animals, and humans within these two films. By showing this connection, the behaviors of the female characters seem more understandable, as the connection shows that humans are not as far off from animals in behavior as humans think they are.

Human and Animal Relations

The first framework that I will be exploring is the relationship between humans and animals. This theoretical framework is worthwhile to understand in relation to *Antichrist* (2009) and *Nymphomaniac* (2013) because it adds a new dimension in which these two films will be understood more clearly in that the female protagonists and other characters identify with or interact with animals in such a way that there is a clear connection between how animals behave and how humans behave. Specifically, humans in these two films act out characteristics usually given to animals. However, the point of this analysis is to show that while humans do act as animals, there must be a common thread between the two groups that show these actions as a similarity between species rather than behaviors appropriated from one group to another.

Nymphomaniac in particular likes to directly correlate human characters with animal counterparts in a way that shows the link between human nature and the nature of animals is not as separate as one would believe. This idea of human-animal separation has existed throughout history, going as far back as Aristotle writing in *Politics* that the nature of animals is to serve human beings (Aristotle 9). This idea was later expanded on by philosophers like Descartes and further amplified by the Darwinism coming out of the nineteenth century in which humans have become the most evolved species and are therefore separate from animals. The reason for the superiority that humans have over animals is because of what philosophers like John Locke theorized that distinguishes man from animal: consciousness (Locke 109). Since animals could not be proven to be conscious, they could not be on the same level as humans. Despite these past notions though, in my perspective animals and humans are, in fact, very closely related and

interact with each other in complex ways that does not separate them based on this hierarchical scale.

In the first chapter of *Nymphomaniac*, the female and male leads, Joe and Seligman respectively, are introduced and Joe articulates the beginning of her story and, therefore, her sexual life. Joe decides where to begin telling her story when she notices a fly-fishing lure on Seligman's wall. The chapter then opens, calling itself "The Compleat Angler" after the book on fly-fishing that Seligman explains he enjoyed as a child. Joe begins to explain that she had her sexual awakening at a young age, two, when she discovered her genitals. Lars von Trier inserts a clip of a young girl looking down as she says this through voiceover. She goes on to tell of one of the many activities she would do with her friend B which was "playing frogs." As older Joe narrates, on screen the viewer sees young Joe and young B as they spray water on the shower floor. Young Joe and B then lift up their skirts and begin moving across the floor on their stomachs in a similar fashion to the frog. After this, von Trier inserts a shot of a frog leaping off of a rock into water. This is done not only to show this action and actions like these as a jumping off point for Joe's sexual life, but also to build the foundations for the film connecting humans with animal counterparts. As Joe is compared to a frog through visuals, the viewer comes to understand that these human/animal connections will be shown this way. This is done in order for von Trier to perfectly illustrate the points he is trying to make about the relationships between humans and animals.

The next animal Joe is compared to is the nymph stage of an insect. Seligman comments on this stage, noting that it fits in with her story about nymphomania. At this point, von Trier inserts a shot of a nymph sitting in water, fluttering its fins. As this stage of an insect's life marks

the border between childhood and adulthood, it is easy to see why von Trier included this in the film. Joe begins to tell of the time she lost her virginity, adding that it was imperative to her growth. Joe seeks to lose her virginity to leave the innocence of childhood and enter into her sexual, adult life. Just as a nymph is on the cusp of adulthood, so was Joe. By using a nymph, too, von Trier shows Joe as a sexual being. Insects generally are born and grow up with the sole intention to breed and carry on the species. Showing Joe this way lets von Trier tell the viewer that Joe will lead her life in this manner. By adding in this sequence, von Trier is able to show that this moment is what signaled Joe's move to sexual adulthood.

The next human/animal connection continues with this insect sentiment as Joe is compared to a fly-fishing lure. She begins to explain to Seligman the time her and B, now adolescents or young adults, went on a train ride with the express purpose of seeing who could have sex with the most men. Joe describes that she and B put on what she calls "fuck me now clothes," meaning, clothes that show off their bodies and signal to men that they are available and looking to have sex. As her and B are shown in their clothes, von Trier inserts a clip of a fly-fishing lure. The lure is bright red and seems to be glowing, much like Joe in her bright red shorts. Already, von Trier is setting up Joe and B to act as lures for these men who will, after this, be compared to fish. The whole point in their dress and the visual comparison to a flashy lure is to show that these two women seeks to "catch" men in a way that is almost fooling or entrapping them.

As Joe and B walk down the aisle of the train, the next sequence begins in which Seligman describes "reading the river." Joe explains that her and B walked down the aisle in search of men, noticing their looks as they walk by. As this is happening, the song "Born to be

Wild” by Steppenwolf is playing, showing that they know they are taking part in risqué behavior and are seeking thrill. Seligman then stops Joe’s voiceover at which point the sequence plays in reverse. As it begins to play once more, Seligman talks about the idea of “reading the river.” Taking information from the book he read as a child, he explains to Joe that her and B were essentially acting as the fishermen that observe the river and its inhabitants before deciding where to go and who to prey on. As the clip of them walking is playing with Seligman speaking about this, shots of the men in the train are shown with an translucent overlay of a camera moving beneath the water in a river. This shows the train as a space that is being symbolically turned into a river for the two women to “catch” men. The viewer is now meant to take all of the images shown and meld them together to see this action as a parallel between the human and animal worlds.

Turning Joe and B into the fishermen in this sequence gives them the hierarchical power they need to succeed in their endeavors. By Seligman making this connection to Joe and the viewer, there is a shift in power between the sexes. While men are usually the ones seeking women out, Joe and B are completely turning this notion on its head through nature’s hierarchies. While the men are put on the same level as animals, Joe and B remain in their human state as fishermen. This difference is what allows Joe and B to outsmart the men on the train car. Now, this is not to say that humans are inherently above animals. What this means is that in the context of hunter and prey, humans come out above fish as humans, over their evolution, have acquired brains that allow them to observe and attack in a way that fish cannot. This understanding of how the natural world works allows Joe and B to be successful, as the viewer will see, at fishing in their prey. The only way this is possible, however, is through connecting

the men to fish. The visual elements that von Trier has added to this sequence solidify them as animals and therefore as a viable prey to the humans. Without this, Joe and B could not be successful.

Moving down the aisle, Seligman also offers insight into the location of the men. As the train is shown visually as having a center aisle, it also has cabins with sliding doors that contain seats for the men to sit. Seligman describes this as the men finding places that are safe and out of the direct line of eyesight. The fish, he describes, do not want to be out swimming when danger may lurk nearby. To illustrate this point, von Trier inserts a shot of a map of a river detailing these movements. This map shows the viewer what Seligman means by describing the train this way. As Joe tells her story, Seligman offers the human/animal connection to the viewer to drive home the point that she and B are acting as if they are fishing for these men. The viewer can come to understand what is meant through this visual.

The first man that Joe is able to sleep with on the train is also shown through visual elements to be in this process of being caught by a fisherman. Joe sits down in a train cabin and, after some painful conversation with the other travelers, asks where the restroom is. One man is kind enough to lead Joe to the restroom where they both enter. After this, a clip of a fish biting the lure and a fisherman, male, reeling it in is shown. This clip is shown as fast-paced, much like Joe wants to be fast paced to keep up with B in their competition. The fish bites and is immediately reeled in by the fisherman. This fast-paced visual works in the same way as Joe does, not only in competition, but in her reaction. As soon as the man offered to show her to the restroom, or “bit” the line she casted, she worked fast in order to secure her catch. This is just the same as in fishing where if one does not reel in a biting fish right away, he or she risks the fish

getting off the hook and swimming away. The visual, too, of the fisherman being a male drives home the point made earlier about power dynamics. Joe has become the male fisher. As a human male in this instance, she is given power over the other men, as while they may be male, they are acting as animal prey to the humans and therefore are below Joe and able to be outsmarted by her.

This idea is continued when Joe explains that the men, like fish, will no longer bite. Joe explains that while she had luck with the first men and a few after, none seemed to be interested in her after a while. Seligman, excitedly, tells her that this is because at the beginning the fish go into a feeding frenzy, but after a while, it will all stop. Meaning, either all the fish are biting at the line or none are. Joe finds this to be true and remarks that she had to get creative. Seligman notes that the proper way to deal with this problem, according to his book, is to mimic an insect in distress. As he explains, a visual is inserted showing a lure being frantically pulled and then let go to move a little downstream. This distress signals to the fish that it is an easy prey. Joe proves this notion to be right when she explains her method. She sits down on the train and begins to look upset. After some coercing by the men, she explains her dwarf hamster is ill. Seeing her vulnerable leads her to her next target, a man sitting across from her. She catches him and the two engage in intercourse in the bathroom. This distress is used by Joe to catch her prey much like the appearance of distress in a fly-fishing lure will coax the fish out of hiding. The visual cement this notion in the viewer's mind, as the comparison between Joe and the fishing lure show that moving from human thinking to animal instincts can win the human what he or she wants by playing upon them.

Another interesting part of this sequence to look into is the Joe's use of a dwarf hamster to signal her distress to the men. Seligman remarks that a dwarf hamster is a fitting choice, and while Joe says it was not a choice made consciously, it holds a lot of weight. While Joe was talking about the dwarf hamster in the sequence with the men, multiple images of dwarf hamsters in a cage were shown to the viewer. Through this, the viewer becomes accustomed to what Joe is describing and can make inferences as to what Seligman means. Being a small rodent, it is not unlikely that the viewer would see these images and hear Seligman's statement and assume that these animals are quick to breed, just as Joe is quick to sleep with as many men as possible. In a scientific paper titled "Females choose gentle, but not healthy or macho males in Campbell dwarf hamsters (*Phodopus campbelli* Thomas 1905)," it is stated that:

Receptive females attract males from a distance of up to 1 km, and may mate with several males (Wynne-Edwards et al. 1992; Surov 2006). In captivity, adult males act aggressively toward each other from the age of 2 months, and their cohabitation in the same cage often leads to the death of one of them. Success in mating with the female can be related positively to aggressive dominance in male–male conflicts. (Rogovin et al 546).

This piece of scientific information highlights what Seligman tried to talk about before he was cut off by Joe. The choice of a dwarf hamster is an important one made by von Trier as it touches on many aspects. First, rodents do breed at a quick rate which would explain Joe's drive to participate in this competition. Second, as the sequence includes her and two males, it is easy to see the connection with the quote. As Joe begins to attract the men, they both try to win over her attention. However, they both go about this in different ways. The man sitting next to her tries to

downplay her sadness, stating that her hamster is only a pet. The man across from her, though, remarks that saying such a thing is hurtful and tries to console her. He reaches for her hand and after, von Trier shows a close up where the other man tries to hold her hand, but she rejects. This back and forth between the men is similar to the competition between the dwarf hamster males. One could say they do act aggressively, as stated in the article, as the man across from her shuts the other man down for being rude. However, this same man's kindness towards her is why she chooses him. This is echoed in the article where the results of this breeding experiment showed that female dwarf hamsters would breed at a higher rate with males that used "non-aggressive grooming" (Rogovin et al 551). Lar von Trier's choice in using a dwarf hamster as Joe's pet was a clever one, as the viewer becomes interested in this connection through Seligman's statement and visuals. Upon investigation, it seems that the dwarf hamster is a perfect comparison to the mating techniques being used by Joe. This also further solidifies that animals and human, in their behavior, are quite similar. This shows that throughout the film, the connections made between animals and humans are deeper than their surface-level comparisons. Each choice that von Trier makes is meticulously calculated to related humans and animals in such a way that breaks down the hierarchies that have been previously established.

In another chapter of *Nymphomaniac*, titled "The Little Organ School," two direct connections are made between humans and animals; the first of these is Joe connecting one of her lovers, named G, to a cat, jaguar, and leopard. The connections to the cat family, specifically these cats, both wild and domestic, is relevant in that they contribute to Joe's characterization of G. Joe describes G as being like a house cat, in that she must wait for him to come, and when he does, he does not immediately enter her apartment. House cats, while domesticated, retain some

of their primal qualities such as observing before entering. This allows them to scope out the area and the situation and decide whether or not they would like to enter.

Through these visuals, G is able to take on qualities of an animal, yet he still retains his gendered view of the world through his gazing at Joe. After Joe describes G as a house cat, von Trier juxtaposes Joe's description with a clip of a cat looking directly into the camera. Much like G, the cat does not look excited, but simply sits and stares at the camera and, in turn, the viewer. House cats, as observant creatures, are always watching without much reaction. In connecting G to a house cat, he is given the role of the observer. Laura Mulvey in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" writes that men are the "bearer of the look" that "[control] the film phantasy and also [emerge] as the representative of power" (Mulvey 838). Lars von Trier's stylistic choice to show a clip of a house cat looking at the camera coupled with Joe's commentary signals this idea. Jean-Paul Sartre, too, in *Being and Nothingness* comments a statement similar to this. He says, "Curiosity in an animal is always either sexual or alimentary. To know is to devour with the eyes" (Sartre 578). While Sartre is speaking about hunting for knowledge, this line at its base feels appropriate in that he is saying that animals watch to see if something is worthwhile that can aid in sex or nourishment. G's gazing at Joe is sexual in nature, and as he gazes upon her, he is devouring her in the way that Sartre outlined. G, as a house cat, observes Joe and objectifies and analyzes her through this gaze while also maintaining power over her in the sense that it is he that chooses when he will enter and have sex with her, all while von Trier shows her standing complacent in her apartment.

This animal-human connection happens again almost immediately after his G's connection to the house cat when Joe then describes G as being more like a jaguar or leopard. G

is described as different animals to show the fluidity within humans to take on species-specific behaviors. A change in a human's animal counterpart signals a change in their character or an added layer of shown behavior. As Joe states his new animal association, another clip is shown, this time of a leopard laying in the grass. More interesting, though, is when von Trier shows a clip of G's character, walking nude across a gridded background, and then immediately shows a leopard walking in the jungle. This is done to show that the gaits of both man and animal are almost exact, and von Trier connects them further in that he also shows them both walking in the same direction, from the right of the screen to the left. Leopards and jaguars are wild cats, both of which hunt solitarily. This shows G as a solitary entity that stalks his prey; there is no one else hunting Joe but him in this moment. Both man and animal are on the prowl in a similar fashion and seek out their prey.

With G already being visually compared to a cat and leopard, the sex scene between the two solidifies this connection. Joe describes the sex between the two as having a dominant-submissive aspect as she directly states that "He was in charge." As she says this, von Trier shows the two engaging in sexual intercourse in which Joe is on all fours while G is behind her. This position is animalistic in nature, as it is aptly referred to as "doggy style," and only further shows the connection, in this instance, between G and his animal counterparts. This position is known for a lack of eye-contact which denotes a primal, animalistic urge rather than an act of love between two people. Not only has G been compared to these animals visually through von Trier's stylistic elements, but also through the sexual acts that are performed.

Even though these connections are being made by von Trier, the question of what these connections mean to these characters remains. Roman Bartosch writes, in his essay "Ghostly

Presences: Tracing the Animal in Julia Leigh's *The Hunter*," that "human and nonhuman bodies and meanings [can be] brought into a mutually shaping relationship" (Bartosch 261). In the case of G, this is seen to be true. As the scene progresses, G is further connected to these animals, and in doing so, von Trier is able to create a relationship between the two in which these animals almost influence G to act, or be expected to act, in a certain way. This may also show that while this could just be a connection, it may be too simple to say so. Rather, the connections between G and the animals shows the viewer that humans and animals, even at a base, sexual level, behave very similarly. By von Trier choosing to have Joe connect G to members of the cat family through dialogue and stylistic visuals, G is portrayed as a solitary hunter while Joe is what is being hunted. This connection is set in stone through the choice of animals used. Cats, leopards, and jaguars are all solitary creatures who observe and act in silence, much in the same way that G is shown to pursue Joe.

The last clip of this comparison is shown when Joe is connecting G to the lover she talked about just before through the stylistic choice of split screen. The other lover's clip is on the left side, while G's is on the right, with a black gap in the middle. This works to break the realistic illusion of the film's content and remind the viewer that what he or she is watching is a film. It also works to spatialize temporality in that these two men, placed on the same screen, form a cohesive chapter in the story that Joe is relating. G's clip is intermixed with the clips seen throughout his scene, but strikingly, one clip is shown that portrays a leopard biting into the neck of a deer-like animal. Symbolically, this deer represents Joe, as in her relationship with G, she becomes the submissive. Meaning, in the presence of a solitary cat predator, Joe becomes the animal that is hunted. However, this clip is grotesque in that it is showing one animal devouring

another. This leads to the next point in which the darker sides of animals are shown. Bartosch writes that “those who cross the species barrier do that at their own peril” (Bartosch 260). Both G and Joe cross the species barrier, but while the rest of G’s story is never explored, this statement will be analyzed in relation to Joe. The deer being in the mouth of the leopard is symbolic of Joe slowly being devoured not only by these men, but by her own sexual energy, which is beginning to wear her down.

This idea is carried directly into the scene following Joe’s encounter with G. Joe is shown walking along her usual path through a park, which was also seen earlier in the film. As she gets to a certain point in her walk, it cuts to it being shown again from the beginning, but this time at a higher speed. This stylistic choice by von Trier is used to show just how often, and, in turn, how repetitive, Joe’s walks have become as she takes the same path every time, only occupying a certain space. She states that these walks became a “metaphor for [her] life,” as she goes on to compare herself to an animal. This time, the animal is a lion, very much unlike her previous relation to a deer. This transformation, like G’s from house cat to wild cat, signals an added layer of behavior and personality. Her meekness while in the company of G is upturned by her prowess when alone. However, unlike G’s wild counterpart, Joe’s is subjected to life in a cage. A shot is shown of a lion in what looks like a circus cage as it is pacing back and forth and banging its head against its perimeters. In this sense, Joe has become animal, but to the peril that Bartosch describes, as she is confined and unable to escape this pattern.

One way to look at this is that in taking these walks, which are her only way to clear her mind, she cages herself in like a circus animal. In her real life, she has free mobility to walk around, yet confines herself to the same path and in doing so, she creates a metaphor of the

tension between her body and mind for herself through this visual. In Anat Pick's book *Creaturely Poetics*, in the chapter titled "Cine-Zoos," she writes that the agency of an animal is through its human observer (Pick 109). G can negate this claim, as he becomes animal, yet is the one observing Joe. As Joe says, he is in charge, which gives his human-animal character hybrid agency. Joe however, in her solo example, becomes the animal which is observed. This takes away her agency as Pick describes it, and perhaps her loss of agency is a result of her loss of control over her sexual desires. The symbolism, too, of the lion, a pack animal, being confined by itself also shows an existentiality where Joe feels alone and disconnected from the world and those around her. This loss of agency is echoed by what Joe says herself after this sequence; that she is "waiting for permission to die." By becoming animal in this instance, so much agency is taken from her that she, like a circus lion, cannot even choose death if she wanted to.

Another way to view this scene is in relation to patriarchal structures. In the presence of men, like in her story with G, she is the one that is stalked and hunted. The structure of the patriarchy forces her to become the deer; she must be the one being devoured by men. However, as she compares herself to a lion, the viewer can see that Joe sees herself differently and that, to reiterate, relations to animals are fluid. Joe's sexual energy and promiscuity is symbolized through the lion. As it is a male lion, Joe sees herself as dominant and in control, ready to sexually hunt and devour the men who come into contact with her. However, due to patriarchal structures at play, she must be caged because she has too much power than a woman should be allotted. As a lion, another wild cat, she is denied the same freedoms and actions that other men, namely G, can have and take. By her comparing herself to a caged lion, a new layer of

self-awareness and consciousness is given to her. Her self-labeling is her understanding the reality of her situation in that she must be caged by the patriarchy.

All of these examples highlight how complicated this theoretical framework becomes. Joe is compared to a frog, nymph, fisherman, and dwarf hamster in the first chapter, while men are compared to fish and dwarf hamsters. This is done by von Trier to show that animals and humans are fluid in their behaviors and that humans can transcend different species when they are faced with different tasks. Joe is dynamic, without even realizing it, in her ability to be an animal. This speaks to the innate instincts that humans retain from once being animal. Meanwhile, in a later chapter, both Joe and G become the animal counterparts of themselves, but they do so very differently. G is able to become animal in order to observe his prey, being Joe. In doing this, he negates Pick's argument that says animals lack agency, as he becomes the one who observes. However, Joe does the opposite. The animal, for Joe, is a symbol of entrapment, and plays directly into Pick's statement. By becoming animal, Joe gives up her agency and cages herself in. This leads her to be the observed. Even so, the role of being observed leads the viewer to look deeper into and examine Joe's character than one could if she did, in fact, retain her agency. All of these analyses prove that von Trier offers a new way to view humans and animals in film. Even within the same film, these views are dynamic and show the viewer that nothing in the natural world is necessarily concrete.

Animal Agency

The second framework that I will be discussing in relation to von Trier is the idea that animals do, in fact, have agency. As said earlier, Anat Pick criticizes the notion that animals in film have agency. Pick writes that “The animal in film solicits rather than defers questions of reality... the animal is both central to the development of film technology and the subject of ‘the unresolvable dialectic between humane and cruel attitudes to animals that governs their history in modern culture’” (Pick 109). By this, Pick means that animals cannot transcend the negative attitudes towards them that is seen in our culture. However, I propose that animals, in fact, do transcend this notion. To do this, I will be analyzing key scenes from von Trier’s *Antichrist* in relation to Susan McHugh’s “Animal Gods in Extinction Stories: *Power* and *Princess Mononoke*.” In this article, McHugh argues that animals take on godly presences, much like how they do in *Antichrist*. The animals in *Antichrist* come in a few forms, however, I will be focusing on the Three Beggars, as the film refers to them. These three animals take on an almost spectral quality while maintaining strong connections to reality.

The first of these animals to be shown is a deer with a fetus hanging out of its body. As He, the male character, is walking through the woods towards the cabin, he comes across a deer. From a distance, the two stare at each other. Upon moving closer, however, the camera shows the deer in slow motion, allowing the viewer to fully take in what is being shown. The deer looks at the camera and then turns to run, showing the fetus hanging from its body. Being in slow motion, He and the viewer watch as the fetus bounces, lifeless. He witnesses this whole event,

first with child-like excitement and then in shock. The sound, too, gives off a dark ambience which is later echoed with the other animals. The deer looking at He in the beginning at first seems innocent; a man and an animal in query of each other. However, as the deer shows He and the viewer the fetus, this takes on a strange tone. The encounter being in slow motion coupled with the ambient sound signals that this encounter is not by chance.

Being so visually different from the previous parts of the film, it stands out as something of note. The film up until now has been relatively normal, save for the slow motion at the beginning when Nick, the couple's child, dies when falling from a window while the couple have sex. In this way, it can be understood that in times of slow motion, von Trier is unveiling an important aspect of the film to the viewer. But while Nick's death served as the catalyst for the film and was arguably straightforward, this scene is different. No plot points are given away. All the viewer can gather is that it, like Nick's scene, is in slow motion and therefore must hold some importance to the rest of the film. When another animal is shown this way, the point becomes even more interesting.

The second animal to be shown is a fox, which gives a foreboding message. He, again, is alone walking through the woods. He comes across a patch of ferns and upon noticing fur, pushes them back only to come into contact with the fox. Again, like last time, a jarring clangning is heard which turns into the ambient music like before, but this time more menacing in tone. The camera goes to slow motion and the fox is seen snapping up at He. After this, the fox, still in slow motion, is seen disemboweling itself before exclaiming in a deep, distorted voice "Chaos Reigns." He's face, also shown in slow motion, has a look of terror, as he cannot process what he has just seen. The viewer, too, is equally as jarred by this, as a self-mutilating

animal that is also speaking human language is incomprehensible. But still, the viewer and He both have no idea why this is being shown. That is, until a small explanation is given.

The first time He and the viewer have any insight into these animals is when She begins to explain her thesis. She has been working on a thesis on the subject of gynocide, which means the mass killings of women. Her thesis, however, has begun to drive her crazy, at least from He's perspective. She begins explaining witches, evil women, and even a trio of animals called the Three Beggars. They are signaled by constellations lined up in the sky, and when they make an appearance, as She explains, they signal the death of one person. He, believing she has gone mad, tries to convince her that women are not evil and that her studies have led her to madness. She, however, will hear none of it. This small scene is important in that the viewer makes the connection between the deer and fox, as they are two parts to the trio. Suddenly, their appearances seem like omens and the viewer begins to wonder when the third animal, the crow, will make its appearance. The viewer, after all that has happened thus far, also wonders if He will ever believe She, as her studies seem to be coming true.

The last of the animals, the crow, makes its appearance towards the very end of the film. To recap, after a long, strenuous few days, She seems to have gone mad. In a fit of rage, she has drilled a hole through He's leg and bolted a whetstone onto it, hindering his movement. As he tries to escape her, he crawls into a small hole in the earth. Hidden from She as she runs around screaming for him, he notices something under the rocks in the hole. The camera is packed in tightly with He as this happens, giving the viewer a sense of panic and claustrophobia. As He removes the rocks, he finds a crow, relatively lifeless. The crow, however, springs back to life and begins attacking him, all while the viewer is confined to the same space. He tries to kill the

bird with a rock, but to no avail. The bird seemingly cannot die. As it squawks, it gives up his location, leading She to him.

The camera placement inside the hole puts the viewer into direct contact with the crow like all of the other animals. This time, however, there seems to be no escape. The viewer begins to identify with He through this camera placement and feels the claustrophobia and panic that he does. There is no sympathy for She, because the viewer is trying to get away from her just as much as He is. The fact that the viewer is in the hole with the crow, too, gives the viewer the foreboding feeling that the film is about to hit its climax as all of the Beggars have now been introduced.

In one of the final scenes of the film, He and She both lay together on the floor of the cabin. She has a flashback, in slow motion of the beginning scene of the film. Here it is revealed that She did, in fact, notice that Nick was climbing towards the window, yet ignored it to focus on her own pleasure. Remembering this, She, in an act of defiance against herself, grabs shears and cuts off her clitoris. As she screams, the deer is shown, again in slow motion, turning its head towards the cabin. This signals to the viewer that the film is coming to a climax, as the animals are being alerted of the downfall of these two humans. He turns, noticing the start through the window. After a few moments von Trier overlays the stars with the map of constellations seen when She was describing the Three Beggars earlier. Still in disbelief, he turns away. This visual overlay is important in that the viewer's thoughts about the end coming are being proven true, yet there is a feeling of anguish for He, as He does not want to come to terms with it.

After this, the deer enters the cabin and the two other animals are not far behind. He, awake, hears the crow squawking under the floorboards. After He breaks them, the crow flies out and the wrench under the house is revealed. This allows He to remove the whetstone from his leg and prepare for the final battle. As She lays on her side, bloody from self-mutilation, the Three Beggars sit next to her, looking at He to take action. As someone must die, He kills She after she tries to attack him.

These animals have an obvious importance that makes them less animal and more ethereal. As stated earlier, McHugh writes, “animal gods in contemporary fictions are being depicted as dying” (McHugh 205). These animals all have a connection with death as seen through the visuals of the film. The deer is depicted with a dead fetus, the fox is ripping its own flesh from itself, and He tries to kill the crow. McHugh’s point stands strong here, as these animals all are depicted as dying, but the difference between McHugh’s article and von Trier’s film is in the purpose of their dying. In *Antichrist*, these animals are depicted as dying for what they stand for: an omen to signal death. In this way, these animals have agency just as humans do in the film, and arguably even more. As these animals enact their omens, there is nothing the humans can do but suffer through the motions. There is nothing He or She can do to stop them. The agency of these animals rivals what scholars like Anat Pick have written, as these animals do not have agency through the humans, but have agency in general on their own terms. These animals made themselves and their omens known, and even in the case of the crow can point out things the humans may have missed, like the wrench. The Three Beggars act on their own accord, and it is in this way that von Trier has given animals agency.

Human and Nature Relations

The connections between humans and nature are often considered. Philosophers like Emerson and Thoreau analyzed these connections extensively. It is often thought that humans, while striving for a deep connection with nature, are unable to be as connected as we used to be. And more often than this, nature is thought to be a place of comfort, stemming from the feminine, motherly, connotations given to it. However, in both *Nymphomaniac* and *Antichrist*, nature has different roles. In *Nymphomaniac*, nature does take on a comforting role, whereas in *Antichrist* nature is dark, scary, and oppressive. However, while these are two feelings are from opposite sides of the spectrum, the two films do share one thing in common when it comes to nature: its patriarchal force. While this may seem like an outlandish claim, the pressures that nature has enacted on women in both of these films prove that male dominance has taken over the realm of motherly nature.

In *Nymphomaniac*, one scene is shown in the film where Joe is talking about learning all the different types of trees as a young girl with her father. Joe says that learning about trees contributes to a good education. Shots are shown of her father teaching her about trees and teaching her tales of how they got their names. Joe and her father are seen laying down in the forest, voices silenced by the narration, yet it is plain to see that Joe enjoys this time with her father. This sentiment is echoed in other areas of the film. When Joe is stressed or feeling down, she takes out her book of leaves and reminisces about her father. This is clearly a sweet

sentiment by Joe, but this has patriarchal undertones. The only source of comfort that Joe can find is through nature and, through that, her father. Joe can only enjoy nature because of what her father has taught her about it and without him, it seems, she would not be as knowledgeable or as comforted by it.

Likewise, the nature in *Antichrist* also takes on a patriarchal tone, but in a way that is much, much darker. The whole reason that He and She are in the forest at the cabin in the first place is to try to get She to get over her fears. In a scene where He is asking her to name her fears, the camera is not steady, giving a general feeling of unease. The focus, too, signals this feeling, as the only things in focus are He and She as the camera quickly pans between the two. This gives the viewer a sense of displacement, as if what She is fearing is so deep that it is affecting the ways in which the world is seen. After an anxiety attack, she reveals that she is afraid of the woods. Specifically, She is afraid of the woods around their cabin, aptly named “Eden.” This is symbolic of Eve and the fall from grace from the Bible, yet von Trier may be asking the viewer to side with She. Nolan Boyd writes that “From the first [scene], it seems, von Trier is aligning our spectatorial position, and thus our intellectual sympathies, with She,” as she loses her only child and is ravaged by grief (Boyd 2). However, as She descends further into madness, how can von Trier ask the viewer to take her side? Simply, Boyd writes, “‘Mr. Nature’ is human nature, gendered male, ‘the kind of nature that causes people to do evil things against women,’ the kind of nature that controls women’s bodies” (Boyd 8). In this way, the nature around Eden becomes a space of oppression for She. Her husband, obsessed with fixing her mental illness, tries to control and force her to be in a space in which she does not feel comfortable. This oppression is why She must die in the end of the film. She cannot escape the

guidelines set out by the patriarchy, and cannot escape in one of the only places that is over and over again gendered female. As the patriarchal forces has encapsulated the world around her, she is forced to become one of the women that she has written about. She, like the witches, calls upon a hail storm, and through this, her fate is sealed. Showing her power as a woman, He must kill her to preserve the patriarchy.

While both of these films portray the feelings that natures provides in different ways, both are seen to take on a patriarchal role in relation to the women in each film. For Joe, nature is a place of solace and comfort, yet she can only find this solace and comfort in nature through her father figure. For She, nature oppresses her, and as much as she pushes against it, she cannot escape the natural, patriarchal world; it is just not possible. By playing with nature in these ways, von Trier has given nature a patriarchal role, yes, but he has also given nature the ability to be dynamic in that it can act for the good of woman-kind or for the bad.

Conclusion

Through this analysis of Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009) and *Nymphomaniac*, I have been able to show that Lars von Trier is fairly progressive when it comes to breaking down old conventions in film. Where animal and humans have been long separated by philosophy, science, and media, von Trier tears down these hierarchies to blur the lines between what is strictly human and what is strictly animal. In doing this, the dynamic natures of humans and animals has been highlighted, as humans and animals cross these borders freely. Animals, too, were once thought by scholars to not have agency in film or other forms of media. Von Trier, again, has negated this notion. The animals presented in *Antichrist* have agency that rivals that of humans, where they can create omens and enact long-held rituals. Nature, too, has been questioned by von Trier, as where it was once thought to only be feminine, now takes on a masculine role to show that the patriarchal structures present in the human world have infiltrated the world of nature. It is in these ways that von Trier's films should be hailed as progressive, as he brings new threads of thought into previously concrete scholarship.

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