

LISA DOWNING

## On the fantasy of childlessness as death in psychoanalysis and in Roeg's "Don't look now" and von Trier's "Antichrist"

**CERTAIN NARRATIVES OCCUR** so frequently, and in so many places, that they take on the status of profound and natural truths reflecting back to us through the prism of culture. Critical theory tends to do one of two things with such privileged arch plots. Classical (as distinct from post-structuralist) psychoanalytic criticism digs deeper, looking for the unconscious meaning of such narratives and thereby wittingly or unwittingly shoring up the sense of a deep and universal truth being conveyed through them. Conversely, other forms of criticism with political underpinnings, such as queer and deconstructive methodologies, may try to show up the constructedness and locatedness of even the most emotionally loaded and cherished narratives and reveal them as politically interested discourse. I have argued elsewhere (Downing and Saxton 2009), that this revelation of ideology in the apparently psychological or emotional is an urgent ethico-political endeavour.

This article sets out to address such a commonly occurring narrative in cultural production – including, very prominently, film – that is given credibility in psychoanalytic discourse. Namely, it examines the notion that childlessness, whether through the loss of a child, or barrenness, are such absolute and universal human tragedies that they are the symbolic equivalent of the death of the parents or would-be parents – where death is understood as psychical, social, and literal. So taken for granted is it in everyday life that childlessness is a negative that recent online communities of non-reproductive people have deliberately adopted the label “childfree” in place of “childless” as an identitarian badge to try to undo the unassailable logic that, for an adult (particularly for a woman, and even more so for a heterosexual couple), being without a child is some deeply undesirable and unnatural state, some marker of loss, of being “less than”.<sup>1</sup>

While very obviously not wishing to dismiss or understate the genuine personal despair that must be experienced by individuals who wish, but are unable, to bear children, or who lose offspring, I will be arguing in this article that what magnifies individual instances of loss to the status of universal tragedy is not empathic sentiment, or even sentimentality, but rather the interested operations of the hetero-patriarchal machine. The mechanism by which this function has been termed by queer theorist Lee Edelman in *No future: queer theory and the death drive* (2004) the ideology of “reproductive futurism”, that is “the pervasive invocation of the Child as the emblem of futurity’s unquestioned value” (Edelman 2004:4). For there is no politics, Edelman argues, that does not invest in this ideal, as it is unthinkable in our current political *Weltanschauung* to imagine what it might mean “not to be ‘fighting for the children’” (3). In her significant study, *Cinema’s missing children* (2003), Emma Wilson has written that the grief of mourning parents is “popularly reckoned an ultimate horror” (Wilson 2003:157), but for one form of affective loss to be popularly elevated above other kinds of loss as the ultimate, the worst, suggests a hierarchy of values

in which the role of reproductivity has been accorded a privileged weight and the parent-child relationship prioritized among modes of relationality. The existence of such a hierarchy signals the workings of a political agenda. This agenda is both heteronormative (valuing heterosexual couples for their reproductive capacity) and patriarchal (making assumptions about the nature of women on the basis of their biological capacity to carry and give birth to children).

Borrowing Edelman's idea of reproductive futurism to underpin my critique, but providing also a feminist analysis that is absent from *No future*, I will examine three case studies: Ernest Jones's psychoanalytic paper "An Unusual case of dying together" from 1912, Nicolas Roeg's classic horror film *Don't look now* (1973), and – in a more extended discussion – Lars von Trier's controversial film *Antichrist* (2009). These three cultural products, each produced roughly half a century apart, represent the literal loss of a child or inability to bear a child as productive of the death of one or both of the mourning or childless parents in such a way as to suggest a psychological equivalence between childlessness and annihilation that I will read, not as an aetiology (in the manner of psychoanalysis), but rather as an ideology. *Antichrist* is especially pertinent for the current investigation, as I shall argue that it may be read to pose – in its thematics, form and imagery – similar questions to those raised by Edelman about the ideological meanings of reproduction. Moreover, in its explicit engagement with the idea of maternal essence and femininity, it raises debates pertinent to a queer radical feminism that seeks to question beliefs about women, children and the inevitability of the biological and emotional imperative that links them via the discourse of "nature".<sup>2</sup>

Jones's paper, "An unusual case of dying together", describes a bizarre death, found in the *faits divers* of a Toronto newspaper, that seems to him to illustrate the points he had made in his earlier theoretical paper "On Dying together" (1911). In the earlier paper he proposed, using the morbid

Romantic writing – and life – of Ernst von Kleist as his case material, that, in the unconscious, death stands in for birth; the grave for the marital bed. And, following this unconscious logic, the desire of a couple to die together (“gemeinsames Sterben”) stands in for the desire to conceive a child.

The death Jones describes in the 1912 essay occurs as follows:

A man and wife, aged thirty-two and twenty-eight respectively, went from Toronto to spend a week-end at Niagara Falls. In company with several other people they ventured on to the great bridge of ice that forms every winter just at the foot of the Falls, and which then joins the American and Canadian shores of the river. The ice-bridge began to crack and drift from its moorings, and a river-man, who knew the locality well and who was on the ice at the time, shouted to the others to make for the Canadian side where there was more chance of getting ashore. The couple in question ignored the advice and rushed towards the American shore, but were soon stopped by open water. They then ran in the other direction (about 150 yards), but when about 50 yards from safety the woman fell down exhausted, crying “I can’t go on! Let us die here! (Jones 1996:14-15)

The upshot was that the woman refused to move any further and the man refused to leave his wife and accept the rescue effort that was mounted on their behalf. Jones describes their end thus: “He flung the rope aside, knelt down beside the woman and clasped her in his arms; they went thus to their death” (15).

Jones goes on to tell us that in addition to these facts that had been published in the press, he was able to discover from a friend who happened to know the couple that they were “devotedly fond of each other, that they had been married for seven years, and that they, the woman

in particular, were sad at never having had any children" (15). For Jones, then, the woman's behaviour is to be understood as the manifestation of an unconscious desire for death resulting from – what is to be understood as apparently quite “natural” – despair over her inability to reproduce. He calls it an “automatic suicide” as distinct from a deliberate or conscious suicide and posits that, had the particular set of circumstances not conspired to put the watery grave in the woman's way, she may never have actualized her barren-despair-cum-death-drive.

Significantly, the setting of the suicide-accident is of particular interest to Jones and takes on an explicatory function by means of the way its symbolism is read as resonating unconsciously with the couple's submerged psychosexual obsessions. Jones expands on the psychoanalytic meaning of Niagara Falls: “the association between Niagara and death, especially suicide, is one that has been enforced by countlessly repeated experiences”, he tells us (16). “It is not so generally known, however,” he goes on, that “the association between it and birth is also very intimate” (16-17). A favourite Honeymoon resort for Canadians, Niagara Town is apparently commonly known as “the Baby City” owing to the high number of conceptions that take place there.

The watery grave of Niagara thus became for the childless woman, according to Jones, the locus of her despair over her childlessness and the death wish it aroused. He concludes: “The hope of giving birth to a child was almost as small as that of escaping from the threatened doom. That this doom was one of drowning – in the horrible form of being swept under an ice-cold whirlpool – is a circumstance of considerable significance in light of all we know about the symbolic meaning of water in general and of drowning in particular” (17). The psychical equivalence drawn between the death wish and childlessness, then, is literalized – dragged from the depths of repression to find expression – by the geographical fact of: “A sterile woman [...] floating *on a block of ice*” (17, Jones's italics).

Jones is able to draw those conclusions by reference to the psychoanalytic belief that “the idea of personal death does not exist for the unconscious, being always replaced by that of sexual communion or of birth” (17-18). In Freud’s later essay on the controversial theory of the death drive, *Beyond the pleasure principle* (1920), however, he will argue that the unconscious drive for un-being, for stasis, for death, is a more primary drive for the human subject than any other, and is not capable of being brought to consciousness, but will appear in dreams, in the repetition compulsion, and in sexual sadism and masochism. Jones’s reading of the desire for death as thwarted reproductive desire, then, flies in the face of the Freudian idea of death as the primary drive, and, it can be argued, reveals Jones’s interpretation, not as the revelation of a deep universal psychological truth, but as inspired by a culturally normative fantasy of the omnipresence and originary nature of the desire for reproduction. In short, Jones makes *death itself* a metaphor for failed conception, while Freud, embracing the nihilistic possibility of “no future”, will go on to say that we can only ever imperfectly metaphorize the death drive, which, in and of itself, symbolizes *nothing*.

### **Failed hetero-reproductivity**

The striking focus on setting, on *mise-en-scène*, in Jones’s pro-natalistic psychodrama reminds us inevitably of the realm of visual representation, especially film. The semiotic system of setting in Roeg’s *Don’t look now*, adapted from a story by that mistress of psychoanalytically rich plots, Daphne du Maurier, is suggestive of, and consistent with, the psychoanalytic logic set out by Jones. The film opens with the death of a child, the daughter of Laura and John Baxter (Julie Christie and Donald Sutherland), by drowning. And the symbolism of water, as in the case of the Niagara Falls suicide, will be deployed throughout the film to suggest the eternal return, the compulsion to repeat the association between birth and death. The daughter drowns in a stagnant lake. And so, unlike the choppy,

icy Niagara Falls death, it is to stagnant water that the mourning couple are drawn, as the film's narrative revolves around their trip to Venice. Roeg's film uses a subtle, visual, particularly colour-based, language to suggest the haunting loss of the child for the parents – and to increasingly accelerate towards the literal annihilation that it marks.

The mother, Laura, seems slowly to come to terms with her loss over the course of the narrative, finding comfort in the claim of the clairvoyant old lady, one of a pair of sisters the Baxters meet in Venice, that she can communicate with their daughter from beyond the grave. The ultra-rational father, John, on the other hand, rejects this supernatural hope, but becomes ever more obsessed with a short figure in a red cape, whose clothing and stature resemble those of their daughter as she appeared just prior to her death, and who moves through the grey, mournful Venetian landscape as a bright trace of blood, of life, of death. The figure, finally unmasked, is revealed as a murderous dwarf who fatally stabs Sutherland's character John Baxter in the final sequence, literalizing the mark of blood suggested by the red-riding-hood clothing throughout.

Film scholars have speculated as to the meaning of the fact that it is the father, not the mother, who dies at the end of the film. Kristi Wilson, writing in *Screen*, goes so far as to describe the film as portraying the “death of masculinity” (Wilson 1999:292). She posits that “any thorough reading of *Don't look now* should take into account the importance of the fact that [...] John, the white male professional – is ruthlessly destroyed” (292). Yet, what Wilson's analysis omits is the fact that the kind of masculinity Baxter embodies, and that is annihilated here, is not only white and professional masculinity (the epitome of “reason”), but *failed hetero-reproductive* masculinity. Indeed, it can be argued that Baxter's “straightness” is both emphasized and undermined by the fact that the character is juxtaposed with “queerness” in the film. Wilson suggests that the sisters whom Laura befriends may be read as “queer characters” (291): they are unmarried,

non-reproductive and, moreover, implicitly incestuous lesbians. While his antipathy to the sisters can suggest that John is outwardly threatened by the taint of this mark of queerness and over-identifies with normative heterosexuality, he is bathetically revealed as “not man enough” (in the terms of the hetero-patriarchal order he serves) to be able to survive. The failed father, with no capacity for furthering futurity, becomes himself in turn a subject with “no future”. Unlike the queer subject of Edelman, who strategically assents to the position of the death drive, John Baxter goes to his death as a symbol of his failure to master the loss of the child (“The Child”).

Thus, the logic of the film can be read both as thematizing Jones’s psychoanalytic schema and as ripe for Edelmanian critique: a heterosexual couple, bereft of a child, is rendered excessive, surplus to the reproductive system and therefore, however unconsciously, one of them must seek death. For, although John Baxter is murdered rather than taking his own life, his single-minded pursuit of the figure symbolizing the dead child becomes readable as an “automatic suicide”, in Jones’s terms, a dereliction of the duty owed to life-drive and to reproductive futurism, much like that of the barren Niagara Falls wife.

In *Antichrist*, *mise-en-scène* is again crucial to thematizing the idea of loss of a child as equivalent with parental death. Here, the settings used become an extended metaphor for the discourses that the film evokes. Structured similarly to *Don’t look now*, the narrative begins with a child’s demise. In the beautiful, lyrical, almost oneiric, black-and-white sequence that opens the film, a young boy falls to his death while his parents are transported on waves of ecstasy by their (explicitly filmed) sexual congress. Psychoanalytic theory is slyly evoked here in the game the boy plays with his toy through the bars of the cot before his fall, as it echoes the *fort-da*; here-gone, game of symbolization played by the child in Freud’s essay on the death drive (1920) in order both to experience masochistically and to



master the sensation of unbearable loss. And, because the child dies by falling, the rest of the film becomes an extended and painful meditation on the idea of The Fall writ large. The setting of the disturbing full-colour action of *Antichrist*, following the black-and-white opening sequence in the apartment, is a Green World, a rural idyll that turns into a dystopia, called – in unmistakably overdetermined fashion – “Eden”. The characters, archetypal Adam-and-Eve-like, are merely referred to as “He” and “She”, and the symbolism of the Biblical story of humans’ fall from grace, of Eve’s sensual weakness, and of the sin of sexuality, could not be more blatant.

Much critical debate has already centred on the ethical and gender-political nature of von Trier’s film with its explicit sex and raw violence – culminating in a visually troubling scene of Charlotte Gainsbourg’s “She” cutting off her own labia with a pair of rusty scissors before being brutally strangled to death by “He” (Willem Dafoe), the husband she has already mutilated and tried to kill. Is this film, then, a straightforward exercise in misogyny? This is, certainly, an accusation that has been levelled at the filmmaker more than once (see especially Appleyard 2009), owing to the repetitive motif of female sacrifice in, for example, *Breaking the waves* (1996), *Dancer in the dark* (2000), and *Dogville* (2003). Reviews of *Antichrist* tend particularly to focus on this aspect of the film. One reviewer opines that audiences might “balk at its association of nature and the devil with women” (James 2009:20), while another states that “its misogynist subtext [...] seems calculated to provoke the controversy that von Trier’s films need” (McNab 2010:95).

I would argue, however, that a literal reading of the film’s politics as straightforwardly woman-hating (whether issuing from a deep-seated personal directorial bias or as a cynical ploy to provoke publicity) is the least compelling one.<sup>3</sup> Von Trier is above all a self-aware filmmaker, a game-player, an experimenter with generic and discursive convention. The focus in *Antichrist* on the ascription of sin and guilt to female sexuality

through centuries of theologically enshrined misogyny is not naturalized in the film. Rather, misogyny appears *at the surface*, as an *object* of scrutiny, rather than as unconscious motive or motif. It is revealed in the course of the narrative that the film's female protagonist was last in Eden when writing her doctoral dissertation on the subject of "gynocide". And the camera lingers on her writings, and on the images she has collected of centuries of institutionally sanctioned woman-hating (such as witch trials), pasted around the walls of the attic – that hackneyed dual symbol of the unconscious and of feminine madness. These self-conscious references to the problematic history of patriarchal violence against women make any reading of the film as simply an endorsement of misogyny far too simple.

I contend too that the trope of childlessness as death that I am investigating here is similarly complexified by its displacement from symbol to surface, from narrative conveyed through a series of subtle visual resonances suggesting the workings of the unconscious (as in *Don't look now*), to a self-conscious excursus about the social meanings of parenthood, of reproductivity, and of the institution of heterosexuality. It is not innocent that the husband in the film is a misguided psychoanalyst who tries to cure his wife's deep melancholia over her child's death by encouraging her to revisit Eden – to regress to nature and confront her fears. The fact that this simply unleashes her latent hostility towards him suggests a mocking of the psychoanalytic cure and of the patriarchal figure. Moreover, the image of maternity and parenthood as a bliss that is sundered with the child's death (again, as in *Don't look now*), is effectively undermined in *Antichrist* as "She" is revealed to have been an ambivalent mother, who may have deliberately tortured her child by forcing him to wear his shoes on the wrong feet, causing a medical deformation. No idealization is admitted in this dystopian vision, but the disjuncture between the *promise* of idealization in the filmic style of the slow-motion opening sequence and the nightmarish, garish tone (and tonality) of the rest of the film strongly suggests that von

Trier is aware of the discourses with which he carries.

A good example of this is the extent to which the discourse of “nature” is played with and undermined in the film. Historically and ideologically, “nature” has been aligned with “woman” (whereas “culture” is synonymous with “man”). The horror that is unleashed in the film could be read (following the accusatory, von Trier-as-misogynist line) as the result of “She’s” failure to be a “natural woman” (in the terms of the popular discourse that conflates biological essence with the gender expectations that are mapped on to genital difference). Indeed, “She” fails to live up to the patriarchal notion of “woman” – whose nature it is to nurture – in numerous ways. She appears firstly to have been an abuser of her child while he was living, flouting the law of maternal care; secondly, she is a woman whose sensuality distracts her from motherly duties such that the site of her orgasm becomes the locus of her child’s fatality; and thirdly she eschews the myth of the “gentler sex” when, in Eden, she crushes her husband’s genitalia with a block of wood, masturbates him until blood gushes forth in place of sperm, then drills a hole through his leg and bolts a millstone to it.

Yet, to claim that the film presents these transgressions from culturally endorsed femininity in order to demonize the “unnatural” woman and laud in its absence “natural” femininity is to ignore the extent to which it is concerned with deconstructing the whole idea of “the natural” as a reliable category from which truths can be adduced. The insertion into the Green World of unnatural animals, alongside the “unnatural woman”, serves to give weight to the other reading of the film – the one I am proposing here – in which von Trier is an arch debunker of such myths. Where the Biblical Eden included a talking snake, the Eden of *Antichrist* is populated by grotesque talking animals (called “The Three Beggars”) who embody deformed Nature. While certainly adding to the ambience of nightmarish horror which the film references generically, and to which it appeals viscerally, the inclusion of a self-disembowelling talking fox, a

prophetic crow, and a deer which has a stillborn fawn protruding from her vagina, does not merely suggest magical realism. Instead, it represents allegorically the rejection of an idea of the natural qua unproblematic truth, precisely there where we most expect to find it. If foxes, crows and deer cannot be expected to behave “naturally”, the film seems to say, then perhaps the whole system of “human nature”, “maternal nature”, and the “natural order of things” is urgently in need of deconstruction as normative fallacies passing as inevitable truths. As the talking fox tells us: “Chaos reigns”. This reading suggests the flaw in one critic’s interpretation of the film which explains that: “as originally conceived, the ‘evil’ in *Antichrist* was intended to be rooted in nature”; whereas, he goes on, in the final cut, the film has taken on instead the “misogynist subtext” that “woman is the root of evil” (McNab 2010:85). McNab misses the crucial point that precisely because of the traditional link between woman and nature that I have discussed above, both of these “roots of evil” are indeed referenced in the film. But they are *not* present at the level of “subtext” (as the “hidden truth” of von Trier’s misogyny); rather these discourses are explicitly put on screen as symptoms of historical gynophobia, shown in order that they become available for debate, rather than remaining naturalized.

It can be argued, then, that the heavy-handed symbolism that pervades *Antichrist* is not to be read as symbolism at all, but rather as a self-conscious comment on the ways in which symbols have historically masked oppression and violence and served to shore up misogynistic myths. This suggests, perhaps, that rather than simply being part of the ideological continuum represented by Jones and Roeg, von Trier’s film comments upon their logic – along the lines of Lee Edelman. And there are further parallels to be drawn. Critics of Edelman, such as Tim Dean, have decried the “fundamentalist” style of Edelman’s writing, encapsulated in his oft-quoted rant:

Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital ls and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop. (Edelman 2004:29).

Detractors accuse Edelman of delivering his anti-reproductive message in much the same absolutist language and style as the Christian, anti-gay, pro-life exponents he decries when he describes the “totalitarian tyranny” of reproductive futurism (Dean 2008:125). Similarly, von Trier has been accused numerous times of an over the top cinematic sadism, a gratuitous excess. For one critic, *Antichrist* contains irredeemable levels of “misogyny, undergraduate portentousness” and “nastiness” (Appleyard 2009), and therefore merits censorship. Certainly, von Trier assaults us, his audience, in an unremitting visual onslaught, with images of abject physical violence. However, the violence against the guilty, grieving parental bodies committed intimately in *Antichrist* rhymes visually with the institutional gynophobic violence that, I have argued, is *Antichrist*'s subject matter and conscious reference point (that which is literally plastered on the walls of its set), rather than as a bigotry that it unquestioningly perpetuates. In the cases both of von Trier and Edelman, the form and style of their critiques bring to the discursive and visual surface the vehemence, the zeal of the pro-reproductive, pro-family ideology. They illustrate how discourses that pass commonly as benign and humane in fact prescribe an exclusionary, normative agenda that does violence to other economies of relationality and forms of attachment, while divesting subjects – particularly female subjects – of the possibility of being ends in themselves. Rather than revealing, Freud- or Jones-like, a hidden truth about human emotion, *Antichrist* brings to the surface an Edelmanian truth about *ideology*.

In *Cinema's missing children*, Wilson writes that: “the loss of a child knows no repair or reparation; filmmakers address instead a limit subject, a subject which reaches or exceeds the bounds of representation, and normative, narrative resolution” (Wilson 2003:153). It is here that I depart from her thesis, as it has been my contention that at stake in filming the absence of a child – in the two films I have explored at least – is discourse itself, not what lies at or beyond the limits of discourse. This is the case even if in *Don't look now* there is no attempt to reveal discourse, but rather to solicit horror and sentiment from the audience via a presumed capacity for universal identification, while *Antichrist* can be read as nothing but a series of citations using conventions of the horror genre and theological myth to draw ideology to the surface. And the narrative resolution at stake in both films is, arguably, normative in the ideological sense, as it represents the imposition of the value system of a pro-reproductive social order with punishment by death of one parent or the other for the loss of the child. While Roeg has the father play the role of sacrifice for the failure of reproductive futurism, von Trier self-consciously alludes to the misogyny that underpins the excessive cultural expectations of maternal feminine nature, as I have argued above. Thus, in the wife's sexualized violence towards her husband and in her eventual murder at his hands, the promise of plenitude embodied culturally in the heteronormative reproductive couple is fractured and the symbolic violence underlying its coercive nature is literalized and laid bare.

My readings in this article have been influenced by a deliberately anti-reproductive critical stance, where pro-reproductivity would be understood as the social valuing of adults for their hetero-reproductive function, the reduction of women to their childbearing and maternal capacities, and the idealization of children for their propensity to signify valorized qualities – innocence, promise and, as Edelman has devastatingly shown, an absolutist vision of futurity. My stance is not, however, anti-children.

Indeed, that tendency to idolize children because *they symbolize something* else that pro-reproductive logic engages in so liberally, actually reduces the living flesh and blood realness and agency of any child to the flat status of a universal symbol – that of “The Child”, as analysed in Harri Kalha’s article included in this special issue of *lambda nordica*. The missing child marks a subject as flattened and devoid of agency, then, as the classic absent woman of Hollywood cinema, the “Lady who Vanishes”. It is this figure that, Wilson argues, the missing child replaces in more contemporary filmic representations (Wilson 2003:15). The dead or absent child is a cipher for its parents’ – and for heteronormative culture’s – threatened values and hopes. This is a logic and an ideological trace that, I have argued, Roeg’s film does not bring to the surface (appropriately, perhaps, in a film that is visually obsessed with still depths), but of which von Trier’s self-conscious play with history, myth and discourse seems all too shockingly aware.

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## NOTES

1 For a representative selection of English-language childfree blogs, see: “Childfree news” (<http://childfreenews.blogspot.com/>, accessed 20/03/2011),

“Childfree me: choosing to be childless when the world wants me to breed” (<http://childfreeme.blogspot.com/>, accessed 20/03/2011), and the particularly polemical “Childfree ghetto” (<http://childfreeghetto.blogspot.com/>, accessed 20/03/2011).

2 Echoing Emma Wilson’s comment cited above that the death of a child is culturally perceived as “an ultimate horror”, one reviewer of *Antichrist* isolates von Trier’s representation of this subject matter as the reason the film is so shocking, making the universalist claim that: “Since the accidental death of a child is the worst thing a parent can experience, we feel squeamish about seeing it exploited” (Taubin 2009:51-2).

3 By arguing that the logic of *Antichrist* is not straightforwardly misogynistic and should not be read as simply a representation of the director’s attitudes or fantasies, I make no defensive or redemptive claims about von Trier’s biography. It has been suggested (Appleyard 2009) that the female actors with whom the director has worked have had much to complain about in terms of his personal and professional politics. This consideration lies, however, outside the scope of the discussion. For the purposes of the article, the *auteur* is dead and “Lars von Trier” is to be understood as a Foucauldian author function.

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## ABSTRACT

LISA DOWNING

### On the fantasy of childlessness as death in psychoanalysis and in Roeg's "Don't look now" and von Trier's "Antichrist"

This article explores, from a broadly queer theoretical perspective, a cultural fantasy that finds expression in psychoanalysis and cultural production alike: namely the idea that childlessness, whether through the loss of a child, or barrenness, are such absolute and universal human tragedies that they are the symbolic equivalent of the death of the parents or would-be parents – where death is understood as psychological, social, and literal. I argue, with reference to Lee Edelman's theoretical work *No Future: queer theory and the death drive* (2004), that this commonly stated idea can be productively read as an *ideological* claim – a symptom of heteronormative "reproductive futurism" – rather than as a universal emotional truth.

I explore this contention via close readings of three cultural products: an essay

by Freudian psychoanalyst Ernest Jones, “An unusual case of dying together” from 1912, and two films: Nicolas Roeg’s *Don’t look now* (1973) and Lars von Trier’s controversial *Antichrist* (2009). All three texts represent the literal loss of a child as productive of the death of one or both of the mourning parents. I argue that, whereas Jones’s essay (explicitly) and Roeg’s film (suggestively) pursue the psychoanalytic logic that those subjects who fail the reproductive imperative unconsciously seek death via “automatic suicide”, *Antichrist* can be read as a critical filmic project that pursues a similar agenda to this article. Namely it examines *at the surface of the film* the symbols of sin, sexuality, femininity, maternity, misogyny and religion that constitute the ideological conditions for the production of the cultural fantasy in question. In this way, von Trier’s film can be read as exposing the workings of “reproductive futurism” (and in particular the misogyny explicit in it, a concern not analysed by Edelman in *No Future*), rather than engaging in a psychologizing obfuscation of the same.

## SAMMANFATTNING

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### **Om fantasin om barnlöshet som död i psykoanalys och i Roegs ”Rösten från andra sidan” och von Triers ”Antichrist”**

Denna artikel undersöker ur ett brett queerteoretiskt perspektiv en kulturell fantasi som kommer till uttryck såväl inom psykoanalys som i kulturell produktion: nämligen tanken att barnlöshet, antingen genom förlusten av ett barn eller på grund av ofruktsamhet, är en sådan absolut och universell mänsklig tragedi att den är symboliskt liktydig med föräldrarnas eller de blivande föräldrarnas död – där död förstås som psykisk, social och faktisk. Jag hävdar, med hänvisning till Lee Edelmanns teoretiska arbete *No future: Queer theory and the death drive* (2004), att det kan vara produktivt att uppfatta denna ofta framförda tanke som ett *ideologiskt* påstående – ett symptom på heteronormativ ”reproduktiv futurism” – snarare än som en universell, emotionell sanning.

Jag utforskar denna sak genom närläsning av tre kulturella produkter: en essä av den freudianske psykoanalytikern Ernest Jones från 1912 och två filmer, Nicolas Roegs *Rösten från andra sidan* (*Don't look now*) (1973) och Lars von Triers *Antichrist* (2009). En utförlig analys av *Antichrist* och dess tematiska och symboliska fokus på kvinnlig ondska, moderskap och natur ger dessutom utrymme för att diskutera den aktuella kulturella fantasins genuspolitiska aspekter och belysa dess konsekvenser för feminismen – en fråga som saknas i Edelmans kritik av reproduktiv futurism i *No future*.

Inledningsvis undersöker jag Jones text ”An unusual case of dying together”. Jones beskriver ett bisarrt dödsfall som för honom illustrerar de teser han framfört i sin tidigare, teoretiska text ”On dying together” (1911). I den tidigare texten hävdade han att död är, i det omedveten, liktydigt med födelse; graven är liktydig med den äkta sängen. Och i linje med denna omedvetna logik står ett par begär att dö tillsammans (”gemeinsames Sterben”) för begäret att avla ett barn. Det barnlösa paret som diskuteras i Jones andra essä förstås av psykoanalytikern som att de har koncipierat sitt ”automatiska självmord” som ett alternativ till det avlande av ett barn som deras ofruktsamhet förhindrat. När de efter en olycka hamnar på ett drivande isflak i det kalla vattnet vid Niagara fallen avvisar i synnerhet kvinnan alla räddningsförsök med följderna att hon och hennes man omkommer. Jag hävdar att Jones val att tolka döden som ett substitut för reproduktion (med en logik som kastar om Freuds modell av Thanatos som den primära psykiska driften) avslöjar analytikerns anammande av en pronatalistisk ideologi, snarare än att vara ett uppdagande av en djup psykologisk sanning.

Artikeln fortsätter sedan med att i detalj studera två filmer som framställer den faktiska förlusten av ett barn som varande orsaken till en av de sörjande föräldrarnas död. I den första av dem, den klassiska, narrativa skräckfilmen *Rösten från andra sidan*, blir fadern i slutet dödad av en mordlysten dvärg som, i sin långa, röda cape, liknar barnet som i filmens början drunknade. John Baxters ”straff” för att han försummade sin reproduktiva plikt och lät sin dotter drunkna tycks avslöja en mekanism som påminner om Jones förståelse av det

”automatiska självmordet”. Rollfiguren förföljer tvångsmässigt den mordiska figuren genom hela filmen vilket ger relief åt hans känsla av oöverkomlig förlust. Filmens logik kan således förstås som att den vidmakthåller den psykoanalytiska ”sanningen” som sin moraliska och betydelsefulla kärna.

I den andra filmen, den nyare, kontroversiella *Antichrist* av den danske *enfant terrible* von Trier, kulminerar den allt våldsammare och mer explicita handlingen som följer på ett barns död (genom att han trillar ut genom ett fönster medan hans föräldrar är upptagna med att ha sex), med att fadern mördar den sörjande modern. Jag hävdar att den senare filmen trots att den speglar flera av den tidigare filmens narrativa, generiska och tematiska egenskaper, ändå avviker från den psykoanalytiska logiken i *Rösten från andra sidan* genom att det *på filmens yta* granskas de symboler för synd, sexualitet, femininitet, misogyni och religiositet som är filmens ämne. Genom att göra detta, kan von Trier förstås som att han försöker sig på, i filmisk form, samma slags kritiska projekt som jag försöker mig på här – det vill säga en redogörelse för och ett avslöjande av ideologiskt präglade diskurser om vuxenhet, reproduktion och heteronormativitet, snarare än ett psykologiserande fördunklande av de samma.