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There's No Place Like Home: From Oz to Antichrist

Abstract

This article explores the dialectic of the uncanny in *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) and *Antichrist* (Lars von Trier, 2009), treating the latter as a sequel to the former such that we encounter Dorothy first as a young girl and then as a grown woman. I observe that the uncanny entails a repressive and expressive moment that is cinematically rendered in these two films, and drawing on Freud and Žižek, I argue that in Dorothy's evolution from *Oz* to *Antichrist* we see that the witches and wizards and gods and devils of our own minds are known to us most powerfully through the uncanny aesthetics of their repression and expression.

Keywords

The Wizard of Oz; Antichrist; Lars von Trier; uncanny; Freud; Žižek; witches; aesthetics of horror; aesthetics of pornography; repression

Author Notes

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It is difficult to imagine two more dissimilar films than *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) and *Antichrist* (Lars von Trier, 2009). *The Wizard of Oz* is an adaptation of L. Frank Baum's children's book of the same title and tells the story of a girl who travels to the magical land of Oz where she encounters witches, wizards, and flying monkeys before clicking her heels together and waking up back in Kansas. *Antichrist* is the unholy offering of bad boy director and Danish provocateur Lars von Trier. Part porno, part horror flick, *Antichrist* tells the story of two unnamed characters, a husband and wife, who retreat to a cabin in a forest called Eden after the death of their son where they inflict upon one another brutal and unspeakable atrocities.

However, the differences between these two films are more like inversions rather than a catalog of contrasts. And these inversions suggest an illuminating dialectic. *The Wizard of Oz* is about a young girl named Dorothy, *Antichrist* is about a grown woman known only as She. In *The Wizard of Oz* Dorothy defeats the witch, in *Antichrist* She becomes the witch. In *The Wizard of Oz* Dorothy travels through Oz to the Emerald City, in *Antichrist* She travels out of the city and into the darkness of a forest called Eden. And whereas Oz is a dream, Eden is real. On her journey, Dorothy's three companions are in search of knowledge, love, and courage. In *Antichrist* She also has three companions, though they bring

grief, pain, and despair. But most importantly, they each perform the unconscious.

The Wizard of Oz presents Dorothy's dream of Oz as an escape from the reality of her life in Kansas as she struggles to repress her impulse to flee her stultifying farm life. *Antichrist* similarly invites viewers into the unconscious of a woman rebelling against her reality. In *Antichrist* however, the repressed violently returns when She travels to Eden and embraces the dark impulses that Dorothy left in Oz. Side-by-side, these two films offer a cinematic window on to the suppression and expression of the unconscious.

Thus, in this article I set these two very different, yet remarkably parallel, films along side one another in order to trace the arc that leaps between them. I propose to treat the latter, *Antichrist*, as a sequel to the former, *The Wizard of Oz*, such that *Antichrist* tells a story of Dorothy grown up. In the space between these films I suggest that we glimpse a cinematic dialectic of the uncanny, entailing as it does, repression and the return of the repressed. I conclude that in Dorothy's evolution from *Oz* to *Antichrist* we see that the witches and wizards and gods and devils of our unconscious minds are known to us most powerfully through the uncanny aesthetics of their repression and expression.

To make this argument I rely on Freud's articulation of the uncanny from his famous 1919 essay of the same title and Slavoj Žižek's notion of fantasy. I begin by first presenting the relevant ideas from each thinker before moving on to

the films themselves, where I turn to the application of these ideas. In this section, I map the surprising parallels between the films, in both content and shared mythic architecture, which, appealing first to Žižek and then to Freud, I argue figures a cinematic dialectic of the uncanny in the life of Dorothy, young and old. Returning to the beginning then, I conclude that these films, placed along side one another, disclose the uncanny aesthetics of repression and expression that animate the gods and devils, witches and wizards of the mind.¹

Freud's Uncanny and Žižek's Fantasy

Freud's Uncanny

In his essay on the uncanny Freud described the *heimlich*, the homey or familiar, as containing its own opposite – the *unheimlich*, or the uncanny. The *unheimlich* refers to the unfamiliar, the disturbing, the strange, and the weird. Freud explained that the *heimlich* contains its opposite in that it describes that which is intimate, known, and private. By virtue of this privacy and intimacy, the *heimlich* is at once familiar yet hidden and secretive. The hidden and secretive aspect of the *heimlich* that most interested Freud was expressed in the workings of

the unconscious; that dimension of the psyche that is at once most active and powerful, yet also most intimate and hidden.

The *unheimlich* – the uncanny – as Freud characterized it, refers to the emergence into consciousness of the repressed or surmounted drives of the unconscious id. Thus the common description of the uncanny as the “return of the repressed.” It is no coincidence that at the same time he was writing his essay on the uncanny, Freud was also completing *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, wherein he replaced the libidinal and egoistic drives of his earlier work with the more potent and contestable pairing of *eros* and *thanatos*² – life and death, pleasure and aggression. The uncanny is thus the conscious encounter with the otherwise repressed instinctual drives toward pleasure and aggression that seethe in the unconscious. As Freud writes, “this uncanny element is actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed.”³

Freud begins his inquiry into the uncanny by observing that, “It is only rarely that a psychoanalyst feels impelled to investigate the subject of aesthetics...”⁴ For Freud, the uncanny falls to aesthetics because it pertains to “the qualities of feeling.”⁵ The feeling Freud has in mind is the return of the repressed. This return of the repressed is an aesthetic phenomenon inasmuch as it prompts “feelings of repulsion and distress.”⁶

Although philosophical aesthetics has historically focused on “positive” qualities like beauty and the sublime, their opposite is no less an appropriate subject inasmuch as the perverse, the hideous, and the frightful are likewise “qualities of feeling.”⁷ If aesthetics is going to take the realm of sensuous experience as its subject as Baumgarten first intended, then it must embrace the whole panoply of feelings, including the most morbid. Thus for Freud the uncanny is the quintessential “negative” aesthetic. It represents the most archaic psychic experiences realized in sensible form. Moreover, Freud recognized that these experiences are often themselves provoked through aesthetic means. For example, using shocking hues and dramatic composition or cinematic techniques and visual tropes the painter or filmmaker can prompt an uncanny experience in the viewer by reminding us that the desires and drives we thought were gone have been lurking in our unconscious all along. Thus, where in *The Wizard of Oz* we experience the aesthetics of repression, in *Antichrist* we witness the full return of the repressed in filmic form as the drive to sex and death explode in a grotesque coupling of the aesthetics of pornography and horror that incite feelings of repulsion and distress.

Žižek's Fantasy

In a reinterpretation of Freudian thought, Žižek offers to the uncanny the Lacanian complement of fantasy. For Žižek fantasy is the answer to the enigma,

“Che vuoi?”. What do you want? However, unlike Freud, for whom the instinctual drives of the id form the hard kernel of the unconscious, for Žižek there is a hollow void at the core of subjectivity. It is not the case however, as Foucault, Derrida, or Deleuze might suggest, that subjectivity is nothing more than a performative process or a construct of discourses. Rather, like Lacan, for Žižek there is a powerful extradiscursive force that constitutes “the truly traumatic core of the modern subject.”⁸ This force is the REAL and stands in contradistinction to commonplace reality in that it corresponds to the limits and limitations of language and the entire symbolic order that constitutes reality. Fantasy structures what we call reality by constructing the contours of desire as a veil pulled over the REAL.

Fantasy is not escape from reality into desire, rather it is the transcendental framework that affords the very coordinates of our desire that are repressed and produced by the pacifying law of reality. Thus fantasy generates desire, not the other way around. That is, fantasy is not about what we desire, rather what we desire is the product of the fantasies into which specific desires fit. These desires in turn form the basis for an ideologically sanctioned version of reality. This is because our unconscious fantasies prompt conscious desires that reinforce dominate cultural values. This is why Žižek claims that fantasy, as an answer to the enigma, “What do you want?”, is in fact an answer to the question, “What do others want from me? What do they see in me? What am I for others?”⁹ By

providing the “transcendental schemata” for the desires that prompt our responses to these questions (and the sanctioned ideologies they convey), fantasy operates as the structuring agent of what we call reality.¹⁰

Fantasy is the reality of the unconscious. Where Freud emphasized the unconscious as a reservoir for the wild and illicit drives, Žižek adds that inasmuch as these drives are repressed, the unconscious is also, if not above all, the traumatic site of primal castration by the Oedipal law of repression. Thus he writes that, “The Freudian point regarding fundamental fantasy would be that each subject, female or male, possesses such a ‘factor’ which regulates his or her desire... There is nothing uplifting about our awareness of this ‘factor’: such awareness can never be subjectivized; it is uncanny – even horrifying – since it somehow ‘depossesses’ the subject...”¹¹ The “factor” that Žižek mentions here is the repressed impulse that triggers desire. Awareness of this “factor” is uncanny because it appears as something other than our own innermost psychic being when it is in fact the deep content of our unconscious and it compels behavior with a force that transcends the subject.

If for Žižek the reality of the conscious subject is constituted by the repressive elements realized in the fantasy response to the question “What do others want from me?”, then the horror of the uncanny is the non-symbolizable, fundamentally aesthetic character (the quality of feeling) of both its repression and expression. Thus, on one hand, Žižek offers fantasy as the mechanism of

repression that supports the symbolic world of language and law that is realized as normative ideology and transgressed in the return of the repressed. On the other hand, Freud offers the uncanny as the quintessential moment of the return of our repressed instinctual drives for pleasure and aggression. Turning to *The Wizard of Oz* and *Antichrist*, we see then the narrativizing aesthetics of Žižek's repressive fantasy in Dorothy's dream-work in *Oz* and the explosive return of the repressed in the aesthetics of sexualized violence played out by an adult Dorothy as the unnamed character She in *Eden*.

The Yellow Brick Road Between Oz and Eden

Taking a character from one film and interpreting her as the same, though matured, character of another, altogether different, film is unusual. There is admittedly no reason to suspect that Lars von Trier had any intention of casting his female lead as a grown up version of Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*. Neither is there any reason to believe that he set out to create something of a postmodern sequel to *The Wizard of Oz*. Rather, his own comments quite plainly set out that, in the wake of a serious and debilitating depression, his aim was to exorcise his own internal demons in a Strindbergian homage to Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky, and that the female protagonist was largely a projection of his own psyche.¹² Thus von Trier made *Antichrist* as a type of therapy.¹³

In 2007 *Reuters* reported that von Trier had slipped into a deep depression that left him completely unable to work.¹⁴ To cope with this depression he penned a short script as a type of therapy to see if he would ever be able to make another film. For the script, and later in the film, von Trier drew on imagery that he explained, “often came from dreams I was having at the time, or dreams I’d had earlier in my life.”¹⁵ In the press book for *Antichrist* von Trier explained that the script was made “with about half of my physical and intellectual capacity” adding however, that in many ways the film represents his “most important [and] most personal” work.¹⁶ With the archetypal dream imagery of his unconscious he wove a visual story that was more viscerally expressive than anything he had done in the past – even telling the production crew to actually paint sections of the forest where the film was shot in more somber tones to capture the dream-like mood of the film. The result was a mythic tale of the subconscious origins of grief, pain, and despair told through the archetypal imagery of the feminine, sex, and death in Eden.

Whereas in *Antichrist* the drives of the unconscious violently return from repression, in *The Wizard of Oz* we witness the original move of their repression as Dorothy escapes reality by journeying into her unconscious mind. Thus in a converse yet parallel manner *The Wizard of Oz* also trades in the mythic currency of dreams and archetypes as Oz is the land of Dorothy’s unconscious just as Eden is its lived expression. Placing these films alongside one another thus forms a

persuasive couplet for understanding the aesthetics of the uncanny as the principle mode of experiencing the gods and devils of our own mind through the dialectic of their repression and expression.

From silent films to modern movies, there is a long tradition linking the operations of the mind, and the uncanny in particular, to film and cinema.¹⁷ Žižek for example has described cinema as the equivalent of Freud's "royal road" to the unconscious.¹⁸ And in his book *The Uncanny*, Nicholas Royle, writing on a film by Hanns Heinz Ewer, notes that, "Ewer's film is uncanny because *film* is uncanny."¹⁹ Film is uncanny because it appears to represent reality without modification, and yet the reality it proffers "systematically plays upon a slide between the familiar and the unfamiliar (the *unheimlich*).²⁰ There is an inherent dissonance between the apparent reality playing out on the screen and the truth of its constructed artifice. In this, film draws us into an alternate reality, persuading us through aesthetic means to forget the present and to travel, like Dorothy and She, to another land – Oz or Eden. The experience of watching a film is thus akin to the dreamer's dark vision of streaming images playing out like Freudian screen memories in the unconscious where characters and events from waking life are transformed according to the unique logic of the unconscious.

If therefore, film "taps our imagination, our unconscious, to produce a sensory affect of dissonance at the very moment of identity"²¹ and thereby uniquely renders the uncanny, it follows that the dialectic of repression and

expression would be uniquely imaged in cinematic form. Moreover, because this dialectic transpires within the psyche of a single individual such that repression obtains early in life and expression threatens only secondarily, it stands that a cinematic presentation of the uncanny could exist in two unrelated films, featuring two unrelated characters that are bound only by the dialectic of the uncanny itself, such that one film renders the aesthetics of repression and the other the aesthetics of expression. The dialectic of the uncanny is itself then the yellow brick road running between Oz and Eden. In what follows then, I propose that Žižek's theory of fantasy discloses the repressive aspect of Dorothy's childhood dreaming in *The Wizard of Oz*, while Freud's articulation of the uncanny as the return of the repressed elucidates the horrifying return of Dorothy's repressed drives in *Antichrist*.

Black and White

It is peculiar that Dorothy returns home at the end of *The Wizard of Oz*. Compared to techno-color Oz, Kansas was bleak and desolate, cast in sepia tones of gray and dust. Her house had just been hit by a tornado, her biological parents were gone, Auntie Em was mean, Uncle Henry was spineless, the farmhands were bores, and Miss Gulch wanted to kill her dog. What was there to come back to?

I suggest that she came home because she accomplished in her dream-work the repression necessary to return to the fantasy of her life in Kansas. As such, Dorothy's fantasy was not her dream. Rather, her fantasy was her waking life. In her dream she approached what Žižek calls the REAL – the unsymbolizable paroxysm of pleasure in pain. There she answered the enigma, “What am I for others?” as her otherwise unhinged drives became sanctioned desires yoked to objects and objectives within the symbolic system of her fantasy of life in Kansas.

This journey into the unconscious, into Dorothy's dream-work, begins in washed-out black and white. There is a humility in that faded two-toned palate that is mirrored in the vast emptiness of the Kansas plains that reduce people to silhouetted specks on a barren landscape. Like the landscape, the black and white of *The Wizard of Oz* is solid and binding. It situates its characters as either/or figures within an aesthetic of sturdy presence where good and evil, right and wrong are clear and obvious categories that are given incontestably with social identity.

It takes a tornado to unravel this fantasy. Having run away from home after Miss Gulch threatened to kill her dog, Dorothy, whose last name is Gale, returns home amidst gale-force winds that parallel her inner rage and instinct to harm those who have upset her. In short, the tornado is her impulse to topple the stalwart black and white of Kansas. In his short essay on *The Wizard of Oz*,

Salman Rushdie describes the tornado as “the greyness gathered together and whirled about and unleashed...against itself.”²² For Dorothy, it is the sublime unleashed and the moment of Kansas’, and thus her own, undoing.

Antichrist also begins with a sublime black and white moment. And as in *The Wizard of Oz*, it is an entrée to the female protagonist’s undoing. Yet, whereas in *The Wizard of Oz* Dorothy instantiates the repression of Žižekian fantasy, in *Antichrist* she is recast as the embodied expression of a Freudian will to pleasure and pain that aims to destroy the symbolic system of *logos* in the name of the chaotic unconscious. As such, the black and white opening of *Antichrist* inverts that of *The Wizard of Oz*. Rather than serving as a normativizing aesthetic that promises civility in a narrative of staid domesticity, the sensuous black and white of *Antichrist* foreshadows the collapse of fantasy and the uncanny return of the repressed.

Unlike the faded black and white of *The Wizard of Oz*, *Antichrist* opens in rich, robust, high definition black and white with a slow motion, lavishly shot, pornographic sex scene set to Handel’s aching aria “Lascia ch’io pianga” (Leave That I Might Weep). The black and white here is active and potent, functioning more like a character than a landscape. It is rich and deep with abyssal blacks and sun-bright whites. The Bill Viola-like slow motion caresses the eye as the contrast of black and white captures a throbbing pulse beating beneath sweaty skin or the firm flex of muscles stiff in ecstasy.

The couple, a husband and wife, remain unnamed throughout the film and are only identified in the credits as He (Willem Defoe) and She (Charlotte Gainsbourg). While He and She make love, their toddler climbs out of his crib and onto a desk that sits before an open window. In the process he topples a trio of small metal figurine-men labeled “Pain,” “Grief,” and “Despair”. And just as the farmhands from the black and white opening of *The Wizard of Oz* reappear in brightly colored Oz, so too do these dark characters reappear in lushly colored Eden.

As the couple climaxes, their child teeters on the widow ledge before plunging to his death at the precise moment his parents orgasm. As one commentator put it, “*La petite mort*, indeed.”²³ Thus the prologue establishes sex and death, *eros* and *thanatos* entwined, as the thematic core of the film. In aching slow motion and grand black and white, the film announces the return of the repressed and the dissolution of the childhood fantasies of Oz.

Tornados and Falling Babies

Where *The Wizard of Oz* begins with an ascent, *Antichrist* begins with a fall. In *The Wizard of Oz* Dorothy is lifted, house and all, by a tornado and transported to the lively world of Oz. In *Antichrist* however, She’s downward

spiral begins with the fall of her son, which transports the adult Dorothy to Eden and the darkness of her own mind.

The tornado that sweeps Dorothy into the sky has been variously interpreted as a manifestation of her anger, the embodiment of adolescent confusion, and a frightening phallus. Daniel Dervin has gone so far as to describe the tornado as “a remarkably apt representation of the paternal phallus in its swollen, twisting, penetrating, state which is part of the primal scene.”²⁴ Yet no matter how it is interpreted, it remains beyond all else, the vehicle of her repression.

After Miss Gulch threatened to kill her dog, Dorothy ran away from home where she met Professor Marvel, a carnival charlatan. Despite having just fled her home, when Professor Marvel tells her that Aunt Em is ill, she immediately returns to the farmhouse. Clearly she is torn between her hostile impulse to leave and a dutiful sense of responsibility to stay. Thus, when the tornado lifts her up, bumping her on the head and sending her to Oz (and her unconscious), she is able to simultaneously leave home and stay home.

The tornado lifts Dorothy up and out of the immediacy of her reality, which is what Žižek after Lacan calls her “private myth.” A private myth is the particularization of a larger meaning system to the idiosyncrasies of a single individual. Because the categories and contents of public myths are general and often contrary to the needs of the individual, we fill in the gaps with particularized

meaning systems. Here we find the symbols we each devise to cover up the sundry ways cultural myths fail to apply at a private level.

Because cultural meaning systems are most often lacking with respect to our carnal cravings, the private myths we create and inhabit embody a negotiation between our excessive and monstrous internal drives and the external prohibitions that inhibit them. As the transcendental paradigm that gives desire its coordinates, fantasy projects the lost (or prohibited) object of instinctual drives onto acceptable objects and objectives of a symbol system that is personalized as private myth. Thus private myth constitutes a formalized matrix of the fantasy narrative.

Dorothy's private myth entailed a powerful image of young girls as passive receptacles of social dictates – this despite her own contrary impulses. To compensate then, her fantasy coordinated her desires according to the *telos* of that myth – namely as the desire to see herself as the “good girl” of her own internalized cultural expectations. In becoming upset, angry, and hostile she violated her own private myth and the fantasy that sustained it.

Importantly, it was not simply that she desired to do something she knew was wrong (such as run away or harm Miss Gulch). Rather, she experienced an overturning of the very impulses that prompt what she understood to be “appropriate” conscious desires. The unconscious fantasy that oriented her desires according to the ideology of her private myth was crumbling. To sustain

the fantasy and the myth where she wants to be worthy of the desire and approval of others she had to reorient her very inclinations; she had to repress her impulses. Thus the whole of her dream-work was the work of repression.

In *The Wizard of Oz* Dorothy is lifted up and out of the fantasy of her life in Kansas so that that life – that fantasy – might ultimately be preserved. In *Antichrist* however, her son's fall from the window ushers She into the maw of reality without fantasy, where all that was repressed returns in a uncanny explosion of *eros* and *thanatos*.

After the death of her son, She falls into a crippling depression and tries to kill herself. Her husband, a cognitive therapist and a straw man for the hubris of male *logos*, convinces her that she must face her trauma and confront her fear. The place she claims to fear most is Eden – a forest outside of town where the couple owns a small cabin, and where He pushes her to go for her “treatment”.

Clearly von Trier is calling up the Christian story as a shared myth ripe for reinvention. According to the Christian myth Adam and Eve, the first He and She, were cast out of Eden after the fall. Having eaten the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil Adam and Eve saw themselves as naked and they were ashamed. For the first time, they regarded themselves as sexual beings, with bodies that were private and not for sharing; with bodies that were in some vague sense excitable yet corrupt. And for the first time they felt shame as expressed in

their act of covering their nakedness and hiding from God. With the knowledge of good and evil – of sexuality and shame in particular – He and She “had become like Gods.” For this, their fall, they were cast out of Eden.

Antichrist, however, inverts this paradigm. In the film it is the child, the product of the primal scene that he himself witnesses, who falls. After the fall, He (Adam) and She (Eve-Dorothy) enter back into Eden. However, whereas in the Christian myth Adam and Eve are originally naked and unashamed because they lack the knowledge of good and evil (and an awareness of their own sexuality in particular), it is sexuality itself – both the actual intercourse they were having when their child fell, and the child himself as the manifest product of their sexual desire – that casts the primordial parents back into Eden. Thus in this second Eden, guilt and shame – those primal implements of repression – are shed and the libidinal instincts flower in their full erotic and violent aspects.

Von Trier envisioned this return to Eden as a return to our most natural state. Emerging from his depression, von Trier recalled a therapeutic technique whereby a patient is asked to envision a relaxing and calming scene. Von Trier recalls that, “the response was a lake in the forest, with deer and all that...that was the place where everybody would like to go and relax.”²⁵ However, he adds that “what is characteristic of this very romantic forest, is that it’s where the maximum of pain and suffering and struggle occurs, because a lot of species want to live in

this place and they all fight and die all the time.”²⁶ Thus this new Eden is a place where our deepest and most violent instincts flourish as we struggle for survival.

This then is another essential link and between Oz and Eden. For Dorothy, Oz is where she undertakes the psychological work of repression. For She, Eden is a place where the tactics of repression have come undone and the repressed returns. Thus Oz and Eden together represent the psychological geography of repression and expression that defines the aesthetics of the uncanny.

Witches and Houses

Dorothy's repressed hostility for Miss Gulch transforms her into an ugly green witch that flies by the mental window of Dorothy's unconscious. In this Freudian screen memory the witch (Miss Gulch) floats by with a broom, a symbol of the stolen phallus, clutched between her legs as what Joseph Campbell called “the witch as phallic woman.”²⁷ All of this just before Dorothy and her house land on and kill the witch's sister.

The house and the witch – the first a symbol of the womb with echoes of the feminine and domesticity, the other, the witch, a symbol of the “bad mother” and shrunken womanhood. Yet, stepping out of her black and white house and into colorful Oz, the first question Dorothy is asked is whether she is a good witch or a bad witch. While she roundly claims she is not a witch at all, it would appear

that the presumption in Oz – Dorothy’s unconscious – is that all women are witches.

The figure of the witch is an affront to the established symbolic order and the patriarchal discourses that constitute it. She is dangerous because she challenges the accepted boundaries between the rational and the irrational and her danger (her evil) is entwined with her feminine nature. As Julia Kristeva writes, in male dominated societies women are often regarded as “baleful schemers,” and the feminine is considered “synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed.”²⁸ As such, Dorothy unconsciously regards herself as a witch inasmuch as she recognizes her impulse to upset the fantasy of a social order wherein, as a young girl, she desires and merits the approval of others. Thus Dorothy’s trip into her a-rational unconscious is introduced by the conflict of a house (the normative feminine) landing on and killing a witch (the abject feminine), and the question “Are you a good witch or a bad witch?”

If women are witches then men are wizards. The Wizard of *The Wizard of Oz* is first encountered as a disembodied head; an implicit statement on the respective station of masculine reason over the embodied feminine. The Wizard’s body is revealed only in an act of subversion that compromises the former authority of the lone floating intellect. Yet, as Žižek points out, even when the Wizard is exposed as nothing more than an old man behind a curtain, Dorothy

still believes in him and his magic. "There is something more real in the illusion than in the reality behind it."²⁹ It is the illusion (the repressive fantasy) of the symbolic order that Dorothy ultimately longs to return to and that compels her belief.

On her journey to see the Wizard, Dorothy meets a scarecrow in search of a brain, a tin man that needs a heart, and a lion that longs for courage. Her three companions are in search of stereotypically masculine prizes: a brain or knowledge, a heart or love (repressed sexuality), and courage or power. Juliet McMaster sees these as correlates to the Christian Trinity, such that Power is God the Father, Love is the Son, and Knowledge is the Holy Spirit.³⁰ Yet, whether her companions are searching for generic attributes of male identity or those of the masculine God of Christian patriarchy, they are all equally products of Dorothy's unconscious and signal a fantasy complicit in the artificial construction of feminine identity. Commenting on this, Stuart Culver writes that:

Just as her companions learn that what they already have must and will suffice, Dorothy learns to embrace the comfortable enclosure of the whitewashed picket fence and the domestic role it projects for her. The theme of containment is perversely underlined by the casting of Garland, then sixteen, in the role of a seven-year-old, infantilized and all too obviously confined by her costume and character.³¹

Confined by her costume and character, Dorothy represents the subjugation – repression – of passion and emotional will (embodied in the feminine) by the ideology of *logos* which fears the disrupting influence of *eros* and *thanatos*. *Antichrist* however inverts this paradigm as the constricting fairytale aesthetics of paternal repression give way to a graphic aesthetic of sexualized violence.

In *Antichrist* Dorothy steps, not out of, but into a cabin – a house, the feminine. And this time she embraces the witch. Tina Beattle notes that here she is (re)cast in Eden as Eve, the first witch, “who in the Christian theological tradition has been represented as the personification of evil and the bringer of death to the world.”³² In this, *Antichrist* answers *The Wizard of Oz* and figures the dialectic of the uncanny by unleashing the impulse to overturn the symbolic order that young Dorothy had repressed.

Plotting the course of this return of the repressed are the three beggars. In *Oz* the scarecrow, the tin man, and the lion serve as chapter markers with each character introducing a different theme (knowledge, love, courage) and charting Dorothy’s journey to see the Wizard. In *Antichrist* the chapters are plotted with the introduction of a deer, a fox, and a crow – symbols of grief, pain, and despair respectively. And as in *Oz*, they are uncanny doubles first introduced in the black and white prologue where they appeared as small metal men with nameplates announcing their identity (Grief, Pain, Despair). Here then, men become beasts –

or more accurately, the beast buried within each of us reemerges. And as She dully explains, “When the three beggars arrive, someone must die.”

The last time She was at the cabin was the summer before when she was working on her doctoral thesis – a dissertation on the history of male persecution of women and the figure of the witch in particular. She brought her son with her that summer and through a series of flashbacks, we see a latent cruelty emerge as she repeatedly forced him to wear his small boots on the wrong feet – lacing them up so tight that he began to cry.

In Freudian thought feet and shoes are commonly taken as unconscious symbols of the penis and vagina. Thus the ruby slippers of Oz appear red, inviting, and open, and transport Dorothy back home whereas the boots of Eden are painfully laced to bend the foot into a crooked deformity. (Later in the film She anchors a grindstone to her husband’s leg in an overt expression of the same tactic.) *Eros* and *thanatos* converge in the impulse to own the object of desire to the point of its own destruction, while simultaneously prompting destruction of the self by that same object.

Thus in *The Wizard of Oz* Dorothy must take the witch’s broom, the stolen phallus, and present it to the Wizard, a man, and thereby restore the gendered order of the fantasy reality she longs to return to. In *Antichrist* however, she literally destroys the erect phallus of her husband, clubbing it with a piece of

firewood in a brutal display of erotic horror. She then drills a hole through his calf and bolts a grindstone to his leg before burying him alive in an earthen tomb.

Years before the release of *Antichrist*, Barbara Creed described the use of such male-burial imagery in horror films as a symbolic evocation of the “voracious maw, the mysterious black hole that signifies female genitalia...”³³ Thus when She returns to his grave and digs him out, delivering him back to life, the tomb becomes womb. Following the death of her son – the literal death of the first fruit of her womb – the repressed archaic mother reemerges as She gives symbolic birth to the now-castrated father before performing a hideous auto-clitorectomy on herself to remove her own sex and invite the chaos of abolishing the very gender distinctions Dorothy sought to preserve. Thus in a twisted inversion, Oz is a wishful postlapsarian fantasy of gendered order and Eden is a violently prelapsarian tumult.

Porn and Horror

These scenes from Eden unravel a grotesque aesthetic that merges pornography and splatter horror in a vicious expression of the abject uncanny. The abject, according to Kristeva, is that which transgresses borders, upsets systems, and threatens identity. A corpse, vomit, and an open wound are

all abject because they invite death, sickness, and pain into the realm of life, health, and well being.³⁴ The abject, she claims, differs from the uncanny in that it is more violent and perverse. However, in *Strangers to Ourselves*, she writes that, “uncanniness occurs when the boundaries between imagination and reality are erased...[and there is a] crumbling of conscious defenses...”³⁵ Thus, if the abject is the violent and perverse violation of established boundaries, and the uncanny is a violation of the boundaries between fantasy and reality, the abject uncanny would be the violent and perverse return of the repressed that transgresses the boundaries of conscious defenses. The aesthetic expression of the return of the repressed in *Antichrist* is surely thus the abject uncanny *par excellence*.

Here, the Freudian repressed returns as the fear of castration, actual castration, the fantasy of being buried alive (that is, as Freud writes, the fantasy of “intra-uterine existence”), sadism, masochism, and sexualized violence. All of these are realized through the aesthetic tropes, the visual codes, of pornography and horror - *eros* and *thanatos* – in a spasmodic return of the repressed.

From one moment to the next, *Antichrist* unleashes the repressed unconscious by screening the id as a series of perversions, each one a singular gratuitous act of pleasure in pain. Because repressed impulses lack narratively specified coordinates of desire, their expression likewise lacks obvious design and trajectory. Representing them as such, as they are in themselves, thus amounts to

wild and random chaos. To cinematically figure the return of the repressed in its most basic form as an encounter with the abject uncanny, thus means eliding the narrativizing aesthetics of repression that formerly served to situate the impulses within a psychic story that the conscious mind could negotiate and ultimately repress (such as in *The Wizard of Oz* where there were finally no wizards or witches, as “it was all just a dream.”)

To image the return of the repressed in its brutish and natural form demands an aesthetic of punctuated, staccato-like force, where the narratives of gods and devils are exposed as nothing more than civil costumes for our most elemental impulses; where a visceral aesthetic overwhelms discursive form. *Antichrist* brings pornography and horror together to achieve precisely this.

The cinematic formulas of pornography and horror provide an aesthetic matrix for figuring the chaotic impulses of the unconscious. When Žižek writes that there is a hollow core at the center of the modern subject, he means that the depth of the subject – the REAL – resists symbolization and thereby thwarts direct access. Like the Freudian unconscious – possessed as it is by undifferentiated impulses – it is known only through its affects and is only retroactively constructed. Any representation of the primal unconscious as it is in itself is therefore impossible as it is fundamentally non-symbolizable. Figuring the formidable depths of the unconscious, cinematically or otherwise, thus demands

an aesthetic scaffolding that elides the discursive in favor of the affective while embracing visual and thematic tropes that can sustain its potency.

The visual codes of pornography and horror achieve this by bypassing *logos* and directly targeting primal arousal. Aesthetically, pornography and horror offer neither the mystery of eroticism nor the refuge of an immersive plot. Rather, each possesses an immediacy that sustains its presence through the spectacle of its own directness and dares the viewer to turn away and refuse the promise of moment-to-moment arousal. Linked together, these discrete moments form collected snapshots of *eros* and *thanatos* like a cinematic flip-book that renders the raw potency of our undifferentiated impulses through an aesthetic of serial arousal.

Atop the aesthetics of pornography and horror that define *Antichrist* there is a thin layer of theology. This however is perhaps the weakest dimension of the film. The ostensive explanation for She-Dorothy's unraveling into maniacal atrocities is her embrace of the idea that, as she avers, "Nature is Satan's church." Reinforcing the mythic ties between mother, nature, and witch, she also accepts the wickedness of woman proffered by Christian misogynists since Tertullian wrote in the 2nd century, "[Woman] you are the one who opened the door to the Devil, you are the one who first plucked the fruit of the forbidden tree, you are the first who deserted the divine law; you are the one who persuaded him whom the Devil was not strong enough to attack."³⁶

These gestures toward theologizing the overwhelmingly more compelling (if admittedly disturbing) aesthetic a/theology simply fall flat. The suggestion, made by von Trier himself, that the film explores the possibility that it was Satan, not God who created the world, clangs like hollow theorizing compared to the pure aesthetic brutality of the film. *Antichrist*, in all its gratuitousness, works best when seen as a blasphemous proposal that neither God nor Satan created us and our world, but rather, we created our gods and devils from our own basest instincts and we know them best in their rawest aesthetic expression.

In the end, the Dorothy of *Antichrist* dies. The chthonic witch is strangled and burned on a pyre by her husband and the blind *logos* he represents.³⁷ Yet staggering out of the woods, both literally and metaphorically, her husband is overrun by hordes of “glowing and faceless women [who] surround and move past him [as] nature is restored to benignly indifferent fecundity.”³⁸ Like nature itself, these women remind us that the expressive moment of the uncanny will always prevail as that which is repressed will always return to topple the artifice of stultifying fantasies and private myths.

These two remarkably different films work together precisely because their mirror-like inversion of another discloses the aesthetic dialectic of the uncanny. From their juxtaposition we see this dialectic in the saccharine sweetness of Dorothy’s repressed hostility against a constrictive culture that she longs to leave, yet longs to please, and in the dark brutality of She’s expressed

rage against a frightened patriarchy that has fueled misogyny for centuries. In both instances, the feminine (first as child, then as adult) stands in for the twin drives of *eros* and *thanatos* that have been subjugated by an ideology – a fantasy – of banal *logos* that fears the creative and destructive force of the unconscious. Viewed together then these films suggest not only the psychological origins of the divine and demonic, but moreover, they indicate an essentially aesthetic vocabulary as a formative ground for theological reflection.

Thus in conclusion, in *The Wizard of Oz* Dorothy's dream of witches and wizards, yellow brick roads, and ruby red slippers amounts to the machinations of repression pursuant to the preservation of a fantasy-life in Kansas. In *Antichrist* however, the repressed returns as She embraces the raging unconscious, red in tooth and claw. In both films it is their aesthetic quality – the “quality of feeling” they possess and evoke – that ultimately instantiates and animates the dialectic of the uncanny. Placing these films side-by-side and watching the arc that leaps between them reveals the unsettling proposition that the only witches and wizards and gods and devils, are those of our own mind and we know them most powerfully through the uncanny aesthetics of their repression and expression.

¹ Throughout this article, I use the term aesthetic as Freud used it in his essay on the uncanny - to refer to, as he put it, "the theory of the quality of feelings", which I take to connote the realm of the affective and sensuous that lies beyond purely discursive thought.

² Freud himself never used the term “thanatos” to describe the impulse toward aggression and violence that is at the heart of the death drive. Rather, according to Fritz Wittles, one of Freud’s contemporaries and his first biographer, it was Wilhelm Stekel who introduced the term. See Fritz Wittles, *Freud and the Child Woman*, edited by E. Timms (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 112.

³ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. by David McLintock (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 148.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Slavoj Žižek, “Preface: Burning Bridges,” in *The Žižek Reader*, edited by Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), xvii.

⁹ Slavoj Žižek, “The Seven Veils of Paranoia, Or, Why Does the Paranoiac Need Two Fathers,” *Constellations* 3.2 (1996), 147.

¹⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (New York: Verso Books, 1997), 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹² See for example von Trier’s interview with Henrik Saltzstein in September, 2009 for viceland.com and his July, 2009 interview with Total Sci-Fi Online. Also, in her book *Lars von Trier*, Linda Badley addresses the cinematic and personal motivations behind *Antichrist* (see specifically, pages 141 and 144).

¹³ This lends all the more credence to a psychoanalytic reading of the film.

¹⁴ “Depression Threatens von Trier’s Career,” *Reuters* May 12, 2007 accessed 4/1/2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/05/15/people-denmark-vontrier-depression-dc-idUSL1228102520070515>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Lars von Trier, “Director’s Confession,” *Antichrist*. Official Website accessed 4/1/2012, <http://www.antichristthemovie.com/?p=277&language=en>.

¹⁷ In Freud’s own essay on the uncanny he references the work of fellow psychoanalyst Otto Rank. Freud writes in a footnote that Rank begins his study of the double, an important feature of the uncanny for Freud, by appealing to Hanns Heinz Ewer’s work *Der Student von Prag*. What Freud does not say however, is that *Der Student von Prag* is a film and that Rank went on to observe, “It may perhaps turn out that cinematography, which in numerous ways reminds us of the dream-

work, can also express certain psychological facts and relationships...in such clear and conspicuous imagery that it facilitates our understanding of them.”¹⁷

¹⁸ Geert Lovink, “Interview with Slavoj Žižek”, accessed 9/21/11, www.ctheory.net/a37-society_fan.html.

¹⁹ Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 77.

²⁰ Lesley Stern, “I Think, Sebastian, Therefore...I Somersault: Film and the Uncanny,” *Paradoxa: Studies in World Literary Genres*, vol. 3 no. 3-4 (1997): 356.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Salman Rusdie, *The Wizard of Oz* (London: British Film Institute, 1992), 16.

²³ Elizabeth A. Castelli, “Slouching Toward Copenhagen,” *Artforum* (October, 2009), 81.

²⁴ Daniel Dervin, “Over the Rainbow and Under the Twister: A Drama of the Girl’s Passage through the Phallic Phase,” *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic* 42 (1978), 55. Quoted in Paul Nathanson’s *Over The Rainbow: The Wizard of Oz as a Secular Myth of America* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), 63.

²⁵ Virginie Sélavý, “Interview with Lars von Trier,” *Electric Sheep: A Deviant View of Cinema*, 29 (July 3, 2009), accessed 4/2/2012, <http://www.electricsheepmagazine.co.uk/features/2009/07/03/antichrist-interview-with-lars-von-trier/>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Press, 1976), 73.

²⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 70. Henceforth, *Powers of Horror*.

²⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema: Part 3*, DVD. Directed by Sophie Finnes. San Francisco: Microcinema International, 2009.

³⁰ Juliet McMaster, “The Trinity Archetype in *The Jungle Book* and *The Wizard of Oz*,” *Children’s Literature*, vol 20 (1992), 102.

³¹ Stuart Culver, “What Manikins Want: *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows*,” *Representations* 21 (Winter 1988), 99.

³² Tina Beattle, “*Antichrist*: The Visual Theology of Lars von Trier” accessed 9/23/11, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/antichrist-the-visual-theology-of-lars-von-trier>.

³³ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 27. Clearly Creed's comment predates *Antichrist*. Her reference however is to the horror film trope of a female burying a male and the associations that accompany such imagery, which von Trier obviously draws on.

³⁴ *Powers of Horror*, 1-6.

³⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 188.

³⁶ Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women* (Montana: Kessinger Publications, 2004), 3.

³⁷ Because the husband kills the wife and because of von Trier's already robust reputation as a misogynist, *Antichrist* has been labeled a "wo man-hating" film. Without speculating on von Trier's personal attitudes towards women, which are highly complex and far from straight-forward, I would argue that *Antichrist* ultimately depicts men and male *logos* in particular as fundamentally flawed. We see this in the way the film portrays He as a wholly banal two-dimensional character who blindly pushes his wife (the feminine) toward detached masculine rationality only to discover he is unable to accept the consequences of her rejection.

³⁸ Linda Badley, *Lars von Trier* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 149.

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