

Blu-Ray Review: 'Antichrist' Receives Pristine Treatment on Criterion

Submitted by [mattmovieman](#) [1] on November 10, 2010 - 8:41am

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CHICAGO – One of the most reliable scenarios in the horror movie playbook is the satanic possession of a human character. “Antichrist” is about a woman who isn’t possessed, but is nevertheless absolutely convinced that she is an instrument of the devil. This is a much scarier premise, since the greatest horrors externalized in the film are spawned entirely from the woman’s unstable psyche, deranged by guilt.

It’s a sad day in film criticism when a daring and exhilarating work of art like Lars von Trier’s “Antichrist” is widely labeled as a “joke” directed by a “fraud.” Say what you will about von Trier, but he is nothing if not sincere. Using this latest effort as a catalyst to free him from paralyzing depression, von Trier delved into his own lifelong struggles with anxiety, exorcising his psychological demons onscreen. While the film is certainly not devoid of von Trier’s irony-laced humor, it is also a shattering meditation on the debilitating grief that comes from devastating loss, and the destructive toll that it has on the body and soul.



Blu-Ray Rating: **5.0/5.0**

Utilizing his trademark chapter markers, von Trier centers his story on a nameless couple (played by Willem Dafoe and Charlotte Gainsbourg), who are engaged in passionate lovemaking during the film’s prologue, which is exquisitely filmed by cinematographer Anthony Dod Mantle in black-and-white. Like Andrei Tarkovsky’s “The Mirror,” which served as a primary inspiration for von Trier, “Antichrist” shifts between color and black-and-white with dreamlike ease. The slow-motion sequence culminates with the couple’s infant son climbing atop a windowsill and plummeting to his death. Gainsbourg becomes immobilized with guilt and unease, while psychiatrist Dafoe treats her like one of his patients. Her fear of the woods inspires them to take a trip to their country home, cryptically named Eden. Once there, Dafoe begins having ominous visions, as Gainsbourg slowly descends into madness. The psychological torture he inflicts on her, however naïve and well-meaning it may be, proves to have physical repercussions. A fitting alternate title for the film could be, “A Woman Under the Satanic Influence.”



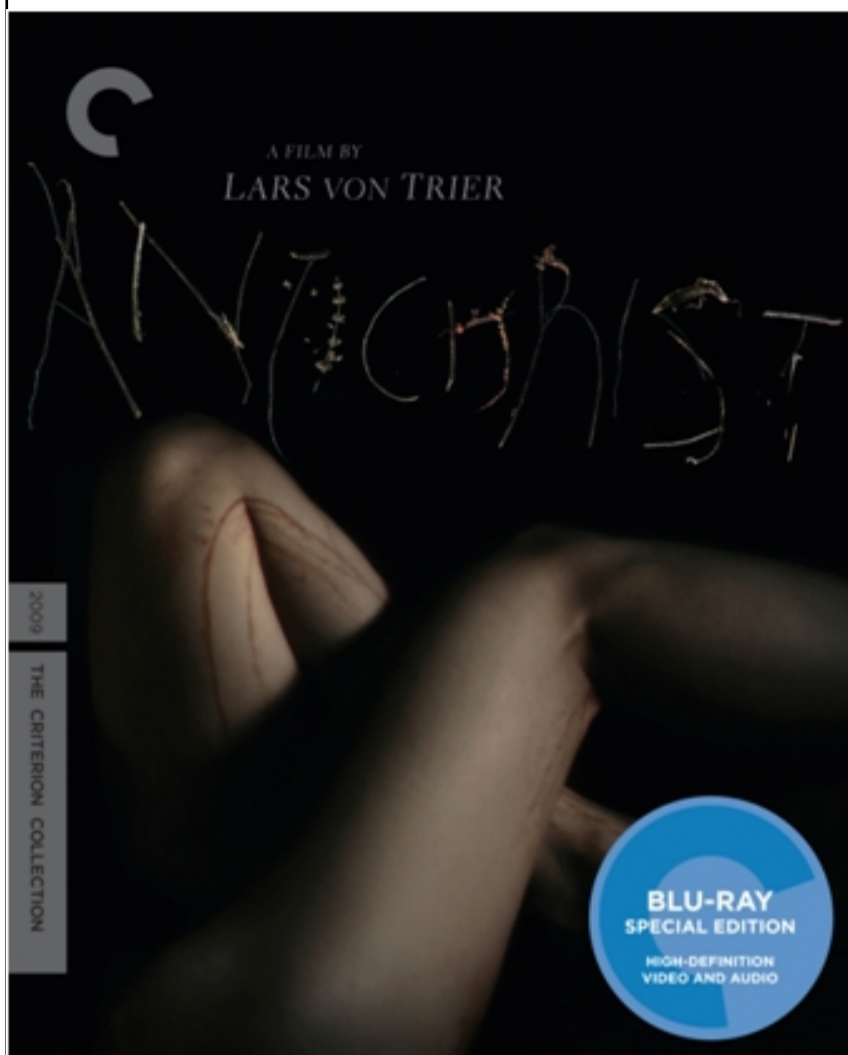
Charlotte Gainsbourg stars in Lars von Trier’s Antichrist.

Photo credit: Courtesy of the Criterion Collection

The controversy surrounding “Antichrist” was so overpowering that it succeeded in drowning out the film itself. I won’t even mention the particular sequences of violence that most writers seem breathless to reveal. Some detractors have hurled at von Trier the tired claim that the abuse inflicted upon his female characters reflects his own “misogyny.” Though the director’s worldview may be dark and pessimistic, his films have always been about abuse, never an endorsement of it. He has always identified more with his female protagonists, who have valiantly struggled in the face of adversity in every one of his pictures, from Emily Watson in “Breaking the Waves” and Bjork in “Dancer in the Dark,” to Nicole Kidman and Bryce Dallas Howard in the “Land of Opportunities” trilogy.

In each film, von Trier has proven his gift for eliciting overwhelming performances from his actors, and the duo of Gainsbourg and Dafoe are

no exception. Mantle and von Trier's spellbinding visual poetry, particularly their use of tangled human limbs and fantastical animals, has drawn comparisons to Hieronymus Bosch's infamous triptych, "The Garden of Earthly Delights." Yes, von Trier has always worn the title of "provocateur" like a badge of honor, but his films don't aim to shock simply for the sake of stirring people up. They force viewers to confront the darkness in human nature, while harnessing the duality of gritty realism and deliberately heightened surrealism to create an experience both aching intimate and viscerally cinematic. Von Trier's work may not be for everyone, but it deserves to be taken seriously.



Antichrist was released on Blu-Ray and DVD on Nov. 9, 2010.

Photo credit: Courtesy of the Criterion Collection

"Antichrist" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 2.35:1 aspect ratio), and the film's stunningly gorgeous HD digital master easily makes this one of the best looking Blu-Rays ever released. The picture quality is maximized on Blu-Ray, primarily because the film was shot with two Red cameras, and one Phantom camera, which captured some footage at 1000 frames per second. The resulting images are utterly breathtaking to behold on an HD television. And though "Antichrist" could've easily been the type of enigmatic art house curiosity released with no extras (a la "Wild Grass"), the movie lovers at Criterion have accompanied von Trier's picture with an array of excellent, unmissable special features. The audio commentary track accompanies von Trier with film scholar Murray Smith, who ends up dominating the discussion, while the stammering director struggles to answer his questions. It's clear the filmmaker wasn't cut out for commentaries, though he still manages to provide several revealing insights, such as his belief that the film would've benefitted from a greater contrast between its "ragged" handheld sequences and its "monumental," artfully composed sections. He also points out various stylistic homages to Tarkovsky, such as the self-consciously artificial way that rain enters a scene, from one side of the screen to the other. It's especially amusing to observe which moments in the picture were considered "humoristic" by von Trier, including one gruesome "double take" that probably hasn't elicited too many chuckles from audiences.

A seven-part, hour-long making-of documentary features footage of the film's initial "test" version (starring Jens Albinus from "The Boss of It All"), as well as interviews with some of von Trier's longtime collaborators, including visual effects supervisor Peter Hjorth and production designer Karl Júlíusson. One of the best featurettes showcases the extraordinary work of composer/sound designer Kristian Eidnes Andersen, who utilized organic materials such as grass and rocks to create the film's atonal soundtrack. There's also a memorable trip to the makeup effects department, where artists Thomas Foldberg and Morten Jacobsen offer a closer look at their startlingly realistic, manufactured body parts.

The final part, titled "The Evil of Woman," centers of von Trier's "misogyny consultant" Heidi Laura, who had the unpleasant task of compiling the worst examples of gender discrimination and witch hunts in history, unearthing outrageous statements made by legendary thinkers such as Aristotle and Nietzsche. Rounding out the disc are three featurettes detailing the film's premiere at Cannes, as well as magnificent, heartfelt interviews with the two leads, who agree that the controversy upstaged the film. "I don't think this film has gotten its day in court yet," says Dafoe. With this superior Blu-Ray release, that day has finally come.

'Antichrist' is released by The Criterion Collection and stars Charlotte Gainsbourg and Willem Dafoe. It was written and directed by Lars von Trier. It was released on Nov. 9th, 2010. It is not rated.



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Staff Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
matt@hollywoodchicago.com [13]

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