In Pursuit of Authenticity

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A naked figure masturbates amid the gnarled roots of a tree. Her white body glows against the dark backdrop of the forest, gyrating violently on the ground. Though she is more skeleton than woman, the figure’s thrusts make visible sharp ribs that protrude under small, emaciated breasts and a flowing head of hair scattering over the bark. Having escaped her husband after he refuses to continue sexual intercourse, the woman retreats to satisfy her needs here, in the forest, a place that—as she professes to him earlier—harbors her greatest fears. This is simultaneously a search for pleasure and a provocation of imminent despair.

The man, naked himself, emerges from the couple’s cabin and follows her panting; her short, throaty gasps imply both a struggle for air and an outcry of passion. His search becomes ever more frantic, his pace quickening as he runs among dense trees, following the woman’s breath until he reaches her. He lies on top of the woman, with no words exchanged, and the couple resumes having sex. Here, a stillness takes over the scene. There is a snap, a change of feeling, a difference in tone: the violent gyrations of the woman’s hips become fluid wave-like motions, her intakes of breath are now drawn out, lingering and un rushed in the air. Perhaps orgasm, here, is an effective antidote; it marks the resolution of a dissonant chord. However, this notion is upended as the hands of corpses suddenly appear among the twisting roots. Though the couple has relaxed into their action, bodies synching with one another, the macabre and fantastical mingle with pleasure. Death and sex, strain and ease, embrace.

This scene is from Lars Von Trier’s Antichrist, which tells the story of a couple who retreat to “Eden,” their remote log cabin, in hopes of mending their fractured relationship after the loss of their infant son. Throughout, sexuality is coupled with evil and terror: a child falls to his death as his mother climaxes in orgasm, a woman smashes her husband’s genitals with a wooden plank before making him come, a couple have sex with the hands of corpses looming over them. Von Trier and his company, Zentropa Entertainments,
used the latter image for a promotional poster nearly half a year before
\textit{Antichrist}'s official release. And it’s no wonder: it is perhaps the archetypical
image of \textit{Antichrist}, encapsulating themes of sex and death in a single frame.
Charlotte Gainsbourg’s head sensually rolls back, her hands clutching Willem
Dafoe’s backside. His muscular body contrasts with the limp, sickly hands that
sprout from the tree like malignant growths. Still, the couple seems not to
notice or seems incapable of noticing this apparition—nor do they really care.
Actually, they look turned on. Are we? It cannot be ignored, meanwhile, that
such merging of overt sexuality and horror has the potential to repulse rather
than attract. (When the film screened at the Toronto International Film
Festival in 2009, it was reported that an audience member vomited in the the-
atre, while others walked out of the screening (McGinn)). Nonetheless, only
when we consider how such a scene was constructed, in the technical and
artistic senses, can we overcome such knee-jerk reactions. But only if we dare
to look.

Anthony Dod Mantle, director of photography, brought the surreal and
the phantasmagorical of \textit{Antichrist} to life with a variety of different filming
techniques. In the sex scene beneath the tree, Mantle shoots with a handheld
digital camera. The woman’s violent movements and emaciated body are ren-
dered ever starker as the frame shakes imperfectly, uncontrolled, the camera’s
movements almost a reaction to those within the scene. We are reminded,
here, of \textit{The Blair Witch Project} and \textit{Cloverfield}, films whose horror-labels rely
on the unease resulting from a moving camera. We are stripped of our usual
power as all-seeing witnesses as we confront fleeting images and engage in a
subconscious, futile battle to seize control of them. But in these films, tropes
of the horror genre, the technique is used without discretion. The camera
nearly convulses, jumping across the screen, as a character runs in fear.
Mantle, however, engages realistically and empathetically with the camera;
his firm grip slips only for a second at a time, his hands instinctively reacting
to his subject’s movements, creating a sense of simultaneous intimacy and
removal. Through his physical responses to his subject, Mantle’s presence lies
\textit{within} the scene rather than \textit{behind} it. And yet, he does not intervene. Mantle
neither protests the violent nature of the woman’s sexuality nor encourages it.
An innocent bystander, the camera quietly bears witness to what it is seeing,
but does not shy away. Von Trier and Mantle, here, reveal the act of watching
wholly private acts, shattering the barrier between maker and consumer.
They beg the question: “\textit{Are we [the viewers] allowed to view what is being}
exposed?” (Strauss 149).
David Levi Strauss, in his essay “The Documentary Debate: Aesthetic or Anaesthetic,” considers this question through what he terms the “aestheticization of the documentary image” (148). He focuses on photography, an art form inherently linked to the documentation, or truthful rendering, of an instant. Strauss examines the works of photographers labeled as “subversive,” like Robert Mapplethorpe and Sebastião Salgado, whose subjects are often damaged, suffering human beings and whose works are replete with blood and tragedy (149). Yet amid depictions of terror, such photographs serve not just as documentation, but also as art. The artist beautifies, “aestheticize[s]” and “transform[s]” the images into objects that can be hung in a gallery, viewed (150).

Strauss considers Ingrid Sischy’s New Yorker review of an exhibit of Salgado’s work. Sischy states that Salgado is too concerned with “the compositional aspects of his pictures,” and that in “finding the ‘grace’ and ‘beauty’ in the twisted forms of his anguished subjects,” he does not rely on the power of the struggle at hand to speak for itself (148). He tweaks, glosses and adulterates. She labels his artistry as a “beautification of tragedy,” resulting in images “that ultimately reinforce our passivity toward the experience they reveal” (qtd. in Strauss 148). Sischy believes Salgado’s art fails to actively engage the viewer in the human struggle it seeks to represent. It is “inauthentic” art (Strauss 150).

In contrast, Strauss contemplates Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano’s take on Salgado’s work. In his essay “Salgado, 17 Times,” Galeano praises Salgado for photographing “from inside” (149). Rather than “approach” his subjects, he profoundly “enters” them (149). This process of finding “solidarity” with the subject is described by Galeano as a “horizontal” approach to artmaking (qtd. in Strauss 149). It allows both artist and viewer to extend the meaning of the image, and to apply it to their own realities. The work is not a stylishly political piece that incites comfortable contemplation—“a few crocodile tears” and a “pious word” from elite art-goers in a gallery (qtd. in Strauss 149). Rather, Salgado’s art attempts to lessen the distance between disparate peoples, and to erode the barrier—if only slightly—between subject and viewer. Strauss asks, “Are Galeano and Sischy looking at the same images? What is the political difference in the way they are looking?” (149).

Strauss makes clear that a transformation necessarily occurs when an artist seeks to represent someone or something else: “To represent is to aestheticize; that is, to transform. It presents a vast field of choices but it does not include the choice not to transform, not to change or alter whatever is being represented” (150). Strauss argues that this transformation on the
artist’s part is not only inevitable, but also necessary to reach audiences “at other points of the spectrum of communication.” The “aestheticization” of an image is what elicits a more visceral, complex response than a simple “acceptance or rejection” of what is being presented (151). Sischy claims that “beauty,” or rather, “aestheticization,” “is a call to admiration, not action” (qtd. in Strauss 148). Strauss argues, though, that without the full will to transform on the creator’s part, the piece will become sterile, its pertinence only temporal. Such work is more akin to propaganda, whose purpose is to resonate within a particular social and political construct, than to art.

Kea Trevett, in her essay “Truth, Mon Amour,” questions the very ability to label a piece of art as documentary. Among other works, she considers Alain Resnais’s seminal film *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, which combines both “journalistic and fictional narrative” to recount the aftermath of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, Japan (102). Trevett describes the opening scene, where two lovers—a French woman and a Japanese man—lie together. The woman tells the man of her visit to the museum of Hiroshima, insisting that she has seen *everything* after he tells her: *You saw nothing. Nothing.* The film cuts to a montage of the people of Hiroshima just after the bomb: “A desolate landscape. Mass bodies in despair. Dirt, blood, hysteria, paralysis” (101). Resnais seems to be critical of the woman’s convictions in much the same way that her lover is. The juxtaposition of the woman’s certainty—“everything”—with the actual horrors of Hiroshima confirms the hopelessness “of achieving authenticity in the reproduction” of an event; it is impossible for an experience to be rendered authentically through artifacts and documents, by cold and uncolored means that do not tap deeply enough into feeling (101).

Trevett then grapples with the inherent “transformation” that Strauss concerns himself with. The fictional and the factual may seem to be at odds in a work like *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, where a fabricated love story interweaves with journalistic video footage of a historical event. But Trevett focuses instead on the similarities between fact and fiction in art, arguing that both reflect the “inherent ‘I’” in any attempt to represent something: that even in a non-fiction or documentary work, “someone exists behind . . . the camera lens, deciding what to highlight, what to exclude, what to portray positively, or negatively, or even indifferently” (103). Trevett lays out a few of the many “choices” that Strauss claims are inherent to representation. Accepting this futile battle—the inevitably unsuccessful attempt to render a moment exactly as it was experienced—is perhaps when true art begins, and when complexities of human, social, and political natures are drawn out of their initial
source of inspiration. Resnais, in merging factual and fictional narratives, nearly upends the very idea of the documentary image, as it will inherently fail at reproducing experience. Instead, he submits to “the complexity of story-telling,” using a variety of media to arrive at a world where “words and images rarely mean only one thing [and] in which beauty and romance mingle and merge habitually with death and destruction” (Trevett 103, 101). The same could be said of Salgado’s work, and of Antichrist; they too prioritize storytelling over perfect representation. They too bring beauty and destruction together.

There is a snap, a change of feeling, a difference in tone: the violent gyrations of the woman’s hips become fluid wave-like motions, her intakes of breath are now drawn out, lingering and unrushed in the air. Anthony Dod Mantle’s camera has suddenly made a switch, mid-take, from hand-held to motion controlled. The latter technique, synonymous with modern film (it first appeared in Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey), allows the camera to record motion in such a way that a computer can read and duplicate the movements of the scene. Motion-control photography is characterized by a calm, nearly static tone that enables computer-generated images to be superimposed on the shot, accounting for the seamless appearance of the corpse hands in the lovemaking scene by the tree. No change of lens or camera is needed to achieve different effects, permitting the scene to go on uninterrupted, in a single take. But why does Von Trier have Mantle use a hand-held camera when the scene culminates in a fantastical image? Why is he concerned with garnering a lifelike, authentic feel when he seeks, finally, to upend it with illusion?

Perhaps Von Trier is ridiculing the very notion of “documentary,” giving way to the futility of rendering authentic experience. This same awareness of futility is what led Resnais to combine pure documentary and fictional elements in Hiroshima, Mon Amour. But what Resnais seeks to prove throughout the length of a feature, Von Trier does in a single take. A snap, a change of feeling, a difference in tone. Does the authenticity of the first half of the scene from Antichrist get lost once the motion controlled camera takes the place of the handheld? Do the corpse-like hands make the emotion of the image any less visceral, any less human? What Strauss and Trevett seem to argue, along with the films of Resnais and Von Trier, is that the fictional can serve to affirm the documentary and vice versa; these two means by which we create need not be separate—nor, in fact, can they ever be. As the viewer hypnotically watches a moaning Charlotte Gainsbourg thrusting against her partner, it takes a
moment to register the white hand that has appeared, floating above her head, just as it does to notice the camera’s newfound, seamlessly artificial sense of stillness. For a striking few seconds, it seems all too real.

WORKS CITED