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*Loveless apathy: Sade's erotica and parodic excess  
in Lars von Trier's film Nymph()maniac 2014  
(Directors Cut)*

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## Studies in European Cinema

### Loveless Apathy: Sade's Erotica and Parodic Excess in Lars Von Trier's film

#### Nymph()maniac 2014 (Directors Cut)

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## Loveless Apathy: Sade's Erotica and Parodic Excess in Lars Von Trier's film *Nymph()*maniac 2014 (Directors Cut)

### Abstract

This exegesis takes seriously Lars von Trier's claim that *Nymph()*maniac (2014), is an exposition of Sadean themes and tropes. The film is redolent with recondite pornographic flatness and aesthetic cultural density that remains peculiarly un-erotic. Sexual representations intersect with a plenitude of digressions; sensualism is simultaneously tempered and positioned as threatening the domain of normative romantic love and marriage. The series of allegorical vignettes are visually intelligent and serve to form a portrayal of desire, where sensuality is found to be searching for a glimpse of unbridled sexual deliverance and release. Not unexpectedly, reviewers, spectators and censors have reacted with reservations, trepidation and fascination. Trespassing and destabilising the posture of representations found in realist cinema, von Trier's cinematic Sadean journey transgresses and is unsettling, as the visual experience moves sensuality and desire beyond the prosaic limits established in normative society.

**Key Words:** *Nymph()*maniac; Lars von Trier; Love; Sade; sadomasochism; cinema of evil; Hollywood realism

### Sade's Thematic: Forget about Love

*Nymph()*maniac (2014) is the third and concluding instalment in von Trier's 'Depression Trilogy', having been preceded by *Antichrist* (2009) and *Melancholia* (2011). The film portrays the androgynously named Joe (Charlotte Gainsbourg), literally entering the underground world of subterranean activity found in sado-masochistic culture, violent eroticism and criminal conduct. Likewise, *Melancholia* and *Antichrist* depict a number of scenes where the lead female characters struggle with passions that are characteristic of masochistic and sadistic modalities (see Gullestad 2011). Here *Nymph()*maniac stands out, providing a Sadean prism through which are refracted the inter-subjective nature of desire and pleasure and relationships of domination and subordination. The film is exemplary in its portrayal of a willingness to dispossess oneself of the routines of thought and action that prescribe utilitarian identity. In an interview at Cannes, von Trier stated that *Nymph()*maniac was a film intersecting hard sex and discursive philosophy akin to the narratives found in the works of Marquis de Sade (Von Trier 2011). The director characterized himself as a cultural radical revealing that the film was a discussion about the use of the word 'nymphomania' and a woman's erotic development from infancy up to fifty years of age.

Sade's narratives reiterate the romantic tradition where the greatness of literature lies in its capacity to give voice to the transgression of utilitarian values (broadly speaking, 'the icy water of egotistical calculation', bourgeois possession, acquisition and unbridled materialism). In the intricate and extravagant framework of Sade's erotica the thematic transgressions also presuppose a metaphysical void that excoriates and detaches itself from sacred dogma. Sade refuses to enclose desire in overarching structures such as consecrated religious or social authorities with their immanent and dogmatic totalities. For Sade, the intractable problem in these canonical and institutional authorities is that they fundamentally reduce sexual diversity and restrict the pursuit of pleasure in experimentation and inexhaustible stratagem. Sade's oeuvre is a scandalous literary configuration and a legendary fictional campaign that draws an indissoluble link between human desire and the forces

of nature that cannot be circumscribed by sanctions that routinely suture sexual longing and yearning to the flagpole of conventional cultural norms.

Sade privileges a space that imposes the locus of identity in a process of self-invention determined by self-styled axes of subjectification found in one's own destiny. Desire procures fulfilment by removing dogmatic universal determinations and patterns of domination found in institutional arrangements such as family, love relationships, marriage etc. Sade's novella *Justine, ou Les Malheurs de la Vertu* (1791) and *L'Histoire de Juliette* (1797) are filled with debauched parody and decadent transgressions where excess challenges the ideals of uniformity, virtue and systematised conventions. In *Justine*, Sade presents the bourgeois critique of feudal Catholic morality, presented within the genre of pornography and in turn, *Juliette*, his most mature work, utilitarian morality is subjected to the same treatment meted out to the Catholics, and it comes off no better than its predecessor. Instead of the debauched libertine's actions being an affront to God and then the expression of the nature of God, they become, respectively, an affront to nature and then the only way of completing impotent nature's divine plan. For Sade, nature is inextricably linked to the expression of vicissitudinous human desire and nebulous sexual predilections that are not indissolubly tied to an essential essence. Sade was the consummate critic of both earlier romanticism and rationalism, and that is why he is such a seminal influence in the development of the entire edifice of modern French thought (Bataille 1986; 1994).

This legacy of transgression and provocation subscribes to an ornate and stylised pornography where its very nature is anti-rationalist and, for this reason, so repulsive to the bourgeoisie. As Linda Badley puts it 'What ultimately distinguishes *Nymph()maniac* from most of Trier's previous films is the elaborateness of its cinematic adaptation of a Sadean discourse or rhetoric of excess (Badley 2015, 26). The film's subtitle: 'Forget about Love', can arguably be said to initiate the elision of sexual behaviour as a domain of conventional moral experience. Following Sade's legacy the film *Nymph()maniac*, crafts a region of fragmented digressions, a montage that reflects human sexual diversity and supports the imperatives of emancipation and dissociation from immutable doxa, utilitarian conventions that constrain and impose tangible limits on desire. Echoing Sade's characters, in particular, Juliette, *Nymph()maniac*'s protagonist, Joe, establishes a selfhood that journeys through various moral mutations and finds a space emancipated from the liturgy and regulatory inscriptions that invoke repressive sexual control and bodily seclusion. Joe's attitude is found in a corollary where Sontag's reading of Sade underlines a frontier between comedy, novella and pornography. Although Joe represents the emotional flatness of pornography in her countless sexual encounters, she differs from her other literary Sadean counterpart, Justine: an eternal ingénue who is perpetually astonished by the degradation, rape and humiliation she repeatedly experiences in her encounters with libertines. Justine is more akin to a pornographic consciousness characterised by a flat monotonous figure that invariably learns nothing from experience (Sontag 1969, 55). Nevertheless, Joe does belong to a Sadean theatre of types. She is never a fully developed personality in the realist sense but corresponds more to an unending diaphanous response engaged in a dizzying array of sexual experiences. Pornographic sex is perpetual motion, a perpetual tableau, regulated by the principle of repetition. Like Sade's libertines, Joe comes to understand the inevitability of power in pleasure and finds the logic of prohibition and utility an affront to the demands of desire and self-affirmation.

In keeping with Sade's liberation campaign, von Trier's *Nymph()maniac*, encourages confrontations with the obscene because sexual immersion in a number of debauched endeavours forecasts an emancipation from an individuality tied to bourgeois values and conventions. The film serves as an exemplary model for examining the complex subregion of human nature where desire confronts the cultural debris that delimits sexual experience. In Sade's literary canon regimes of authority claiming the primacy of utility, charity, virtue and invoking sexual constraint are met with parody and are depicted as the normative wreckage that delimits the density and complexity found in human sexual experience. Sade codes this kind of cultural debris with scathing critique and laughter; Justine's

Catholicism makes her incapable of abandoning a maddening compulsion to see nothing but virtue and charity in every human soul, an obsessive spiritual incandescence that makes her the victim of unending abuse. It is in this sense that *Nymph()*maniac rehearses schemes and the intentions of conduct found in Sade's oeuvre and forays into the somatic realm, the realm in which suffering takes place. In this terrain boundary experience and sexual transgression unsettles the consecrated demarcations that constitute the economy of the body and its pleasures.

### **The Cinema of Evil and Anti-Realism**

The Director's Cut of *Nymph()*maniac is five and a half hours long, precisely because von Trier's antirealism refuses trivialised representation and eschews a shallow psychological plot. Rather, the sententious and elliptical character of Joe's reasoning expresses allegorical and imaginary modalities of teaching that depict a diffusion of thoughts, images and fantasies. The unfinished yet intense exploration of intimacy inhabits a series of montages where the domain of perpetual motion approaches the unmediated intensities residing within the human psyche. In turn, standard Hollywood realism is rebuked because it is recognised as a kind of synthetic tableaux that conditions our knowledge with predictable and illusory romantic banality. Instead, *Nymph()*maniac responds to Greenaway's call for a cinema conveying a transformative 'visual intelligence,' a graphic spectacle that refuses to safeguard the natural order of things (see Brown 2016). Von Trier's film eschews realist window dressing. In *Nymph()*maniac mystical experience is akin to sensual abandonment and the cinematic landscape stridently provokes alterity using a vast grid of cinematic instruments, including ineffable and lyrical signifiers realised in a montage of mythical and transcendental representations. This kind of diversity establishes a touchstone for the liberation of desire and ultimately disavows the tired genre found in Hollywood realism where the movie experience is generally conventional, predictable and insipid because the themes are an endless repetition of the same.

Von Trier's cinema embodies forms of anti-humanism and anti-realism that resist parochial and totalising belief systems, and *Nymph()*maniac shares similar axioms relating to 'pulsating image saturation' and a politics of heterodoxy that is depicted in an anachronistic meeting with an eighteenth century Sadean thematic (Ogden 2010, 59). Like Sade's narratives, much of von Trier's oeuvre is non-conformist and does not subscribe to grand theories of progress. As Ogden illustrates, von Trier's filmic representations find aesthetic form in '... synchronic overlap of past and present ... forged [within] emerging and disappearing simulacra, which create and unravel snatches of aesthetic and narrative unity (Ogden 2010, 62).' His work resides in the recondite inter-textual themes, heterogeneous forms and shared perspicuous horizons expressed in the 'cinema of evil'. The term stems from 'Bataille's concept of evil' and is crystallised in a radical devaluation of utility as well as an ethical transfiguration of '... taboos and principles established by social, religious or cultural systems that advocate ... equilibrium, perfection and goodness (Beugnet 2007, 175).'

Bataille's approach is basically a theological one and the most influential figure in the thinking of the Bataille School is the Marquis de Sade. In keeping with the romantic tradition, Bataille begins with the state of nature, when all that exists is animalistic, when all creatures are 'like water in water'. This state of nature was lost when humans first picked up something to use as a tool. Whatever was picked up became an object, something of utility, something used for a purpose. Ever since that moment, according to Bataille, the human instinct has been impelled to reunite with nature in the only way possible, by negating the original moment of objectivity, by destroying utility. Sin is the destruction of utility and it therefore has a deeply theological resonance, for it is through the destruction of utility that humanity, individually or collectively, is reunited, face to face, with God (Bataille 1986; 1994). This kind of Sadean metaphysics resonates with a kinship found in Spinoza's deity who - with a loose knot - situates human conduct in a state of nature, and here, human beings are not deprived of radical transformation. Consequently, the 'cinema of evil' is, in part, a representation of the sovereign sway of individuals who exist in the instant, crossing the threshold of utilitarian values and resisting the

imperatives that designate internal principles of bourgeois discipline. The 'cinema of evil' seeks to break the foundations ordering nature in terms of vociferous commercial and calculated liberalism. Against this background, *Nymph()*maniac challenges the liberal conventions over us and traces the path of pleasure, plunging it deeply into evil.

As Frey suggests 'transgressive rhetoric' tends to be contiguous with "a step into the unknown and a step that is without precedent" (Frey 2016, 19). Transgression found in Bataille's work has a similar affinity and joins with the pattern of doing evil in Sade. The subversive points of concordance in erotic and violent representations extend the pleasures of the body to the point of insensibility and foreshadow the deliberate apathetic reiteration of an impulsive act. Dissident conduct is a persistent theme in the anti-rationalist and anti-realist tradition and is found in the 'cinema of evil'. In this regard, one film review explicitly draws attention to the inter-textual binding that *Nymph()*maniac has with its 'closest filmic relation', particularly '... in its parallels with those of Catherine Breillat, who often depicts...[sex] as both a potentially transformative ordeal and [agonistic] passion to be endured (Romney 2014).' What Breillat expresses in cinema is the problem of the female body. Her graphic portrayals are notorious for the explicit treatment of sexuality. 'In interviews she has referred to herself as a sort of sex "entomologist," who examines the microdynamics of sexual relations and desire (Frey 2016, 27).' Breillat's portentous cinematic style depicts many subversive, anti-realist and impersonal allusions and her steadfast anti-humanism characterises realism as intrinsically mendacious, 'encompassing a narrowly defined psychological and emotional human circumference' (see Sontag 1969; Krisjansen and Papadopoulos 2015; Krisjansen and Maddock 2001).

In a similar fashion, the antirealist and anti-humanist tenor of Joe's actions and tonality almost exist below the threshold of reflectivity, even the prosaic features of her everyday life are often difficult to interpret (see James 2014). The film begins in the darkness of an impasse, Seligman (Stellen Skarsgard), her interlocutor and intellectual interrogator, finds Joe lying badly beaten in a dark alleyway and takes her home to his flat to recover. He struggles at times to find conceptual tools that can satisfactorily lend credence to the embodied sexual experiences appearing in Joe's retrospective story. The inexplicable libidinal eruptions and feverish sexual excesses are mirrored in the unsettling capacity of an existence lived in the instant. The 'instant,' relates to an instantaneity refusing to conciliate desiring production with the prescriptive servitude inscribed in the domain of bourgeois possession. Joe's desire is largely animated by the ungraspable incandescence of a fire that disavows 'possession,' particularly, bourgeois possession that encompasses the peculiarity of normative standards of sexual attraction, love or marriage. Joe's desire cannot be controlled or harnessed by the harbingers of 'belonging' and 'ownership'. Her desire resists and abandons the mindless inanity, servitude and passivity existing in marriage and conventional sexual encounters. Her quest becomes an ontological fusion, encompassing the rapture of passion and instantaneity. This is what outrages the critics and in a succession of reviews they express an ongoing bitter and vindictive diatribe. In general, they seek to rebuke and even ridicule the enigmatic and opaque gestures depicted in the film (see Atkinson 2014; Puig 2014; Denby 2014; Coleman 2014). According to Frey, 'The tone of the [*Nymph()*maniac] reportage was of shock, outrage, or at least news ... Britain's leading liberal broadsheet ... had printed no less than thirty-four articles, reviews, and other items on the subject ...'. Furthermore, 'Reports revealed that Romanian censors would classify [*Nymph()*maniac]: Volume II at IM 18 XXX, thus banning its theatrical release and banishing the DVD to share shelf space with sex shop smut (Frey 2016, 1-2).' The film was judged to be potentially violating ethical norms, threatening spiritual well-being, public order and cultural values.

### **Sade's Taxonomy and Machinic Anti-humanism**

Joe's first amatory encounter begins her initiatory journey in Sadean sexual immersion. Like Sade's Juliette who projects a desire commensurate with unending adolescent greed - the greed of experience - where the attitudes of the body are pushed to a frenzy, Joe starts her traineeship with a

disposition ready to abandon the 'despotic irons of virtue' (Sade 1959, 85). With a mixture of humility and impropriety Joe offers her virginity to Jérôme (Shia LaBeouf). She refuses to concern her-self with the consequences of potential scandal and opprobrium, recognising that modesty has superfluous value and virtue attached to virginity is illusory. Her sexual immersion is like a Sadean spur that cleaves its way through the conventions that prohibit sexual turpitude and affirms desire emancipated from censure and debased prohibitions. Coiled in this Sadean web, Joe dissimulates and averts conventions and like Juliette, she grows to understand that '... it is a crime against Nature not to fuck'. And that, '... the abstinent girl is Nature's execration ... (Sade 1959, 84-5).' As mentioned above, here, nature should not be read as essentialist or fixed but rather allied with Joe's amorphous and personal desiring production.

Aligned with the prescriptive and procedural sexual encounters found in Sade's narratives, where achieved self-satisfied indulgence emphasises mathematical sequence and ordered rules, and where sodomy suppresses the specific borders between the sexes (Klossowski 1991, 29), Jérôme penetrates Joe vaginally three times and anally five times and Seligman interprets this scene as a Fibonacci sequence. The large scripted screen depiction of this obscure numbered mathematical sequence leaves viewers with an impression that some form of intellectual curiosity has occurred. What do the numbers signify? In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1999), Nietzsche posits that colours and numbers are in essence the primal expressions of our deepest primal drives, these elements emanate from the subterranean unconscious and more than likely we will never fully know their true nature (Nietzsche 1999, 78). Numbers signify the incessant and frenzied activity existing in the unmediated unconscious - the extreme point of desire - where desire refuses full disclosure and can only be realised in the imaginary. This inner experience is allied with Sade's oeuvre where the literary works are shaped more as an intellectual and formulaic project 'to explore the scope of transgression', rather than the realm of sexual activity elucidated in sensualist terms (Sontag 1969, 61-62).

Barthes provides an instructive account of these intellectual and formulaic Sadean projects which resonate with extreme intentions; libertine inventories where erotic posture, 'all actions and every site capable of arousing a libertine's imagination,' are scrupulously recorded and assigned to nomenclatures. These visible signs enter taxonomy of rank or operations: posture, figure, episode and scene. Victims are submitted to a meticulous examination and a catalogue of social rank that accompanies injunctions regulating classes of action. These so-called 'operations' enter a tableau of 'order and purposeful structuring (Barthes 1989, 27-28)'. The endless calculation and obsessive order are linked to numerical projects such as Juliette's stratagem for corruption 'by geometrical progression, of the entire French population.' According to Barthes, this determinate accountancy and mathematicising designates Juliette's imagination as one eminently allied to that of a bookkeeper. The distribution of numerical order and posture is graphically illustrated when

'... after an orgy including Juliette, Clairwil, and the Carmelites one Easter, Juliette does her accounts: she has been had 128 times one way, 128 times another way, thus 256 times in all, etc. (Barthes 1989, 28-29).'

Once again, numbers are indicative of unconscious motivations and signify a licentiousness that articulates an ordering of nature that privileges perpetual motion in all its plenitude. The arrangement of identifiably taxonomic postures in secluded spaces is a conduit for criminal and extreme compositions of vice. Herein, the order of beings and the designations of desire intersect with the prescriptive and obdurate laws established by Sade's libertines.

The mathematical spirit is permeated with a machinic approach that embraces operations in a quantitative process. The multiplication of scenes is in keeping with a close account of endless repetitions and as mentioned earlier, finds its philosophical affinity in the works of Spinoza (Deleuze 1991, 20). Even the comedic features, such as the ménage à trois with two African men and copious

images of genitalia which do at times prompt laughter, remain peculiarly un-erotic and these, *mise en scènes* even though graphically sexual, tend to neutralise emotion (Phillips 1999). The imperturbable and un-erotic anti-humanism found in these comedic depictions are visibly conversant with a Spinozist version of demonstrative reason. The calm anti-realism 'defuses the erotic charge' and the film, paradoxically, remains strangely sexually un-stimulating. It remains anchored in anti-realism and traverses a pornographic terrain that is fundamentally 'emotionless and affectless' (Sontag 1969, 55).

### **Sadian Vignettes: Marriage and Critical Reflections**

In *Nymph()*maniac, Joe eventually marries Jérôme and the film moves towards a conjugal catastrophe where Joe realises 'one of the worst moments in her life' as she loses 'all sexual sensation.' Distressed and in an anguished and desperate bid to arouse sexual feelings she is seen thrashing her vagina with a wet towel. She tells Seligman, 'My cunt simply went numb!' Joe recognises that ethical fidelity delimits the union of marriage in a sublimation requiring mothering and passion in wives to conform and pay homage in a closed space turned from the world and moreover, 'all [in marriage] is devoured in a single face, a single creature [and] a single emotion (Camus 1975, 70).' In Sade's *Juliette*, this de-ontologising of the concept of marriage provides a reality that questions the sublimated unity amongst couples and provides a spectacle of sexual frustration and conflict. For Sade, Juliette's body is not a conduit for reproduction, nor is it a passive vector upon which male power inscribes it. Juliette obeys the festival of fucking and flogging where the loveliest skin in the world is covered with stripes (Sade 1959, 1135). She feels exhilaration in her scheme to kill her husband, 'I hatched my plot to the tune of acute spasms of joy ... (Sade 1959, 162).' Juliette is not motivated by motherly affections or maternal obligations and leaves her daughter in ward-ship (Sade 1959, 563). Juliette belongs to an apparatus of libertinage that explores, breaks down and destabilises the inscription of male authority; the immanent expression and rhythms of male power are rearranged or dismissed because female anatomy is not destiny. Juliette is less an individual than a pornographic type whose anatomical economy is like O in *The Story of O* (Reage 1954), where she is initiated 'into a mystery' - and the 'emptying out of herself' is signified in a vision of the world where 'the highest good is the transcendence of personality (Sontag 1969, 55)'. In this sense, Juliette is less an individual personality than an embodied manifestation existing within a nexus of variable interconnections and a multiplicity of signifying practices. Hereby, Sade's pornographic imagination disavows a body dominated or weighed down by marital duty or reproductive inscriptions which demand progeny. Rather, marriage is depicted as an act of calculation, and an expectation that implies habit and invariably, an interminable repetition of dull intensities (Bataille 1986, 111).

Juliette mocks marriage with conspicuous derision telling the young libertine Abbe Chabert

'Every chaste wife is mad; or else a fool who, lacking the strength to shake off her prejudices, remains buried beneath them ... Women are built for impudicity, born for it ... (Sade 1959, 559).'

In *Nymph()*maniac, Jérôme inevitably accedes to his wife having extra-marital affairs as he dejectedly seeks to save and sustain the remnants of 'amorous glue' that still resides in their troubled relationship. In the manner of a heuristic event that had reached its dissolution Joe rises above a sublimated unity that represents her marriage and instead, seeks the embodiment of freedom which presages an ethics of difference, unrestrained impudicity and abandonment. Her growing impersonal Sadean disposition presents her as a woman who will not allow her name or her identity to merge with that of her partner. Even the arrival of her child, Marcel, does not as Hegel assumed, portend a unity of spirit connecting the couple. In disbanding her body from the constructions of marriage Joe protects her sexual organs to preserve and sustain maximum pleasure and therefore she tells Seligman that, 'Consciously or unconsciously, it was important for me to have a caesarean.' Contra Hegel's dictum, which claims children strengthen parental bonds, Marcel does not act as a portentous signifier

that finds the spirits of the parents exchanged in a 'determinate consciousness' (Miller 2004, 131). Instead, their unity remains unfulfilled and restrictively sublimated.

Joe's diegesis is lengthy and philosophical in line with the prolonged meditative and instructive narratives delivered by libertines in Sade's parodic fiction. These extensive Sadean expositions arise precisely because they portend to express the righteousness of libertine behaviour (Klossowski 1991, 80). Joe tells Seligman that she recalls the 'improved version' of the 'fuck-me-now-clothes' she had used as a youngster when competing to have sex with as many men as possible on a train journey. Her rumination informs us that

'For a long time I'd been playing around with the idea that the concept of the fuck-me-now clothes could be improved... And [I] became the piano teacher.'

Joe's spectrum of sexuality aligns her with Sade's Juliette; her body articulates an obsessional pursuit of sexual encounters which is solicited in a calculated role-play schema that signifies a binary link with pornographic filmic comedy. The 'piano teacher' subterfuge adopted by Joe is an overt Sadean invocation of erotic lure, artifice and calculation. This pretence involved using her 8-cylinder car for pleasure seeking; pretending to break down she used a calculated formula telling Seligman that 'The possible combinations of eight spark-plug caps on eight spark plugs are 40,320 if I remembered my math correctly.' The complexity of this mechanical combination provided time to seduce the males that happened to stop and lend her support. She added, 'And only one of these [combinations] will make the car run, which gave me all the time I needed.'

Joe orbits in the philosophy of transgression which informs libertinage. The libertines met by Juliette are pedagogical, Clairwil seeks to educate and de-personalise Juliette stating that 'A woman should never appear to have a character of her own...' she is by Nature an impulse that expresses itself in '...the mask of deceit and...treachery ... (Sade 1959, 434).' If Juliette epitomises a parody of bourgeois planning and calculation, if she is 'the organ of calculation where no orifice is left neglected and no body function inactive,' then Joe aligns herself with Juliette in spirit if not in essence (Horkheimer and Adorno 2009, 69).<sup>1</sup> Although the two are frequently imbricated something substantively different subtends Joe and Juliette. Where Joe is a sensualist, Juliette in turn subsumes emotions in the calculative thinking of instrumental rationality. In contemporary terms, she is unreservedly market orientated and, represents the threatening embodiment of ruthless neoliberalism. For her, 'planning is an end in-itself' and the busy pursuit of pleasure is not wholeheartedly concerned with sensual joy and pleasure but rather with utility and material advantage. As Barthes discerns, in Sade, money is a valued resource in so far as it serves a practical role - a means to an end - such as maintaining the upkeep of harems. It also serves as a principle signifier in that money bestows honour, demarcating a measure of crime and vice. As Barthes claims '... [money] clearly designates the evildoers and criminals who are permitted to accumulate it (Saint-Fond, Minski, Noireuil, the four protagonists in *The 120 Days*, Juliette herself), (Barthes 1989, 23).' Barthes is careful not to include pleasure in the accumulation of money, rather, money is a resource that 'proves vice and supports bliss' precisely because what 'gives pleasure is never there for *pleasure* (my italics)' but rather, supports and maintains social distinctions - '... it guarantees the spectacle of poverty ... (Barthes 1989, 23).'

To have, in sum, is essentially to be able to consider those who have not (Barthes 1989, 24). Following Clairwil's example, Juliette shuts herself away from time to time to count her gold, with a jubilation that drives her to ecstasy. She is not contemplating the sum of her possible pleasures, but the sum of her accomplished crimes. 'The common poverty, positively refracted in this gold which, being there, cannot be elsewhere; money, therefore, in no way designates what it can acquire (not a value), but what it can withhold (Barthes 1989, 24).' In turn, Joe subverts the liberal imagination with its romantic legacy of consumerism and accumulation. With Seligman, Joe describes how she wanted to destroy the consumerist enshrinement of 'love' and viewers witness her smashing the window of a store

selling valentine trinkets. Unlike Juliette, Joe's sensualism diverges from the pursuit of acquisition and accountancy, in its place, her desiring production is irreducibly grafted to an evocation of the shuddering anticipation found in extreme pleasure.

In Sade's oeuvre passion is subjected to reason in which 'a series and groups of actions' appear in 'a new 'language,' no longer spoken but acted; a 'language' of crime, or new code of love, as elaborate as the code of courtly love (Barthes 1989, 27).' This coded and sequestered reality is found in Sade's notorious libertine Clairwil. As a paid-up member of women admitted to the Sodality of the Friends of Crime, she instructs Juliette that 'the first law for all women... [is] never to fuck save through libertinage or for the sake of gain ... (Sade 1959, 431-432).' The woman's heart is to be kept 'inaccessible to love'...'love being the veritable and certain kiss of death to enjoyment (Sade 1959, 432).' Clairwil discloses to Juliette that members of the 'Friends of Crime' are taught that '...fidelity [is] an infantile habit and romantic sentiment, can bring about nothing but the cause of woes without end, and never be the source of a single pleasure ... (Sade 1959, 433).' Enjoyment and pleasure are bonded to reason and utilitarian purpose and *jouissance* is moved from pleasure seeking to occupy a co-efficiency which enhances the utility of bodies and meets the ever-shifting criminal needs and demands of libertines.

### **The Abortion Scene: Libertine Transgression**

In this sense, Juliette emerges as an alarming parody of bourgeois moral apathy and is caste outside the sacred limits of normative ethics because she idolises the forbidden and represents a functionalised reason that 'loves systems and logic.' Nevertheless, there is an emancipatory sense in which *Nymph()*maniac serves an exemplary cinematic vision of freeing the libido and affirming the economy of pleasure expressed as a radical trans-valuation of conventional values. Joe will not fully subscribe to an abstinence of pleasure for pleasures sake as found in Sade's narratives, where Eros is repeatedly distorted in immured self-preservation constrained by material acquisitions. The ascendancy of reason in Sade's writings privileges the 'soul of the table of categories' and utility functions alongside the principle of science (Horkheimer and Adorno 2009, 68). In turn, pleasure emerges as a rational measure that immanently, becomes an object of manipulation (2009, 83). Juliette's eroticism registers a degree of constancy that is re-iterated as reasoned crime (Barthes 1989, 27) and vice is apprehended in terms of manipulation, subjugation and administration. Nature enjoins disciplined self-mastery and directs 'an inescapable functionality' that is on hand for our exploitation. Echoing Sade's Juliette, Joe does however, refuse to allow her body to be organised in functional forms that makes her organs into a receptacle for male desire and progeny. A discernible simulacrum appears when, in a theatrical multiplication of libertinage and in something akin to the 'unexhibitable,' Joe endures - in complete solitude - the terrors of self-abortion in a kind of perilous purification of the senses that forecloses language or imposes 'a form of non-language in language (Klossowski 1991, 42).' Joe's graphic abortion scene borders on being unwatchable, the animated procedure is a privileged register of mechanical utility as her organs are impregnated with homemade forceps. Joe acts with a rigorous clinical formalism and a demonstrative skill-set associated with the expertise of an obstetric technician.

Joe's experience resonates with an agonism that rejects the metaphysical obfuscation of idealised maternity and correlates with the exegesis Juliette receives from the libertine Madame Delbene, she learns that 'The embryo is to be considered the woman's exclusive property; ...she can dispose of it as she likes' and, furthermore, she is instructed that '...infanticide is a sacred right' if the new born displeases her in any way she can terminate its existence (Sade 1959, 68). Dominating Juliette's sexual landscape is libertine transgression; authoritarian libertine's issuing cruel acts of violence and eroticism. Despotism offers Juliette an education in which she learns that the female introitus can demonstratively channel a variety of objects for the purposes of infiltration and extraction. The ontological alliance repeatedly discerned among Sade's libertines are reflected in the technological

accoutrements and the skilled and ongoing refinements used when pursuing the limits of desire and fulfilment. In one *mise en scène*, the young Joe (Stacy Martin) fills her vagina with cutlery to win a wager with her partner Jérôme. In turn, the abortion scene exudes extreme pain which is endured in a spectacle that transgresses and ruptures subjectivity, to the point of '[going] outside oneself in order to find oneself (Blanchot 1963, 150).' Here the foreclosure of language is an idiographic method which concerns itself with the unique experience of the individual; it marks the violence of an inner experience that seeks to escape language as it primacies the act (Klossowski 1991, 42). Viewers enter a very disturbing domain where an x-ray image provides a visual demonstration; a wire hook is inserted into the skull, and the foetus is removed after being clinically dragged out along the genital passage. Confronting von Trier's visual assault on the propriety of fecundity and crossing this forbidden threshold was too much for many audiences; as one reviewer observed 'During the Venice screening, ...there were many walk-outs over the course of this scene...(Vestheim 2014).' Like Sade's libertines, Joe's sex is machinic and is caught in a hermetic circle of her own solitude and uniqueness. The libertine is intrinsically freed from the obligation to create, to propagate, preserve or individuate (Deleuze 1991, 27).

### **Sadomasochism as Sexual Transgression**

In this Sadean space, bodily immanence is de-subjectified, and sadism resides in a violence attached to a geographical and mathematical matrix. This constitutive Sadean element is manifestly echoed in the depths of the body where taxonomic arrangements constitute the order of things. In a ritualised sadomasochistic scene when Joe meets with the sadistic practitioner, K (Jamie Bell), K is shown repeatedly micro-adjusting his handiwork, positioning Joe's buttocks in preparation for a whipping session; viewers witness Joe being strapped and tied, her body stretched, thrust and fastened across a sofa in suspenseful anticipation. Joe's scenes with K have been misconstrued on several levels, one interpretation infers that Joe surrenders all agency and experiences a sense of passive powerlessness when she chooses to enter K's apartment (Galt 2015). In fact, Joe never fully relinquishes agentic propriety and as Linda Williams points out in '... sadomasochistic film pornography ... there is always some element of power at stake for the masochistic victim (Williams 1999, 227).' Driven by the need to suture her body with desire Joe's participation is voluntary, '...it was a last, desperate attempt to rehabilitate my sexuality.' As Williams suggests, this kind of sexual tableaux crystallizes as a transvaluation 'that may even represent for women a new consciousness about the unavoidable role of power in sex, gender, and sexual representations and of the importance of not viewing this power as fixed (Williams 228).'

K's dominion is personalized in the shape of a clinician's office, where the walls are painted in bland and muted colours; the room is decked with instruments of the profession: whips, dildoes, riding-crops, hand-cuffs, ropes, etc. Sade's sadism is systematised, and tellingly, Joe recalls that 'The system was the overriding factor with K'. Nomenclature is deployed with a strategic violence that aims to de-territorialise, decompose and redistribute the victim's established boundaries across regimented and strict systematic fields. Subject to a state of decomposition and re-composition Sade's victims are regularly arranged within a configuration of mathematical order and their signification resides within a calculated and methodical taxonomy (see Sade 2016). In Sade's narrative self-referentiality is delimited and numbers are 'never more narrowly erotic than when [they] measure the human body (Cryle 1991, 102)'; the clitoris, tongue and penis are measured with an arithmetic propriety that reflects not just a quantitative but also, a qualitative evaluation. In this sphere of structured extremity K informs Joe that she will have to agree to a set of intransigent rules, including 'no safe word,' '...if you, ...go inside with me, there is nothing that you can say that will make me stop any plan or procedure.' Like O in *The Story of O*, Joe must voluntarily submit to whatever K chooses to do with her. The mark of constancy in this rule-bound and formalised Sadean domain reiterates a pitiless insensitivity towards reciprocity. Sadean apathy used by K makes Joe's name superfluous. He tells her, 'I'm not interested in your name. Here your name is...Fido.' The hierarchy of regulations and their

mathematising nature extend to the duration of the sessions; K imitates the Sadean penchant for a quantified distribution and order across specific time-spans.

'Third rule: If I choose to let you in, you have to be sitting out here. In other words, you...You won't know when. Only that it will be sometime between ... 2:00 and 6:00 at night.'

This sensuous masochism is explicable in so far as Joe discerns Bataille's assertion, that '...violence means being beside oneself, and being beside oneself is the same thing as the sensuous frenzy that violence results in (Bataille 1986, 192).' K's terse language and blunt commands, like the orders prosaically articulated by the sadists in Sade's stories, carry imposing impact. True libertine's observed Sade, 'believe that sensations communicated through auricular organs are the most acute (Bataille 1973, 101).'

As Deleuze suggests

'...language reaches its full significance when it acts directly with the senses. Words are at their most powerful when they compel the body to repeat the movements they suggest, and the sensations communicated by the ear are the most enjoyable and have the keenest impact (Deleuze 1991, 18).'

K's directorial language demonstrates that he grasps the import of words employed by reasoning, that they unequivocally express a form of violence and a self-satisfied excess that disdains prejudice. This requisite defines for Deleuze that the Sadist '...is on the side of violence, however calm and logical he may be (Deleuze 1991, 18-19).' Nonetheless, Joe insists that, 'The mood was sexual.' K's disposition is 'the solitude and omnipotence of its author,' revealing a libertine's Sadean insensitivity and apathy. K needs to dominate and as mentioned above, 'Each libertine, while engaged in reasoning, is caught in the hermetic circle of his own solitude and uniqueness (Deleuze 1991, 19).'

The masochist, in turn, is not entirely de-agentic, deriving pleasure from the process by which she can control another individual and turn that individual into someone cold and heartless. This is where the co-dependence exists between the masochist and the sadist - they need the compliance and submission of the 'other' or as Deleuze put it the masochist's submissive 'contract' and the sadist's cold and insensitive 'law', to satisfy quite different motivations for expressing desire (Deleuze 1991). This sadomasochistic theatre of cruelty (Artaud 1970)<sup>2</sup> founded on a coded value that anticipates absence and rejection is indeed found in von Trier's film.

In part, therefore, Joe's masochistic manoeuvrings confound K and he gradually loses control over her as she contests his regulated economy, destabilising the hermetic circle that encompasses imposed discipline and directorial criteria. Joe flagrantly trespasses and forcibly interrupts the immovable rhythm that governs visitation rights with K; she outdoes his clever knots and under the whip she surreptitiously pivots her hips to extend her pleasure. Joe's inexorable agency is patently visible when she challenges a proscribed reciprocity, she exclaims: 'I want your cock.' As Freud pointed out - in masochism there are vestiges of sadistic dispositions and vis-à-vis, in sadism there are residual elements of masochism (Freud 1962). But these elements are not isomorphic, as Deleuze points out

'Even though the sadist may definitely enjoy being hurt, it does not follow that he enjoys it in the same way as the masochist; likewise, the masochist's pleasure in inflicting pain is not necessarily the same as the sadists (Deleuze 1991, 46).'

At the meeting of sadism and masochism where the pleasure - pain complex affirms an affinity existing between them, there is also found a propinquity that diametrically diverges in motivation and outcome. As Deleuze suggests '[t]he sadist and the masochist might well be enacting separate dramas, each complete with different sets of characters and no possibility of communication between them ...

(1991 45).’ When Saint-Fond in *Juliette* arranges for a gang of men to assail him with whips he confirms Freud’s maxim that ‘a sadist is always at the same time a masochist’ (Freud 1962), but for the sadist it is less about the pleasure derived from pain and more about a celebration that he has come far enough in his libertinage to engage in masochism. The sadist is confirmed in his privileged authority, ‘through insults and humiliations, in the throes of pain,’ the libertine remains certain that he is not amending his ways but rather, ‘in Sade’s words, ‘he rejoices in his inner heart that he has gone far enough to deserve such treatment’ (Deleuze 1991, 39).’

Even though this ontology of sexuality can divest itself of a prescribed economy of power, it remains the case that

‘Pleasure in humiliation never detracts from the mastery of Sade’s heroes; debasement exalts them; emotions such as shame, remorse or the desire for punishment are quite unknown to them’ (Blanchot 1963, 30 in Deleuze 1991).

## **Lust and Desire**

In this signifying network of extreme libidinal excess, *Nymph()**maniac* problematises how much sex is permissible for a woman and questions what authority decides female promiscuity. The film debates these issues using a counterpoint for Joe’s expressed sensuality in an excursus of sensuous allegorical vignettes. A dense imagery is illustrated in the form of montage where the visible point of surfaces enjoins exotic sexual encounters and reckless passion with strategizing science, diagrammatic representations and heuristic philosophy.

In one montage Joe’s licentiousness is extended in a series of trysts that includes three male lovers. The extended montage unveils the paramour’s individuated configurations of masculinity and desire. Their virility is shaped in a spectrum of disparate masculine temperament, bodily constitution and a measure of dominion. Together, the sexual interplay with her lovers serves to provide Seligman with a musical analogy; he likens Joe’s schematic tryst to ‘polyphony’ and the sensual repertoire to a Baroque Fugue. Accordingly, the lover’s sensuous offerings generate an allegorical Fugue-like tonality, whereby the permutations of their behaviour are addressed in terms of a well-tempered rhythm, in conjunction with, mellow, sharp, and domineering dispositions that together ‘harmonise’ with Joe’s sensuality. The contrapuntal texture reiterates Sade’s claim that variety and multiplicity ‘are the two most powerful vehicles of lust (Sade 1959).’ Hereby, desire flows across a spectrum belonging to a collective of styles, patterns of speech, dress, ornamentation, and a ‘polyphony’ of sexual orientations.

In another filmic pastiche viewers witness a competitive sexual encounter between young Joe and her friend B. Dressed in ‘fuck-me-now clothes,’ the girls seek to sexually seduce a maximum number of male passengers on a train to win a childish competition - a bag of sweets. This vignette is then strategically compared to fisherman analysing a river for hidden trout. Joe’s imagistic narrative is met with a modern liberal response by Seligman, when he infers that if Joe had been gendered as male, her story would be banal and commonplace. His interpretation aligns with late 20th century sexual science where the meaning of nymphomania had moved on from classifications where the disorder was listed as a chronic disease.<sup>3</sup> Tensions and contradictions existing in Physicians’ casestudies of nymphomania reflected growing demands by women for participation in socially sanctified roles traditionally reserved for males. Women were demanding much more unrestricted engagement ‘... in public debates over issues of prostitution and women’s rights, joining the workforce in growing numbers, and marrying later – or not at all – and having fewer children (Groneman 1994, 341).’ In the late nineteenth century medical science governed an arrangement designating a sexual threshold which assumed ‘natural passivity, modesty and domesticity’ for women, her impulses and passions needed to remain ‘fixed and static’ but instead, were found to be fluid and unstable (1994, 342). Female behaviour, particularly amongst the white middle class was perceived to be a ‘necessary bastion against the uncertainties of a changing society (342).’ Consequently, the medical profession

sought to cool and subdue women's sexual expression, '...even minor transgressions of the social strictures that defined "feminine" modesty could be classified as diseased (1994, 341).' Physicians diagnosed nymphomania for women '... whose "symptoms" consisted of committing adultery, flirting, being divorced, or feeling more passionate than their husbands (341).' Females were scientifically assigned to notions of 'incomplete psychological selfdevelopment, along with ideas about repressed homosexuality and stunted frigidity,' they had been subjected to surgical castration, and to rid them of nymphomania clitoridectomies were performed on children and caustic materials were applied to woman's genitals to cool their ardour (see Hall 2001). Nymphomania was '... variously described as too much coitus (either wanting it or having it), too much desire, and too much masturbation (Groneman 1994, 340). By the 1960's the Kinsey Report and Masters and Johnson had moved Nymphomania into a new category, a new scientific posture of representation where most women popularly portrayed as nymphomaniacs were 'nothing but highly-sexed females who would hardly be noticed if they were males (Albert 1964, in Groneman 2000, 137).'

Joe seeks to affirm and determine a culture of the self, freed from the binding distribution and order found in the scientific lexicon, and the typologies inflected in language and grammar that determines our identity. Extinguishing the defining categories that reside in the insistent medical unity of wellness and illness Joe subverts the ordered classifiers of nymphomania that delimits fecundity. As a participant in sexual therapy, she refuses to eclipse the irreducibility of her desire and excessive passion. Joe recognises that medicine refers desire back to a synthesis delineated as a disorder in need of restraint and supervision. The sex therapist tells Joe

'The first and most important step is to remove incentive and to reduce exposure. You have to ask yourself what kind of incentives you have and then make it difficult for yourself to come into contact with them. Basically, anything that makes you, think about sex.'

Therapy in effect immobilises the nymphomaniac returning her to the long-standing aesthetic of passive receptacle where she is subdued to the conformity of masculine desire. These reified monuments of social control are resisted when von Trier reinvigorates the vagina's graphic by displaying an imagistic multiplicity of female genitalia on screen. The wantonness of this screen presentation helps to resurrect the female sexual organs from the debased phallogocentric stigma that despises them and subverts the prejudice Sade would have recognised as a form of injurious censure. Joe realises that desire is foremost active, and that sacrifice is passive because it is based on an elementary fear of the unlimited, the uncontained and the infinite expression of desire. As Bataille puts it 'Desire alone is active, and desire alone makes us feel alive (Bataille 1973, 101).' This is exemplified when at her sex therapy group, Joe reads a prepared speech:

'Dear everyone, don't think it's been easy, but I understand now that we're not and never will be alike. I'm not like you, who fucks to be validated and might just as well give up putting cocks inside you. And I'm not like you. All you want is to be filled up, and whether it's by a man or by tons of disgusting slop makes no difference.'

Then addressing the therapist, she continues with -

'And I'm definitely not like you. That empathy you claim is a lie, because all you are is society's morality police, whose duty is to erase my obscenity from the surface of the earth so that the bourgeoisie won't feel sick. I'm not like you. I am a nymphomaniac, and I love myself for being one. But above all, I love my cunt and my filthy, dirty lust.'

When Joe rebels against the invigilated processes of adjustment and unchangeable determinants expressed in the practice of therapeutic science she recognizes that it restrains and frames her identity in a nihilistic order that designates pathology. As Norris correctly points out, for Joe 'sexuality is about pleasure, and she locates pleasure in her body, not her psyche (Norris 2015, 11).' In Sadean terms, Joe

demonstrates that this kind of curative practice with its prescriptive nomenclature that pathologizes her is nothing more than a heinous extirpation of her libidinal sensuality. Joe refuses to acquiesce to the therapeutic prejudice that designates her as a 'sex addict' and reclaims her libidinal status as a nymphomaniac. She understands that people in sex therapy are inflicting wounds on themselves, especially when having to submit to a self-controlled libidinal sacrifice that will supposedly eventuate in effectual cure.

### **The Metaphysics of Desire**

Joe comes to understand that sex is libidinal intensity consigned to struggle in terms of introspection and lived experience. As Camus points out in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, specialists in passion understand that there is no eternal love, instead, there is 'scarcely any passion without struggle (Camus 1975, 69).' In other words, power and judgment inextricably coalesce with sex and pleasure. In her recitation with Seligman, Joe relates a lyrical and dramatic event where she experienced a spontaneous orgasm accompanied by a vision of two women on either side of her. Joe cannot readily identify the chimerical figures but recollects that '...one of them did look like the Virgin Mary....' Seligman's erudite response is conventionally patriarchal in its depiction of the Madonna/Whore dichotomy; he is dismissive of Joe's interpretation, asserting

'...it wasn't the Virgin Mary, I can tell you that. From your description, it must've been Valeria Messalina, the wife of Emperor Claudius, the most notorious nymphomaniac in history. And the other woman, the one astride the creature, that was no one else but the great whore of Babylon riding on Nimrod in the form of a bull.'

Seligman views Joe's spontaneous orgasm as a

'Blasphemous retelling of the transfiguration of Jesus on the mount .... Which is one of the Eastern Church's holiest passages. It's when the humanity of Christ is illuminated by the divine light of eternity.'

This kind of sacrilegious inversion is commonplace in Sade's oeuvre. Some of the most perfidious libertines in Sade's narratives are members of the Church. And, like Nietzsche, they abhor what they perceive to be a Christian slave mentality which constitutes itself in a slave morality (Nietzsche 1956). The chronic malaise of Christianity is made visible at the tribunal of responsibility where debilitating and listless judgements regarding benevolence and doing good suppress passion and jouissance. Sade's ministers of the Church are libertine's that take delight in sacrilegious desecration of normative moral precepts. In *Juliette*, the Pope represents a pivotal voice in breaking the aura of sanctity concerning conventional social sanctions and in promulgating evil and vice as 'a superior worth in Nature's eyes (Sade 1959, 775).' Mentoring Juliette, the pontiff informs her that humans are inspired to commit evil and vice because it best serves Nature's 'impulses and purposes' (Sade 1959, 774). Sade's Holy Father aligns himself with excess and alienates the sacred limits shaping culturally defined boundaries; as Bataille puts it 'Just as disgust is the measure of love, thirst for Evil is the measure of Good (Bataille 1973, 119).' Evil is erotic excess, an eroticism venerated by Sade's libertine's because excess makes us human and returns us to the instincts of passion and immediate pleasure. Pleasure is visceral and as Lübecker suggests '...von Trier puts to work Artaud's idea that 'in our present degenerative state, metaphysics must be made to enter the mind through the body' (Artaud 1970, 77 in Lübecker 2016, 165). Nevertheless, as illustrated above, for the libertines in Sade's narrative, the improvidence of virtue is primarily measured in gain and procurement. Vice and excess possess an ontological weight capable of embracing indifference and invoking unbridled lasciviousness.

Joe's metaphysical visitation can be understood as a transcendent reconfiguration that resists the theistic legacy of women being slaves of destiny. It can be read as an attempt to re-constitute a lost female goddess, restoring the female god in a cosmology where Irigaray recognised it had been purged

and exiled from the masculinised Christian religion. Irigaray's consistent theme positions women in a signifying practice where the interdicting authority of male representations delegitimises and disempowers women as bearers of their own 'auto-representation'. Their 'instinctual economy' presents as a kind of mirror image, a 'specular duplication' where the female subjects engendered sexual difference emerges in a sameness unfree from decisions which are not her own (Irigaray 1985a, 50-54). Irigaray seeks to reinstitute a radical alterity - a different economy of bodies and pleasures - which is freed and opens up to a vicissitudinous conduit of selfrepresentation in desire (1985a, 83). As Irigaray suggests 'history' has manipulated 'the female desire of woman' and she has been '...forced to function as an object, or more rarely as a subject so as to perpetuate the existence of God....' Her *jouissance* is abhorred '...because of its 'unlikeness' because it's 'not yet' defies all comparison (1985a, 231-32).' Woman is constructed in a metaphysics '...as that which is utterly unknown, entirely hypothetical [and], finally unspeakable (Priest 2003, 13)'. For Irigaray, women's mysticism has its own specificity, valorising sexual organs and desire so as to escape '... the domination of the philosophic [and phallogocentric] logos [that] stems in large part from its power to reduce *all others to the economy of the Same* (Irigaray 1985b, 74).'

Joe's resistance towards hyper-masculinised Christianity can be read as a profane and sensualist rebellion against the obsequiousness and servility that resides in the eclipse of otherness. Here, the intensity of Joe's recalcitrance is akin to Irigaray's proposal for a female divine which coalesces with a desire for self-affirmation in the process of becoming. This is poignantly illustrated when young Joe and her school friends blasphemously mimic - with an obvious scorn and derision against religion - a liturgical-like chant using the words 'Mea vulva, mea maxima vulva.' Joe's band of females are like the lascivious and fecund woman found in Bataille's *Madame Edwarda* (2015), she possesses an unshakeable conviction that profane liberty transcends cultural interdictions, sexual anxiety and modesty. *Edwarda* is a religious metaphor; her shimmering body is a kind of revelatory exposition where an unfathomable solemnity reveals the interminable profligacy of a devouring sexuality that defies reason. She performs erotic excess with a conviction that the sacred and the forbidden are one. The vagina will exculpate the spirit anew, bequeathing an existence where desire is freed from guilt and is given permission to embrace the saturnalia of untrammelled sexual pleasure.

Correspondingly, Seligman tells Joe that the Eastern Christian Church prioritised the Virgin Mary which led to happiness but as the Church moved Westward the Crucifixion and masculinity devoid of the feminine found fertile ground to proliferate images and fantasies of suffering. He asserts that 'If you generalize, you could say that the Western Church is the church of suffering, and the Eastern Church is the church of happiness.' Joe's metaphysical visitation reiterates a *vita-femina* that is the source of *jouissance*.

### **Seligman**

Unlike Joe, Seligman delivers a set of learned behaviour patterns that entice and persuade the psyche; he appears to stand beyond the corporeal reality of the body and its' desiring production. His erudite, logical and reasoned persona projects a genuine concern and interest in Joe's plight and wellbeing. Yet, we learn that his platonic union with Joe ends up being a sterile masquerade steeped in secularised piety. In the end, his facade as a genuine and beneficent mentor is unveiled in a betrayal that is as deceitful and fraudulent as the pious cardinals and papal dignitaries found in Sade's stories. Seligman tells Joe

'I consider myself...Asexual. Of course, I...experimented with masturbation when I was a teenager, but...It didn't do much for me. So, there's nothing sexual about me.'

But his sexual abstinence and ascetic claims are steeped in patriarchal condescension and resonate with misogyny. At the end he tries to rape Joe while she is sleeping. Seligman's enlightened liberalism preserves a secularized Christian piety that is redolent with dogmatic naivety. He does not transcend

the Madonna/Whore binary that locates women's bodies in a passive vector inscribed and dominated by medical, political, metaphysical and gendered conventions typified against a norm. Like Juliette who kills her mentor Clairwil, Joe kills Seligman and leaves his apartment as the camera fades-to-black. Paradoxically, the darkness is liberating because as we hear Joe's footsteps on the stairwell, there is a realisation that she has escaped the light of liberal reason - a kind of therapeutic truth that internalises a representation of women in a modality of bodily confinement and constrained pleasure. Echoing her resistance when in sex therapy, Joe kills and then abandons Seligman because she refuses to succumb to the very system that oppresses her.

It is worth noting that von Trier references *Arabian Nights* as the literary model used to establish the mentoring relationship between Joe and Seligman. In this richly layered classic text, many elements including anomaly, foreshadowing, dramatic visualisation and sexual humour are framed by the female protagonist, Scheherazade<sup>4</sup>, who uses story-telling - a series of tales - as a survival mechanism before she kills the authoritarian monarch whose homicidal practice has eliminated all his sexual partners.

Seligman's betrayal is explicitly the deception found in the machinery of power that operates a masculine doxa, where identity is represented in a compendium of reasoned morality, science and the limits of good conscience. *Nymph()maniac* subverts the concealed authoritarian and coercive patriarchal imperatives existing in this kind of reasoned liberalism and illustrates that flesh and desire adhere to the same mould as violence and excess.

## Conclusion

*Nymph()maniac's* allegiance to Sade is signified in what Linda Badley refers to as 'a gargantuan hybrid', where an 'intermediary cross between cinema, novel, encyclopaedia, and treatise' are found to subtend Sadean works (Badley 2015, 25). The films analogical inference also turns to a Sadean sensibility consistent with the filmic genre known as the *cinema of evil*. The 'cinema of evil' situates itself 'between traditional narrative forms and pure experimentation' and opens filmic forms to an engagement with uncharted perspectives (Beugnet 2005, 183). Sade aborts the trivial and false sense of intimacy, the all-embracing story, inferring that contemporary romantic literature and cinema often depicts or narrates a form of realism that habitually provides a trivialised sense of familiarity, 'where all is revealed too quickly and thereby intimacy and sexuality is reduced and diminished in an all too readily and effortlessly palatable and appropriated representation (Sontag 1964).'

Watching *Nymph()maniac* draws viewers into the action and the cinematic experience is overtly visceral, insistently moving the viewer towards ethical reflection (Lübecker 2016, 167). Joe resists the culturally defined conditions shaping the lives of women, where social investments forcibly insert love and desire into orchestrated forms of social production and reproduction. *Nymph()maniac* positions this bourgeois economy of bodies and pleasures as a Sadean prejudice and inveighs against the feeble compromise which sacrifices the full expression of the human libido and passion. This kind of transgression constitutes a jouissance that endorses the somatic realm and seeks to transvalue strict sexual identities and sexual norms. The radical transformation '[challenges] phallic laws that stand for strict dichotomization,' and concupiscence oscillates across a vicissitudinous spectrum and extends into domains that exude 'a rising regime of relative differentiations (Williams 1999, 226).'

Women's bodies are numbed and deadened when they are being enhanced to compliantly serve utility in a neo-liberal world with ever shifting needs and desire is invariably enervated in fixed gender roles and repressed libidinal sacrifice. In *Nymph()maniac*, the demarcation of bodies in the conventions of marriage and romantic love is subverted, especially, in terms of the realist and insipid compromise it elicits. Instead, pleasure and sensuousness disrupt and destabilises the subject; establishing the condition of a culture where the body provides an outline and a signification that

articulates a hectic and variegated destiny freed from a liberalism that functions as an instrument dictating the organizing principles of traditional sexual attitudes. The defiance expressed in Sadean terms makes von Trier's filmic rendition of Sadean tropes an anti-realist verisimilitude that refutes the harnessed sexuality and romantic love found in Hollywood realism. 'True love' is not depicted as a moral imperative and romantic love does not offer a source of justification which legitimates the context of sexual activity. The imagery rendered in allegorical digressions projects a visual intelligence whereby anti-realism disarticulates concupiscence from the gender typologies and standards against which females are compared. Eroticism is flattened in the pornographic imagination and the Sadean tableau provides entangled lines of diverse representations that disarticulate the body in animated scenes that repeatedly portray violence bordering on being outside of reason.

Joe's sensualism is conjoined with Sade's Libertines, she does not pejoratively judge the variety of sexual appetites that function in sexual exchange, and her sensuality does not consign her to the same pattern of calculated eroticism found in *Juliette*. Joe's passion and pleasure are not destroyed in the manner where 'great libertines who live for pleasure are great only because they have destroyed in themselves all their capacity for pleasure (Bataille 1986, 173).' Her moral apathy is not as ferocious as the 'great libertines,' pathos remains; she clearly suffers when leaving her son, Marcel, and remains devoted to her own father. Joe does not entirely extinguish maternal attachments her criminal gains are clandestinely used to send funds to support her abandoned child. In *Nymph()*maniac, Joe learns, in progressive instalments, that eroticism breaks down established patterns and that flesh is an extravagance that seeks the profane and fuses desire with transgression. If Juliette is a trans-valuation of classical values and a hyper-individuated way of viewing the world then Joe's subjective position seeks to join this kind of individuated disbanding and detachment. Immunizing herself against the reification of beliefs emancipates Joe from the imperious designations that express an immutable feminine essence acceptable to society. Joe does not forego pleasure in the strict utilitarian sense found in Sade's storylines but she does pay homage to eroticism that subverts and triumphs over taboos. In the world of the senses, a world of perpetual restless passion the pure felicity of the image finds Joe activated with a Sadean desire to abandon prejudice and reach for the indiscernible and unattainable threshold of unlimited sensuality.

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### **Notes:**

- (1) 'Adorno and Horkheimer interpret Juliette's calculating and ruthless behaviour as representing Sade's critique of the "bourgeois subject freed from all tutelage", the embodiment of an Enlightenment philosophy in which reason, detached from experience and suffering, becomes identical with domination' (Linda Badley 2015, 30). The German critical theorists Horkheimer and Adorno are critics of the culture industry and the corporate industrial complex. Their work offers an analytical and political purchase on the parameters of an ethos in capitalist production and reproduction, where life has ossified and degenerated in a culture whose norms and moral precepts necessitate conformity to the ideals of uniformity, production, efficacy and utility. These conditions have allowed exploitative exchange relations to permeate society, turning it into a reified totality. They deflate the pretensions of modern science and ideological appeals heralding the modern subject's autonomy and freedom. Western societies are dissolute because corporate instrumentalities and cultural practices discipline individuals; instincts are delimited and serve to fetter populations to aesthetic ugliness and culturally regressive and reactionary ideals that end in abject renunciation and domination.
- (2) Antonin Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty' demands a hermeneutics of the self that displaces the submissive and docile conventions found in a lifeless and petrified rationalist culture. Artaud's incendiary 'Theatre' recognises that traditional imagery and art which perpetuates docility and exclusion of human intensities results in a valetudinary state. Artaud's 'Theatre' confronts the spectator with the visceral power of extreme experience and seeks to detach and distract the audience from the numbing mediocrity and impotence found in common humanity. This form of disturbing art signifies a kind of 'shock therapy' where the power of the somatic realm works on the consciousness of the audience awakening vital energies and freeing powerful instincts of vitality and creativity.

- (3) Clair Serine claims nineteenth century physicians' descriptions of nymphomania focussed on nymphomania as a woman's excessive or insatiable erotic desire; an affliction that signified a variety of female conduct classed as indecent and offending the appearance of modesty; in particular, bourgeois sensibilities. As a legitimate medical condition in the nineteenth century nymphomania was defined according to broad medical classifications, comprising a range of behaviours that included a host of ambiguous symptoms: an 'excessive amount of bodily heat, lascivious glances, over-adorning oneself with jewellery or perfume, talk of marriage and scandals, and inclination for the society of men.' More common and readily identifiable symptoms included, excessive vaginal moisture, a 'tumid' clitoris, 'masturbation, 'venereal excesses', flirting, being more passionate than one's husband, expressing emotion or rage, lewd language, tearing one's clothes, the public exposure of oneself, and making indecent proposals to men'(see Serine, Clair. 2003).
- (4) The character Scheherazade in the book 'A Thousand and One Nights' or 'Arabian Nights' is a cultural survivor. As an astute observer Scheherazade adjusts and refines her techniques and uses the erudite powers of a psychic priestess; she is a philosopher, historian and a mystic who possesses a prodigious record of the poetic and literary works of her time. Her knowledge and memory are put to work with an artifice that finds expression in the well-rehearsed art of story-telling. Scheherazade survives because she understands the reified totality of her time; her King has the power of life and death over her. She uses surreptitiousness and masquerade to survive the absolute authority of sovereign male power. Shrewd scheming and guise in the form of intrigue and anticipation creates a space that dislocates the overarching patterns of domination.

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