

Linda BADLEY

**“Fill All My Holes”:  
*Nymph()*maniac’s Sadean Discourse**

**Abstract.** Lars von Trier’s exploration of pornography as a cinematic language *Nymph()*maniac (2013, 2014) culminates his long-term fascination with the Marquis de Sade. This paper argues that, as in *Sade*, the film’s real provocation lies not in eroticism but in its discourse of excess, its desire or compulsion “to say everything.” A Gargantuan hybrid, a cross between cinema, novel, encyclopedia, and treatise, the film resembles anatomy, a genre favored by Sade’s greatest (and lengthiest) hits, as the heroine’s narrative/libidinal drive is matched by the abstruse digressions of her interlocutor. In Volume I, the body is dissected and reduced to its anatomical and functional materiality; Volume II, however, shifts to overt sadomasochism staged as melodrama whose affect is as typical of von Trier as it is different from Sade, bewildering, disturbing, and/or enraging even the most favorably disposed audiences.

**Keywords:** Nymphomaniac, Sade, discourse, pornography, BDSM, Barthes, Hénaff.

Lars von Trier has been in dialogue with the Marquis de Sade since his earliest creative endeavors. What this means is harder to decipher. Von Trier’s most recent and direct attempt to incorporate pornography into the cinematic language and by reputation his most provocative film, *Nymph()*maniac (2014)<sup>1</sup> culminates his long-term engagement with Sade’s example and works. Although its hardcore content has drawn the most attention, I argue that the site of the film’s vaunted obscenity, as in *Sade*, is its discourse (beginning with the archly scandalous title spelled with a gaping set of parentheses in place of the “o”) and secondly in its premise as the narrative of a female libertine.<sup>2</sup> I will also address the larger question of whether, in

**Linda BADLEY**

Middle Tennessee State University

E-mail: Linda.Badley@mtsu.edu

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a 21<sup>st</sup>-century context, its Sadean strategies are provocative and, if so, how. Widely referred to as his magnum opus, *Nymph()maniac* is an archive of references to von Trier's previous films; consequently reading the film through a Sadean lens can illuminate some of the central controversies raised by his work.

In a metacinematic moment at a sex addiction support group meeting, the self-diagnosed heroine Joe (Charlotte Gainsbourg) introduces herself as a "nymphomaniac" and is promptly corrected by the therapist ("We say 'sex addict.'"). Ultimately, however, she stands by her identification with an archaic, misogynistic stereotype of insatiable female sexuality. Reinforced further by Joe's abject refrain "Fill all my holes," the film pronounces itself a throwback, in part to the 1970s, in which it is partly set, a period "associated with a strain of sex cinema that sold itself on the idea of scandalous, excessive female desire" as Jonathan Romney puts it, naming usual suspects *Deep Throat* and *Devil in Miss Jones*. The term dates much further back, however, to eighteenth-century medicine, reminding J. Hoberman of an obscure doctor's tome, *Nymphomania, or a Dissertation Concerning the Furor Uterinus*, the first scientific study of female hypersexuality, a point that will become increasingly relevant.

Joe narrates the picaresque two-volume, five and one-half-hour story of her life—or her genitals, as she has little use for love, family, or career in any conventional meaning. Meanwhile, Stellan Skarsgård's Seligman (German for "blessed" or "happy man") comments at length, drawing on a massively eclectic knowledge base that includes everything *but* sex. If this sounds rather literary and not very sexy, it is, nor is it meant to be erotic in any way, as Trier's cinematographer Manuel Claro, proud to have been associated with such a "literary" (not to mention cinematically complex) film, assured me in December 2014. In two volumes and eight chapters with elaborate title cards, *Nymph()maniac* dissects and theorizes Joe's "pornographic" narrative through Seligman's abstruse digressions and baroque visual illustrations. Von Trier's most flamboyantly allusive film, it references a surfeit of musical, literary, religious, and historical texts: Bach, Handel, Mozart, Rammstein, Isaac Walton (*The Compleat Angler*), Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, Dostoevsky, Poe, *1001 Nights*, Brecht, Godard, along with most of Trier's own previous works.

But *Nymph()maniac* is obviously as interested in provocation as in erudition, and its less "edifying" inspirations probably include Pauline Reage's *The Story of O* (1954) and even its (pale) successor *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Above all, the film "channels" another 18<sup>th</sup>-century author, the Marquis de Sade, as *Sight and Sound*'s Nick James has noted -- and as Trier has done at least since his application film for The Danish Film School *Orchidégartneren /The Orchid Gardener* (1977). At the time, his interest in Sade was filtered through his obsession with *Il portiere di notte/The Night Porter* (1974) and Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma/ Salò, or the 100 Days of Sodom* (1975), as shown in a series of tableaux in which he stars, posing alternately as a naked Christ figure, as a woman who wrenches the head off a bird, smearing her/his cheek with blood, and as a Nazi officer who dips a whip in honey and salt (see Badley

17). But an episode from his Danish film school career is more explicit as he describes it in Bjorkman's *Trier on Von Trier*: "I wrote a script for *Philosophie dans la boudoir*. ... A grand drama in three acts, splendidly vulgar. ... But Gert Fredholm, who taught direction, told me to destroy the script. It wasn't enough that I couldn't make the film. Any evidence that a script made for a film like that had been written at film school had to be destroyed!" (33). This experience becomes a funny and pivotal sequence in *De unge år: Erik Nietzsche sagaen del 1/The Early Years: Erik Nietzsche, Part I* (2007), von Trier's fictionalized autobiography, which he narrated in voiceover. The title character protests that "Sade was a revolutionary in his day" to no avail, and this brutal suppression changes the sensitive young Nietzsche into a cynical, opportunistic-and successful – filmmaker. (Nietzsche is of course named for another of Trier's youthful heroes.) Perhaps Trier turned this act of censorship into a challenge: to make "Sadean" films (much as Sade had been challenged by his incarcerations in the Bastille to write *Les 120 journées de Sodome ou l'école du libertinage/120 Days of Sodom* [1785] and *Justine* [1791]). Hence was born one of Trier's basic strategies, of converting provocation into art: that is, turning prohibitions or taboos into prerequisites, rules, or even controlling principles for his films and initiatives. The unwritten rules for a Hollywood film became the prohibitions of the Dogme95 "Vow of Chastity," and his USA: Land of Opportunity trilogy was inspired by critics who attacked him for setting *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) in the US without ever having visited (Badley 99-100).

He also continued to adapt Sade's novels. In the first draft of *Breaking the Waves* (1996), an erotic drama adapted from Sade's *Justine*, Trier turned the woman's melodrama into an excruciating "spectacle of suffering," a form of provocation that has become his trademark.<sup>3</sup> He modeled Bess and Grace of *Dogville* (2003) who are subjected to different kinds of sexual slavery, on Sade's *Justine* (whose name is given to the clinically depressed heroine of *Melancholia* [2011]). *Dogville* and *Manderlay* (2005), Trier's most obviously political films, concur with Michel Foucault's understanding of the sadomasochism inherent in power relations and conclude in sadistic applications of that point designed to make audiences squirm (Badley 124, 128-29).

Thus far, von Trier's Sadean allusions and affinities had functioned primarily on the level of theme, characterization, structure, and affect, including some or all of the following: the featuring of an innocent and/or promiscuous heroine, a novelistic mode, overbearing allegory, and deliberately monotonous repetition with variation and building through increasingly intense modes and levels of torture and suffering, not least the audience's.

At present, *Nymph()*maniac culminates von Trier's obsession with Sade. On the most obvious level it poses as a pornographic film that plays off the oppositional perspectives embodied in the intersecting, Janus-faced *Justine* and *Juliette* (originally published as *Histoire de Juliette ou les Prospérités du vice / Juliette, or Vice Amply Rewarded* (1797-1981). Together the two demonstrate Sade's lesson that vice will invariably

triumph over virtue. Two orphaned sisters come of age in pre-Revolutionary France and take opposite paths. Sade opposed the Enlightenment philosophies of Rousseau and Hobbes, which attempted to reconcile nature, reason and virtue as basis of ordered society, understanding nature to be unreasonable, violent, and destructive, and a life of hedonism and crime to constitute the only reasonable existential response. Thus Sade deems Justine's virtue perverse and "well-chastised" – so that, in Trier's words, she is "exploited, raped, or whipped by everyone she meets" (Thomsen 110), with "everyone" grouped into representatives of the church, the aristocracy, the sciences, and the law. Justine's devotion to "virtue" leads inevitably to her degradation until she is split down the middle by a bolt of lightning to the amusement of the omniscient narrator, who concludes with this "politically correct" moral: "May you be convinced ... that true happiness is to be found nowhere but in Virtue's womb," capped with a winking reference to "compensation by Heaven's most dazzling rewards" (743). A mocking inversion of Samuel Richardson's novel *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740), *Justine's* the revised 1791 edition was *Justine, ou de Malheurs de la Vertu / Or Good Conduct Well Chastised*. Or as Apollinaire wrote in his preface to the 1949 edition of *Juliette*, Justine is "woman as she has been hitherto: enslaved, miserable and less than human" (qtd. in Wainwright, ix).

In contrast, however, *Nymph()*maniac's Joe is a sexual outlaw from the beginning. Having "discovered" her "cunt at the age of two" she lives in pursuit of untrammelled desire – and so is more like *Juliette*, Justine's opposite. If Justine is killed off by a derisive narrator, Juliette's education in pleasurable depravity enables her to thrive, to acquire wealth, luxury, and power. This begins with a coterie of lascivious lesbian nuns and is followed by a succession of libertine nobles who exhaust perverse variations on sexual congress, and engage in incest, torture, murder, and cannibalism. *Nymph()*maniac's Joe embodies aspects of both of Sade's heroines. The frame story introduces her as a type of Justine, as abject, betrayed by her lesbian lover P and her former lover Jerome, and left beaten and urinated upon, in an alley, setting us up to expect that, like most von Trier heroines, she will be punished. But Joe is no martyr; obeying her nature, rejecting conventional mores, she lives out her desires and can be seen as a somewhat humanized, 21<sup>st</sup> century pro-sex postfeminist version of Juliette. Desensitized by her excesses, Joe seeks out "dangerous men" and increasingly more extreme sources of stimulation including sadomasochism. Eventually forced to accept therapy or lose her job, she responds by owning her "cunt and [her] filthy dirty lust." In her final career move Joe assumes a more performative and pro-active sadomasochism: employed by L (a suavely sinister Willem Dafoe), she works as an extortionist who sniffs out men's secret sex "crimes" (masochism or pedophilia, for example) and, backed by a couple of heavies, finesses the most appropriate sexual tortures. Like Juliette, she finds satisfaction in sadism and crime while training her much younger lesbian lover in the business. Thus like Sade and his imitators, whose "porn" scenes are repeated in increasingly violent and "deviant" permutations, Trier works through repetition,

complication, and intensification. Yet perhaps we should think of *Nymph()*maniac as "the book ... Sade never got to write", in that Joe is *neither* Justine nor Juliette, but "a hybrid: a woman driven by deep and not entirely comprehended desires ... in conflict with equally incomprehensible social norms", as Lowry Pressly asserts in *Los Angeles Review of Books*.

As Trier's magnum opus, however, *Nymph()*maniac may be concerned less with what Peter Schepelern calls the "summing up of the woman" at the center of most of von Trier's films since 1988's *Medea* than about its own discourse of excess, its desire or compulsion to "say everything." Now that von Trier "has made an unmistakably Sadean film," Pressly continues, it's "funny and ... telling" that the reviews highlight the sex, when "as in ... Sade, the site of the film's eroticism is in its discourse, in the telling of the story." Orgy scenes alternate with lengthy philosophical treatises – with Juliette and her entourage of rogues joining other libertines for a session of "frigging" followed by treatises on theology, morality, aesthetics, naturalism and/or metaphysics. "You have killed me with voluptuousness. Let's sit down and discuss," says the heroine after one such orgy in an example noted by Barthes (*Sade, Juliette*, qtd., trans., Barthes 32 n 19), the "discussion" modulating into another orgy that ups the ante in kinky violence. Often "anticipating Freud, but also inverting him, describing it in the same terms as the orator's art, Sade makes sperm the substitute for speech ..." (32), and vice versa. In *Nymph()*maniac, Joe's narrative/libidinal drive, demonstrated through Trier's variations on hardcore porn, is pointedly matched by the florid vigor of his Enlightenment-style rhetoric – or "Digressionism" (von Trier's term) of her interlocutor. This is peppered with topics for which Trier has been censured in the name of political correctness – such as Joe's use and staunch defense of sexist and racist terms (including "cunt," "nymphomaniac," and "negro"), and Seligman's remarks on anti-Semitism versus anti-Zionism (referencing Trier's 2011 expulsion from Cannes for joking about Hitler). More often, however, Seligman's discourse, much like Sade's savage parody of classical reasoning used to support Enlightenment ideals,<sup>4</sup> is the butt of the joke, as Trier habitually ridicules his male characters. Representing Logos, they are often philosophers (*Dogville's* Tom Edison), psychotherapists (*Antichrist's* He), or wealthy amateur scientists (*Melancholia's* John). As a pedantic intellectual omnivore, Seligman resembles all three. As Joe narrates her sexual escapades, competing for narrative dominance, Seligman comments, analyzes, and catechizes in turn through (elaborately digressive) analogies: with fly fishing, Zeno's paradox, knot tying, cake forks, the Western versus Eastern church and so on, Joe responding in turn, with bits on parallel parking, eight-cylinder engine spark plug caps, James Bond's Walther PPK automatic, and the like. A Gargantuan hybrid, an intermediary cross between cinema, novel, encyclopedia, and treatise, the film most closely resembles anatomy or novel of ideas, a genre favored by Sade's greatest (and lengthiest) hits.

### *Nymph()*maniac's Sadean Discourse

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. I will discuss two types that correspond with each of the film's two volumes: that of "saying everything" (through repetition and variation, as theorized by Roland Barthes and Marcel Hénaff) that prevails in Volume I; and that of "showing everything," or "speaking the unspeakable," as Peter Michelson puts it, in the unmediated, corporeal sadomasochism of Volume II. Both are types of anatomy, the first figurative, the second literal.

#### Volume I: "Saying Everything"

For Barthes, writing in *Sade/Fourier/Loyola*, Sade reduces the erotic scenario entirely to discourse, and for Hénaff's Sade, "there is no sexual pleasure that is not spoken. ... the libertine body ... must speak incessantly of its own doings. . ." (67). Sade's goal was encyclopedic, or "the saturation of the Catalog"; moreover, pleasure (via vice or crime) "exists only in proportion to the quantity of language invested in it" (Hénaff 33). Quality is not without importance, however. Barthes notes that one of Sade's most common rhetorical tropes is therefore "metonymic violence": juxtaposing "heterogeneous fragments belonging to spheres of language ... ordinarily kept separate by moral-social taboo" (34). "To bring together incest, adultery, sodomy, and sacrilege," for instance, a man "buggers his married daughter with a host [as in wafer]" (Barthes 33). Another sentence juxtaposes "the church, 'fine style,' and pornography" (Barthes 34), and so on. Trier delights in this sort of figure, which resembles an elaborate form of swearing. In Chapter 3, the medieval Catholic *Confiteor, mea maxima culpa*, is hilariously reiterated as "*mea vulva, mea maxima vulva*," the self-loving pro-sex credo of Joe's adolescent clique, only to reemerge, as Lynne Huffer notes, "as the secular humanist" confession of twelve-step recovery "My name is Joe, and I'm a nymphomaniac." In a blasphemous tableaux related at the beginning of Volume II, one that inverts the transfiguration of Christ, Joe relates her memory of her first orgasm at the age of ten as a spiritual epiphany. This is rendered as a levitation scene, one that alludes to von Trier's *Antichrist* and to a mystical sex scene between the protagonist and a "witch" in Andre Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice/Offret* (1986) and is capped by a vision of two women, clothed in light and hovering over the ground, whom Seligman identifies as the "notorious" nymphomaniac Valeria Messalina, the third wife of the Roman Emperor Claudius, and the whore of Babylon.

While von Trier takes Sadean delight in such impious inversions, what is equally notable and pervasive is the film's visual representation of the body in ways that dissect, moralizes, politicize, and de-eroticize Joe's "porn." Sade's representations of debauchery "in minute detail systematically exhaust the anatomical possibilities of the human body" rather than evoking or explaining eroticism as affect (73), Beauvoir

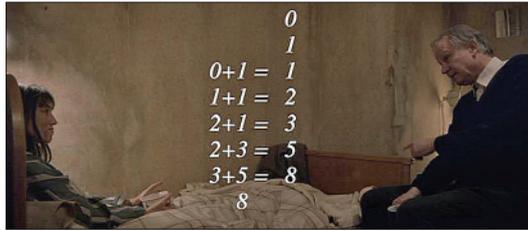


comments; von Trier sustains a similar alienation effect through similar means. In his comprehensive analysis of Sade's poetics, philosopher and anthropologist Marcel Hénaff details Sade's replacement of the (idealized and figurative pre-Enlightenment) "lyrical body" with the "libertine body" – the body demystified, mechanically reduced to its materiality by Enlightenment rationalism and turned into a "pleasure robot" (24). Expressing and travestyng the biological reductionism of the "medical gaze," the libertine body is the body anatomized, turned over to "the scalpel of classifying reason," much as explored by Foucault in *The Birth of the Clinic*: "Dis-affected from any expressive relationship ... the Sadean body ultimately models itself on flayed matter, the *échorcé*, of the medical dissecting lab. [It] is by definition a body exhibited, divided up, and inventoried, which is why it is so lightly handed over to the torturer" (23). One probable influence was the early French materialist Julien Offray de La Mettrie's *L'Homme Machine/Man a Machine* (1748), whom Sade read with enthusiasm (Hénaff 24). In *Nymphomaniac*, what often comes across merely as abstraction and alienation, and which some critics attributed to a failure of Trier's libido, is savagely political.

Although Hénaff organizes Sade's poetics into five rhetorical elements,<sup>5</sup> I focus on the first two, representation, or "the demystified body" and the "will to say everything," which often overlap in the examples to follow. In *Nymph()*maniac, as in Sade, the libertine body is anatomized, de-eroticized, and politicized, through a plethora of visual/rhetorical devices involving non-diagetic, often non-cinematic text: spelling out the lesson in overlaid captions, diagrams, and maps, shifts of aspect ratio or from color to black and white, scrapbook-like inserts, and so forth. One of these is arithmetical reduction or the quantification of the body, a practice at which Sade's Juliette is especially adept. (In the current era she would be texting or tweeting mid-orgy to report on her friends' latest round of ejaculations and orifices.) At the Monastery of the White Friar Clairwil is "fucked another fifteen times in the mouth,

ten in the cunt, and thirty-nine in the ass; and I forty-six in the ass, eight in the mouth, and ten in the cunt. All told, another two hundred fuckings each" (Sade, *Juliette* 486).

In *Nymph()*maniac, the body is comparably quantified and dissected through enumerations of thrusts, seduction strategies, sex toys (whips, etc.), lovers, and catalogues (of body parts, and so forth). In chapter 2, for example, Joe tells of being "relieved of [her] virginity" at fifteen (at her behest) by Shia Labuffe's Jerome, who completes the task in eight laconic thrusts: three vaginal and five from behind (via Sade's favored orifice), in a rigorously organized sequence with numbers superimposed on the screen. (Seligman portentously interjects that  $3 + 5$  is a Fibonacci



sequence, which becomes a recursive motif.) This episode exemplifies Jerome's and Seligman's (stereotypically male) abstraction. But Joe's sexual prowess or addiction is exponentially matched by her quantification and dissection of sex – for example, in this representation of her technique of masturbating to fetishized images of parts of various men that remind her of Jerome's erotic features – and in her techno-prowess (demonstrated in parallel parking, with eight-cylinder engines, and guns).

Joe's obsession with adding and upping the ante lends irony to the paradox in which, as Peter Schepelern suggests, satiety eludes her – comparing it to Metz's "imaginary object" of desire. In an ironic commentary on Joe's "Fill all my holes" refrain, at a posh restaurant Jerome promises her a fiver if she can insert a dessert spoon "up into her cunt". She inserts seven or eight, which clang one by one to the floor as she exits. Eventually, as Hénaff explains, "Because the [libertine] body is divided up, mechanized, and quantified, amorous relationships can mean nothing but combinations, which can be attained only through the construction of a system of variations meant to establish the greatest number of articulations among available bodies" (32). In Volume I, the result is what Jan Simons calls, in his book on the subject, von Trier's "game cinema," approached as a collection of data (characters

and locations) and algorithms (roles or actions) that together define a field of possibilities (a matrix or state space) – and graphically illustrated in the way that *Dogville* and *Manderlay* are laid out on a sound stage like board games. In *Nymph()*maniac, Joe’s friends, business associates, and sex partners alike are designated by alphabetical letters, as in the eighteenth-century novel, but taken to an extreme in which Joe’s lovers become cyphers and combinations thereof. From the beginning, young Joe approaches sex successively as a sport, a game, and (apropos of Dogme95) a secret society with vows and rules. In her first real sexual escapade, she and best friend B compete to see who can have sex with the most men on a train (in a sport Seligman compares to fly fishing), with numbers highlighted on an imaginary scoreboard. Where B racks up points quickly, Joe lags behind but ultimately wins by betting five points on one “difficult” man who insists that he is saving his sperm for his ovulating wife and requires a complicated set of moves. Next, Joe’s adolescent “flock” of girlfriends form a secret society and take a vow of promiscuity (inverting Dogma’s vow of chastity), swearing never to have sex with the same man twice, and confess both their conquests and violations of this rule. Then, as a young adult with seven or eight appointments a night, she creates variations and makes decisions by rolling dice, assigning each number a reply ranging from “almost passionate” (1) to 6 (for no answer).

Searching for a musical equivalent for Sade’s writing, scholar Philippe Sollers seizes on Bach’s contrapuntalism, and it is no accident that Chapter 5, Volume I’s final sequence, embraces an analogy between Joe’s sexual experience (which she limits for the sake of illustration to three men), and Bach’s baroque organ music. This is dissected through a three-way split-screen sequence to convey the contrapuntal polyphony of “Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ” from *The Little Organ Book*. Articulating the multisensory and polyphonic nature of Joe’s cumulative sexual experience, this is the film’s most expressive sequence. Yet its technical virtuosity only serves to demonstrate how far we’ve come from a pre-Enlightenment “lyrical” body.



Trier is also playing off and amused by his own well publicized obsession with numbers, rules, and games. Applied to sexual bodies, however, the effect is distinctly Sadean even as he adapts it to his own purposes. Overall it produces a *Verfremdungseffekt* that speaks of Joe’s detachment, which Peter Schepelern explores and that might, in another essay, be analyzed in the light of what Hénaff calls, apropos

of Sade's texts, "apathetic desire" (84-103), or alienation from others and herself, while provoking the equivalent – analysis and intellectual/esthetic appreciation as opposed to arousal – in the spectator. Watching *Nymph()*maniac (like reading Sade) is, and supposed to be, repetitive, tedious, and painful, a matter of suffering on the audience's part. As Nicola Evans suggests, in Trier's films "the passage of time itself ... [is] a masochistic temporal experience." Hence in today's reactionary yet sex-saturated climate, Volume I is provocative paradoxically for the Sadean abstraction of its dissection of Joe's "porn." \_

The question remains: Beyond all these effects and in-jokes what is von Trier's purpose or "message"? In Sade, these strategies are both sadomasochistic on a personal level and, arguably, satirical on a socio-political one. For example, Adorno and Horkheimer interpret Juliette's calculating and ruthless behavior as representing Sade's critique of the "bourgeois subject freed from all tutelage" (68), the embodiment of an Enlightenment philosophy in which reason, detached from experience and suffering, becomes identical with domination (82). In *Nymph()*maniac, however, it is largely Seligman's detachment that entertains and exasperates by turns until the end, when his hypocrisy is directly exposed. As for Joe's Juliette-like blend of apathy and hedonism and how we're supposed to feel about it, this is a more complex problem.

Which brings us to the issue in any discussion of Sade and von Trier: the woman in the text, misogyny, feminism – and, perhaps ultimately, the way she is used in the film as a provocation and affect. This is especially crucial when Volume II shifts from the rhetorical or figurative anatomy of Volume I to anatomy in the literal, unmediated, corporal sense – to overt sadomasochism staged as (woman's) melodrama and calculated to make audiences suffer.

Still, as Hénaff asserts of Sade, "only women [being associated with nature] are accorded the privileged function of the narrative *I ... historienne*, or storyteller" (258), with their libertine interlocutors [aligned with male culture] supplying the analysis.<sup>6</sup> This is important if, as Barthes has said, "The master is he who speaks; the object is he or she who remains silent ... separate by a mutilation more absolute than any erotic torture" (31). Juliette represents the paradox of the female libertine narrator, whose body/text transgresses gender identity. As Apollinaire asserted in his 1949 preface to the Pauvert edition, Sade wanted woman to be "free as a man," calling Juliette "the woman whose advent [Sade] anticipated, a figure of whom minds have as yet no conception, who is arising out of mankind ... who shall renew the world" (qtd. in Wainwright ix). Accordingly, "Fill all my holes," Joe's nymphomaniacal refrain, would be an assertion of insatiable, polymorphous desire, and a refusal of monogamy, the procreative imperative, and the social order.

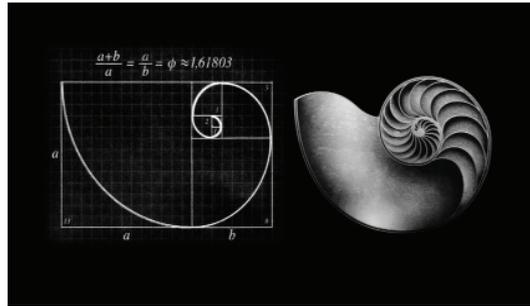
In many ways Joe is a Sadean revolutionary, a sexual outlaw who has "no use for society, [as] society has no use for me," calling her support group leader "society's morality police – whose duty is to erase my obscenity from the surface of the earth." This speech, which follows Joe's abrupt exit from therapy, is followed by an equally

abrupt cut to a shot of Joe setting a car on fire – to the Talking Heads’ “Burning Down the House.” At least two prominent feminists have defended Sade in ways that illuminate this moment and Joe’s choices in general. Simone de Beauvoir’s “Must We Burn Sade” (1951-52) defended Sade for his critique of bourgeois institutions, ideology, clichés and false comforts. In *Nymph()*maniac, young Joe and her friends protest against what they call the “love-fixated society” institutionalized in patriarchal heterosexual monogamy. By the end of Volume II, love, which Joe defines as “lust with jealousy added,” ends in her domestic entrapment, frigidity, betrayal, and battery. A major theme is her rebellion against the maternal role, her abandonment of her child, and a harrowing abortion. The film can be appreciated further by way of Angela Carter’s *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography*, which approached Sade as a political satirist and paradigm for a “moral pornographer,” one whose texts might be read as a “critique of current relations between the sexes.” Aiming for “the total demystification of the flesh and the subsequent revelation, through the infinite modulations of the sexual act, of the real relations of man and his kind” such a pornographer might “penetrate to the [obscene] heart of the contempt for women that distorts our culture” (19-20). Neither Sade nor von Trier, however, is ever that straightforward.

That said, *Nymph()*maniac arguably culminates von Trier’s long-term interest in female-audience-oriented eroticism. In the late 1990s, Trier’s Zentropa Entertainments became the first mainstream company to produce (quite successful) hardcore pornography through its subsidiary Puzzy Power whose manifesto called for pornography produced and directed for women by women. Although authored by a man, *Nymph()*maniac’s male gaze is deflated by Seligman’s asexuality and qualified by the slender (not conventionally “sexy”) androgyny of Gainsbourg and Martin. Female sexuality is portrayed overall as “polyphonic” – surveying the “deviant” variations that female pleasure and pain can take – hence subverting the phallic “Law.” That quest, however, is unsuccessful, as the sadomasochistic melodrama of Volume II makes clear.

## **Volume II: Showing Everything / Speaking the Unspeakable (Destabilizing Gendered Spectatorship)**

In nearly all of von Trier’s films since *Dogville*, male power is a pretense asserted in order to be deflated. In *Nymph()*maniac this theme is literalized in a succession of jokes about male genital vulnerability, as in Joe’s oral “rape” of a devoted married man, disruption of patriarchal families in general, and sexual exhaustion of Jerome. In an episode including Joe and two African brothers with impressive “dueling” erections, von Trier delights in violating the taboo against showing erect penises (outside of porn) while simultaneously joking about penis size fetishization (especially in porn). Of course the elephant in this room is the over-the-top racist stereotyping, along with the fact that the men are more interested in competing with each other through Joe’s



body than in it as they argue in dialect over who gets which of her orifices. In the opposite way, Joe's "morphological study" of flaccid penises (which Romney calls the "penile equivalent to mug shots") reverses the compositional rhetoric of porn. Overall, as Joe acquires exotic specimens to "fill all [her] holes," the film flaunts male frontal nudity as much as, if not more than, female, playing off the vulnerability of the male genitals, whether erect or soft, confronting the heterosexist male gaze with its literalization in abject flesh. And it's no accident that the last dick we see is Seligman's "very floppy" one (as described by Skarsgård quoting von Trier, in Lyttelton).

Von Trier's hardcore close-ups are sensational but, as Rosalind Galt has noted, the essential part of the sensation is "the overturning of conventional ideologies of image composition," destabilizing patriarchal visibility. When Joe's father dies, his corpse in the background is framed by Joe's legs in a sort of female necrophilic money shot: the eye is drawn to the drop of liquid running down her right thigh, provoking simultaneous "repulsion, arousal, and empathy" while "privileging ... female sexual pleasure over patriarchal scripts" (Galt). When in close up, female genitals, like the aforementioned penises, are rendered clinically – that is, unmediated and corporal – in images that thwart a conventional erotic or sadomasochistic response, for example in the sequences in which Joe is whipped by Jamie Bell's dominator K. (By contrast, consider Dakota Johnson's rosy bottom in *Fifty Shades of Grey*.) In shots of the fifty-year-old Joe's genitals after years of abuse, the pornographic affect of arousal is sabotaged by a literalization of woman as bleeding wound – as it is to a more traumatizing effect in *Antichrist*'s rendering of She's autocliteradectomy.

Von Trier's disturbing "porn" close-ups compel us either to look away or to watch analytically, perhaps politically. A case in point is the film's protracted BDSM subplot (Chapter 6) presided over by K, who names Joe "Fido" and deploys an assortment of knots, whips, and lashes, and the "silent duck" (fisting) to provoke orgasm, and as Richard Brophy comments, Trier films the "sadomasochistic relationship" with a real "verve, an excitement ... missing from the rest of the movie." Together Seligman and Joe strain to explain her attraction to sexualized violence and pain. Seligman asks what K's "business" is, and Joe explains it merely as "a system of violence" not unlike that of many Western institutions, with Seligman commenting that "The Passion of Christ" is "full of systematic violence. Via Dolorosa. ... The thirty-nine lashes." In



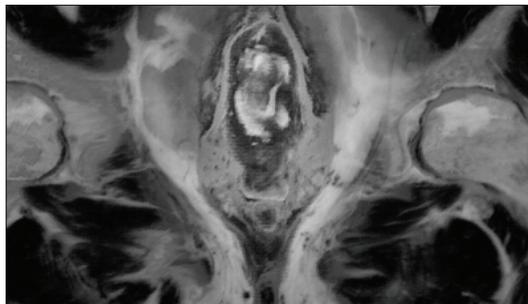
making cruelty “a new kind of pleasure principle,” Sade subverted the mystifications inherent in the mind-body dualism of the Enlightenment (Judovitz, *Culture* 158). Perhaps we are to see, by way of Sade, Georges Bataille, and Michel Foucault, how violence informs the power relations represented in our institutions, expressing our true passion, our real savagery – and how we disavow sadomasochism at our peril.

Further, as Rosalind Galt suggests, in the BDSM scenario of Volume II, von Trier is staging his own relationship with the spectator in a consensual role-playing game. K, the dominant, stands for the filmmaker as he constructs suspense, desire and sensation. The rules are two: “I don’t fuck you” and “we have no safe word” – in a provocation of a “politically correct” audience response: If she enters his apartment, she must submit to whatever he chooses to do to her. We enter into a similar (masochistic and ‘politically incorrect’) pact when we submit to a von Trier film, with its “complex affect layering [and destabilizing] bodily, emotional, and political responses” (Galt) that promises something sensational or exhilarating, but accomplished through suffering.

I conclude with two examples of sadomasochistic affect staged as melodrama in Volume II that are typical of von Trier’s provocations as they are distinct from Sade’s. One is the Director’s Cut’s reputedly “unwatchable” ten-minute self-administered coat-hanger abortion, which caused three men to faint at the gala Copenhagen premiere (Schepelern), provoked several walkouts at Venice (Debruge) – and which leaves Seligman, for the first time, speechless. This sequence cross-cuts between external and internal shots that are mediated by Joe’s heaving screams: from Joe’s hands and tools and “bleeding wound” to MRIs of the fetus as she extracts it, until an overhead shot reveals a bloody mass between her legs. While evoking the Sadean libertine’s view of the stillborn fetus as excrement (in *Juliette* and *120 Days of Sodom*), the sequence also forces us to look directly at the issue (in two senses) that Joe refuses to acknowledge. This close up of the coat hanger, a symbol employed by pro-choice groups to recall the brutal specter of illegal abortion in the pre-Roe v Wade era, provokes audiences to experience Joe’s pain and to take a liberal perspective. The black and white MRI image, on the other hand, is shockingly inserted outside of its



clinical context (Joe is lying on her own kitchen floor) and packs a double message: It doubly reminds us of the institutional/medical gaze that determines whose (and in what contexts) flesh may be privileged, probed, or anatomized – at the same time it exposes the effects of the procedure on the fetus. Taken all together, the sequence conveys a pro-choice message yet suggests right-wing pro-life displays “forced” on bystanders. Perhaps most interesting, while traumatizing the spectator by crossing as many trigger lines as possible, the sequence is oddly “educational”: it achieves the step by step clarity of a YouTube “How To” video.



The film's last few moments are unwatchable in another sense, and they bewilder, disturb, and/or enrage even the most favorably disposed audiences. Until now Joe's ideal interlocutor and first real friend, Seligman makes a limp attempt – as cringe worthy as atrocious – to rape her in her sleep. (Suddenly awake, she says "No", reaches for her gun, the film abruptly cuts to a black screen as he protests, "But you've had sex with hundreds of men", followed with a sharp sound edit by a shot fired in the dark and Joe's departing footsteps.) And if this "feel bad" ending begs to be interpreted as "feminist", it does so with a non-sequitur that exploits a cynical cliché from the rape-revenge tradition adored by Tarantino – that men will be men and women will retaliate with deadly force.

To conclude: As these last two examples also suggest, *Nymphomaniac's* "Sadean" discourse exposes the constructed nature of the image, with Trier reminding us that (like Sade's heroines' accounts) Joe's "confession" is his elaborate fiction or ruse. Through its overbearing rhetoric, the film ridicules the idea that sexuality can be "added up" or rationally understood. As Christine Evans argues apropos of Trier, "Interpretation is a Fantasy". "Digressionism" compels interpretation yet fails to reveal any essential psychological or moral "truth"; instead it results in contradictions, non-sequiturs, and a "structure of tautology" that defeats any single reading. No sooner does Volume I get us rooting for her exploration of the "zipless fuck" (per Erika Jong), than Volume II reverts to sexuality according to the *fin de siècle*, as Schepelern suggests, "to Nietzsche, Wagner, Freud, Munch, and Strindberg" [and, I argue, much further back, to Sade]: to sex as irrational, "inescapable torment, obsession, and depravity," a sadomasochistic, misogynistic view that Trier's sexologist consultant discredited to no avail.

Seligman's discursive dominance (that wears a Good Samaritan mask) suggests Sade's demystification of the classical reasoning and philosophical arguments with which his obscenely rich and powerful libertines supported their crimes. Applied in Pasolini's *Salò* to Italian fascism, this trick takes on obvious political significance. While entertaining and harmlessly obtuse throughout Volume I, Seligman increasingly insists on rationalizing everything Joe narrates including her criminal career that embraces torture. In the final hour, he becomes the mouthpiece for what sounds like the film's "feminist" message. For every time Joe expresses her regrets, insisting she's a "terrible" person who's gotten her just deserts, Seligman defends her, asserting that "You were a woman demanding her right," condemning the double standard: if Joe had been a man, her exploits would have been unworthy of comment. Joe counters with "All this sounds frightfully like the clichés of our times," and "you've probably misunderstood the whole thing."

Lynne Huffer helps explain these seemingly reactionary rebuttals on Joe's part thusly: the film's image of "the multiply orgasmic, self-pleasing woman has become a neoliberal cliché, a sex-positive coin whose sex-negative flip side is a feminist obsession with worldwide ... sex trafficking, rape and ... media" that turn women's

bodies into spectacles that serve men – a dichotomy that harkens back to the dichotomy of Justine versus Juliette. Von Trier confronts us with such dichotomies to force us beyond them, compelling us to unlearn our “spectatorial habits lest we simply repeat ... Seligman’s moralizing intellectual projections” (Huffer). *Nymph()* *maniac*’s infuriating black screen of an ending works like the cheeky dovetailing parentheses (“()”) that von Trier substitutes for the “O” in the film’s title: it plunges us into rage and confusion or provokes the kind of disturbance that fosters thinking and debate.<sup>7</sup> That was Sade’s method as von Trier understands and employs it, and the point of provocation as art.

### Endnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise indicated, I refer to the director’s cut (2014) rather than the shorter 2013 version.
- 2 Various scholars have treated Sadean “pornography” as a discourse, rhetoric, or poetics. See Barthes, Hénaff, Judovitz, and Michelson.
- 3 See, for example, Paula Quigley’s “The Spectacle of Suffering: The ‘Woman’s Film’ and Lars von Trier,” Rosalind Galt’s “The Suffering Spectator? Perversion and Complicity in *Antichrist* and *Nymphomaniac*,” and Christine Evans’s “How to Make Your Audience Suffer.”
- 4 See Judovitz, *Culture* 172.
- 5 Hénaff covers the following five components: “representation (the demystified body), the will to say everything, apathetic desire, the space of the masterly gaze, and a time made of repetitive sexual pleasure” (xi-xii).
- 6 “The storyteller figure is never a man, and even if a man by chance happens to tell his story, the name *historien* is never bestowed on him,” Hénaff goes on to say (258).
- 7 The parallel parentheses are also an impishly self-reflexive allusion to the spelling of the title of *Antichrist* in the opening credits and publicity for the film with the woman symbol substituted for the final “t.”

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