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All the Jocks, Queens and Foxes: On the Fringes of the Male Hetero-Heterotopia in Von Trier's "Depression Trilogy"

Abstract. While heterosexual sex turns to be the frequent driving force and the litmus test of characters' actions in Lars Von Trier's "Depression Trilogy", it is rarely given subjectivity. At least part of the blame lies in the filmmaker's tendency to draw female protagonists as emblems, burdened with the task of channeling oft-multi-layered yet still mostly symbolic meanings. Such is also the function of sex the female characters undertake and represent. Posited in a binary opposition to what Von Trier deems to be the dull idiocy of the bourgeois family life, their sexual activity is a destructive force, feeding them with an illusion of liberation, which irrevocably results in their failure. In *Antichrist*, She's sexual activity, climaxing in her mutilating both her and her husband's sex organs, is closely connected to her son's tragic death; it is through sex that She channels the trauma of her loss, negligence, and guilt. In *Melancholia*, Justine's random fling, happening instead of the anticipated marital honeymoon sex, is paired with the ascending doom, both internal and external, which looms in the literal form of planet Melancholia, dancing the "dance of death" with the Earth. Even *Nymphomaniac Part I and II*, which revolves around Joe's sex-driven narrative peripetia and quagmires, uses sex to portray the protagonist's ultimate moral descent and degradation. Despite its binary-driven gloominess, the largely heteronormative and dualist sexual world reveals a few cracks, through which lurk potentialities of bliss. The aim of this paper is to take a closer look at the third-tier characters in the "Depression Trilogy," the "jocks", the "queens", and the non-humans, breaking the sex narrative binarisms with the never fulfilled promises of sexual bliss.

Keywords: heteronormative heterotopia, sexual bliss, gender / sex binarisms, depression, post-traumatic sex activity, queer.

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"What do we do now [that] the orgy is over?"
(Baudrillard, *Transparency of Evil 3*)

I will start this text with sketching two settings, references, or, to quote Baudrillard, "floating theories" (*Forget Foucault 16*).

Setting one: In his seminal text “Of Other Spaces” (1967), Foucault maps out the concept of heterotopia as the product of both the 20th century’s increased interest in space that the individual/collective human body occupies and the anxiety it triggered.¹ Heterotopia, Foucault claims, is the space “in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and knaws at us” (23). An important element of heterotopias is relationality. People do not live in a void but inside a set of relations that delineate emplacements, of which heterotopias are certain forms. Foucault’s reading of heterotopic spaces derives from readings of utopian spaces, notably the ones Adorno and Bloch counterpoint in their conversation on utopian longing – I will write more on that later on. Foucault calls utopias “sites with no real place”, sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society (24). For Foucault, heterotopias are a project that offers a potentiality for utopias to become “real”, to be “effectively realized utopias” (ibid.). In that respect, the “realness” of the utopia/heterotopia project connects relationality with detachment or isolation; it, therefore, may be read as an anti-social turn.

An example of space that Foucault identifies as both a utopia and a heterotopia is a mirror. It is a utopia since the mirror image is a virtual though phenomenologically experienced place; it is “a place without place”; it is a heterotopia since the mirror, as an object, really exists (24), exerting a return effect on the place one turning one’s gaze at the mirror occupies. In the mirror, one discovers one’s absence in the place where one is through one’s image being reflected that one sees on the “other” side of the mirror.

Setting two: In a somewhat cheesily titled TED talk, “50 Shades of Gay”, visual artist iO Tillett-Wright presents her sociological art project, which aims at mapping a queer heterotopia through debunking the myth of the artificially binary self-identification categories of “gay” and “straight”. If you go out on the street, Tillett-Wright purports, and ask random people where they would place themselves on the scale from 100% gay to 100% straight, they will in most cases self-position, and hence self-identify, themselves at the 10%-20% and 80%-90% scale point marks. The study aims to prove that there has been a change, perhaps generational, in people’s self-identification of their sexual orientations, a claim supported with a few recent studies.²

One of the key statements from Tillett-Wright’s speech is that “After traveling so much and meeting so many people, let me tell you, there are just as many jerks and sweethearts and Democrats and Republicans and jocks and queens and every other polarization you can possibly think of within the LGBT community as there are within the human race” (Web). A noble shot at promoting tolerance and mutual respect, her TED talk may be read nevertheless as an epitome of a queer strategy that I would dub “Assimilation 2.0”, i.e. a strategy that draws from the earlier forms of

queer assimilation politics³, having reduced, however, the load of self-shaming, which would result, for instance, in the dress-code policies introduced at Pride Parades.⁴ "We are like you", the message of the past slogans directed at heteronormative audiences, has symbolically turned into "We are what we are, not necessarily like anyone around", hence without anymore targeting the heteronormative "opposition" as a homogenous body. There still exists the "we" category, a popular irritant for individuals not wanting to be identified with goals of hegemonic minority groups who would not necessarily support the goals of less visible minorities or individuals; it is, however, used more arbitrarily in relation to people whose only mutual characteristic is being denied the right others are provided with; it is not an identity.

Tillett-Wright's "50 Shades of Gay" may be read as a pro-assimilation heterotopia project, primarily aiming to procure gay marriage equal rights in the US; it thus radically differs from another queer reframing of Foucault's heterotopia, i.e. a queer activist project by Angela Jones. In her reading, heterotopias are potential safe spaces where actors, both academics and activists, participate in the radical politics of subversion, with the use of which they try to subvert the normative configurations of biological sex, gender, and sexuality through daily explorations and experiments with shaping a queer identity (Jones 1). In that respect, the latter project is closer to Foucault, who sees sexuality as a discourse largely regulated by the class-based society (**source**); Tillett-Wright suspends society class issues promoting the universal **postulate** of granting individual and collective equal rights and freedoms to everybody.

Perhaps paradoxically, each of the mentioned texts might serve as a lens, through which one could read the heterotopia in Lars Von Trier's "Depression Trilogy", as well as the cracks at its fringe border lines, which provide even more explicitly political statements, behaviours, and agencies. Each of the texts creates mirror-like "return effects", which question the possibility of identifying a homogeneity in Von Trier's criticism aimed at the bourgeois society and at the heteronormative marital sex. The filmmaker is frequently preoccupied with the society's power structures that frame one's sexual activity, yet his observations are often self-contradictory, at times eliminating the society from the mix, and at other times endowing it with agency shaping the protagonist's actions. In both cases, the imprecisely defined yet purported object of revolt is the conservative, the bourgeois, the privileged.

The revolutionary stances both Tillett-Wright and Von Trier represent are largely different: she is an artist-activist, fighting for a change in what she perceives as the still not-sufficiently tolerant Western world; he undertakes a fight against political correctness and the bourgeois society norms, facing accusations of misogyny and the male-gaze exploitation of the female body. What is common for both, however, is their inclination towards the anti- or post-revolutionary fight for freedom. Also, both produces heterotopias as spaces where one constructs and expresses one's sexual/gender identification despite and against the seemingly homogenous normative mainstream societies. For Von Trier, political correctness or awareness of political

issues involving the non-privileged society groups is a refutable idea, more dangerous than beneficial. In the two films made before *Nymphomaniac*, the filmmaker's position is not different, yet it works through omission: *Antichrist* and *Melancholia* contain a few scenes that offer a potential of a queer commentary reading; they, however, are not contextualized through the specific political viewpoint that pervades in *Nymphomaniac*.

If set against Tillet-Wright's project, *Nymphomaniac* would be placed on the opposite pole of the gender, anti-racist, anti-sexist politics. Von Trier is uninterested in, even at times hostile towards, the idea of dialoguing with any politics that would stem from dozens of years of gender, anti-racist, and anti-sexist activism (**example of the "N" word**). Yet the political stances in both projects both eradicate what could, if not riskingly, be conceptualized as a queer element from the fringes of their heterotopias. Von Trier does not fight for the equality, which is where the two projects radically differ; nevertheless, he channels his deep-seated criticism against the normative bourgeois society through his female protagonists' actions and, what comes to the fore in *Nymphomaniac*, words, having Joe (the main character played by Charlotte Gainsbourg) explicate her viewpoints on political correctness, interracial sex, BDSM practices, and contempt for psychotherapy. Her partner in conversation, the framing device of the film, Seligman (Stellan Skarsgård) is positioned as her opponent, yet he does not embody the contempted though underrepresented bourgeois element. Similarly to the queer elements, it exists on the outskirts, in third-tier episodic characters (also present in *Melancholia*), who react with unreserved awe at the actions of the protagonists, which, through their gaze, are then identified as following or breaching the moral code that Von Trier pokes fun at and, at other times, defends. His revolution is then the one of restraint and undecisive moves forward and back.

Not that there is a revolutionary potential in Tillet-Wright's project. Grounded in the specific temporal and spatial-cultural context (the U.S. during the Obama administration), her lecture promotes the idea of peaceful revolution, akin to romantically idealistic song manifestos such as John Lennon's "Imagine" or USA for Africa's "We Are the World". Promoting the politics of positive indifference to difference, Tillet-Wright's humanistic project purports that there is a group of non-heteronormative people that compose a "we" category, that the "we" does not promote the idea of being identical or similar, and also that "we" require equal rights.

The non-revolutionary apathy shaping Von Trier's "Depression Trilogy" shares the mood with several post-1968 texts by Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and particularly Jean Baudrillard, who also asked questions concerning the structures of power and desire, the intersections between death and sexual activity, and the sometimes deadly lock between the societal and the individual. While in *Antichrist* and *Melancholia* the philosophical thought performs the role of a behind-the-curtain operator channeled through metaphors (of the nature in the former, of the cosmos in the latter⁵), it is nevertheless shifted to the fore in the text-driven *Nymphomaniac*. The narrative axis

in the latter (as in Von Trier's several films) is based on a central binary opposition, a dichotomy of two gendered body (self-)identifications. *Nymphomaniac* positions Joe against Seligman, a 40-something woman whose life has revolved around looking for sexual pleasure against a 50-something male virgin, preoccupied with collecting history- and art-based knowledge, a woman of experience against a man of theory. This opposition is one of Von Trier's recurring motifs⁶: female characters explore potentialities of sexual behaviours by transcending or subverting the constraints of what the filmmaker classifies under the umbrella term of "the bourgeois", which delineates areas such as family, monogamy, job stability, and emotional distancing. These elements produce the mood of the dominating heterotopias in *Nymphomaniac*, as well as *Melancholia* and *Antichrist*.

Despite his self-proclaimed distrust of feminism and gender politics, Von Trier nevertheless casts as fringe characters, the "jocks", the "queens", and the "foxes", who, again most visibly in *Nymphomaniac*, are involved in meaningful exchanges with the film protagonists. In several cases, they do play the "Rosencrantz-and-Guildenstern" roles⁷, characters who are summoned to the screen in order to gaze at or read the film heterotopia(s) through their presence.⁸ The fox in *Antichrist* serves as a matter-of-fact retainer of the order: it is the CGI fox that utters the (in)famous "Chaos reigns" line to the dumbfounded male protagonist (He, a psychiatrist), who still remains not entirely lucid about how non-idyllic the utopia he calls "Eden" will turn out to be. That is, by the way, one of several overt instances of Von Trier's blatant critique against psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. *Antichrist's* He is one of the men of science and knowledge who appear in the "Depression Trilogy"; in *Melancholia*, this function is given to John, Justine's brother-in-law, whose main narrative function is realising how wrong he was in his science-based optimism concerning the outcome of the titular planet circling the Earth. Contrary to what he states, planet Melancholia will hit and eventually destroy the Earth; failing to acknowledge his error, John commits a suicide. The males of the "Depression Trilogy" are pictured as men of theory/science rather than of experience, which is why they remain incapable of moving the plot forward and articulating their sexual drives. Even the only sex act concluded with a climactic climax (as opposed to one anti-climactic climax in *Melancholia*), i.e. the one opening *Antichrist*, is counterpointed by its immediate outcome (the death of their child) and its successively revealed context (She, the wife, turns out to display murderous intentions).

One of the texts that DT's somewhat schizophrenic sex/society/power ideas might be read through is *Forget Foucault*, the meeting point of Foucault's and Baudrillard's divergent framings of sex, sexuality, society, power structures, and the revolutionary potential. Sex and sexuality are placed in the centre of Von Trier's interest; sexual activity is narrated and recounted in minute details; through its depoliticization or random politicization, it is, however, sex without sexuality, or sex separated from sexuality. The split, though of different proportions, is also visible in Foucault. As

Lotringer claims in his preface to *Forget Foucault*, Foucault sees sex as essentially different from sexuality. For him, sex is “a habit to which consciousness has not long been accustomed”; it is a leftover that Freud came up with after “extracting from sexuality a series of regulated oppositions (sexual differences)”; sexuality then would be an older system of meanings, “a fluid configuration meant to adapt readily to various social pressures and historical situations” (Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault* 18). Disagreeing with Foucault, Baudrillard proposes placing sex in the same category as society, revolution and politics: mortal discourses in the process of disappearing; he asks: “what if sex’s reality effect, which is at the horizon of the discourse on sexuality, also started to fade away radically, giving way to other simulacra and dragging down with it the great referents of desire, the body, and the unconscious?” (*Forget Foucault* 31).

The political explicitness of *Nymphomaniac* may also stem from the real-life events from Von Trier’s public activity, i.e. the real-life backlash that the filmmaker experienced after the press conference at the Venice Film Festival (2011), during which he infamously expressed what came to be interpreted as his defense of Hitler. This conference eventually resulted in his self-imposed ban on making public statements.⁹ *Nymphomaniac* contains a scene that could be read as his commentary on both the situation and political correctness. Having lost the ability to have orgasms, given birth, and reached an agreement with her partner (Jerome, earlier in the film identified as the agent of “love”, the “missing ingredient to sex”) about having an open relationship, Joe experiments with various forms of sexual activity, one of which is a threesome with Kookie and Papou, two lower-class black men she spots on the street. The threesome ends in a failure, which Joe, not knowing the language both men speak, interprets as the outcome of their apparently homophobic repulsion towards experiencing their respective penises touching each other inside her body. Relating the situation to Seligman, Joe refers to both males with the contemptuously racist “N-word”; Seligman reacts, which fuels Joe’s uninhibited rant on the duplicity of political correctness. What might be a factor here is the distribution of roles between Joe and Seligman: the former is positioned as the less literate and thus more crude in her use of language she employs to describe the relations she has entered; however, Von Trier favours this stance as the more honest one: Joe, as well as She in *Antichrist* and Justine (Kirsten Dunst) in *Melancholia*, speaks her mind, which encounters a hostile reaction from the society both defending the idea of political correctness and brutally acting against the personal freedoms of the individuals who choose not to obey the norms.

The paradoxical position of a good-will racist and sexist that Von Trier occupies may be contextualized through the cinema context the filmmaker is part of. In the film industry, he is one of the European festival-circuit cinema auteurs, such as the New French Extremity wave directors (particularly Gaspar Noé and Bruno Dumont), or the older generation, such as Jean-Luc Godard, Roman Polanski, and Andrzej Zulawski.

These are filmmakers coming from a specific tradition of the male-authored cinema, preoccupied with attempts at "breaking the grounds" in terms of film representations/framings of sexual, though mainly heterosexual, behaviours. Their characters talk about sex and engage in sexual activities in the ways that extend the scope of the traditionally heteronormative representations of sex in cinema, i.e. monogamous heterosexual, marital or outside-marital, which would play with, and at times subvert, the idea of female passivity, thereby bringing agency to the female characters. A significant point of reference here is Andrzej Zulawski, whose films conform to the classical Western dichotomy between desire and reason, contrasting a younger, less experienced, stereotypically primitive/animalist female sexual energy with male figures of authority: older and associated with reason yet prone to emotional breakdowns, usually instigated by the interactions with the female characters.¹⁰

Both Zulawski and Von Trier display contempt towards for what they interpret to be the consequence of political correctness: a silencing and euphemising strategy that obstructs honesty and infringes the freedom of speech; it is also an argument commonly used by the radical right-wing homophobic, racist, and xenophobic groups, rather than the means to protect the non-hegemonic individuals and groups of society. Being potentially offensive towards others would then be annulled by being likewise towards oneself. Therefore, "Depression Trilogy" replicates the stereotypical white-heterosexual-male perception of black men and gay men (e.g. the clichéd characterization of the gay wedding planner in *Melancholia*). This tone-deafness is arguably the most problematic of all issues appearing after reading "Depression Trilogy" with a queer commentary.¹¹ A few political shrugs in *Nymphomaniac* (associating psychotherapy and psychiatry with the biopolitical control of the state; disowning political correctness) and the lack of socio-political undertones in *Antichrist* and *Melancholia* (apart from the thickly veiled yet general attack against the bourgeois, the mundane, the normative) display a similar affinity for the blind, no-matter-what protection of one's freedom of speech.

Still, one might argue that Von Trier's and queer interests do intersect in the interest towards the aggression with which the mainstream societies treat individuals who do not fit, the interest uncommon in Zulawski or most of the filmmakers mentioned a few paragraphs earlier. The mainstream societies are presented as a facetious, vulgar, and oppressive mob, equipped with instruments to promote and implement their policies. In *Nymphomaniac*, Joe needs to start attending group therapy sessions whose aim is to help her overcome what the society, through the proxy of her boss, interprets as sex addiction. Another similar statement is visible in the scene of the DIY self-inflicted abortion, which Joe conducts in the act of defending her freedom to own her body. As Baudrillard claims, post-modern societies are composed of masses that have a destructive and frequently self-centred drive towards numb non-action fashioned in the form of an angst-ridden yet empty revolution. Masses absorb "all the social energy... every sign and every meaning. ... [The mass] absorbs all messages and

digests them. For every question put to it, it sends back a tautological and circular response. It never participates" (Baudrillard, *In the Shadow* 28).

Since masses are apathetic, they are not capable of creating a revolutionary potential. The disappointment in the failure of the revolution project appears in *Nymphomaniac* in an early scene, in which teenage Joe and her friend B. form a female-only group.

Joe: Soon B and I started a club that we called "the little flock"... B, of course, took the lead, as she was the most daring of us. She was raised Catholic. It was about fucking and about having the right to be horny. We masturbated together, that kind of thing. But it was rebellious. We weren't allowed to have boyfriends. No fucking the same guy more than once.

Seligman: What did you rebel against?

J: Love.

S: Love?

J: We were committed to combat the love-fixated society. I really believed in our little flock, but of course, that was naive of me. Over time, even the strongest couldn't stay true to our manifest.

(*Nymphomaniac*, transcription mine)

The chant "Mea vulva, mea vulva...", which the group engages in, may be read as the nucleus of the film's political-sexual manifesto, the promise and the failure of a revolution that Von Trier also signals, though further in the background, in *Melancholia*. As narrated by Joe, the story of the "little flock" is brief yet eventful: it is in this context that the motto of *Nymphomaniac* is used for the first time. The first, and at the same time last, clash within the group that leads to its dissolution concerns breaking the rule of having single sexual intercourses with individual men. B., the leader of the group, who earlier on initiates Joe's sexual proclivity through a contest on a train, suddenly starts a "romantic relationship", which stands in opposition to what teenage Joe has vowed to believe and which still resonates with adult Joe - her irritation with the betrayal may explain the seemingly random mentioning of B's catholicism. What follows gets to become the film's recognizable line:

B. (to Joe): "Do you think you know everything about sex? *The secret ingredient to sex... is love.*"

(*Nymphomaniac*, transcription and underline mine)

This astonishingly simplistic statement recurs throughout the film, becoming its moral compass, a consistent point of reference in the moral-judgment-laden conversation between Joe and Seligman, the narrative frame device of the film. How the scene develops, however, points to a sudden arbitrariness in terminology, veering away from Seligman's academic (or para-academic) discipline. Continuing her story, Joe notices, "For me, love was just lust with jealousy added. Everything else was total nonsense", to which Seligman counters with the off-the-head statistics,

"For every hundred crimes committed in the name of love, only one is committed in the name of sex" (*Nymphomaniac*, transcription mine). Seligman's random reference to the non-existing statistical data rhymes with what Joe's shift towards looking for "love" through dabbling in multiple sexual encounters, including an interracial double penetration, a same-sex intergenerational relationship, and hard-core flogging-based BDSM practices. While the dilution of the revolutionary potential may be consistently read through referring to Baudrillard, the interpretation of love promoted by Von Trier seems more ambiguous, if not arbitrary. What is the mystical / mysticized love element? Does it facilitate or compromise pleasure? Is it a "trojan horse" inserted into Joe's sexual quests in a performative act of her friend's naming it? Both "love" and the lack of it become a moral issue, which permanently spoils the friskiness of Joe's sexual encounters.

Through Seligman the theorist, Von Trier positions love in an intimately close relation to ideas, both of which Deleuze reads as contrary forces. Love is an affect, a mode of thought that is not defined representationally, unlike ideas, which are defined by their representational character. Affects, including love, contain an element of hope and expectation. An idea represents something, while an affect does not. An affect is not nothing, but it is also not something in the same way as an extrinsic or intrinsic idea. An affect is a force of existing that is neither the realized thing (an idea) nor the accomplishment of a thing (an act). For Deleuze, the perpetual variation between striving to persevere and any actual idea or action that emerges from this striving provides a space of potentiality where new forms of life can emerge. But in a similar way that two people may, or may not, share a disposition toward enjoyment as *jouissance*, so two people may or may not share a disposition towards these spaces of immanent possibility. Yet affects, such as hope and love, "represent nothing, strictly nothing" (Deleuze 1).

The sexual quest that Joe undertakes from her early years presents as a quest for nothing, an empty signifier. It also presents a paradox: the protagonist claims to have found love" is swiftly juxtaposed with the terror of losing pleasure – this is how the first part of *Nymphomaniac* ends. What precedes and follows it is an increasingly "unbearable" journey, from the sex contest whose winner, as based on the number of immediate sexual partners, gets chocolate candies, to the loss of orgasm, to the failure of motherhood, to disappointing interracial double penetration, to BDSM practices, to the intergenerational, same-sex relation, to the final betrayal. The unbearability or futility of the quest is brought in by the love element, the optimism, the "missing" ingredient to sex, or rather the sexual bliss.

The unbearability of the search for love entails digging for various modes of relationality, which is probably why *Nymphomaniac* is Von Trier's first film which not only features a few non-heteronormative characters but also places them closer to the central narrative threads – one of the few longer-lasting relationships Joe enters is with P, a younger girl who is initially recommended to her by her superior as her

debt-collector job apprentice. Though their relationship ends with a betrayal, Von Trier does not present it in an exploitative way, the accusation he frequently is given, especially in the representations of female body and female sexual activity. Similarly, the pedophile – gets romanticized, retributed, rewarded with a merciful blowjob and orgasm

The trans-racial threesome is not the only non-heteronormative scene in *Nymphomaniac*. Similarly issue-laden is what it is followed by, i.e. Joe's hook-up with K, a sadomasochist master who has no safe word practice and eventually leads her to regaining her orgasm. The BDSM practices are shown here not as performed and negotiated areas of exchange, but as sites of domination: K decides about how a meeting develops, devises the methods of inducing pain/pleasure, and, most importantly, cancels the rule of a safe word, regularly used as a safety valve in partnerships/assemblages formed for the sake of BDSM practices. If Tillet-Wright's talk expresses the post-revolutionary optimistic naivete, then Von Trier may be considered equally pre- and post- since he purposefully ignores the outcomes of anti-sexist, anti-racist, and gender activism, while underlining the importance of some other enunciations of freedom (notably one's freedom of expression).¹²

"Unbearable" and "optimism", the two words I have used in the context of *Nymphomaniac* are keywords in *Sex, or the Unbearable*, a text engaging in the similarly strenuous yet revealing quest into sex/sexuality in relation to optimism, framed as a move which would be counter to negativity inscribed in sex. The text-dialogue between Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant frames sex and love in negativity and optimism. At the beginning of the dialogue, Edelman quotes Lacan's assertion that "there is no sexual relation," which he then interprets as the lack of potentiality for optimism in a sexual relation. Edelman reads optimism, not death, as a utopia. Through denying the fantasy, i.e. utopia or optimism, sex "affords a privileged site for encountering negativity", which colours enjoyment, the sexual drive, as well as "various disturbances that inhere in relation itself" (Berlant & Edelman 2).

Is sex in "Depression Trilogy" linked with the negativity Berlant and Edelman use as methodology to map out the queer experience? Being doubtful about erasing optimism from the "sex/love" project, Berlant poses a question about what it does to understand about the many ways that sexuality manifests itself. Can sex be a scene for both optimism and subordination (Berlant & Edelman 3)? And if so, does that transform what sexuality stands for and what it does. What sexuality stands for and does to the protagonists in "Depression Trilogy" may be read with a number of tools pertaining to the fields of psychoanalysis and cultural analysis. Yet it is the fringe characters that create a disjointed assemblages of contexts that escape any consistent interpretation, contexts where there still are more questions than answers (which is particularly not the case of *Nymphomaniac*). In *Antichrist*, the potentiality for sexual bliss is vaguely related to nature, to Eden, to the ants, birds, deer, and the symbolism-laden old tree, against which both protagonists engage in a sexual

intercourse. Both *Melancholia* and *Nymphomaniac* offer hints at sex being a space for optimism, or non-negativity, sex that is not connected with what Von Trier associates with the bourgeois experience. This is not an entirely heteronormative space – both films feature characters that are stereotypically gay (Wedding Planner in the former), that struggle with pedophilic desire (Debtor Gentleman in the latter) or that engage in group sex, which would not be recognized as heteronormative. Are those sites for optimism?

The example of the mirror constituting both a utopia and a heterotopia can be applied to the relations the protagonists of Lars Von Trier's "Depression Trilogy" bring with them their readings of the heterotopia that they mirror against each other, through acting out and working through a trauma (as in *Antichrist*), through mapping out interpretations for the depressive state (as in *Melancholia*), and through disputing over the ethics of a sex-driven lifestyle (as in *Nymphomaniac*). A more literal representation of mirror may be the final scene from *Nymphomaniac*, when Seligman, after hours of listening and reacting to Joe's stories, attempts to rape her, saying "You've had sex with thousands of men." The scene concludes with a black screen, which can be read as two mirrors blinding each other out. Another clash of two heterotopias happens in *Melancholia* with planet Melancholia literally crashing against planet Earth. In *Antichrist*, the clash happens on a more rudimentary level of nature v. science. Here, the mirroring has the function of compensation: while She grows in confidence, He grows in anxiety, which is accented by the few encounters he has with nature (the ticks, the fox, the deer).

Such mirrors, or largely speaking heterotopias, have a function of being in relation not only to each other but also to the rest of space, which does not receive much exposure though it pops up in a number of situations. In *Nymphomaniac*, Joe encounters cracks in the heterotopia she fashions, yet this does not bring her the resolution to the issue of the "missing element to sex", the utterance that she does not escape throughout the film. In *Antichrist*, the "rest of space" that enters relationality is non-human. Taking the trip to the cottage in the forest, the protagonists move from heterotopia to utopia – Eden, the name of the place, is a utopian space where the male-guided healing process is supposed to happen, yet it goes fails. In *Melancholia*, there are two male figures that bring Justine a different relational potentiality: her father, engaged in a romantic relation with two women that he consistently calls Betsy, and her ex boss's protege, with whom she has a fling instead a wedding-night intercourse with her husband.

The concept of counterparting heterotopias and utopias seems to be the site of potentiality in terms of characterizing the diegetic world in "Depression Trilogy". Here, depression, whether or not conceptualized through the psychiatric framework, is distinctly linked with the potentiality of death, which may be fulfilled through sexual encounters. Perhaps, the most on-the-nose metaphor of utopia is Eden, the cottage the couple in *Antichrist* resort to as part of their therapeutical process. Another

utopian element is planet Melancholia, which, before it finally hits the Earth, becomes a popularly fetishized object with a set of meanings ascribed to it by the film's characters. The fascination is initially shared by Justine, who, in an early scene, gazes lovingly at the planet, differentiated from other stars by its pinkish colour. Finally, there's the utopia of sexual bliss as conditioned by the missing "love" ingredient in *Nymphomaniac*.

As I have signalled in the opening paragraph of the text, a set of readings of utopian spaces, one that Foucault's text on heterotopias is indebted to, is to be found in the conversation by Theodor Adorno and Ernst Bloch. While Bloch approaches utopia from the syncretical history-based perspective, starting from Thomas Moore and distinguishing between a few modes of Utopian constructions, Adorno, by the end of the discussion, comes up with a vital issue relating to Utopia. The issue concerns categories of happiness, popularly as key in conceptualizing Utopia, and death. Adorno says that every utopia contains a profoundly contradictory element – it cannot be conceived without the elimination of death, which is inherent in every thought (Bloch 15). It is impossible to picture utopia in a positive manner since this would be an attempt to speak about the elimination of death as if death did not exist. Therefore, "one can talk about utopia only in a negative way – death has to be included, death is nothing other than the power of that which merely is just as; on the other hand, it is also the attempt to go beyond it" (Bloch 9).

This interpretation of utopia is akin to how Von Trier frames the longings that his protagonists aim for. Therefore, the nature in *Antichrist's* Eden is cruel and savage – even the sounds of acorns falling on the roof of the cottage are given a threatening quality. Utopia in *Melancholia* is both the planet and what it metaphorically stands for – depression is the death element embracing the ideas of longing, expectation, and hope. Expressed in time, the depressive state expresses itself through the "what-has-been"; therefore, beingness, i.e. being here and now, coincides with both been-ness and what approaches, i.e. death. Finally, in *Nymphomaniac*, there is the utopian quest for the "secret ingredient" contextualizing the vague notion of love, expressed with optimism and/or sexual bliss.

The mentioned quest is the main element of the dispute the two protagonists in *Nymphomaniac* have, being based on the ongoing polarization of views on ethics and morality. Joe presents her story with the purpose of condemning herself for being, what she calls simply, a "bad person". Seligman, though increasingly astounded by her tales, keeps on finding reasons to justify her behaviours. The film is then a polarized experience in itself: we see stories from Joe's life, her indulging into sexual behaviours, yet we also receive a morality-tale-like dispute on the moral/ethical meanings of what we see. The conflict the two protagonists engage in exists for the sake of the continuation of the conversation, which leads to a cliff-hangerish ending, reverting the seemingly partnership-like relation that has been set up throughout the film.

The black-screen ending of *Nymphomaniac* may be seen as a fitting comment to Baudrillard's statement on nihilism: that being a nihilist and a terrorist is possible only through theoretical violence (*Simulacra* 105). Understanding being a nihilist as "carrying, to the unbearable limit of hegemonic systems, this radical trait of derision and of violence, this challenge that the system is summoned to answer through its own death", Baudrillard calls this sentiment utopian: there is no more a radicality; death does not have meaning. Operating with big and encompassing quantifiers like "death", "sex", and "love", Von Trier shies away from forming any social-political belongings, which empties out meaningfulness from the mentioned categories. What is the concept of love that Von Trier promotes? How does it match Joe's unquestionable hostility towards the socially imposed bans on freedoms of speech or act? Similarly, what is the role of the fringes of the heterotopia(s)? An attempt at mapping out the temporal zones that *Nymphomaniac* traverses shows a chasm between the temporal non-specificity of the story within the story and the literary, academic, and cultural codes that Von Trier employs through Seligman. Both queer and non-queer (asexual yet ultimately succumbing to a whim of heterosexual desire), the latter serves as a spoiler, a story-telling stopper that produces similies, analogies, references, and loose correlations to the past texts and works of art. To what Joe narrates, Seligman produces "floating theories", random interpretations, to which Joe counters with other, equally random interpretations. Stripped off the figurative element, so present in *Antichrist* and *Melancholia*, *Nymphomaniac* shows the flatness of both ideas and affects, criss-crossing and zeroing out each other. What happens to the fringes when the centre is off? "What do we do now that the orgy is over?" (Baudrillard, *Transparency of Evil* 3).

Endnotes

- 1 Foucault writes "... I believe that the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time" (23).
- 2 In August 2015, YouGov published a study, according to which 49% of the surveyed 18-24 year olds choose something other than 100% heterosexual on the Kinsey scale (source: <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2015/08/16/half-young-not-heterosexual>, access date: 15 Sep 2015). Later in August, another study showed that 31% of Americans under 30 claim not to be "100% heterosexual" (source: www.advocate.com/bisexuality/2015/08/20/study-1-3-american-young-adults-identify-bisexual-spectrum, access date: 15 Sep 2015).
- 3 Visible, for instance, in Niech nas zobaczą or in somewhere else. More on that in Majka's ... and ...
- 4 The Pride Parade in Warsaw 2015 is a recent example of the policies still being introduced: one of the participants, LGBT activist and literary critic, Marta Konarzewska, marching topless yet with two scotch-tape straps covering each nipple, was asked by the organizers to cover up. As she claims, her costume was a protest against the biopolitical control mechanisms that the Parade organizers replicate. More on that (however in Polish) to be found here: codziennikfeministyczny.pl/konarzewska-byl-manifest-rejonow-biopolityki-nie-striptiz/.

- 5 As Baudrillard writes about melancholia, it is “the brutal disaffection that characterizes our saturated systems. Once the hope of balancing good and evil, true and false, indeed of confronting some values of the same order, once the more general hope of a relation of forces and a stake has vanished. Everywhere, always, the system is too strong: hegemonic” (*Simulacra and Simulation* 106).
- 6 Before “Depression Trilogy”, this dichotomy also operated in *Dogville* (2003), *Breaking the Waves* (1996), and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000).
- 7 Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the two minor characters from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* were famously shifted to the fore in Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, a stage play translated into a movie in 1990, directed also by Stoppard.
- 8 I argue that all the three films offer a fairly consistent heterotopia, rather than distinct heterotopias.
- 9 Von Trier eventually breached the ban in 2015, giving a few interviews, including the one published in *The Guardian* on April 20, 2015 (source: www.theguardian.com/film/2015/apr/20/lars-von-trier-interview, access date: 15 Sep 2015).
- 10 Such gender characterization is present in Zulawski’s most films, notably *La femme publique* (1984), *L’amour braque* (1985), and *Fidelity* (2000).
- 11 Von Trier’s “Depression Trilogy” exhibits tone-deafness verging on homophobia and racism, which used to be popularly encountered in the U.S. TV series of the 1990s, including “*Seinfeld*”, the most popular comedy show in the history of the U.S. television.
- 12 During the infamous 2011 conference, the filmmaker also made an implicitly homophobic comment about having designed a way to repeatedly hire Udo Kier, i.e. cast the actor as “a homosexual”, adding that he was wondering how Kier had managed to be so effective in this role type (source: www.festival-cannes.com/en/mediaPlayer/11391.html, access date: 15 Sep 2015).

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