

A Radical, Vulnerable and Agentic Body: *Nymphomaniac*

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A hypersexual woman in a society that represses female sexuality is marginal. Judith Butler asks, "How can bodies be recognized when they do not fit the social norm of what bodies should be? What acts of agency are necessary to counter the forces of exclusion and derealization?"ⁱ In answering this question, I examine Lars von Trier's uncut 325-minute film *Nymphomaniac* (2014)—separated as Volumes I and II—where he narrates the "sexual evolution" of Joe (Charlotte Gainsbourg/"young Joe" played by Stacy Martin) over a span of several decades.ⁱⁱ Joe has a traditionally male name but an anatomically female body; she identifies herself as a nymphomaniac and makes this claim vocally and physically.ⁱⁱⁱ *Nymphomaniac* explores how a marginal body counters her society's forces of exclusion and derealization through various acts of rebellion; the language that von Trier utilizes to illustrate such acts is sex. I rely on psychoanalytic and feminist film theories to establish what constitutes the male gaze and a sexist film. In my textual analysis, I use Slavoj Žižek's Lacanian theory, Althusserian Marxist theory and Foucault's theory on sexuality to examine Joe's specific acts of rebellion while navigating a society that continuously fails to recognize or accept her nymphomania.

In his review, Eric Sasson of *The New Republic* dismisses von Trier's *Nymphomaniac* as sexist:

"For all the talk of *Nymphomaniac* being a 'shocking' film from a 'radical' director, von Trier's depictions of a woman incapable of enjoying sex and despising her sexuality are fairly conventional. A truly novel film would star a sexually adventurous woman, not devoid of love and compensating for her lack of it, not hating herself, but instead embracing her sexuality and feeling content with her decisions."^{iv}

When Kechiche's *Blue is the Warmest Color* was released—a year prior to the *Nymphomaniac*—it was met with criticisms of its alleged sexism. Manohla Dargis comments on Kechiche's preoccupation with Adèle Exarchopoulos' "derrière" as well as what she feels is too long of a sex scene: "Primarily, I questioned Mr. Kechiche's representation of the female body."^v The title of Dargis' piece, "Seeing You Seeing Me," echoes Laura Mulvey's reaction to Christian Metz' "The Imaginary Signifier": "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female."^{vi} The male gaze, according to Mulvey, is confirmed through the projected male fantasy of the female body. Whereas Dargis criticizes Kechiche's male gaze in *Blue is the Warmest Color*, she does not bring up the same accusations against von Trier in her review of *Nymphomaniac Vol. I*. Instead, Dargis notes the film's "shocking" qualities, and at the charge of von Trier's sexism, she comes to his defense:

"The title is preposterous, a huckster gimmick; it may also be a dig at those who, I think wrongly, label him a misogynist because of the abuse he rains down on his female characters. ...Women suffer in Mr. von Trier's films, yet they also dominate, shape and haunt his work."^{vii}

Nymphomaniac stands up against accusations of sexism in that it does not try to make any of the bodies look like beautiful. Simply put, and to borrow Gainsbourg's words, *Nymphomaniac* is "a film about flesh and the crudity of sex."^{viii} Von Trier's illustration of Joe's sex life is crude and dispassionate. Von Trier gives his protagonist a voice through long monologues.^{ix} Joe's voiceover narrates the experience as though she might be reading from a newspaper, and it is present in nearly every sexual encounter, thus consistently disrupting the images with a detached presence. In this way, the film limits opportunities for a purely "voyeuristic-scopophilic" viewing per Mulvey.^x

The film opens with a lonely old bachelor named Seligman (Stellan Skarsgård) who goes for a walk near his home and finds Joe sprawled in the alley, battered. Seligman takes her in, offers her a change of clothes and a bed to lie in. These two characters have the most screen time in the film, and their entire interaction is confined solely to this one room, with Joe in bed and Seligman in a chair. In that single space, Seligman and Joe share a long conversation that reveals Joe's numerous sexual encounters as a nymphomaniac. Von Trier said, "The subject of everything I have been doing has actually been the clash between nature and the mind, if you will."^{xi} This statement readily opens up an entry for a binary reading of the film as a tension between the mind and body, or the soul versus nature.

In von Trier's earlier film *Antichrist* (2009), he hired cultural history scholar Heidi Laura, whose assigned task was credited in the film as "Research on Misogyny." Laura was asked to find any and all Western sources that argue that women are evil by nature: "The male authors [throughout history] all seemed to agree on one thing: woman is intrinsically more connected to nature than man. This is why man rightfully fears woman: just like nature, she is beyond control..."^{xii} To briefly give into a binary reading, it's possible to establish Seligman (male) as the mind, the rationale, and the psychological entity; Seligman is a very well read and learned; he is always alone but accompanied by an endless amount of books. Joe (female) who identifies entirely with the physical experience, represents nature—or the body—the embodiment of her materiality. Initially, it is easy to read the film as a gendered tension between mind (male/Seligman) and body (female/Joe), but the film's narrative complicate things. By intruding on Seligman's space, Joe is "forcing a stranger's door" which is much like "piercing a hymen."^{xiii} Given Seligman's admitted asexual and virgin identity, it's also possible to read him as the classically chaste female body, and Joe as the male penetrator, thus making her entire body a phallic object in the film. In many ways, Joe and Seligman share a duality, but their gender and sexual identities are not fixed. Von Trier's complication of their positioning forces the viewer beyond a binarily-gendered reading of the film, and such complication is most appropriate when narrating on nymphomania; as Luce Irigaray puts it, "...the geography of [a woman's] pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined..."^{xiv} By moving past a simplistic reading, the viewer moves past a conventional reading of the film which can only lead to a conventional, male interpretation of the film; instead, the viewer now sees creative acts of rebellion that Joe takes on in order to exercise her right and freedom. One way is by appropriating a system commonly found in the capitalist ideology to aid her lifestyle as a nymphomaniac which can be analyzed through an Althusserian-Marxist conception of labor, value and production.

Joe values sexual conquest and experience. Said values derive from her body, which she uses to accumulate what she desires. For her, sex is an ideology. Gainsbourg explains that Joe knows "what to use [men] for—what she needs."^{xv} The way Joe uses men to fulfill her needs is very much in line with how a capitalist ideology functions; according to Marx, labor is characterized by either its "use-value or exchange-value."^{xvi} The use-value materializes into commodity-value. Different men service Joe's various sexual needs at certain stages in her life; the men in this film—with the exception of Jerome (Shia LeBeouf)—have no real dimension beyond their sexuality. In fact, the film includes a penis montage where only the male member is shown in a series of photographs, some even with a numbered Post-It note beside it (*Vol. I*, 01:25:07-01:25:45). This montage lasts almost forty seconds revealing the large amount of Joe's conquests. Bodies matter to Joe insofar as they help her achieve orgasm. Pleasure is her currency. The type of body that enters hers is organized per its use-value.^{xvii} What makes this exchange even more significant is that "traditionally," it was the woman who was treated as a "commodity" among men.^{xviii} By the time Joe reaches adulthood, she has so many men lying in wait for her that she has "trouble remembering who was who" (*Vol. I*, 01:27:04). At this point she rolls a dice upon hearing a message on her answering machine and responds according to a scale she developed. She appropriates a random yet bureaucratic system that she can easily apply to organize her partners in order to maintain her flow of commodity. Joe handles this without emotion; she treats her men with an arid professionalism; what she gets out of these relations (not relationships) is simply a fulfillment of her sexual hunger.

Per Foucault, there is a positive correlation to a country's wealth and its population; society's control—or administration—of intimacy is a result of this correlation.^{xix} The way that Joe uses her body and sexuality is rebellious to society's cause. In a Western society where sexual conduct gets regulated for the sake of its ideological progress and maintenance, the fact that Joe repurposes this procedure and applies it to the very action that it is meant to regulate by isolating its pleasures and not fulfilling its purpose in accordance with society's ideology gives Joe the agency for self-determination.

Joe recounts her time as a part of a female cult called the Little Flock, led by her friend B, where the young women participate in chants, rituals, group masturbation and storytelling about their last sexual encounter without any sentimentality: "It was directed at the men. It was about fucking, and about having the right to be horny...But it was rebellious" (*Vol. I*, 00:55:41). When Seligman asks what the girls were rebelling against, Joe promptly answers, "Love...We were committed to combat the love-fixed society" (*Vol. I*, 00:56:05). This rebellion against love is an action demonstrating Joe's ideology, which works directly against the dominant ideology as described by Foucault and Louis Althusser.^{xx} Joe reproduces her conditions of production through action, which is having sex with multiple partners without any desire to fulfill a romantic fantasy or obligations of love.^{xxi} The fact that Joe is able to detach herself from any sense of morality or guilt, but still objectively claim that she is "a terrible person" indicates her submission to her own rules conscientiously; as Althusser writes,

"All the agents of production, exploitation and repression, not to speak of the 'professionals of ideology' (Marx), must in one way or another be 'steeped' in this ideology in order to perform their tasks 'conscientiously'—the tasks of the exploited (the proletarians), or the exploiters (the capitalists), of the exploiters' auxiliaries (the managers), or of the high priests of the ruling ideology (its 'functionaries'), etc."

In this way, Joe is the exploiter, her male partners are the exploited, the auxiliaries are the male partners' wives, children (family), and the ruling ideology here is the pure carnal experience as a rebellion against love.

One day, the group leader B announces that she is in love. She advises Joe: "The secret ingredient to sex is love" (*Vol. I*, 00:57:45). This largely echoes what Zizek says on how sex requires a third element—a phantasmatic support—because sex is never an act between two people engaged in it; there is always the intrusion of fantasy or the imagined gaze that gives sex its completion. In B's case, love is the phantasmatic support that gives her a complete sexual experience. At B's confession, Joe severs her connection with the group. For Joe, the idea of love is offensive. Sentimentality, emotion and affection—these are all lies. Shortly thereafter, however, Joe falls in love with Jerome, the boy she'd lost her virginity to as a fifteen-year-old girl.

Eventually, Joe does fall in love. Joe's desire to subjugate herself to Jerome is antithetical to her ideological preference for control and autonomy over her own body and emotions. This becomes apparent when love becomes an ailment for Joe. While sitting up in bed, Joe testily tells Seligman: "Love is something you've never asked for...This idiotic love—I felt humiliated by it, and all the dishonesty that follows...I'm ashamed of what I became but it was beyond my control" (*Vol. I*, 01:14:01-01:14:39). To Joe, love is invasive. It acts like a virus and contaminates her view of the person she once regarded with no interest. It even affects her appetite for sex, which is something that she once valued more than anything else, and she stops having it with other men. Once Jerome disappears from her life, Joe moves through the world pining for something that is out of reach.

Love is a symptom of dominant ideology, which goes against Joe's ideology for pure carnal satisfaction. Because Joe always prefers the experience of sex without a third party intrusion, falling in love with Jerome is traumatic; when she and Jerome reunite and finally become physical, the sexual encounter causes Joe to lose all sensation in her genitalia. Such a loss, needless to say, is tremendous for someone whose persistent goal in life thus far has always been in an orgasm (*Vol. I*, 02:23:36). The very introduction to love takes the pleasure out of Joe's sexual activity. Inviting the dominant ideology's symptoms into her life causes her to become estranged to her own body. In compromising her ideological value—sex for the sake of sex—she loses the ability to orgasm. At the end of *Vol. I*, it is clear that love is the cause of Joe's self-alienation—an exclusion from her own self and a derealization of her purpose and identity.

In spite of losing her ability to orgasm, Joe continues to have sex—in fact, more rigorously—in order to regain her sensation. A couple of things go awry for Joe: First, she becomes pregnant with an unwanted child and gives birth to a son. This birth is a crime against her own ideology; she fulfills society's ideological obligation by producing a child but abandons her own.^{xxiii} At the sight of her newborn, Joe says, "I could've sworn I saw him laughing" (*Vol. II*, 00:22:45)—a demonic sight. The second thing that goes wrong is when Jerome admits to Joe that he is unable to keep up with her sexual demands. They agree that Joe should seek fulfillment outside of their relationship, which brings us to another example where a woman's love leads to her derealization.

At Jerome's insistence, Joe puts her hair up into a bun, sports a trench coat and glasses, and takes on a new persona to bait lovers: "I became the piano teacher" (*Vol. II*, 00:26:14). This is a reference to a film by Michael Haneke, *The Piano Teacher* (2001), in which Erika (Isabelle Huppert), a tightly wound piano teacher at a conservatory tries her best to keep the persistent romantic advances of the young and handsome Walter (Benoit Magimel) at bay; she tries to control both of their sexual impulses by withholding intercourse, giving him hand-jobs where he cannot express any pleasure aurally, and eventually handing him a letter containing a list of sadist sexual acts that she would like for him to perform on her. When Walter retreats in disgust, Erika's

desire for him spirals out of control to the point of desperation. She confesses her love for him over and over again until, eventually, Walter rapes and abandons her. Erika stabs herself in the heart with a kitchen knife then disappears down a street, presumably, to die. Both Haneke and von Trier's films share parallels. For one, they are both, to a degree, films where the actors—Huppert and Gainsbourg (and Martin)—embody the male filmmakers.



Figure 1 *The Piano Teacher*, Michael Haneke, 2001.



Figure 2 *Nymphomaniac*, Lars von Trier, 2014.

Huppert mentions in an interview:

"When I watched [The Piano Teacher], I realized how much, as a director, more than as a man, mostly as a director, Haneke identified himself with my character. And there was a sort of metaphor between me as an actress who acts more like a subject—I'm not like an object in these moments—exactly as a director does with his audience. The director manipulates his audience. He pulls the strings in order to give them pleasure or fear or whatever, but he is the great organizer for that pleasure. And in these moments, I am the great organizer to the man's pleasure. In these moments, I never felt unprotected as an actress could be. Because I felt more identified with the director's situation."^{xxiv}

Gainsbourg expresses similar feelings about her character: "For me, the character I play is Lars so it's hard to only see [Joe] as a woman."^{xxv} Joe's ideology as a nymphomaniac in the female body with an allegedly masculine agenda—using bodies for a sexual satisfaction without falling in love—is put into words best by bell hooks: "In the patriarchal male imagination, the subject of love was relegated to the realm of the weak and replaced by narratives of power and domination. For men, satisfying sexual desire became more important than the art of loving. Sex could take precedence over love because it was like work, a domain where one could engage in power plays."^{xxvi} Joe has the sexual agency in order to assume control of her pleasure while Joe's female body also acts as a vehicle to express a man's (von Trier's) ideas about identity, loneliness, guilt and pain. In an interview, both Martin and Gainsbourg mention that they are embodying von Trier himself in the role of Joe, who, onscreen, is anatomically a woman, thus indicating the film's awareness of gender fluidity.^{xxvii}

In an interview where von Trier is asked why his protagonists are generally always female, he responds, "It would be extremely difficult to give the same things to a male lead."^{xxviii} Ehrlich comments on von Trier that "... for a filmmaker so concerned with the permeability of the human body, the vagina is a far more helpful sex organ than the penis," as if the male body does not have any orifices.^{xxix} The actors' statements reference their

character's masculinity, which derives, in part, from the directors' gender. But something else hints at the characters' masculinity, and it can be observed through the absence of emotion or failure at love.

In both films, love leads to a loss of control for the protagonists. bell hooks writes, "As long as being loved is seen as a gesture of weakness, one that disempowers, women will remain afraid to love fully, deeply, completely."^{xxx} In *The Piano Teacher*, Erika first resists love. Huppert interprets this resistance as a way of control: "[Erika] doesn't want to be seduced. She thinks if she controls [Walter's] pleasure, she's going to be safe."^{xxxi} Erika fails at love completely—not only in giving it but also receiving it. Huppert discusses the rationale behind her masculine female character through the film's absence of a father figure, a constant maternal presence, and Erika's determination to keep her emotions protected:

"The daughter (Erika), she has the place of the husband in a way (for her mother (Annie Girardot))... She almost has a phallic status in this strange couple. ...I think there is a little bit of a man in [Erika]. And very candidly, and very clumsily, and very instinctively, yes, of course she wants to behave like a man, but not to play a power game as one could imagine. Just to be sure that she's going to be protected because she feels hurt and she feels [like she is] in danger just [by] being a woman. Just being passive. That's why she wants to be active. That's why she wants to control things."^{xxxii}

Huppert identifies the masculine element in Erika as the desire for dominance and control. Just as love behaves like a virus for Joe—the kind that destroys her ideology, estranges herself from her own body, distorts her outlook, and makes her lose bodily sensation—for Erika, love is dangerous because it leads to her loss of control. For all her scrupulous efforts in trying to maintain her distance and control Walter's advances, as soon as he recoils at her opening up to him with her dark and violent fetishes, Erika's terror at the possibility of losing his affections, and the eventual realization of that insecurity, drives her to despair and suicide. This is Erika's fate: derealization through love.

Erika, much like Joe, is a character whose identity goes unrecognized or excluded by those around her: her overbearing mother does not see Erika as a person, but a child who must only work as a pianist to support the family; Walter sees Erika as a conquest; Erika's colleagues at the conservatory do not see her extreme isolation; the scene when Erika stands in line at peep shows or sex shops, the men regard her strangely, judging her for being so out of place. Erika is not only estranged from her society but also to her own self; she's never developed a healthy mode of sexual and romantic conduct that could bring her fulfillment; at her first romantic encounter, she unravels. Although love is just as traumatic for Joe, von Trier does not give her Erika's fate. In fact, he lets Joe appropriate Erika's piano teacher image as a costume. The trench coat and hairstyle are Joe's new "fuck-me-now-clothes" (*Vol. II*, 00:26:29) in her attempt to regain her lost sensation, which is critical to her identity's completion. For Joe, Erika is the opposite of derealization; she is the gate to self-determination. Joe stops her eight-cylinder car in the middle of the street and removes the sparkplugs to attract men, and take her time in choosing her partner. She stands there dressed like a professional, pretending to be someone she is not, self-inflicts the distress and behaves innocently to her circumstances as the damsel with frank flirtation. By presenting herself in a submissive form, Joe activates her sexual aggression.

In their lengthy conversation, although Joe is the storyteller, Seligman is at times equally verbose, and goes on numerous tangents based on the topics she mentions, which triggers his imagination with all kinds of ideas—none of which are related to sex necessarily; his tangents lead to discussions that are relevant to Joe's point in incredibly shallow ways, almost dismissive; he brings up mundane facts related to topics such as fishing, rock climbing, religious figures, etc. These interruptions demonstrate how when the body speaks, its listener is often preoccupied with its own thoughts and imaginations. Even though Joe speaks, she is not entirely heard. Even though the body is expressing itself, the receiving end does not get the letter immediately; the letter gets intercepted multiple times by the listener's own musings.^{xxxiii} This problem of misrecognition reoccurs between Joe and Jerome. According to Žižek, "The letter arrives at its destination when we are no longer 'fillers' of the empty places in another's fantasy structure, i.e., when the other finally 'opens his eyes' and realizes that the real letter is not the message we are supposed to carry but our being itself, the object in us that resists symbolization."^{xxxiv} When Jerome gives Joe the consent to seek other lovers in order to maintain her sexual appetite, this generosity is at least suggestive that for Jerome, being in love isn't distorting; in fact, it allows him to see Joe for who and what she is: "You're just the way you should be" (*Vol. II*, 00:24:37). Jerome makes a noble suggestion that for the sake of their relationship, Joe take on other lovers. Jerome, however, is unable to contain his jealousy after all. Joe's theory, "For me, love was just lust with jealousy added," comes true for him (*Vol. I*, 00:57:41).

Jerome's fear driven by his jealousy of the other men induces a fantasy that tortures him—a fantasy that he makes up, which is not that she is having sex but that she is in love with one of her partners. Soon after Joe takes on her piano teacher persona and goes on her outings, she starts receiving love letters sealed in envelopes with men's names on them addressed to her, but finds all the envelopes empty. Joe soon learns that it is in fact Jerome who is sending the letters to test her fidelity: "My decision not to show them to him was exactly the reaction he had feared, and it reaffirmed his insane jealousy and his fantasies of the countless times I would fall in love for real while being the piano teacher" (*Vol. II*, 00:30:00). Jerome's envy derives from his protectiveness over her love, not necessarily her body. In this sense, her body is almost irrelevant to him. Butler says: "To speak within these classical contexts of *bodies that matter* is not an idle pun, for to be material means to materialize, where the principle of that materialization is precisely what 'matters' about that body, its very intelligibility. In this sense, to know the significance of something is to know how and why it matters, where 'to matter' means at once 'to materialize' and 'to mean.'^{xxxv} By being unable to resist his jealousy, Jerome is unable to accept Joe's body—one that constantly lusts. In the case between Jerome and Joe, the letter has not arrived, both literally and figuratively. The only way for Joe to regain her ability to orgasm is by giving up all the things that separated her from her own ideology: love, partner, a child, and a secure home. Joe eventually finds her way back to her identity, but it is only after she abandons her family, and it abandons her by not accepting her nymphomania. What helps her achieve this isn't simply sexual intercourse. Joe's self-determination at this point in the film is through self-inflicted pain and exclusion.

One evening, Joe finds herself sitting in a cold, green waiting area with a couple of other women who sit rigidly, silently and avoiding one another's eye contact. They wait for a violent man named K. Joe confesses that she doesn't have an explanation for why she turned to masochism in order to find her sexuality again. Kaja Silverman might simply explain it in Freudian terms that Joe "...submits herself to punishment at the hands of the father, and so atones for her incestuous guilt. This new fantasy evokes intensely pleasurable feelings, however, pointing to an erotic as well as a punitive content."^{xxxvi} Silverman's words do indeed have validity here as in *Vol. I*, after Joe witnesses her father's passing at the hospice, she immediately lubricates. To this

bodily function, Joe tells Seligman that her reaction was "shameful" (*Vol. I*, 02:05:15). This reaction and shame, logged in Joe's memory, returns in the form of her seeking retribution for it from K, disguised as it being a hunt for her sexual reawakening.

Joe risks the safety of her three-year-old son and leaves him alone inside his crib to come to this institution for her needs. "Institution" is an appropriate term for the space where K conducts his work for his manner of administering sexual violence onto the masochist women is extremely procedural, much like a doctor would conduct his sessions with a patient. Again, it is no accident that Joe's father's occupation was a doctor before he passed away. The way K handles her is almost like a caretaker's. On her first appointment with K, Joe is extremely unsettled as she watches K move about the room preparing various tools for his activity, e.g., duct tape, rope, a bath of water for the riding crop to soak, and a belt to secure her position on the couch. K reassures her throughout the session with empathetic responses in a gentle tone, much like a father's (*Vol. II*, 00:52:00).

One evening, while Joe is out getting whipped, her son wakes up in the middle of the night, escapes his crib, and stands on the balcony unattended. Jerome comes home in the nick of time and saves Marcel from falling to his death.^{xxxvii} Jerome sits Joe down and gives her an ultimatum: she cannot continue her outings or she will never see her family again. In an emotional state, Joe goes to the crib to take one last look at her son then leaves. Although her decision to abandon her son brings up emotions for Joe, she cannot deny her deep aversion towards being a mother—more evidence of her disdain for any vulnerability as it is a sign of weakness. In telling her story, Joe throws her teacup against the wall in anger and shouts: "The sentimentality... I hate it" (*Vol. II*, 01:19:33). This decision—the abandonment of the conventional identity as a partner and mother—allows her to regain her ability to orgasm. By not allowing her body and identity be tied down to other bodies, Joe takes action against what has caused her derealization: love. Joe visits K one last time, and breaks K's rules and intrudes while he is working with another client, demanding that she go first. K gives her forty lashes with a whip made of blood knots, and it's during this session that Joe regains her ability to orgasm. The rebellion against K's rules, rebellion against the dominant ideology's conventions, a rebellion against her own emotional weakness and against her own body through pain brings her to a climax. In all her actions that led her to this place, rebellion is key.

Part of Joe's rebellion is denouncing taboo. When Seligman asks Joe why she does not like psychologists, she tells the story of her abortion. A flashback shows Joe at the hospital receiving an ultrasound, and the doctor congratulating her pregnancy. Joe immediately tells him that she wants it removed. The doctor explains that she must undergo a mandatory psychological exam to conclude that she is mentally sound for the procedure. In a tense scene, the psychologist asks Joe a series of questions, which eventually drive Joe to lose her patience. Joe swears at the psychologist and leaves the office in a huff.

Unable to withstand the interloper in her body any longer, Joe decides to perform the abortion herself. In a swift and procedural manner, Joe spreads a plastic sheet and towels on the kitchen floor. She washes her hands, puts on gloves, and sterilizes steel knitting needles in boiling water. She files down the tip of a wire coat hanger and places it on the floor beside her along with the needles. The shots alternate between Joe's face and her vagina. Joe's self-conducted abortion is an unrelentingly painful scene as she screams, grovels and trembles while inserting the needles into her body, one by one, to puncture the cervix. The film reveals an X-ray visual of the body as the needles enter her vaginal canal, until finally, Joe inserts the wire hanger to grab the fetus and extract it. The fetus lies on the blood-soaked towel, visibly breathing. This scene, which is removed from the abridged version, is what *Variety's* Peter Debruge calls "indispensable" precisely because it catalogues in graphic detail the result of a State not granting a woman her right to an abortion.^{xxxviii} The scene leaves the viewer to consider just how many women over the years have performed such procedures on their own and suffered if not died from it because society did not grant a woman the right to maintain her body as she wished.

Von Trier, as both a filmmaker and a person, is no stranger to taboo.^{xxxix} His effort in all his films is to discuss topics that the hegemony typically represses by putting it out in the open; to converse on taboo topics is to rebel against its repression. Von Trier's discourse on such topics are often made through the female body and its suffering, which iterates society's inability to accept or accommodate women for just as they are. After providing the "lurid details" of her self-conducted abortion, Seligman tells her that he is pro-choice but that this is a hundred percent "female territory" and that he has no say because, "I don't believe a man can ever comprehend the situation or the pain. And when it comes to the method, I think the less said, the better." He also says that her abortion is not worth discussing, regarding the topic taboo. Joe responds, "...it's very convenient for men to leave all that abortion stuff to women. That way they don't have to deal with the guilt and all the small stuff... On principle, I believe that taboos are damaging for human beings" (*Vol. II*, 01:39:13-01:41:00). By telling such "lurid details," Joe denounces taboo. The very act of discussing a taboo topic frees it from its repressive state, making it no longer taboo. The scene is "indispensable" as it contains an empowering element by leaving no part of the abortion to the imagination. Von Trier forces the viewer to see the woman's pain as well as the strength of her pro-choice determination. His intent to remove a topic of its potent power of repression is apparent in this scene. But society's repression continues to haunt Joe's life.

At this point, Joe has regained the ability to orgasm, and she is back to having sex with multiple men while also masturbating incessantly at the office bathroom, even to the point of injuring her genitals, which bleed from having been rubbed raw. Such an image, a referencing of a wound, immediately conjures the castrated body—the *female body* as determined by Freud.^{xl} If Joe had a penis in this scene, it would be no different from the scene where Brandon (Michael Fassbender), a sex addict, masturbates incessantly in the bathroom at his office in Steve McQueen's *Shame* (2011). Just as Brandon's satyriasis plagues his life, Joe's nymphomania shows signs of being an impediment.

Joe is called into her boss' office one afternoon to discuss the other women's complaints against her promiscuity for fear that she might prey on their men. Joe is ordered to seek group therapy for her sex addiction. The scene is a classic reiteration of what Foucault identifies as a *device* for discussing sex as a discourse in a society so concerned with repressing sex.^{xli} Joe's boss threatens to fire her if she does not receive psychological help. Joe goes to the group session and she introduces herself: "My name is Joe and I am a nymphomaniac" (*Vol. II*, 01:46:52). The sex therapist corrects her and says, "Sex addict." To this, Joe repeats her statement with more determination bordering on anger, to let her know that it is in fact the therapist who is mistaken on her identity and how she chooses to identify herself as: "My name is Joe and I am a nymphomaniac." The therapist corrects her once again. "We say sex addict. Here, everyone's the same" (*Vol. II*, 01:47:08). Even within a group that claims to understand Joe's addiction, she is forced to use a different term to identify herself.

Joe admits to her therapist that her addiction is creating problems in her life but that she cannot stop. She and

the therapist discuss steps to change her life so that she can let go of her addiction, but Joe eventually turns against the group:

"Dear everyone, don't think it's been easy, but I understand now that we're not and never will be alike. ...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" (*Vol. II*, 01:53:46-01:55:26).

Joe's love and acceptance of her body's lust are quite contradictory to how McQueen's protagonist views his satyriasis—an object of shame and a mental affliction. For Joe, her nymphomania is a proud identity that makes her soul (lust) and body (cunt) one. At the end of her exit monologue, Joe joins the underworld and becomes an extortionist. The circumstances, which derive from her unwillingness to concede to society's wishes, turn her into a thug so that she can support herself financially. In order to preserve herself, she leaves her day job and joins the illegitimate world. This is Joe's decision to avoid derealization (death through starvation) by self-exclusion from the legitimate world—the hegemonic order.

When Joe goes underground, she is accepted with open arms. Not only that, she is praised for her work and highly compensated for it. Her boss favors her so much that he advises her to take on an apprentice—a teenager named P who is just as alone as Joe. Joe and P get involved in a mentor-apprentice relationship that is complicated by their affections for each other, and they soon become lovers. There is an interesting Oedipal tension between the two women as Joe's masculinity causes P to look to Joe as a father figure. Joe even hands down her knowledge of trees that she learned from her own father.

In a scene where Joe and P first bare their bodies to each other, it becomes emotional for Joe. As P tries to remove Joe's robe, expressing a desire to see her body, Joe protests fervently and says, "No, I have a wound" (*Vol. II*, 02:23:34). The shame of her wound here, again, recalls a Freudian notion of female shame at the sight of her castrated body.^{xliii} For one, Joe's authority is stripped as she is exposing her bare body to P; the sight of her protégé's youthful body that Joe covets, admires and no longer possesses brings Joe to tears; and when P kisses Joe's breasts, the image is more like that of a child suckling a mother's breast—a painful memory for Joe as a mother who'd abandoned her child—rather than an act between two lovers. Beyond just the complicated positioning of gender roles and expectations in this scene, the significance of nudity as an agentic force is finally introduced here in the latter end of the film. In her talk, "Vulnerability and Resistance," Butler says that vulnerability can be a political resistance that involves the bodies to be "exposed and agentic at the same time...I want to argue affirmatively that vulnerability understood as occasionally a deliberate exposure to power is part of the very meaning of political resistance as an embodied enactment."^{xliii} Nudity, sex and discussions of what society might consider taboo are elements of political resistance embodied in the form of media through the female body in von Trier's film. Furthermore, nudity and exposure offers a deeper insight into humankind in his film. The metaphor of the soul tree works especially well to illustrate this

When Joe's father tells his young daughter, "It's actually the souls of the trees we see in the winter" (*Vol. I*, 01:23:43) at the sight of the naked trees exposed without the covering of their leaves, von Trier is making a poignant comment on the body's iteration or pronouncement without discourse but by being itself through nudity. In this way, vulnerability becomes both an exposure and agency, as it forces the spectator to reckon with a deeper dwelling that exists inside the body—a soul. The knowledge of there being another dwelling within a body makes it less inconsequential thus less disposable.^{xliii} This realization or force of recognition is the agency and power of nudity—a vulnerability.

P eventually betrays Joe by taking on her former lover, Jerome. In her agony, Joe pays a visit the woods just before leaving town for good. There, without expecting it, she finds her soul tree. When the "being itself, the object in us that resists symbolization" finally bares itself on screen, there is no voiceover monologue from Joe, and there are no responses from Seligman.^{xliii} The camera stays on Joe and her soul tree for almost a full minute (*Vol. II*, 02:35:47-02:36:31). Joe's soul can't be put to words but it is a sight to see. The tree is bent towards the side—a sign of having grown and survived against extreme conditions. Ironically, for what is supposed to resist symbolization, the image of this tree that is bent sideways is extremely symbolic. Consider the scene in Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* (1960), when after Töre learns that his daughter was raped and murdered by the group of men who are sleeping under his roof, he goes outside and pushes the birch tree with all his might out of deep despair that would otherwise be inexpressible.



Figure 3 Lars von Trier, *Nymphomaniac*, 2004.



Figure 4 Ingmar Bergman, *The Virgin Spring*, 1964.

It's as though Töre's expression of anger, upon hearing of the brutalization that befell his daughter, remained frozen in time until it could take residence inside Joe. Seligman's summation of Joe's story in the end works well as an articulation of frustration at the sight of injustices that befall women: "You were a human being demanding your right, and more than that, you were a woman demanding her right.. When a man leaves his children because of desire, we accept it with a shrug, but you as a woman, you had to take on a guilt, a burden of guilt that could never be alleviated. Your abortion was legal, but more than anything else, it was a punishment you inflicted upon yourself. And all in all, all the blame and guilt that piled up over the years became too much for you, and you reacted aggressively, almost like a man, I have to say, and you fought back. You fought back against the gender that had been oppressing and mutilating and killing you and billions of women in the name of religion or ethics, or God knows what" (*Vol. II*, 02:45:00-02:46:58).

On the surface, the soul tree scene can be interpreted as Bergman's deep influence on von Trier as a filmmaker, who claims that Bergman was like a "father" to him albeit one who showed little interest in his children but more precisely, after the birch tree scene, Töre makes preparations to exact revenge on the men who disgraced and murdered his daughter.^{xlvi} In the same way, upon seeing her soul tree, Joe makes the decision to exact revenge on Jerome—the man who took away her lover and protégé. The sight of the tree is the only affirmation she needs to fully demonstrate her anger, and take steps towards self-determination without subjecting herself to further exclusion by running away. Nature has given her something that makes her feel trapped inside her body, and the society she lives in has abandoned her. As Ehrlich puts it, von Trier's characters are "isolated by internal idealism and external morality, but most fundamentally, they're isolated by their bodies."^{xlvii} Although Joe had been against violence all her life, she now decides to take Jerome's life; her decision to run transforms into the decision to combat exclusion against those who made her feel alienated. Joe eventually fails at this task and does not murder Jerome and P, but Joe does commit murder in the end.

At the end of Seligman's poignant monologue, Joe responds that her goal now is to rid herself of her sexuality

because it caused her too much grief: "I will stand up against all odds just like a deformed tree on a hill. I will muster all of my stubbornness, my strength, my masculine aggression" (*Vol. II*, 02:50:07). Seligman turns off the light and lets her rest, letting her know that he will make sure that she is not disturbed. Then, in a jarring sequence, Seligman returns to the room and looks at Joe's naked bottom while touching his penis. Joe wakes up to this in alarm, reaches for the pistol in her coat pocket and racks it. Seligman says, "But you, you fucked thousands of men" (*Vol. II*, 02:53:08). On a black out screen, the sound of the gun going off, a body hitting the floor, Joe putting her clothes back on and leaving the house can be heard before the end credits roll. Even after a touching scene where Joe and Seligman share an intimate bonding moment, von Trier concludes with cynicism by ending Seligman's life. Yet signs of self-determination for the protagonist can be garnered in this ending. Joe does not allow—even her "new and maybe first friend" Seligman—to violate her body. No matter how close a woman is to someone, and despite whatever trust she's established with a man, if he molests her in her sleep, it is unacceptable. Joe makes this assertion clear in the only form of self-defense she has at the time and that is through the pistol.^{xlviii} It also illustrates Joe's (von Trier's) persistent disdain for sentiment.

As Dargis mentions in her review, the title *Nymphomaniac* is indeed a "huckster gimmick," as the film is about more than just a woman's sex life. It is film that explores the complexity of female sexuality through the body's persistence to exist in a society that continuously rejects her. The film's ending in particular brings to mind the frequent news stories on the rape of unconscious women. The scene when Seligman creeps into Joe's room right after promising not to disturb her and molesting her in her sleep is shocking, but what is also shocking is that Joe kills him immediately for this. Seligman's response to her alarm implying that she should concede considering she's slept with "thousands of men" echoes numerous excuses that men give in response to charges of rape brought against by women who were assaulted while asleep or unconscious.^{xlix} The intimate bond that Joe and Seligman share a moment ago gets shattered immediately through violation and murder. For Joe, establishing a bond does not excuse unwanted contact. Women in the US have long suffered a history of marital rape without being able to bring charges against their husbands, but only since 1993 has that drastically changed, although there are some states where the laws are still murky.^l The challenges that women face when bringing up charges of rape and assault against people they know or are close to are still prevalent.

In November 2015, comedian Margaret Cho opened up about a man who'd sexually abused her since age five, and raped her at age fourteen; Cho went on to say that her family silenced her and excused the perpetrator on the grounds that he is a family friend.^{li} Cho released a new song "I Want To Kill My Rapist" and gave an interview explaining, "I do not condone violence but cathartic rage has its place in art. I believe if you have been sexually abused, you must 'murder' your rapist in your mind." As Andrea Grimes of RH Reality Check states, "Nowhere in this country do we have an apparatus that is set up to believe those among us who are sexually harassed, abused, raped, when we tell our stories."^{lii} Then what defense does a violated woman have? If the final scene is a testament to that figurative murder, then von Trier is making a positive claim for women: It is unacceptable to violate a woman when she is sleeping—no matter who you are—because any sexual contact that is nonconsensual is rape, and she will punish the rapist with death.

Von Trier's film offers a complex depiction of a woman who seeks freedom from repression through different acts of rebellion such as sexual aggression, and self-inflicted pain or exclusion. Joe's body is radically incapable of accepting the hegemony's ideology that it falls ill when it falls in love. In this way, through the illustration of his heroine, von Trier suggests that it is not the outcast who must change, but the society that must change to accommodate it. However, in her efforts to return to society, Joe makes yet another radical decision and that is by abandoning her body's ideology: she decides to expunge her sexuality. It is possible to interpret this as her final submission to change herself to join society by meeting its terms, but this decision Joe makes to remove her sexuality is a radical one. Radical action—another kind of rebellion—is the recurring form of self-determination that presents Joe's willingness to live. Von Trier boldly illustrates the complexity of a woman's body and mind, and the extreme measures that the female body takes in order to retain her agency in combatting the forces that wish to expunge her sexuality—even to the point of eliminating it herself.

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