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## The Impure Cinema and the Provocative and Infamous Films of Lars von Trier

**Abstract.** This paper was part of the special feature panel of the **Provocation as Art** conference (Cluj 28-29 May 2015), dedicated to the philosophy and aesthetics of Lars von Trier's cinema, with a special interest in the so called Depression Trilogy (*Antichrist*, *Melancholia* and *Nymphomaniac*). The initial purpose of this paper was to discuss the irreverent nature the Dutch director's cinema and the consequences of censorship on cinematic contents. Yet the main argument shifts, when it becomes obvious that the various obstructions imposed on the creative spirit of movie directors have created a type of moviemaking which can be described as a "pure cinema". This kind of cinema is the main object of criticism practiced by filmmakers who challenged the limits of the "morally acceptable", such as Lars von Trier. Their reactions to the "pure cinematic" generated a movement this author identifies as "impure cinema". The final contention of the paper is that, in the contexts of a highly censored environments, where politically correct contexts are hypocritically imposed and a consumer society is developed, where audiences are passive, the only possible path free thinking and artistic creativity can follow is the path of impurity.

**Keywords:** pornographic representations, obscenity in cinema, Lars von Trier, *Nymphomaniac*, pure and impure cinema.

Immediately after E.L. James' novel, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, was published in 2011, it soon became a global phenomenon. The movies studios were competing for the screen adaptation and although a cinematically disappointing movie followed in 2015, the first installment of the soft-BDSM trilogy earned a staggering 500 million \$ global revenues. Yet when the production of *Nymphomaniac*, which started in 2012 and was launched on Christmas Day in Denmark, in 2013, the movie shocked many prude viewers. The film board in Turkey abruptly banned the movie, labeling it as pornographic, since it described

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sex scenes and was filled with nudity. Romania also made the highlights of the global media, when The National Center of Cinematography classified the movie with the infamous category IM-18-XXX, which meant that it could not be screened in any regular movie theater, thus practically banning it from public viewing. After several protests from many film critics (including this author), the rating was changed and the movie was available for public screenings.

A first question arises here – how are some cultural products accepted as part of our daily dose of soft core pornography, while others are perceived as controversial and even obscene? A possible answer would be that there is a deep incapacity to distinguish between art and pornography. While the classical, legal distinction that art is not arousing while pornography has a sexual stimulating purpose is fuzzy and adds to the uncertainty, pornographic representations continue to be part of our daily life.

Another major question is if our contemporary popular culture is becoming more and more “hard core”. If so, then how and when has this process started and where does this take us? One thing is certain, sexual representations were always an intrinsic part of the artistic and cultural expressions of human beings. From the sexually explicit painting of Paleolithic caves, to the statues of ancient Rome and Greece, to the representations in Kama Sutra or the Egyptian art (well hidden in the British Museum as the “Secretum”) visual artifacts and artistic depictions included a certain degree of pornographic representation.

The written culture and literature were no exception. From The Golden Donkey of Apuleius, the “Arabian Nights” (all 1001 on them), or Boccaccio’s “Decameron”, there is an identifiable long trail of obscene and sexually explicit texts. Many of these writings had political meaning, as it was the case with the outrageous works of the Marquis de Sade or of modern writers like Flaubert and Zola, who were accused that their work was indecent, when in fact they provided a heavy social criticism. And while the XXth century “normalized” women erotica, as it is the case with literary works like *Histoire d’O*, by Pauline Réage (the pen name of Dominique Aury), or the erotic writings of Anaïs Nin, the liberation of female sexuality is far from being complete.

Lars von Trier is an atypical artist, he was always an *agent provocateur*. After provocatively calling himself a “nazi” – during the 2011 film festival at Cannes – Lars von Trier was declared by Thierry Frémaux “persona non grata” at the most important European event. Trier’s comments about Hitler – as well as his films – were misunderstood and were taken as an apology for the criminal nazi regime. For those who do not know his own biography, such remarks could be misunderstood, yet if one take his comments as coming from a profound and self-conscious author, from a socially critical artist, then the provocation should take us to the source of the contemporary political and cultural hypocrisies. In the following part, I would argue that only a “persona non-grata” could expose the ingrate nature of the culture he is part of, and that the provocative way Trier practices cinema is a pathway to a better

understanding of this art and of the contemporary society. Seeing *Nymphomaniac* as an obscene production without taking into consideration the fact that, according to Forbes, in 2001 only the pornographic industry generated about 10 to 14 billion \$ in global revenues (Forbes 2001), means to fail to understand the purpose of the director.

### Promiscuous Technologies and the Birth of Impure Cinema

*Nymphomaniac* was quickly described as transgressive, due to its explicit pornographic nature. Of course, if we use the "standard" definition of pornography, as defined by the 1986 Attorney General's Commission on Pornography as a "material that is predominantly sexually explicit" and if we define "hardcore" sexuality as depicting "ultimate sexual acts", "exhibition of genitals" and "sodomasochism", then the movie is pornographic.

But what if the *explicit* nature of pornographic representations, which is a standard by which we measure representations, is problematic? One assumption that needs to be clarified before going further with the interpretation is the very nature of the pornographic representations. That is whether or not contemporary pornography is a *cultural code*, defined by the rules of society. As I would argue, what we define as pornographic has resulted from the technological transformations that were devised and allowed by modernity. This reflection comes from Michel Foucault's hypothesis, formulated in *The History of Sexuality* (1978), that sex is a result of the proliferation of "sexual discourses". As Joseph Slade suggested, there is an evolutionary trend induced by the inter-determinacy between our natural sexuality and the technologies of visual representation (Slade 2001).

More so, as argued compellingly by Patchen Barss, there is a traceable link between the development of modern media technologies and pornographic representations. Barss calls this social mechanism as "the erotic engine", that is there are a factual connections between modern media and the erotic representations throughout their recent development. Modern reproduction technologies were in fact driven by pornographic consumption and, more importantly, we can trace a more relevant cultural connection between all media innovations and the tendency towards pornographic representations (Barss 3-4). It is also relevant for this argument that, from the very moment it was created, photography was used as an erotic tool, providing obscene materials for an increasingly addicted mass public. Thus, pornography can be defined as technological creation, it was our visual technologies that were born within a promiscuous environment that have generated a cultural predisposition. Today almost all our visual technologies, from telephones to computers and TV screens are continuing to function according to this connection. There is a widespread culture based on a certain pornographic visuality, one reaching into cybersexual media, cyberporn, game sex or sexting.

It all started with photography, as the ancestor of movie making and all visual technologies, which was early on committed to capturing sexual representations.

Just a couple of years after the daguerrotype was invented, by 1846, there was the first documented pornographic capture. As early photographic records show, there is an attested pornographic predisposition of the photographic lens, a voyeuristic inclination that would later be developed into a culture of visual promiscuity. As Stephen Marcus argued in his documented depiction of Victorian society, the sexual desires and erotic fantasies of modern middle-class were much darker and pornographic than we are inclined to accept (Marcus 1966/ 2009). Unfortunately the same Victorian hypocrisy about sexual representations has played a major influence on the formation of our contemporary visual practices.

Cinema, with its ability to provide cheap entertainment for the masses, substituted the early pornographic pictures and simplistic visual objects (postcards or like playing cards) and created a global culture driven by eroticism. The cinematic medium itself was predisposed to a certain level of obscenity. Be it pornographic or not, the photographic camera evolved from a very profound interest towards the human body and specially for the naked body. As it is clear from the earliest cinematographic experiments of Eadward Muybridge or Étienne-Jules Marey, the “scientific” use of images allowed a certain leniency towards the public display of naked bodies. As it is obvious from watching Marey’s 1904 film of a naked man dismounting a bicycle, there is an unnaturalness of the camera capturing nakedness coupled with a strange attractiveness of this weird exposure. The pioneers of cinema, just as the creators of photography, were fascinated by the ability of the new medium to represent naturally what was restricted and regulated by the arts of the past.

If William Heise used Edison’s kinetoscope to make the prudish *The Kiss* (or the *May Irwin Kiss*, 1896), the same year a French director made the first recorded “nude movie”. Under the title *Le Coucher de la Marier* (*In Bed with the Married Woman*), directed by Léar (Albert Kirchner), it exposed the viewers to one of the earliest stripping scenes in the history of moviemaking. Soon Georges Méliès followed path with *Après le bal* (*After the Ball* 1897), using bathing as a justification for showing nude images of a woman. Cinema became the preferred environment for exploiting sexually explicit images. The French production company of the Pathé Frères soon specialized in making erotic movies, which were globally distributed. By the beginning of the previous Century Pathé was making a widely popular movie called *Ce que l’on voit de mon sixième* (*Scenes from my Balcony*, 1901) indicating a clear voyeuristic predilection of early viewers. Soon “the sleazies”, or, as the German term goes “Pikante Films” were to enter the daily existence of the modern men while using visual technologies to penetrate the private life of their fellows became a social practice. The positioning of men at one end of the peephole and of women as objects of their visual poking into their privacy was early on a negative component of this culture.

Nonetheless, the pornographic industry developed fast, and it moved from photos and stereoscopes, to comics and films. By 1915 the movie industry was creating clear pornographic productions, as it was the case with *A Free Ride*, one of the earliest

“stag films”. Although projected in “male only” clubs, these “Venus Films” or the the French “risque” movies were becoming more and more popular. When Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments* (1923) vividly depicted the orgies of the golden calf worshipers the public was not scandalized by such representations. Albeit we describe the new technologies in terms of an ontological predisposition towards *obscenity* – or rather its *exhibitionist* dimension – this did not make cinema naturally *moral* or *immoral*.

The cultural history of cinema shows that, in the first three decades of its development at least, a form of impurity was tolerated and even cultivated in movies. Productions like *Blonde Crazy* (1931) or *Gold Diggers* (1933), allowed the viewers to see on screen “misbehaving” men and women. More relevantly, powerful women were dominating the screen – Marlene Dietrich in *The Blue Angel* (1930) or Barbara Stanwyck in *Baby Face* (1933) depicted women in strong roles. One cannot stop from wondering how the global cinema could have evolved without the imposition of the moral censorship during the 1930s?

Clearly, as is was the case with a movie like *Ekstase* (1933) by Gustav Machaty, sexual intercourse and sexual relations were shown as part of the natural dimension of depicting human interactions by the new medium. From Heise’s *The Kiss* to Ingmar Bergman’s *The Silence*, or the more abrupt experiments of Gaspar Noe, moviemakers used sexually or erotically vivid scenes as a tool for generating *reality* and *intimacy*.

### **Enter the Grand Censors and the Creation of “Pure” Cinema**

This “impure” cinema flourishing at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was forcefully abandoned when profoundly puritanical regulations were imposed on filmmakers by The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). This organization, created in 1922 under the pressures of the Republican legislative in Washington was trying to prevent Hollywood from turning into a modern “new Babylon”, considered to be another “synonym of Sin” (Anger 12). This moral cinematic police was created under the lead of Will Hays, who elaborated in 1927 twenty five rules to govern all the screen representations of sex, violence and other forms of profanity. A new and “pure cinema” was supposed to be encouraged, a form of art that would keep the innocence of our society. Supervising this chaste cinema, one so prude and infantilized that it would become acceptable even for the Cardinals of the Catholic Church in America, was another religious man – Joseph (Ignatius) Breen, a layman Catholic journalist who was backed by the powerful The Legion of Decency. Hays, with the help of Breen, declared war on the impure cinema and set up to remove all “dirt” from filmmaking.

By 1930 The Hays Code (“The Code”), which was supposed to “Govern the Making of Motion and Talking Pictures”, became the standard of the MPPDA, and after the creation of the The Production Code Administration (PCA) in 1934, the two men started to enforce it on all filmmakers. If the creators were not compelling to

demands of "The Code", their movies were boycotted by the Legion of Decency and other religious groups. Thus the strict rules of "The Code", which stemmed from the premise that Hollywood is debauched and corrupt, functioned as a censoring mechanism. Once a movie was finished it had to get the final approval of the Hays Office and only after the "seal of purity" was applied, a film was allowed to be circulated and distributed. As a final stroke, by 1936, the Legion of Decency imposed a more complex rating system, where "G" meant General Public, "M" was for Mature public, R for Restricted and X for adults, which further limited artistic expression.

The list of "Don'ts & The Be Carefuls" elaborated by Hays (Lewis 301) were in fact transformed into *The Big No-No's* of cinema. Designed to keep movies "pure and morally safe", "The Code" was in fact a long list of prohibited actions and representations, which lead to the alteration of contents. Some of the rules were very religious by their nature – like the *No profanity* and *No blasphemy* rules. They prevented any negative depiction of priesthood and any form of cursing on screen – the result was a hypocritical discourse, where the use of the name of Christ or of God were restricted, yet swearing was mildly accepted. Other rules were simply trying to impose a social prevention of violence – like the *No killing*, *No drinking*, *No illegal drug trafficking* principles, which were almost a list of police indications. Yet the most important concern of The Code was human sexuality – the *No perversions*, *No illegal showing of flesh* or *No sex between different races* rules were starting to create an imagined and eschewed reality.

This kind of of censorship soon reached all the productions of that time, and even the cartoons were monitored and "cleansed" in order to protect children from sexuality. One of the early victims was Betty Boop, who was transformed in a matter of years from a voluptuous *Snow White* (1933), into a respectable housewife in *The Musical Mountaineers* (1939). The transformation of Boop, modeled after the "infamous" Clara Bow, one of the most provocatively eroticized actresses in early Hollywood was just one of the effects of "The Code", since even the real Snow White was suspected of deviant behavior, thus the censorship had Disney to cut the scene where the dwarves are preparing the bed for the young girl, in order to eliminate any possible innuendo to an orgy (Malone 62).

The "Grand Censors" have created a long tradition of content alteration and a long standing attitude that radically changed the essence of cinema. This "puritan" impact continued long after The Motion Picture Association finally replaced "The Code" with a new ratings system (which is still in place today). This kind of control, based on the morality of "Irish Catholic Victorianism" (Doherty 6), is still in place, with one of the many relevant examples being the restrictions applied on a remarkable film like *Boys Don't Cry*, for which Hilary Swank won a Best Actress Oscar. Deciding ratings based on sexual prejudices is an indication of the fact that the prejudices of "The Code" are not buried yet.

### Breaking the Code and the Return of the Impure Cinema

Some of the earliest attempts to break with the disreputable “Code” were made by controversial film producers, like Howard Hughes. In 1941 Hughes wanted to promote his movie *The Outlaw* as a “taboo breaker” and titillated the audience by advertising Jane Russell’s sexual features. Yet it took Hughes two years and some major editing to finally obtain the seal of approval from the Hays Office. Another director who fought with “The Code” was Otto Preminger, and his movies were soon put on the black list of the Legion of Decency. His depiction of rape in *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959) or the promiscuous characters in *The Moon is Blue* (1953) had the censors ban his movies as “immoral” and some of them were rated as “Condemned”. Even Hitchcock had to go around the rules of “The Code”, as in *Notorious* (1946) where he had to edit the kiss of the two characters so that it would fit the moral standards of the censors, or in *Psycho*, where there is no explicit nudity, although we are in a bathroom and a naked young woman is taking a shower. The editing of the classical shower scene is done in such a way that no female parts, and clearly no genitals are shown on screen, in a silent compliance to the straightjacket of the “pure cinema”. By the time *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) won the Oscar despite its X rating, “The Code” has changed after being challenged by directors like Elia Kazan (*Baby Doll*, 1956) or Billy Wilder (*Some Like it Hot*, 1959) who blatantly disregarded the disapproval of Breen and went on showing their films.

Clearly cinema has returned to its “perverse” roots – since it is an art form with a high participatory nature. By simply positioning the viewer as a visually libertine, who acts like an onlooker, and by the fact that is naturally linked to a certain voyeuristic attitude, *cinema is profoundly impure*.

Returning to the example of Lars von Trier’s *Nymphomaniac* – if we are watching it from a moral high ground, it would seem clear that, in a strictly formal way, the movie is pornographic. Since it not only describes sexual acts, it is displaying genitalia in contact and in plain sight, or by presenting the viewer frontally with “perverse” erotic actions, it would qualify as pornographic. As the American courts settled this matter, in the decision of the US Supreme Court concerning the *Miller v. California* (1973), pornographic representations are “offensive” when they are without “political, social or scientific value” or when disregarding common “community standards”. Once more and by all means, the depiction of Joe having anal and vaginal sex simultaneously with two African men would qualify as pornographic. Even the “social” use of such depictions would be hard to explain.

Yet the problem of making such distinctions appear from this very definitions since, if we use the same standards to analyze other cultural products of contemporary media, we will come to understand how deeply pornographic in nature these are, and yet they are condoned by law and society. Still we treat a book like *Fifty Shades of Grey*, or an advertising like the *Guess* magazine as normal and acceptable.

This is why we must carefully understand how the story of *Nymphomaniac* unfolds and why it begins with an extremely theatrical setting (as usually is the case with how Lars von Trier develops the *mise-en-scène*). At the very beginning a woman, which is later identified as “Joe” (Charlotte Gainsbourg), is found beaten in a back alley by an austere man, Seligman (Stellan Skarsgård), who then takes her to his nearby apartment. This ascetic and puritan environment, where Joe will start her narrative about her sexual exploits, is a room looking very much like a monk’s cell. The celibate and chaste Seligman (his name is symbolically an indication of holiness) questions the woman about her exploits, who grow more and more obscene. Yet the room is not only a spiritual retreat, it is also a place of confinement – at a closer look it is distinctly constructed as a cage, a prison where the striped and grey pajamas of Joe give here the looks of a prisoner outfitted for spiritual torture. So, following this path of interpretation, we can see how the puritan and ascetic figure of Seligman, coupled with his Jesuit attitude, must be understood as a symbol of Censorship – particularly of the Legion of Decency, the Catholic infused organization that imposed the creation of a “pure cinema”. Just as Seligman is not just listening to the perverse accounts of his “captive”, he is also trying to change their meaning, the restrictions imposed on cinema were altering its nature. And when at the end of the narratives he ends up trying to rape Joe, Seligman shows his true nature and true intentions.

Following this line of argumentation, I suggest we should pursue a line of interpretation that allows a decoding of *Nymphomaniac* as an explicit manifesto for the “impure cinema” against the “pure cinema”, exposed as hypocritical and even noxious. Each chapter (and even each scene) in Lars von Trier’s film can be interpreted a direct reaction to the main principles of “The Code” and thus the director is purposefully breaking each one of them, with the presumed outcome of liberating filmmaking from its captivity.

### *No Young Sex*

From the very beginning one of the main “rules” of “The Code” becomes the subject of the first chapters in *Nymphomaniac*. In the initial chapter of Volume I, entitled “The Complete Angler”, the provocative Danish filmmaker is presenting his viewers the sexual extravaganzas of a teenage Joe and her woman friend “B”. At an early stage of her sexual development, barely a teenager, Joe performs anal and genital sex casually. Then she and her girlfriend climb a night train, where they nonchalantly offer sex for strange males, and then move on and both give a married man, a solitary passenger in the first class of the train, oral satisfaction.

If we go beyond the visually explicit scenes and we are looking at the chapter as a provocative exposure of the hypocritical nature of the Catholic Church to protect children, while its members were actually molesting young boys, then we reach the first level of the deep critical purpose of the Dutch director. Obviously the exploitation of teenage sexuality is NOT the creation of Trier, and if so then his sharp and crude representation of it must have another meaning.

I would argue that von Trier is actually criticizing the pedophilic discourse of the mainstream media. Starting with movies like *Manhattan* (1977) which depicts the desirability of older men having relationships with younger women – deepened by the Woody Allen scandal – and ending with advertising campaigns like the controversial Calvin Klein campaign, in which young men and women are depicted as sexual objects, we have come to accept the early sexualization of young people. Described as the “Lolita effect”, this process is in fact an important part of pop culture today, that of pressuring young girls to behave as adults (Meenakshi 2009). In their desire to reach younger and younger audiences, using sexually filled messages and presenting young girls with behaviors that are based on sexual attraction, the advertisers have induced a culturally acceptable image of precocious sexual behavior. This is cultivated by not only by advertising, but also by video music shows and TV series where young girls are shown mimicking behavior which displays adult features.

We can describe a cultural form of pedophilia (Brooks 47), driven by a phenomenon identified by the Australian journalist and author, Philip Adams, as “corporate pedophilia” (quoted by Brooks 46), a marketing process transforming children into consumers, by teaching them to act like adults. When children are exposed to media contents that are increasingly pornographic, where women are depicted as constantly searching for pleasure and catering to the needs of men, the consequences are that they are persuaded that male violence is acceptable (Barrie 101). As the 2010 American Psychological Association report indicates (APA report) media messages induce an “unhealthy” exposure to sexuality at early stages of development. Preadolescent girls are encouraged to “look sexier” and to act on their “sexual needs”, while media is teaching young girls that women are “sexual objects” (APA report 4), wearing sexualized clothing and using sexualized speech.

The argument is that Trier uses his movie to expose this hypocrisy. As it happens in the sequence in which Joe meets “P”, who becomes her apprentice in the debt collecting business – the end up working for “L” – who is secretly a pedophile. By the end of her training the young woman becomes a representation of the damaged girl in a society cultivating obscenity. In one of the last scenes of the movie, “P” urinates on a victimized Joe, mocking her and leaving her abandoned, as a reminder of the internalized fake identity of young women.

#### *No Sex Outside Marriage*

The following two chapters of Volume I – “Jerôme” and “Mrs. H” – deal with another major regulation of the puritanical view on cinema, as supported by the Hays Office who was trying to enforce a religious view of marriage. The forbidding of the depiction of relationships outside the wedlock, which was presumably promoting the values of family as the fundamental “unit” of society, is fundamentally a Vetro-Testamental projection on a culture that is clearly not functioning as prescribed.

Once again, the myth of the “family” is NOT destroyed by von Trier or by cinema, it is merely dismissed by statistics. Almost 40% of children today are born outside

marriage (global data from 2011), the numbers have doubled since 2000, with the EU marriage rate decreasing constantly and with divorce increased – from 1970 (7.9/ 1000 to 4.8/ 1000) in 2008. Sex outside marriage and divorce are simply social realities.

This is transformed by Trier in a two powerful sequences. The first, in which Joe meets again Jérôme (played by Shia LaBeouf), she is shown as part of a women club who live their life according to a libertine vision. The meetings of this club, self-appointed as “The Little Flock” (here the religious satire is direct), are revolving around their chanting of a sexual liberation mantra: “mea vulva, mea maxima vulva” (a parodic re-interpretation of the Catholic *Confiteor*). Needless to say that sex without love and repeated sexual intercourse with strangers becomes the way of life for these young women. Trier is neither presenting it as undesirable or desirable – he is simply exposing his viewers to a social reality.

The same is true with the following chapter, featuring a remarkable Umma Thurman who depicts a betrayed wife and a mother of three. Once again, the director is disclosing the brutal realities and consequences of sex outside the marriage. In an emotionally intense scene, in which a young Joe remains detached from the passion and suffering of others, she witnesses the heartbreaking interaction between the adulterous man and his wife. And the most brutal part of the scene becomes in fact the one in which the children (as well as the spectators) are taken into the middle of the mindless behaviors of Mrs. “H”. Here again the social and cultural criticism reaches an extreme intensity and a powerful lucidity. Using a discourse similar to that of the Hollywood censors, the crazed mother tells the children that she is doing this with the hope that they will never have to be faced with such a situation again. In fact, by denying reality she is scarring them emotionally for life.

#### *No Perversions (or Death) on Screen*

The next chapters are built in negative reference to other major restrictions of “The Code”, which identified as “perversions” any forms of sexuality deviant from the heterosexual norm and which forbade any representations of death on screen. Yet in one of the most visually intense episodes of this film, the Danish director couples both death and sexuality. At the beginning of the chapter entitled “Delirium” Joe is visiting her father at the hospital, where he is slowly dying of cancer. As she watches over him, at the deathbed of her father, Joe has an orgasm. In a powerful black and white aesthetics, we see the sick man in a deep focus through the legs of his daughter. Just as he is about to die, she drips a drop of uncertain liquid, looking like a tear that flows incontinently and unconsciously down her inner thigh.

Then in episode five, and the final of Volume I, once more Joe takes on her polymorphic sexual life. The chapter, called “The Little Organ School”, which points to a subtextual reference to the female genitals and the musical instrument, presents the viewer with the pathway that turns the young woman into a being incapable to feel. Losing her ability to have any sexual pleasure, and having Bach’s music as a backdrop, Joe starts “singing” by having sexual intercourse with two different

men, one named F and the other G (the two “classical” keys), only to realize that the polyphony has turned into a cacophony, the same way her promiscuous lifestyle has turned her totally numb. In a direct reference to the numbness of contemporary viewers, the scene is mimicking a nature documentary, presenting humanity in its transparent inability to escape its profoundly animalistic dimensions.

#### *No Miscegenation*

The representation of sexual relationship between races, which was totally forbidden by “The Code”, also carried an obviously racist perspective against black men. Movies were simply promoting the dominant view of the times – as in the infamous production of the “father of cinema”, D.W. Griffith, black men were often depicted as criminals abducting white women who needed to be “saved” by the “good guys” (in this case a “good” squad of Ku Klux Klan riders). This restriction, which followed a long tradition of the “accursed” Moor (as in Shakespeare’s case, where the dark Othello kills the innocently light skinned Desdemona), was still in place during and after the Hays Code was enforced. Although brilliant directors, like Stanley Kubrick who brought to the screen the first interracial kiss (*Killer’s Kiss*, 1955), who contested this racist perspective on life, the influence of this rule of “The Code” remained intact. This indirect control is visible in a film like *Guess Who’s Coming to Diner* (1967), where interracial contacts are seemingly promoted. The movie played by Sidney Poitier, which is still banned in several states of the United States today, is only mildly playing with the “provocative” idea of interracial relations. It is even having the young couple abstain from pre-marital sex in an adulcorated version of miscegenation. This is a constant in contemporary Hollywood cinema, with movies like *The Pelican Brief*, *Kiss the Girl* or *The Bone Collector* – where black men are depicted in close contact with beautiful white women. The common denominator is that depicting can be no romantic interest, they are “just friends”. Even African-American directors who are following a more critical path, as is Spike Lee in *Jungle Fever*, where Wesley Snipes and Annabella Sciorra are depicting an African American man in a love relationship with a white woman, indicate that this relationship is not really possible.

On the other hand, the Volume II of the provocative film closing the “Depression trilogy” opens with a powerful chapter, in which the polemic side of Lars von Trier reaches its highest points in the criticism of racism. This is not a new topic in the cinema of Trier, as is the case with *Manderlay* (2005) where the director deals directly with the consequences of slavery. Yet in *Nymphomaniac* it is no longer simply about political criticism. We see how Joe, now a mature woman, still searching for sexual satisfaction, asks two African-American men she picked from the corner of the street, to engage in a threesome. In strongly sexualized scene – showing male genitalia – Trier is presenting the viewers with one of the most “impure” representation in contemporary filmmaking. His mixing miscegenation with sexual perversions reaches the highest level of intensity. This is not a gratuitous rendering of eroticized

interactions, it is a profound critical exposure of a cultural falseness of our cultural inability to overcome our deep hypocrisies.

*No prostitution (and no BDSM)*

While early cinema centered early on the presence of prostitutes and call girls (Campbell 10-11), during the "Code era" any form of prostitution in movies was hypocritically forbidden. Although it was a widespread social practice, the women of "questionable reputation" were indirectly depicted as "dancing girls" and their "jobs" had metaphorical names like "escorts" or "chambermaids". At the other end, contemporary cinema is extensively depicting prostitution as a "desirable", with movies like *Pretty Baby* (1978) or *Pretty Woman* (1990) that describe prostitution as a socially acceptable practice. More so, if we are taking the example of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, women which are introduced to sexual perversions are often presented as culturally acceptable. Based on a deeply modernist vision of female sexuality, and rooted in a profoundly misogynistic understanding of sexual roles, nymphomania was often described as a characteristic of the animal nature of women. Using Freud's documentation of the Dora case, which added to this view of the woman as having an insatiable appetite for sex, today nymphomania is a "normalized" representation of womanhood, with innumerable books and movies using it for profit. Best sellers like "Diary of a Nymphomaniac" or "Confessions of a Nympho" are constantly inducing this idea that a woman's sexuality is uncontrollable and exaggeratedly superficial. As pointed out by Campbell (21-22), attributing these traits to women is actually reinforcing a patriarchal view on womanhood and is projecting a deep male fantasy.

Yet when Lars von Trier's volume II of *Nymphomaniac* presented the viewers with the shocking episode "Silent Duck", in which Joe meets "K", who performs brutal sadomasochist actions and where sexual insatiable women are depicted, the movie was viewed as inappropriately "radical". Once again, just as the recourse to sexual deviant practices is a consequence of Joe's inability to have any more orgasms, Trier is obliquely criticizing a society which is turning to pornographic representations due to a clear depletion of natural passion, lost through an excess of exposure to sexuality. We are losing our ability to feel anything, since we are constantly stimulated by visual excitation. Our brains are as dead as Joe's genitalia after decades of overuse and abuse, where love does not exist anymore, since it is substituted by its secondary representations in the media. As Joe tells Seligman in the movie, this "addiction to lust" leads to the loss of intimacy, one that is hard to be accepted by society as a whole. And when Joe ends up in the sex therapy group, where she states aggressively that she is a nymphomaniac, all the other patients are shockingly reacting to her honest confession. So do we, the visual nymphomaniac, are revolted by the provocatively sincere scenes in *Nymphomaniac*.

### A Long Paranthesis Leading to A Brief Conclusion

Some critics analyzed the parenthesis in the title of *Nymph()*maniac as a reference to the female genitalia, or even a marketing tool for promoting a over-sexualized movie (Ariano 46). Others have suggested a more nuanced interpretation, one beyond simple explanations ((Forshaw 190). Since the movie itself is divided into two parts we should also take into consideration a simpler assumption, coming from the fact that its meanings might not necessarily be present in its visually explicit nature. I would argue that actually the message of the film is not present *within* the explicit narrative. It is actually *hidden* by the non dissimulated sex actions, brutal sadomasochistic scenes, provocative eroticized characters, by the narrative mixing masturbation, oral sex and other forms of gratuitous sexual rewards.

I would suggest that a phenomenological reading could provide a more profound understanding of Trier's intentions. Just as Husserl indicated by elaborating the concept of *Einklammerung* (sometimes translated as bracketing), the "Objective" reality together with our psychological experience are determined by our Ego and in order to understand the true nature of the world, this Ego must be subjected to a transcendental reduction (Husserl 26). Without detailing the philosophical implications of the "bracketing", this is a narrative options Trier places within his cinematic discourse. In fact the entire story Joe tells Seligman is a large parenthesis in her life. We are in a subjective reality, with the viewer presented with a form of studied artificiality – contrasted with the powerful reality of each of Joe's stories. This separation is imposed on the entire movie – in order for us to understand the true meanings *intended* by the director, and to reach the true significations, the apparent reality must be bracketed. Thus, by using the concept of phenomenological reduction, operating as a nullification of our own biases or prejudices, we can take a leap into what takes place in the space between representations, between the chapters of the two volumes of the movie, between the spoken and the unspoken, between what is apparently real and what really takes place in the visual field.

In this sense the movie, which seems to be a long list of sexual deviances, extracted from a specialized book on human pathological behavior, is no longer connected with the reality of the depicted acts. The argument in this paper was that Trier is actually exposing our culture of perversions by using, as many have done before him, pornographic representations as psychological, political and critical tools.

The director is not just fulfilling the important role any artist must play in every culture – that of exposing the negative manifestations of the individuals, he addresses the society he lives in. By showing our addiction to sexual manifestations he exposes the generalized erotomania of the contemporary popular culture, where visual representations compel us to a hyper-sexualized state of mind. Through media representations we are absorbed in social behaviors that are unnaturally eroticized. In fact we, as users and consumers of sexualized representations are the true nymphomaniacs. We are *sensory nymphomaniacs*, viewers always in search for

sterile pleasures provided by our gaze, captives in the visually driven civilization, bi-products of the excessively sexualized culture. We live in an environment which is offering us substitutes for real feelings, we need the mechanical stimulation of our media in order to achieve gratification.

As seen above, if we take into consideration the particular chapters of *Nymphomaniac* as individual critical appraisals of specific manifestations in the contemporary society, they are exposing the hypocrisy of a culture that judges negatively some representations, while cultivating others. When we see the chapters in relationship to each other we realize how the Dutch director is actually unmasking the hypocritical nature of the visual consumption that thrives in the representations of contemporary media. It is the depravity of our media and visual culture, feeding and nursing our obscene desires, by using sexuality and perversions for granted, while normalizing promiscuity, that is dismantled by Trier's cinematic discourse. We take for granted advertising campaigns depicting female orgasm and submission gestures, where the exploitation of female sexuality is part of the daily consumption, yet we are outraged by a movie where these actions are explicit. We are exposed to promiscuous representations which are explicitly pedophilic, like the Calvin Klein campaign in 1995 which was promoting images of teenagers in soft core pornographic situations, or TV series like *H2O* which promote on television young nudity, while the consequences of such exposures depicted Trier are scorned as disgusting.

*Nymphomaniac* must be seen as part of a more profound way of using cinema as a critical tool. Lars von Trier has been practicing this approach in most of his films and, just like in Pasolini's *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) deviant sexuality is used as a wider parable, of a defective humanity. Denouncing the callous nature mainstream content production, Trier is exposing a larger process, one that critics like Sarracino and Scott described as "the porning of America", which in turn affects the entire global media. The pornographic nature of the media have permeated our entire existence, it was amalgamated in our consumption of media daily content and our cultural behavior. Why public marketing campaigns for beauty products – as for example the promotion of the "Extase" by Nina Ricci – make acceptable the representation a woman touching her own body and getting self satisfaction, while the behaviors of Joe are deemed as obscene? One argument is that the sexual objectification of women and the obsession with sexual satisfaction, with overtly eroticized images in the media presenting "mature" behavior in contexts that are compelling young adults to buy products are normalized for profit making. Pornographic depictions, restricted to the "adult" audience, increasingly made their way into the mainstream culture because they serve a commercial purpose. Today the pornographic is no longer limited to the X-rated industry, it has become part of the daily consumption.

Trier's films have the breaking force of any work of art, they test the limits of what is "acceptable" or not acceptable in cinematic representations. At the same time they are a criticism of the sugar coated sexual aggression, of erotic behavior constantly

presented as desirable, of the glamorous version of soft core pornographic depictions implanted from early stages of our development in our brains. Finally, if we return once more to the formal definitions of pornography, then *Nymphomaniac* must be seen as an *anti-pornographic* film, since it always breaks with the arousing purpose of the sexual representation and it operates at the level of our conscience and reason. Every time the viewer gets caught in the erotic nature of the scenes, there is a crushing return to reality. And just as the end of the movie comes like an abrupt cut into reality, we must separate the *nympho* and the *maniac* in order to be able to understand our own false perception of society.

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23. <https://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-full.pdf>
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