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Addicted to stories? Review of Lars von Trier's *Nymphomaniac*

How are we to make non-complacent erotic fictions after Sade and Bataille, and in an age of pornographic sensationalism and sexual permissiveness? Lars von Trier's latest installment to his Depression trilogy cuts nicely into this current of thought originally inaugurated by what may be considered as ebbs and remnants of a history of revolution, secularization and modernization. The result is *Nymphomaniac* (2013), an ambitious work judging by its 4 hour length, about the life of a woman (Charlotte Gainsbourg, as Joe) self-diagnosed with the eponymous condition as she retells it to a man Seligman (played by a somewhat mellowed Stellan Skarsgård, who's otherwise icily sharp).

By posing the inaugural question, we are not suggesting that the erotic masters were precursors of our easygoing attitudes to sexuality; rather it is to highlight the difficulty in our time to keep up with their intensity and voluptuousness, when the subject matter is in many respects not a taboo any longer. By bringing to light cruelty as the royal road to personal enjoyment, Sade represents an early challenge to the modern adventure of building a society made up of men who live by the principle that the most natural goal of life is maximization of pleasure and avoidance of pain. If religion is but a fiction, nothing stops me from pursuing the most extreme form of pleasure even if it means the other has to die for my appetite. The lone inheritor of Sade in contemporary times, Bataille reverses the direction of inquiry. Instead, it is the pre-historical idea of the sacred that demands that we lust the pain of sacrifice and violation of the other as the alibi of the fictitious concept. Stripped of the religious framework, the non-functional nature of erotic experience can only be articulated

through adjudication of the corporeal. The inquiry of the exact nature of the social is never incidental to their works, although they are more or less reluctant to make explicit the central importance they accord to it. It seems preordained by the very object of their interest: sex, after all, is about relations, concerning the miraculous fusion of each individual with another equally atomic person which makes two become one.

The story is divided into sections, punctuated by leaps, cuts and regressions, and it goes a long way from Joe's earliest experiments with sex to ever more daring adventures as she reaches womanhood. Very early in life she is already inclined to coital pleasure, and as she is eager to lose her virginity she becomes connected to a man called Jérôme (Shia LaBeouf) who she barely knows initially. Their brief sexual encounter, which arguably carries some premonitory foreboding, proves to be a disappointment – it's short, unfulfilling, coming awkwardly to a premature end. To her story, the very book-savvy Seligman adds a rich repertoire of symbolic allusions woven into a web of knowledge covering mathematics, religion, literature and music, not in order to give the woman's story an intellectual height but to provide the essential digression to Joe's storytelling which keeps the narrative energy burning from two furnaces. He reminds us the number of penetrations Jérôme makes conforms to the Fibonacci sequence: start from 0 and 1, add the last two numbers in the sequence, then you get the next one, *ad infinitum*. Something like the Genesis is being cooked up.

That Joe and Seligman are both intrigued in the narrative maelstrom they are creating gives things an amicable appearance in the first part. Dialogue is not an innocent act; language discloses the innermost core of our thoughts by giving them a sensible form. (Roland Barthes once wrote that language is a skin with which one rubs against the

other.) A hidden layer of sexual tension and tantalization ebbs up and down in conversation. Sade goes right to the core by giving center-stage to dialogue even during sexual intercourse; *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, for one, is entirely driven by dramatic dialogue. Dialogue is also known since the inception of Western philosophy as the procedure to knowledge, a tradition established by Socrates. Originally, in this tradition, intellectual endeavor is not a solitary or pedagogic activity, but is deeply engaged in intercourses involving an interrogative and a responding party who either defends or surrenders himself. It raises an interesting question: Is sexual pursuit identical with thirst for knowledge, and what is the role of dialogue with respect to truth, sexual or philosophical?

The narrative couple here seems to be mirror images for each other trapped in their respective realm. Joe looks for the ultimate answer to feminine sexual pleasure, whose notorious difficulty most men in the world can testify to. Seligman, who reveals later that he identifies as asexual, is fascinated by the idea of religion and knowledge. Pent-up frustrated feelings for not getting what they want are quite clear. This structure of desire and gratification goes something along the line of what is said to be typical of female sexuality: it's getting close, quite close, yes, but never quite gets it, then you go far and never return. It's an experience fraught with doubts and forked paths, and there's no barrier to keep one from the frigidity of stopping short of somewhere before the mythical, unattainable absolute.

What is starkly absent in both cases is love, the "absent center" of the whole film. As we can tell from his room's decors, Seligman leads a solitary life, although there isn't much statement on that coming from him. Joe, on the contrary, is not shy to display her hostility towards what she sees as a love-obsessed culture, and it only grows after a previously like-minded girl friend whispers to her "the secret ingredient of sex is

love”. What her friend suggests is union between body and soul. Most of what Joe is shown to do in the film is revolting against what she considers a nonsensical statement masqueraded as truth. Her sexual excess is constituted by the separation of body and soul: if ultimate gratification comes from the mystical unification of my material existence and spiritual essence, my denial should reveal the non-existence of spirituality by showing that all bodies are the same for me, bereft of their inner content. Therefore, Joe leaves personal feelings behind in arranging her dates by using a dice to make decisions. Nothing about personality really matters about the other. In the realm of human sexuality, there is always the specific danger of reducing the other as a means to a self-serving end and obliterating the uniqueness of the other as a distinct personality from myself. The body, seen by itself, is naked and identity-less, no more than a bundle of physical attributes which exists among other things in the material world. Of course the same formula can be read as, what if the most mysterious experience cannot be found down here on earth at all?

What is to be said about modern forms of spirituality and materiality here? Joe has an affair with a family guy, Mr. H, who is willing to run away with her. Joe, initially requesting this escape as nothing other than a way to ditch him conveniently, now finds her apartment stormed by Mrs. H and her three children just struck by the realization that their father is leaving them. The breakdown of Mrs. H, asking to see the “whoring bed” and telling the children they would be left fatherless, simply makes the whole scene – and the life of marriage behind these – blatantly absurd and decidedly exposed for the whole world to see. Their arrival explodes Mr. H’s romanticism – if sex within the marital bond is a frustrating bore (no pun intended), his affair with Joe is in reality as bogus and preposterous, and he hardly knows a tint about Joe and his wife before making the decision of leaving his family. It is little

more than an outlet for him to take out the frustration of having to play the role of father and husband. Presented here is the blueprint of bourgeois marriage: purportedly equal subjects under the rubric of a secularized marriage must consider the marital bond as some kind of commercial contract based on exchanges and commitments (sexual pleasure, procreation, childrearing) and, failing those, one is free to pursue the same utilitarian end from another person. This may be what is on Joe's mind when she says out of one hundred crimes (marriage for stability, adultery) committed in the name of love, only one is committed in the name of sex. (It's the same Sade who, against all the raunchy and dark humorous tales of sexual libertinage he wrote about, wrote a little collection of moral tales entitled Crimes of Love where love and passion are the root of all evil, where all characters are severely chastised for loving. Sade seems to ask what gives us the double standards with respect to the passionately proliferating crimes of love and the repetitive crimes of sex.)

Enter the second volume, and the jolly appearance is quickly peeled off. Body-soul separation takes a more extreme form when Joe, who manages to orchestrate a sexual pattern worthy of Bach's polyphony, loses all coital sensations precisely when she reunites with Jérôme, who she now reckons she loves. It's fully borne out in the chapter entitled "The Eastern and the Western Church", where the "church of happiness" in her family life with Jérôme and her child is wholly separate from, and finally sacrificed to, the "church of suffering" in her affair with K, a male dominatrix. To call the Eastern Orthodoxy a "church of happiness" is somewhat a misnomer, because while it is true that it takes an interest in the motherly form of Virgin Mary which Roman Catholicism did not share, the style of its iconography is distinctly emotionally austere. Baby Jesus is always portrayed as a mini adult sage rather than a human infant, and Virgin Mary is typically lacking in emotional investment. (It may

be related to the fact that Eastern Orthodoxy owns some influences from the Gnostic dogma of Sophia being a female personalized form of Wisdom which came to be associated with Mary.) But rather than a mistake, can it be seen as the director's statement on Joe's supposedly happy family life? How can our heroine assume the joy of motherhood without any qualm when she's known to shatter all our illusions about modern marriage, being nothing but a cozy façade which also leaves us cold? As her lust grows, she begins to neglect her child, to whom she admittedly feels very distant and un-motherly.

In this particular episode, von Trier is in fact exploring an intensely interesting fact that has already been propounded by Bataille – the duality and contradiction within religious life. What makes the sacred as such is precisely its untouchable danger which comes close to some source of evil. The sacred is to be separate from the mundane and therefore in fact useless. But it is this waste and inutility which constitutes the social by making all classifications into a system. (The Protestant church, which von Trier omits, is what Max Weber the sociologist enshrines as the father of modern capitalist ethics, whose rise symbolizes the fading away of the sacred and the disenchantment of the world.) Religion is known to institutionalize ambiguity for its own nourishment, alongside poetry and psychoanalysis; only in religion does absolute asceticism, self-punishment or flagellation make sense, otherwise they are pure madness or perversion in the perspective of self-interested rationality. Von Trier points to a similar slippage where Virgin Mary is confused with Valeria Messalina, the famous slut in history, and put alongside with the Whore of Babylon, in the visions received from Joe's divine revelation or spontaneous orgasm depending on your preference. What for a religion is sacred is often distinguished from the sacrilegious by a very thin line. In the Russian church it is well-known that

the holy fools are much honored precisely because they sleep in graves and lash out blasphemy, acts which the believers think are marks of their closeness with God. Without the divine explanation, we can only understand deviant behaviors as perversion. Joe's exploration in sadomasochism, as Seligman sees it, in fact aligns her to the Passion of Jesus because she had the treatment of the Roman maximum punishment of 40 lashes that Jesus Christ also received. A literal interpretation of K foils that association because in practice only 39 would be delivered. The moderns turn out to be not very good at being the beneficiary of their cultural legacy.

Is it the central theme of *Nymphomaniac* – a diagnosis of the rise and fall of Western culture in modern times? (We know the film is unashamedly about the Western mind, in all its pride and prejudice, when Joe tries to hook up with the people she calls “Negros”, whose only on-screen definition is having perpetually erected penises and speaking in alien languages.) We are speaking in the shadow of a lost culture, an estate willed to emptiness because the inheritor knows nothing about it and is not even bothered to claim it. An infuriated Joe asks why Seligman is so keen on making associations here and there instead of taking her story as a whole and in itself; she does not see how the richness of the intellectual history of her own culture has anything to offer to understand herself better. But the film is not a nostalgic note on the lost golden age of Western history. The religion, split between joy and suffering, already preordains its own downfall because it makes its discomfiting contradictions plainly visible. As we all know, all theologians struggle to understand the dogma of the Holy Trinity, the exact meaning of Oneness within division of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghosts. The solution to this mystery, as we have it from St. Augustine, is love: love loves itself by loving other fellow men. While desire annihilates difference, love preserves and transcends it, so that each individual element is differentiated from

the other and yet the unity between them is all the stronger. Only Christianity makes such a great deal out of “love” by identifying it with God (John the Apostle) and ascribing divinity to it. We know this is unprecedented – Judaism and Islam insist that God should busy himself with the delivery of messianic justice (which has a claim to power) while Buddhism, which does not worship any deity, practices non-attachment to the world. By concentrating on love which is radically personal and incommunicable by nature (alas, how many times do we have to say ‘I love you’ to our beloved to prove that), Christianity foregrounds modern individualism, which is notorious for its ineptness to foster meaningful social bonds. (It would be a curious case to study why Buddhism did not bring about similar changes in the society to which it belongs but that would be another story to tell.) So when the movie boldly makes “Forget about Love” as its tagline, it simultaneously declares what the director thinks modern secularism has run down to, something like the negative proof of John’s saying “Whoever does not love does not know God”.

The teaching of Christianity is never coherent; maybe recent events in our city concerning the exact political meanings of Jesus Christ’s sacrifice show us precisely that. The fascination of reading the Bible from a non-religious perspective lies in the enigmatic and fragmentary narratives, which Erich Auerbach the literary critic contrasted to Greek epics which are coherent in form and unified in content. Different from epic literature, whose aim is for us to forget about the real world, the Bible inspires disbelief and reality testing. (If the story of Abraham’s sacrifice is not illogical enough to convince us that, we still have the story of Job or the four Gospels telling the same story of Jesus of Nazareth, told in a style that we now call “unreliable narrator”.) If anything is done consciously by von Trier with respect to this cultural tradition, it is his metanarrative winks at this narrative style. Despite all his confessed

pleasure in Joe's story, isn't Seligman pressed to be at odds with himself at some of the preposterous contrivances in the plot? ("How are you gonna make the most out of my story, by believing it or by not believing it?" – as if belief is what a story is supposed to make.) The way the woman tells her stories, woven in dialogues between disagreeing partners, where narration haphazardly begins and ends, corresponds to the style of telling stories which we know since the Bible. Of course, Lars von Trier modernizes it by playful intertextual referencing to other cinematic works, such as from his previous films and Haneke's *The Piano Teacher* (2001)), making the film a reflection of what it means to be a storyteller on the silver screen. (And Joe concocts imagined stories to someone who refuses to pay back, and through that we know he is in fact pedophilic. "Truth," which the modern world says is always the truth of our desire, "has the structure of fiction.")

To tell stories is to connect with others by revealing ourselves; modern culture makes the eloquent art obscene by reducing it to exhibitionism and voyeurism. We are always confessing, on radio or TV or the Internet, exposing ourselves to complete strangers. We even make a psychotherapy out of it, thinking that the root of our psychological disorders is not being able to fully express ourselves, leaving aside the question of who to open ourselves to. Group therapy, portrayed in *Nymphomaniac*, has a quasi-religious atmosphere, feigning acceptance by a therapist-leader and an anonymous group of people representing the moralizing public. They, as much as we secretly are, are interested in nothing other than finding themselves in the other's image, and it is this rather than sexual exposure that defines obscenity. ("Sex addicts – that's what we call ourselves," says a female patient with a coy smile too eager to impress.) The idea of confession, which is not understandable without Christianity, is to get rid of our interior life, to expose everything, because according to our ideology

shying away from others, who are free to mock us and flatter themselves, is unhealthy. Leaving nothing to hide, dialogue also tends to become soliloquy when everyone is simply talking to him- or herself, waiting to be instructed by the authority of the mass. Sade does show how this instructive position, occupied by the politician or the clergyman or the philosophical mentor, is never separate from that of a torturer, something the therapist in the film may not be too far off from.

With dialogues, storytelling, and the endless sex scenes, we are in fact approaching the question of what binds people and their stories and bodies together. Religion used to be the answer (God says “it is not good for the man to be alone”), but of course not anymore. With the dirty bathwater of religion thrown away there goes the baby of Love as well, and modern family life is a terrible desert as the film shows. (Some relief is provided by the father, a romanticist about Mother Nature. According to anthropologists, only the Western man is so obsessed by nature, from which he feels painfully separated.) We are then left to the most instrumentalized forms of human relations. Now there is no defense from the market, where the logic is the exchangeability of everything and “an eye for an eye”, which is written in the most ancient penal logic. So Joe becomes a loan collector and what she learns about masochism, originally proof of divine love and forgiveness, comes in handy. (Nietzsche, contemporary philosophers’ most beloved misanthrope, did have a word about the law and punishment originally having something to do with debt collection.) Let’s remember that it is business that leads Joe to P, her apostle and later partner, but it does not stop at the strictly commercial beginning against all odds. And then the personal feelings arising out of this context can again be manipulated in the name of business, so P betrays Joe like Judas Iscariot did Jesus Christ for 30 silver coins. Who’s using who? And does it matter?

There may be a point or two to make about the gender issue for the misogyny of the film but it tends to overlook what is more important for Lars von Trier, namely misanthropy. Seligman's remark on Joe's failure to fire at Jérôme makes use of the unconscious as an explanation like all good psychoanalysts do, and its humanism sounds coming out of nowhere in the film. And the humanist underpinning of psychoanalysis is the constant object of parody, as the whole evening between Joe and Seligman reads like a long session of the talking cure. (Of course the film's playful disrespect of the Freudian science is totally invisible to someone who wants every story to be about killing our inner father and freeing our inner woman.) With Joe resolving on abstinence and Seligman's newfound sexuality, both of them seem to come out of the couch "cured" – and that's when they can't get along any longer. So the misplacedness of the humanism in the film is deliberate. But the thing is they have always been mirror images of each other, and perhaps not any less after the ending. (To argue that Seligman is just a male predator which has learned new ways to "appropriate" the woman sexually does not do justice to the pair's complex dynamics. To read every film as about female or anybody's empowerment misses the intricacies of our social life and film narratives.) Living in a post-religious era, when each of us has our own truth, are humans meant to live together under the rubric of the humanist notion of "universal values"? The misanthrope says, we should have known better.