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Mea maxima vulva:
Appreciation and aesthetics of
chance in *Nymphomaniac*

Tarja Laine

This essay considers Lars von Trier's *Nymphomaniac* diology as an allegory of a polyphonic cinematic event that creates an unusual relationship between the film and the spectator. The two films revolve around Joe (Charlotte Gainsbourg) narrating her life story to Seligman (Stellan Skarsgård), who sometimes reacts to her narration with fascination, sometimes with disbelief. I shall explore how their relationship can be seen as an allegory that describes the relationship between cinema and the spectator in general. This relationship is based on trust and the aesthetics of chance, and it is best characterized as a reciprocal, co-creative energy that flows in both directions. However, as soon as this flow of energy is blocked, a form of resistance develops, which prevents the functional relationship.¹ This, in turn, is linked with the valuation of cinema. I shall argue that aesthetic appreciation seems to be at its most intense when one is able to trust the very event of cinematic experience – however untrustworthy – from within one's own sensory perception and intelligent deliberation. The *Nymphomaniac* diology is no empty provocation. Rather, it invites us to reflect upon our own act of looking by first closing and then breaching the spectatorial contract with the films. This complicates the controversy that is raging over these films; a controversy that is based on complaints that von Trier subjects his female protagonist to a patriarchal worldview, restraining her autonomous agency. This is an accusation that has been brought against many of von Trier's films, even though his male protagonists are clearly subordinate as narrative agents to his female ones from *Breaking the Waves* (1996) onwards.

Nymphomaniac Volume I starts with a black screen accompanied by diegetic off-screen noises such as the sound of an approaching train, pattering water, squeaking metal and a dingling bell. Silence enters only after approximately a minute and a half, and the black screen is replaced by a long shot of a dark, gloomy, labyrinthine alley, lit by only one streetlight that illuminates slowly falling snow. The architectural structure of the alley evokes an association with Richard Serra's monumental steel sculptures that literally absorb the spectator within their space, while the film invites us to step into the world of cinema. Then the image is cut to a close-up of meltwater dripping down a brick wall, the camera lingering on its uneven surface before passing a squeaking, rusty ventilation fan and coming to a halt with a trash can cover in close-up, rhythmically hit by the dripping water as if it were a drum. In the next shot the camera tracks along a tin roof before settling in a close-up of a rusty iron nut chain suspended from a roof beam, jingling quietly as the nuts make contact. A chain is often associated with the logic of cause and effect, but the way in which the shots are organized in this opening suggests haphazardness instead, as they follow each other seemingly without any narrative motivation or significance. At the 3:15 minute mark of the film, there is a crane shot into a close-up of a bleeding hand, after which the film tracks into a square hole in the wall, diving into darkness. Finally, there is a shot from inside this hole, the edges functioning as a black frame for the image, just as the wall behind the movie screen in a film theatre might function. The image that we see here is exactly the same as the one with which the film opens, but it is now expanded into an extreme long shot so that we see our badly beaten Joe lying unconscious on the ground to the left side of the image, while Rammstein's 'Führe Mich' ('Lead Me') kicks off forcefully on the soundtrack.

Both volumes of *Nymphomaniac* regularly and randomly cut to footage of which it is difficult to say what status it has, that is, whether the footage is existing educational, archival or stock material, early film imagery or documentary film. There are references to Eadweard Muybridge, von Trier's earlier work (*The Kingdom*, *Antichrist*) and countless quotes from Andrei Tarkovsky. The icon that triggers the chapter on 'The Eastern Church and the Western Church' could be seen as a reference to Tarkovsky's film about the great icon painter *Andrei Rublev* (1966). The image on the title card of *The Compleat Angler* is the spitting image of the first shot of Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972). *Nymphomaniac* also features a shot of Pieter Bruegel's *The Hunters in the Snow* (1565) as well as a Bach church chorale from 'The Little Organ Book', two masterpieces that play important roles in Tarkovsky's film. The scene with young Joe levitating is a direct reference to the levitation scene in Tarkovsky's *Mirror* (1975), and one of the chapters in von Trier's film is given the same title. Again, the similarity between the title card of this chapter and the poster for Tarkovsky's film is striking.

Finally Seligman's apartment itself is as rundown as Stalker's house in *Stalker* (1979). It is clear that we have landed in the world of cinema, and this is why the dilogy can be read as an allegory in the first place.

As said before, the *Nymphomaniac* dilogy revolves around Joe, who narrates her story to Seligman, the man who finds her in the alley and takes her into his house. Her storytelling is triggered by random objects (a fly fishing hook, a cake fork, a painting with a nametag, an orthodox icon, a mirror), conversation topics (Edgar Allan Poe, Johann Sebastian Bach) and even a stain in the wallpaper. This is why the organization of narrative in *Nymphomaniac* cannot be understood in terms of spatial and temporal causality. This is accentuated by the fact that the story is not set in any particular time or space – everybody speaks English, for instance, but the dilogy was mostly shot in Germany and Belgium. The setting, especially the train compartment and Seligman's apartment, is best characterized as shabby and old-fashioned. Joe's clothing seems deliberately inelegant, ranging from vulgar 'fuck-me-now' clothes to a boring 'piano teacher' outfit, both styles chosen to attract men. In *Nymphomaniac*, causality is conditioned by disentangled impulses that randomly emerge. As a result, the spectator does not construct meaning along some sort of logic of cause and effect, but rather along patterns of coincidentally occurring different narrative triggers.

The argument that is made in this essay is threefold. First, I argue that the *Nymphomaniac* dilogy embodies an insight into the ontology of cinema, which takes a polyphonic form. In music, polyphony is a style of composition employing two or more simultaneous, but relatively independent, musical lines. It is the central theme in Chapter Five of the dilogy, entitled 'The Little Organ School'. The narration in this chapter is triggered by a church cantata by Bach that Seligman recently has been listening to. Seligman explains to Joe that Bach was a master of medieval polyphony, which is based on the idea that even though every voice follows its own melody, together they are in harmony. Polyphony has its origins in a form of numerical mysticism based on the Fibonacci sequence, which in turn is connected to Pythagoras' theorem and the golden section. This provides Joe with an opportunity to define her nymphomania as starting from a mathematical premise, rather than as a pathology or as an addiction. She explains that her nymphomania is the sum of all her different sexual experiences and that, in that way, she only has one lover. But since Bach's music has only three voices, she limits herself to talking about three lovers only. There is the gentle-hearted F (Nicolas Bro), who forms the bass voice, the foundation, which is monotone, predictable and ritualistic; G (Christian Gade Bjerrum) is the second voice, unpredictable and in charge; and Jérôme (Shia LaBeouf) is the first voice, cantus firmus, or the secret ingredient, which is love.

These voices are presented to us through a triple split screen tied together with Bach's music. The left screen shows an organist's foot playing the

pedalboard, F waiting outside of Joe's house in his used red car, Joe sitting in his lap, and F performing cunnilingus on her. The right screen shows the organist's left hand playing the keyboard, a jaguar moving through a jungle with prey in its mouth, Muybridge-inspired footage of G naked and walking in the same spot and Joe being taken from behind by him, as if in the clutches of some wild animal. Finally there is the middle screen with the organist's right hand playing the keyboard, and Joe and Jérôme embracing passionately. The scene is cut abruptly to the present tense in Seligman's apartment with an emphatic click from an old-fashioned tape player as it suddenly brings the music to an end. This is followed by a return to the past tense with Joe announcing not to be able to feel anything while still making love to Jérôme, which ends *Volume I* of the *Nymphomaniac* trilogy. The polyphonic structure described in 'The Little Organ School' epitomizes the organizational logic of cinema in general, which entails that there is no distinction between what the film is, what the film means and what the film does. This means that cinema might be best described through what Paul Crowther defines as 'ontological reciprocity', in which our bodily lived capacities (the bass voice) engage with the aesthetic diversity of the film (the second voice) through 'the secret ingredient', which Edgar Morin simply termed magic.² Each of these elements brings forth and defines the characteristics of the others reciprocally and together they operate in a unified field³ – or should we say a *polyphonic* field?

Furthermore, Joe's nymphomania can be described as the defining element of her ontological reciprocity, which shatters the assumption that intimacy is directed towards one person only and cannot be administered in variable degrees. Describing the character that Gainsbourg plays in *Antichrist*, Magdalena Zolkos writes that she is 'free from the forms of self-victimizing and self-destructive love'.⁴ The same could be claimed for Joe, whose nymphomania is not a pathological symptom linked to her inability to conform to society's patriarchal expectations. Rather, her nymphomania is an open strategic game that defies any form of social control telling her how to express her sexuality. This is why it is significant that Joe loses all sexual feeling as soon as she falls in love. Her frigidity can be seen as a form of critical re-examination of the expectations that both men and women hold for their intimate relationships. One of the central assumptions in western society's system of intimacy is that romantic love creates a union, with which the lovers come to identify. This assumption includes a concept of sexual desire as an arena for celebrating this newly formed 'we'. By contrast, Joe's nymphomania and later frigidity do not celebrate the central beliefs and ideals of love, but critically call into question its uncertainty. And it is only after leaving Jérôme and their child that she regains her sexual pleasure, whipped into orgasmic ecstasy by a mild-mannered, soft-spoken sadomasochist K (Jamie Bell). This act of humiliation and brutal cruelty towards Joe could be easily condemned as justifying sexual

violence towards women, but I think the provocative dimension of the scene complicates the all too easy claims that von Trier is a misogynist here, as I will argue later.

My second argument is that the *Nymphomaniac* trilogy is a pornographic work of art that not merely represents but *reveals* – a process in which the spectator is co-responsible for bringing the film's meaning into the open. This is a process based on reciprocity and dialogue. For instance, the first chapter of the trilogy, named after a book by Izaak Walton entitled *The Compleat Angler* (first published in 1653), is prompted by a fishing fly (a nymph) on Seligman's wall. In this chapter the art of fishing is interwoven with the art of seduction both on the visual level and on the level of storytelling. In this sequence the camera follows Joe and her friend B from a low camera position as they make their way through a train corridor in search of men to fuck as a form of competition, as Joe's voice-over explains. Seligman interrupts her story though, in order to draw a parallel with 'reading the river', in which men are equated to fish and women to fishermen. The sequence rewinds and starts again, while the image is superimposed with underwater imagery, inserted with topographic maps of a river and cross-cut with shots of fishing. This exemplifies the way in which Seligman is able to relate to Joe's story, regardless of its remoteness to his embodied experience, as he is asexual. As a result, the meaning of the angling anecdote belongs neither to Joe nor to Seligman, but it emerges through the reciprocal, interactive encounter between the two.

A popular controversial charge brought against the *Nymphomaniac* trilogy comes down to the judgemental – rather than descriptive – claim that it is pornographic. I think the films actually raise the question whether pornography should categorically be considered 'bad' or harmful and generically incompatible with art house cinema.⁵ Furthermore, if cinema is 'an inherently participatory art' like Bruce Isaacs has argued,⁶ then pornography is the ultimate participatory genre. Thus the suggestion embodied in the form and style of *Nymphomaniac* is perhaps that all cinema is inherently pornographic, which is supported by the relationship between Seligman as a spectator-voyeur and Joe as a pornographer-exhibitionist. But, unlike Seligman, we do not have the luxury of occupying the voyeuristic position voluntarily, which perhaps is the true source for the porno-debate surrounding the film.

In another train scene Joe attempts to hold on to her memory of Jérôme, the man who took her virginity, the only one of her lovers whom she grows to love, and with whom she has a child later on. In this scene Joe masturbates amongst other train passengers, doing a jigsaw puzzle in her mind. This jigsaw puzzle consists of details she finds in the other passengers that remind her of Jérôme. The camera tracks into these details, such as a slicked parting of hair or a pair of shoes, which are then framed in the form of a jigsaw puzzle piece. In a white frame with Jérôme as the silhouette, Joe's

mind organizes the pieces so that in the end a fragmented patchwork of 'Jerôme' emerges, which she nevertheless finds impossible to hold on to. This sequence is what Pepita Hesselberth and Laura Schuster call a 'recollection narrative' in their discussion of puzzle films,⁷ and it could be seen as a watching instruction for the whole dilogy. It exemplifies the way in which the act of random recollection is the operational logic of the films' narrative strategy. But it also shows how sensuous, affective meaning can arise from a fusion of the separate, formal features of the world, which is what happens when an artist creates an artwork that others can respond to.

Memory, and the limitations of memory, play a central role in the opening scene of the chapter on 'Mrs H', in which Joe starts having trouble remembering which of her lovers is which. These men exist only as random voices in Joe's answering machine, so that they stay anonymous and inseparable from each other, both for us and for herself. As she finds it impossible to remember the individual relationships or to predict the things these men want to hear, she invents a method based on randomness and chance. Sitting at her kitchen table Joe is shown throwing a dice, which determines the reaction each of these anonymous voices will get, ranging from an overtly loving answer to complete rejection. Neither she nor her lovers can predict what her reaction will be, and this unpredictability can be considered emblematic for cinema in general, in which 'the canonical and recurrent elements are juxtaposed with unique and specific elements; and the audience's expectations are juxtaposed with unavoidable surprises', as Francesco Cassetti puts it.⁸

The *Nymphomaniac* dilogy is by no means the first film in which von Trier explores the concepts of unpredictability and chance. In his *The Boss of It All* (2006), the film-maker used a computerized method called Automavision, in which the computer picks six or eight randomized set-ups for each scene. In *The Five Obstructions* (2003), von Trier has his mentor film-maker Jørgen Leth make five new versions of his short film *The Perfect Human* (1967). In this film, and especially in its fifth chapter, the point is that the highly skilled, perfectionist Leth is forced to make a mess of his own film by the equally skilled, perfectionist von Trier. As the fifth and the ultimate obstruction, von Trier states that Leth is to do nothing at all apart from being credited as the director, and reading the narration written by von Trier. The fifth version consists of scenes that had already been shot during Leth's four previous sojourns in Cuba, Bombay, Brussels and Texas, while reworking *The Perfect Human*. Furthermore, this black-and-white footage is collected and assembled neither by Leth nor by von Trier, but by Camilla Skousen, one of the film's editors.

Thus all the rules of film-making are deliberately ignored, and the resulting film has nothing to do with the original *The Perfect Human*, but with von Trier's personal relationship with Leth, the latter being present in every randomly chosen scene on top of which he narrates words not

written by him. I think that here von Trier's point is that in the process of making, the film always takes on a life of its own, which seems to have almost nothing to do with the film-maker's attempt to control it.⁹ Furthermore, in *The Five Obstructions* the two film-makers try to understand each other's aesthetic choices, just as one might imagine a film-maker attempting to predict what the audience's response to his or her film will be. Obviously, this too is beyond the film-maker's full control, which makes all cinema fundamentally unpredictable and accidental. At the same time film spectatorship too is a process in which the spectators use their intuitive understanding of the creative or artistic choices of the film-maker, without ever being able to know what went on exactly during the making of the film. Hence my argument that Joe and Seligman's relationship can be seen in allegorical terms that describe the relationship between cinema and the spectator in general. Joe is the 'film-maker' telling her story and Seligman is the 'spectator' investing in her story in a way that enhances his own experience of it. Crowther describes this relationship as follows:

The artwork [...] places us in a relation of aesthetic empathy to the creator's view of things. In such an experience, we are not simply told how a fellow being views and experiences the world. Rather [...] because the work becomes physically independent of its creator once its production is complete, we are free to appropriate his or her version on our terms. What is common in the work to both artist's and recipient's experience can serve as a basis for imaginative development by the latter.¹⁰

Furthermore, this relationship could be considered as a film-philosophical concept, be it in a romantic sense. According to Robert Sinnerbrink this is based on:

a mutual becoming, a dynamic, *transformative* relationship in which the *relata* in question are profoundly altered by their very engagement, opening them up to new relations with each other as well as with other things (as in any good relationship).¹¹

This mutual becoming might best be described as based on the concept of trust, which takes me up to my third argument. As Philipp Schermheim has shown, trust plays a central role in aesthetic experiences, insofar as they provide us with the feeling that our connecting link with the world is not broken. He writes that trust:

essentially seems to be an attitude directed at a world shared with others, a matter of being-with-someone, or being-with-others. Put prosaically, trust means closing one's eyes and falling asleep on the passenger seat in

the certainty that the driver will steer you safely towards your mutual goal. It is a form of letting go.¹²

This trust is the main reason why Joe narrates her story to Seligman in the first place, and why he agrees to listen, although not always without disbelief. For instance, in the scene in which Joe is reunited with Jérôme, she is shown taking a walk in the forest where she accidentally stumbles upon some pieces of torn photographs, scattered around like clues for a treasure trail. Joe decides to follow these clues, and the final piece she picks up depicts Jérôme during his honeymoon, after which a male hand emerges in the image from the upper right corner of the frame. In the left side of the frame, Joe looks up to what appears to be Jérôme himself, reaching down to Joe. Seligman comments on this account as follows:

No. No, no, no. No, there ... there are some completely unrealistic coincidences in your story about Jérôme. First, by chance, he hires you as an assistant, and then you take a walk in the forest that is littered with photographs of him. And not only that, he is present. And then, like a God, pulls you up to him through the clouds. Goodness gracious.

Both Seligman's disbelief and Joe's reaction ('Which way do you think you'd get the most out of my story? By believing in it or by not believing in it?') could be seen allegorically to describe the relationship between cinema and the spectator in general. Joe asks Seligman to trust her and, after a brief hesitation, he agrees. It could be argued that it is through trust that cinema – more or less successfully – invites us to invest in its spatio-temporal organization and to experience its aesthetic system from within our own sensory perception and intelligent deliberation, even when we are aware of the films' fictional and artificial status. Daniel Yacavone makes a similar claim when he argues that in an aesthetic apprehension of cinema the spectator becomes immersed in the film world through the temporal, spatial and affective dimensions that structure the cinematic experience.¹³ Furthermore, this experience is reciprocal and co-creative since, as Thomas Elsaesser puts it:

A film not only immerses and absorbs an audience into its (fictional) world, there is also a counter-current where the spectator has to immerse the film into his (psychic) world, brought to the threshold of consciousness and bodily sensation by the complicated dynamics emanating from a viewing situation itself.¹⁴

This reciprocity could be seen as an affective-intellectual energy that flows in both directions, and as soon as this flow of energy is blocked a form of resistance develops, which 'makes it impossible for the film to

“work”.¹⁵ This blocking of energy between the film and the spectator has consequences for the aesthetic appreciation of the film and, in fact, the whole process of appreciation may depend vitally on the way in which the flow of energy establishes itself, as I shall show later.

Another scene that could evoke disbelief rather than trust takes place at the beginning of *Nymphomaniac Volume II*. The film starts off where *Volume I* left off: Joe's sudden frigidity and the ensuing apathy. At this point Joe shifts her narration to the past, to a memory of a school trip in the hills. In this sequence, the twelve-year-old Joe is shown in a medium close-up lying on her back in a field, cut with shots of high grass blowing in the wind, bumble bees collecting nectar from flowers and a small creek running down the hill, with the sound of birds chirping empathically on the soundtrack. Some of these shots are framed differently, so that our attention is directed to the black borders on the edges of the image, reminding us of the film's artificial status. This is followed by a shot of the brightly shining sun, centred exactly in the middle of the image. There is a booming noise, during which Joe is shown levitating towards the sun while experiencing a spontaneous orgasm. A circle of light emerges, with two figures on each side of the circle, with Joe in the middle. Seligman offers as an insight that these women were Valeria Messalina, the wife of Emperor Claudius, the most notorious nymphomaniac in history, and the great whore of Babylon. He interprets Joe's account as a blasphemous recounting of the New Testament narrative in which Jesus is transfigured and becomes radiant in glory upon a mountain. As he has trouble relating to her story, Joe asks Seligman to imagine that he lost all desire to read, all his love and passion for literature, in one fell swoop. This request is accompanied by an image of a naked, frozen Joe floating in the air and dissolving into a vast ocean, which is followed by a similar image of Seligman dissolving into an ocean of books and letters. This may demonstrate the power of cinema, enabling unusual experiences that might otherwise be out of reach for an average spectator.

This blasphemous theme continues in the chapter 'The Eastern Church and the Western Church', in which the Western Church is clearly meant to refer to 'natural' heteronormative sexuality, and the Eastern Church to an 'unnatural', dark form of sexuality based on sadomasochism. But for Joe sadomasochism becomes 'the real creation of new possibilities of pleasure, which people had no idea about previously', as Michel Foucault would have it.¹⁶ Yet it is in these scenes that the film starts to breach the relationship of trust with the spectator. First there is a scene in which Joe attempts to experience a sexual situation with two African men, in which verbal communication would be impossible. In this scene the two men are having an argument about how to perform the threesome. But the way in which the scene is filmed – mobile camera positioned on low height turning from left to right with Joe in the middle – creates the impression that their penises were having the discussion, not the men themselves. This

is a hilarious scene, but it is also a troubling scene as it would be very easy to interpret it in racist terms, insofar as in the scene the agency of the two men is confined to their bodily characteristics and their sexual ability only. In my opinion, this is a conscious provocation on von Trier's part. Von Trier is often considered a notorious provocateur, accused of misogyny ever since his 1996 film *Breaking the Waves*, and especially with regard to his *Antichrist* (2009), in which Gainsbourg's character cuts off her own clitoris with rusty scissors. But rather than being misogynist, the film provides a serious metacinematic commentary on misogyny, as Sinnerbrink has shown.¹⁷ Similarly, this scene could be considered conscious of its own racism, but the question remains whether this makes the scene any less racist. In any case, we start to doubt as to how we should react to these scenes. In other words, we are starting to lose our faith; no longer is the relationship a good relationship.

In the same chapter, in order to get back her orgasm, Joe starts her nightly visits to K's ascetic practice studio, the man for whom she leaves Jérôme and their child Marcel on Christmas Eve. A particularly cruel spanking session follows a sequence that is a direct reference to von Trier's *Antichrist*. Here shots of Joe in K's waiting room are cross-cut with shots of Marcel waking up to the noises and the flashing lights of a snow plough. And, getting out of bed, he heads towards the balcony doors that are wide open. The sequence is accompanied by Handel's aria 'Lascia ch'io pianga', which can be heard in the remarkable opening scene of *Antichrist*, in which a child falls to his death while his parents are making love. As a result, the audience's expectation in *Nymphomaniac* is that Marcel will fall too, but he is rescued by Jérôme at the last moment. After Jérôme gives her an ultimatum, Joe shows up at K's place unexpectedly, forcefully demanding his 'cock'. In the spanking scene Joe receives the 'original Roman maximum' of forty lashes, while stimulating her clitoris against the cover of the telephone book under her pelvis. All this is shot up close and personal, camera constantly switching from close-ups of Joe's buttocks full of bleeding wounds and bruises to close-ups of her ecstatic face. This creates a proximity, which is not pleasurable but agonizing, as it confronts the spectators with their spectatorial desire, breaching the trust that the film can be experienced from a safe distance. As a *New Yorker* critic described this scene of excruciating detail, 'von Trier seems to be saying, "You're fascinated? Well, stomach this"'.¹⁸ According to Jacques Lacan, this is the function of all visual art. For him, art must lead to self-reflection, catch the spectators looking, invite them to see themselves not only seeing, but also as seen:

The painter gives something to the person who must stand in front of his painting which, in part, at least, might be summed up thus – *You want to see? Well, take a look at this!* He gives something for the eye to feed on,

but he invites the person to whom this picture is presented to lay down his gaze there as one lays down one's weapons.¹⁹

Von Trier's provocation explicitly challenges the coordinates of the film-maker-spectator relationship, critically daring us to converse with him rather than to condemn him,²⁰ in a similar fashion to the way Joe dares Seligman. Thus again the formal structure of the film as framed by the relationship between the two confirms the analogy of Joe as a film-maker and Seligman as a spectator. Further evidence for this analogy can be found in von Trier repeatedly stating that his female characters are all versions of himself, an approach borrowed from Carl Theodor Dreyer.²¹ Not only does this complicate the controversy surrounding von Trier's representation of his female characters, it also complicates the divide between the character and the film-maker, as well as the divide between the film-maker and the spectators. The relationship between the film-maker and the spectators in von Trier's films has always been saturated by provocation, which is not always appreciated by his critics. For instance, Mette Hjort writes that, due to von Trier's provocation, he is 'less of an artist than he could be, on account of his consistent gravitation, in his films and his public pronouncements, towards provocation [which is] inappropriate, irresponsible, disingenuous, and incoherent'.²² By contrast, I argue that von Trier's provocation is a responsible form of provocation – in the sense of assuming responsibility – rather than merely seeking controversy insofar as it is based on risk-taking and rendering oneself vulnerable to misinterpretation. At the same time, von Trier's provocation makes it impossible for the spectators to ignore the process of their own interpretative engagement with his work, which potentially also provides grounds for philosophical reflection.

The *Nymphomaniac* dilogy ends with Seligman 'absolving' Joe's 'sins' and leaving her to sleep after she has finished her story, and the trusting relationship between them could be compared to the Sacrament of Penance by which a penitent confesses his or her sins to a priest. This association is evoked also by the phrase 'mea maxima vulva', hauntingly chanted by Joe and her friends during a ceremonial scene of a secret sect that repudiates love in the pursuit of sex. Obviously the phrase is a blasphemous twist of a prayer of confession when a penitent receives the sacrament of Penance. But then Seligman betrays the trusting relationship by re-entering the room and climbing into her bed, in an attempt to have sex with her. Joe reacts by reaching for her gun, at which point the image goes black and we can only hear the subsequent series of actions: the sound of cocking the gun, Seligman pleading ('but you have fucked thousands of men!'), his body thudding, Joe getting dressed and escaping. Finally, the film ends with Charlotte Gainsbourg singing Jimi Hendricks's 'Hey Joe'. This ending is significant as it shows that the breach of trust between the film and the spectator can go both ways. All films beg for spectators to fill in the gaps

left open by film-makers, but some film-makers like von Trier structure their films in order to invite the spectators to reflect on the way in which they fill in these gaps. In other words, film-makers too trust the spectators and their ability to generate and to contribute to the diversity of cinematic experience. Throughout the *Nymphomaniac* diology we see examples of this as Seligman continuously fills in the gaps in Joe's narration with his own stories of the superiority of Finnish lures, the role of cake forks in the Bolshevik revolution, and the mountain climber Prusik, among other things. But in the end Seligman turns out to be an unreliable spectator, totally misinterpreting Joe's motivation to tell her story. And this seems to be especially relevant in the context of the reception of von Trier's controversial *oeuvre*.

But what does this have to do with valuing cinema? That, too, has to do with trust, insofar as the aesthetic appreciation seems to be at its most intense when one is able to have faith in the intentional dimension of the film. It is this intention that enables reciprocal exchange to occur between cinema and the spectator. This means that aesthetic appreciation is not merely a question of imposing interpretation *on* the film, but rather a relation that emerges in and through an affective, embodied, sensorial, and intellectual engagement *with* the film. Martin Heidegger, among others, affirms this when he writes that lived experience is 'the source that is standard not only for art appreciation and enjoyment but also for artistic creation'.²³ In this process both the film (maker) and the spectator are co-responsible for the emergence of the cinematic event, and they need to trust each other for being open to this responsibility. Crowther argues that in aesthetic appreciation:

We *empathize* with ... those feelings and intentions which we take to be embodied in the work's formal structure. Here, at the very least, the grounds of our appreciation logically presuppose that we *believe* [my italics] the work to be what it seems to be.²⁴

At the same time, this complex encounter can neither be known in advance nor predicted, as the film becomes more or less independent of the film-maker once its production is complete, after which the spectators are free to appropriate the film-maker's vision on their own terms. Crowther writes that aesthetic form is only energized if it reflects the possibility of an exchange of this kind of freedom between the artist and the spectator.²⁵ What makes the *Nymphomaniac* diology unique is that it enables the spectators to see von Trier's vision from where he sees the spectators, but at the same time it grants the spectators the freedom to engage with this vision on their own terms as well. This actually renders the diology an ethical project aimed at altering our practices of looking, so that we might adjust our viewing mode and then look again. This second look might be

characterized as what Linda Williams calls a 'double vision', a recognition of the way female sexuality is traditionally located within the gendered economy of looking, which renders the conventional spectatorial contract much more problematic.²⁶

Notes

- 1 In a similar vein, Nicola Evans argues that the controversy surrounding von Trier's *oeuvre* stems from the way in which his films violate the 'melodramatic contract' with the spectators. Nicola Evans, 'How to Make Your Audience Suffer: Melodrama, Masochism, and Dead Time in Lars von Trier's *Dogville*', *Culture, Theory and Critique* 3 (2014): 366.
- 2 Edgar Morin, *The Cinema, or the Imaginary Man*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005, p. 107.
- 3 Paul Crowther, *Art and Embodiment: From Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 2.
- 4 Magdalena Zolkos, 'Violent Affects: Nature and the Feminine in Lars von Trier's *Antichrist*', *Parrhesia* 13 (2011): 186.
- 5 Similar debates have surrounded films such as Nagisa Oshima's *The Realm of the Senses* (1976), Virginie Despentes' *Baise-moi* (2000) and Patrice Chéreau's *Intimacy* (2001). But as Linda Williams has argued, explicit sexual dramas like these can also be seen defying 'the soft-focus erotic prettiness ... of mainstream Hollywood', thereby allowing 'an unprecedented emotional and physical honesty', Linda Williams, 'Cinema and the Sex Act', *Cineaste* 1 (2001): 21–3. I think that similar claims could be made of the *Nymphomaniac* diology.
- 6 Bruce Isaacs, *Toward a New Film Aesthetics*, New York: Continuum, 2008, p. 77.
- 7 Pepita Hesselberth and Laura Schuster, 'Into the Mind and Out to the World: Memory Anxiety in the Mind-Game Film', in Jaap Kooijman, Patricia Pisters and Wanda Strauven (eds), *Mind the Screen: Media Concepts According to Thomas Elsaesser*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008, p. 98.
- 8 Francesco Cassetti, *Communicative Negotiation in Cinema and Television*, Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2002, p. 29.
- 9 For a similar point on painting, see Barbara Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2010, p. 1.
- 10 *Art and Embodiment*, p. 173.
- 11 Robert Sinnerbrink, 'Re-enfranchising Film: Towards a Romantic Film-Philosophy', in Havi Carel and Greg Tuck (eds), *New Takes in Film-Philosophy*, New York: Palgrave, 2011, p. 41.
- 12 Philipp Schermerheim, *Scepticism Films: Knowing and Doubting the World in Contemporary Cinema*, Amsterdam: ASCA, 2013, p. 207.

- 13 Daniel Yacavone, *Film Worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2015, p. 193.
- 14 Thomas Elsaesser, *The Persistence of Hollywood*, New York: Routledge, 2012, p. 97.
- 15 *The Persistence of Hollywood*, p. 97.
- 16 Michel Foucault, 'Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity', in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, New York: New York Press, 1997, p. 165.
- 17 Robert Sinnerbrink, *New Philosophies of Film: Thinking Images*, New York: Continuum, 2011, p. 163.
- 18 David Denby, 'The Story of Joe', *New Yorker*, 24 March 2014. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/03/24/the-story-of-joe>.
- 19 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, London: Penguin, 1994, p. 101.
- 20 On this point see also Lori J. Marso, 'Must We Burn Lars von Trier? Simone de Beauvoir's Body Politics in *Antichrist*', *Theory & Event* 18 (2015).
- 21 Paul O'Callaghan, 'The Many Faces of Lars von Trier', *British Film Institute*, 25 February 2014. <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/features/many-faces-lars-von-trier>. In an interview with the Danish *Politiken* on *Antichrist*, Charlotte Gainsbourg confirms this by saying: 'It was my character that Lars has personally identified with. He was very close inside the life of my character and my feelings, my vulnerability, my anxiety attacks were his. It was *him* that was *her*' (cited in 'Violent Affects', p. 179).
- 22 Mette Hjort, 'The Problem with Provocation: On Lars von Trier, *Enfant Terrible* of Danish Art Film', *Kinema: A Journal for Film and Audiovisual Media* 2013. <http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/article.php?id=492&feature>.
- 23 Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977, p. 204.
- 24 *Art and Embodiment*, 22.
- 25 Crowther, *Art and Embodiment*, p. 174.
- 26 Such questioning of our ethical relation to the spectators' acts of looking can be found in many other films by Lars von Trier, like Caroline Bainbridge has shown. She argues that the ethical structures found in von Trier's *oeuvre* concern not only the films themselves, but also the spectator's relationship with them. Caroline Bainbridge, 'Making Waves: Trauma and Ethics in the work of Lars von Trier', *Journal for Cultural Research* 3 (2004): 364–5.