

Regarding the Pathology of Others? Narrating Female Hyper-sexuality in *Nymphomaniac* (2014)

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Abstract: This article analyzes the therapeutic discourses in Lars von Trier's film *Nymphomaniac* (2014), exploring the deconstruction of the boundary between pathology and normativity, as well as the reconstruction of the relationship among audience, creator and film text. This article points out that *Nymphomaniac* consistently challenges the boundary between normativity and pathology through consciously engaging with the therapeutic discourses in the film, notably constructed through the dialogue between Seligman and Joe, and the reflexive gaze of the self in the group therapy scene, inviting the spectator into the meta-narrative game of the film. The ending of the film further challenges its own therapeutic structure: not only does the nymphomaniac narrative subject fire at the creator, the nymphomaniacal creator also shoots back at the spectator who expects a shocking ending from a transgressive art film, revealing that the audience has long participated in constructing the purpose and meaning of the artwork. This article thus argues that *Nymphomaniac* provokes spectatorial reflection not merely through the transgression of its content, but constructs a spectatorial game on the meta-level: by regarding pathology and madness as the source of creativity, the film forces the audience to face a dilemma—either forfeit the creative act to avoid the risk of falling into madness, or recognize that madness is actually part of normativity and they are already enmeshed in it. This article further suggests that the blurring of the boundaries between pathology and normativity, self and other in *Nymphomaniac* also reflects the relationship between extreme cinema and mainstream cinema: the transgressiveness of the former is defined by the norms set by the latter, and the gradual adaptation of the audience to the visual spectacle of extreme cinema has gradually weakened the provocative power of cinematic extremism. The reflexivity of *Nymphomaniac* provides a way out of this dilemma: instead of relying on the novelty of content to achieve subversion, the film implicates the spectator in the textual construction through reflexive re-examination of pathological sexuality, which is a narrative trope of transgressive cinema, and ultimately transforms the reflexive negotiation of hypersexuality between pathology and normativity into a reflexive spectatorship. This article holds that this negotiation completes the contested encounter between self and other not only in the cinematic space, but also beyond the silver screen, and provides a new approach for transgressive non-mainstream cinema to maintain its subversive potential.

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1. Introduction

A gaping void, visually devoid of sensual stimulus: this is the opening scene of *Nymphomaniac* (2014), a film with an allegedly unprecedented degree of explicit sexual representation (McNair 2017, 258). That the excessively pornographic content of *Nymphomaniac* does not simply serve as a form of erotic entertainment which elicits spectatorial voyeurism is apparent from the beginning of the film, where the blackened screen casts the audience into a visual void that forces them to mobilize their sensual perception to make sense of the off-screen sounds without the aid of visual cues. The affective experience of a gaping void represents a “shockridden, disorienting, convulsive world” (Huffer 2016, 100) into which the viewer is plunged. This sensual discomfort, which requires the audience to attune themselves to the filmic environment, provokes them into engaging in a consciously reflexive mode of spectatorship.

Pulled into an eerie, liminal space by the camera, which, as with the introduction sequences in von Trier's other films, such as *Antichrist* (2009) and *Melancholia* (2011) (Thomsen 2018, 294), presents a haptic description of a black void that is later revealed as “a violent, claustrophobic space seemingly bereft of hope” (295), the spectator is absorbed into the cinematic space (Laine 2017,



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234). In contrast to this “haptic–violent, realistically represented backyard outside,” the narrative action of the film takes place in the “literary, imaginary zone inside” (Thomsen 2018, 296). This inside space is potentially therapeutic, as Seligman, who assumes the position of the therapist, invites Joe, whom he found lying half-dead in the dark alleyway, to tell the story of how she ended up there. This is also an invitation to the viewer to hear the story: here, Joe’s narrative functions as a device which is “used to hook the viewer” (Thomsen 2018, 296).

This narrative hook, which invites the audience into the story, establishes a link between the spectator and Seligman, who are both interpreters of Joe’s narrative. As recognized by Linda Badley (2022), “*Nymphomaniac*’s therapeutic framework also bears uncanny resemblances to *Anita: Swedish Nymphet* [(Wickman 1973)],” starring “a young Stellan Skarsgård as Erik, a psychology student” who listens to the story of the titular nymphomaniac Anita (122). If Anita succumbs to the psycho-therapeutic authority of Erik, who eventually cures her, then *Nymphomaniac* raises questions about the reliability of Seligman as therapist, which throws doubt on the role assumed by the spectators themselves as interpreters of Joe’s story.

At the end of the film, the role of interpreter is relegated wholly to the audience, as Seligman, inadvertently falling victim to what in therapeutic discourse is called countertransference, ends up being “[d]rawn into the web of the patient’s desires” (Neroni 2017, 219). Despite being a self-claimed asexual intellect, Seligman attempts to rape Joe after hearing her narrative about her hypersexuality. This impulse to act on the urge of bodily desires calls attention to the precariousness of the voyeuristic mode of spectatorship elicited by pornographic films. Seligman’s failure as a therapist who must remain detached from the patient’s emotions poses to the viewer the question of whether they, too, are safe from the desires that they have been witnessing, especially because of the implicit identification between the audience and Seligman as interpreters of Joe’s narrative.

This implication of the audience through inviting them to identify with a character who is revealed only at the end of the film to be highly problematic underlines the reflexive nature of the mode of spectatorship that *Nymphomaniac* enacts. It can thus be seen that spectatorial participation in *Nymphomaniac* is not only inextricably bound up with the pornographic content of the film, as “pornography is the ultimate participatory genre” (Laine 2017, 233), but also enacted through engagement in the interpretative task that is assigned to the audience. *Nymphomaniac* achieves a reflexive “unveiling of the pornographic genre, which in its classic form fulfils the voyeuristic urge to such a degree that physical satisfaction can be achieved” (Thomsen 2018, 298) through the strained way in which desires are played out. Joe’s narrative is structured as a confession; she is ridden with guilt and repentance as the confessor. *Nymphomaniac* thus does not allow desire to be fully played out, as in a purely pornographic film, but rather puts pressure on the audience to interpret what is entailed by the satisfaction or restriction of that desire.

The tension between the sensuality of the film’s pornographic portrayals of sex and the reflexive engagement that it requires of the viewer is construed by Lynne Huffer (2016) in the light of “Agamben’s description of artistic creation as an amorous relation between man and nymph” (112). Huffer (2016) interprets the sexual excess of *Nymphomaniac* as “seduc[ing] the viewer into a complicit relation,” not only “with Seligman’s possessive, digressive, violently appropriative intellectual projections” of Joe, but also with von Trier, “the artist-director-Pygmalion brain mirrored in the film by Seligman” (99). Huffer’s (2016) analysis of this implicating mode of spectatorship situates “the dangers of nymphomania lurking beneath the Pygmalion story’s understanding of artistic creation” (110) within the history of the medico-literary discourse on the relationship between creation and madness. The nymph who stands for the source of creative inspiration for the male creator has, historically, been perceived of as unsuitable for that act of creation, since women’s active desire, it has been argued, cannot ultimately be sublimated into cultural productivity, but has instead only been diagnosed in medical discourses as an excessiveness which accounts for illnesses such as nymphomania (Huffer 2016, 112).

Huffer (2016) suggests that this is challenged by *Nymphomaniac*’s “restag[ing of] the relation of projection and screen as a non-self-identical, self-fracturing game. In so doing, it unmakes itself, ultimately shooting back at the sexualized system of projection that brought it into being” (114). As we will see, the reversal of roles, which culminates in the transformation of the cerebral Seligman into a “nymphomaniac” who is “possessed by a madness he analyzes but cannot contain” (114), also reveals the filmmaker and the spectator to be, like Seligman, the real nymphomaniac. If the nymph was posited as the “other” in the original creation myth that the film draws upon, then the reversal of roles turns the male creator, as well as the spectator who identifies with him, into the “other” in a renegotiated narrative where it is the nymph who asserts her agency over her male “others.”

Underlying the medico-literary discourse on gender, creation and desire which Huffer draws upon in theorizing a mode of nymphomaniacal spectatorship is the association of pathology with creativity. This can be applied not only in the context of the nymphomaniacal creator theorized by Huffer with reference to *Nymphomaniac*, but also, in a broader context, to von Trier’s own contested experience with and conscious reflection upon therapy and mental illness. Von Trier’s collaborators suggest that his struggle with alcoholism underlay *Nymphomaniac*’s engagement with the therapeutic discourse on addiction (Badley 2022, 120).

It is perhaps because of the sense of disillusionment with psychological clichés which von Trier derives from his experience of therapy that he presents *Nymphomaniac* as a film which, instead of being a case study of sexual pathology (Badley 2022, 120), uses self-reflexive techniques, such as the incorporation of documentary images as an accompaniment to Seligman’s commentary on Joe’s narrative, to conduct a more open-ended exploration of sexuality (118). The shared identity between director and protagonist as “addict” provides a foundation for emotional identification that is manifested in the film by Joe’s “diverge[nce] from norms and labels” (Badley 2022, 120), which parallels von Trier’s avoidance of labeling addiction as pathology by opting for a more conscious engagement with the therapeutic discourse using reflexive cinematic techniques. In the film diegesis, Seligman’s digressive comments on the central narrative of sexuality in *Nymphomaniac* creates a stylistic fluidity which reflects upon the film’s challenging of a fixed definition of normativity.

The “discursive and metadiscursive edge” that *Nymphomaniac*, like von Trier’s other films, such as *Epidemic* (1987), *The Idiots*, *Dogville* (2003), and *Manderley* (2005), flaunts (Badley 2022, 118), is transformed in the cinematic diegesis into a questioning of the discursive power of the therapeutic discourse as a means of pathologizing sexuality. This challenging of the labeling of hypersexuality as pathology is most notably manifested in the somewhat parodic portrayal of the group therapy scenes, as well as through the emergence of a therapeutic subtext that underlies the cinematic narrative which draws upon pathology as a source of productivity. This narrative function of pathology as a means of productivity can be understood in the light of Thomas Elsaesser’s

(2016) analysis of Joe's nymphomania as a psychological state which, "border[ing] on the pathological" (309), is converted into a "productive pathology" that enables Joe "to undertake undertake tasks or take risks that more 'normal' people are incapable of" (310).

I point out that, however, this narrative productivity comes at the price of reading "pathological" behaviour as "unmarked" in Elsaesser's (2017) observation that such "behaviour may seem aberrant and even dangerous under ordinary circumstances, but in the narrative is not marked as a disorder or affliction" (13). I suggest that, in *Nymphomaniac*, Joe's nymphomania is not unmarked, as in the case of a pathology that simply serves a narrative function. Though nymphomania is not labeled pathological as such, there is a reflection on nymphomania in the context of the pathological, which is manifested by the conscious engagement with the medical discourse on female hyper-sexuality through the "obsessive but irreverent portrayal of experts, therapies, cases, and testimonies" (Badley 2022, 118). Through this conscious reflection on the effectiveness of therapeutic discourses, *Nymphomaniac* throws into question whether "different mental-physiological states" (Elsaesser 2017, 13) are indeed pathologies in the first place. Unpacking how this tension between pathology and productivity is played out through the negotiation of the medical discourse on female hyper-sexuality via different modes of therapeutic regimes in *Nymphomaniac*, I will now explore how the fraught relationship between pathology, therapy and productivity bears, through the unique mode of spectator-ship that is enacted by the film, upon cinema as a contested space for playing out taboo desires.

2. The Toxicity of Therapy: Othering the Self through Pathologizing Sexuality

The most explicit engagement with the therapeutic discourse in *Nymphomaniac*, manifested through the scene of the psychotherapy group of which Joe becomes a member, is grounded in the negotiation of the relationship between self and other. After Joe's endless pursuit of sexual pleasure had culminated in the destruction of both her marriage and her body, thus becoming more "visibly corporeal" as well as "socially unacceptable" (Thomsen 2018, 334), she is demanded by her boss to seek help for overcoming her excessive sex drive. Though supposedly serving as a means for the rectification of socially deviant sexuality, group therapy turns out to be an ineffective treatment for Joe. The first shot of the room in which the group therapy is conducted is presented from a high camera angle, which creates a sense of alienation and oppression. The capaciousness of the room throws into relief the smallness of the circle of people that occupies just a section of the space, creating a haunting sense of emptiness which is echoed by the blankness of the apartment that Joe is asked by her therapist to clear out, so that there is nothing left to arouse her sexual desire.

In the scene after the first group therapy session, Joe clears out her room to the accompaniment of the Introitus of Mozart's *Requiem in D Minor*, K. 626. The swelling background music culminates in the scene where Joe lies in bed, covered in black clothing, which, in this context, could be interpreted as resembling a black shroud that covers her up, stifling her sexuality and vitality. The window is pasted with newspapers; the room has now been transformed into a suppressing blankness, an entombment for the restless Joe. In a sense, the requiem, which can be understood as an injunction to Joe to put her sexuality to rest, also represents Joe's conflicted psychology, since the swelling music serves as an affirmation of the fact that even a requiem is not stylistically restful.

The blankness of Joe's apartment room represents the erasure of her identity through group therapy, which "impos[es] upon one an identity defined by transgression and abnormality" (Hallsworth 2021, 82), thus pressuring Joe "to recognise that her addiction resembles everyone else's" (Thomsen 2018, 335). Joe's mental deviance is thus first identified as being similar to all other mental illnesses for it to be regulated, which reveals how "the institution of medicine [] seeks to reduce and classify her" through "the scientific practices of nomenclature and diagnosis" (Hallsworth 2021, 82). Within this biopolitical framework of the disciplining of sexuality through knowledge-power (Foucault 1978, 143), all psychopathologies are the same, and can be cured through the same psycho-therapeutic process.

However, for Joe, therapy is ineffective, not only in the sense that it pathologizes in order to remedy, but also in that it reinforces the desires that it meant to repress, since "she experiences a spontaneous orgasm on the basis of her efforts to control her desire" when clearing out her apartment (Featherstone 2016, 31). By depriving Joe of the sexual drive that has been such a dominant force in her previous life, group therapy paradoxically reminds Joe of the importance of this libidinous energy for negotiating her sense of self, triggering her subconscious response of preserving it as a means of asserting her identity. During the group therapy session after Joe has cleared out her apartment to erase her sexuality, just at the moment that she is about to acknowledge that, as a sex addict, she is like everyone else in the therapy group, she catches a glimpse of her younger self in the mirror. Startled, Joe looks back but sees only a row of empty chairs. She pauses, unable to proceed with the formulaic "twelve-step recovery" initiated in group therapy by the conventional, confessional opening line, "my name is Joe, and I'm a sex addict" (Huffer 2016, 97).

Meeting the gaze of her younger self staring back at her from the mirror, Joe looks down at the notes she has made for the session and tears them into shreds. In a calm voice she claims that she is different from the other group members, before lashing out at them and her therapist, whom she accuses of trying to police her desires. Marching out of the room indignantly, Joe leaves behind her notes on the seat and her bewildered former group members. In the next shot she is walking away from a burning car, accompanied by the upbeat background music, the Talking Heads' "Burning Down the House" (Badley 2022, 140). The therapeutic control and regulation of desire are thus defeated by the younger Joe's stare from the mirror; the gaze of the other which attempts to subject Joe to a process of pathologization is thus ultimately not as powerful as the reflexive gaze of the self.

The gaze of the young Joe in the mirror reveals the danger of psychotherapy as a process of a pathologizing "othering," to which the adult Joe has been subjected, but which may be overlooked in therapy discourses. According to psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, psychotherapy is "a technique for creating a potential space" (Zittoun and Stenner 2022, 1081) which, in Bainbridge's (2014) analysis, "negotiate[s] the relationship between the very separate worlds of inner and outer experience," thus "facilitat[ing] a re-working of personal (internal) experience in light of what is observed in the reactions and/or contributions of others" (55). However, the depiction of group therapy in *Nymphomaniac* reveals that this encounter between self and other can also be perilous, as group therapy poses a threat to Joe's identity.

Finding her sexuality smothered in that regulating, assimilating therapeutic discourse which labels hyper-sexuality an addiction just like any other, "Joe refuses to identify as an addict, instead branding herself as a nymphomaniac and impugning psychological

interventions” (Hallsworth 2021, 82). By appropriating what is seen to be the archaic, gender-biased expression “nymphomaniac,” Joe counters the seemingly neutral yet disturbingly pathologizing psycho-therapeutic discourse on sex addiction. Joe’s “opposition to a medical discourse as a frame for her deviations” thus “reinforces the inadequacy of dominant institutions to rationalise or otherwise explain her identity” (Hallsworth 2021, 82), revealing “therapy as a normalizing force not able to provide viable alternatives to variations of the symptom” (Kurilla 2015, 117). However, the othering force of group therapy also ultimately leads to the assertion of a sense of self; it is thus indeed in relation to the other that the self is defined. Having examined the contentious negotiation of self and other through the conscious engagement with the therapeutic discourse in the group therapy scene, I will analyze, in the next section, how the complex relationship between self and other is further played out through *Nymphomaniac*’s more subtle engagement with narrative therapy, which structures the dialogue between Joe and Seligman that frames the film.

3. Self-Care as Cure: Narrating the Nature of the Nymph

In the group therapy scene, where “the reflection of the child Joe that has a crucial bearing on the adult Joe’s final choice: to remain in the Dionysian, schizoid stream of desire” (Thomsen 2018, 334), the reflexive surface of the mirror serves as a metaphor for the reflexivity that *Nymphomaniac* tries to achieve as a means for pushing beyond the boundary of the cinematic screen, which allows only for a unidirectional way of looking. The tension between self and other, manifested through group therapy as not only a pathologizing mode of social regulation which threatens to erase Joe’s sexual identity by labeling it as pathology, but also a means of negotiating a sense of self, is further complicated by the narrative therapy that Joe engages in through conversing with Seligman. Though ostensibly more effective than group therapy as a means of asserting identity, the unreliability of the therapist, Seligman, throws this mode of narrative therapy into doubt.

Drawing upon previous scholarship on Michel Foucault’s “three key therapeutic configurations of confession” (Faustino 2020, 261), I argue that the group therapy on sex addiction in *Nymphomaniac* is an othering, “disciplinary” force which, as a common practice in the psychological sciences, draws on “a certain socially and culturally defined standard of normality” (267), and serves only inadvertently as a means of asserting a sense of self. In addition, the formulaic opening line in group therapy, “my name is Joe, and I am a sex addict,” can also be interpreted “as the secular humanist form of confession” (Huffer 2016, 97) in the context of confession in the religious tradition of Christianity (Faustino 2020, 263). By contrast, Joe’s conversation with Seligman can be understood not only in the light of “Freudian psychoanalysis, where truth results from reflection in the mirror of the therapist” (Featherstone 2016, 28), but also in the light of confession as a means of self-examination in ancient philosophy (Faustino 2020, 261), where truth is the product of Socratic dialogic interrogation (Featherstone 2016, 28). If the modern therapeutic regime represented by group therapy derives its disciplinary power from the authority of the therapist, then the narrative therapy between Joe and Seligman centers more on the exploration of the self, repositioning the therapist as “a merely circumstantial and provisional presence” (Faustino 2020, 263). In the following section, I will analyze how narrative therapy, which at first promises to be a more affirmative mode of self-negotiation for Joe, is complicated by the troubling relationship between the confessing patient, Joe, and the therapist figure, Seligman, thus manifesting how the tension between self and other is further played out in the therapeutic narrative that structures the film.

3.1 Narrating Nature

Whereas the formulaic “my name is Joe, and I am a sex addict” employed in group therapy conflates the person and the problem, “extend[ing] the notion of pathology to the whole person” (O’Grady 2005, 49), Joe’s own narrative gives a fuller account of her identity, the development of which she traces back to her childhood. Just as the mirror in the group therapy scene serves as a means of reflecting the gaze of the self, so, by juxtaposing a shot of the adult Joe looking towards the right with a shot of the young Joe facing left, is this self-directed gaze created. Before being subjected to socially imposed therapeutic regulation, Joe is allowed to freely explore her sexuality by her loving father, who, as a doctor, does not stand for the authoritative figure imparting medical knowledge, but rather introduces Joe to a means of negotiating a sense of self through connecting with nature. The challenge to normativity posed by Joe’s narrative of her hyper-sexuality as a counter-discourse to social regulation and therapeutic rectification can be traced back to the teachings that she received from her father, whose “depictions of the ash, the lime, and the oak illustrate the immanent value of difference and the idea that the normative notion of ‘bad’ is a social invention” (Badley 2022, 149). Just as “the ash tree’s black buds are not an aberration but a mark of singularity,” so is Joe’s perversion “a mark of her identity” (Badley 2022, 149).

The emotion support that group therapy fails to offer is instead provided to Joe on top of a barren mountain, where she finds her “soul tree” standing “windswept and gnarled” (Thomsen 2018, 316), much like Joe herself, who “does not have a place for society, as there has never been a place for her in society” (336). After a close-up shot of Joe’s face as she looks at her tree for the first time, the camera does not cut to a reverse shot of the tree from the perspective through which Joe is looking, but rather a wider shot from the same angle as the previous shot of Joe’s face, so that Joe and her tree are both in the frame, with the tree in the foreground. Instead of Joe directly looking at the tree, it is the spectator who looks at Joe through her tree. The tree thus constitutes a new frame to look through, a frame which may be somewhat awry due to the distortion of the trunk. The distorted visual frame provided by the trunk offers a perspective through which Joe can be viewed in a new light, no longer rendered aberrant by her sexuality, but at ease in the close vicinity of a piece of nature that is distinguished from others by virtue of being an anomaly, as Joe feels herself to be.

This sense of affinity is further reinforced by the fact that the natural space in which Joe’s “soul tree” is growing echoes the liminal spaces that she, as a social outcast, occupies: the dark alleyway where she is found lying half-dead at the beginning of the film, as well as the cramped bachelor’s chamber where she tells her story to Seligman, her sole listener. Joe’s affinity with nature is also manifested when, “wandering alone in the forest,” she comes across “three dead leaves, which perform a kind of ballet in the breeze, giving her hope of regaining her sexuality” (Thomsen 2018, 328). Presented “in its original, Edenic state” (Badley 2022, 108), blossoming “into a high Romantic leitmotif associated with trees, nature, youthful innocence, and aspiration that becomes

Joe's affirmative keynote" (146), nature offers Joe with more therapeutic and emotional value than psychotherapy, since it empowers her to affirm her identity without labeling her as deviant.

In this light, it is useful to highlight the fact that nymphomania originates from the word nymph, which, as a figure in Greek mythology, is a mediator between man and nature (Larson 2001, 54) often appearing in verdant areas subjected only to a minimum level of human intervention (10). A similar tension between natural and "non-natural" spaces can be detected in *Nymphomaniac*, where nature "is juxtaposed against the postindustrial urban settings that limit Joe's horizon and regiment her mind and body," such as "Seligman's drab apartment off an alley so dark that he greets a small square of sunlight with delight" (Badley 2022, 148). The "alienated urban environments" where most of Joe's sexual activity takes place, "together with Seligman's dissections and equations, suggest that Joe's sexual addiction and consequent desensitization, as well as Seligman's autistic asexuality, are in part an environmental disease, a product of Western modernization, abstraction and alienation" (Badley 2022, 148). There is indeed a process of pathologization taking place in the film, other than that of socially labeling excessive sexuality as pathological: "[p]ost-industrial urban existence has diverted Joe's natural, healthy sexuality into a 'mechanical' compulsion that becomes self-destructive and destructive to others" (Badley 2022, 148).

It is Joe's connection with nature which returns her to a more primitive state where the nymph has an organic link with the natural environment untainted by the pathologization either of social regulation and stigmatization of hyper-sexuality or through the alienating effects of industrialization. This provides an alternative perspective for understanding the medico-literary discourse on the pathology and creativity associated with the nymph and nymphomania, as theorized by Huffer. Though nymphomania is inherently pathologically productive as a lurking presence in "the Agambenian nymph story as paradigmatic of the masculine creative act" (Huffer 2016, 110), Joe's connection with nature, both through coming into direct contact with it, and symbolically through the connotations of the word nymph, serves as a means of depathologizing her sexuality. If natural imagery in von Trier's previous films, such as *Antichrist* and *Melancholia*, was a metaphor for mental anguish (Bainbridge 2014, 60), then in *Nymphomaniac*, the blossoming of nature in adverse conditions serves as a reminder of the possibility of thriving in distress and psychological perversity, not only for Joe, but also for von Trier, since the forest of *Nymphomaniac* recalls that of von Trier's youth (Badley 2022, 108). However, the promise for a healthier means of self-negotiation by connecting with nature is undermined when the therapeutic discourse in which this narrative of the exploration of self through nature emerges, namely, Joe's conversation with Seligman, is revealed to be unreliable.

3.2 Therapist, the rapist

Just as the association between nymph and nature serves to depathologize hyper-sexuality, which complicates the medico-literary discourse on nymphomaniacal creation, so, conversely, is the therapeutic potential of narrative thrown into question by the unreliability of the therapist, Seligman. At first, Joe's construction of a narrative through conversing with Seligman seems to "constitute[] a safe haven where she can live with her nymphomania in a literary sense without having to abuse her thoroughly hackneyed and worn-out body" (Elbeshlawy 2016, 199). Joe's freedom to construct a narrative for herself provides an alternative to the discourse of group therapy through its "concern about the way in which oppressive practices and structures of the wider society might be reproduced in the therapeutic environment" (O'Grady 2005, 42). If group therapy imposes the same regime of diagnosis and treatment on sex addiction, then narrative therapy offers a more personalized means of self-exploration. As a "type of self-making," narrative therapy, which "undermin[es] the power of therapeutic discourse to impose an essential identity," as is the case with the pathologization of sexuality in group therapy, "subverts dominant identity norms, thereby expanding possibilities for creative, open-ended identity-making" (11).

Through narrative therapy, Joe attains distance from her former self, "assum[ing] a new subjective position from which she can look upon her nymphomaniac adventures as fiction. As narrator of her own personal history she seems to be a completely different woman" (Elbeshlawy 2016, 200). Joe achieves the emotional distancing required of a therapist by "looking upon herself as a nymphomaniac from a great remove" (Elbeshlawy 2016, 200), which allows her eroticism to change its direction "from directly attending to the needs of the body to narrating the body and its needs" (200). However, if Joe now seeks to understand her nymphomania instead of acting upon it by "transforming it into some readable text" (Elbeshlawy 2016, 200), then the question arises as to whether this interpretive drive replicates the power structures that underlie the discursive regime of group therapy. Furthermore, this narrative therapy is complicated by the relationship between self and other enacted through Joe's interaction with Seligman.

While Joe achieves emotional distance through narration, Seligman adopts a more sympathetic attitude towards Joe, questioning her self-labeling as pathological and non-normative by drawing attention to the expressions that she uses to characterize herself: "a bad human being," "sinful" etc. Ostensibly, Seligman "puts himself in a role comparable with that of a psychotherapist willing to listen attentively and empathically" (Sabbadini 2016, 368). However, this "tolerant and unhurried listener" who "is careful to avoid judgmental or moralistic comments" not only "show[s] off his knowledge about all worldly matters" (Sabbadini 2016, 368), thus imposing his own knowledge regime upon Joe, but also, ultimately, attempts to rape Joe.

The intellectual projection that lies at the center of the Pygmalion myth of creation, which, as identified by Huffer, can be understood in the light of the concept of sexual intercourse in a metaphorical sense, is thus translated into a sexually aggressive act at the end of *Nymphomaniac*. Seligman's response to Joe's rejection, "but you, you fucked thousands of men," is revealing of his reductive, stereotypical conception of her as a promiscuous woman who would not turn down any man's sexual advances. The shot that Joe then fires at Seligman, the therapist turned rapist, at the end of the film, when the screen has gone black, also "fires back at the Pygmalion structure of nymph copulation that produced woman as an image out of nothing" (Huffer 2016, 116).

The contested relationship between self and other negotiated through the therapeutic dialogue between Joe and Seligman reveals the risk of being implicated in madness as the source for productivity. If it is Joe's productive pathology that generated the narrative of *Nymphomaniac* in the first place, then it is also Joe who kills that narrative, as "the homicide is also the film's suicide, signaled by the implosion of the film's visual imagery into the black screen from which it started" (Huffer 2016, 116). While Huffer (2016) interprets the shot that Joe fires into the black screen as a killing of "the generative structure that brought her to life as man's mental image of himself" (116), I suggest that this reveals the destructive power of productive pathology. If Seligman's attempted

rape, following the interpretative comments that he imposes onto Joe during their dialogue, threatens to overtake Joe's narrative, then the violence of this final act serves as a means for Joe to reclaim her narrative.

4. Contesting Cinema as Therapeutic Space

The deceptively empathetic stance adopted by Seligman cunningly invites the spectators to identify with a position which then “transpires to be violently inadequate, if not inadequately violent” (Galt 2016, 79). If the therapist figure has been recognized as deceitful in film portrayals (Floriano 2015, 104), then there is something doubly deceitful about Seligman in *Nymphomaniac*. Seligman, who appears at first to be more keen to express sympathy for Joe than she herself, is debunked in the end as an attempted rapist, which, by throwing into question the therapeutic relationship between Seligman and Joe, reinforces the ambivalence of the film. In addition, if the audience identify with Seligman as the sympathetic listener to Joe's story, then they, too, are confronted with the question of spectatorial complicity (Galt 2016). The troubled negotiation of pathology and productivity through the therapeutic discourses invoked in *Nymphomaniac* thus leads towards the question of spectator-ship.

The contested negotiation of the relationship between self and other enacted through the therapeutic dialogue between Seligman and Joe “could be read as a narrativisation of the director's conflicted psyche” (Hallsworth 2021, 86). Von Trier, who “uses his characters as vehicles to explore his inner struggles” (Hallsworth 2021, 85), also engages in a process of spectatorial projection and identification with Joe, whose hyper-sexuality is a source of narrative productivity not only within the film diegesis, but also beyond the screen, as a manifestation of how von Trier's signature cinematic style lies in creating narratives out of perversity. However, if the ostensibly sympathetic Seligman is revealed to be a rapist, then the question arises as to whether the limits of sympathy also apply to von Trier, the male creator of a film on female sexuality. If, by using feminine alter-egos like Joe “to represent his own self-image” (Valsson 2018, 124), von Trier is interacting with “cultural and historical narratives” (Hallsworth 2021, 86), then to what extent is he just replicating the Pygmalion myth that Huffer claims *Nymphomaniac* is working against? Even this last, subversive shot that the nymph fires back at her creator is, ultimately, a creative gesture of the creator. To what extent, then, does *Nymphomaniac* transgress the framework of transgression that it operates within?

I suggest that it is through the identification with the “pathological” psychological state of the nymphomaniac that von Trier expresses his sympathetic attitude towards the female protagonist of his film. This identification is achieved through the parallel between Joe's productive pathology and von Trier's experience with therapy providing a source of inspiration for his conscious engagement with the therapeutic discourse in his films. It has been observed that *Nymphomaniac* belongs to “the cycle of films from 2009 through 2018 that followed and, to a greater or lesser extent, expressed, reflected, or were impacted by his experience of clinical depression in late 2006 through early 2007” (Badley 2022, 2). Film-making is potentially therapeutic for von Trier in that it serves as a means “to project out the violent imagery underpinning his psychological distress,” thus “mobilis[ing] a space in which to explore it safely” (Bainbridge 2014, 57).

However, the therapeutic potential of cinema is challenged by *Nymphomaniac*'s blurring of the boundary between pathology and normativity. The question that arises as to whether the “pathology” of both the protagonist and director is an “othering” force or a means of negotiating the self remains open-ended, especially since *Nymphomaniac*'s ending “risks an opening into an unknown, post-Pygmalion future” (Huffer 2016, 117). By not allowing the audience “to pin down the director's attitude” (Forshaw 2015, 194), *Nymphomaniac* invites them “to decode and deconstruct what is happening” (195).

Yet this ambivalence is also predictable in the sense that it is recognized as “the cornerstone of psychoanalysis for the very reason that psychoanalysis posits a subject who is fundamentally split by language” (Swales and Owens 2020, xiv). Moreover, an ambivalent, thought-provoking ending is what the spectator would already be expecting when “enter[ing] the space of a von Trier film” (Galt 2016, 73). The knowingness implied by this expectation renders the spectators complicit in their implication in the ambivalent ending of *Nymphomaniac*. Seligman's “but you, you fucked thousands of men” could be rephrased as a question to the audience, “but you, you've watched thousands of films like this, are you still surprised?”

Spectatorial expectation is also imbricated in the creation of the meaning of the text, as it is something that the director draws upon to create the ambivalent effect of the ending. Joe's final shot, which implicates the spectators through their identification with both Seligman and the film-maker as the nymphomaniacal creator, is used by the director to further imbricate the audience in the process of creation. *Nymphomaniac*'s “consistent blurring of its own diegetic borders” (Huffer 2016, 117) can be understood in the light of its challenge to the boundary between pathology and normativity. The final shot that implodes the film, thus also the director-function—by way of Foucault's author-function (Foucault 1977, 124)—serves as a vanishing trick which confronts the audience with the gaping cinematic void that they have been cajoled, albeit knowingly, into creating. If madness is recognized to underlie the process of creation, then the spectator is left with the question of whether they, too, are mad, or whether madness and pathology are, in fact, the norm.

5. Conclusion

The therapeutic discourses in *Nymphomaniac*, which this article has analyzed, stage a confrontation between self and other situated at the boundary between pathology and normativity. The reflexive gaze of the self in the mirror in the group therapy scene is further enacted through the therapeutic dialogue between Seligman and Joe as an agonistic encounter between self and other (Huffer 2016, 100). This “framing dialogue between Joe and Seligman introduces a riveting tension and element of self-critique into the cinematic game” (Huffer 2016, 100) into which the spectator is invited.

The therapeutic structure of *Nymphomaniac* is challenged by the ending, where it is, I suggest, not only the nymph who fires the final shot at the creator, but also the nymphomaniacal creator that shoots back at the spectator whose expectation of a shocking ending as the staple of a transgressive art film implicates them in the creation of the purpose and meaning of the artwork itself. If *Nymphomaniac* provokes the spectator into reflection, it is less by virtue of the transgressiveness of the film than by the cultural conditions within which the film comes into being. *Nymphomaniac* thus enacts a spectatorial game on a meta-level: were the spectator to acknowledge pathology and madness as productivity, then their implication as indispensable agents in the process through

which the film comes into being as a cultural product in turn posits them as mad. The spectators are faced with the dilemma of either forfeiting the creative act itself to avoid the risk of falling into madness, or recognizing madness as a condition of normativity in which they are already enmeshed.

By not only “assail[ing] the viewer with scenes that might be difficult or pleasurable to watch,” but also inviting the audience to gaze back upon themselves through the ambivalence created by the blurring of boundaries between pathology and therapy, as well as self and other, *Nymphomaniac* generates “an intense and perversely destabilizing affective relationship with the spectator” (Galt 2016, 72). In the context of the rising trend of cinematic representations of female hyper-sexuality, I reflect upon the argument that, despite “transgressing through its subject matter of non-normative sexual behavior as much as through its pornographic treatment of it,” *Nymphomaniac* has been “regarded as part of a broader trend in contemporary European cinema,” which “restricts [its] subversive potential” (Jovanovic 2017, 204). The line between pathology and normativity, between self and other, which is contested by the negotiation of medical discourses on female hyper-sexuality in *Nymphomaniac*, is also reflexive of the relationship between extreme cinema and mainstream cinema, as the transgressiveness of the former is defined with regard to the norms set by the latter. Since the introduction of transgressive content such as pornographic portrayals of sex into art cinema, there has been an increasing trend towards the employment of such material as a means of provocation, to the extent that even a director as intentionally provocative as von Trier is regarded as not subversive enough when considered in the light of various other films which are characterized by a similar cinematic style.

While the content of *Nymphomaniac* might be recognized as a commonality in extreme cinema, its provocative potential is manifested more prominently on the directorial and spectatorial levels. If the mode of screening and distribution can also be considered major, if not defining, aspects of extreme cinema, then von Trier’s films fulfill this criterion in that they constitute a deliberately titillating game that von Trier plays with the audience through not only the content, but moreover, the release, circulation, and publicity of his films, an typical example of which being *Nymphomaniac*. It is thus on the meta-level that *Nymphomaniac* ultimately achieves spectatorial provocation.

The contested negotiation of the relationship between self and other through blurring the boundary between pathology and normativity, which ultimately bears upon spectator-ship in *Nymphomaniac*, suggests that reflexivity might be the answer to the question of whether the success of transgressive, non-mainstream cinema ironically restricts its subversive potential. If the audience have gradually become accustomed to the visual spectacle which, though not the main purpose of extreme cinema, is nevertheless a crucial component, if the productive “pathology” of the “other” is questioned through the blurring of the line between pathology and normativity, then to what extent can it be said that cinematic extremism has lost its power to provoke? I suggest that the blurring of boundaries between pathology and normativity, self and other, serves as a means of implicating the spectator through the recognition and reflexive renegotiation of pathological sexuality as a narrative trope of transgressive cinema. This article thus shows how the reflexive negotiation of narratives of hyper-sexuality in *Nymphomaniac* between pathology and normativity ultimately bears upon the renegotiation of the reflexive mode of spectator-ship that is enacted in the contested encounter between self and other staged in the cinematic space.

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