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# The Rage of Joe: Lars von Trier's *Nymphomaniac* and the Female Scream

BY TONI BENTLEY

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Finally, as the saccharine bodice-ripper-with-rope, 1950s throwback *Fifty Shades of Grey*—monogamy, marriage, and babies are the trilogy's happy ending—hits the 100-million-copies-sold mark, a pungent antidote has arrived on screens in the form of renegade bad boy Lars von Trier's magnificent provocation *Nymph()*maniac, complete with its labial parentheses. This work is not so much a film, as a ferocious manifesto on the subject of female sexuality in its terrifying enormity and misery. And the reaction has been predictably

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nervous: men are skeptical, if not dismissive, and women are lying low. As a woman born under the wobbly, but still-standing, great State of Patriarchy, I can only applaud von Trier's heroine (while remaining numb to the insultingly anemic Anastasia Steele) in her desperate pursuit to exist on her own terms no matter how high the price. And it couldn't be higher.

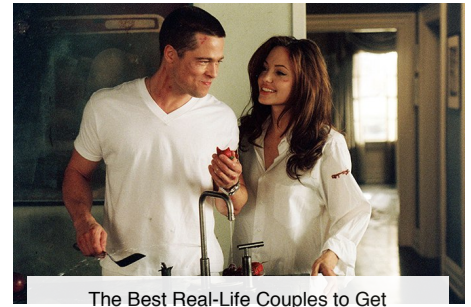
Von Trier's film is not really, as described, the story of a woman's sexual "journey" of "identity"—those overused, patronizing, rhetorical tropes that presuppose she might have neither—but rather an allegorical depiction of the female Scream. Munch's androgynous face of terror fully embodied and, lo and behold, von Trier finds not a man but a woman behind that seminal oval. And she is wearing the shortest, fire-engine-red, plastic hot pants you have ever seen as she swaggers across the bridge of her fate. To me, von Trier is the anti-misogynist, despite endless proclamations to the contrary, so often, it seems, by those vying for recognition for their highbrow "feminism." He is an easy mark for such sophistry given his many wrenching renderings of women enduring great suffering. But endure they do. As we have.

As with any revolutionary work, *Nymph()* provides a delicious Rorschach test, in this case for our sexual morals and mores, which contain, of course, just enough—but not too much—political incorrectness to render us sexual sophisticates. And so the pronouncements roll in and, among a few positive reactions—David Denby who dared to call it "a pornographic work of art" in the *New Yorker* has thus been mocked as having been "aroused" (God forbid!) by the film by J. Hoberman in the *New York Review of Books*—lie the many others: "repugnant" (Richard Brody in the *New Yorker*), "tame," (Peter Debruge in *Variety*), "leering," "juvenile," "shallow," (Richard Lawson, [vanityfair.com](http://www.vanityfair.com)), and "commits the sin of boredom, (Joe Morgenstern, the Wall Street Journal), which brings to mind the words of another, less abrasive but no less subversive, social commentator, Barry Humphries (a.k.a. Dame Edna), on the subject of sex, from *The Erotic Review*:

It is possible for a detailed depiction—verbal or pictorial—of the world's most interesting subject, to be maladroit, or merely pedestrian . . . but a cavalcade of lubricity is never actually boring. Not seldom it is absorbing to the exclusion of all else. 'Boring' is a Puritan exculpation.

Von Trier presents to us, through his leading lady Joe, nothing more or less than an uncensored, unapologetic, portrait of the female sexual id—voracious, lascivious, cruel, cunning, vulnerable, and entirely amoral—incongruously wrapped in the svelte, nubile bodies of his two bold actresses, Stacy Martin and Charlotte Gainsbourg.

Joe has every and any kind of sex except vanilla—aberrant, indiscriminate, emotionless, dangerous, ugly, desperate, ridiculous, painful, illegal, and yes, even, occasionally, ecstatic, but even then it is a tragedy, laced in loss. But what woman in this day and age, von Trier suggests, could orgasm (if she does orgasm, but that's another subject) without inexorable sorrow for her Pyrrhic



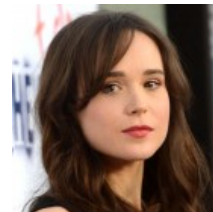
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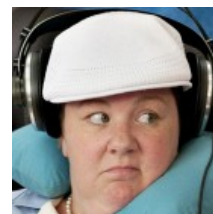
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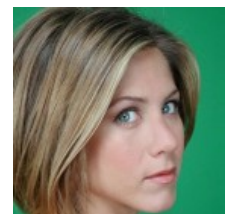
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victory. Our fight has been so very long and it is so very, very far from over. (Note, for starters, the worldwide epidemic of sex trafficking, rape, murder of female fetuses and little girls, and just good old-fashioned, practically comforting, quotidian male chauvinism.)

But Joe marches on, no matter her difficulties and her utter isolation: a sexual panzer in her obstinate quest for she knows not what. But she does know what she does not want: the sentimental trappings of what she calls “the love-fixated society.” Joe characterizes “love”—that ill-defined commodity sold to girls from birth as the great pie in the sky—as “just lust with jealousy added.” Her childhood chum B whispers to her one day that “love is the secret ingredient of sex,” but Joe is not buying. Notably, she loses all sexual feeling not while churning through 10 men a day, but while ensconced in domesticity and motherhood with the only man with whom she falls in love, albeit shamefully, apologetically. (There is an emerging discussion today on this painful paradox: love as the death of lust.) But Joe escapes that prison soon enough, a militant nihilist to the brutal end—and it is very brutal—and von Trier’s film becomes nothing less than a current-day imagining of history’s long female Armageddon.

Joe begins her Bosch-ian rituals, trials, and self-imposed punishments when she announces “At age two I discovered my cunt”—the phrase cuts the air early on in the four-hour epic and the blade just goes deeper as the film progresses—into middle adulthood with total, self-directed, agency. This is not a woman to be saved, calmed, or converted (or plied with Xanax)—she would laugh in your face and proceed straight to her next conquest. Joe is uncaged, impervious to “civilizing” influences, and though she flirts in her narration with regret and claims her tale is a “moral” one—“I am a bad human being”—one feels her attempts at self-recrimination to be but superficial nods in our direction.

Watch her trajectory from playing “frog” on the flooded bathroom floor with her girlfriend as a young schoolgirl, yanking her little skirt up to maximize the friction, to her 17-year-old self achieving upright congress multiple times during a single train ride, to her amassing so many lovers that she can neither remember their names, nor their particulars and ends up literally rolling the dice on their fates, before resorting, in *Volume II* of the film, to ever darker, and far more dangerous, criminal and masochistic exploits. Though von Trier’s mirror is relentless to the point of parody, he knows, like Joe, like any true provocateur, that too much is still never enough to wake us up.

While the film is no doubt full of any number of filmic faults—discontinuity, absurdity, a good dollop of idiocy—I leave those sins to cinephiles to outline. I found these distractions unimportant in the face of von Trier’s sheer brazen insanity in depicting something I have never seen before on a screen. For a man who told the *Observer* in 2007, “I’m afraid of everything in life, except filmmaking,” (he refuses to fly, among other phobias) he is one defiant scaredy-cat.

The woman who tells her tale to the kindly, monkish (“I am asexual”), but oh-so-literate older Seligman is no victim—when will this insidious condescension to any woman in trouble or pain cease? Joe’s beaten, bruised, and bloodied body and mind are but the inevitable injuries from the great battle for her freedom. “I love my cunt and my filthy, dirty lust,” is Joe’s final *cri de guerre*.

The most potent image for me in the film is that of seeing Joe’s father, lying freshly dead on a hospital bed, slowly coming into focus, framed between his daughter’s parted legs, a drip running down her right inner thigh. Woman, that chthonian source of human existence, weeping both above and below, in the face of the death of her beloved (non-abusive) father. Do we dare look at the beauty and truth and sadness that is a veritable Freudian holocaust of female sorrow? I doubt it. But von Trier is showing us anyway.

The fortress our society has erected, with the ever-ready, complicity of women, around the absolute anarchy and ferocity of female sexuality—the latest science on the subject as reported, for example, in Daniel Bergner’s *What Do Women Want?* supports von Trier’s vision of its rampant nature—will not crumble one iota from a single film, however powerful. But von Trier has done the almost unimaginable, and all an artist can do. He has blasted open a peephole in that impenetrable stronghold and those who care to look—and fork out \$14—can climb the parapets and take a glimpse at the raw spectacle of a woman pleasing herself, for better, but mostly worse.

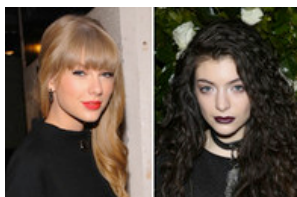
A free woman, *Nymph()*maniac suggests, might not be Hollywood’s vision of a woman walking barefoot in a field of buttercups, her hair blowing in the warm breeze with Botoxed brow, a bevy of girlfriends in her wake, and the beatific glow of self-satisfaction. She is, like Joe, a warrior in combat boots, mortally wounded in body and soul, traversing a war zone laden with landmines, but forging forward anyway. Watch her stagger in battered glory and bow before the woman who dares in the face of sure defeat.

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