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# THE VIOLENCE OF THE FRAME: IMAGE, ANIMAL, INTERVAL IN LARS VON TRIER'S *NYMPHOMANIAC*

Steven Swarbrick

*All authentic reading is in its own way violent, or it is nothing but the complaisance of a paraphrase.*

—Pierre Macherey (113)

*Imago, n. 1. a. Entomology. The final or adult stage in the development of an insect, during which it is sexually mature. 2. Psychoanalysis. A subjective image of someone (esp. a parent) which a person has subconsciously formed and which continues to influence his or her attitudes and behavior.*

—Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed.

**W**hat is a nymph, and how do we recognize her/its appearance in Lars von Trier's *Nymphomaniac* (2013)?<sup>1</sup>

The film's title—spelled *Nymph()*maniac—points to a difference without recognition. I am referring to the parenthetical lips that hollow out the film's center. Those lips, when read through a Foucauldian lens of power-knowledge-pleasure, are certainly not the same lips that, in saying yes to sex, believe they are saying no to power. The lips of von Trier's title do not speak the truth of one's sexual identity, much less the protagonist Joe's (Charlotte Gainsbourg). Instead, suspicious of the repressive hypothesis and its attendant sex-positive formulations, the lips of *Nymphomaniac* are more akin to the lips theorized in Luce Irigaray's essay "When Our Lips Speak Together," which posits a sexual ethics based on difference and self-fracture rather than a unified politics of the One. At the center of my question, then, there is a (w)hole fractured by two parentheticals. And yet the interval that interrupts my question is the same interval that arouses so much speculation about

the future of the image, as theorized by Jacques Rancière, and the image of life at the heart of biopolitics.

Rancière frames the question of the image and its future in terms of the “interstice” and its distribution. Following Gilles Deleuze, Rancière states, “Thenceforward, what creates the link is the absence of the link: the interstice between images commands a re-arrangement from the void and not a sensory-motor arrangement” (*Film Fables* 108). Rancière continues his post-Deleuzian investigation into “the interstice between images” in *The Future of the Image*, where he is primarily concerned with the category of the new, that is, with what the image *can be* after the breakdown of the sensory-motor link between images. Notably, this absence of the link is also what governs the image of life within biopolitics, as “life itself” tends more and more toward molecularization and the recombination of elements (Myers 2015).<sup>2</sup> Rancière highlights the connection between “life itself” and the image-link problematic in his essay on Deleuze, in which he calls Deleuze’s cinema books works of “natural history.” My goal—somewhat at odds with Rancière’s—is to embrace Deleuze’s notion of the image-link problematic by tracing the propulsive force of nature’s queer negativity, the interval or gap between images, in von Trier’s cinema. What creates the link in *Nymphomaniac* is the absence of the link—nature’s hollow center.

Among the first to read nature’s absent center was Spinoza. According to Warren Montag, Spinoza reads nature in the same way he reads Scripture, by paying painstaking attention to the materiality of the letter, its gaps and contradictions—in a word, its form. Spinoza shows that there is not a coherent, undivided meaning beyond or behind the letter of the text, but a swarming assemblage of material bodies whose swarming encircles a void—text without substance. Montag relates Spinoza’s reading practice to a series of natural disasters:

Spinoza’s method has been compared to an archaeology but, if anything, it resembles the activity of modern paleontology which in place of the gradual, uniform and continuous evolution imagined by Darwin . . . has restored to the fossil record its gaps and discontinuities, and in the process demonstrated the existence of a natural history replete with catastrophes and reversals. (11)

This chain of catastrophes tells us how Spinoza’s philosophy of reading connects to his metaphysics: nature is not a self-present totality, a

“real” out there, nor is it a teleological narrative of fitness and survival. Rather, nature, for Spinoza, is a series of unfolding disasters. Nature becomes most “real” when symbolic structures—human and nonhuman—begin to break down. It is this inarticulable real that Deleuze, following Freud, reads as nature’s death drive and that I, in relation to von Trier’s cinema, read as *queer*. Intricating Spinoza’s nature with queer theory, my goal is to proliferate the pleasures of this (un)natural and disastrous joining. Whereas in Lee Edelman’s *No Future*, reading to the letter means *literalizing* a lack consubstantial with sex (not a lack *of* sex but a lack in the very meaning of “sex”), for Spinoza-Deleuze, all of nature reads and rewrites itself as lack, as a desiring-production occurring at the very edges of a cracked nature.

In what follows, I argue that von Trier’s cinema opens up a space (a crack) in which to think about queer relations beyond the boundaries of the human. After all, the nymph in *Nymphomaniac* is not just “she”; the film’s repeated references to fly-fishing remind the viewer that the nymph is also “it,” an insect larva of the family *zoe*, which, being sexually immature, is in a constant state of metamorphosis (Figure 1).

In the interval separating the film’s two parentheticals, sexual difference intersects with species difference, creating a *mise-en-scène* of frames within frames. Sexual difference both punctuates and frames von Trier’s film, but species difference divides it in ways that have yet



Figure 1: A larva or nymph undergoing metamorphosis

to be examined. Providing the second half of the film's narrative frame, Seligman (Stellan Skarsgård) is the film's center of pastoral care: he is Joe's analyst, confessor, and pedagogue; in all cases, he tries to suture his narrative to Joe's, *his* truth to *her* image, despite the interval that divides them (Figure 2).

In the film's closing scene, Seligman tries to rape Joe in her bed. Before he can do so, however, Joe reaches for a gun and points it at her attacker. The film cuts to black, and only seconds after Seligman says to her incredulously, "But you, you fucked thousands of men," we hear the sound of a single gunshot fired from the depths of an ink-black screen. Lynne Huffer's queer feminist reading of the film's violent ending foregrounds the creative depths of the black screen. Returning to the parenthetical lips that punctuate the film's title, Huffer reads the black screen as an audiovisual and tactile image with its own logic. This logic is outside the digital logic of one and zero. Not only are the lips in *Nymphomaniac* not a void to be filled by the spectator, but also they produce sonic effects of their own.

My reading of von Trier's film builds on Huffer's queer feminist reading, but with a difference: whereas Huffer mobilizes Irigaray to show how *Nymphomaniac* breaks from the homosocial economy of image making, I focus on the ontogenetic dimension of the film's



Figure 2: Joe (left) and Seligman (right)

opening chapter, where what we encounter is not the image of the nymph as bounded human subject but an instance of what Deleuze calls “larval subject” (*Difference and Repetition* 78). A “larval subject” is neither formed nor unformed, organic nor inorganic; larval subjects are insect-like precisely because they reference a preindividual state of being-in-sections, wherein what the subject is and will become is intra-actively determined by cuts (from the Latin *insecāre*, meaning “to cut into”).<sup>3</sup> Ontogeny in this case is a radical form of montage.<sup>4</sup>

My second goal concerns the broader stakes of reading von Trier’s naturalist frame through the shattered lens of queer negativity. Indeed, a key hope of this essay is that it will help to welcome life’s negativity as an animating condition of both queer and ecological scholarship. The film’s outer frame is violent in at least two senses: Seligman seeks not only to elide Joe’s difference but also to make her image an amorous participant in *his* creation. Joe’s sexual awakening, Seligman argues, is neither evil nor amoral, as Joe says it is, but rather natural, biological, and functional. It is here that we see the violence of the film’s naturalizing frame. By reading her tale of sexual awakening through the lens of natural selection, Seligman elevates nature to the status of a norm. Nature, according to Seligman, is not negative, destructive, or traumatic, but rather self-furthering, flowing, and world-disclosing life.

My claim is that this narrative of life has become the dominant frame of ecological and new materialist scholarship. Despite sharing many of queer theory’s radical tenets, new materialist scholarship increasingly invests its progressive hopes for an egalitarian politics in the image of life as a vitalistic One.<sup>5</sup> For Jane Bennett, for example, life is the image of the One-all: “I believe in one matter-energy, the maker of things seen and unseen” (122). Bennett calls this her “Nicene Creed” (122). Within this theistic and totalized space, negativity passes into activity as life gives birth to its own image. It is the Pygmalion story in overdrive (Huffer 2015). Instead of man giving birth to his own image, we have the autopoietic creation of life. Yet this version of life appears strikingly thin, politically speaking, when compared to an earlier version of queer naturalism. I am thinking specifically of what Leo Bersani, writing decades earlier, described as queer theory’s “ecological ethics,” an ethics built to include life’s negativity as an animating condition of the social (62). Far from positing an antisocial queer

theory, Bersani was arguing for an ecological ethics that includes forms of self-shattering as an operative condition of change.

At stake here is not the version of negativity defined “from the perspective of a simple opposition of forces” (*Difference and Repetition* 17). Rather, the negativity I trace in this essay is the far profounder negativity that Deleuze, in his reworking of Freud’s theory of the death drive, defines as the repetition of pure difference. This repetition has neither a *from* nor a *to*; death drive, for Deleuze, “has nothing to do with a material model,” and so comprehends difference as a baseless spiral: “Death instinct may be understood in relation to masks and costumes [i.e., simulacra]. . . . It is not underneath the masks, but is formed from one mask to another, as though from one distinctive point to another, from one privileged instant to another, with and within the variations” (*Difference and Repetition* 17). Life, according to Deleuze, is immanent *to* nothing—including life itself. Read through the lens of *Nymphomaniac*’s shattered lips, the image of life that I pursue in this essay stresses Deleuze’s point that life in an important sense *does not work*. Life is not geared toward the production of the One but toward encounter with the not-One, and this mode of life entails violence as its enabling/disabling condition.<sup>6</sup>

This essay not only de-privileges life in the current image regimes of sex but also de-privileges affirmation, *philia*, and the good as ultimate values in readings of Deleuze. The first section focuses on the natural historical underpinnings of von Trier’s sex film with an eye to rethinking what is intolerable in the film’s de-pastoralization of sex. I conclude by articulating how my reading of film form centered on cuts within *Nymphomaniac* forces us to imagine a critical naturalism that embraces *both* nature’s flourishing and its capacity to do harm.<sup>7</sup>

## LARVAL SUBJECTS

*Not human, but nymphic (that is, demonic).*

—Vladimir Nabokov (16)

Christian Metz has described the cinema as a kind of “permanent strip-tease” whose “wandering framings” revise and re-envision the nature of the visible (77). Porn scholar and film theorist Linda Williams

suggests that this act of reframing—at once a formal exercise and a way of adjusting the viewer’s expectations—is precisely what hard-core cinema does by “screening sex”: that is, porn mobilizes the elements of classic cinema—cut, ellipsis, montage—in order to reframe, or better yet, erase, the storehouse of sexual imagery that occupies our mental imaginary. In this way, porn functions as an archive, in Jacques Derrida’s sense of the word, in that it both creates and de-creates our images of “sex.” Although Tim Dean maintains that “pornography and the archive” share a long history, and “come together as functions of modernity,” Williams contends that, since the 1990s, it is the art film in particular that has become the privileged site for archiving and thus reframing sexual acts. Building on Metz’s idea that cinema, *all* cinema, is a kind of striptease, Williams suggests that the archival violence of the hard-core art film is not a departure from the “wandering framings” of the silver screen era, when a kiss followed by an ellipse was all that the viewer needed to imagine the sexual encounter. Rather it is that “we do not necessarily need the old-fashioned ellipses of the era of the kiss for the imagination to do its work. There will always be ellipses, just not in the places we once expected them” (260).

As an instance of what Williams calls a “hard-core art film,” *Nymphomaniac* defies viewers’ expectations. Like the insect from which its name derives, *Nymphomaniac* appears to us in sections, divided into eight discrete chapters. Von Trier describes *Nymphomaniac* as his porn film, and yet the fractured structure of the film’s interlocking chapters bears as much in common with the formalist violence of a film like *The Human Centipede* (2009), which terrifies the viewer (in part) by dramatizing what Henri Bergson describes as the “cinematographic” violence of the human eye: the tendency of the human eye to cut the world into sections (subjects and objects) and to suture those sections into a larger centipedal whole (Bergson 306). If *The Human Centipede* falls under the category of horror because it makes our everyday habits of perspective something intolerable to watch, then *Nymphomaniac* falls under the category of a sex film not because it is particularly sexy but because it, too, makes such cinematographic violence the condition of possibility for witnessing “sex.” Sex in von Trier’s film approximates what Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman call “sex without optimism”: the idea that sex, whatever else it may be, is a key site for exploring the violence that forms and deforms human subjects.



*Nymphomaniac* begins with an encounter. This encounter is neither located in a particular time or place nor directed toward recognition of a particular image or object; the film gapes open, projecting an ink-black screen that will stay black for the first 120 seconds of the film's viewing. There are no credits, no indication that *something* is under way. The opening sequence tantalizes the viewer with the possibility that this beginning is no beginning at all. It is perhaps better understood as the aftermath—or what Peter Szendy calls the “after all”—of von Trier's previous film *Melancholia* (2011). The latter, a film about the end of the world, depression, and the Earth's annihilation by a previously unknown planet, named Melancholia, begins and ends with the two planets colliding in an abrupt conflagration. Szendy remarks that “never, to my knowledge, has a film so closely conformed to what would be the strictest law of the apocalyptic genre (if indeed there is a genre): that *the end of the world is the end of the movie*. . . . When I attempt to convince myself that this was only *a movie*, *after all*, I unavoidably hear that it is also a question of *a cinema of the afterwards*, of a cinema that comes *after it all*, after everything has disappeared” (1–2, 3). What lives on after this “cinema of the after-all,” which erases not just “the mineral cosmos, but the world *as world*,” is a question that *Nymphomaniac* tries to answer (3). For if the imageless black that occupies the final ten seconds of *Melancholia* is emblematic, as Szendy says it is, of “the end of the world,” it is worth asking, whose end? For Szendy, the detonation is total; there is only *one* world. And yet, the opening of *Nymphomaniac* suggests that there are in fact multiple impossible worlds beyond the human I/eye, and that the annihilation or archiving of the one world yields, for a cinema that is already a cinema of the inhuman apparatus, the possibility of exploring *what else imaging can be* in the aftermath of the One, “the human”—a species designation that feminists have long argued is not one at all. Rather than see *Melancholia* as allegorizing the end of the world *tout court* (although it clearly imagines this at the level of plot), we might read its apocalyptic structure as a radicalization of what cinema, all cinema, makes possible: the encounter with the not-One, or the inhuman eye that inhabits every frame (such is the nature of the cinematic machine), whether “we” recognize it or not.

This is the encounter that *Nymphomaniac* reveals in its endurance after the end of the world. The imageless image of the ink-black screen

saturates the viewer in darkness and in sound. Not just black, but audible black. We hear, in the first 120 seconds or so, a train in the far distance, getting closer. The sound of rainfall softens the screeching of heavy metal as the train rolls steadfast on the nearby tracks. Is this the train that Joe will embark upon later in the film's first chapter, or is it the train from von Trier's earlier neo noir film, *Europa* (1991)? Impossible to know. What is certain is that the image archives in its very erasure of sight and knowledge other possibilities for seeing and knowing the film's subject: Joe. Thrown amid the interval—the parenthetical lips that hollow out the film's center—we begin in the aftermath of histories and genealogies invisible and yet audible, of pasts that have yet to find their figure. When the screen finally does cut to an image of a woman (Figure 3), we are teased with a Pygmalion fantasy, a hylomorphic fantasy of autogeneration and masculinist creation. She is born, it would seem, as if from nothing—nothing but the camera's own dilating frame. Just as Seligman will later try to recreate Joe in his own image, so too the film lures us to believe that the nymph only exists when we, the viewer, open our eyes to see her.

And yet, if the "after all" of the film's beginning teaches us anything, it is a healthy distrust of beginnings. Rather than see Joe as emerging *ex nihilo*, as if from a void, I want to trace the history of this



Figure 3: Joe lying supine on the ground. Her figure resembles that of a nymph or snow angel

beginning—the interval separating being and nothing—to what seems at first glance outside history, history’s other: natural history.

In his two books on cinema, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Deleuze sets himself the task of producing not a history per se—“This book does not set out to produce a history of the cinema,” Deleuze writes—but an assemblage (*agencement*) of “certain cinematographic concepts” or types: “It is a taxonomy, an attempt at the classification of images. . . . It can be compared with Linnaeus’s classifications in natural history, or even more with Mendeleev’s table in chemistry” (C1 ix, xiv). When challenged in an interview as to the historical framework of his project—“You introduce an order of succession, you say a certain type of image appears at a certain moment, for instance after the war. . . . You’re not just producing an abstract classification or even a natural history. You want to account for a historical development too”—Deleuze insists that his “history” has nothing at all to do with the concept of history promulgated by his interlocutors. He responds:

There are of course historical and geographical factors in all this, running through cinema, bringing it into relation with other arts, subjecting it to influences and allowing it to exert them. There’s a whole history. But this history of images doesn’t seem to me to be developmental. I think all images combine the same elements, the same signs, differently. But not just any combination’s possible at just any moment: a particular element can only be developed given certain conditions, without which it will remain atrophied, or secondary. So there are different levels of development, each of them perfectly coherent, rather than lines of descent or filiation. That’s why one should talk of natural history rather than historical history. (“On *The Movement-Image*” 49)

Between insisting, on the one hand, “This study is not a history of the cinema. It is a taxonomy,” and registering, on the other hand, the historical event that catalyzes the shift from the regime of the movement-image to that of the time-image, Deleuze not only proves susceptible to the accusation of logical contradiction, in fact, he provokes it. But what appears as antinomy in Deleuze’s thought need not appear so. What is needed, rather, is a different concept of history.

When Deleuze says that “this history”—the history of persons, geographies, and events—“doesn’t seem to me to be developmental,” it is not that “this history” counts for nothing; it is that “this history”

counts solely under the horizon of human history, as the history of human actions. Yet it is precisely this notion of history *as the history of human actions* that, according to Deleuze, cinema brings to a crisis in the concept of the time-image. Briefly: if the movement-image of classical cinema is wedded to the perception of human actions, such that time itself is perceived only indirectly as the measurement of human affairs, what we perceive in the time-image is more and more false movements, as if action itself had become impossible, or as Deleuze says, “intolerable” (C2 18).

What makes modernist cinema “intolerable” for Deleuze is its reinvestment in the interval as such, freed from the body’s sensory-motor-schema. Without this link between body-image-action, the world of images is released to novel, often unbearable conjunctions. It is no longer the human eye that anchors the world of perception, but the inhuman eye of matter-energy-movement. *Nymphomaniac* embraces this posthumanist perception. The third installment in von Trier’s Depression Trilogy, *Nymphomaniac* foregrounds the intolerability of the image-link problematic after the end of the world: that is, after the world pictured in *Melancholia*, and after the world lost to us in the era of global climate change. It is therefore not entirely identical to Deleuze’s thesis regarding modernist cinema, since the time-image it imagines is not so much the empty time of Yasujiro Ozu’s films but rather the deep time of the Earth’s strata, in which human history evolves as but one part of a much longer history of life and extinction on Earth.

The film’s first chapter derives its name from the seventeenth-century English guide to angling, *The Compleat Angler* (1653), written by Izaak Walton and later supplemented by Charles Cotton. The book extols the virtues of the good life. It is part natural history, part Platonic dialogue. Although it is framed as a pastoral debate among literary personae (Piscator, Venator, and Auceps), its subject matter is treated with the utmost importance, on par with the experiments of high science: “For *Angling* may be said to be so much like the *Mathematicks*, that it can ne’r be fully learnt; at least not so fully, but that there will still be more new experiments left for the tryal of other men that succeed us” (7). *The Compleat Angler* is written by men and for men, and yet its greatest contribution to von Trier’s film is its discourse on nymphs.

In chapter five of the *The Compleat Angler*, Piscator (i.e., the fisherman) discourses at length on the “art of *Fly-making*” (107). Introduced as a pedagogical scene with Pygmalion overtones, Piscator frames the art of fly-making as a homosocial activity reenacted between generations of men: “and because you shall not think your self more engaged to me than indeed you really are, I will freely give you such directions as were lately given to me by an ingenuous brother of the Angle, an honest man, and a most excellent *Flie-fisher*” (103–4). Piscator’s brotherhood of “the Angle” reenacts its brotherly ties across time by trafficking in the life of images—the “Artificial Fly” or nymph. The art of “*Fly-making*” is an art of making images whose lifelike quality seduce the angler “to grow more and more in love” with the object of his own creation. In the following passage, Piscator rhapsodizes on the allure of making nymphs, with none other than nature as his teacher. Piscator states:

To see a Flie made by an Artist in that kind, is the best teaching to make it, and then an ingenuous Angler may walk by the River, and mark what flies fall on the water that day, and catch one of them, if he see the *Trouts* leap at a fly of that kind: and then having always hooks ready hung with him, and having a bag also always with him, with Bears hair, or the hair of a brown or sad-coloured Heifer, hackles of a Cock or Capon, several coloured Silk and Crewel to make the body of the flie, the feathers of a Drakes head, black or brown Sheeps wool, or Hogs wool, or hair, thred of Gold and of Silver. . . . I say, having those with him in a bag, and trying to make a flie, though he miss at first, yet shall he at last hit it better, even to such a perfection, as none can well teach him. (107)

On the one hand, Piscator’s attraction to the river nymphs mirrors any number of images that depict water nymphs as nature’s enchantresses, from Sandro Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus* (c. 1485–86) to John William Waterhouse’s *Hylas and the Nymphs* (1896). Partaking of this nymphic topos, Piscator’s love for the “flies [that] fall on the water” entrenches the angler in a scene of queer naturalist desire in which nature, not man, implicates or folds the one within the other along the same desiring circuit. The fisherman’s line resembles a “line of flight,” insofar as the bodies in question—man, nymph, and trout—meet in the middle of a differential line or circuit—what Deleuze and Félix Guattari call “becoming-animal” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 233). The becoming-animal that Deleuze and Guattari describe is not a process of analogy; one does not become *like* an animal, collapsing differences

into the identity of the One. Rather, becoming-animal signals an escape from the “creatural confinement” (Hallward 55) that defines any actual entity as a subject opposed to objects. Becoming a “line of flight” thus means tracing an abstract line *between* entities, where desire circulates.<sup>8</sup> The creatural tableau that induces the angler to a virtual animal creating—the making of an artificial fly—is the very thing that, according to Deleuze and Guattari, excites the human subject to exit their creatural condition by becoming-animal.

On the other hand, Piscator’s naturalist description also highlights the problem of reciprocal capture, whereby a process of becoming alienates itself in the material form it creates (Stengers 41–42). The telos of Piscator’s naturalist education is the proper image or object, the “Artificial Fly” divested of its relational context. So taught, *The Compleat Angler* intersects with the early modern practice of image making defined by art historian Janice Neri as “specimen logic,” which “dominate[d] the approach to depicting insects throughout the early modern period” (xii). Although “insects appeared in a number of visual contexts prior to the sixteenth century,” mostly “in the margins of illuminated manuscripts,” Neri argues that the rise of specimen logic in sixteenth-century natural study was signaled by the “shift of insects from the margins to the center,” as in Albrecht Dürer’s depiction of a single stag beetle in 1505. According to Neri:

As a way of understanding the natural world as a succession of isolated objects [specimen logic] had a far-reaching influence on image makers who took insects as their subject matter. Specimen logic turns nature into object by decontextualizing select creatures and items—that is, by removing them from their habitats, environments, and settings. Conversely, only those creatures and items that can be depicted or displayed as objects, those that possess clearly defined edges or contours and whose surfaces are visually distinct, are suited to the aims of specimen logic. Insects—or rather, certain types of insects—meet the criteria of specimen logic and were thus well suited to the broader impulse to visualize nature as a collection of objects. (xii–xiii)

Nowhere is this specimen logic better evidenced in Walton’s text than in Piscator’s description of insect reproduction. Because the transformation of larvae into adult insects could not be seen by the naked eye, the metamorphosis of the nymph defied the early modern desire to extract a specimen logic from the preindividual state that subtends

both subject and object. In order to circumvent this ontogenetic problem, Piscator, on the authority of Pliny, projects a specimen logic in reverse, claiming that the imago (the “clearly defined” adult insect) preexists its individuated form. He states:

*Pliny* holds an opinion, that many [flies] have their birth or being from a dew that in the Spring falls upon the leaves of trees; and that some kinds of them are from a dew left upon herbs or flowers; and others from a dew left upon Coleworts or Cabbages: All which kinds of dews being thickned and condensed, are by the Suns generative heat most of them hatch'd, and in three days made living creatures; and these of several shapes and colours. (97–98)

The “Suns generative heat” animates the preexisting forms, bringing the soon-to-be imagos to life. In this preformationist narrative (Oyama 2), the sun’s vital heat is analogous to the angler’s vital art, insofar as both sun and art create life in the image of the One. Absent from these narratives is an account of the sexual (i.e., material) differences at play in the nymph’s metamorphosis. The specimen logic on view is a speculative logic that subtracts material difference in the production of the individual. As such, it conforms to the specular economy diagnosed by Irigaray, in which the speculum—man’s power to see—reduces difference to a cipher. Read through a natural historical lens, *The Compleat Angler* projects man’s image—the clearly defined human subject—at the origin of life. Piscator’s preformationist fantasy thus replaces a process of individuation or becoming-animal with an image of reciprocal capture.

*Nymphomaniac* repeats this image of life, but with a difference. By interpellating *The Compleat Angler*’s naturalist frame, *Nymphomaniac* introduces a heterosexist fantasy in which Joe’s nymphomania—what she calls her “filthy lust”—serves as a vehicle for the reproduction of Seligman’s image of self-sustaining, autopoietic life. Just as Joe begins to relate her story of nymphic origins, a story that takes us from queer erotic beginnings—a girl “playing frogs” on the bathroom floor, stimulated by the electric conductivity of flesh, water, and friction (Figures 4 and 5)—to a natural history of trees and fly-fishing (surely, at this point, if this is autobiography, the *bios* or “life” at the heart of Joe’s auto-bio-graphesis is anything but self-evident, given, or unidirectional), Seligman interrupts her naturalist frame to place it squarely within the confines of his own specimen logic.



Figure 4: Joe's naturalist tableau



Figure 5: Joe and "B" playing frog



Seligman, in other words, intervenes by fixing the image-interval according to a familiar logic of what does and does not *count*—both in the traditional sense of giving an account of oneself, as Joe does, and in the more scientific sense of counting, of bestowing significance or existence on that which can be *counted*. This latter definition is what Alain Badiou calls “the logics of worlds”: for Badiou, the being of any existent depends on its re-presentation within a logic of the count. Whatever falls outside this count belongs to the void. Whereas Joe repeatedly returns the image of life to this void, reopening the space of her story to ever new cuts and conjunctions, Seligman operationalizes her story by fixing the order of the count: for Seligman, what counts in nature is its systematicity and futurity. He therefore reinterprets Joe’s naturalist frame as a kind of *mathesis naturalis* in which every existent belongs to the same world of meaning; has the same order, structure, and eventuality; and aims toward the same image of life (Figures 6 and 7).

This difference in the logics of counting comes to the foreground as Joe narrates the time she lost her virginity to Jérôme (Shia LaBeouf), the film’s Byronic suitor. After a quick, altogether unconvincing (and intentionally so) pass at character development, *Nymphomaniac* reveals its pornographic pretensions by cutting straight to a scene of hard-core

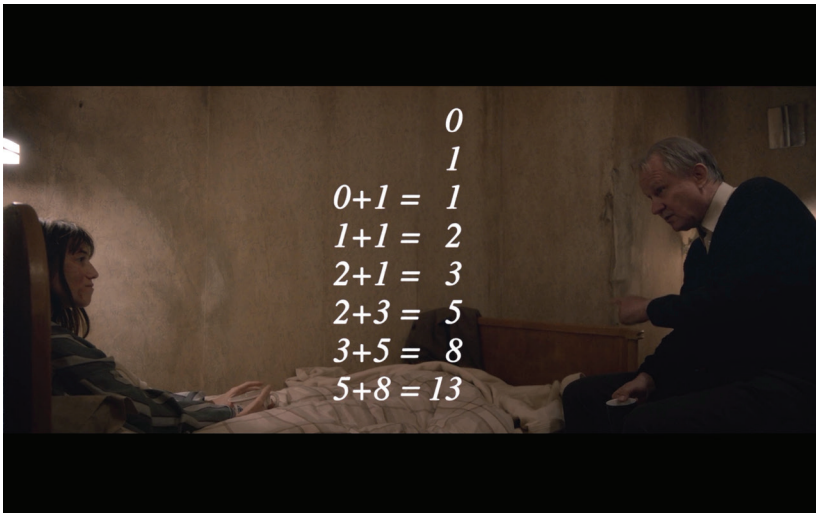


Figure 6: Seligman explains Fibonacci’s sequence

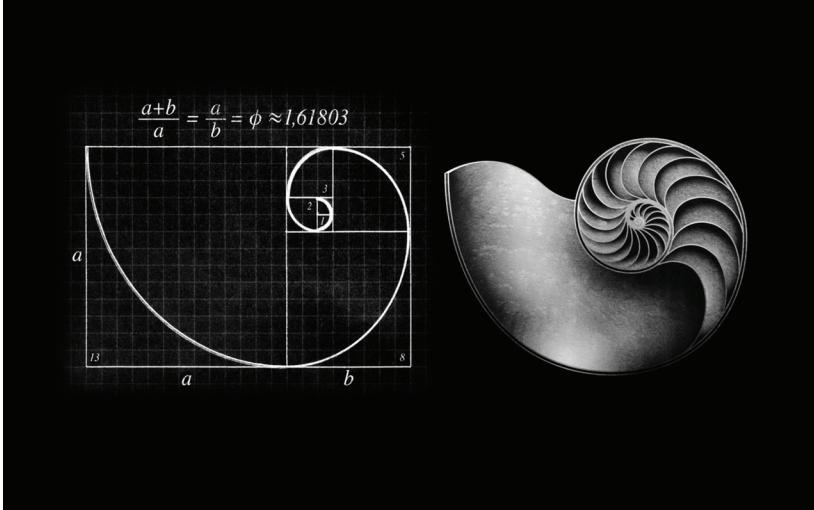


Figure 7: *Mathesis naturalis*: Seligman interprets Joe's nymphomania according to Fibonacci numbers

sex. "He shoved his cock inside me and humped me three times," Joe states in voiceover. "Then he turned me over like a sack of potatoes. Then he humped me five times in the ass." The visual coordinates are as matter-of-fact as the description; there is no trace of romance in these sheets, no poetry in the bedroom. Joe's remarks afterward suggest the tenor of the event: "I never forgot those two humiliating numbers [i.e., three and five]." To which Seligman, always the bemused glossator to Joe's text, states in fascination: "Three and five? Those are Fibonacci numbers." Shaken by the memory of her encounter with Jérôme and discouraged by her interlocutor's studious response, Joe replies, "That may be. In any case, it hurt like hell. I swore I'd never sleep with anyone again." Joe stresses what it felt like to be humped three and then five times by Jérôme; Seligman stresses the number, the *form* of the event. Neither interpretation is wrong. What *Nymphomaniac* shows after all is not the beauty of sex—freed from all formal constraint—but rather *scientia sexualis*, the science of sex, which is technical and formal; hence, from Joe's prosaic description of sex to the numbers used to record each pelvic thrust, which are layered on top of the screen (Figure 8), the film makes the cinematographic violence of the count—of counting and not counting, according to the logic of the frame— intrinsic to the sexual act.



Figure 8: “[He] humped me three times”

What Seligman *does* get wrong, however, is the direction that this formal violence will take. Whereas Joe presides over the scene of her first sexual encounter as at a funeral, describing a scene both humiliating and painful, Seligman enlists *The Compleat Angler’s* specimen logic to “interrupt” Joe’s narrative of larval ontogenesis. Just like at the beginning of the film, when a pitch-black screen gaped open to reveal audiovisual coordinates in motion, emblemized by the sound of a moving train, Joe cuts to a memory of a childhood “game” involving her and her best friend, “B,” in which they both wore “fuck me now clothes” and boarded a train to see which of them could have sex with the most men. The game would eventually tip in “B’s” favor, as the score became three and five—the second time Fibonacci’s sequence would reveal its algorithmic behavior. Aboard the train, Joe begins to embody the role of the nymph (Figure 9) as she lures men to her.

It is at this point that Seligman interrupts with an observation about fly-fishing:

Seligman: May I interrupt here? What you were doing when you walked down that [train] corridor. You were reading the river. Most of the large fish stay sheltered from the current to save energy, and to hide from the prey. Where the fish hides in the stream entails a very complicated hierarchy. The topography decides where the most attractive places are, and



Figure 9: A fishhook disguised as a nymph

the biggest fish choose the best positions. . . . That's a very clear parallel to fishing in the stream. As it happens, either none of the fish are feeding, or they all feed at the same time. They go into feeding frenzy. All bite. And then just as suddenly as it started, it all stops. . . . If the fish stop biting, you move on to phase two. And in phase two, you not only imitate an insect, but an insect in trouble. . . . It can be done very elegantly.

The "parallel" to fly-fishing serves Seligman as a predictive measure. Not only does he (pretend to) know Joe's story before she can finish it; the parallel to natural history unfolds, as does Fibonacci's sequence (1, 1, 2, 3, 5, and so on), with predictive regularity. The "topography" of Joe's desire thus confirms a naturalist belief in the logic of the world's appearance as  $2 + 3 = 5$  and analogy (human + insect) yields fruitful comparison. The interval that fractures the film's title, dividing its subject like two lips, disappears in this future-oriented frame. Joe's nymphomania becomes as sensible, as reasonable, as a change in the "weather, [or] barometric pressure."

This, however, is where the similarities between Joe's natural history and Seligman's end. If there is something negative, destructive, and irrecoverable in Joe's story, as she insists there is, it is not to be found in Seligman's piscatorial rendition of sex, which is wholly reparative. Joe, by contrast, casts her image of life on the side of the violent,

the depressive, the nympho-*manic*. “Sex” in her autobiography becomes auto-bio-thanatological insofar as it archives—while erasing—our images of sex as natural and productive. While she is happy to accept Seligman’s naturalist frame—she does not seem to mind, in the end, talk of flies, streams, and fishes—she rejects it as mere analogy, just as she rejects the idea of a common good. Contra Fibonacci’s sequence, Joe knows that, in her case at least,  $1 + 1$  does not equal 2, since the image of the One defines the set. The One can be divided, multiplied, added, or subtracted, but the image it creates is still sovereign.

Less interested in the logic of the set—the representational outcome of sex—Joe takes us to the areas where numbers become virtual and where a game of “reading the river” changes the visual topography of the film. Moving between cars along the train’s open corridor, Joe revises the means-end dynamic of natural selection, in which desire is matched to utility, suitability, and fit. As she passes from train car to train car, each time metamorphosing to lure her prey, she redistributes the image-interval-link. Her story is not *like* Piscator’s, where the analogy keeps the imagos and their well-defined borders in place. Her story of animal-becoming displaces the link between human and insect, ruining the purity of the analogy while making indeterminate the relation among images (Figure 10).



Figure 10: The interval separating human history and natural history collapses as the train car appears submerged under water

By the end of the film, this intra-activity of images exceeds the reassuring conclusiveness of Seligman's naturalist tableau, which, according to Seligman, results in mutual satisfaction, a harmless dalliance, even a child. The outcome, he argues, cannot be as negative as Joe claims it is. This, after all, is what is unbearable to Seligman, that nature *could* be as meaningless and as painful as Joe says:

JOE: I've consciously used and hurt others for the sake of my own satisfaction. And what I've told you so far only begins to suggest that.

SELIGMAN: But when you told the story you were cheerful. Full of humor.

It wasn't as if you embarked on some tragic tale.

JOE: Well, that's the way I am.

The way Joe "is" is ambivalent. Her nature is depressive in the sense that tragedy and comedy for her are not so clearly separate as Seligman would like. Whereas the latter insists that nature, which strives for the "good," can go astray, Joe's central claim is that straying is what nature does. The nymph is both amorous object and subject of manic, melancholic rage, both human and inhuman at once. How could nature be any different? The startling consequence of Joe's negativity is that it removes all shelter from Seligman's image of life: the train that we first hear at the start of the film and that Joe later boards is not taking us *to* or *from* danger, because the danger, the meaningless void, has already contaminated every image. Denied shelter, the interiors of *Nymphomaniac* lose their specialness and become like any other space—what Deleuze calls the "any-space-whatsoever"; we see this in the mute color scheme, the beige, stained walls, and the images and icons (Walton's text, for example, or the image from Andrei Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev* [1966]) used to construct not an interior world but rather a common world in which inside and outside are infinitely interchangeable.

If this reality leaves one open to violence, as Joe's story suggests it does, it also, however, makes possible novel conjunctions. By allowing the nymph to shoot back, as Huffer puts it, von Trier's film reopens the space of negativity that the *Angler's* specimen logic forecloses. It does so not by repudiating the *Angler's* naturalist lens but by excavating a queer naturalism that remains submerged in Walton's natural historical text. Joe's nymphomania, in other words, becomes a line of flight, a way of cutting together/apart human and animal through the fractured lens of sexual difference (Figure 11).



Figure 11: Sexual difference intersects with species difference as the film invites us to read these images together/apart

Joe's becoming-animal thus resists resolving material differences dialectically under the banner of the One. Instead, by introducing a naturalist framework as the film's common denominator, she uses the cinematographic violence decried by Bergson—the cutting and re-grouping of sections—as a means to explicate the lines of flight that exist in and between subjects. The result is not Piscator's clearly defined imago, nor is it Seligman's image of the good life. What results is a process of imaging or becoming that is and remains larval.

### HOW TO CUT UP A SUBJECT

*We know less than ever where to cut—either at birth or at death. And this also means that we never know, and never have known, how to cut up a subject.*

—Derrida (“Eating Well” 285)

Consider a final image: a diamond. *Nymphomaniac* tells us again and again to forget love. This is the battle cry of its protagonist, Joe, who champions her “filthy lust” above all things beautiful, sentimental, or kind. She wears a diamond pendant around her neck (Figure 12).



Figure 12: Joe's necklace



Figure 13: A diamond with fifty-seven cuts



She does not remember who gave it to her. Seligman calls it “brilliant,” referring not to the stone itself but to the cut of the crystal; the “brilliant cut” is a diamond with fifty-seven facets (Figure 13). Seligman calls it “divine.” Why this diamond in a film about female erotic rebellion? The diamond itself communicates something about storytelling. After remarking on the table of the diamond, what’s called the “mirror,” the film cuts to one of two mirrors located on the inside wall of the bedroom in which Joe and Seligman conduct their version of Marquis de Sade’s *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (1795). The first mirror reflects neither Joe nor Seligman, the only two present in the room, but rather von Trier himself. A trick as old as Diego Velázquez’s painting *Las Meninas* (1656), the image of the filmmaker reflected in the film suggests that what makes the film brilliant (von Trier no doubt believes it is) is its diamond-like structure, which radiates light from multiple points and multiple impossible perspectives. The second mirror reflects Joe (Figure 14).

Seligman remarks, “It’s like a thought, isn’t it?” referring to the mirror. Thought is, as philosophers have long speculated, luminescent. In *Seminar XI*, for example, Jacques Lacan links the unconscious thought processes to the imagistic montage of the drive: “It is not a *montage* conceived in a perspective referring to finality,” Lacan writes



Figure 14: Joe’s reflection in the mirror triggers a chain of light-image diffractions that recompose the contours of her image

(169). As in *Nymphomaniac*, the “montage of the drive” leads to a surreal, animal combinatoric: “The *montage* of the drive is a *montage* which, first, is presented as having neither head nor tail” (169). Joe, however, is less interested in Seligman’s philosophical navel gazing; her interest is in *her* story, which involves yet more mirrors, this time the speculum of a medical examination, and the mirror she uses to perform her own abortion. In Joe’s hands, the diamond-mirror-image becomes exemplary of a different operation of the interval than the one used by Seligman, her analyst and confessor; whereas the latter uses the image-interval to link his story—a story of cause and effect, natural selection, and sex optimism—to hers, Joe redistributes the image-interval as crystal, splitting and relinking the facets of her image along the crystalline edges of both sexual and species difference, producing an image of life that is not one but multiple, recomposable, and fragmented. Writing on Deleuze’s theory of the “crystal-image,” Rancière states, “The crystal-interval creates a new whole, a whole of intervals” (*Film Fables* 113). What this means in the context of *Nymphomaniac* is that the interval that arrests and divides the intra-activity of images—human, animal, and otherwise—into stable unities of self and other is redistributed by Joe, who uses the crystal-image to diffract Seligman’s pro-life ideology, an ideology she aborts, into a veritable mirror-play of chimerical shapes, forms, and figures.

In the end, then, *Nymphomaniac* is a film about cuts: filmic cuts, diamond cuts, and the cut of sexual difference. It falls neatly within the radical formalism advanced by film scholar Eugenie Brinkema, who wagers that film scholars and affect theorists alike have become too complacent in their regard for the affective shock value of film, neglecting in turn the *form of what happens* in films that seek to jar the sensory-motor apparatus. While Brinkema’s polemic is aimed primarily at film theorists, it applies just as well to environmental scholars who, as I have been arguing, frame the natural world in ways that neglect the violence of that frame. And yet the mark of any true reading, Pierre Macherey argues, is violence; without the requisite attention to form, we are left with “the complaisance of a paraphrase.” To theorize ecological relations beyond the familiar holism of the One, we will need to welcome nature’s theater of cruelty back into our theoretical reflections.

Deleuze can help. As early as *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze submitted the question of sense and its emergence from the body’s depths to

a reading informed by none other than that staunch defender of the death drive, Melanie Klein. At a significant turning point in Deleuze's text, Deleuze pivots from a rather abstruse analysis of time and its dimensions to the question of life's emergence in and through sense or sensation. He writes:

Now, the history of depths begins with what is most terrifying: it begins with the theater of terror whose unforgettable picture Melanie Klein painted. In it, the nursing infant is, beginning with his or her first year, stage, actor, and drama at once. Orality, mouth, and breast are initially bottomless depths. Not only are the breast and the entire body of the mother split apart into a good and a bad object, but they are aggressively emptied, slashed to pieces, broken into crumbs and alimentary morsels. . . . The bits of one are always the persecutors of the other, and, in this abominable mixture which constitutes the Passion of the nursing infant, persecutor and persecuted are always the same. In this system of mouth-anus or aliment-excrement, bodies burst and cause other bodies to burst *in* a universal cesspool. (*Logic of Sense* 187)

The "theater of terror" that Deleuze describes in this early text goes under a variety of names in later works: the body without organs, the virtual, plane of immanence, a life. What Deleuze critiques under each of these titles is not negativity per se (after all, can we think of a more negative description of life than "a universal cesspool" of becoming?) but a tendency to fetishize and equate life's negativity with a lack that can be filled. Following Lacan's "admirable theory of desire," which is "related to 'the object small *a*' as a desiring-machine," Deleuze and Guattari posit the "objective being of desire is the Real in and of itself" (*Anti-Oedipus* 27, 26–27). In other words, desire as "Real" is related to a nonobject—the interstice or gap, what I am calling nature's queer negativity—and not a preexisting object. Importantly, the negativity that Klein theorizes is preindividual and therefore related to *partial objects* only. The "picture" of life that Deleuze takes from Klein is necessarily shot through with this preindividual and indeed prehuman negativity, so much so that it would be impossible to separate the one from the other, the affirmation of life on the one hand, from the affirmation of life's negativity—its "Passion," persecution, and cessation—on the other.

So too with *Nymphomaniac*. At its core, the film asserts the impossibility of disassociating negativity not only from feminist and queer

politics, where it has long found a privileged home, but also from new materialist, neovitalist, and object-oriented politics, where the interest in reparative approaches to life all too often exclude negativity as a foundational exercise.<sup>9</sup> Von Trier's *Nymphomaniac* is a sex film for the climate change era in which nature—the world “out there”—has been lost for good; what is left is the aftermath of a world in which “we” no longer know where and how to cut up the human subject. Joe's nymphomania suggests that this may be a salutary condition after all. For larval subjects, sexual and species differences do not just cut into the One; they redefine it. The One is no longer a promise, a unity aimed for, but rather a ground for further individuation. Against rapturous returns to life, *Nymphomaniac* conceives of nature as that which is already common, and therefore vulnerable, a universal cesspool of becoming in which being/speaks/always and everywhere/through/cuts.

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## Notes

1. This question critically mimes Lynne Huffer's question in “The Nymph Shoots Back” but with the added difference of the impersonal “it” to mark my essay's focus on the nonhuman as crosshatched with the feminine. I engage Huffer's Irigaray-inspired ethics of difference and repetition throughout.

2. As Nikolas Rose writes, “Such molecular elements of life may be mobilized, controlled, and accorded properties and combined into processes that previously did not exist. . . . Life itself has become open to politics” (2007, 15).

3. See “Insect, *n.*” (*OED Online*). I borrow the term “intra-action” from Karen Barad, for whom “the primary ontological unit is not independent objects with inherent boundaries and properties but rather *phenomena*. In [Barad's] agential realist elaboration, phenomena do not merely mark the epistemological inseparability of observer and observed, or the results of measurements; rather, *phenomena are the ontological inseparability/entanglement of intra-acting 'agencies.'* That is, phenomena are ontologically primitive relations—relations without preexisting relata” (Barad 2007, 139).

4. Throughout this essay, I link the naturalist montage of *Nymphomaniac* to what Susan Oyama calls the “ontogeny of information”: the development of individual images—human, animal, and otherwise—from preindividual and trans-individual relations.

5. Jean-Thomas Tremblay raises an important question in this regard: “How . . . can we let emergence breathe?” Turning to Luce Irigaray’s theory of sexual difference, Tremblay argues that “Irigaray’s philosophy of the *two* makes possible a theory of emergence that rejects the oneness implied by the labeling of heterogeneous force fields as objects or networks” (284). “For Irigaray, the *two*, or the encounter between the one with the other, submits a promise of transformation that is otherwise precluded by the multiplicity, which she views as an endless reproduction of the self-willed individual complicit with the logic of the *one*” (284). On this score, see also Pheng Cheah and Elizabeth Grosz’s argument against essentialist readings of Irigarayan difference: “Sexual difference,” they write, “cannot be expressed within anthropocentric conceptions of nature precisely because it is an originary nonanthropocentric form of negativity that issues from nature itself” (Cheah and Grosz 9). Like Tremblay, Cheah and Grosz posit the interval of difference in Irigaray’s thought as “not quite human . . . and never totalizing” (Tremblay 285).

6. My focus on the not-One of being derives from Jacques Lacan’s reading of the “not whole” (*pas toute*) of feminine sexuality. Joan Copjec articulates the philosophical and ethical consequences of Lacan’s argument, “*woman* does not exist” (Lacan 1999, 7), in the following: “The famous formulation of a feminine ‘not-all,’ that is, the proposal that there is no whole, no ‘all’ of woman, or that she is not One, is fundamentally an answer not just to the question of feminine being, but to being as such. . . . [Lacan’s] ethics takes off from the proposal that being is not-all or there is no whole of being. And yet if it is woman who is privileged in Lacan’s analysis this is because she remains closer to the truth of being, while man obfuscates this truth through a nostalgic, secondary operation that allows him to maintain a belief in the plentitude of being to come” (Copjec 6, 7). In *Nymphomaniac*, Seligman is the representative of this “nostalgic” “belief in the plentitude of being to come.” In Lacan’s play on words, “Phallic jouissance,” or belief in the plentitude of being as One, “is the obstacle owing to which,” in fact, “man does not come (*n’arrive pas*)” (7). For a related argument, see Andrea Long Chu’s *Females*, in which Chu defines femaleness psychoanalytically as “a universal existential condition” of “self-negation, against which all politics, even feminist politics, rebels” (12, 11).

7. On this point, see Elizabeth A. Wilson: “Feminist politics are most effective . . . not when they transform the destructive into the productive, but when they are able to tolerate their own capacity for harm” (6).

8. On “becoming-animal,” Deleuze and Guattari write, “There is a circulation of impersonal affects, an alternate current that disrupts signifying projects as well as subjective feelings, and constitutes a nonhuman sexuality” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 233).

9. Karen Barad, whose research is frequently credited by those working at the intersections of feminist new materialisms and science studies (Alaimo 8; Wilson 13, 112), adopts the Latourian position that “critique” has run out of steam in order to bolster a theory of life that is infinitely malleable, adaptable, and repairable

(Barad 2012, 49). I stake my opposition to Barad's optimism of repair on the grounds that it misrecognizes and therefore pastoralizes nature's internal divide. My queer naturalist ethics thus corresponds more closely to Edelman's understanding of the death drive as an (impossible) ethics of the real. On this point, see Edelman's argument against Judith Butler, who shares Barad's "faith in [the] ever-widening horizon of inclusiveness, the liberal version of futurism," in *No Future* (104). See also Swarbrick, "Nature's Queer Negativity: Between Barad and Deleuze."

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