Women Bodies at Trial by Ordeal since Christianity to Trier Movies

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In his *Antichrist* and *Nymphomaniac*, Lars von Trier seems to defy norms on sex and women's desires. However he actually reproduces Christianity's perspective that women are sinful by their dispositions. According to the classical creation story, Eve falls into temptation and then, convinces Adam to commit the same crime. All Abrahamic religions but especially Christianity identifies women with the body and bodily desires, rather than the mind which comes from nonmaterial and divine substance. Accordingly, women can easily be deceived by Satan since they contain a lesser amount of mental substance compared to men. In *Antichrist*, Trier reiterates the story of Adam and Eve in a different context. The woman writes her dissertation on women who are burnt with the accusation of being a witch. But she realizes that her body is sinful and deserving of punishment, too. She finds her salvation when she cuts her clitoris. In *Nymphomaniac*, the main character gets her clitoris whipped. While she resists traditional and bourgeois morality, she defines herself as morally evil because of her unmanageable sexual desires. Thus, reputed as critical of all social structures and morality, Trier in fact simply rehashes the classical sexist and misogynist perspective.

Keywords: Lars Von Trier, *Nymphomaniac*, Christianity, women's bodies, witch trials

Introduction to Hostility against the Female Body

Although it is not known exactly when misogyny has started, bodies of women have been an issue of curiosity and dread since the beginning. Women's biological specialties which men do not have, such as menstrual bleeding, multiple orgasms, procreation, and breastfeeding have rendered women as mysterious creatures in the eyes of men. Ancient Greek texts very often exemplify this fear about the mystery of the female body; for example, Ancient Greek philosopher Pythagoras claims: "There is a good principle that created order, light and man and a bad principle that created chaos, darkness and woman" (Pomeroy, 2013). Another Ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle says: "The female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities" (de Beauvoir, 2010, p. 25). Thus, women are positioned opposite of men, which are the symbol of brightness, goodness, and rationality whereas women are identified by dusk, obscurity, irrationality and evil.

As it is well known, acquisition of property triggered domination of men over women, which have been enduring for centuries, even today. Oppression of women and hatred towards women continue under different guises even in so-called developed and civilized countries. Admittedly, the appearance of private property and class society created gender discrimination and domination of men over women. However, economic reasons are not adequate to account for the misogyny focused on the female body. In addition to class societies and prevalent patriarchy, this hatred can be explained through the enigmatic bodies of women. This enigma or

mystery has not been attempted to be solved and explained because of this fear; on the contrary, women's body and sexuality have been proclaimed as taboo and sin. Even science hesitated to explore this issue until the second half of 20th century. The clitoris was mapped in 1998 whereas the first satellite was sent to space in 1957 and the first atomic bomb exploded in 1945 (Kolodny & Genuske, 2015). When research on sexuality began in 1966—still too late compared to other scientific achievements—, it was harshly criticized not only by churches but also academies.

In a modern world, sexuality is still a taboo even in Northern countries and the enigma of the woman's body and sexuality has not been entirely explored. In such a situation, Trier's shooting a film on nymphomania seems very valuable. In his *Nymphomaniac*, the director summarizes Western hypocrisy on sex through the main character of the movie called Josephine or shortened as Joe, who is forced to attend to a sex addiction therapy group. Joe chastens the psychotherapist and other members of the therapy group. She accuses the psychotherapist of being a society's morality police since the therapy's aim is to make all people alike and to repress uncontrollable sexual desires and convert them in a permissible way. However, when this movie *Nymphomaniac* is analyzed together with Trier's former movie called *Antichrist*, we can clearly see that the female body and sexuality are matched with sin in both. Tearing down sex taboos, Trier implies that women are sinful by their disposition.

Therefore, the problem of misogyny is still waiting to be solved even in our century. To begin with, the solution to the problem passes through the detection of the problem and uncovering hostile attitudes towards women's sexuality. Thus, in the paper, the Christian roots of misogyny are traced and a comparison is made between Christianity's comprehension of female bodies as sinful and Trier's reflection. Today this hostility is usually covered up with more nudity and pornographic images as seen in Trier's example. Facing with this example and revealing its primordial roots, we ought to know better our body and admire our sexual desires as they are.

Trier: Breaking Taboos?

Lars von Trier is a contemporary avant-garde director, disturbing audiences by pushing boundaries, questioning even basic norms and provoking political correctness. The author of the book called *Lars von Trier*, Badley (2010) portrays him as the most "polarizing" figure of world cinema (p. 1). If we hastily review his major films, his provoking stance can apparently be appreciated. Trier boldly shows what is unspoken and invoiced on the big screen. For instance, in his *Europa*, he tells the situation of Germany after the Second World War through the perspective of a Nazi woman. Nazis' underground resistance after the War is actually represented as a homeland defense against USA's policies under the pretext of peace-building pass. While, some authors such as Richolson claim that Trier attempts to show that there were no innocent Germans since all were under the hypnotic influence of Nazism (1992, pp. 62-63), many years later in the 2011 Cannes Film Festival, Trier admitted that he has sympathy for Hitler and Nazism. Although he later expressed his regrets insisted that his joking words were misunderstood, he expelled from the Festival and got reactions from audiences. However, Cündioğlu interprets a scene in *Nymphomaniac* as Trier's defiance in which Joe yells that she does not care about anyone and is against being politically correct (2014).

In his *Breaking Waves*, Trier speaks for a husband, who is paralyzed in an accident and convinces his wife to have sex with other men. The husband thinks in the name of his wife, who has been raised in a very religious and conservative environment, and intends to save her sexual vividness from the rigid constraints of society.

Trier's movies shot in the US, especially *Dancer in the Dark*, *Dogville*, *Manderlay* harbor some reservations on the presumption that human beings are essentially good by their dispositions. He shares Plato's view on democracy that the line between democracy and tyranny is indeed quite thin and vulnerable.

In all his movies including his last trilogy called *Depression*, Trier shows some extreme examples in which the human condition comes before bourgeois morality. That is, he acknowledges human beings as ambiguous subjects who are sometimes in conflict with themselves and societal morality. He refuses to categorize what life brings to us as good and evil. Besides, he discards politically correct language. For instance, in *Nymphomaniac* the main character Joe expresses her desire to have sex with a "negro". Then, she is warned by the other major character Selligmann not to call black people as "negros". Selligmann reminds the importance of political correctness as an indication of respect for minorities in democratic societies. But Joe disagrees with him and claims that whenever she uses a politically incorrect word, she undermines the bases of a democratic and cowardly society.

Admittedly, both Trier's narration and his technique break ground. He defines himself as "the best director of the World" (Peacock, 2012, p. 149). Some critics and audiences agree with him but some others have charged him with being a Nazi, a misanthropist and misogynist especially following his trilogy, *Depression* composed of *Antichrist*, *Melancholia* and *Nymphomaniac*. In my opinion, his movies like *Europe*, *Dancer in the Dark*, *Dogville* and *Manderlay* force audiences to confront themselves and traditional moral values. Besides, they leave room for choosing one's own moral way while exposing societal hypocrisy. However, in his last trilogy, all the doors are closed for any confession and moral choice. Although *Nymphomaniac* seems to be a story of defiance, it is actually a confession and religious submission of wickedness.

Trier: Amoralist or Immoralist

Some authors, artists, and directors may claim that they have a right to hold an amoral position, which is neither moral nor immoral but a stance lying outside the sphere of any morals and values. They usually call themselves as "nihilist" and "existentialist". But they are far from being a genuine existentialist and nihilist artists instead; they just hide behind some existentialist and nihilist mottos in order to get rid of some humanitarian responsibilities. According to Sartre's existentialism, a person ought to live as if he/she is a model for all humanity and taking on responsibility for all people.

... man is responsible for what he is. Thus, the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders. And, when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men... When we say that man chooses himself, we do mean that every one of us must choose himself; but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men... Our responsibility is thus much greater than we had supposed, for it concerns mankind as a whole. (Sartre, 1946, p. 68)

So, it is not even possible to claim that existentialism is an immoralist or amoralist philosophy; it is based on the view that everyone ought to construct their own values instead of escaping their freedom by sheltering religion or morality for themselves. Nietzschean nihilism is of course amoralist but this does not mean that it is immoralist; that is, opposing to anything related with morals. Nietzsche himself is in a combat with all current societal and Christian values since religion and morality conceal weakness, cowardliness and resentment.

What is good? Everything that heightens the feeling of power in man, the will to power, power itself. What is bad? Everything that is born of weakness. What is happiness? The feeling that power is growing, that

resistance is overcome. Not contentedness but more power; not peace but war; not virtue but fitness. The weak and the failures shall perish: first principle of our love of man. And they shall even be given every possible assistance. What is more harmful than any vice? Active pity for all the failures and all the weak: Christianity (Nietzsche, 1976, p. 570).

Trier seems to have a Nietzschean amoralist stance since he tries to show shockingly that what are accepted as morally good behaviors actually cover some wicked intentions or weaknesses. For example, ordinary people in *Dogville*, accept to help Grace who runs from gangster in the first place, but then when they realize that she is needy and vulnerable, they begin to exploit her mercilessly. In this sense, Trier is very talented since he shows us that what we call as human essence is indeed conditioned by what life brings. So, moral templates do not usually fit into life and they are mostly artificial in front of the intricacy of life. Yet some people try to hold moral norms tight to cover their impotence and vitiation. Trier has a presumption exposed in several of his movies that the human being has a wicked inside which can be a viable argument since benevolence and malignity are usually ideological categories. For example, motherhood has represented a purified status in our age but in his movie *Dancer in the Dark*, Trier reflects a “selfish” blind mother on the big screen.

Trier’s Nietzschean amoralist stance, avoiding any values either good or evil while driving audiences to contemplate on what is good and what is evil is usually appreciated. However, his *Depression* trilogy, assumes Christian guiltiness and sinfulness, which is just the opposite of the Nietzschean amoralist attitude. So, his efforts to question what is good and to provoke our settled categories are very valuable. However, in *Antichrist* and *Nymphomaniac*, he does these provocations on the basis of a Christian presupposition that all human beings are sinful because of having a body and women are more sinning since they have less rational substance and more material substance. Thus, his last movies pass beyond the recognition of self-interestedness or wickedness which all human beings have owing to conditions. On the contrary, they ascribe this wickedness to the essence of human beings.

Antichrist and Nymphomaniac

In *Antichrist*, while a woman and man (they have no name) are having sex and the woman is climaxing, at that moment their little child, who is approximately three years old, climbs on the table while the window is open and falls from the window. The woman indeed has seen that her child was climbing on the table and about to fall down. However, she does not want to interrupt her orgasm. In the aftermath, she blames herself and is depressed. Her husband is a therapist and tries to help her. She is skeptical of this therapy and tries to harm her husband, too. Then she decides to go away from the therapy and moves to their chalet in a forest, called *Eden*. In this wooden house, she had spent some time when she was writing a dissertation called “women genocide” which was about witch hunting. Until this scene, the movie can be interpreted as a narration on a selfish mother as in the *Dancer in the Dark* which tells us a story of a blind mother giving birth to a child knowing that the child will be blind, too. However, after she comes to their so-called Eden garden, the director makes a reference to witch hunting and relates her selfishness with Eve’s first sin. He reinterprets the story of Adam and Eve through a deep Catholic perspective. According to the story, while Adam and Eve were living happily in heaven, namely, Eden garden, Eve succumbed to worldly desires. She deceived Adam using her body and thus caused their expulsion from heaven. Eve’s willingness to sacrifice heaven for the sake of bodily pleasures was the first sin and this sinfulness has been inherited and continued by her female descendants. In this movie, the

female character feels that she is going to destroy her husband too; in the end, she cuts her clitoris which ends her sufferings and saves her from being a witch.

In *Nymphomaniac*, Triel repeats almost the same story: A woman, Josephine (or Joe) is married with a man whom she actually loves and gives birth to a child. However, she does not have any warm feelings towards her child. One day, she leaves both her husband and her child forever due to her sexual dissatisfaction despite the fact that her husband is aware of her wife's sexual hunger and leaves her free to have sex with others. While her husband is so benevolent that he understands and lets her go, she behaves very brutally. Besides, Joe lacks understanding of herself. On the one side, she recognizes her nymphomania and resists society and bourgeois morality. On the other hand, she feels guilty and sometimes defines herself as perverted and evil. Finally, she has her vagina whipped in order to get rid of it. Joe discovers that she has been a nymphomaniac since her childhood; so, no matter how much she tries to change herself, she will never change since she is a natural born nymphomaniac. Unachievable satisfaction of pleasure is both a source of pride and shame for Joe. She never accepts being labeled as a sex-addict because she claims that such labels are used by society as a means to hold abnormal persons under control. Sometimes, she associates her nymphomania with a resistance to the order; she thus smashes cars, has intercourse with her dad's corpse, joins the mafia and tortures people to get their money, gets beaten, is urinated on by her ex-husband, and so on. When she lives through all these, she sometimes behaves in an arrogant way; sometimes she feels shame and repeats that she is a terrible human being.

References to Christianity, Witch Hunting and Bourgeoisie Morality

In Christianity, the body is inherently sinful, even infants are blamed for the first sin inherited from Adam and Eve which St. Augustine calls "original sin" (Couenhoven, 2005, p. 360). Consequently, even babies are baptized in order to be freed from this original sin. God is an incorporeal being and is the unique source of absolute mind and goodness. When a human being is detached from God and has acquired a corporal existence, he or she immediately turns out to be a culpable being. An animalistic human body is prone to controlled by Satan. Fortunately, human beings, unlike other animals, have minds and wills in addition to their physical bodies, and through their mental faculties and with the help of their wills, they can have faith in God. However, human beings' bodies often impede them from going with God. The body always requires consumption and annihilation. More consumption brings more desires for more and different things. Thus, according to Christianity, rational human beings must stay away from their bodies for as long as and as much as possible. Accordingly, a good Christian has to fast periodically with only bread and wine, have sex only for procreation, close his/her eyes to worldly pleasures, all of which keep people from wickedness and evil (Ramsey, 1988, p. 60). To put a stop to the desires of the body and to prevent the body's temptations are the duty of a strong will. Since men are more rational than women, they can have stronger wills and so, they can stay away from some desires and pleasure. However, women are weaker and less rational; thus, they can easily succumb to physical needs. While they are in the grip of desire, they can deceive men and invite them to temptation. Therefore, the only impediment to going with God is the human body, but when human beings die and dispense with the body, they can reach God.

For Augustine, Adam and Eve originally would not have died, not because their bodies were not mortal, but because their bodies were so united with their souls in union with God that death would have been prevented. They would have had sexual intercourse and produced physical offspring. But this original sexual

intercourse would have been completely free of “concupiscence” or sexual lust. In Augustine’s words, Adam would have performed sex as a rational act completely under the control of his mind, as a farmer sows a seed in a field. Eve would have remained virginal in this intercourse and subsequent parturition, just as Mary remained virginal in her impregnation by God and the birth of Jesus. But this lust free insemination and birth of offspring never actually happened, because the creation of Eve was followed immediately by the fall of Adam and Eve into sin. Eve took the 2 initiative in this choice to disobey God, because as a woman she had less rationality and was closer to the bodily lower self and so was easily deceived by the tempting serpent. Adam, in Augustine’s view, was not deceived but went along with Eve in an act of kindly companionship lest she be left alone (Ruether, n.d., pp. 1-2).

Trier seems to be impressed by Augustine’s views on sex, women, and rationality. As mentioned in the previous section, *Antichrist* replicates the story of the first human beings’ exile as a consequence of a sin for the sake of an animalistic pleasure.

Women’s reproduction, menstrual cycles and complexity of sexual organs lie in the roots of this malicious view of Christianity towards women. These malicious views are neither peculiar to nor the outcome of Christianity; they have been rooted in a very remote history. Indeed, theorization of the split of mind from body has originated in Plato and has been persisted in almost the whole history of philosophy.

With procreation, women literally create a new creature from nothing, which has been perceived as a magical or divine facility. Moreover, men can die when they are bleeding because of a serious injury. Nevertheless, women bleed every month but they do not die because of this menstrual bleeding (Houppert, 2004). Furthermore, sexual organs and sexual reactions of males can be easily seen but women’s sexual organs have two complicated parts composed of layers. A large portion of it is inside and invisible through bare eyes. The vagina looks like a dark and deep hole, which can pull bigger organs inside and bring out much more bigger creatures, that is, babies. In addition to these, during the female orgasm, men sometimes may feel that their penis is lost in this misty abyss.

Another fear, which is fear of so-called witchcraft, comes on the scene mainly around 15th century to 18th century in Europe. Women have been responsible of gathering as a result of the first division of labor which was obviously gender based. This led to an inclination of women to prepare some medicines and some healing solutions or poisons. So, some women working with herbs are called witches, who are believed to have a power “to call life and death” (In his movie *Day of Wrath* [*Vredens Dag*, 1943], another Danish Director Carl Theodor Dreyer tells a story of witch hunting with its backgrounds in the seventeenth century Denmark. He uses the term “to call life and death” for witches but in this movie, the director does not make explicit either a positive or negative attitude towards witch hunting, either). Witch hunting actually first appeared in ancient Egypt and Babylonia and is still found in India, Saharan Africa, Papua New Guinea, Saudi Arabia and Cameroon.

In *Antichrist* and *Nymphomaniac*, we witness the endless desire of women. When the church began to lose its power, it became more authoritarian and harsh towards some women incompatible with the church or society. Thus, they were burned by the accusation of being a witch and entering the devil’s service. The witch hunting is implicitly approved in *Antichrist* by von Trier. Antichrist as a word denotes the devil, which is matched with the woman in the movie; conversely, Christ corresponds to the man since man carries a heavenly substance whereas woman has an evil spirit. For this reason, women’s liberation from evil is possible only through liberation from sexuality. In both movies, both female characters realize this truth after causing great harm not only to others but also themselves, and they get rid of their sexual organs. In the former one, the

woman cuts her clitoris with a scissor and in the latter she has her vagina whipped. Thus, they find salvation by destroying their sexuality.

Trier has been applauded for these scenes, the disposal of the vagina and clitoris since he displayed the nastiest taboos (Cündioğlu, 2014). If there were no apparent references to Christianity in his movies, we could read these scenes as extreme stories of extreme individual characters or a relatively naive misogyny which can be seen in Michael Haneke, Zeki Demirkubuz and Nuri Bilge Ceylan, too. Their naive misogyny can be explained as hatred towards the cunning of women and their slave morality owing to their suppression. However Trier avoids this reading by his obvious hatred of the vagina and clitoris.

Afterwards, we can conclude that instead of using hyper sexuality or sex addiction Trier has not chosen to use the word nymphomaniac accidentally. Trier uses the word on purpose in order to underline women's obsession with intercourse since the "word" nymphomaniac denotes females' excessive sexual drives. In the mid-nineteenth century, nymphomania has been certified as a disease in which century kleptomania, alcoholism and pyromania were also certified. The bourgeoisie which had completed its development had begun to draw its own moral boundaries explicitly and to exclude those remained outside these limits, as criminal, insane, diseased, and abnormal. However, excessive sexual desires in women cannot be compared to taking excessive amount of alcohols, and unlike stealing something and starting fires, sexual drives of women do not harm anyone. To determine the limits of what is normal and excessive or abnormal is rather ideological. Here again a hypocritical attitude against women is apparent. Woman's sexuality has been confined into the home; sexual pleasure has been reduced to procreation and to make happy the husband. On the one side, women who cannot be satisfied are labeled as "excessive" but on the other side, those who cannot make their husbands happy are categorized as "frigid" (Groneman, 1994, pp. 337-367).

Conclusion

Trier, while positioning himself as opposed to morality and other social values, offers deeply rooted misogyny wrapped in the guise of radicalism and pornography. Even though Trier undertakes a mission to provoke, provocation does not always work against the current order. Order sometimes is fed by provocations and provocateurs do often what order tells them to do. Bourgeois ideology imposes that human desires are limitless and people can annihilate anything if they are given the opportunity. While Joe is climaxing, she always wants more and tries to go to extremes which is not actually in opposition to bourgeois ideology; on the contrary, it lies at the basis of it. According to Trier, a person always pursuing to be more heretical cannot be created by a merciful God, but by Satan. Indeed, he claims that the world is not created by God, but Satan ("Personal Quotes of Trier"). He makes the nameless woman character in *Antichrist* say the same phrase: "Nature is Satan's church".

Nature is obviously neither a heaven nor a hell which is a home for all rational and irrational creatures and for their good and bad deeds. Perceiving the body and bodily desires as insignificant and even inferior, constitutes the essence of Roman Catholicism. In this respect, it is not difficult to share Trier's claim that human beings often succumbing to their desires and physical needs cannot take part from a divine or pure mental substance. Fortunately, contemporary mind researches show that there is no distinction of this kind between body and mind. Thus, we do not have to look at our body and vagina as a source of sin and wickedness. On the contrary, we better grasp our bodily desires, sexuality and sexual organs as means of enriching ourselves without separating our body from our mind.

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