

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
J. Zimmerman, MA

Sexuality in Cinema

Nymphomaniac: Vol II (2013)

Lars von Trier (1956-)

Director Born in Kongens Lyngby, Denmark in April 1956, Lars von Trier worked as a child actor during the late 60s before going to the University of Copenhagen to study film theory. His first films, produced at age 25, won awards. Since the 1990s, von Trier has been a force in the avant garde film movements of Europe including Hyperrealism, German Expressionism, and Dogme 95—a movement he founded himself. Often his films delve into topics that make people uncomfortable such as mental illness, sexuality, and violence. Von Trier's detached attitude about the controversial 'necessities' for his hyper-realistic films—including animal abuse, unsimulated sex, and physical violence—have marked him as a controversial director. Film journalism outlet *Looper* listed him first among the likes of Ruggero Deodato and Stanley Kubrick in 2021.

Film This unique film comes in two forms: A combined 241 minute edited version, or a two-volume uncut version, Volume I running for 117 minutes and Volume II running for 124 minutes. The first volume follows Joe, a young nymphomaniac, as she tells her life story to Seligman, a solitary middle-aged man, as she recovers from a beating. It was revealed early in the film's production that it would actually be two films, and they would have a "softer cut" available. Filmed in the German cities Cologne and Hilden and Ghent, Belgium, production began in late August 2012. Upon release, *Nymphomaniac* was given an NC-17 rating by the MPAA, but this was eventually rescinded, and the film is now unrated. At the time of writing, Volume II of *Nymphomaniac* holds a 59% approval rating on the digital review aggregator Rotten Tomatoes.

Background Using digital composition, *Nymphomaniac* combines the actors having simulated sex with pornographic actors actually engaging in sexual contact. Von Trier spoke about this at the Cannes Film Festival, saying, "We shot the actors pretending to have sex and then had the body doubles, who really did have sex, and in post we will digital impose the two. So above the waist it will be the star and the [sic] below the waist it will be the doubles." Lead actress Stacy Martin would jokingly complain about the sex scenes being "boring" to shoot because of the technical nature of digital body doubling. Among those interested in erotic film, Volume II receives far less praise than the first volume. Fandango Media—the company which owns and maintains Rotten Tomatoes—has this to say: "It doesn't quite live up to the promise of the first installment, but *Nymphomaniac: Volume II* still benefits from Lars von Trier's singular craft and vision, as well as a bravura performance from Charlotte Gainsbourg."

MAIN CHARACTERS

Joe – A young woman with nymphomania

Seligman – a somewhat shut-in middle-aged man

Jerôme Morris – Joe's former employer turned husband

K – A sadist

L – Joe's boss at a debt collection company

P – A young woman who becomes sexually and professionally involved with Joe

SYNOPSIS

Picking up where the first volume left off, Joe chastizes Seligman for his constant interjections and allegories, saying he cannot and will not relate with her. He says this is because of his complete lack of sexual experience, claiming this makes him the best person to listen to her story without judgment.

Seemingly sated by this, Joe continues, telling Seligman about her struggles with sexual pleasure and the birth of her son, Marcel. During this time, Jérôme decides to let her see other men, but his jealousy grows quickly. One of the men she sees often is a sadist she calls K, whom she credits with returning her ability to feel pleasure again. During her visits to K, she leaves Marcel alone, eventually losing him to the foster system when Jérôme leaves them both.

Years later, Joe struggles with injuries to her genitals. At the same time, her boss—having deduced her nymphomania from her co-worker's complaints—demands Joe go to therapy. Joe does as she's told at first before rebelling, insulting the women at the group before storming out. After quitting her job, she falls into a position as an illicit debt collector, using her "special talents" to coerce men into their payments. During one episode, she reveals to a man that he is a pedophile, telling Seligman she feels sympathy for him as a fellow sexual outcast. Just after this episode, her superior, L, tells her to groom a young girl to take over her position. The girl, P, joins their ranks when she reaches eighteen. P moves in with Joe, and the two begin a sexual relationship.

On the job, Joe realizes she's been sent to collect debts from Jérôme, and she allows P to do the job on her own. Soon, however, she realizes that P is having an affair with Jérôme, and Joe grows possessive and jealous. Joe ambushes them in an alleyway, but the gun doesn't fire when she pulls the trigger. Jérôme beats her savagely before he and P have sex in front of her. P finishes the humiliation by urinating on Joe before the two leave. Seligman has some thoughts about the failed ambush, instructing her on how to properly use the gun. Joe says she feels content after unburdening herself from her story, telling Seligman she considers him a true friend. After he leaves to let her sleep, he returns and attempts to rape her. Joe shoots him and flees.

PLOT

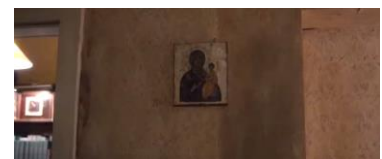
Loss of sensation – Picking up just after the last film left off, Joe lies in bed with Jérôme, naked. Frantically, she touches herself, still unable to feel sexual stimulation. Eventually, she rises and goes to the bathroom, where she beats her crotch with a wet towel. Hearing the noise, Jérôme tries to stop her. The story is interrupted by yet another interjection by Seligman. He talks about Zeno's paradox, applying it to Joe's loss of sensation, saying chasing Jérôme was part of what brought her pleasure. "I'm sorry," she interrupts, "but it seems as if you're not taking this very seriously. I'm telling you about the worst thing that's happened to me... and immediately we have to hear about this ridiculous mathematical problem." Joe says she doubts that Seligman is even listening, admitting she's never told anyone the full story of her life before saying she's disturbed by Seligman's sheer lack of arousal.



Asexuality – After a long pause and a supposition by Joe, Seligman admits that he lacks sexual attraction and is a virgin. He has a curiosity about sexuality, but it's the same kind of curiosity he has for literature or math. "It's not as uncommon as you would think," he says as Joe stares at him, a bit confused. "I think maybe it makes me a better listener to your story: I have no preconceived notions or preferences." Seligman concludes that this makes him the best judge on whether or not she is a "bad human being" as she claims.



Madonna and Child – Joe's eyes are attracted to a picture on the wall, Mary and the baby Jesus. The organ tune from Seligman's tape player begins as she stares, saying, "she's looking at me." Seligman turns to look and is excited when Joe correctly calls it an icon and identifies it as Russian. She stands and crosses the room to join him as he points out the finer details and explains the symbolism that fascinates him so, discussing the schism between the Roman Catholic Church and what he calls "the Eastern Church." This gives Joe an idea of how to continue her story, saying, "Let's call this chapter 'The Eastern Church and



the Western Church.” She “peps up” the name with an extra title, “(the silent duck).” With an image of St. Basil’s Cathedral beside it, the title appears.

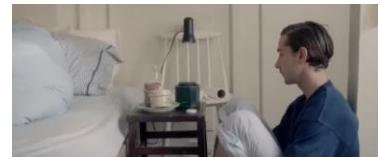
School trip in the hills – “I have to go back a bit,” Joe begins, explaining that when she was twelve, she went on a school trip into the hills. The screen is black for a moment, the sound of the wind through grass and birdsong caress the ears. Suddenly, the screen is filled with the image of young Joe looking up at the sky, having just opened her eyes. In the distance her friends chat and giggle. Farther away still, a cuckoo calls. Closing her eyes again, Joe lies completely still. Her eyes snap open again, and she begins to float, breathing heavily. Before her eyes, the vision of two women appears. One is clad in rich jewels, holding a golden goblet, riding atop a bull. The other is draped in a white veil and holding a child.



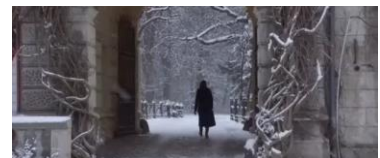
Orgasm or seizure – Seligman can’t believe her. Joe says it was a spontaneous orgasm, but her doctors called it an epileptic seizure. In spite of his claims of secularism, Seligman begins to walk from the room, offended. He thinks she’s making fun of him. What Joe has described is, in Seligman’s words, “a blasphemous retelling of the transfiguration of Jesus on the mount, which is one of the Eastern Church’s holiest passages.” Instead of Jesus’ vision of Moses and Elijah, Joe has a vision of the whore of Babylon and Valeria Messalina, Rome’s most notorious nymphomaniac. Joe maintains that she’s ignorant of the religious allegory, and Seligman eventually calms down. “Goodness gracious,” he says, sitting again. “You demand a lot from your listener.”



Depression – Joe continues her story. She lies slumped in bed, unmoving, dishes stacked up beside her bed. Jérôme sits on the floor beside her, looking at her. Joe’s men come knocking and fill up the answering machine, Jérôme confronting them when they show their faces. Frantically, he tries to please Joe, but she still feels nothing.



Winter walk – Joe continues her walks described in the last volume as those of a caged animal, though now snow coats the ground and drifts through the air. The woman and her dog, the old man on the bench, and her father’s favorite trees are all still there, the perspective different. She tells Seligman that “a bit of hope sprang from a mystical event.” Joe describes three leaves dancing on the wind, suspended before her. In response to this ‘sign,’ she decides to take sex with Jérôme into her own hands. In her apartment, she takes control, pushing Jérôme around and pulling off his clothes. Joe says this shift in initiative encouraged Jérôme.



Fun with Jérôme – “I have to admit,” says Joe, “there came a time when we had fun together.” In a high-class restaurant, Joe and Jérôme sit, waiting for their order. Suddenly, Jérôme passes a spoon to Joe and slaps a five-pound note on the table, saying he’ll give it to her if she can put the spoon inside her. With a daring look, Joe stands and crosses to the server’s station, where she grabs a handful of spoons. Jérôme laughs quietly. Back at the table, she lines them up before, one by one, pushing each inside of her beneath the tablecloth. The waiter appears with their parfaits, apologizing for not getting them any spoons. The two eat their dessert before leaving, the spoons slowly clattering out from between Joe’s legs as they exit, she and Jérôme giggling.



Cesarean – Seligman asks if love and sex are contrary to one another in Joe’s mind. Joe describes the period as “secure and restful domestic comfort.” She moves on without really answering his question, telling him of how she became pregnant. Doctors prepare her for a procedure as she narrates, “It was important for me to have a cesarean... I was



hoping that my fucking cunt was going to work again.” Jérôme is there with her, comforting her. Joe describes seeing her child in the reflection of the surgeon’s lamp and it looking at her with the face of a demon. “I could have sworn I saw him laughing.” Seligman interjects as always, comparing it to an episode from Faust.

Motherhood – “I assume maternal love didn’t live up to its expectations,” Seligman says. “I didn’t have any expectations,” Joe replies, saying it wasn’t really a problem; she just couldn’t look into her son’s eyes without a feeling of being “found out,” that somehow the child would never return her love. Young Joe plays with the infant, Jérôme watching them nearby. Later, she and Jérôme have sex, and he’s unable to keep erect. “Achilles again was chasing the tortoise,” Joe says wryly. In a heartfelt conversation, Jérôme tells Joe she can pursue other men again, as he wants her to be sexually satisfied and he simply isn’t enough for her.



The piano teacher – “For a long time,” Joe begins, “I had been playing around with the idea that the concept of the ‘fuck-me-now’ clothes could be improved. I became the piano teacher.” She says goodbye to Jérôme and heads out. On the streets, she fakes a car failure, unplugging the distribution wires from the spark plugs, creating a puzzle for the men she wanted to attract that they could not resist, one that was both simple and time-consuming. Every time she played this role happens all at once: a literal mob of men surrounding her car and trying to get it running. Fur Elise plays. Selgiman interjects a quick aside about Beethoven and Bach.



Tension – Joe returns home to find Jérôme waiting for her. Joe tends to her son for a moment before Jérôme asks if she had a good day. After, he walks into another room and punches the wall. In spite of his desire to please her sexually, he feels cuckolded. Joe talks about how secrecy between them fueled this. Joe only wanted to protect his feelings, but he saw the secrecy around her lovers as manipulation, an insult.



Language barrier – The story jumps ahead three years as Joe describes her encounter with “the dangerous men.” Jérôme was traveling, leaving her and Marcel alone most of the time. On a walk with her son, she spies a group of African immigrants talking on a street corner. The idea of having sex with someone she couldn’t communicate with “turned [her] on immensely.” Enlisting the help of a language expert, Joe asks to have sex. The expert returns with an address and a time for Joe.



Cheap motel – The address was for a cheap hotel. Joe sits alone on a bed, waiting for her date. She’s surprised when two men enter. They begin undressing her, arguing in a language she can’t understand. They undress and take positions with Joe straddling one of them. Both of them penetrate her at the same time. Disappointingly for Joe, they can’t stop arguing about who gets to use which hole, so she quickly dresses and leaves.



Free speech – In describing the scene at the hotel, Joe uses the word “negro.” Seligman takes issue with this. Joe begins a tirade about censorship, saying it’s right to “call a spade a spade” and the removal of words is an attack on the “democratic foundations of society,” comparing culturally sensitive expression to book burning. Seligman and Joe go back and forth for a moment, but neither changes the other’s mind.



Strange test – In a strange little room connected to a long hallway, Joe enters and sits near two other women as if it were the waiting room of a doctor's office. A man enters and approaches Joe, asking who she is. "I know what you do," she says, "and I'd like to be one of the women that you see." The man dismisses her, asking one of the other women to join him. Joe remains, and other women come and go. She sees marks on their legs and faces. The man returns and demands to strike her as a test. When Joe filches and cries out "No," he demands she leave.



System of violence – "How mysterious," Seligman interjects. "Will you give me an explanation now, or shall we wait?" Joe says she can't give him an explanation but does say there were rumors that the man was a sadist of some note and that she was desperate to regain her sexual sensation. "The system was the overriding factor with K," she says. "The system of violence?" Seligman asks. Joe then compares the sadism to the fixation on crucifixion of the Western Church, spurring Seligman to prattle on about Jesus' agony, the thirty-nine lashes, and so forth.



The rules – Back in the strange little waiting room, K confronts Joe again. "You are beginning to irritate me," he says, staring at her dangerously. Joe simply looks up and closes her eyes. He strikes her, and she sits back up. He strikes her again, and she stays down. Seemingly satisfied, K tells Joe the rules: "The first rule is I don't fuck you, and there isn't any discussion about that. The second rule is that we have no safe word." He goes on to explain that there is nothing she can say to make him stop if she enters the room with him. He then gives her an assignment, saying, "You must bring a brown, used, leather riding crop, and not one from a shop selling sex toys. It's not a masquerade." The final rule is to come at a specified time, which will be determined during the previous visit. As he leaves, he gives her a new name—Fido.



Riding crop – In an equestrian tack shop, Joe struggles to get the used riding crop K demanded. Later, she leaves her son with a babysitter, taking the crop with her to the strange little waiting room in a long taxi ride. After waiting patiently for a long time, K appears, calling to her with a whistle: "Fido!" They walk down the long hall to K's room and enter together.



Bondage – Inside, K takes Joe's coat and examines the riding crop. From a desk drawer, he takes out a hair tie and asks Joe to put up her hair. After she does this, K practices a few knots on her, deciding what he's going to do. Then he directs her to bend over a chair, finding the position awkward. He then shows her to a nearby couch where, after some fiddling, he positions her over the arm. After grabbing the riding crop—which has been soaking in a bucket—K lifts Joe's skirt, telling her not to wear underwear next time before cutting them off with a pair of scissors. Joe begins crying quietly, and K says they can't do anything today, telling her to come back Thursday.



Twelve strokes – Thursday, Joe argues with her babysitter on the phone. After hanging up and thinking for a moment, she puts her hair up in a ponytail and leaves her son home alone. In K's room, he sets up the couch again, this time using a pair of phone books to prop Joe up higher. After strapping and tying her down, K clinically places a finger inside of Joe. Rubbing his fingers together, he says, "So much better." K then grabs the crop and stands behind Joe. "I'm now going to hit you twelve times," he says, "no matter how much you scream." Joe surprises him by crying out before he strikes her. "That's not how it goes," he chides before beginning. After the twelve strokes, Joe whispers, "Thank you."



Discussion about perversion – Seligman sits, staring pensively. Standing near the window, Joe says, “Hello? Are you there?” He says it’s strange, and Joe agrees. “I don’t know where we get our sexuality from,” she says, “or where tendencies of this kind come from.” She guesses it must emerge from childhood. Seligman argues that Freud says that childhood is full of perversion, that children are “sexually polymorphic.” Joe goes on to explain that the experience made her feel invincible, but also “like a potted plant.” Seligman is confused, and she explains, “He was constantly checking my cunt juice the way old ladies check their potted plant to see if they need watering.” Joe then praises K’s knots and handiwork. Seligman compares this to a cat playing with a dying mouse before discussing the invention of the Prusik knot, one that tightens under pressure and looses in its absence. Joe calls this Seligman’s “weakest digression.”



Fifteen coins – Joe continues her story, and we see her walking down the hallway with K away from his room. “Tomorrow,” he instructs, “bring fifteen small coins, all the same.” In her apartment, Joe counts out the coins and looks over her son before leaving him alone. In K’s room, he places the fifteen coins in a leather glove, arranging them along the fingers as he slips his hand inside. He tests it out with a strike on the desk before positioning Joe, standing her in the center of the room. He slaps her, sending her tumbling across the desk.



Blood knots – K talks about how some people give craft supplies and instructions as gifts, pulling some cord from his desk. Joe sits naked and bruised before him as he shows her how to tie blood knots. He then asks her to tie one herself. Finding Joe’s handiwork satisfactory, he pulls out a yardstick and instructs her on the construction of a cat-o-nine-tails. As Joe begins tying, K talks about the history of the cat o’ nine tails, blood knots, nooses, and so forth. After a while, he takes the tied cord away from Joe and shoves a gag into her mouth. Joe returns home, checking on her son before lying on the floor in pain.



Climbing out of the crib – The next visit, Joe sits in the waiting room with two other women. Back outside her apartment, a heavy loader works as a snowplow, clearing mounds of snow from the roadway. The yellow beacon atop flashes across the ceiling of her son’s bedroom, and he watches curiously. In the waiting room, Joe checks her watch as the baby stands in his crib in his bedroom. Skillfully, he climbs out, chasing after the light. He finds the door to the balcony open and climbs on a box to watch the machine working in the street. Jérôme returns home to find the boy standing outside on his precarious perch, scooping him up and taking him back inside.



Christmas – Jérôme sits before the fireplace in a red sweater. A stocking and Christmas tree mark the time of year. Silently, he sips from a glass of wine. Joe sits silently behind him. He turns to her, asking, “Are you fond of me still?” Joe nods. “More fond of me than the others?” Jerome asks. “Yes,” Joe says, growing frustrated. Joe says she wants to be with her family for Christmas, but Jérôme isn’t satisfied with this, telling her, “If you leave tonight, you’ll never see me or Marcel again.” Suddenly, Joe stands and enters her son’s room, kneeling by the crib in tears. Jérôme sees this and starts a fight, waking up his son to use him as a prop. When he won’t stop harassing her, she leaves.



Cat-o-nine-tails – Joe barges through the waiting room and walks down the hall to K’s room. Inside, K prepares another woman for one of his games, but Joe interrupts them. “What is this?” K demands before apologizing to the other woman, saying he needs to “have a few words with Fido.” Alone with Joe, K says, plainly, “Your behavior is really



upsetting me today.” Joe tries to kiss him, and he pushes her away. “I really ought to send you home,” he says, sitting at his desk. Instead, he pulls out a Christmas gift, saying, “Merry Christmas, Fido.” Joe unwraps it, finding a cat-o-nine-tails inside with ‘Fido’ written on the handle. Without a word, she prepares the couch, getting into position without restraints. “I want your cock,” she begs, but K denies her, strapping her down before beating her with the whip. He gives her “the Roman maximum” of forty lashes.

Lie of sentimentality – “And when you came home,” says Selgiman, “Jerôme and the child were gone.” “I haven’t seen Marcel since,” Joe says, before suddenly throwing her tea at the wall. She shouts that she hates the “lie of sentimentality.” Seligman crosses the room to pick up the shattered cup, asking, “Are you sure?” Joe talks at length about how even Jerôme abandoned Marcel, placing him in foster care. Seligman returns a bit later with a new cup of tea, making a comment that every time he leaves, he feels that Joe will disappear like a cat through a flap in the door before talking about the cat he used to have.



The silent duck – Seligman asks, “What happened to the silent duck?” “Oh, shit,” Joe says, “I’d forgotten all about it.” She begins telling her story again, and we see her seated on K’s couch. Joe describes him as being in “an unusually good mood” that night, saying he wanted to introduce her to the concept of the silent duck. He bends her over, pulls up her skirt, and pushes his hand into a duck-like shape, thumb caressing his pointer and middle finger. He places his fingers into his mouth, slathering them in saliva before inserting all of them into Joe’s vagina. Seligman cracks a joke about the “quacking duck” as we see a flock of ducks floating in a pond, quacking noisily. In another digression, Seligman talks about how Roman lashes were given in bouts of three, meaning the Roman maximum was thirty-nine, not forty.



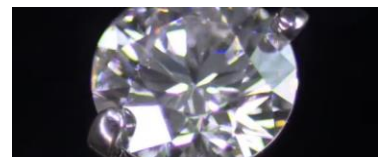
Digression on masochism – Joe starts up her own digression, saying, “Superficially, the sadist acts as the decider. But I once had a conversation with a prostitute who had tried all the variations in her field. She admitted to have only one prejudice: masochists.” She goes on to say the prostitute called masochists demanding and ungrateful. She returns to her story, and we see Joe walking near a canal. “I never went in that direction again,” she says of masochism and K. She throws the cat-o-nine-tails into the canal. “But I took the orgasm with me,” she concludes.



Joe’s maliciousness – Seligman is still unconvinced of Joe’s “badness” as a person. “It’s as if you want to misunderstand me,” Joe says, frustrated. “You keep inventing false excuses for my despicable and selfish actions.” Young Joe lies on a couch reading a magazine when Jerôme enters. He has a gift for her; a diamond ring. Joe reacts with surprise and thanks. “It was impossible for me to work out Jerôme’s income,” Joe says before her young self stands, ring in hand, asking Jerôme if he’d like to play Cinderella. Telling him to watch the ring, she says, “Ready, steady, go!” With a flick of the wrist, she throws the ring into the fire, sending Jerôme scrambling to extinguish it and retrieve the expensive ring.



Diamonds and brilliance – In yet another digression, Seligman admits to being interested in diamonds and the jeweler’s craft. “The word ‘brilliant’ refers to the cut,” he explains. “It’s a frighteningly refined cut.” Joe fiddles with the small diamond necklace around her neck, looking at its construction. “Fifty-seven facets,” Selgiman continues, describing how the special cuts reflect and refract the light through the same opening, creating the brilliance we know the stones for today. Joe finds this cut being called a mirror i



Mirror – A title card appears: “Chapter seven – The Mirror.” In a bathroom, Joe sits on a toilet, frantically masturbating. She sees blood on her hands and uses a pocket mirror to look between her legs, finding an open sore. She trudges down a hallway to an office where she knocks before entering. Inside, her boss demands that she seek treatment for her nymphomania, having deduced the issue from complaints from her co-workers.



Informed consultation – “Why didn’t you want to speak with a psychologist?” Seligman asks. “It’s an old story I just don’t like,” Joe replies. Seligman insists that if he is to understand, he needs all the information. Joe relents, telling Seligman about a time when she was lax in her birth control. After a short digression about repression, the story continues. In a doctor’s office, Joe receives an ultrasound, the doctor finding a fetus inside her womb. He offers to show her the baby’s sex, and she replies, “I don’t give a shit about the gender. I want it removed.” The doctor mandates an informed consultation with a psychologist. Joe makes it clear she wants an abortion, but the psychologist ignores her, asking probing, judgmental questions. Making no headway and growing frustrated, Joe shouts, “I’ve already had a kid! I know what I want!” she storms out of the office.



Abortion – In her kitchen, using her father’s calipers to measure them and other tools to change their shape, Joe makes her own abortion tools. Joe narrates that she followed the procedure for an abortion she learned in medical school. She places all the tools she’s made inside an electric kettle and sets it to boil before popping some pills and washing them down with vodka. Joe then spreads a sheet on the kitchen floor before removing her skirt and scrubbing down for the procedure. She lies down, performing the abortion on herself, crying out in pain. When she’s done, she lies there, weeping and shaking with the dying fetus lying in a pool of blood between her legs.



Discussion of abortion rights – Seligman sits in stunned silence, and Joe goads him, demanding he say something: “You always have so many clever things to say.” Seligman says he feels bad for Joe’s pain and sympathizes with the abortion. Joe seems incensed by his reasonable opinion that men cannot fully comprehend what abortions mean nor should they speak on them as experts: “That’s like saying I couldn’t understand the feelings of earthquake victims because they were Chinese.” He calls the way her abortion unfolded a “luxury problem.” Joe also takes insult to this comment, delving into a long narration about ‘the nutcracker,’ a tool used to crush the fetus’s head so it can be removed without hurting the mother or leaving her septic.



Snail gathering – Joe dives into yet another digression about how she and her father used to carefully move snails off of walkways or other dangerous places and put them in safer places, calling it needless sentimentality compared to the practice of cracking fetus skulls. Seligman requests that they change the subject, standing away from her in a corner. She makes one more cruel quip about how they could discuss the removal of organs for transplants before continuing with her story.



Group therapy – i n a circle in the middle of a school auditorium, a group of women sit. Joe stands and introduces herself as a nymphomaniac. The therapist leading the group, telling her they use the term “sex addict” here. One of the women talks about how she tried to induce an “overdose” by going naked to a work site. “They fucked me for three hours,” she concludes. The therapist asks her if she felt like it helped her. “No,” the woman says. After the meeting, Joe speaks with



the therapist one on one. The therapist explains the unique challenges of treating sex addiction: Everyone has a sexuality, and you can't simply avoid it like drugs or alcohol. From the discussion, Joe gleans an idea.

Deprivation – In her apartment, Joe wanders around, busying herself with removing anything that makes her think of sex. She cuts her phone line, removes erotic Asian art from the wall, covers the mirrors in paint, tapes towels on the corners of the sink and tables, and more. She also seems to turn off the heat, as when we next see her, she lies on the bed in a winter coat and gloves. After a long moment of stillness, she frantically grabs her herbarium, flipping through it to see the leaves she collected and pressed with her father. To her dismay, the licking of her fingers to turn the pages arouses her. She pulls her fingers from her mouth, crying and saying, "Stop it!"



Joe has something to share – In another group meeting, the therapist begins with, "Joe has something she'd like to share." She says she hasn't had sex for three weeks and five days, and the little group claps for her. She begins reading from a prepared statement, starting by saying that everyone in the group is the same. Joe looks up and sees her young self in a mirror, staring at her from a nearby chair. The therapist notices her uneasiness and gives her a glass of water. After, Joe abandons her speech, tearing it up, and then tells the women around her what she really thinks: "Dear everyone, I don't think it's been easy. But I understand now that we're not the same, and never will be... I'm not like you, who fucks to be validated... And I'm not like you: eat yourself to death if you want... And I'm definitely not like you," she says, turning to the therapist. "That empathy you claim is a lie, because all you are is society's morality police... I'm not like you. I am a nymphomaniac, and I love myself for being one." Outside the meeting, she torches a car with a Molotov cocktail. Seligman doubts this actually happened, and Joe apologizes, saying she was in a hurry to get to the next chapter.



First rays of morning light – Seligman crosses the room and looks out the window into the darkness. "It's dawning," he says. Looking confused toward the darkness, Joe asks, "How can you tell?" Seligman says there is a subtle shift in the color of the sky, undetectable to some, but he's learned to see it. "Then you understand what I mean when I say that twilight suddenly appeared at this point in my story. I understood that society had no room for me and I had no room for society. It would have been much, much easier to have realized that earlier on, but, suddenly, my senses unfolded dramatically." The image of an owl appears. She describes her switch to the "shady, nocturnal side" like changing sides in a war.



Change of perspective – Again, Joe pauses and looks at Selgiman's things around the room: The collected works of Poe, the Madonna and child, the picture peeking at her from behind another, the tape player, the fish hook. She then complains that his spartan decorating style has made seeking inspiration for chapter titles difficult. Though in a much more long-winded manner, Seligman simply suggests she shift her perspective. Joe looks around with her head at an angle, realizing the stain left by her teacup smashing on the wall looks like the kind of gun she received at the shady job she started working after her crashing out at the meeting. The Talking Heads' *Burning Down the House* blares as the new chapter begins: "Chapter Eight—The Gun."



A new job – "Whether I left society or it left me, I cannot say," Joe begins. She explains that she picked up a job as a criminal debt collector, which included such intimidation as burning people's cars. "I had for a long time known about this man, L," She continues as we see her knocking on a door. A man opens the door, and Joe introduces



herself. Excitedly, the man lets her in and begins an informal job interview. With a strange pridefulness, L tells Joe that she's proven herself to be unscrupulous and over-qualified for the position he has in mind. He then offers to help her "start her own business" with his help. This will include putting "moderate pressure" on debtors as a sort of subcontractor. "Extortion," Joe says softly. "No, no, no, no," L corrects with a sly smile, "I always prefer debt collection."

Thugs – "That's interesting," Seligman says. Joe disagrees. "The most interesting thing about it was how easily I dedicated myself to crime," she says, explaining that her main qualification was that of seduction. In some wine cellar, she ties blood knots in an electric cord before using it to beat the rear of a man tied to a table as her thugs watch. The man cries out before she strikes him, and she paraphrases K's words from before: "Now this is not how it goes. You have to wait until you're hit." Joe describes the brutishness of the thugs and the repetition of their technique, "creating as much havoc as possible with a pair of iron bars." The thugs wield their weapon of choice in an opulent house, smashing ceramics and toppling furniture.



Difference in technique – Joe notes that the thugs' usual techniques are having little effect on their mark, so she employs her unique skills. Her voiceover notes that she was unable to read this man sexually. Crossing the room to the man tied up in a chair, telling him he's "equipped with a very reliable truth detector" before pulling down his pants. She begins telling a series of dirty stories, looking at the man's penis for any sign of arousal. Nothing works until she tries a new story, one in which the man meets a young boy in the park and takes him home. Fear and despair cross the man's face as he becomes erect, and he swears he'll pay up, pleading that she stop. Suddenly, Joe kneels before him and begins to perform oral sex.



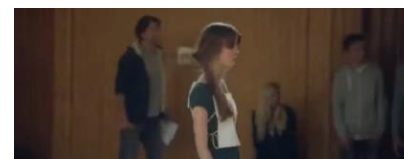
Pity for a pedophile – "You did what?" Seligman asks, a disgusted look on his face. "I gave him a blowjob," Joe says plainly. "I took pity on him. I had just destroyed his life. Nobody knew his secret, most probably not even himself. He sat there with his shame. I supposed I sucked him off as a kind of apology." When Seligman still cannot understand, Joe calls him admirable for being able to repress his desire so totally. "No matter how much I try," Seligman replies, "I can't find anything laudable in pedophilia." Joe begins a digression on the "95% who never live out their fantasies," telling Seligman to think of their suffering: "To be born with a forbidden sexuality must be agonizing." After thinking for a moment, Seligman quotes Thomas Mann: "A temptation resisted is not a sin, but a test of virtue."



Growing business – A montage of bank notes being stacked and changing hands crosses the screen as Joe narrates: "In any case, some years passed, during which my business grew." In L's office, the man praises her, "But, we aren't getting any younger," he concludes. Joe scoffs at this, "No, that's for sure." L suggests she look for a successor and suggests a teenage girl with parents who frequently run afoul of his debt collectors. He also lays out for her the process of grooming, replacing the deadbeat parents until all you're left with is a loyal follower who sees you as a parental figure. Joe calls it entrapment, but L says, "If you believe at all in the effects of good parenting, that kid will have far greater opportunities with you as a mentor than without."



Successor – Swallowing her pride, Joe goes to watch the girl in question at her basketball games. "As if L had foreseen this, the meeting with P filled me with pity and emotion," says Joe's voiceover. After one game, P begins a conversation with Joe, who tells her she's doing a great job. Sometime later, they meet in a fast food restaurant.



Joe gives her a gift for her sixteenth birthday, a book about trees. A memory of Joe's father plays again, this time with a bit more detail. He describes the existence of "soul trees," a tree that matches a person.

Two trunks – "Sure enough," Joe continues, "one of the following days, my dad dragged me into the woods again." "I found my tree," he says proudly. They look up at a big oak. "It has two trunks," young Joe comments. "Dad, how does a tree get two trunks?" she asks as they walk closer. He says the most common cause is the top getting broken off. Older Joe then talks to P about her father and soul trees. "I've never found mine," she says. "You will know it when you see it. That's what he said."



Roommates – After turning eighteen, P moves in with Joe. We're given a tour of the apartment where Joe performed an abortion on herself. Later that night, Joe wakes up in pain. Her voiceover explains that she had become celibate, explaining, "My groin was one big sore from my abuse that wouldn't heal." She stumbles to the bathroom, describing her withdrawal symptoms. In the bathroom, she chugs a glass of water, but she fails to put the glass down, knocking it over as she shakes and spasms. P finds her, cleans up the glass, and helps her back into bed. "I love you, Joe," P says. Joe returns the sentiment, but P clarifies that she doesn't mean it in "that way."



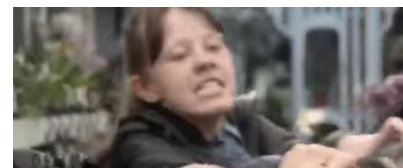
Sexual relationship with P – Seligman comments that perhaps P's love was real. Joe says she couldn't accept it even if it was. When Seligman calls the story 'touching,' Joe reacts with disdain, asking if they can get the story over with. On another bad day, P helps Joe into bed. After sitting with her for a while, P starts trying to undress Joe. "Don't," says Joe. "I want to see you," P says. Self-conscious about her sore, Joe still protests, but P reacts with kindness and tenderness. P strips and crawls into the bed with Joe. Joe cries as P kisses and licks her body.



P's question – Seligman asks if P knew what Joe did for a living. Joe describes her as "discrete" and "a girl of few words," saying she never asked about Joe's work. "But one day," she begins, "she had a question." "Joe," says P, "why did you start coming to my basketball matches?" After assuring Joe she won't get angry, P listens intently to her answer: "What I do... My job isn't a normal job. It's not legal." "No one in my family does anything legal," P says, almost proudly. Joe then explains L's plan. P says she's glad things happened the way they did, "Because if you hadn't, we'd never have met." P then says she wants to go to work with Joe. Joe refuses at first but has to relent when P is insistent.



P learns the ropes – After a short digression on social inheritance by Seligman, we see one of P's early jobs. In a greenhouse, Joe commands her thugs as she typically does. P lurks in the background as Joe methodically snips the blooms from orchids. Suddenly, P bursts forward and holds a gun to the man's head, Joe screaming for her to stop. Later, Joe tells P, "We don't use firearms," then asks for the gun. P argues, but relents eventually. Joe examines the firearm before hiding it away.



Jerôme's house – Joe's voiceover tells Seligman that another one of the coincidences he has trouble believing occurred. One of Joe's jobs took her to Jérôme's new home. After seeing his name on the address plate, Joe asks P to do the job on her own before disappearing into the bushes as P and the thugs push past Jérôme. The organ tune



from Seligman's cassette player begins again as Joe walks through a familiar alley on her way home, saying—in another coincidence—that it was the quickest route from Jérôme's to her flat. P returns home late, waking Joe to tell her things went well.

Waiting – Joe watches the wind ripple through the trees from her apartment. “Jérôme was to pay off his debt in six payments,” she narrates. “Every time P went to Jérôme to collect, I paced around restlessly until she was back home again.” She talks about picking up her mother's habit of playing solitaire to pass the time. “Each night,” she continues, “I was less reassured by her coming home than the night before. The question of whether jealousy is the fear of sharing or the fear of losing was of little interest to me.” Joe laments that the feeling she repressed for so long was “creeping up” on her. On the night that P left to collect the final payment, she didn't kiss Joe. “I took it to be forgetfulness,” Joe narrates. “But the hours passed, and she didn't return.” Joe leaves her apartment and goes to Jérôme's home, where she spies P and Jérôme hugging, kissing, and having sex.



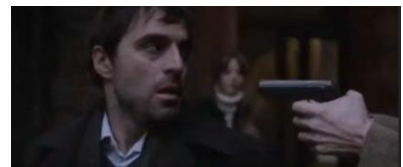
Farewell to the hillside – On a windswept hillside, Joe takes a walk. “So the next morning,” she narrates, “I took a trip to the round hills just outside of town that I visited with my school class when I was twelve to say a symbolic goodbye.” She explains she couldn't stay in town with P and Jérôme so close. Finding the goodbye unfulfilling, she climbs further up the small mountain. At its peak, she looks across to another outcropping where a tree, crooked and scrawny, pushed by the wind, grows. She stares at it, her soul tree.



Sympathy for Hitler – “I understand dictators who commit murder,” Joe says suddenly. “What was Hitler when it all boils down other than a man to whom society gave free reins?” Seligman makes a spiteful comment about her understanding for racists, “soft spot for pedophiles,” and sympathy for mass murderers. “What I mean is,” Joe says softly, “It's said to be difficult to take someone's life.” She goes on to explain that it's actually very easy and that humans were made for it. “Wonderful,” Seligman says with breathless sarcasm.



Joe's beating – Joe leaves her apartment and makes her way down to the alley. She hears two people laughing and hides herself behind a blind corner. It's P and Jérôme who are stumbling drunk. When Jérôme rounds the corner, Joe draws the pistol from her coat, aims at his head, and pulls the trigger. The chamber clicks, empty. She pulls the trigger again. Another click. Jérôme stares at her in disgust before savagely beating her. He then pulls P aside, and the two have sex in front of Joe. P finishes the humiliation by urinating on Joe as she lies helpless on the ground, dazed from the blows to the head. P and Jérôme walk away. “Fill all my holes,” Joe murmurs. “Please.”



Sunrise – “I still don't know why the gun wouldn't work,” Joe says. Seligman says he lacks experience, but from his reading, it seems she forgot to rack the gun, placing a round in the chamber. He crosses again to the window and looks out, saying, “It's morning.” Joe asks how he can see the sun. Standing together by the window, Seligman points out how a cascade of reflections allows him to see the sun before it's fully risen. “It's beautiful,” Joe whispers.



Recap – “In the beginning,” says Seligman, “you said your only sin was that you ask more of a sunset.” As they speak, moments from Joe's story play out again in a montage: Playing frogs with B, reading through the anatomy book, losing her virginity. “You were a human



being, demanding your right. More than that, you were a woman demanding your right.” “Does that pardon everything?” Joe asks. In his long-winded way, Seligman asks if society would have judged her as harshly for her actions had she been a man. “You as a woman, you had to take on a burden of guilt that could never be alleviated.” He says she was fighting against the expectations of her gender. After this, Seligman suggests she get some sleep. Joe thanks him for listening, saying that being able to tell her story has helped her decide to fight her addiction. Seligman leaves her.

Rape attempt – After a long, silent moment, Seligman creeps back into the bedroom. Slowly, carefully, he pushes back the comforter before pulling down his pants. Stroking himself, he lowers to the bed. Joe stirs. When she realizes what’s happening, she says, “No.” Reaching down to her coat, she grabs something. The gun flashes in the early morning light. The gun’s slide clicks as she racks it. The screen goes black. “But you’ve fucked thousands of men,” Seligman says. The gun goes off. The sounds of Joe dressing and running from the apartment fade into nothing. The cat flap in Seligman’s door squeaks as she exits the building.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Joe

We learned of Joe’s younger years in the first volume of the film. The second volume focuses on the latter years of her life leading up to her beating and being discovered by Seligman in the alley. She focuses her storytelling in this volume on those which she believes make her look like a “bad human being.”

Depressed/unhappy While unintentional on her part, we see a lot of Joe’s joy in the first volume of the film. In this volume, her unhappiness is front and center. She begins the film having lost her sexual sensation. She loses her husband and child. She is forced into therapy in order to keep her job. All of these things cause Joe deep sadness. The loss of her sexuality, family, and job push her toward depression. She finds little joy in anything as the story goes on, speaking at length about how bored and tired she is. At the film’s end, however, she seems oddly at peace. Having finally told her whole story, Joe is able to confront her depression and start to move on from the depths of despair.

Biased While she had some risqué opinions in the first volume, the second volume lays bare some of Joe’s bigotries. While we’ve already seen the harmful self-bias she has in calling herself a “bad human being” and some of her bigoted opinions about women, she delves at length into defense of racist phraseology, pedophiles, violent criminals like L, and even authoritarian killers like Hitler. In some ways, it is contradictory that Joe thinks herself a bad human being for being a woman with an overactive sex drive but not for racist opinions or sympathy for the likes of Adolf Hitler, but that in itself is the nature of bias: We are often blind to internalized bigotries like misogyny and racism.

Seligman

In the first volume, Seligman couldn’t stop interjecting during Joe’s story. After being called out early in this volume, Seligman becomes more subdued, allowing Joe to speak freely for the most part. His focus is less on understanding and more on defending Joe’s humanity this time around.

Aware Just like in the first half, Seligman is interested in listening to Joe’s story. His awareness is shown to be much broader, however

Disloyal While in the first volume and throughout the second volume, Seligman has proven himself to be a staunch defender of Joe’s behavior and often anti-social beliefs, his loyalty comes to an end at the conclusion of the film’s second half. After listening to her story and gaining her friendship, Seligman attempts to rape Joe after hearing that she is determined to end her sexual dysfunction, first by attaining celibacy. For this betrayal, Joe shoots him and leaves him for dead.

Jerôme Morris

Joe's husband who eventually divorces her. Jérôme gives Joe a child, but both abandon him after being unable to keep their relationship together. He shows up again at the end of the film, this time as P's lover.

Cruel Jérôme is prone to cruelty. When his jealousy comes out, he verbally abuses Joe, refusing to hear her side of the story or accept her constant admissions of love and adoration. We rarely see him interact with his son save for moments when he uses him as a prop for his arguments, calling Joe an unfit and inattentive mother while also being distant and unhelpful in raising the child. When he abandons Joe, he puts his son into the foster system as a final cruelty: Joe can't see the child that way. Even though we only glimpse him in both volumes, Jérôme cements himself as a bad human being, muddying Joe's perceptions of herself.

Jealous Jérôme's jealousy creates the dramatic elements of the film's beginning and end. While he gives Joe permission to seek other sexual encounters, he is spiteful when she takes him up on this. Jérôme constantly demands to know that he is her favorite and sets up manipulative tests for her like sending fake letters from supposed lovers to gauge Joe's reaction. It's his jealous manipulations that drive her away on the last Christmas Joe spent with her family.

K

We don't know much about K beyond his sadism. He is, however, key to the story of the second volume of *Nymphomaniac*.

Cruel Different from Jérôme's cruelty, K's is strangely playful. He is a kinkster, and he is engaging in a specific kind of sexual play with (supposedly) willing participants. While he is shown to be physically brutal to women, he is incredibly controlled, doing everything in a specific way with clear expectations from himself and the women he's beating. While his actions are clearly that of a character created by someone who has never participated in S&M or bondage play, he is still strangely reminiscent of real-life sadists in his almost professional approach to bondage.

P

Joe first comes into contact with P when grooming her to take over the debt collecting position in the future. P is at first self-conscious and unsure of herself. She proves to be quite ambitious and even cruel as the film goes on.

Trusting P's first portrayal is very trusting. Even after learning the truth about Joe meeting her as a teen, she decides to live with and even sleep with Joe. She hangs off of Joe's instructions and lessons as she enters the criminal underworld as her protégé. While we don't see much of her, we do clearly see this trait in P.

Disloyal While she wants to be loyal and helpful at first, P eventually betrays Joe. Sending P to Jérôme's house alone gives her the time and space to act as she desires. In these meetings, she starts a relationship with Jérôme. She forsakes Joe, who she has been sleeping and living with, forgetting—or perhaps choosing not to—tell Joe she loves her when leaving for the last time. P's disloyalty comes to a head in the final moments of Joe's story when she has sex with Jérôme in front of her before urinating on the badly beaten Joe to cement her humiliation.

Angry/violent While P is only present in the final chapters of the film, we see that she is driven toward anger. In the first incident, she presses her gun (which she brought without permission) to the head of Joe's mark and demands he pay up, acting more violently than even the thugs Joe brought with her. In the final moments of the film, she almost gleefully watches as Jérôme beats Joe. Then she participates in the mistreatment of her former lover, urinating on her out of anger at her trying to shoot Jérôme.

THEMES

Sexuality

Asexuality A small but important theme is that of asexuality. Seligman admits to not feeling sexual attraction early in the film. It's because of this, he says, that he is a "perfect judge" of Joe's story and whether or not she is a bad human because he isn't predisposed to judge her sexual behavior. "It's more common than you'd think," he tells Joe after admitting he's never had sex. At the film's end, he acts in contradiction to this stated asexuality, attempting to rape Joe. This might be the director's commentary on the realness or falsehood of asexuality, or it might just be a frankly lazy ending for shock value.

Illustrative moment Early in the film, Joe calls out Seligman's strange interjections, noting how he cannot connect with her sexual stories on a sexual level, only through allegory or literature. After a moment's thought, Seligman admits not only to lacking sexual feelings but also to never having had sex. He denies Joe's supposition that he cannot connect to her, saying that he just has to reframe some things to make up for his own 'lack of sensation' when it comes to sex. Seligman also says that his "innocence" makes him the best person to listen to Joe's story without judgment.



Masturbation / Loss of sensation As seen in the last volume, this is an almost obsessive part of Joe's life. Where before it was in pursuit of pleasure, now it is a response to stress and panic in the loss of sensation. Her disorder progresses to the point that she masturbates to the point of causing sores that bleed and cause her great discomfort. The exploration of the previous volume is gone, replaced by desperation and frustration.

Illustrative moment The first moment highlighting this theme set the tone for the rest of its appearances in the film. In the first moments of the film, Joe touches herself frantically in bed. Frustrated, she rises and walks to the bathroom, where she wets a towel before beating it against her genitals in the hopes of regaining sexual sensation. The loss of sexual pleasure drives the plot and Joe's struggles throughout the film, leading her to risky behaviors and extreme measures in order to feel sexual pleasure again.



Orgasm Joe's struggles throughout the film relate almost entirely to her inability to achieve orgasms, first at all, then easily because of her injuries. She tells Seligman the story of her first orgasm, which coincided with either an epileptic seizure or a religious vision during which she saw the whore of Babylon and Valeria Messalina, historically infamous nymphomaniacs.

Unable to reach satisfaction with a single partner and working Jérôme past his breaking point in search of sexual pleasure, Jérôme agrees to open their relationship, allowing her to sleep with multiple partners. She is unable to achieve an orgasm with any of these partners. Only after meeting the sadist K and abandoning her family does Joe experience an orgasm once more. Later in the film, she struggles with her nymphomania, experiencing physical withdrawal symptoms when she is unable to masturbate or have sex because of sores and wounds on her groin. After telling her story to Seligman, Joe reevaluates her life and decides to give up sex altogether to beat her addiction, forsaking orgasms in order to live a fulfilling life.

Illustrative moment Much like the first film, there are many orgasms we could talk about to illustrate this theme. One of the more significant comes nearly half-way through the volume after Joe has left her family on Christmas. She barges in on K while he is with another woman, but instead of punishing her with denial, he gives her a gift: a cat-o'-nine-tails. She assumes the position that is expected of her but does most of the setup herself, allowing her to stimulate her clitoris while K beats her. In this moment, she has her first orgasm since reuniting with Jérôme.



Sexual games This idea comes up several times in the second half of *Nymphomaniac*. We see it first as pure playfulness, Jérôme making a silly bet at a restaurant that Joe couldn't put a spoon inside herself. Smirking, Joe crosses to the server's table and retrieves a handful of spoons, placing them inside of her underneath the tablecloth one by one. This entertains them both greatly. Another sexual game Joe plays is pretending to be the piano teacher. She creates a game that both attracts and distracts her prey by unplugging the distribution wires that power the engine. While there are potentially tens of thousands of combinations, only one will work. This gives Joe enough time to seduce the men who try to help her get her car running again. While brutal, K is engaging in a form of sexual games in his bondage scenarios. It's clear he has a different game he plays with each woman, calling some "madame" while he calls Joe "Fido," like a dog. In the flashbacks that recap the story at the film's end, we see one of Joe's earliest sexual games with B, where the girls would "play frogs" and drag their genitals across the floor.

Illustrative moment Early in the film, Jérôme dares Joe to put a spoon inside her vagina at a restaurant. Never one to back down from a dare, Joe confirms Jérôme will give her a five-pound note for one spoon before grabbing a handful from the server's station. One by one, she slips them under the tablecloth, under her dress, and inside of her. Before they leave, we see Joe putting a large stack of notes in her purse before standing. As she and Jérôme exit, the spoons clatter, hitting the ground as they fall out of her, both Joe and Jérôme laughing.



Multiple partners While multiple partners was a theme in the first film, it takes on a new meaning in the second. In the first film, Joe is a single woman with no one to demand she stop. In the second film, Joe is a married woman and mother. While Jérôme gives Joe permission to pursue other sexual partners, he is quick to turn to jealousy. The expectations of Joe's new roles make her sexual promiscuity seem all the more disgusting in a societal sense. But, as Seligman says at the film's end, if Joe had been a man, this story would likely have been a comedy. It is Joe's gender and the backwards, puritanical expectations of society that cause her to suffer for what is (though in less excess) typical human behavior.

Illustrative moment The first volume shows us many sexual exploits, often in rapid succession. The second volume takes a more artistic look at the concept. While we do see a few moments of sexual contact, the clearest moment of multiple partners appears when, in her new guise at the piano teacher, Joe baits men into sexual encounters by pulling the distribution wires from her car engine's spark plugs. A crowd of men appears around Joe as she remembers every time she played this role, and we see them all at once.



Masochism We see many examples of this theme throughout the second half of *Nymphomaniac*. While it's in a sensationalized form, we see the kink play out in full for nearly an hour in the film's middle. Joe's experience allows us to see both sides of such play, she the masochist, K the sadist. He is controlling and demanding, and Joe is desperate enough to revive her orgasm to participate in her own humiliation, tying blood knots for a whip and purchasing an authentic riding crop or preparing the couch to be tied down.

Illustrative moment Surprisingly, the clearest moment of this theme is not a moment where we watch it happen, but a digression. After discussing her relationship with K and talking about the "silent duck." This time, Joe takes the lead, telling Seligman about a sex worker she'd spoken to, telling her about the woman's one bias against masochists. Joe says that they are the neediest, most demanding, and least thankful of people, and she agrees with her. This statement directly contradicts some of what we've seen in Joe's own experience with masochism.



Lesbianism There is a small exploration of lesbian relationships in *Nymphomaniac*. In grooming P to take over her debt collection business, she earns the girl's devotion. This slowly morphs into something more, genuine adoration. P wants to sleep with Joe when they move in together. They do, eventually, Joe

asking her to stop, ashamed of the wounds on and around her groin. P doesn't care, kissing and licking her tenderly. The relationship blossoms from there, Joe and P growing into a happy couple. P's eventual relationship with Jérôme, however, brings this all crashing down, ending in Joe's eventual beating and humiliation.

Illustrative moment Late in the film, Joe admits she had ill intent when she first started seeing P at her basketball games. P listens without judgment, saying it was all meant to happen so they could meet each other. P pulls Joe into a kiss, and they smile at one another, P demanding Joe show her the ropes at the debt collection job after.



Love In this volume, love loses its romantic tint, tainted by Joe's revulsion at herself and the things she has done. The film begins with her relationship with Jérôme falling to pieces and ends with her new lover urinating on her after Joe is beaten within an inch of her life. Joe talks about her struggle to love her infant son. She also pushes back against P's advances, though Seligman says the young woman likely felt deeply and truly.

Illustrative moment In one moment, we see love, plain and simple. When Joe is going through withdrawals from a lack of sexual activity, P finds her in the bathroom and helps her back into bed. While standing over Joe, P tells her that she loves her. Joe responds in turn, and P corrects her, making it clear she means in a romantic way.



Dysfunction Much like in the first volume, there is no one moment that clearly highlights this theme. The whole story is one of sexual dysfunction. In the second volume, we learn that Joe's true dysfunction began with what doctors called an epileptic seizure, but Joe believes is a supernatural vision. While it was exploratory and fairly harmless in the first film, her nymphomania rises to new levels in the second. No longer is she just having sex to seek pleasure, she needs it like an addict needs their drug. After months and years of rubbing sores on her genitals seeking sexual pleasure, she goes through a period of celibacy, which brings withdrawal symptoms. Where the first film seeks a more comedic edge in its explorations of sexual dysfunction, the second looks at the harm such things can cause.

Sexual assault A small but important theme, sexual assault only really comes up toward the end of the film. Seligman, finally overcome by sexual curiosity, tries to force himself on Joe in her sleep. Whereas other sexual acts and social ills have been played with, this film doesn't even entertain justifying such actions, and Joe kills Seligman for trying to assault her.

Illustrative moment in the film's final moments, we watch Seligman attempt to rape Joe in her sleep. He enters her room after she falls asleep and begins trying to insert himself into her. Having found the desire to stop being a nymphomaniac, Joe stops him, shooting him before fleeing.



Psychology

Therapy Joe begins therapy at the behest of her boss. She says she's tried it before and it didn't work. Again, she tries to fit in at therapy, seemingly making progress when she says she hasn't had sex for nearly a month. What should be a celebration of celibacy and progress turns into a self-aggrandizing insult session when Joe begins insulting the women in the group and the therapist who leads it. In a way, Joe telling her story to Seligman ends up working better than therapy, as she resolves to end her nymphomania before trying to fall asleep.

Illustrative moment As in most themes, *Nymphomaniac* likes to pervert the norms. It does this blatantly with Joe's therapy when she stands to deliver a speech about her recovery to her group therapy circle.



Instead of delivering the speech she'd written, Joe tears it up before insulting the women around the circle and the therapist who leads the group. She says she's proud of being a nymphomaniac and loves herself for it before storming out and beginning a new life funded by crime.

Society

Gender Much like the first volume, the second volume of *Nymphomaniac* fails to adequately examine gender. What examination there is is similarly surface level. While in some ways an improvement, it is also a disappointment that the deepest moment of gender exploration comes with Seligman spoon-feeding us an idea. After she's finished telling her story, Seligman tells Joe her opinions might be different if she had been a man.

Illustrative moment After telling her story, Joe and Seligman recap what has been discussed. After running over the main themes and plot points of the story, Seligman tries to comfort the obviously frustrated Joe by telling her, "You as a woman, you had to take on a burden of guilt that could never be alleviated." Joe seems to understand this, pledging to start anew on her self-deprivation in order to rid herself of her nymphomania so she can learn to enjoy life again.



Religion More set dressing in the first volume, discussion and themes of religion take a larger role in the second volume of *Nymphomaniac*. This emerges out of Joe's interest in the picture of the Madonna and child. After he speaks at length about the Orthodox Christian icon, she tells Seligman a story about her first orgasm that included a woman who looked like her. We see religion come up again during the birth of Joe's son, when a tritone plays from the clattering of the doctor's instruments, and she sees the demonic visage of her infant child laughing at her. As in the first volume, the second volume tries to make its perversions of religious imagery into comedy.

Illustrative moment In a moment that offends Seligman, Joe describes her first orgasm which came to her spontaneously on a hillside. A woman draped in purple and wearing ornate jewels atop a bull and a woman with a baby in a white veil appear as specters on either side of the floating young Joe. Seligman says this is "a blasphemous retelling of the transfiguration of Jesus on the mount." He continues, explaining that instead of Jesus' vision of Moses and Elijah, Joe has a vision of the whore of Babylon and Valeria Messalina, Rome's most notorious nymphomaniac.



Abortion While it is legal and an accessible option for Joe, she chooses to give herself an abortion. Frustrated with a system that she must perform normalcy for to access the medical care she needs, she instead decides to take a riskier, though more self-sufficient, method. Using medical knowledge gained from her time in medical school, she prepares an array of tools before lying down on the floor of her apartment and performing the procedure on herself without the aid of anesthesia.

Illustrative moment Joe's self-abortion is shown in graphic detail. She makes and sterilizes the tools before taking what seem to be pain pills with vodka and lying down on a clean sheet. One by one, she inserts the tools into herself before the final procedure: removing the fetus. She finishes, removing the whole fetus and leaving herself bleeding and shaking in pain on the floor. It is a brutal moment and, in many ways, needless, as she simply had to answer a few questions to access this care but refused.



Relationship

Motherhood Joe's struggles with motherhood are a minor but important part of the story. She is unable to connect with her child, feeling as if he has "found her out" and does not return her love. Even after this lack of connection and abandoning him, she still makes a long-term effort to put money into his foster care account, at least economically still doing what she can to provide for her son.

Illustrative moment Perhaps the clearest moment of motherhood in the film comes when Joe first has her child. She plays with him on the floor while Jérôme watches. While we watch this domestic scene, Joe explains to Seligman that she failed to really connect with her son. She fails to bring up that this may have been similar to her mother's issues with connection.



Justice

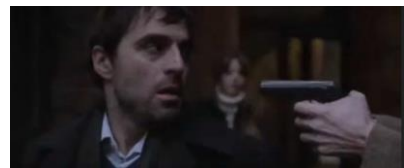
Crime A minor but important theme in the second half of *Nymphomaniac*, criminality dominates the film's end. Having lost her day job, Joe seeks out employment with a loan shark through a man named L. L. sets her up with a couple trustworthy thugs and sends her to work. They extort those who owe money and receive a good wage for it. Joe grooms P to enter the field. Eventually, Joe tries to kill Jérôme. The film ends with a final crime when Seligman attempts to rape Joe as she sleeps.

Illustrative moment There are many notable moments of criminal activity throughout the second volume of *Nymphomaniac*, but one of the most clear comes when Joe is describing her difference in technique compared to her thugs. They begin the scene by upturning furniture and shattering ceramics with iron bars. Joe, however, pulls down her mark's pants and uses his "truth detector" to figure out his darkest fantasies, getting him to repay their criminal loan shark bosses.



Violence Violence runs throughout this film. Joe is particularly violent with her own body in this volume. She begins the film by whipping her groin in a panicked attempt to regain sexual sensation and ends the film killing a man who attempts to rape her. We see bondage—violence as pleasure—and extortion—violence for profit—at several different points in the film. It's hard to watch this film without encountering some form of violence.

Illustrative moment Selecting one moment from all the violence in this film was difficult, but we find the densest variety in the moment when Joe tries to kill Jérôme. Jealous of losing P's affection, Joe tries to shoot Jérôme. Then Jérôme beats her savagely. He then has sex with P in front of her before P urinates on Joe. In this moment we see violence as both rage and a tool of humiliation.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the tone of the second half of the film differ from the first? How is it similar?
2. Did you, as Joe, note a decline in the quality of Seligman's digressions in this volume?
3. In what ways does this volume put politics before art? In what ways does it do the opposite?
4. Did the character's characterizations remain true to the first volume? Why or why not? List at least two examples.