

DOING IT FOR THEMSELVES: SEXUAL SUBJECTIVITY IN CINEMATIC  
DEPICTIONS OF FEMALE AUTOEROTICISM

by

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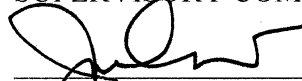
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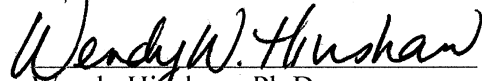
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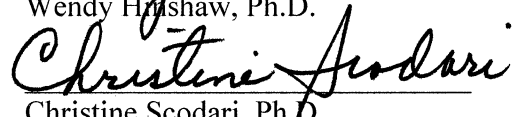
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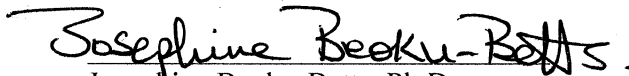
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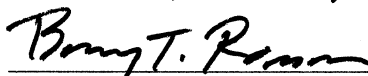
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## ABSTRACT

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Whereas male masturbation has generally been normalized by being the butt of friendly jokes and a popular subject in romantic comedies, the predominant discourse surrounding female masturbation, both in society and the movies, is silence and stigmatization. However, female masturbation is symbolically powerful because it signifies a female sexuality that is not dependent on male presence. This thesis seeks to explore depictions of female masturbation, specifically looking at how female characters who engage in autoeroticism are stigmatized, controlled or silenced. This thesis will also explore the minority of depictions that show the act as liberating in films like *Pleasantville* (1998) and *Better than Chocolate* (1999).

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## INTRODUCTION

In a culture where Jenna Jameson, a pornography star, has been a bestselling author, women's magazines advertise "how to drive your man wild" and being on *Girls Gone Wild* is a desirable option for college women, there are few aspects of female sexuality that haven't been openly discussed (or commoditized); yet one still remains shrouded in shame and secrecy: female masturbation. While American culture prides itself on its sexual openness and progressiveness, the issue of female autoeroticism is largely absent from our sexual discourse and our popular culture. Whereas male masturbation has been the butt of many friendly jokes and a popular subject in romantic comedies, the predominant theme surrounding female masturbation, both in society and the media, is silence and stigmatization. That is not to say, however, that female masturbation is never addressed. The cultural taboo surrounding female autoeroticism has ebbed slightly with more depictions both on television and on the big screen. These depictions represent the few discursive sites in which female autoeroticism is addressed, and this makes them significant to our understandings of female sexuality and how it is portrayed in popular culture. Despite the importance of such portrayals, very little academic scholarship has focused on this issue.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Another MA thesis has been produced on the topic: Adams, M. E. (2011). *Flicking the bean on the silver screen women's masturbation as self-discovery and subversion in American cinema* (Unpublished MA thesis). Bowling Green State University. Retrieved November 24, 2011, from <http://etd.ohiolink.edu/send-pdf.cgi/Adams%20Megan%20E.pdf?bgsu1300749024>

Both the act of masturbation itself and its representations can be viewed as radically anti-hegemonic and an act of resistance to male dominance. Portraying masturbation on the big screen, first and foremost, admits that women masturbate. Representations of female masturbation signify a female sexuality that is independent of a male presence and acknowledge that women can orgasm without penetration. Autoeroticism also allows women to focus on pleasure beyond vaginal-penile intercourse, or more specifically pleasure that exists outside of the heteronormative and androcentric model of sexuality. Traditional heterosexual intercourse maintains hierarchical oppressive relations between genders and ignores female sexual response, making normative heterosexual intercourse, some radical feminists argue, dehumanizing (Dworkin, 2006) and physically dissatisfying for women. In *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* Laqueur explains that radical feminist in the 1970's viewed masturbation as a freeing alternative to intercourse. It was seen by feminist activists "as a practice in the service of freedom, autonomy, and rebellion against the status quo . . . Sex with oneself came to stand for autonomy, even autarky" (p.75). Therefore, masturbation offers women freedom from repressive sexuality.

Women, through self-stimulation, had the possibility to become sexual subjects defining their own erotic needs. Female autoeroticism also demonstrates a connection to one's body, both physically and spiritually. Adrienne Rich (1979) discusses masturbation as connected to an entire process of a woman's life, detailing how "her growing sense of her own body and its strengths, her masturbation, her menses, her physical relationship to nature and to other human beings, her first and subsequent orgasmic experiences" are tied to the connection between body and mind (p.179).



Because female autoeroticism challenges asymmetrical gender roles and a sexuality tied to passivity and reproduction, it can be understood as an act of resistance in a patriarchal culture because it defies the social construction of femininity, which requires submission and selflessness. Masturbation allows, and in essence requires that a woman take an active role and selfishly think only about her own pleasure. In “Doing IT Ourselves; Female Masturbation Past and Present,” Mary Vause argues, “Female masturbation was, and continues to be, the monkey wrench in this phallogentric approach to sexuality . . . female masturbation both then and now threatens to topple the system” (2004, p.58). The threat female masturbation has and still continues to pose has resulted in a violent history in which women were punished for their masturbation, diagnosed as hysterical or made to believe that masturbating would harm them. Before discussing cinematic portrayals of masturbation, it is important to review how female masturbation has been treated historically, particularly since patriarchal attitudes and medical treatments for masturbation parallel much of the current depictions of the act. The second wave feminist movement challenged much of this problematic history by asserted its liberatory capacity to undermine the taboo nature of female masturbation. Feminist activists such as Betty Dodson (1996) urged women to masturbate in order to achieve sexual freedom. Both these historical periods are pertinent to understanding female masturbation because they showcase masturbation as a powerful feminist tool and how patriarchal society has continuously tried to control it.

## The History of Masturbation

In *Solitary Sex* Thomas Laqueur (2004) states of masturbation that "no sexual practice over the past three hundred years has signified quite so much, in quite so many places, to quite such a range of people" (p.82). Masturbation's long and brutal history is plagued with diagnoses of hysteria, along with crude medical devices, and procedures aimed at preventing self-stimulation that focused on both men and women. Though a natural part of human sexuality, masturbation has been pathologized, demonized and repressed for centuries. Institutions ranging from religion to medicine, have labeled masturbation as sinful and perverse and connected to insanity. In *Masturbation: The History of the Great Terror*, Stengers and Van Neck (2001) assert that in the 16<sup>th</sup> century many believed masturbation to be a ghastly and wicked act noting that "All physicians agree[d] that masturbation predisposes to a great number of illnesses" (p.1).

The religious and medical fervor in regards to masturbation is rooted in a long history of pseudoscience and general cultural anxiety towards sexuality. Many scholars point to the controversy over masturbation erupting after the 1723 publication of *Onania; or, The Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution, And All its Frightful Consequences, in both Sexes* (Laqueur, 2004; Stengers and Van Neck, 2001). *Onania* argued that those who engaged in "self-pollution" would succumb to both physical and mental diseases. While much of the fear *Onania* caused has ebbed, this private act still remains a cultural taboo. In 1994 Joycelyn Elders, then Surgeon General of the United States, suggested that masturbation might be a healthy alternative to riskier forms of sexual activity. After a public outcry, Elders was fired by President Clinton (Laqueur, 2004). To this day, a majority of school

children are not educated about masturbation because many sexual education programs are abstinence based and refuse to mention masturbation (Lucker, 2006).

*Onania* may have served as the catalyst for masturbatory hysteria, but the fear of masturbation - still evident today- is part of a much larger cultural anxiety towards sexuality. In “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” Gayle Rubin (2006) asserts that sex can be understood as a “political agent,” which is used as “a means of implementing repression and creating dominance in today’s western society” (p.521). Pointing to the hypocrisy of modern culture’s stance on sexuality and relying on Foucault, Rubin explains that sex is not constructed in terms of biological needs but rather cultural ones. She notes that sex, when socially constructed and institutionalized, “is organized into systems of power, which reward and encourage some individuals and activities, while punishing and suppressing others. Like the capitalist organization of labor and its distribution of rewards and powers, the modern sexual system has been the object of political struggle since it emerged and as it has evolved” (529).

The repression and punishment of masturbation is clear evidence of society’s sex negativity. The focus on sex as solely a reproductive tool ultimately transformed masturbation into a threat. The cultural institution of sex only allows for heterosexual, monogamous, procreative intercourse that parallels the power structure of gender roles; masturbation exists outside of this paradigm, and therefore needed to be pathologized and demonized by medical and religious authorities. Much of the earlier anti-masturbation texts either treated female masturbation as equal to the evils of the male variety or ignored the possibility of its existence. As time shifted so too did the focus on

masturbation; later texts offered gender equality in the fact that they asserted masturbation as dangerous for both sexes, but this understanding was soon after revised. As Crockett (2010) states, the author of *Onania* later revised his text to focus specifically on women:

Samuel Gegory, M.D. drew his readers' attentions to what he called the "monster vice" (25) in his 1845 sexological text, *Facts and Important Information for Young Women on the Subject of Masturbation*. Gegory's work is unique in its direct acknowledgement of female masturbation, but otherwise conforms to the strategies employed by earlier anti-masturbation texts, pointing to the debilitating and dehumanizing consequences of the deviant practice. (p. 130)

In 1873 Eliza Duffy published *What Women Should Know*, which cautioned mothers against allowing their daughters to masturbate for fear that it would hurt their ability to be wives and mothers. Vause asserts, "Health reformers in the mid-1800s advised parents to keep their daughters from the 'vicious habit' of genital self-stimulation. This suggested that if left to their own devices, women's innate sexual desires could be easily roused -- a clear contradiction to the notion that women were 'naturally' pure and asexual" (2004, p.58). Such a contradiction, though, was never acknowledged because doing so would admit to the existence of a woman's sexual nature. A woman's purity and lack of sexual desire was not just a sexist double standard but a method of protecting patriarchy from its fear of female sexuality. The less women were in touch with their sexual selves the less power they possessed.

Women's sexuality and their bodies have long been viewed as sites of deadly power. For instance, the *vagina dentate* is a near universal myth (Lederer, 1968). The

myth's origin is rooted in the fear that hidden within the female body are perilous secrets and that any man who has sex with a woman may risk castration. Ironically, though female sexuality is thought to be dangerous, it only poses harm to other men. Another example is the African "Curse of Nakedness," which has become an effective weapon for activist African women because of the underlying fear it taps: men's fear of women's sexuality. In African culture a woman purposefully stripping curses the man who witnesses the act. This is because a woman's reproductive capacity allows her to give life and because of this it is believed that her power also allows her to take away life (Ricciutelli, Miles & Margaret McFadden, 2004).

Many African women have used the curse's power to elicit dramatic political change and were able to do so in a nonviolent manner. In June 2002, hundreds of unarmed Nigerian women, held 700 workers hostage for more than a week and blocked production of half a million barrels of oil a day only by threatening to strip naked (Turner, 2004). The threat has also been successfully used in mass protests by Leymah Gbowee during the Second Liberian Civil War, and Gbowee recently received a Nobel Peace Prize for her work (Gbowee, 2011). As this example demonstrates, women's bodies offer them symbolic strength. The *vagina dentate* and "Curse of Nakedness" highlight male fear of the female body, which gives women both physical and symbolic power; however, much of this power derives not from fear specifically of the body but what the body represents: a woman's sexual and reproductive powers.

#### Fear of Female Sexuality

Because a woman's sexuality may offer her some form of power, and because men gain power, both individual and social, from controlling female sexuality and

reproduction, patriarchal cultures promote beliefs and actions that adversely define, regulate and even attack female sexuality, including through practices of overt sexual violence like rape. Patriarchal society has controlled, punished, and pathologized women's sexuality generally, and female masturbation specifically, which had been patriarchal society's predominant responses to its fears of women's sexual power.

Men's fear of female sexuality has been thoroughly examined by Bram Dijkstra in both *Idols of Perversity* (1988) and *Evil Sisters* (1996). Focusing on depictions of women as vampires, demons and seducers in both high and low art, Dijkstra illustrates how such portrayals highlight women's implicit quest for domination and control over men. These numerous and diverse femme fatales, who have long been a staple in popular culture and advertising, all possessed one common tool: a potent sexuality, which they use to weaken and manipulate men.

*Evil Sisters* (1996) builds upon the assertions of *Idols of Perversity* (1988) by linking this century's genocidal horrors to patriarchal fears about female sexuality. Dijkstra contends that xenophobia mixed with a perverted form of Darwinism created a climate in which women were understood as dangerous to men because of their supposed capacity to diminish a man's vital resources and stunt his ability to transcend his primal nature. Dijkstra states, "female sexuality had come to be seen as a degenerative disease. Women were nature's secret weapon against manhood's valiant efforts to triumph over mortality" (4). It was believed, Dijkstra asserts, that women would drain a man of his power, which was thought to be located in his semen. Through her use of seduction and sex, a vampire/woman would suck a man of his essence. In doing so, she feeds off the man's vitality leaving him weak and dependent on a woman's sensual nature.

Dijkstra states that “at the opening of the [nineteenth] century, biology and medicine set out to prove that nature had given all women a basic instinct that made them into predators, destroyers, witches – evil sisters” (1996, p.3). A race to the evolutionary top was the focus of late 18th and early 19<sup>th</sup>-century science. In this race, women were seen as holding men back because of their insatiable appetite and seductive allure that proved undeniable for men. The nature/culture dichotomy maintained by evolutionary science deemed women as being much closer to nature (Dijkstra, 1996). Women’s ability to reproduce as well as having a menstrual cycle that paralleled lunar phases, was taken as illustration of their closeness to nature (seen as inferior to culture) in comparison to men. Similar to women, patriarchal conceptualizations of “nature” were understood to be uncontrollable and wild, particularly because of their unruly sexuality. As mankind struggled to shed what were viewed as primitive shackles, women, impediments to “civilization,” were seen as a step backwards into chaos.

Female masturbation was also feared for the power a woman could derive from it by putting her in touch with her sexuality. Audre Lorde (1984) in her article “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” discusses creative and spiritual resources that are not recognized as forms of knowledge and power that can fuel resistance. She states this power has been denied to women and has been confused with pornography. Lorde does not define the word erotic as merely sexual. She uses the etymology of the word to explain her point:

The very word erotic comes from the Greek word Eros, the personification of love in all its aspects - born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony. When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that

creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives. (p.58)

I also do not intend to simplify the concept of the erotic by only equating it with sex. Lorde never directly mentions masturbation as part of the erotic, but the connection lies in her emphasis on self-discovery and love. To masturbate women must believe they are worthy of feeling sexual satisfaction and must love themselves. While masturbation may not always lead to an orgasm, when a woman experiences one it can be not only a sexual experience, but a spiritual one as well, as well one that can strengthen a woman's life force. Lorde (1984) states, "We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings. . . The fear of our deepest cravings keeps [patriarchal society] suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance" (p.57).

Masturbation is both a discovery and a form of sexual truth. Besides the obvious discovery of physical likes and dislikes, masturbation allows women to find sexual identities that exist outside of conventional constructions of gender. Patriarchy would be nothing without its tools of dominance, and sex is one tool that has been particularly powerful in forcefully reasserting asymmetrical gender roles. As a tool of patriarchy, sex is one of the ways in which domination can be physically acted out under the disguise of pleasure. Hegemonic constructions of gender require women to be passive and submissive and men to be active and in control. These gender constructions are learned through social teachings and then performed through social interactions. While the traditional roles of passivity and domination have ebbed slightly with more women gaining powerful positions in government and the workforce and the adoption of more



diverse gender expressions-never are such clear roles more apparent than in traditional heterosexual intercourse.

Aside from the fact that conventional heterosexual sex forces some women to ignore their sexual desires and to submit to an activity that leaves them unsatisfied (Koedt, 1970), it also works to create a very clear power structure. In her controversial book *Intercourse*, Dworkin states that sex “distorts and ultimately destroys any potential human equality between men and women by turning women into objects and men into exploiters” (Dworkin, 1987 p.12). Women become a body to be penetrated and men become a conqueror of women’s penetrable bodies. In a patriarchal society, sexual intercourse rarely expresses equality and recognizes the humanity of both parties. Masturbation becomes that much more threatening because it is a sex that is free from patriarchal control. Masturbating women engage in a form of sexual pleasure in which they are more than penetrable bodies. It allows a woman to find a sexual consciousness and assert her sexual needs. In addition, it requires an acceptance of self-worth, a willingness to explore one’s sexual likes and dislikes as well as one’s own physicality. Masturbating can also promote sexual growth that can raise sexual consciousness. Women become both aware of themselves as sexual individuals and aware of their bodily needs; both of which are things women are typically not encouraged to do. Women are rarely given knowledge that allows the, to fully understand their bodily needs and create their sexual identity outside of a male sexual paradigm.

The general threat of female sexuality has also engendered violence against masturbation. Distinguished medical professionals advocated the use of clitoridectomy in order to stop the act and its alleged associated devastating physical effects (Laqueur,

2003). However, this was not the only medical solution to the problem. In *The Technology of Orgasm* (1998) Maines argues that a more popular form of treatment was “orgasmic treatment,” which “contrast[ed] favorably with such ‘heroic’ nineteenth century therapies as clitoridectomy to prevent masturbation. It is certainly not necessary to perceive the recipients of orgasmic treatment as victims: some of them most certainly must have known what was going on” (p.5). What was “going on” is that the prevention of female masturbation led doctors to manually stimulate the clitoris. In other words, though masturbation enacted by the female deemed her insane, masturbation enacted by a physician or midwife on the woman was seen as a treatment for hysteria (Maines, 1998). A 1653 medical compendium advises that “when these symptoms [of hysteria] indicate, we think it necessary to ask a midwife to assist, so that she can massage the genitalia with one finger inside, using oil . . . And in this way the afflicted woman can be aroused to paroxysm. This kind of stimulation is recommended by Galen and Avicenna . . . for widows, those who live chaste lives and female religious” (p.1).

The medical community failed to acknowledge what this “treatment” truly was and disguised it as a legitimate therapy. In fact, the vibrator was invented specifically because of orgasmic therapy, and until the early 20th century was seen as a medical tool (Maines, 1998). During its usage, medical literature was published detailing its uses and effects in an almost pornographic nature. In the way nude paintings were used as pornography for upper class men, medical literature about hysteria treatments were titillating to the medical community. Maines describes one such instance when a large three-volume medical text was published with “voyeuristic photographs of women stimulating their own nipples or arched in ecstatic paroxysms . . . The physician notes

with interest that she cries out ‘Oue!Oue!’ tosses her head back and forth, and then rocks and flexes her torso very rapidly” (p.40). The volume also discusses the “vaginal lubrication of these patients . . . at frequent intervals” (p.40).

The medical community was not the only one to openly celebrate the use of masturbation as a healthy therapy. The retail community also embraced the vibrator as well, so much so that it was openly sold in Sear’s catalogs until the 1920’s. As Maines states,

the social camouflage of the vibrator as a home and professional medical instrument seems to have remained more or less intact until the end of the 1920’s, when the true vibrator (but not massagers or electrotherapeutic devices) gradually disappeared both from doctors’ offices and from the respectable household press. This may have been the result of greater understanding of women’s sexuality by physicians, the appearance of vibrators in stag films in the twenties, or both.

(p.20)

These two depictions of female masturbation – both as what I will call “medical porn” and in actual pornography, early stag films – are important precursors to current depictions. Female masturbation was either connected to insanity and controlled by male medical professionals or was used as a theme in pornography for male pleasure; both of these undercut female masturbatory power. The sexual agency that female masturbation provides, both in allowing one to explore her own sexual needs and to engage in sexual gratification free of a male presence, is stripped from women when masturbation is controlled and pathologized by men. Even though these characterizations of female autoeroticism have eroded, particularly insanity and its use as a medical therapy, these

ideas have been appropriated and repackaged for cinema audiences. As will be discussed in the following section, a majority of female masturbatory films conform to themes that play upon these historical developments. Many films still connect hysteria or some level of depravity to the masturbator. In other cases the masturbation is quite literally controlled by a male romantic love interest as masturbation was controlled by physicians. In other cases the masturbation occurs to sexually arouse a man. This parallels the presence of masturbation in the “medical porn” that Maines describes, as well as masturbation’s appearance in stag films. Though society has progressed a great deal since the time of clitoridectomies for female masturbators, much of the ideology that worked as a catalyst for such action has been modernized for the big screen.

#### Masturbation as a Feminist Cause

*Onania* and the social and medical attitudes it manifested never completely disappeared. In the 1950’s when Alfred Kinsey was conducting research on sexual practices, he encountered the text’s residual effects. Many women thought that masturbation caused ailments ranging from headaches to cancer. As Vause (2004) states, “a 1959 study of medical school seniors in Philadelphia found that half of them believed masturbation caused insanity” (p.58). During the second wave feminist movement, activists worked to dispel these myths and encourage women to masturbate, as an act of pleasure and rebellion.

The 1960’s and 1970’s represented a radical change in society’s understandings and attitudes toward masturbation. In the 1950’s Alfred Kinsey sought to shed light on sexuality in a manner no else yet had by directly interviewing men and women about their sexual behaviors. One of the many revolutionary findings was that women orgasm

from clitoral stimulation. Kinsey's discovery was the impetus for the work of William Masters and Virginia Johnson, a psychologist and gynecologists, who sought to give medical credence to Kinsey's work and to expand its implications. They created a comprehensive study that entailed watching hundreds of male and female participants engage in intercourse and masturbation. The culmination of their project resulted in findings that disproved the long held notion of female sexual inferiority. The study found that women, unlike men, could continue to have orgasms without the "recovery period" that men required, allowing them to experience an infinite amount of orgasms.

The most revolutionary aspect of their research was their ability to offer scientific proof that the clitoris was the site of orgasmic pleasure for women, disproving Freud's notion that "mature" orgasms could only be experienced through vaginal penetration. Their research findings and methods were controversial. Many objected to their use of mechanical stimulation, the studying of masturbation and the ultimate conclusion one could draw from such radical findings: "While conservatives expressed horror that such a contrivance [dildo] would be used to define and defile human intimacy, leading feminist suggested something even more frightening- the irrelevancy of men in sexual satisfaction" (Mailer, 2009, p.242). Before their research, the clitoris had long been thought to be analogous to the penis, but Masters and Johnson asserted that the clitoris was anatomically unique in that it is the only organ whose sole function is for sexual pleasure. Women were hard wired to experience sexual pleasure in a way men never could, but this experience and knowledge has been denied for centuries. In *Masters of Sex*, Mailer (2009) highlights that "the results all stressed the magnitude of female sexual response" (p.162).

It may come as no surprise that Masters and Johnson's work garnered much media attention. Soon a new understanding of sexuality emerged. This change coincided with both the sexual revolution – which Masters and Johnson are largely credited with catapulting – and the feminist movement. While Masters and Johnson never identified as feminists, the knowledge they produced was utilized in the movement, which is most evident in the work of Anne Koedt (1971) and Betty Dodson (1974). Accurate knowledge of female sexuality was harnessed by activists both to promote masturbation and dispel the myths surrounding penile-vaginal intercourse. In “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm,” Koedt (1971) wrote that both the work of Kinsey and Masters and Johnson asserts once and for all that penile-vaginal intercourse was within the paradigm of male pleasure and was not an act that was, for the most part, pleasurable for women. She argued that heterosexual intercourse does not legitimize women's sexual needs, stating that

whenever female orgasm [is] discussed, a false distinction is made between the vaginal and the clitoral orgasm....Actually the vagina is not a highly sensitive area and is not constructed to achieve orgasm. It is the clitoris which is the center of sexual sensitivity and which is the female equivalent of the penis. (p. 422)

Dodson took this a step further, arguing that masturbation was the most important form of sex and any other form of sex that one chose to engage in beyond masturbation was superfluous. Dodson (1974) proclaimed that “masturbation is our primary sexual life; it is our sexual base everything you do beyond that is simply how we choose to socialize our sex” (p.401).

Dodson also produced books on masturbation and held workshops teaching women how to masturbate. Both the feminist movement and the research of Masters and

Johnson helped radically change women's views in regards to their own pleasure and attitudes surrounding female masturbation. Women, for the first time, did not need to masturbate with guilt or shame. They could do so with the knowledge of how to please themselves and not have to rely on a man for sexual pleasure.

Laqueur (2004) asserts, "For the first time in human history, masturbation was embraced as a mode of liberation, as a claim to autonomy, to pleasure for its own sake, an escape from the socially prescribed path toward normal adulthood. It went from being a deviant sexuality of the wrong kind of social order to being the foundational sexuality of new sorts of imagined communities, the basis of a new covenant - or lack thereof - between self and other" (p.397). Masturbation was not just seen as an act of sexual freedom. Dodson, and many others in the feminist community, saw it as an act of autonomy. It was more than a solo act of sexual gratification; it represented love of oneself and has emotional and spiritual benefits. Masturbating proclaimed that one can exist sexually independent of others. For women this was particularly powerful.

Many not only saw masturbation as freedom from unpleasurable intercourse but also freedom from a dehumanizing act because of the violent and degrading roles women were subjected to during conventional heterosexual intercourse. In her controversial and often misunderstood book, *Intercourse* (1987), Andrea Dworkin argues that the social construct of sex is one of violation in which the woman is set up as the object to be violated and the man is the violator. Women become a space that is meant to be penetrated and which leads to the perpetuation of violent gender power relations in heterosexual intercourse. Masturbation exists outside of that paradigm where women can engage in non-patriarchal sex that acknowledges their sexual needs.

While film portrayals of female masturbation offer feminist possibilities, inherent to any visual medium is the possibility of a voyeuristic gaze. In *Solitary Sex*, Laqueur (2003) highlights the earliest depictions of female masturbation as forms of porn. Private art collections contained “explicit pornography of (women) rapturously masturbating” (p.343). In addition to art, medicine also voyeuristically portrayed female autoeroticism by discussing every minute detail of their sexual response and using graphic pictures of a woman in extreme ecstasy (Maines, 1998). Such early portrayals not only situate female masturbation as a tool for male viewing pleasure, but also seek to oppress the act by placing it under the control of the male gaze. As Laqueur states, “men actively gaze at images of women and make them their own; many literary pornographic confections seem to be about male control over women’s bodies” (p.343). While the technology used to depict female masturbation has changed, its need to control images of women’s pleasure has not.

Rather than portraying female sexuality as autonomous and independent, many cinematic depictions highlight a woman’s sexuality as dependent on the approval of a male character or for a male audience. This is also true for female autoeroticism. For instance, in *American Pie* (1999) and *Silver* (1993) the gaze is part of the film’s narrative in which, respectively, characters played by Shannon Elizabeth and Sharon Stone are both being watched through the use of a camera as they masturbate.

#### The Male Gaze

In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” Laura Mulvey (1973) explains her influential concept of the male gaze. Using a psychoanalytical framework, she discusses how both the camera and male spectator objectify female characters by coding their



image with “to-be-looked-at-ness.” Mulvey applies Freud’s concept of scopophilia, the erotic pleasure one receives in looking at others’ bodies, to the act of watching a film. In many ways the two acts are similar; the darkness of the theater offers privacy and a unique relationship with the images being viewed. Mulvey suggests that such an environment creates a voyeuristic relationship with the female characters and thus creates the male gaze. Dividing the gaze into two distinct modes, Mulvey asserts that the gaze can be voyeuristic or fetishistic. She states, “voyeurism . . . has associations with sadism: pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt (immediately associated with castration), asserting control and subjecting the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness” (4). Much of the earlier discussions in chapter one about the pain inflicted on female masturbators would fall under Mulvey’s understanding of voyeurism. The second mode of fetishistic concerns Freud’s concept of the “ego-ideal” and is a narcissistic process of identification with an ideal in which women are seen as “Madonnas.” Both modes are problematic in that they see the female character as a one dimensional images and the spectator gains pleasure from the power of looking.

The role of spectator is one of domination in which the voyeur has the ability to control the meaning of the image. One derives power from deciding the meaning, whether it be voyeuristic or fetishistic. As Mulvey (1973) states, “the position of the spectators in the cinema is blatantly one of repression of their exhibitionism and projection of the repressed desire onto the performer” (16). He (since the voyeur is typically male) decides what the woman's image/presence signifies and what part of the image is focused on. Similar to the camera that gazes a woman's body or the male artist that paints a woman's form, the male voyeur chooses the images and ultimately uses it to

make the woman a prop of his fantasy. The perspective of the camera lens and the characters of the film are typically male, and therefore female characters became the objects of the gaze for both the former and the latter. Women are usually made to be passive objects in which they typically lack desires or thoughts of their own and serve only as props for male desire.

Mulvey's theory has informed feminist and communication scholarship focusing on film, but it has since received criticism for being heteronormative and ignoring the possibility of a female gaze, even a female voyeur, particularly since popular media also has tried to entice female audiences by making them the spectator of male bodies. For instance, E. Ann Kaplan's article (1983) "Is the Gaze Male?" directly highlights this tension of ignoring half of the viewing audience. One cannot just assume that women and non-heterosexual men take on the male gaze. In addition, bell hooks (1992) argues that the concept of "woman" that Mulvey discusses mainly focuses on white women and ignores women of color. The newer discipline of Cultural Studies has also criticized Mulvey's theory for seeing the audience as largely passive in the process of looking and such understandings of audience members ignores their agency in how they interpret images.

However, the audiences these films are catering to - especially in the *American Pie* franchises - are young heterosexual males, so while such criticisms of Mulvey do need to be taken into account, the male gaze is present in the films being analyzed. While the discussions of masturbation are not voyeuristic, many scenes in each of the movies invite male (presumed heterosexual) to objectify female characters in the film. For instance, Jennifer Aniston's character parades around in lingerie while eating phallic food

such as a hot dog, popsicle and a banana. In *Step Brothers*, Will Ferrell's character is sexually attracted to his psychologist. In a fantasy scene, he strips off her professional clothing to reveal pink and black lingerie. Clearly a voyeuristic gaze pervades many of these scenes.

### Masturbating on Screen

Female autoeroticism and its acknowledgement in films are both powerful and significant. Cinematic depictions of female masturbation possess symbolic potency in which they challenge androcentric sexuality, traditional femininity and distorted understandings of female sexuality. However, though most of the filmic depictions of female masturbation have the potential to be feminist, almost all end up traveling along a hegemonically gendered line, in which the female masturbator is demonized, abused or stigmatized. This thesis seeks to explore such depictions of female masturbation also explore the minority of depictions that show the act as liberating in films like *Pleasantville* (1998) and *Better than Chocolate* (1999).

The films chosen range over the past few decades. The earliest film used is from the 1970's, *The Exorcist* (1973). This film coincided with the popularity of the second wave of the feminist movement. As was argued earlier, masturbation was an important part of the second wave feminist movement. It is not a coincidence that portrayals of female masturbation appeared soon after the feminist movement. This negative cinematic depiction arguably is an expression of anxiety against the feminist movement and women's sexual liberation.

In researching the films, I noticed themes of violence, insanity, the male gaze and control used against the female masturbator. Rather than taking a chronological approach to the films, I feel it is more fruitful to take a thematic approach in order to investigate the various ways in which depictions of masturbating women is denigrated. The chapters of my thesis will highlight these themes.

CHAPTER ONE VIOLENCE AGAINST FEMALE MASTURBATORS AS A FORM  
OF SEXUAL TERRORISM: PORTRAYALS OF MEN'S VIOLENCE AGAINST  
WOMEN'S MASTURBATION

The sexual autonomy and sexual agency that is inherent to masturbation renders it as threatening to patriarchal society and therefore needing to be controlled. The same is true of cinematic depictions of female masturbation. As mentioned in the introduction, the symbolic potency of these images can be controlled or lessened through demonizing the female masturbator or connecting her to insanity. Such depictions send a clear message that female masturbation is dirty or perverse. In other films, violence is used to send an unequivocal message that female masturbators are deviant and will be punished for their acts.

Historically, violence against women generally and violence against women who masturbate specifically has manifested because of an underlying patriarchal fear of uncontrolled female sexuality. The act's power derives from the fact that female masturbation writes the man out of the sexual equation, demonstrating that men are not necessary for sexual pleasure and that a sexual experience that lacks a male presence may be more pleasurable than traditional heterosexual intercourse.

This chapter focuses exclusively on the male fear of female masturbation as a sign of female sexual autonomy— and this fear's connection to men's violence, which can

be seen in films such as *Body of Evidence* (1993), *40 Year Old Virgin* (2005), and *The Exorcist* (1973), *Keeping the Faith* (1999) and *The Ugly Truth* (2005). Each film depicts a man's violence against women after or during their autoeroticism, which perpetuates a history of control and punishment for women who transgress heteropatriarchal sexual norms. By deconstructing portrayals of women who are punished for masturbating, I will argue that this is a manifestation of the fear of female sexuality and seeks to warn female audience members from masturbating.

### Sexual Terrorism through Film

In "Sexual Terrorism" Sheffield (2007) argues that the threat and use of violence against women keeps them in a constant state of fear, allowing men to control and dominate. It is this fear, that any woman at any time and any place can be a victim of sexual assault, domestic violence, incest, murder, sexual harassment or street harassment, which permits men to maintain control. As Broad and Jenness (2009) states "As such, violence against women can be seen an objective condition of females' existence and linchpin to the power relations that sustain patriarchy" (p.81). Sheffield states that patriarchal society uses female sexuality to legitimize the need for such violence:

Male supremacy identifies females as having a basic "flaw" – a trait that distinguishes males from females and legitimizes women's inferior status. This flaw is "female sexuality": it is tempting and destructive and therefore disruptive, capable of reproducing life itself and therefore powerful. Through sexual terrorism, men seek to bring this force under control. The site of the struggle is the female body and female sexuality. (p.125)

In addition, she states that during physical attacks by an intimate partner a woman is most commonly hit in her face and breasts which are “both symbols of her sexuality and her attractiveness to men” (p.125). When a woman is pregnant, the most common area for attack is the abdomen, which is “a symbol of her reproductive power” (p.125).

I situate these depictions within Sheffield’s theory of “sexual terrorism,” specifically within the propaganda component of her theory. Sheffield argues that fear is perpetuated by constant depictions of women being violated, which functions as a warning for the violence women should fear. Propaganda is another tool to discipline female sexuality by teaching women to constrain the expression of their sexual desires. The media both normalizes and encourages such violence; whether it is the sexualized images of dead women on crime shows, sexually violent lyrics in music or aggressive sex in pornography, violence against women is both common and desirable in popular culture. Feminists have criticized such images, highlighting the danger they manifest.

Each of the films showcases a female masturbator being sexually and emotionally violated as a result of her act. The fact that so many depictions of female masturbation - which are rare to begin with - show the masturbator subsequently being violated is a form of sexual terrorism. While the violence in the more comedic films (*40 Year Old Virgin*, *Keeping the Faith* and *The Ugly Truth*) being analyzed is much less overt than in *The Exorcist* and *Body of Evidence*, all female characters experience sexual violence which works to propagate women's fears about freely expressing their sexuality, particularly when engaging in autoeroticism.

## Feminism and Masturbation

While sexual terrorism is a physical reality for many women, that is not to say that women do not possess some level of sexual autonomy. The feminist movement and sexual revolution have helped to usher in an era of more sexual freedom for women. Women now have access, however tenuous, to birth control, legal avenues in the case of rape and domestic violence, and self-help books such as Dodson's (1996) famous *Sex for One: The Joy of Selfloving* and the popular *Getting Off: A Woman's Guide to Masturbation* (Waxman 2007) are being openly sold. Though there is still much progress to be made, these are only some examples of the sexual and bodily freedom women have obtained in the last few decades. Such freedom, and therefore less patriarchal control, makes female sexuality that much more threatening.

In addition to more sexual freedom, the dismantling of the sexually restrictive Production Code in the 1960s and an increase in sexual images in popular culture offers opportunities for images of female sexual autonomy (Williams, 2008). This poses a grave threat to patriarchy, and has manifested a prevalence of images of violence against women. As Kaplan (1994) asserts contemporary film has gone even further in

the open representation of female sexuality. The causes for this are well known: the various 1960's movements produced radical cultural changes resulting in a loosening of rigid, puritanical codes, and the women's movement encouraged women to take possession of their own sexuality, gay or straight. The open display of female sexuality has been threatening to patriarchy and forced a greater degree of directness about the underlying causes for relegating women to absence,



silence and marginality. The mechanisms that worked in earlier decades to obscure patriarchal fears no longer worked in the post 1960's era. (p. 6-7)

In order to reflect current attitudes, films had to be more discreet in their portrayals of female sexuality. Outright demonization of the sexual woman, Kaplan (1994) argues, was no longer in favor. Instead, a woman could be sexual and the good girl of the film, though it had to be within heterosexual and conventionally feminine confines. That is not to say, however, that women were free to do whatever they sexually pleased. Kaplan argues that, after this change occurred, depictions of rape escalated. She states,

the larger patriarchal hostility is now expressed in the notion that all women are yearning for sex all the time. The repulsion in this notion (for men) comes from being forced to recognize the vagina, and this sexual difference. Man's reaction is to want to "give it to her," as painfully as possible and by force, in order first to punish her for this (imagined) desire; second to assert his control over her sexuality; and finally to prove his "manhood" by his ability to dominate with the phallus. (p.7)

Depictions of female autoeroticism clearly assert actual desire (as opposed to imagined) and forces men to recognize another part of female anatomy: the clitoris, an organ that could arguably be considered superior to the penis. It is the only sexual organ that exists solely for pleasure and allows women to experience multiple orgasms without the "recovery" period Masters and Johnson discuss in their pivotal research on sexuality. By punishing a woman for masturbating, a man can control a woman's sexuality by making her fearful of committing the act again. In scenes where sexual assault occurs

such as *40 Year Old Virgin* and *Body of Evidence* the control is maintained both through coercion and the use of the penis as an agent of domination.

While sexually and physically violent images pervade the culture, they are rarely recognized as sexist, as based in patriarchy definitions of both sexuality and gender. Nor are they even, to a large measure, understood as unethical and even criminal. This is related to the fact that, as Sheffield (2007) states, “amorality pervades sexual violence. Child molesters, incestuous fathers, wife beaters, and rapists often do not understand that they have done anything wrong. Their views are routinely shared by police officers, lawyers, and judges, and crimes of sexual violence are rarely punished in American society” (p.112). This view is transferred onto the big and small screens, and the American public is largely unperturbed by images of gender violence. Violence against masturbating women is also rendered invisible. In *Body of Evidence*, as Madonna’s character is raped, a minute into the act she starts to enjoy it. In *40 Year Old Virgin* the sexual assault of Elizabeth Banks’ character is only briefly alluded to, and in *The Exorcist* the violence that Linda Blair’s character experiences is seen as part of her exorcism. In *Keeping the Faith* and *The Ugly Truth* the female characters are forced to experience publically humiliating orgasms and this, of course, is portrayed as humorous.

#### Female Masturbation: Fear and Violence

The fear of female sexuality has been the motivating factor in much of the systematic violence that women have experienced over centuries of patriarchal rule. Because a woman’s sexuality may offer her some form of power, patriarchal men attempt to control it, and patriarchal cultures promote beliefs and actions that attack female

sexuality, including through practices of overt sexual violence like rape. One of the most horrific examples of violence motivated by the threat of female sexuality is the Witch Hunts that occurred during the Reformation. The witch largely symbolized female sexuality and was associated with male impotence, specifically when men were overpowered by the witch's charms.

During the Reformation, the witch was portrayed as having a ferocious sexual energy and that existence of such energy was a direct threat to men (Barstow 1994). Both Mary Daly (1990) and Andrea Dworkin (1974) have asserted that the impetus for the Great Witch Hunt was patriarchal fear of female sexuality and the power derived from such a force. In an attempt to reverse societal knowledge about witches, Daly reclaims terms such as "Hag" and "Crone." These words have been denigrated from their original meaning of a powerful woman who threatened patriarchal power and defied the passive and powerless roles of traditional women. The hysteria of the Witch Hunts was not motivated by witches themselves but was rather a symptom of male sexual anxiety. While the Witch Hunts may seem unrelated to our current era and stemming from the beliefs of darker times, the motivating factor for them has been reborn in popular culture. For instance, promiscuous women being murdered in horror movies are "depictions reminiscent of the ideology of witchcraft, which promoted the punishment of women for being too sexually active" (Ryan & Kellner, 1988 p.58). Similar to witches, women who masturbated were sometimes burned at the stake and many times they were subjected to clitoridectomies – a practice many gynecologists deemed necessary for women who masturbated or were diagnosed as hysterical (Wilson 2005; Maines, 1998).

The threat of female sexuality is also an assault on masculinity both because of its supposed ability to weaken and control men, and its representation of a woman's reproductive power. All men had to depend on their mother (or mother like figure) early in their life. A mother's ability to undermine the crux of patriarchal power poses a danger to patriarchal social order. The mother represents the weakness, dependency and fear that men – and all individuals – have, and, in doing so, steals from her son the strong, fearless and phallic identity he is expected to uphold. In all individuals is a residual child who at times longs for the nurturance and safety of a mother like figure. As E. Ann Kaplan (1983) states, “Some part of motherhood lies outside of patriarchal . . . economy. It is this part that eludes control. The extreme patriarchal domination of female sexuality may be a reaction to the helplessness in the face of the threat that motherhood represents” (p. 206).

The threat that female sexuality, and therefore motherhood, poses to masculinity provokes men to reassert their manhood through violence. As Kaufman (2007) and Kimmel (2007) have asserted, masculinity is a social construct that is contested and requires constant reaffirmation. In the face of female sexuality, this reaffirmation comes in the form of violence. As Kimmel (2007) states, “for him, violence is a form of revenge, a form of retaliation, of getting even, a compensation for the power that he feels women have over him” (p. 94). Violence is one component of a hegemonically masculine performance. By being violent, a man can disempower the woman and regain his masculinity.

Masturbation

Thus far the threat of female sexuality has been addressed in relation to the threat it poses to masculinity, but one of its most threatening aspects, especially when discussing masturbation, is the power one can derive from it. Masturbation requires an acceptance of self-worth, a willingness to explore one's sexual likes and dislikes as well as one's own physicality. Masturbating can also promote sexual growth that can raise sexual consciousness. Women become both aware of themselves as a sexual individual and aware of their bodily needs; both of which are things women are typically not encouraged to do. Women are rarely given knowledge that allows them to fully understand their bodily needs and create their sexual identity outside of a male sexual paradigm.

In "This Sex which is Not One," Luce Irigaray (1977) argues that autoeroticism is not only an empowering act for women, but that masturbating is intimately tied to their physicality. She states "woman 'touches herself' all the time, and more over no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, with herself, she is already two - but not divisible into one(s) - that caress each other" (p. 363).

As Tuana (1993) asserts woman's sexual organs are typically discussed in the medical community as a passive receptacle, an empty space, a lack, but to discuss female genitalia as autonomously sexual and whole recasts conventional understandings of the vagina as incomplete. The intimacy already inherent to a woman's body, according to Irigaray, makes her masturbation, as Irigaray further argues, a natural and almost expected act, something heterosexual intercourse disrupts. Irigaray states, "this autoeroticism is disrupted by a violent break in: the brutal separation of the two lips by a violating penis, an intrusion that distracts and deflects the woman from this 'self-

caressing' she needs if she is not to incur the disappearance of her own pleasure in sexual relations" (p. 364). Masturbation as a form of pleasure, Irigaray argues, can prevent the violence of intercourse. In many ways the violence that women experience on screen after or during their masturbation can also represent the violent "intrusion" that Irigaray discusses. This violence disrupts the woman's pleasure and intimacy with herself, reestablishing phallic dominance.

### Body of Evidence

The threat of female sexuality is played out quite literally since sex becomes a murder weapon in *Body of Evidence*. In the film, Madonna plays a *femme fatale* named Rebecca Carlson who uses kinky and physically exhaustive sex to trigger her rich elderly husband's heart attack. Carlson is then put on trial for her husband's death and is defended by Frank Dulaney, played by Willem Dafoe. The uptight and sexually unsatisfied Dulaney is a direct contrast to the sexual deviance and lasciviousness of Carlson. After meeting Carlson, Dulaney is ushered into a world of sadomasochist sex through Carlson's alluring charms. Taking on the active and masculine role, Carlson challenges his sexual boundaries by pushing him beyond the normative sex that the audience sees him having with his wife earlier in the film. Carlson's deviant sexual knowledge, unrelenting sexual appetite and aggressor status becomes the focus of their sexual encounters. Dulaney is further drawn into her sexual world, consumed by her erotic enticements. Her sexuality is seen as both frightening and engulfing, swallowing Dulaney whole. Even markers of his engulfment are evident on his body when his wife sees burn marks and cuts from the sadistic sex he had with Carlson.

Carlson clearly challenges a hegemonically feminine sexual performance by not only performing a masculine sexual role, but by challenging Dulaney's marriage and engaging in sexual practices outside of traditional monogamous and procreative functions of sexual intercourse. Her sexual subversion is what makes her so deadly and ironically is also what leads to her death. The movie makes no attempts to be subtle about equating female sexuality with weaponry. During opening statements the prosecutor asserts, "She is a beautiful woman, but at the end of the trial you will see her no differently as a gun or a knife or any other weapon. She's a killer, and the worst kind: a killer who disguised herself as a loving partner."

The film's focus on her threatening and dangerous sexuality, and its inevitable cause for her death, is not uncommon. Thrillers such as this utilize the stereotype of the *femme fatale*, a sexually free woman who must be disempowered through sexual subjugation or death (Finlay and Fenton, 2005). Finlay and Fenton (2005) discuss these two solutions as part of films that focus on female sexuality. They argue that films concluding with the *femme fatale's* death are "marked by the resurgence of *film noir* remakes and shows a more traditional stereotype of female sexuality as excessive and uncontrollable, which eventually leads to murder in order to secure the woman's unbounded sexual freedom" (p.50). Though Carlson engages in a sexual relationship with Dulaney, his mostly passive role during intercourse allows Carlson to be independent of sexual subjugation; however, it is not her sexual freedom that poses the threat. As Meyers (1999) argues "whereas the *femme fatale* of the 1940s taunted the hero with her knowledge of information he was not privy to . . . the 1990s' *femme fatale*, also taunts the hero with the unknowable. However, her knowledge is of sexual experience" (p.295).

Carlson's deviant sexual knowledge is juxtaposed with Dulavany's sexual blandness. As the trial progresses, it is revealed that Carlson has had many sexual liaisons with rich men. Her affair with Dulaney seems genuine since he only possesses a modest income in comparison to the men Carlson has had previous relations with. However, at the end of the trial it is revealed that like all her affairs, Carlson had an ulterior motive. She sexually seduced Dulaney to get him to believe in her innocence and to perform better during her trial. After she is deemed innocent by the jury, she tells Dulaney she was guilty all along.

Her monstrosity becomes most evident in the film when she engages in masturbation. As evidence mounts against Carlson's guilt, Dulaney starts to lose faith in his sexual partner/client. He attempts to break off their affair, and in response Carlson lies on the floor and starts to masturbate. Dulaney is transfixed, unable to leave. Her act clearly asserts her sexual power over him, and ultimately achieves its goal since he is rooted in his spot, both silent and still. Her use of masturbation affirms her sexual autonomy and Dulaney's sexual irrelevance. Dulaney is neither necessary for her sexual pleasure, nor does he possess enough power over his own sexual desire to walk away from Carlson. This is a threat specifically to his masculinity and to the sexually necessity for men generally and becomes the impetus for the violence directed at Carlson. After a few minutes of watching her masturbate, Dulaney becomes enraged and rapes her. He grabs her hands and wrestles her into handcuffs, whispering in her ear that they will be playing "a new kind of game." She struggles to free herself as he flips her over and "forcibly penetrates her, reinstating genital intercourse as the primary and ultimate function of sexuality" (Sherwin, 2008 p.177).



Initially, Carlson cries out in pain and tries to escape, but eventually she seems to enjoy the act. Though Dulaney's action starts as rape, it becomes consensual intercourse, and it is the first sexual encounter wherein which he asserts his masculinity and sexual authority. His use of violence both disrupts Carlson's control over him, and his rape also punishes her for her sexual autonomy. His violent reaction manifests because of a perceived loss of power. As Kimmel states "men initiate violence when they feel a loss of power to which they felt entitled" (p.102). Dulaney's use of violence not only reaffirms his masculinity but is also legitimized through Carlson's apparent enjoyment of the rape.

His rape also becomes a cure for Carlson's sexual deviance. In their earlier sexual encounters, Carlson initiated and controlled the interaction. It is also important to point out that most of their sexual encounters were non-genital forms of sex such as pouring candle wax and using broken pieces of glass. The rape was the only sex scene in which Dulaney both asserts his masculinity, and engages in more traditional forms of sex in which he is on top of Carlson and penetrates her vaginally. As Sherwin (2008) states generally of *femme fatales* "Sexual plurality, like the polysexuality depicted in *femme fatale* films, suggests that men and heterosexual intercourse are not necessary to fulfill female desire. According to Irigaray, man is dependent on another for sexual satisfaction, while woman is autoerotic and therefore needs no one. This, in addition to castration anxiety, is what woman represents for man: autoeroticism, sexual independence" (p. 177). Carlson's use of actual autoeroticism was a more literal representation of women's sexual independence. And both her rape, by Dulaney, and murder, by a jealous ex-lover, seek to legitimize the destruction of women's sexual independence.

## 40 Year Old Virgin

While *Body of Evidence* and *40 Year Old Virgin* may seem light-years apart in their depictions of sexuality, these two movies are parallel. Both movies portray women who possess unbridled sexuality and are depicted as monsters. Madonna is the monstrous *femme fatale* who possesses sexual knowledge and authority that emasculates Dulaney. It is only through her rape that Dulaney reasserts his masculinity, and through her death that society is saved from her threat. While Elizabeth Banks' role as a monster is much less pronounced than Madonna's, her label as "freak," her sexual depravity and her disruption of the union between Andy (Steve Carell) and Trish (Catherine Keener) make her the villain. Just as Carlson entices Dulaney, Beth (Elizabeth Banks) plays a similar character whose sexual allure leads Andy astray.

The film creates, as many films do, an obvious virgin/whore dichotomy between the two major female characters. Andy's love interest is Trish, a single mother, who patiently suffers through their sexless relationship. This eventually causes a tension in their relationship that breaks them apart. Though Trish desires sex, her willingness to delay sexual intercourse until they marry (once the couple gets back together) asserts her non-whore status. She is also framed as a maternal figure who spends most of her time coaxing Andy into maturing both sexually and socially.

To get over the break up, Andy's friends take him out to a club where he encounters Beth, whom he had met earlier in the film. Later, the two leave the club to go to her house, presumably for sex. The scene leading up to their sexual encounter (which is ultimately disrupted by Andy's friends) is parallel to the sexual dichotomy in *Body of*

*Evidence*. Andy is lured in by Beth's sexual prowess, and comedy - as opposed to thrills - manifests from the juxtaposition of his sexual inexperience with Beth's supposed "kinkiness." This scene also demonstrates another virgin/whore dichotomy, but the film's comedic premise is that the man, Steve Carell's character, literally is a virgin.

Similar to Dulaney in *Body of Evidence*, Andy is made uncomfortable by his lack of sexual knowledge. Once Beth and Andy start kissing, Andy takes off his shirt displaying patches of waxed skin. Earlier in the film his friends forced him to wax his hairy chest, which he found to be too painful and ran out mid-way through the act. Thoroughly embarrassed by this display, Andy apologizes and tries to laugh off the incident. Instead of being offended or laughing, as Andy assumes she will, Beth reacts sexually saying he is "kinky" and becomes even more sexually aroused. Throughout the exchange, Beth continually assumes that the comments and actions of Andy assert his "kinky" nature when, in fact, they showcase his sexual inadequacy. Beth is depicted as being so hypersexual that she fails to see what is obvious to the audience: Andy doesn't know what he is doing. To further solidify Beth as the whore, the scene is juxtaposed with clips of Trish leaving her house to go see Andy. She calls him on his cell phone and leaves a voice message saying: "Hey. Hi, it's me, and I'm on my way to your house. I want to do whatever you want to do, okay? Fifty dates. 100 [until we have sex]. I hope not, but whatever. I'm gonna see you soon, okay? Bye." Her agreement to postpone sexual contact in the relationship is once again in direct contrast to Beth's overt sexual desire.

Later, Beth and Andy move to the bathroom, and Beth states that she wants to please him, and she asks about his sexual preferences. Andy stops and pauses sadly,

stating “I don’t know.” Earlier in the scene his lack of sexual knowledge and emasculation were portrayed as humorous, but in this brief moment it is no longer comedic. He then asks her to tell him what she likes, to which she replies “Can I show you?” She gets into the bath tub and starts to masturbate, which makes Andy visibly uncomfortable. He then says “Wow. This is graphic.” Soon after, his friends break into Beth's house to “save” him from the terrible mistake of having sex with the narrative’s “whore” instead of its “virgin.” His friend states “that girl [Beth] is a freak,” to which Andy replies “You think so? That woman scares the shit out of me, and I want to go home.” This statement is not just a condemnation of Beth’s masturbation, but rather can be read as an indictment of female sexuality generally. There is no logical reason why her self-pleasure should scare him, especially in comparison to other sexual experiences he has had throughout the movie. Between his predatory female boss who constantly sexually harasses him, a date that drives drunk and then vomits on him and an overly aggressive lesbian who suggests that he “put on rouge” and “tuck in his penis” in order to make himself more sexually pleasing, masturbation would be the least “scary” thing he encounters.

In *40 Year Old Virgin* there is a clear double standard between male and female masturbation. Andy’s masturbation, shown earlier in the film, is seen as normal and a required activity to deal with his virgin status, while Beth’s masturbation earns her the label of freak. The film’s focus on virginity is unique because it is usually only discussed in relation to women’s purity as opposed to men’s. In the context of *40 Year Old Virgin* male virginity is a burden one carries that bars him from entering into full manhood. Virginity for a female – the context in which it is typically discussed – represents one’s

purity and value in a patriarchal society. Virginity as a concept exists only in a context where women's bodies are commodified and surveyed.

Men are not punished when they lose their virginity nor are they held to an impossible standard of sexual purity. Such standards, in which a woman is no longer valuable once her purity has been lost, leave women vulnerable for sexual abuse. While the loss of virginity for Andy is cause for celebration, Beth's "whore" status opens her up to sexual abuse. Soon after she starts masturbating and is labeled a "freak," Andy leaves Beth's house while Beth lies in the bathtub continuing to masturbate. Cal, one of Andy's friends who came to "save" Andy from having sex with Beth, stays behind and wanders into the bathroom. The scene cuts abruptly, and the audience does not see Beth object to his presence in her bathroom (or call the police). Instead, the audience is left with the understanding that Beth had sex with this home invader regardless of the fact that his mere presence in her bathroom is a form of sexual assault. In "Purely Rape: The Myth of Sexual Purity and How it Reinforces Rape Culture" Valenti (2008) states, "the myth of sexual purity not only enables sexual violence against women, it forgives it and renders it invisible" (p.301). The sexual abuse incurred by Beth is not recognized as such because she no longer possesses the protection of purity, so she lacks an ability to be violated. Audience members are led to assume that the kinky and lascivious Beth would want whatever sexual action Cal, played by Seth Rogen, intended forcing upon her. At the same time, Rogen is not acknowledged as a rapist but rather a sex-obsessed buffoon, which is typical of the characters he plays. In *Observe and Report* he plays a mall security guard who has sex with Anna Farris while she is drunk and passed out. This rape, which is more overt than the one portrayed in *40 Year Old Virgin*, is also not

recognized as such. Instead, Rogen's need to sleep with an unconscious woman is presented as evidence of his social and sexual inadequacy, not his predatory nature and misogyny. The same can be seen in *40 Year Old Virgin* in which walking into Beth's bathroom is further proof that he is clueless.

Beth's violation, while brief and barely visible, demonstrates another component of sexual terrorism. Sheffield states,

indiscriminate violence and amorality are also at the heart of sexual terrorism. Every female is a potential target of violence-at any age, at any time, in any place. Further, as we shall see, amorality pervades sexual violence. Child molesters, incestuous fathers, wife beaters, and rapists often do not understand that they have done anything wrong. Their views are routinely shared by police officers, lawyers, and judges, and crimes of sexual violence are rarely punished in American society. (p.411)

The fact that Beth was most likely raped in her house directly before she masturbated highlights the indiscriminate nature of the act. In addition, the fact that it happened to a character in a comedy also further adds to the fear that such violence can occur "anytime, anywhere and to anyone" since a violation occurred on two levels. The first being Beth's rape, and the second violation is that of the audience in which female audience members witness an act they weren't expecting to occur.

In both *40 Year Old Virgin* and *Body of Evidence*, the monstrous and sexual villains tempt their victims. However, because *40 Year Old Virgin* is a comedy, as opposed to a thriller, we see the hero – Andy – prevail. Beth must be denigrated for her promiscuity and like any monster she must be destroyed. The film's genre, however,

requires levity, so her destruction cannot be seen as such. Instead, her sexual assault is seen as humorous and is only briefly hinted at.

### The Exorcist

*The Exorcist* focuses on a child who is possessed by the devil and the desperate attempts of two priests to save the young girl. Of all the movies analyzed, *The Exorcist* provides the most violent and gruesome depiction of masturbation; it also portrays the youngest female masturbator to date, and the age of the character is important to note. She is on the cusp of puberty, just arriving into her sexuality. As stated earlier, the threat of female sexuality generally and female masturbation specifically is partly due to the power it summons. When one is in control of their sexuality and masturbation, it signifies an autonomous bodily and sexual consciousness. For those just entering puberty, it signifies a sexual awakening. As Biskind (1998) asserts

[*The Exorcist*] presents a male nightmare of female puberty. Emergent female sexuality is equated with demonic possession, and the men in the picture – almost all of them celibate priests – unite to abuse and torture Regan in their efforts to return her to a presexual innocence. Having Regan thrust a crucifix into her vagina is intended to be a fiendishly inventive bit of sacrilege. (p.223)

In contrast to other masturbation scenes discussed, Regan's masturbation is not pleasurable and is almost unbearable to watch. It also demonstrates the sexual depravity attached to her possession. While the violence she endures is self-induced, it is the possession that causes her violent masturbation. It is not Regan who is punishing herself, but rather the (male) demon that possesses her.

In no other movie is the threat of female sexuality more apparent. Blair's possessed state, as Biskind (1998) has argued, is a metaphor for her burgeoning sexuality. One of the most glaring symptoms of her possession is hypersexuality. Throughout the film she gropes authority figures, uses obscene sexual language and is open about her sexual desires. Her monstrosity not only stems from her uncontrollable sexuality, it also includes those to which she is aggressive. Throughout the film she is verbally, physically and sexually hostile to many, but most of her aggression is against men, making her that much more threatening and evil. As Rommel-Ruiz asserts "her sexuality unleashes uncontrolled power, enabling her to enforce her will over the doctors, priests and her mother. And although her hypersexuality empowers her as she dominates these authority figures, the film asserts that her power is unnatural and destructive, leading towards disorder and evil" (p.44). The characterization of Regan as sexually overpowering parallels Dijkstra's (1996) discussions of femme fatales and vampires who hypnotize their victims into submission.

Many of the male figures she challenges represent institutions that have been responsible for violence against women. For instance, she is verbally aggressive towards the physician her mother takes her too, but interestingly she is not aggressive towards the nurses. The doctor is an obvious symbol for the institution of medicine, and her aggression towards him can be read symbolically as a challenge to an institution that has long punished masturbating women with the use of clitoridectomies. Another example in the film is when Regan grabs the crotch of the psychologist trying to hypnotize her. This scene happens later in the film, and therefore further into Regan's possession, which is why her actions are more sexually aggressive. The sexual assault of the psychologist can



also be read as another challenge to the medical establishment. The specific use of the psychologist can be tied to medicine's diagnosis of hysteria for masturbating women and confinement of "hysterical" women to medical wards (Maines, 1998). Her most violent act of aggression is when she murders Burke Dennings, a friend and possible love interest of Regan's mother. Burke is murdered at Regan's house while her mother is away. As Keller and Ryan (1990) have asserted, Regan's house lacks a male presence and can be viewed as a feminine space. When Burke enters the household, he is encroaching on that space and also functions as possible future father figure. Regan's violence against Burke is violence against one of the most obvious patriarchal figures: the father. The last major authority figure she challenges is the church through Father Karras and Father Merrin. The Church has punished women both through Witch Hunts and the Myth of Eve, in which sexually threatening women were burned at the stake, and the Myth of Eve has served as the ideological backing for such actions, asserting their legitimacy since all women have the potential to become evil (Daly 1987).

Regan's masturbation is a much more complicated picture of violence against women since she also becomes a violent aggressor; her violence, of course, is tied to her possession, and therefore she is not actually committing it. When Regan masturbates, she uses a crucifix and violently shoves it into her vagina. Her masturbation is a form of self-mutilation, clearly evident by the blood streaming down her legs and the force she used to insert the item. Her use of a crucifix as opposed to any other object is important to note as well. The damage it does to her genitalia is symbolic of the churches role in violence against sexually threatening women. Her body becomes the site where in which this violence can be enacted. Her masturbation, which would in any other context symbolize a

woman's erotic pleasure and sexual autonomy, becomes an act of demonic possession and pure terror. She becomes a sacrificial lamb for patriarchal fear of women's sexuality.

Regan is the victim of violence throughout her possession, and it is only after she has experienced such violence that she submits to a gender role that is no longer sexual or threatening. As Keller and Ryan (1990) state, "At the conclusion of the exorcism, [Regan] sits on the bed in the pose of a temptress, and Karras beats her until she submits to his power by crying out and becoming a good little girl again... returned to a state of innocence. She smiles at a priest, looks at his clerical collar, impulsively kisses him and runs off, a perfect example of devoted submission to patriarchal authority" (p.58). Once she is finally free of the possession that has plagued her throughout the film, Regan returns to a passive good girl and is unable to remember the violence she has experienced, perpetrated by both the demon and by Father Karras. The message of the film is clear: women who challenge patriarchal control of their sexuality will be brought back into gender compliance by any means necessary, including violence.

#### Humiliation as Violence

The last theme of violence that was evident in the films analyzed was public humiliation. Both Katherine Heigel and Jenna Elfman play career women, who have lost focus on the truly important part of life: romantic relationships. In the films, a romantic love interest appears in the women's lives to revive their sexual and romantic energy. The love interests of both film (played by Gerard Butler and Ben Stiller) in an oddly parallel fashion suggest that the women need to masturbate. Unlike the previous films mentioned, the women themselves are not seen masturbating through their own inclination; instead,

they must be told to do so by the men in their lives. While advising Abby (Katherine Heigl) on how to be sexier, Mike (Gerard Butler) decides that she should masturbate and purchases a vibrating thong as a gift. Later that evening while waiting for her date, she decides to try her new gift only to be surprised by her boss at the door. He informs her that she needs to come to an urgent dinner meeting and is quickly whisked out of her house with the underwear still on and the remote control in her purse. The remote control then falls into the hands of a young boy and humor (and humiliation) ensues. A similar incident occurs in *Keeping the Faith* in which Anna (Jenna Elfman) gets a call from Jake (Ben Stiller), and he instructs her to put her cell phone between her legs and wait. Jake then decides to call her cell phone right as two of Anna's male associates decide to come in to do an impromptu business presentation.

The punishment each woman experiences is one of public humiliation in which they must orgasm at work in front of (male) coworkers or possible (and very important) clients. The backdrop of the women's punishment is not coincidental; it highlights the public space, as opposed to the private one, that they have devoted so much time to. Before their orgasms, they were seen as emotionless and sexless "shrews," who we're also powerful career women. Orgasming at work shows this identity to be a ruse, asserting that no matter how hard they try to fight it, they are still tied to their bodies. Nancy Tuana in her book *The Less Noble Sex* (1993) highlights how ancient notions of female inferiority particularly those of philosophy and religion influenced the study of science and medicine. Work from Plato to Darwin emphasized woman's defective rational capacities and moral sense, and woman's need to be under the control of man. Now used to elicit humor, these same ideas are replicated in these films. The women are

made to look foolish and dumb, trying to suppress their orgasms while maintaining a professional composure.

The important business meeting Abby is whisked away to is also attended by her co-worker/love interest, Butler. As was mentioned earlier, the remote for Abby's underwear happens to fall out of her purse, and a young boy gets a hold of it. He starts playing with the remote unaware of what he is actually controlling. Soon after, Mike realizes what is happening, and not only does he do nothing to help her; he also encourages her to make a speech to the business executives she needs to impress. The child continues to play with the "toy" until Abby's character reaches orgasm in the most humiliating way possible. Yet regardless of the risk to her career and the embarrassment she experiences at the hands of Mike, the two become romantically involved.

In "Sexual Terrorism" Sheffield states that such a system of fear could not be successful without voluntary compliance: "Sexual terrorism is maintained to a great extent by an elaborate system of sex-role socialization that in effect instructs men to be terrorists in the name of masculinity and women to be victims in the name of femininity" (412). In the films, all is forgiven and each of the characters becomes romantically united. The voluntary compliance Sheffield points to is more prominent in *The Ugly Truth* where both characters hate each other and continually seek ways to embarrass or hurt the other person. Mike's actions are overlooked because Abby accepts her role as the victim and his act of terrorism is veiled by the supposed humor it conveys. Both male characters feel they have the right to control their partner's sexuality and to order them to masturbate by directly telling them to or by buying a product that will do it for them. The

coercion that is connected to each woman's masturbation not only makes the subsequent relationships problematic it also furthers male control of female sexuality. This is not new, however; depictions of rape, domestic violence and coerced sexual favors are common in films, and also showcase male control of female sexuality. What is unique about these depictions is the control over masturbation. This parallels what was discussed earlier the introduction. While female masturbation was pathologized in the 17th and 18th centuries, those who were diagnosed with hysteria or some other form of sexual dysfunction were subjected to “orgasmic treatment” (Maines 1998). This irony was most likely due to the medical establishment's need to control women's bodies. If they could not stop women's masturbation, at least they could control it by performing the act themselves.

In these scenes two things are made very apparent: women's masturbation must be initiated by men and controlled by men. Neither of the female characters is acting with complete agency; they had to be coaxed into engaging in this behavior. Abby must be bought the device and Elfman's character must be told to put the cell phone between her legs. For Elfman the vibrations are controlled by Stiller; he decides when to call and how long it lasts. Unlike using a vibrator, she has no say on how the experience goes. This undoes much of female masturbations liberatory aspects in which a woman asserts her sexual needs.

For Heigl's character there is a dual control in which Butler can stop the situation and decides not to and that the young boy has the remote control for the vibrator. Both of these scenes take away an agency these women might have gained by masturbating on their own and also undermines the professional ethos they have worked hard to create.

Instead of showcasing masturbation outside of the sexual control of men, it is put back inside that paradigm. These scenes can also work as warnings, though not directly, by showing the ways in which these women were comically punished for acting out their desire.

## Conclusion

In all the films mentioned, violence transforms female characters with subversive potential by stopping their masturbation. After experiencing violence, each character either later on in the film or soon after their traumatic experience is reified as a harmless and/or hegemonically feminine character. Both Heigl and Elfman's characters give up focusing solely on their careers to realize that a heterosexual relationship is the only true place to find happiness. Regan is released from her possessed state and once again becomes an obedient and passive girl who respects male authority. After Beth experiences a sexual assault that is only briefly alluded to in the *40 Year Old Virgin*, she is never seen again. Madonna's character in *Body of Evidence* experiences the most obvious transformation in the fact that she is murdered and can no longer ruin men's lives or "fuck" them to death. The sexual terrorism that the female characters experience allows the male characters to control them and mold them into disempowered characters.

Depictions of masturbation have the potential to be sites of powerful subversion, depicting female sexual discovery and sex free from patriarchal control. Instead, most depictions showcase female masturbators as vile and crazed. Portrayals that show women experiencing violence soon after masturbating are the most problematic of all because they continue a long history of violence against women that is precipitated by men's

perceived threat of female sexuality. Clitoridectomies and witch burnings are historical examples of men's social responses to the perceived threat of female sexuality and female masturbation. Depictions of violence against female masturbation, similar in tone to real-world violence of witch burning and clitoridectomies, legitimize the ideology that allowed such atrocities to happen in the first place. Women's sexuality and female masturbation, as Audre Lorde (1984) asserts, offers women an erotic power. Rather than harnessing and celebrating this power, these depictions show that women should fear their own sexuality and their urge to masturbate because it will lead to their punishment. In each of these films, men's violence against masturbating women is rendered normative and invisible. It is high time that women see depictions that celebrate our sexual and erotic power rather than legitimize further violence against an act that should be embraced for the love and power it expresses.

## CHAPTER TWO “WHEN THE MOOD STRIKES”

### CINEMATIC CONVERSATIONS ABOUT FEMALE AUTOEROTICISM

*Beth (bookstore sales clerk): We have a great section of do-it-yourself [books].*

*Andy: Do you like to "do it yourself"?*

*Beth: Sometimes. I mean . . . if the mood strikes.*

*-The 40 Year Old Virgin*

In *The 40 Year Old Virgin* Beth is subsequently labeled a "freak" by Andy soon after she masturbates in front of him. As was stated in the last chapter, her act "scares the shit" out of Andy, but, of course, this is not true until she actually masturbates. At the point in the film when Beth merely proclaims her use of autoerotism, she still is seen as sexually desirable and unthreatening. Visually depicting the act and as opposed to merely showcasing female characters discussing the act elicits two very different reactions from male characters. These two different portrayals that surround the same sexual act are important to investigate since they can offer audience members different ways of understanding cultural perceptions of female masturbation. In conducting research for this project, I encountered a small minority of films that never depicted female masturbation, but did show a female character candidly discussing her love of masturbation or intention to masturbate later on in the film. However, while the act was portrayed in a different manner (being discussed as opposed to being shown), the same themes identified in earlier chapters remained the same.



These conversations may represent female audience members' first exposure to women openly proclaiming their use of masturbation, so it is important to investigate how these conversations are portrayed. Such conversations may seem mild in comparison to some of the graphic depictions of female masturbation that exist in films, but even the slightest mention of female masturbation can arouse controversy.

Kevin Smith, famed director of *Jack and Miri Make a Porno* (2008), intended to make a tame romantic comedy when he directed *Jersey Girl* (2004). The film lacked any of the crude and graphic sexuality that Smith was known for, but with no nudity, graphic sex scenes or constant use of foul language the film still received an R rating from the MPAA. You may ask, what could have possibly elicited such a drastic rating? The answer: female masturbation. In the documentary *This Film is Not Yet Rated* (2006), Smith alleges that his essentially family-oriented film was given an R rating because the two main characters frankly discussed masturbation. During the candid yet relatively mild conversation, Maya (Liv Tyler) unashamedly proclaims she masturbates twice per day. Smith recalls in an interview for the documentary that a woman from the MPAA told him that she would be bothered if her 16-year old daughter were to see that scene. While scenes of scantily clad women being bludgeoned to death may receive PG-13 ratings, a scene of a woman merely saying she masturbates receives an R rating.

Since such conversations clearly elicit controversy, this paper seeks to examine the rhetorical implications of these discussions in four different films *Horrible Bosses* (2011), *American Pie* (1999), *American Reunion* (2012), and *Step Brothers* (2008). In addition, while discussions of female masturbation are rare, the same is not true of male masturbation, discussions of which are a constant feature, particularly in comedy. In all

of these films except *Horrible Bosses* both male and female characters discuss autoeroticism. I also compare the rhetorical constructions of these conversations and how they are portrayed along gendered lines. All of the films analyzed are comedies and the discussions about masturbations for female characters center around how crazed, deranged or ridiculous each of the women is for wanting to masturbate. This is akin to a punishment theme, not an empowering/informational theme? How are you reconciling this? This needs more thought. This theme is not limited to the films discussed; Greg Tuck (2010) in his article "Orgasmic (Teenage) Virgins: Masturbation and Virginity in Contemporary American Cinema" points out that in the film *Slums of Beverly Hills* Marissa Tomei's character plays a neurotic and drug-addicted woman who discusses masturbation and "refers to her vibrator as her 'boyfriend'" (161). This clearly links Rita's masturbation to her mental instability and even her inability to find a living, breathing boyfriend. The films analyzed in this chapter, however, focus on conversations between men and women and also compare men's reactions to discussions about masturbation with other men.

### Conversations and Screenplays

These conversations being analyzed function at two levels. First, they are rhetorical acts of the female characters of the film. Much of the audience will view them in this way as a conversation coming from the voice of the character as opposed to a script writer, but, at the same time, these are not genuine organic conversations and were in fact created by screen writers. At a second level these conversations represent male

screen writers<sup>2</sup> dictating how female characters express their sexuality. According to Boon (2008), author of *Script Culture and the American Screenplay*, screenwriting has been dominated by dominated by men and "concerned primarily with 'male' issues of power and morality, and has tended to define 'female' by its relationships to patriarchal hegemonic standards of sexuality and the male view of a woman's relationship to male desire" (132). The fact that male screen writers highlighted female characters having sexual desire beyond an act that would bring any of the male character pleasure can be seen as progress, but when looked at more closely problems arise. The male authorship that is inherent in these conversations is much of where the problematic aspects of these conversations stem from.

The women's expression of sexuality has little to do with their relationships to other male characters. However, while these discussions offer little erotic pleasure to male characters, in two instances – *Horrible Bosses* and *Step Brothers* – these conversations seek to terrorize and harass male characters. In addition, all of the conversations about *female* masturbation occur with *male* characters. While the male characters talk to other male characters about their own masturbation, female characters only discuss their autoeroticism with males and never with any other females, as one might expect them to do. While these discussions elicit no pleasure for male characters, the focus is once again attached to male characters. Women can only discuss their sexuality in their presence of men as though their sexuality has no meaning without them.

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<sup>2</sup> *American Pie*: Adam Herz; *American Reunion*: Aman Herz, Jon Hurwitz and Hayden Schlossberg; *Horrible Bosses*: Michael Markowitz, John Francis Daley, Jonathan M. Goldstein; *Step Brothers*: Will Ferrell, Adam McKay, John C Reilly (The Internet Movie Database)

Once again it is a male character who gives meaning to the woman's act. Even though discussions as opposed to the act being shown avoids the problematic aspect of voyeurism, women who don't pleasure themselves for the benefit of male characters or a male audience only seek to bring fear and discomfort. This equation in which good girls self-stimulate under the watchful eye of the male gaze and crazy girls avoid it because no one really wants to see it only adds up to adverse messages for women about their sexuality.

Discussions of masturbation seek to publicize that fact that women engage in self-pleasure but do so in a way that represents what Iris Marion Young (2004) deems "Cultural Imperialism." In her article "Five Faces of Oppression," Young details the complexity of oppression and power by highlighting how various ways a dominant group can have power over another group, not just through overt structural domination but through more subtle ways such as exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. These films and their conversations represent a form of cultural imperialism because they normalize one cultural expression and demonize another. When defining cultural imperialism, Young states "Given the normality of its own cultural expressions and identity, the dominant group constructs the differences which some groups exhibit as lack and negation" (59). The difference Young discusses is what has been illustrated above.

Women's masturbation is only desirable when it for male pleasure and when it is discussed it must be demonized through the expressions of the women. This is also another component of cultural imperialism. Young states that, "consequently, the dominant culture's stereotyped and inferiorized images of the group must be internalized

by group members at least to the extent that they are forced to react to behavior of others influenced by those images” (60). As was stated before, these conversations function on two levels. Looking at these conversations as manifesting from the voice of the character, they represent an internalization of the dominant (and patriarchal) culture’s inferiorized image. These female characters could have discussed their masturbation with other female characters as a way of enhancing their knowledge or becoming more intimate with a friend, but their decision to do otherwise represents an internalization of the female character and another method for male writers to continue to enforce such images on female audience members.

#### Horrible Bosses

In *Horrible Bosses*, Jennifer Aniston plays a dentist who incessantly sexually harasses her dental assistant, played by Charlie Day. The film follows three male friends who have bosses so detestable that they all plot to murder them. The bosses are labeled "tool," "psycho" and "man eater," and, as one might guess, Aniston's character (the only major female character in the film) plays the “man eater.” Throughout the film, each boss abuses and denigrates their employee through various methods. Aniston's weapon of choice is through overt discussions of her sexuality and sexual desire for her employee. In one scene, Aniston undresses and molests Day while he is unconscious; she takes pictures of this and later uses it for blackmail. In another scene, she squirts water on Day's pants in order to see the outline of his genitalia.

Masturbation also becomes a weapon in Aniston's arsenal of sexual harassment techniques. Among the many disturbing statements that Aniston makes throughout the

film, her worst is the one in which she recounts her autoeroticism. She states, "Did you see 'Gossip Girl' last night? I fucked myself so hard [watching] that Penn Badgley guy, I broke a nail." The use of the word "fuck" as opposed to masturbate or pleasure asserts Aniston's act as aggressive, and the fact that Aniston broke a nail during the act points to its possible masochistic nature. While "fuck" can be used as a synonym for sexual intercourse, it is also used as a threat or an act of violence. When one "fucks" (or screws, bangs, etc.), violent power relations manifest, and gender dichotomies allow for two roles: the violator (the man) and the violated (the woman or feminized figure).

The social construct of "fucking" creates the woman as a penetrable space. This idea is articulated Andrea Dworkin (1987) in *Intercourse* in which she states "violation is a synonym for intercourse" (p.154). *Fucking*, of course, is the most violent term for normative heterosexual intercourse, but our vocabulary offers only slightly less sadistic verbs for the act, all of which imply violation. Phrases such as "he entered her," "thrustured," "penetrated," "took," and "filled" all assert the same thing: "a woman has a body that is penetrated in intercourse: the vagina is muscled and the muscles have to be pushed apart. The thrusting is persistent invasion. She is opened up, split down the center. She is occupied - physically, internally" (p.154). Her point echoes Irigaray's (1977) discussion of intercourse, in which she states it violently interrupts the perpetual kissing of the vaginal lips. Female masturbation, when using clitoral stimulation, neither invades nor interrupts; it continues the harmonious relations of the female body. However, Aniston's characterization of her autoeroticism denies this recognition. In contrast to "fucking," masturbation, both physically and rhetorically, allows for sexual subjectivity. The act asserts sexual autonomy outside of gendered roles. The woman is neither the

penetrator nor the penetrated; she is merely, as Irigaray would argue, harnessing the already erotic nature of her body and genitalia. Masturbation as a rhetorical construct asserts women as living, breathing, desiring sexual subjects. The fact that Aniston chooses to characterize her autoeroticism as "fucking" arguably reasserts a woman's position as penetrable and highlights her sexuality as masochistic. In an act that offers freedom from such oppressive roles, the decision to rhetorically situate her act as a violation shows that she has internalized such negative sexual conditioning. The comment is meant, as is much of what Aniston does, to make Day, her employee, uncomfortable. This is also another way she reasserts hegemonic gender roles. Her act of sexual pleasure can only be achieved through the violation of another; part of the pleasure she feels in retelling her act of masturbation is that emotionally violates him.

Aniston's violent self-pleasuring and aggressive retelling of the act is juxtaposed with the only other major female character, played by Julie Bowen. She is the wife of the "psycho" boss. Bowen is a trophy wife, using her husband for financial gain. Her husband, played by Kevin Spacey, is a domineering and jealous man, who later becomes fatally violent when he incorrectly suspects that Bowen is having an affair. Later in the film, however, Bowen does commit infidelity by performing fellatio on a man she just met at her husband's surprise birthday party. The "favor" is never returned in the film, and Bowen doesn't seem mind this, nor does she seem to expect it to occur. The film offers no reason for this act or the odd context in which it occurs. *Horrible Bosses* portrays women's sexuality as predatory, frightening or safe only when its goal is male pleasure only. Aniston's assertion of sexual pleasure, though problematic, is contrasted with Bowen's disavowal of sexual pleasure. Whereas Aniston openly admits to

masturbating, Bowen's only expression of sexuality is in an act that focuses solely on the sexual enjoyment of a man. Bowen's sexuality becomes a pornographic trope in which Bowen is ready and willing to be sexually objectified by any man at the drop of a hat. After she "finishes the job," Bowen wipes her mouth and swallows, leading the audience to assume that she consumed his ejaculate, further solidifying her pornographic status.

*Horrible Bosses* crafts a sexual landscape in which female pleasure is largely absent. Bowen is uninterested in sexual pleasure and Aniston's pleasure is violent, and her retelling of her masturbation situates the act as rhetorically problematic. She is the only woman who forcefully affirms her right to pleasure, but she does so in a manner that rejects other's rights to be free of molestation and harassment. Her pleasure can only be obtained through another man's misery, and her predatory nature is directly connected to her masturbation.

#### American Pie and American Reunion

*American Pie* has been lauded as a groundbreaking teen sex comedy, showcasing honest depictions of teenage sexuality (Durham, 2008; Buckwalter, 2012). In the film, both men and women openly discuss sex, and it is one of the few films where both male and female characters openly talk about their masturbation. In fact, the film's title references Jason Bigg (Jim)'s usage of a pie to masturbate. In the film, there are two references to female masturbation, one being a depiction –as was mentioned earlier – and the other being a discussion.

In *American Pie* male masturbation, while seen as humorous, is a normal part of the men's lives and is mentioned multiple times by many male characters. The act is



discussed openly and with little shame; in one scene Jason Biggs' father even advises him to engage in self-pleasure as a normal part of being a teenage boy. It can be argued, especially in *American Pie*, that female masturbation is also normalized to some degree because it is such an important part of the film's narrative. In *American Pie*, viewers see Nadia - a foreign exchange student - masturbating and Alyson Hannigan (Michelle) openly admitting to masturbating when she states in the now infamous line, "This one time, at band camp, I stuck a flute in my pussy." After Jim expresses shock at her statement, Michelle responds by asking "What? You don't think I know how to get myself off?" Such a question challenges the taboo nature of female masturbation and highlights that women seek access to such sexual knowledge. Both Michelle's assertion of sexual autonomy and newly formed sexual knowledge, offers subversive potential; however, this is largely undermined by Michelle's supposed method of achieving sexual pleasure, which will be addressed later on.

One somewhat subversive aspect of her statement is that she is challenging her character's persona as the self-proclaimed "band geek." Since her character is not viewed as sexually enticing as opposed to the other female characters in the film, she is coded as asexual before uttering this bold statement. Women who are deemed unattractive or do not meet the conventional norms of femininity are not viewed as being sexual because they are seen as unworthy of sexual attention. Kate Harding (2008) in her essay, "How Do You Fuck a Fat Woman?" puts forth the idea of "unfuckability"-- the concept that only those who fit the very narrow patriarchal confines of "fuckable" are worthy of receiving and expressing sexual desire. She states that one's "hotness" determines her ability to express sexual desire: "'Hot' is an objective assessment, based on a collection of

easily identifiable characteristics. Thin is hot. White is hot. Able-bodied and quasi-athletic is hot. Blond is hot. Clear skin is hot. Big boobs (so long as there's no corresponding big ass) are hot. Little waists are hot. Miniskirts and high heels and smoky eyes are hot. There's a proven formula, and if you follow it, you will be hot" (p.35) Much of these characteristics are completely uncontrollable or rely on a conventional feminine gender performance. Michelle possesses many of the characteristics listed above (white, thin and able-bodied), but she does not perform traditional femininity. She makes no effort to act or dress in a manner that is pleasing to the opposite sex. By stating that she masturbates and knows how to "get herself off," she is challenging her status as an "unfuckable" female. She claims the right to such sexual knowledge regardless of her perceived worthlessness in a patriarchal culture.

While Michelle's assertion of sexual desire is met with shock and some distaste, Nadia's masturbation is applauded both because she meets conventional standards of beauty and femininity (and is therefore "fuckable") and because her self-stimulation becomes porn for the whole student body once it is broadcast via webcam unbeknownst to her. Both Michelle and Elizabeth play characters who clearly care about their own sexual pleasure, but it is important to note that these two characters are coded as sexual others especially in comparison to the two other main female characters, Tara Reid (Vicky) and Mena Suvari (Heather). However, that is not to say that Vicky and Heather do not care about their sexual pleasure. In fact, Vicky asserts that having an orgasm will allow her to make the decision to lose her virginity. In the film, audience members see both Vicky and her boyfriend achieve orgasm through oral sex, but it is important for her

that this same sexual satisfaction be achieved in conventional intercourse (spoiler alert! She is sorely disappointed).

As Tuck (2010) asserts of Vicky "it is not enough for her to engage in partnered orgasmic sex, but coitus. The act in some sense must ape heteronormative partnered sex (and hence potentially reproductive) sex, if it is to be valued. Meanwhile sexual acts that are not properly partnered and are not potentially reproductive - most notably, but not exclusively, masturbation - are those that attract comic opprobrium" (p.164). Though Michelle does engage in partnered intercourse, it is in contrast to the "love making" of the other characters because of the fact that she leaves the next morning and makes it clear she is using Jim for sexual pleasure. In essence their partnered sex becomes mutual masturbation, as both are looking to achieve their own sexual pleasure and little else. It is also in direct contrast to the more potentially procreative acts of the other couples since, as Tuck (2010) points out, Michelle asks that Jim put on two condoms before they have sex, negating any reproductive possibility (and perpetuating a very inaccurate myth about needing two condoms). In addition, she is also further cast as the sexual other by screaming "say my name bitch" directly before engaging in intercourse. This only further highlights the unromantic and deviant nature of their intercourse since Michelle is taking on the dominate role and further emasculating Jim. While a majority of the female characters seek out sexual pleasure, it is both the sexual others that masturbate as opposed to the other female characters that only engage in sex that is safely confined to an androcentric model of sexuality.

The fact that Michelle asserts that she has a right to sexual pleasure and knowledge is empowering, but, as mentioned earlier, her style of masturbation is

problematic. Upon closer examination, Michelle, similar to Aniston in *Horrible Bosses*, is expressing a violent sexuality. The use of a flute, as opposed to her finger or vibrator, is a form of self-mutilation. While the mention of masturbating with a flute is meant for comedic purposes, since it is absurd, it is also potentially physically damaging and abusive. Though the audience is never directly told, her actions could have led to injury or infection. The many times she expresses a need for sexual pleasure seem at odds with her statement of masturbation. This dissonance is both problematic and dangerous because of the pornographic tropes it parallels. According to Rosewarne (2011), author of *Part Time Perverts: Sex, Pop Culture and Kink Management*, the insertion of foreign objects into various orifices is a common image in pornography (p.153). She states, “extreme penetration – i.e. with large or simply *unlikely* objects – is popular in porn: websites such as MeatInsertions.com showcase women penetrating with all kinds of objects such as bottles, oversized dildos, cans and bats. Extreme-Penetrations.com displays the use of glass rods, handfuls of pencils, and the phalluses of monsters” (p.153). In this way, *American Pie* caters to the in-group knowledge of pornography consumers.

In *Men Who Rape: The Psychology of the Offender* Groth and Birnbaum (2001) characterize rape as existing in patterns, one of the worst being sadistic rape. For these rapists, sexual excitement is elicited not only through rape but through the infliction of pain. “The offender finds the intentional maltreatment of his victim intensely gratifying and takes pleasure in the victim's torment, anguish, distress, helplessness, and suffering” (p.44). Extensive and prolonged torture is common of sadistic rape. Many times, to inflict pain, a rapist will use a foreign object to penetrate the victim. The use of a foreign object helps the rapist to control the pain the victim experiences and is also used to

mutilate bodily orifices. Both porn and sadistic rape engage in body-punishing sexuality, which seeks to injure and sometimes fatally harm women. This is in direct contrast to masturbation which is an act whose sole purpose is to offer pleasure, rather than violently take it away. Porn and sexual assault play a role in both instances of female masturbation. Both Nadia and Michelle's masturbation exist within the pornographic imagination in which female masturbation should be either a voyeuristic spectacle for the entire student body or it should be painful. Once again female pleasure is absent from an act whose sole purpose is to offer sexual joy.

The most recent addition to the teen film franchise is *American Reunion* in which all the cast, thirteen years after graduating, unites for an unofficial high school reunion. The film opens with Jim and Michelle, a married couple with a young child, who now find that parenthood has put a damper on their sex life. Opening to R. Kelly's "Bump 'N Grind" and the image of a moving bed, the audience assumes that the "kinky" Michelle and sex obsessed Jim are bumping and grinding right along with the song, but instead the camera pulls out to reveal the bouncing and music is all a part of Michelle's attempt to put their toddler to sleep. Once she has put the child to sleep, Michelle says she will take a bath and leaves Jim to his own devices.

As is usual for any *American Pie* film, Jim starts to masturbate to porn and is caught in the act, but this time he is discovered by their awakened toddler. In the process of being surprised and then trying to cover up any evidence of the act, Jim hurts himself and rushes to the bathroom for a Band-Aid. Upon opening the door, the audience finds that Jim wasn't the only one masturbating. Michelle was also using her time alone for private pleasure in the bathtub. Startled by Jim's unexpected entrance, she releases the

shower head she was using, which sprays all over the bathroom and, more importantly, all over Jim. Drenched by the device that was pleasing his wife, Jim "is figuratively and literally, 'all wet' or perhaps, cooled down after having been hot and bothered" ("American Reunion," 2012, par. 7). The catalyst for this humiliation is the toddler's presence in a room where both of his parents are not having sex with each other. He is a reminder (and a disrupter) of the non-procreative sex they are both having

The interruption of Jim's masturbation and his subsequent experience of pain and embarrassment is not a new narrative device nor is the use of female masturbation as the cause of the embarrassment. The original film of the franchise also showcased a similar situation. As mentioned earlier, in *American Pie* Shannon Elizabeth plays a foreign exchange student named Nadia. After class, Nadia asks Jim if she can come over in order to study. She informs Jim - in front of all of his friends - that she will need to change at his house since she will be coming straight from dance class. Jim's friends see her announcement as an opportunity to violate Nadia's privacy as a benefit for the whole group, and they convince Jim to set up a webcam in his room. While the original plan only included his small group of friends, Jim inadvertently sends the webcam link to the entire student body. The whole school watches as Nadia undresses and then starts to masturbate on Jim's bed.

When Jim walks in on her masturbating, rather than being horrified that he is violating her privacy, she turns the tables and asks that he strip. Her new role as spectator only serves to embarrass him as he makes a fool of himself imitating a male stripper. However, he is rewarded for this act, by being asked to "finish the job," but he is so overcome by her sexuality that he is unable to do so. Overwhelmed by her sexual

aggressiveness, he climaxes prematurely twice. The fallout from Jim's viral error has nothing to do with his clear violation of Nadia's privacy, and instead is centered on his compromising display of sexual immaturity.

Nadia is created as the exotic other, who is present purely for the pleasure of the high school boys and Jim. Her only role was to be objectified and then to humiliate Jim because of his lack of sexual prowess. Even though she asserts her right to also be a sexual spectator, this leads to Jim's embarrassment and is meant for farce. When Nadia undresses and masturbates, it is meant to please male viewers, even if she is unaware of what is going on. Nadia is caught within two gazes: the male student body and the male audience.

When Jim does the same thing, it is only meant to produce laughs. She is cast as the exotic other through her Eastern European descent and strong accent. She even internalizes this patriarchal ideal by being turned on by images of women being degraded and objectified in the pornography she looks at. Her masturbation also plays upon another common pornographic trope of the "pseudo lesbian" in which true homosexuality is changed into something to be enjoyed and objectified by heterosexual men (Fahs, 2011). In this case, she is not seen as a gender deviant, though she still is threatening as evidenced by the way her sexuality makes Jim unable to perform. She challenges his ability to enact his role of dominator, master and exploiter, which causes him to be the laughing stock of the entire school. Her masturbation becomes his sexual demise: he is no longer seen as an attractive date for the prom, which hinders his ability to find a woman to exploit so that he can finally come into his manhood. Ironically, this forces him to date the only girl unaware of his failed exploits: Michelle, who thirteen years later (in the

sequel) embarrasses him in a similar fashion when he walks in on her masturbating. Both women leave him "all wet" and ultimately embarrassed and emasculated as their masturbation is directly tied to his inability to enact his sexual role. This focus is much more heightened in the *American Reunion*.

Throughout the film the couple constantly tries to reconnect in order to restart their once active sex life. The emphasis on rekindling their sex life in order to be a better couple asserts masturbation as problematic in a marriage. Masturbation is portrayed as an act that is only needed when one lacks a sexual partner. It becomes the undesirable alternative to sexual intercourse. It is not seen, instead, as a sexual act completely on its own, one that many women perform regardless of being in a relationship (Waxman, 2007).

After making the decision to rekindle their sex life, they decide that their trip to the high school reunion is the perfect opportunity. On the way there Jim mentions that he would much rather Michelle has sex with him and not use the shower head as a way to obtain pleasure. The rest of the film details the hijinks the couple experiences, along with their high school friends, in order to get their sex life "back on track." Clearly her act is seen as threatening to both his masculinity and the sanctity of their marriage. It could be argued that the emphasis on the couple's poor sex life and each of them masturbating situates masturbation as a harmful act for both men and women; however, the focus in the film is much more on her masturbation than it is on his. Many times in the film masturbation is referenced by male characters as normative and expected. There is also a specific reference to the original *American Pie* film, when Jim returns to his old room at his parents' house and looks through some old pornographic magazines he left there (the



same ones Nadia used to masturbate). His father catches him looking at the magazines, and their conversation parallels the one they had earlier in the first film. Jim's father nostalgically waxes about other conversations they have had that both normalize male masturbation and porn's involvement in the act. Even though he encourages Jim to fix the couple's sex life, he never negates the necessity of masturbation.

The film ends with the couple finally having sex at the high school reunion. They run into a classroom (which just happens to be a band room) and start making out on a desk. Michelle stops right before they have sex and gives a coy smile while holding up a flute, referencing her previous masturbation from the original *American Pie* film. Pushing it aside, the couple engages in the act they were supposed to all along: copulation. While the film thinks it's being cute and self-referential, the message is quite clear: Michelle gives up masturbation for the "more pleasurable" and "correct" option of intercourse. Notice that a pie is not involved in any scene where the two have sex even though Jim's masturbation scene is arguably more famous than Michelle's. The emphasis on the flute only focuses on her masturbation and her need to give it up.

In the opening of *Sex for One: The Joy of Selfloving*, Dodson (1996) states "Masturbation is the primary form of sexual expression. It's not just for kids, or in-between lovers or for old people who end up alone. Masturbation is the ongoing love affair that each of us has with ourselves throughout our lifetime" (p.3). *American Pie* creates a dichotomous relationship between heteronormative intercourse and masturbation. The two cannot exist together, and one works as the other's demise. Rather than seeing masturbation as part of a spectrum of sexual acts that one can enjoy, it is an act of a pathetic and unconnected couple. While *American Pie* is one of the few films that is very

open about men *and women's* desires to masturbate, the franchise refuses to see it as a natural, healthy and frequent part of human sexuality. Instead, it works as device that only brings pain and shame to those who engage in it and laughter and uneasiness to those who watch.

### Step Brothers

*Step Brothers* centers around two aimless and jobless middle-aged men, played by Will Ferrell (Brennan) and John C. Reilly (Dale), who are forced to become roommates when their parents get married. Like many of the comedies that are directed or produced by Judd Apatow, perpetual male adolescence is the theme of this movie. Both men demonstrate clear emotional and sexual immaturity. The men's masturbation is not only evidence of their sexual immaturity; it also functions to bond the men together. When the two men are forced to live together, they instantly hold animosity towards each other, but it is discussions of masturbation that pacify their hostility towards each other. As they are in their joint room, Brennan starts looking through Dale's stuff and finds old pornographic magazines. Brennan says to Dale, "You know what? I still hate you, but you got a pretty awesome collection of nudie mags." To which Dale responds by saying: "Yeah, I got 'em from the '70s, '80s and '90s. It's like masturbating in a time machine." As with other films mentioned, male characters openly discuss masturbation and its connection to porn. Never is this issue challenged, nor seen as deviant; and such discussion typically works to help the male characters bond. Just as Jim's dad reminisced about the masturbation discussions in *American Reunion*, Dale and Brennan are able to become closer because of their frequent discussions of masturbation.

In another scene Dale states that they will play a game in which they will name their favorite dinosaur. The both automatically respond with the same kind to which Brennan responds by saying "Favorite non-pornographic magazine to masturbate to." Both respond by saying "Good Housekeeping." Shocked by their similar answers Brennan asks "Did we just become best friends?" to which Dale enthusiastically responds: "Yep!"

While their parents are happy to see their step children getting along, they are frustrated with the fact that they seem unable to get jobs. Dale and Brennan are sent to therapy in order to learn to become adults, but neither takes the process seriously, which is additional evidence of the adolescent mentality. Dale, when asked to discuss his life, retells the plots from various movies such as *Good Will Hunting*. Brennan also makes little effort to make his therapy sessions productive and even insults his therapist. He constantly undermines her professional status by calling her "Dr. Angelface" even after she refuses to be acknowledged in such a manner. During their therapy session he tells her he loves her, which makes her visibly uncomfortable. He repeats this sentiment many times as she tries to defuse the situation and maintain a professional demeanor. Continuing his sexual harassment, he states that his "penis tingles" when he thinks about them being together. While he is clearly engaging in sexual harassment, the film portrays him as hapless and clueless as opposed to aggressive. His blatant disrespect for female authority is in direct contrast with a key female character, Alice's desire of (male) authority. Alice (Kathryn Hahn) is the wife of Brennan's much more successful but also terribly selfish and cruel, brother, Derek. Alice is miserable in the relationship and makes no attempts to hide this fact. Derek's status and outward appearance are a driving force in

much of his actions, and he must maintain the perfect family to the point that they become robotic versions of themselves.

There is only one brief scene in the movie that shows Alice and Derek together, but it is enough to give a clear picture of the way he treats his wife and family. As they are driving to Thanksgiving dinner, Derek forces his family to sing a pitch perfect rendition of "Sweet Child of Mine." He directs the entire song telling each child when to sing and then criticizes Alice for being "off key" and wasting "twelve hundred dollars a week on voice lessons." Later in the film Dale gets into a fight with Derek; and Alice questions Dale about this when they are alone after a family dinner.

*Alice Huff: "Hi, I'm Alice, I'm Derek's wife."*

*Dale: "Hi."*

*Alice: "Uh, is it true that you struck Derek in the face and he fell from the tree house?"*

*Dale: "Yeah. He asked me to."*

*Alice: "Oh, that's the most amazing thing I've ever heard. Um, I want you to know that tonight am gonna pleasure myself to the image of you doing that to Derek. You know what I mean? Masturbate. I am."*

*Alice: "Oh, Dale. You are something. You are something."*

*Dale: "You're something too."*

*Alice: "I wanna roll you up into a little ball and shove you up my vagina. You could just live there. It's warm and it's cozy."*

*Dale: "In your vagina?"*

*Alice: "I wanna walk around with you in there and just know that whenever I feel a little tickle or scratch that it's just your hair up my vagina. Please, just do it for me."*

*Dale: "What's happening?"*

Before even starting this conversation, she corners Dale in a manner that demonstrates her lack of social awareness. Dale seems to have no interest in her and while she is telling him about her desire to masturbate she moves closer and closer to Dale. Allison is so desperately unhappy in her marriage that another man's violence

committed against her own husband becomes sexually arousing. Her inability to recognize Dale's discomfort as well as her assertion of sexual agency when she is not the desired subject for Dale, positions her as the sexual other. Rather than being an expression of sexual desire, Alice's masturbation stems from her lack of marital and sexual satisfaction. Her crazed statements and mannerisms seem to be part of the larger issue: her sexual starvation. She needs to masturbate in order to ameliorate her unhappiness from her failed marriage and inadequate sex life. Rather than seeing masturbation as another expression of one's sexuality, or as a superior form of sex as Dodson asserts, Alice only turns to masturbation out of desperation. Even though insanity and illness are no longer equated with female masturbation, this connection is being visibly resurrected by Alice's crazed sexual expression.

Similar to *American Pie*, in *Step Brothers* both male and female masturbation is openly discussed, but male masturbation is seen as a normative form of sexuality and female masturbation is only discussed within the context of sexual depravity. Alice's marriage to a self-obsessed and emotionally neglectful husband could have crushed her sexual spirit, but in this scene she is proclaiming some degree of sexual freedom; unfortunately, it is not characterized as such. She terrorizes Dale by making sexually aggressive comments and overt physical gestures. Her discussion of masturbation is set up to be seen as awkward and outrageous and therefore comedic. Another very problematic aspect is the violence that is present in the scene. Her actions, whether she is aware or not, are sexually aggressive and her desire for Dale is based on the violence and physical domination he asserted. Derek denigrates his wife and many other characters in the film, and he takes great pains to emasculate Dale and Brennan. Dale's act allowed him

to regain some of the masculinity he lost from Derek's constant berating of him, and Alice's desire for Dale and desire to masturbate stem from this violence. Such desire shows that she is attracted to a particular kind of masculine performance which is dependent upon violence and dominance. The combination of her sexual depravity and attraction to such a violent gender expression set up a dangerous equation that is bound to equal additional abuse for her, if not from Dale or her husband then from some other male she will encounter.

## Conclusion

Conversations as scripted by men in the Hollywood films discussed here perpetuate a view of female masturbation as an activity of crazed and sexually aggressive women. This leads female viewers to be afraid of or laugh at characters who could possibly be engaging in the same behavior that female audience members are engaging in privately. Unfortunately, in all the films good girls have hegemonic heterosexual intercourse and bad girls masturbate. Sadly, few positive images exist of women masturbating and a majority of female autoerotic depictions are in porn, which exist primarily for male sexual pleasure.

Another problematic discovery is the amount of sexually violent rhetoric that was used during these conversations by the women discussing their masturbation.

Masturbation was used both as a form of violence against others and a form of self-mutilation. Aniston's character discusses masturbation to sexually harass her employee and Alice makes Dale extremely uncomfortable by discussing her masturbation.

Michelle's masturbation plays upon rape fantasies and if actually performed would

mutilate her vagina. Aniston's masturbation is also violent in the fact that she characterizes it as "fucking" and that she breaks a nail. Furthermore, Alice's masturbation, while not violent, is connected to violence because her desire to masturbate manifests from Dale's use of violence against her husband. The masochism these characters displayed can be viewed as both the internalization of patriarchal violence and a way of legitimizing that violence. Masturbation would represent the one sexual act, in which women are free of sexual violence, but the fact that the writers chose to have the women characterize their masturbation in a sexually violent way disempowers women, and denigrates its subversive potential.

## CHAPTER THREE HYSTERIA ON THE BIG SCREEN: THE CRAZED FEMALE MASTURBATOR

Throughout history patriarchal society has consistently pathologized women's sexuality. Greek scholars deemed women mentally unstable because of their reproductive organs, and Victorian doctors devised diagnoses such as hysteria and nymphomania for women who expressed even the smallest of sexual desire. Currently the pharmaceutical industry has labeled many women as being afflicted with female sexual dysfunction because of their inability to experience sexual pleasure within the confines of an androcentric model of sexuality.

As discussed in the introduction, patriarchal society fears autonomous female sexuality for its ability to undermine male dominance. Controlling female sexuality by demonizing it and treating it as a disease has been a successful strategy in combating such a fear. The particular “pathology” afflicting women is usually cited as psychological, situating women as individuals who are ruled more by their bodies than by their minds. As Carol Groeman (2001), author of *Nymphomania: A History*, writes "it was widely accepted that women's reproductive capacity—from puberty to menopause—dominated their entire being. Wombs (and by the middle of the nineteenth century, ovaries) shaped and determined women's nature far more than testes affected men's lives. As a result, not only doctors but average citizens as well believed that gynecological



problems lay at the root of many female diseases, including nervous and mental conditions" (p.9).

By connecting mental instability and female sexuality, patriarchal society undermines women's access to their erotic power and undercuts women's ability to challenge male dominance over female sexuality. This ideology parallels a thematic development in cinematic depictions of female masturbators. Just as *Onania* connected insanity to those who dared to engage in self-pleasure, cinematic representations of female masturbators have replicated this in films such as *Single White Female* (1992), *High Tension* (2003), *Precious* (2009), *Black Swan* (2010) and *Mulholland Drive* (2001). While the films range in genre from drama and horror to psychological thriller, they all possess the common element of having a female character's masturbation being connected to insanity or mental dysfunction. In each of the films, the female character's break from reality or sanity is typically punctuated by her masturbation. In *High Tension* Marie's masturbation unleashes chaos when a serial killer enters the house and murders the family of Marie's best friend. However, it later turns out that it is Marie who is the killer, and the serial killer was a figment of her imagination. The close proximity of her masturbation and the appearance of the imagined serial killer ties together Marie's descent into madness with her assertion of sexual agency, and a criminal sexual agency at that.

In *Single White Female* Hedy's masturbation occurs after she starts to mirror her roommate in dress, hairstyle and mannerisms. While Natalie Portman's character in *Black Swan* suffered from delusions before her autoeroticism, her masturbation becomes the start of her transformation into the black swan character which ultimately leads to her suicide. A similar instance occurs in *Mulholland Drive* in which Naomi Watt's character

tries to masturbate after realizing she has put a hit out on her girlfriend, and in a scene showcasing painful and awkward autoeroticism, Watts is unable to climax and then shoots herself.

Though the chapter is limited to these five films, there are many others that could have been incorporated, including films that were mentioned in chapters one and two. *The Exorcist* and *Body of Evidence* clearly showcase deranged female characters. This is also the case in *40 Year Old Virgin*. As detailed in chapter two Kathryn Hall's character in *Step Brothers* and Jennifer Aniston's character in *Horrible Bosses* are both portrayed as sex crazed lunatics who are unable or unwilling to see that their sexual aggressions are unwelcome. In fact, the portrayal of a crazed female masturbator was the most common depiction I encountered during my research. Some scholars have criticized the depictions of male masturbators, stating that they are a negative representation of male sexuality. In "Jerkus Interruptus: The Terrible Trials of Masturbating Boys in recent Hollywood Cinema" Schneider (2005) argues that "there seems to be a gendered double standard at play in teen movies when it comes to teens busted for playing games with themselves: whereas the guys who try unsuccessfully to get off on their own are depicted as spiritual children - mamma's boys with father issues who can't even find solace in fantasy - the gals are seen (often by diegetic male audiences) as full figured, fully bloomed, hot-blooded women" (p. 379).

Schneider mainly focuses on Nadia's masturbation in *American Pie* and another masturbation scene in *Not Another Teen Movie*, which is meant to spoof the *American Pie* masturbation scene. Beyond that, Schneider doesn't point to other examples and either is unaware of or ignores the countless depictions of crazed female masturbators. In

comparison to the comedic portrayals of masturbating via a pie (*American Pie*) or getting caught in the bathroom (*Fast Times at Ridgemont High*), suicidal, murderous and sexually abusive female masturbators are clearly more problematic. A minority of depictions exists in which male serial killers masturbate (Tuck, 2007), but a majority of the depictions - and there are many male depictions to begin with - comedically poke fun at normal men and boys getting caught in the act. While the connection between insanity and masturbation of men and women points to the sex negativity that pervades Hollywood's culture, the pervasive connection between female autoeroticism and psychosis replicates a long history of pathologizing female sexuality. Before further investigating these themes and their portrayals in the films mentioned earlier, it is necessary to briefly discuss the history of hysteria and its connection to women's sexuality.

### Masturbatory Insanity

Well before masturbatory insanity was promoted as truth by male medical professionals, the diagnosis of hysteria legitimized female mental and physical inferiority. In *Hysteria beyond Freud*, Helen King (1993) writes that the earliest notions of hysteria appeared in Plato's dialogue *Timaeus* in which the uterus is likened to a living creature that roams a woman's body, "blocking passages, obstructing breathing, and causing disease" (p.25). The pathological animal that the uterus is described as became the source of the term *hysteria*, which "stems from the Greek cognate of uterus, ὑστέρα" (p. 26).

Women were thought to be frail and mentally weak because of their sexual organs. However, while women's physicality had great bearing on their mental capacity and stability, male sexual organs were thought to play little to no role in their lives. Women's sexual organs were long thought to have crippled a woman's control of her emotions and inability to maintain rationality. In *The Less Noble Sex*, Nancy Tuana (1993) asserts "women's reproductive cycles . . . were all times when she was subject to the nervous disorder labeled 'reflexive insanity', the nineteenth-century term for hysteria. Woman was a 'victim of periodicity' and thereby subject to a range of mental disturbances that had 'neither homologue or analogue in man'" (p.101).

Over time the agreement as to what caused hysteria shifted gears. As Tuana (1993) states, "In the nineteenth century scientists implicated an individual's sexual habits, arguing that certain practices, such as masturbation, could precipitate psychological disorders, including hysteria" (p.103). Many medical texts were devoted to hysteria and its connection to masturbation. One such text comes from Isaac Baker-Brown, a well-known gynecologist famous for "curing" female masturbation by performing clitoridectomies. He theorized this view in his book *On the Curability of Certain Forms of Insanity, Epilepsy, Catalepsy and Hysteria in Females* (1866).

A similar text was produced by Dr. A.J. Block in 1894 entitled "Sexual Perversion in the Female" in which he details discovering the clitoris as the source of pleasure for a female patient: Waxman (2007) retells the event by stating: "after Dr. Block manhandled her vagina and labia and found no response, he decided to touch her clitoris. Her body responded with short and rapid breaths, a pale face, and slight moans,

and he deduced that the clitoris itself was the cause of her disease and therefore aptly removed it" (p.201).

The term "masturbatory insanity" was coined by English psychiatrist Henry Maudsley in 1868. Though the term was based on the supposed brain damage that manifested from masturbation, regardless of gender, much of the treatment and cures focused solely on women (Waxman, 2007). Beyond clitoridectomies, Dr. Robert Battey of Rome, Georgia created an alternative treatment to address such issues. The operation known as Battey's Operation, or an ovariectomy, the procedure involved the removal of both ovaries in order to treat nymphomania and masturbation (Tuana, 1993). According to Waxman (2007), "inhumane practices around masturbation and hysteria continued well into the early 1900s, even as medical opinion and attitude toward masturbation slowly began to change. In 1936, Holt's *Diseases of Infancy and Childhood* still recommended the cauterization of the clitoris as a way to cure female masturbation" (p.202).

Patriarchal society's obsession with the insatiable appetite of the female masturbator is ironic, especially when compared to the image of the sexless and passionless female. To some degree, it may suggest that many knew this feminine ideal to be a lie, and the only way to protect from the façade being revealed was to cut off all avenues a woman had to express sexual passion. By demonizing such expressions, women themselves would police their own sexual desire. Pathologizing female masturbation extended patriarchal control into the most private act a woman could perform. The idea of masturbatory insanity denied a woman's ability to self-stimulate or become in touch with her body, and instead allowed patriarchal men to define female masturbation, therefore controlling a women's ability to engage in it. The diagnosis of

insanity or mental depravity also denies one's sexual subjectivity, placing a disconnection between one's mental clarity and sexual self.

The policing of women's sexual behavior was not only meant to avoid, but to protect society as well. A woman's hysterical nature subjected her to ailments beyond just mental fragility; it also allegedly caused her to lack an innate sense of right and wrong. Tuana asserts that because a woman's mental state was intimately tied to her physicality a woman was "seen as more tied to the instinctual, the emotional, and the sexual. She is less capable of controlling her desires and so must be controlled by man for her own good and for the good of society" (p.92). The unhinged female masturbator posed a danger both in her negation of traditional femininity and her challenge to the androcentric model of sexuality that was the basis for sexist beliefs of female inferiority (Maines, 1999).

In addition to practicing clitoridectomies and ovariectomies on women to cure them or their desire to masturbate, many physicians recommended good old fashioned procreative and heteronormative intercourse within the confines of marriage (Maines, 1994). When one was diagnosed with hysteria doctors would state that "if she be married, let her forthwith use copulation, and let her strongly be encountered by her husband, for there is more remedy more present than this" (p.27) This binary of crazy women who masturbate versus feminine and sane women who engage in heteronormative and procreative sex is also seen on screen. In both *High Tension* and *Single White Female* the masturbating antagonists (Marie and Hedy) are portrayed as direct opposites to the heteronormative protagonists of the films. Each protagonist is involved with or interested in a male character, which upsets Hedy and Marie because they are both romantically interested in their friends.

As has been discussed earlier, female protagonists who masturbate pose a symbolic danger to patriarchal society by challenging asymmetrical gender scripts and denying the need for a male presence when women try to achieve pleasure. However, the danger these female characters pose in the films mentioned is quite literal in which they are responsible for death or sexual abuse. The fact that all of these women wreck some degree of havoc on the world around them or on themselves is resurrecting these archaic notions used to control women's sexuality and to deny their sexual subjectivity. Rather than have medical professionals profess the insanity of women who masturbate, certain films promote stereotypes that take over for where the medical profession left off. These scenes offer clear evidence that women who self-pleasure are unhinged. These films suggest that only the craziest of (lesbian) female characters would dare to touch themselves.

### Insanity and Lesbianism

Upon analyzing the films, it was discovered that these female masturbators were not only deviant in their decision to self-pleasure but also in their homoerotic desires. All the films mentioned showcase characters that have sexual desires for, or are in a sexual relationship with, another female character. In addition to the two films which were previously mentioned, Natalie Portman's character in *Black Swan* has a sexual relationship with her rival for the part of the lead ballerina.<sup>3</sup> Naomi Watt's character in

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<sup>3</sup> While the film shows the two engaging in sex, the intersections between reality and delusion make it difficult to tell what is real and imagined. Moreover, Janell Hobson has pointed to the scene being incestuous and that Lily, Portman's dance rival, is an imagined stand in for Portman's mother. There have also been scholars who have asserted that Lily, herself, is a partially imagined character and is a physical manifestation of Portman's paranoia. This will be addressed later on in the chapter.

*Mulholland Drive* is also a lesbian and is in a committed relationship. The only film that diverges from this theme is *Precious*; however, the sexual abuse that occurs is enacted by Precious' mother.

To chalk these connections in theme up to coincidence would be naïve. Ultimately, it would make sense that lesbianism would be connected to women who masturbate. First, both lesbians and female masturbators challenge the necessity of the penis when obtaining pleasure and the exalted position of penetrative intercourse in patriarchal society. The emphasis on crazed masturbators also being lesbians only further denigrates women who challenge sexual norms. Each of the characters, as problematic as they are, disrupts heteropatriarchal control of their bodies by engaging in sexual pleasure outside the paradigm of vaginal intercourse and heterosexuality. Labeling them as "crazy" helps to lessen their symbolic potency to signal female liberation.

As Irigaray (1977) states, normatively, "woman . . . is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies . . . such pleasure is above all a masochistic prostitution of her body to a desire that is not her own, it leaves her in a familiar state of dependency upon man" (p.364). Women who masturbate resist such sexual objectification, but only to a certain extent. While autoeroticism works outside of the "masochistic prostitution" Irigaray points to, women who masturbate may also engage in sexual intercourse and not view masturbation as the only way to obtain pleasure. However, in contrast to a heterosexual woman who masturbates, a lesbian is an extension of the liberatory stance taken while masturbating. Not only does she refuse to be a sexual prop while masturbating but also when engaging in sex. She is neither romantically nor erotically dependent on a male. This is a further expansion of autoeroticism, not only be



engaging in sexual pleasure with one's self but also with one's own gender. This is also the second reason for the connection: lesbian desire and autoerotic desire are intimately connected. In her article "Lesbian Bodies: Tribades, Tomboys and Tarts," Barbara Creed (1999) discusses popular images of the lesbian as usually being mirror images or doubles of the same woman. She states such images are threatening not because they are "specifically related to the notion of sexual penetration. Instead, the threat is associated more with auto-eroticism and exclusion" (p.117). She continues,

Like masturbation, lesbianism was seen as inextricably linked to self-absorption and narcissism. Men were shut out from this world - hence they understood the threat offered by the lesbian couple. (According to popular male mythology, what the lesbian really needs is a good fuck, that is, a phallic intrusion to break up the threatening duo.) The representation of the lesbian couple as mirror-images of each other constructs the lesbian body as a reflection or an echo. Such an image is dangerous to society and culture because it suggests there is no way forward - only regression and circularity. (p.121)

The emphasis on mirror images is a theme present in some of the films mentioned. Both *Black Swan* and *Single White Female* utilize mirrors as a device to showcase how the two major female characters in each film are connected and are symbolically merging into each other. Mirrors also function to represent blurred reality. Creed specifically mentions *Single White Female* as one example. She states "a popular convention of *fin-de-siècle* painting the cinema and fashion photography is the image of two women, posed in such a way as to suggest that one is a mirror image of the other. We see the image of the lesbian as a narcissist in films about lesbianism . . . in *Single White*

*Female* the mentally disturbed girl, in love with her flat mate, deliberately vampirizes her appearance and behaviour until they look like identical twins" (p.124).

In *Black Swan* Nina's madness is expressed through the delusions she sees in mirrors. Mirrors and reflections - which appear in numerous scenes- work as constant reminders of Nina's altered perception of reality. It is also when Nina stabs Lily with the mirror - later to find that she in fact stabbed herself - that the audience realizes that Lily is possibly an imagined character or that many of the interactions with Lily were imagined, such as the fight that led to Nina stabbing her. Creed's theory of the lesbian as a double and the significance of the mirror images is most relevant to the events in *Black Swan*. While *Single White Female* utilizes an actual double as Hedy actually masquerades as Allie, *Black Swan* takes a much more symbolic approach to the lesbian body. As Creed states, lesbian imagery can also be in the form of "a reflection or an echo." There is controversy (Fisher & Jacobs, 2011; Rogoff, 2011) as to whether Lily is a real person or an imagined *doppelgänger* that represents the black swan Nina must become. However, it is clear that many of the interactions that Lily and Nina had were a part of Nina's paranoia. Lily's character becomes an echo; her existence is dependent on Nina imagining her and much of what Nina imagines is Lily acting out Nina's own hopes and horrors. Even the sex scene that received so much attention might merely be a reflection as well. At one chilling point in the scene, Lily transforms into Nina for a brief moment. The scene becomes autoerotic as Nina envisions a scene in which she is literally having sex with herself.

In *Idols of Perversity*, Dijkstra (1986) writes: "Woman's desire to embrace her own reflection, her 'kiss in the glass,' became the turn of the century's emblem of her

enmity towards man" (p.150). Dijkstra points out that due to the popularization of Freud's ideas many beliefs circulated about the "dangers of the active, masculine woman who threatened to destroy the fragile boundary which kept the sexes different and separate" (p.153). The figure of the lesbian threatens patriarchal society because she represents an uncontrolled woman. By not desiring male attention, she doesn't need to enact a traditional feminine performance nor would she desire to be in a relationship in which she would need to be submissive to a man. As Creed states, "the lesbian body is particularly pernicious and depraved version of the female body in general; it is susceptible to auto-eroticism, clitoral pleasure and self-actualization" (p.117). Creed compares the symbolic potency of the tomboy to the lesbian figure in film. Both relinquish a proper female identity either by forgoing heterosexuality or a passive identity, which Creed says is parallel to "Freud's anatomical narrative about the journey of the clitoris which is, at its base, a narrative about culture. The tomboy who refuses to travel Freud's path, who clings to her active, virile pleasures who rejects the man and keeps her horse is stigmatized as the lesbian. She is a threatening figure on two counts. First, her image undermines patriarchal gender boundaries that separate the sexes. Second, she pushes to its extreme, the active heterosexual woman" (p.118). Such a figure poses a threat because asymmetrical gender relations are crucial to the continuation patriarchal society.

In addition, Dijkstra (1986) uses Dr. Bernard Talmey, author of *Love: A Treatise on the Science of Sex-Attraction* (1919), as an example of some of the many anti-masturbation proponents who believed masturbation turned women into lesbians and led to "abnormal conditions such as 'hypertrophy of the clitoris' which caused the clitoris to

expand and become erect" (p.153). He further quotes Talmey as stating that "the female masturbator becomes excessively prudish, despises and hates the opposite sex, and forms passionate attachments for other women" (p.153). The threat of both masturbation and lesbianism is that each negates acts that are inherent to a patriarchal society. Masturbation negates the need for traditional heteronormative intercourse and lesbianism negates the need for a heteronormative relationship or the need for a man in general. As Creed states, "The lesbian double threatens because it suggests a perfectly sealed world of female desire from which man is excluded" (p.122). Women who possess autoerotic desire, whether it is for masturbation or lesbian sex, are further demonized because of their mental derangement, creating a trifecta of evil. The combination intertwines homoeroticism, autoeroticism and destruction as one and the same.

### Single White Female

In *Single White Female*, Jennifer Jason Leigh (Hedy) plays a woman who is driven insane by the guilt she still harbors after her twin sister drowns when she is a little girl. The film showcases Leigh's slow unraveling into complete insanity as she then decides to replace her sister with her new roommate played by Bridget Fonda (Ally). While the film uses the death of Hedy's sister to explain her actions, many critics have pointed to the clear sexual and romantic desire that Hedy feels for Ally as the true cause of her actions (Creed, 1999; Hollinger, 1998; Hart, 1994). It has also been argued that the film works as a warning that women's relationships in general can be dangerous when left unchecked by male involvement (Hollinger, 1998).

As the film progresses, the new roommate that Ally thought was so wonderful and normal starts mimicking Ally both in appearance and personality. The act is taken so far that Ally's boyfriend is tricked into thinking that Hedy is Ally, and Hedy then uses this mistake to lure the boyfriend into unknowingly being unfaithful in order to get Ally to break up with him. His presence, in Hedy's mind, is the one thing that keeps the two women apart. Hedy later performs fellatio on him while pretending to be Ally.

Once he discovers the truth, he threatens to tell Ally, which Hedy knows would endanger her own relationship to Ally. She pleads with him, asserting Ally needs her by stating "I took care of her. We lean on each other, protect each other. We're best friends." The context of this statement makes it seem ludicrous. Hedy's obvious manipulation of Ally's boyfriend clearly asserts she is not a loyal friend; however, there is some truth to her statement. Although the film represents Hedy as insane, much of the early part of the film details the loving relationship the two women share. Hedy comforts Ally in the wake of her boyfriend's infidelity, which takes place earlier in the film; she cooks for her and helps around the apartment and even buys her a puppy to cheer her up. The beautiful connection the two women shared in the earlier part of the film is undermined by Hedy's insanity, and when Hedy boldly states what their friendship means, the partial veracity of her statement rings hollow.

In her book *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* Lynda Hart (1994) discusses depictions of dangerous women and their connections to lesbian desire. She states, "The film *Single White Female* classically repeats the thematics that have been this book's concern: the deadliness of the inseparability of women, the return of a 'repressed' homoeroticism in their relationship, the uncanny meeting of two women

who function as dual construct" (p.111). When other characters express concern at Hedy's change in appearance and mannerisms that directly mimic her roommate, Ally shrugs it off dismissing their concerns.

It isn't until Ally catches Hedy masturbating that she starts to suspect anything. The scene is a physical manifestation of Creed's theory of lesbian as double since Ally witnesses Hedy's autoeroticism through a reflection on a mirror. She watches as Hedy thrashes around the bed naked, completely uninhibited. Ally is transfixed by the reflection before her until Hedy hears a noise and stops. Ally then moves to run away and sees her reflection. Hedy represents the sexual possibilities that Ally has not allowed herself to enjoy. Hedy regularly walks around naked, which visibly makes Ally uncomfortable. When Ally gazes at Hedy, she sees a version of herself an active and unconstrained subject in touch with her body and erotic desires. However, once this action occurs, their relationship becomes strained and ends in a downward spiral in which Hedy lashes out through fatal violence. The fact that Hedy's masturbation becomes the first rift in their relationship only further connects it to Hedy's descent into madness. The threat of repressed homoerotic desire in female friendships is also evident in the film *High Tension*. Similar to *Single White Female* the female friend who enacts fatal violence does so to protect their relationship. In addition, her masturbation punctuates her break with sanity.

## High Tension

All of the films in this chapter as well as the rest of the thesis are mainstream American releases except for *High Tension* (2005), which is a French film that was

popular in the United States because of the cult status of its director, Alexandre Aja, and his characteristic use of extreme gore in such features as *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006) and *Piranha 3D* (2010). The film begins with two female friends, Marie and Alex, who are staying with Alex's family for vacation. Hints of Marie's lesbianism become clear when Marie expresses her annoyance at Alex choosing to see a male companion over seeing her. Alex teases her for not having the same interest in men that most girls do. Later, Marie sits on a swing and seems clearly lovelorn over the fact that Alex is not interested in her. She then gazes up at the house where she can easily see Alex showering. After the camera voyeuristically gazes on Alex, it turns back to the swing where Marie sat, but the swing is now empty, foreshadowing violence that is about to occur.

The audience then sees Marie masturbating while listening to music, and as soon as she climaxes the serial killer enters the house, and as is typical of Alexandre Aja films, a gruesome and bloody scene ensues. The father is beheaded, the mother has her vocal cords ripped out, and the young brother (dressed as a cowboy) is also murdered. While this occurs, Marie hides while she watches the horror unfolding and then sees Alex kidnapped by the killer. She then goes in pursuit. Once Marie finally catches up to them, she murders Alex's captor with the use of a chainsaw. She then finds Alex gagged and tied up in the van. Marie releases Alex, only to find her traumatized and scared, rather than relieved and grateful. It later becomes clear why: the narrative the audience has witnessed was a figment of Marie's disturbed imagination. She and the serial killer are one and the same.

Up until this point, Marie can be read as a positive character. While she is forlorn over the unrequited love of a friend, she doesn't fall into the typical stereotypes of horror

film protagonists. She is both clever and calm while attempting to rescue Alex and is both victorious and independent in killing the serial killer. As Clover (1992) points out, there are many independent and intelligent female protagonists who are able to thwart off the film's monster; Clover terms these protagonists "final girls." Another very important aspect of the "final girl" is her sexually unavailable or virginal status. The astute viewer will realize that Marie has been disqualified for this valorized "final girl" status because of her masturbation as well as her overt lesbian desire. Indeed, her masturbation prefigures the ultimate revelation that she is the film's monster. Once again, masturbation and lesbianism are paired with insanity and horror.

As Hantke (2010) states "The 'high tension' of the title refers to the tension caused by love, in this case, same sex desire." It is her repressed desire that becomes the catalyst for her fatal violence. As Shauna Swartz points out, when the serial killer enters the house Marie evades him by hiding in the closet. Her inability to face her homosexuality and admit her attraction to Alex becomes such a powerful force that when her emotions "are finally unleashed, they take the form of predatory hyper-masculinity . . . The murderous intruder doesn't speak; he only grunts. He is heavysset and dirty, purposeful and merciless. His sole motivation is a twisted desire for Alex" The hyper-masculinity that Swartz identifies in the killer parallels Dijkstra's discussion of the lesbian body as deviant in the fact that it is active and masculine. The plot hinges on a presentation of Marie's deranged love for Alex, which pushes her to destroy all the obstacles she perceives in the way of them being together. This is made clear at the end of the film where she repeatedly states "I won't let anyone come between us again." This parallels Hedy's pleas in *Single White Female*. The need to be inseparable with their female object



of desire is part of what motivates the lesbian characters in these films. *High Tension* is essentially an updated version of *Single White Female* with added violence and gore. Hedy and Marie are, in essence, the same evil character, one that represents the underlying threat to patriarchal stability that comes from female friendships and the sometimes repressed homoerotic desire that exists in those relationships.

### Black Swan

*Black Swan* similarly watches the descent of a woman into insanity paralleling her rise to the status of a prestigious ballerina. The entire film blurs the lines between reality and imagination, making the audience unsure of what is real and what is a figment of Nina's deranged imagination. While the focus on competition adds a new element to this film, the same formula applies to the female friendship that was evident in *Single White Female* and *High Tension*. Nina functions as the possible closeted lesbian and her rival, Lily, functions as the friend that Nina has repressed homoerotic desire for. Though Lily functions as her supposed rival, much of the rivalry is created by Nina's paranoia.

Lily is one of the few characters in the film that looks out for Nina. The two major characters that influence Nina are her mother, Erica, and Thomas, the director of the academy. Erica's emotional and physical abuse stifles Nina. Her inability to stand up for herself and sexual immaturity (which will be discussed later on) is directly linked to her mother's suffocating presence. When her mother fears that Nina is hurting herself with her finger nails, she forces Nina to have them trimmed. Erica trims them with a pair of scissors and cuts Nina's finger. Even when Nina cries out in pain, Erica continues cutting.

The other figure in Nina's life is Thomas. While Erica's presence enforces an emotional and sexual immaturity on Nina, Thomas forces Nina to embrace a sexual maturity that Nina seems unable to handle. He continually pushes Nina to embrace her sensual side, but he coerces such actions through sexual harassment. When she screams at him for initially not getting the part, he grabs her and kisses her. The only reason she masturbates is because he assigned it as homework for Nina, and when Nina tries to embrace her sexual side in rehearsal, Thomas states she is not "seducing" him and starts to fondle her. As stated before, Lily is one of the few characters in the film that has a positive influence on Nina. When Lily discovers Nina crying, she comforts her and tells Thomas that he shouldn't be so hard on Nina. Lily encourages her to let loose, and it is her presence that allows her to leave the house and stand up to her mother. When Nina returns to the house after a night of partying with Lily, she screams at her mother and the next morning tells her she will be moving out. As the two women become closer, Nina is able to embrace some of Lily's qualities such as independence and sensuality. Their relationship, like the relationships in *Single White Female* and *High Tension*, is one of protection and growth. Like Hedy and Marie before her, it is Nina's insanity that breaks the relationship.

#### Black Swan and Precious

The story of a prima ballerina driven insane and an overweight poor black girl growing up in Harlem may seem like drastically different narratives; however, these films are connected by the maternal abuse that plagues the lead character. As Janelle Hobson (2011) asserts, both women experience sexual abuse at the hands of their

mothers, though this is only indirectly addressed in *Black Swan*. She states, " the abuse that Nina suffers can only be hinted at (such as depicting Erica calling out to her daughter, "Sweetie, are you ready for me?" right after we witness Nina exploring ways to keep her mother out of her room)." She also points to the infamous lesbian scene which garnered buzz well before the movie even came out. While many have viewed it as a sexy scene, Hobson argues that, in fact, audience members are really witnessing sexual abuse at the hands of Nina's mother. She states, that the scene "is a cover for the sex abuse Nina experiences. It's important to note that, after this scene (which is later revealed to be an Ecstasy-induced fantasy), Nina's attitude towards her mother changes from fear and resentment to outright disgust, leaving us to question if she had been having sex not with Lily . . . but with her own mother" (para. 8). I will build upon Hobson's analysis and point to another scene that covers sexual abuse as well. One of the challenges Nina faces is proving to the ballet director that she can be as sensual a dancer as she is determined and precise. The director is undoubtedly sexually interested in Nina, and, as mentioned earlier, he orders Nina to masturbate at home to find her sensual self. Nina is horrified by the request but complies anyway. This request and his other sexual advances are part of the sexual harassment she must experience in order to achieve her dream of being the lead dancer. However, the more severe form of sexual abuse occurs when Nina self stimulates. During the act, she turns over to see her mother sleeping in the chair next to the bed. Horrified, Nina yells at her mother, but there is no explanation for why her mother is in the room, and no context as to why she would be there and more importantly why Nina had not noticed her before. Just as the sex scene between Lily and

Nina is a veiled metaphor for incest, I would also argue that this scene is another way Nina's fragmented psyche is registering the abuse she has experienced.

While Nina's masturbation signals the abuse she experienced, the masturbation in *Precious* signals the abuse that is about to occur. In one scene Precious' mother (played by Mo'Nique in an academy-awarding winning role) masturbates under the covers, and she calls out to her daughter, "Come take care of mommy, Precious." While the scene ends there, the audience is left to assume that Precious was forced to either partake in her mother's masturbation or in some other sexual action. Regardless of what transpired, the mother's masturbation precipitated an act of child sexual abuse. This is also not the first sign of sexual abuse, and the film is rather explicit about the abusive nature of Precious' mother as well as her father, who had raped and impregnated Precious previously.

In *Precious*, masturbation is seen as weapon used by a physically and sexually abusive mother. In this sense Precious and Nina are two sides of the same coin. Nina imagines herself masturbating to cover up the abuse she suffers and Precious experiences someone else's masturbation as a form of abuse. However, it is Precious who, as Hobson points out, admits to her abuse and seeks out help. Neither Nina nor the film *Black Swan* itself truly admits to what lurks in the subtext of the film. The fact that Nina's sexual abuse is never recognized, and therefore never addressed in a therapeutic way, is partially why Nina self-destructs and commits suicide.

### Mulholland Drive

Of all the films, *Mulholland Drive* offers the most overt depiction of a lesbian relationship. The other films have only hinted at repressed desire or maternal abuse in the

case of *Precious*. *Mullholland Drive* is also the film that, arguably, offers one of the most disturbing masturbation scenes of all. The complicated and complex film ends with Naomi Watt's character, Diane, breaking down after realizing that she had put a hit out on her girlfriend. The film is a tapestry woven together with dream sequences and flashbacks, making the film difficult to comprehend at first viewing, but what is quite plain to see is the self-disgust, hatred and despair Watt's character feels while masturbating. The blurred shots and extreme close ups of her agonized expression are painful to watch and the complete silence of the scene only adds to the sense of discomfort.

Before the masturbation scene occurs, the pieces are put into place as to why Watt's would want her girlfriend murdered. The audience sees a fragmented relationship filled with jealousy and deceit. The two women are making love when Camilla, the girlfriend, interrupts the act stating that she doesn't want to have sex anymore. Diane is clearly horrified and tries to force her to continue. Then the scene cuts to a movie set with Camilla and a young male film director. The director is now involved with Camilla and Diane, who is also on set, looks on scowling as Camilla openly flaunts her new heterosexual relationship.

In a masturbatory fantasy, Diane reimagines her life with a successful career and a happy relationship with the woman she loves. In this fantasy, Camilla escapes the hit Diane put out on her and Diane reimagines herself as a new Hollywood starlet who has a thriving career. However, this fantasy can never be a reality. This is also the point at which she is revealed to be criminally insane and is so disgusted with herself that she cannot reach climax. As Dillon (2006) states, "What Diane really has is, however,

nothing: frustration, masturbation and solitude. These tears now represent sheer depression, not love, and Diane apparently kills herself at the end of the film” (p.94). The sadness and pain evoked through her autoeroticism make the scene unbearable. Once audience members realize that her masturbation is a way of relieving her of pain and distracting her from the lives she has destroyed, her self-pleasure is seen as a deprived and pathetic act of a crazed and desperate woman.

## Conclusion

Female relationships whether they be platonic, sexual or maternal are at the heart of each of these films. The connection these women possess, whether it be biological or emotional, is a clear threat to patriarchal men and to heterosexuality. In her foundational essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Continuum,” Adrienne Rich (1993) defines the “lesbian existence” as covering a broad spectrum of the relationships women have with each other. Rich identified all women who share a love for other women, both romantic and platonic, as part of this existence. She defines it as a "political affiliation that can re-establish those lost same-sex loyalties by uniting women - heterosexual, bisexual and lesbian - in a mutual, woman-focused vision" (p.227). These kinds of relationships can be very powerful, even when they are demonized by misogynist plot twists. Hedy helps Ally stand up to her sexist boss and become a stronger, more self-sufficient woman. Lily stands up for Nina and helps her to reach both sexual and emotional maturity, ultimately challenging her mother's authority, and Marie criticizes Alex's boyfriend for mistreating her. All these relationships though, then are developed along pathological lines as one of the women turns on her friend or daughter, even posing

a fatal threat to her. However, at their core. Subtextually, these relationships represent the possibility of a strong female friendship, or even romantic relationship. These relationships if allowed to flourish could signify a world in which it is accepted that men are not always necessary to the amorous experiences of women. The fact that one of the women in these potentially viable pairs is demonized still reflects the patriarchal ideology that fears that women's independence means men's dependence or irrelevance.

As was stated in the beginning of the chapter, the predominant historical portrayal of the female masturbator was as a crazed figure. The continued demonization of female autoeroticism in these films will only help to further reinforce the idea that good girls have sex with men and the bad girls are the only ones bold enough to touch themselves and/or other women. While all of the films discussed in this chapter and in the previous ones have the somewhat redeemable quality of admitting that women do, in fact, pleasure themselves, they set up a dichotomous relationship of good and evil, sane and insane, between who dare to touch and those who don't. This reinforces centuries-old patriarchal understandings of female sexuality. Yes, these films may be modern in their portrayal of female autoeroticism, but their characterizations of the act mirror much of the earlier hysteria that surrounded the act.

## CONCLUSION

The assertion of this thesis has been that depictions of female masturbation are too symbolically potent and threatening to patriarchal society to be shown in a manner that highlights female sexual autonomy and self-discovery. Therefore, such portrayals need to be denigrated through being associated with female deviance, particularly female violence and insanity. However, while such depictions are represented in the majority of films, there is a small minority that depicts female masturbation in an authentic and powerful manner. While this is an area for future research, I would like to take the opportunity here to direct some attention to two of these deliberately unconventional films.

The films *Better than Chocolate* (1999) and *Pleasantville* (1998) both offer depictions that are subversive because of their recognition of female autoeroticism as a normative, important and empowering aspect of women's lives. The films are from two different genres: comedy and drama. While both films offer a similar message about female masturbation, the difference in genre also affects the overall impact of the scenes. *Better than Chocolate* is a comedy, and therefore, the scene is humorous, but never at the female masturbator's expense. *Pleasantville*, on the other hand, offers a much more dramatic scene in which masturbation transforms not only the female character but an entire town.

Interestingly, both of the positive depictions focus on mothers who are dissatisfied with their sex lives, and it is through masturbation that they are able to find sexual



satisfaction and overall happiness. In *Better than Chocolate*, Lila is a recently divorced woman who is open about her lack of sexual satisfaction. In front of her children and her daughter's girlfriend she states, "I read a study and after the age of forty a woman's chances of having sex are diminished by eighty percent, so after fifty, God help you." While her children look on in horror at her frankness about sex, she sighs and continues while eating a box of chocolates: "and since I probably won't be having sex ever again, chocolate is the only pleasure left for me." Soon after the conversation, she continues to consume the box of chocolates as she stumbles into an extra bedroom at her daughter's house (where she is staying while visiting her daughter). She accidentally knocks over some of the dresser's contents, and when she goes to pick them up, she discovers a box under the bed. With chocolate still in her mouth, she inspects the plethora of sex toys in the box. At first her reaction is shock tinged with slight disgust and her facial expression is meant to elicit humor. But, as she continues searching through the box, her reaction becomes one of curiosity as opposed to revulsion. Later, she settles on a vibrator that piques her interest, and then she moves the box, consequently dumping over the chocolates, and begins masturbating. While the symbolism of both the movie's title and the actual scene is a little heavy handed, the message is clear: There is something much better than chocolate!

*Pleasantville* also highlights a conversation between a mother and daughter about masturbation; however, in this film the roles are switched. Reese Witherspoon's character must explain sex and masturbation to her mother, which are acts her mother is completely unaware of. The film is a fantasy drama that tells the story of two modern day teenagers (played by Reese Witherspoon and Tobey McGuire) who are teleported to a *Leave it to*

*Beaver* type 50's sitcom. When the two are transported through the television, they become characters of the show. Witherspoon's character fulfills the role of Mary Sue and McGuire's character fulfills the role of Bud, Mary Sue's younger brother. *Pleasantville*, which is also the title of the sitcom and the town the show takes place in, is an idyllic town in which everything is perfect, or so it seems on the surface. It is the simplicity and monotony of the town that attracts McGuire's character to the show. However, the simplicity of the town also leads to rigid and conventional gender roles and sexual repression. In fact, the whole town abstains from sex because they are unaware of its existence.

The town's lack of sexuality points to the repressive nature of sexual conservatism and Bud and Mary Sue react differently once they discover this fact. Bud is happy to be a part of such an old-fashioned lifestyle while Mary Sue finds a unique opportunity to defy the town's script moral code. By having sex with one of the townspeople, she challenges the town's sexual oppression. This act ignites a metaphorical fire among the teenagers of the town as more of them learn about sex. Soon after the rest of the town starts to discover not only sex, but also art, literature and other pleasures that have been kept from them, and many of them, though not all, begin changing from black-and-white to full color. Sexual knowledge and sexual desire spread quickly and lead to many of the townspeople gaining color. This facet of the film's unique presentation asserts that sexual conservatism is unsustainable because one cannot achieve subjectivity or "color" without recognizing and exploring one's own sexual desires.

Mary Sue's act has been noted for its symbolism parallel to Eve (Walsh, 2002; Cargal, 2007) since she is the one that brings "sin" (knowledge) to this "perfect" town

through introducing sex. The symbolism of Adam and Eve is carried even further later in the film when the love interest of Bud takes a red apple from the tree and offers it to him. The obvious metaphor of Adam and Eve may appear to depict the town's falling from grace as negative, but in fact the movie is meant to lampoon the misogynistic, racist, unenlightened and repressive nature of Pleasantville and conventional religious-based sex-negative morality. While some may wax nostalgic about times that were simpler, *Pleasantville* points to the transformative progress the country has made in terms of gender equality and sexual liberation. It also points to how Mary Sue has had a transformative effect on the town through having sex. Typically, conventional narratives portray a woman who initiates sex outside of a committed relationship as then entering into a zero sum game (Millar, 2008), one that she loses. The woman typically loses the man or is punished in some manner for either giving "it" up too soon or using her sexual charm to lure a man in. The man gets "it" while the woman loses something (whether it is her dignity, the guy, or the right to be the story's good girl) for giving "it" up too soon. Mary Sue's act never falls into these categories; in fact, her act becomes a beneficial transformative influence on the town. As O'Heir (1998) states, "In refusing to restrain her own desires – in order to collaborate with the Pleasantville ethos – she liberates the town into all the chaos and disorder of sensuality" (p.50). The knowledge that Mary Sue offers the town allows its many inhabitants to obtain autonomy, freedom and self-actualization.

As more changes start to occur, Betty, Mary Sue's mother becomes curious to find out what all the teenagers are doing at lover's lane. When Mary Sue bluntly states "sex," Betty responds by asking "what's sex?" Mary Sue then explains by starting with "when two people love each other very, very much . . ." The scene then fades, and we see

a shocked Betty and a concerned Mary Sue. After asking if she is okay, Betty responds, “it’s just that your father would never do anything like that.” Mary Sue counters by telling her that there are ways to enjoy herself without a sexual partner. The scene then cuts to a close up of a bathtub faucet. After telling her husband she will take a bath, Betty stands in front of the mirror and takes off her robe. As she takes a long look at her image, she recognizes a part of herself that, until now, she never had access to. Facing her naked body is the first step to embracing her sexual self and also gaining knowledge about her body. Then she enters the bathtub and slowly starts to touch herself. As she begins to feel pleasure, parts of the bathroom gain radiant color including the wallpaper, soap dish, toiletries and a bird outside of the window. Once she achieves orgasm the tree outside the window bursts into literal flames “as though, enflamed by the profundity of Betty’s awakening, the Tree of Knowledge itself seems to be catching fire” (Armstrong, 2008 p.158). What could possibly be a more beautiful metaphor for an orgasm than a tree lighting up in brilliant colors? In addition to the tree, Betty gains color as well, once again highlighting the discovery of one’s sexual self as a necessary part of self-discovery and being whole. As Armstrong (2008) states, “the film is chiefly about her transformation into a fully desiring and aware woman” (p.158). Similar to Mary Sue, her sexual act also brings great change to the community. The tree becomes one of the first objects to gain color and the fire forces the town to recognize that their way of life is not sustainable. Betty’s process of self-discovery also parallels many of the other characters, and her acceptance of her “color” also helps Bud to accept that the town’s traditional ways are indeed oppressive.

Both female characters in the film are the catalysts for the town's major changes. Mary Sue's introduction of sex and Betty's masturbation both ushered in dramatic changes that led to the self-actualization of other townspeople. Each used their sexuality to enlighten themselves and others. After Betty masturbates she agrees to do a nude painting that causes outrage and a tense standoff between "coloreds" and the rest of the town. In many of the other depictions discussed thus far a woman's sexuality wreaks havoc either through her insanity, ability to lure innocent men, or to harass another male character, but in *Pleasantville* a woman's sexuality offers the possibility of beneficial change. It is a tool that possesses power, not meant to be feared, but rather meant to enlighten and transform.

The cinematography of each scene highlighting female masturbation is also unique in the fact that each focuses on the female face to highlight pleasure, thereby avoiding turning the female subject into the object of a pornographic or voyeuristic gaze. In the documentary *This Film is Not Yet Rated* (2006) the director of *Boys Don't Cry*, Kimberly Pierce, tells the story of how she received an NC-17 rating for the original version of the film. She stated that one of the major concerns about the film was the focus on female pleasure. In particular, she stated that the MPAA viewers expressed concern with the fact that the camera focused on a female character's face for an extended amount of time while she was receiving oral sex and experiencing a prolonged orgasm. They found the scene, which had no nudity, to be extremely graphic. True authentic ecstatic pleasure is rarely seen on a female face in cinematic depictions. Many times the female character is a prop in scenes that depict conventional heterosexual sex. The focus is on her body or body parts for the viewing pleasure of the male audience; if the camera

tightens on her face, the shot is typically brief. To focus on a woman's face while she is receiving pleasure outside of intercourse forces audience members to acknowledge the woman's pleasure and to witness an orgasmic state few women are seen in beyond pornographic depictions.

Focusing solely on the female face is also a method that helps to avoid sexualizing the subject. The camera concentrates on the character's emotions and reactions as opposed to her fetishized body. In an article on the sexual depictions in *Pleasantville*, "Where am I going to see colour like that?' Bliss, Desire and the Paintbox in *Pleasantville*." Armstrong (2008) writes, "We do not see Betty naked; the camera respectfully peers over the bath at her face, catching her gratification as it registers there. The moment is short and sweet . . . [giving viewers the] sense that this is a film about a woman's desire" (p. 157). In both scenes the women's experience of pleasure is the focus instead of making their desires a performance for male enjoyment. That is not to say that a woman is sexualized negatively every time she is nude on screen; however, the fact that both films only depict each woman from the neck up shows a conscious effort to focus on their experience as transformative, without objectifying the female characters.

In *Better than Chocolate* the masturbatory scene is intended to be comedic, so Lila does make noises that are meant for laughs, and at one point she even runs out of batteries for the vibrator and panics. However, the portrayal is not meant to sexualize her or make her look like a buffoon. The noises she makes, while meant to be humorous, only help to give the scene more authenticity, and rather than moaning like a porn star, her sounds only make her orgasm seem real and make her character more endearing. Through much of the earlier scenes, the audience is introduced to a miserable and

overbearing mother who is bitter from her husband's infidelity and her unsuccessful career. However, the scene in which she masturbates is the first time she is happy.

The uptight and negative attitude she had during the conversation with her children is in direct contrast to the happy and carefree attitude she has while masturbating. Her transformation continues into the next day in which she openly admits to her daughter that she masturbated. She is neither ashamed nor is her daughter upset (though the conversation is a bit awkward). This conversation is clearly distinct from the ones that were analyzed in chapter two. While discussions in *American Pie*, *American Reunion*, *Horrible Bosses* and *Step Brothers* all focused on women only talking to other men (typically ones they were romantically linked to) about their autoeroticism, Lila's conversation is with her daughter and daughter's girlfriend.

Her honest statement seems both direct and brave, and it doesn't even begin to resemble the crazed and ludicrous conversations of the female characters in the films listed above. Her statement is not used to harass another male character nor is it demonized in order to make her claim of sexual autonomy seem villainous. The scene's humorous nature could have easily depicted her in a negative light since all the films are of the same genre, but the choice not to is part of what makes the scene so wonderful. It highlights a subject that many women may be uncomfortable with in a way that is genuine and thereby disarms the taboo nature of masturbation.

Lila represents many women who feel they have been mistreated by society. She sacrificed her career and children and now has nothing to show for it. Her feelings of dissatisfaction both towards her life and her sex life may seem relevant to many female audience members. It can also help to make other women to see that there are other ways

of obtaining pleasure. Much of the film's progressive portrayal is largely because of the target audience and distribution of the film. *Better than Chocolate* is an independent film that was directed at the "lesbian market," and was set in Vancouver to represent the area's gay and lesbian population (Melnyk, 2004). It also had a female director and a female screenwriter, which is another contrast between the films mentioned above. Both *Pleasantville* and *Better than Chocolate* represent films that challenge patriarchal depictions of female sexuality and allow the depiction of female masturbation to be revolutionary and powerful. However, these films are the extreme minority, and they also are not recent films suggesting that Hollywood may no longer have an appetite for such depictions.

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When I started this project, I only had a handful of films to discuss. I incorrectly thought I was addressing a tiny niche of films that were bold enough to portray an act that is shrouded in secrecy, but the more I researched and encountered others interested in my project, the more I realized female masturbation *is* visible in popular culture. There are still many films that have not been discussed and I continue to discover more films (as well as television shows e.g. HBO's *Girls* and AMC's *Mad Men* with potentially positive depictions at first glance) that need to be investigated. Women masturbating or openly admitting to doing so on the big screen – and having this be represented as beneficial and empowering (as it is in these two unconventional films) is a welcome departure from the long tradition of stigmatizing and punishing the act – and the women who engaged in it.

While horrific stories of women being subjected to clitoridectomies and being shamed and even institutionalized for having masturbated seem archaic by today's



standards, Hollywood nonetheless has repackaged many of these same misogynist and sex-negative ideas, incorporating them into popular comedy, horror, and drama. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century a masturbating woman could be medically diagnosed as insane. Horrifically, films of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century characterize female masturbators in the same manner. While women are no longer subject to tortuous treatments to make them stop masturbating, in some sexist cinema women still are subjected to sexual or physical violence as a kind of punishment for their self-pleasure. And clearly some men still want to directly control women's masturbation and these intentions are showcased in those films featuring the hero initiating and directing their love interests' autoeroticism (as in *The Ugly Truth* and *Keeping the Faith*). Meanwhile, despite decades of sexual and women's liberation, many male writers and directors still regularly script female masturbators as being as demented and evil as they please.

Hollywood will admit that women actually masturbate, only with depictions that parallel so much of the problematic history that feminist activists like Betty Dodson and others have worked so hard to overturn. Female autoeroticism is a powerful force that can allow women to explore their bodies; it is an act that frees them from patriarchal gender norms that are reinscribed during conventional heterosexual intercourse. Betty Dodson titled her book *Sex for One: The Joy of Selfloving* because masturbation at its core is an act of self-love. It is a way of honoring not just one's sexual needs but one's spiritual and emotional needs as well. Self-love is in direct contrast to what our culture teaches women. We live in a culture that hates women. Women are taught to be submissive, selfless and, above all, masochistic, so what is more transgressive, more threatening to a world that tells us to hate ourselves than to commit an act of love?

Not every woman may be experiencing self-love when she masturbates. Clearly, women pleasuring themselves on *Girls Gone Wild* is not the feminist revolution I am speaking of. When women masturbate they may not see it as a form of feminist resistance, but, at some level, for many women masturbating can be resistance, a radical choice, if you will, to say I am worth it. Not the sort of "I am Worth it" sentiment that L'Oreal uses to sell makeup, but the kind of feeling that allows a woman to embrace herself and shed the masochistic tendencies that patriarchal society has forced upon her. When Betty orgasmed in *Pleasantville*, she started a fire both literally and metaphorically that radically changed the town for the better. Women everywhere can start those fires, fires that patriarchal society can't put out.

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