

VISIONS OF FEMINIST (POM(O)NANISM): MASTURBATING FEMALE
POSTMODERN SUBJECTIVITY IN AMERICAN TELEVISION AND FILM

By

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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This project explores the possible literal and theoretical significance of female masturbation as a model for negotiating a progressive personal and political relationship between feminism and postmodernism. Masturbation seems to represent a potent form of sexuality, yet one that is not essentially defining or definitely essential. In a postmodern world where identity and sexuality are unstable and fluid, masturbation in its nebulosity seems strangely appropriate and as such potentially relevant for better understanding postmodern existence and women's postmodern existence in particular. Despite, and indeed because of, its somewhat troubled history, female masturbation might provide a kind of touchstone for exploring the nature of feminist postmodern subjectivity. The self-serving and self-critical sexuality of masturbation in practice and in its representation within televisual and filmic sites of cultural impact seems particularly useful as a point of initiation of this kind of committed exploration.

In looking at the prospect of female masturbation in *Seinfeld*, *Sex and the City*, *Single White Female*, and *Mulholland Dr.* we can begin to imagine the framework and potential of this kind of theoretical and political tool. Female masturbation in these texts signifies sexual power and freedom, lesbian continuum community building, queer transgression of heterosexist norms, feminist agency, recuperative confrontation with psychic trauma, and salient subjectivity integration. Combining second wave and post-feminisms, postmodernism, queer theory, and psychoanalysis, an understanding of the potency of masturbation promises to offer new progressive ground for both individual and collective satisfaction and action. If we work practically and theoretically to embrace a kind of feminist (pom(o)nanist) subjectivity and wield its powerful benefits socially, then we might be able to move towards actualizing a kind of radical, eroticized utopia.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

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 --Thomas W. Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation*

When I was a child the Mormon church told me that masturbation means a gateway to deviant homosexuality and spiritual ruin; when I was an adolescent a *YM* magazine told me that masturbation means sexual experimentation; when I was a young adult my mother told me that masturbation means a way to help husbands learn how to help wives enjoy sex. These are just a few of the things that masturbation has signified in my life, yet none of them seem quite right. Now an adult feminist bisexual film studies student trying to understand gender and sexuality in their postmodern manifestations, I am still trying to figure out what the “right” signification(s) of masturbation might be.

If the above quote is true, then it is no wonder that getting a hold on what masturbation is and why it might be significant seems to be so difficult. And if it is true then it seems that attempting to accomplish such a difficult task is monumentally important when negotiating the terrain of gender and sexuality studies within the force field of postmodernism. If masturbation has signified so much in so many places to so many people, then should we not be more concerned with exploring what it means for us now?

What is masturbation? Is it deviant and/or liberatory? Is it personal and/or political? Is it subjective and/or objective? Is it fantasy and/or reality? Masturbation seems to

represent a potent form of sexuality, yet one that is not essentially defining or definitely essential. Laplanche and Pontalis describe autoeroticism as “that moment...when sexuality draws away from its natural object...[and]...finds itself delivered over to phantasy,” thereby existing as sexuality itself (46). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick contends that:

part of the great interest of autoeroticism...is that it is a long-execrated form of sexuality, intimately and invaluablely entangled with the physical, emotional, and intellectual adventures of many, many people, that today completely fails to constitute anything remotely like a minority identity. (303)

Thus in some ways masturbation is sexuality, is everyone, and is no one. In a postmodern world where identity and sexuality are unstable and fluid, masturbation in its nebulosity seems strangely appropriate and as such potentially relevant for better understanding postmodern existence and, I would argue, women’s postmodern existence in particular.

According to Laqueur, “history has given female masturbation—liberating, ecstatic, dreamy, and lyrical versus abject, humiliating, and decidedly second-rate—its own, gendered resonance”(406). Despite and indeed because of this somewhat troubled history, female masturbation might provide a kind of touchstone for exploring the nature of feminist postmodern subjectivity. Sedgwick similarly argues that:

in the context of hierarchically oppressive relations between genders and between sexualities, masturbation can seem to offer—not least as an analogy to writing—a reservoir of potentially utopian metaphors and energies for independence, self-possession, and a rapture that may owe relatively little to political or interpersonal abjection. (303)

At the, I think, vital risk of indulging in written mental masturbation, I would like to here seek out some answers to the above question of what this unique form of sexuality signifies and can signify for us now through exploring what these “utopian metaphors” might be exactly.

By examining the representations and implications of female masturbation in two of its televisual and two of its cinematic recent manifestations, I hope to suggest that as a literal and theoretical model, masturbation can create a potentially fecund avenue towards thinking through postmodern subjectivity, feminist action, sexuality, and the disjunctive and possibly liberatory relationship between fantasy, desire, and reality.

CHAPTER 2 POSTMODERN FEMINISM OR FEMINIST POSTMODERNISM?

As E. Ann Kaplan considers in attempting to utilize television studies in elucidating the significance of postmodernism and feminism alike, the relationship between these two fields of study remains fraught with troubling complications:

Contemporary feminism, as a political and cultural discourse, has assumed a set of strategic subjectivities in order to attack the old patriarchal theorists. Feminists have both made use of and criticized the powerful, often subversive discourses of both Marx and Freud in creating the feminist stance against dominant gender constructs. If those discourses are seen as no longer relevant, on what ground can any strategic feminism stand?...Does postmodernism make feminism archaic as a theory, while refusing to address the remaining oppressive discourses that perpetuate woman's subordination?(38)

As these questions suggest, the unease and potential danger of an alliance between postmodernism and feminism persists despite the basic similarities between their respective goals. In fact, in many ways feminism is already postmodern in that it “enter[s] into and echo[s] postmodernist discourses as we have begun to deconstruct notions of reason, knowledge, or the self and to reveal the effects of the gender arrangements that lay beneath their neutral and universalizing facades”(Flax 42). As such these two fields should be understood as already interrelated rather than as being distinct categories in spite of their somewhat contradictory foundational principles. While both fields seek to dismantle the essentialist and essentializing grand narratives of the Enlightenment that claim to provide universal explanations and trade on the authority this gives them, such as those that constitute traditional gender roles and relations, postmodernism also entails a decentering of the subject amidst this broader dissolution. Modernity encouraged the

notion of the individual subject as a unified self with a central core of unique identity. Within postmodernity, however, this kind of fixed unification of identity is no longer possible and the individual subject is rather viewed as a process in a continual state of dissolution. In that feminism necessitates a distinction between male and female subjectivity in order for its aims at being a social and political force that strives to improve the specific conditions of these female subjects to hold ground and be effective, this postmodern conception of the unfixed and thus ungendered subject clearly becomes problematic for the cause. Consequently, many feminists remain wary of the impact of postmodern theory, as Nancy Hartsock articulates by saying:

Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic? (163)

This type of suspicion remains palpable even though feminism itself has always been engaged with a questioning of subjecthood in the form of reevaluating the designation of “woman” and the compulsory norms of “femininity.”

Despite these complications, negotiating the interactions of postmodernism and feminism, particularly in respect to their mutual presence in and relevance for film and television studies, remains essential and can also potentially open up a symbiotic relationship between the two that will help to ameliorate the problematic implications of each. Feminism’s attention to the political importance of maintaining some kind of identifiable subjectivity helps to prevent postmodernism from becoming a new kind of destructive master narrative that does not allow for particular political voices and concerns. In the reverse relation, postmodernism’s push towards dissolving essentializing and thus limiting gender definitions of what a ‘woman’ or a ‘man’ is “becomes a sort of therapeutic corrective to feminism’s universalizing tendency” (Thornham 45). In

conceptualizing this symbiosis, “one can imagine a feminism not only immensely aware of its self-contradiction, but committed to explorations of the contradictions of ‘self’ through which the modern social subject is called into being”(Wiegman 13). Film and television present particularly conducive objects of study for such an imagination as they epitomize sites of prevalent contemporary impact and significance for both feminism and postmodernism. The self-serving and self-critical sexuality of masturbation in practice and in its representation within these sites of impact likewise seems particularly useful as a point of initiation of this kind of committed exploration.

CHAPTER 3 FROM THE FREUDIAN VAGINA TO THE LESBIAN CLITORIS

In the introduction of his 2003 publication concerning the cultural history of masturbation, *Solitary Sex*, Thomas W. Laqueur delineates an overview of society's evolutionary interpretation of the practice's significance:

The history of masturbation thus goes through three stages although the earlier ones are never left behind...Beginning in the eighteenth century, solitary sex came to represent the relationship between the individual and the social world, a sort of crossroads where men and women...might, if not carefully watched and taught otherwise, choose the wrong kind of solitude, the wrong kind of pleasure, the wrong kind of imagination, the wrong kind of engagement with their inner selves. A false step led not so much to sin as to disease and decay; it was a secular waywardness. Then came the Freudian revolution. Now masturbation was less a crossroads where one might go astray than a stage that one had to pass through in an appropriate way. We all have to struggle in the shoals of autoeroticism to emerge with a socially useful articulation of the ego with its sexual energies. Finally, masturbation becomes an experience of self-esteem or self-love, a form of personal autarky that allows each of us to form relationships with others without losing ourselves. What the philosophes had regarded as the surest road to ruin has become for some a road to self-realization, the nearest thing we have in our day to the Hellenistic care of the self but now available not only to the leisured gentleman, as it was in antiquity, but to everyone democratically.(22-23)

As it entered the twentieth century, masturbation thus transformed through Freud from being an altogether pernicious act to representing the foundational form of sexual expression. However, continuing to masturbate past childhood remained pathologized.

For women the process of overcoming masturbation:

was especially treacherous, because their early rehearsals were for the wrong show. In becoming adult, they had to give up not only masturbation but also the kind of orgasm procured by their infantile efforts. Giving it up meant, in this account, giving up clitoral for vaginal sexuality, fantasies of active masculinity for the reality of passive femininity. (Laqueur 72)

Although the sway of this theory has never completely dissipated, with the sexologist publications of the Kinsey reports in the 1940s and of the findings of Masters and Johnson in the 1960s that proliferated data suggesting the prevalence of adult masturbation and the importance of clitoral stimulation, conceptions of adult masturbation's personal and political importance began to change. These reports suggested that "at least from a physiological perspective, masturbation represented the real truth of a woman's sexuality" (Laqueur 75).

From here an embrace of masturbation as liberating self-constitution arose due to the influential theories and activism of second wave feminism during the 1970s. Feminist texts published during this period, such as *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1971) and Betty Dodson's *Liberating Masturbation* (1974), advocate that women explore their own sexuality and sense of self through learning how to masturbate effectively and incorporating the practice into their daily lives. Within these texts and the general attitudes towards gender and sexuality that they helped to proliferate due to their immense popularity, "Masturbation was posited as a political act of individual liberation from confining social structures—the home, marriage, the family" (Juffer 72). As a result of this effort to free the practice of masturbation from its traditionally pathologizing taboo connotations, self-stimulation became an avenue for developing an independent and confident sense of self for women who had heretofore been denied access to their own sexuality and the potential subjectivity and power that it made possible. *Our Bodies, Ourselves* defines masturbation as "sex with ourselves" and as:

a special way of enjoying ourselves...[that] allows us the time and space to explore and experiment with our own bodies. We can learn what fantasies turn us on, the kinds of touch which arouse and please us, what tempo and where. We can learn our own patterns of sexual response without having to think about a partner's needs

and opinions...As women, who have for so long been taught to ‘wait for a man to turn us on,’ knowing how to give ourselves sexual pleasure brings us freedom. (166-7)

The fact that both of these previously mentioned texts are still in print and have been translated into numerous languages speaks to the continuing significance of the practice of masturbation for the realization of feminist goals (Laqueur 400). Much of the second wave feminist literature on masturbation also emphasizes its capacity to serve not only individual self-creation, but also community building as women in groups learned to do it together and in doing so established social spaces of pleasure and support. This communally masturbatory impetus also survives in such arenas as the internet where sites such as that of the New York Jacks, a gay masturbation network, are dedicated to the sharing of uncensored fantasies and desires, and the sex industry in which erotic goods stores such as San Francisco’s Good Vibrations combines commercial gain with social commentary with the advent of “National Masturbation Month”(Laqueur 361). The poster for the 2002 observation calls for us to “Think Globally, Masturbate Locally” and belies “a sexual sociability rooted in the celebration of the imagination and its infinite possibilities” (Laqueur 362, 419). In the face of AIDS culture, solitary and communal masturbation also offers a safe avenue for sexual exploration and pleasure.

Laqueur also observes that masturbation is “decidedly queer” in that “we are all polymorphously perverse, and a self-conscious embrace of autoeroticism—the sexuality before gender, male or female, or sexuality, heterosexuality or homosexuality, divided us—would be a way of expressing this [form of queerness]”(82, 413). Masturbation is a kind of pure and nonreproductive sexuality that as such seems threatening to the heteronormative matrix. The queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick contends that “to have so powerful a form of *sexuality* run so fully athwart the precious and embattled

sexual *identities* whose meaning and outlines we always insist on thinking we know, is only part of the revelatory power of the Muse of masturbation” (304). The theoretical implications of lesbianism in particular arise largely from their relationship to Freud’s previously referenced troubling conception of women’s relationship to masturbation.

Lynda Hart explains the connections between psychoanalysis, masturbation, and lesbianism and suggests the subversive power that this relation provides:

female masturbation must be understood as the trace of women’s repressed masculinity, and that it is the prohibition against masturbation...that is fundamental to the explanation of women’s giving up a pleasure that they have no rational reason to renounce...if it is the prohibition of masturbation that is fundamental to women’s assumption of femininity, the fear that women can give pleasure to themselves is just one step away from homosexuality...what is really at stake is their inability to achieve heterosexuality...the return of women’s repressed autoeroticism is what threatens the assumption of femininity (heterosexual reproduction)...And what of the woman who refuses to give up her active desire, the women who refuse repression? These women, as inverts, are the paradox in the economy of the same...the lesbian is thus a haunting figure not because she is the return of the repressed, but because she is the manifestation of that pleasure which women have no reason to renounce. She is the possibility of refusing to accede to femininity. (*Fatal Women* 59-61)

Therefore the masturbating woman queerly transgresses the proscriptions of patriarchal gender norms and compulsory heterosexuality and as such threatens to dismantle their self-perpetuating power.

While I do not wish to suggest here that the ‘touchy-feely’ (pardon the pun) kind of feminism of the 1970s, the real and virtual communities of masturbators, or the queer defiance of repression alone and in their own rights stand as solely sufficient for actualizing a successful feminism today amidst postmodern complications, I do want to argue that the issues raised by these second wave feminists, queer theorists, and progressive psychoanalysts concerning the potentiality of masturbation as a liberating prospect for subjectivity constitution, positive interpersonal relations, and subversion of

heterosexist norms should be reexamined in relation to one another within contemporary contexts for their possible enduring potential for helping to liberate postmodern feminist subjectivity and effect beneficial personal and social change. As the indelible slogan of the second wave feminist movement argues, “the personal is political,” and what could be more personal and thus more potentially politically powerful than masturbation, even today?

CHAPTER 4 MAINSTREAM MASTURBATION MEDIA

In order to offer up a variant, potentially liberating point of insertion into the analysis of postmodern feminist subjectivity, within this paper I will seek to explore the practical and theoretical significance of the prospect of female masturbation in four of its recent appearances as a topic in popular American television and film. Through doing so I hope to distinguish this often ignored and/or repressed aspect of sexuality as a potential source for a liberatory partial reunification of the individual subject in the face of postmodernity's fragmentation, for a building of feminist community and agency, and for the subversion of heterosexist norms.

Given the troubled history of masturbation's connotations and associations, and of the somewhat similarly troubled history of the reception of second wave feminist and queer theory ideals for that matter, it stands as no real surprise that this self-stimulating topic remains to be rarely discussed or represented in mainstream media. As Rebecca Alvin contends:

it is only in recent times (the past 30 years or so) that this subject has even been addressed, let alone explored in the mainstream media of film and television, in the U.S.. Even now, it is more often used as a comedic element... character device, demonstrating the depravity...character flaw of the "offender." (1)

Popular American film most frequently posits the figure of the masturbator as the object of scorn and/or ridicule as can be witnessed in the character and situational formulations of Norman Bates in both versions of *Psycho* and of Judge Reinhold's character in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. Popular American television by and large fails to depict

masturbation at all other than with the occasional off-hand mocking among male characters.

Tellingly, within both of these media contexts the female masturbator is even more than often absent, which bears witness to the perseverance both of the taboos surrounding masturbation and of the patriarchal erasure of self-serving female sexuality of any kind. Nevertheless, according to Jane Juffer, “masturbation for women in the 1990s has become an everyday practice”(70). In part due to the efforts of second wave feminism, it thus appears that the autoerotic trend has been spreading, or that at least some women are now admitting to the activity in sexologist surveys. Despite this account of private behaviors, however, the public representation and discussion of female masturbation has rarely made it to the big or the small screen thus perpetuating the traditional stigma and erasure. Some lesbian feminist art cinema of the 1970s did succeed in depicting female masturbation as a progressively erotic source of agency, such as Barbara Hammer’s 1977 short film *Multiple Orgasm* which portrays “a woman masturbating, a close-up of her finger moving on her clitoris superimposed over a rocky landscape,” and more recent lesbian pornographic films, such as Ayanna Udongo’s 1993 videotape *Edges*, also utilize the “image of a woman masturbating [as]...self-definition and empowerment”(Straayer 201, 204). However, these filmic texts are hard to come by and only effectually speak to a certain niche public. As the feminist film theorist Claire Johnston suggests, “In order to counter our objectification in the cinema, our collective fantasies must be released: women’s cinema must embody the working through of desire: such an objective demands the use of the entertainment film”(31). Visual representations of masturbatory fantasy and

desire within Hollywood cinema and television seem particularly potentially useful for enabling this feminist objective.

I will focus my study of the potential of televisual and filmic depictions of female masturbation on two particularly significant episodes of *Seinfeld* and *Sex and the City* and on two particularly relevant American films, Barbet Schroeder's *Single White Female* and David Lynch's *Mulholland Dr.*. I want to suggest that even though their representations of female masturbation may still convey lingering repressive attitudes, rather than merely exemplifying additional instances of female masturbation as a subject of levity, scorn, or ridicule, they do when progressively read speak more significantly, if not wholly unproblematically, to the liberating potential of masturbation as constitutive aid to postmodern feminist subjectivity and community. Beginning with *Seinfeld* and moving through to *Mulholland Dr.* these texts convey increasingly complex practical and theoretical implications for this project, from an increased visibility and depathologization to a postfeminist lesbian continuum, to a doppelganger identification and feminist fantasy, to a more focused psychoanalytic fantasy subjectivity and trauma recovery.

All of these texts offer a unique perspective for the concerns of feminism and postmodernism, however, I do want to make note of their significant limitations as well. The masturbating women in each are white, urban, single, childless, and of a relatively high socio-economic status. As such an analysis limited to these texts necessarily fails to extensively contend with the crucial influence of issues such as race, ethnicity, religion, heterosexuality, motherhood, class, and region, among others. The basic fact that women of color and of a low socio-economic status and/or rural existence rarely garner the

interest of mainstream television and Hollywood cinema period much less within the rare depictions of female masturbation speaks to the continuing influence of oppressive social structures and puts strictures on the ability to even attempt to exhaustively contend with these issues. Nevertheless, I want to admit to the somewhat problematically narrow scope and depth of this project along these lines so as not to completely preclude its possible potency. I look forward to going further after the initiation of this analysis towards future more heterogeneously socially informed and influential explorations of female masturbation's practical and theoretical significance.

CHAPTER 5 TELEVISION MASTURBATION

In his work concerning the postmodern condition Jean Baudrillard observes that, “the television [is] the ultimate and perfect object for this new era”(127). This perfection of the relevance of the televisual medium arises from the way that it directly speaks to and exhibits the influence of the postmodern age’s dissolution of the traditional societal metanarratives and the fragmentation of subjectivity through both its textual and contextual features. As the manifestation of postmodernity’s obsession with the self-referential image and of the fragmentary and heterogeneous display of these images, television constitutes the quintessence of postmodern culture and also thus offers us a “perfect object” for the critical analysis of this “new era.” According to Laura Stempel Mumford, the pertinence of the study of television further reveals itself in that:

Feminist theory is a congenial companion to TV Studies because the basic concerns of these two areas of inquiry overlap significantly. The fundamental questions of feminism focus on issues of cultural identity and position...These questions neatly inflect the fundamental question of TV Studies..and prompt us to ask how television works to establish or promote not just specific gender identities, but existing cultural relations generally. (115)

As these two authors suggest, television studies is a critical tool for the exploration of the nature and implications of contemporary existence, and particularly for the analysis of female existence, including the constituent impact of masturbation.

In addition to being the only two popular television shows in recent years to give any kind of substantial attention to the topic of female masturbation, *Seinfeld* and *Sex and the City* also constitute provocative objects of this kind of critical study due to their

stance as two of the most pervasively popular shows of the last decade. *Seinfeld* ran in NBC's prime time hot spot from 1990-1998, its producers choosing to end the series despite continuing high ratings in order to avoid any future cancellation due to lost momentum and waning popularity. HBO's *Sex and the City* picked up where *Seinfeld* left off, launching in 1998 to immediate rave reviews and continued through early 2004 when it similarly ended its run in the efforts of going out with lingering high regard. Both shows have won numerous awards including Emmys for best actor performances, writing, directing, and for Outstanding Comedy Series, *Sex and the City* being the first cable show to win this award. Whereas these awards do not necessarily indicate critical value, they do testify to the shows' popularity and thus their cultural significance, for these shows have obviously been widely watched and:

when we watch, we are not simply being entertained in some neutral way; we are having a political and ideological experience as well, and both our viewing practices and our ways of making sense of what we watch are articulated within a particular political and social context. (Mumford 118)

Seinfeld still airs in syndication and most likely will continue to do so into the next decade. *Sex and the City* will also reportedly begin airing in cable syndication within the next few years. Both shows are available for purchase on DVD and video, have numerous websites dedicated to them, and have a sort of cult appeal that will most likely continue to even further entrench their status as American popular culture icons. Taking both the shows' general appeal into account, I will explore the similarities and differences between them, their postmodern attributes, their particular manifestations of female masturbation, and the ways in which all of these factors interact in order to work towards a deeper understanding of their political and ideological significances as postmodern texts in regards to feminist subjectivity.

Even on the surface level, *Seinfeld* and *Sex and the City* exhibit many telling similarities in both content and form. Set in Manhattan, both shows follow the interactions and experiences of a somewhat heterogeneous set of four friends as they make their way through single life in an urban environment. In content both shows center around what Michael Skovmand describes as “a deliberate minimalism, where the emotional minutiae of the personal world are magnified into ironic proportions”(207). By this assertion he refers to the tendency prevalent in both shows to be overwhelmingly comprised of the conversational rather than the action-oriented situational. These conversations most often concern the characters’ troubled negotiations of the etiquette of dating and take place either in one of their apartments or around a table in a New York City restaurant. Another formalistic commonality between the shows rests in their organizing principles: both most often combine these group discussion scenes along with separate plot lines that follow each of the four characters individually and then ultimately intertwine and/or thematically relate. Both shows fill a thirty minute time slot and most easily fit under the genre title of comedy.

Despite these similarities, crucial differences exist between the shows as well. Most obviously, a widely available network broadcast replete with commercial breaks delivers *Seinfeld* into American homes, whereas *Sex and the City* airs on the premium cable channel HBO and thus remains commercial-free and more limited in its audience accessibility. This difference also accounts for the dissimilar production values and cinematography between the shows. *Seinfeld*’s camera work, mise en scene, editing, and nondiegetic sound consist of the standard moderately low-budget television fare, whereas in *Sex and the City* these same elements look more like the stuff of cinema than

television. A much more significant difference for the purposes of this paper, however, lies in their respective gender makeups and tones. Whereas *Seinfeld* is generally male-oriented, with three of the major four players being men (and in fact Elaine was only added to the show after the pilot was made), *Sex and the City* is decidedly female-oriented, with all four of the main characters being women. The audiences of both shows are surely mixed in gender, yet according to *Newsweek*, *Sex and the City* has a particular appeal for the female viewers who make up 40 percent of HBO's roughly 25 million subscribers (2). While attempting to avoid any kind of antithetically essentializing generalizations, one cannot help but make the connection between these different gender makeups and the variations between the shows' moods. Both shows have a decidedly ironic address, yet this feels much stronger and more detached in the more "masculine" *Seinfeld* and much more muted in the more emotionally melodramatic "feminine" *Sex and the City*. I would conjecture that this situation arises due to each show's targeted market appeal that still works at least in part within traditional notions of gendered genres, male-centered genres such as the crime drama traditionally being less emotional in nature than female-centered genres such as the soap opera. As such it seems that *Sex and the City* could be considered as a kind of "female" or "feminized" version of *Seinfeld*. That said, however, this kind of binary division becomes less distinct when we consider that the female characters of *Sex and the City* parade through a plethora of failed relationships without exhibiting the traditionally melodramatic corresponding level of emotional trauma, and conversely the male characters in *Seinfeld* devote a disproportionate amount of their time and energy obsessing over relationships than traditional "masculine" genres would allow their male characters to do. Therefore, we can

begin to consider the kind of postmodern blurring or fragmentation of gender subjectivity exhibited by both the “masculinization” and “feminization” present in both of these shows.

Following from this preliminary examination, I contend that both of these shows are in effect postmodern texts despite their lack of the more obvious or stereotypically postmodern form. Marc O’Day describes this televisually postmodern stereotype:

postmodern TV is characterized by a high degree of excess, fragmentation, heterogeneity, hybridization, aestheticization, stylization, intertextuality, recycling, bricolage, self-referentiality, and parody and pastiche. Postmodern programmes are often ontologically unstable, playfully foregrounding production contexts and environments..., shifting between realistic and fantasy worlds without comment, blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction or past, present and future, and casually using computer graphics and special effects to warp or wipe out televisual worlds. (117-118)

The model text of early postmodern television studies was 1980s MTV with its schedule of back to back heterogeneous music videos that worked well within this list of formal stipulations. Yet even traditionally filmed and organized televisual texts, such as *Seinfeld* and *Sex and the City*, can be understood for their more ideologically postmodern attributes.

The aforementioned blurred gender identification speaks to this kind of postmodern ideology as do several other postmodern features of the texts. Skovmand also highlights the postmodern nature of *Seinfeld*, saying that, “The show may be said to be post-Modernist, not only because of its preoccupation with metafictionality, intertextuality and self-reflexivity—buzzwords of the post-Modern—but equally, and perhaps more importantly, because there is no agenda, no implicit allegiance to the grand emancipatory narratives of Modernism”(211). Examples of the intertextual, metafictional, and self-reflexive nature of *Seinfeld* abound including the 1992 episode, “The Boyfriend,” in

which the investigation of a spitting incident during a baseball game borders on pastiche of the investigation into the Kennedy assassination, “The Betrayal”(1997), which amounts to a pastiche of Beckett’s play *Betrayal* (a postmodern text in its own right), and the numerous self-referential episodes dealing with the show “about nothing” within the show that Jerry and George pitch to NBC (210). The “no hugging, no learning” philosophy of the show results in its lack of Modernist moral agenda and its kind of Jamesonian waning of affect, yet the absence of Enlightenment metanarratives also accounts for the show’s hyperfocus on negotiating the rules of relationships in that without an overarching grand scheme of right and wrong and distinct gender constitution, the characters in this urban postmodern space must flounder with making and remaking a kind of bricolage of etiquette minutiae. Thomas S. Hibbs describes this *Seinfeldian* condition in more philosophical terms:

Instead of the nihilistic era eliminating rules, initiating a lapse into a kind of anarchy, there is a medley of rules with no clear relationship to one another. There is something capricious and comical in the continuing hold that rules have on us; they operate like taboos, making little or no sense but nonetheless exercising an irresistible psychological pressure. (149)

This also stands as representational of the postmodernism that Fredric Jameson theorizes in which, “Modernist styles ... become postmodernist codes. And ... the advanced capitalist countries today are now a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm”(17). *Seinfeld*’s own discursive heterogeneity without a norm concerning the rules of interpersonal relationships and gender subjectivities thus further reveals its postmodern ideology.

This unstable negotiation of rules or “codes” also pervades *Sex and the City*’s similar hyperfocus on gender and dating boundaries or the lack thereof. Each episode centers around the examination of one of these codes as presented through the question

the protagonist central character, Carrie, attempts to answer while writing her newspaper column each week. These questions point to quandaries such as, “Can women have sex like men?”; “How often is normal?”; and “Should one exploit one’s sexuality for fun and profit?”, and in effect constitute what Avis Lewallen calls, “almost a mini-encyclopaedia of female sexuality”(89). Although there sometimes emerges a kind of tenuous answer to these questions by the end of the episode, more often than not the question remains unresolved and/or any kind of attempt at an answer is usually refuted by the possible answers offered in previous or subsequent episodes. For instance, in the first episode, in which the first question listed above subtends the plot, Carrie initially succeeds in having sex “like a man” in that she gets pleasure from a man she no longer has any feelings for and then leaves unscarred; however, by the end of the episode she questions the value of this kind of casual sex, and even this kind of admonition dissolves when the other characters’ experiences factor in. Samantha, the most sexually aggressive character of the group, perpetually has sex “like a man,” or free of emotional attachment, and finds an immense amount of both pleasure and power in it. These aspects of open-endedness and the presence of multiple character perspectives contribute to the show’s postmodern quality, as they similarly appear in and contribute to *Seinfeld*’s postmodernism, through their unstable excess and heterogeneity. Kaplan posits a similar kind of postmodern quality of the feminist goal when she relates Teresa de Lauretis’ argument for “the need for texts that construct a new aesthetic in a specific female and heterogeneous address—an address which insists on a series of different spectator positions through which one becomes involved in a process toward subjectivity, rather than being fixed”(34). The unfixed subjectivity that de Lauretis imagines resembles the subjectivity posited by

postmodern theory rather than reproducing an essentialized and essentializing notion of what a 'woman' is, yet it also strives for a movement *towards* a subjectivity rather than a more negative postmodern process of dissolution. I contend that this is the kind of positive subjectivity that is in many ways both textually presented and allowed for in the spectator positions of *Seinfeld* and *Sex and the City* particularly as a result of their respective depictions of female masturbation.

CHAPTER 6
SEINFELD: “MASTERS OF THEIR DOMAINS” AND THE “QUEEN OF THE
CASTLE”

In the Emmy award-winning 1992 episode entitled “The Contest,” *Seinfeld* constructs the space for this kind of positive postmodern feminist subjectivity through its novel depiction of masturbation. Despite not being able to even utter the word “masturbation” in the episode due to censor constraints, it succeeded in “implicitly establishing masturbation as a natural phenomenon among singles,” and, in relation to the aims of this project, it most significantly does so for its female character, Elaine (Skovmand 211). The show opens as George arrives at the diner to meet Jerry, Kramer, and Elaine for lunch. He soon explains his apparent state of despondency as arising from the experience of his mother catching him masturbating in her house earlier that day. In response to his friends somewhat empathetic mockery of the situation, George asserts that he will never again engage in the practice. Upon Jerry’s scoffing at this impossible prospect, George introduces a challenge to his friend in which they will bet to see who can go the longest without masturbating. Kramer then indicates his interest in getting in on the bet, followed by Elaine’s similar request. The discussion that next ensues speaks to the prevalence both of the practice of masturbation and of the male conception of the female practice of masturbation:

Elaine: “I wanna be in on this too.”

(George, Kramer, and Jerry vehemently answer with “No”s)

Jerry: “It’s apples and oranges. It’s a whole different thing because you’re a woman.”

Elaine: “So what?”

Jerry: “It’s easier for a woman not to do it than for a man. We have to do it, it’s

part of our lifestyle. It's like shaving."

Elaine: "Oh that is such baloney, I shave my legs."

Kramer: "Not every day."

George: "You wanna be in you gotta give us odds, at least two to one. You gotta put up two hundred dollars."

Kramer: "No, a thousand."

Elaine: "No, I'll put up one-fifty."

George's mother's reaction of horror and plea that he see a psychiatrist along with this indication of somewhat patriarchal notions of women's masturbation practices testify to the influences of the traditional pathologization of masturbation and erasure of female sexual desire. However, what follows in the episode answers these more Modernist notions not with the expected shame associated with and mockery of the practice, but rather with the further normalization and depathologizing of the practice for both the male and female characters. This masturbation representation allows for a unique and somewhat postmodern sexual subjectivity for each character, and especially for Elaine who is able to compete with the men and bear witness to the power of her sexual desire. Though the situation definitely instigates laughter, it is significant that for the most part we are laughing at and with them because they *aren't* masturbating, not because they are in a way that works towards reversing the traditional taboos and representational forms of masturbation.

Kramer drops out of the contest first after seeing a naked woman across the street through Jerry's window. He represents the most sexualized character of the four in that they all doubt his ability to participate in the bet the most and in that, despite the contest, he refuses to deny his sexual urges when they confront him. His pleasure and sexual subjectivity hold more value for him than the monetary value that he would gain through winning the contest. Tellingly this also next becomes the situation for Elaine when sexual

fantasies about JFK, Jr. overwhelm her after meeting him at her gym and then learning of his potential interest in her. She too opts for sexual selfhood over competitive victory and monetary reward. Thus, although she loses the competition against her male friends, she wins in the societal competition for feminist reclamation of satisfaction and sexual subjectivity; through masturbating Elaine's "autonomous self escapes from the erotically barren here and now into a luxuriant world of its own creation" and the potency of her sexual desire is realized and posited on a more equal par alongside that of her male cohorts (Laqueur 13).

Jerry and George hold strong in the competition, but their effective losing positions become apparent through their elevating senses of frustration that hinder their ability to interact with each other and through the show's motif of montage shots of each of the four friends in bed at night at the end of each day of the contest. Jerry and George toss and turn in uncomfortable insomniac misery, while, after they have masturbated, Kramer and Elaine blissfully sleep. Hibbs goes so far as to assert that in the world of *Seinfeld*:

Isolation involves an abridgement of one's sexual ambitions, or at least of one's sense of sexual conquest, but it by no means entails the elimination of sexual satisfaction. In many respects, autoerotic activity is superior to sexual congress with another, since it involves none of the complications attendant upon the latter. The experience of pure sex, of having sex as one wants it, without all the unwelcome human elements that accompany interaction with others, is the impossible dream of *Seinfeld*. (156-157)

I would argue that this "experience of pure sex" comes close in essence to the sexual dreams of the majority of fragmented postmodern subjects who must necessarily also deal with the complications of interpersonal relations and "sexual congress" within the unstable heterogeneity and proliferation of devalued and contradictory codes that

constitute the postmodern existence. I am not suggesting that masturbation can alone be the savior of the fragmented subject or that it alone is superior to interpersonal sex, nor does *Seinfeld's* televisual text in that problems of celibacy continue to arise throughout various episodes despite the allowance of the prospect of masturbation as a partial treatment for lack of sex in this instance. However, I do suggest that masturbation can offer a potentially liberating method of subjective satisfaction and can in particular help women like Elaine to make the importance of their sexuality known without it being necessarily dependent upon the literal attentions of a male, or female, partner. Although the title "master of your domain" corresponds to those who refrain from masturbation for competitive purposes within the show, and Elaine calls herself the "Queen of the Castle" when she can refrain from masturbating, it seems that the true "masters," or less troublingly fragmented subjectivities, of the show are those who allow themselves the pleasures and selfhood of masturbation that in turn seem to help to at least partially unify their "domains," or postmodern subjectivities. Elaine as "queen" is in control of her "castle," or sexual subjectivity, when she allows herself to masturbate. This masturbatory mastery of the subjective domain becomes more significant in that it gains emphasis within the context of the communal diegetic interaction of the group of friends and within the external public of the show's televisual address. "The Contest" makes female masturbation normal and visible and thus allows it to become a matter of progressive public discourse. As a result, female viewers of the show, of which there are many considering the show's immense popularity, can acquire a feeling of sexual confidence and grasp the impetus for feminist action based in providing legitimacy and unleashing the power of female sexuality.

CHAPTER 7 POSTFEMINIST PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES

If we consider *Seinfeld*'s characterization of Elaine beyond this noteworthy episode, the show's benefits for and complications to the project of postmodern feminism become apparent and indicate a close relationship to the somewhat equally problematic female characterizations within *Sex and the City*. Elaine's character embodies many feminist attributes within the show, while at the same time displaying some lingering traditionally non-feminist and/or patriarchal attitudes, as Sarah E. Worth suggests in her article, "Elaine Benes: Feminist Icon or Just One of the Boys":

She is strong and independent but still enjoys the company of men (lots of men). She can maintain friendships with men (something which can be difficult for single women to do as adults), and she doesn't let others push her around. On the other hand, ...she is not strong enough to claim to be a feminist, although she seems to have feminist tendencies and is definitely a product of feminism. (37)

Elaine has an attractive, "feminine" appearance, yet we don't see her obsess over her looks; she seeks a loving mate, yet we don't see her obsess over wanting to be married and have a family; although not apparently too concerned about her career, she does have a college education from Tufts University and most often holds down a professional job at respected publishing firms; she seems in control of her sexuality not only through masturbation, but also through her empowered ability to enjoy sex and still control her reproductive rights as she decides who is "spongeworthy" enough to have sex with. Despite these seemingly feminist attributes, however, she also at times exhibits her lingering desires for more traditional female roles as when she gets irritated at George's engagement, telling a Rabbi who lives in her building that, "it should have been me. I'm

smart. I'm attractive." She also seems to reverse her decision on not having children in an episode in which she has the man she dates get his vasectomy reversed. Additionally, although she maintains friendships with her male friends, we very rarely see her partaking in, much less enjoying, any interaction with other women; as Kramer points out to her in one episode, she is "a man's woman—you hate other women and they hate you" (Worth 36). Despite breaking up with a man who does not agree with her right to have an abortion, Elaine also does not seem to be politically motivated or even concerned in a way that belies her lack of a truly feminist agenda.

This problematic "feminist" depiction within *Seinfeld*, which also appears to an even more troubling degree in *Sex and the City*, again raises the issue of the apparently impossible realization of feminist ideals within postmodernity and thus the theoretical complications of the relationship between feminism and postmodernism. The "simultaneous incorporation, revision, and depoliticization of many of the central goals of second-wave feminism" such as *Seinfeld's* characterization of Elaine seems to exhibit represents the political and ideological obstacle of "postfeminism" (Stacey 8). Bonnie J. Dow describes the problems that postfeminism poses:

What postfeminism represents, I think, is a hegemonic negotiation of second-wave ideals, in which the presumption of equality for women in the public sphere has been retained. This presumption, serving as the 'essence' of feminism, requires the least ideological adjustment from men and from the culture at large...At the same time, the most radical aspects of feminism, those centered in sexual politics and a profound awareness of power differences between the sexes at all levels and in all arenas, have been discarded as irrelevant or threatening. (87-88)

These kinds of postfeminist problems abound in *Sex and the City*. While the female characters it portrays have high paying careers and an ostensibly independent lifestyle much like that of Elaine, they seem overly concerned with finding the ideal man to "complete" their lives, buying expensive shoes, and talking about fashion and sex to the

exclusion of social, political, or economic concerns. They also almost never interact with anyone who isn't white, rich, and heterosexual (aside from their token gay male friend Stanford Blatch).

These abundant problems, as well as those within the characterization of Elaine in *Seinfeld*, should not be ignored when considering the significance of the texts in reference to feminism. However, I contend that they should also not be analyzed to the exclusion of their possible beneficial representations and that they should be scrutinized taking the theoretical complications of feminist postmodernism into account. The above quote from Dow seeks to reinforce the differences between male and female subjectivities in the efforts of political awareness and action, yet it does not consider the problem of essentializing these categories of male and female, and thus does not enter into a discourse with postmodernism. That said, as discussed earlier, postmodernism alone does not seem to allow for any gendered political action for its fragmented subjects. The complete dissolution of subjectivity distinctions would obviously cripple the feminist as well as many other social causes, yet a reactionary essentialism against all of the aspects of postfeminism will ultimately do an equal amount of harm in trying to reinscribe its own limiting metanarrative. There are no easy answers here, but I wish to argue for the importance of trying to imagine a situation in which feminism and postmodernism can achieve the kind of symbiotic relationship that I describe above. While problematic in terms of both feminism and postmodernism, both *Seinfeld* and *Sex and the City* also have much to offer both for this kind of imagining. In portraying the ignored and/or repressed practice of masturbation in ways that help to constitute the “political” of the “personal” in terms of raising an additional aspect of female sexuality and opening up a possibility for

its liberating effects for postmodern feminist subjectivity, the potential benefits of the shows for television studies, feminism and postmodernism become apparent. As the British Film Institute website considers, “*Sex and the City* may provide female voices within a mainstream narrative framework, but it may also be perpetuating dominant ideologies.”; the operative word here is “also” rather than “instead” and through taking a closer look at one particular episode of the show that most significantly portrays female masturbation, I hope to further illuminate its liberatory potential.

CHAPTER 8
SEX AND THE CITY: MASTURBATING “SOUL MATES”

While masturbation is only discussed, never actually depicted on *Seinfeld*, *Sex and the City*, largely due to the freedoms offered it by being a premium cable show with much looser censorship regulations, does in fact come much closer to truly depicting masturbation in a few instances along with its much more frequent incorporations of discussions between its characters concerning masturbation. In a season four episode of the series entitled “The Agony and the ‘Ex’tasy,” the four friends engage in a discussion of their masturbation fantasies that speaks to the liberating aims of incorporating the practice into women’s everyday lives and into their discursive communities. At the outset of the show we see the women dress and gather for an engagement party which serves to make them question the complications of their single status and leads Carrie to formulate the query that will impel that week’s newspaper column and will also thus constitute the episode’s central theme: “Soul mates: reality or torture device?”.

Later in the show Samantha’s introduction to an attractive priest instigates her fantasies of sex with this “Friar Fuck” that compel her to masturbate. We see her in bed with his St. Francis religious card next to her. A sheet covers her body, but we see her arm in motion as she brings herself to climax while singing out triumphantly along with the nondiegetic soundtrack of Handel’s *Hallelujah* chorus. High key lighting and smooth camera pans across her body glamorize this image of the masturbating woman that also works to refute the religious taboos restricting masturbation through its juxtaposition with

the signifiers of this religious iconography. When her orgasmic hallelujah concludes the shot cuts to a medium close up of her smiling face as she sits with her three friends at a restaurant. Charlotte asks why Samantha is glowing, to which she openly regales them with her account of her earlier two and a half hour masturbation session with her priest fantasies. To this Miranda unabashedly relates her own much more short-term and efficient “in and out” practice of masturbation. Samantha describes her fantasy of the priest overpowering her in the street that sustained her self stimulation for such a lengthy session and then the other three women proceed to discuss their own masturbation fantasies: Carrie and Miranda agree on Russell Crowe and George Clooney, Miranda admits to fantasizing about a busboy that was rude to her once, and Charlotte, the most traditionally demure of the group, describes her fantasy of perfect sex with her husband who she is currently separated from in part due to his impotency. This episode’s depiction of masturbation and the subsequent discussion in effect argue for feminist goals of realized yet diverse female sexualities and the creation of a space for communities of women to share their fantasies in order to free their own. Within this episode we see and/or hear about multiple methods of masturbation as well as multiple sexual fantasies. While these can be interpreted as somewhat problematic in terms of their postfeminist attributes, they can also be seen as potentially liberating in that they realize a sexual female subjectivity, yet do not essentialize that this subjectivity and its fantasies should be of one particular nature. As Samantha asserts, “You can masturbate to whoever you want, it’s imagination, it’s fun, and it’s perfectly healthy.”

Following a failed attempt at a 35th birthday celebration later in the episode, Carrie begins to despair over her increase in age and lack of a soul mate. Troubling as

this depiction might be in terms of its postfeminist implications, it does address the real concerns of many aging single women amidst a society that in many ways fails to value them due to their age and non-heteronormative or reproductive “spinster” position. In response to her friend’s despair, Charlotte suggests, “Don’t laugh, but maybe we could be each other’s soul mates and men can just be some great nice guys to have fun with.” Despite the somewhat sickening sentimentality of this suggestion, it does ideologically posit the possibility for a positive kind of feminist community made up of heterogeneous female subjectivities within the fragmentary drives of the surrounding force field of postmodernity.

This community actualizes and makes potent lesbian feminist Adrienne Rich’s concept of the “lesbian continuum.” In her now iconic 1980 essay, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” Rich seeks to invigorate and resituate the methods and goals of feminism through a reevaluation of lesbianism and heterosexuality. In doing so, she challenges heterosexual feminists to reexamine the structures and implications of heterosexuality itself while also arguing for an inquiry into and utilization of the prospects of lesbianism. Her argument broadens the range of possible sexualities and relationships between sexuality and gender, for the female gender at least, by reinvesting femaleness with erotic agency and then expanding the notion of the erotic. She states that “erotic sensuality...has been...the most violently erased fact of female experience,” while also arguing against limiting the term, wishing to “discover the erotic in female terms: as that which is unconfined to any single part of the body or solely to the body itself; as an energy not only diffuse but,...omnipresent”(241, 240). Therefore, Rich’s essay opens up the definitions of sexuality and female gender.

Rich also posits an avenue for the effective usefulness of her understanding of the relationship between gender and sexuality through striving to expand the term lesbian to include not only women who engage in sexual relationships with other women, but also the more pervasive and potentially powerful relationships between all women. She designates the mutual differences and benefits between what she calls “*lesbian existence*” and “*lesbian continuum*,” with the former representing “both the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and our continuing creating of the meaning of that existence,” and the latter indicating an inclusive “range—through each woman’s life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience” that “embrace[s] many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support”(239). Believing that this “re-education of solipsisms” allows for the expansion of our conception of the erotic, the connection of diverse aspects of woman-identification, the resistance of male tyranny, and the fruition of a “lesbian feminism” that has the power to “change the social relations of the sexes, to liberate ourselves and each other,” she stresses the importance of the political resignification of the term lesbian (244). Rich thus effectively disrupts traditional discourse by unhinging “lesbian” from a specific kind of sexuality, thereby questioning sexuality itself in terms of gender. Through calling for this reexamination, she helps to create an awareness of the historical and potential dangers of unquestioned heterosexual authority and a space for both personal survival and fulfillment and political power for women as a result of women-identified experience.

Sex and the City similarly works to expand our notions of the erotic by way of emphasizing the importance of fantasy and masturbation. It also effectively utilizes this conception of the erotic to formulate the powerful women-identified experience of the four friends' lesbian continuum relationship. And in presenting this depiction of a community of masturbating women, the show does at least in part construct the kind of "female and heterogeneous address...through which one becomes involved in a process towards subjectivity" that de Lauretis advocates as liberating feminist texts (Kaplan 34). Even though the women on the show fail to harness the lesbian continuum as a vehicle for more direct political action, they do, like the friends on *Seinfeld*, grant visibility and access to the potential liberatory implications of female masturbation. Audiences of the show can likewise embrace the practice and its discursiveness and can with the sexual and social freedoms they allow move towards more distinctly political feminist goals within the postmodern world. With lesbian continuum soul mates, postmodern women can then contend with the complications of postfeminism and wield masturbatory sexual power and agency.

This analysis only covers one of the episodes of *Sex and the City* that deals with masturbation and only discusses at length one of the *Seinfeld* episodes that raises gender and subjectivity issues. A more extensive analysis of the televisual portrayals of masturbation and other feminist concerns within these shows would vastly contribute to an understanding of the complexities and significances that these shows and issues represent; However, I hope to have at least instigated a reexamination of the potentially liberatory possibilities that televisual depictions of female masturbation may offer for negotiating the complicated relationship between postmodernism and feminism for the

constitution and political and ideological significance of subjectivity. Again, here I am not suggesting that the proliferation of depictions of female masturbation on mainstream American television will easily or resolutely solve the problems posed by the contradictions of postmodernism and feminism, nor do I wish to suggest that the universal enactment of the practice of masturbation would achieve such a monumental goal. I hope only to offer an additional type of question that could open up a new space for theoretical consideration that might aid in the difficult task of negotiating a feminist postmodern subjectivity with social and political valency.

As Worth contends, “Popular culture shapes the way we think about the world and about ourselves. Television especially has an influence on us because it is so easily accessible—it arrives in our private living space...Thus...TV has a tremendous impact on how we perceive the world”(27). In that *Seinfeld* and *Sex and the City* are two of the most popular, and thus conceivably two of the most influential, television shows of the last decade, it is essential that we reexamine both their problematic depictions and their potential for liberatory theoretical implications. These ideologically postmodern texts both uniquely convey the prospect of masturbation. I suggest that in doing so they in effect create an avenue for critical inquiry into the significance of the dissolution of the taboos surrounding masturbation and the possibilities that this dissolution might have to offer for the contrary partial reconstitution of a kind of feminist postmodern subjectivity. As viewers we should thus reconsider the literal and theoretical “mastery” of our own postmodern “domains.”

CHAPTER 9 MASTURBATING THE MOVIES

Like television, recent American cinema often dispenses with the objective forms and ideologies of Modernism utilizing many of the same visual and narrative tactics as described above concerning postmodern television. As Val Hill and Peter Every assert:

postmodern film criticism has celebrated the vivid intensity of the surface and the multivocal readings ‘against the grain’ that [the change towards postmodern cinema] allows...Hollywood cinema has never been without contradiction, but postmodern cinema plays this contradiction within a frame that works to allow its pleasures, [and] to make visible the contradiction. (101-3)

Much of recent American cinema thus also constitutes a relevant object of study for the understanding of postmodernism.

Also like television, American film presents us with crucial texts for understanding the implications of contemporary attitudes toward gender and sexuality. For feminist theorists such as Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane, and E. Ann Kaplan, film is the key artistic medium for both the analysis and deconstruction of existing patriarchal oppression and the proliferation of more liberatory feminist ideals and theories. Feminist and queer theorist Teresa de Lauretis suggests that:

the project of women’s cinema...is no longer that of destroying or disrupting man-centered vision by representing its blind spots, its gaps or its repressed. The effort and challenge now are how to effect another vision: to construct other objects and subjects of vision, and to formulate the conditions of representability of another social subject. For the time being, then, feminist work in film seems necessarily focused on those subjective limits and discursive boundaries that mark women’s division as gender-specific, a division more elusive, complex and contradictory than can be conveyed in the notion of sexual difference as it is currently used...What is becoming more and more clear...is that all the categories of our social science stand to be reformulated starting from the notion of gendered social subjects. And something of this process of reformulation–re-vision, rewriting,

rereading, rethinking, ‘looking back at ourselves’—is what I see inscribed in the texts of women’s cinema but not yet sufficiently focused in feminist film theory or feminist critical practice in general.(182-6)

I hope to allow for this kind of reformulation by “looking back at [sex with] ourselves.” Masturbation offers a focused space for self-reflection that tests the subjective limits of sexuality and feminist postmodern subjectivity in general both literally and theoretically and thus promises to help “formulate the conditions of representability of another social subject” through its manifestations in film. This other social subject through masturbation might be a more unified and sexually powerful woman who has also acquired the ability to face and overcome trauma and build communities through masturbatory fantasy and its discursive proliferation. As Chris Straayer explains, feminist film theory also:

has much to gain from considering lesbian desire and sexuality. Women’s desire for women deconstructs male-female sexual dichotomies, sex-gender conflation, and the universality of the oedipal narrative. Acknowledgment of the female-initiated active sexuality and sexualized activity of lesbians has the potential to reopen a space in which heterosexual women as well as lesbians can exercise self-determined pleasure. (9)

As discussed earlier, significant links between female masturbation and lesbianism exist as both are subversive forms of “self-determined pleasure,” and as such the following analysis will also strive to incorporate a utilization of queer theory and a consideration of the particular manifestations and masturbatory power of lesbian desire within both films.

While the above discussion of representations of female masturbation on American television is somewhat limited by encompassing only a few key episodes of the two shows’ lengthy runs, I would like to here offer a more extensive analysis of two more self-contained filmic texts. *Single White Female* and *Mulholland Dr.* are both relatively popular American films. Both garnered a relatively substantial amount of attention and box office revenue, although *Single White Female* was the more financially successful,

and *Mulholland Dr.* was the more critically praised. Both films concentrate their narratives on the interactions between their female characters who live together in an urban environment, New York and L.A. respectively. But the more pertinent reason why I chose these texts in particular is the way in which both uniquely depict female masturbation and both visually and narratively deal with the complexities of feminist postmodern subjectivity. Whereas *Seinfeld* and *Sex and the City* work more superficially to expose and normalize an eroticized female subjecthood, these filmic texts operate on a more fantastical and psychoanalytic level to reveal the intercomplications of identification and desire. Like the television texts, they also utilize postmodern attributes as will be discussed later, however, I am less concerned with delineating what makes them postmodern here than I am with attempting to understand how they work ideologically to convey postmodern themes and feminist possibilities through their complicated incorporations of female masturbation. These films also offer less obviously positive representations of autoerotic practices that are also more infused with lesbian desire and consequently require a more in depth and nuanced queer and psychoanalytic analysis, yet as such can also possibly offer even more beneficial insights for understanding the potential of female masturbation in both practice and theory. By reading these films ‘against the grain’ I hope to offer a more theoretically complex and potent way of understanding the significance of female masturbation and of feminist postmodern subjectivity itself.

CHAPTER 10
SINGLE WHITE FEMALE: “I NEVER MET ANYONE SO AFRAID OF BEING A
(MASTURBATOR)”

Although not overtly postmodern in form, Barbet Schroeder’s 1992 film, *Single White Female*, does profoundly speak to postmodern concerns in regards to female subjectivity. Within this film we watch as the protagonist, Allison Jones (Bridget Fonda), seeks to overcome the dissolution of her engagement to fiancé Sam (Steven Weber) by inviting Hedra Carlson (Jennifer Jason Leigh) to be her new roommate. The relationship between Allie and Hedy soon becomes dangerously close and overwhelmingly pertinent to Allie’s own sense of herself as a “single” and “female” subject as Hedy ultimately transforms into a kind of doppelganger that confronts Allie with what seems to be her own fractured subjectivity, aggressive feminist fantasies, and masturbatory queer sexuality. As Deborah Jermyn suggests when discussing the trend of “female psychopath” films in the 1990s, “the division between the women is not the simplistic battle between good woman/bad woman, virgin/whore, monster/victim that it may initially seem to be, but is in fact rather complex. The conflict between women in these films—or fundamentally between ‘oppositional’ female functions and behaviour—can be seen as the external representation of the victim/wife’s own internal battle”(253). Despite the more superficial reading of *Single White Female* that might lead us to see Hedy as merely a pathological murderess and Allie as the sympathetic victim, or the knee jerk reactionary feminist reading of the film that might posit it as a misogynistic backlash against feminism itself, if we engage with a more queerly postmodern analysis of the

film, we can begin to realize its complex representation of the “internal battle” of feminist postmodern subjectivity and the especially vital role that female masturbation plays within it.

When Allie and Hedy first meet, the seeming disparity of their appearances and personalities initially establishes them as opposites. Allie’s slim body and friendly, outgoing demeanor look distinctly feminine and modern as adorned with a short red bob hairstyle and expensive looking clothes that are “so New York.” Hedy, on the other hand, strikes us as nervously shy and somewhat dowdy within her dated and loose-fitting dress. However, her signifiers of abject difference soon give way to a complete repetition of Allie’s appearance. Hedy effectively copies the kind of idealized femininity that Allie embodies as she buys identical clothes, wears the same makeup, and even eventually has her hair styled to match Allie’s. The surface identities of these two women thus begin to merge within the visual terms of the film that equate the women through their identical signifiers of stereotypical femininity. They both become stylishly “New York” with red hair and lips and trendy outfits. The prominence of these costume and makeup mise-en-scene elements takes on added significance as they, “work like ‘the masquerade’ to highlight [femininity’s] artificiality. By showing the ultimate failure of Hedy’s attempts to be closer to Allie and become more like her by copying her style, the film illustrates the futility of this notion of the construction of femininity” (Jermyn 265). Therefore, not only does Hedy come to represent a kind of double of Allie that actualizes a specter of Allie’s postmodern fragmented subjectivity, but these feminine signifiers also serve to critique the stereotypical trappings of compulsory female norms.

The film also visually posits Hedy as a refraction of Allie's subjectivity through its use of mirror motifs. Throughout the film we frequently see the women interacting in front of reflective surfaces that serve to further visualize their closeness and interchangeability. As such, not only do the women now look alike, but they also reflect one another in a way that doubles that doubling effect for the spectator and allows them a reflective spectacle of their own similar self-images. In the majority of these mirror shots, Hedy gazes at Allie or at her reflection while Allie most often concerns herself with her own image. This positioning reinforces our focus on the threatened constitution of Allie's sense of coherent identity and establishes a queer element of desire within the relationship between the two women, or rather between Allie and the projected image of herself that Hedy comes to represent. According to Scott Paulin:

In *Single White Female*, the interrelation of identification and desire, the dynamics of the relationship between self and other, are suggested especially in the play of mirror reflections set into motion by the film, and by the implication via Lacan of that mirroring...these mirrors...serve to literalize Lacan's conception of the mirror stage as a process that is formative of subjectivity and identity. (44)

Hedy identifies with and desires for herself Allie's feminine ideal image while Allie sees herself as divided and repeated. Here Hedy appears as a kind of specular image for Allie that is simultaneously her and Other and thus threatens her notion of unique selfhood.

According to Dylan Evans, the specular image "threatens the subject with fragmentation, and the mirror stage thereby gives rise to an aggressive tension between the subject and the image"(115). Hedy's reflection confronts Allie with her own postmodern fragmented subjectivity and this confrontation will indeed lead to "an aggressive tension" between the two women before Allie is ultimately able to truly identify with Hedy as the specular image by killing her and integrating her specter. In these mirror shots we as spectators

also see a double and sometimes a quadruple “white female” and thus have a visual representation of the multiple fragmentations of Allie’s subjectivity.

As Hedy in essence becomes Allie in copying or masquerading her feminist signifiers and further reflecting her image on the surfaces that surround them, the similarities between the women crystallize to the point that others begin to mistake them for the same person and we as spectators can also begin to think of them as a single yet divided subjectivity. Graham tells Allie that he had chased down someone who had turned out not to be her and was most likely Hedy, and later the front desk attendant at Sam’s building says goodnight to “Ms. Jones” as Hedy exits the lobby after killing Sam. This visual doubling is ultimately doubly significant in that it emphasizes the ununified nature of postmodern subjectivity and represents Hedy “as a doppelganger, doubling Allie and threatening her illusion of coherent individuality” (Paulin 43). Allie feels threatened by Hedy’s transformation in that it in effect dismantles her imagined uniqueness; she is no longer an individuated trendy redhead in New York City, she is no longer even the only one of these in her own apartment. Hedy as doppelganger thus stands as a postmodern visual refutation of the Modernist belief in an inherent unique subjectivity within each individual. As Catherine Spooner contends, here “the word ‘single’ also takes on the connotations of ‘singular’ and ‘unique’ when, ironically, Hedy turns herself into Allie’s double”(300).

As this “double,” Hedy goes beyond representing a mere visual pastiche of Allie in that she comes to embody and enact many of the hyperbolic feminist ideals that Allie seems too afraid or demure to carry out herself. Near the end of the film Hedy tells Allie that she “has never met anyone so scared of being a woman.” The kind of “woman” that

Allie is afraid to be is a radically aggressive feminist. Allie may be willing to take Sam back despite his infidelity and to tolerate the advances of her lecherous boss Mitch to a certain extent, but Hedy as her double refuses to sit back and let Allie be oppressed. Myra Macdonald takes issue with the film's depiction of this hyperbolic feminism, stating:

The psychotic flat-sharer, Hedy...has the feminist lines. It is she who warns Allie...about trusting men too far, she who insists that Allie's boss needs a serious fright after he has attempted to rape her, and she who takes the necessary action. Her extravagant and uncontrolled behaviour at the same time establishes her insanity. When feminism becomes identified with madness, even postfeminism seems dangerous. (129)

The violence within this film is extreme and problematic for the significance of its reception and of this project's interpretation. Nevertheless, foreclosing a reading that would look beyond the severity of this troubling violence seems equally problematic. Hedy does become a psychotic murderer, yet her hyperbolic performance speaks to a theoretical confrontation with misogyny and as such poses a "dangerousness" that seems imperative to explore. As dangerous and psychotically violent as Hedy's actions and significations are, if we rather read them within the metaphorical framework of her representation of Allie's own "internal battle," they can also offer a more progressive imagining of feminist agency.

Following her breakup with Sam, we learn of Allie's intense fear of being alone and her lack of positive relationships with other women. Her only friend, the homosexual and thus non-threatening Graham, counsels her with the advice that "there are worse things than being alone," yet she decides to look for a roommate anyway. We also learn through her initial meeting with Mitch that her relationship with her female ex-business partner ended as a "non-friendly split." When Hedy arrives on the scene, her own intense fear of being alone renders Allie's hyperbolic, yet she also serves to establish a kind of

progressive relationship between the women that replaces the compulsory heterosexual partnership and family. As Jermyn observes, “in the first line of dialogue, Sam asks Allie, ‘So how many kids do we want?’ ... Hedy disrupts this vision, posing the potential formation of a new kind of relationship or female family”(263-4). Before killing him, Hedy tells Sam that “[Allie] needs me, I took care of her. We lean on each other, protect each other. We’re best friends.” Indeed, beginning with their initial meeting, Hedy comforts Allie, solacing her through her depression following Sam’s infidelity, cooking for her, and helping her with her career projects. Hedy even brings home a puppy that comes to represent a child-like figure in the new found “female family” of Allie, Hedy, and dog. In one scene we see them all in bed together taking a “family portrait” picture of themselves. This new family structure supports Allie emotionally and professionally and, like the “soul mate” relationship between the women in *Sex and the City*, figures as a type of “lesbian continuum” along the lines of Adrienne Rich’s vision of women-identified affiliation for personal survival and political action.

As a member of this lesbian continuum family, Allie undergoes a harrowing experience of sexual harassment at the hands of her boss Mitch. She deflects a potential rape by punching him in the groin and running away, yet when she later relates the incident to Hedy she seems more troubled by her own actions than by his: “What I did, it was like something inside taking over. It was scary...It’s like he’s put me back to square one...What can I do?” Hedy responds with a criticism of Sam for not being there to help her and with direct action; without asking Allie, she calls Mitch and threatens him so as to assure that Allie’s connections to future clients are not jeopardized by Allie’s self defensive attack. Mitch in many ways represents the embodiment of patriarchal

oppression in the workplace. He condescends to Allie, pays her less than her efforts are worth, and finally sexually assaults her. Allie repeatedly tolerates this sexist treatment with a smile up until her self defensive strike; it is Hedy who truly fights back for her. Later in the film Mitch reappears as a would be rescuer, yet as he straddles Allie's restrained body, Hedy again enacts a feminist fantasy of not only verbally berating him, but of literally killing the misogynist threat as well. Here Hedy as "the female psychopath can also be read as offering progressive or oppositional possibilities for female spectators, for confronting dilemmas and exercising a behaviour in which they are not usually allowed to indulge" (Jermyn 252). As Allie watches Hedy kill Mitch, she is in essence watching her doppelganger do what she herself could not: defeat the misogynist enemy. Hedy has enacted Allie's own feminist yet unrealized fantasies and through doing so has in a way liberated her from a form of patriarchal tyranny.

Hedy performs a similar kind of hyperbolic feminist liberation when she kills Sam. Before the actual murder takes place, Hedy repeatedly strives to eliminate the heterosexual imperative that Sam represents by dissuading Allie from contacting him, erasing his answering machine messages, and hiding his letter of apology. Despite these efforts, Sam, in his own words, "force[s] his way in" and the couple make amends, rescheduling their wedding plans and effectively threatening to destroy the lesbian continuum family that Hedy has worked to establish. Nevertheless, Hedy ultimately succeeds in destroying this threat by killing Sam. After Allie realizes what Hedy has done, Hedy tells her that "it was an accident, but he deserved it." Allie tries to placate her saying, "I know you weren't yourself when you did this," to which Hedy responds, "I know. I was you." Superficially, Hedy here refers to the building clerk's misidentification

of her as Allie following the murder, but on a more relevant level, her words refer to her actions as the actualization of Allie's own probable revenge fantasies. Carrying out a kind of punishment for his infidelity, Allie's double or projected subjectivity has again performed what Allie herself could not or was afraid to let herself think she might unconsciously want to do. Hedy kills Sam by piercing him through the eye with Allie's stiletto heeled shoe, thus using Allie's own feminine signifier to effectively dismantle the power of the male gaze while also removing the prerogative of compulsory heterosexuality. Lynda Hart argues that "Allie's destiny is to reproduce Sam. Hedy, the pathological lesbian, interrupts this reproduction. But her violent intrusion into this arrangement not only effects a disruption of Allie's heterosexuality but also cancels out what is clearly a reproduction of 'normative' white procreativity" (117). Through creating an alternate female family, taking direct feminist action against Mitch, and cancelling out this normative procreativity, Hedy as Allie's double poses a further threat to the protagonist by confronting her with the prospect of aggressively assertive response to patriarchy that frighteningly shows Allie the dangerous actions that she herself might unconsciously desire. According to Paulin:

Hedy's 'dangerousness' cannot be read with a wholly negative valence. It is, in fact, part of her appeal...Hedy has access to these acts of aggression, beyond the gestures of self-defense Allie is initially able to practice, precisely because of her refusal to be pinned down by standard definitions of gender and sexuality...it is Hedy's capacity for aggression that fascinates us, even as we are encouraged to fear Hedy's insanity and deviance. (50)

Hedy as subjective doppelganger thus appeals to and upsets spectators through her subversion of heterosexist norms; her actions are all the more threatening in that we watch them unfold set within the masquerading signifiers of Allie's own subjectivity.

For the purposes of this project, however, the most significant site of Hedy's disruptive influence as reflected subjectivity lies in her enacted queer and masturbatory sexuality. Allie seems to suffer from the patriarchal repression of female sexuality in that she is horribly embarrassed to learn that Graham can hear her having sex, in that when we do see her engaged in sexual activity, it is always veiled in shadows as is her nudity that is only shown briefly from behind, and in that she continually averts her eyes with a look of shame whenever she is confronted with the site of Hedy's conversely frequently and frontally exposed nudity. Hedy repeatedly undresses, showers, and walks around with her underwear exposed in front of Allie in a way that conveys her relative comfort with her own body and sexuality as compared to Allie's apparent embarrassment. Jermyn points out that, "the film clearly indicates that Hedy's open sexuality is further evidence of her psychopathology, yet a progressive reading demands the recuperation of Hedy's behaviour as a rejection of the passive, inhibited, female sexual role which patriarchal society assigns to women"(265). This kind of sexual exposure also works to engender a palpable, if never outwardly named, queer character within the relationship between the two women. Throughout her emulation of and transformation into the double image of Allie, Hedy continually conveys a sort of lesbian desire. She gazes longingly at Allie and her image, rubs her back, holds her hand, and kisses her on the cheek, often all whilst scantily clad. Even though the prospect of lesbianism remains at the subtextual level within the film, its presence exacerbates the deviant power of Hedy's sexuality and infuses her subversion of heterosexist norms and subsequent disruption of Allie's sense of selfhood. As Paulin states, "for Hedy, identity and identification, sexuality and desire are always complexly interwoven, just as they appear to be in her relationship with

Allie”(49). If Hedy essentially projects Allie’s fragmented subjectivity, then her potential lesbian desire for Allie already insinuates a kind of masturbatory prospect of self love.

Whereas Hedy may be only provisionally lesbian, she is definitely a masturbator and thus the specter of Allie’s own sexual pleasure and of the ultimately threatening prospect of nonreproductive sexual activity. In a key sequence of the film, Allie voyeuristically witnesses Hedy masturbating which becomes the crucial first step towards Allie’s comprehension of Hedy as veritable threat to her sense of self. Following a shadowed sex act between Allie and Sam, Allie finds Hedy talking to him and subsequently falls asleep despite the apparent feelings of paranoia that this exchange between her roommate and fiancé engenders. We next see Allie awakened later that same night and wandering out into the hallway where she hears lustful moans emanating from Hedy’s room. Intrigued, Allie investigates and comes face to face with the reflected image of Hedy bare breasted and impassioned in the throes of masturbatory pleasure. With a look of both fascination and shock Allie stands transfixed by the image until the dog in her arms yelps, alerting Hedy to their presence. Paulin asserts that in this scene:

only when the body is autoerotically engaged, when it attains a kind of phallic power through its own pleasure—and when Allie can believe that her gaze is not returned, when she cannot be seen looking—can she look upon it, and then she is both fascinated and appalled by the image of her own sexual pleasure without its fantasmatic cloaking. (55)

Normally too embarrassed to look at Hedy’s body, here Allie seems to voyeuristically revel in the sight and this moment of pleasure in looking at the other who represents herself engaged in self pleasure seems to confront her with the dangerous prospect of a self-serving female sexuality. Allie flees from the sight of this “phallic power” back to her own room, yet its impact follows her metaphorically and literally as Hedy pursues the

noise that disturbed her into Allie's room. As the threatening figure of female sexuality, Hedy looms over Allie's body as she pretends to be asleep and pervades her psyche with the sight of her own subversive pleasure. This confrontation with the specter of female masturbation serves as a kind of turning point in the film as we see Allie's attitude towards Hedy as markedly changed the next morning. Suspicious of and threatened by her sexual pleasure, Allie is now cold to her eroticized double and scurries to be out of her presence.

The threat of Hedy's sexuality comes to a head somewhat later in the film when after Hedy completes her visual transformation into Allie's double and Allie discovers the truth about Hedy's past, we follow Allie as she follows Hedy to an underground sex club. Here the now redheaded Hedy wears a vampy black dress identical to one of Allie's and as she descends into the club, Allie in effect witnesses herself existing in a metaphoric milieu of sexuality itself. The club is dimly lit and populated by leather clad sexual "deviants" who watch what seems to be a s/m performance in a side room. A woman from this audience pursues Allie upon her arrival and asks her if she wants "to play." Allie nervously declines this more direct lesbian threat and stumbles over to a cage where a man strokes at her through the bars. Allie is clearly highly uncomfortable in this sexualized environment and her discomfort becomes horror as she sees Hedy as Allie participating in this sexual subculture using her name. Here the masturbating woman interacts with other dangerously sexual beings and thus poses the ultimate threat for Allie as a visualization of herself doing things that she would never as a properly feminine heterosexual do.

The film must ultimately punish Hedy for her reflective subjectivity and subversive sexuality; she has transgressed normative gender and sexuality and confronted the protagonist—and the spectator—with her troubling mimicry and abjection, and so for all Hollywood intents and purposes must be eliminated for her queer potential and aggressiveness. However, it is Allie who finally aggressively acts to kill Hedy off and in doing so finally behaves as the “pathological” Hedy does. Amidst her efforts at this triumph, Allie smashes Hedy into the mirrors in the apartment that had reflected their similarities and declares that, “I’m not like your sister, not anymore Hedy. I’m just like you now.” In finally fighting back, Allie is now like Hedy, although in that she is fighting against the specter of her own fragmented subjectivity, she is in essence embracing her own aggressive potential and acting to absolve the fragmentation of that subjectivity.

Jermyn asserts that:

At one point Hedy tells Allie, “I saved you,” and perhaps that is one of the best ways to understand the film. Through surviving her ordeal, Allie has escaped containment within the family, avoided marriage to an unfaithful partner, overcome sexual harassment, confronted female sexuality and , arguably, started to overcome her fear of being alone. (266)

When Hedy tells Allie that she has saved her she refers to her presence as having saved Allie from her fear of being a “woman.” Allie has in fact been forced to face this fear as a result of her relationship with Hedy. She has seen herself doubled and thus rendered no longer unique and aware of her fragmented subjectivity, she has seen her latent feminist revenge fantasies enacted, and she has come face to face with the prospect of female masturbation and the sense of actualized sexuality that it entails. Now she must embrace the aggressive power of the masturbating feminist in order to save her life and her sense of integrated subjectivity.

The last few shots of the film depict Allie in the efforts of putting her life, and in essence her subjectivity, back together. These efforts remain haunted by postmodernity, however, in that “Allie does not quite emerge as a subject who has classically misrecognized herself as an autonomous, unitary whole. Rather, her ordeal leads her to acknowledge the alterity within herself, moving from her initial adoration of the integrity of her reflection to the film’s final image” (Paulin 46). This final image of a photograph that aligns half of a picture of Allie’s face with half of a picture of Hedy’s visualizes Allie’s final comprehension of her own divided subjectivity and leaves us with the indication that Allie will from this point forward perhaps incorporate much of what Hedy as her double represented into her own actions, including the possibility that she too will now take direct feminist action and will also perhaps masturbate. As Paulin contends:

Allie may continue to be haunted by past events and by the awareness of her own incoherence as a subject; in that sense she will never be alone again. Yet...Allie does seem to be radically alone, and in a sense, autoerotic...Despite the split subject...there remains only one (auto)erotic body to which Allie has access. (57)

In this one body Allie now has the image of Hedy as the masturbating woman as part of herself and thus has also attained the prospect of immense pleasure in her solitary and queerly nonheteronormative state.

Unlike *Seinfeld* and *Sex and the City*, *Single White Female* fails to more obviously positively normalize the prospect of female masturbation. Here the masturbator isn’t winning visible sexual pleasure and power from losing a contest or sharing an extravagant fantasy with her lesbian continuum friends; Hedy as masturbator rather offers a more challenging representation of eroticized feminism. As a masturbatory and hyperbolically violent doppelganger, she embodies the epitomized postmodern threat to Allie’s subjectivity and the ultimate subversive lesbian feminist threat to patriarchal

heteronormativity. On the surface level the threat she poses is destroyed through her death, however, on an ideological and psychoanalytic level, the powerful subversion that she instigates and emblemizes persists in its integrated incantation within Allie's subjectivity and within the cultural imagination of the film's spectators. In Hedy we see many of the problems of feminism and postmodernism visualized and we see them masturbating. Laqueur contends that prior to the influence of second wave feminism, adult "masturbation was the evil doppelganger of ordinary intercourse that had to be repressed" (402). For Hollywood Hedy is likewise the masturbating evil doppelganger that must be eliminated, but for understanding feminist postmodern subjectivity, she is the potentially progressive figure of a self serving powerful sexuality and fantastical feminist agency. In *Single White Female* feminism is not represented as a simple and innocent cause or activity; we see positive women-identification, yet we also see this breakdown in a way that questions feminists like Adrienne Rich's easy answers for affiliation and progress. Women are postmodern fragmented subjects who can flourish in a lesbian continuum but who can also commit literal and ideological violence against one another. Both potentialities must be contended with which means acknowledging the dangers as well as embracing the sometimes threatening possibilities each may offer. Despite our revulsion to her abjection, Hedy through being such a disruptive figure importantly makes us ask vital questions concerning postmodern subjectivity, feminist action, and queer sexuality. In order to preclude the actualization within the feminist cause of the kind of literal destruction that she engenders, we must like Allie seek to destroy the threat of her hyperbolic violence and to integrate her masturbatory subversive power.

CHAPTER 11
MULHOLLAND DR.: “THIS IS THE (MASTURBATING) GIRL”

As the discussion of *Single White Female* has taken our conception of the prospect of masturbation to a more subjective and theoretical level, by looking closely at another more recent popular Hollywood film containing the haunting image of a masturbating woman, David Lynch’s 2001 film, *Mulholland Dr.*, we can begin to theorize the potentialities of the psychic implications of masturbation to an even greater extent. Whereas *Single White Female* speaks to postmodern concerns regarding subjectivity, yet does not do so in a stereotypically postmodern visual way, *Mulholland Dr.* manipulates the filmic medium in more obviously postmodern ways as it also explores the psychoanalytic implications of postmodernity. David Lynch has become a kind of poster boy for postmodern cinema by way of incorporating unsettling postmodern imagery and themes across the majority of his films, including *Eraserhead* (1976), *Blue Velvet* (1986), and *Lost Highway* (1996), as well as within his groundbreaking television series, *Twin Peaks* (1990-91). Originally conceived of and created as a second foray into serialized postmodern television, *Mulholland Dr.* ultimately proved “too disturbing” in its psychic convolutions for the ABC network executives who opted not to pick up the show after viewing Lynch’s pilot episode (Natoli 242). However, upon receiving additional funding for supplemental footage from the French production company Studio Canal + who bought the rights from ABC, Lynch eventually transformed this pilot into the more self-contained feature film. As such, this film provides an interesting conflation of televisual and cinematic codes that particularly speak to the aesthetics of postmodernism.

According to Stuart Sim:

the mainstay of Lynch's style draws upon the staples of postmodern aesthetics. A love of parody and cliché, an eclectic use of film genre, from high art film noir and surrealism to horror to pornography, an interrogation of surface image and employment of psychoanalysis to probe that surface and reveal the hidden and abject where least expected. (307)

Mulholland Dr. in many ways exemplifies this Lynchian postmodern style with its incorporation of Hollywood clichés and 1950s design elements that lend themselves to the creation of a pastiche of film noir. Graham Fuller observes that “Lynch...cross-fertilized film noir and 50s pop flicks into *Mulholland Dr.*'s ambient postmodern Hollywood gothic”(“Babes in Babylon”). The classic film noir genre as well as the gothic literary tradition embrace the themes of paranoia and identity confusion and subversion as does Lynch's film, however, while the classic films of these genres most often reach some kind of definite closure and prescription of normative truth, Lynch conversely utilizes the pastiche of these styles to leave open an unsettling space for the exploration of a decentered postmodern subjectivity. Here we have the caricatures of the ingenue, the femme fatale, the detective, the gangster; however, these noir staples gain their significance in the film through their more postmodern psychoanalytic implications. Also unlike the majority of its Hollywood noir predecessors, this film focuses the narrative on its female characters and incorporates an exploration of lesbian desire and, even more importantly, female masturbation and fantasy. In doing so, Lynch's postmodern noir, like recent lesbian thriller fiction, can:

problematise the masculinist stereotypes associated with classic crime fiction...and...can construct a more complex model of subjectivity and social relations than is generally associated with the genre...By portraying the protagonists...transgressing accepted social and sexual codes and challenging phallogocentric images of femininity, [postmodern lesbian thrillers] interrogate the

scripts conventionally assigned to women in Western fiction, creating alternative representations of femininity and relations between women. (Palmer 160)

Mulholland Dr. provides such potent transgressions of “feminine” codes in depictions of lesbian sexuality and the traditionally stigmatized image of the masturbating woman.

Like *Single White Female*, this film makes use of visual and psychic doublings of women implicated in lesbian and masturbatory desire that interrogate the norms of gender and sexuality and the nature of subjectivity and identification itself. Lynch has described the film as a “love story in the city of dreams”(Macaulay). Set in the dream factory of Hollywood, the narrative revolves around the relationship between two women as they search for lost identity and find mutual desire. Within the first two thirds of the film we watch as the seemingly innocent ingenue Betty (Naomi Watts) arrives in Hollywood to pursue her acting career and finds a mysterious amnesiac who adopts the name Rita (Laura Elena Harring) in a befuddled state in her aunt’s apartment. These two women become close through their efforts to uncover Rita’s true identity and ultimately become sexually involved. In the last third of the film, however, the identities and relationships that have heretofore been established fall into disarray as Betty is now the jaded Diane, heartbroken and embittered by her rejection from Camilla, the now coldly seductive version of Rita. The juxtapositions and complications between the identities of Betty/Diane and Rita/Camilla suggest that this film has at its core an exploration of the nature of identity that in being so convoluted brings into question the complications of postmodernism for female subjectivity. Philip Lopate argues that “what [Lynch] is really drawn to is performance. Where identity is not fixed, performance becomes a floating anchor...turnabout shows the playful fluidity that represents, for Lynch, the promise of human character, the reverse side of the anxiety that comes of not having a fixed

self”(“Welcome to L.A.”). Thus, as Lopate suggests, although the fragmented nature of identity within the film is unsettling, it can also be read more progressively as a realm of “fluid” self-creative possibility.

That the film takes place amidst the workings of Hollywood, the metaphorical epitome of the creation of “dreams,” or illusory manifestations of identity, and that Betty/Diane and Camilla and her blonde name double are actresses who we see performing various identities reinforces this theme of the “playful” search for identity and, in a typically postmodern fashion, calls attention to itself as another one of Hollywood’s identity fictions. As we as spectators attempt to make sense of the convoluted narrative of *Mulholland Dr.*, the difficulty that we encounter also upsets any lingering modernist assumptions about the stability of truth and identity and the centered nature of subjectivity which makes us viscerally aware of our own troubled relationship to postmodernism and its psychoanalytic implications. Rather than constructing an easily decipherable and objective narrative:

Lynch’s films play out like dreams inspired by them. In effect, this means lifting the lid of narrative itself to reveal the tempestuous currents of wonder and terror thrashing about beneath the specific details of the plot. This places the audience in uncommonly raw, direct contact with the terror and confusion the characters are enduring. (Le Cain)

We feel our own notions of knowledge and subjectivity complicated by witnessing this confusing raw terror, but, as mentioned above, this disruption also allows for potentially liberating creativity and reinvention.

The most prevalent interpretation of the film’s convolutions among published reviews deciphers that the first two thirds of the film constitute the makings of Diane’s fantastical dream that reinterprets her relationship and eventual breakup with Camilla.

Kirsten Ostherr and Arash Abizadeh's review of the film in *Senses of Cinema* typifies this interpretation: "Betty and Diane represent two temporally distant poles of a single identity, and the seemingly chronological narrative of the first half represents...a sequentially rearranged interpretation by Diane of her own (willing) corruption at the hand of Camilla"("Amnesia.."). This type of review contends that the remainder of the film represents the "reality" of the situation that opposes the earlier dream and thus that Diane and Camilla are to be taken as the true identities of the women and that what we see unfold in this section is the nonlinear explanation of the dissolution of the women's romantic attachment. While this popular interpretation of the film does offer up many interesting insights into the film's implications for our understandings of the nature of reality and of the psyche, I would like to consider an alternate interpretation of *Mulholland Dr.* that foregrounds the significance of masturbation. Considering the postmodern nature of Lynch's oeuvre and the imagery and events that we see unfold in the last third of the film, I argue as Amy Taubin does that:

in *Mulholland Drive*, there is no conclusive evidence that the dreamer ever awakes. While the second half of the film transforms the meaning of the first half, it does so by reflecting one dream in its mirror opposite. Despite [its] seemingly expository moments...the second half of the film is even more Borgesian in its circularity and more hallucinatory in its imagery than the first. ("In Dreams")

Thus there is no distinct indication that the latter portion of the film should necessarily be valued as "real" anymore than what precedes it. In fact, interpreting the end of the film as "reality" and/or the beginning as a kind of passive dream state seems to foreclose a possibly more fecund understanding that takes into account the potential for more active identity creation, its connections to masturbation, and the resulting significance that it offers for feminism and postmodernism.

Here I will consider the implications of reading *Mulholland Dr.* not as a dream juxtaposed with its sources in reality, but rather as in its entirety constituting a kind of extended masturbation fantasy. Philip Lopate contends that in this film, “the languid, seductive rhythms, the unresolved, circular, less-than-over-beating narrative, the sexy actors all contribute to a kind of personal, open-ended fantasy, or pornography, of yearning,” and I would argue that this languid fantasy of yearning is particularly masturbatory (“Welcome to L.A.”). The insertion point for this reading, one of the most indelible sequences of the film that creates the kind of raw connection between characters and audience as described above, takes place within the last third of the narrative as we witness a desperate and disheveled woman, who we have by this point been led to identify as Diane, feverishly masturbating. Within this sequence the camera slowly pans right from a doorway to an extreme close-up of this woman’s tortured face as it convulses with tears. This close-up cuts away to subjective point of view shots that indicate her perception focusing in and out of her surroundings with a flickering blurring effect that is accompanied by a muffled sound of distortion. These blurred shots repeat and intersect with more shots of the woman’s face and a slow tilt down her body that reveals her hand at desperate work rubbing her genitalia. We also see a change come over her expression as her tears give way to a frenzied look of angry determination. We can read the initial lingering on the doorway as an indication of the sequence’s significance for allowing an entry point to the subjectivity of the woman we next see foregrounded. The blurred point of view shots provide us with an identification with this woman’s perspective and work to move us further into her psyche. Similarly blurred shots occur at several other key moments in the film, including during the linking shots between the opening jitterbug

sequence and the subjective fall into the bed, while Betty and Rita take a cab ride to Club Silencio, and throughout the dinner party sequence. This subjective blur motif connects the masturbation sequence, in which the effect is the most acute, to other portions of the film in a way that seems to support a reading of the film as masturbation fantasy. While the masturbation sequence proper only lasts a few moments, choosing to read the film ‘against the grain’ with this sequence as a kind of model engenders new possibilities for understanding the power of masturbatory fantasy in relation to feminist postmodern subjectivity. If we imagine the film as a whole as a masturbation fantasy, we can see it as one woman’s eroticized search for her own identity. Rather than suggesting that this woman is Diane, that Betty is her alter ego, or that Rita and Camilla are just different versions of some external object of desire, I would like to consider the theoretical possibilities that might arise if we instead consider all of the characters within the film and their permutations to be the psychic images of this figure of the masturbating woman. If we imagine this woman as being somewhat outside of the text of the film, we can consider the psychoanalytic relationships between these images and envision what the effects of this fantasy might be for this woman’s subjectivity and for our understanding of feminist postmodern identity.

In order to effect this kind of understanding, we must explore the nature of the relationship between fantasy and reality and seek to grasp that relationship’s bearing on sexuality and subjectivity. In *Between the Body and the Flesh*, Lynda Hart delineates the problematic customary conception of these relationships:

The most common understanding of fantasy is that it is always disjunctive with reality—indeed it is most often understood as a retreat, or escape, from reality...[but] if we truly believed that fantasy was something like a vacation...we would not be so concerned with it. Is it then the disjuncture that is really so

troubling, or the possibility that the disjuncture does *not* divide fantasy from reality? Perhaps the disjunctive theory is merely a way of avoiding the fear that fantasies can indeed not only affect reality but even constitute it...the notion that the place of fantasy has no relation to the changing of reality is what is most problematic... 'we' deny, even prohibit, the power of women's fantasies.(17-18)

Hart makes this argument in the context of criticizing the efforts of some feminists to police female sexuality in order to rid it of any traces of sadistic or masochistic desire and fantasy. These comments also speak to the erotic fantasy that is *Mulholland Dr.*. What we see unfold in the film is not always pretty or ostensibly feminist; this fantasy is often violent and dark. Masturbation in *Mulholland Dr.* enables a kind of transgressive and potentially therapeutic psychoanalytic exploration of subversive sexual and aggressive possibilities, many of which are similar to those that Hedy enacts and embodies for Allie in *Single White Female*. In her fantasy the masturbating woman can be both Betty and Diane, can know and love both Rita and Camilla, and can attempt to make a kind of fantastical sense of the social forces in the world around her in envisioning the workings of a film noir Hollywood that seems to conspire against her. Within this interpretation we can begin to uncover and contend with the darker aspects of subjectivity and sexuality that do not fit so nicely within a "lesbian continuum" or a white washed version of feminist sexuality. Here desire and identification commingle in a disturbing milieu that helps to reveal the traumatic yet potentially salutary power of female sexuality and postmodern subjectivity. Here we can begin to understand that masturbation fantasy is not disjunctive with the reality of the psyche that creates it and that it rather in fact potentially contributes to its creation.

Hart's remarks in many ways relate to the theories of Lacanian psychoanalysis, in which fantasy is constituent of the Imaginary order of the psyche which:

has powerful effects in the real and is not simply something that can be dispensed with...The basis of the imaginary order continues to be the formation of the ego in the mirror stage. Since the ego is formed by identifying with the counterpart or specular image, identification is an important aspect of the imaginary order. (Evans 82)

This psychoanalytic tenet speaks to the powerful influence of fantasy and its intimate proximity to identification. However, Lacan generally contends that within the Imaginary fantasy serves a protective function against trauma (Evans 60). Arguing against this claim, I will suggest, as Hart also does, that fantasy can in fact engender a direct and recuperative confrontation with psychic trauma. The masturbation fantasy of *Mulholland Dr.*, while tied to the Imaginary and to identification, instigates this kind of subjective therapeutic encounter. The film's masturbating woman does not escape from reality within her fantasy; through it she intimately confronts her own sexual subjectivity in a way that we can imagine might lead to more "real" changes in her sense of self and interrelations with society. In this reading the film is a fantasy, but in this fantasy the permutations of identity and sometimes traumatic events combine and interact to constitute her subjectivity. The film's fantasy can thus represent:

a salient temporality in subject formation. If indeed the subject is always a subject-in-process, then at any one point she is formed, being formed, and...forming. Does not her formed-ness grant some subjectivity (however provisional) which she exercises even as cultural norms continue to interpellate her? (Straayer 176)

We hear the line, "This is the girl," repeated throughout the film, and I would argue that in many ways the "salient temporality in subject formation" through masturbation fantasy that is *Mulholland Dr.* is the "this" that "is the girl." This masturbation fantasy has the fearful power to both "affect" and "even constitute" her reality, her subjectivity, and it therefore seems to offer us a promising possibility for agency in the face of the sometimes oppositional relationship between feminism and postmodernism.

Two key sequences within the film particularly speak to the nondisjunctive relationship between fantasy and reality. The first occurs early in the film when we see two men conversing at the Winkie's restaurant that we later see Betty and Rita and even later Diane and the hit man meeting in. One of these men explains his reason for bringing the other there:

I had a dream about this place...it's the second one I've had but they're both the same. They start out that I'm in here...and I'm scared like I can't tell you...You're in both dreams and you're scared. I get even more frightened when I see how afraid you are and then I realize what it is. There's a man in back of this place. He's the one who's doing it. I can see him through the wall, I can see his face. I hope that I never see that face ever outside of a dream.

The other man responds, "So you came to see if he's out there," to which the first affirmatively answers, "to get rid of this God awful feeling." The men then walk out to the back of the building and find that the man is in fact there. The sight of his face causes the man who had dreamed about it to collapse, possibly dying from his fright. Within this scenario the man has had a dream fantasy of this terrifying face and then confronts it in reality; his fantasy and reality thus appear intimately interconnected as his dream trauma becomes his real trauma. This scene operates to both foreshadow the outcome of the masturbation fantasy of the film as a whole and to comment upon its nature and effect. The man's two dreams of the man behind Winkie's seem to correspond to the partial division between the two parts of the masturbation fantasy, the first being the early two thirds of the film in which we follow Betty and Rita, and the second being the final third of the film in which they have become Diane and Camilla. In terms of the actual masturbation sequence of the film we can understand the first part of the fantasy as corresponding to the woman's tearful face and the second relating to the subsequent change to angry determination. Both parts of this fantasy effect one another and effect the

constitution of the woman's subjectivity. The Winkie's dreams have informed the man's reality just as the masturbation fantasy surely reflects and affects the woman's psyche. In that this sequence appears as part of her masturbation fantasy, it in and of itself projects her psychic contention with the relationship between fantasy and reality.

The second key sequence of the film that informs our understanding of the relationship between fantasy and reality takes place near the end of the first portion of the masturbation fantasy when Betty and Rita travel to Club Silencio. As the two women watch from the audience, a man on stage speaks in a combination of English and Spanish to explain that, "There is no band. This is all a tape recording and yet we hear a band. If we want to hear a clarinet, listen, a trombone,...a muted trumpet...It's all recorded. It is all a tape. It is an illusion." Whilst he does so we hear the corresponding sounds that he describes and see a man who appears to be playing a trumpet come on to the stage and reveal that he is not in fact playing what we hear. A thunderous noise and a lightening like blue light then overtake the theater and within it we see Betty traumatically convulsing in her seat in a way that mirrors the masturbating woman's convulsions. Rebecca Del Rio then comes on stage and seemingly performs a Spanish rendition of Roy Orbison's "Crying," yet this performance proves to be illusory as well as she soon collapses like the frightened man behind Winkie's and is carried away while the sound of her singing continues. Just as "there is no band," there is no Betty, no Rita, no Diane, no Camilla; they are all just images within the masturbating woman's fantasy, and, on another level, just images on a movie screen that we are watching. Nevertheless, we "hear a band," we see these characters interacting within the fantasy, we become entranced in the film's narrative as it unfolds. It is all "an illusion," a fantasy, but this

fantasy intimately effects the masturbating woman's subjective reality and our theoretical conception of the film. Jean Tang argues that:

the sequence in the performance hall 'Silencio,' is fraught with entendre: more intense than a mere hint, Lynch nudges us forcefully in the ribs. His message? It doesn't matter whether the illusion you interpret is the music on the stage, the dream itself, which is about to come to an end, or all films and all of cinema. What's most disturbing isn't the fact of the illusion or fantasy, but its power to move audiences—here, Betty and Rita, suddenly proxies for a universal group—to tears, even to fell the feigning performer herself. It's a frightening power, especially when it can be evoked without any real sensory input (the pre-recorded song is lip-synched). ("Dissecting Lynch's Latest...")

Just as the illusory performance moves the women to tears, the masturbation fantasy confronts the woman with her own troubled psyche, and *Mulholland Dr.* confronts us with the power of cinematic illusion and the power of fantasy to effect a postmodern reality. Within the sequence these illusory performances engender more than tears; they also seem to create the blue box within Betty's purse and motivate her to find it there. This blue box serves as the psychoanalytic gateway between the two parts of the masturbation fantasy. Its creation leads to further effective change in the more dangerous second part of the masturbation fantasy in which psychic confrontations with trauma give way to the creation of a kind of feminist postmodern subjectivity.

The entirety of *Mulholland Dr.* is also riddled with mysteries and searches for identity that correspond to and inform the overarching search for identity of the masturbation fantasy. The men at Winkie's search for the nightmare man behind it, the Hollywood men look for the girl to star in the film, the detectives search for the woman who got away from the car accident, Betty and Rita search for Rita's true identity and for Diane Selwyn, and the hit man searches for his victim, all whilst the woman masturbating searches for herself. Within these identity investigations, repetitions and doublings

frequently occur that connect the film to the doublings of *Single White Female* and similarly call attention to the fragmented nature of postmodern subjectivity. Situations and lines of dialogue continually repeat and reappear, such as the aforementioned mise-en-scene of Winkie's and the phrase "this is the girl"; to name them all would seem endless. However, an analysis of the doubling that takes place between Betty and Rita speaks to the film's questioning of postmodern subjectivity and its imbricated confrontations with both trauma and sexuality. About halfway through the film the two women seek out the apartment of Diane Selwyn in the efforts of discovering clues to Rita's identity. What they find instead is a rotting corpse. When confronted with this gruesome sight, the women run from the apartment in terror and their images begin to literally blur and overlap. We next see the women in the bathroom of Aunt Ruth's apartment where Rita frantically attempts to cut her hair in order to alter her appearance, the image of her identity. The sight of the dead body has reminded her of the possibility of her own death. Betty stops her in her efforts, saying, "I know what you're doing. I know what you have to do, but let me do it. Let me do it." The camera then pans left across a table overloaded with signifiers of femininity, makeup, hygiene products, and wigs, to reveal the women standing side by side and gazing into the mirror hanging before them. Betty smiles and says with awe to Rita, "You look like someone else." This someone else is Betty herself as Rita now dons a short blond wig that marks her with the refracted identity of her soon to be lover. Not only does this sequence question the nature of identity itself through its duplicated imagery, but it also seems to speak to the masturbating woman's efforts to consolidate her fragmented postmodern subjectivity. Seeking to create the self-identical, Betty as proxy has taken the initiative to transform

another permutation of the woman's psyche and selfhood. Like in *Single White Female*, we are again presented with the mirror image of two identical women masquerading in feminine signifiers who in their interreflection visualize the fragmentation of postmodern subjectivity and the mirror stage's drama of identification.

Directly following this sequence of self-identification, we see these doubled women eroticized. Betty and Rita lie down together in the bed to sleep, but instead discover their mutual sexual desire. That this is a lesbian desire between two women works to posit a visual subversion of heteronormative gender and sexuality, yet we can also read this sex scene as a kind of masturbatory act of self love in that these women have just appeared to each other as self-identical. The image of their erotic embrace soon dissolves into a close up of their entwined hands and then into a medium close up of the women's faces aligned. Rita lays in the foreground, and Betty in back of her, but their facial features are matched with each other in such a way as to convey the image of one body, one face, one woman as subject before us. Much like the final image of *Single White Female*, these images of their combined hands and faces signify a kind of salient integration of subjectivity. Here the sexual act of one woman with the image of herself has resulted in the merging of these two doubles into one. This integrative power of the masturbatory act can be extended to the significance of the masturbatory fantasy of *Mulholland Dr.* as a whole. The women as psychic manifestations of the masturbating woman have confronted death, a divided subjectivity, and now a subversive lesbian sexuality which has at least temporarily engendered an integrated "salient temporality in subject formation." This sequence is followed by the blurring effect and the women's

experiences in Club Silencio that lead to the metaphoric trip into the blue box of the more dangerously traumatic second part of the masturbation fantasy.

We have now seen how one traumatic encounter with the specter of death leads into sexuality and to a kind of subjective integration, yet other significant brushes with the traumatic occur throughout the identity searches of *Mulholland Dr.* Within the postmodern fantasy of the film several haunting figures serve to symbolize the masturbating woman's psychoanalytic traumatic encounters with the Real. In Lacanian psychoanalysis the Real is one of the three orders of psychoanalytic phenomena. Located beyond the symbolic, the Real "emerges as that which is outside language" and "is the impossible...traumatic...object of anxiety...It is the missed encounter with this real object which presents itself in the form of trauma" (Evans 159-60). This notion of the Real describes the unknowable excess of the psyche that can sometimes be partially confronted through fantasy. Dylan Evans explains that:

The real is aligned with *tyche*, which Lacan redefines as 'the encounter with the real'. *Tyche* thus refers to the incursion of the real into the symbolic order...It is a knock on the door that interrupts a dream, and on a more painful level it is trauma. The traumatic event is the encounter with the real. (24-5)

Mulholland Dr. depicts *tyche* through its incorporation of disturbing embodiments of trauma within the fantasy: the grotesque image of Mr. Roque in effect represents the controlling force of the Hollywood gangster conspiracy to cast Camilla as "the girl" and relegate Diane to only supporting roles; the elderly couple that help welcome Betty to the "dream place" of Hollywood reappear as a kind of return of the repressed signifier of her futile ambition; most significantly, the figure of the disheveled man behind Winkie's rears its frightening face at several key moments of the film, representing "the film's heart of darkness, the face of the unnameable fear, which lurks beneath the layers of

dreams and nightmares that float over Mulholland Drive, but is probably unique to Diane's crushed soul" (Le Cain). The "unnameable fear" that the man's face represents can be understood as the Real of the masturbating woman's psyche, and when we see his face, we can imagine her own tyche.

We also witness a somewhat less abstracted form of her tyche through the appearance of the dead body that the women encounter, through the blue key's symbolization of Diane's murderous desire and crime, and most indelibly through Diane's suicide. As we behold these traumatic encounters with the Real we also literally hear a "knock on the door that interrupts a dream," or in this case a fantasy. The overwhelming sound of knocking pervades each of these encounters as the woman who supposedly switched apartments with Diane bangs on the door as Betty and Rita find the dead body and as we are first shown the hit man's blue key that indicates the completion of his task in murdering Camilla resting on Diane's coffee table. The sound of the knocking and its signification of tyche reach their loudest and most profound level at the end of the film when the elderly couple appears under Diane's door and chases Diane to her self-inflicted death. Maximilian Le Cain argues that "In Lynch the problem is not seeking to understand in a traditional way, but rather being able to see through the blinding emotional trauma of revelation that has shattered the world into dreamlike fragments that obliquely reflect the reality of the situation" ("In Dreams"). In reading the film as a masturbation fantasy, I am likewise not trying to understand it in a traditional way, but am rather interpreting these disturbing and violent events not as literal occurrences, but as the projected images of the "blinding emotional trauma" of tyche within the woman's psyche.

While watching the film we are witnessing how the woman is able to “get rid of this God awful feeling,” or confront her problematic identification and subjectivity, experience sexual desire, and also encounter trauma and deal with its effects through masturbation. The eroticized self-critical fantasy has allowed her a place to work through the problematics of postmodern subjectivity, feminist sexuality, and psychic trauma excess. Diane as Betty confronts the prospect of her own death, Diane enables the murder of Camilla, and Diane eventually kills herself, yet as such we behold the masturbating woman facing and “killing off” or mastering different aspects of her fragmented subjectivity. In this light the masturbation fantasy represents a kind of Lacanian zone between-two-deaths “in which tragedy is played out” (Evans 31). The body that Betty and Rita find in Diane Selwyn’s apartment serves as the symbol of the first death, or “the physical death of the body, a death which ends one human life but which does not put an end to the cycles of corruption and regeneration,” and Diane’s suicide acts as the second death, or “that which prevents the regeneration of the dead body” (Evans 31). The discovery of the dead body presents the image of a physical death in the film, yet it does not end the convolutions of the narrative. The suicide, however, does do so and thereby works as a kind of final subjective change within the psyche of the masturbating woman. With this second death the suicide sequence also seems to indicate a kind of orgasmic excess of jouissance that concludes the masturbation fantasy and act. As Diane runs into her bedroom the sound of the knocking and her screams reach an unbearable level and the rhythm of the editing and movement of the mobile framing accelerate much like the quickened bodily rhythms of an approaching orgasm. Diane finally reaches for the gun and shoots herself in the mouth with a last loud orgasmic bang. The scene then goes quiet

as the room fills with smoke and the blurred image of Betty together with Rita in her doubling blonde wig dances across the screen. This image of the women together as refracted representations of the same divided subjectivity also works much like the final image of *Single White Female* in which we see the images of Allie and Hedy integrated together. Therefore, in *Mulholland Dr.* we are also left with the visual indication of the equation of the different manifestations of one woman's fragmented subjectivity and thus of the salient temporality of integration of that subjectivity. However, the final images of the film go even further to reintroduce the prospect of trauma with the hazy image of the man behind Winkie's face and then to signify the silencing of this trauma with the images of the Club Silencio's stage on which we witnessed the performance of the nondisjunctive relationship between fantasy and reality and of the woman in the balcony seat whispering "Silencio." Here we have seen the climactic culmination of the masturbatory fantasy in a violent orgasmic death of a fractured subjectivity that works to "silence" the traumatic Real. The masturbating woman has fantasized her conflicted subjectivity and undergone tyche that brings her through an erotic recovery from trauma. Within *Mulholland Dr.* masturbation has thus theoretically offered a space for self-critical creation through a direct encounter with sexuality and the Real.

The masturbating woman of the film contends with the troubling and intense interrelations of trauma and pleasure in her fantasy and from it ultimately draws power over her own creation of subjectivity. In the film murder and suicide are not merely sadistic or masochistic in a derogatory way; they are powerful fantasies of agency. In them Diane like Hedy is a murderess with suicidal tendencies, yet in her killing and dying she in effect gives the masturbating woman life. This fantasy is also distinctly

postmodern and feminist in its acknowledgment of the transactional nature of identity as it arises out of a combination of social forces and individual methods of self-creation through fantasy; it harnesses the power of self-creativity through fantastical vengeance.

A feminist subjectivity may be threatened by postmodernism's fragmentation and incoherence and by sexuality's traumatic encounters with the Real, but it may be through an embrace, through the intimacy of a literal and theoretical masturbatory touch, of this contentious psychic and social situation that a woman may be able to find both political and personal strength. Lynda Hart argues that:

If integration is the goal of recovery, it would seem to me that the survivor who brings together [the] various aspects of her self, and performs them in a sexual space in which they can all be present at once, has achieved a level of integration that is the purported goal—the movement from survivor status to “recovery.” (200)

The masturbating woman of *Mulholland Dr.* plays with her multiple refractions of subjectivity and envisions the complex interactions between them in a sometimes traumatic, eroticized search for identity. In order to survive and “recover” feminist power, she indeed brings the various aspects of herself together in the sexual space of masturbation. Hart goes on to formulate the notion that:

Although it encompasses a wide range of practices, sexuality that embraces the erotics of power moves toward a precarious, delicate borderline that tests and transgresses the line between fantasy and reality. For...women...this borderline is often not a place to which they travel in order to risk the repetition of oppressive social structures; rather, it is the place where they find themselves located in order to repeat and transform their histories with a difference. Being there, rather than transcending it, may well be “the cure.”(202)

Masturbation seems to be a crucial manifestation of this kind of powerful sexuality that draws its power from its unique relationship to the disjuncture between fantasy and reality. Through masturbation women troubled by the complications of feminist postmodernism can “test and transgress” not only the interrelations of fantasy and reality,

but also the heteronormative prescriptions of gender and sexuality and can “repeat and transform their histories with a difference,” or play with the divisions of their subjectivity and affect “the cure” of salient integration, recovery from trauma, and orgasmic pleasure and power.

Mulholland Dr., like *Seinfeld*, *Sex and the City*, and *Single White Female* creates a public for the dissemination of masturbation’s potential power. It does so even more significantly through extending our comprehension of this power to a psychoanalytic level. We as spectators of these texts can through them understand the import of female masturbation that begins within the psyche yet can extend beyond the individual to initiate a possibly liberating discourse of self-creation and feminist action. Televisual and filmic manifestations of masturbation can thus provide the potent understanding of the disjuncture between fantasy and reality that can engender a salient and subversive temporality of subjecthood. This subjectivity can link us to others and help to create a progressively theoretical and political sense of communal feminist postmodernism.

CHAPTER 12
CONCLUSION: MASTURBATING FICTIONS FOR CYBORG MYTHS THROUGH
FEMINIST (POM(O)NANISM)

At the outset of this project, I suggested that exploring the practical and theoretical potential of female masturbation might offer a unique way of negotiating a progressive understanding of feminism and postmodernism. However, I am by far not the first to attempt to conceptualize how these two interrelated fields of thought and action might be mediated. One of the most influential theories to come out of these efforts has been Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto." Within her argument she constructs the foundational myth of the cyborg as "a means of empowering both a shared sense of identity and the struggle against oppression" without erasing "the differences between women and within each woman" (Thornham 50-1). A hybrid of animal and human, body and machine, the cyborg "is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self. This is the self feminists must code"(Haraway 205). This theoretical figure allows for the blurring of modernist boundaries of all kinds, including those between self and other, mind and body, male and female, and culture and nature, among others, and thus opens up fecund possibilities for personal and political reformulations (219). Haraway's concept is enthusiastically "blasphemous" and "monstrous" in its imaginings of a "powerful infidel heteroglossia" that would reshape the world, and I agree with Cathy Griggers, in reference to not only lesbians, but to all women, that "Haraway's vision of unnatural, hyperconstructed social bodies in their potential, if blasphemous, positivity provides an empowering alternative strategy for

thinking lesbian bodies and organ-izing lesbian cultural politics into a material (if monstrous) body of power”(Haraway 223, Griggers 128). This very limited synopsis fails to convey the rich complexities of Haraway’s theory, however, I mention it here at the end of my own project in the hopes of gesturing towards how what I have argued might enter into the general discourse surrounding feminism and postmodernism and, more specifically, how it might speak to her influential work.

For all of its immense benefits, Haraway’s theory is admittedly and somewhat purposefully incomplete. Despite and because of its pervasive impact, the cyborg manifesto has been variously criticized in that it tries to “have it both ways: to be both situated and multiple, within and outside postmodernism,” that it substitutes “for a narrative of liberation directed at change in the real world, a utopian fantasy whose notions of ‘embodiment’ and ‘situatedness’ are slippery in the extreme,” that it cuts feminist thought “off from the source of feminism’s transformative possibilities,” and that it leaves “us with a feminism without women”(Thornham 51-2). For my purposes, however, the most palpable gap in Haraway’s theory lies in the almost completely absent consideration of sexuality other than in its inclusion within the criticism of radical feminists for focusing on it too much. She does discuss the exciting possibilities of the pleasures that we might gain from hybridization with machines and animals, but what about the bodily and psychic pleasures of more distinctly sexual activity? She does potentially resolve many of the problems of identity politics by imagining a world without gender or sexual binaries, but, whatever kind of hybrid they might be, will cyborgs have orgasms? Susan Bordo asserts a very pertinent criticism of Haraway’s cyborg when she questions:

What sort of body is it that is free to change its shape and location at will, that can become anyone and travel everywhere? If the body is a metaphor for our locatedness in space and time and thus for the finitude of human perception and knowledge, then the postmodern body is no body at all. (145)

While my project falls far short of rectifying the problems of feminism and postmodernism and of answering all of the challenging questions asked in and of Haraway's work, it does seem to potentially speak to some of them. I would like to suggest that the "sort of body that is free" in the way that Haraway imagines might not just be a cyborg, but perhaps might be a masturbating cyborg. It also seems that one of the most influential relationships blurring this kind of blasphemous body with technology exists between it and the visual productions of televisual and filmic media. Through these productions we can see the subjectivity of the female masturbator "disassembled" by postmodern fragmentation and "reassembled" through feminist agency and sexual fantasy and we can see these cyborg-like masturbators attaining "personal" and "collective" eroticized power. By way of self-critical, self-serving, and self-creative sexual attention these masturbating bodies are both "situated and multiple" "embodied" "women." Like the cyborg, masturbation in both practice and theory blurs the binaries between self and other and mind and body, yet it does so within the subversively "monstrous" guise of the eroticized female body. Therefore, I would like to at least open up the possibility for an alternative and/or amendment to Haraway's cyborg foundational myth with the nascent political fiction of the masturbating woman, the feminist (pom(o)nanist).

In looking at the prospect of female masturbation in *Seinfeld*, *Sex and the City*, *Single White Female*, and *Mulholland Dr.* we can begin to imagine the framework and potential of this kind of theoretical and political tool. Female masturbation in these texts signifies sexual power and freedom, lesbian continuum community building, queer

transgression of heterosexist norms, feminist agency, recuperative confrontation with trauma, and salient subjectivity integration. Combining second wave and post-feminisms, postmodernism, queer theory, and psychoanalysis, an understanding of the potency of masturbation promises to offer new progressive ground for both individual and collective satisfaction and action. Laqueur points out the “potential of masturbation to become, someday, the key to radical, sometimes utopian, changes in how we experience ourselves and our sexuality”(397). If we work practically and theoretically to embrace a kind of feminist (pom(o)nanist) subjectivity and wield its powerful benefits socially, then we might, someday, hopefully soon, be able to move towards actualizing this kind of radical, eroticized utopia.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born in Bradenton, Florida, Jennifer Beth Simmons soon moved to Huntsville, Alabama, where she spent the majority of her young life. In 2001 she graduated summa cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts in English and a minor in French language and literature while participating in the University Scholars Program at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Deciding to return to her state of birth, she then accepted a partial fellowship and an assistantship position at the University of Florida. Ms. Simmons will receive her Master of Arts degree in May 2004 and will then stay on in the graduate department at the University of Florida to pursue her Ph.D.. Her academic interests include film studies, feminist and queer theories, and twentieth century American literature.