FLICKING THE BEAN ON THE SILVER SCREEN: WOMEN'S MASTURBATION AS SELF-DISCOVERY AND SUBVERSION IN AMERICAN CINEMA

Megan E. Adams

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS
May 2011

Committee:
Kim Coates, Advisor
Ellen Berry
ABSTRACT

Kim Coates, Advisor

Women’s masturbation has the potential to disrupt the patriarchal constructions of sexuality by presenting an alternative wherein women can control their own pleasure independently of relationships with men. Considering the power of film as an influential and widely-consumed medium, and given the persistent cultural climate against women’s self-stimulation and sexual satisfaction in general, diverse onscreen portrayals of autoeroticism have the ability to foster feminist resistance to hegemonic discourses and potentially change attitudes regarding what is culturally considered to be normal sexual behavior. The selected depictions of female masturbation discussed in this analysis often implicitly or even explicitly address themes of power and sexuality, repression, transformation, and many other issues wrapped up in autoeroticism, suggesting that both real life masturbation and its onscreen representations are volatile and potentially revolutionary. These portrayals are examined based on their distinct intentions, audiences, and contexts in order to understand the films’ reflection of and influence on women’s sexuality within a patriarchal society. A comprehensive analysis of this manner calls for the reconsideration of traditionally oppressive constructions of sexuality and the re-examination of established film theory, including reevaluating spectatorship and gaze theory. Not every representation is equally feminist or sex-positive on its face, but all depictions of women’s autoeroticism offer an opportunity to construct subversive readings and identify redeemable aspects, even if it is only a reminder that women can and do masturbate at all.
For unruly women everywhere.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First of all, I would like to thank Dr. Kim Coates and Dr. Ellen Berry for their invaluable assistance and endless patience in serving on my thesis committee. Additionally, I am incredibly grateful to Kevan Feshami, whose support and encouragement enabled me to see the value in my own ideas and analysis, while his knowledge of film theory challenged me to clarify my arguments. Finally, I would like to thank everyone who has suggested films to watch upon discovering my research topic. I never tire being told that they are reminded of me every time they see a woman masturbating onscreen.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I: RECONSIDERING FEMINIST FILM THEORY</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II: THE POWER OF LOOKING</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III: SELF-DISCOVERY AND SUBVERSION – COMING TO CONSCIOUSNESS</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

For women in contemporary American society, masturbation, though a natural and common part of healthy sexuality, remains shrouded in secrecy and shame. When it is not denied and ignored completely, it is often discussed in hushed tones or with subtle winks. Masturbation, it seems, is one of those things that most everyone does but few will candidly admit to doing. In recent years, however, some of the coyness in addressing women’s autoeroticism has given way to more forthright and varied social outcomes. Discreet “neck massagers” are sold at most drugstores while more risqué novelty vibrators are prevalent at bachelorette parties and as gag gifts. The Rabbit vibrator saw a significant boost in its popularity after it was featured prominently in an episode of the HBO series Sex in the City. However, despite increasingly frequent acknowledgement of women’s masturbation in film, television, and popular culture, there has yet to be a sustained examination of the significance of this shift in representations of autoeroticism as fundamental to most women’s sexuality.

This cultural discomfort regarding masturbation is rooted in the long history of policing sexuality, particularly with women and children. As early as 1712, English “quack” John Marten indicted self-stimulation for various unsubstantiated medical and social reasons in his widely distributed tract Onania. In Masturbation: The History of a Great Terror, Jean Stengers and Anne Van Neck chronicle the historical denunciation of masturbation, from Marten to Freud, based on claims that the behavior led to everything from sexual licentiousness to early death. The fear mongering aimed at anyone who dared self-stimulate effectively pathologized any sexual expression that did not fit neatly within the confines of conventional heterosexual intercourse; it is worth noting that men and boys were more often directly targeted by these warnings, as the existence of female carnal desire outside of procreative relations was largely
denied and disregarded. Historian Thomas Laqueur expounds upon the construction of autoeroticism as the ultimate sexual taboo in *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation*, extensively detailing its role in society from the period before *Onania* into the twentieth century. Although threats of sterility, blindness, and hairy palms are not currently perpetuated with the same fervor as in centuries past, it is clear that this cultural taboo remains a touchy subject. For example, in 1994, U.S. Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders was forced to resign after indicating her support for discussing masturbation as a part of sex education in schools (Stengers and Van Neck 175). Exactly what it is about masturbation, particularly for women, that remains so threatening and controversial even in contemporary society is point of some contention. I would argue that women’s masturbation has the potential to disrupt the patriarchal constructions of sexuality because it simply offers an alternative wherein women can control their own pleasure independently of relationships with men.

Traditionally, women’s sexuality has been simultaneously constructed as purely procreative and borderline nonexistent, while also seductive and corruptible. This Madonna-whore binary reinforces the idea that female sexuality must be restrained to protect women and men alike, and the social order as a whole. Given this contentious history, it is important to discern how and why female masturbation continues to act as a potential site of resistance. In her article, “Doing It Ourselves: Female Masturbation Past and Present,” Mary Vause takes a sex-positive feminist approach and declares female masturbation a “monkey wrench in this phallocentric approach to sexuality” (61). She asserts her belief that “in a society where the gender order and the imbalance of power that comes with it depend on women’s disinterest in sexual pleasure, female masturbation both then and now threatens to topple the system” (Vause 61). Sexual activity that is expressly focused on women’s physical pleasure and emotional
satisfaction illustrates that women’s wants and needs are both valid and valuable; by pursuing personal fulfillment apart from men, women reject dependency and reclaim power. Betty Dodson, author of *Sex for One* and widely considered an authority on the issue of female masturbation, provides further insight to understanding mainstream and feminist perspectives. The book, regarded as her “feminist commitment to liberating masturbation,” is part personal masturbation memoir, part illustrated instructional manual, and part social commentary on the sexual taboo (xiv). She alleges that many conservative Christians denounce masturbation and other non-procreative aspects of sexuality in order to maintain compulsory heterosexuality and blind allegiance to the status quo, though it should be noted that they are not the only ones who subscribe to these archaic notions (xiii). Self-determined sexual expression jeopardizes the conservative heterosexist sensibilities that seek to keep women confined to the home, hopelessly entangled in unsatisfying relationships. The potential strength of female autoerotism becomes clear as Dodson describes masturbation as more than a physical act, but also as an act of self-love and awakening, an act that is crucial to undoing sexual repression (4). Laqueur also notes that the women’s movement embraced masturbation “as a practice in the service of freedom, autonomy, and rebellion against the status quo…. Sex with oneself came to stand for autonomy, even autarky” (75). The threatening prospect of women’s sexual self-sufficiency speaks to the extent of patriarchal culture’s desperation to cling to hegemonic constructions of heteronormative sexual relations, which in turn shape gender dynamics outside the bedroom and in the public sphere. More than just a private hobby, masturbation actually has significant social and political implications.

In turn, by constructing expressions of female sexuality as dangerous and in need of restraint, women, individually and as a group, can be more easily controlled based on antiquated
ideas of what is proper and acceptable. The conventional conceptions of women’s sexuality are
problematized in the essay “This Sex Which is Not One,” in which Luce Irigaray asserts,
“Female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters,”
particularly by Sigmund Freud and other phallocentric theorists (323). Existing gendered power
dynamics informed the way theorists conceived of sexuality causing the female anatomy to be
theorized as lacking and the clitoris to be dismissed as immature and rudimentary. In The
Technology of Orgasm: “Hysteria,” the Vibrator, and Women’s Sexual Satisfaction, Rachel P.
Maines illustrates how Freudian theory posited that heterosexual intercourse, meaning vaginal
penetration to male ejaculation, should regularly result in orgasm for women, a falsehood that
left a majority of women unsatisfied. Unfortunately, Freud was not alone in his flawed
understanding of the female anatomy and the dynamics of women’s sexual pleasure: “The role of
the clitoris in arousal to orgasm was systematically misunderstood by many physicians, since its
function contradicted the androcentric principle that only an erect penis could provide sexual
satisfaction to a healthy, normal adult female” (Maines 10). This masculine construction of
sexuality is further problematized in Anne Koedt’s “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm,” in which
she challenges the erroneous assumption that what gives men physical pleasure also necessarily
gives women physical pleasure (371). In fact, it is reported that an estimated seventy-five
percent of men but only twenty-nine percent of women always have an orgasm during
intercourse with their regular sex partner, whereas sixty percent of women report that they
always or usually climax from masturbation (Laumann et al. 114, 84). Maines is careful to note
that “[t]he penetration myth is not a conspiracy perpetuated by men; women too want to believe
in the ideal of universal orgasmic mutuality in coitus” (115). Ultimately, this pervasive
misconception of female sexual gratification, and particularly women’s internalization of these beliefs, effectively contributed to the pathologizing of women’s justifiable sexual frustration.

As indicated by researchers like Alfred Kinsey and Shere Hite, privileging penile-vaginal penetration and otherwise subscribing to a typically patriarchal view of sex, which does not reliably result in orgasm for most women, resulted in widespread diagnoses of “hysteria” (Maines 3, 4). Because androcentrically defined sexual relations failed to bring most women to orgasm consistently and left them with an understandable amount of tension, Western physicians manually or mechanically masturbated women to orgasm as a medical treatment for this affliction – a treatment women often sought repeatedly (Maines 3). Interestingly, even outside the traditional marital relations, women’s sexuality was confined to strictly controlled circumstances: women’s orgasms were to be left in the hands of their husbands or medical professionals. Women who self-stimulated privately without proper medical assistance and supervision were deemed to be hypersexual or possibly even homosexual due to the absence of the phallus (Laqueur 261). Irigaray challenges this traditional phallocentric framework by criticizing an understanding of sexuality that restricts the multiplicity of female pleasure and denies women’s autoeroticism, which she alleges exists even in the simple contact between the two lips of a woman’s genitals (324). Examining these selected film portrayals of women masturbating provides an opportunity to frame a critical discussion of sexuality that does not focus on the role of masculinity and the presumed centrality of the phallus. By rethinking the fundamental concepts of sex and pleasure, it is possible to move away from this oppressive history and toward potentially revolutionary conceptualizations of sexuality and gender relations that value women’s sexual expression and gratification both with and without men.
The extent to which the act of female masturbation and its depictions are necessarily revolutionary in and of themselves remains up for debate, however. Michel Foucault in particular rejects the simplicity of the idea that sexual revolution is liberation, instead emphasizing “sexuality not as a force of libido to be repressed or liberated, but as a discursive form of entwined power, knowledge, and pleasure” (Williams, *Screening Sex* 12). More specifically, he seeks “to account for the fact that [sex] is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said. What is at issue, briefly, is the over-all ‘discursive fact,’ the way in which sex is ‘put into discourse’” (Foucault 11). Drawing a connection between the larger discourses of power and the individual and everyday pleasure, Foucault’s philosophy indicates the potential for film as a discursive medium to reflect and influence women’s personal lives as well as the greater cultural politics of gender and sexuality, as conceiving of power as a discourse necessarily allows space for potential opposition. Thus it is women’s masturbation as a part of this greater cultural discourse that it functions as both a site of hegemony and resistance. By engaging with the selected texts depicting women’s self-stimulation and interrogating the discourses surrounding masturbation, it may be possible to tease out spaces for oppositional readings to patriarchal constructions of female sexuality.

Although pornographic films are not included in this analysis, it is nevertheless crucial to consider the role of pornography in shaping our understanding of women’s sexuality in terms of masturbation and orgasm. Female orgasms have often been regarded as elusive or inconsequential, mainly because it is the male “cum shot” that is used to punctuate heterosexual sex acts. The meaning invested in visual orgasm highlights the fragile nature of patriarchal
constructions of sexuality: “Masculinity is conventionally read as active and, by extension, the act of male ejaculation in hardcore is rendered as a triumphant and gender-defining act, often constituting a defensive difference to feminine passivity. The ejaculation/active analogue implicitly promotes certain anxieties for men because ejaculation represents male control” (Krzywinska, “Dynamics” 36). Recently, female ejaculation, or “squirting,” has changed the terms of the visuality of orgasm, though to what end remains unclear. Linda Williams argues that female ejaculation gives men proof of women’s sexual pleasure, while cinema scholar Chris Straayer asserts that in hardcore film women’s authentic sexual gratification is secondary to maintaining gender demarcations (Krzywinska, “Dynamics” 40). Nonetheless, this relatively new site of fascination fundamentally shifts traditional narratives surrounding sex; as Tania Krzywinska contends, “Female ejaculation is positioned as transgressive because it dis-aligns the hegemonic difference between masculine and feminine sexuality (defined as active and passive),” and this new emphasis on “squirting” highlights the potential political ramifications of orgasm (“Dynamics” 40). Even without the visual evidence of ejaculation, by conceiving of women’s orgasm as active rather than passive in both solo and partnered contexts, this alternative view of female sexuality, while it is in many ways still highly problematic, disrupts traditional notions of phallocentric sexuality and gender relations.

Feminists have long touted the power of masturbation as a crucial aspect of healthy sexuality, yet it is rarely presented as part of the spectrum of sexual activities regularly engaged in by teens and adults. A critical examination of depictions of female masturbation is significant because, as theorist Richard Dyer says, “sexuality, both as knowledge and solution, is also the means by which men and women are designated a place in society, and are kept in their place” (26). Considering the power of film as an influential and widely-consumed medium, and given
the persistent cultural climate against women’s masturbation and sexual satisfaction in general, diverse onscreen portrayals of autoeroticism have the ability to promote conversation and potentially change attitudes regarding what we consider to be normal sexual behavior.

Despite their relative rarity, depictions of female masturbation have played a central role in the liberation of women’s sexual identity onscreen over the last couple of decades, from She’s Gotta Have It (1986) to The 40-Year-Old Virgin (2005). Although images of and references to female masturbation remain fairly uncommon in mainstream film, these representations of female sexual expression are quite revealing about society and the film industry’s attitude toward women’s sexuality. These depictions often implicitly or even explicitly address themes of power and sexuality, repression, transformation, and many other issues wrapped up in autoeroticism, suggesting that both real life masturbation and its onscreen representations are volatile and potentially revolutionary. However, these scenes can either focus on women, both as characters and as spectators, in a way that speaks authentically to their lived experiences of self-discovery and sexual fulfillment or they can exploit masturbation for the gratification of the male gaze. Some of the selected films can be interpreted as both authentic and exploitative. Even in scenes that are primarily constructed to titillate straight male viewers and reinforce the power of the male gaze, representations of female masturbation may still be inherently radical because they focus on female sexual desire and gratification often independent of male partners. Thus, it is crucial to examine these depictions based on their distinct intentions, audiences, and contexts in order to understand the films’ influence on women’s sexuality within a patriarchal society. A comprehensive analysis of this manner calls for the reconsideration of traditional constructions of sexuality and the re-examination of established film theory.
For feminist filmmakers and critical spectators armed with a thorough and nuanced understanding of feminist film theory, onscreen masturbation could provide a potentially radical means of expression for exploring the relationship between sexuality and power. In her examination of depictions of sex in film in *Screening Sex*, film scholar Linda Williams seeks to promote a discourse “of an intertwined power-knowledge-pleasure,” emphasizing the importance of feminist savvy cinema for changing traditional cultural notions of femininity and sexuality (13). She argues that the real world impact of onscreen depictions of sex are impossible to ignore: “Sex acts—both graphic, as in pornography, and simulated, as in most mainstream movies and television—have not only embedded themselves in the dramas that we quantitatively watch so much more of but they have also become … qualitatively significant in how we learn and live our own sexualities” (Williams, *Screening Sex* 6). While the focus of this analysis will be necessarily limited in scope, examining a small selection of mainstream and independent films, the potential ramifications of this research may extend beyond Hollywood narrative cinema. The fact remains that positive and diverse portrayals of female sexuality, including masturbation, are an imperative aspect of women’s sexual and sociopolitical liberation. Films that present masturbation as a healthy and normal activity at various stages in one’s life raise the possibility of pulling back the curtain on the compelling reality of autoeroticism, allowing the female body to act as a powerful site of feminist discourse. Because, as bell hooks plainly states, “There is power in looking,” it is crucial that feminists interrogate representations and interpretations of women’s masturbation onscreen (hooks, “Oppositional” 115). The conscious act of looking can be a strategy for taking control of cinematic space, and feminist viewers and filmmakers can potentially look at images of women taking pleasure into their own hands as inspirational and relatable on some level. Rather than turning away from explicit depictions of
sexuality and autoeroticism, we must revisit feminist film theory and look closely to determine whose stories are being told and whose experiences are being privileged.
CHAPTER I: RECONSIDERING FEMINIST FILM THEORY

Feminist film analysis legitimizes the examination of masturbation as something essential and valuable, which helps to ease any initial apprehension at discussing a sexual act normally regarded as private. With particular attention to gendered power dynamics, feminist film theory allows viewers to develop ways to look at films through various critical lenses, offering multiple perspectives to consider, particularly in regards to gender, race, and sexuality. Thus, it is crucial to return to the fundamentals of feminist film theory in order to develop a more complete and nuanced understanding of textual analysis, which depends largely on the spectators’ respective standpoints. Emphasizing the role of distinct identity categories in shaping people’s experiences, an effective methodology for examining women’s masturbation in film requires a synthesis of feminist film theory and feminist conceptions of the matrix of domination. Furthermore, reviewing the production history of a film, from financing to MPAA ratings, can reveal as much about the greater social and film industry attitudes toward female sexuality as a purely textual reading of the film itself. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis that addresses the cultural context of film production as well as textual analysis offers a more complete picture of the significance of representations and interpretations of onscreen female sexuality.

As a starting point, this analysis will consider modifications of Laura Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze, as explained in her foundational essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Although her theorizing of the male gaze is invaluable, it is nonetheless imperative to critically look at the many intersecting components that affect with whom spectators will identify and to what extent. Therefore, this analysis will address the theories of other feminist scholars like Jane Gaines and bell hooks who seek to elucidate the significance of various identity categories in the intersections of oppression in respect to influence on spectatorship. By
analyzing ways of looking, feminist film theory examines how the individual and conceptual female spectator is situated differently than the assumed generic male viewer. If, as Mulvey claims, “the position of the spectators in the cinema is blatantly one of repression of their exhibitionism and projection of the repressed desire onto the performer,” then women and men viewing these scenes of autoeroticism are engaging with these texts in ways that may affect their lives outside of the theater (61). The opportunity offered by the critical analyses of these films is not to be underestimated, as “the acts of analysis, of deconstruction and of reading ‘against the grain’ offer an additional pleasure – the pleasure of resistance, of saying ‘no’… to the structures of power which ask us to consume them uncritically and in high circumscribed ways” (Kuhn, *Power* 8). Even the casual viewer can claim the power and pleasure of resisting projected images and ideas that do not speak to their experiences, choosing instead to reject or further dissect facets of the films made for their consumption. In the face of a film industry that often reduces women to passive accessories to the male protagonist, female spectators’ oppositional readings can yield transgressive, sex-positive, and even feminist interpretations despite hegemonic master narratives.

Particularly with women of color, lesbians, and other women whose perspectives have not traditionally been theorized under the broad category of Woman, this constant negotiation of cinematic consumption speaks to some of the limitations of past film theory. Historically, films have been predominantly analyzed through a psychoanalytic lens, often resulting in an ideological conflict with feminist theory. This tension between feminist theory and psychoanalysis as a means to ground film theory is further discussed in E. Ann Kaplan’s article “Is the Gaze Male?” (134). Ultimately, in order to construct a more woman-positive and potentially subversive conceptualization of sexuality, traditional theories and frameworks must
be revisited and reexamined, rather than outright dismissed as impossible to reconcile with feminism. Of course, this is not to suggest that all women interpret all films in the same ways, as some past theory has bordered on gender essentialist; again, it is crucial to recognize and interrogate the ways in which differences among female spectators in terms of social location can impact their reading of a text. Although women as a group are shaped by dominant narratives of womanhood, the importance of women’s individual subjectivity cannot be underestimated when it comes to deconstructing interpretations of cinema and crafting oppositional readings.

According to Nina K. Martin, “The notion that women (and men) are ruled or controlled by images and sexual representations places an overwhelming emphasis on the effect of fantasy on the unconscious; this diminishes the conscious agency involved in creating sexual fantasy for one’s own pleasure” (32). In her historical overview of feminist film theory, Sue Thornham contends that it is essential to address the weaknesses of foundational theory in order to maintain contemporary relevance. In *Passionate Detachments: An Introduction to Feminist Film Theory*, she observes, “Despite its explanatory power, the influential work of theorists like Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane seemed to leave little space for resistance by female spectators to the power of patriarchal structures” (xiv). She further questions the role of theory based on the unconscious in psychoanalysis, which often presupposes a particular sex-based perspective and experience while ignoring the fact of individual subject positions (Thornham 44). These observations underscore the importance of recognizing how people consciously engage with texts and work to create meaning, a reality that is often dismissed by psychoanalytic-based theories that seek make broad ahistorical generalizations. When it comes to interpreting films produced within specific sociohistorical contexts, particularly in terms of shifting feminist politics, even an admittedly limited analysis of the possibilities presented by contextualized and
active spectatorship must take precedence over the inclination to generate overarching theories based on absolutes and oversimplifications.

By examining the assumptions and conclusions of psychoanalysis, it is possible to identify some of its more illuminating and obfuscating arguments. The cinematic image of woman and its “to-be-looked-at-ness” has been central to the foundations of feminist film analysis (Mulvey 63). Psychoanalysis contends that the sexualized and objectified image of woman is intended to do more than titillate, rather “it is designed to annihilate the threat that woman (as castrated, and possessing a sinister genital organ) poses” (Kaplan, “Gaze” 121). Consequently, these bodily representations of female characters influence the perceptions of the women viewing the film, as “for the female spectator there is a certain overpresence of the image—she is the image. Given the closeness of this relationship, the female spectator’s desire can be described only in terms of a kind of narcissism” (Doane, “Masquerade” 423). While it is undoubtedly true that some spectators can and do identify with the image of woman in this way, not all female spectators experience this closeness or desire in the same way, if at all. In much the same ways as a similar Freudian paradigm, Mary Ann Doane’s theorizing limits the choices that female spectators are presumed to make when engaging with the image of woman, asserting, “the female spectator is given two options: the masochism of over-identification or the narcissism entailed in becoming one’s own object of desire, in assuming the image in the most radical way” (“Masquerade” 432-3). Her statement offers a provocative starting point to consider spectator identification; however, difference and agency are erased by the overgeneralization. Furthermore, this strict viewpoint, if assumed, could also effectively circumscribe narrative possibilities in filmmaking as well. E. Diedre Pribram sums up the restrictions of psychoanalytically based film theory thusly:
When psychoanalysis is applied to film, the potential for theorizing alternative readings or interpretations within any given text is inhibited by a denial of viewing contexts: no place is allowed for shifts in textual meaning related to shifts in viewing situation. As a result, varying social groups – white women or women of colour, lower, middle or upper-class women – are readily assumed to have the same viewing experience. (“Introduction” 2)

By thinking in terms of possibilities and alternatives instead of absolutes, revamped film theory acknowledges that spectator responses are as diverse as spectators themselves.

Bell hooks remains one of the leading voices criticizing the shortcomings of earlier feminist film theory based heavily on psychoanalytic generalizations regarding gender and identification. She challenges the presumed centrality of gender relations, speaking to “the necessity of revisioning conventional ways of thinking about psychoanalysis as a paradigm of analysis and the need to rethink a body of feminist film theory that is firmly rooted in a denial of the reality that sex/sexuality may not be the primary and/or exclusive signifier of difference” (hooks, “Oppositional” 124). Hooks alleges that most feminist film theory ignores subaltern perspectives and the alternative interpretations that women can construct with a reading informed by other systems of oppression like racism (“Oppositional” 123). The consequences of this kind of gender-focused feminist film criticism is made plain: “Feminist film theory rooted in an ahistorical psychoanalytic framework that privileges sexual difference actively suppresses the recognition of race, reenacting and mirroring the erasure of black womanhood that occurs in films, silencing any discussion of racial difference—of racialized sexual difference” (hooks, “Oppositional” 123). Although it is tempting to make claims and draw conclusions about what certain images signify or how texts are interpreted, ultimately more harm is done by contributing
to a discourse that presumes to speak about all women from the perspective of heterosexual white women (hooks, “Oppositional” 123). This problem with privileging the experiences of white women extends beyond just psychoanalytic film theory to mainstream feminism as a whole. By insisting upon the primacy of gender in feminist discourse, even dialogues that include race and sexuality can seem like an afterthought distinct from the fundamental issues (Gaines 340). In fact, feminist theorist Jane Gaines argues, “the very concept of ‘different perspectives’, while validating distinctness and maintaining woman as common denominator, still places the categories of race and sexual preference in theoretical limbo” (340). In an attempt to avoid these past pitfalls of feminist film theory, an effective framework for film analysis must maintain constant awareness of its own limitations in terms of whose experiences it may or may not address within a matrix of domination.

Despite its significant inadequacies as a framework, it is also important to remember that although it is not necessarily inherent nor universal by any means, psychoanalysis has still both consciously and unconsciously informed the creation and interpretation of film. Filmmakers can deliberately use a psychoanalytic lens and can also expect many spectators to approach their films with an awareness of certain psychoanalytic concepts and symbolism. For example, Linda Ruth Williams argues, “It would also be perverse not to turn to psychoanalytically informed theories of spectator and visual subjectivity given the erotic thriller’s self-reflexive obsession with sexual spectatorship, its profound awareness of its own textuality and its sometimes blind, sometimes knowing, obsession with formations such as voyeurism, gendered identity and arousal” (xi). Although she refers to a specific genre here, her assertion can reasonably be applied to other films, not limited to just erotic thrillers; the significance and even the concept of distinct film genres is highly contested, and the ways in which spectators and filmmakers interact
with films cannot easily be restricted to particular genres. Prudent application of psychoanalysis to specific films or performances can produce valuable observations while still recognizing that meaning is continually created in ways that resist conclusive interpretations. Annette Kuhn, who conceives of “spectatorship as an act of readership,” further examines the active role of the spectator (McCabe 46). Janet McCabe sums up Kuhn’s understanding of the spectator/reader relationship with the text:

> Meaning is not fixed in the text but instead is reconstituted through the process of reading. The text will be read in different ways, at different times and within different contexts. For her, there is a difference between how gynocentric genres appeal to women in terms of how the female spectator is imagined by the producer, how she is constituted in the text and how the actual spectator is informed by or comes to resist these positionings. She calls on the scholar to study as discourse the interaction between text and context, between the woman as the imagined spectator (or textual subject) and woman as actual audience member (or social subject).

Too often the theoretical spectator and the actual spectator are collapsed into one position, when in fact it is the interaction between them that provides a rich site of cinematic discourse (McCabe 47). Rejecting a text-focused semiotic approach, a cultural studies approach “understands spectatorship as about a process of negotiation involving producer, text and spectator in which meaning is made in the act of readership” (McCabe 63). Thus, the role of the actual spectators, depending on their particular standpoints, becomes more influential in assigning meaning to the given images than the cinematographers constructing the images.
While contemporary critical feminist analysis now questions much of traditional film theory’s tendency to essentialize women with generalizations about “the female spectator” without regard for the multitude of identifications possible, marginalized women, particularly women of color, have been deconstructing cinematic narratives long before many film scholars even acknowledged the importance of difference. Accordingly, for this analysis it is essential to examine the manner in which spectators’ identities influence the ways in which they may understand the various scenes of masturbation, depending, of course, on how they relate to the character’s position within society. For example, bell hooks problematizes the generalization of the gaze in “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” arguing that “black female spectators, who refused to identify with white womanhood, who would not take on the phallocentric gaze of desire and possession, created a critical space where the binary opposition Mulvey posits of ‘woman as image, man as bearer of the look’ was continually deconstructed” (122-3). However, warning against the risk of essentialism when discussing black women spectators, hooks further clarifies, “Many black women do not ‘see differently’ precisely because their perceptions of reality are so profoundly colonized, shaped by dominant ways of knowing. … Critical black female spectatorship emerges as a site of resistance only when individual black women actively resist the imposition of dominant ways of knowing and looking” (“Oppositional” 128). Though her analysis refers specifically to the viewing experiences of black women, her caution acts as a reminder of the importance of recognizing that resistance and alternative textual readings are negotiated on an individual basis rather than unconsciously occurring as a necessary result of the viewer’s subject position. Thus, this complex and contested relationship between spectator and text makes it impossible or at least inadvisable to
attempt to make any over-arching claims about how exactly these depictions of masturbation are interpreted by their diverse audiences.

Despite the colonization that hinders the viewing experiences of many women, the overall potential for radical ideological change sparked by representations of women’s sexuality should not be underestimated. Feminist film theorist Jane Gaines ruminates on the implications of prominent depictions of sexually liberated women of color: “If, as feminists have argued, women’s sexuality evokes an unconscious terror in men, then black women’s sexuality represents a special threat to white patriarchy; the possibility of its eruption stands for the aspirations of the black race as a whole” (303). Women of color taking control of their own orgasms can be symbolic of them rejecting racist and sexist social limitations and prioritizing their own personal fulfillment and pleasure. Interrogating these images and initiating a multifaceted conversation about the complexities of female sexuality extends beyond gender and race. While theorists like hooks and Gaines challenged the presumed whiteness of the theoretical spectator, Teresa de Lauretis complicates the assumed identity of the woman spectator as heterosexual by approaching film theory with a queer lens. In “Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation,” she references prominent second-wave feminist writers to illustrate how women’s sexuality, and lesbian sexuality in particular, has been made invisible, if not impossible to conceptualize and therefore represent onscreen (385). Lesbian desire complicates the assumption that the female spectator’s desire for the sexualized image of woman is due to her identification with the dominant male gaze. In fact, a lesbian spectator could potentially gaze upon an image of a masturbating woman and simultaneously identify with her and wish to possess her, without encountering the tension presumed to be inherent in identifying with the predatory male gaze. Such discourse is just the beginning of the prospective significance of
onscreen autoeroticism when considered within a feminist framework that pays specific attention
to the intersecting oppressions faced by the very women who would benefit most from positive
portrayals of female sexuality.

In order to more comprehensively deconstruct the function and significance of female
masturbation onscreen, foundational feminist film theory must be put into conversation with the
work of theorists who focus particularly on the experiences of the subjugated spectator,
establishing a framework complex enough to simultaneously address issues of race, class,
sexuality, and spectator identification and objectification. Considering lesbian and black
feminist responses to film theory based predominantly in white heterosexual subjectivity, Sue
Thornham argues that individual and social standpoint must be addressed fully, lest
sociopolitical realities be ignored in favor of creating a universal subject of Woman. In order to
ensure a more inclusive dialogue in discussions of representations and spectatorship, the idea of
the generic woman must be soundly rejected in favor of a multifaceted analysis dedicated to
articulating and evaluating the multiple realities of women from differing perspectives. In the
following examination of a few select films featuring critical scenes of female masturbation, it
becomes clear that a revitalized and nuanced framework of feminist film theories better
untangles the complexities of these representations compared to a single foundational theory. By
addressing the components of race, sexuality, and class, this analysis illustrates just how complex
these films can be in terms of the multiple messages they can convey. Because films are
invested with meaning from the earliest stages of production by the filmmakers to the ongoing
consumption and interpretation by the spectators, contemporary film theory can avoid some of
the shortcomings of the past by being properly historicized and concretely located, opting for
debatable concepts within contextualized frameworks rather than overarching ahistorical
generalizations (Gledhill and Williams 5). Furthermore, in addition to speculation about authorial intent, spectator interpretation, and textual analysis, this examination aims to be more comprehensive by considering the implications of film as the product of an industry situated within a specific cultural moment. Looking at text, production, sociohistorical context, I hope to illuminate how the production of a film from concept and financing to distribution and reception is shaped by cultural values and politics. The following analysis is not intended to be a conclusive or exhaustive survey of films featuring female masturbation. On the contrary, the analysis of these selected films is meant to reveal just how much of a conversation there is to be had regarding the importance of women’s sexuality in contemporary American cinema.
CHAPTER II: THE POWER OF LOOKING

Before venturing into an extended analysis of specific films, it is first prudent to further examine the ongoing debates about gaze theory and the politics of looking. The spectacle of a masturbating woman onscreen, one knowingly or unknowingly being watched, presents an exceptional opportunity to observe the numerous ways the concept of the gaze can shape a particular scene. The various manifestations and functions of the gaze, both within the film and between the spectator and the text, make evident the power dynamics involved in spectatorship and voyeurism. As noted previously, Laura Mulvey’s groundbreaking essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” set the foundation for future feminist analysis regarding cinematic identification and the gaze. She theorizes that woman is positioned as image, with a certain “to-be-looked-at-ness,” whereas man is “bearer of the look” (Mulvey 63, 62). Several film theorists have detailed the limitations of her theory of the male gaze since she first wrote the piece in 1975. With no consideration of the differences between films’ positioning of a theoretical spectator and actual audiences with varying perspectives and social locations, Mulvey collapses diverse viewing experiences into the thought-provoking but ultimately oversimplified concept of the male gaze. However, given the voyeuristic nature of cinema in general, exploring the power dynamics involved in gazing at the sexualized image of women provides a productive starting point for analyzing the selected films.

Traditionally, the pleasures of real life and cinematic voyeurism have been regarded as male domain. Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane “suggest that both Freudian theory and socialized gender imbalances attest to the ‘impossibility’ of women’s experiencing visual pleasure through voyeurism” (Martin 160). Luce Irigaray continues with the generalizations, asserting, “Woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking, and her entry into a dominant scopic
economy signifies, again her consignment to passivity: she is to be the beautiful object of contemplation” (326). By rejecting even the possibility of a gratifying female “scopophilic drive,” this problematic psychoanalytic theory restricts and even wholly denies the pleasures of women’s spectatorship in the face of sexually charged material (Martin 160). Further complicating the matter of cinematic voyeurism, while women may both receive and reciprocate a gaze in the strictest sense, E. Ann Kaplan argues that contrary to the male gaze, the female gaze lacks “the power of action and of possession” (“Gaze” 121). Kaplan’s claim, however, seems to ignore the reality that women are quite capable of consuming other women’s bodies much in the same way men do, particularly when additional power dynamics come into play. There is a long history, for instance, of black women’s bodies being displayed for the gratification of the exploitative gazes of white men and women alike (e.g. Hottentot Venus). Yet again, feminist criticism falls into the trap of psychoanalytic narratives that privilege ahistorical views of gender dynamics at expense of the diversity of women’s lived experiences. Given proper respect to the distinct and diverse perspectives of women spectators and their agency, the female gaze can indeed be one of possession, identification, rejection, or any combination thereof. Thus, the implication of women watching other women, and even themselves, masturbate problematizes gaze theory on a fundamental level.

Bell hooks rejects gender essentialist generalizations and complicates the gaze by examining the discourses of power that influence the ways different people are able to look based on their social location. She identifies the oppositional gaze, which arises from the history of repression of black people’s gaze, and explains its significance:

Even in the worst circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one’s gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the
possibility of agency. In much of his work, Michel Foucault insists on describing domination in terms of ‘relations of power’ as part of an effort to challenge the assumption that ‘power is a system of domination which controls everything and which leaves no room for freedom.’ Emphatically stating that in all relations of power ‘there is necessarily the possibility of resistance,’ he invites the critical thinker to search those margins, gaps, and locations on and through the body where agency can be found. (hooks, “Oppositional” 116)

The idea of the oppositional gaze can be extended to other individuals who actively resist psychological colonization and critically engage with the images presented on screen. In fact, in spite of any hegemonic constructions or intentions of the filmmakers, viewers have the ability to use the gaze as “a site of resistance” (hooks, “Oppositional” 116). By developing an analytical gaze, dominated classes assert agency and focus on aspects of the text at will, deconstructing the traditional paradigm of woman as passive image and man as active bearer of the look (“Oppositional” 123). Because judicious black female spectators refuse to identify with either the oppressive phallicentric gaze or the objectified position of white womanhood, hooks argues that they are able to create a system of looking wherein satisfaction comes from the pleasure of engaging with the text, rather than mindlessly consuming it (“Oppositional” 126). Extending this critical space beyond solely black women, it is possible to identify space for conscious analytical spectatorship that resists passively accepting the dominant readings constructed by the text.

The unique positioning of lesbian spectators offers another opportunity to further problematize the gaze and question whether or not it must necessarily be possessive or oppressive. Gaines establishes how the very concept of lesbianism disrupts traditional theory:
Consistently, lesbians have charged that cultural theory posed in psychoanalytic
terms is unable to conceive of desire or explain pleasure without reference to the
binary oppositions male/female. This is the function of what Monique Wittig
calls the heterosexual assumption, or the ‘straight mind’, that unacknowledged
structure not only built into Lacanian psychoanalysis, but underlying the basic
divisions of Western culture; organising all knowledge, yet escaping any close
examination. (340)

That lesbians could gaze upon the image of women with desire but without the oppressive power
of male privilege complicates the conceptualization of the image of woman as passive and
objectified as part and parcel to cultural gender relations. The sheer revolutionary potential of
lesbian epistemology is laid out in Marilyn Frye’s 1983 essay “To Be and Be Seen: The Politics
of Reality”: in the production she terms “Phallocratic Reality,” lesbian spectators look past the
men in the foreground to the women stagehands (170). As a result of the lesbian’s dedicated
attention, the woman may realize that she can be seen and therefore can both perceive and be
perceived (Frye 172). This attention to women functioning beyond merely as an image, but as
integral to the production of cinema and culture, reveals the significance of women as more than
objects for the projection of men’s anxieties and desires. Theorists Judith Mayne and Teresa de
Lauretis suggest that lesbian spectators conceive of “the cinematic screen as a site of conflict, in
which it functions simultaneously to prohibit as well as offer alternative scenarios of desire”
(McCabe 108). However, it is also possible that by assuming the purported male gaze, lesbian
spectators are allowed to overtly experience and express desire for a sexualized female image.
Envisioning the gaze as something potentially liberating rather than necessarily possessive and
destructive is one way of teasing out subversive readings in some of these seemingly hegemonic films.

With an idea of the myriad of ways the gaze can function, films that implicitly or explicitly reflect on the nature of voyeurism and the power of the gaze are logical choices to initiate an analysis of women’s masturbation. According to film scholar Linda Ruth Williams, in some films “voyeurism is more thematically central, driving the narrative’s primary engine as well as fleshing out its erotic contemplations, its Mulvey-esque ‘frozen moments’. In these movies about looking … scopophilia is articulated around a partnership of the voyeur and the exhibitionist” (336). In these moments, the sexualized spectacle of woman is often more active than passive, making herself so visually available for consumption that she works to justify the spectators’ voyeurism. Visual subjectivity must be considered in contemporary film’s “self-reflexive obsession with sexual spectatorship, its profound awareness of its own textuality and its sometimes blind, sometimes knowing obsession with formations such as voyeurism, gendered identity, and arousal” (Williams, L.R. xi). The 1993 erotic thriller Sliver exemplifies this type of self-reflexive narrative focus on voyeurism and spectatorship, and presents an opportunity for multiple interpretations of the portrayal of female autoeroticism.

Bearing in mind that Sliver was written by Joe Eszterhas, screenwriter of Basic Instinct and Showgirls, initially the film does not seem to offer the most fruitful site for identifying potentially subversive images of female masturbation. However, considering Carly’s (Sharon Stone) masturbation scene within the scope of the greater subject matter of sexualized looking does create a helpful starting point for directed discussion of the possessive gaze in contemporary film. L.R. Williams sums up the film’s somewhat contradictory politics: “Sliver, it seems, wants both to indulge in its own barefaced voyeurism and give itself the alibi of mild
feminist critique of male-gaze obsessions. Thus, we get the exploitation spectacle (scopophilically-framed views of Carly, and views of Carly viewing) and we get the critique of exploitation spectacle (Carly’s suspicion and dismissal)” (155). The film’s preoccupation with surveillance and control is apparent from the beginning; the opening credits show numerous screens from surveillance cameras, a neighbor casually mentions that he teaches “psychology of the lens,” and Carly intently watches her new neighbors through the window. This obsession with watching continues throughout the film when Carly is anonymously given a telescope, which she utilizes with little hesitation, and several other characters discuss their affinity for voyeurism either directly or suggestively. Mirrors, windows, and television screens all appear frequently, as production designer Paul Sylbert’s goal was to stylistically create the impression of always gazing through a lens (Williams, L.R. 154). Because the film’s subject matter explicitly addresses the pleasure and control sought through the act of looking, the spectator is positioned to more readily reflect on their own act of looking.

Carly, who has just moved into a new apartment building, becomes the subject of fascination for an unknown figure who watches her from a control room with countless screens revealing an extensive level of surveillance. Soon after moving in, she gazes contemplatively at herself in the mirror while stroking her stomach and decides to take a bath. The film repeatedly cuts between Carly and a television screen showing a blue-gray image of her as she lies in the water and masturbates. That she first gazes at her reflection then self-stimulates suggests that she finds desire in her own image; therefore, if even she finds the sight of her sexualized body erotic, other characters and the film’s viewers who may gaze upon her and find her image desirable may feel justified in their objectification of her as well. The eye of the camera sweeps over the spectacle of her nude body, seizing upon the “to-be-looked-at-ness” of her display. That
an anonymous voyeur is simultaneously watching her adds another layer to her objectification, according to L.R. Williams:

Thus she is seen on-screen, and on the screens-within-a-screen, yet not through the woman’s own view, in counter-shots taken from the bath, as the editing techniques of classical Hollywood would bring us to expect. We see her, and we see with someone else seeing her. But although it is her solitary pleasure, coupled with her ignorance of its voyeuristic context which charges the scene, even her narcissism only signifies because of the fact that when she looks in the mirror in this film, she unwittingly presents herself for our view. (339)

A surveillance screen shows the shadowy user zooming in as the camera pans over her body and face as she writhes in the tub until the scene finally closes on her post-orgasm face. Even as she comes to orgasm, Carly’s sexual gratification is not the focal point of the scene— rather it is the spectacle of her pleasure and its close observation by an unknown viewer that draws the spectator’s attention, thus encouraging the film’s spectators to identify with the male voyeur.

Eventually it is revealed that the anonymous voyeur is Zeke (William Baldwin), the unassuming yet rich and powerful neighbor and love interest. As we learn more about his character, it becomes clear that because of his omnipresent gaze he possesses knowledge about his neighbors as well as the power to use that knowledge to various ends. Notably, Zeke initially appears to be just an ordinary guy, not so different from someone viewing Sliver at home on the sofa; however, with the ability to secretly survey and consume sexualized images of women, his position of power is affirmed. Zeke’s invasive viewing room, with its abundant monitors and extensive surveillance capabilities, is reminiscent of the panopticon and emphasizes the correlation between observation and the power to control; this visual imagery reinforces the idea
that the gaze is not just voyeuristic in a pleasurable way, but also can be highly dominating and potentially threatening. The manipulation of the gaze is underscored when Zeke replays Carly’s masturbation scene while continuing to spy on her in real time—what was a fleeting moment of private autoeroticism is now something that he can re-watch, pause, and otherwise control at his will. According to L.R. Williams, Zeke’s tech-savvy voyeurism directly relates to the degree of control that spectators now have to manage their viewing experience with VCRs and DVD players. While dark theaters foster the semblance of privacy and solitude, movie watching in theaters is nonetheless a structured communal activity. Watching films in the home, however, is more private and affords the viewer the opportunity to focus on certain scenes as they choose, particularly those of a sexual nature. *Sliver* itself actually features sex scenes so intense the film required re-shoots to avoid an NC-17 from the MPAA’s ratings board (Honeycutt). Zeke re-watching Carly’s masturbation alongside videos of him having sex with various women is not so different from the way viewers may re-watch titillating scenes from films for their own gratification.

In some ways, *Sliver* validates this type of invasive voyeurism because it is not just the calculating Zeke who enjoys watching, but the protagonist Carly as well. In fact, when the discovery of his surveillance room initially upsets her, his counters that he watches just like her only with better technology. Again, the film draws upon the connection between what would traditionally be considered illicit voyeurism in the real world and the acceptable voyeurism inherent in watching films onscreen. Zeke gropes her as they watch their previous sex scene together, highlighting the relationship between onscreen sex and spectator titillation, yet “the sense of surveillance, of constantly being watched – even as [the protagonist] herself watches – is overwhelming” and underscores the vulnerability of woman-as-spectacle (Doane, *Desire* 156).
Although perhaps sexy, this scene is also discomfiting because of the constant reflexivity that reminds spectators of the invasiveness of omnipresent voyeurism. If we can watch others in their most private and exposed moments, what is to stop them from watching us? Despite Carly’s fascination with watching, part of what L.R. Williams calls “the erotic thriller’s widespread neoscopophilic sexual interest in voyeuristic women,” the film takes a somewhat ambivalent approach to voyeurism (155). After finding a stash of videos of Zeke having sex with other women, she says, “You like to watch? Watch this,” and with his gun she shoots out all of the monitors and destroys his viewing room. Finally, she holds up a remote and says disdainfully, “Get a life,” appearing to gaze at the film’s spectator as much as Zeke. After a ninety-minute exercise in the illicit pleasures of voyeurism, the film’s climax “tries to disavow an undercurrent of salacious glee in peeping with a final critique of visual obsession” (Williams, L.R. 155). This erotic thriller attempts to indulge both basic voyeuristic desires and critical spectatorship that resists the exploitative pleasure of gazing at the objectified image of the woman.

*Sliver* sets itself apart from standard exploitation fare common to the early 1990s by virtue of its production pedigree and its narrative focus on the sympathetic protagonist Carly’s point of view. However, its agenda is not so different from that which can be ascribed to erotic thrillers similar to *Sliver*, albeit lower profile and often direct-to-video. L.R. Williams describes a thematic push in the late 1980s and 1990s during which these erotic thrillers “make a virtue of female visual pleasure, seeming to cock a snook at male-gaze theorists by including women as active scopic participants” while simultaneously “award[ing] their own audience pole position for securing a good look at those women in the act of sexual looking” (155). Although the politics of the film seem to indicate that the filmmakers want it both ways, their priorities are unmistakable. Because these kinds of films recognize themselves as exploitation cinema, “any
empowering arguments about women taking control of the male gaze which the DTVs [direct-to-videos] might make come after the fact of pleasing the core male heterosexual audience with sex images of women taking secret pleasure” (Williams, L.R. 155). Contemplating Carly’s apprehensive enthrallment with Zeke’s viewing room, it is a question whose pleasure a woman represents when she controls, watches, and even physically responds to sexually explicit video images. By depicting women as sexually available and responsive as a result of sexual voyeurism, the protagonist acts as “a libidinous affirmation” of the male spectator’s possessive gaze (Williams, L.R. 340). Essentially, the voyeuristic image of woman may “be used to assuage male guilt about using porn: if on-screen the women are also using recorded porn (or enjoying performed live action), then surely it’s OK to use it yourself, and surely it’s double OK to get off on the vision of that woman’s own visual enjoyment” (Williams, L.R. 341). Because Carly reveals her own voyeuristic tendencies, the spectator is justified for watching and enjoying her masturbation, and watching someone else objectify her as well. This mind-set requires that the viewer focus on Carly’s attraction to voyeurism rather than reflecting on Zeke’s repeated gross violations of her privacy. Although not explicitly pornographic, the erotic representation of a female gaze validates the existence of an objectifying male gaze, as “[t]he thought that women do it too may then offload male guilt about their own viewing predilection and visual objectification of women” (Williams, L.R. 341). Similarly, female spectators who find themselves identifying with an objectifying gaze and may possibly be initially disconcerted are more likely to feel reassured.

Although any potentially subversive intentions may be secondary to satisfying male desire, the female protagonist’s experimentation with a typically male gaze raises questions about how women seek pleasure in identification. If, as L.R. Williams argues, “Visual pleasure
is partly about the narcissism of distorted reflection,” it follows that *Sliver’s* female spectators also have much to gain from the film’s recognition of the gratification of sexualized looking (340). Female spectators can wonder at the exhibitionist spectacle of Carly’s body while also relating to her voyeuristic desires. In fact, L.R. Williams situates the erotic thriller genre as emerging specifically from a moment when home viewing increasingly allowed pornography to reach a female audience:

The on-screen voyeuristic woman is therefore a very clear image of and for an embryonic female audience, a reference within the film to the way in which the video itself might subsequently be viewed within the home, by women. … These scenarios represent women on-screen taking pleasure in exactly the kind of video footage which women off-screen are presumed to be watching. The self-referential quality of the erotic thriller thus tells a story about audiences, with the genre imagining its anticipated audience as a female home viewer. (341)

In addition to assuaging men’s guilt about their objectifying gaze, the onscreen voyeuristic woman also provides a model for female spectators who may feel uneasy about blatantly consuming sexualized images of other women. It is worth noting that this self-reflexive idea of female spectators’ response to onscreen women’s voyeurism can be extended beyond just the erotic thrillers coming out of this specific cultural moment. This opens up a new discussion for female spectators also responding in both a thoughtful and potentially sexual manner to representations of women’s sexual expressions onscreen. In fact, I would argue that if Carly’s voyeurism assures women that it is acceptable to find sexual pleasure in watching, then perhaps her character also reassures women that masturbation is a healthy and ordinary response to arousal. Though certainly not a feminist film, *Sliver* does at least present masturbation as a
normal aspect of women’s sexuality, which helps take away at least some of the stigma associated with the act.

Another film exploring similar nuances of onscreen voyeurism and images of women masturbating is the 1998 teen comedy *American Pie*. Mulvey argues that the image of woman conventionally acts both “as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen” (63). *American Pie*, which scholar Thomas Laqueur simply dismisses as “one long, sophomoric joke,” exemplifies this practice of positioning the woman as erotic object, yet also has redeeming qualities upon further reflection (418). The film prominently features both male and female masturbation; however, whereas the male masturbation is depicted as humorous and cringe-worthy, the scene of female masturbation seems designed for the erotic viewing pleasure of the largely male audience. When the sexy foreign exchange student Nadia (Shannon Elizabeth) inexplicably finds herself alone and nude in sexually inept high school student Jim’s (Jason Biggs) room, she inadvertently becomes part of a carefully orchestrated peep show. As Mulvey explains, often “[t]he presence of a woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a storyline, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (Mulvey 63). Indeed, Nadia stripping off her clothing and relaxing nude offers plenty reason for the camera to savor the spectacle of her body, stalling any progression of the plotline. Her naked form renders male characters nearly speechless as they watch her in awe, fervently taking in every moment of her display, likely reflecting the reactions of many of the film’s spectators when presented with such graphic exposure.
This particular scene exemplifies the traditional conception of the male gaze because not only is the movie marketed toward a male teen audience, but also Nadia herself unwittingly has a large male teen audience. Unbeknownst to her, Jim set has up a webcam for the viewing pleasure of his peers in a desperate attempt to “prove his virility,” supporting the notion that there is power inherent in the gaze (Shary 105). As Nadia undresses, Jim and his friends watch eagerly and excitedly voice their approval of her body. This examination and assessment of her naked form is reinforced when Nadia gazes at her reflection in the mirror and inspects her own body, just as Carly does in Sliver. Despite the fact that her figure more than satisfies the standards of conventional beauty, she appears to be somewhat critical. Nadia’s innocent expression of mild dissatisfaction with her body serves as a reminder that women’s bodies and sexuality are held to nearly unattainable social standards that consistently undermine women’s confidence and pleasure. Perhaps more importantly, however, by casting a critical eye on her own image, she reinforces the notion that images of sexually objectified women are subject to be evaluated, picked apart, and consumed.

Thoroughly unconcerned that she is only supposed to be changing clothes in her classmate’s bedroom, Nadia peruses Jim’s pornographic magazines and subsequently begins to masturbate. This moment raises provocative questions about female sexual pleasure as viewing typically male-oriented erotica arouses her easily, although there is no suggestion that she is actually sexually attracted to women. In her ruminations on the male gaze, E. Ann Kaplan suggests, “Women, in turn, have learned to associate their sexuality with domination by the male gaze, a position involving a degree of masochism in finding their objectification erotic,” an interpretation which could possibly explain why Nadia responds to pornography that supposedly objectifies women like herself, although her argument is evocative of some radical feminist
claims that women often suffer from “false consciousness” in regard to their sexuality as a result of internalized sexism (135). However, that she could be genuinely aroused by pornographic images of women is not actually surprising, given that research indicates women respond equally to sexually stimulating images of both men and women, regardless of sexual orientation (Rupp and Wallen). The male characters act surprised that Nadia expresses interest rather than disgust at finding the pornography; their disbelieving reactions are predictable given the common assumption that men are visually stimulated but women are not. Nevertheless, her positive reaction to the visual stimuli normalizes the reality that many women are in fact embracing erotica and pornography for their own private use and for consumption with partners. The spectator is presented with a fairly graphic image of a woman submitting to purely physical, and stereotypically masculine, desires, providing a beneficial counter-image to another female supporting character who shyly admits she has “never double-clicked [her] mouse.” Nevertheless, Nadia’s lack of inhibitions is presented as likely due to her exotic background, rather than any politically conscious sexual liberation. The narrative repeatedly reminds us that Nadia is not a typical woman; she is constantly othered as the hypersexual foreigner—“the Czechoslovakian chick”—as indicated by everything from her shaved pubic hair, a grooming style that was less common at the time, to her willingness to have sex with a nerdy and undesirable American boy. Although the entire masturbation scenario is rather implausible, Nadia’s exhibitionism and voyeurism provides further opportunity to examine various manifestations of the gaze.

Although L.R. Williams was specifically theorizing about depictions of women watching sexually explicit videos in erotic thrillers, it is possible to extend her analysis beyond just that genre and to more than videos as well. While the narrative of American Pie is not as explicitly
focused on voyeurism as *Sliver*, the scene at hand reflects similar ideas to those discussed previously in terms of validating voyeurism by watching women who also like to watch. With both Carly and Nadia, the “T&A spectacle is thus adjusted and augmented through the suggestion that the on-screen woman is driven by a sexual agency which is also voyeuristic” (Williams, L.R. 341). Because Nadia looks at and responds sexually to pornographic images of women, it is acceptable for the male characters to do the same to her; further, it is even more acceptable for the film’s spectators to watch and become aroused by the image of her character, who is both watching and being watched.

Despite the fact that she is masturbating solo, the viewer never sees from her perspective or actually focuses on her desires and gratification. Watching incredulously at a friend’s computer, Jim exclaims victoriously, “There is a gorgeous woman masturbating on my bed!” Beyond, of course, the obvious celebration of a fantasy come true, Jim’s declaration also serves as a reminder that his bedroom and his territory act as the site of her sexual expression. He seeks to claim ownership or connection, even in a limited way, to her sexuality even when he is not physically present. In yet another twist to this improbable scenario, the webcam feed mistakenly becomes available to the entire school. The film cuts between Nadia masturbating, Jim and his friends drinking beer and watching the feed intently, and several other groups of students gathered around their computers observing the explicit scene. The various reactions of the spectators draw our attention and Nadia ceases to be the focal point; her masturbation is not about her or her pleasure, but rather the response it elicits from others. At least during an initial reading, this instance of female autoeroticism seems to be reduced to nothing more than a site of voyeurism for the internet age.
Another problematic aspect of this depiction is that Nadia never comes to orgasm, as Jim interrupts her in order to crudely proposition her for sex. Ultimately, her masturbation becomes an aid to stimulate male arousal, rather than being for her own gratification. Despite the fact that she is rendered a passive image subjected to the intrusive male gaze, the power of her sexuality dictates her encounter with Jim. Surprised but unashamed when he walks in on her, she regains control of the situation by commanding, “You have seen me, now it’s my turn to see you. Strip.” Now Jim, acutely aware of the webcam capturing the event, is made vulnerable by the audience’s gaze. It is worth noting, though, that his striptease, much like his two masturbation scenes, is comedic and not erotic in any way. Film critic Matt Singer speculates as to why male and female masturbation are portrayed so differently: “When you see male masturbation onscreen, it’s almost always a means of evoking humor and comedy. It’s not used to titillate or arouse or excite because, let’s face it, there’s nothing titillating or arousing or exciting about watching a man masturbate” (Indie Sex: Teens). Because it is assumed that the vast majority of males begin masturbating regularly in their teen years, for the most part it is regarded as unremarkable, though sometimes indicative of sexual incompetence or general awkwardness. Emphasizing the disparity between Nadia’s self-assured sex appeal and Jim’s sexual incapability, his awkward striptease and incompetent attempted seduction is intercut with the responses multiple web cam viewers, whose reactions range from disgust to pity to laughter. This display of sexual ineptitude calls into question the extent to which visual objectification may or may not relate to actual power of sexual possession. While Jim was able to orchestrate Nadia’s sexual objectification, he is unable to use his sexuality or his masculinity to move beyond merely looking and actually physically act upon his desire for her. When their encounter culminates in embarrassing failure rather than satisfactory intercourse, we are reminded that real life
objectification and power are limited to a much greater extent than spectator-image dynamics which are restricted by imagination more than anything.

After the comedic spectacle of Jim’s clumsy striptease, attention returns to Nadia when she pulls down her underwear and the shot of Jim’s shocked face is framed between her legs. Once again underscoring her exoticism, he exclaims in disbelief at the sight of her bare pubic region, as do the many other groups of people gathered around their computers watching the encounter. However, “as if countering his ‘visual conquest’ of her with his deeper insecurity,” he prematurely ejaculates at her touch, a humiliation that is exacerbated by being broadcast over the internet for his peers to see (Shary 105). While the virginal Jim hardly embodies strong masculine sexuality, it is nevertheless notable how a woman’s potent sexuality overpowers and emasculates him, an accomplishment that echoes the assertions of second-wave feminists who touted the threat of female sexuality to male dominance. His classmates ridicule his sexual incompetence, justifiable comeuppance for his role in taking advantage of Nadia’s trust. It is later revealed that she is sent back home after her host family sees her on the internet. That she is penalized for the incident while the boys who arranged the broadcast suffer no formal consequences aligns with the cultural tradition of policing women’s sexuality and punishing bad girls who step out of line. During the film’s end credits, Jim repeats his embarrassing striptease as Nadia watches via web cam, evidently bearing no ill will toward the man who took advantage of her. Once again, the implication is that she enjoys watching and apparently feels fine about being watched, so it is therefore acceptable for others to watch and objectify her regardless of the potential consequences.

For the film’s audience, watching Nadia while also watching the teens who are watching her may inspire reflection about the experience of spectatorship. This potential self-interrogation
is particularly true with regards to the complicity of the spectator in her sexual objectification. Some audience members, particularly women who have experienced a relentless male gaze in their own lives, may be appalled at the boys’ deliberate exploitation of Nadia’s body and her sexuality for their own gratification, rather than identifying with their gaze as Mulvey theorizes. But if we consider hooks and other theorists who criticize the gender essentialism implicit in much of the gaze-centric spectator theory, we can identify other possible readings of the film for differently located viewers. For example, women who do not fit the cultural model of desirable femininity and beauty may experience invisibility rather than hypervisibility onscreen and in real life in regards to their sexual appeal. These women, therefore, may not identify with Nadia as the image to be desired and possessed, nor with the men who objectify her. Furthermore, the degree to which the viewers acknowledge or question the voyeuristic pleasure they may get from the very same image can only be speculated, again depending upon whether or not they are accustomed to the social power needed to easily relate to the role of the oppressor. Thus, it is crucial to remember that analysis of spectators and the gaze consider those whose experiences and perspectives cannot be summed up by the man/woman paradigm.

Although the film initially seems to be just another exercise in sexist ideology for teen consumption, *American Pie* actually has some redeeming messages about female sexual pleasure. For instance, when Kevin’s (Thomas Ian Nicholas) efforts to convince his girlfriend Vicky (Tara Reid) to have intercourse are met with resistance, he seeks out a legendary sex bible in order to learn how to expertly perform oral sex and bring her to orgasm, which she has been doing regularly for him. Few other teen films present oral reciprocation and women’s orgasms as crucial to satisfying sexual relationships. Additionally, Michelle (Alyson Hannigan), the quirky band camp geek, mentions casually that she once inserted a flute in her vagina. She
responds boldly to Jim’s spit-take: “What? You don’t think I know how to get myself off?” Her matter-of-fact statement highlights the need for women to claim sexual satisfaction for themselves without shame rather than passively seeking gratification solely through their relationships with others. Still it is noteworthy that the closet sex freak and the promiscuous friend are the ones who admit masturbating, not the nice girlfriends Vicky or Heather, who stick to missionary sex. Regardless, men’s quests for sexual fulfillment take center stage in this raunchy comedy, and women’s sexuality is not portrayed as important in and of itself in terms of driving the narrative.

Despite the instances where it is possible to identify subversive readings of the film, *American Pie* can generally be understood as predominantly reinforcing hegemonic paradigms of sexuality. While it is widely credited with bringing about the return to gross-out humor, this teen comedy does not transgress significant sociopolitical boundaries, which would generally be considered beyond the agenda of a major studio like Universal Pictures. According to Warren Zide, a producer of *American Pie*, it took four times for them to secure an R-rating because the MPAA was fixated on details such as the number of times Jim thrusts into the apple pie while experimenting with creative autoerotic techniques (Lewis 284). These objections are quite revealing in terms of the MPAA’s priorities given that, as will be discussed in more detail later, the MPAA’s influence on the production and distribution of film speaks volumes about paternalistic attitudes regarding sexuality held by the mainstream film industry. Hence, the minimal objections to visually explicit female sexuality as depicted in *American Pie* suggest that traditional male-driven narratives about teen sexual coming-of-age stories are deemed acceptable for a broad audience.
Another film about man’s quest to have sex is the 2005 box-office hit *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*. Female masturbation is not as central to this film, but it plays along with similar themes of voyeurism and sexual accessibility. When Andy (Steve Carell), the title character, practices inane flirting tactics on the bookstore sales clerk Beth (Elizabeth Banks), she flirts confidently in return. Responding to his innuendo about whether or not she likes to “do it [her]self,” she suggestively replies with a giggle, “Sometimes. If the mood strikes.” This casual admission in a mainstream film is significant in its normalization of women’s autoerotism, which still is not regarded with the same presumed ordinariness as male masturbation. (For example, one of Andy’s friends nonchalantly brags about how frequently he masturbates without a hint of shame at this disclosure.) Later, Andy and Beth return to her apartment intoxicated and prepare to have sex. She suggests shaving each other and excitedly, if mistakenly, assumes that Andy is kinky. Evidently lacking in sexual inhibitions, she gets into the bath and places the showerhead between her legs, moaning, “This is how I’m going to warm up for you.” Although she is addressing Andy, the camera angle makes it appear as though she is gazing right into the camera and speaking directly to the spectator in anticipation of audience arousal. With most of her body submerged under water, the camera shows a close-up of her face, as she squeaks and moans with her eyes closed. Andy watches her uncomfortably for a few moments before turning to leave, when there is a moment reminiscent of *American Pie*. As he exits the bathroom, Andy finds that three of his friends have been standing in the doorway watching her masturbate, with Beth blissfully unaware of her growing audience. His friend Jay (Romany Malco) confesses that he had slept with Beth previously and describes her as a “freak.” Right at that moment, she moans Andy’s name from the bathroom and he turns back to his friends, saying, “Oh, you think? All I know is that woman scares the shit out of me and I just want to go home.” It is never specified
why exactly she has been labeled a “freak,” yet it is fitting within the contemporary cultural narrative that draws a thin line between sluts and prudes. Women who are not overtly sexual are often described as prudes, whereas Beth’s comfort with her body and her desires have now framed her as too sexually experienced to be considered normal and worthy of respect and privacy.

It has been theorized previously that the true power of the male gaze is that it carries the potential to go beyond merely looking and actually possess the image. Despite the fact that Beth intended to masturbate only in front of Andy as a form of foreplay, Andy and his friends all occupy a position that holds the potential to act upon their gaze. Unlike Jim’s non-threatening appearance in *American Pie*, here the physical presence of four grown men emphasizes Beth’s vulnerability, although the film does not question this aggressive invasion of her space. In fact, as the other men leave, Cal (Seth Rogen) enters the bathroom and introduces himself, taking off his shirt and implying that he intends to join her. We do not see her response to his advance, but the two are shown together as a couple at the end of the film. This problematic exchange suggests that Beth and, presumably, other hypersexual masturbating women are available and eager to be propositioned and consumed by any desiring men. Just like sexy and exotic Nadia welcomes dorky Jim’s advances, Beth is likewise ready and willing to submit herself to schlubby Cal at a moment’s notice. Furthermore, although self-stimulation is often part of foreplay with a partner in addition to a solo activity, it is also noteworthy that Beth does not appear to climax in this scene. Without this indication of her ultimate sexual gratification, her masturbation is portrayed as less about her pleasure and more about how men respond to her behavior. Again, the film reflects the prevalent social notion that women’s physical urges are only important to the extent that they satisfy men’s desires.
It is also interesting to consider her deliberate and familiar use of the showerhead, which is often used as a substitute for the stimulation of a vibrator. Linda Williams ruminates on the significance of women using mechanical aids for masturbation, as depicted in pornography: “This woman is simultaneously insatiable and satisfied, capable both of continuing her pleasure indefinitely and of satisfying herself through her own efforts at clitoral stimulation” (“Fetishism” 109). Beth’s adept masturbation, possibly to the verge of orgasm, affirms her ability to satisfy herself, yet she is also presented as a nymphomaniac who may not need a man but responds eagerly to any advances nonetheless. Because she knows she is being watched, by Andy at least, her masturbation becomes somewhat of a performance, which potentially eases spectators’ apprehension about objectifying her. This is another scenario in which socially undesirable women, who are usually cinematically invisible, may resist identifying with Beth as she offers herself up as an image to be looked at and desired—a reminder that it is only certain women who have been deemed conventionally attractive and worthy of being looked at and wanted. While the film is not particularly transgressive in its treatment of women’s sexuality, it can still potentially help audiences become accustomed to the sight and idea of women self-stimulating. Although her character goes from flirty to freak in one brief scene of masturbation, Beth’s liberated and playful attitude might remind some women that there is nothing shameful about knowing how to work a showerhead.

Neither Sliver, nor American Pie, nor The 40-Year-Old Virgin is likely to be labeled a feminist text. Each film is to some extent troubling in its depiction of female masturbation and in its construction of women’s sexuality as a whole. However, in navigating the problematic representations of female sexuality produced within an androcentric culture, women spectators who actively seek feminist or sex-positive images and narratives can develop the film savvy to
isolate the redeeming aspects of certain texts. Jacqueline Bobo, for instance, discusses black
women’s conscious reading of *The Color Purple* to reject racist and hegemonic aspects of the
film and instead focus on the parts they find valuable and engaging (103). All critical spectators
with a similar propensity for oppositional readings can develop subversive interpretations of
mainstream and seemingly hegemonic texts by actively engaging with the films and isolating
positive images and messages, multiplying the opportunities for women to identify instances of
female masturbation that speak to their own experiences.
CHAPTER III: SELF-DISCOVERY AND SUBVERSION – COMING TO CONSCIOUSNESS

In the films addressed previously, the characters’ reasons for masturbating are relatively straightforward: physical desire. However, there is another motivation presented in recent American cinema that seems inspired by Betty Dodson herself. In addition to its pleasurable physical attributes, some depictions of female masturbation emphasize its importance to women’s sexual self-discovery. This feminist re-imagining of sexuality and eroticism is discussed in “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” wherein Audre Lorde describes self-discovery as part of the power of the erotic, a potential force that lies within women to assert their bodily rights and come to consciousness (Lorde 278). However, in order to claim the potential power of the erotic, women spectators must see themselves reflected in the characters portrayed onscreen. Whether women are seeking their first orgasm or continuing their sexual awakening, the personal and social ramifications of women’s masturbation are a critical aspect of feminist analysis in the following selected films.

Coming Soon (1999), a rare teen film written and directed by a woman, focuses on teenage girls who have already lost their virginity but find themselves seeking fulfilling sexual relationships. Director Colette Burson breaks down her intentions for the film: “I was making a movie about the female teenage experience as you enter into and explore sexuality. … And so I wanted to plant this idea in young girls’ heads that you have a right to have an orgasm, you have a right to sexual pleasure” (Indie Sex: Teens). Burson acknowledges the challenge she faced when tackling the project because the idea of teen girls enthusiastically pursuing sex and the empowerment of orgasm does not fit into the predominant narratives about appropriate heterosexuality (Lehmann-Haupt). This discomfort is most plainly stated by a production designer who reportedly told the editor, “This movie really gets to me, it's as if these girls think
that they have the right to have an orgasm” (Lehmann-Haupt). A male producer also expressed his distaste for the protagonist Stream’s (Bonnie Root) active and unapologetic search for fulfilling sex, saying that it made her character “unlikable” (Lehmann-Haupt). Even when filmmakers have unambiguously sex-positive feminist intentions, external factors throughout the production process restrict the diversity of representations of female desire portrayed onscreen. Burson acknowledges the limits of her control as a filmmaker by explicating the constant pressure she faced from producers to make the film’s political message less radical by cutting the line where Stream challenges the sexual double-standard point blank: “What's wrong with girls wanting to have sex as much as guys?” (Lehmann-Haupt). The crux of the issue seems to be just that—patriarchal norms dictate that women are not entitled to pursue sexual satisfaction outside the confines of male-initiated heterosexual coitus.

The radical notion of teenage girls masturbating is more contentious than the accepted reality of their male counterparts masturbating. Film historian Timothy Shary says, “When girls masturbate in teen films, which is not very often – there’s only a few instances of that – it’s seen as being more exploratory and more curious and there’s not this level of getting caught” (Indie Sex: Teens). This theme of girls’ and women’s self-discovery stands in stark contrast to the comedic embarrassment of teen boys being caught masturbating, almost as a rite of passage, which is seen in films like American Pie and Fast Times at Ridgemont High. Tanya Krzywinska illuminates some of the gender-specific genre patterns found in sexual initiation narratives, asserting that male stories are usually comedies, while female stories are often framed as psychological melodrama (Sex 62-63). Although Coming Soon has its comedic moments, it demonstrates sensitivity and awareness of the mental and emotional significance of sexual awakening. Race and class privilege prove to be significant factors in this film, which follows
three wealthy, white high school girls in Manhattan as they pursue sexual satisfaction, despite the pitiable efforts of the insensitive boys they date. Stream, dissatisfied with the inadequate fulfillment she has been receiving from her sex life, sets out expressly in a pursuit of an orgasm. Her snobby friend Janet (Gaby Hoffmann) discourages Stream from masturbating by calling it desperate and pathetic, and insinuating that she easily achieves orgasm through vaginal intercourse. Again, contrary to male masturbation, which is most often depicted as normal and expected, female masturbation is pathologized, as are women who admit to being unsatisfied by penetrative vaginal intercourse. Stream even complains to her therapist about her unsatisfactory sex life, an opportunity few women have access to despite widespread sexual frustration. After being rebuffed by her despicable boyfriend and resigning herself to disappointing sex, Stream inadvertently climaxes with the aid of a well-placed water jet in a hot tub. With her face lit up with a smile of surprise and excitement, she triumphantly shares her discovery with her friends. Later she confronts her boyfriend about his dismissal of the importance of her orgasm, with her newfound self-assurance that she can and should have satisfying sex. For a young and rather timid girl, Stream takes charge of her sex life and claims her right to sexual satisfaction.

The class privilege present in this coming-of-age narrative cannot be ignored, as it provides the context for most of the plot. The three best friends are all from wealthy families of high status, and their every whim is consistently indulged. This life of privilege likely influences their assured sense that they are entitled to sexual satisfaction when they grow weary of faking it, contrary to the many women who struggle with feelings of shame and inadequacy when vaginal intercourse does not lead to mind-blowing orgasms. Director Burson concurs that the girls’ social status creates tension between their false sense of maturity and entitlement and their sexual dissatisfaction: “I chose this setting because of anyone who should know more about sex and
orgasm, then it should be these kids. But they don’t” (Lehmann-Haupt). Nonetheless, ultimately it is Stream’s persistence, not her privilege, which results in the orgasm and sexual satisfaction she has been seeking.

*Coming Soon* is a prime example of how examining a film as the product of an industry, beyond a textual analysis of the film itself, can further clarify the cultural investment in restricting depictions of female masturbation. Film historian Timothy Shary says that the film’s reception illustrates the industry’s attitude toward women’s sexuality, declaring, “It’s so indicative of how the industry, even as late as ’99, was uncomfortable with female sexual pleasure and especially at the level of teenage girls” (*Indie Sex: Teens*). Mary Vause discusses the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) board’s quasi-censorship of the film, which was repeatedly crippled by an NC-17 rating due to its focus on the girls’ desire for gratification, despite the film’s complete lack of nudity or graphic sex (59). Although the distinction between mainstream and indie films remains quite obscured for the reasons enumerated in *American Independent Cinema* by Yannis Tzioumakis, the backing of a major distributor can make a crucial difference when a film is given a tough rating. *American Pie*, for instance, was re-edited from an NC-17 to an R and performed well at the box office; *Coming Soon*, however, did not have the benefit of major studio support and consequently faded away to a video release “where few teens saw its healthy gender inversion of the sex-quest plot. The same double standard that promoted female sexual practice while denying female sexual pleasure in earlier youth films was obviously still a disruptive factor in bringing more realistic and positive depictions of teenage sexuality to American movies” (Shary 106-107). Other low-budget films faced similar difficulties when attempting to portray diverse sexual coming-of-age stories that focused on girls’ sexualities.
The low-budget cult film *But I'm a Cheerleader* (1999) directed by Jamie Babbit further illustrates the politics involved in determining which images of female masturbation and sexuality are deemed acceptable for distribution and public consumption. Megan’s (Natasha Lyonne) brief scene of self-stimulation is relatively unobtrusive, as she stands in a hallway rubbing her hands between her legs over her pajamas while whispering to herself. The campy comedy features no nudity, graphic sex, or violence, and yet it was initially given an NC-17 rating (Taubin 57). Without the power and influence of a major studio backing, the film was the target of strict MPAA censorship because it tells the rebellious story of queer teens at a de-gaying camp. Because their budgets could not adequately support their politics, progressive films like *Coming Soon* and *But I'm a Cheerleader* were doomed to gather dust on a video rental shelf; meanwhile, other more male-centered films with graphic sexual and violent content easily earn R ratings and big box office returns, highlighting the inconsistencies in the industry’s attitude toward sexuality. Jokes and frank discussion of male masturbation are depicted onscreen, but women are only portrayed as accessories to phallocentric sexuality, with no sexual autonomy or physical desires of their own. As Vause observes snidely, “Apparently male sexuality and violence against women are deemed appropriate topics for mass consumption, but an honest film about female sexuality remains unthinkable” (60). This wariness of the MPAA board’s ratings double standard is well justified, as modern day censorship effectively inhibits radical filmmaking.

Completely lacking in nudity and violence and with its innocuous sex scenes, director Burson admits she was shocked that the MPAA board cited seventeen areas of issue with *Coming Soon* (Lehmann-Haupt). Specifically, they contended that Stream’s orgasm in the hot tub is “too lurid” and whenever a girl came to orgasm, the board suggested that the scene be cut
by seventy-five percent (Lehmann-Haupt). The director claims that she was told expressly that the board does not like girls having orgasms, double standard or not—a representative from the board contended that parents judge movies with a sexist framework and therefore it is the responsibility of the board to do the same (Lehmann-Haupt). Director of the exposé *This Film is Not Yet Rated*, Kirby Dick confirms the ratings board’s approach, noting that an MPAA representative justified their unequal censorship of queer sex by responding simply, “We don’t set the values. We reflect them” (*This Film is Not Yet Rated*). This revelation exposes the circular loop of onscreen depictions of sexuality, both reflecting and reinforcing real life attitudes toward women’s masturbation within a patriarchal society.

Rather than contending with the restrictive agenda of the MPAA, John Cameron Mitchell’s directed the unrated film *Shortbus* (2006), which follows several New Yorkers in their pursuit of sexual and emotional satisfaction. Distributor ThinkFilm marketed the film only to art houses, avoiding unnecessary aggravation by targeting audiences who would presumably be open to some of the more unconventional aspects of the film (Williams, *Screening* 294). The film unapologetically puts female sexual pleasure front and center, following Sofia (Sook-Yin Lee), a Chinese-Canadian woman who has become discouraged by her inability to orgasm. She masturbates and experiments with sex enthusiastically, adventurously, and even desperately until she is able to finally climax. Depicting actual sex between the actors, *Shortbus* does not shy away from explicit sex, as the camera closely follows Sofia’s breasts, her contorted facial expressions, and her hands frantically rubbing her clitoris. The film’s graphic, un-simulated sex between the actors led some critics to question what distinguishes films featuring real sex from pornography. According to Linda Ruth Williams, pornographic films “operate with a constant cinematographic awareness of masturbation as a prime audience response,” and thus scenes are
composed in order to provide maximum visibility and allow sufficient time for spectators to come to orgasm (10-11). Although *Shortbus*’ “narrative nevertheless imitates the pornographic quest for pleasure,” the film does not necessarily solicit a carnal audience response, suggesting that the film’s intentions go beyond visual arousal (Williams, *Screening Sex* 288). While some may find its graphic representations arousing, the narrative maintains focus throughout the film, keeping the characters’ journeys central rather than the sex acts themselves, a particularly transgressive approach given that the characters are all queer, polyamorous, or otherwise sexually marginalized.

At the film’s culmination, Sofia finally orgasms with the assistance of a couple of attractive swingers, losing herself in her newfound, unrestricted sexual expression. The camera focuses on her changing facial expressions as she is overcome with ecstasy. At this moment, she transcends the bodily confines of her actual orgasm, as she “finally discovers that she can ‘get it in the end,’ not by working hard but by letting herself go with strangers” (Williams, *Screening Sex* 292). After masturbating with numerous tools and techniques, she is finally able to orgasm as by trusting in the safe and nurturing arms of the community, as the film firmly situates its politics and metaphors in post-9/11 New York City. The euphoric freedom and liberation, on both a personal and political level, brought by this act of alleged sexual deviancy becomes the focal point of the scene, resisting any objectifying gaze. Outside the bounds of heterosexual monogamy, *Shortbus* challenges dominant constructions of acceptable sexuality. Furthermore, presenting a woman of color taking charge of her sexuality for her own pleasure makes a powerful statement, given the historical racial politics that have long portrayed Asian women in film as submissive “lotus blossoms” or manipulative prostitutes.
Much of Sofia’s frustration is rooted in the conflict between her idea of what sex and orgasm should be like and the less satisfying reality. Her optimism about her “preorgasmic” state fades as she becomes more cynical about the idealistic image of sexuality she has been sold. Linda Williams’ extended examination of the film concludes, “the film is smart enough not to insult its female protagonist by identifying any single technique or philosophy as the solution to her preorgasmic status…. [I]t harnesses that quest [for sexual pleasure] to the larger social goal of forming a community of ‘permeable,’ unafraid beings” (Williams, Screening 288). The theme of community, particularly among marginalized people, easily lends itself to discussions of spectatorship and the relationship between image and viewer as a partnership in creating meaning. This concept of spectator involvement is reflected in the film’s tagline: “Voyeurism is participation.” The film’s queer politics ground the film’s more absurd moments and encourage spectators to engage with the text while maintaining an element of distance from identification due to its over-the-top camp. In some ways the more unreal depictions of reality offer safer spaces for exploration of sexuality and identity.

A strikingly different example of an adult woman whose orgasm is vital to her self-discovery can be found in the film Pleasantville (1998). Betty (Joan Allen), a repressed mother living a seemingly perfect 1950s existence, discovers masturbation and, in turn, discovers herself and her sexuality. While Coming Soon depicts orgasm as central to sexual awakening and self-discovery, Pleasantville takes a less direct approach and positions climax as just one part of the exploration and development of a woman’s sexual identity. Following two teens who have been magically transplanted into a black-and-white 1950s sitcom world, Pleasantville offers an opportunity to examine how messages regarding traditional femininity and sexuality stifle women’s autonomy. Betty is a June Cleaver-esque housewife who lives only for her husband
and children and has literally never even heard of sex. It is not until her two kids turn the town upside-down by spreading knowledge and rebellion that Betty, and other women like her, begin having their feminine mystique revelations, recognizing their dissatisfaction with their daily lives. The film does have conflicting messages about women’s sexuality, which are particularly clear with daughter Mary Sue/Jennifer (Reese Witherspoon). She is portrayed as promiscuous, with her sexual influence corrupting the local boys while remaining unfulfilling for her personally, as indicated when she laments that she is still black-and-white despite her extensive sexual experience. Ultimately, she decides to remain in Pleasantville and start over as a model student, having outgrown “the slut thing.”

While Jennifer’s sexuality is presented as unsatisfying and false, perhaps because Betty is older and married the film is less judgmental of her need for sexual exploration. She appears sweetly innocent and bewildered when Jennifer explains the concept of sex, and intrigued when she says, “There are other ways to enjoy yourself – without Dad.” The next shot is of Betty’s hand turning the nozzles on the tub while her husband goes to bed. She looks in the mirror contemplatively as she removes her clothing, illustrating the connection between looking at one’s own body and discovering one’s sexuality and identity. Betty lies in the bath mostly submerged in water, limiting the camera’s visual access to her body. She tentatively begins to masturbate and looks wide-eyed and disbelieving as the bathroom begins to turn to color. The camera cuts between a shot of her husband lying restlessly in bed and a close-up of her face as she gasps and moans, “Oh my goodness!” As Betty comes to orgasm for the first time, the spectator sees from her perspective rather than indulging in the spectacle of her body. At this moment, the bathroom turns to color and the tree outside the window bursts into flames “as though, enflamed by the profundity of Betty's awakening, the Tree of Knowledge itself seems to
be catching fire” (Armstrong 158). This impressive imagery may seem (over)dramatic; however, recalling some of the testimonials from *Sex for One* reminds us just how powerfully transformative an orgasm can be, particularly for women who have been sexually unfulfilled for years.

The revolutionary nature of her sexual awakening demonstrates that masturbation and climax are just part of her self-discovery. When Betty turns to color herself, however, she is terribly distressed because of how deeply ingrained messages about proper black-and-white femininity have been. Betty’s character development progresses when she poses nude for the diner owner and aspiring painter (Jeff Daniels) and learns to embrace her sexuality on her own terms despite pressure from her husband and harassment from the community. Richard Armstrong notes its significance that Betty is not shown naked but for the painting on the diner window: “this visual remove turns desire into art, voyeurism into contemplation” (158). The nude artistic image of Betty incenses some of the townspeople who are moved to vandalism, underscoring the perceived threat of female sexuality even in artistic representations. That “it is Betty’s emergence that epitomizes the changing tone of the community” highlights the idea that women’s sexuality has the power to revolutionize the world around them (Armstrong 158).

Although the message is similar, unlike *Coming Soon*, *Pleasantville* did not face the same criticism from producers or the MPAA ratings board. Arguably, this is largely due to the fact that it was a bigger budget film distributed by New Line Cinema, thereby escaping the increased scrutiny that “indie” films often face. However, the lack of opposition is further evidence that masturbation and sexual-awakening is more acceptable for certain people and within certain contexts. For a married adult woman in a make-believe world, her sexual self-discovery is more poetic than problematic. With teenage girls in the real world, on the other hand, orgasm-centered
self-discovery presents a threat to the patriarchal status quo. Certain bodies and identities are culturally policed more so than others because they represent a reality contrary to the dominant narratives of sexuality, and this is particularly true when it comes to depictions of women of color.

Although Spike Lee’s directorial debut, *She’s Gotta Have It*, was heralded as a refreshing look at black female sexuality, it is difficult to see much more than a new twist on an old stereotype. Women of color are often hypersexualized onscreen and even with masturbation their sexuality is rarely presented as autonomous and self-satisfying, as most films leave much to be desired in their representations of the sexual autonomy of women of color. This 1986 film was ostensibly progressive in its graphic portrayal of black female sexuality, depicting Nola Darling’s (Tracy Camilla Johns) sexual exploits with her three male suitors, her flirtation with a female friend, and a scene of masturbation. Yet ultimately, Nola is depicted as just another woman who uses her sexuality to boost her feelings of self-worth, as Lee’s film reinforces the racialized and sexualized stereotypes of black women. Nola is not an autonomous sexual being because “though we are led to believe she enjoys sex, her sexual fulfillment is never the central concern. She is pleased only to the extent that she is able to please” (hooks, “Whose” 136). Judging by Lee’s film, it seems as if black women are doomed to be either desexualized or hypersexualized onscreen, never represented as individuals with varying but healthy sexual desires, and never portrayed as women who are strong and self-determined rather than merely the products of the men around them. In her preeminent critical piece, “‘Whose Pussy is This’: A Feminist Comment,” bell hooks asserts that Nola commodifies her sexuality as social currency to be used with her lovers:
[Nola,] though [a] desiring subject, acts on the assumption that heterosexual female sexual assertion has legitimacy primarily as a gesture of reward or as a means by which men can be manipulated and controlled by women (what is vulgarly called “pussy power”). Men do not have to objectify Nola’s sexuality because she objectifies it. In doing so, her character becomes the projection of a stereotypical sexist notion of a sexually assertive woman—she is not in fact liberated. (136)

After toying with the affections of many men and a lesbian friend, Nola finds herself alone in her bed. She masturbates as the camera pans from her breasts to her hand moving over her clitoris beneath the sheets, and then the camera again pans up toward her face at the close of the brief scene. It is more graphic than many of the other selected scenes discussed previously, yet it does not culminate with her orgasm. Hooks suggests that although masturbation is a part of her sexuality, it is only a replacement for when her many lovers are absent because autoeroticism in itself is never fully satisfying for her: “Ironically and unfortunately, Nola Darling’s sexual desire is not depicted as an autonomous gesture, as an independent longing for sexual expression, satisfaction, and fulfillment” (“Whose” 136). At one point, Nola even internalizes her lover’s criticism of her sexual desires, causing her to seek the help of a therapist. Her promiscuity becomes pathologized, similar to many women who have sought to satisfy their sexual desires in ways that run contrary to hegemonic expectations.

Although Nola’s opening monologue suggests that the viewer will learn about her sexuality from her perspective, the film actually privileges the perspectives of her male counterparts, many of whom condemn her promiscuity as a divisive force within the black community. Male-driven narratives and masculine perspectives often dominate the story, as
documentary-style interviews with her various suitors are intercut throughout the film. Her sexuality is scorned as the result and cause of many problems within communities of color in Brooklyn during the 1980s. The depiction of masturbation is followed by a rape scene that solidifies the realization that *She’s Gotta Have It* is not a revolutionary representation of black female sexual emancipation. As hooks writes, “Suddenly we are not witnessing a radical questioning of female sexual passivity or a celebration of female sexual self-assertion but a reconstruction of the same old sexist content in a new and more interesting form” (139).

Regardless of its intentions, hooks argues, “*She’s Gotta Have It* can take its place alongside a growing body of contemporary films that claim to tell women’s stories while privileging male narratives, films that stimulate audiences with versions of female sexuality that are not really new or different” (hooks, “Whose” 137). Although Nola is not a perfect example of liberated black female sexuality by any means, it is nonetheless possible for viewers to use Bobo’s idea of deliberately subversive readings in order to identify and isolate aspects of the film that speak to them, even if it means simply focusing on the depiction of black femininity as beautiful and desirable.

Any analysis of Nola’s peaceful and solitary act of masturbation is undoubtedly overwhelmed by the ensuing violence. In her twenty-year anniversary reflection on the film, Thelma Wills Foote affirms, “the film's enactment of male domination over the black female protagonist's body communicates its underlying ambition to defend black manhood against the perceived inordinate power of contemporary black feminism's excoriation of black male sexism. The film's critique of the double standard imposed on emancipated black female sexuality is a pretext for that agenda” (Foote 218-9). As the spectator watches Nola being sexually dominated, any potential rebelliousness of her previous act of masturbation fades away; the sexual autonomy
of a black woman is presented as no match for that of black men. Hooks, I would argue, demands too much resistance from a character being raped, but the spirit of her criticism rings true for many who are desperate to see strong, self-determined black women represented onscreen as sexual beings within their own right:

As Jaime rapes Nola and aggressively demands that she answer the question, ‘whose pussy is this,’ this is the moment of truth—the moment when she can declare herself independent, sexually liberated, the moment when she can proudly assert through resistance her sexual autonomy…. Ironically, she does not resist the physical violence. She does not assert the primacy of her body rights. She is passive. It is ironic because until this moment we have been seduced by the image of her as a forceful woman, a woman who dares to be sexually assertive, demanding, active. We are seduced and betrayed. (“Whose” 139)

Foote, on the other hand, argues that the extent to which Nola does or does not resist the rape is beside the point (223). To her “Lee’s film represents the communal nature of the punishment imposed on Nola by means of the rape scene's barely detectible cuts,” which intercut her three lovers as if they are all participating in her rape (Foote 223-224). As hooks argues, “we still do not see an imaging of mutual, sexually satisfying relationships between black women and men in a context of non-domination” (“Whose” 141). Given the lack of opportunities for women of color to see themselves reflected onscreen, this dearth of sexually fulfilled and self-aware black women means that She’s Gotta Have It can have a disproportionately negative effect on audiences seeking representations of black women’s sexuality.

The current cinematic images of female masturbation barely begin to reflect the diversity of women’s experiences with navigating their sexuality in a patriarchal society that overlooks the
significance of the female orgasm. Masturbation can be about self-discovery, seduction, or simply about getting off, and there should be more cinematic representations of the myriad of ways autoeroticism functions in women’s daily lives. With an analysis, albeit limited in scope, of the possibilities presented by depicting the multiplicity of women’s autoeroticism, it is reasonable to examine what future films and feminist film theory might contribute to an ongoing analysis.
CONCLUSION

Representations of female autoeroticism have come a long way from the demonically possessed Regan (Linda Blair) masturbating maniacally with a crucifix in *The Exorcist* (1973), and current depictions paint a complex and evolving picture of women’s sexuality. Self-stimulation functions as an integral part of both partnered and solo sex. Masturbation to first climax is central to the sexual coming-of-age stories of urban professionals like Sofia in *Shortbus* and working class girls like Vivienne (Natasha Lyonne) in *Slums of Beverly Hills* (1998). Good girls do it, like Betty in *Pleasantville* and Stream in *Coming Soon*. Bad girls do it, like Nola in *She’s Gotta Have It* and Diane (Naomi Watts) in *Mulholland Drive*. Lesbians and masochists do it, like Megan in *But I’m a Cheerleader* and Lee (Maggie Gyllenhaal) in *Secretary* (2002), respectively. Upon further examination, there is a selection, though not exactly a multitude, of depictions of female masturbation that reflect much of the gamut of women’s sexual experiences. Not every representation is equally feminist or sex-positive on its face, but all depictions offer an opportunity to construct subversive readings and identify redeemable aspects, even if it is only a reminder that women can and do masturbate at all. According to Laqueur, “Masturbation has become not only a source of individual self-discovery, but also the basis for a new form of sexual sociability rooted in the celebration of the imagination and its infinite possibilities,” breaking free from the strict hegemonic confines of penetrative heterosexual intercourse that has left so many women sexually unfulfilled (419). By honestly embracing masturbation and other forms of sexual expression it is possible to appreciate the multiplicity of women’s sexuality and the power of the erotic.

Film functions as a powerful avenue for encouraging or suppressing diverse images of female sexuality. Comprehensive feminist film criticism is crucial to identify and promote savvy
readings of contemporary films, as bell hooks declares “the truth that every aesthetic work embodies the political, the ideological as part of its fundamental structure. No aesthetic work transcends politics or ideology” (“Whose” 135). The female body becomes a site of resistance, as “the body is always a function of discourse,” and film could act as the medium for the ongoing sexual revolution (Doane, “Women’s Stake” 89). Mary Ann Doane reflects on the feminist resistance to attempts to embody women’s femininity and sexuality onscreen because the temptation of essentialism erases the diversity of women’s experiences and plays into the hands of the patriarchal control, particularly because limited representations yield disproportionate influence. However, it seems that the remedy for this dilemma is an influx of assorted images of women and varying representations of sexual expression. A diverse wealth of images would support the complexity of female sexuality, a vision in which more women could see themselves and their lives reflected. These selected scenes of masturbation in recent films provide inspiration for spectators and filmmakers alike, prompting candid conversations about female sexuality that no longer needs to be spoken of only in whispers.

While supporting female filmmakers, particularly women of color, seems like an obvious way to encourage more feminist and sex-positive representations of female sexuality, it is critical to remain vigilant about not falling into the trap of gender essentialism. Nina K. Martin warns against this very tendency:

Celebrating the purported difference in something created by and for women suggests a level of essentialism, wherein women desire differently because they are intrinsically different from men and require different forms of entertainment for stimulation. While the construction of gender—along with identity-related issues of class, race, age, sexual orientation, and ethnicity—contributes to
different levels of experience, feminist research simply has not proven that women make different films from men simply because they are women. (158)

Therefore, while it is important to support female filmmakers in order to foster a diversity of perspectives and standpoints, it is nonetheless crucial to recognize that the identity politics of the person behind the camera do not always translate to the screen. Rather, when it comes to women’s sexuality, perhaps the next step for consumers is to demand honest and varied representations free from paternalistic interference.

It seems that one of the central factors in determining which messages about women’s sexuality are portrayed onscreen is the MPAA ratings board. Jersey Girl (2004) director Kevin Smith alleges that his essentially tame film was given an R rating because the two main characters frankly discuss masturbation. During the candid yet relatively mild conversation, Maya (Liv Tyler) unashamedly proclaims she masturbates twice per day. Smith recalls that a woman from the MPAA told him that she would be bothered if her 16-year old daughter were to see that scene (This Film is Not Yet Rated). This morally conservative discomfort manifests in harsh ratings, which effectively suppresses socio-politically transgressive messages that would disrupt dominant conceptions of sexuality and power relations. Kimberly Peirce, director of Boys Don’t Cry (1999), speculates on the significance of the NC-17 rating as a means of policing film content:

In a construct where most movies are written by men, directed by men, they’re mostly the male experience. So I think that, and even in sex scenes, I think that it’s from a male perspective. So I don’t think that the focus is female pleasure. I think that female pleasure is unnatural; I think that female pleasure is scary in that kind of narrative setting. So I think that if you’re a woman who understands
female pleasure and understands it from the woman’s perspective, you are probably going into terrain that’s unfamiliar. And I think that unfamiliarity is generally what breeds these NC-17s. (This Film is Not Yet Rated)

While her comments reflect an apparently gender essentialist attitude, her experience verifies that films that reject or even challenge patriarchal constructions of sexuality in favor of woman-centric explorations of pleasure, power, and identity are censured precisely because of the socially progressive alternatives they represent. Essentially, if films are receiving seemingly unwarranted NC-17 ratings because their politics conflict with the dominant social narratives, it is likely that they are doing something right.

I would like to return to Marilyn Frye’s idea about lesbians looking past the foreground and instead focusing on the women who help construct the representations of reality. Learning that they can be seen, these women then learn to see themselves, recognizing the fragile structure of the patriarchal system that works to maintain women’s invisibility. While it is true that even the most outwardly sexist and hegemonic constructions of female masturbation in film can yield positive and even radical glimpses of women’s sexuality when read with a generous yet critical feminist lens, that possibility does not mean that women should to be satisfied with collecting the scraps of cinematic images of women. Nor does this research intend to suggest that there is ultimately a truly authentic and comprehensive view of female sexuality that could be committed to celluloid. Because of this inability to pigeonhole the multiplicities and complexities of women’s experiences with their own sexualities, a diversity of representations is crucial to reflecting the variance of all women’s lived experiences, regardless of how they fit into the overarching narratives of either hegemonic or feminist sexuality. One would hope that any woman, regardless of her orientation, race, or class, could gaze upon the image of a masturbating
woman and find something to identify with, potentially transforming these hegemonic discourses for a subversive purpose. Even interrogating cinematic depictions of women’s sexuality independent of men and traditional hegemonic dynamics functions to create a space where actual women are recognized as autonomous sexual beings. Perhaps the next decade will yield even more images of the beauty of female sexuality, providing a foundation for equality based on an understanding of the revolutionary power of women’s autoeroticism.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 1999. DVD.


Universal Home Entertainment, 1999. DVD.


Unapix Entertainment Productions, 1999. DVD.


*Indie Sex: Teens.* Dir. Lisa Ades. Independent Film Channel (IFC), 2007. DVD.


*Secretary*. Dir. Steven Shainberg. Perf. Maggie Gyllenhaal and James Spader. Lions Gate, 2002. DVD.


*She’s Gotta Have It*. Dir. Spike Lee. Perf. Tracy Camilla Johns, Tommy Redmond Hicks, John Canada Terrell, and Spike Lee. MGM Home Entertainment, 1986. DVD.


This Film Is Not Yet Rated. Dir. Kirby Dick. IFC Films, 2006. DVD.


