Sex, Dialectics and the Misery of Happiness

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I

It is undoubtedly the case that cine-psychoanalysis no longer has the dominance within film studies that it once had. While those of us with certain misgivings about psychoanalysis might welcome this change, we should not lose sight of why it had such a stranglehold on criticism in the first place.¹ Beyond the analogy of the cinematic experience to dreaming, claims for the ‘unconscious’ underpinnings of the cinematic apparatus, or even the ‘symptomatic’ status of the image, the underlying reason I would suggest is that cinema, like psychoanalysis, is fascinated with sex. Whether mainstream or art house, metaphoric or explicit, of direct narrative concern or a more general framing through which events unfold and moods are established, it is clearly the case that sexual desires and behaviours dominate a great many films. Cinema talks to and of our sexual being and seems particularly well equipped to not only help us think about sex via it’s on-screen representation, but also through its more affective, expressive and evocative capacities, to offer us a deep engagement with our feelings about sex. In this respect, it would be far more surprising if the conjunction had not taken such firm root. Sex matters to both psychoanalysis and cinema in profound ways, as a foundation of identity, as a driver of behaviour and as an articulation of difference. While one may take issue with the interpretation of sexuality offered by psychoanalytic criticism this does not prevent one agreeing with it on the centrality of sex to our lives and as a consequence of this claim, the vital role sexuality plays in our understanding of, and engagement with, cinema. In this respect we must not confuse a

¹ This is one of my biggest problems with the rather blanket rejection of cinepsychoanalysis as called for by the likes of David Bordwell and Noel Carroll. Their attack on method leaves little room for sympathy with the questions asked and posed by psychoanalysis, questions which still seem fundamental to to our understanding of the cinematic experience.
questioning of its methods with a rejection of its interests. Indeed, with so many films representing sex as a pathological force in our lives, the link between the psychological and the cinematic seem even more pertinent.

Yet, it is precisely the power and seductiveness of this pathological interpretation of sex that should cause us to pause, particularly in conjunction with the penetration of psychoanalytic ideas and tropes into Western culture, which can seem to prefigure the problems of sex in exclusively psychoanalytic terms. Aesthetic metaphors too quickly become psychological displacements, struggles between two men necessarily reveal something oedipal and any malignant force can be explained, or explained away, as the return of the repressed. The model, even if only at the level of pop psychology, precedes and influences the production of Western film to such an extent that it becomes both the object and method, risking a hermetically sealed circularity in which theory is elevated to fact. Now, rather than a way of understanding this pathology as a potential, sex and sexuality risk becoming something which are necessarily pathological. Even at its best, there is something wrong about sex. There seems little room here for any understanding of sex (whether utopian or quotidian) as something which might sustain us, let alone bring pleasure, satisfaction, or even, dare one say, happiness. Under such a regime of thought ‘good’ sex is seen at best as a normative fantasy reduced on screen to the banality of (overwhelmingly heterosexual) romance or the triteness of pornography while the negativity of bad sex ossifies rather than articulates our sexual situation. Rather than tales of bad sex, sex itself becomes bad, a cause of misery to which we can respond with either theological despair or ironic detachment. Todd Solondz’s black tragic-comedy *Happiness* combines both reactions and presents us with what I think is a strikingly psychoanalytic vision of a world made miserable by sexual desire and bifurcated by sexual difference. The film presents a series of failing marriages, abusive sexualities and alienated individuals whose sexual desires compete rather than ever meet. It focuses on three generations of the Jordans, a white, middle-class, New Jersey family, and a brief description of their fundamentally unhappy intra- and extra-familial and sexual relationships sets out what is at stake.

The grandfather, Lenny Jordan (Ben Gazzara), has just announced to his wife, Mona (Louise Lasser), that after forty years of marriage he loves no one and now wants to be alone. However, while unable to emotionally engage with either his wife or his family, he cannot simply leave. When a widow, Dianne (Elisabeth Ashley), seduces Lenny and after extremely hurried intercourse tells him not to feel guilty, Lenny simply replies, ‘I don’t - I don’t feel anything’. On the other hand and in keeping with the film’s misanthropic narrative, we discover that subsequent to this encounter Dianne has had a stroke. Lenny and Mona’s youngest daughter, the ironically named
Joy (Jane Adams) is thirty, still living at home and unhappy in both her job and her relationship. She opens the film splitting up from her boyfriend Andy (Jon Lovitz) during a dinner date. The event does not go well and Andy’s subsequent fate (we discover that he has committed suicide), like Dianne’s, demonstrates that relationships with the Jordans generally have dire consequences. Not that the Jordans themselves fare much better; Joy remains single for the rest of the film. However, as with her father, we do see her have a brief sexual encounter with a recent Russian émigré called Vlad (Jared Harris). As with Lenny and Mona the event is more mechanical than passionate with Vlad leaving almost immediately after he has achieved climax, but it is at least seen to put a smile on Joy’s face the next day. Unfortunately even this pleasure is short lived as it turns out that Vlad is in a relationship and the smile is removed when his angry partner punches Joy to the ground at work, sealing her public humiliation. For good measure, she also discovers that Vlad has stolen her stereo.

On the face of it, the Jordans’ oldest daughter, Trish Maplewood (Cynthia Stevenson), has the perfect upper-middle-class existence with her large house, uniformed maid, three children and a husband, Bill Maplewood (Dylan Baker) who is a successful therapist. However, the marriage has grown sexless and it turns out that Bill is developing paedophilic tendencies which he is unable to master and during the course of the film he commits two child rapes and is arrested. Finally their second daughter, Helen (Lara Flynn Boyle) has a successful career as a writer and a string of well-muscled lovers, but she has adopted a totally cynical attitude towards her life’s work, which she feels lacks worth and meaning. The closest she comes to an emotionally fulfilling encounter is with an abusive telephone caller named Allen (Phillip Seymour Hoffman), who calls her while she is berating her lack of authenticity and wishing she had been raped as a child, an event she is convinced would have given her writing the gravitas she craves. Allen abuses her for being nothing, worthless, a void. By directly agreeing with Helen’s own self-criticism, he raises the momentary possibility of Helen actually having a genuine emotional response to another person. It also sexually excites her, particularly as Allen claims ‘I’m gonna fuck you so hard, you’ll be coming out of your ears’. Unfortunately, rather than an exotic sexual predator, Allen turns out to be a sexually terrified and deeply unattractive ginger-haired loser, so it comes as no surprise that when they do eventually meet, the encounter fails. Although Allen generally spends his lonely evenings in a miasma of masturbation, alcohol and self-loathing he does manage to spend one intimate evening with likewise lonely neighbour Kristina (Camryn Manheim). While rather dowdy and extremely overweight, Kristina does appear to have genuine affection for Allen and although he shuns her at first, they do eventually go out for a date. They dance together, they talk together
and even, platonically, sleep together. However, Kristina admits she is
disgusted by sex, an aversion undoubtedly intensified by the fact she was
raped by her doorman. Worse, subsequent to the attack rather than report
him to the police Kristina simply snapped his neck and then disposed of his
dismembered body in her freezer.

What are we to make of this litany of pain, abuse, uncontrollable
desires and social and sexual failure and how should we interpret and
articulate it if not through psychoanalytic means? One thing which seems
abundantly clear is that no one is actually happy in \textit{Happiness}, indeed the
desire for happiness, particularly as sought through sex, love, or
companionship is presented as the cause of their misery. It is not just that
these characters want what they cannot have, but their refusal to give up
wanting what they cannot have that seems to be the problem. Furthermore,
the problem seems not merely a matter of the impossibility of forming
sustaining intersubjective sexual relationships, but also of their prohibition,
as there appears to be a narrative duty to ensure there are no healthy sexual
relationships. Vlad could easily have been single (and honest), and with time
Kristina might well have developed a capacity for sexual intimacy (had she
not been a killer), but the text’s universalisation of misery wins out. No one
is either nourished or satisfied by their encounter with the other as no one
seems to offer what is being truly sought. Besides supporting the rather
obvious and generalised psychoanalytic claim that unconscious desires of a
sexual nature drive these characters behaviour, it is the focus on their desires
being driven by a sense of lack that seems significant. In the disjunction
between their keen self-awareness that something is missing from their lives
and their incredulity towards the things (and people) with which they try and
plug the gap, these characters seem not just psychoanalytic, but particularly
Lacanian subjects. I would even suggest that the film’s totalisation of the
failure of intersubjective heterosexual life could be read as a materialisation,
albeit a narratively extreme one, of Lacan’s infamous claim that ‘there is no
sexual relationship’.\footnote{The amount of literature on this topic from within the psychoanalytic field is huge.
For the clearest explanation, see the entry in Dylan Evans, \textit{An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis} (London: Routledge, 1996) 181-182. For a
more detailed analysis of Lacan’s allied theory of sexuation see Bruce Fink, \textit{The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance} (Princeton N.J.: Princeton

Lacan’s point, of course, was not to deny the reality of physical
relationships between men and women, but essentially to claim that there is
no \textit{logical} relationship between sense and sex. What we think we want or
need at the psychic level to make up for our sense of lack is never met by
what we do at the physical level. In his claim that ‘there is no sexual
relationship’, Lacan produces an antithesis – if not a full blown antinomy – between psychic and material sex, and it is this antinomy that is both presented and shared by Happiness. They both offer us worlds in which the rational subject and the sexual subject are not a whole, not even competing parts, but an uneasy coincidence that makes no sense to itself, let alone understands how on earth it could relate to another, despite suffering overwhelming urges to do so. Whether Solondz is aware of this similarity to Lacanian models of sexual desire or whether he is simply picking up on more popular psychological versions of the same themes is another matter. However, regardless of whether Solondz has directly or indirectly engaged with Lacanian theory, his film does seem to ‘think’ sexuality as an existential failure, a force which as with Lacan makes people who they are, but fails them as it can never bring satisfaction. However, I would like to argue that the way the film displays this logic reveals a significant aporia in both its and Lacan’s concept of sexual desire. In particular, the implicit understanding of desire as a force motivated by a sense of lack, seems to rest on a restricted and limiting notion of dialectical negativity. It is therefore the understanding and application of Hegel’s dialectic as much as Freud that I believe is of issue here.

II
Before turning to Hegel however it must be stressed that Lacan’s refusal of the sexual relationship is more sophisticated than it might at first appear. Clearly, it is not a claim that there is no sex so much as that sex can never make sense. The sexual relationship seems both inexplicable and axiomatic at the same time. Meaning is imposed on sex; not something which emerges from it in a natural manner. This goes beyond simply claiming it is a social construction, but instead presents the failure of the sexual relationship to make sense as almost the price of consciousness itself. This is because for Lacan, the formation of a ‘natural’ relationship between male and female is blocked by the subject’s construction by and relationship to language, which is different for men and women, and it is this which scuppers purely instinctive or biological relationships. Indeed, without language there is no such thing as gender so consequently no such thing as gender orientated desire or relationships. Hence masculine and feminine refer to different modes of failure that can in principle be taken up by any actual body. In particular, it is their fundamentally different relationship to the Phallus as master signifier, the different form in which ‘men’ and ‘women’ essentially fail to live up to the demands of the symbolic order, that produces a nonreciprocal difference between the masculine and the feminine. In simple terms ‘man’ wants to have and therefore fears losing the Phallus (and in attempting to identify directly with the Phallus perennially falls short of this
aim), while ‘woman’ on the other hand is tempted into being what ‘he’ lacks and therefore fears not being the Phallus. What each party fears therefore is a reflection of two quite different modes of lack, a lack in having and a lack in being. Consequently, the attempt by each partner in a couple to ‘plug the gap’ for the other’s sense of lack necessarily fails to live up to the different form in which they each fail the symbolic in the first place. The sexual relationship therefore cannot achieve reciprocity, it can never stand as a totality in which both parties can now see themselves as ‘full’. For Lacan, the sexual relationship is at its heart therefore a fantasy of fullness in which a pure subject longs to be in a relationship with a partner who offers them the pure otherness which they lack. As both lack and otherness comes in two distinct varieties – not having and not being – this relationship never, as such, exists.

In many respects, Lacan’s project reflects the perennial philosophical quandary regarding the relationship between matter and ideas and extends it onto the terrain of sexuality. For some his attempt to dematerialise our relationship towards the phallic function (not least by using a modified form of predicate calculus to produce his infamous formulas of sexuation which map out our symbolic predicament), aims to describe in principle how any speaking beings psychically experience sex. Whether we take up a masculine or feminine speaking position is therefore not a matter of physiology. Compared with Freud’s emphasis on castration anxiety, Lacan’s linguistic reformulation of lack seems to offer a far less biological mode of analysis. Instead, it has the potential to articulate more epistemological differences between notions of having and being, as well as offering a more nuanced understanding of the differences between need, demand and desire. Slavoj Žižek has mounted a defence of the Lacanian project in these terms and argues that what Lacan offers is very much a description of, rather than prescription for, patriarchal culture. For others, the influence of castration on the having-being split, with ‘man’ fearing castration (not having the Phallus) and ‘woman’ fearing she already has been (not being the Phallus) means Lacan still produces an essentialist and heteronormative notion of sexual difference. Luce Irigaray (1985) for example, claims Lacan’s error is to repeat

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4 Žižek seems less Lacanian in his recent work but most of his publications between *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) and the *Ticklish Subject* (1999) offer a defence and use of Lacan’s ideas. For a more general overview of contemporary Lacanian thought on this matter see Renata Salecl (ed.) *Sexuation: Sic 3* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).
rather than question society’s fundamental phallocentrism, while for others, such as Judith Butler, (1990, 1993) Lacan has not gone far enough in his linguistic turn. For Butler, the problem still lies (as it does more generally with psychoanalysis) in a residual biologism and essentialism. While I would agree that Lacan’s model of sexual difference is both conservative and heteronormative, I am less convinced that biologism and essentialism is either its cause or even quite such the absolute error its opponents have painted it. Indeed, I would instead suggest that the problem with both Butler and Lacan is neither of them is either material, or indeed, ‘biological’, enough.

Following David McNally (2001), I would argue that both Lacan’s and Butler’s emphasis on meaning over matter results in the attenuation of the actual physical body. We might well be linguistic subjects but we are also embodied persons and the capacities and limitations of the human body do not go away simply because we are also symbolic, social, and linguistic creatures. Sexual expression is diverse, but it is not limitless, so while biological essentialism risks reductive and normative explanations of the historically rich and culturally diverse reality of human sexual practices, idealist and voluntarist explanations have their own pitfalls. Not least in their fetishisation of difference they risk rather overstating the diversity of human life over the repetitions and similarities. As Stella Sanford (1999) has suggested in regard to Butler, she also runs the philosophical risk of allowing her critique of the metaphysic of substance and her subsequent epistemological doubt, actually becoming a rejection of any notion of ontology. Butler is right to argue against essentialism’s prioritisation of the body as substance, but the error is merely reversed and repeated rather than solved by the prioritisation of the sexual body’s conceptual production via historically located discourses. Instead what needs to be described is the nature of the bond that both entwines and divides these realms. This is a task that is both urgent and formidable, or as Maurice Merleau-Ponty once described it, ‘we touch here the most difficult point, that is the bond between the flesh and the idea.’ (1968: 149)

So, while we are on dangerous political ground the moment we talk of the natural as normal in regard to such notions of ontology this should not preclude us talking of the common, or the usual, particularly when offered as empirical description rather than ethical/political evaluations of how such ontology is lived. We must reject the notion that we are simply ‘natural’ beings without, albeit it unwittingly, suggesting we are supernatural ones either. Human meanings must not be divorced from human flesh. This is not to claim that the sexual subject is identical to the ‘sexed’ body-subject. The body refuses to be so easily reduced to the subject and likewise the subject is not confined to the body. Hence, human ontology demands the opacity of
sexuality as much as a semiosis of the sexual, which are clearly allied but not identical phenomena. As Merleau-Ponty has also suggested:

Understood in this way, the relation of expression to thing expressed, or of sign to meaning is not a one-way relationship like that between original text and translation. Neither body nor existence can be regarded as the original of the human being, since they presuppose each other, and because the body is solidified or generalised existence, and existence a perpetual incarnation. What is particularly important, is that when we say that sexuality has an existential significance, this is not to be understood as meaning that the sexual drama is in the last analysis only a manifestation or a symptom of an existential drama. The same reason that prevents us from ‘reducing’ existence to the body or to sexuality, prevents us also from ‘reducing’ sexuality to existence: the fact is that existence is not a set of facts (like ‘psychic facts’) capable of being reduced to others or to which they can reduce themselves, but the ambiguous setting of their communication, the point at which their boundaries run into each other, or again their woven fabric. (1962: 166)

The biological capacities of the sexual body are neither sufficient nor straightforwardly causal of our sexuality but they are necessary ontological facilitators of such woven existence. This does not mean they are essential in any heteronormative sense because the capacity of the body to do a range of certain things and to undergo a range of certain physiological responses, are more than capable in their own right of disrupting heteronormative claims. However much patriarchal ideologies have attempted to confine sexual behaviour to an expression of our reproductive function, the empirical evidence clearly demonstrates that our sexual being resists such confinement. According to the archaeologist Timothy Taylor for example, ‘as soon as there are written records, from around 5,000 years ago in the Near East, we find references to many of the sexual practices - homosexuality, male and female transexualism and transvestism, masturbation - familiar to us today’. (1997: 182) Interestingly, the last of these practices, our capacity to enjoy autoerotic pleasure, has a long history of inducing anxiety not simply for heteronormativity, but also for psychoanalysis and it is an activity that is of major importance to the narrative Happiness. It is unlikely that a practice that has been so heavily tabooed in Western society, a phenomenon often described as not merely sexually but socially aberrant, could appear on film as mere indifferent observation. However, despite its Art House radicalism, in its representation of masturbation Happiness actually reproduces the standard condamnatory heteronormative discourse regarding the autoerotic. The masturbators in this film are sad, bad or even mad, but it is a condemnation that throws an interesting light on our understanding of what
precisely sex ‘is’. This in turn has a consequence on our understanding of what sexual relations are, or could be and therefore what it is to claim that they do, or do not, exist. As shall be discussed momentarily, Lacan takes and equally dim, but (logically) distorted view of masturbation and the comparison of the one with the other suggest a prioritisation of discourse over embodiment with reactionary consequences.

III

On the one hand masturbation’s status as a solitary act has raised concerns over its precise ‘sexual’ status as, being unpartnered, masturbation seems to be not-sexual or even anti-sexual. At the same time, however, in bringing about orgasm masturbation is patently sexual. Masturbation can therefore be read as a boundary phenomenon because it is both within and without the field of sexuality as usually conceived and hence a privileged site of logical analysis because it is a content that brings into question the truth claims of its own form. It seems to be quite seriously bad sex in so many ways, bad in terms of it being worthless sex, dangerous sex and even, not proper sex. So, how does Happiness reveal these anxieties and present this pathology? Despite the black comedy, there are moments in the film which are treated with a great degree of seriousness. The most important of these comes when Bill confesses his paedophilia to his twelve year old son, Billy (Rufus Reid). Until this moment, their relationship has been based on mutual honesty and love, but Bill’s behaviour and his brutally honest confession utterly destroys any trust Billy has in him. While he is able to allay Billy’s fear that his father would actually rape him, Bill is unable to deny that if drugged into submission (as were his previous victims), Bill would be unable to resist ‘jerking-off’ over him.

This reference to the autoerotic is of enormous significance, as it has become clear by this stage of the film that masturbation (or, more accurately, male masturbation) is presented as a symptom (and quite possible a cause) of the misery on display. We have already seen the beginnings of Bill’s paedophilia when he masturbates in broad daylight while parked outside a mall, using a children’s magazine as a pornographic prop. At this stage our future sexual predator is clearly a slave to his passions, and the urgency of his need suggests his desires are having him rather than the other way around, in a way that presents male masturbatory desire as both abject and self-serving. However, the autoeroticism on display in the film is rarely solitary, but usually involves the abuse of another. Masturbation is not simply presented as what it usually is, unpartnered sex, but is specifically articulated as ‘anti’-partnered sex. In Bill’s case, the inappropriate use of a children’s magazine and masturbating in a public space suggests this abuse at
the level of desire, but it is also presented in more explicit terms when we see Allen masturbating while making an obscene telephone call to Joy.

The scene begins with Joy, alone in her parents’ kitchen, waiting for a call from Damian, a potential blind date. Allen meanwhile is trying to call Helen, upon whom he is becoming more and more sexually fixated. The assumption is that he has tracked down Joy by chance. The fact that he has gotten through to the wrong sister seems unimportant to Allen, who uses Joy’s openness (and her belief that he is Damien) to pose a number of ever more personal questions while he masturbates. As the conversation becomes less innocent (are you alone, what are you wearing, what are you wearing beneath your jeans), the framing moves from a single shot of Joy, to a half-wiped split-screen of both Joy and Allen, and then wipes to Allen alone. Joy realises her error and puts the phone down just as Allen asks his first fully obscene question (‘is your pussy wet?’) and he begins to orgasm. This is represented as realistically as possible within the constraints on representation at the time, in that, although the erect penis is discreetly hidden by the telephone console in the foreground, a reverse shot of ejaculate hitting the wall by the phone leaves little doubt as to the nature of the event. Beyond the visceral realism, what dominates the *mise-en-scène* is the split-screen staging of a telephone conversation, an unmistakable intertextual reference to the use of split screens in the romantic comedy *Pillow Talk* (Michael Gordon, USA, 1959). Unlike the relationship in *Pillow Talk* between Brad (Rock Hudson) and Jan (Doris Day) however, there is no underlying mutual attraction here (however initially tense or inverted into mutual hostility) which can be worked through. Allen and Joy do not misunderstand each other; they do not know each other. Indeed, despite the normative emphasis on the formation of the heterosexual couple in so many romantic comedies, we must not forget how much sexual negotiation takes place in such films. Rather than presenting simplistic ideologies of ‘true love’, people have to change in ways that take account of their differences for the couple to form. As Kathrina Glitre (2006: 159-177) has suggested of *Pillow Talk*, the split screen reveals the sophistication and complexity of the relationship on display as it both materialises these differences as well as conjoining Brad and Jan, bringing them together by demonstrating their mutual intrusion into the other’s life. They are frequently framed in similar ways, emphasising balance as much as friction. In *Happiness*, the framing is often very unequal (Allen in extreme close up, Joy in medium long shot) and it simply marks the couples’ mutual isolation and once again enforces that ‘there is no sexual relationship’. This is particularly true of the final wipe which removes Joy from the picture entirely. Unlike Brad, Allen’s self-serving masturbatory priorities demonstrate that seduction was never his aim; hence the subjectivity of his interlocutor is of little interest to him. That she is a
woman is enough. Unlike Jan (who wanted sex but only on her terms) and Brad (who was prepared to marry), in Joy and Allen’s world the sexual and the romantic are antithetical desires which seem to drive people apart rather than towards any form of mutual recognition or negotiation.

_Happiness_ ends with yet another scene of masturbation. The Jordans are having a family dinner. Lenny sits at the head of the table, but still wants to be alone, Helen informs Joy that she has arranged a blind date for her with Allen, while Trish puts a brave face on her broken marriage and now imprisoned husband. Meanwhile we see Billy achieve his first masturbatory orgasm while spying on a sunbathing woman from the apartment balcony. Even this potentially innocuous event is represented as deeply abject by first showing the family dog licking Billy’s ejaculate off the balcony railings, and second having the dog wander back into the apartment and immediately lick Trish’s face. After this quasi-incestuous spermatic transfer and Billy’s bathetic declaration, ‘I came’ followed by the stunned silence of family in response, the film ends. This dénouement undoubtedly suggests that the fleeting and infantile pleasure of autoerotic sex (or the momentary relief from sexual tension experienced after the act), defines (and negates) happiness.

What is the basis for this overwhelmingly negative (if not hysterical) attitude towards what is essentially an innocuous (and ubiquitous) sexual practice? It could be argued that this negativity on display is merely a continuation of the anti-masturbation hysteria which arose in the early eighteenth century and which has persisted with varying degrees of intensity ever since. Nevertheless, the vehemence of the antipathy remains surprising, particularly for a film that many would see as sexually radical. It becomes less so if we assume the film adopts or reflects a psychoanalytic approach to autoeroticism, as masturbation is seen to be problematic for a number of reasons from this perspective. Masturbation seems to collapse the distinction between the sexuality of men and women, adults and children, heterosexuals and homosexuals, in ways that call into question the policed boundaries of sexual difference. It is too polymorphously perverse (Freud even condemned it as a perversion), and too queer a practice to be granted a non-pathological status as simply a shared aspect of adult human sexuality. From a psychoanalytic position it seems as if it is a practice that must be infantilised if it not to open up a site of adult sexual similarity and self sufficiency rather than difference and lack. It is also a practice which can be identified as sexual without conferring a gendered sexual identity. More particularly, masturbation seems to collapse the distinction between the

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pleasure principle and the death drive. While its aim is to reduce tension and excitation, and therefore is allied to the life preserving instincts of the individual, this is only achieved through the negation of their reproductive capacities and in this regard is seen as anti-life. Furthermore, the moral and interpersonal anxiety produced by the act cancels out masturbation’s potential to reduce the individual’s excitation. Finally, it seems perverse because masturbation is presented in both Solondz film and more generally in psychoanalytic theory as a threat to partnered sex rather than as an alternative, or supplement, to partnered sex.

This anxiety over the autoerotic seems to raise a real concern that psychoanalysis is prescriptive rather than descriptive of patriarchal demands that reproduction take precedence over pleasure. Freud’s earliest writings on the subject in his 1898 paper ‘Sexuality in the Aetiology of the Neuroses’ makes this clear. Freud’s concern was specifically with the growing contraceptive practices and desires of middle class couples, not least ‘the current Malthusian tendencies to limit the offspring of marriage’. (Freud cited in Nye, 1999: 141) His particular worry was that family planning was achieved either by neurosis-inducing abstinence or neurosis-inducing and potency reducing masturbation. He states:

If masturbation is the cause of neurasthenia in youth, and later on also has its aetiological significance in the anxiety-neurosis by its action in reducing potency, then the prevention of masturbation in both sexes is a task that deserves more attention than it has received up to the present time. On considering both the slight and the serious disabilities that have their root in neurasthenia, which is apparently growing more and more prevalent, it becomes evident that it is positively to the public interest that men should enter upon sexual relations with full potency.

(in Nye, 1999: 142)

By 1905, in his ‘Three Essays on Sexuality’, Freud was describing the origins of ‘onanism’, and the role it plays in the development of infantile sexuality. While his acknowledgement of the reality of infantile genital stimulation seemed progressive, the elision of this infantile practice with the physiologically and psychologically distinct practice of orgasm-producing adolescent or adult masturbation is deeply problematic. It suggests that it is

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6 Onanism refers to the sin of Onan who spilled his ‘seed’ on the ground rather than impregnate his dead brother’s wife as required by law as described in the Old Testament (Genesis 38 4-10). While it seems more likely that his sin was a contraceptive rather than masturbatory practice, it came to stand as a euphemism for masturbation from the early eighteenth century onwards.

the behaviour of the infant agent, rather than his genetically preordained physiological development, that will lead to the development of an adult subject capable of genital orgasm. Rather than an origin, infantile masturbation can be equally described as a pale imitation of a future developmental capability, which has no more of an impact on adult sexual development than infantile babbling has on adult oration. In combination with Freud’s physiologically inaccurate model of spermatogenesis, that it was this limited resource which made the subject masculine (rather than the truth that the male body perpetually manufactures the substance), masturbation was seen as a hysterically dangerous narcissism which literally risks the physical and moral health of the masturbator.

While Freud’s concern to promote vaginal rather than clitoral orgasm demonstrated his equal anxiety over the autoerotic potential of women, by the time we get to Lacan, the censure is almost entirely directed at men. Indeed, Lacan suggested as late as 1973 (seminar XX) that phallic pleasure outside a system of exchange (or put more simply, male masturbation), could offer nothing but ‘the jouissance of the idiot’. (1999: 81) As his protégée and editor Jacques-Alain Miller has described it, masturbation is the archetypal doing related to this phallic having. Miller states that ‘having is clearly linked to masturbation. Phallic jouissance is proprietary jouissance par excellence’ (Miller, 2000, 20). So, in wanting to own his own pleasure the masturbating man reveals he is not already the master of his own body but merely a slave to his passions and in linking it to a masculine notion of having, masturbation is something which has now become gendered. What seems particularly at stake now is the role that men’s autoerotic capacities play in the engendering and/or blocking of their sexual relationships. Is masturbation a reaction to, a manifestation, or a cause of there being ‘no sexual relationship’? The film seems to make manifest what psychoanalytic theory fears: male sexuality is essentially masturbatory and hence incapable of a full sexual relationship. At the same time, the absence of any female masturbation in the film manifests a belief in a certain feminine frigidity that equally, albeit in a different way, prevents fulfilling sexual relations. This produces a paradox in which heterosexuality is seen as essentially ‘not’ heterosexual, even after the development of a ‘proper’ sexually opposite object. It also suggests that rather than a failure to live up to the symbolic order, the impossibility of the sexual relationship is premised on a split between an inward facing obsession with, or outward facing denial of, the body.

This begs the questions as to whether there is another way to articulate sexual desire or to map out human sexuality, one that refuses to think of it as grounded in such a wretched relationship between autoerotic desire, gender and sexual fulfilment. Furthermore, it also calls on us to consider whether
the anxiety over the autoerotic within the psychoanalytic field in general and Lacan in particular is not simply a symptom of prudishness or patriarchal alliances but a necessary result of his underlying sexual logic which is, as I shall argue, an erroneous interpretation of the dialectical logic. This is where a re-examination of Hegel’s theory of recognition as described in *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1997: 104-138) and its relation to Lacan’s model of desire, is instructive.

IV

According to Elisabeth Grosz, one of the most influential theorists to bring Lacan into general academic discourse, ‘Lacan derives his conception of desire from Hegel, particularly from *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, where Hegel posits desire as a lack and an absence’. (1990: 64) A note specifies that it is the section on Lordship and Bondage that is of most relevance. In this section Hegel outlines how our desire for recognition can find its expression in the most aggressive and proprietary terms, which has come to be characterised as the master-slave relationship. To begin, Hegel claims that beyond being conscious of sensuous objects in the world, consciousness in Man is also always self-conscious, i.e., aware of its own operation. It is this self-reflexive moment that gives rise to the subject-object relationship at the heart of self-consciousness. I am both conscious of the objects in the world (which I may identify and possess) and of the fact that it is I who is conscious of them. This awareness of one’s own self-consciousness logically implies that other human bodies are not merely objects in our world, but likewise subjects in theirs. The other is not simply an object that can be possessed without a struggle; he/she enjoys the opacity of subjectivity. Recognizing one’s status as a full subject therefore requires recognition of the self by the other, but there is no guarantee that the other, as an independent agent, will grant said recognition. What is so threatening about this Hegelian scenario is that not only is there a good chance that we will not receive the recognition of our subjectivity that we desire, but that the other potentially sees us as an object, an object that it likewise wishes to possess. This potential is intolerable for a nascent self-consciousness. Hence, a life-and-death struggle is envisioned, in which the combatants are prepared to risk everything to secure recognition from the other and so become the sole absolute subject. However, to kill one’s other is to lose the possibility of him or her granting us the recognition we seek, so instead the victor subjects the other to actual or virtual slavery which is chosen by the loser in place of death. This confirms the victorious self-consciousness as a new type of subject: a master. However, the process is self-subverting, for a mere object (a slave) cannot give recognition adequate to the master’s needs. So, there has to be a part of the slave that the master does not possess, in order for the slave’s recognition
to have any value. The paradox and paranoia of the master’s position arises here, for he both wants and does not want to fully possess the slave. Generally, the solution for most masters is to attempt to possess their slaves while keeping them at a safe enough distance to allow them to preserve this un-enslaved kernel.\(^8\)

Clearly there are many moments when the abusive men of *Happiness* attempt to become sexual masters, but they also are aware of how this desire both enslaves them to their passions and grant those whom they wish to enslave a profound power. The emphasis on abusive forms of male masturbation materialises the inherent negativity and self-subverting nature of the desire to sexually possess the other, while keeping her at a safe distance. In this sense, their masturbatory acts are *not* autoerotic, in that they are not solitary and private, but are staged as attempts to sexually consume the other and gain recognition of their sexual being. Yet, they *are* clearly masturbatory, in the sense that (in the end) it is only the self who is sexually touched and consumed, as the other remains too distant and/or objectified to be properly engaged with. In being staged at enough distance to prevent a potentially threatening ‘real’ encounter with the other, this ‘safe’ distance also ensures the other can never deliver the sexual recognition the men actually seek. Allen literalises his paradoxical desire to dominate women while avoiding actual contact with them by becoming an abusive telephone caller; Bill maintains his psychic superiority by abusing children; even young Billy maintains a spatial distance from (and voyeuristic power over) the object of his desire. In all three cases, there is no sexual ‘relationship’. Meanwhile even the men who do have sexual intercourse, Vlad and Lenny, remain emotionally distant from both their own sexual performance and that of their partners. In the end, all the men use or abuse other people to varying degrees, but this abuse never actually provides them with the satisfaction they seek. The fortification of the self against the authority of the other prevents a genuine encounter. In the end, the men do little more than objectify themselves, and their mastery becomes little more than an addiction, an ahistoric treadmill of repetition. As Hegel explains more generally of such fleeting and blocked encounters:

In this satisfaction, however, experience makes it aware that the object has its own independence. Desire and the self-certainty obtained in its gratification are conditioned by the object, for self-certainty comes from superseding this other; in order that this supersession can take place, there must be this other. Thus self-consciousness, by its negative relation to the object, is unable to supersede it; it is really because of

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\(^8\) It must of course be remembered that Hegel is proposing a thought experiment regarding the development of consciousness. The historical reality of the master’s indifference to the slave is therefore of no relevance.
that relation that it produces the object again, and the desire as well. (1997: 109)

This repetition at the heart of desire might seem to follow the Lacanian model of lack. In turn, this does seem to map rather easily onto the male characters in Happiness, where masculine sexuality demands the recognition of the master and in wanting to so fully ‘have’ the other, reduces femininity to ‘being’ the slave. In Happiness, the ‘tragic’ gap inherent in male sexual mastery is presented as that between the power of male desire and the fear of its aim. It is through the experience of the gap, and most vitally the repetition of this experience across a number of male subject positions, that masculine desire is both homogenised and represented as its own punishment. However, there are a number of problems with this analysis both in terms of its interpretation of Hegel and what occurs in Happiness.

First, while Hegel certainly discusses desire throughout this section and desire undoubtedly involves a relation with something or someone beyond or outside the subject, at no time does he explicitly claim that the desire for recognition is synonymous with lack. It is true that the subject does not have what they want but there is a world of difference between desire therefore being an awareness of this lack, or this lack only coming to light as a consequence of the encounter. We must not forget that the master and the slave are not subjects (neither master nor slave have any subjective status prior to their encounter), but figures at the beginning of an unfolding process of subjection. The master’s desire and subsequent sense of lack is not the original condition, but the first of a chain of consequences that flow from the primacy of the subject coming to self-consciousness. Rather than a subject who feels incomplete, it is only the growing self-awareness of being incomplete - the development of self-consciousness itself - that produces any subject in the first place. Desire produces lack rather than lack producing desire, because ‘self-consciousness is Desire in general’ (1997:105). The difference is not without consequence.

The key point to note is that the negativity that drives the system is as much an internal property as it is the product of a failed encounter. For Hegel dialectical logic attempts to understand the essence of a concept, thing, state of affairs, or subject, not merely as a statement of identity (what it is), but as non-identity (what it is not). However, what it is not, is not what it lacks, but what it has in the form of a necessary, but external relation. The other with who it is in relation is therefore both an essential element of its being, yet an external element of its being. Essences are not therefore essences of things, essential properties or traits that are immanent to the subject, but essences of transcendent relationships, or better still, shared boundaries that stage events rather than static attributes that fix meaning. There is no such
thing as a self without an other, a slave without a master, or a consciousness without an unconscious. This is the logical priority of negativity in dialectical thought, where contradictory relations between people and things are seen as both the source of their identities and the engine of change that kept these identities evolving. If lack is simply another word for relationship it is one which carries unnecessary pessimistic connotations. Negativity is therefore not reducible to lack. Rather than a marker of absence, it is simultaneously both an immanent and transcendent condition (it belongs to the subject and the system in which they find themselves) and a literally productive force that drives the system to ever greater complexity. So, while the dialectical method does attempt to conceptualise a synthesized totality beyond negativity, it does not do so with recourse to an arithmetical and hence potentially excluding notion of such a totality. The totality or absolute is neither unitary, it is not ‘one’, nor is it arrived at through addition and therefore is incapable of lacking. The priority of the absolute in Hegel is therefore not a fascistic desire to obliterate difference, for the subject to become the totality, but an attempt to account for it, for the subject to comprehend their foundation in the other. In this respect the absolute is not merely a totality of historical contents but a description of the relation, indeed the logical limit of thinking in terms of form and content. While the universal can be understood as the attempted summation of all particulars, the absolute reveals such a process as an abstraction.

What such a method has to offer the analysis of sexuality is an understanding of sexual difference that is both absolute and not absolute, such that the tension between the identity and non-identity of the sexual subject is a marker of an internal as well as an external negativity. This means the lived realities of sexual difference and desire are culturally specific and as mutable and open to historical change as any other human activity. The understanding of difference can only arise from shared fields of significance so anti-essentialism is right on this score. Yet at the same time the dimorphic limitations and material structure of the human body, particularly in relation to reproduction, mean such lived realities are neither limitless nor groundless. Hence anti-essentialism risks becoming anti-materialism or, more simply, a form of idealism. To avoid overly fixing or freeing our understanding of the dialectical potentiality of sexuality, we must articulate rather than prioritise body and meaning. We must let our understanding arise from the material world and our embodied being in and of this world, as well as from how these lived relationships are forged through language and their cultural representations. Words must be ontologised, made flesh, as much as flesh must be epistemologically interrogated.
Unfortunately Hegel’s rather naïve teleology of subjective and psychological progression often masks the usefulness of the dialectical method as a logical description of this far more evolutionary and dynamic process. This has resulted in two critical approaches to dialectical negativity. On the one hand, as Robert Sinnerbrink (2007: *passim*) has cogently described it, dialectical negativity is accused of offering little but a goal directed progressive resolution of such tension towards a totally synthesised end point of absolute spirit. The dialectic is accused of having things all worked out beforehand and herein lays the terror of synthesis in thinkers such as Adorno, Derrida and Deleuze. On the other hand negativity is often misrepresented as the same throughout its unfolding such that it is little but a perpetual static tension between thesis and antithesis as it is with the initial master-slave relationship. The dialectic never as such gets started but is merely a repetition of the same. The living complexity of the dialectic which moves forward, folds back on itself, makes progress and revisions and guarantees nothing is too often reduced to the banal triptych of thesis–antithesis-synthesis. In one history is over before it has begun and in the other it never really starts at all. In the former approach, the validation of difference over synthesis and the fear that all totalities are totalitarian, mistakes the dialectical process as a movement towards unity rather than complexity. In the latter it stagnates the dialectic such that it looks like the logic of lack. It is this second manoeuvre which Lacan seems to adopt in his model of sexual difference; the impossibility of reciprocity in sexual relationships seems to mimic the impossibility of reciprocity between the master and the slave. However, Lacan is not unique in this reading of the dialectic. When Dylan Evans, in his *Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, tells us that Lacan takes the role of recognition in desire ‘from Hegel, via Kojève’ (1996: 38) he identifies who I believe is the source of this misreading, a misreading which has become almost an orthodoxy in the wider take-up of Hegel.

For Kojève, Hegelian recognition ‘is synonymous with the unequal recognition of master and slave. As Robert Williams has suggested, Kojève thinks the concept of recognition primarily on the basis of ‘an ontology of negation and finitude’. (1997: 11) As if offering a Hegelian prequel to Marx’s notion of class struggle as the motor of history, in his *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, Kojève demands that Hegel’s notion of history as pure struggle in both its logical and actual essence is ‘nothing but the history of the dialectic - i.e., active - relation between mastery and slavery’. (1969: 44) It is precisely the polar or binary distortion, or as Richard Kearney has

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9 For an excellent account of this as well as a variety of other ‘myths’ and travesty of the dialectic and of Hegel’s thought see Jon Stewart (ed.) *The Hegel Myths and Legends* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996).
described it, this ‘Cartesian proclivity towards antithesis’, (1998: 120) that haunts much that passes for dialectical thought. Kojève explicitly conflates recognition and mastery in his description of the master as one who seeks recognition ‘in and by a consciousness, of bearing the name of master, of being called master’. (1969: 45) The slide from a desire for recognition to a desire to be recognised as master hermetically seals off any other more positive forms of intersubjective recognition for self-consciousness. The implication of Kojève’s reading is that the self-consciousness that wins the battle for recognition understood mastery as its goal, as its specifically desired form of recognition prior to its experience of such a state. This is to give mastery an ideal content outside of the dialectic encounter that generates it while simultaneously making the dialectic all about struggle (antithesis) and therefore takes little account of development (synthesis). Furthermore the emphasis on the externalised struggle of an interpersonal master-slave dialectic conceals the no less important intrapersonal consequences of Hegel’s model. As Malcolm Bull has argued, ‘in the Phenomenology there are repeated references to the splitting of self-consciousness into opposing extremes, and to the inescapable mirroring of the one by the other’. (1998: 101) Hence, both mastery and slavery exist within as well as between subjects who are never ontologically static but exist in a constant process of both internal and external negation and mediation. Unfortunately, as Robert Williams (1997: 364) has suggested, Kojève’s philosophical anthropology lent itself almost too vividly to a teleological description of the historical-political conditions of Europe at the time, hence its take up and dominance is not surprising.

This concentration on lack and the failure of the master’s position obscure the real dynamic in the dialectic which is not a simple reversal of fortunes, in which slaves could become masters and masters, slaves. Of far more importance are the changes that occur to the slave despite them remaining a slave. Rather than a reversal or simple repetition of the moment of their enslavement, the slave undergoes a step-change in their understanding of their condition, a new understanding which radically alters their subjective status. Despite their continuing servitude, slaves change their understanding of their slavery, they negate the absolute negation of the master and develop either a stoical or sceptical position in regards to their lot in life, which can undergo further evolution into what Hegel described as the unhappy consciousness. It is not simply the Hegelian concepts of master and the slave, but also of the stoic, the sceptic, and of the unhappy consciousness (as well as the underlying logic that articulates their

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10 That the process of dialectical unfolding so often proceeds via such negation-of-the negation offers further evidence that Hegel was well aware that sublation was far from a straightforward teleological process.
encounters) which resonate so uncannily with the characters of Happiness while throwing a sharp light on the appropriateness of the dialectic as a model of sexual difference. So, on the one hand the film seems to present male sexuality as a form of failed mastery supporting a rather static, ahistorical and almost Promethean model of sexual misery. This would appear to be based on an infantile sexuality primarily driven by a masturbatory narcissistic aggression (which seems Lacanian). Yet, on the other, it actually presents a mode of sexual difference far more in tune with the logic of the unhappy consciousness than the master-slave dialectic. In this regard it would seem to offers a different mode of non-reciprocity through which to model sexual difference, but one that unlike the hierarchical binary of the master-slave relationship, presents a potential for sexual similarity (despite the continuing absence of a relationship). Whereas the master-slave dialectic presents a relationship between identity and difference only at an inter-subjective level, the unhappy consciousness also maps an intra-subjective mode of difference and identity. We now have ‘types’ of slaves who can both differ from each other (the stoic versus the sceptic) and become the other (the stoic becomes the sceptic). Identity and non-identity now becomes both immanent and transcendent, both an intersubjective and intrasubjective phenomena. As I shall outline, this four-way split throws further light on Lacan.

V

At one level Happiness seems to suggest that both sexes suffer at the hands of male desire as both are in effect enslaved to it, albeit in different ways. This is obviously so for the women, who are raped, abandoned and abused, but as the men never get to ‘have’ the recognition they desire, they also never really gain the status and satisfaction (however fleeting) of the master. Indeed, the men’s failure to become the master in many ways seems to reflect Lacan’s notion of masculinity as a failure to live up to the demands of the master signifier. While this might seem an example of one of the many affinities between Hegelian and Lacanian thought there is a sense in which Lacan does not follow through on the logical consequences of his claim. What sort of failure is this? The general emphasis on the master-slave relationship as the logical model through which to map and understand sexual desire and difference seems to confuse two distinct modes of failure. It seems to subsume the intrinsic failure of the master’s position, the logical impossibility of a master subject ever feeling sustained by the recognition of a slave object, with the failure to become the master in the first place. Unhappy masters and failed masters are however not the same thing, they do not share an identity, but a difference. Failed masters are in effect not masters and therefore actually have much more in common with slaves, driven as they are by forces
which they do not control. Indeed, in many ways, everybody in *Happiness* can be more accurately envisaged as a post-encounter slave, although as we shall see, this shared identity as slaves does not in itself preclude difference (namely that between the stoic and the sceptic), but accounts for it, albeit at a different dialectical order. It is the dialectical development of the post-encounter slave that we must now turn.

As Hegel describes it, after a while the slave recognises that the master cannot make them believe his or her authority, only experience it. (1977: 119-122) The master may compel the actions of the slave, but not his or her thoughts. The problem for the slave is what to do with such mental freedom, incorporated as it is in the very notion of physical bondage. For Hegel, the solution that slave consciousness generally adopts is to develop a stoical attitude towards its material difficulties. The stoical attitude allows for the development of indifference towards the agent’s actual historical and material situation. Stoicism reasons, first, if the quality of freedom-of-thought is determining of the subject as such, it cannot logically be taken away, and second, since such freedom-of-thought is independent of the historical agents involved in any particular master-slave encounter, the essence of this freedom must lie outside the material reality and logic of the master-slave dialectic. Human freedom becomes something that is real, yet immaterial. A slave cannot be made to think, only to act, so the subject is not located in the contingent position of the actual historical-material slave, but dwells in the notion of a universal and idealised subject. Taken to the next logical step, Hegel suggests that such stoicism develops into scepticism. (123-126)

The sceptic reasons that if the slave’s own subjective point of view counts for nothing, and yet the slave’s consciousness is formally equivalent to any other consciousness, then all points of view can logically be rejected due to their equally inherent contingency. The subject is unsure whether he or she is mentally enslaved or mentally free and this subjective doubt itself now becomes objectively universalised. The sceptic knows that no one knows the truth. Yet inherent to this universalising gesture, or indeed any appeal to a universal negative truth (in this case, that all knowledge is contingent and subjective), is another paradox: how can a subjectively defined truth be objectively true? This means that in many ways the stoical position continues to hold sway despite the surface sophistry of sceptics. Such agents believe in the ‘authority’ of their belief in the ‘absence-of-authority’ precisely because it is theirs. This is despite the fact that the form of the authority claimed to exist must be blind to its own content, i.e. there is no authority. If sceptics own up to this contradiction, and according to Hegel it is hard not to, they cease being either sceptics or stoics and develop into what he terms the
unhappy consciousness ‘a consciousness of self as a dual-natured, merely contradictory being’. (126)

This is a state of consciousness and subjectivity which admits that there is no authority in one’s specific contingent set of beliefs, yet still refuses to give up these beliefs. If sceptics are caught by their own objective belief in the universality of contingent subjectivity (i.e., they actually believe that it is true that there is no such thing as truth), the unhappy consciousness is aware of the paradox but takes this very rent in their logic to be the reality of lived existence and the reality of their own desires. For the unhappy consciousness, reality is not true. The split between the content (that which is specifically true) and the form (the possibility of truth in general) becomes a frozen ahistoric parody of the dynamic logic of our dialectical existence. Things are believed or desired for no good reason other than they have been rather than they should be. There is no longer a contradiction which can be dialectically worked out, but an acceptance of contradiction as a fixed dichotomy which is both necessary and determining of the subject as such. Hence, rather than demand that the concept of human freedom (or in the case of Happiness, sexual satisfaction) be historically materialised in all its potentiality, it is declared that the contradiction at the heart of the notion of human freedom and sexuality that blocks such a move cannot be escaped and must be lived with instead. While this necessary contradiction is experienced as a state of crisis, it is equally believed to be a strangely stagnant and permanent, yet comforting, state of crisis.

This is the case of the multiple unhappy consciousnesses that populate the narrative of Happiness, in which contemporary (white, bourgeois) American society is undoubtedly represented as the society of the unhappy consciousness. This society acts as if sexual desire is the master passion whose demands must be met, but at the same time does not believe that sexual and/or passionate relationships will make them happy. More vitally, the unhappy consciousness is materialised as a social totality forever divided along gender lines. The feminine subject is the stoical subject, who denies the subjective proof of the body and attempts to find the objective proof of their freedom in idealised concepts (love, authenticity, happiness). Yet while these female stoics continue to seek abstract universals (immaterial passion for Kristina, fundamental authenticity for Helen, the actualisation of romantic love for Joy) they ignore the vivid particularity of themselves as embodied subjects. They can be unloved, left, knocked down, verbally abused, even raped, yet none of these brutal material realities seem to affect their idealism. However, this also means that they do not believe that any particular encounter based on the physical reality of the body will ever be truly satisfying. So, when it comes to sex, they cannot even please themselves and
hence must be represented as incapable of the autoerotic activities that come so naturally to the men.

Meanwhile, the male subject is represented as the sceptical subject, the logical counterpoint of the introverted self-consciousness of the stoic. For the sceptic the conceptual notions of truth questioned by the stoic break free from any sense of materiality and so there is no longer any trust that a physical encounter will not bring satisfaction. So, the problem now is less ‘why bother?’ than ‘why not?’.

For the sceptic, the repetition of disbelief renders the subject not merely able but compelled to attempt masturbatory satisfaction time and time again, for it is now impossible to dismiss the act a priori while the same relentless disbelief always renders the experience as inherently unsatisfactory in itself. They suffer a form of autoerotic ‘bad-faith’ in which they neither believe nor deny their own sexual self-sufficiency such that availability rather than desire is the actual driver of their addictive consumption. For the women their aim is too high to ever be met while for the men it is too low to be in any sense fulfilling or sustaining, yet they both remain wedded to their own cause. In effect the contradictions inherent to identity, that it is an unfolding and entwining of identity and non-identity, has been reduced to an apriori essence, one that fails to account for the unfolding nature of a properly Hegelian essence as that which drives a form of becoming rather than determines a mode of being. The Kojèveian mistake of placing preformed identities into conflict rather than mapping the emergence of figures and logical relations out of such conflicts is repeated.

So, beneath the narrative’s insistence that sex lies at the heart of this timeless chain of human misery are heterosexist stereotypes of sexuality as gendered, permanently split, and in the case of men, inherently masturbatory.

We must not be lulled by the exceptionally fine performances and naturalistic shooting style into reading this film as offering a critique of real sexual relations, albeit in an exaggerated and dark comedic form. Instead, the characters seem at best parodic constructs which have been placed back into a social field, rather than offering descriptions of subjects who have been extracted from within it. Furthermore, because the representations of masturbation are always wretched (and only limited to male characters), we must reject any notion that Solondz is offering a truthful recognition or realistic portrayal of our autoerotic capacities, despite the seeming radicalism of its ejaculatory verisimilitude. Indeed, the film’s unwillingness to represent the reality of female masturbation merely emphasizes the binary sexual stereotyping on display. At the same time, it is of course the sheer concreteness of film, the experience of being shown as opposed to being told, that delivers the movies’ peculiar power to reveal experience and play out the consequences for different modes of human being. Not only is this experience made all the richer by the positive sense of its inexhaustibility, our sense that
we can never fully account for this experience, but this power is also augmented and framed by the negativity of what is not shown and not told. Not telling tends to validate what is shown and in the case of Happiness not showing, the not showing of any neutral let alone positive masculine autoeroticism and the total absence of any female autoeroticism, validates the telling of masculine sexuality as a sorry story of abuse, disappointment and despair. So, what looks like an explicit description of what sort of people heterosexual men and women are if their sexual desires truly do emerge from a fearful and aggressively antithetical desire for recognition, seems closer to a prescription. In this autoerotic negativity and absence, Happiness reveals both its own and Lacan’s sexual conservatism, not least their shared incapacity to deal with autoerotic excess. A better understanding of the autoerotic, one that does not limit it to the infantile or the alienated, but is equally willing to validate it as concrete evidence of an autonomous capacity shared across the gender divide, would therefore seem to have profound consequences on the concept of sexual difference as usually conceived. At a logical level it is a capacity that seems both essential to our (generalised) sexual identity yet not in itself adequate to produce (gendered) sexual identity. Hence (if properly included in our model of sexual difference and desire) masturbation demands we move away from the static and oppositional logic of the master and the slave or at least supplement and combine it with the more complex logic of the unhappy consciousness.

This is not however a claim that we should give up entirely on the concept of the master, far from it, but a demand that we don’t simply impose it at a universal level on to men. Male sexuality may include a desire to have or posses the other but it cannot fully accounted for in these terms. Neither can we equate the Master simply with the sexual drive as a thing in itself, as having sex is far from the only form of having on display here. The wider social rather than psychic, or indeed sexual meaning of having must also be taken into account if we are to understand in what sense and what modes of subjectivity we ‘have’ sex. Miller’s reference to the proprietary is of significance here as while the ‘pursuit’ of happiness in Happiness is overwhelmingly presented as limited to the sexual and emotional realm, it should be remembered that the film’s title, particularly in its American setting, has a wider resonance. Happiness is after all something enshrined in the American constitution as something which the individual has an unalienable right to pursue. The problem is what happens when this economic claim regarding the having of property is transferred to the sexual realm? This I would suggest is the real tragedy of Happiness, as it would seem that the economic ‘logic’ of the American Dream, the right of the individual to prosper, seems so dominant it is as if the sexual and the emotional realms should be approached with the self same logic of
individualised market exchange. Sexual happiness becomes a right of the individual subject, not the positive consequence of sustaining intersubjective relationships. This elision of the sexual with the economic has grim consequences for the former, reduced as it is to a relation between competing individuals (as opposed to an intersubjective field of mutual recognition). Under the influence of capitalist logic, sexuality itself now comes to be conceived as essentially individual, that is, *masturbatory* and/or *rapacious*. Sexuality becomes infantile, and it is treated as an addiction; sex becomes ‘the problem’.

This singular economic version of sexual gratification, in combination with a permanently bifurcated model of sexual difference, produces a self-defeating concept of sexual relationships. Now the doubly reactionary (rather than radical) and ahistoric credentials of the film emerge. In terms of its sexual politics the film seems to long for the authority of the ‘good old days’ when men were sexual masters of themselves, as well as others. This is why Bill’s confession of paedophilia to Billy is such a pivotal scene. As it is played (without humour), it stands out as the least ironic moment of the narrative and hence it emphasises the fact that this, Billy’s loss of a ‘proper’ father, rather than the failure of the husband and wife relationship, is the central tragedy. In this the film seems deeply nostalgic for the authority of non-desiring patriarchs. Indeed, it even allows Lenny to maintain his position as head of the household in return for him feeling ‘nothing’. Between these two extreme modes of fatherhood, the unfeeling and the obscene, the film makes its sexual politics clear. While patriarchy is bad, masculinity freed of its patriarchal commitments is worse. At the same time, by denying Trish any scene or space to convey her emotional trauma, it demonstrates its own indifference to the stoical women it creates. Indeed, in their stoicism, it even seems to suggest that the women do not suffer with the same intensity of feeling as the men. Rather than commend them for trying to get on with life, it mocks them.

By dividing the unhappy consciousness along gender lines, *Happiness*’ sexual logic offers a vision of heterosexuality in-itself that can *never* be for-itself. What the film’s sexual logic parallels is central to the notion of gender that defines phallocentrism. Satisfaction for women is prohibited by their own fixation on the other, while for men it is impossible due to their fixation on themselves. This can only be ‘cured’ by men denying their right to pleasure and becoming as ‘immaterial’ as the body denying stoical women. In both cases gender is presented as intrinsically its own form of pathology, a thing that in itself negates the possibility of sexual satisfaction. Or to put a Hegelian twist on the dehistoricising pop psychology that drives this narrative, sceptics are from Mars and stoics are from Venus.
At one level the film presents itself as ‘thinking historically’ as it is very much of its time and place, it is almost obsessively ‘contemporary’, addressing as it does the most current cultural concerns in terms of big issues such as paedophilia as well as paying close attention to minor yet historically precise cultural artefacts such as the Tamagochi. This is American suburbia in all its pre-millennial tension, this is ‘now’. However, the *universalisation* of the misery on display is also deeply dehistoricising as the possibility of either social or sexual revolution is negated via a message of total intersubjective failure. Hence despite its apparent criticism of the middle classes, the film actually develops a specifically bourgeois notion of a universal ‘human condition’. It maintains and mystifies class advantages by presenting an endless repetition of failed sexual and emotional encounters and alienation, rather than any facet of material exploitation or socioeconomic political organisation, as the ‘true’ source of human unhappiness. On the one hand, the lost and mourned God of *Happiness* would appear to be patriarchy itself, while on the other its unacknowledged God would appear to be capitalist modernity, where the logic of the monadic market individual is seen as parasitizing our sexuality. In this regard the interest in masturbation in *Happiness* marks a certain theological sensibility within neo-liberal capitalism, one in which the antinomies of market freedom expressed at the sexual/social cultural level are felt particularly acutely. Yet, while it seems to agree with the fundamental critique of heteronormative phallocentric ideology as a formation incapable of encouraging true human happiness, it equally claims that nothing can be done about it. We are ‘naturally’ unhappy, because the contemporary experience of the sexualised unhappy consciousness is an ontological, rather than political, ‘truth’. I would suggest this is also the fundamental problem with psychoanalysis in general and Lacan in particular. First he confuses a historical description of sexuality’s tortuous relationship with market logic for a logical description of the psyche as such and second, he deploys a restricted and static version of dialectical logic to do so.

However, what if rather than a manifestation of lack the autoerotic is a form of excess, an abundance that brings into question the totalisation of lack within the Lacanian schema of sexual desire? Furthermore, if modes of recognition and dialectical negativity are not premised on lack, how does this contribute to our understanding of sexual difference neither as a hostile binary or blank dichotomy but as a genuine dialectic, one that allows for identity and non-identity. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty claimed:

> To treat sexuality as a dialectic is not to make a process of knowledge out of it, nor to identify a man’s history with the history of his consciousness. The dialectic is not a relationship between contradictory and inseparable thoughts; it is the tending of an existence towards
another existence which denies it, and yet without which it is not sustained. (1962: 167)

It is as existences that we share much that is irreducible to our gendered identities, not least our common need and capacity for sexual and emotional recognition which is clearly not as universally impossible or dreary as this film might suggest. Indeed, to sneer too quickly at the normative aspects of romantic comedies like *Pillow Talk* is to ignore the utopian desire for loving sexual relationships that they express. The synthesis between the couple in such films may well be produced by an ideological sleight of hand that masks some very suspect sexual politics, but this does not detract from an underlying structure that is well aware that sexual relations, even such apparently heteronormative sexual relations, are culturally negotiated rather than unproblematically ‘natural’. Indeed, once our desire for recognition, sexual or otherwise, comes to be acknowledged and negotiated, once the unhappy consciousness accepts the death of its crippled Gods and cedes all authority to its encounter with the other, the recognition they both give and receive suddenly becomes the mechanism which generates a new and non-exploitative form of dialectical human relationship - love. As Hegel described it, ‘Love means in general terms the consciousness of my unity with another so that I am not in selfish isolation but win my self-consciousness only as the renunciation of my independence, and by knowing myself as the unity of myself with another and of the other with me’. (1967:261)

While such mutual recognition in the interpersonal sense is clearly no guarantee of freedom in any wider socio-economic and material sense, it seems hard to imagine any form of real freedom or happiness without it. Most of us, regardless of gender and sexual orientation, seek satisfying sexual and emotional relationships, hence to claim (as *Happiness* seems to) that the notion of love itself is at best chimerical and at worst delusional is no less idealistic and infantile than to claim that love conquers all. The historical nature of love and sex (and the recognition of its potential to sustain as well as destroy) indicates that, while having a sexual relationship is not a sufficient condition for human happiness, it is seen by the majority of people as a desirable one, even if only for part of our lives. The length and forms of such unions are in this respect far less important than the fact that they do ‘exist’. At the same time however, this does not negate any potential we may have for self sufficiency - whether at an emotional or sexual level. Indeed, if love is the overcoming of the denial of the other, the sustenance we receive from a genuine encounter, it must in fact be premised on a free choice. We are neither saved by the other nor are we totally lost without them. Sexuality is therefore an essence, or better still a ground, that neither restricts nor prescribes us. While it has no capacity to magically synthesise
away the contradictions it brings into being, the disruptions it brings forth are a marker of its richness not of its incoherence. Life is not reducible to sex, but sex is an expression of life. A psychoanalytic response to this reversal or repositioning of the sexual under a wider ontological framework would be instructive as it would allow for modes of identity that are shared across or in excess of sexual difference and sexual orientation without simply prioritising these over modes of difference. The fundamental consequence of the dialectical relationship between identity and non-identity is to ask that difference must take account of non-difference. Similarly it counters the universalisation of lack as the only driving force that can articulate such relationships. In the end Lacan’s notion of sexual difference is too wedded to a structural lack to take account of the existential richness of human sexual being: our differences, our similarities, and our contradictions. As Hegel concludes more generally with regard to the lived realities of contradiction, ‘finite things, therefore, in their indifferent multiplicity are simply this, to be contradictory and disrupted within themselves and to return to their ground’. (Hegel cited in Pipin 1996: 250)

Both our own and cinema’s fascination with sexuality is more than a symptom of a pathological and unfulfillable desire to find a sexual antithesis; it is also a reminder of our grounding in a realm which allows for our capacity to find satisfaction in an ability to give rather than to have and it is the acceptance of this need to give that we find moments of sexual synthesis. In this respect, despite the normative outcome, Pillow Talk might actually represent our dialectical capacity to form sexual relationships more accurately than Happiness, not because sexual relationships inevitably lead to happiness, nor that they necessarily maintain themselves, but because it acknowledges our hope that this is still, at least, a possibility.
Bibliography


**Filmography**

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