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Benjamin Austin Date

Masculinity, Masturbation and Writing in *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Adaptation*

By

Benjamin Austin
Master of Arts

Film and Media Studies

_____

Daniel Reynolds, Ph.D.
Advisor

_____

Anna Grimshaw, Ph.D.
Committee Member

_____

Karla Oeler, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Accepted:

_____

Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D.
Dean of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies

_____

Date

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By

Benjamin Austin
B.F.A., Tufts University, 2011

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Abstract

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By Benjamin Austin

This study considers the relationship between practices and representations of autoeroticism and the practice of writing, particularly as this relationship can illuminate understandings of masculinities. By drawing representational examples from film, literature and other media, this study deploys the figure of the masturbating man as a site where queerness and abjection coalesce around hetero-masculine identity. These cases studies and analyses show that representations of masturbators are rich sites from which heteromasculinity can be recuperated for queer readings that may unlock subversive and nonnormative potentials in figures of abjection, failure, and childishness. These readings reflect how representations of masturbating men condition and construct men's relationships to their own bodies, their sexual practices and identifications through sexuality and gender. The first chapter discusses *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), considering how Philip Roth constructs Alexander Portnoy as a figure of contestation within cultural narratives of sexual liberation and psychoanalysis whose autoerotic childishness can be read as a form of resistance to normative heteromasculinity. The second chapter on *Adaptation* (2002) examines how Charlie Kaufman's writing practice and autoeroticism are linked in the film, primarily via solitude and anti-sociality, but also, importantly through imaginativity, creativity and fantasy. This second chapter argues that the film productively narrativizes masturbation's generative capacity and the ways in which it is imbricated in identity, sociality, and masculinity. The third chapter of the thesis broadens the scope of investigation to consider a variety representational engagements from contemporary film and other media with masturbating men and solitary sex in order to consider how these texts shape cultural understandings of masculinity and autoeroticism and how apparently heteronormative narratives can be reread to produce masturbators as subversive figures.

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Introduction

The subject, who thinks he can accede to himself by designating himself in the statement, is not more than such [a bad] object. Just ask the writer about the anxiety he experiences when he faces the blank sheet of paper, and he will tell you who *is* the turd of his phantasy.

-Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*

Consciously or not, everyone has had *some* same-sex eroticism, if not as a polymorphously perverse infant, then as a (no matter how furtively or infrequently) masturbating adult … Masturbation is, after all, an unavoidably thoughtful … and unavoidably same-sex activity, and I am not alone among queer theorists in associating the turbulence of solitary sex with the disturbances of identity formation.

-Calvin Thomas, "Crossing the Streets, Queering the Sheets"

Writing about masturbation is a fraught practice. Masturbation and writing share self-alienating qualities that may be read to mark each activity with conjunctive degrees of abjection and queerness that we may not see (or may not want to see) upon first look. As Calvin Thomas notes, when Lacan writes, "I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object" (*Écrits* 247), he suggests an ex-corporeality of writing that resonates with Kristeva's concept of abjection ("Crossing" 5). With Lacan and Thomas, we might think of the writer (as a figure of abjection) when we read Kristeva's lines, "I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself" (Ibid.). To the extent that we can think of writing as an abject practice, I would follow Thomas in asserting that "given dominant culture's still regnant abjection of the feminine and the queer, [writing] is potentially feminizing and queering for any heteromasculinized "I" that speaks or writes" ("Crossing" 6).

Insofar as abjection and by extension queerness can be seen at

work in the activity of writing, these subversive qualities also appear, however counterintuitively, in even the straightest and most masculinized practices of autoeroticism. As Thomas suggests in the epigraphic quote above, masturbation is the site at which everyone (assuming, as the saying goes, that "everyone does it") expresses a degree of same-sex eroticism. Along with this queerness, abjection also comes to characterize the masturbator in at least three different registers.

Firstly, masturbation is an abject activity on the level of practice in its excretion of bodily fluid. In the sense that the fluids excreted in masturbation carry the genetic coding of the subject, the masturbator, as Kristeva says, quite literally expels his or her self. On the level of identity and self-alienation, masturbation shares the abjection of writing in that it asks its practitioner to assume a position outside of his or her self. While the writer is abjected through signification, the process for the masturbator occurs through the self-disassociation of fantasy and spectatorial identification when visual materials are used in conjunction with the activity, as the masturbator becomes both the sexual actor and the sexual object. Here, masturbation reflects a similar paradoxicality to Kristeva's and Lacan's notions of the conjunctive expelling and identifying oneself. In this sense, the autoerotic act always promises the possibility of being outside of oneself while being intimately in contact with that self. Such characteristics have caused critics like Leo Bersani to raise the question of "Who are you when you masturbate?" or as

Thomas reformulates the question, "With whom do we think are we having sex when we have sex with and by ourselves?" (*Homos* 103; "Crossing the Streets" 3).

Finally, we can see how masturbation is marked as abject at the level of representation. While representations of masturbators may be codified as safe and even pleasurable sites of identification, more often than not masturbators are constructed as figures of shame or guilt or simply as one of unassimilable otherness. Such representational associations between masturbation and abjection emerge from the cultural connotations of self-pleasure as a marker of inadequacy concurrent with sexual and/or social failure, but also through representational practices that so often render the masturbator as a disgustingly overembodied figure.

The queer and abject tendencies that associate writing and masturbation both elicit and delimit my study of the imbrication between these practices. There are ways of reading masturbation's associations with other practices like reading, viewing[1], exercising, or perhaps soldiering[2], among others, but given the potency and diversity of potential queer resonances between masturbation and writing, they will be one of the points of focus of my investigation. Engagements with these resonances from film, video, live performance, literature and television

[1] Linda Williams addresses the phenomenological relationship between masturbation and spectatorship in her well known *Film Quarterly* article "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre,

[2] The memoir *Jarhead* and its subsequent film adaptation present the opportunity for precisely such a reading as they reflect on simulation, masculinity and masturbation. through the framework of postmodern warfare.

present an array of cultural productions for my study to draw from and suggest the relevancy of such issues in the areas of film and media studies, art history and literary criticism as well as for gender and sexuality studies. As I begin to sketch out stakes of my project, let us linger for a moment on the shared mechanics of masturbation and writing.

I am not the first writer to make note of the similarities between writing and masturbation. In his consideration of the poetics of self-pleasure in *Portnoy's Complaint*, Lawrence Schehr remarks of both practices (as conducted by a male)[3]:

> A singular activity occurs with the agent in isolation, separate from any community and divorced from any absolute knowledge. He moves one hand along a somewhat cylindrical object until a liquid is released. No other is there to receive the liquid; the dried traces of that liquid may or may not be noticed at a subsequent point as tell-tale signs of the activity. ("Fragments" 216)

While Schehr's analogy uses the pen, the logic of the analogy between writing and masturbating has remained as the mechanics of each activity have changed over time. For the writer churning out drafts on a

[3] Like Schehr, my project is focused specifically on male masturbation and leaves female masturbation largely unaccounted for. The reason for this is partly due to the scale of my project but mainly it is a result of my primary focus on male sexuality and men's relationships to masculinities. This is not to say that female masturbation has little to bear on masculinity or that masculinity itself is not constituted through relationships of difference to femininity and female sexuality. Rather, I would posit that discourses and representations of men masturbating provide the most direct and incisive textual opportunity to confront critical issues pertaining to masculinity and that such moments in film and literature are rich and complex enough to warrant thorough and sustained readings at the expense of other, almost certainly also fruitful avenues of investigation.

typewriter, these “unrealized” attempts fill the wastebasket or are strewn on the floor of the bedroom like so many wadded-up tissues. And of course, now, the very platform of the computer with keyboard, mouse and glowing screen hosts each activity for most modern practitioners. The bedroom wastebasket for drafts and tissues is now augmented by the digital wastebasket of the “trash” file on your computer. The converging media of masturbation and writing suggest how not only the platforms or “implements” of these practices develop in tandem, but so do the activities of their users.

Joseph Gordon-Levitt’s 2013 directorial debut *Don Jon* dramatizes specifically such a connection between the digital garbage of one’s computer and the excreted humoral refuse of the masturbator through a small but pointed detail. Throughout the film when “Don” Jon Martello finishes masturbating (which he does often) he flicks his crumpled up tissue into his bedroom wastebasket as the sound effect, familiar to all Apple users, of a file being dragged to the “trash” punctuates the moment.

Don Jon’s aural metaphor is characteristic of a broader and more endemic tendency toward a rhetoric of analogy, metaphor, substitution and simulation circumscribing masturbation. While the metaphorical relationship between masturbation and literary writing will prove a most productive site of inquiry, masturbation’s aptitude for metaphor is hardly limited to writerly resemblances. Chris Elliott takes Ben Stiller on a short

tour of masturbation metaphors in *There's Something About Mary*, just before the film's memorable ejaculate-cum-hair-gel scene:

> You choke the chicken before any big date, don't you? Tell me you spank the monkey before any big date. Oh my God, he doesn't flog the dolphin before a big date. Are you crazy? That's going out there with a loaded gun! Of course that's why you're nervous.

As is the case in *There's Something About Mary*, euphemism often wears the cloak of humor to cover over its own anxiety about direct engagement. In other masturbatory utterances humorous metaphor can offer a subterfuge for meaningful commentary, soliciting a wide audience by masquerading as levity and comic relief while actually addressing "serious" issues. Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* is precisely one such example where humor is deployed to assuage sensitivities about confronting masturbation while asking the reader to engage with it in a critical way. When Alexander Portnoy refers to his penis as "that battering ram to freedom" (33), or calls himself the "Raskolnikov of jerking off" (20), Roth is using the parlance of Jewish humor to alert his reader to narratives of liberation, guilt and shame that circumscribe masturbation.

For other examples of rhetorical ellipticism and euphemism regarding masturbation in contemporary popular media we might consider the well-known episode of *Seinfeld*, "The Contest." The episode follows the show's foursome as they plan and then execute a wager of

who can abstain from masturbating the longest. Although solitary sexual stimulation is the primary focus of the episode, the word “masturbate” is not spoken once during the show in any form.

Sam Mendes’s 2005 film *Jarhead* suggests a number of metaphorical associations of masturbation as it underscores the activity’s centrality to the lives of the soldiers it depicts. In *Jarhead* the simulativity of postmodern warfare is transposed onto the male subject as the sexual simulation of masturbation. When our eponymous soldier and his company-mates fire their M-16s into the night sky for the first time in the war as they celebrate its end, we might read their exuberant release as the result of the lack of “action” they’ve gotten during the war.

How can we account for the continual reliance of obliquity and euphemism in discourses of masturbation, specifically within contemporary media such as in the examples considered above? The apparently obvious answer would be the stock rationale for euphemism more broadly as a tactic to avoid an uncomfortable or unsavory topic by eliding a direct discussion of it for a tangential one. Indeed this recourse to a rhetoric of substitution is certainly tied to the social unspeakableness of masturbation, far exceeding many other forms and practices of sex, and it is not only limited to social discourses on the topic but also to historical and scholarly approaches as well.

Despite the wealth of scholarship on sex and sexuality over the last half-century, masturbation has seldom received the critical attention it

deserves. The ubiquity of autoeroticism as a form of sexual practice coupled with its relatively infrequent depiction in media and popular culture contribute, no doubt, to its being overlooked by critics and theorists. Appreciably, the books and studies we do have on masturbation are valuable and well researched. The following two books are invaluable resources in the small but growing field of inquiry into the historical and cultural discourses of masturbation as well as its status as representation and serve as touchstones for my project as they might for any scholarly approach to autoeroticism.[4]

Thomas Laqueur's 'Cultural History of Masturbation,' *Solitary Sex*, focuses primarily on historical perspectives of masturbation and more particularly, its stigmatization and prohibition beginning in the mid-eighteenth century and lasting into the mid-twentieth century (and onward). Laqueur considers the moral, medical and social taboos associated with autoeroticism via what he considers its core qualities of imagination, excess, solitude and privacy, as they come to constitute it as a threat. Laqueur's expansively useful *Solitary Sex* presents a critical approach to autoeroticism that brings together aspects of medical, literary and moral discourses on the practice by drawing from a varied body of sources.

The second major text my study returns to time and again is the

[4] See also Havelock Ellis' *Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Vol. I*, Sigmund Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Robert Jensen's *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity*, Peter Michelson's *Speaking the Unspeakable: A Poetics of Obscenity*, Mels Van Driel's *With the Hand*, and Jean Stengers and Anne Van Neck's *Masturbation: The History of a Great Terror*.

volume of essays *Solitary Pleasures*, edited by Paula Bennett and Vernon Rosario. Bennett and Rosario's anthology collects essays from critics in a variety of disciplines on the topic of the history and cultural representation of masturbation. Addressing both historical and representational issues of shame and stigmatization surrounding autoeroticism, *Solitary Pleasures* studies the role of masturbation in the production and consumption of cultural objects such as films, novels and visual art. Of particular interest to my project is Eve Sedgwick's[5] essay on resonances between onanism and queer sexualities as well as Lawrence Schehr's piece, "Fragments of a Poetics: Bonnetain and Roth," which addresses the centrality of self-pleasure in Philip Roth's novel, *Portnoy's Complaint*. Schehr and Sedgwick's pieces contend with masturbation in generative ways that open up precisely the avenues of engagement with queerness and writing that are central to my own investment in the topic.

More scholarship on masturbation is needed and this minor foray is intended to establish a case for how unpacking representations of masturbation can yield productive readings of films and provide valuable insight to contemporary work in masculinity studies. To set up the investigation to follow, I would like to pose a series of questions to direct our focus. What are the imbrications between masturbation and writing

[5] Sedgwick and Leo Bersani are the two queer theory scholars who have engaged most substantively with masturbating (specifically as a queer sexual practice). See also Sedgwick's *Tendencies* and Bersani's *Homos*.

and how do the cultural discourses of masturbation serve understandings of masculinities? How do media texts represent masturbating men and what meanings do they produce? How does masturbation relate self-discipline and self-indulgence to male subjectivity? Are creative writers childish? Is the masturbator a child? What forms of failure does masturbation come to embody? Can the unreproductiveness of masturbation resonate queerly? How does masturbation locate itself at borders of sociality and normativity? These questions will serve to guide this study through salient film and media texts that open onto discussions of the shifting relationships between masturbation, masculinity and writing.

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This study considers the relationship between practices and representations of autoeroticism and the practice of writing, particularly as this relationship can illuminate understandings of masculinities. By drawing representational examples from film, literature and other media, this study deploys the figure of the masturbating man as a site where queerness and abjection coalesce around hetero-masculine identity. These cases studies and analyses show that representations of masturbators are rich sites from which heteromasculinity can be recuperated for queer readings that may unlock subversive and nonnormative potentials in figures of abjection, failure, and childishness. These readings reflect how representations of masturbating men

condition and construct men's relationships to their own bodies, their sexual practices and identifications through sexuality and gender.

The project is divided into three chapters, two of which comprise case studies of two texts that focus significantly on masturbation. Philip Roth's 1969 novel, *Portnoy's Complaint*, and the 2002 film *Adaptation.*,[6] directed by Spike Jonze and written by Charlie Kaufman, receive sustained analyses through frameworks emerging from the series of questions posed above. These two works foreground masturbation both conceptually and representationally in ways that few if any other popular cultural productions can be seen to do. While *Adaptation* did not make as large of a splash as *Portnoy*, its widespread critical and popular acclaim and the continued success of its director is indicative of its cultural significance.[7] As such, *Portnoy* and *Adaptation* warrant close critical scrutiny as they narrativize masturbation and its attending historical discourses in ways that invite queer and abject readings of (hetero)masculinity.

The final chapter represents a broadening of scope in considering a variety of filmic and non-filmic engagements with masturbatory and auto-indulgent practices. Here, recent work in abject masculinites, particularly that of Calvin Thomas, as well as scholarship on queer negativity, such as that of Eve Sedgwick, Lee Edelman and Judith

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[6] The title of the film contains a period after the word 'adaptation,' which I will omit in the text for the sake of clarity.
[7] Spike Jonze's most recent film, *Her* (2013), has enjoyed a similarly warm reception, earning Jonze his first Academy Award in the category of original screenplay.

Halberstam, informs brief but pointed engagements within a variety of genres and cinematic forms. The texts included in the third chapter range from the performance and video work of Vito Acconci and George Kuchar back to Stan Brakhage's early experimental film *Flesh of Morning* (1956), all the way up through raunchy sex comedies from the 1990s and 2000s and more recently, Joseph Gordon Levitt's directorial debut *Don Jon*, returning again, finally, to Spike Jonze with his 2013 film *Her.*

While this third chapter considers some more esoteric and non-filmic representations of masturbation in the works of Acconci and Kuchar, my intention is to maintain a focus on the interpenetration between popular understandings of masculinity and masturbation and as such *popular* media texts are privileged. The first chapter establishes *Portnoy's Complaint* as the historical starting point of my textual analyses with its appearance during the cultural moment of the late 1960s in America during the "sexual revolution." The chapter on *Adaptation* introduces an exploration of the queer resonances (and dissonances) of the relationships between masturbation, literary writing and auto-representation more broadly, that continues in my readings of the autobiographical works of Acconci, Kuchar and Brakhage in the third chapter. By beginning with *Portnoy* and tracing texts all the way up through this year, the archive of my project does not provide a historical survey of masturbatory media but rather a pair of case studies and a series of juxtaposed glimpses. Taken together, these investigations will

mine cultural representations of masturbating men from a variety of approaches in order to contend with what they say about masculinity.

While my project is primarily focused on cinema, I draw from scholars in other fields such as queer theory, psychoanalysis, cultural history and literary criticism just as I draw texts and representations from non-filmic media. I see this interdisciplinarity in both scholarship and media texts that I draw from as fundamental to reading masturbation as a powerful and pervasive cultural phenomenon and to unpacking how its representation produces popular meanings for audiences, readers and media consumers.

Masturbation and its Discontents

> Who are you when you masturbate?
> -Leo Bersani, *Homos*

> The literal-minded and censorious metaphor that labels any criticism one doesn't like, or doesn't understand with the would-be-damning epithet "mental masturbation," actually refers to a much vaster, indeed foundational, open secret about how hard it is to circumscribe the vibrations of the highly relational but, in practical terms, solitary pleasure and adventure of writing itself.
> -Eve Sedgwick, "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl"

Leo Bersani's question for masturbators is not just pertinent for literal practitioners of autoeroticism but also for anyone who has experienced the 'solitary pleasure and adventure of writing," as Eve Sedgwick suggests (“Jane” 134). Furthermore, autoeroticism as a form of sexuality, if not a sexual identity, holds a particular position of interest in relation to sexual practices and writing practices given its requisite

solitude,[8] same-sex action, anti-sociality and dependence on fantasy and the workings of the imagination. Sedgwick continues, "In the context of hierarchically oppressive relations between genders and between sexualities, masturbation can seem to offer-not least as an analogy to writing-a reservoir of potentially utopian metaphors and energies for independence, self-possession, and a rapture that may owe relatively little to political or interpersonal abjection" (135). What can be made of Sedgwick's suggestions of the utopian potential of masturbation and its relation to (sexual) identity? I would argue that what is exciting and profitable in Sedgwick's reconceptualization of masturbation is its emphatic divergence from the predominantly negative narratives permeating the discursive history of the sexual practice, a précis of which will better situate Sedgwick's questions and my own.

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Given how thoroughly masturbation has been maligned, devalued and rendered invisible (or unrepresentable) in the popular consciousness, even decades after its medical and mental myths have been debunked, one might be surprised to learn how relatively late its stigmatization emerged in the history of the Western world. In fact, masturbation was not significantly considered to be a threat to

[8] Masturbation can and is, of course, practiced with others (often in enacting voyeuristic fantasy), under which circumstances its meaning and significance changes. In such contexts masturbation loses at least one of its structural similarities (solitude) with writing, and since it is not my goal to map a compendium of masturbatory practices, but to consider its relationship to writing, my engagement is limited to solitary autoeroticism.

physiological or psychological health until the anonymous publication of *Onanism, or the Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution* in 1710. Although this pamphlet, later expanded into a larger volume, is historically considered the work of a huckster and a charlatan, its influence on medical and popular opinion of autoeroticism was both rapid and far-reaching. Following *Onanism*'s publication and leading all the way up into the twentieth century, ailments were frequently attributed to onanism, often, it could be argued, to cover over the diagnostic inefficacy of the doctors themselves. The widespread acceptance of onanism as a serious medical and psychological condition by both doctors and the general public was predicated upon an opportunistic and highly flawed interpretation of the myth of Onan from the book of Genesis which appeared in the aforementioned volume.[9]

In the fable, Onan, the second eldest son of Judah, is asked by his father to impregnate his widowed sister-in-law following the death of his brother Er. Unwilling to bear a child with his recently deceased brother's widow, Onan "spilled his seed/semen on the ground," and was subsequently struck dead by God in his uncompromising disappointment.[10] For many years theologians have debated the specificity of Onan's crime and punishment. Before modern exegesis framed Onan's crime as one of disobedience to the father, these debates

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[9] The text's full title is *Onanism, or the heinous sin of self-pollution , and its frightful consequences in both sexes considered, with spiritual and physical advice to those who have already injured themselves by this abominable practice.*
[10] Genesis 38: 7-10.

focused on the specificity of Onan's actions leading up to his fatal seed-spilling and the gravity of those actions in the punitive (and voyeuristic) eyes of the lord. Principally, these theologians were concerned with distinguishing if Onan was engaged in an autoerotic act before he ejaculated or whether he initiated *coitus interruptus*. Ironically, this interpretive distinction between the two possibilities was something of a moot point as the church had already officially condemned both sexual acts.[11] Two important notes regarding the condemnation of masturbation by the church at this time are that it was directed towards *adults*, and that the church considered the act to be a self-defilement of *the mind and soul*, not to the body, nor the bearer of any long-term psychological effects (Bennett and Rosario 4).

Simultaneous to these theological debates, medieval and Renaissance medical discourse addressed concerns about the retention and excretion of seed/semen as they pertain to humoral balance as a key facet of their understanding of healthfulness. Medical practitioners of the age were significantly more preoccupied with the dangers of over retention and accumulation of seed as a potential detriment to the physical and mental health of a patient than to its comparatively innocuous over-excretion. In fact, even experts who cautioned against humoral over-excretion did not attribute semen with any special

[11] Paula Bennett and Vernon Rosario note in their introduction to *Solitary Pleasures*, that Corinthians (6:9-10) was often cited: "Do not be fooled: neither the bawdy, nor the idolatrous, nor the sodomites, nor the thieves … will inherit the heavenly Kingdom."

significance over other bodily fluids and certainly did not attend specifically to masturbation above any other acts of humoral excretion. These doctors were highly conscious of the church's position on 'illicit sexual acts' and as such engaged in a sort of dance around their medical behavioral prescriptions and the policing of sexual behavior by the church (Ibid. 3).

Despite the pressure from the church on the medical community, the theological opinion of masturbation and the medical one remained quite separate and distinguishable until the publication and wide influence of *Onanism* in 1710. *Onanism* reread the myth of Onan as a cautionary tale about the fatal dangers of masturbation, eschewing other interpretations of Onan's crime as one of coitus interuptus or of disobedience in order to fabricate a multitude of physical and mental afflictions (going as far as death) attributable to masturbation, many of which would persist well into the twentieth century.

In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, his seminal study of sexuality in the modern Western world, Michel Foucault cites a key mode by which onanism was considered "pathogenic" through its unreproductive status. In the book, Foucault describes "four great strategic unities which, beginning in the eighteenth century, formed specific mechanisms of knowledge and power centering on sex" (103). Between two of these unities that Foucault names as "a pedagogization of children's sex" and "a socialization of procreative behavior," we find a

significant parallel between masturbation and queerness. In the section, Foucault states that children had been recognized to possess nascent sexualities and that these sexualities were seen to be potentially dangerous if they were not properly routed and regulated by parents, doctors and teachers. Linking this strategy specifically to masturbation, Foucault writes, “this pedagogization was especially evident in the war against onanism” (104). Foucault goes on to address the socialization of reproductive sexuality that he describes as “an economic socialization via all the incitements and restrictions, the “social” and fiscal measures brought to bear on the fertility of couples” (104-5). Foucault’s articulation of how the regulation of masturbation and the socially and economically motivated emphasis on the heterosexual couple suggests an alignment of autoeroticism with queerness in their shared unreproductiveness that will be explored in greater depth throughout this study.

The early twentieth century saw a shift in the medical and psychological community away from maligning autoeroticism as a threat to physical health while maintaining its detriment to mental health. Freud’s reading of the role of masturbation in sexual development and socialization was as impactful as any of his theories of sexuality and reshaped the discourse on masturbation to suit a broader reconceptualization of the individual’s relationship to civilization. Laqueur’s account of masturbation’s position after Freud is worth quoting at length:

> It was … to be regarded as something natural when practiced by the young … And conversely, "when practiced by any adult," it was the mark of arrested development. Not so much wicked, and certainly not physically threating, it was now a symptom of abjection, a sign of failure, a font of guilt, and a token of inadequacy … Adolescence, in particular, became the crux, a fraught time between "natural" infantile autoeroticism and its sad holdover into maturity, the period when masturbation went from being a sign of "budding sexuality" full of promise to being an indication that its practitioner was unable to have a proper love object and, more generally, to make peace with the demands of society. One's relation to masturbation tracked precisely one's willingness to go with the flow of the civilizing process. (73-74)

Laqueur's language pinpoints how psychoanalysis' rethinking of masturbation introduced salient characteristics of modern perceptions of the practice. Such discourse firmly situated masturbation as a battleground for the self-discipline required of the modern social subject.

The discursive functions of masturbation came into question during the 1960s as part of the "sexual liberation" movement and the broader questioning of the relationships between our bodies and politics that was characteristic of the period. The more positivistic and even utopian recuperations of masturbation as a practice of autonomy and freedom that emerged in the 1960s and 70s can lead us back to Eve

Sedgwick who set us off on this abridged history. Sedgwick describes the sanitization of masturbation in the last quarter of the twentieth century in her essay, “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl,” asserting that “Modern views of masturbation tend to place it firmly in the framework of optimistic, hygienic narratives of all-too-normative individual development” (133-4). While in many ways I feel tempted to agree with Sedgwick regarding a growing acceptance of or perhaps more pointedly, a normativization of masturbation, I would caution against overlooking its subversive potential and hyperbolizing its cultural permissibility in a contemporary context. That is to say, I would highlight the reentrenchment of the conservative fundamentalist right in American politics and the “culture wars” of the 1980s and 90s as indicative of the broader persistence of devoutly antionanistic discourses. Furthermore, we will find that contemporary film and television has also contributed to heteroreproductivist and gender normative understandings of masturbation. Such texts, which Laqueur characterizes as “titillation artfully blended with fear, embarrassment and abjection” and often feature “men and boys [who] are repeatedly caught “doing it” and are humiliated, mocked or emotionally pummelled,” are worth considering alongside more obviously subversive texts in order to mark their inadequacies and to discover how they might be reread to produce alternative meanings (417-8).

Chapter 1: "Liberating" the Queer Child in Alexander Portnoy

Introduction

> As people grow up, then, they cease to play, and they seem to give up the yield of pleasure which they gained from playing. But whoever understands the human mind knows that hardly anything is harder for a man than to give up a pleasure which he has once experienced.
>
> -Sigmund Freud, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming"

> What kinds of reward can failure offer us? Perhaps most obviously, failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods.
>
> -Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*

In this chapter, *Portnoy's Complaint* is used to probe the trajectory of masturbation emerging from the historical moment of the "sexual revolution" leading up to its place in the contemporary media landscape. *Portnoy* must be examined from the perspective of the broader cultural history of masturbation preceding the so-called sexual liberation of the 1960s in order to see how the book influenced how we think about and represent autoeroticism and how we understand its relationship to identity and subjectivity.

Perhaps the greatest fixation of Roth's novel is the internal battleground of desire, emblematized in the autoerotic act and how it bears upon identity and subjectivity. It is key to consider *Portnoy*'s autoeroticism in the context of Foucault's elaboration of the discursive power structures of modern sexuality. When Foucault calls to "emphasize practices of freedom over processes of liberation" ("Ethics" 283), autoeroticism can be read as just such a site where subjects may contend with the "intensification of the body – with its exploitation as an

object of knowledge and an element in relations of power" (*History* 107). *Portnoy* dramatizes this struggle of the Foucaudian sexual-subject particularly and most pointedly as its protagonist is constructed as a troubled masturbator (and a troublesome member of society).

Importantly for the project of this chapter, *Portnoy* bears the legacy not only of Foucault but, quite prominently, that of Sigmund Freud as well. Locating Portnoy within a Freudian framework, Roth's story is told as a monologue to a psychoanalyst that narrativizes the impossible process of internalizing sexual moralization. Masturbation for Freud was one of the earliest phases of psychosexual development, but its persistence into adulthood was threatening. As he writes in *'Civilized' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness*, "The forces that can be employed for cultural activities are thus to a great extent obtained through the suppression of what are known as the *perverse* elements of sexual excitement" (8). Freud would cite shame as a principle suppressor of autoeroticism as we can read when he differentiates the self-involved child who plays with him or herself, so to speak, from "The adult … [who] is ashamed of his phantasies and hides them from people" ("Creative Writers" 438). This adult, Freud claims, "cherishes his phantasies as his most intimate possessions, and as a rule he would rather confess his misdeeds than tell anyone his phantasies" (Ibid.). Shame is a key concept in my analysis of *Portnoy*, for its regulatory function over masturbation links the protagonist's shamelessness to childishness.

Portnoy's Complaint's relationship to Freudian and Foucaudian discourses on masturbation provides the foundation for my engagement with the text. As we investigate *Portnoy*'s narrative of childish masturbation's persistence into adulthood (among Portnoy's other childish tendencies), Judith Halberstam can provide a means to recalibrate our understanding of Roth's novel and its troubled protagonist's position within Foucault's web-like discourses of power. Freud's conception of masturbation as a stop along the way to mature, heteronormative sexuality, and its concomitant association with childishness can be productively reread through Halberstam's framework of queer failure as she reclaims adult childishness as a mode of resistance and counter-normativity. Along with Halberstam's reclamations of childishness for queer theory, Freud's little-known essay on creative writing and childish fantasy will serve to guide my reading of *Portnoy's Complaint*'s focus on masturbation and its thematization of shame as a socially regulating impulse. The Freudian move to place masturbation (and childishness) squarely in the rear-view mirror of a teleology of sexual progress is unsettled by *Portnoy* as it contests, as does Foucault, the concept of a "liberated" space *outside* of sexual discourse.

***

Portnoy's Complaint's publication in 1969 came in the midst of the cultural-historical period in America commonly referred to as "the sexual revolution" (or "sexual liberation"). Philip Roth's novel both indicates and

was born out of a moment of shifting attitudes toward sex and sexuality in the American cultural landscape of the 1960s. The book's intelligent (though often misogynistic) use of body and bedroom humor in the ejaculatory monologue of Alexander Portnoy in many ways emblematizes a growing acceptance of explicit sexual representation in "serious" art. Simply by the fact of *Portnoy*'s foregrounding of masturbation the book asserted it as a form of sexual practice worth more sustained attention from cultural producers. Literature, among other art forms[12], played a significant role in changing traditional values about sex and the politics of its representation, as explicit and sexually non-normative narratives began to reach a wide readership in the United States with *Portnoy* on the front lines.

The massive critical and popular success of Roth's novel capped a decade that had begun with the lifting of bans on D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterly's Lover* (1928) and Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1934). From one perspective an apotheosis, but also a form of rebuttal or anti-climax, *Portnoy's Complaint*'s painfully neurotic perversity was a far cry from the rhetoric of freedom and transcendence that characterized "the sexual liberation." The novel occupies an interesting position of ambivalence to the cultural milieu in which it emerged. At once of-its-moment and a reaction against it, *Portnoy* eschews conventionally teleological narratives

[12] Film and music from the late 1960s, such as the work of Ingmar Bergman, Andy Warhol and The Velvet Underground, brought sexually explicit art to a wide, middle-brow, consumer audience, paralleling developments in literature.

in which sexual repression is overcome through liberatory openness, acceptance and candor. Instead, Roth crafts a more conflicted picture of how sex(uality) works on and through us, offering both escape and confinement. As the book's eponymous protagonist desperately searches for happiness and some modicum of contentment, his sexual escapades and (mis)adventures offer not a solution to his problems (as his contemporaries would have it), but also not their root (as psychoanalysis would).

Roth's novel is narrated from the perspective of Alexander Portnoy in the form a monologue spoken to his psychoanalyst, Dr. Spielvogel. In the monologue, he recounts stories from throughout his life in often painfully sordid detail, as his experience of the world has been, apparently, almost comprehensively defined by his sexuality (religion, language and family comprise his secondary defining contact points). The central concern, the central issue of *Portnoy's Complaint* it appears, is that he is unable to enjoy and derive pleasure from his sexual encounters as an adult despite his best and most inventive efforts. Rather, he is constantly seized by shame and guilt. Portnoy's strongly internalized moral impulses are continually at odds with his lustful sexual longings, leading to classically perverse sexual practices, sexual-psychological agony, self-loathing, neurosis and impotency.

As one critic writes of *Portnoy*, "While most Americans were engaging in sex without guilt, Alexander Portnoy engages in guilt without

sex" (Weiner). Along such lines it could be argued that the book foregrounds guilt over sex, but *Portnoy* is certainly not "without sex" and in fact what it narrativizes is an inseparability of the two. Before the title page of the novel, Roth includes a definition of "Portnoy's Complaint" that appears as though it could have been excerpted from an encyclopedia of psychoanalysis:

> **Portnoy's Complaint** (port-noiz kom-plant') *n.* [after Alexander Portnoy (1933-) A disorder in which strongly-felt ethical and altruistic impulses are perpetually warring with extreme sexual longings, often of a perverse nature. Spielvogel says: 'Acts of exhibitionism, voyeurism, fetishism, auto-eroticism and oral coitus are plentiful; as a consequence of the patient's "morality," however, neither fantasy nor act issues in genuine sexual gratification, but rather in overriding feelings of shame and the dread of retribution.' (Roth i)

In this epigraphic page, Roth introduces dynamics and themes of *Portnoy* that will be central to reading the ways the text engages with ideas about sexuality, auto-eroticism subjectification and liberation. Here, shame and auto-eroticism in particular should be noted as they have become two of the most salient points of *Portnoy*'s cultural legacy. Two additional key notes from the above quote are the language of "warring" sexual and moral impulses in the novel and the characterization of "plentiful" (perverse) sexual acts. *Portnoy*'s plentitude, we shall find, is not limited to

the protagonist's sex practices but extends to their discussion in its style (confessional, stream of consciousness), and its form (taking place as a marathon psychoanalytic session). The "war" Roth suggests here, as he does through the book's narrative, is more akin to "the war on terror," or "the war on drugs," than to a winnable, endable war, such as the term "sexual liberation" connotes. This distinction is significant in that it characterizes *Portnoy*'s divergence from the mythological "sexual revolution." Without diminishing the significance of measurable and material changes in sexuality and sexual practices in the 1960s and 70s[13], we can read *Portnoy*'s unwillingness to give up the struggles and messiness of the modern sexual-political body to problematize the notion that "sexual liberation" has been or can be achieved. In such a sense, *Portnoy* is not progressive, at least not literally, in that it clings to the abjection and failure of psychosexual struggle rather than projecting hopefulness or normalcy onto the future, resisting the teleology of both Freudian and sexual revolutionary narratives of autoeroticism.

Onan(ism), Foucault and Portnoy

Make me *whole!* Enough being a nice Jewish boy, publicly pleasing my parents while privately pulling my putz! Enough!
-Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*

[P]ower does not simply prohibit; it does not directly terrorize. It normalizes, 'responsibilizes,'and disciplines
-David Halperin, *Saint=Foucault*

[13] Social changes associated with the broadly conceived historical moment of "the sexual revolution" include the increased availability and use of contraceptives, a rise in pre-marital sex, increases in promiscuity and casual sex, and a greater openness about autoerotic practices. These changes in sexual lifestyles coincided with economic and political achievements fueled by the work of Second-wave Feminism and to a lesser extent, the burgeoning Gay Rights Movement, such as abortion rights for women, non-discrimination laws and efforts toward equal pay and treatment in the workplace.

Contemporary histories of masturbation invariably cite the publication of *Onanism, or the Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution* in 1710 as a key moment, even an originary moment of discourses around masturbation. This pseudo-scientific pamphlet's pivotal status in the discursive history of masturbation as it marks the inception of a secularization of its stigmatization creates a hinge between Roth's novel and Foucault's theorization of modern sexuality. In his cultural history of masturbation, *Solitary Sex*, Thomas Lacqueur elaborates on the role of *Onanism* and masturbation in broader shifts of power dynamics and subjectivity:

> *Onanism* was almost contemporaneous with the society for the reformation of manners – the vice society – which tried desperately and unsuccessfully to fill the place of the church courts, which until the late seventeenth century had exercised jurisdiction over matters that then became private morals. Thus efforts to control sexuality from within – and masturbation was considered the paradigmatic form of interior sexual desire – might be regarded as the modern alternative to older forms of communal, religious, judicial and political control. (270)

Like Laqueur, I would argue that the influence of *Onanism* is almost too neatly emblematic of Foucault's conception of the shifting, dynamic flow of power in the 18th and 19th centuries through the secularization of

morality and the development of a private sphere beyond the reach of the law. Or, as he continues in *Solitary Sex*:

> The state … no longer burned or whipped the sexual offender, but enmeshed him or her, and many others, in the webs of "bio-power." Put differently, the story of modernity and the individual is not one of liberation – repression to freedom – but one in which a new and perhaps more insidious form of power is exercised. Desire is discursively created in order to be the locus of control. Masturbation, long slumbering in a moral backwater, is made over into a major horror, a threat to self and society, the object of the full power of all right-thinking guardians of good order. (Ibid.)

By conceiving of *Portnoy's Complaint* as a form of response to the emerging narratives of "sexual liberation" in the 1960s, in what follows we may consider how Foucault's account of sexual subjectivity and psychoanalysis's regulation of desire circumscribe Alexander Portnoy as the emblematic modern masturbator.

In his essay on Foucauldian concepts in *Portnoy's Complaint*, Dan Colson argues that Roth's book introduced (in practice rather than theory) some 8 years before the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*'s publication, many of Foucault's ideas about matrices of power and their workings on the subject (131). Colson cites liberation as the central concern for Portnoy, from his complaint, as it were, but sexuality is not the only discourse of power from which Portnoy seeks liberation. To be

added to the list are religion, family, location, language and the body. Colson proposes a reading of the radical suggestiveness of *Portnoy's Complaint* arguing that where he primarily seeks liberation is not from sexuality but through sexuality (Ibid.). Colson argues that Portnoy's continually thwarted efforts to free himself of constraints reflect the Foucauldian notion that any attempt to liberate oneself or to step outside of a force of power is impossible, as liberation is not a state of being, but a form of practice (132).

Colson's reading of *Portnoy* highlights the novel's frustrated ambivalence between the discourse of the (self-)disciplined Foucauldian subject and that of the sexual liberation movement. Colson's suggestion that *Portnoy* anticipated Foucault's development of the concept of biopower is as true as it is useful in unpacking Roth's depiction of self-discipline and lack thereof. Colson is again insightful and nuanced as he articulates *Portnoy*'s turn away from the narrative of sex as a potential site of liberation that was so prevalent in the moment of the book's publication. Unfortunately, Colson's argument loses traction as he posits that *Portnoy*'s response to this failure of sex to liberate the subject is the embrace of "practices of freedom" or the embrace of pleasure (132). While Colson's case certainly improves upon teleological accounts of sexual liberation that posit an (eventual) outside to subjection to sex(uality), his deployment of the concept of Foucauldian "practices of freedom" in *Portnoy* elides the friction and messiness of "embracing pleasure" that is

precisely what Roth's novel dramatizes.

When Colson writes, "For Roth to liberate Alex, he must not have him strive toward an illusory and impossible liberation, but rather, to recognize the pleasure he (Alex) derives from life," are we not left wondering, '(how) does Alex derive pleasure from life?' (140). Indeed, Portnoy certainly seems to draw pleasure from sex, perhaps it is even his only source of pleasure – though intellect and speaking about himself may be central as well – but what is significant about the contribution to cultural discourse on sex that *Portnoy* makes is precisely the inseparability of torment and struggle from the search for pleasure.

Roth's epigraphic definition of 'Portnoy's Complaint' introduces the titular complainer's fraught relationship to the discursive regime of sexuality. Portnoy's internalization of guilt that cannot be separated from sexuality is reiterated time and again throughout the novel, establishing and developing both Portnoy's status as an emblematic figure of Foucauldian subjectivity and the torturous nature of such a position.[14] Portnoy laments, "Why is a little turbulence so beyond my means? Why must the least deviation from respectable conventions cause me such inner hell? When I hate those fucking conventions! When I know *better* than the taboos!" (124). But unfortunately for Portnoy, there is no

[14] Whether or not Portnoy, or any practitioner of deviant sexuality, would be better off enduring direct persecution from a formal institution of power such as one of medicine, religion or education rather than the self-imposed torment depicted in the novel is a question I will leave to critics of Foucault and his students who may not find lashings or forced institutionalization a more preferable model of power dynamics than the psychological agony of self-discipline.

ultimate catharsis, even when he "howls," as he calls it, at the end of the book, in an fantasized hail of bullets as he declares to an imaginary police officer, "Up society's ass, Copper! … Blaze, you bastard cop, what do I give a shit? I tore the tag off my mattress – But at least while I lived, *I lived big*!" (274). To which Portnoy hears the response, not from the authority figure of this imagined policeman but from the psychoanalyst Spielvogel, simply the punch line to the joke of an idea that psychoanalysis might liberate Alex, "So. Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?" (Ibid.)

If the concept of "sex without guilt" that characterized the narrative of "sexual liberation" indicates a resistance to or break from Foucault's model of the disciplinary power of sexuality (however illusory it might have been), then *Portnoy*'s *insistence* on guilt accompanying sex reflects a full absorption of the regimentary imperatives of sexuality. That is, if the sexual revolutionaries too easily sloughed off the confinements of modern sexuality then *Portnoy* functions to reaffirm the strength and power of such structures.

Portnoy on the Couch: Infantile Sexuality and Queer Infantalism

> When the child has grown up and has ceased to play, and after he has been laboring for decades to envisage the realities of life with proper seriousness, he may one day find himself in a mental situation which once more undoes the contrast between play and reality.
>
> -Sigmund Freud, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming"

> I have read Freud on Leonardo, Doctor, and pardon the hubris, but my fantasies exactly: this big smothering bird beating frantic wings about my face and mouth *so that I cannot even get my breath.* What do we want, me … and Leonardo? *To be left alone!*
>
> -Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*

We may look to Portnoy himself to find the imbrication between Foucauldian power dynamics and the discourse of psychoanalysis. In one of his fits of guilt over his overactive libido, Alexander Portnoy pleads with his psychoanalyst, Dr. Spielvogel, saying, "Doctor, my doctor, what do you say, LET'S PUT THE ID BACK IN YID! Liberate this nice Jewish boy's libido, will you please?" (124). These sentences reveal three key pieces of information about Portnoy. Primarily, they show that Portnoy feels that his libido is severely repressed. Furthermore, it indicates that he is in psychoanalysis to find liberation from his sexuality. Subtly, but perhaps most importantly, Portnoy's reference to himself as a boy, in the present tense, makes it clear that he recognizes and perhaps (painfully) identifies himself with the figure of the child. Portnoy's association with the child is significant and is elaborated through numerous references in the novel. Many of Portnoy's perversions could be linked to early stages of sexual development before "The sexual instinct is … subordinated to the reproductive function" (Freud, *Three Essays*, 73). Masturbation, however, is the practice that is most consistent throughout the book (and his life), and its continuation from his adolescent sexuality into his practices as an adult makes it a bridge between Portnoy and the figure of the child.

Portnoy's Complaint is a veritable tour of diverse sexual impulses and practices, but masturbation may be singled out as a practice that holds a primary and privileged status in the novel's representation of

sexuality. Notably, masturbation does not fade or disappear from the novel's narrative when we encounter Alexander Portnoy as an adult and thus the book does not brush masturbation aside as an adolescent sexual practice overcome in the trajectory of sexual maturation. While *Portnoy's Complaint* does not take the masturbation out of adulthood it also refuses to void the practice of a certain degree of childishness long associated with masturbation. The fact that Portnoy fails to sufficiently "overcome" masturbation, thus failing to sufficiently mature as a sexual subject, can and is most often read as a flaw marking Portnoy as a pitiable character. What I propose is a queer revision of Portnoy's failure to grow up properly and consideration of his failure to properly subjectivize as a mode of resistance to neatness of normative, adult sexuality. Rather than reading Portnoy's adult masturbation as simply an inadequacy or a fault, we might hold onto some of the adolescence of autoeroticism, like Portnoy does, in order to see what childishness can offer adulthood in terms of a mode of resistance to hetero-reproductive sexuality.

Masturbation's centrality as the battleground for Portnoy's sexuality reflects its status as both a trigger for shame and guilt and as a utopian escape from subjectivity. Characteristic of these twin effects are two moments early in the novel where Portnoy articulates his oscillation between these poles. In one instance where Portnoy most clearly embodies the paranoia about masturbation that emerged from medical

discourses on the practice from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, he frets over the damage his autoeroticism is wreaking on his body. Believing a small freckle on his genitals to be cancer, Portnoy remembers, "I discovered on the underside of my penis, just where the shaft meats the head, a little discolored dot" (19). Exclaiming, "Cancer. I had given myself *cancer*. All that pulling and tugging at my own flesh, all that friction, had given me an incurable disease" (Ibid.), Portnoy shows that he has internalized even outmoded injunctions against masturbating.

Later in the same chapter, the very same organ is figured quite differently for Portnoy, not as an emblem of death, but of freedom. "I tear off my pants, [and] furiously I grab that battered battering ram to freedom, my adolescent cock," Portnoy shrieks. At that moment, Portnoy is terrified for the safety of his "battering ram to freedom" from the threat of his knife wielding mother. Portnoy's castration anxiety reflects that not only has he internalized the paranoia of medical discourse on masturbation with his cancer hypochondria, but Freudian discourse as well.

> Freud asserts in "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex," that: When the (male) child's interest turns to his genitals … the adults do not approve of this behavior. More or less plainly more or less brutally, a threat is pronounced that this part of him which he values so highly will be taken away from him. Usually it is from

women that the threat emanates. (396)

Freud's brief sketch of castration anxiety in this late essay characterizes it in a way that is particularly well suited to Portnoy. The icon of the knife appears throughout the novel, but its earliest appearance comes precisely at the moment in Portnoy's life when he develops an obsessive relationship with masturbation. In the chapter, "Whacking Off," Portnoy moans, "Doctor, *why*, why oh why oh why oh why does a mother pull a knife on her own son? … And why doesn't my father stop her?" (16-7). In this passage, Portnoy laments how quickly his mother passed from playing wife with him as a child to embodying his shame of autoeroticism. The knife returns for Portnoy (like the repressed), time and again, when he remembers his mother later: "She has baked a marble cake for our dessert tonight, beautifully bleeding – there's that blood again! There's that knife again! – anyway expertly bleeding the chocolate in and out of the vanilla" (44). Continuing into Portnoy's adulthood, the threat of losing his member returns during a moment of anxiety at the office: "The Puerto Rican is shouting at me in Spanish, my mother is waving a knife at me back in my childhood, and my secretary announces that Miss Reed would like to speak to me on the telephone" (207).

Portnoy's anxiety about losing his penis, articulated in these recurrences of the knife and in his cancer scare, is directly attached to masturbation, particularly in its nonreproductive character.

Masturbation is a decidedly unreproductive sexual practice. Quoting from P.D. James's post-natalist novel, *Children of Men*, Lee Edelman writes, "sex in a world without procreation … becomes "almost meaninglessly acrobatic"" (64). Here, we can see the tension in queer readings of the figure of the child emblematized in Portnoy. In one sense, the masturbator can be aligned with the queer in their opposition to the figure of the child, as Edelman "ascribes queerness the function of the limit; while the heteronormative political imagination propels itself forward in time and space through the indisputably positive image of the child" (Halberstam, 106). Edelman argues in his seminal queer theory polemic, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, that queerness represents a threat to social order in that it fails to reproduce the family unit as we know it and as such, threatens futurity and the reproduction of the status quo as emblematized in the figure of the child. At this point we should remember the history of religious injunction against any 'spilling of seed,' that is, any nonreproductive sex practice, shared by the church of psychoanalysis, which may ironically (queerly?) produce the means for aligning the masturbator with the queer and queering Portnoy.

On the other hand, as Judith Halberstam suggests, we might consider "alternative productions of the child that recognize in the image of the nonadult body a propensity to incompetence, a clumsy inability to make sense, a desire for independence from the tyranny of the adult, and a total indifference to adult conceptions of success and failure" (120).

Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* claims the child for her archive of queer losers, to which we might add the figure of the masturbator and indeed, Portnoy himself. In the book, Halberstam argues that "failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers" (3). Later, Halberstam paraphrases Katheryn Stockton, elaborating on the queerness of the child: "the child is always already queer and must therefore quickly be converted to a protoheterosexual by being pushed through a series of maturational models of growth that project the child as the future and the future as heterosexual" (73).

What is key to note about such a conceptualization of childishness and queerness is the fact that Freud would probably not disagree with Stockton's claims. In fact, we might read Halberstam's recapitulation of Stockton as a recapitulation of Freud, albeit from quite a different perspective and with quite a different aim. In this sense, Portnoy's masturbation functions as a practice of refusal to be "deliver[ed] … from [an] unruly childhood to [an] orderly and predictable adulthood" (Halberstam, 3). As such, we can see how Halberstam's project provides the means to recalibrate our understanding of Portnoy's failure to grow up. Interestingly, Portnoy himself exhibits an inclination to read against the grain, so to speak, in order to open Old Father Freud up to new meanings and engagements when recounts reading the author in bed:

[I] have been putting myself to sleep each night in the solitary

> confinement of my womanless bed with a volume of Freud in my hand. Sometimes Freud in hand, sometimes Alex in hand, frequently both. Yes, there in my unbuttoned pajamas, all alone, I lie, fiddling with it like a little boy-child in the dopey reverie, tugging on it, twisting it, rubbing and kneading it, and meanwhile reading spellbound through "Contributions to the Psychology of Love." (185)

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Portnoy holds the status of a landmark in modern representations of sexuality, largely for its explicitness, depravity, and its sense of humor about perverse sexual practices[15]. Perhaps more importantly the book productively articulates existent but mostly latent cultural narratives of masturbation and its place within the formation of sexualities as they circulate in a broader network of subjectivication. In considering the novel through both psychoanalysis and Foucauldian theory, ultimately borrowing from Judith Halberstam, there is a strong case for counterintuitively queering the often misogynistic Portnoy. What is concerning about such a reading is that it may always be in danger of sliding into precisely the kind of liberatory mythologism that *Portnoy* rebuts. To deflect that possibility it is essential to linger in the place of tension and friction the Portnoy has carved out for himself as we read his autoeroticism in relation to both Halberstam's and Edelman's queer

[15] For contemporary readers, misogyny could be added to this list.

conceptions of the child figure.

In the third chapter, we will return to *Portnoy*, reading the book's influence on future masturbatory media texts such as *American Pie* (1999), *There's Something about Mary* (1998), and most recently, *Don Jon* (2013), to consider how much (and how little) representations of masturbation have shifted since 1969. In drawing through-lines between *Portnoy* and current popular culture in the third chapter, we might note that the book broke significant ground for the contemporary film genre of the raunchy sex comedy. Bernard Avishai writes in his book on Roth's novel:

> [*Portnoy*] paved the way for smartened-up, masturbation-rich film comedies by visible, young, almost always Jewish tricksters like Judd Apatow: 'Those reluctant, barely grown-up guys would have nothing without Portnoy's now distant permission. Convention-bound, expensive, big-ticket romantic comedies were allowed to be about the fussy, demented, frightened partings from the reassuring cleanliness of childhood.' (30-31)

While in many ways, *Portnoy* paved the way for the comedic treatments of masturbation in contemporary film, those that Laqueur so damningly labels as "titillation artfully blended with fear, embarrassment and abjection," it also complicates such very epithets.

Additionally, Roth's work reflects a self-consciousness of language, its own creation and the performative role of self-indulgence in

intellectualism and creative practice, making it a salient text in considering how autoeroticism bears on creative and intellectual practices, concepts that will be explored in depth with *Adaptation* in the following chapter. Finally, *Portnoy*'s cultural status as both a widely read popular novel and its critical acclaim and significance to the contemporary American novel as a form mark it as a kind of pivot point between the more "serious" experimental and underground films which will be addressed in the third chapter and the low-brow comedies noted above. *Portnoy* will not be left alone then, as it were, and returns to illuminate the other autoerotic texts herein.

Chapter 2: *Adaptation*: The Masturbating Writer

Introduction

Screenwriter Charlie Kaufman and director by Spike Jonze's 2002 film *Adaptation* provides an intriguing case study into the intersection of literal masturbation and the mental masturbation of the writing process. Kaufman and Jonze's film has been widely acclaimed for being both intellectually inventive and popularly enjoyable with much praise for the film focusing on its postmodern self-referentiality and meta-textual construction. Detractors of the film might cite these buzzword characteristics as indicative of a mental masturbation which marks *Adaptation*, and though they would be correct, it is precisely therein that Kaufman and Jonze's film presents profound and insightful explorations of creative and or writing process(es).

The very plot of *Adaptation* seems to invite a consideration of both mental and physical forms of masturbation. Is it not the masturbatory act *par excellence* (for a screenwriter) to write yourself into a film? In such a sense, *Adaptation* announces itself as a text about masturbation as much as a text about text-making, and it is precisely at the intersection of the two that the film opens a dialogue on autoeroticism and wrtiting. In the film, Charlie (Nicholas Cage) oscillates between periods of extreme anxiety, depression and woeful unproductivity and ones of ecstatic, orgasmic inspiration characterized by outpourings of creative thought. Between these poles and the intermittent scenes of

Charlie actually masturbating, *Adaptation* speaks to both derogatory and celebratory cultural narratives of masturbation pertaining to creativity, identity, mental health and socialization.

We should note that in *Adaptation,* Kaufman not only writes himself into the film, but he creates a fictional twin brother and co-lead, Donald Kaufman, disturbing the notion of a singular Charlie Kaufman as well as that of a singular author figure. In its configuration of Donald *Adaptation* resonates deeply not with outmoded discourses on autoeroticism's detriment to mental health, but with contemporary queer scholarship's investigations of relations between forms of sexuality and how they come to bear on identity and its disruption. In Calvin Thomas' foreword to *Straight Writ Queer*, he quotes Donald E. Hall's consideration of masturbation as a queer form of sexuality, and his claim that:

> The challenge of queer theorization … is to return to those 'sites of becoming,' and more importantly *un*becoming, wherein identity is temporarily constructed, solidified and then threatened or rendered inadequate in its explanatory power … one of those hopelessly complicated and therefore highly intriguing sites is the relationship between solitary or masturbatory sexuality and the question of identity. (“Crossing” 3)

In building on the work of Hall, Thomas and others, if we take *Adaptation* as a case study of the imbrication between discourses of masturbation and (creative) writing, we must begin with the central

premise of the film. The masturbatory structure of *Adaptation* is simple; Charlie Kaufman has written himself into a screenplay adapted from a book that he has nothing to do with (other than the fact that he was asked to write a treatment of it), turning the book into a film about his own process of adapting it. When Kaufman handed in his script to Columbia Pictures executive Valerie Thomas (played in the film by Tilda Swinton), it actually contained lines of dialogue in which the character Charlie Kaufman criticizes himself (and by extension the extradiegetic Kaufman) for such a self-involved move. In the screenplay, Kaufman writes: "I've written myself into my screenplay… It's self-indulgent. It's narcissistic. It's solipsistic. It's pathetic. I'm pathetic. I'm fat and pathetic."[16]

When Kaufman wrote *Adaptation*, *Being John Malkovich* was currently in production and he was working closely with the director Spike Jonze who would team-up with the screenwriter again for *Adaptation.*[17] Kaufman accepted the job to adapt Susan Orlean's 1998 non-fiction book about John Laroche, a toothless orchid poaching horticultural fanatic, after growing weary of his reputation for the bizarre and the fantastical resulting from his work on *Being John Malkovich*. "I liked the book and it wasn't the kind of thing that I was being sent,"

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[16] The earliest *Adaptation* script posted to the web is the second draft, dated September 24, 1999, available on the fan site Being Charlie Kaufman, in which the lines appear. Charlie/Kaufman's self-admonition subsequently appears in the shooting script and the film itself.

[17] Jonze was in fact the only person Kaufman confided in before handing in a draft to the studio. Contactmusic.com interview, undated, unattributed. Web. Accessed 1 November, 2013.

Kaufman stated in an interview with Rob Feld.[18] "I was getting sent the weird stuff because *I'm the weirdo*" (120). Kaufman's sentiment is echoed in *Adaptation*: "Nobody in this town can make up a crazy story like you. You're the king of that," Charlie's obnoxious agent Marty says. To which Charlie responds, "No, I didn't want to do that this time."[19]

Alas, Kaufman had accepted the job before realizing the profound difficulties of turning what Charlie[20] alternatively refers to as "that great, sprawling *New Yorker* stuff" and "that sprawling *New Yorker* shit,"[21] (depending on his stage in struggling with the book) into a commercial film. Ultimately, the film (re)presents Kaufman's writerly struggles (among others)[22] as he attempts to adapt the book, alongside a dramatization of Orlean's (and Laroche's) experiences of the writing of *The Orchid Thief* leading up to the film's wholly fictional (and Donald Kaufman-esque) third act.

While the characters Susan Orlean (Meryl Streep) and Charlie Kaufman are based on their namesakes, the third central writer in

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[18] Kaufman's reluctance to be typecast may remind us of how often actors are cast against type in films he is involved in. Examples include: Kate Winslet and Jim Carey in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), Cameron Diaz in *Being John Malkovich* (1999) and Nicholas Cage in *Adaptation* (2002).

[19] Kaufman's rationale for taking the adaptation project, in its "straightforward[ness]," (see interview with Feld) is elaborated further by Charlie's would-be girlfriend in *Adaptation*, Amelia, who suggests "I'm glad you took the orchid script. I think it will be good for you to get out of your head. I think it'll ground you to think about the bigger picture."

[20] First names will be used to distinguish characters in the film from their real-life counterparts who will be identified by their last names.

[21] *The Orchid Thief* was based on an article published by Orelan in the January 23, 1995 issue of *The New Yorker*.

[22] Charlie and Kaufman's struggles such as sexual (masturbation), psychological (depression), social (parties, McKee lecture), romantic (Amelia, waitress), professional (*Malkovich* set, writer's block), familial (Donald), dietary (overweightness, sad salad eating), genetic (baldness), hygienic (sweats profusely) and stylistic (schlubby clothes, appearance) are also recurring themes in the film.

Adaptation, Donald Kaufman, has no real-life surrogate.[23] Donald is created by Kaufman as a narrative conceit that productively dramatizes the otherwise solitary monology of Kaufman's writing process. The Donald device also, however, playfully lampoons its own clichédness (i.e. Charlie's criticism of Donald's split-personality-themed script that "The only idea more overused than serial killers is multiple personality.")[24] Throughout the film, Donald embodies everything that Charlie is not. While Charlie is depressed, anti-social, passive and introverted – a romantic failure and a self-obsessed artist – Donald is active, gregarious, romantically successful and commercially viable. As such, Donald presents the properly hegemonic (however buffoonish) masculine counterpoint to Charlie's pathetic (however likeable) subordinate masculinity. A thorough consideration of the functions and meanings of Donald (as he relates to both Charlie the character and Kaufman the person, particularly as he shares an authorial credit with him) will be essential to unpacking how *Adaptation* treats both masculinity and heteronormativity.

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When I first came to *Adaptation* as a case-study of the intersectionality between male masturbation and the (creative) writing process, I encountered a review of the film by Lucas Hilderbrand that

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[23] Donald Kaufman, while not an actual person, does "exist" outside of the film both as he is credited, along with Charlie Kaufman, for writing the screenplay and as he may be read as an embodiment of Charlie Kaufman's psyche.

[24] Donald also holds a special place of tension within *Adaptation* as he serves as the film's constant reminder to the viewer of its own fictionality.

touches upon precisely those imbrications. Hilderbrand's review, published in the Fall 2004 issue of *Film Quarterly*, argues that *Adaptation* "Productively narrativizes masturbation's myriad associations, pathologies and possibilities."[25] *Adaptation* weaves such a narrative by figuring the writer as an autoerotic, imaginative fantasizer whose malaise and self-doubt impedes the quest for self-expression, posits Hilderbrand. Furthermore, the suggestion made by Hilderbrand that autoerotic acts may serve as an apt metaphor for the writing process itself opens up a fruitful avenue of investigation into *Adaptation*'s fascinating entwinement of masturbation, self-love, self-loathing and creative production.[26] Not only do Hilderbrand's insights productively configure *Adaptation* as a self-conscious engagement with masturbation and writing, they present an initial framework of metaphoricity to read the deep resonances between the two.

Hilderbrand's angle of investigation into the film will broadly inflect my own grappling with the text, with his suggestion of the structural correlation between writing and masturbation serving as a guiding conceptual lever in my project. My aim is to complexify Hilderbrand's

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[25] Hilderbrand, Lucas. *"Adaptation." Film Quarterly.* Fall 2004: 36-43. Web.
[26] See also Sergio Rizzo's article "(In)fidelity Criticism and the Sexual Politics of Adaptation," for an alternate reading of *Adaptation*'s masturbatory impulse. Rizzo's argument that *Adaptation*'s "use of masturbation draws on and reinforces conventional dualisms," is compromised by its failure to account for the complexity of Donald's authorial and narrative significance in the film. Rizzo's claim that, "Donald's unselfconscious approach to life [the film suggests] holds the key to solving Charlie's masturbatory 'problems,'" seems to miss both the satirical nature of *Adaptation*'s Donald-inflected third act and the fact that Charlie comes up with the film's premise as a result of an act of masturbation (in his fantasy dialogue with Susan). Rizzo's logic even seems to suggest that Donald's brand of unselfconscious normativity simply wins out over Charlie's subordinate, masturbating masculinity and that the film singularly figures masturbation as a 'problem,' which we will find is far from the case.

brief suggestion of a metaphorical relation between these two solitary acts by applying pressure to their structural, practical and theoretical intersections and convergences. More broadly, the constellation of masturbation and writing painted by Kaufman will undergird my deeper exploration throughout this text, of masculine sexualities and the embodiment of maleness on the screen and on the page.

'Spilling the Seed' and 'Baby Batter on the Brain'

> The *Semen* discharged too lavishly, occasions a Weariness, Weakness, Indisposition to Motion, Convulsions, Leanness, Driness, Heat and Pains in the Membranes of the Brain, with a Dulness of the Senses; more especially of the Sight, a *Tabes Dorsalis*, Foolishness, and Disorders of the like kind.
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> –Hermann Boerhaave, *Academic Lectures on the Theory of Physic*[27]

> Dom: You choke the chicken before any big date, don't you? Tell me you spank the monkey before any big date. Oh my God, he doesn't flog the dolphin before a big date. Are you crazy? That's like going out there with a loaded gun! Of course that's why you're nervous. Oh my dear friend, please sit, please. Look, um, after you've had sex with a girl, and you're lying in bed with her, are you nervous? No, you're not, why?
>
> Ted: Cause I'm tired...
>
> Dom: Wrong! It's 'cause you ain't got the baby batter on the brain anymore! Jesus, that stuff will fuck you're head up! Look, the most honest moment in a man's life are the few minutes after he's blown his load - now that is a medical fact.
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> -Robert and Peter Farrelly, et al., *There's Something about Mary*

Two key cultural legacies of the myth of Onan and *Onanism, or the Heinous Sin of Self Pollution* are borne out by *Adaptation* as it conceptualizes and figures masturbation. The first is the characterization of solitary sex as a biologically, socially and economically unproductive activity. The second is of the dangers that masturbation presents to the mental health and well being of its practitioners. Using *Adaptation* we

[27] Original italics and orthography.

may (re)discover, as Bennett and Rosario suggest, that:

> If the masturbation phobia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries came to crystalize a variety of fears about social disaggregation, physical degeneration, and psychic non-conformity, it also surfaced individuals' needs for erotic self-expression and release. For many creative artists, masturbation became a trope for the trauma and delights of imaginative reverie, self-cultivation and autorepresentation.(Bennett and Rosario 10)

Initially the film seems to present a relatively conventional, anti-onanistic, pro-social(-sexual) narrative of (writerly, sexual) struggle, overcome in an ironic denouement, staging the appeasement of heteronormative imperatives and reverting to the narrative and visual discourses of conventional Hollywood. As we shall see, however, (the brothers) Kaufman craft a much more complex, contradictory and sophisticated engagement with masculinity and masturbation than such a surface reading of the film would suggest.

Borrowing *Adaptation*'s "~~image~~ [rhetorical] system"[28] of Ouroboros to reconfigure its apparently negative treatments of solitary sex, we can productively reroute *Adaptation* through a reading of queer negativity, failure, and anti-sociality, as the film engages with the cultural legacy of Onan. Furthermore, Leo Bersani's concept of *ebranlement* (self-shattering) will help us to consider how the film narrativizes

[28] In *Adaptation*, Donald claims Ouroboros, an ancient symbol depicting a snake or other serpent eating or swallowing its own tail, as the "image system" of his film *The 3*.

masturbation and writing as they come to bear on identity. The anti-social turn in queer theory and Bersani's conception of sexuality as self-shattering can frame *Adaptation* so as to show us how Charlie (Kaufman), like Ouroboros, seems to be able to have it both ways. As we shall read, he is at once self-annihilating and self-fulfilling, top and bottom, self-loving and self-loathing. In such a sense Charlie (Kaufman) shows us how the hand might be the burial site for "the masculine ideal … of proud subjectivity"[29] (Bersani 28).

What a Failure: The Bleak Prospects of Romance and the Counter-normativity of Solipsism

> In relation to the art of failure, I turn to queer artwork preoccupied with emptiness, a sense of abandonment … a mode of negativity that lays claim to rather than rejects concepts like *emptiness, futility, limitation, ineffectiveness, sterility, unproductiveness* … [T]he works strive to establish queerness as a mode of critique rather than as a new investment in normativity or life or respectability or wholeness or legitimacy.
>
> -Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*

> But if the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal … of proud subjectivity is buried, then it should be celebrated for its very potential for death.
>
> -Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave*

Screenwriter Charlie Kaufman and his would-be romantic companion Amelia Kavan share a bottle of wine sitting on the floor of a hallway across from one another with distant sounds of socializing and reverie in the background. Dismissive of Charlie's typical self-effacement, Amelia ambitiously claims, "We're going to solve the whole Charlie Kaufman mess once and for all," sipping heavily from her glass as she slides across the carpet to pull herself up next to the flannel-clad

[29] Albeit, importantly, one not tragically literalized as a site of biological death (like the rectum).

neurotic. A short exchange about Charlie's latest script project, an adaptation of a non-fiction book about orchids, leads Amelia to suggest that "It will be good for you to get out of your head." Charlie expresses disbelief at the very fact he was given the job after his sweaty and anxiety-riddled meeting with the attractive studio executive, played by Tilda Swinton, who alternatively to Amelia, expressed a desire to find a portal *into* Charlie's head, a la *Being John Malkovich* (which is ostensibly the premise of the film we are watching). Romantic tension mounts between Charlie and Amelia as a tender exchange of looks builds up to a shot-reverse-shot sequence of wordless, intimate eye-contact for a full nine seconds. Then, crushingly, Charlie nervously averts his eyes down to his half-drunk glass of wine and disappointment washes over Amelia's face. Jonze immediately and abruptly cuts to a medium establishing shot of Charlie sitting alone at a typewriter in a sparsely outfitted bedroom, not writing, but attempting to.

The two-fold effect of Jonze's cut provides the viewer with both a sense of disappointment and relief at our (and Charlie's) escape from the awkward, aborted romantic moment that has preceded. Kaufman's writing and Jonze's deployment of conventions of cinematic romance come together here (as throughout the film) to create almost magically painful scenes in which heterosexual hope and desire are thwarted by paralyzing anxiety and neurosis. The dual response elicited by the scene, of *disappointment* in Charlie's inability to consummate the ready-made

romantic moment and *relief* as we are brought suddenly away from the uncomfortability of this failure, is mirrored in Charlie's own movement towards the solitude of writing and masturbatory fantasy.

The state of profound disappointment (or depression) and relief, however fleeting, that Charlie finds himself in when he is alone in his room after the most recent romantic, social or professional failure is acted upon alternatively by (not) writing or by masturbating. These twin impulses, articulated within the film respectively by the writerly trope of voice-over narration and the cinematic fantasy sequence, are encapsulated in the shot of Charlie's room that falls immediately on the heels of his missed opportunity with Amelia. Here, Charlie is placed in the center of the frame but at the farthest point from the camera, decidedly alone in a room that seems to contain almost nothing but the typewriter in front of him and a bed in the foreground. Charlie sits hunched over the machine set on a low-slung chair, rather than a desk, and placed against the only windowless portion of the wall. His self-absorption, as he curls in upon himself, is spoken through a voice-over lost in his own head while reinforced formally in the construction of the shot.

In these early conjoining scenes, Kaufman "introduce[s] the themes," to borrow from Charlie, of masturbation and writing as roadblocks to a normative masculinity that is *genitally* centered around *another* individual of the opposite sex. Here, Kaufman plants the seed of

masturbation as an act of (normative) disobedience and as a failure to follow the Law of the Father. If we follow the logic of such a reading of *Adaptation*, we may find it to reinforce a conventional dichotomy of normativity, hegemonic masculinity, happiness and Donald on one side, and transgression, subordinated masculinity, depression and Charlie on the other. Alternatively, I would argue that Charlie's un(re)productiveness, and his failure to properly, heteronormatively subjectivize opens up a space for critique of normative masculinities, a space from which we might root for the failure, the loser, the masturbator and to counterintuitively embrace all that is messy, maligned and messed-up about such a position.

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What if we wholeheartedly accept the premise suggested by Kaufman's choice to give Donald a screenplay credit, that he is in fact the film's co-author? *Adaptation* certainly invites this reading of the paratextual Donald through its dramatic formal and narrative shift in the third act. At this point in the film, after Charlie is unable to confront Susan Orlean about his struggles adapting her book, he calls Donald to ask him for help. Charlie's self-loathing is uncomfortably palpable as he allows his brother to lead him to Florida to spy on Orlean and Laroche, where they ultimately discover, at the risk of their lives, the illicit love affair between the two and their drug cultivating horticultural lab.

The ending enacts precisely the tropes that Charlie vows to eschew in adapting Orlean's book when he blurts out in the meeting with Valerie Thomas, "I don't want to cram in sex or guns or car chases … Or characters learning profound life lessons. Or growing, or coming to like each other, or overcoming obstacles to succeed in the end."[30] These contrivances are of course hallmarks of Donald's normative style of (script) writing and indicate his conceptual control over the film. Suspenseful electronic music cues the viewer's heightened state of tension as Charlie is taken hostage, an alligator eats Laroche and Donald is ejected through the car's windshield in a screeching wreck. Here, Jonze and (Donald) Kaufman accelerate the film, filling the narrative with action and speeding up its editing to produce the enthralling experience of the Hollywood action film.

But who actually gets the last word in the film, so to speak, between Charlie and Donald? As Donald is ejected violently from the car he's in with Charlie, he is in a sense conceptually abjected from Charlie Kaufman as he leaves the film, allowing Charlie to write the final scene. This narrative and conceptual renunciation of Donald and his embodiment of normativity only arrives after Charlie experiences a moment of epiphany concerning self-love and confidence from listening to Donald.

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[30] The ending not only fails Charlie's principles, but also Robert McKee's injunction, "Don't you dare bring in a *deus ex machine*," a role ultimately filled by the alligator that attacks Laroche, saving Charlie's life.

In the final scene of the film, Charlie confronts his would've-been love interest, Amelia. Finally kissing her and saying "I love you," Charlie remains radiant despite Amelia's withdrawal as he exudes a new air of resolve and purpose. Driving off, Charlie explains through a voice-over that now he knows how to finish the script – with, as we might imagine, a scene of him thinking he knows how to finish the script. (Literally) ultimately, *Adaptation* offers an exuberant ode to the focus on oneself as the film closes on a time-lapse sequence of flowers opening and closing their petals. These last flowers in the film are touching themselves as it were, rather than engaging in the explicitly heterosexualized interspecies "love-making" of flowers and bees fetishized previously in the film.

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It could be argued that most of *Adaptation*, if not the whole film, presents a rather bleak perspective. Despite Charlie's apparent self-satisfaction at the film's end, he has not overcome what have been set up as obstacles to happiness and its mythical guarantee through the consummation of the heterosexual romance. These 'obstacles' of self-involvement symptomatized in a solipsistic writing practice and solitary sexual life are not *surmounted* through personal growth, but rather *reconfigured* through a simple shift in perspective from Charlie. Resonating with Halberstam's reconceptualizations of failure, ineffectiveness and unproductiveness as opening up a space of queer critique, *Adaptation* presents a vision of selling-out to Hollywood

normativity only to rescind it – forgoing romantic closure for a resignation to solitude. It is key to emphasize that despite Donald's momentary usurpation of narrative control, Charlie's self-indulgent voice-over is ultimately reinstated after Donald's death, reminding us of the insistent auto-fixation that pervades the film.

Through two central elements of its narrativization of self-obsession *Adaptation* both depicts and performs self-indulgence, suggesting connections between masturbation and writing. These two components are the three scenes that show Charlie pleasuring himself sexually and the voice-over narration that characterizes Kaufman's writing of himself into the film.[31]

While Charlie's voice-over pervades much of the film, significantly, many of its occurrences narrate his writing process or perhaps more accurately, his failed attempts to write. Charlie's voice-over, that is, Kaufman's writing of and as himself, reflects what Bersani characterizes as "the destabilization of self initiated by the act of writing" (Thomas, *Masculinity* xiii). As one sees oneself "reproduced/expelled/spelled out on paper" (Thomas, Ibid. xiv), the self-alienation of writing, of being located as both subject and object recalls the simplicity and beauty of Rimbaud's construction – "I is an other."

Upon deciding to write himself into the adaptation of Orlean's

[31] Charlie's voice-over narration is notably absent from the majority of Adaptation's third act where Donald has assumed authorial control. Reinforcing the dichotomization of Charlie and Donald, the latter's scenes are characterized by their action and activity with the former's marked as passive and introspective by the continued use of voice-over.

book, Charlie painfully and exuberantly records a voice-memo (to be transcribed into his treatment, but itself a form of diegetic voice-over) of himself narrating first the preceding scene where he decides he must write about his own writing process, and then the very scene we are watching in which he begins to do so. Here, marked with a fervor and ecstasy approaching *jouissance*, Charlie has become Ouroboros, as he subsequently admits to himself and his brother. Ouroboros appears in *Adaptation* as the emblem of self-shattering, Bersani's concept of a radical (however temporary) losing of oneself. And as Lacan reminds us, the act of writing can bear the same self-alienation and dissolution of the ego that we might call self-shattering: "This subject, who thinks that he can accede to himself by designating himself in the statement is no more than such [a bad] object."[32]

This moment in which Charlie begins to lose himself through writing uncoincidentally results from an act of masturbation that inspires the decision to write himself into the film. Charlie's gushing articulation of the premise of the film we are watching bleeds into the next scene through a reference to the autoerotic moment of its own inspiration as we hear Charlie's voice playing back off the tape recorder saying, "Kaufman, repugnant, ridiculous, jerks off to the book jacket photo of Susan Or--," before he cuts it off as Donald walks in the door. Here, Donald's interruption of Charlie creates a neat echo with the earlier

[32] Lacan qtd. In Thomas, 2008, pg. xiv.

scene in which Donald walks in on Charlie actually masturbating. In this case, *Adaptation* creates a structural linkage between the act of writing and the act of masturbating in which both are solitary, personal, and thoughtful practices.

The scene Charlie is writing here, where he fantasizes about Susan while he masturbates, has already taken place in the film. The Susan sequence is the third scene in the film that shows Charlie masturbating and in a key sense it is the most significant. The scene begins with a shot of a clock changing from 3:32 to 3:33[33], as Charlie lies in bed unable to sleep. He picks up his heavily marked copy of *The Orchid Thief*, reading from it at first, the words spoken in voice-over by Streep, then turning to the jacket picture and carrying on a fantasy conversation with the author who speaks back in a continued voice-over.[34] Charlie puts the book to the side with the picture of Susan facing him as he rolls onto his back.[35] Susan enters the frame from below Charlie's waist, reaching her hands up toward his chest and shoulders. The brief sequence then cuts between Susan in a silk robe kissing Charlie as she straddles him, raising up vertically in pleasure and then to Charlie on his back, grimacing, each of them moaning.

After Charlie lets out a slight exhalation, signifying his small

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[33] The first masturbation scene is actually interrupted by Donald, while here the threes, which recall Donald's screenplay *The Three*, mark his presence.
[34] Here, Jonze brilliantly creates the subtle effect of reaction shots of Susan as Charlie speaks to her picture and we see her facial expression change at each interval as Jonze swaps out mock book jackets with different pictures of Streep.
[35] This is the only masturbation scene in the film in which Charlie uses a visual aid in his fantasizing but significantly, the object of his fixation is a book, a text, and not a purely visual object (and certainly not a cinematic one like a pornography video).

climax, he rolls back to the book for a post-coitus talk with the picture of Susan, the camera reconfirming she is not really with him. Charlie's thoughts of writing follow closely on the heels of his orgasm as he admonishes himself, eliciting Susan's encouragement and advice: "Find that one thing that you care passionately about and then write about that." As Kaufman would have it, the one thing Charlie really cares passionately about is himself.

The following morning finds Charlie in the kitchen with Donald and his girlfriend Caroline, all three of them in states of post-sex bliss with Charlie appearing happier than we have seen him. Neither of Charlie's other scenes of self-pleasure yields much contentment, suggesting that what has made this sex act good for Charlie is that it helped him push through a blockage in his creative process. Charlie initially seems to conceive of Susan and his connection to her as the missing focal point of his writing as suggested when he writes that next morning: "We see Susan Orlean, delicate, haunted by loneliness, fragile, beautiful. She lies awake next to her sleeping, insensitive husband." But quickly we find Charlie shifting the focus inward as he develops the concept for *Adaptation* after literally running away from a meeting with Susan Orlean, saying to himself:

> Who am I kidding; this is not Susan Orlean's story. I have no connection with her. I can't even meet her. I can't meet anyone. I have no understanding of anything outside of my own panic and

self-loathing, and pathetic little existence. It's like the only thing I'm actually qualified to write about is myself and my own self-.

Charlie cuts himself off there to begin the work at hand. Shortly thereafter he reverses positions again when Donald mentions Ouroboros (the 'image system' for *The 3*) providing a metaphor for Charlie's solipsistic decision as he has an epiphany about his epiphany: "I'm insane. I'm Ouroboros." Then, Charlie decides to go to New York and force himself to meet Susan, inciting the extended segment of the film in which Donald drives the narrative to drugs, guns and murder. It is indeed Charlie's narcissistic neurosis, characterized by his masturbation and his writing, which has driven him to insanity. It might also be said that when *Adaptation* is referred to as a 'crazy movie' it is the concept of the film that makes it so, not the madcap but ultimately conventional portion that Donald seems to produce.

Of course by the time Charlie cedes control of the film to Donald in the third act we already know that he has ultimately stuck to the strategy of writing himself into the story and thus we may experience it as the staging of a fantasy. The fantasy resolution of the narrative can be read to dramatize Charlie's accession of a more heteronormitized masculinity. All of a sudden Charlie is determined, active and capable as he sneaks around Susan and John's drug lab and survives the chase and shootout in the swamp. In these scenes Charlie becomes aligned with the investigative and ultimately punitive tropes of normative

Hollywood maleness. Ultimately, however, the purpose of the extended Donald-driven fantasy is for Charlie to overcome Donald and the model of masculinity he embodies so that the film will turn out to be the one we have been watching.

Before Charlie saves Donald, only for him to be shot out of the windshield of their car and killed, the two of them remember a girl from high school who spurned Donald, making fun of his come-ons after he had walked away. Charlie has spent his life perplexed by the apparent happiness Donald showed in the face of such treatment but is able to come to terms with his brother and his outlook when Donald shares his contrived aphorism, "You are what you love, not what loves you." What is so intriguing about Donald's philosophy and its profound impact on Charlie is how deeply and bleakly narcissistic it is (even in comparison to what we have seen Charlie capable of). Charlie's discovery, which allows him to finish his screenplay and allows Donald to be cast off from the film, is ultimately a discovery that his own self-interestedness and self-involvement is not the source of his misery. Donald's happiness, Charlie finds, does not come from any greater connection to the world around him that Charlie is incapable of; his happiness is rooted in the confidence and belief in self-worth that his pithy slogan suggests.

In the film's ending, Charlie has not simply become Donald or adopted his world-view, but his character does reflect a new, more positive and balanced energy. Charlie's shifted outlook does not

crystalize in the hetero-conclusivity of pairing off with Amelia (what we would imagine to be Donald's ending), but instead a reconfiguration of solipsism as a powerfully inspirational and creative force. Charlie's voice(-over), previously silenced by Donald's cinema of action, returns to confirm that he knows how to end the film, as it were with Charlie alone. The shifting scales between self-love and self-loathing that characterize both Charlie's writing and his masturbating have ultimately generated a dialectical movement when we close on Charlie driving off toward the horizon. There is no grand promise or even vexing question that *Adaptation* leaves its viewers with. Kaufman provides no guarantee that Charlie will or has developed into a more properly social subject or that there is a practice of productiveness (or perhaps reproductiveness) awaiting him in the future. The flowers on which the film closes do however suggest to us that there can be profound beauty, pleasure and generativity in an act of self-indulgence.

Chapter 3: Masturbating Men across Contemporary Film and Media

> [T]here are, it seems, queer heterosexuals, and regarding the question of the way queer theory opens the possibility of thinking about such a torquedly rhetorical figure, the point is that queer theory's greatest intervention has been to denaturalize and disrupt the common-sense assumption … that one *must* have a coherent sexual identity of some sort, that eroticism of any and all kinds *must* be routed through *some* regulatory political fiction of personhood that can (and must) be affixed with a clearly legible label.
>
> -Calvin Thomas, "Crossing the Streets, Queering the Sheets"

> Masturbation itself, as we will see, like homosexuality and heterosexuality, is being demonstrated to have a complex history … Because it escapes both the narrative of reproduction and (when practiced solo) even the creation of any interpersonal trace, it seems to have an affinity with amnesia, repetition or the repetition compulsion, and ahistorical or history-rupturing rhetorics of sublimity.
>
> -Eve Sedgwick, *Tendencies*

Portnoy's Complaint and *Adaptation* have proven to be valuable case studies of masturbation and its functions in representing masculinities. Both texts foreground men's autoeroticism in meaningful ways that engage masturbation's existing cultural discourses but also produce new meanings and understandings of its role in male sexualities. As *Portnoy* and *Adaptation* reflect at length on masturbation, their focus brackets key issues attending to the sexual practice while necessarily excluding others. The depth of the two chapter-long case studies of single texts will now be sacrificed in order to broaden the scope of my investigation. Some of the examples in this chapter do not represent or thematize masturbation as explicitly or as consistently in their narratives as we have seen and some do not have anything directly to do with masturbation at all but each one either extends a dialogue on autoeroticism from the previous chapters or opens up a new one worth following. Taken together, these brief readings sketch out a constellation

of masturbation and masculinity in contemporary culture. I conceive of this loosely grouped collection as a starting point for considering masturbation in cinema as a potentially queer practice that can unsettle dominant conceptions of masculinity.

Calvin Thomas and Eve Sedgwick, each of who have suggested ways in which the masturbator can appear under the sign of the queer, return in this chapter [36]. Continuing my exploration of masturbation's resonance with queer theory, Lee Edelman and Leo Bersani's concepts of queer negativity and queer sexualities's disturbances of identity are put into dialogue with the films in short readings to illuminate the queerness of the masturbator in film. Furthermore, the work done with writing and masturbation in the previous chapter is expanded here to account for other narratives and texts where creativity, authorship and autobiography are aligned with masturbation in various ways. Kristeva's concept of abjection also returns in this chapter as we look at the overly embodied men so common to representations of male masturbation. Additionally, Caetlin Benson-Allott's work on "The Queer Fat of Philip Seymour Hoffman," opens the discussion of the queer masturbator onto a broader field of investigation into queering heteromasculine bodies in film.

In this chapter, diverse texts such as George Kuchar's *Weather*

[36] Sedgwick lists the masturbator as one who the name queer can refer to in her introduction to *Tendencies* (8) and Thomas claims its essentialness to his broader project with 'straight queer theory,' in the introduction to *Straight Writ Queer* (3).

Diary videos, *Being John Malkovich* (the first collaboration between Spike Jonze and Charlie Kaufman) and popular comedies like *American Pie* and *There's Something about Mary* will be used to unpack how these men indicate the ways that various filmic engagements with masturbation can produce meaning and raise questions. As we continue, let us consider what answers can be drawn from these figures to questions such as, how is the heteromasculine man queered by solitude? How do we touch our bodies as if they were an other's when we are alone? Can the (anxious) laughter aimed at these men encourage us to reconceive the guilt and shame we associate with autoeroticism? Can modes of film and media production themselves be masturbatory? If more "serious" texts ask audiences to meditate on autoeroticism, what happens when we seriously consider Hollywood's more laughable masturbator? These questions and the theorists who have helped me to raise them motivate my study of artistic and filmic treatments of masturbation and construct the framework through which heteromasculinity can touch upon the queer. To close the chapter, two films from 2013, *Don Jon* and *Her,* are used to conceptualize the persistence of antionanistic discourse in film and to address how media convergence and new technology can reshape and reimagine solitary sex.

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Before turning to a discussion of masturbating men in recent film and media, I'd like to look back to an early cinematic representation of

autoeroticism from Stan Brakhage in 1956, *Flesh of Morning*, and two works by video artist George Kuchar and the performance artist Vito Acconci. The autoerotic men in these works are worth considering for a number of reasons. Other than these three pieces, my investigations have focused on what can generally be considered as popular cultural texts, for reasons I elaborate elsewhere, but Brakhage, Kuchar and Acconci are decidedly not mainstream. The lack of popular and commercial viability of these products and their individual, visionary authorship indicates their status in the realm of fine art and thus imbues them with a sense of honorific seriousness (despite or perhaps because of the laughs they may generate) that we do not bring to popular media. Additionally, they address masturbation autobiographically through experiences of their own physical solitude, a possibility to a greater extent precluded by the industrial model of Hollywood that shapes my other texts. What is most interesting then about these introspective, self-centered texts is that they emerge from high-brow cultural discourses of the avant-garde filmmaking and contemporary art that are themselves often decried as masturbatory and solipsistic by critics and mainstream audiences.

The early Brakhage's film *Flesh of Morning* articulates an internal narrative of alienation through the trope of masturbation. Brakhage's film is what is referred to as a 'psychodrama,' a term coined by P. Adams Sitney in his book *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-*

2000[37]. In Sitney's psychodrama, the filmmaker is the main actor and protagonist, typically appearing in the film but also the embodiment of the point of view shots these films employ to construct a "highly personal psychological drama"[38] (14). Brakhage's film displays both pleasure and melancholy in alienation and solitude as the filmmaker explores the surfaces and textures of his own body and objects in his bedroom through an anamorphically distorted lens. Although Brakhage's genitals are never shown directly, the movement of the handheld camera indicates at times that he is masturbating.

Flesh of Morning reflects on reproduction when, at the end of the film, the subject and filmmaker sees a group of school children out of his window. Parker Tyler writes about this moment in the film in his book *Underground Film*: "The whole content of masturbation, with its anticlimax of futility and infertility, becomes present. The last sequence of shots is the protagonist's sight of small children playing in the suburban street below his balcony; inevitably they symbolize possible souls whose life his ritual habit makes impossible" (38). As Parker points out, *Flesh*'s ending conjures the discourse of the spilled seed that aligns masturbation with queerness. Parker writes of Brakhage in *Flesh*, "the young hero's sexual obsession makes it possible for him to sacrifice

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[37] Brakhage almost immediately moved away from the narrativity of the psychodrama and its use of characters in favor of the highly textured and more abstract films he is best known for.

[38] Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) is emblematic of the psychodrama and is its best known example. *Flesh*'s similar title indicates its engagement with *Meshes* and as *Meshes* has profitably been read as a dramatization of psychosexual interiority, so to could Brakhage's film.

marriage and possible children" (112), reminding us of how he resembles the figure of the nonreproductive queer who stands in opposition to heterofuturity.

The very title of Vito Acconci's 1972 performance work *Seedbed* foregrounds the concept of fertility, like Brakhage's *Flesh*. *Seedbed* is an exploration of the mediations between artist and audience, the tensions of which are prodded continually throughout Acconci's performance work. In the piece, Acconci concealed himself under a raised area of flooring in New York's Sonnabend Gallery for three weeks while he purportedly masturbated as he fantasized about the gallery visitors walking overhead. Like *Flesh of Morning*, *Seedbed* presents the masturbating artist to the audience, but for Acconci, this figure is paradoxically out of sight. Acconci stages masturbation in *Seedbed* as hidden but not private, simultaneously disembodying the artist, its author, and predicating the performance on the presence of that body (or at least the audience's belief in its presence).

Seedbed presents masturbation through a series of paradoxes, each of which raises a set of questions about how we think of autoeroticism. During the performance, the masturbator is at once completely solitary in a small space where no one can see him. On the other hand, he is performing a sexual act in a space that is open to the public and basing his autoerotic fantasies on sensing and imagining the presence of that public. By using speakers to amplify his crooning to the

unseen audience, Acconci presents male masturbatory fantasy as a monologue. Yet *Seedbed* is not quite a one way conversation as most of Acconci's utterances were responses to the perceived and imagined activity of his overhead visitors. Through such tactics, Acconci's piece unsettles particularly the solitary and anti-social qualities of autoeroticism. By predicating autoerotic fantasy on the presence or at least existence of others and staging masturbation in the social environment of the gallery, Acconci creates a twisted micro-community of shared and hidden fantasy.

Masturbation makes interesting appearances in the video work of contemporary artist George Kuchar as well. A notable trace of autoeroticism shows up in Kuchar's mournful *Season of Sorrow*, from 1996. In the fifteen minute digital video chronicling a tearful stay in a motel after Kuchar's beloved cat Blackie passes away, a very brief shot of the artist's crotch with what appears to be an ejaculate stain on his shorts passes in front of the camera. *Season of Sorrow* is a part of Kuchar's *Weather Diary* videos, chronicling the artist's annual pilgrimages from San Francisco to El Reno, Oklahoma to observe tornadoes. The brief shot of Kuchar's (freshly) stained shorts in the video is indicative of the artist's tendency to include moments of sexual or gastric functions in his diaries. Kuchar's diaries often feature short intercut scenes or shots where he showers, eats inscrutable foods, discusses flatulence, peers into a toilet or discusses bowel movements

with his dog, Bocko.

Kuchar's bodily interventions resonate with Judith Butler's reading of Kristeva's concept of abjection. For Butler, "abjection designates a degraded or cast out status within the terms of sociality" (243) which may also prove to be an apt description of Kuchar himself, who produces his video diaries in seclusion from social interaction. Butler goes on to explain that "abjection (in latin, *ab-jicere*) literally means to cast off, away or out and, hence, presupposes and produces a domain of agency from which it is differentiated" (Ibid.). Kuchar's abject, autobiographical stains incorporate the everyday grotesqueries of being a body that are never shown in popular film. *Season of Sorrow* is characteristic of this tendency in Kuchar as his stain both marks his solitude and withdrawal from social life but also marks his physical presence as the video's author, constituting him as such.

Eve Sedgwick describes the "would-be-damning epithet" of 'mental masturbation' as a "censorious metaphor" for "any criticism one doesn't like, or doesn't understand" ("Jane" 134). While Sedgwick is thinking specifically of criticism here, both contemporary art and experimental film and video are areas that often elicit the label 'masturbatory' or even specifically 'mental masturbation.' In the three works by Brakhage, Acconci and Kuchar, each confronts the discourse of the self-involved artist by literalizing the anxiously condemnatory metaphor of masturbation frequently directed at them. In the three cases, the

encounter with masturbation for the audience is likely an unsettling one. Kuchar includes abject and typically private moments in his video diaries that are precisely the elements of the experience of being a human body that are evacuated from the supposedly intimacy of classical Hollywood cinema. Acconci makes the audience both the subject and object of a mutually voyeuristic fantasy scenario. Brakhage's audience is pulled into complicity as well through the use of first-person point of view. By using self-representation to align creative practice with autoeroticism, these three artists address solipsism head on and use masturbation to produce alternative visions of masculinity than we find in traditional film and literature.

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As I note earlier, *Portnoy's Complaint* broke ground for the explicitness of how masturbation could be deployed in comedy, establishing conventions of autoerotic humor that would be picked up in popular film comedies in the decades to follow. *American Pie* (1999) and *There's Something about Mary* (1998) both borrow masturbation scenes directly from *Portnoy's Complaint*. Two scenes, perhaps those each movie is best known for, both draw from comedic but meaningful masturbation scenes described by Portnoy from his adolescence. *There's Something about Mary*, directed by the brothers Robert and Peter Farrelly, borrows from Roth in a scene where the obsessed protagonist, Ted (Ben Stiller), cannot find the semen excreted in a pre-date masturbation session. As it

turns out, Ted's ejaculate affixed itself conspicuously to his ear, where it remains until his date Mary (Cameron Diaz) mistakes it for a glob of hair gel which she promptly wipes from Teds ear and applies to her hairdo. Mary's inadvertent repurposing of Ted's 'baby-batter' plays on the anxiety of being "caught" masturbating, or in this case having masturbated, by allowing Ted to (narrowly) escape embarrassment and instead making the one who might have exposed him look like the fool as she flicks the 'gel' into an appropriately stiff cowlick.

Like Ted, Portnoy struggles to control and find the refuse of his better-kept-private habit as he worries, "The sticky evidence is everywhere! Is it … in my *hair*? My *ear*?" (20). Portnoy connects semen to hair product, like Mary does, when he confesses: "[N]ot infrequently, in my blindness and ecstasy, I got it all in the pompadour, like a blast of Wildroot Cream Oil" (18). *Mary* engages with the anxiety and shame of the masturbator that is so prevalent for Portnoy by making ejaculate into that 'sticky evidence,' that is funny precisely because it threatens to demolish the film's hetero-romance. Interestingly, *Mary*'s masturbation dramedy functions as a cautionary counterpoint to Ted's friend Dom's earlier advice to masturbate before an important date so as to alleviate the stress and pressure of the sex drive in order to pursue the greater goal of the heterosexual relationship. Whether it does so simply for laughs or not, *Mary* dramatizes the tension that autoeroticism holds in relation to heterosexual culture, emblematized by the 'big date.' That is,

masturbation both produces the conditions under which the de-stressed man can properly advance his romantic relationship with the woman, but it also always risks undoing that very enterprise.

American Pie, directed by Paul Weitz, similarly thematizes masturbation as a risky but necessary practice on the way to the ultimate goal of forming a heterosexual couple. *American Pie* connects masturbation to food, as Roth does in his novel, by showing the propensity of the adolescent mind to turn a food item into an autoerotic prop. In the film, Jim (Jason Biggs) uses the eponymous pie, "*Mom*'s apple pie" specifically, to simulate sex after hearing the simile for sex, "It's like warm apple pie," from his less-virginal friend Kevin. Portnoy exhibits a similar tendency to conflate food and sex through a number of antics in Roth's book. Portnoy explains how he employs various food items such as "the empty milk bottle that I kept hidden in our storage bin in the basement" into his autoerotic practices (19). Portnoy goes on to recount the experience of "squirting into the empty wrapper from a Mounds bar" (18), and the cored apple whose "cool and mealy hole" he would pretend "was actually between the legs of that mythical being who always called me Big Boy" (Ibid.).

While these practices share the experimentation of Jim's pie scene in their domestic and maternal connotations, Portnoy's most remembered food-play involves a dish quite different than the all-American apple pie. Surely there are no apple pies in the Portnoy

household, but the industrious Alex does make use of a "maddened piece of liver," of which he says, "in my own insanity, I had bought one afternoon at a butcher shop and, believe it or not, violated behind a billboard" (19). *American Pie* reverses the order of sex prop to food item of Portnoy (Alex's mother later prepares the liver for family dinner), when he ruins the iconic pie before anyone else has a chance to try it. For Portnoy, who prefers the burgers and fries forbidden by his mother to the dish of liver (for eating, that is), his autoerotic activities with food point up the disconnect in his household. Jim, on the other hand, has less to complain about at home, raising the stakes of the shamefulness of befouling the pie his mother has graciously baked. The substitution of American for apple in the pie of the film's title suggests a shared national cultural for Jim as opposed to the alienation Portnoy experiences. In *American Pie*, it is not the experimentation of masturbation that helps Jim mature sexually, but the humiliating experience of being caught doing so, constructing autoeroticism as an element in the process of regulating desire and directing it towards a proper sexual object. By naming the film from this scene and making it "American," *Pie* normalizes the humiliation Jim experiences as a necessary step in a young man's sexual maturation, suggesting it is as natural as apple pie.

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One of the central stakes of my project is to find contact points between queer theories and straight men, an objective shared by Calvin

Thomas, who, as evinced by his frequent quoting herein, is a key figure in this emerging sub-field of straight queer theory. The masturbator has proven to be a profitable figure to consider along such lines, but we might diverge from the specificity of autoeroticism, briefly, in order to read, along with Caetlin Benson-Allott, how Philip Seymour Hoffman crafted a body of acting work that bears importantly on that conversation.

The late Philip Seymour Hoffman may provide a useful counterpoint to the beta-males we have considered from *American Pie* and *There's Something about Mary*. Hoffman has been an exemplary figure of queer masculinity in film over the last twenty years. From portrayals of gay characters in *Flawless* (1999), *Boogie Nights* (1997), *Capote* (2005) and *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead* (2007), to bad daddies and perverse fathers in *The Master* (2012) and (perhaps?) *Doubt* (2008), and a deviant masturbator in *Happiness* (1998) and the decaying visionary cuckold of *Synecdoche, New York* (2010), Hoffman consistently, even meticulously probed the margins and borderlines of normative masculinity throughout his acting career. When Hoffman began appearing in leading roles following the success of *Capote* in 2005, he brought the particular mode of fleshiness and gestural physicality he had developed as a supporting or character actor in the 1990s and early 2000s into the register of Hollywood stardom.

As Benson-Allott productively notes, Hoffman's performances

"demonstrate that Hollywood's compulsory sex-gender system operates at the material level of the actor's body and that It can be contested with that body" (201). As Benson-Allott claims, little "attention has been paid to how fat men look in movies or how their bodies are cast in relation to normative masculinity" (202). "The Queer Fat of Philip Seymour Hoffman" endeavors to redirect focus onto one particular actor's *ouvre* in order to chart how representations of men in film can queer masculinity at the level of the physical body. Quoting from Kaja Silverman's seminal study, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, Benson-Allott argues that "[Hoffman's] body should therefore remind the viewer to regard "masculinity as a masquerade" … because it implies that the body's representational contract is a social construction, just like any other element of gender" (212). Benson-Allott's valuable study of Hoffman, which I cannot rehash in its entirety here, presents a model for investigating ways that "the male body can be organized around other symbolic structures besides the phallus" and how performances such as Hoffman's can "offer a new vision of male embodiment outside compulsory heterosexuality [through] an alternative use of the flesh we might even consider queer" (216).

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Before moving on to the final and two most recent films of my study, I would now like to draw our attention to a particular scene from another film written by Charlie Kaufman, and directed by Spike Jonze,

Being John Malkovich. Kaufman and Jonze's collaborations often suggest ways of thinking about and relating to our bodies that fall outside of normative sex-gender paradigms. While this scene does not depict a masturbating man, or really, any masturbation at all, it is a scene about touching oneself. The scene I am referring to takes place when Lotte (Cameron Diaz) enters, so to speak, John Malkovich in order to hook up with Maxine (Katherine Keener), who will only have sex with her when she is in the body of a man. When Lotte enters Malkovich through the portal that her husband Craig (John Cusack) has discovered in his office, the first thing she sees (and feels) is Malkovich's soapy body in the shower. As Malkovich lathers himself, Lotte moans with excitement as she experiences the pleasure of touching her own body, but sensing it as the body of an other. Lotte's moment in the shower is akin to adolescent attempts to simulate the experience of the touch of an other by either sitting on one's hand to numb its sensitivity before touching oneself, or by using one's off hand to masturbate to achieve a similar effect. All of these practices relate to the very theme *Malkovich* explores – the sensation of being outside of one's self. This brief scene in Jonze and Kaufman's film articulates the pleasure we draw from such experiences and reminds us of how this sensation is inherent to masturbation as its practice renders the practitioner both subject and object of his or her own fantasy.

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Two popular Hollywood films of 2013 drew sharp focus on the

theme of solitary sex. *Don Jon* and *Her* written and directed respectively by Joseph Gordon-Levitt and Spike Jonze, explore autoeroticism's bond with media in different, but mutually illuminating ways. Both films feature leading men who are too fixated on the fantasy figures of their personal media devices. *Don Jon* and *Her* also both cast Scarlett Johansson opposite the self-involved Jon, played by Gordon-Levitt, and Joaquin Phoenix's (agoraphobically) introspective Theodore in *Her*. *Don Jon* is about a man's relationship with masturbation over the course of his romance with Johansson's character, Barbara Sugarman, until he meets Esther (Julianne Moore) who ultimately "cures" him of the habit. *Her* is not really about masturbation specifically; Jonze's film deals with solitary sexuality and the possibility of a near-future society in which people lead physically solitary sexual lives by committing to relationships with their computer operating systems.

Early on in *Don Jon*, the eponymous protagonist explains, "There are only a few things in life I care about: my body, my pad, my car, my family, my church, my boys, my girls and my porn." Each item in the list, spoken as a voice-over, accompanies a mini-montage visually elaborating these relationships that structure Jon's life. Each of these elements of Jon's life serve to formally structure the film as well. Throughout the film, the same shots of Jon walking in the hallway of his gym or climbing the steps to church on Sunday, driving his car and of course, watching pornography, are regularly repeated verbatim. The formal composition of

the film's structure indicates the regimentary role the eight discourses serve to provide meaning to Jon's life. Jon's obsession with masturbating to pornography is figured as the central force within this structure through its frequent recurrence and influence on the other narratives of family life, work-out routine, romance, etc. Gordon-Levitt meticulously structures the film to develop the hierarchy within these identificatory regimes of Jon's life, subordinating each of them to his *raison d'être* of autoeroticism.

Accounting for some, though not all of Jon's stated points of reference in life, we might consider that Jon's visits to church center on his confessions, which center largely on Jon's sex life, which itself revolves around masturbation, for which Jon is assigned 'Hail-Marys' and 'Our fathers' which he dutifully recites while he lifts weights at the gym, which he does in order to have a desirable body for the girls he will meet when he's out with his boys at the club, who will offer him frequent and promiscuous sex that he feels still only pales in comparison to masturbating about which Jon claims, "I just fucking lose myself." Jon's claim of autoeroticism echoes the self-divestiture noted above in *Being John Malkovich* and dramatized through Charlie's moments of delirium (or perhaps *jouissance*) in *Adaptation.* Although *Don Jon* ultimately leaves masturbation behind as Jon's ability to lose himself through the practice is fairly conventionally transposed onto the proper hetero-sex act, the film still suggests that autoeroticism carries the (threatening) capacity to

produce the sensations we seek from mutual sex acts.

Returning finally to Spike Jonze, we can consider how the director's most recent film constructs a world in the near future where physically solitary sexual practices (though still founded around monogamy with a computerized partner) have emerged as alternatives to sexual partnerships. *Her* tells the story of Theodore Twombly, played by Joaquin Phoenix, and the development and dissolution of his relationship with the computer operating system, Samantha (Scarlett Johansson). While *Her* ultimately reinstates the physically embodied heterosexual couple as the happy ending to Theo's tale, it is less dismissive of the very real pleasure and emotion its protagonist has derived from his physically solitary sex life than is Gordon-Levitt's film. In a scene where Theo ponders the value and suitability to societal expectation of his relationship with Samantha, his friend Amy (Amy Adams) offers a justification of such behavior: "We're only here briefly, and so while I'm here I want to allow myself to feel … joy. So fuck it!" Although the pun is not obvious in the context of the scene, the 'it' to be fucked could stand for the cyborg Samantha, or perhaps the physical object he strokes when he has what can only be described in contemporary parlance as phone-sex with her/it. Semantically we have arrived back at the question of who is being fucked and who is doing the fucking when we are fucking by ourselves, so to speak.

Jonze uses humor in *Her* to allow elements of falling in love with

what is ostensibly a smart phone to appear just as ridiculous as such a premise might seem to a contemporary audiences. *Her*'s sporadic humor also gives greater weight to more sentimentally affecting scenes that feel serious enough to hush a crowd. Two scenes in which Theo has phone-sex exemplify how Jonze uses this interplay to explore the strangeness and the potential reward of a solitary sexual practice. The first scene which is played for laughs shows Theo in bed on a call service line with a female voice[39] that instructs him to strangle her with a dead cat, just as Theo appears to be starting to enjoy himself. Later, Theo presumably touches himself (though the screen has faded to black) during a similarly framed phone-sex episode as he describes a fantasy of having sex with an embodied version of Samantha. The seductive voice of Samantha responds to Theo's embodiment fantasy in kind as the scene assumes all the sexual and emotional tension of a visualized romantic sex scene in direct contrast to the earlier comedic one. The parallel structures of these two scenes allow Jonze to suggest both the hilarity and the meaningfulness of the idea that one might choose a solitary sex life.

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The examples explored here have deliberately not formed a narrative of the role of masturbating men in contemporary film. Each example I consider suggests a possible avenue of exploration for both masculinity studies and film and media studies. *Adaptation* and *Portnoy's*

[39] The film does not make clear whether or not the voice Theo speaks to in this scene is attached to a person.

Complaint are due the sustained analysis I have provided, but that does not mean *Don Jon* or *Seedbed* or *Being John Malkovich* could not yield productive returns on chapter or article length studies under the same frameworks. Hopefully the short interventions into the texts in this chapter are rewarding in their own right and serve as a testament to the need for further scholarship on the role of masturbation in constructions of masculinities.

Conclusion:

A person who is drawn, however tremblingly, to what disturbs identity may ironically be identified or even self-identify as one of what Sedgwick calls those "other people who vibrate to the chord of queer without having much same-sex eroticism."
-Calvin Thomas, "Crossing the Streets, Queering the Sheets"

The queer must insist on disturbing, on queering, social organization, … on disturbing, therefore, and on queering *ourselves* and our investment in such organization. For queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one.
-Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*

Masturbation could well be the most common sexual activity, though it would be difficult to prove, and yet it receives less scholarly attention than even some of the most obscure sexual practices a reader could imagine. A meticulous survey of sex acts in film might return similar results, and if we were to compare masturbation scenes to hetero-sex scenes, coitus could outnumber autoeroticism one hundred to one. These hypothetical statistics would not surprise us, no doubt. If we have learned anything from Freud, it is that the reproductive union of the heterosexual couple is the most culturally privileged sexual practice and any other form might only be permissible as a step along the way to that end-goal. Since the archive of masturbation in cinema is relatively slim, it reflects a certain consolidation of discourse. Although cinematic autoeroticism often draws from of familiar tropes such as shame, abjection, failure and anti-sociality, even popular films that largely speak from a dominant cultural position can be made, as this study has shown, to present new understandings and new modes of engagement with the figure of the masturbator. The examples I have drawn from cultural

discourses outside of the mainstream introduce the ways that alternative artistic models address similar issues, yet popular representations of masturbation are particularly significant to the lines of inquiry my work opens up.

This study makes a case for how autoeroticism can be rethought as a productive and generative force in how we understand masculinities and as it resonates with the struggles and pleasures of being a writer or creative practitioner. The cases studies and analyses show that representations of masturbators are rich sites from which heteromasculinity can be recuperated for queer readings that may unlock subversive and nonnormative potentials in figures of abjection, failure, and childishness. These readings reflect how representations of masturbating men condition and construct men's relationships to their own bodies, their sexual practices and indentifications through sexuality and gender.

The first chapter of this study investigated *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), considering how Philip Roth constructs Alexander Portnoy as a figure of contestation within cultural narratives of sexual liberation and psychoanalysis, whose autoerotic childishness can be read as a form of resistance to normative heteromasculinity. The second chapter on *Adaptation* (2002) examined how Charlie Kaufman's writing practice and autoeroticism are linked in the film, primarily via solitude and anti-sociality, but also, importantly through imaginativity, creativity and

fantasy. In this second chapter I argued that the film productively narrativizes masturbation's generative capacity and the ways in which it is imbricated in identity, sociality and masculinity. The third chapter of the thesis broadens the scope of my investigation to consider a variety representational engagements from contemporary film and other media with masturbating men and solitary sex in order to consider how these texts shape cultural understandings of masculinity and autoeroticism and how apparently heteronormative narratives can be reread to produce masturbators as subversive figures.

Given Hollywood cinema's ability to reach massive audiences and its commercial industrial model, it holds a stronger position in influencing popular discourse and shaping cultural understandings of gender and sexuality than do the smaller, more subversive works by Brakhage, Kuchar and Acconci in the third chapter. As such, the popular films we have explored are well situated for engaging cultural narratives about masturbation and the role it plays in constructing particular ideas about gender. In the various ways we have seen cinematic representations of male masturbation to consistently configure the autoerotic man as grotesque, pitiable, and laughable, this figure presents moments of weakness and fear that indicate fault lines of anxiety for masculinity that merit further investigation.

As creativity, generativity and inspiration have emerged in counter-discourses to dominant antionanistic narratives, the figure of the

masturbating writer especially draws out productive ways of rethinking autoeroticism. *Adaptation* narrativizes such a perspective as Charlie Kaufman carves out spaces for self-indulgence, introspection and self-pleasure as modes of resistance to heteronormativity. In its status as both a self-reflexive piece of meta-authorship and its exploration of the sexual life of a man who does not embody an ideal form of masculinity, *Adaptation* addresses the epithetical status of mental masturbation and the abject figure of the masturbator. The Kaufman written film pulls out precisely the threads of subordinated masculine identity that can cause otherwise hetero characters and texts to resonate queerly. While my engagement with it is brief, I see Caetlin Benson-Allott's work with Philip Seymour Hoffman to explore similar issues in the performances of the late actor. Benson-Allott's project latches onto a figure of heteromasculinity playing at its margins, who, like the masturbator, can be found to embody the ways that straight culture unsettles itself.

Straight queer theory is a practice by which figures like Hoffman, Charlie and Portnoy can be rethought for their hetero-inadequacies and reclaimed for modes of reading that unpack the anxiety of normative masculinity. The queer analyses of thinkers like Judith Halberstam, Lee Edelman and Calvin Thomas introduce the methodological tools that have proved to be essential to my readings and should be returned to with frequency in masculinity studies.

As much as contemporary critics inform my approach to cinematic

masturbation, historical thinkers such as Foucault and Freud cannot be left out. By reading *Portnoy's Complaint* through Freud's framework of sexual development and Foucault's conceptualization of biopower, we have seen how each can shed a great deal of light, still, on modes of sexual practice and the ways in which they relate individuals to social discourses of power. Particularly in the case of Freud, visionary writers like Halberstam can introduce new models of rethinking what have so often been deployed as regressive frameworks for sexuality and sexual practices.

Although the textual examples considered in my third chapter are not examined to the full extent to which they might be rewarding, I imagine each one as a point of contact between film studies and masculinity studies that can and should warrant the rigor with which I address *Portnoy* and *Adaptation*. Many questions about how we conceive of masturbation's relationship to creative practices and to gender have subtended my study, as have questions of the role that cinema plays in shaping and suggesting answers to these questions. While I believe the probing of these chapters has answered some of my questions, I envision the third chapter to mark a series of new starting points. Along such lines I invite the reader to conceive of this project not as a prescription for what representations of masturbation should do, nor as a historical summary of the ones we have, but as a guide to new possibilities of conceiving of these figures and as an invitation to further scholarship.

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