

**Of Monsters, Masturbators and Markets:
Autoerotic Desire, Sexual Exchange and the Cinematic Serial Killer¹**

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[...] masturbation and more importantly the new commodities (such as sex toys, home consumed pornography and erotica via video, DVD and now the internet, cable and satellite television, phone sex etc.) associated with masturbatory pleasure would seem to clearly demonstrate the final penetration of commodificatory dynamics into the realm of social and sexual relations. First, we no longer simply partake of masturbatory pleasure directly, we manufacture distribute, exchange and consume masturbatory pleasure, such that it is mediated through market forms. Furthermore such industries and consumer goods would support the idea of a certain degree of reversibility with regard to the vector of determination between the sexual and the economic. That is, while these commodities helped facilitate masturbation their economic success and expansion were equally driven by masturbatory desires, a model that suggests the inherently masturbatory pleasure of commodity consumption more generally. With the masturbatory commodity, consumer goods seem to have reached an apotheosis, an almost pure form. However, even if we would do well to not collapse or homogenise consumption and sexual pleasures quite so fully or so easily, such an analysis does at least suggest that in both cases (the general consumer commodity and the sexual commodity) the political locus seems to have shifted from productive classes to single and autonomous consuming subjects. We now live in a social formation where self-pleasure has become the paramount driver of economic activity so it becomes untenable for this economic logic *not* to effect our understanding of sexual logic. More specifically masturbatory satisfaction mimics commodity satisfaction in that it is both fully heterogeneous, it is based entirely on a conception of the monadic 'free' individual, and fully homogeneous at the same time in that all these individuals consume the same thing, despite the individual packaging. Indeed if not entirely outside of the notion of sexual difference, masturbation does seem in excess of it as both genders and all sexualities can partake of it.

As with capitalism generally however, the effect of such sexual abstraction and sexual reification are both ambiguous and paradoxical as they are lived 'as catastrophe and progress altogether'.² In the emergence of a sexually autonomous subject in whom

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² Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. (London: Verso, 1991), p. 47

sexual desire can finally break free of the tethers of sexual function, it suggests a progress. This is where the sense that masturbation is in excess of sexual difference should not be read as a simple claim for masturbatory androgyny. For example, the role of masturbation in the development of second wave feminism, in particular its vital role in the development of the bodysex workshops of Betty Dodson in the early 1970s cannot be underestimated. Dodson developed a new discourse on masturbation that came to define female masturbation as a right and a form of self-love rather than self-abuse. In 1974, the woman's magazine *Ms.* ran an article that widely publicised Dodson's views and which later became the groundbreaking book, *Liberating Masturbation: A Meditation on Selflove*. This promotion of a women's right to self-induced orgasm, their autonomous control over their own bodies, undoubtedly rendered masturbation a 'political' act. Yet at the same time and again following Jameson postmodernism thesis, in the potential alienation of the subject not merely from a specific other, but *any* other, the promotion of masturbation could equally suggest a catastrophic waning of affect. Literally nothing, beyond ourselves, can touch us. From this perspective the sexual consumption of the self suggests the deepening reification of the sexual body, an objectification of sex, a process indexed through the growing profits of the atomising entertainment industry generally and the pornography sector in particular. Even from a more neutral standpoint however, somewhere between either of these utopian or dystopian readings, the promotion of masturbation as a model of *both* commodity consumption and sexual autonomy certainly suggests at least the blurring of the sexual the economic and the cultural. The ethical and social use-value of sexuality is either being replaced by an aestheticised and privatised exchange-value, or the boundary between them has become so fluid as to render their separate existences problematic.

In demonstrating and demanding a subjective and individual rather than collective or even hierarchical terminal point of ownership and consumption the notion of masturbation both requires and supports a capitalist notion of the subject as a free agent capable of such individual 'having'. It is no longer a commonwealth but individual wealth that indexes notions of value. Yet in being an activity outside or beyond a system of exchange, masturbation is equally anathema to such a model, as it reveals the self-subverting and inherent negativity of the logic of market freedom. It demonstrate the ideological limit of the free individual of capitalism as the one freedom capitalism cannot offer such an individual is of course freedom from the market, the right to withdraw or opt out of market relations. [...] Masturbation stands as a concrete materialisation or demonstration of the moment when freedom conceived as a property of monadic individuals becomes isolation and the logic of consumption disintegrates due to the absence of value outside social systems of accumulation and exchange. It reveals that for all the ideological attention paid to the individual under the capitalist mode of production, it is only an individual suspended within the matrix of the market (rather than over the body of a victim) that can enjoy

such rights and pleasures. Furthermore, as is the case of all commercial markets, the inherent abundance or availability of masturbatory pleasure causes its own inversion into worthlessness. That which cannot be exchanged or circulated cannot attract value and so despite the promotion of individual desire encouraged by capitalism, the value that underpins that system only occurs at this social level.

In conclusion, the addition of the logic and ideology of the 'free' market from the beginning of the eighteenth century onwards to existing religious and medical attitudes to masturbation created a new synthesis, or mode of address towards the practice that revealed a fundamental ideological aporia within the ontology demanded by market logic. As a moment of sheer consumption masturbation seems to generate exactly the type of monadic consuming subject required by capitalism, but in its inversion of the protestant work ethic's injunction to accumulate masturbation equally negates the ideological desirability of its own logic. This ambivalence at the abstract or theoretical level is also visible at the concrete level of capitalist practice. That is, whilst on the one hand many direct representations of masturbation, particularly on film continue to be negative, on the other, a less direct but positive appeal to masturbatory pleasure pervades consumer culture. Indeed, the promotion of consumption at an individual level, that is representation that offer positive portrayals of 'solitary' pleasures, are commonplace. Furthermore, in the rise of branded goods, the role of fetishised modes or recognition within commodity culture is becoming more and more obvious. In this respect whilst rejecting any notion that there has been an 'arrival' of masturbation in mainstream culture, a boundary that marks a postmodern scission or definitive new historic period, it does suggest that the current emphasis on consumption reveals a facet of capitalism that is particularly sensitive to both the pleasures and the costs of a masturbatory subjectivity.