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## **Faking Like a Woman? Towards an interpretative theorization of sexual pleasure.**

In this paper we discuss the possibilities for developing a feminist approach to gendered and sexual embodiment drawing on a tradition of theorizing bypassed by most previous feminist approaches: interactionist sociology (a perspective with roots in early pragmatist philosophy). While this tradition has made an impact on studies of sexuality through the work of Gagnon and Simon (1974; 2004) and is given partial recognition in some overviews of the sociology of the body (Shilling 2003; Synott 1993, Crossley 2001), feminist theorists of the body have largely ignored it. This is, perhaps, not surprising since, as has recently been noted, interactionism has been subject to a collective theoretical amnesia (Atkinson and Housley 2003, Maines 2001)<sup>1</sup>. In re-evaluating this perspective we will argue that it offers a corrective to the rather abstract, asocial theorizations of the body deriving from corporeal feminisms, enabling us to ‘embody gender without overwhelming the “sociality” of gender by “corporeality”’ (Witz 2000:7). It also provides an alternative to the over reliance on the unconscious in feminist psychoanalytic approaches. Utilizing interactionism facilitates a conceptualization of sexual pleasure as socially mediated, and embodied sexual selves as reflexively constructed and reconstructed. This is not to suggest that interactionism offers a complete sociology of the body, or even of the sexual body, but it can alert us to aspects of embodiment neglected by other approaches. This paper, then, is intended as an exploration of the contribution that a broadly interactionist analysis can make to a fully social understanding of embodiment through the example of embodied sexual pleasure.

Sexual encounters arguably engender a greater sense of embodied selfhood than many other forms of social interaction, but it must be remembered that they *are* social. For it is here, especially when discussing desire and pleasure, that many theorists too easily fall back on understandings of the libidinal as fundamentally a property of the psyche, thus uprooting sexuality from social context. In contrast we set out to analyse embodied selves in socially located interaction. In focusing on sexual pleasure we consider how desire and pleasure may be reflexively understood in the context of everyday/everynight<sup>2</sup> sexual practices. Taking orgasm as a paradigmatic case, we will argue that even this most individual, ‘private’, ‘physical’ experience is always also social. Since our concern is with the experiential gendering of orgasm, and since this is particularly evident in heterosexual practice, this will be the focus of this paper. Within

heterosexual relations, women's orgasm has conventionally been seen as more problematic, elusive and mysterious than that of men. Building on an earlier analysis (Jackson and Scott 2001) we will explore the relationship between such representations and the lived experience of orgasm, interrogating the ways in which 'faked' and 'authentic' orgasms are socially constructed within interactional settings.

Sexual bodies are, of course, also gendered bodies: sexual desires and identities are conventionally ordered around gender, which is particularly evident in relation to heterosexual encounters. Heterosexual sex, indeed the very definition of the 'sex act', is premised on socially constituted bodily difference, and heterosexual desire and pleasure are generally both represented and experientially understood in terms of gender polarity. Before going any further, therefore, we need to define more carefully the way in which the terms gender and sexuality are being used here. We will then move on to raise some general points about the conceptualization of gendered and sexual embodiment and what we take to be a distinctively sociological approach to 'pleasures of the flesh', before concentrating more specifically on orgasm.

## **Gender, Sexuality and Sociality**

Much recent social theory, influenced by poststructuralism, treats gender and sexuality as constituted through language, discourse.<sup>3</sup> In many respects poststructuralism is congruent with an interactionist position as both perspectives conceptualise meaning as fluid, flexible and multivalent and neither posit gender and sexuality as objects existing prior to the meanings invested in them. The interactionist tradition, along with other interpretive sociologies, however, attends to aspects of meaning-making not generally emphasised by post structuralists: in particular those meanings intersubjectively produced by active agents in the course of everyday social practices (see Gagnon 2004: 276). The effects of language and discourse are therefore seen as mediated through the local production of meaning and 'people's intentions to mean' (Smith 1999:98-99). What we are particularly concerned with here is the meaningful social reality of embodied sexual encounters constituted *not only* through discourse but *also* through the meaning-making emergent from, and negotiated within, situated everyday interaction. It is the focus on the social as founded upon interaction and intersubjectivity that gives interactionism its purchase on embodied sexuality. While there is more to the social than interaction (see Jackson 2006), it is impossible to envision the social without the everyday interaction through which it is lived.

Following Gagnon and Simon (1974) we are treating gender and sexuality as analytically distinct although empirically interrelated (see also Jackson 1999; Jackson and Scott 2001a). In our analysis gender refers to the social division and distinction between women and men whereas sexuality denotes what is socially defined as of erotic significance. In maintaining the distinction between gender and sexuality we view so-called ‘sex differences’ as already gendered and therefore properly ‘gender’ – reserving the terms sex and sexuality for the erotic. The recognition of bodily differences between women and men (on which normative heterosexuality depends) is always a social act (Kessler and McKenna 1978). It is social gender that enables us to ‘see’ biological sex as significant in that gender division ‘transforms an anatomical difference (which is itself devoid of significance) into a relevant distinction for social practice’ (Delphy 1984: 144) – including, of course, sexual practice. However in some feminist theorizing of the body the contestation of the sex-gender distinction is resolved through a different move, by abandoning gender and returning to sex. The most influential variant of this within studies of sexuality is Foucault’s sex/sexuality formulation whereby the apparatus of sexuality produces sex by ordering ‘the body, the sexual organs, pleasures, kinships relations, interpersonal relations’ (1980:210).

Taking her cue from Foucault Elizabeth Grosz defines ‘sex’ as referring ‘to the domain of sexual difference, to questions of the *morphologies of bodies*’ (her emphasis) as distinct from sexuality – erotic desires, pleasures and practices. She maintains that the term ‘gender’ is redundant because everything it designates is ‘covered by the integration of and sometimes the discord between sexuality and sex’ (1995a:213). Grosz’s line of argument risks conflating social differences between women and men with bodily difference. This, as Anne Witz (2000:8) points out, bequeaths us an impoverished concept of gender from which the social disappears<sup>4</sup>. A more sociologically informed analysis, as Witz goes on to elaborate, allows us to understand gender not as ‘variations on the theme of “sex” but as a complex set of social relations which *defy* reduction to “sex”, whether this is defined in naturalistic or social constructionist terms’ (2000:9).<sup>5</sup> We feel it is important to retain a term capable of designating more than bodily sex differences and which is able to encompass the wider socially ordered character of male-female relations such as gendered divisions of labour. Such aspects of gender are not particularly relevant to the intellectual project of theorists such as Grosz and may, indeed, seem distant from bodies and sexuality. We, however, would wish to emphasise that all interaction is embodied *and* gendered and that sexual relations always occur within a nexus of wider social relations. This is

particularly important in understanding the asymmetries and inequalities entailed in heterosexual sexual relations (see Jackson 2006; Jackson and Scott; 2004).

Distinguishing between gender as social division and sexuality as the social definition, construction and ordering of the erotic avoids conceptual slippage between 'sex' as differences between men and women and 'sex' as an erotic activity (c.f. Sedgwick 1991 28-29). 'Sexuality' then defines a sphere of social life, 'sex' an embodied activity within that sphere and 'sexual' qualifies activities, practices, emotions, sensations and representations as belonging to or of relevance to that sphere. It can then be recognized that all that goes on within the sexual sphere is gendered, but that this occurs through complex processes which require investigation rather than being taken as pre-given. We will now go on to consider how such an investigation might be pursued in relation to the ways in which heterosexual sexuality maps onto and is played out through gendered bodies.

### **Sexual embodiment as social embodiment**

If we understand sexual relations as social relations, then this entails thinking about the varied ways in which bodies and embodiment might figure in sexual encounters. First the body can be an object of desire or of another's sexual acts; second, the embodied self is capable of sensual awareness of another – this is a self who sees, smells, touches; third the embodied self also has the capacity to feel the emotions and sensations associated with erotic desire and sensual pleasure. The body in the first sense, the sexualized body, is often a passive body, looked at or acted upon; a sexual body implies more, a body in the second and third senses is a body both active and feeling. In all of these three senses a body can never be *just* a body abstracted from mind, self and social context.

In making these distinctions we are drawing on Gesa Lindemann's (1997) categories: the objectified, experiencing and experienced body. Here we rework these categories as objectified, sensory and sensate embodiment in order to emphasize social embodiment as process rather than structure, in which the reflexive capacities of the self are implicated (Mead, 1934). This facilitates a more nuanced understanding of the sociality of the body. Objectified embodiment refers to bodies as perceptible entities in physical and social space. In terms of sexuality this does not mean seeing bodies as sexual objects; rather it is to recognize that bodies can be perceived as objects of desire and can also be acted upon sexually. Sensory embodiment is the capacity to

experience our surroundings through sight, hearing, taste, touch, which, in sexual terms, enables us to perceive another's embodiment as sexual. Sensate embodiment is the means through which we feel pleasure and pain, and more broadly experience our bodies as a part of our being – and, of course, a heightened awareness of our capacity to feel emotion and sensation is part of what defines a social situation as potentially sexual. Sensory and sensate embodiment together, therefore, constitute what we might be called lived or experiential embodiment (c.f. Williams and Bendelow 1998). Embodiment in all three senses has a physical materiality (a body will bleed when it is cut and can be seen to bleed and an embodied individual feels the pain of the wound and experiences that pain as her own), but embodiment it is not simply a physical given: each aspect of it is always already social and intermeshed in complex relations of reciprocal effectivity with each other aspect.

Objectified embodiment, though materially 'there' in physical and social space is not simply a natural state, but one marked by social place and history, coded by gender, class, context and happenstance rendering an embodied manifestation recognizable as a particular person or a member of a particular social category (e.g. as a man or a woman). As Nick Crossley notes, bodies 'are classified from birth and even before' and 'this process of categorization ... effects a "social magic"' (2001: 151). This 'marking' of bodies is not simply symbolic – investing them with signifiers of, for example, class, gender and ethnicity – but also material in that social location and biographical events leave physical traces on bodies (e.g. effects of diet, environment, physical and emotional labour)(Morgan and Scott 1993) as well as endowing us with a particular bodily hexis (Bourdieu 1992).

As embodied beings we are 'reversible'. We not only perceive but are perceived: we can be seen, touched, heard, smelled and tasted. And, as a consequence, we can be classified according to our perceptible qualities, or at least according to those perceptible qualities deemed salient within the forms of classification that have been constructed historically within our societies. (Crossley 2001: 150-151)

This categorization, and the recognition on which it is based, is itself a social act, an act of decoding that enables us to 'see' a particular body as someone we know or as classed or gendered. Furthermore, our bodies can be objects to ourselves – such self-reflexivity is a central premise of interactionism (Mead1934), which not only enables each person to see her/his body

as object, but also to imagine how it is seen by another and to envisage engagement with the embodied actions of others.

Here we are moving on to the second sense of embodiment, sensory embodiment, the capacity for sensory perception. But we do not perceive by physical sense alone: the work of perception is accomplished by an embodied *self*, someone who not only has ‘sense organs’ but is capable of active, reflexive *sense-making* by virtue of her social being, social location and personal biography. For example, think of what is required to enable sensual perception of another as a lover. To ‘see’ another’s (objectified) body as sexual requires interpretive work – even the simple identification of another as of a gender appropriate to our preferences is, as ethnomethodologists have demonstrated, a practical accomplishment (Garfinkel 1967; West and Zimmerman 1987). Further, to read another’s body as desirable necessitates the mobilization of appropriate scripts and an ability to locate ourselves and the other within them (Gagnon and Simon 1974).

Finally, embodiment in our third sense, sensate embodiment, does not just produce sensations ready to be ‘felt’; we interpret them and in so doing give them meaning. ‘Feeling’ requires a reflexive engagement with our own embodied state – whether immediate and conscious sense-making or habitual recognition based on past experience. As G H Mead puts it ‘unordered sensuous content’ only ‘becomes experience when it is placed within the forms of understanding’ (1964: 530): only when it is reflexively processed does it enter into the self’s ‘heritage of experience’ (Mead: 1934: 172). To feel desire and pleasure requires not just a sensate body, a body physically able to feel, but an embodied decoding of sensation (being caressed) and internal states (bodily signifiers of arousal) as sexually significant: ‘the sources of arousal, passion or excitement (the recognition of a sexual possibility)... derive from a complicated set of layered symbolic meanings’ (Gagnon and Simon 1974: 23).

While objectified, sensory and sensate embodiment may be distinguished from each other analytically, in everyday sexual life they are inextricably intermeshed. Objectified embodiment, while it is the mode through which we identify and experience bodies as having facticity, does not imply that bodies are simply there to be defined as sexual: how they are sexualized (for example, divided into erogenous zones) may well affect how bodily acts and sensations are perceived, ordered and experienced in the progress of a sexual encounter: which body parts are brought into play, which stimuli are interpreted as pleasure. Similarly the sexual experiences we have may then act back upon the way objectified embodiment is perceived. Thus, for instance, a



woman's first sexual encounter with a penis may reorder her perception of the male body. Sensory and sensate embodiment – bodily sensual perception and feelings – are particularly closely linked through our lived embodiment. We can explore and thus experience another's body through our senses – sight, smell, touch – while at the same time experiencing (feeling) sexual sensation in our own bodies. Thus the physical contact of sex entails simultaneous touching and feeling. What makes this recognizable as erotic is first, as we have already indicated, each individual's understanding of embodied experience and second, the interaction itself. Sexual interaction creates a potentially<sup>6</sup> shared sense of erotic meaning, a sense of a particular configuration of interacting bodies as erotic and thus the possibility of another level of reflexively embodied sexual meaning.

While this reflexive interplay is crucial to understanding our own experiences of the sexual and how they become felt and embodied, we must always be wary of presupposing these links when observing others' bodies. We cannot simply read off properties of another's lived (sensory and sensate) embodiment from their objectified embodiment, deduce what another person is feeling from the body we see. For example, an erect penis is conventionally read as an unproblematic signifier of male desire, but it may not have such meaning to the man experiencing it. A woman might be perceived as 'sexy', read as sexual, when she is not actually feeling sexual (Jackson & Scott 2001a); she may consciously project herself as sexy without feeling desire (Tolman 2002).

The view of embodiment being advanced here does not deny the physical materiality of bodies – rather it emphasizes that bodies are not meaningful in themselves. All of us are embodied within social contexts, which profoundly affect how we experience our own and others' bodies. Interpreting bodies as sexual requires a set of culturally acquired competencies as does experiencing our own lived bodies as sexual. When we engage in sex with another person it is not about abstract bodies meeting in a social space, but embodied social beings interacting in a social context, bringing with them a good deal of cultural and biographical baggage.

### **Pre-social and supra-social fictions**

That sexuality is not a natural phenomenon has become almost axiomatic within critical academic thought, if not always in commonsense thinking. Sociologists have become used to contesting biological forms of essentialism, where sexuality is seen as an inherent property of the human organism in which bodily sexual gratification is driven by biological imperatives.<sup>7</sup> Here

sexuality is conceptualized as *pre*-social, capable of modification by social mores but nonetheless as essentially prior to the social. Yet alongside this, there are other common-sense understandings of sexuality, whereby it is invested with magical, mystical and romantic properties, associated with ideas of transcendence, the belief that it can somehow raise us above the mundane realities of our quotidian existence. Sexuality becomes, in this sense, *supra*-social, beyond the social. In everyday terms these two frequently overlap, so that sex can paradoxically be seen both as an expression of humanity's animal nature and a means by which individuals can discover transcendental 'truths' about themselves.

Among many social and cultural theorists pre-social conceptualizations of the sexual are routinely dismissed as essentialist. *Supra*-social imagery, however, is less easily contested. There are forms of theory that lend themselves to a view of desire itself as outside the social, as resistant to, and potentially subversive of, the social ordering of sexuality. For example in Lacanian psychoanalysis desire, figured as a consequence of lack, is irreducible to need, in that it cannot be easily satisfied (see Rose 1982). In recent years Deleuzian thinking has to some extent displaced this notion with a reconceptualisation of desire as 'positive, and associated with transformative production and experimentation' (Potts 2004: 18). Those who draw on such perspectives are by no means essentialists and are poles apart from those who view desire as a product of biological imperatives; rather, desire is here envisaged as in excess of the functional requirements of bodily and species needs and irreducible to physiological processes. It is in this idea of desire as potentially uncontainable by normative sexuality that we detect a *supra*-social imaginary that risks abstracting desire from both physical and social location. For Elizabeth Grosz, for example, desire is far more than an interaction between lovers or an exchange of physical intimacies:

Erotic desire...is a mode of surface contact with things and substances, with a world, that engenders and induces transformations, intensifications, a becoming something other. Not simply a rise and fall, a waxing and waning, but movement, processes, transformations. That is what constitutes the appeal and power of desire, its capacity to shake up, rearrange, reorganise the body's forms and substances, to make subject and body as such into something else, something other than what they are habitually... desire need not, indeed commonly does not, culminate in sexual intercourse but in production ... the production of sensations never felt, alignments never thought energies never tapped, regions never known (1995b: 294-5)

The appeal of this conceptualization of desire is that it resonates with feminists' investment in challenging the conventional sexual order and therefore championing forms of desire that push at the boundaries of normativity. Thus Annie Potts (2000) draws on Grosz's depiction of desire as a means of disrupting the mechanistic, end driven model of the sexual encounter as a 'natural' sequence ending in orgasm. Potts takes 'the deconstructive implications of desire' as potentially destabilizing the meaning of sex and orgasm in pursuit of a different form of sex in which orgasm is 'neither the target nor the non-target of sex' (2000: 70). We have some sympathy with this project and are on record as seeking to de-privilege a monolithic notion of (hetero)sex, with orgasm as end point and high point (Jackson and Scott 1997). However, the notion of desire as a means through which this might be achieved is problematic in that desire, for us, cannot be envisaged as floating free of the social: it will always be social and therefore meaningful, meaningful and therefore social. We would contend that locating desire as supra-social is no more tenable than positing instinctual drives as pre-social.

Embodied desires and practices cannot be disembedded from the social – if changing conceptualizations do help to effect change in embodied practices it is as part of social life not as an escape from it (Cohen and Taylor 1978, 1992). There can be no 'revolutionary', 'productive', disruptive or subversive desire beyond the social. Human sexuality is not fixed, but it is both reproduced *and* transformed as an ongoing accomplishment of everyday practices within wider social relations.

### **The 'mystery' of the female orgasm**

A common manifestation of supra-social thinking on the sexual, in both its commonsense and academic forms, is the assumption that women's pleasure is particularly mysterious, unknowable or unrepresentable. Women's orgasm has conventionally been seen as less physical than that of men and less susceptible to medical intervention (Clark 1993), a 'problem' currently bedeviling pharmaceutical companies in the race to find a female equivalent of Viagra. There is also a strong tradition of treating women's pleasure as mysterious and unrepresentable in psychoanalysis, perhaps the best known example of which is Lacan's notion of a female *jouissance* beyond the phallus, beyond language, beyond - even - knowledge of those experiencing it. Yet, as Lacan himself appears to understand, women's pleasure *is* commonly represented as in his own depiction of Bernini's statue of the medieval mystic, Teresa of Avila: 'You only have to go and

look at Bernini's statue in Rome to understand immediately that she is coming, there is no doubt about it.' (1982:147)

The point here is not to critique psychoanalysis in general or Lacan in particular, but to draw attention to a common theme in cultural understandings of women's sexuality.<sup>8</sup> Making connections between sexual and religious ecstasy is by no means peculiar to Lacan and frequently informs readings of Bernini's statue.<sup>9</sup> The reason why he and others can immediately see that she is coming is by interpreting a particular set of cultural insignia manifested not by a material embodied woman, but by a representation of a woman in a state of ecstasy: the head thrown back, the eyes closed, the lips parted etc. What we have here are the conventions by which female ecstasy is represented, which may or may not bear any relation to women's embodied experience of orgasm. As we have cautioned earlier we cannot read off the characteristics of sensory and sensate embodiment from the visible signs that constitute objectified embodiment even in the case of a material living person. Moreover, we should be wary of applying current constructions of sexuality to earlier representations, which could, in the context of their time, have had quite other meanings.

We would suggest that a sociological understanding of women's pleasure and its representation should recognise the ways in which representations enter into everyday interaction. Today's conventional depictions of women's pleasure and orgasm in many respects share a cultural history with Lacan's reading of Bernini, but now especially through the medium of film, combining sound effects with visual imagery.<sup>10</sup> These conventional representations have real effects - not least in that they provide women with everyday knowledge of how to fake an orgasm and perhaps how to have a convincingly 'authentic' one: how to signal an internal embodied event to a partner and how to understand a partner's responses as an orgasm. This performance, which is highly gendered, may be what makes an orgasm 'real' in sexual interactions.

### **The gendering of orgasm**

We are interested then in the gendered meanings of orgasm, meanings which cannot be anything other than social. Even writers otherwise committed to an anti essentialist stance often seem to assume, where arousal and orgasm are concerned, that meaning is inherent in bodily responses.

Pasi Falk's (1994) discussion of pornography is a case in point. Male bodies, he tells us, evidentially signify arousal/pleasure through erection and ejaculation. Here the 'lack' of physical signs in women is represented as problematic: women's bodies simply cannot be read in the way male bodies can, hence the necessity for women in pornographic movies to 'act' desire and pleasure. Falk thus reduces male sexuality to an unproblematic bodily reflex – to which some theorists of masculinity and male sexuality might object. Emmanuel Reynaud (1983), for example, delivers an acerbic critique of the 'myth of the phallic orgasm'. 'Ejaculation in itself has little to do with sensual pleasure' he says and more to do with concretizing men's power. For Reynaud male sexuality is more a product of men's social location as the dominant gender than of their bodily capacities (1983:61):

Man is afraid of letting himself go. He does not abandon himself to his pleasure; he confines it within the limits of his penis...he rarely lets himself be carried away by his own sensuality. He centres it on his penis without feeling that his whole body is totally sexualised. (Reynaud 1973:62)

While this may read as a rather essentializing account of masculinity it does suggest that male desire and pleasure may be more problematic than Falk assumes. That such significance is accorded to a small quantity of body fluid – with the consequent equation of coming and 'cum' – is surely a consequence of its social definition rather than any essential properties. Susan Bordo offers an alternative explanation for the focus on female orgasm in representations of sex, one more in keeping with Reynaud's view that men are more concerned with demonstrating potency than pleasure. A man's virility is represented as control of both his own and his partner's sexual response: 'She's transported to another world; he's the pilot of the ship that takes her there' (Bordo 1999:191).

While Bordo is critical of traditional representations of male sexuality, she nonetheless assumes that men's bodies unproblematically signify arousal, that arousal can simply be read off from the erect penis. She is not alone among feminist writers in reducing the meaning of male sexuality to physiological responses. It is not unusual for feminists to understand the conventional sequence of heterosexual – dictated by his erection and his orgasm – as intrinsically male-defined rather than socially ordered. Hence the assumption that the male definition of orgasm is somehow built into the male body. Describing models such as the Masters and Johnson sexual response cycle (arousal, plateau, orgasm, resolution) Annie Potts comments: 'This tumescence and

detumescence deemed to be characteristic of the “natural” course of sex is inevitably more consistent with a male (penis)-centred version of sexual experience’ (Potts 2000: 61). Why should this be so? Certainly we should question the accepted syntax of sex – foreplay followed by penetration leading to (his) orgasm. But questioning the prioritization of penetration in this ‘sexual sentence’ (Scott and Freeman 1995) need not entail arguing that penetration per se is intrinsically ‘male’ or simply about producing male orgasm. It is even more difficult to see why orgasm itself, or physiological responses preceding or following from it, are intrinsically male, somehow given by possession of a penis. The current masculine meanings associated with the ‘sexual sentence’ and orgasm itself are not given by male sexual anatomy and physiology, but are the product of culturally ordered meanings embedded in particular social practices. The meanings of orgasm derive from social, not biological contexts.

As we said earlier, we are not denying the physicality of bodies. But physiologically the bodily responses which are understood to constitute orgasm are simply part of a reflex action, in themselves, of no more social significance than any other reflex. Physical reflexes, including those associated with orgasm, happen in women's, as well as men's, bodies. Women, however, rarely describe orgasm in purely physical terms – it has become bound up with mystical ideas of ecstasy and transcendence and associated with the romantic trappings of love and intimacy (Potts 2000; Roberts et al. 1995). Women may thus unwittingly collude in the social definition of their orgasms as somehow more mysterious than those of men. This mystery is, then, a widely believed social fiction with real effects – and, to quote an old sociological maxim, if something is defined as real it is real in its consequences (Thomas 1923).

## **Doing Orgasm**

Social definitions of male and female orgasm, then, have real consequences for everyday heterosexual practices. Qualitative research on the meanings of orgasm suggests, for example, because women's orgasms are not deemed self-evident women are required to make a show of it, to produce a spectacular and noisy performance (Potts 2000; Roberts et al. 1995) Moreover, because orgasm is understood as the ‘peak’ of sexual experience, (Potts 2000), its absence signifies a failed or incomplete sexual event, one which has not reached its proper conclusion: the sexual sentence has no full stop! In heterosexual intercourse, male orgasm is assumed to be virtually inevitable, whereas that of a woman requires male work and skill; thus a woman's spectacular demonstration of orgasm affirms her partner's sexual expertise. ‘The demand for

noise... indicates that heterosexuality becomes an economy in which the woman's orgasm is exchanged for the man's work' (Roberts et al. 1995: 528; see also Jackson and Scott 1987). Absence of orgasm in a woman may represent her own sexual failings, but may also reflect on her partner's 'flawed' technique, hence the pressure on her to reassure him, to provide evidence of her orgasm or, if necessary to fake it. This is also an example of the embeddedness of sexual activity in everyday sociality: women's reassurance of their partners is part of the 'emotion work' of maintaining a heterosexual relationship (see Duncombe and Marsden 1993) and conforms to the more general expectation that women will 'feed egos and tend wounds' (Bartky 1990).

There are a series of a paradoxes here: the male performance ethic creates a demand that women enact a convincing performance of orgasm; the idea of women as passive recipients of male expertise requires an active use of 'their minds in order to perform (being) the body' (Roberts 1995: 530); a woman's 'appreciation' of male sexual work requires considerable emotional labour to produce a performance that appears authentic, that provides an appropriate affirmation of her partner's prowess.<sup>11</sup> Dealing with these paradoxes requires considerable interpretive work, reading a male partner's responses and producing a finely judged performance of orgasm. For, as Roberts et al. point out, an overly theatrical and extravagant display is likely to be read as faked; subtler performances are more convincing. They suggest that women are expert at this deception in that most women in their sample admitted faking it on occasion, while few of the men thought that they had ever been with a partner who had faked.

If a woman feels the need to reassure her male partner of the adequacy of his performance, that felt need will persist whether or not she 'really' experiences orgasm. Similar performances may thus accompany both 'faked' and 'authentic' orgasms. The cultural availability of these 'canonical orgasmic insignia' (DeNora 1997: 44) is what makes such performances possible and available to be read as 'authentic' orgasm. Tia DeNora is interested, as we are, in how cultural resources and various forms of representation 'actually "get into" and inform real lines of erotic conduct' (1997: 44). The issue then becomes how orgasm is practically accomplished, how it is embodied, how it is manifested and reworked through social practice. This entails a reflexive process through which our embodied selves are continually constructed and reconstructed, through making sense of the social and cultural world available to us, in interaction with others.

If orgasm is a practical accomplishment in this sense, then at some stage we must acquire the cultural competencies that enable us to 'know' what it is, to 'recognize' it in ourselves and others. As we pointed out earlier 'feeling' requires reflexive decoding of our own sensate embodiment.

We would suggest that we have to learn to recognize an orgasm and also learn its cultural definitions. This resonates with one of the classics of the interactionist tradition, Howard Becker's study of marijuana users. Becker (1963) argues that while it necessary to use marijuana 'properly' in order to get high, this is not sufficient and users must learn to relate their 'symptoms' not only to the action of the drug, but also to deem them comparable to the 'symptoms' experienced by other users and thus appropriate. This process is summed up neatly by one of Becker's respondents: 'I heard little remarks that were made by other people. Somebody said, "my legs are rubbery", I was very attentively listening for all these cues for what I was supposed to feel like' (Becker 1963: 50). What Becker is suggesting is that users must learn to define the effects of drugs as pleasurable. Thus a three-stage process is involved: learning to use the drug, learning to perceive its effects and learning to define them as pleasurable. We would suggest that a similar process is entailed in learning to 'do' orgasm.

Orgasm, however, unlike getting high is not usually a collective experience; indeed there is a lack of everyday discussion of 'doing' sex and particularly of sexual pleasure. The most evident source from which it is possible to learn how to perceive its effects and come to define them as pleasurable is the media. As Susan Bordo points out 'We learn what sexual arousal looks and sounds like from the movies, and – as with any other language – we pick up the grammar and syntax without being aware of it' (Bordo 1999: 65). These codes are highly conventionalized, learned by actors from other actors. Jill Lewis discusses an actor's account of this process wherein: 'She had an image of generations of actors all imitating how they had seen sex/love represented in other plays or films or books, conjuring up stereotypical postures, expected gestures' (Lewis 1997: 241). These representations are culturally available to us all as a means of 'making sense' of our own embodied sensations and of finding ways to communicate desire and pleasure in intimate interaction. There is some evidence that such images have long been drawn on, by young people, in learning to 'do sex' (Blumer 1943; Christian-Smith 1991; Thomson and Scott 1991; Illouz 1997). Thus media representations of sex do not affect the lived body directly; their effects are mediated through the interactional contexts in which we 'do' sex and the reflexive processes whereby we interpret our own bodily responses and 'read' those of a lover. It is only then that cultural meanings of sex become part of our lived embodiment.

For orgasm to become a 'real' experience, for a simple reflex to be understood as an erotically significant event, requires far more than the technical know-how necessary to set off the appropriate physiological response. As Annie Potts's (2000) data suggests, the meanings of orgasm are extremely complex for both women and men, relying on particular interpretations of



it as the ultimate or peak sexual experience. It is this which allows orgasm to become imbued with all manner of mystical and emotional meanings, which creates a space for the construction of specifically gendered understandings of what the experience *is*.

This raises the question of what sense orgasm can be said to exist in the absence of such meanings. The obvious case here would be a child masturbating to ‘orgasm’ who does not have access to the meanings with which it is invested by adults. While the physical sensations may be homologous they cannot be assumed to have the same significance. This is precisely because children are denied full access to adult means of making sense of the experience *as* orgasm – it is not that children are intrinsically asexual, but a result of the social organisation of childhood and sexuality within contemporary culture (Jackson 1982; Jackson and Scott 1997, 1999, 2004). Insofar as there are bodily links between these childhood and adult experiences it is only because they are retrospectively reinterpreted as ‘the same’.

We may remember sexual feelings and sensations associated with our own childhood activities, but this does not mean that we attached the same significance to them at the time, for in recalling our experiences we are interpreting them with the hindsight of adult knowledge (Jackson 1982:70)

Self understanding, sexual or otherwise, can only ever be accomplished, as Mead says, from the perspective of the present. We cannot think ourselves back to the child we once were without taking the adult of the present moment back with us (Mead 1929, 1932). As Gagnon and Simon put it, rather than the past simply determining the present, ‘the present significantly reshapes the past as we reconstruct our biographies to bring them into greater congruence with our current identities, roles, situations and available vocabularies’ (1974: 13).

### **Scripting or composing the sexual body**

We have suggested elsewhere (Jackson and Scott 2000) that our understanding of sexual embodiment might be furthered by returning to Gagnon and Simon’s conceptualization of the social construction of sexuality in terms of ‘sexual scripts’ (1974). Drawing on this conceptualisation we are suggesting that orgasm is in many respects scripted. The term ‘scripts’, though, has its limitations in that it connotes something fixed. As Gagnon and Simon themselves note, the term ‘suggests the conventional dramatic narrative form, which more often than not is inappropriate’ (1974: 23). As they point out, even the most conventional erotic sequence (such as

the 'sexual sentence') 'derives from a complicated set of layered symbolic meanings' which might not be the same for both participants in the standard heterosexual drama.

Scripts, then, should not be understood as closed texts which lock us into predictable plots and roles, but something much more fluid and open, offering opportunities to improvise. Scripts are played with, not simply played out; they are open to renegotiation as we take cues from partners and make sense of what is happening to them, to us and between us. Gagnon and Simon identify three interrelated dimensions of scripting (1974; 2004; Gagnon 2004).<sup>12</sup> There are first, 'cultural scenarios', which we have already discussed in relation to the conventional ways in which sexuality is represented in the media. More broadly cultural scenarios or cultural scripting refer to the discourses through which the sexual is constituted as an object of knowledge (c.f. Foucault 1978) and to 'what the intersubjective culture treats as sexuality' (Laumann et al. 1994: 6). Cultural scenarios provide a generally available stock of cultural knowledge about sexuality; they do not *determine* sexual conduct or experience, rather they are available to us as resources to make sense of our own embodied sexuality.

Secondly, interpersonal or interactional scripting is that which occurs in the intersubjective space of sociality, which is negotiated in and emergent from interaction with others. This, of course, draws on available cultural scenarios which are reworked through everyday sexual practices which can then themselves become, within a particular social group, available as ways of 'doing sex'.<sup>13</sup> In negotiating sexual relationships and activities these wider cultural scenarios are interactionally shaped 'into scripts for behaviour in specific contexts' (Simon 1996: 41). Even if this might involve little more than predictable variations on common cultural themes, interpersonal scripts are nonetheless locally, interactionally produced by the actors involved.

The third dimension is intrapsychic scripting, consequent on the reflexive self, through which we come to 'a socially based form of mental life' (Gagnon 2004: 276) constructed from relations between self and other(s) as well as through internal conversations with the self.<sup>14</sup> We thereby reflexively process material from cultural scenarios and interpersonal experience, constructing a personal set of sexual scripts through which we make sense of desires and practices which then inform both our individual fantasies and our sexual engagements with others. Intrapsychic scripting is also the process whereby 'meaning is attributed to the interior of the body' (Gagnon and Simon 1974: 21) enabling us to make sense of bodily states as sexually significant. Sexual feeling does not derive directly from the body, but must be actively interpreted before it

becomes incorporated into our sensate embodiment as what arousal or orgasm ‘feels like’.<sup>15</sup> Orgasm, then, is a cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic construction and not the ultimate truth of sex.

The idea of scripting derives from an interactionist tradition and pragmatist philosophical foundations in which the self is provisional and always in process; in which meanings are emergent, negotiated and renegotiable – but always in the context of the actualities of social life. The advantage of this perspective is that it is non-deterministic, in that it allows for fluidity and agency, without assuming that we are free to do anything we please or to apply any number of an infinite array of meanings to erotic encounters. On the contrary, our practices and the meanings informing and emergent from them derive from the cultural resources we have to hand, from the social and cultural repertoires and vocabularies and the past biographical experience reflexively available to us in the present (Mead 1932). An interactionist perspective presupposes socially located bodies in interaction. Even when we are alone, however, we are still social beings (Mead 1934); hence solo sex, like sex with another, involves a reflexive process whereby cultural meanings and social knowledge, shaped and re-shaped throughout our lives, guide both our minds (our fantasies) and our hands.

Thus sexual scripts, while always socially situated, are active compositions, not merely pre-defined guides for action. Elsewhere, extemporizing from DeNora’s work on music and erotic agency, we have suggested an alternative metaphor: that of the composition of the sexual self and sexual embodiment (De Nora 1997; Jackson and Scott 2001b). The dual meaning of the verb ‘to compose’ and its associated nouns are suggestive of the active composition of narratives of embodied selfhood and the enactment of forms of bodily composure necessary for sexual interaction. The scripting or composition of sexual encounters is not just about acts, but how we make sense of what we feel and thus what we can make intelligible to ourselves as feeling – both emotion and sensation – and what we can therefore convey to others. The three forms of embodiment we outlined at the outset – objectified, sensory and sensate – are here brought into complex interplay. Engaging in sexual interaction entails reading, though our sensory embodiment, a partner’s (or partners’) embodied sexual composure – their objectified body – for imputed signs of their sensate embodiment. At the same time, we are objects of a similar process through which they are reading us. Through this interaction each participant can pick up the cues for further improvisation. We cannot ‘do sex’ competently without this interactive process and the reflexivity this entails. Sexual embodiment requires that we compose ourselves bodily,

construct an ongoing sense of embodied self within the intersubjective social space of the sexual encounter.

Bodily composure in its sexual and non-sexual forms is of course highly gendered. Iris Marion Young, in her well known phenomenological account of women's embodiment, argued that the typical female bodily comportment is a product of situatedness in the social environment and of the orientation of the body to the social world. Much of what Young (1990) identifies as the specificity of feminine embodiment is posited as being a consequence of women being objects of the male gaze and of men's actions. It could be said that just as a woman learns to 'throw like a girl' so she later learns to fake like a woman. However this suggests that forms of sexual embodiment inevitably become fixed and habitual. There are of course forms of embodied selfhood which are pre reflexive, as Mead (1934) recognizes: acquired habits of being, of bodily movement and deportment about which we no longer need to be reflexive (c.f. Bourdieu's [1992] notion of bodily hexis). However, we would suggest that a fixed pre reflexive bodily hexis may be less a characteristic of sexual embodiment, in that sexual comportment arises out of interaction and is therefore always subject to modification as a result of reflexive accommodation to a sexual partner or partners. Hence while sexual interaction in long term couple relationships may become tacitly understood and habitual (see for example Duncombe and Marsden 1996), in any less routine sexual encounters bodily contact and posture have to be negotiated anew in order to reach an accommodation to a different partner or situation.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have argued that sexual practices and experiences have to be understood in social context, taking account of the everyday situatedness of sex as well as of wider socio-cultural processes. Here we have drawn on a neglected tradition within social theory - interactionist sociology. We have taken as our point of departure Gagnon and Simon's pioneering work on sexuality, itself in part inspired by the early pragmatists (Gagnon 2004) among whom we have placed particular emphasis on GH Mead. Revisiting interactionism enables us to re-direct attention to the everyday sociality in which bodily encounters take place and in which embodied experiences are negotiated. In its emphasis on the mundane everyday

experiences and practices, symbolic interactionism differs radically from traditions that emphasise the subversive power of desire and the destabilising potential of sexual transgression (see Gagnon 2004: 280). As Ken Plummer points out:

...with the exception of some radically sexual transgressors, changes do not happen that easily or quickly. And the unstable, identity-less, utterly fractured sexual and gender identity seems to be largely a myth created by social science! (Plummer 2003: 525)

We are not attempting to offer a total theorization of the body or of sexuality; rather we are suggesting that this approach can help us to understand aspects of sexual embodiment which have tended to fall between more abstract theorizations of the corporeal and empirical investigations of sexual conduct.<sup>16</sup> In making interaction central, the articulation between the cultural, interpersonal and subjective aspects of sexual embodiment can be explored without assuming deterministic lines of causation, while at the same time locating sexuality securely within the social. Because embodied, sensory and sensate experience takes place within the social, it is simultaneously corporeal *and* meaningful, physical *and* symbolic. By working through the example of orgasm we have endeavoured to show that sexual desire and pleasure, while always embodied, equally always entail interpretive interactional processes. Human sexual embodiment can neither be thought of as an abstract potentiality outside the social spaces where it is lived, nor as a mere assemblage of organs, orifices and orgasms.

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<sup>1</sup> As Atkinson and Housely note neo pragmatism has some currency in contemporary social theory the work of the early pragmatists such as James, Dewey, Mead and Cooley and their influences on sociological as opposed to philosophical thought are less often recognized despite the fact that they speak to many current theoretical preoccupations with the fluidity of the social and questions of practice.

<sup>2</sup> This formulation derives from Dorothy Smith 1987.

<sup>3</sup> Recent accounts of social constructionism rest more on Foucauldian foundations than on earlier sociological conceptualizations. Whereas Berger and Luckman, (1966) for example, asked how 'human activity' could 'produce a world of things', Foucault (1972) asks how discourse produces objects.

<sup>4</sup> This disappearance of the social is a more general theoretical tendency within which the cultural is made to stand in for the social, leaving out of consideration both everyday practices and the material conditions in which they are embedded.

<sup>5</sup> In endorsing Witz's argument we are not engaging in sociological imperialism, but merely suggesting that particular forms of sociological understanding help to situate analyses of the body in the social relations of embodied interaction.

<sup>6</sup> A potentially shared sense of meaning because even in consensual heterosexual sex one partner may define interaction as erotic while the other might not, or may not invest it with the same form of eroticism what might be understood by one as an overpowering physical need might be seen by the other as romantic passion.

<sup>7</sup> The most influential form of biological determinism at present is evolutionary psychology, which dominates popular representations of both human and animal sexuality in the media.

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed discussion of psychoanalysis see Jackson and Scott forthcoming 2007

<sup>9</sup> A recent example of this reading was offered by Simon Schama in his 2006 BBC 2 television series, *The Power of Art*. There is also a long psychoanalytic tradition of reading Bernini's sculpture in this way (see Macey 1988). This

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understanding is part of a very Western and Christian tradition – there is a need for more cross-cultural analysis in order to understand the range of meaning given to desire and pleasure. We cannot assume that all cultures share Western ideas about the transcendent and mystical meanings of sex.

<sup>10</sup> Among the best known versions is the scene from the film *When Harry met Sally*, in which Sally demonstrates that orgasm can be convincingly faked. An earlier example is provided by the Jane Fonda in *Barbarella*; the scene with the ‘orgasmatron’, a machine for producing orgasms, also represents a highly sexual woman as autonomously erotic only with the aid of a machine.

<sup>11</sup> As Duncombe and Marsden (1996) point out, in long-term relationships women perform emotional work in sex in numerous ways, including pretending desire and acceding to unwanted sex.

<sup>12</sup> Only two of these dimensions appear in the first edition of *Sexual Conduct* (1974): the interpersonal and intrapsychic. The idea of cultural scripting or cultural scenarios arises from John Gagnon’s later work (see Gagnon 2004)

<sup>13</sup> An example would be conventionalized sequences of petting behaviour among adolescents – in our youth British teenagers followed a 10 point scale while North Americans favoured a four-stage baseball analogy.

<sup>14</sup> This is a rather different conceptualisation of subjectivity from the psychoanalytic notion of the psyche.

<sup>15</sup> Gagnon and Simon discuss this in relation to the ways in which early adolescent feelings reported as ‘anxiety, nausea, fear’ later become re-recognized as sexual excitement (1974: 23).

<sup>16</sup> Although, as Plummer (2003) notes, symbolic interactionists have recently neglected the embodied aspect of sexual (and other) interaction, G.H. Mead himself did pay considerable attention to human beings as embodied organisms.

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