

Secretary (2002): Purple Pose, Indie Masochism, Bruised Romance

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A young woman glides gracefully around the office in a white silk blouse, her neck and arms secured in a bondage brace that holds her arms aloft. She manages the complex ecosystem of the office's machines and objects with speed and efficiency – she kneels to push her chin into a stapler to staple a letter, she clenches and grabs with her teeth a sheet of a paper lodged in a typewriter, swings into a kitchen with ornate grillwork to pour a cup of coffee, carrying all these things down a dark, plush, baroque hallway. She enters the room at the end of the hallway through a heavily carved wooden door, turns around to face the camera, and shuts the door. The image darkens. The sadist is only visible in the foregoing shots through the demands exacted on the submissive's body. But this is no doubt a film about the assertive sexual presence of the masochist.

A cut to '6 Months Earlier'. We see a close-up of a purple suitcase, drab orthopaedic shoes and knee-high nylon socks being pulled up below a long dowdy skirt. The spectator is made aware that these are the same legs, the same body, as the camera pans up, revealing the frumpy Lee Holloway (Maggie Gyllenhaal), now bracketed in an anachronistic 'before' stage. Lee's voice-over narrates that she has been released from a mental health institution and is returning, with reluctance, home to her family. She is dwarfed in long shot by a multi-coloured asymmetrical work of architecture, a facility resembling a panoramic arrangement of toy blocks. Pointed narrative details emerge: she has grown accustomed to the drudgery of the institution, and her sister's wedding awaits her on the day of her release. We then see her queasy relation to family, as the garishly hued pink poolside wedding party winds down, revealing her incorrigibly drunken father. Lee's recourse is self-cutting. She digs up an old jewellery box that contains varied blades, including a plastic ballerina, one pirouetting leg sharpened at the tip for the purposes of incision into Lee's flesh. She falters, but overhearing parents arguing, opts to sear her inner



Figure 16 Maggie Gyllenhaal in *Secretary* (2002)

thigh with a steaming teakettle. A close-up of her face expresses pain mixed with transported bliss.

So begins Steven Shainberg's polysemous *Secretary* (2002). Ostensibly the film's coming-of-age arc is also a *Pygmalion* tale, a therapeutic makeover fantasy. Lee transforms into a figure of sexual agency *through* acts of submission to the reclusive attorney who employs her, E. Edward Grey (James Spader). A hybrid object, *Secretary* operates on multiple tonal and generic registers, including literary adaptation, art cinema and romantic comedy, all anatomised in the opening which shuttles from the intense sobriety of an erotic performance seemingly culled from soft-core cinema, to a more distanced, detached and implicitly comic style aligned with a late 1990s indie 'blankness'. Akin to Lee's bondage acrobatics, this is a considerable balancing act of oft bad objects, negotiating arty sex and romantic comedy. As this chapter will suggest, *Secretary's* significance as well as its marginality in the sphere of indie film rests in its peculiar negotiation of erotics and comedy. The film's tone both deploys and ironises the 'sweetness' of romantic conventions, yet it is precisely the film's ironic investment in romance that positions this film apart from the erotic seriousness of European art cinema.

The screenplay was adapted from the Mary Gaitskill story of the same name by playwright Erin Cressida Wilson (Gaitskill 1988). In Gaitskill's story, a young woman's experience of a creepy boss remains discomfortingly realist, lodged in an unspoken violence; Wilson converts the scene of trauma, adding the detail of self-cutting to radically different effect, explicitly eroticising and romanticising the lawyer–secretary relation. Lions Gate Films picked up the

film for distribution, after a successful release at Sundance where it won a Special Jury Prize for Originality, and best First Screenplay at the Independent Spirit Awards, grossing US\$4 million at the box office domestically and over US\$5 million abroad.

In its moment, the film was synonymous with the ascendance of Maggie Gyllenhaal, who as Lee channels sexual need, nerdy spunkiness and self-possession. The film relies heavily on the pliable, open nature of her face and the expressivity of her unique performance style, which oscillates between a childish naïveté to slapstick inflections of physical comedy to a vibrant eroticism. Paired with Gyllenhaal, Spader extends his manifestation of white middle class male sexual neurosis in his role as the emotionally remote sadist lawyer. Spader's reticent, squirrely performance resonates with his indie film persona of the late 1980s and 1990s as a cynical, sexually nefarious bad boy – from *Less Than Zero* (Marek Kaniévski, 1987) to Steven Soderbergh's *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* (1989) to his turn in David Cronenberg's J. G. Ballard adaptation *Crash* (1996).

Perhaps due to its multivalent tonality, and its anchoring in a 'perverse' female subjectivity, the film's critical success and cultural significance have been overlooked within histories of American independent film culture. A *Variety* review framed the film as 'beyond niche': its 'touchy theme and cloistered nature . . . relegate this well-acted picture to a specialised realm even within the specialised market for domestic art films' (McCarthy 2002). Yet we can situate the film in relation to critical discourses of American independent cinema, both the blank ironies of 'smart cinema', and indie film's aesthetics of 'quirk' or new sincerity, of which I contend *Secretary* is an unrecognised contributor (Sconce 2002; Newman 2011; McDowell 2012; Perkins 2012). *Secretary* also imbibes from the stylistics of David Lynch's estranged Americana wherein placid surfaces reveal sinister and inexplicable depths; it also aligns demographically with the post-collegiate, neo-bohemian slacker ennui of films by Richard Linklater and Kevin Smith.

Despite its film historical neglect, the film has gathered a range of criticism within the field of gender and sexuality studies, an apt object for the theorisation of female masochism in the context of third wave feminism's embrace of non-normative sexual practices (Restuccia 2004; Cook 2006; Weiss 2006; Noonan 2010; Belmont 2012). In this respect the film was perceived as making the terms of BDSM (bondage and discipline sadomasochism), extracted from a more subcultural sexual orientation and queer identitarian context palatable to a 'vanilla' US viewing public. Cinematically, Shainberg no doubt took cues from the New Queer Cinema, claiming that he was deeply affected by the gay romance in Stephen Frear's *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985). And Cressida Wilson framed the film's intervention through a closet analogy: 'what if this was a coming out film for a submissive?' (2003: vi).

Possibly unwittingly, *Secretary* narrativises the prior two decades of feminist film theory's tussle with questions of the submissive spectator. Film theory negotiated the figure of masochism, from Freud to Lacan to film phenomenology, as intrinsic to female and male spectatorial positions, and fundamental to wider conditions of cinema spectatorship (Studlar 1988; Silverman 1992; Shaviro 1993). By asserting a woman's desire to be dominated – in the office no less – as a speakable desire, *Secretary* anachronistically returns to another 'touchy' bad object – masochism's status, *pace* Freud as intrinsically feminine. Yet the film takes this claim as the site for parodic and ironic re-inscription. *Secretary* felt for some audiences like a discovery and an affirmation in a millennial moment seemingly moving beyond an identitarian politics of representation. If the ponderousness of cinematic sadomasochism (SM) often relegates it to middlebrow kitsch, *Secretary* toes a delicate line between seriousness and play. The film's political charge lies in its cocktail of a deflationary mode of irony and a sincere claim for sexual subjectivity in submission. The feat of this modern sexual 'fable' is thus forged precisely through the ironies of the film's inveterate 'sweetness', what the critic Frances Restuccia has more cynically described as its 'dopey saccharine quality' (2004).

An investment in the script of romance is what sustains the film's ironic tone and allows it to depart from a dispossession narrative more common to the treatment of masochism in the European art cinema, from Luis Bunuel's Severine in *Belle de Jour* (1967) to Catherine Breillat's Marie in *Romance* (2000) to Michael Haneke's Erica in *The Piano Teacher* (2002), in which the body and by extension its social bonds are rent asunder. Indeed the film's themes align closely with a developing aesthetic of masochistic and mordant erotics in the European art cinema, in films such as those by Breillat, Haneke, as well as *Morvern Callar* (Lynn Ramsay, 2002), *Talk to Her* (Pedro Almodovar, 2002) and *Under My Skin* (Marina de Van, 2002), all released in the same year as *Secretary*. When compared with these more brooding accounts of sexual obsession, perverse attachment, corrosive passion and erotic failure, *Secretary's* embeddedness in romance and the redemptive function of sex distanced it from the darker implications of desire unbound in negation, even as it drew from a shared interest in the erotic lure of negative affects and 'bad feelings' (Johnson 2004).

Secretary's strange tone is produced by the collision of shame and negative affects and the ephemera of a commodified, 'cute' femininity and its gendered scripts; this is the site of its aesthetic critique as well as its visual force, making visible the treachery of gender normativity, even as it enacts it. The *mise en scène* of the film has an artificial quality, combining retro elements – ranging from mid-century modern to art deco to 1970s kitsch and 1980s prefab – with unplaceable generic props. Colour blocking expressionistically marks space in Grey's office, swathed in red, brown and green hues. The production designer

Amy Danger aimed to create two worlds, the plastic pastel world of an enforced femininity in the suburban and the domestic, and the earth and jewel toned, dark and oft Medieval arcadia of Grey's office, with its natural, 'organic' and curvilinear textures, blooming orchids in dewy terrariums, brocaded fabrics and filigreed baroque and deco patterns (Danger 2003). Lee's arrested psychic space is marked by the chromatic excess of her bedroom: a purplish-pink mausoleum to twelve-year-old girlhood (she began cutting in seventh grade), covered in fake flowers, stickers, sparkles and synthetic materials. As Estelle Noonan discusses, at home Lee occupies a zone of developmental arrest, and signifies an 'arrested movement' (2010: 146). Lee is also linked with the colour purple, a hue both ostentatious and feminine, and, as many have noted, purple is the colour of a bruise. She wears a hooded purple plastic rain cape, Riding Hood style, in her first entry into the lair of Grey's office. Positioned between realism and fairy tale, Lee oscillates from naïf to libertine, affectively juvenile yet erotically mature.

Boredom, regimentation and restriction are Lee's pleasure principle. In her interview for the secretarial position she professes her preference for 'dull work'. Lee welcomes the drudgery of office labour as much as various forms of mortification. In an early scene of humiliation-conversion, Lee benignly delivers to Grey a bag of donuts. When Grey announces he has accidentally discarded a file, Lee eagerly offers to go find it in the garbage. From his window, Grey watches in a tamped down pique as Lee pliantly and dutifully scavenges in the dumpster – comically descending, with the aplomb of slapstick, into waste to please him. When Lee returns with the rescued memos, she is asked to crawl on the floor to replenish Grey's mousetraps and sees the donuts in Grey's office trash bin. Thus humiliation is transposed into erotics, as direct expressions of care are converted into their opposite: affirmation takes the form of negation. Traversing the slippery logic of displacement – turning bad objects into erotic ones – becomes the key pleasure of the film's articulation of masochistic subjectivity.

Lee's return to the emptiness and emotional turbulence of suburban life is paired by a return to dating her meek high school boyfriend Peter (Jeremy Davies), an apex of a passive, limpid masculinity. A benign date in a laundromat café articulates the absurdity of Peter as romantic object, in the tradition of the romantic comedy a foil that amplifies the desired object. The spinning machines, and the mechanised domestic labour they signal index an unimaginative, puerile, if stable courtship. They titter like teenagers about Peter's tightly-whitey underwear and constrained testicles as steely Grey spies from a distance.

Grey, who has also spied Lee readying to cut herself as well as the neat row of Band-Aids on her leg, offers her a more enervating option. The film insists on Lee's capacity to be refashioned by the conversion of the private

pain of 'self-harm' to an aestheticised pain in relation, understood as submission in masochism, a more diffuse impact left on the flesh and not cut into the skin. Grey's forbidding of Lee's cutting – his demands that 'you will never ever cut yourself again' – coincides with their embarking on a regimen of spanking and more elaborate forms of submission. Lee's internal drive shifts to the unexpected conditions of an externalised force, the discipline of Grey and his regimen of correction and punitive valuation. The conversion to a less 'harmful' mode of sex play in the form of BDSM can be construed as a therapeutic salve to Lee's developmental arrest and her anachronistic recurrence to the space of Oedipal trauma, marking a shift from self-pleasure in pain to a pleasure in a regimented dyad, the incipient couple.

The first encounter that marks their entry into dominance and submission secures the necessity of work to the scene of shared desire. As Restuccia has noted, the workspace is the field of their contractless SM arrangement (2004). The formal structure and specific activities of Lee's labour – typing, filing, sharpening pencils, answering phones, making coffee – becomes the scaffolding for Grey's punishment, which requires actionable errors and temporal interruptions through castigation. In this sense, *Secretary* partakes in the formal logic of masochism as analysed by Gilles Deleuze, in which the scene of subjection is contingent on suspense and waiting, forms of temporal dilation that emerge out of the masochist's rituals of repetition (1991).

The first proper spanking scene between Lee and Grey establishes a system of interaction, a logic of correction. Lee is told by Grey to bend over the desk, and repeatedly read the errant letter. Her reading is punctuated by the crescendo of Grey's slaps on her ass, as he stands behind her. The reading of the letter parodies forms of penance and ritualised confession. Further, the attention to the product of Lee's labour is the temporal scaffolding of the punishment, an arrest of the time of the office, in which the text of the correspondence structurally defines the terms of repetition and non-productivity. The bustle of the workplace stops, as the suspended time of masochism, its scenes of dilated anticipation and styled torture, overlap with an arrested labour time, in fact parodying labour into the excessive performative 'work' of discipline.

The most intensive site of discipline's lexical abstraction, in the film's stage setting of Lee's masochistic pleasure, becomes the typing error, circled by Grey with a thick red Sharpie marker to accentuate the mistake and its necessary physical 'correction' in the corporeal register. The transposition of modes of *correction* accentuates the sexual drama as a scene of writing, as Eugenie Brinkema insightfully elaborates: it moves from the striking of the page with the typewriter keys to the violent circling of the mistake to the infliction of a mark on the body of Lee, all indexical registers of bruising that efface the secreted and solitary act of writing on the body *as* self-cutting that they seem to replace and substitute (2009: 136).

The aesthetic of subjection and humiliation that the film constructs also produces the blazing iconicity of the accoutrements to pleasure – the red pen, the typed page, the pencils, the typing table, the voice through the intercom. These objects, these ‘instruments’, in their totemic capacity, vis-à-vis Lee’s subjectivity, hold the strongest charge in the film: they assert the principle of desire’s *displacement* onto an impediment or obstacle, that is at the very heart of the erotic – sadomasochistic or otherwise. The purple bruise on her ass that Lee carefully examines through the mirror is a mark of a different order; it is someone else’s work on her body, as it tethers her to the law and rule(s) of Grey, a different memorialisation on the skin that leaves no (lasting) marks. The typed page is conflated with a flash of vision – Lee’s subjectivity is articulated directly after the spanking through a flash cut, a white-out – as if a loss of consciousness, a formal shattering.

Lee’s desire, her escalation of wished for punishment also leads to the rebuff and *détente* in the film’s latter half, as the film unabashedly lurches into romantic comedy. Moving past the story time that marks the film’s opening, the film transitions into a demand, made now by Lee, for a romantic bond. Lee senses Grey’s fear of attachment – he has put his red pens away and sent her back to her old desk. Upping the ante, Lee sends Grey a ‘love letter’ – a dead worm in an envelope on an empty page. An intrusive signifier from outside the order of the office, the worm is plucked from the world outside and from an organic source external to the styled ‘nature’, the orchids and curlicues, of Grey’s pruned, coiffed and managed interior space. The dead worm is a multiple figure – of shame, of disgust, of formless matter, and of a writhing vibrancy that exceeds the inanimate world that Grey can control through his discipline and organisation. Exceeding the litany of corporeal contingencies that Grey aims to correct – Lee’s sniffing, her tongue in the corner of her mouth when she types, her hair twirling, the smell of her feet – the dead worm is a provocation of another order, triggering severe disruption. Lee is summoned into the office, told to pull down her pantyhose and underwear. Grey proceeds to masturbate on her back – this scene is shot with both characters facing the camera, Lee bent over, Grey jerking off over her bare ass, with cuts to close-ups of Grey’s face and Lee’s flickering facial response, as she registers the impact of Grey’s orgasm, his involuntary admission of feeling.

This sexual event and Grey’s shame, the film imputes, leads to his cruel firing of Lee, using the same lines of her entry interview as an exit strategy. The same exact questions are asked, a repetition of probing, inappropriately lecherous inquiries: Are you married? Are you pregnant? Do you live alone? As Lee packs up her box of possessions, we flash back to the previous fired secretary who Lee glanced on her first entry into Grey’s office. Thus, Lee insists that she be considered not one in a *series*, but a romantic singularity. The imperatives of rom-com take over, pitching the film towards high farce.

The contrast between Lee's masochistic romantic idealism, her longing for restitution, and the vulgarity of the quotidian sphere of American suburbia and its diminished aspirations is sharp – she is subject to self-help, bad dates with incompetent sadomasochists, a return to dating Peter, the ordinary vulgarities of the world, and inevitably a marriage proposal from the inadequate romantic object.

In the climactic sit-in and hunger strike, Lee on first tryout of Peter's mother's wedding dress, alights from the scene of her impending marriage to demand the affections of Grey, to prove her mettle as his mate *and* his erotic property. Grey initially refuses, protesting 'we can't do this seven days a week, 24 hours a day'. Lee's response is 'why not?' Grey's invocation of the limits of labour time and the workday is significant, as it implies the necessity of the office for their arrangement, even as it suggests that for him desire is delimited by a finite economy. Lee, however, persists in the idealisation of a boundless sphere of immeasurable possibility entrenched in a love relation. Grey's role as the worker in Lee's masochistic fantasy is exposed; he now subject to *her* law of desire, to her sense of the infinite time of submission.

In the final test, Grey commands that Lee sit at his desk, palms down feet to the ground without moving, until his return. The scene becomes a stage of social reprobation and media attention. In a series of visitations from former secretaries, Grey's ex-wife, Lee's father, her psychiatrist, a priest, a feminist activist, Peter's family, the film imagines its own publics for its staging of female masochistic dispossession, parodying and pre-empting the terms of its own potential reception. Grey returns three days later to 'rescue' Lee from his own law and to imbue her abjected saintliness with redemptive care – after she has pissed on the wedding dress, signifier of normative coupling, and grown shaky and catatonic. The sex that ensues is swathed in a soft-core romanticism, as Grey bathes and caresses Lee, kissing her extremities and scarred parts, newly visible, in an act of romantic recuperation – no doubt the least 'sexy' part of the film (Belmont 2012: 329). Lee is attended to on a green grass bed, as if such 'natural' signifiers have the power to literally naturalise the couple's hitherto 'pathological' or deviant sexual relation into one now palliative and mutual, securing a fantasy of soon to be wedded heterocentric bliss.

Thus the perverse normativity of the film's 'happy ending' articulates a redirection of the spectator's desire through and against the generic conventions of the romantic comedy. Do we read the film's ending as a reaffirmation of the masochistic relation, or its effacement, now ensconced in and protected by the architecture of privacy? Is this an ironic deflation of erotic aspiration and masochistic idealism, despite the claim of Lee's evident satisfaction? Frida Beckman and Charlie Blake suggest a bit of both in that '*Secretary* somewhat remarkably performs the double feat of both normalising a sexual pathology and of pathologising a social normality within the frame of a Hollywood

romance' (2009: 4). Noonan in a parallel reading indicates that the script of heteronormative romance and the terms of sadomasochism are in a chiasmic dialogue, underwriting yet simultaneously undermining each other (2010: 149–52).

The parody of the stay-at-home wife is overlaid by an assertion of the home as perennial dungeon, again a normative relation literalised into ironic performativity. Earlier tropes of discipline are transposed – as the blank, white page, yet to be typed, translates to the clean white bedding in the couple's antiseptic suburban bedroom. The site of power's staged contest and the theatricalised labour of its maintenance move from the textual to the material, from the boardroom to the bedroom, and from the abstracted encryption of sexual acts within the language of office drudgery to the 'appropriate' space of their enactment. Sex, kinky or not, happens in beds after all, the film seems to enjoin. In the morning after they have carefully made the bed together, Edward leaves for work. Lee, wearing a men's oxford shirt, removes a cockroach from her breast pocket, placing it on the bed. We recognise the substitution of signs: from typo to worm to cockroach. The bed is now the new slippery site of 'sex/work': office labour is displaced onto domestic labour, and transgressing a clean house evinces punishment. Invoking the worm communiqué, this is another engineered ploy by the submissive to be punished for a transgression of order. The 'good secretary' becomes the 'good homemaker', itself a statement that demands the irony of quotation marks to register its doubled cliché. What happens to the sense of the punitive order of dominance as contingent, unpredictable, fundamental in the violence of surprise, and suspense? In an inversion of the eroticisation of workplace banality, the banality of domestic bliss is by coy defilement eroticised. Why for many viewers does this scene ring hollow? Why do we want a return to the office?

Another lingering question is summoned by the last shots, as we see Edward's departure for work, without Lee as his dutiful employee. His car exits out into the traffic of an orderly suburban street. A crane shot from above evokes Sirkian melodramas' beginnings and ends. Conjuring the visual codes of the melodrama, the film's ending raises the spectre of naïveté and knowingness, in the certain resolution of this fairy tale of romantic liberalism, in the finding of one's 'natural' self and of love as an acquisition or possession of its chosen object. The final shot shows Lee's face, as she looks off after her husband's departing car. Her gaze shifts to address the camera directly. A shot that insists on the fundamental significance of character to the film, it leaves us with an immediate gaze and an acknowledgment of the apparatus. What does Lee's gaze portend? We can take it as the satisfaction of desire in the acquisition of the love object, or in contrast, the eradication of romance as futural ideal, the stripping of the terms of the fiction, hearkening to the distanciations of modernist art cinema. The supplement of Lee's singularity is also what Brinkema

and others have noted is the danger of Lee's solitude, her subversive relation to herself. Is the smile Lee's happiness, a state possessed, possessable, or her basic solitariness preserved? There is something chiasmic about this ending that speaks to the limits and the potential of masochism itself as an ironic form.

How does this gaze measure against the brief moment of direct address in the opening when Lee faces the camera, in bondage, as she closes the door to Grey's office? The opening scene, retroactively visualises a time in the middle, a middle time. It signals the erotic apex of the relation between Grey and Lee, and perhaps 'answers' the question of the 'unsatisfying' ending. What comes before and what comes after in story time pales in comparison to the suspended energy of the office dungeon, and the temporal arrest that those scenes of humiliation hold, in their theatricalisation of the power of forepleasure, their hyperbolisation of punitive restraint, their exposure of the fictions that undergird sexual and romantic relationality. The 'unsatisfying' ending, even as it affirms and naturalises Lee's character, is also testament to the work of the film to make seductively clear the pleasure of the masochist's 'middle time', of waiting, suspense and anticipation. *Secretary's* intervention is its figuration of female subjectivity and the flushes, affects and temporalities of structures of restraint, with sincerity and risk, but without judgement. It is this commitment to the risky truths of female subjectivity that *Secretary* hazards and that have made it an elusive object for indie film history.

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Figure 17 Adrienne Shelly, Keri Russell, Cheryl Hines and Nathan Fillion in *Waitress* (2007)