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**The erotization of leisure
or the escape from everyday intimate life**

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Abstract

On the basis of an ethnographic strategy and individual-scale sociology, we analyse the organizing principles of the social sexual relationships of a couple living a multiple-partner relationship – by engaging in swing activities with other couples or finding more or less temporary ‘boyfriends or girlfriends’. Multiple-partner relationships are eroticized and colonize the sexual imaginary but remain under-theorized. Our analytical interest is in change and normative processes in sexuality; in other words, in the relationship between routine and escape attempts with regard to intimate life, on the one hand, and eroticism, on the other. Stereotypically, there is a section of our lives where we may feel temporally removed from monotony, this is sex. Our erotic and intimate life becomes important when it is cultivated as a free area. But apparently transgressive practices must obey more rigid codes of conduct. The erotic scenario of a multiple-partner relationship organizes socially constructed plots for sexual behaviour and expression, turning out to be a ritualistic and controlled dimension of the everyday life of repetition.

Key words: Multiple-partner relationship, erotic scenario, routine, fantasy, normativity.

Introduction

When carrying out field research on escort-girls and their customers, I frequently find myself in two main sites, one is virtual and the other physical. The first consists of the exploration of internet sites hosting advertisements for escort girls as a first step towards contacting these girls; the second, the physical one, is constituted of strip-clubs, where it is possible to find male customers.

At the start of the research, I soon found that a significant part of the ads hosted by these thematic internet sites were posted by couples in search of sexual experiences with others: couples, single men or women, groups of couples, etc. Moving from the virtual to the physical field, I found that strip-clubs do not have exclusively male custom. Men and women come together to strip-clubs; couples pay for special performances (lap and table dances), with both the men and women interacting with the professional dancers.

If intimate life can become obsessive and ritualistic, becoming another dimension of the everyday life of repetition, we can imagine these erotic practices as a form of leisure that seeks excitement by looking at others' bodies or sexually interacting with others.

Are these sexual practices only a leisure activity or are they a specific way of living intimate lives and sexuality? Could they be an escape attempt from the everyday intimate life, creating an alternative erotic reality and constituting an orgiastic normativity?

A couple's sex life can be a universe of escape, giving room to fantasy, desire, and dreams. For these couples, sexuality is, at least temporarily, cultivated as a free area and regarded as a portion of life in which they can feel out of the routine. It is deliberately set off in time (evenings, nights, weekends, etc). It is segregated in space (home, bedroom, hotel, bed, etc). It is often located in places deliberately set aside and especially designed for it (bars, pubs, clubs, strip-clubs, certain hotel rooms, swing-clubs, etc), thus disrupting the idea of the privacy of sexual experience: erotic experiences are lived by couples in strip-clubs, swing-clubs, hotel rooms or in the free flow of the internet. It is stage-set (candles, music, sexy clothes, etc – like strip-club or swing-club settings) and involves the use of psychotropic substances like alcohol and certain drugs, creating a special atmosphere, distinct from that of everyday life.

This is a dimension of fantasy where the couples organize socially constructed images or plots for the sexual behaviour and expression that they wish to accomplish. It is a living fantasy, involved in other aspects of life or with everyday rationality. Erotic reality, being lived by couples in strip-clubs, swing-practices or on the internet and subjecting sex to an implicit logic, to a regime of constitutive norms. Body, performance and pleasure are the main laws of the erotic reality: the body determines the site, the object and the subject on which, with which and for which erotic sexuality is engaged in. Performance and pleasure both concern the aim of erotic sexuality– to enjoy erotic pleasure. Lovers obey the norm of being hedonist, they submit to the rule of libidinous reason. They set and accept a regime of pleasure: sex involves the participants in adhering to a formal sequence of activities leading to the expected orgasm (understood as the moment of freedom).

We need to understand more about the ordinary day-to-day patterns of sexual relations through which people live their lives. Common sense is flooded with the idea that mundane life is all about routine and repetition. However, hiding in the shadows of apparently monotonous lives are all the attempts to resist and disrupt this (Pais, 2002). It is important to understand the place of transgressive or escape attempts, to find and interpret the transgressive dimension of everyday life, namely the escape routes made possible in everyday sexual life. Only by knowing more about both normative and non-normative sexualities experienced every day can we understand the novel and the subversive – locating sexuality within everyday life, as part of the fabric of the routine of day-to-day social life, as enmeshed with other non-sexual aspects of our lives (Jackson, 2008).

Why research erotic sexuality and erotic reality? First, because it is there. Second, because it seems self-evident, once you are conscious of the fact that erotic sex is a highly privileged site in which to search for keys to the larger realm of sociability (Weitman, 1999).

Method, including some relevant field notes

After this surprise in the field, I took a step forward to satisfy my sociological curiosity. I decided to face this emerging – in this context, at least for me – phenomenon. At this point the question was: how is it possible to get in touch with these

couples? Keeping it simple was right thing to do. I contacted several of the couples who had posted an advertisement on the internet, letting them know of my academic interest. It took a while until one of the couples answered my e-mail, but they were very receptive and were willing to participate. And so Maria (female) and João (male) became my informants.

Since these people appeared as a line of research parallel to my project on escort girls and their customers I had no previous idea about how to deal with them and what questions would be most pertinent, and so on; once again, keeping it simple was the answer for these field work anxieties. Faithful to an ethnographic strategy I decided to hold informal conversations with them; these unstructured conversations produced clearer information on the why and the how of their sexual lifestyle: their motivations and the way they manage an 'open relationship' (both emotionally and practically) as individuals and as a couple. If those conversations were rich in information, they were even more important for the interaction game played between me (a researcher) and them (the objects of study), producing the necessary trust to keep the research alive. After a couple of encounters, with the minimum necessary trust established between us, I was surprised when they gave me a digital file whose contents were extensive and important: the history of all their conversations over the internet - the history of their talks using msn.

I still wonder what their real intentions were in giving me this file. Were they annoyed and bored with our conversations and this was just a way to get rid of me? Or, on the contrary, did they think this was important material with which a sociologist could try to understand this sexual and emotional lifestyle? I do not know the answers to these questions but, anyway, the information they gave me was fundamentally important raw material for the exploratory analysis I carry out here.

So I literally entered this world by reading their experiences. A kind of voyeuristic sociology in a double sense: firstly, I was looking at an intimate dimension of João and Maria's lives, discovering their most secret and private sexual fantasies and desires and even having access to people with whom they eventually had sexual encounters in the search for those desires and pleasures. Secondly, because I was overwhelmed by this information, I almost confined my sociological interpretation to the written conversations they had had over the internet. With this decision, I put myself in the shoes of the typical voyeur, not by feeling pleasure in watching the experiences of

others but because my awareness, thus my analytical power, regarding this erotic reality became limited by the experiences revealed by Maria and João.

As Maria and João became my eyes, my senses and my body in this erotic reality, it is of primary importance to introduce them to you briefly. They were both born in Lisbon and still live there; Maria is 28 and João 29 years old; they were both born into upper middle class families. In addition, they both have degrees and have invested in post-graduate studies: Maria is finishing her PhD in philosophy and João his master's in architecture.

They have lived together for five years. There are no children. In 2005 they decided to 'open their relationship and meet other people' by engaging in swing activities with other couples or finding more or less temporary 'boyfriends or girlfriends'. They do not want to jeopardize their relationship or their love for each other, so their individual quest for sexual pleasure and emotional gain is complemented by always being honest with each other.

Methodologically, this represents the practice of sociology on an individual scale (Lahire, 2005). Because reality is not available all at once, in adapting the idea of a carnal sociology (Merleau-Ponty, 2002) and bearing in mind the Simmelian approach to social reality, on the basis of small details and pieces of the social world (Axelrod, 1994), this approach opens up the possibility of understanding the social as it is individualized (embodied). That is, the social refracted through an individual body that goes through different social institutions, groups, power fields and struggles, providing an understanding of the social reality in its embodied and internalized form (Lahire, 2005).

By the nature of the object-subjects analysed and in line with the materiality of the object (Fernandes, 2002a; 2002b) it is important to shift and interconnect the different scales of analysis, producing a continuum between societal-level and individual-scale sociology. Following Schutz (1943), I dare say that this continuous shift is always possible in sociological interpretation. Even more, it is in this moving process that it is possible to activate accumulated knowledge and theories and, in a dialogue with the objective reality emerging from the field, produce new theorization.

Routinized sexuality and escape attempts

For common sense discourses there is a section of our lives where we may feel temporally removed from the daily round, an area where we may engage in some identity work without the risk of becoming entangled by routine and monotony. It implies a great deal of fantasy and of searching for ways to escape the routine This is sex.

In contemporary society, where it seems impossible to escape the fatality of choosing, deciding, and building our lives; where the self becomes sexualized and the intimate and erotic dimensions of life occupy a node in the self-reflexive identity process (Weeks, 2007) – in such a context, we find the specialness of sex, its status as extraordinary, as somehow separable from everyday practices and routines; a source of ecstasy that lifts us beyond the mundane, but also a uniquely problematic element, liable to provoke disgust and anxiety. We must relate the extraordinariness of sex to the ways in which the illusion of escape that sex offers can, itself, provoke anxiety (Jackson and Scott, 2004).

Although sex may become part of the routine of life – the bed at night time –, it is persistently seen as an activity in which we may be ourselves or get away from everyday life. But what aspects of sexual activity allow us to describe it as so special? The behaviour looks perfectly compatible with other aspects of routine life. It is extremely difficult to view sex as unrelated to the consciousness characterizing our involvement in the world.

Sex involves the participants in a formal sequence of activities; there are stages through which the partners go, following the basic pattern of foreplay, intercourse and orgasm. It is orgasm that constitutes the end of the activity, the product created by the combined work of the participants (Oerton and Phoenix, 2001; Cohen and Taylor, 1998). Failure to achieve orgasm and experience pleasure is a fault in the process (Oerton and Phoenix, 2001). The measurement of success in sex is increasingly regarded as dependent upon the number of orgasms achieved by both partners: the pleasure experienced, and the emotions and sensations felt in and through the body. Accounts of heterosexual activity have typically reported sex to be highly patterned (Oerton and Phoenix, 2001). Script theorists have described a sequence of material events: ‘kissing, tongue kissing, manual and oral caressing of the body, particularly the female breasts, manual and oral contacts with both the female and male genitalia,

usually in this sequence, followed by intercourse in a number of positions' (Gagnon and Simon, 1987: 2). Coitus (and presumably [male] orgasm, which is not mentioned) is the endpoint in this sequence. The pattern forms a cultural resource for *how (hetero)sex happens*.

Scripts are involved in the learning and organizing of the sequence of sexual acts, a way people give meaning to their intimate experiences and become able to recollect those experiences into the reflexive process of self-construction (Plummer, 1996 and 1997); and, before that, scripts are involved in all the seduction process, decoding novel situations and setting the limits on sexual responses. There are no natural sexual feelings or natural sexual situations, there are internalized scripts making sexual experiences natural.

The sense of *déjà vu* in sexual activities derives from script recognition: with the scenery reconstructed, the plot and the parts played are fundamentally the same. Because there are a limited number of sexual scripts available, people may find that these scripts are well-known and over-practised, functioning more like constraints than facilitators of the erotic experience.

Repetition can become the dominant feature of our intimate lives; the sense of the repetitive may invade the paramount reality so that we are unable to engage in any action that brings us near repetition (Cohen and Taylor, 1998). If a sense of routine is frequent in our expression of dissatisfaction with life, then the achievement of novelty is seen as a form of happiness. The search for novelty is often the only way people find to put themselves ahead of reality, to absent themselves from the involvement in routine. Therefore, in a societal context where life becomes a reflexive bricolage process and where sexuality is plasticised (Giddens, 1992; Weeks, 1995 and 2007), erotic and intimate life only becomes important when it is cultivated as a free area, when it is regarded as a portion of life in which we can feel free of the routine of the rest of existence, when it is accompanied by feelings of excitement and delight. It is dominated by fantasy.

Our lives are run through with (hidden) fantasies. Fantasy is ever-present in our lives in the form of daydreams, reveries, castles in the air, etc. But fantasy is more than imagination; it is not simply the representation of objects not present but a representation which may be so out of this world as to be incompatible with paramount reality. It directs the flow of imagination and conjures up territories in an alternative

world – projecting the activity and the self into something quite different (Cohen and Taylor, 1998).

Because battles against reality rarely take the form of frontal assaults, they are more often interruptions in the flow of life, interludes, temporary breaks, glimpses of other realities (Cohen and Taylor, 1998). In this particular case, an erotic reality. It is in this interlude for escaping repetition in intimate life through fantasizing and creating scenarios where those fantasies become (temporarily) real that we can start decoding and interpreting João and Maria's decision to 'open their relationship and meet other people' by engaging in swing activities with other couples or by finding more or less temporary 'boyfriends or girlfriends'.

Multiple-partner relationships are eroticized and they colonize the sexual imaginary (meaning both image and imagination) but remain under-theorized. Pornographic films frequently present images of multiple-partner sex, most often of multiple women or a man with several women. Rather than challenging gendered and sexual roles or enlarging the sexual sphere of women, these scenes actually reinforce heteronormativity (Jenefsky and Miller 1998). These highly sexualized images and the concomitant under-theorization fail to capture the lived experiences of the people, both men and women, who actually engage in multiple partner relationships (Sheff, 2005). Polyamory is a relationship in which people have multiple romantic, sexual, and/or affective partners, with the emphasis on long-term, emotionally intimate relationships. It is distinguished from adultery by its focus on honesty and (ideally) its full disclosure of the network of sexual relationships to all who participate in or are affected by them. Both men and women have access to additional partners (Sheff, 2005, 2006).

The specific kind of multiple-partner relationships in which Maria and João engage (both as a couple and individually) represent a way of evading and switching the main sexual script. Departing from a sexual script dominated by heteronormativity and monogamy, Maria and João change the organization of sexual acts, invent new acts and responses, and create new social sexual roles to play in different social worlds and with different partners. Such improvisations occur within master scripts: partners return to the basic plot after the symbolic excursion, satisfied with the demonstration that their sexual activity is more than that which they assume is determined for the great majority.

João: It all started with a shared sexual fantasy, pillow talk... We both wanted to see each other having pleasure with different partners, but it took a while until we decided to swing, to swap partners with other couples.

Maria: You [João] took the first step in that direction. You were the first to search the net for sites and forums about that... and you were the one that started almost all the contacts with other couples on the net...

João: Yes, that's true...

(...)

Maria: This [swinging] opened my eyes... I felt more self confident, more confident about my body and my sexual performance and all that... and I suddenly felt inside a glass cage, I felt 'there are so many things to be lived, so many experiences and sensations that I'd like to feel and experience, I can't be imprisoned in this relationship [with João], with this man [João]'... you see. He [João] had never done anything to make me feel that way, it was something social, I don't know, this idea of commitment to monogamy... it is a powerful constraint, it constrains our life experiences and what we get from life, what we learn from it.

João: I think it was different for me... I always had those typical male sexual fantasies, always wanted to experience sex with more than one woman at the same time, a ménage, and all that, do you see? But I was afraid to share it with Maria, I was afraid of her reaction, that she would become jealous, do you see?

(...)

We talked about our growing fantasies and our individual desires and that's how and why we started this thing... we don't like to say that it is a lifestyle, because this is not the centre of our lives as individuals or as a couple. It is just something else we can do.

Maria: Yes, we always talk about it. We are completely honest with each other because we love each other and don't want to lose that. Our life plans are to be together, the other stuff is just that, other stuff and experimentation.

(...)

João: Pleasure is our goal in this, sexual pleasure and something more than that...

Maria: And this pleasure is linked to novelty, diversity, fun and all that...

João and Maria, unstructured conversation

The fantasies put into practice by Maria and João through their sexual lifestyle assume different functions. The fantasies experienced work out as starters and maintainers (Cohen and Taylor, 1998). A starter fantasy is one that enables them to begin experiencing an emotion and register a perception by importing new elements into a particular segment of reality that they are facing. The typical starter fantasy takes place in the sexual realm when seduction begins, or during the sexual activity promoting an orgasm.

A maintainer fantasy involves either continuing the starter fantasy into the activity itself or struggling to get through an activity by using fantasy. These fantasies are mind games. They go beyond most starters; they are not just mental rehearsals of unplayed scripts, but accompaniments to normal life scripts. When we use fantasies in this way none of our fellow players need to know about them (Cohen and Taylor, 1998). Maintainer fantasies then make the present enjoyable or more tolerable by transporting the self to a reality of delight, to a different modality of experience. This is more self-conscious and controlled than schizophrenic dissociation from reality: there is a split from the real world, but this split appears to be manageable. It is a kind of self-contained trip into another world (Cohen and Taylor, 1998).

The sense of being somewhere else or forgetting the world outside during these fantasies is often so acute that these fantasies can be transformers. Reality has changed. An escape has been made. But we always return. We can find a script to get the fantasy working within our paramount reality. By living this erotic reality – a fantasy made real – Maria and João produce escape attempts from their daily lives, attempting to escape from their repetitive sexual life and promoting diversity, novelty and new emotional and sexual experiences. They end up producing an eroticized version of leisure as their leisure time is somehow occupied with and invested in the production of such intimate and erotic activities. Or, conversely, it is possible to say they turn their erotic lives into a leisure activity by giving themselves a break from routine and producing an alternative erotic reality where hedonist values such as the quest for fun and pleasure are 'tops'. This is a dimension of fantasy where couples organize socially constructed images or plots for sexual behaviour and self-expression that they wish to accomplish. It is a living fantasy involved in other aspects of life; it becomes a dimension of the real world, lived separately.

Erotic sexuality / Erotic reality

What is erotic sexuality? A kind of sexuality engaged in by lovers who love one another, at least in the course of their sexual and emotional activities. It differs from sexuality tout court in that it entails more, much more than mere copulation. Erotic sexuality is literally the process of ‘making it’: it can last for hours. It begins hours, even days, before the lovers engage in actual sexual intercourse – initial attraction, flirting and seduction games (Weitman, 1999).

Erotic sexuality is a separate, distinct reality in the Schutzian sense – constituting an erotic reality. It is a reality that lovers shift into to engage in their erotic activity and experience their erotic feelings and then shift out of to slip back into their daily lives (Weitman, 1999). Erotic reality is extraordinary in that it experiences everything more keenly, vividly, deeply; it is a reality in which people not only experience something but they generate experiences. Erotic reality is a state from which participants can retain, as they return to their everyday lives, lingering memories of a different, extraordinary reality, where they felt more alive (Weitman, 1999).

This is a living fantasy, an escape attempt from everyday sexual life. Fantasies may break down standard everyday life, but fantasies have their own vocabulary, grammar, rules and norms that must be followed. In this particular context, fantasies operate in facilitating or supportive ways that, far from disrupting paramount reality, may actually have a conservative or regulating relationship with it, accommodating the self to monotonous or routine tasks (Cohen and Taylor, 1998).

Erotic reality is a social construction. The intimate life of the couple can be a universe of escape, giving room to fantasy, desire, and dreams. For these couples sexuality is, at least temporarily, cultivated as a free area, regarded as a portion of life which they can feel is removed from the routine. It is deliberately set off in time (evenings, nights, weekends, etc). It is segregated in space (home, bedroom, hotel, bed, etc). It is often located in places deliberately set aside and especially designed for it (bars, pubs, clubs, strip-clubs, certain hotel rooms, swing-clubs, etc), disrupting the idea of the privacy of sexual experience: erotic experiences are lived by couples in strip-clubs, swing-clubs, hotel rooms or in the free flow of the internet. It is stage-set (candles, music, sexy clothes, etc – like the strip-club or swing-club settings) and involves the use of psychotropic substances like alcohol and certain drugs, creating a special atmosphere, distinct from that of everyday life.

Erotic reality subjects love-making to an implicit logic of its own, to a regime of constitutive laws and rules which, if violated, withdraws the lovers from erotic reality and returns them to their everyday practices and realities (Weitman, 1999).

Law of seduction

If it is true that Maria and João want to have new opportunities for sexual and emotional experimentation and have different sexual partners, it is also true that this does not mean that they want it on any terms. They have clear selection criteria for their possible sexual partners. These criteria are organized into an intuitive selection process; a special selection process because it depends on seduction. These games are put into practice both in the virtual and the physical interactive (face-to-face) realms of sexual reality. There are three main stages in this selection-by-seduction process:

Stage one - attraction: initial conversation, using formulas to get to know each other. This is an important filter. Most of the contacts made by Maria and João (over the internet or in other places such as clubs and bars) do not go beyond this stage. At this point three filters are activated:

The first is objective and visual and mainly has to do with physical attraction. In their own words:

“Let’s be honest, physical attraction is fundamental, without it there’s nothing we can do.”

Maria and João, internet chat with singles/a single person? and couples

When asked what kind of couples and singles they are looking for (physical and bodily appearance), the answer is very clear:

“About our age, slim, fit, sensual... we don’t like fat people. We like sensual people like us.”

Maria and João, internet chat with singles and couples

In the virtual scenario of the internet this criterion must be clearly disclosed but when the attraction is (or is not) going to take place in a face-to-face interaction, for

instance in a bar or disco or at the workplace, it becomes an intuitive and automatic process, almost as fast as a glance.

“(...) [in a club] I just flirt with who I want and if I feel somehow attracted to the guy, if I feel attracted, I talk to him... I start flirting...”

Maria

“I had an affair with a colleague once... I always felt attracted to her, from the time I first saw her... we flirted for a while before we got together...”

João

The second filter is mostly activated in internet chats, ‘What are you looking for?’ With this question Maria and João¹ filter out two types of couple and single man or woman with whom they do not want to interact: the ‘sex hunter or fast-sex type’ and the ‘community or lifestyle type’. When they write, “We don’t like fast sex and we don’t like sex hunters”, they always have to explain what they mean by that:

“I don’t like... we don’t like people who, in the first chat, start rushing things, they want to meet us fast and have sex fast... we are not into that. The fast-sex brigade and sex-hunters just want one more fuck.”

Maria, unstructured conversation

“We are not in a sexual hurry! Sex just for sex is no fun... well it is fun in itself, but if you are with someone just for that, if you don’t get to know the person a little more, if it is only a physical thing, that’s fast sex. We don’t like that because it becomes grotesque and mechanical and you don’t learn anything in that relationship because there is no relationship, it is only bodies in action...”

João, unstructured conversation

The other person must be interested in you, interested in knowing you...

¹ This is not an exclusive procedure of my informants; as I was reading their conversations over the internet I understood this was a common filter for many of the couples and singles (both men and women) that Maria and João talked to on the internet. NB: In this text, I use the term ‘singles’, as employed in the discourse of swingers, among others.

Couple A: Do you go to X-Club [a swing club]?

Maria and João: No.

Maria and João: We don't go to swing clubs, it's not our style. We like to meet other people in normal places, bars, restaurants, discos... we like to keep things private and discreet...

Couple A: Do you have anything against swing clubs? And people who go there?

Maria and João: No, we prefer other places, the places we usually go to... in normal places there is no rush for sex, and we like to get to know people and people to get to know us... Checking up on empathy and attraction is easier somewhere cosy, where you can talk without pressure... if we like each other we go a step further...

(...)

Maria and João: People who go there [the X-Club] all know each other, they have this community. We are not into that. It's not our lifestyle, this is not the centre of our lives...we are not just this..."

Maria and João, internet chat with couples

The third filter is objective and produces structural information. After a little small talk, Maria and João always introduce what they call 'job interview talk or job interview questions'. Some of the most important and ever-present questions are about what the others do for a living, where they live, etc. In fact, Maria and João ask what we call characterization questions. These questions allow them to create a better portrait of the people they are talking to, and their social, cultural and economic background. Questions about their jobs immediately show the level of education attained and questions about their home base (Where are you from? Where do you live?) can reveal something about the way people live their lives.

This filter reveals an endogamic strategy in the flirting and selection process. That process and the seduction games only go further if there is a minimum common background. If there is a huge cleft between type of occupation or level of education between Maria and João and the other couple, the personal and erotic interest stops there. Because 'this is not just sex or fast sex, we must build some kind of relationship'. Finally, the fourth filter is more subjective and interpretative. Here the topic of conversation shifts to leisure and free-time activities. At this point, Maria and João are interested in knowing the other people's hidden interests, what they like to do outside

the sphere of work and sex. This information is interpreted as a way of portraying cultural backgrounds.

It is possible to identify the kind of activities or cultural backgrounds that are most appreciated: they are patterned by an experimentalist or hedonist position towards life and the world. So it is not surprising that the most valued activities and interests are travel and both the visual and performing arts (from cinema to contemporary dance).

Stage two - seduction and flirting:

At this stage we find a mixed discourse: on the one hand talk becomes progressively more sexually explicit and, on the other, the flirting depends on a real show of interest in the others, beside sex, i.e. an interest in what they do in their daily life and free-time activities. The flirting stage depends on showing an interest in really knowing the people.

We witness the creation of an illusion of conquest. It is not a simulation of sexual pleasure, but the creation of an apparent reality where the other party is invited to flirt and to seduce and conquer you. An illusion that operates before sexual interaction but that goes on even after that moment.

In this context it seems pertinent to activate Simmel's idea of coquetterie (Simmel, 2004). For the coquette, the fundamental thing in the seduction process is the continuous shift between acceptance and negation, simultaneously suggesting yes and no to possible intimate and erotic scenarios. All definitive decisions put an end to seduction. When one gets near a decision or a definitive action, this is immediately compensated by an opposite act (Simmel, 2004). This is the art of seduction. Teasing and creating and maintaining desire are the aims of this game that Maria and João play with other couples and singles.

Stage three: setting a date.

Let us hear Maria and João. They are most eloquent in explaining this stage.

“We like to meet people here [on the internet], chat a little, get to know each other a little and then, if there is empathy, we set a date. There is nothing like a face-to-face conversation.”

Maria and João, internet chat

“Maria and João: (...) If there is total empathy between us, if we feel confident, we take a step forward...”

Couple B: Do you take a step forward on the same date?

Maria and João: Why not?!

Couple B: Where do you go?

Maria and João: We like to keep it very discreet and intimate, we prefer you to come to our place.”

Internet chat

Law of the body

The erotic body is the site, subject and object of erotic sexuality. It is the agent of erotic reality. The law of the body determines the site, object and subject on which, with which and for which erotic sexuality is engaged in (Weitman, 1999).

“Ohhhhhhhh! What a great body! [smile]”

Maria, internet chat with another man

“You’re really sexy! You’re just perfect!”

João, internet chat with another woman

Law of pleasure

This is what erotic sexuality is all about, enjoying erotic pleasure (Weitman, 1999). Lovers in erotic reality obey one central paramount obligation, one imperative – to seek pleasure, to surrender to Eros and desire, following the role of libidinous reason (Marcuse, 1955). But this regime of pleasure is not only part of a larger escape route from sex-life and intimate life routines (part of the normalized alternative sexual script), as it is made up of more specific, tacit norms:

Erotic sex is play-like: first, lovers engage in sex acts for its own sake, for the pleasure of it; second, it is not taken seriously and so there are no strings attached (Weitman, 1999).

Pleasurable giving. In erotic sex, gift-giving (kissing, caressing, bringing one’s mate to orgasm) is itself pleasurable. Giving oneself is not sacrificial, because it is experienced intrinsically as pleasurable and it is a requisite for pleasure, the only way to break with the reality of daily life and routine sex (Weitman, 1999).

“When I’m having sex, specially if it is another partner [not João], I forget everything else, I forget the world exists, I dive deeply into the stuff that is going on... that’s the only thing that exists for the moment (...) I really free myself in those moments, I enjoy myself and feel great pleasure (...) I give myself to the other and to the moment, even more than when I’m with João, because with him there is always the routine thing... Of course I have great pleasure with João, but it’s different. In the other experiences there is the unknown and the novelty and all that exciting stuff...”

Maria

Mutuality/Reciprocity:

“João: if we are swinging it is fundamental that both of us find pleasure in it... that I find pleasure with my new partner and that Maria finds pleasure with hers (...)

Maria: Exactly! (...) When I’m with another man, by myself or when I’m swinging, it’s also important that I give him pleasure, it’s not only receiving pleasure... it is all about giving...then receiving... the important thing is to give ourselves to the moment.”

João and Maria, unstructured conversation

Heterosexual practice is not only exclusively influenced by discourses of (hetero)sexuality, but also by other wider cultural values and discourses, such as the principle of reciprocity. On the surface, reciprocal heterosex sounds like a good thing, and it is not hard to find socio-cultural evidence of a discourse promoting reciprocal (or equitable, mutual) heterosex (Braun et al., 2003). On the surface, reciprocity discourse and practices seem to enable sexual practices in which each person consider the other’s wants and needs, and space for partners to be sexually satisfied during a sexual encounter. However, I am interested in what happens when this social norm clashes with coexisting dominant discourses of heterosex and gendered sexual mores.

Mutuality does not mean equality. The social relations put into practice in erotic sexuality are not free of more structural constraints. Lovers occupy different positions in erotic sexuality/reality: their bodies embody significant gender differences. Those gender differences are materialized in sexual scripts that the participants are willing to accomplish during sexual activities in the realm of erotic reality. Mutuality does not negate asymmetry in relationships. Men and women may be differently positioned

within negotiated relationships for mutual sexual pleasure and may have different access to the products of that relationship (Thomson and Holland, 1997).

Liberating or plastic sexuality (Giddens, 1992; Jackson and Scott, 1997 and 2004), brings new constraints, as does increasing reflexivity regarding the sexual. Sex can no longer be taken for granted but, rather, must constantly be improved upon in the pursuit of perfection. And perfection has a name: pleasure. Sexual pleasure is most frequently expressed as an orgasm, so that, typically, reciprocity effectively means an exchange of orgasms (Braun et al., 2003).

“(...) some men are very difficult to please... they take a while until they reach orgasm... they give lots of work [laughs]! (...) for me it is very important to please them as they please me, with both having orgasms, (...) as a woman I would be frustrated if he didn't find sexual pleasure with me, I would feel bad... I would feel bad at sex and that's bad, that's terrible! (...)”

Maria, unstructured conversation

The ideal sexual encounter requires both partners to have an orgasm. This appears to articulate a broader cultural ‘orgasm imperative’, whereby an orgasm is seen as naturally and inherently good, something everyone should have (Potts, 2000, 2002). To be bad at sex is almost like failing as a human being (Jackson and Scott, 1997 and 2004). The new aspect of this pattern is its extension to the female sexual script, as an imperative aspect of women’s sexual behaviour and expression. For men and women alike, sexual fulfilment has come to be seen as a life-goal in itself, the key to personal happiness (Heath, 1982).

Fulfilment, however, remains a peculiarly gendered term. It is still the woman’s sexual satisfaction that requires the most effort to achieve. Following the common-sense version of how heterosex happens. Traditionally, this typically involved a range of sexual activities leading to female orgasm first, followed by coitus and male orgasm. She represented her orgasm as something that she had as a result of what he did or gave her. In contrast, his orgasm, achieved through intercourse, was not typically framed as the result of her giving. In these accounts, the man is represented as more active in the production of the orgasm – both hers and his own – than the woman. In this way, it is a subtle account of the relative passivity traditionally expected of women in heterosex (Braun et al., 2003).

This points to how ‘saturated’ heterosexual reciprocity is with unequal status. If a woman’s orgasm is ‘given’ by a man, as it is in the discourse of reciprocity, men stand to gain positive identity positions (Braun et al., 2003). Furthermore, the caring, sensitive man partaking in reciprocal heterosex is also accredited with ‘sexpertise’ (Potts, 2002), the skill of knowing how to meet the complex challenge of producing an orgasm in the female body, as well as the more straightforward task of his own orgasm.

If we say that her not reaching orgasm would mean he had ‘failed’, female orgasm can be important for men not simply for reciprocity and the importance of the woman’s pleasure, but also as an indicator of his performance and skills as a lover (Duncombe and Marsden, 1996; Mansfield et al., 1992; Roberts et al., 1995).

“I have great pleasure in giving pleasure to women... I really love it!”

João, internet chat with another woman

Is the manifestation of reciprocity as an exchange of orgasms liberating in women’s experiences of heterosex? Reciprocity does seem to challenge or disrupt other conventional discourses on heterosex. A discourse of reciprocity in accounts of heterosex offers a man the position of a nice, caring, considerate lover, but not at the expense of his sexual pleasure. A woman is offered an agentic position, of taking and making pleasures (Braun et al., 2003).

Women are cast as active sexual subjects, as in the case of Maria; as potentially equal sexual partners who give and receive, equally, with their male sexual partners. Reciprocity also offers women an entitlement to pleasure-as-an-orgasm within sex, which can, at least theoretically, be sought if not achieved. Without acknowledgment of women’s entitlement to sexual pleasure, the basis for reciprocity within heterosex is meaningless.

In these ways, a discourse of reciprocity can be seen to challenge aspects of a traditional male-focused construction of heterosex. Arguably, it has the potential to produce more enjoyable and egalitarian heterosex for women. But reciprocity brings with it the potential to reinstate (or maintain) gender inequality in heterosex. In conjunction with particular patterns of heterosex, reciprocity offers another potential layer of sexual expectation and obligation for women, and possibly also for men.

Something more than physical sexual satisfaction is sought as both sex and the relationship itself become projects to be worked at and worked on (Braun et al., 2003;

Jackson and Scott, 2004). Mutuality entitles lovers to be recognized and valued by their mates as they present themselves, thus to have their sexual aversions, fantasies and desires respected and cared for. This is why in erotic sexuality lovers must be oriented to each other, and each other's desires. They must intend to discover desires (Weitman, 1999). Therefore, reciprocity becomes a dimension where the contemporary ambivalence towards sexual life is most profoundly experienced: reciprocity, as a pattern of the liberating sexual life, is a field of anxiety both for men and women engaged in sexual activity.

Erotic sexual bonds: following Weitman (1999) these can be defined as experiences lovers generate in one another during sexual activity. But in the context of an erotic sexuality that challenges monogamy these erotic sexual bonds are twofold: firstly, they are at the core of the relationships with different sexual partners.

"(...) To know people and to learn with interpersonal relations is also to know people sexually, that is one of the dimensions of interpersonal relations, it is a dimension of this learning process and of life. You learn about others and about yourself, you know yourself better with these emotional experiences... yes, because these experiences are more than just casual sex or fast sex – I have no interest in that – they imply more emotional commitment than that. Therefore Maria and I see our experiences create bonds with others but also between us..."

João

Secondly, all the emotional and sexual experiences that Maria and João have had, both individually and as a couple, feed back into their relationship. The experiences are recalled in their life together and their day-to-day lives, building new bonds between them.

"After swinging and after our individual sexual experiences, or when we are in another relationship, we [Maria and João] become very horny... we are always in the mood for sex! We have great sex... (...) And it's not only the sex, we feel deeply in love and tightly bonded to each other."

Maria

“Our sex life is different now... is outside the normal... is out of the routine. At least it is not like it used to be (...) sharing our experiences really turns us on (...) I agree with Maria, we are much more in love (...)”

João

Sexual pleasure in relationships remains both the spark for intense relationships and a major factor in cementing them and making them meaningful. If sex goes wrong, it can undermine the harmony and break the trust (Weeks, 2007). A key aspect of the specialness of sex is that it is something shared, defining both the activity and the relationship as special. Thus the very sense of self, while individual, can also be reflected in the couple, taking each partner beyond or out of him/herself. Sex is seen as a shared practice through which each partner gets under the other’s skin, and this binds the couple together and renders the relationship more than the sum of its parts (Jackson and Scott, 2004; Weeks, 2007). Accordingly, each sexual relationship is seen as special, unique, different from any other.

In the sociological portrait of Maria and João’s intimate erotic life we dive into a particular way of manipulating larger sexual scripts and creating an erotic reality. Within the script manipulation or erotic reality/sexuality-building put into practice by Maria and João, there is considerable opportunity for them to demonstrate various forms of self-consciousness about the project in hand. They do not simply indicate that they can monitor their own performance of the script: they also display a variety of styles in that monitoring (Cohen and Taylor, 1998).

The script switching works as an alternative device for assembling a sense of originality in conventional situations. It is a way in which new emotional colouring can be grafted on to traditional arrangements, novelty reasserted in the face of repetition. Such switching serves an erotic function.

The greater part of our lives is lived within boundaries. Those who set out to seek novelty encounter their persistent presence as soon as a sense of repetition begins to invade their consciousness. Even script evasions draw their strength and their sense of surprise and excitement from the manipulation of enduring master scripts. They are not novel or spontaneous. They are common pattern-practices which are resorted to after a history of standard scripted performances; script evasions produce a particular kind of repetition; they produce evasion script (Cohen and Taylor, 1998). It is therefore possible to say that in living a fantasized erotic reality there is always the illusion of

novelty. But novelty is elusive (Cohen and Taylor, 1998). Nothing is as new as promised and these moments of escape may be inevitable repetitions in a hyper-differentiated world (Cohen and Taylor, 1998).

Social changes sexuality

From the sociological portrait of Maria and João's sexual lifestyle it is possible to derive an idea of a celebratory sexuality, an erotic life experience free from constraints that is generated according to emerging and always-shifting desires. This was the way they produced their narrative, it is the way they give meaning to their lives and sexuality. The impression of a sexually freer, more diverse society is also reflected in the representations of sexuality and intimate relations in popular culture and reinforced by everyday knowledge that is increasingly saturated with sexual imagery (Jackson and Scott, 2004). Therefore, caution is urged over too eager a celebration of new sexual freedoms. For this it is important to connect the individual scale analysis with a broader sociological analysis of contemporary sexuality, in an attempt to understand how the particular case of a young Portuguese couple fits into a general, more complex scenario of social-sexual change.

Feminists, for example, point to the continued existence of a gender hierarchy in heterosexual relations and the persistence of sexual violence. They have also long been aware that sexual liberation can impose new forms of constraint (Jackson and Scott, 1996 and 2004). Early Foucauldian accounts concurred, in that the incitement to have more and better sex is as much a function of power as are injunctions against sexual activity (Jackson and Scott, 2004). Sociologists have tended to celebrate diversity and fluidity in sexual relations in keeping with these late/postmodern times as, for example, in Giddens' (1992) account of plastic sexuality and the 'pure relationship'.

Making sense of these tensions entails more than an awareness of both continuity and change. It is not simply that some things change while others stay the same, it is that these changes and continuities throw up tensions and contradictions around sexuality that, we feel, are indicative of a persistent unease about the sexual that sits side by side with an acceptance of greater sexual freedom and diversity (Jackson and Scott, 2004).

Because sexuality has been shaped in and through history as a unique matrix between the private and public, the personal and the social, the natural and the human, it has become a site for contradictory and intersecting forces (Weeks, 2007). Late-modern sexual mores, then, are in tension between a celebration of sexual pleasure, experimentation and diversity, and a wariness of sexuality as a source of anxiety and revulsion. This is more than a case of cultural lag between progressive and retrogressive moralities, since both sets of views are held simultaneously (Jackson and Scott, 2004).

Heteronormativity and a different double standard

The other side of the claims about change in sexual mores is the idea that heterosexual relations are undergoing democratization (Giddens, 1992) and the old inequalities that once made heterosexuality so oppressive for women are being undermined. There is of course evidence that egalitarian ideals are having an impact on heterosexual relationships. As we have witnessed in Maria and João's case, there has been an apparent erosion of the sexual double standard and an increasing emphasis on a woman's right to sexual pleasure and freedom of sexual expression. Women are more sexually active and have more partners than in the past (Jackson and Scott, 2004).

However, the sexual world continues to be ordered by institutionalized heterosexuality. One of the features of heteronormativity is the social-sexual differentiation between men and women, which becomes particularly evident in the production and acting out of sexual scripts, as far as what is right or wrong in the erotic scenario. Not so very surprisingly, heteronormativity is a dominant referent even in the alternative erotic world actively produced by Maria and João (where they produce themselves as sexual subjects).

However, each social world has its own particular moral rationality, which is highly gendered in the sense that men and women may inhabit overlapping but differentiated moral universes, particularly with regard to their sex lives and intimate lives (Weeks, 2007). These differentiated moral and normative universes become evident when we look more closely at sexual practices.

"I'm completely straight! That's the only thing that I'm not open to experiencing."

João

“I’m straight. But I’ve experienced being with other women and I liked it, too. I really enjoyed it. Firstly, I did it because I thought it was an excellent form of teasing for men, for João, because it is a fantasy they have, but then I have had pleasure with other women. I’m bi-curious I think...”

Maria

This gendered break in heteronormativity, allowing women to experience sexual pleasure with other women, is not an exclusive reserve of Maria and João. It is something that is general among the couples and singles with whom they spoke. This double standard is one of the most prevalent topics of conversation. There is always the question, ‘Is she bi or bi-curious?’ or, when Maria is contacting a single woman, ‘Are you bi?’ For some couples or singles a bi-woman is absolutely necessary in order to accomplish their sexual fantasies and scripts.

In the fantasizing and experiencing of their sexual lifestyle, João expressed aspects of hegemonic sexuality², such as a desire for sex with multiple women, and hypersexuality. He expressed the heterosexual male fantasy of having sex simultaneously with multiple women (Sheff, 2006), the proverbial ‘Hot Bi Babe’ scene depicted so frequently in pornography produced for heterosexual men (Jenefsky and Miller, 1998; Roof, 1991; Swedberg, 1989). This seemingly ubiquitous fantasy may enrich these men’s idea of masculinity with the notions that they can also ‘please’ many women.

Sexual attention among multiple women endows the heterosexual man with definitive evidence of his desirability. Not only is he accorded this status by the multiple women but he also stands in contrast to other men who are unable to garner as much attention, thus demonstrating his mastery over (hetero)sexuality. While the women are bisexual, their triadic sexual interaction is encoded as heterosexual through the iconic, hegemonic sexual narrative projected onto female-female-male sex. Thus the man in a sexual encounter with two or more women attains, at least symbolically and possibly in reality, his ultimate fantasy of sexual satisfaction and provides supreme proof of his sexual prowess (Sheff, 2006).

Conversely, by entering this specific sexual reality João shows a propensity to defy some of the norms of hegemonic masculinity, expanding the boundaries of

² This sexual expression of hegemonic masculinity is not an exclusive characteristic of João; it is a pattern among all the men with whom both Maria and João talked over the internet.

heterosexuality and, at the same time, redistributing gendered social power. This innovative character, based on gendered power shifts, holds potentially negative implications for these men, namely the loss of the privileges accorded to their social positions, through their transgression of one of the primary mandates of hegemonic masculinity: sole control over female partners (Sheff, 2006). And, in addition, the derived sexual uncertainty: the potential for the other partners to have greater success in the relationship market and the attendant potential loss of relational power (Coltrane and Collins, 2001).

Answering the question “What does it mean to be a man?” was never an easy task (Kimmel, 1987). Sexuality traditionally occupied a practical, clarifying position on masculinity, avoiding risks and uncertainty. But in contemporary society, where there seem to be no ontological sexual rights or wrongs (Weeks, 2007), and in a social-sexual world where experiences themselves serve as raw material for bricolage men engage in disrupting intimate lifestyles, questioning the traditional features of masculinity. With Weeks (2007) we can say that greater sexual freedom has brought immense gains but has its costs: antinomies of sexual and intimate transformations, balancing the real achievements against the downsides, the new pleasures against the new insecurities. The novelty is not that men experience these uncertainties about their emotional life and sexuality. What is new is that they are finding ways of expressing them, new ways of defining themselves as men.

For women (for Maria), sex is problematic. Embodied, potentially erotic, intimate physical encounters are perilous because if women are seen to be involved in them outside a narrowly circumscribed set of contexts they risk imputations of disreputability and immorality. Embodied, potentially erotic, intimate physical encounters do not exist in and of themselves. They become meaningful only in the context of symbolically dense terrains (Oerton and Phoenix, 2001), terrains still dominated by a masculine symbolic economy (Bourdieu, 1999) and a hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987 and 2005). Women remain concerned with maintaining an appropriately feminine sexual respectability (Skeggs, 1997), still lack a language of autonomous female desire and pleasure, and continue to experience coercive sex (Holland et al., 1998).

Ideals of sexual self-expression have reshaped the old slag/drag dichotomy but have also narrowed the margin between excess and deficiency, between being too

sexual and not sexual enough, thus producing an even more slippery tightrope for women to walk (Jackson and Scott, 2004).

“I go out in the evening with my [girl]friends, go to bars and clubs, I go without him [João] and I love it and I need it to feel myself... When I go out with my [girl]friends I want to meet people, new people, I like to flirt with guys; it doesn't mean anything at all. I just talk to them, that's it... but my [girl]friends are not like me, they are more...they're shy, they always think about what others might think about them because they are girls and that... Because when you're a girl there is stuff that you are not supposed to do (...) I express myself, I'm not afraid, I like to express myself, I like to dress and dance sensually and feel sexy and attractive! A friend of mine says that I have sex written all over my body, but I'm not an object either! I just flirt as I want with the guys I find interesting... and from flirting to sex there is a long, long way to go!”

Maria

By simultaneously challenging and participating in aspects of sexual subjectivity and sexual objectification, Maria inhabits the borderland between what Connell (1987) calls *emphasized femininity*, or a version of womanhood that is oriented towards accommodation according to the interests of a male order, and an alternative, non-compliant form of femininity (Sheff, 2005).

The tension between egalitarian ideals and the emphasis on sexual difference finds its expression in what is often interpreted as a new, more assertive style of femininity: a femininity that is ‘out and proud’ (Jackson and Scott, 2004). The image is that of the powerful woman who is nonetheless feminine – sexually empowered in her push-up bra, designer clothes and 6-inch spiked heels. High-heeled shoes, the fashion pages tell us, are emblematic of a confident, powerful femininity (Jackson and Scott, 2004).

Heteronormativity, monogamy and the sexual double standard

Maria and João's sexual lifestyle is at the heart of a specific paradox of contemporary sexuality: greater tolerance of casual sex and serial relationships co-exists with the continuing reification of monogamy. Nowadays it is difficult to find any area of adult sexual conduct that most people will unequivocally say is wrong. The one

exception seems to be sexual infidelity, especially adultery. Here we encounter a mismatch between attitudinal data and actual practice (Jackson and Scott, 2004). Almost everyone says that sexual infidelity is wrong, yet it is widespread enough for it to be likely that many of those who disapprove of it in principle are actually practising it or have done so (Jackson and Scott, 2004). Adultery still seems to be thought of as a sin, something engaged in guiltily or as a transitional stage between relationships. There is little endorsement of non-monogamy as a lifestyle or political choice, even among feminists, who were once critical of monogamy (Jackson and Scott, 2003, 2004). Monogamy remains the ideal and any departure from it is seen as a personal betrayal of one's partner (Jackson and Scott, 2004).

“(...) and suddenly I felt I was inside a glass cage (...) I can't be imprisoned in this relationship [her relation with João], with this man [João](...) it was something social, I don't know, this idea of commitment to monogamy... this is a powerful constraint, it constrains our life experiences and what we get from life, what we learn from it (...)”

Maria

Study of the kind of polyamory experienced by João and Maria is essential if we are to gain a better understanding of women's sexual subjectivity and power. It is essential to perceive the new complexities associated with multiple-partner relationships and expand sociological understanding of women's sexuality by investigating a previously unexamined area of sexual subjectivity (Sheff, 2005).

Sexual appetite would be unremarkable coming from a man but, from a woman, it goes against dominant cultural scripts mandating a woman's lack of interest in sex except to meet masculine needs. Risking defamation by eschewing the constraints of coupledness, polyamorous women reject the power dynamic embedded in the persistent sexual double standard that continues to limit women's sexual choices and stigmatize those who refrain from living by its mandates (Sheff, 2005).

Maria felt constrained and disempowered by monogamy and reported a sense of release upon embarking on this specific erotic and intimate lifestyle and these relationships. Departure from the accepted forms of relationship and erotic norms for femininity required her to create new roles or expand roles previously available to her as a monogamist (Sheff, 2005). In direct opposition to a cultural mandate of female sexual submission and a double standard that requires women to restrain their sexual

desires (L. Rubin, 1990a; Tolman, 2002; see also L. Rubin, 1990b), Maria said she viewed herself as a highly sexual person. Rejecting the idea of sexual objectification, she felt she was a sexual citizen and felt empowered by her access to multiple partners and a redefinition of sexuality (Sheff, 2005).

In the realm of sexuality Maria puts her self-invention into practice, creating a viable sense of self which has become the key element in the individualizing process (the individual choices about sexuality and sexual lifestyle). Following Weeks (2007), we can say that Maria somehow embodies and internalizes the emergence of the sexual self, the individual conscious of her erotic needs, sexualized identity and cultural positioning. The contemporary self is shaped in a continuously sexualizing culture where the erotic becomes meaningful for a sense of who and what you are. And the meanings of the erotic are themselves in constant flux (Weeks, 2007).

Conclusion

We live in a plural world, made especially challenging, where people seem to have, let us say, ‘no choice but to choose’ in a never-ending process of giving meaning to their lives and experiences. This produces new opportunities, new aspirations, and new forms of eroticism, love and intimacy (Weeks, 2007). Because investing in the body (aesthetically and sensually) as a dimension of identity defining the relationship with others and the world, it is not surprising that in the contemporary world everybody has a sexual lifestyle, some of them more or less traditional, others very new. The ways sexuality is expressed, the way we see the body and its potentialities, and the ways we live our erotic lives.

In this context of the bricolage of experiences and choices, sexuality in itself embodies no obvious rights or wrongs. As we saw with the sociological portrait of Maria and João’s sex/intimate life, we can see the erotic as socially highly malleable, shaped by permission and inhibition (marked both by a particular self-created sexual normativity and the co-existence of disrupting practices and traditional values and norms), intervention and non-intervention, which create sexual categories and hierarchies, and meanings and subjectivities (Weeks, 2007).

We are talking about agency, about the individual and collective practices that shape and reshape life (Weeks, 2007). Reflexivity is a key aspect of this process. It

involves the individual ability to reflect on their situation, and to act in light of this. Reflexivity means self-confrontation (Beck, 1994; Adkins, 2002). In the scenario of sexuality, individualization is not an abstract process but a key force in individual lives, a social process that imposes its imperatives but, within itself, allow individuals to fashion their lives. A paradox is at stake here (a classical paradox in sociological thought – the relationship between agency and structure): people may not feel they can choose their sexual desires. For this freedom is always constrained and limited. Even when people feel they choose their desires or the way to experience them, as in the case of Maria and João, choice is always limited by the social constraints and forces that have made it available (Weeks, 2007): the prevalence of heteronormativity and the emergence of a new double standard on the possibility of experiencing sexual pleasure in same-sex relations; the persisting mores of monogamy; and the obstacles to living feminine sexual expression and a feminine sexual subjectivity.

At the centre of many of these contradictions surrounding sex is its status as ‘special’, as somehow existing outside and apart from everyday life. Sex is susceptible to being seen either as uniquely exciting, raising us above everyday sociality, or as uniquely dangerous.

Everyday life is associated with the routine and mundane, and routine and mundane sex can only ever be seen as ‘bad’ sex. To suggest that everyday sex might be acceptable is to risk being seen as a sad person deprived of ‘good’ sex. Everyday life is associated with routine, which is boring, almost by definition, and the point of sex is to lift us above workaday life. Sex is associated with spontaneity, passion and subversion and not with everyday practices such as cleaning teeth and drinking tea. A routinized sex-life is to be avoided. ‘Good sex’ is a mark of distinction. In everyday discourse ‘better than sex’ has become the ultimate accolade, implying that sexual pleasure is the benchmark against which other pleasures are measured. The reason why this comparison works so well is because sexual pleasure is seen as superior to other forms of pleasure (Jackson and Scott, 2004; Oerton and Phoenix, 2001). Sex is never seen as simply an everyday activity or just a pleasant pastime.

Fantasies may provide a break in standard everyday life but fantasies have their own vocabulary, grammar, rules and norms that must be followed. There is a common stock of symbolic material out of which fantasies are fashioned – sexual scripts and social-sexual imagery and imaginaries (Cohen and Taylor, 1998).

Fantasy, even when fully lived in a specific erotic realm, plays a minor transformative role, blurring some of the cruder edges of reality and giving routine experiences a more elevated status (Cohen and Taylor, 1998). Paradoxically, fantasy as a domain of experience appears to be closest to the unconscious but is in fact saturated with consciousness. First, fantasy is a way of getting away from the world but, as soon as you know, this world (routine and repetition and familiarity) announces its presence (Cohen and Taylor, 1998). In an attempt transform reality by bringing fantasies into the real world, Maria and João actually set out to script their fantasies. In the process of giving some concrete expression to their imaginings they produce normativity for an alternative and fantasized sex life and intimate life. They want an escape, an area in which they can temporally absent themselves from reality and the world of repetition. They wish to escape to a dimension full of experiences and find new symbolic resources enriching the bricolage of their individual and social existence. Secondly, the fantasies experienced are embodied and recollected in the realm of reality, removed from the fantasy. The experiences become part of the reflexive process of self-construction and self-confrontation.

Combining the experience of a specific and somehow disruptive sexual lifestyle (as an enclave of activity for fantasy, self-expression and identity work) and the social reality lived on an everyday basis, I follow Schutz (1967/1984) in saying that we simultaneously occupy several worlds and move into and among different activities ruled by different norms and expectations.

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