

# FROM FEAR OF INTIMACY TO PERVERSION: A CLINICAL ANALYSIS OF THE FILM *SEX, LIES AND VIDEOTAPE*

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In this paper we explore themes that emerge in psychoanalytic work with couples, particularly in those couples presenting with sexual problems, from the more 'ordinary' difficulties of anxiety about being intimate to the more pathological manifestations in perversion. We examine how unresolved conflict in the internal world, especially in relation to the internal couple, can lead to difficulties in the capacity for intimate relating. We suggest that intrusive projective identification and the use of 'defensive sameness' and 'defensive difference' serve as defences against intimacy. These defences function to obliterate the reality of the other and it is in this sense that we use the term perversion. Finally, we comment on the difficulties for the therapist who may feel drawn into a perverse arena when working with couples with sexual problems.

To illustrate these themes, we offer an interpretation of the film *sex, lies and videotape* (Soderbergh 1989). In this film we can observe a set of characters demonstrating the range of these difficulties, with the advantage that we do not encounter any problems about confidentiality.

*sex, lies and videotape* presents us with four main characters, all of whom have a relationship with each other. The film witnesses the different kinds of couples they form, ranging from the marriage between John and Ann to the more transient liaison between Graham and Cynthia. John is an upwardly mobile lawyer who has just become a partner in his firm. He is married to Ann, and they have a beautiful home in a comfortable middle-class American suburb. As the film opens, we see that he is engaged in a torrid affair with Cynthia, his wife's sister.

Ann is beautiful. She gave up work upon marrying and now occupies herself with looking after her husband and their home. She is obsessive about housework and sees a therapist with whom she talks about guilt and anxiety that the world will be overrun with garbage. She has lost interest in sex but realizes in discussion with her therapist that John seemed to lose interest in her before she lost interest in him. These characters could be a couple coming for psychotherapy.

Cynthia is everything that Ann seems not to be and vice versa. She lives in an untidy flat and works in a bar. She is uninhibited sexually and shows no guilt about her affair

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with her sister's husband. After all, as she points out to John, *she* didn't take a vow to be faithful.

Graham is an old college friend of John. They have not met for years and, when they do, they stand in sharp relief to each other. Graham, in contrast to John, has not pursued a life of professional achievement. He is a loner, a drifter, introverted with an air of innocence, as if he has been thrust into adulthood and failed to manage it. When John and Graham meet again after many years, they both believe that there is a clash of values between them. John abhors Graham's nonconformity, Graham sees John as a liar.

The film revolves around these four characters, each of whom has a relationship with the others. In other words, they are a series of couples. The only other significant character is Ann's therapist, whose role is particularly interesting with regard to therapists working with sexual material, a subject to which we shall return later.

### *The Internal Couple and its Impact on the Capacity to Relate*

The presence in this film of a series of couples provokes the question: who is relating to whom? The editing of the film places this theme prominently. The interaction between the only couple who are having sexual intercourse (John and Cynthia) is overlaid with dialogue between other couples or interspersed with interactions of other couples. We can see the following: the marriage between John and Ann; the relationship between the sisters, Ann and Cynthia; the relationship between the college friends, John and Graham; the affair between John and Cynthia; the sexual encounter between Cynthia and Graham and finally the developing relationship between Ann and Graham. Alongside these observable external relationships, we can wonder about what kinds of relationships exist inside these individuals - what kind of internal couple exists and what kind of relationship to an internal couple object.

The concept of the internal couple derives from the psychoanalytic notion that we all have an inner world, with inner objects to which we relate. These inner objects are mental representations of the way we have experienced important other people in our lives, particularly our parents. The psychic images of the parents are influenced by parental experience and emotional states, so that our internal objects are not identical to who our parents are in real life. The most significant influences on our internal objects come from our childhood experiences with our parents, but later experiences in life can also modify them.

We carry inside ourselves representations, not only of our parents as individuals, but also of their relationship with each other. This is the basis of the internal couple, the image in one's internal world of how two people relate to each other intimately. A healthy resolution of the Oedipus complex results in the introjection of the kind of internal object that we might describe as an internal creative couple (Morgan & Ruszczynski 1998). This concept includes the capacity for mature sexual relating. It also includes, as Britton (1989) points out, the capacity to observe and tolerate others in a relationship from which we are excluded, as well as the capacity to engage in a relationship ourselves whilst observed by others who are excluded. Serious disruptions in the resolution of the Oedipus complex can result in disturbed internal couples that give rise to dysfunctional, and maybe even perverse, intimate relationships.

The kind of internal couple we each have inside us, or the absence thereof, and the way we relate to that couple has an impact on our own capacity for relating to others.

In the film *sex, lies and videotape*, we are taken into a world in which the internal creative couple is not allowed to survive, at least not one that is integrated in the psyches of the individuals. Where the possibility of such a coupling is perceived, it is mercilessly attacked. These characters and the way that they relate illustrate some destructive dynamics that can also be seen in clinical work with individuals and couples.

At the beginning of the film, there is a vivid example of a destructive attack on an external couple, which we suggest is motivated by an internal pressure to destroy the possibility of something more creative. In the opening scene, John (the husband) and Cynthia (his sister-in-law) meet for a passionate sexual encounter. This is an external coupling, which we think is motivated, at least in part, by destructive internal dynamics that unfold later in the film. The director intersperses this scene in a striking way with another scene, that of Ann (the wife) talking to her therapist about her sexually unfulfilling and empty marriage. This second scene, Ann's *external* world, could easily be viewed as a depiction of the *internal world* (an experience of an empty relationship) that exists inside John and Cynthia and drives them to seek passion and aliveness at any cost.

There is also much evidence in the film to suggest that both characters, Cynthia and John, are motivated in their liaison by a wish to attack and triumph over an internal creative couple. For Cynthia this couple is represented by her sister and John, a couple from whom she feels painfully excluded. She could be seen as someone who is unable to contain her rivalrous oedipal feelings towards Ann, her sister, representing the internal mother. Cynthia is driven to possess Ann's husband or any other male of interest to Ann, representing the internal father. She finds herself in a desperate place in which she can never quite achieve her aim, so that the affair with John, representing the oedipal father, is not enough. She wants to 'do it' in Ann's (the mother's) bed - psychically she wants to *be* her. She says to John after they have made love, 'You know I'd like to do it at your house some time. I must admit the idea of doing it in my sister's bed gives me a perverse thrill. I wish I could come right out and tell everyone that Ann's a lousy lay - the beautiful, the popular, Ann Bishop Melaney.' When 'doing it' in her sister's bed fails to relieve her psychic turmoil, she has to have Graham, whom she quickly senses is becoming Ann's new interest. Cynthia is dominated by her internal world and her need to wreak havoc and revenge on the oedipal couple. She is left in a lonely place without any meaningful real relationships of her own. She eventually says to John, 'We don't have anything to talk about'.

Later in the film, there is a poignant image of Cynthia in the bar where she works with the man who doesn't even know her name but is always there, admiring her and wanting her, providing her with temporary respite from her usual destructive position. She acts out in her external world what remains so unresolved internally. The result is extreme poverty in her relationships.

John unconsciously joins Cynthia in attacking the oedipal couple, in his case represented by his own marriage and perhaps also by his new partnership at work, which he treats in a similarly cavalier way. Early in the film we hear him giving advice to a friend over the phone. He says:

I'm gonna tell you a little secret. As soon as you've got a ring on your finger you start getting the most spectacular attention from the opposite gender... I wish I had Super Bowl tickets for every time some filly came up to me and started talking without the slightest provocation... if

I'd known that (before I got married) I'd have gone out and bought a ring and saved myself a lot of time and money.

For John, it is through being unavailable to all women by choosing to marry one woman that the world of women becomes freely available. In this way he is like an acting-out oedipal father who is desired by his daughters by virtue of his position and misuses his position to gratify his narcissism.

Neither character, John nor Cynthia, can show any regard for or dependence on each other, seeming to despise such notions and instead relating to each other as objects that can be summoned and discarded. They use each other mercilessly to deal with unbearable psychic pain, their sense of emptiness and the painful feelings of being excluded, as well as any guilt they momentarily encounter as a consequence of their destructive attacks. An example of the latter occurs when Cynthia confronts John with being a liar because he breaks his marriage vows. He makes fleeting contact with his guilt, finds it intolerable and seeks to evacuate it immediately through sex with Cynthia. These characters and the way they relate illustrate some destructive dynamics that, in our experience, can also be seen in clinical work with individuals and couples.

What about Ann and Graham? Ann tells her therapist that she fears the world will be overrun with garbage. We do not hear the therapist's interpretation of this, but we might interpret it as her own fear of her messy/dirty sexual feelings. She tells Graham that in her view sex is overrated. She keeps herself distanced from her own sexuality, which she fears could easily become out of control. Instead, she projects rampant sexuality into her sister Cynthia. Her relationship to Cynthia is highly charged because they each represent a dominant internal object for the other. She is sufficiently close to Cynthia to ask her the details of her sexual encounter with Graham. This undeveloped part of her is safer in others: in Cynthia, in John, in the cruel adult world which spills out garbage. Denying parts of herself leaves her out of touch with her own sexuality, but she feels safe and secure and identified with her mother whom she also sees as a non-sexual woman (she buys her mother a dress that looks like a tablecloth). We could say that Ann is a character who closes her eyes to the world of adult sexuality, including her own sexuality, because she believes this is a dangerous place. Cynthia provokes and confirms her fears. When Ann discovers the details of Cynthia's encounter with Graham, she tells her 'You're in trouble'. Cynthia retorts, 'You sound just like Mama.'

We can postulate that both Ann and Graham share the idea of an internal couple in which sexuality is dangerous and has to be repressed or controlled. Perhaps they unconsciously recognize this in each other, in the same way that John and Cynthia recognize a shared wish to attack the parental couple. Graham tells Ann about his relationship with an ex-girlfriend, Elizabeth, subsequent to which he became impotent. He used to lie and to express his feelings non-verbally, and he scared people close to him. Here he describes a particular kind of internal relationship of a paranoid-schizoid type, in which lying is used as a defence against the other triumphing over you. Feelings are projected or acted out, instead of being owned and thought about, as he would have been helped to do if he had more sense of an internal creative couple. Perhaps Elizabeth reacted to this by dealing him a narcissistic blow that left him impotent, or perhaps in his mind Elizabeth became the devouring sexual partner, while he disavowed any sexual interest.

In the aftermath, Graham developed a strategy to contain his sexuality through a kind of intercourse - his videotaped interviews - in which he has no physical contact with the other. The women in his films have an exhibitionist sexual experience, whilst Graham has a voyeuristic sexual experience. Neither person makes physical contact with the other. When alone, Graham can select a tape to use as a masturbatory aid. As Stoller (1975, p. 87) points out in discussing pornography, this 'squares one the anxieties of having to make it with another person...'. In this state of mind there is no sense of a real separate other person. This seems to apply almost as much to the way Cynthia and John relate to each other as to the way Graham relates to the women he films.

John and Ann are the only couple in the film who are socially sanctioned. The fact that they are unable to sustain an intimate relationship, in both sexual and emotional terms, tells us something important about the internal couples that exist in the minds of each of them. Yet, as we have described, they both also form quite different relationships with other characters, relationships that carry remnants of their marital relationship but also differ from it. John is able to have a sexual relationship with Cynthia but, as with Ann, it lacks emotional intimacy. Ann's relationship with Graham, whilst emotionally open, is marked by sexual fearfulness, even though we may feel optimistic about the possibility of her achieving a more open sexual relationship with Graham than with John. This could signal the development of something more creative for both of the characters.

We believe that these differences tell us about the variations that are possible when two individuals come together, bringing into contact in a unique way their internal couples. The interaction evokes different valences, so that no two couples are ever the same, even though they may share a partner.

### *Intrusive Projective Identification versus Intimacy*

We have been describing intimacy in relationships and using the term to refer to both its sexual and emotional aspects. The film opens up the implicit questions, what is the nature of relating, what is a sexual relationship as opposed to sex? The relationship between Ann and John lacks both sex and intimacy. When Graham asks Ann if she likes being married, she responds by saying she likes the security and the house they have and that John has just been trade a partner in his firm. Her response, which lacks any reference to the emotional quality of the relationship, may in part be a reaction to being put on the spot by an overly intimate and intrusive question from a stranger. However, it becomes clear that she lacks an intimate relationship with another, something she may not question if she lacks inside herself a creative internal couple.

On the face of it, Graham has endless intimate experiences with women. He persuades them to reveal their most private thoughts and fantasies as well as describing their actual sexual experiences. However, Graham actually has no real intimate contact with the women, as he transforms them through the medium of the video camera to images on a screen. It is like living a lie in which both self and object are deceived. Graham's women may feel that they are being intimate when they talk about their sexuality and sexual experiences, but they do this in relation to a camera, and Graham watches them on film, each engaged in an autoerotic activity. Ann challenges this narcissistic relating in a scene towards the end of the film when she confronts Graham with the fact that he exists in a world of real other people and has

an effect on them. She says, 'Anyone that comes into contact with you becomes part of your problem. You've had an effect on my life.'

In this film, as in some couple relationships, intimacy and intrusiveness are confused. Ann and Graham attempt intimacy when they share something personal with each other: Ann her belief that sex is overrated, Graham that he is impotent. It is by trying to get inside or intrude on women's experience of sex that Graham gets aroused. In the case of Ann and Graham, what they experience as intrusiveness by the other gradually becomes transformed into a genuine curiosity *about* the other. Fisher (1995, p. 103) describes mature intimacy as a 'state of mind marked by humility in the face of the infinitely unknowable mystery of the reality of the other'. After an exchange in which they each turn the camera on the other, Graham switches it off, a gesture that makes way for genuine intimacy to emerge.

Sex can look and feel like intimacy, but John and Cynthia, who do have a real sexual relationship, show that sex may not be intimate. They are not so much relating to each other as relating narcissistically to an internal object. In the end, they discover that they do not know anything about each other. This confusion between sex and intimacy is often present when one partner in a couple has an affair. Like John, faced with a lack of or possibly fear of intimacy in the marriage, a sexual relationship with another is mistakenly sought to provide this missing intimacy.

### *Perversions: Hatred of Intimacy*

Thus far, we have considered problems that couples may experience when they are afraid of intimacy. For some couples - those who present with perversions - the problems with intimacy may actually have hatred at their core. In this film we see a range of perverse activities, including Graham's voyeurism and autoerotism, Cynthia's exhibitionism, and possibly we might include Cynthia and John's 'incestuous' acting-out.

Perversions become evident because of their sexual manifestations, but their internal basis is a turning away from reality and truth. It seems apt that 'lies' is included in the title of this film. The lies that characterize perversion begin as a turning away from the truth of one's early experiences, usually because these were traumatic and overwhelming to a young child. The person elaborates a perversion as an effort to master childhood trauma, and a central feature of this is the hostility involved in taking revenge by doing to someone else what was done to oneself (Stoller 1975).

We suggest that, within a couple, the individuals may resort to perverse interactions as a defence against the anxieties they would experience if they were to engage in true intimacy. These are not anxieties about normal openness and self-exposure. For the perverse individual, intimate relationships present the prospect of a repetition of an overwhelming childhood trauma. The perversion is a behavioural attempt to contain this anxiety and give vent to the hatred without succumbing to psychotic decompensation.

An important aspect of perversions is that they require the presence of another person to be enacted. The other is always present, at least as a fantasized object, and usually as an actual external object as well. Graham needs a Cynthia to film, and Cynthia needs a Graham to look at her. Cynthia and John need each other to engage in the 'incestuous' relationship that has quite personal meanings for both of them. Although the partners in these couples are in a relationship with each other, they relate

in a way that diminishes them as people. Their perverse activities rob the other person of the uniqueness and fullness of their experience. The other is required to become just what the partner wants him or her to be. If the other complies, it is at the price of becoming much less of an individual. We suggest that this deadening constriction within the couple results from the hatred that is at the core of the perversion.

We find the notions of 'defensive sameness' and 'defensive difference' helpful in this context. We mean by these an insistence that the other is completely the same as or completely different from oneself. These beliefs are maintained with certainty for defensive reasons, when a true reckoning of what is the same and what is different threatens to expose the separateness and independence of an individual's existence. The other person is dismissed as entirely the same (so there is nothing to get to know) or as entirely different (and therefore unknowable).

The perverse act often represents an attempt to obliterate differences, whether between the sexes as in cross-dressing or between the generations as in incest, or by exploring differences in a controlling way. The characters in this film seem to have very much in mind their differences from one another. John says early on: 'Graham? We were very close many years ago, but I think we're very different now'. Graham agrees and says a little later, 'John and I were very much alike'. It is interesting that neither of them says which one supposedly has changed. When Graham asks Ann to describe her sister, the first thing she says is that she is very different from Cynthia. Cynthia pointedly seems to live her life as differently from Ann as possible, but then she wants to take over her sister's husband and marital bed.

We come to know that these characters are expressing defensive differences from each other. As events in the film proceed, the defensive process is revealed as the four characters gradually transform their self-images into what previously was their hated other. Thus, Cynthia wants most to have sex in a marital bed and ends up withdrawing from her promiscuous relationship with John. Ann reveals herself as interested in sex and begins a new, presumably sexual, relationship with Graham. Meanwhile, Graham steps into John's position as partner to Ann, while John becomes the odd man out, as Graham was at the beginning of the film. Ann tries to keep interest in sex located in Cynthia, while Cynthia tries to keep fear of sex located in Ann. But already this distinction is breaking down. Ann's obvious excitement and interest in the details of what happened between Cynthia and Graham belie her insistence that 'I don't want to talk about it'. What we are seeing here can be thought about as aspects of perverse internal relationships enacted in couple relationships. In other words, at the beginning of the film, each character invokes projective identification to rid themselves of internal parts that they cannot face. Cynthia carries Ann's sexuality. Ann carries Cynthia's identification with their mother. John is the potent man and liar for Graham. Graham is the sexual and professional failure for John.

This splitting up of internal experience is a central aspect of perversion. Couple relationships present an arena, particularly for more disturbed couples, in which the partners can divide between themselves aspects of their internal lives and evade the reality of who they are. Knowing that this is happening leaves us, as observers, with an ill-at-ease sense that something unpleasant is being done by each character to another, something that rigidly constrains both themselves and the other. Hence, we might construe the frequent accusations about lying as a reference to what each character is unwilling to face about him or herself. It is only with the resolution at the end of the film that Ann can admit this. She says, 'I hate it when I have feelings she

has. It bothers me when I have feelings about men, because I know it's how *she* thinks.'

Through most of the film, the characters insist that they are different from each other, even though the differences seem not to hold. Thus, the various portrayals in this film of so-called differences between the characters represent attempts to take revenge on another person by denying his or her uniqueness and unknowableness. At the same time, seeing the other as just different or just the same protects the perverse individual against not knowing who the other person is and might become. This is protection born out of a need to control the other lest one becomes exposed to anxiety about being separate. Paradoxically, it is the ability to bear separateness that is the precursor to establishing an intimate relationship.

### *Voyeurism and its Connection to Therapy*

Work with couples who bring profound difficulties with intimacy may expose the therapist to experiences that feel uncomfortable and maybe even perverse. Watching this film may bring this vividly to our awareness as an experience of voyeurism. In *sex, lies and videotape* we are invited to observe intimate and sometimes sexual behaviour between people that would be unusual and even perverse were the celluloid absent. In the therapeutic encounter, particularly with couples and particularly when they are sharing their intimate and sexual experiences, we can approach something close to this.

In the film, we are given the uncomfortable experience of feeling that we, too, are behind the video camera, witness to something that we are not sure we should be seeing. We may even feel as if the camera is on us when it seems that the director deliberately attempts to stir up erotic excitement in us. This dynamic of feeling voyeuristic and then exposed to excitement, abhorrence, or perversity, may exist in work with couples and individuals who are sharing their sexual experiences, particularly when we encounter more perverse or enacted sexuality.

The therapist in the film is depicted in a way that makes most therapists' hearts sink. It seems quite acceptable to therapist and patient when he sits on the couch with his patient! On the other hand, we could take this, as well as the intrusive questioning of Ann about her sexuality, as an enactment of transference and countertransference which the therapist was unable to process inside himself and make use of, for example, through interpretation. Thus, what appears as his curiosity about Ann's sexuality and prompts him to enquire whether she masturbates, could be thought of as *her* split off curiosity about her own sexuality which gets projected into others, notably Cynthia, and perhaps also Graham who finds himself, like her therapist, asking her to share intimate details about herself.

We want also to consider another enactment of this perverse mechanism. We are referring to the way that making a videotape becomes equivalent to psychotherapy. The film opens in a psychotherapy session. Ann is sitting on a couch while her therapist sits in the adjacent chair. Sex is a prominent and embarrassing issue in the session. Later, Graham and Ann draw therapy into their discussion about intimacy. Graham says that you should only take advice from someone with whom you have been intimate. Ann says that she is intimate with her therapist. Graham asks whether she means she has sex with him. 'Oh, no!' Ann replies, in the same giggly embarrassment with which she met her therapist's question about whether she masturbates.



Compare this to a later episode. Cynthia has arrived at Graham's house and they are discussing making a videotape. This encounter could be seen as a version, albeit a perverse one, of the beginning of a therapy. Graham assures Cynthia that they will just be talking and that he will keep her tape confidential. Cynthia is intrigued and perhaps excited by her intuition about what the tapes mean to Graham. 'Is this how you get off?' she asks him. 'Yes,' he replies. The scene ends with a question that is familiar to us. Just as our new patients ask, 'Do I sit or lie down?', Cynthia asks, 'Do I sit or stand?' In the event, she sits in the middle of the couch, just as her sister sat in the opening scene with her psychotherapist.

In this sequence, therapy and making a videotape are forced to be the same thing. Their real differences cannot be tolerated. Thus, Graham's perverse aim in making the videotapes is equated with the aim of psychotherapy. In reality, there is an important difference between psychotherapy and videotapes. Videotapes in this film stand for what cannot be said in any other way, unlike psychotherapy, which is a process of increasingly facing and even speaking the truth of one's existence. In this film, Ann does not tell John about her dissatisfaction with her sexual relations with him or about her emerging sexual relationship with Graham. Instead, John *sees* these things on video. The fact is that not only do John and Graham watch videotapes, but we do too. Watching this film forces us to enter into the sexual and sometimes perverse worlds of these four characters -just as working with a couple often forces us to do. We take up various stances about doing this. We may be reluctant or avoidant. We may even feel excited and then guilty. As Cynthia asks Graham, 'Is this how you get off?'

In the therapeutic encounter, the therapeutic relationship and the setting are the medium within which intimacy has to be managed. This can be difficult, both for the therapist who sometimes has to manage disturbing countertransferences, and for the patient who may wish for a different kind of relationship with the therapist and feel perplexed about what kind of relationship it is (see, for example, Ann's discussion with Graham about her therapy). These are very real concerns for therapists and patients. This film asks us to question our and their motives for inviting disclosures. The answers may not always be so comfortable.

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