

‘My inner goddess is smoldering and not in a good way’: An anti-fannish account of consuming *Fifty Shades*

Bethan Jones
Aberystwyth University

Abstract

Fifty Shades of Grey is a text which has divided almost everyone who’s come into contact with it. Those who’ve read the books and those who haven’t; those who’ve seen the film and those who’d never watch it – each has an opinion on the text, the people it supposedly appeals to, and its role in the moral downfall of the nation. As a fan studies scholar, and a feminist, discussions surrounding the books and films fascinate me as much as they frustrate me. Yet I do not like the books, and I do not like the film. In this article I critically examine my reaction to the series and question the ways in which fan studies’ focus on the positive effects of media to the detriment of the negative becomes a site of struggle between my position as a feminist and an aca-fan. I position myself as an anti-fan of *Fifty Shades*, but I also position myself as an anti-fan of much of the cultural dialogue that surrounds the film and books, particularly in relation to its gendered discourse and the notion of a homogenous audience. I thus examine these discourses in relation to my own position, in addition to analysing the ways in which the text is received and perceived, especially in discourses around rape culture. I suggest that *Fifty Shades* is a micro text, affecting the macro culture, which in turn affects the micro individual and ask what this can tell us about readers and academics working in cultural, media and fan studies.

Introduction

I don’t do Valentine’s Day. Partly it’s because I’ve been single for long enough that old habits die hard; partly because of the sheer commercialisation of the event; partly because I am stubborn enough that if someone tells me you have to do something on a certain day (to demonstrate your undying love!) I’ll flatly refuse to do it. Add this to the fact that I’m a researcher of fan studies, gender and popular culture, and of course *Fifty Shades of Grey* would have to be released on Valentine’s Day.

I wasn’t going to go and see it. I really do not like the books, and I really, really didn’t want to put money into Universal’s pocket, on Valentine’s Day no less, to watch a film that I would hate and would then spend time and energy ranting about for days afterwards (I’d much rather pay to watch a film I’d actually enjoy instead). Talking about the film’s release date, I muttered about crass commercialisation and

cynical PR. I’d watch it later, when the fuss had died down, or even better, download it and watch it in the comfort of my own home without anyone actually witnessing me watching it.

In the end, however, we bought our tickets online. Or, more accurately, my partner bought the tickets online while I groused about ‘bloody *Fifty Shades*’ and ‘bloody Valentine’s Day’ and ‘bloody cynical marketing ploys’. Talking about the film’s release, president of domestic distribution at Universal, Nick Carpou, said, ‘Valentines is a big deal for couples and a great relationship event, and the date with the long Presidents Day weekend created a perfect storm for us. This date positioned us to take full advantage of the romance angle, which is how we sold the film in our marketing campaign’ (in Cunningham, 2015). I drove to the cinema, debating about which scenes from the book would be included, and we parked along with hundreds of other couples, all dressed

up for an evening out (in stark contrast with me, in my usual uniform of jeans, an *X-Files* t-shirt, and a hoodie). Of course, the ticket machine wouldn't let us print our pre-ordered tickets so we joined the end of a long queue and when we finally reached the counter explained we couldn't collect our tickets. 'Here to see *Fifty Shades* are you?' the girl behind the counter asked, and I answered 'yeah' while pulling a face which I hoped conveyed the fact that a) this was not a film I would choose to see, that b) I didn't really want to see the film, that c) I wasn't the market for this film and that d) I'd rather be anywhere else than here. She smiled, handed me the tickets with a cheery 'enjoy!' and my partner – who found the whole encounter amusing – and I sloped off to our allocated screen.

I refrained from telling the girl serving us that I was watching the film for research purposes, something I totally failed to do when I bought the books from my local Tesco back in 2012. But I felt a need to justify why I was watching the film, with my boyfriend, on Valentine's Day. There are a lot of things about me that I don't bother justifying or explaining: I'm a fan – I write (sometimes explicit) fanfic, have fan tattoos, pretty much live in jeans and (geeky) t-shirt; I live with depression, self-harmed for years and have attempted suicide; I love fantasy and sci-fi, and action movies and disaster films are my guilty pleasure. Any of these things could be regarded as just as – or even more – shameful than going to watch a film marketed for couples on Valentine's Day. So why did I feel the need to distance myself from *Fifty Shades of Grey*?

This article is an attempt to answer that question – for both myself and for readers who are also balancing distinct, and opposing, opinions – as well as asking what the different responses to *Fifty Shades* can tell us about media, its effects and academic analysis of it. As both a scholar and a fan of many of the texts I study, I find myself walking a delicate line between objectivity and subjectivity – the rational, academic response and the emotional, fangirl response¹ – and this dual identity is at work in this article – in the more stylised prose of the introduction, and the more academic voice in the central three sections and conclusion. This article, given its attempts to balance two sides – of an argument; of

myself – deals in contradictions, but these contradictions must be acknowledged. Indeed, just as these contradictions are at the heart of debates around *Fifty Shades* they are also at the heart of this article: it is possible to be a feminist but enjoy BDSM; it is possible to be an anti-fan but reject others' negative discourse; it is possible to accept the positive impact of media on fans and audiences but reject the media effects model. Each of these contradictions are assessed in this article and although this piece is concerned predominantly with my own response to *Fifty Shades*, I suggest that this response is worthy of analysis. I use my unique position as a fan studies scholar to question the ways in which fan studies' focus on the positive effects of media to the detriment of the negative mirrors my struggle between my position as a feminist and an aca-fan. I also examine the gendered discourse surrounding *Fifty Shades* as well as debates around rape culture in relation to my own position, and suggest that *Fifty Shades* is a micro text, affecting the macro culture, which in turn affects the individual.

Anti-fandom and the (apparently) abusive text

One of the big differences between *Fifty Shades* and action films or sci-fi, is that I am a fan of the latter and very distinctly an 'anti-fan' of the former. Jonathan Gray, who coined the term, suggests that an anti-fan is not necessarily someone who is opposed to fandom, but rather they are individuals who strongly dislike a text or genre, 'bothered, insulted or otherwise assaulted by its presence' (2003: 70). Additionally, anti-fans are not necessarily ignorant of the texts they hate. Certainly I have read *Fifty Shades* multiple times, have read fanfic of the series, watched fan-made trailers for the film, seen the film, read (fan) meta and (academic) articles, and also written extensively on the series. I have undertaken a close reading of the text and the fandom, as well as *Twilight* fandom and *Twilight* fans' responses,² and my reaction to the text is thus 'a complex experience affected by the social contexts in which a text exists' (Click 2007: 306). For me those social contexts include my involvement in fandom, my identification as a feminist and my emerging position in academia. As a PhD candidate working in fan studies, but influenced by

gender and cultural studies, I possess a level of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) which allows me to talk about *Fifty Shades* in relation to academic work on gender, culture, media and fandom. Other audiences may not be able to do this, and thus my understanding of *Fifty Shades* may be considered ‘superior’ to others. In addition I have written extensively about *Fifty Shades*, drawing on my knowledge of fan communities to assess how fans reacted to the series, and my awareness of BDSM blogging communities to examine their responses to the text. In writing about BDSM bloggers’ responses to the *Fifty Shades* books I argued that in many cases anti-fan activities are ‘policing the boundaries of a community already misunderstood, where the mainstreaming of a text which portrays a subculture incorrectly has serious implications for members of that community’ (Jones, forthcoming). Many BDSM bloggers certainly feel this way – there are concerns about BDSM being conflated with abuse in the series, and many bloggers used their platforms to exhort readers not to read *Fifty Shades* as an advice manual: ‘Please, please - if you are a single woman who has read these stories and wants to explore the topics contained therein, do everything you can to not follow in the footsteps of both E L James’ characters’ (hidingfromsomeone 2012). Although Jamie Dornan has argued that the film is a love story, not one of BDSM (in Gardner 2015) my argument is that both the books and the film do position themselves firmly as BDSM themed. As Meg John Barker (2013) notes, the explicit references to BDSM contracts, safe words, and checklists of activities, indeed draw on common understandings and practices from BDSM communities. However, [f]ar from presenting a realistic depiction of kink, as understood by the community at large, James instead portrays an abusive, careless relationship. In doing so she perpetuates notions of kink, as understood in the mainstream, as degenerate, perverse and dangerous” (Jones, forthcoming).

I argued something similar when I posted my response to the film on my Facebook page:

Which leads to my biggest issue: this is not a film about BDSM. It’s an abusive relationship masquerading as BDSM. Grey tells Ana he’s bad for her while turning up on her doorstep and

asking her what she’s doing to him; he tells her he doesn’t do relationships while taking her flying on a glider; he tells her to do her own research on BDSM then demands to know what her answer will be to the contract. He spanks her for the first time then ups and leaves without talking about what’s happened (which you should never do) and he hits her with a belt when she clearly doesn’t want him to. Regardless of what she says, as a dom [sic] he should be assessing the situation and her emotions and if it’s not right then not continue with the scene. And that’s to say nothing of the fact that the whole “being into BDSM because you had a bad childhood” is entirely fucked up and not at all representative of the bulk of people who engage in BDSM (Jones, 2015).

This proved to be contentious and generated a discussion amongst friends and colleagues in the comments. But it counts, I think at least in part, for my desire to distance myself from the film – having read the books and engaged with criticisms of them, I find them incredibly problematic. In addition to the issues around the portrayal of BDSM that I have already mentioned, this ‘romance’ is thinly veiled as abuse and several scenes show Christian forcing Ana to have sex when she does not want to. The books are, admittedly, worse than the film in this regard, and as I noted in my Facebook post, ‘Ana is by far a stronger, more independent character in the film and got a few laughs for standing up to Grey. The scene where she negotiates the contract I particularly liked’ (Jones, 2015). Further, Richard McCulloch points out in his response to the film that,

some of Christian’s most frequently-maligned lines of dialogue (‘If you were mine you wouldn’t be able to sit down for a week’) are met with incredulity from Ana, who delivers a brilliantly deadpan ‘What?!’ on several occasions. Moments like these consistently construct Christian as a ridiculous, unbelievable character, whose desire to control Ana deserves to be laughed at or criticised, not celebrated (2015).

It was difficult for me, though, to ignore the intertextual nature of the book and the film. The book looms in the background, overshadowing some of the more

positive changes made by director Sam Taylor-Johnson.

My engagement with issues around gender through my academic work, as well as my identification as a feminist, thus affect my reading of the text. The books describe an abusive relationship, and the film – while an improvement on the literary text – illustrates types of behaviours which would be considered abusive in a real world scenario. Reading Roe McDermott's account of watching the film and being triggered by the audience reaction suggests that I am not alone in this:

The women who wolf-whistled and applauded when Christian Grey tells an obviously hesitant college student that 'You want to leave? But your body tells me something different'. The girl who groaned 'He's so hot' when Christian Grey explains BDSM to Ana as a thing 'I do to women – I mean, with women'. The male audience member behind me who loudly complained that when the tearful young woman finally leaves her older abuser after having violence inflicted on body and soul, 'they should have shown the welts on her ass'.

The general level of sexual excitement surrounding a male character who demonstrates no personality, merely a distinct pattern of abusive behaviour: obsessive, dictatorial control; violent jealousy; fetishising of young, uninformed, inexperienced women; the blatant ignoring of explicit and implicit non-consent; stalking; the withholding of affection; and the sexual enjoyment of a woman's hesitation, fear and violation. Why was this behaviour being not just tolerated, but celebrated and desired? (2015)

Of course, the kinds of behaviour depicted in *Fifty Shades* are not uncommon in other mainstream romance films, songs and books: the *Twilight* series features Edward breaking into Bella's room to watch her while she sleeps; *Crazy Stupid Love* (Dir. Glenn Ficarra & John Requa, 2011) features Robbie (Jonah Bobo) barraging his babysitter with romantic overtures even after she asks him to stop; the Police sing about stalking in 'Every Breath You Take'. Parallels have also been drawn between *Fifty Shades* and *Jane Eyre*: 'a somewhat innocent young heroine

encounters a wealthy, powerful, dangerous, older, secretive man, uncovers his secrets, provides him with an emotional rescue, and forms a companionate union with him in the end' (Larabee 2015: 223). Suspect behaviour masquerading as love is almost par for the course in your typical romance then, and none of these are real world scenarios. So why do I find it worrying in relation to *Fifty Shades*? Partly, I think, it is because there are still issues around the representation of women in popular culture, and partly because I find Christian's behaviour being passed off as romantic concerning when to me it is clearly abuse.

Anti-fandom and the popular press

Of course, the way in which women are presented in the press and popular culture also factors hugely in the press discourse around *Fifty Shades*, and that is something I am not a fan of either. Ruth Deller and Clarissa Smith note that 'For most media commentators, *Fifty Shades* fell squarely in the category of "genre fiction for women" and many could barely conceal their contempt for the formula romance' (2013, 936). Women's fiction and female pleasures have long been derided in particularly gendered ways (Click 2009; Harman and Jones 2013; Edwards-Behi 2014), with Matt Hills (2012) pointing out that women's desires are frequently attacked by cultural commentators and the mainstream media, and critics also differentiating between the gendered 'masculine cult audience' and the 'feminine mainstream' (Hollows 2003; Read 2003). Natalie Wilson, discussing *Twilight* argues that

[t]his gendered backlash dismisses the productive and engaged nature of *Twilight* fandom, allowing for widespread ridicule that is not only about not liking *Twilight* but also participates in the historical tendency to mock that which females enjoy (such as romance novels, soap operas, teen idols, etc) (2010).

Was this desire to distance myself from *Fifty Shades* an attempt to position myself in opposition to a mainstream audience then? Or a specifically female audience? Or did I want to distance myself from critiques which typically dismiss women and their

concerns? My attitude to *Fifty Shades* has puzzled me. And it continues to do so. True, perhaps I do not like the books because of the various factors I've outlined above, but I also dislike much discourse about the series.

As I have noted, to begin with, *Fifty Shades* started life as a piece of fanfiction and as a result has been roundly derided for being poorly written. Much press discourse examining the popularity of the books refers to James' history as a fan fic writer and as a result, as blogger *audreyii_fic* notes, James is 'embodying the worst stereotypes about fan fic writers. That we're lazy, that we lack talent, that we're leeching off the 'real' creativity of others. It makes every last one of us look bad' (2012). As both a member of fandoms and writer of fanfic myself the attitude of many critics therefore annoys me on both a personal level as a fan, and on an academic level as a researcher of fanfic. Of course, it is important to point out that not all fanfic is good, and only studying the good work can lead to biases and assumptions which are incorrect, but on the other hand it is important to point out that not all fanfic is bad, which is what the press here has failed to do. The poor quality of the prose in *Fifty Shades* is used as evidence that all fanfic is bad, not that James is simply a poor writer. There have been many articles, both academic and fannish, which defend fanfic from a myriad of accusations levelled against it and I am not going to reproduce those here. But as a fan I can state that a lot of good fanfic exists which is excellently written, entertaining and thought provoking. And as a fan I can tell you that press discourse that mocks fanfic and fic writers really, really frustrates me.

The other issue I have with press discourse, which has come to the fore lately as talk about *Fifty Shades*' origins diminished, is the derision shown to the text and its audience. Perhaps the most obvious in relation to this is the series' positioning as 'mummy porn'. Writing in *The Daily Mirror*, Flic Everett said: 'all over the country, groups of mums are discussing Christian's sexual motivations over a slice of Battenburg. So what's going on?' (2012), while Julie Bosman writes that 'The narrative is built on the purple prose typical of pulp novels, with lines like, "My inner goddess is doing the dance of the seven veils"'

(2012). Deller and Smith note that 'These critiques reflect a denigration of "women's genres" and the "chat" they produce: denigration taken further in the description of *Fifty Shades* as "mommy porn" which understands the novels as so tame and vanilla that even mothers indulge in it' (2013: 936). Many of the articles written about *Fifty Shades* immediately after publication were concerned with the sheer number of women reading erotica, and as I. Q. Hunter points out 'The book offered evidence equally of the unruliness of women's desire and the hopeless recidivism of their tastes. "How dare women like this stuff?" was often the subtext, in both senses of "dare"' (2013: 971). Of course, women have been reading (and writing) erotica for years (including of course in fanfic) but the popular press seemed to have forgotten that. *Fifty Shades* was thus emblematic of both the pornification of society and the shock that women were actually reading this sort of thing.

Press articles around the film have continued much of this discourse around the books. Hunter writes that 'From the romance novel to women's cult films such as *Dirty Dancing* (dir. Emile Ardolino, 1987), what women like has often been defined as the most tediously vanilla and escapist mass culture [...] not only by men but also by women in relation to their class and acquired cultural capital' (2013: 971). McCulloch agrees that 'Debates around both novel and film have, for example, been characterised by a sneering condemnation of female sexuality (particularly regarding older women and 'mommy porn'), and accompanied by a succession of news stories about unruly women behaving hysterically' (2015). *The Mirror* reported that a female cinema-goer lost control of her bodily functions (Beek 2015), while the *Daily Record* ran a story about three women being arrested after glassing a man who asked them to be quiet during the film (McGivern 2015). Much as discourse around young, female fans paints them as hysterical and out of control, press discourse around the *Fifty Shades* film fulfils a similar function. And while the content is different to articles discussing the books – there are no stories of punch-ups in Asda over the last copy – the message is the same: texts aimed at women are inherently less valuable than those aimed at men.

Many critics too fulfil the role of *Fifty Shades* anti-fans then, but in a way different to my anti-fandom. Catherine Strong argues that *Twilight* anti-fandom enacts 'a form of symbolic violence, in that the underlying point of the discussion is not about *Twilight* at all, but about constructing teenage girls as a group not worth taking seriously' (2009: 2), and press discourse constructs consumers of *Fifty Shades* in a similar way. Just as teenage girls are considered a homogenous group, so too are these women readers and viewers. But this is an imaginary audience, constructed for the purposes of selling a story – the women of these articles – mothers giggling over sex scenes, and fighting, drunken and unruly in the aisles. As a fan studies scholar these attitudes frustrate me as much as the idea that women's text are worthless irritates me as a feminist. There is not simply one audience, even if I bought into that discourse in arguing that I am not 'the audience' for *Fifty Shades*, as I nearly did in the cinema. In fact in their work on reader responses to James' trilogy, Deller and Smith undertook research with 83 readers. Of these:

Two readers identified as male, the rest female; 84% identified as heterosexual, 4% as bisexual and 8% preferred not to disclose their orientation. None identified as gay, lesbian or queer. One identified as asexual and another said 'I masturbate, but I feel no desire to have sex with other people'. Data also revealed that 75% were in a relationship – 55% were married. One reader was 'dating' and the rest were single. The youngest respondent was 21, the oldest 53 (2013: 933).

From Deller and Smith's sample, then, we can clearly see that contrary to the press' imaginary, there is not one single audience. The most we could argue is that the majority were female and heterosexual, but even then there is no one single female, heterosexual identity. My dislike of press discourse and attitudes to *Fifty Shades* thus positions me as much an anti-fan of the popular press as it does *Fifty Shades* itself.

Media effects and anti-fandom of the moral text

My dislike of this discourse surrounding *Fifty Shades* is, for me, far easier to understand than my anti-

fandom of *Fifty Shades*. I am a media studies academic and fan studies scholar, taught to critically examine texts and look for bias, hidden meanings, inaccuracies and assumptions. Given the nature of the popular press, many of the articles about *Fifty Shades* are simplistic and do not interrogate assumptions like films for women are less culturally valuable than films for men. But is my approach to *Fifty Shades* really that different to the popular press?

In writing this article I have thought a lot about *Fifty Shades*. I have thought about the books and the film, the articles I have read (both for and against). I have thought about my own experiences in fandom and the work I do as an academic. I still feel like *Fifty Shades* is a problematic text, but I am finding it more difficult to pin down why without reverting to the overly simplistic media effects model. This is, of course, a good thing. As an academic I need to question my assumptions and either find an appropriate defence for them or change my point of view. As a fan studies scholar I need to be able to position myself in relation to the object of study (often as a fan – in this case as an anti-fan) but not allow my own biases to colour my attitude towards fans, or anti-fans, of what I am studying. I want to position *Fifty Shades* as a bad text, both in the sense that it is morally repugnant and factually inaccurate in relation to BDSM, but I am also acutely aware that my cultural capital informs my anti-fannish attitude to the text and I know that this investment as an anti-fan may be so specialised that the reasons why viewers may enjoy or value the film are obscured. My knowledge of the poor representation of women in popular culture, as well as my awareness that we live in a society where rape culture is still prevalent impacts upon my anti-fannish response to *Fifty Shades*; just thinking about the last year I can cite numerous occasions where women were threatened with sexual assault, rape, and death; had their home and work addresses posted online; and had to cancel speaking engagements. The feminist blogger, Anita Sarkeesian, has been targeted by gamers since starting the Tropes vs Women in Video Games project in 2009; Zoe Quinn and Brianna Wu have been subject to attacks by Gamergaters; Caroline Criado-Perez, who headed the campaign to feature a woman on the £10 note, was

targeted with threats on Twitter. My concern therefore is that texts like *Fifty Shades* present an environment where that subversive, abusive and controlling kind of behaviour is seen as acceptable.

This is not to say that I believe the women who read or watch *Fifty Shades* will run out and find themselves an abusive boyfriend who they think can be changed into a normal, loving human being by virtue of their virginity. I am not subscribing to the hypodermic needle model that suggests messages are injected directly into a passive audience, which is then influenced by that message or arguing that violent computer games make teenagers go out and kill people and 'Video Nasties' led to a rise in the murder rate. But I am wondering whether *Fifty Shades* contributes to the continuing problematic attitudes towards (men and) women. Here, I am wondering about the other effects of media which David Buckingham calls 'ideological': 'the extensive debates about media representations of women or of ethnic minority groups are clearly premised on assumptions about their potential influence on public attitudes' (1996, 310). These kind of effects raise the issue of how the media can be influential (Barker and Petley 2001), and necessitate more research on the social and cultural contexts of the text and its audience. To that end it is difficult, without further empirical research, to measure the cultural effect of *Fifty Shades*. I would argue, however, it is easier to measure the individual effects of media texts.

Working in fan studies – and being a fan – I can see the positive ways in which media affects people. Henry Jenkins suggests that fan activism:

refers to forms of civic engagement and political participation that emerge from within fan culture itself, often in response to the shared interests of fans, often conducted through the infrastructure of existing fan practices and relationships, and often framed through metaphors drawn from popular and participatory culture (2012).

In examining the Harry Potter Alliance, an activist network created as a result of the *Harry Potter* series which aims to campaign on issues from equal rights to fair trade, Jenkins argues that it 'embraces a politics of "cultural acupuncture", mapping fictional

content worlds onto real-world concerns [...] to generate new narratives or to tap into the meanings associated with the original stories' (2012). Values evidenced in *Harry Potter* like friendship, loyalty, morality are thus used by fans to campaign in the 'real world' for issues which Potter himself would, based on his actions in the books, fight for. It is not just cultural or political changes that can come from being a fan of a text though – personal changes can also be undertaken by fans of a celebrity, book or film. Sandi Hicks, who founded the fan group Aussie X-Files Fans @ Facebook, found that Dana Scully was someone she could aspire to emulate:

Dana Scully to me is the perfect role model. An intelligent woman, working every day in a typically "man's" world—she's worked damned hard to be where she is and she's someone who every young woman should aspire to be like. Strong, determined, faithful, relentless, caring (in Jones 2012).

If media can affect people positively and encourage people to look up to actors as role models, to campaign for equality and raise money for good causes, can it do the opposite? In a culture where women who speak up about a lack of representation, sexism in video games and comic books, and even politics are deluged with rape and death threats, can media like *Fifty Shades* contribute to a normalisation of those kinds of attitudes towards women? *Fifty Shades* seems to have contributed to an increasing interest in BDSM, as both the popular press and members of the BDSM community have stated. Blogger Andrea Zanin writes that the mainstream representation of kink depicted in *Fifty Shades* 'causes people to show up in our spaces with a really skewed idea of what to expect, and [...] those of us who've been around for a while have to engage in the repetitive and sometimes exhausting work of dismantling stereotypes and setting people straight about what this whole kink thing is really all about' (2012). Reports have also begun circulating, albeit in the popular press, of sexual assaults sharing elements of the books (McSpadden 2015; Byrne and Quenby 2015). While I approach these reports with the same scepticism Barker and others have approached reports of video nasties causing people to murder (Barker 1984; Martin 1997;

Petley 1993) there are larger questions to be raised about the feelings that *Fifty Shades* evokes amongst some women and feminists. In their work on women viewing violence, Schlesinger et al. reached the conclusion that:

The issue is not whether depictions of violence increase the likelihood of similar violence among potential perpetrators, but *the feelings and reactions that it creates among those who are the actual or potential victims of violence*. Are women likely to feel more vulnerable, less safe or less valued members of our society if, as a category, they are with some frequency depicted as those who are subjected to abuse? If so, the portrayal of violence against women may be seen as negative, even if women viewers have never experienced such violence and/or its likelihood is not increased (my emphasis, 1992: 170).

This is important in relation to *Fifty Shades* and wider arguments about rape culture that many of the series' detractors invoke in their moral opposition to the text. In his study of *Television Without Pity* forums, Gray points out that many expressions of anti-fandom 'were framed explicitly as moral objections to certain texts and frequently suggested the poster's only meaningful interaction with the text was at this hinge point of morality and what we would call the moral text' (2005: 848). The discussions among the anti-fans Gray encountered focussed on moral or ethical concerns – one example of which being TV movie on homeland security taking advantage of a tragedy (e.g. 9/11) instead of reporting the facts, as opposed to expressing anger at the text due to aesthetic, industrial or rational-realistic reasons. Gray argues that this engagement with the moral text frequently happens before the aesthetic text has aired, and many of the anti-fans Gray examined did in fact not watch the programmes that they derided. Instead they engaged with paratexts like newspaper reports, blogs and news segments to 'read' simply the moral text of the programme.

Many critics of *Fifty Shades* have similarly only engaged with the moral text (see, for example, the religious backlash against the novels discussed in Whitehead [2013], and the UK charity which called

for copies of the book to be burned, referred to by Flood [2012]). These critiques of *Fifty Shades* seem to have focussed on two areas: its pornographic elements, and its inclusion of BDSM as inherently violent. The National Center on Sexual Exploitation, for example, is 'an interfaith effort to counter pornography' which argues that:

Our pornified culture is already affected by violent acts in mainstream porn and now, with the help of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, this violence is being further legitimized and broadly accepted by women. Now men don't have to entice women to engage in the violent acts that they regularly consume through pornography because *Fifty Shades of Grey* is doing it for them (NCSE, online).

Gail Dines also equates *Fifty Shades* with porn, arguing that 'In reality, the violence, debasement, and dehumanization that are rampant in mainstream porn undermine women's rights to full equality. [...] Only by contextualizing *Fifty Shades* in the larger porn culture can we begin to understand its popularity and impact on our culture' (2014: 2). Similarly, the Porn Harms Research site includes links to several articles about *Fifty Shades*, including one entitled 'Sadomasochism: Descent into Darkness' whose author states that 'What prompted me to write this paper was the release of the film, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which from what I have read portrays sadomasochism much in the same that *Pretty Woman* portrayed prostitution. This paper is about the dark underbelly of sadomasochism' (Peters 2015: 2). These critiques, I argue, are clear examples of anti-fandom of the moral text, as outlined by Gray. Peters, in particular, engages with a text he has only encountered through hearsay and discussion and not, at the time of his writing at least, from sitting down and reading or watching it. Anti-fandom of a moral text is, of course, perfectly possible and doesn't necessarily need justification, but the moral panics around porn and BDSM that these framings create speak to a particular lack of engagement with audience research or the role of (multiple and non-homogenous) readers. In addition, the arguments around *Fifty Shades* aren't new. As lipstickchainsaw points out:

we've been having this exact argument for ages. It reached Metal music and DnD for promoting Satanism (and every other genre of music before then for some other imagined crime), video games and comics for promoting violence and who knows what else? The argument was always the same: these works of art were damaging to [insert demographic here] and should therefore not be made. These arguments have always been bogus, and I feel it's just as bogus now (2015).

Given my academic work and my focus on fans and audiences, I cannot accept the arguments that organisations like the National Center on Sexual Exploitation and Porn Harms Research espouse. Yes, of course there can be harm in porn, but there can be empowerment as well. Porn isn't homogenous, just like an audience isn't, and focussing on the potential harms without actually speaking to the audience leaves out a huge part of the debate. As Deller and Smith note, 'it is important to think about how readers engage with the texts because it enables thinking about the distinctions "between the significance of the event of reading and the meaning of the text constructed as its consequence" (Radway, 1984: 7)' (2013, 937). This reinforces the work of David Morrison who undertook research to establish what viewers classified as violent. Morrison's research showed that it was the context in which acts occur which make them violent, and furthermore several kinds of screen violence were established. Of these it is 'authentic violence' which I would argue is most relevant to *Fifty Shades*. Authentic violence is:

violence set in a world that the viewer can recognise. A classic case would be domestic violence. Violence in a pub or shopping precinct might be other examples. It is closer to the life of the viewer than other forms of violence. It might be seen as violence with a little v, depending on how the scene is played, although it does have the potential to be big V, and even massive V. In other words, it has the possibility of assaulting the senses very strongly indeed (1999: 5).

Violence like the kind depicted in *Tom & Jerry* cartoons is not authentic violence – it is 'playful violence' recognised as such. Depicted violence –

another of the categories defined by Morrison – is categorised by realism, and 'often includes close-up shots of injury, and is very graphic' (1999: 5). Neither of these are at work in *Fifty Shades*, however the depiction of emotional abuse within the books and, to a lesser extent, the film, is much closer to Morrison's actual violence and does, I suggest, enable some viewers to see the text as a violent one because of the context within which Christian's actions occur. Given this, and given the discussion around sexual violence that *Fifty Shades* provoked, I argue that the text has potential ideological effects. Barker and Petley agree that the media output has real effects:

Anyone with half an eye on the recent *News of the World* campaign to "name and shame" paedophiles couldn't help but see real 'effects' of media output. Vigilantism, attacks on innocent people, at times escalating to near-riots: all fed by the ways in which the media, and especially the tabloid press, covered the murder of Sarah Payne, "informed" their readers and gave vent to the most brutish of feelings in their editorial columns. But the example is apposite. No one "copied". No direct "message" was involved. There was no "cumulative" influence. The issue of *how* the media can be influential must now move centre-stage (emphasis in original, 2001: 18).

I argue that *Fifty Shades* functions in a similar way. Despite the news reports that suggest *Fifty Shades* is responsible for a handful of sexual attacks, there was no direct message in the text. Rather, *Fifty Shades* adapts and recirculates notions about BDSM and the treatment of women which are already found in the mainstream media. In this way I suggest that *Fifty Shades* is a micro text which affects (and is affected by) the macro culture, which may subsequently affect individuals on the micro scale.

Conclusion

I came to this piece with the aim of thinking through my own anti-fan response to *Fifty Shades of Grey* and its paratextual press discourse. I know why I do not like the popular press dialogue surrounding the text, and I think I have explained that clearly in this article. I have also detailed the contradictions I feel are

at the heart of my response to the text and to debates surrounding it. I believe that:

- a. *Fifty Shades* depicts an abusive relationship;
- b. *Fifty Shades* sends a problematic message in the way it treats Ana and Christian's relationship;
- c. There is no homogenous audience which will all react the same way to a text;
- d. The hypodermic needle model of media consumption is simplistic and violent films and computer games don't make people murder.

But how do I reconcile b and d? How do I on one hand, say that *Fifty Shades* is problematic and on the other that the media effects model is difficult to prove? Bonomi et al's analysis of the association between health risks and reading popular fiction depicting violence against women found that young women who read the first novel in the series were at increased risk of having 'at some point during their lifetime, a partner who shouted, yelled, or swore at them and who delivered unwanted calls/text messages—behaviours that are consistent with definitions of verbal/emotional abuse and stalking, respectively' (2014: 724). But as Sonia Livingstone writes, if we show that those who watch violent TV are more aggressive we have to ask whether it's the TV they're watching that makes them that way, or if they're choosing to watch more violent programmes. Similarly, in regard to *Fifty Shades* we have to ask whether women reading it are at increased risk because they've read it, or whether they've read it because it reflects their experiences. Or, as the case may be, neither. As Livingstone goes on to point out:

However, if by media effects, we mean that the media do not generate specific changes but rather reinforce the status quo, then empirical demonstration of media effects becomes near impossible. It is difficult to know what beliefs people might have espoused but for the media's construction of a normative reality, and difficult to know what role the media plays in the construction of those needs and desires which in turn motivate viewers to engage with the media as

they are rather than as they might be (1996: 307).

So perhaps the key argument to take from this article is not why I dislike the text, but how (and if) that affects my work on it and its audiences. I may not like *Fifty Shades*, but I dislike the assumptions and discourses that surround it even more. My issue with the text is text-based. I worry about the effects it has, yes, but fundamentally I have to argue that individual readers will take from the text whatever meaning they find in it, and they will act on that in ways that are unique to them. Salam Al-Mahadin writes that 'Within the culture industry of today, it would be reductionist to claim that these books interpellate readers—especially female ones—to occupy certain subject positions without allowing for their agency to influence such interpellations. Even more important is the attempt to reduce the trilogy to a simple linearity of cause and effect' (2013: 567). Working in fan studies, studying audiences (and discourses around fans) I cannot place all women who like *Fifty Shades* in one category and call them all naïve, or damaged, or stupid (as some commentators do). I have to accept that people like the text while I do not and more importantly I have to defend that. *Fifty Shades* might be badly written but so is Dan Brown's work. It might be erotica with a thin plot but so is Mills and Boon. What it has done is shown that women do have desires and that sexual empowerment is not a bad thing. It has resulted in hundreds of news articles, office discussions, Tumblr posts and memes. It has got people talking about fan labour, female desire and, yes, violence against women. All of these are important areas for discussion and they are areas which we – as feminists, fan studies academics, audience researchers – need to be engaging with. On the same level as the audience, not from afar putting them into one writhing mass of (middle class) female desire.

I have framed my analysis of *Fifty Shades* and the media effects model through my own work in fan studies and here, then, I want to make some suggestions for the field. Gray and Murray rightly note that fan studies has 'often shown an explicit interest in dislike, precisely because fandom has been shown to balance like with dislike' (2015: 5), and interest in anti-fandom, fan tensions and displays of hate online

are now appearing in scholarly work. I would argue however that we, as a field, still focus too much on celebrating the positive effects of media but look too little at its negative effects. I have already detailed some of the ways in which fans of texts use those text in charitable work, and indeed an entire issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures* (2012) is dedicated to the kind of fan activism that results from texts like *Harry Potter*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and K-Pop. These are instances where fan studies examines the relationships between fandom and political life, 'since fan studies as a research paradigm has something vital to contribute to larger considerations of the relationship between participatory culture and civic engagement' (Jenkins and Shresthova 2012). Yet what are the negative relationships between participatory culture and civic engagement, and what role should fan studies play in examining these?

Jenkins and Shresthova note that 'fan studies has long depicted fandom as a site of ideological and cultural resistance to the heteronormative and patriarchal values often shaping mass media' (2012), but there are situations in which fans (and, indeed, audiences) conform to these heteronormative and patriarchal values and moreover replicates them within fandom or society. Arguing for one mode of seeing fandom, or one approach to fan studies, thus perpetuates the same argument about single audiences or single modes of spectatorship that some scholars and critics have used in relation to *Fifty Shades*. Arguing that *Fifty Shades* is consumed earnestly and that people will get a negative connotation of BDSM and the way to treat women from seeing the film removes the ability of audiences to make their own decisions. Dines et al. fail to consider the multiple positions of spectatorship involved in watching the film, but so, I suggest, do *Fifty Shades*' supporters. Audiences will make sense of the film in multiple contradictory and unpredictable ways, or they may not bother to make sense of it at all. But just as some viewers may not bother to make sense of the film others may, and may view the way the film treats consent and sexuality as a norm reflected by and perpetrated in culture. Thus these multiple audiences and position of spectatorship do not close down the potential for actual harm to be received and perpetrated, which is why we need

these debates – both within and outside of fan studies.

Notes

¹ Yes, these are in many ways an artificial construct – it is possible to be an emotional academic, a rational fangirl and a fangirl academic. But simplistic as they are in this case they serve to illustrate the multiple identities I hold in various aspects of my life and work.

² *Fifty Shades* began life as a *Twilight* fanfic, which was then pulled to publish as original fiction. *Twilight* fans' reactions to the series have been mixed (Jones, 2014).

Bethan Jones is a PhD candidate at Aberystwyth University, examining fan culture, antifandom and fan/producer relationships. Her work has been published in *Sexualities*, *Transformative Works and Cultures* and the *Journal of Film and Television*. Her co-edited collection *Crowdfunding The Future: Media Industries, Ethics and Digital Society* was published by Peter Lang in 2015.

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