

Gazing Grey and the Shading of Female Sexuality

Kavyta K

Institute of Commonwealth Studies

Abstract

Since the worldwide theatrical release of one of the most talked about films of 2015 on Valentine's Day weekend, *Fifty Shades of Grey* has continued to generate immense interest, much as the novel did when first published in 2012. Some of the main sticky points raised, amidst the soaring box office collections, were the flummoxing popularity of the novels and film, a dull plot, lack of chemistry between the protagonists, and the contested representations of gender and sexuality. This article is premised on the idea that female sexuality and female-focused erotic pleasure, in the context of Hollywood cinema, is a contested terrain which throws more shade and less heat to the latter. In this paper, I show that the film's inability to convey female sexuality and pleasure as an experience rather than 'to-be-looked-at' is indicative of the gender politics of Hollywood which legitimises hetero-sexist tropes as I claim the *Fifty Shades* film does under the guise of a love story. I demonstrate that this film adaptation, while mainly targeted towards a female audience, invariably reifies and upholds the dominant cinematic framework of Hollywood, and that is the male gaze (Mulvey 2003).

Introduction

To give a brief summary for those unfamiliar with the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon, the film opens with the young college graduate Anastasia (Ana) Steele (Dakota Johnson) readying herself for an interview with the wealthy, twenty-something business magnate, Christian Grey (Jamie Dornan) at his company headquarters. What ensues is a gradual romantic relationship between the two and Ana's initiation into his world of 'singular' sexual practices of BDSM (Bondage, Discipline, Domination, Submission, Masochism). While the novel extensively relied on detailed sexual passages and eroticised encounters between the two characters, it is significant that in the film adaptation this was downplayed. Sex was central to the plot and when news of the film adaptation was announced, there was huge speculation about how much of the sex would be screened (Wilkinson 2013). That the final reel was largely criticised for its anticlimactic and limited sex depiction which accounted

for only a fifth of its running time (Harlow 2015), adds colour to the debate on the politics of female sexuality and pleasure, particularly in films where an explicit engagement with this has long been repressed and/or neglected. This is also significant because films provide us with ways and spaces of thinking about gender and sex.

Linda Williams makes a strong case about the double bind of screening sex, stating,

Movies move us, often powerfully. Sex in movies is especially volatile: it can arouse, fascinate disgust, bore, instruct, and incite. Yet it also distances us from the immediate, proximate experience of touching and feeling with our own bodies, while at the same time bringing us back to feelings in the same bodies (Williams 2008: 1-2).

On the one hand, this is a process which makes explicit the many expressions of sex; on the other, it

hides its many variations. This article explores how screening sex in *Fifty Shades of Grey* simultaneously broadens the dimensions of sexual expressions on the silver screen while also restricting this in its depiction from a predominantly male gaze, especially when compared to the novel, in which the female gaze is the dominant lens.

There has been a significant body of scholarly work that emerged after the publication of the novel in 2012. Since the film's release, there has also been a vast number of reviews, editorials, listicles and social media activity from viewers and critics weighing in opinions from multiple perspectives. The goal here though, is not to survey the film in order to distinguish good sex from bad (although this has been done extensively on social media and forums) or to analyse if the film pushed boundaries in its enactments of sex (again, a topic hotly debated on various platforms). Rather, it is to move away from rehashing discussions of whether this film was sex-positive vis-a-vis anti-sex and, to use the title as a metaphor, to read sexuality and the erotic as not black and white but rather as grey areas. The cultural impact of the film has been immense and multifaceted, and therefore to take a rigid position on the film is hardly productive as in this context, cinema becomes a discursive cultural arena which is more than simply spectatorship; it is about wider questions of representation, identification and consumption. As such, I explore, through the gaze, how and indeed if, the film opened up the imagination of sex and sexuality beyond the pervasive and familiar formulas of erotica and pleasure for women viewers and how Hollywood, as a masculinist institution, continues to impose a heterosexual, white and patriarchal sexuality paradigm.

To give a brief historical background to the study of sexuality, the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1976) is particularly relevant in signalling the role that public discourses play in producing sex and knowledge; be it the Church, medicine, law or the media. Foucault's work is regarded as one of the leading and most influential in its accounts of how sex and sexuality are produced in modern cultures. More recently, the study of sex, sexuality and the media has been gaining increasing

prominence in contemporary Western societies with fields such as queer theory, lesbian and gay studies, feminism and postcolonial cinema developing epistemological perspectives on the political and social constructions of sex, its norms, representations and regulation. While accounts of sex in the media have become more visible and played out publicly rather than as private moments (Attwood 2006)—for example in reality television, amateur pornography, celebrity sex tapes, and social media practices such as sexting and explicit selfies—both traditional and new forms of media have become central to the ways that sexual identities are constructed, understood, performed and maintained. Therefore it is perhaps a timely and critical intervention for filmmakers to showcase diverse sexualities and expressions in cinematic renderings. While there is a difference between watching sex and having sex, the role of film as mediator and in some cases educator should not be underestimated. Additionally, notions of sexuality in film, to some extent, inform how we perceive gender and there is a disjointed relationship between Hollywood's treatment of sex and real-life gender relations. The release of *Fifty Shades of Grey* came at a time where debates on what is affirmative consent are active and where advocacy for women's equality has, through a range of campaigns and media coverage, been brought to the fore. A number of prominent filmmakers and celebrities such as Emma Watson, Forest Whitaker and Simon Pegg have lent support to the United Nation's 'HeforShe' campaign, which aims to work towards gender equality (UN Women 2016). Yet while there is a gradual increase in female-centered film productions such as *The Hunger Games* (Dir. Gary Ross, 2012; Dir. Francis Lawrence, 2013, 2014, 2015), *Gravity* (Dir. Alfonso Cuarón, 2013) and *Maleficent* (Dir. Robert Stromberg, 2014), there is a dearth of films that foreground female erotics, pleasure and desire through a female gaze; instead, the dominant story-telling technique across most Hollywood film genres tends to focus around the male gaze.

One's relationship to a work of art, be it literary, audiovisual or photographic, is not passive; rather, it has come to be a process of critical engagement in which we consume a popular cultural text

and actively (re)create it in virtual and/or real-life situations, especially in the 2010s digital age. Roland Barthes explores this in 'From Work to Text' (1971), in which he develops a textual strategy that goes beyond prescribed binaries of passive/active, subject/object, reading/writing, and so on. Following Foucauldian logic, this takes the view that we are implicated in the production of identity and meaning, and the subject is therefore an agent/effect of discursive formation. This viewpoint could be extended to suggest that the relationship between feminist theory and popular culture is both cultural and political. Analysing popular culture through a feminist lens involves a range of methodological practices that could be read as political acts, insofar as they attempt to expose and deconstruct the means by which gender and sexuality is textually constituted in relation to dominant notions of gender. Further on in this article, I locate *Fifty Shades of Grey* as a piece of popular culture even though it has received scant acclaim,¹ much like the book which is often claimed to have no literary merit.

Another dimension to this field is that of feminist film theory, which is cultural insofar as it concerns itself with the way that the cultural text of film forms and informs our experiences and understandings of female subjectivity and sexuality. 'Feminist-ing' popular culture is thus a timely and critical engagement with cultural artefacts such as films; particularly, I reiterate, in the digital age in which new web-based technologies are transforming the ways in which identity and meaning are produced and reproduced.

To carry out a feminist analysis of film draws on a range of analytical tools such as semiotics, psychoanalysis, and intertextuality, but it is not within the scope of this paper to utilise these frameworks. I am mainly concerned with how *Fifty Shades of Grey* reifies the male gaze, proving that female sexuality is still a cinematic, and arguably, a social taboo. Though produced and marketed with primarily a heterosexual female audience in mind, I posit that Hollywood cannot seem to escape the ongoing legacy of the male gaze even if the source material is based on female pleasure. At this juncture, it is also important to note that because of the resolutely heterosexual address, this film has foregrounded female desire

(of men) under the guise of a love story; but it is consistent with a wider cultural script that relies upon certain cultural hegemonies—namely heterosexuality, whiteness and a male-top/female-bottom gender dynamic—in a patriarchal society that establishes heterosexual men as figures of absolute authority. As such, for working purposes, the female desire mentioned in this article in reference to the *Fifty Shades* film is heterosexual. A possible reason for this is because the sexuality paradigm of Hollywood uses film as a political tool to impose a heterosexual, male dominant and monogamous ideology which organises woman's pleasure in a way that appears pleasurable, but is not necessarily so. In short, Hollywood films tell us that women cannot be sexual beings in the same way as men and even if an attempt, such as *Fifty Shades*, is made to address this form of sexism, it is done through the objectification of the female form and through a mostly white, heterosexual gaze.

Contesting Christian and the gaze

I do not claim that the politics and problematics of screening female sexuality are solely specific to this one film. However, I do make the claim that *Fifty Shades of Grey* indeed held the proverbial golden key to the playroom that is Hollywood, to address these in the context of twenty-first century cinema. However it could not rise to the occasion of shifting gears in conveying love, sex and the gaze in motion pictures. It may be heralded by some as challenging sexual mores and changing erotics for the viewer, but a demarcation here between the female reader and spectator should be highlighted. This is of significance, and I explore further below how the erotic is in huge demand by women as evidenced by the success of the books and film, and how they are short-changed as the film falls back on the male heterosexual gaze. The exploration of the erotic in film is a necessary endeavour, as attested by Taylor and Baker who state that 'Erotic impulses preoccupy our psyches, shape our identities, inscribe our bodies, and mediate our relationships with others and objects' (2012: 515). Cinema, then, can be understood as a tool of mediating this relationship of object/subject and visual/visceral, where viewers should no longer be understood as passive viewers but as actively engaging with the

screen. As such, the erotic is a compelling concept and if the global reactions to and reviews of *Fifty Shades of Grey* are anything to go by, we see how the claim of Taylor and Baker makes sense:

A public, private and often highly politicized concern, few subjects are simultaneously commonplace and controversial as the erotic. Whatever its form—sacred, profane, ordinary, perverse, vanilla, or kinky—the erotic has persisted in its ability to delight, entertain, panic and outrage us throughout history and across cultures (2012: 515).

In theory the pleasure derived from ‘looking at another as an erotic object’ (Mulvey 2003: 843), is from Christian. As a fictional character, he has gained almost mythical status embodying the sexual fantasies of millions of women. Carrying some of the crucial attributes of a leading man—wealth, power, status, style, good looks—the casting of Christian Grey caused passions to run high as much as the novel’s controversial subject matter. Celebrated as one of the steamiest romances of recent times, it was inevitable that the enormity of the task and pressure to adapt the novel into a film format would be immense. This was attested to by the director, Sam Taylor-Johnson (Campion 2015). Before delving into a discussion of the film adaptation, let us briefly go back to the source material in which a young female college student is taken with the dark and damaged multimillionaire Christian Grey. The story relies on the wide-eyed, lip-biting Ana as a narrator and she is sketched as the virgin maiden archetype who has never had a boyfriend and experiences a sexual awakening with the powerful and dominant Christian. Whether the novel and subsequent film adaptation is feminist or empowering has been the subject of much debate (Jenkins 2015; Perez 2012), and in spite of the surrounding controversies, a high number of women have consumed, located and imagined themselves in this story in a multitude of ways. With a novel, a reader is compelled to use their imagination to synthesise a text and the perceptions are thus more rich, intricate and private. With film, however, one is compelled to view an image that is already pictured out for us and we thus rely on physical perception.

Metaphorically speaking, if the *Fifty Shades* novel can become a female reader’s red room, by default, the film adaption should encourage similar possibilities of sexual fantasy in its portrayal of Ana and Christian. Specifically, the novel is told in a female voice and the film therefore would follow Ana’s gaze and Christian’s form through her eyes; but a viewing of the film illustrates that this is not the case.

In order to understand the ways in which *Fifty Shades* is viewed and gives pleasure to female spectators, I turn to Laura Mulvey’s 1975 groundbreaking essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (reproduced in Brooker and Jermyn 2003). Screen theorists have drawn on the gaze as a theoretical concept in a myriad of ways to explore the relation between ways of seeing and being. Feminist film theory attempts to think through the relation between ways of seeing and the (re)production of gender identity (McCabe, 2013). However, Mulvey’s coinage of the gaze draws on psychoanalytic notions of scopophilia, that is ‘the erotic basis for pleasure in looking at another person as object. At the extreme, it can become fixated into a perversion, producing obsessive voyeurs’ (2003: 135). Her formulation of the gaze remains a theoretical favourite of scholars. She also draws on ego-identification and fetishism to analyse the relationship between sexual difference and production of Hollywood films. Mulvey propounds that Classical Hollywood cinema is primarily designed in such a manner to satisfy unconscious desires of male spectators and asserts that ‘In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness’ (2003: 137). In her landmark article, she reveals the existence and impact of the male gaze in classic Hollywood cinema. However, her argument of woman as spectacle and men as spectator, although applied by scholars to a multitude of films and regarded as a major contribution to film theory, is not without criticism. Indeed, some have critiqued this binary for its simplification of scopophilia (Stacey 1994), and lack of engagement with the dynamics of the female, queer and raced gaze. Furthermore Mulvey’s model has been critiqued for reproducing hetero and Eurocentric thinking. In response to this,

Mulvey foregrounds the role of the female spectator in her essay 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"' inspired by *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1946)' (1988). The female spectator is described as either unable to identify with the male on-screen hero or 'secretly, unconsciously almost, enjoying the freedom of action and control over the diegetic world that identification with a hero provides' (Mulvey 1988: 70). The consideration here, of how women take pleasure in other women's objectification on screen by taking on the heterosexual 'male' gaze (and therefore acting the 'transvestite' in borrowing the gaze), makes critical omissions. The assumption made is that the viewer is heterosexual, and Mulvey does not take into account queer and raced looks.

Although in 'Afterthoughts' Mulvey brings forward the heterosexual female spectator, the possibilities of the female gaze are not comprehensively engaged with beyond the identification or dis-identification with the male hero as a subject. It does not consider the male as spectacle, which is what the *Fifty Shades* novels invite through its sexualisation of Christian. The film, however, caters to heterosexual male desire and it is immediately evident that the focus of the film and dramatisation of the lead characters are female-focused, yet the portrayal of Ana's body in relation to Christian's is done in an exhibitionist manner akin to Mulvey's assertion of women as spectacle. Following the guiding principles of gaze theory, if as a viewer we have been invited to spectate stories through predominantly heterosexual male eyes, does *Fifty Shades*, a film conceived and written for women, contest this?

Given that this is a text produced through the masculinist machine of Hollywood, where the gendered regulation of pleasure is perpetuated by male sexual control over women, it is hardly surprising that the end result falls short of female expectations. While there was perhaps a failure to establish a chemistry between (and audience investment with) the protagonists, the film's reversal of the object of scopophilic desire from woman to man as object does not necessarily heed Mulvey's call for a new 'language of desire' in mainstream cinema (1999: 984). This becomes obvious in the visual representation of gender and female sexuality, which is coded to the

conventions of masculinity in film where the female is passive and looked at. There are, however, a few examples to illustrate this: for instance, the endowment of Christian in the opening scene, which sees him jogging and getting ready in his luxury closet. His 'to-be-looked-at-ness' which Mulvey uses to describe women, does at some points place him as the object. Also, by broaching female fantasy and sexuality from a BDSM angle in a major motion picture, this certainly warrants acknowledgement and the subsequent reactions indicate, if anything, that female sexuality is not to be underestimated. Yet, the point must be reiterated that despite claims of being a pro-sex and pro-women film, the film invariably reproduces hetero-sexist tropes in its portrayal of coercion and submission. For example, when Ana says she is a virgin (feeding into fantasies of purity), Christian 'rectifies the situation' by making love to her. Her sexual awakening is predicated on his 'dark secret' and dominant tendencies, with the scenario offering a sense of 'initiating' the innocent girl. Her enthusiasm to being spanked and tied up by Christian reaffirms traditional gender norms; for example, even when she gives consent to Christian inflicting pain, she is still harmed. The casual association of pleasurable sex with violence is problematic, as this is done without context and implicitly promotes a disturbing fantasy.

But why is this important or a pressing concern? And what does it tell us about society and sex in 2015? For Catharine MacKinnon, 'It is not that life and art imitate each other; in sexuality, they are each other' (1989: 199). This statement underscores the relevance and importance of *Fifty Shades* in conveying the ideas, beliefs and meanings of sexuality. It must be said, of late, Hollywood cinema is regressive in its reluctance to show women as complex sexual collaborators rather than conquests. Stories of princes rescuing women has been a perennial favourite of Hollywood, and while men and women may fantasise about domination and submission, this film has cast the male Christian as the aggressor; it does not expand our ideas about sexuality, because of the focus on male privilege and his point of view in contrast to Ana's.

This marks a departure from the Hollywood

films of the early 1990s. Although the *mise-en-scène* was similarly constructed to present an attractive view to the male viewer in its favouring of female nudity and scantily clad women, it included more topically challenging films in which women's sexuality is a major part of the character and serves as the driving force behind the film's narrative. The most well-renowned example of this is 1992's *Basic Instinct* (Dir. Paul Verhoeven), in which the character Catherine Tramell (Sharon Stone) was made iconic as the ultimate film noir heroine. The 1990s, described as one of 'Hollywood feminism' (Couldry and Curren 2003: 133), saw a number of films in which female power did not solely reside in sexuality, but also other identity markers. We see the emergence of 'a plethora of women professionals in top-grossing films' (Couldry and Curren 2003: 133), for example in *Disclosure* (Dir. Barry Levinson, 1994) and *A Few Good Men* (Dir. Rob Reiner, 1992). *Basic Instinct* is a significant example; while it is widely remembered for the infamous leg-crossing scene, the 'fuck of the century' sex scene between Catherine Tramell and Nick Curran (Michael Douglas) is arguably a clear example of oscillation between female and male modes of looking. An erotic thriller, *Basic Instinct* pushed the parameters of sex on film and went on to become one of the highest grossing films of the decade. Culturally, the film came to signify the mainstreaming of sex and while it is heralded as, to use a pun, the climax of female sexuality on film, it is also the end point. No other film since has been able to repeat or produce a blueprint for the digital age in its sexual storyline, and there has been a dearth of engaging sexual expressions on screen since the 2000s, bar exceptions such as *Secretary* (Dir. Steven Shainberg, 2002) and *Nymphomaniac: Vol I & 2* (Dir. Lars von Trier, 2013).

This is where, I argue, *Fifty Shades* was well placed to do for this decade what *Basic Instinct* did for the 1990s. Yet beyond starting a conversation, the film did not deliver. This speaks to the gender politics of the film establishment, which appear to remain rooted in heteronormative ideas. The result is that any exploration of complex female sexuality is relegated to the margins. Again we see this in the portrayal of BDSM, which takes a backseat to notions of heteronormativity that are hinted at in discreet ways.

When Ana awakens in Christian's hotel room hungover from the night before, he gives her an insight into his 'singular' tastes. He states, 'I don't make love. I fuck....hard', and 'I don't do the girlfriend thing'. As they begin to spend more time together, we see Ana's developing desire to nudge their unconventional arrangement to becoming a functional 'regular couple', for example in her inclusion of a date night into the BDSM contract. In this manner, the Christian-Ana love story has been lightly compared to a fairy-tale archetype, in which the princess selflessly and gradually vanquishes the beast and reveals the prince (Marshall 2015). Christian's BDSM proclivities make up the flesh of the beast, pierced and poisoned by his mother's best friend who initiated him as a teenager. The princess, who becomes contaminated by this poison—for instance in her tearful submission to six lashes with the end of a belt buckle—sacrifices parts of herself to save him, and slowly casts away the poisoned flesh to reveal a prince in shining armour. Though this does not occur at the end of the first film, it is clear that eventually this will happen.

The narrative of transgressive pleasures being overcome in order to enter into a heteronormative romantic relationship is one that can be traced in the BDSM film *Secretary*. Both this film and *Fifty Shades* share similar beautiful-yet-awkward female leads, dominant men in suits, and the development of a dominant/submissive relationship. Yet while both differ in their cinematic treatment of romance in the context of BDSM, they both serve 'as a limit against which a normal, vanilla, procreative, heterosexual, and suburban sexuality is defined' (Weiss 2006: 127). Margot Weiss talks about a similar failure to represent a progressive form of female and non-normative sexuality in her work on how non-practitioners perceived this sexual minority in *Secretary*: 'Instead of promoting politically progressive forms of acceptance or understanding, these representations offer acceptance via normalization and understanding via pathologizing' (2006: 105).

Screening Grey

From the outset, the power imbalance in *Fifty Shades* is painfully obvious. For most of the sex scenes in this film, Dakota Johnson, who plays Anastasia Steele, is

mostly naked while Jamie Dornan, playing Christian Grey, is mostly covered up all but one scene. He is either wearing a towel or jeans during the sex scenes.

That the film is geared towards women and was released on Valentine's Day, a holiday traditionally governed by gender roles, is undeniable; but that it conforms to the tenets of a male gaze is of significance. The character of Christian Grey featured heavily on the promotional materials, and the heated reaction to the casting of Jamie Dornan in this role indicated the high level of interest in this character primarily among women. Yet the positioning of this character does not entirely follow the tenets of a female gaze, as he is somewhat hidden, restricted and contained in the sex scenes. This is indicative of the normalisation of female nudity in cinema, and while there may be a wider acceptance of sexual acts, affects and identities, the film does not largely reflect this in its shying away of erotics; whether due to censor restrictions, or creative clashes with studio executives. As a result, *Fifty Shades* was received as a fantasy of kink and BDSM-lite, and which effectively whipped up a frenzy of divided responses (Child 2015; France 2015; Marshall 2015). Conservatives, religious leaders, feminists and moralists hated it differently, but in equal measures. Even for the waves of defenders of the film anticipating its release, it generated a mixed response with viewers expressing disappointment at the 'vanilla sex' and stripped-away sexiness (France 2015). While there was an appreciation of the cinematography and techniques, the focus on the male gaze—despite being a tale about a female sexual experience—sat somewhat at odds with each other. As a written text, the female gaze takes prime position as we see Ana's journey from her eyes, and Christian through her gaze. Yet the transition from book to film did not follow the same trajectory, as the viewer assumes the position of the male gaze that has dominated mainstream Hollywood cinema for decades. This is a notion that Mulvey (1999:19) elaborates on:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly (2003: 137).

That female nudity is far more common in Hollywood films than male nudity is not a new revelation. For Florence Dee Boodakian, 'In Hollywood, male frontal nudity is still lingering in its taboo status while the same is not true for women on screen', and, 'Consistent with the cultural imperative to keep the heterosexual nude male out of the "peripheric ring" in order to maintain his power as primary "gazer" and keeping his body from being read/viewed, the male-dominated film industry has followed suit....' (2008: 19). For instance, the backlash to the brief male full-frontal nudity moments in *Gone Girl* (Dir. David Fincher, 2013) is an example of how there remains a strong and visceral reaction to male nudity (Atad 2014), and how this requires justification in comparison to female nudity that is largely normalised.

As such, in the reinforcement of strict gendered difference it can be read that female nudity signifies a submission to patriarchal power, and that male nudity cannot be exposed in such a manner. Patriarchal relations in Hollywood are symbolised, in crude terms, through the binary relation of men as active viewers and women as passive objects; any subversions, for example in the eroticised male nude, can become a threat to masculine heterosexual hegemony. Hollywood has been loath to depict complex sex scenes and sexual practices precisely because any deviation from the visual codes of the female nude, not so much as a representation of heterosexual male desire but rather as a form of capitalist objectification, would not fully serve White male heterosexual desire. The repetition of a long-standing patriarchal fantasy plays out in film, so that the limited representations through which White female heterosexual subjects become publicly visible continue to reproduce fixed ideas, fixations and gendered ideological thinking about the nature of female sexuality.

Despite all the politics surrounding the film, *Fifty Shades* has prompted a high-stakes discussion on forms of female pleasure, sexuality and erotics. For all its packaged titillation, yet penultimate disappointment in its 'choreographed sex' (Crocker 2015), it has brought female pleasure into the mainstream in a way that no other film has matched in recent times. It does so by heavily drawing on the long-standing notion that sex sells. However, sex does not sell

equally and not all sex sells. We see in *Fifty Shades*, for instance, that the sex scenes only hint at Christian performing cunnilingus and the titillation portrayed is not from a female perspective. Christian may be the seductor, but Ana is the selling point; her nudity, which features more heavily, can be read as an example of biases by the masculinist film industry who deem female sexuality as 'to be looked at' and not experienced.

Selling sex

That sex sells is not a new or radical notion. Sex and the media have long been considered bedfellows and this duo, whether in film, television, music videos, commercial advertising or online, is one that in recent years has gained much prominence in an era dubbed as 'pornified' and 'over-sexualized' (Dines 2010). With reference to *Fifty Shades*, in addition to sex being the major selling point, there were numerous commercial marketing tie-ins with brands such as Durex and Ann Summers, and luxury product placement for brands such as Audi and Omega (Anon. 2015a). These wealth symbols, which can be termed as lifestyle porn, can be understood to sell a capitalist fantasy more than a sexual; *Fifty Shades* may represent the capitalist appropriation of sex, but does not tell us much about female sexuality. One example of the capitalising on the theme of sex is the boost in sales of sex toys before and after the film's release. By bringing bondage into the mainstream, the 'sexplosion' caused by the film is thought by some to have resulted in an improvement of couples' sex lives with more openness to experimentation (Anon. 2015a). If these are but a few examples of the outcome of this film, it could be assumed that the film addresses a critical gap in women's sexuality previously silenced and shamed. I reiterate the point made in the introduction, that sexuality in relation to reel and real-life is not black and white, but symbolically is grey.

Yet Hollywood is stuck in a double bind in its response to, and treatment of, the expanding meanings and articulations of sexuality on the silver screen; which could very well be interpreted as becoming regressive in its lack of attention to the 'grey-areas', that is the complexities of women's

sexual subjectivities. Cinematic enactments of sex (of the erotic kind, not pornographic), may render visible the reality of sex, but they do so ambivalently, such that the end result provides a model of pleasure catering to a predominantly male fantasy and does not reconcile with any female mode of desire. While some argue that the proliferation of romantic comedies acts as a sort of corrective to this, gender representations even within this genre have been continually contested for normalising male privilege. Mapping sexual dimensions on screen, in all their complexity, thus becomes a potentially productive engagement; especially given that online pornography can be considered as the most ubiquitous model of sexuality education for young men today (Dines, 2010). The question of why Hollywood is reluctant to screen multi-faceted aspects of sexuality, erotics, and pleasure, particularly for women, is one that remains unanswered. Whether this is put down to conservatism or the magnitude of new media, or to the turn towards a vast range of porn channels for the consumption of sexual imagery, there is a failure of erotics on the silver screen. Most depictions deliver a singular and short sex scene with little imagination. Perhaps the last time we have seen a reflection of sex as complex and the erotic dances between two protagonists was in the cinema of the 1990s, with thrillers such as *Basic Instinct*, as discussed earlier.

I argue that there should be an ethical responsibility shouldered by the film industry to show sex in the most diverse, well-rounded, complex way possible, because it has the power to shape sexual norms. It is noteworthy that Hollywood's counterpart, the small screen, can be perceived to be making bolder choices in terms of sexual representations; sex scenes in shows such as *Girls* (HBO 2012-) and *How to Get Away with Murder* (ABC 2014-) (among many others), in addition to being key plot drivers, became major talking points across social media. Yet *Fifty Shades of Grey* could be positioned as one of the very few mainstream erotic films of this decade, in spite of its critical failures. This is so because discourses of desire and pleasure, which were previously silenced, have expanded a larger conversation both in reel and real-life on aspects of female sexuality, albeit in a black and white paradigm.

It could be said that *Fifty Shades* is a minor corrective to the depiction of sex in recent Hollywood films that have, bar a few exceptions, generally shied away from complex sexualities. It must be asked if indeed ‘the Golden Age of Hollywood is dead, but the Golden Age of Masturbation is in full flood’ (Patterson 2015), then who gets to or is allowed to masturbate? The short answer is: heterosexual men. If films are visually coded in such a way to produce meaning, then what one can deduce from *Fifty Shades* is that the spectator is invited to identify with Christian, and that it uses the conventions of the romance genre to echo traditional ideas about gender that are ultimately anti-feminist. While films are primarily forms of entertainment, they are political in that ‘they offer competing ideological significations of the way the world is or should be’ (Storey 2008: 4). It could be argued that Hollywood is nurturing political currents that are actively undermining feminism and feminist representation of sexuality; further, that *Fifty Shades of Grey* should be understood as both tipping its hat slightly to feminism, while at the same time suggesting that it is irrelevant through its characterisation of Ana. That the narrative relies on the classical structure of powerful heterosexual man and passive heterosexual woman shows that sex is still circumscribed by patriarchy, and that female pleasure is determined by the ability to hew to male expectations of desirability.

In this age of online sexual excesses, there exists a spectrum of insights on the implications of online pornography, the most ongoing being the perceived abuse of women in *Fifty Shades*. In a similar manner, some of the responses to the film were that it promotes abuse (Anon. 2015b), that it is anti-feminist, and that the depiction of BDSM is largely inaccurate (Smith 2015). Grassroots opposition to the film saw domestic violence groups, social conservatives, religious leaders and women’s rights advocates urging people to boycott *Fifty Shades*. The social media hashtag #50dollarsnot50shades requested audiences to donate the cost of their cinema ticket to a women’s shelter instead (Jenkins 2015). Another criticism levelled against the film was the awkward sexual chemistry of the lead pair. As one reviewer put it,

the film has set the bar shockingly low. It leaves the audience feeling shortchanged, after sitting through a film that is otherwise fiercely loyal to the original material. In short, the movie that promised to be the most titillating Hollywood motion picture ever made—the apex of a cultural phenomenon that thrust BDSM into the mainstream—was, basically, really bad in bed (Crocker, 2015).

It is evident that the runaway success of the books and film adaptation has not only generated a range of reactions, it has also inspired new cultural genres such as ‘mommy porn’. However on viewing the film, it becomes clear that this genre (which arose particularly in relation to the book series) does not transition quite so seamlessly to the silver screen.

Nonetheless, there are moments which can be read as erotic. In Christian and Ana’s first sex scene, we see a gradual build-up to this from a heated kiss in the elevator to Anastasia’s confession of virginity in his apartment. This scene is gently backlit so we see the fuzziness of Ana’s leg hair, Christian removing his shirt to reveal his bare chest and scars, and briefly his posterior. The backdrop to this is a slow song, as the camera slowly pans away to a mirrored ceiling view. This is the only scene where we see perhaps a comparatively more overtly sexualised visual treatment of Christian; in the remaining sex scenes, more attention is placed on Ana’s form as the camera lingers on the curves of her body, her breasts, curled toes, or lightly touching a Grey branded pencil with her lips. In contrast, there is a fleeting glimpse of Christian’s public hair and penis. The seductive stares between Christian and Ana, and the bondage activity, also form part of the erotic build-up to the affair. The soundtrack also works to set the tone, featuring contributions by Annie Lennox, Ellie Goulding and Beyoncé. If the selling point of *Fifty Shades of Grey* is the sex, then arguably it is a hard sell approach.

It could also be said that the status symbols exhibited throughout the film carry perhaps more aphrodisiac powers than the actual sex. Lifestyle porn as staged in Christian’s tailored suits, bespoke silk ties, private helicopter, flashy cars, and luxuriously furnished apartment appear to be another strong selling point.

Conclusion

Although around 40 years have elapsed since Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking essay, this article tentatively illustrates how some of her insights still apply to film and cinematic productions today. The representation of 'Woman' and the female form as spectacle dominates visual culture, and this becomes evident in the characterisation of Ana, despite the film being targeted for a heterosexual female audience. Although the novel positions Christian as the object of her desire, with the romantic narrative related through her perspective, the film adaptation falls back on a pervasive paradigm that privileges the visual pleasures of the male gaze.

The ending of the film sees Ana walk out on Christian; when he is completely free and in his own skin in the red playroom, it is painful for her. This is the antithesis of what pleasure and eroticism, in any work of art, is supposed to be—a liberatory expression of aspects of one's identity, which we are often instructed to hide and compartmentalise. So, what then, does this tell us about society in the 2010s? If we are to take cinema as a slice of popular culture and a reflection of society, then this film is projected as buying into a form of neoliberal discourse which argues that women may be empowered by hypersexualised images, because this offers a kind of pleasure that comes from being desired by men. But in actual fact, it reproduces sexual inequality and is performing heterosexual white femininity.

Whether loved or loathed, *Fifty Shades of Grey* is a slice of popular culture. If the phenomenal box office figures are anything to go by,² there is a demand for complex sexuality on screen but a supply of films that does not quite deliver. It has helped some women reclaim their sexuality, as the tremendous impact of the film on the pleasure industry through products such as lingerie, condoms, lube, toys and novelty items is openly acknowledged by both defenders and detractors. But what this does in the long term for erotic cinema as a genre is highly debatable. The book may have spawned a cottage industry of erotic novels packaged in the same way, but it will be interesting to see how or indeed if, the film adaptation will set a similar trend.

Female sexuality in film has not, thus far,

been an aspect that women themselves have largely had the creative license to shape. Director Sam Taylor-Johnson was a rare exception, but even in this endeavour was regulated by the masculinist film production machine of Hollywood. If more autonomy was given to female film-makers to author their sexualities and female spectator pleasure, I argue that the results would be less frustrating and more interesting for audiences. To say that *Fifty Shades of Grey* is subversive is certainly a stretch, but forthcoming films could perhaps aim to subvert reigning discourses in ways that permit female pleasure to be represented onscreen. Indeed, progress toward parity will occur not when men become just as objectified as women, but when men and women can move freely between subject and object positions, both on screen and off. Such enabling of possibilities would by far be more transformative and transgressive than a blindfold or a butt plug.

Notes

¹ The Internet Movie Database (IMDB) rated this film 4.2 out of 10 stars.

² *Fifty Shades of Grey* had the biggest opening ever for an 18 Certificate film in the UK, grossing over £13.55m. As of 14 March 2015 the film had grossed \$530,720,000 worldwide (IMDB 2015).

Currently an Associate Fellow at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in London, Kavyta has an interdisciplinary background ranging from the arts and humanities to sociology and cultural studies. Her doctoral research conducted at the University of Leeds explored the production and performativity of Indian identities in the postcolonial Caribbean island nation of Trinidad and Tobago. Influenced by a black feminist ethnographic approach, Kavyta is largely interested in the dynamics of intersectionality within the global South and to this end, has organised conferences and workshops on cultural and screen studies. Her research aims to explore nuanced and non-binaristic ways of thinking through concepts such as race, gender and sexuality from multiple platforms, be it academic, cultural or digital.

References

- Atad, C. (2014) 'Ben Affleck, 'Gone Girl' and the Need for More Male Nudity in Hollywood', *Pajiba*. Online at: http://www.pajiba.com/think_pieces/ben-affleck-gone-girl-and-the-need-for-more-male-nudity-in-hollywood.php (Accessed 19 Mar 2015).
- Attwood, F. (2006) 'Sexed up: Theorizing the sexualization of culture', *Sexualities*, vol. 9, no. 1, 77-94.
- Anon. (2015a) 'The Fifty Shades Effect', *Cosmopolitan*, March, 169-171.
- Anon. (2015b) 'Protestors Criticise 50 Shades of Grey for "promoting abuse"', *The Telegraph*. Online at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/film-news/11409906/Protestors-criticise-50-Shades-of-Grey-for-promoting-abuse.html> (Accessed 19 Mar 2015).
- Barthes, R. (1971) *Image/Music/Text*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Boodakian, F.D. (2008) *Resisting Nudities: A Study in the Aesthetics of Eroticism*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Campion, J. (2015) 'Sam Taylor-Johnson Interview', *Interview Magazine*. Online at: <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/film/sam-taylor-johnson> (Accessed 19 Mar 2015).
- Child, B. (2015) 'Domestic violence campaigners call for boycott of Fifty Shades of Grey film', *The Guardian*. Online at: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/feb/05/domestic-violence-campaigners-boycott-fifty-shades-of-grey-film> (Accessed 19 Mar 2015).
- Couldry, N. and Curren, J. (2003) *Contesting Media Power: Alternative Media in a Networked World*, Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Crocker, L. (2015) 'How 'Fifty Shades of Grey' killed sex', *The Daily Beast*. Online at: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/features/2015/50shades/index.html> (Accessed 19 Mar 2015).
- Dines, G. (2010) *Pornland: How Porn has Hijacked our Sexuality*, Boston: Beacon Press.
- Foucault, M. (1976) *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, London: Penguin.
- France, L.R. (2015) 'What people are saying about *Fifty Shades of Grey*', *CNN*. Online at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/02/12/entertainment/feat-fifty-shades-grey-reviews/> (Accessed 19 March 2015).
- Harlow, J. (2015) 'Fifty Shades leaves other adult films looking limp', *The Sunday Times*. Online at: http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/uk_news/Arts/article1513861.ece (Accessed 19 March 2015).
- Jenkins, A. (2015) '*Fifty Shades of Grey*: This enters a new terrain of toxicity – and no feminist can think otherwise', *The Independent*. Online at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/fifty-shades-of-grey-this-enters-a-new-terrain-of-toxicity--and-no-feminist-can-think-otherwise-10029971.html> (Accessed 19 March 2015).
- MacKinnon, C.A. (1989) *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Marshall, S. (2015) '50 Shades' Is Just 'Beauty and the Beast' with Handcuffs and Sex Toys', *New Republic*. Online at: <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/121039/50-shades-grey-fairy-tale> (Accessed 19 March 2015).
- McCabe, J. (2013) *Feminist Film Studies: Writing the Woman into the Cinema*. Columbia: Columbia University Press.
- Mulvey, L. (2003) 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in W. Brooker and D. Jermyn (eds.) *The Audience Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 133-143.
- Mulvey, L. (1988) 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" inspired by *Duel in the Sun*' in C. Penley (ed.) *Feminism and Film Theory*, London and New York: Routledge, 69-79.
- Patterson, J. (2015) '*Fifty Shades of Grey*: has sex in cinema become boring?', *The Guardian*. Online at: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/feb/09/fifty-shades-of-grey-john-patterson> (Accessed 19 March 2015).
- Perez, G. (2012) 'Fifty Shades of Feminist Criticism', *Fifty Shades of Feminist Criticism*. Online at: <http://fiftyshadesfeminist.wordpress.com/> (Accessed 19 March 2015).
- Smith, A. (2015) 'Fifty Shades of Grey: what BDSM

- enthusiasts think', *The Guardian*. Online at: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/feb/15/fifty-shades-of-grey-bdsm-enthusiasts> (Accessed 19 March 2015).
- Stacey, J. (1994) *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*. New York: Routledge.
- Storey, J. (2008) *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge.
- Taylor, J. and Baker, D. (2012) 'Erotic screen and sound: Culture, media and desire', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, vol. 26, no. 4, 515-517.
- UN Women (2016) 'He for She: Stand Together', *HeForShe*. Online at: <http://www.heforshe.org/en> (Accessed 30 January 2016).
- Weiss, M. (2006) 'Mainstreaming Kink. The Politics of BDSM representation' in P. J. Kleinplatz and C. Moser (eds.) *Sadomasochism. Powerful Pleasures*, Binghamton: Harrington Park Press, 103-132.
- Wilkinson A. (2013) 'Will *Fifty Shades of Grey* really submit to NC-17 Rating?', *MTV News*, 9 January. Online at: <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1699886/fifty-shades-of-grey-nc-17-rating.jhtml> (Accessed 19 March 2015).
- Williams, L. (2008) *Screening Sex*, Durham: Duke University Press.