University of Huddersfield Repository

McCulloch, Richard

Tied Up In Knots: Irony, Ambiguity, and the 'Difficult' Pleasures of FIFTY SHADES OF GREY

Original Citation

McCulloch, Richard (2016) Tied Up In Knots: Irony, Ambiguity, and the 'Difficult' Pleasures of FIFTY SHADES OF GREY. Intensities: The Journal of Cult Media, 8. pp. 1-19.

This version is available at http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/27340/

Tied Up In Knots: Irony, Ambiguity, and the 'Difficult' Pleasures of *Fifty Shades of Grey*

Richard McCulloch
University of Huddersfield

Abstract

Upon its release in February 2015, Sam Taylor-Johnson's *Fifty Shades of Grey* met with vehement critical derision, finding itself reproached on both artistic and ideological grounds. While the precise focus of this indignation varied between reviews, complaints broadly fell into three categories: (1) it isn't titillating enough (2) it is misogynistic, and (3) the love story and characters are clichéd and unrealistic.

In this article, however, I demonstrate that the film is far more sophisticated than it has been given credit for. Each of these 'failings', I argue, is in fact a symptom of its unconventional identificatory strategy, whereby the film aligns the spectator with Ana's (Dakota Johnson) subjectivity and invites us to share in her fluctuating and often contradictory emotions. Seen from this perspective, for example, Christian's (Jamie Dornan) misogyny becomes the central problem to be resisted and tackled, not an ideological position that we are unproblematically asked to accept.

I combine my analysis of the film's 'difficult' identificatory strategy with an exploration of its critical reception, in order to open up a discussion of how and why critics negotiated these ostensibly negative emotions. Doing so, I argue, requires a considerable amount of interpretive labour, especially in the context of the film's widespread critical dismissal, but also because of the complex way in which the movie uses irony both to distance and engage the spectator (cf. Sconce 2002; Plantinga 2009; Lübecker 2015). I argue that the result of these contradictions and ambiguities is that it is often difficult to know how one is supposed to feel towards these two characters and their relationship at any one time.

In many ways, then, this article is a personal piece of criticism; however, rather than asserting my reading as 'correct', this article is an exploration of the interpretive processes involved in taking pleasure from a 'difficult', ambiguous and often contradictory film.

Introduction

It was the opening weekend of Sam Taylor-Johnson's *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015). As the elevator doors closed, the screen faded to black and the credits began to roll, an audible groan spread throughout the cinema auditorium. One woman, sat just two rows in front of me at the Stratford Picturehouse in London, exclaimed loudly and with palpable frustration, 'Is that it?!' This response from the audience appeared to be sparked by the film's 'unresolved' ending. After all, we had just seen its protagonists—Anastasia Steele (Dakota Johnson) and Christian Grey (Jamie Dornan)—spend nearly two hours of screen time falling in love, experimenting with BDSM and other sex acts, and negotiating the terms of their prospective relationship, only for a single flogging scene to apparently bring their romance to an emphatic and abrupt halt. Indeed, having not read the novel on which the film was based (James 2011), I left the cinema asking myself the same question as my fellow patron: was that it? Had I missed something? I disliked many aspects of Christian's personality, so agreed with Ana's decision to terminate their relationship;

but I also felt cheated by an ending that seemed to negate all the events that preceded it. Was I supposed to be rooting for this couple or not? It wasn't simply that I was confused, but that the film itself seemed to be confused—I had no idea how it *wanted* me to feel towards these characters and this story.

Within 24 hours, however, I had embraced the ambiguity and frustration I was feeling, and had arrived at the position I adopt throughout this article: these apparent 'failings' are actually central to *Fifty Shades*' fundamental *pleasures*. It may not be a masterpiece, but I am absolutely certain that the film is far too interesting to be dismissed as the straightforwardly 'bad' text that most critics have made it out to be. To me, *Fifty Shades of Grey* does such an effective job of aligning us with Ana, that both she and the implied audience emerge from the narrative in a similar position of disappointment and confusion; 'we' are just as annoyed at Christian's failure to compromise as she is. I also consider it to be an interesting variation on the romantic melodrama—one that embraces the genre's escapist pleasures, yet is also self-reflexive enough to simultaneously expose escapism as illusory and impossible in practice.

What follows in this article, then, is largely an analysis of how *Fifty Shades* manages to achieve this sophisticated but unpleasant identification. However, I am by no means suggesting that my reading of the film is the only correct one, that criticisms of it are somehow invalid or incomplete, or that my thoughts here should be seen to be in any way representative of actual audience responses. Rather, I combine my textual analysis with an exploration of *Fifty Shades*' critical reception, with a view to opening up a discussion of why some audience members may be able and/or willing to take pleasure from sharing in ostensibly negative emotions. Doing so, I argue, requires a considerable amount of interpretive labour, especially in the context of the film's widespread critical dismissal, but also because of the complex way in which the movie uses irony both to distance *and* engage the spectator. We are frequently encouraged to dismiss Christian as ridiculous and controlling, and to view various elements of the narrative as overwrought and predictable. Yet, somehow, we are also invited to understand and identify with Ana's attraction to

Christian, and embrace the romance narrative as we would do in more conventional examples of the genre. The result is that it is often difficult to know how one is supposed to feel towards these two characters and their relationship at any one time.

In many ways, then, this is a personal piece of criticism about a film that I had not expected to enjoy. Rather than attempting to assert my reading as gospel, however, the article should be seen as an exploration of the interpretive process involved in taking pleasure from a 'difficult' film—one that is ambiguous, contradictory, and broadly unpopular.

Theoretical Framework: Exploring 'Difficult' Cinematic Pleasures

In order to explain the various ways in which the film is 'difficult' to read, and why certain viewers may derive pleasure from negotiating and overcoming its complexities, the textual analysis in this essay relies on what is sometimes called subject-position theory, or the implied spectator. Distinct from the notion of the social audience—that is, a group of real people watching a film or television show together —the spectator is a theoretical construction, described by Annette Kuhn as 'a subject constituted in signification, interpellated by the film or TV text' (1997: 149). The spectator is neither a tangible person, nor does it necessarily correspond to the interpretations of real audiences, and therefore we must be quietly cautious when using it to discuss cinematic pleasures. Nevertheless, it is a useful construct that enables us to speak in terms of what *Fifty Shades of Grey* might be *trying* to achieve at any one time—what Umberto Eco (1992) refers to as the 'intention of the text'. I combine my analysis of the film with numerous references to its 'discursive surround' (Klinger, 1997); primarily critical reception, but also including film journalism, op-ed pieces and blogs on the broader *Fifty Shades* phenomenon. My objective in using such materials is not to assess whether their responses are 'accurate' interpretations, but to focus attention on the interpretive process itself: *how* did these writers (attempt to) make sense of the film? To what extent did it match their expectations?

For many people, these expectations will certainly have been tied to their familiarity with the

source novel, or lack thereof. Anyone who, unlike me, had actually read the book in advance—those who Linda Hutcheon calls the 'knowing audience' (2006: 120-127)—would presumably not have shared my surprise at the film's ending. Yet, as Allen Redmon (2015) has argued, the fact that unexpected endings can only ever be unexpected once, and many films are just as enjoyable the second or third time around (cf. Klinger 2006: 135-190), suggests that surprise can be less important to evaluation than one might suspect. Even a movie with an especially dramatic twist ending, such as *The Usual Suspects* (Dir. Brian Singer, 1995), *Fight Club* (Dir. David Fincher, 1999), *Memento* (Dir. Christopher Nolan, 2000) or *Shutter Island* (Dir. Martin Scorsese, 2012), Redmon claims, 'becomes something different after their reveal. One does not watch them the same way twice, but neither do these films become unwatchable after the reveal' (2015: 256). For me, watching *Fifty Shades* for the second time was a chance to work through my own response to and interpretation of a film that I had hitherto found confusing and frustrating. A 'knowing audience' member—one who approached the film *as an adaptation* rather than a standalone text—may have been better placed than me to understand the dynamics of Ana and Christian's relationship after a single viewing, but there would be little difference in our respective abilities to negotiate its tonal ambiguities and use of irony.

One of my overriding arguments throughout this article is that *Fifty Shades of Grey* is a far more interesting and thoughtful take on the romance genre than it has so far been given credit for. Through an unusual combination of irony and sincerity, the film places great demands on the spectator, who must constantly re-evaluate their own subject-position in relation to characters, narrative and narrative discourse that are often ambiguous, liminal and/or fluctuating. Carl Plantinga (2009) provides a useful point of reference here, arguing that Hollywood narrative discourse can be divided into 'sympathetic' and 'distanced' narratives. Sympathetic narratives, he explains, encourage 'closeness' between spectator and protagonist, to the extent that putting those characters into unpleasant situations will elicit sympathy and possibly negative emotions (2009: 170-171).

Distanced narratives, on the other hand, actively avoid psychological closeness to characters in favour of 'a more distanced, critical, sometimes humorous and occasionally cynical perspective' (2009: 171). *Fifty Shades of Grey* is unusual in that it combines both of these forms of narrative discourse into a single film, beginning with ironic distance before slowly straying into sympathetic territory. Previous work on films that combine these two tonal registers have tended to focus on contemporary 'Indiewood' films (King 2009), such as the 'quirky' cinema of Wes Anderson (Plantinga 2009; MacDowell 2012), or *In Bruges* (Dir. Michael McDonagh, 2008) which mixes highbrow and lowbrow elements of comedy and genre (King 2011). Importantly, however, I suggest that one of the most unusual aspects of *Fifty Shades*' shifting approach to tone is that the irony is not used as a distancing strategy, at least not exclusively so. Instead, the irony works to *engage* the spectator and align them with the character of Ana, who begins the film by appearing to be very detached from the romance narrative she is about to embark on. When she eventually succumbs to Christian's charms and gives herself over to him, we are already firmly on her side, and are invited to share in her frustration and upset when his behaviour becomes too controlling.

The film's deliberate pursuit of displeasure also brings to mind Nikolaj Lübecker's (2015) work on 'feel-bad' films—those that confront the spectator through strategies of assault, unease and transgression. As he puts it, feel-bad films

> frequently offer a form of generic subversion that places them between the art film and popular cinema. [...] In the most exhausting of these films ... the intensification of the feel-bad climate is so radical that the spectators begin to worry where things are going. They begin to wonder about the "intentions" of the film, about the nature of the spectatorial contract (2015: 3).

To be clear, I am not suggesting that *Fifty Shades* is a feel-bad film on a par with the other texts that Lübecker discusses, such as *Dogville* (Dir. Lars von Trier, 2003), *Funny Games* (Dir. Michael Haneke, 1997) and *Elephant* (Dir. Gus Van Sant, 2003). It does, after all, offer spectators at least two potential routes to

catharsis and/or positivity: romantic escapism and ironic distance. Nevertheless, *Fifty Shade*s is a film that repeatedly holds a mirror up to itself, proposing multiple answers to simple questions, and in turn making it difficult for the spectator to gauge its intentions.

Irony is central to this ambiguity, since it is often used to signify a discrepancy between what is said/shown and what is meant, a strategy that by extension divides the audience into those who 'get it' and those who do not (Sconce 2002: 352). Several characters in *Fifty Shades* draw attention to other characters' peculiar dialogue, especially Ana, who spends most of the first 30 minutes of the film rolling her eyes and giggling at the overall ludicrousness of Christian. In this way, the film seems to pre-empt reviewers who would lambast it for being clichéd and melodramatic. As Linda Hutcheon points out, however, irony is a 'culturally shaped process … made possible by the different worlds to which we belong, and the different expectations, assumptions and preconceptions that we bring to the complex processing of discourse in use' (1994: 85). It is, in other words, *communities* that often facilitate the privileging of particular readings over others, especially when it comes to interpreting irony and employing 'oppositional' reading strategies (cf. McCulloch 2011). As we will see, the overwhelmingly negative response to *Fifty Shades of Grey* seems to have been self-reinforcing, and relied primarily on preconceptions and hype rather than detailed analysis. Very few critics appeared willing to think through the film in any depth, which in turn would have made it difficult for some to engage with oppositional readings and/or acknowledge any of its potential cult pleasures.

Coming Attractions: Sex, Genre, and 'Misleading' Paratexts

In the immediate aftermath of its release, by far the most frequent complaint levelled at *Fifty Shades* by professional critics was that it was relentlessly dull. For the most part, this criticism had little to do with pacing or the romantic drama at the centre of the plot, and instead focused very specifically on the film's depiction of sex. Headlines such as '50 shades of vanilla' and '50 Shades of Boredom' were com-

monplace (Anon. 2015; Tucker 2015; X. 2015), while reviews were littered with lines such as:

> About as erotic as an ad for Pottery Barn (Travers 2015).

> Porn for people who shop at Marks & Spencer (Edwards 2015).

> Those looking for hot, kinky sex will be disappointed (Puig 2015).

> Nobody in the film has visible genitals (Schwarzbaum 2015).

> Anyone hoping the movie would really push the S&M envelope may find Christian's tastefully shot toy room a little… vanilla (Weitzman 2015)

> The *Downton Abbey* of bondage, designed neither to menace nor to offend but purely to cosset the fatigued imagination. You get dirtier talk in most action movies, and more genitalia in a TED talk on Renaissance sculpture (Lane 2015).

There are a series of revealing value judgements being deployed here. Firstly, and most obviously, critics not only wanted but *expected* an excess of sexually explicit material ('hot, kinky sex' that should ideally 'push the S&M envelope' and even 'menace [or] offend' its audiences), and were noticeably disappointed that the film failed to grant this to them. Secondly, the flippant tone in which the reviews are written immediately signals critics' refusal to take the movie seriously, especially through their choice of references, metaphors and similes. Comparisons to Pottery Barn, Marks & Spencer and *Downton Abbey* (BBC, 2010-), for example, seem intended to align *Fifty Shades* with a decidedly unfashionable brand of mainstream taste that is both excruciatingly middle class and middle aged.

The reviews also rely heavily on what Martin Barker terms 'figures of the audience', which he describes as 'predictive claims built out of theorisations—sometimes purely speculative, sometimes supported by a scatter of (often laboratory-based) research—of the ways in which films might affect audiences' (2011: 106). In this case, we can see critics

bifurcating the imagined *Fifty Shades* audience into those who they think should have been catered to, and those who they feel actually were catered to. 'Disappointed' audiences who were 'looking for hot, kinky sex' and 'hoping the movie would really push the S&M envelope' are imagined as having perfectly reasonable expectations, while comments such as 'designed [...] to cosset the fatigued imagination' position hypothetical defenders or fans of the film as unadventurous and lacking in 'good taste'. In short, critical discourse was clearly fixated on a discrepancy between the kind of film that was anticipated, and the kind of film they felt it actually was.

These judgements point towards a broader discursive struggle over the film's genre, whereby *Fifty Shades* has been categorised as (failed) erotica/pornography above all else; sexually explicit material whose primary (perhaps even only) goal is to arouse its audience. One reviewer even went as far as calling it 'the movie that promised to be the most titillating motion picture ever made' (Crocker, 2015). This is an extremely loaded statement of generic classification, one that anticipates at least a degree of 'disreputability' and a reliance on erotic spectacle. Of course, spectacle is a somewhat amorphous term, but Erlend Lavik has noted how its appeal is often seen as antithetical to (and/or separate from) a film's narrative. He argues that, while narratives unfold across time, spectacles are 'a form of attention-grabbing' that exist in the 'here and now,' and as such 'have [...] been said to impede the forward thrust of the narratives they enter into' (2008: 172). Although Lavik goes on to argue against this binary opposition, he nevertheless explains that critics often complain about contemporary Hollywood's 'excessive' emphasis on spectacle, largely because it is seen to have taken the place of complex characterisation and narrative depth. So, by categorising *Fifty Shades of Grey* as (softcore) pornography rather than, say, a romance, coming-of-age tale, melodrama, fantasy, or a fairy tale, critics revealed expectations that a mainstream Hollywood release was never going to meet, and simultaneously distanced it from more 'legitimate' genres.

As it happens, *Fifty Shades* does contain far more sexual content and nudity than one would usually expect to see from a major Hollywood studio, or

in a high profile romantic film (very few of which are rated R or NC-17 in the United States), but this is more a question of frequency than explicitness. Nevertheless, framing a film as erotica has the potential to very drastically alter responses to its sex scenes. By repeatedly insisting that *Fifty Shades* was 'supposed to be' a steamy erotic odyssey, critics by extension implied that its sex scenes would have a very specific (and unquestioned) function—to titillate the audience. But where did this generic expectation come from in the first place? Mainstream Hollywood has historically shown little interest in on-screen depictions of sexual dominance and submission, so why should we expect *Fifty Shades* to be any different?

It seems to me that criticisms of its sexual content have far more to do with the hype surrounding the phenomenon (both novel and adaptation) than the movie itself. As Jonathan Gray (2010) has convincingly argued, paratexts—including trailers, posters, reviews, websites, video games, and other forms of merchandise linked to films or television shows—often play an important role in filtering our expectations and responses to various forms of media. He explains that,

> decisions on what to watch, what not to watch, and how to watch are often made while consuming hype, synergy, and promos, so that by the time we actually encounter "the show itself," we have already begun to decode it and to preview its meanings and effects (2010: 3).

Gray is careful to point out that audiences do not take paratexts at face value any more than they would with any other media(ted) text, and that there can often be a disconnect between paratexts and the related works to which they refer:

> Hollywood and its marketers often mobilise paratexts to proffer "proper interpretations," some preceding the show's arrival in the public sphere, thereby setting up pre-decodings, and some working in medias res to subtly inflect the public understanding of an ongoing and open text. Many such paratexts will aim to strike a balance between simile—insisting that a show is "just like X," or "a mix of Y and Z"—and metonym—

encapsulating in microcosm the fuller diegetic world that exists in the show. In doing so, *they are not always successful* or even uniform, sometimes employing similes or metonyms problematically, and thus *setting up unrealistic expectations* that cannot be met, and offering various versions of what therefore becomes only nominally the "same" text. In all cases, though, they allow the text to be created in part outside of its supposed borders, so that public understanding of the film or programme is generated in multiple sites by multiple paratexts (emphasis added, 2010: 81).

I would like to use the remainder of this section to briefly discuss what Gray refers to as 'not always successful' and 'unrealistic' marketing. Did *Fifty Shades'* marketing campaign and pre-release reception 'mislead' critics (and perhaps, by extension, more general audiences) into expecting a different film from the one they eventually saw?

The months leading up to the movie's theatrical release saw a series of promotional materials being unveiled, many of which teased prospective audiences about Christian and his 'very singular' sexual predilections. The campaign repeatedly made use of images that hid parts of him from the audience, depicting him from behind (Figure 1), through

Figure 1: *Fifty Shades of Grey* teaser poster (Zhao 2014).

enigmatic close ups (a clenched knuckle, a tie being tightened), or with his face partially obscured.

Similarly, trailers gestured towards steamy sexual encounters without really revealing very much, and responses to these materials certainly appear to have assumed erotic spectacle to be the film's primary pleasure. For instance, several British newspapers published online articles in response to the release of the full-length trailer in January 2015, combining embedded video clips with sensationalised headlines and excited commentary to emphasise the film's cultural importance. *The Mirror* stated pointedly that 'the trailer … hints at the kind of raunchiness fans can expect when the movie hits the big screen' (McGeorge 2015), while the *Daily Mail* wrote, '"Welcome to my world" [Christian Grey] says as the brief scenes get progressively steamier in the short video' (Waugh 2015). Indeed, whereas earlier trailers for the film had been more suggestive than revealing, this full-length trailer placed far greater emphasis on the attractiveness of Christian/Dornan, who is repeatedly shown topless, removing various items of clothing, or preparing to kiss or caress Ana's body. The contrast between excited anticipatory discourse and frustrated post-release reviews suggests that many critics and journalists took these marketing gestures as 'promises' of what *Fifty Shades* would surely deliver. As the release date approached, the marketing revealed more and more of Christian, who was very clearly positioned (and read) as its central attraction. As another *Mirror* article rhetorically asked, 'If loving [Christian/Dornan] is wrong, who wants to be right?' (Hyland 2014).

However, while critics overwhelmingly bought into the idea that it was trying and failing to be erotic, there is little in the film itself to suggest that this was ever its priority.[1] Although there are six sex scenes in total, 30 minutes go by before Ana and Christian even kiss, and it is only at the 40 minute mark that they finally sleep with each other for the first time. Each sex scene is also subtly different from the last, becoming progressively closer to Christian's wishes, while Ana's reaction to each session sees her become increasingly upset. It seems to me, then, that the sexual content is less about (erotic) spectacle than about character identification; it is Ana's reaction to

the sex, rather than the sex itself, that is at the centre of the narrative.

Interestingly, despite the abovementioned marketing campaign and the implied 'promises' of raunchiness that journalists latched onto, we can also find ample evidence for this less sexual, more Ana-centric interpretation across various promotional materials. In spite of all the whips, restraining devices, and orgasmic writhing that the full-length trailer shows us, there is also a heavy emphasis on reaction shots of Ana (Figure 2). The 'kinkier' elements of the film's mise-en-scène are reserved for the last few seconds, with the trailer as a whole adhering more closely to the structure of a romance narrative—the naïve young woman swept off her feet by an attractive but emotionally unavailable man—than a pornographic movie (Kies 2015). Significantly, the trailer builds towards the sexual imagery, but also towards Ana's coquettish request for Christian to 'enlighten' her. Similarly, poster campaigns led with the taglines 'Lose Control', 'Curious?' and 'Mr Grey Will See You Now', all three of which seem to be directed towards Ana as an audience surrogate (indeed: Mr Grey will see you now). Both protagonist and spectator are addressed as though they are next in a long line of Christian's (implicitly fortunate) erotic conquests. In this sense, we might say that the film's marketing adopts a strangely paradoxical attitude towards its own sexual content: Submission/dominance is presented as both non-normative *and* a central selling point—elusive yet alluring. And crucially, this is just as true for Ana as it is for the implied viewer, both of whom may find the film's depiction of BDSM to be more 'educational' than (solely) titillating.

Thus, it seems as though at least two very different versions of *Fifty Shades of Grey* can be convincingly inferred from its marketing—female-targeted erotica (selling Christian) on the one hand, and romantic melodrama (selling Ana) on the other. To suggest that a marketing campaign is 'misleading' is therefore problematic, since it implies that advertisements only ever convey one coherent meaning. Even if all audiences interpreted texts in an identical way (which we know they absolutely do not), we would still need to consider the range of different marketing texts for the film in question. Any given Hollywood

release from a major studio will inevitably be accompanied by TV spots targeted towards different demographics, teaser trailers, full length trailers, posters, and a website, each of which can deviate from the others in various ways, sometimes substantially so. To refer to 'misleading' marketing is to presume to know how most people responded to a particular campaign or individual promotional text. In the absence of empirical pre-release and post-release audience research (as is the case at the time of writing), critical reception studies can provide us with a useful method of gauging the relationship between expectation and reception, enabling us to map prevailing narratives, perform qualitative and/or quantitative analysis of relevant discourse, and potentially also track changes in that discourse over time.[2]

It is impossible to say whether the pre-release reception of *Fifty Shades* as a 'steamy' romance was directly attributable to its marketing, or whether that was a pre-existing assumption carried over from the hype and/or cultural knowledge surrounding James's novel. What is interesting, though, is the way in which critics conflated the value of the book and the film, seemingly condemning the latter for the perceived sins of the former.

Negotiating Misogyny: Between Irony and Identification
At one point in the movie, Christian explains his fondness for dominance/submission by telling Ana, 'By giving up control, I felt free. From responsibility. From making decisions. I felt safe. You will too, you'll see'. On first viewing, I read this as blatant ideological conservatism—a barely-concealed dismissal of feminism, empowerment and individual agency. Similar concerns were echoed in a large number of reviews and think pieces, with writers variously proclaiming 'misogyny never looked so mesmerising' (Kearney 2015), describing it as 'domestic violence dressed up as erotica' (Taibi 2015) or 'an abhorrent and misogynistic rape fantasy' (Salisbury 2015), and arguing that the film 'idealises male power and emotional abuse as something seductive and sexy' (Margolis 2015). Dornan even had to publicly defend the film against charges of misogyny, six whole weeks before its theatrical release (Rahman 2015). It does

Figure 2: Reaction shots of Ana, as seen in the *Fifty Shades of Grey* official trailer (*Fifty Shades of Grey*, 2014).

not appear to be a coincidence that E.L. James's novel had also been repeatedly vilified for its perceived misogyny and endorsement of abuse (Morgan 2012; Anon. n.d.; Flood 2012; Harman and Jones 2013).

Thus, if we are to explain the potential pleasures that can be taken from a film that has been roundly criticised and accused of being offensive, it is important to return to the question that I began this article with: *is* that it? Is it indeed misogynistic, or is this just how it appears at first glance? While the topic is by no means far from the surface, does the *way* in which the film approaches it change its meaning at all? In my view, the answer is an emphatic yes. Although Christian spends much of the film trying to control Ana, at no point does *Fifty Shades of Grey* justify such problematic moments or actions, or imply that this is something that Ana should find attractive. Again, what many writers see as grounds for criticism, I see as psychological realism; *Fifty Shades* does such an effective job of aligning us with Ana's emotions that we come out of it feeling just as conflicted, frustrated and unsatisfied by her failed relationship as she does. Several critics have noted that the representation of Ana has been 'improved' significantly by Johnson's performance, Taylor-Johnson's direction, and Kelly Marcel's screenplay, all of which have contributed to investing the character with far more personality and agency than her literary counterpart. The *Chicago Tribune*, for example, felt that the 'book has been de-crudified, its most operatic expressions of lust stricken from the record. That leaves the greasy, sexualized violence of the premise, but even that has been tilted ever so slightly to a more sceptical position' (Phillips 2015). This 'sceptical position' is particularly evident in the opening half-hour, which sees both Ana and the film exhibiting detachment, cynicism and playfulness, especially in their attitude towards Christian.

When interviewing him near the beginning, Ana deviates from her roommate's mostly deferential questions by calling him 'lucky' and a 'control freak'. Importantly, her refusal to take Christian at face value is one of the things he seems to like most about her, as well as being one of the film's central pleasures. Ana also jokes that he would make 'the complete serial killer', and drunkenly berates him for being 'so bossy'. Her subsequent impersonation of him undermines his hyper-masculinity (she adopts an exaggeratedly gruff voice) and his indecisiveness ('Ana, let's go for coffee! No! Stay away from me Ana, I don't want you! Get away! Come here, come here! GO AWAY!') Moreover, 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 an incredulously 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.

It is no coincidence that the film's detached, playful tone gradually disappears at the same time that Ana herself begins to take Christian more seriously. Their ensuing relationship is characterised by an increasingly *uncomfortable* tension between their competing desires; Ana is clearly attracted to him and intrigued by his sexual adventurousness, but she yearns for a fairly conventional romance that never fully arrives. 'Why do I have to sleep in [a different room]?' she asks him, before adding, 'We slept in the same bed last night, like normal people!' Christian, on the other hand, only seems interested in the sexual side of their relationship, and—like the critics who struggled to see beyond the film's R-rated scenes—repeatedly shows that he is unwilling to cross the line into romance. Because the film encourages such tight identification with Ana, the failure of the couple's relationship is placed entirely at the feet of Christian and his refusal to compromise on his own desires. The tension between the two characters is manifested in the battle between her desire for 'conventional' romance and his desire for 'unconventional' sex. The contract they negotiate throughout the film is therefore very much a tangible reminder of Christian's inflexibility. Along the way, however, there are plenty of hints that perhaps he isn't really as stubborn as he appears. For instance, he insists, 'I don't do the girlfriend thing', but then sends her first editions of a selection of novels by her favourite author. He refuses to touch Ana until he has her written consent, but then declares, 'Fuck the paperwork', and kisses her passionately in the hotel elevator. And the first time the couple have sex is extremely conventional—

nothing non-normative, a tastefully decorated bedroom with clean bed sheets instead of his rather menacing 'playroom', and ultimately far closer to Ana's idea of perfection than to his. He also sleeps in the same bed as her twice in the opening 45 minutes, something he claims he 'never' does.

In short, Christian seems to want Ana far more than he wants to stick to his own 'rules', which are held up as preposterous and antithetical to the film's narrative. In order for the narrative to conclude as it 'should' (i.e. with the union of the 'final couple' [MacDowell 2013]), it is *him* that needs to change, not her. Yes, siding with Ana means that we want her to end up in a happy relationship with a man who has exhibited ridiculous, controlling behaviour, but this is not the same as saying that *Fifty Shades of Grey* endorses an abusive relationship. On the contrary, like Ana, we are invited to find Christian's domineering behaviour both laughable and impractical, and the film encourages us to hope for and expect him to change. The closer their relationship veers towards the dominance/submission that Christian desires, the less happy Ana is, and it is absolutely significant that her final words to him are 'STOP!' and 'NO!'

It is telling that several critics picked up on the film's shift in tone—from a playfully ironic opening, into romantic melodrama, before ending with a darker, more tragic final third—but were unwilling to embrace it all the way through. Variety's Justin Chang, for example, described the film as 'a consistent hoot until it becomes a serious drag' (2015). Alynda Wheat of *People* magazine spoke even more explicitly about the factors behind this shift, remarking,

> It's all fun and games up until [Christian] reveals himself to be a deeply deranged stalker. The kicker is that, up until then, *Fifty Shades* truly is fun. Johnson has a great knack with comedy, salting silly lines with witty humor, and giving ridiculous moments just the right roll of the eyes (Wheat 2015).

Like many reviewers, Wheat was particularly happy about the film's ability to poke fun at the more 'silly' and 'ridiculous' aspects of the source novel, but seemed unwilling or unable to negotiate this tonal shift from ironic distance (which they enjoyed) through to emotional engagement (which they did not). To me, it is intriguing that several critics claimed to enjoy the film up until the point that they were are being asked to not only witness Ana's upset, but to share in it. It is worth returning to Lübecker's notion of the 'feel-bad' film at this point, since this is an extremely confrontational request between text and spectator. The fact that critics chose to opt out of *Fifty Shades'* call to identification at the points at which Ana was hurting the most suggests to me that, although the film may not have been *enjoyed* by many critics, it was at least inviting them to engage with some interesting moral and ethical questions about depictions of female characters suffering on screen.

In this regard, it is worth concluding this section with a nod to the film's more acerbic ideological critics—those who did not simply express their aversion to its gender politics, but who couched their disapproval in cautionary language and flawed media effects arguments:

> This is not female fantasy, this is male fantasy. Point of fact, [it] borders on rape fantasy and the idea that anyone would derive enjoyment from watching this is abhorrent (Salisbury 2015).

> The central message of this film—that it's okay for men to control and manipulate women—remains unquestioned, and that's not just bad, it's dangerous (Margolis 2015).

> As images of Ana being beaten by Christian become the new normal for what's considered erotic, they raise questions about what it means to "consent" to sex. [...] If anything has the power to shape sexual norms, this does (Green 2015).

Each of these arguments displays palpable unease at the idea of vulnerable audiences being corrupted by a 'dangerous' media text. By this point, my opinion of these comments should be clear—I agree that Christian's behaviour is abusive and controlling, but I reject the idea that the film excuses, condones, or eroticises his treatment of Ana. What I find most interesting here, however, is that these writers' anxieties are underpinned by an uncomfortable attitude

towards *Fifty Shades*' balancing of reality and fantasy. Green's article in *The Atlantic* goes on to say, 'fantasy works like a mirror: It reflects who we are, but it also shapes what we become' (2015), and it seems as though Margolis and Salisbury agree. The implication is that dangerous fantasy might lay the foundations for a dangerous reality, and therefore to depict something on screen is to increase its chances of coming to pass. In the following section, however, I argue that the film is extremely explicit about its own artificiality, offering itself up as more of a cautionary tale than an attractive fantasy.

'Fading In, Fading Out': Between Escapism and Verisimilitude
Other than the attention paid to the film's sexual content, one of the most immediately noticeable facets of *Fifty Shades of Grey*'s critical reception was the glib language with which most critics talked about it. Jan Moir's review in *The Daily Mail* was typical in this regard, describing the film as:

> A tale of two lovers exploring a relationship that takes in the wilder shores of bondage, submission, dominance and terrible dialogue. "Laters, baby!" cries hero Christian Grey, as he leaves his lover, Anastasia Steele [...] "That was nice," she says, after taking a bit of a thrashing from Grey. Nice? You'd think he just gave her a half-hearted peppermint foot rub (Moir 2015).

Philippa Hawker of the *Sydney Morning Herald* spoke in correspondingly negative terms, insisting that 'no one can make the trademark phrase "laters, baby" sound anything other than ludicrous' (2015). In both cases, critics equate 'badness' with failed verisimilitude, and show little desire to take the movie seriously. In the final section of this article, I briefly discuss the way in which *Fifty Shades of Grey* moves back and forth between romantic realism and escapist fantasy, and I argue that this tonal ambiguity proved to be yet another interpretive obstacle that many critics were unwilling or unable to overcome.

What strikes me as surprising about Moir and Hawker's words, above, is the way in which they completely ignore the manner in which the lines are delivered and the context in which they appear.

'Laters, baby', for instance, is first said by Christian's adopted brother, Elliot (Luke Grimes), to Ana's roommate, Kate (Eloise Mumford). When Christian overhears this and then repeats the phrase to Ana shortly afterwards, he does so with a knowing smirk on his face, highlighting its 'corniness' and turning it into an inside joke. In this moment, even Christian is capable of drawing attention to his own artificiality. Equally, the use of the word 'nice' to describe their sexual relationship is explicitly marked as incongruous by Christian, who says, 'it's been *nice* knowing me?! Let me remind you how *nice* it was!'

Slate writer Amanda Hess goes as far as reading the film as 'a kind of fan-fic of *Fifty Shades* the book'—a movie that laces the novel's dialogue with irony, thus rendering its 'bad' qualities more palatable (2015).[3] While I am not entirely convinced that the film deems itself 'superior' to the book, Hess persuasively demonstrates just how important tone is to understanding and appreciating the events on screen.[4] It is not enough to simply take *Fifty Shades* at face value, as Moir and Hawker seem to have done; instead, the film's tonal shifts seem to invite us to laugh at the silliness of love while simultaneously being swept up by it.

There is no shortage of textual evidence in support of the argument that *Fifty Shades of Grey* knows exactly what it is doing, and is extremely self-conscious and upfront about just how fantastical its romance narrative is. Perhaps the most blatant example comes after Ana's drunken night out in a bar, when the couple spends the night together for the first time. She awakens to find painkillers and fruit juice at her bedside, along with notes reading 'Eat me' and 'Drink me', respectively. These overt references to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll 1865/1916) mark the couple's relationship—and Christian in particular—as dreamlike and fantastical from the start.

The movie's soundtrack plays a central role in heightening this sense of fantasy, with lyrics that continually refer to escapist pleasures and the 'unreality' of love. For instance, the opening montage unfolds over Annie Lennox's cover of 'I Put a Spell On You', immediately acknowledging romance's potential to almost magically mislead and distort our perception

of reality. Their first formal 'date', in which Christian whisks her away to Seattle in his private helicopter, is accompanied by Ellie Goulding's 'Love Me Like You Do'. She sings,

> Fading in, fading out / On the edge of paradise / I'll let you set the pace / 'Cause I'm not thinking straight / My head spinning around I can't see clear no more / What are you waiting for? / Love me like you do.

These words explicitly draw attention to Ana's state of mind and the astonishing (albeit pleasing) unreality of this as a romantic experience. 'Fading in, fading out' implies that she is teetering on the edge of two places or states of being, mirroring the film itself, which at this point is on the precipice between ironic detachment and sincere engagement. Other lines, such as 'I'll let you set the pace' and the repeated refrain to 'love me like you do,' signal her decision to hand over control to Christian and buy into the fantasy that he represents. 'I'm not thinking straight' and 'I can't see clear no more' also seem linked to the 'Lose Control' ethos espoused in the film's poster campaign, and could be read as early indicators of the sacrifices Ana may have to make if she is to embark on this relationship with Christian. The other major song at the centre of the film (and its marketing) is a slowed-down, sexed-up version of Beyoncé's 'Crazy in Love'. Once again, this is a song that, as its title implies, is very much about the potential for love to alter our sense of normality ('Such a funny thing for me to try to explain / How I'm feeling and my pride is the one to blame / 'Cause I know I don't understand / Just how your love can do what no one else can').

If the film is signposting its own fantastical elements so consistently, there seems little value in dismissing its dialogue, characters, gender politics and/or sex scenes as unrealistic, let alone harmful. Taylor-Johnson does not seem interested in viewing their relationship objectively, but through Ana's eyes, simultaneously finding Christian attractive and infuriating. The sex is an interesting distraction, but is certainly not the focal point of the film's drama. By the half-way point, it is abundantly clear that Ana is less keen on an odyssey of sexual discovery than on a relatively 'normal' relationship. Her frustration and upset stems from her realisation that the relationship she yearns for is nothing but a fantasy, and impossible in practice.

In spite of the film's ongoing attempt to play down the importance of both verisimilitude and sex, these two issues were very much at the heart of the way that critics talked about Ana and Christian's relationship. They remained fixated on the film's sex, but largely refused to take its romance seriously. Pejorative references to Mills & Boon, daytime soap operas, and female audiences position the film as 'lowbrow', with Lizzie Crocker's words in *The Daily Beast* serving as a fairly typical example:

> It's difficult to do sex brilliantly in a film that's a love story, and impossible to do in a maudlin, made-for-teens love story. The films that handle sex brilliantly, if sensationally, tend to be more realistic in their portrayal of passion, like *Blue is the Warmest Color* and *Y Tu Mamá También*. But in the multiplex-friendly *Fifty Shades* we could not have expected to see anything like what we saw in other movies where sadomasochism is a main theme (*9½ Weeks*, *Last Tango in Paris*). These films are too dark, too transgressive, and *Fifty Shades* was always going to be a commercial film. But if sex in the film had been better—more real or more intense—then it might have given the phenomenon more cultural cachet (Crocker 2015).

This is a very revealing criticism, if a little peculiar. Crocker appears to have a reasonable grasp of the limitations that *Fifty Shades*' commercial status places on its ability to be sexually adventurous, but she also seems disappointed at how rooted in fantasy the film is. Realism is thus equated with risk-taking and artistic integrity. Her choices of references are also interesting, with three out of the four examples being non-Hollywood productions, and therefore ostensibly more 'arthouse'. Most pertinently, of course, 'brilliant' on-screen sex is presented as all but incompatible with the romantic love story, which in turn is envisaged as an inherently worthless genre. Romance is positioned alongside references to 'commercial', 'multiplex-friendly' goals and devalued audiences ('made-for-teens love story'), and in opposition to more 'worthy' values such as realism, intensity and

transgression. There are two things that interest me about this critical position. The first is the extent to which it parallels the hypocrisy of Christian himself—failing to see any value in the trappings of escapist romance, but simultaneously remaining fixated on 'exotic' objects (foreign cinema for the critics, inexperienced and feisty Ana for Christian). The second point is that Crocker ignores all of the more 'realist' events towards the end of the movie, in which Ana's experience of BDSM becomes far less escapist, far less happy, and the fact that the film ends without adhering to generic conventions of narrative closure. Again, I point this out not to suggest that Crocker has somehow 'misinterpreted' the film, but that her evaluation relies very heavily on only very selective aspects of *Fifty Shades'* approach to sex. It is worth turning our attention in more detail to these harsher moments, and the abovementioned shift in tone from playfulness to serious drama.

Although Ana never actually gets round to signing their submission/dominance contract, there is a moment two-thirds of the way through the film—on stage during her graduation ceremony—when he urges her to 'try it my way'. Her agreement is the precise moment that the change in tone begins—one that will henceforth permeate the remainder of the movie (and their relationship), taking it (and us) from exhilarating fantasy through to a more grounded, more painful reality. The scene immediately following her graduation is significant here, since Christian's behaviour (and especially his dialogue) can be read as self-reflexive commentary on the shift in tone that is about to take place. As they toast to Ana's graduation 'among other things', Christian tells her sternly, 'Roll your eyes at me again, and I will take you across my knee.' He will repeat this line—'Did you just roll your eyes at me?'—shortly afterwards. It seems to be targeted directly at the ironically distanced Ana that we see much of earlier on in the movie, signalling that the playful part of their relationship (and of the film) is now over. He then remarks, 'And so it begins', which may seem like an innocuous phrase, but is peculiar in the context of their lengthy romantic entanglement. After all, despite not having had sex in Christian's playroom at that point, they had already begun to experiment with bondage and blindfolds, and their sexual activity had been

gradually escalating well before any agreement from Ana. As he spanks her for the first time, he asks, 'Do you want more?' She does not reply, but it is significant that he smiles and accepts her silence as tacit complicity. 'Welcome to my world', he says, signalling that we have entered the next phase of the film—one in which he is in control, ironic eye-rolling is forbidden, and one in which *he* 'sets the pace', to refer back to the Ellie Goulding lyrics from earlier. The change in both the tone of the film and the tone of their relationship is almost immediate, as this very brief spanking scene (cut short when Christian abruptly announces he is needed at the office) is followed by a teary phone conversation between Ana and her mother (Jennifer Ehle)—the first overt sign that Christian is really making her unhappy. Goulding's lyrics are then echoed again in the very next scene, which sees Ana's roommate, Kate, anxiously warning her to 'make sure you're taking it at your own pace'. The cinematography also follows suit, gradually shifting from smooth dolly shots to more erratic movements, as well as a steadily decreasing depth of field to visually depict Ana's psychological instability (Dillon 2015: 44).

Critics' responses to this tonal shift are interesting, since they very clearly show us that certain aspects of the film proved more 'difficult' to embrace than others. Katie Rife, for instance, writes, 'somewhere around the first sex scene the winking self-awareness begins to recede, and to its detriment, *Fifty Shades of Grey* starts taking itself seriously' (Rife 2015). Kate Muir of *The Times* writes in similar terms, praising the 'surprisingly entertaining' opening, but then going on to explain,

> The mentions of "anal fisting" and "genital clamps" in the dominant/submissive contract that Christian wants Ana to sign go swiftly from ridiculous to downright creepy. At this point, all the initial vim and verve seems to drain out of Ana and she turns into a pink-eyed, tearful mess. In the book, Ana seemed keen on bondage, discipline and masochism, but the screen version shows deep discomfort with the whole enterprise of trading whipping for a whiff of romance, and the film shifts from stomach-churning excitement to stomach-turning brutality (Muir 2015: 3).

These quotes are incredibly revealing, displaying obvious discomfort at the suffering that Ana must endure towards the end of the film. In the previous section, I demonstrated how this was often the case for critics in relation to the film's gender 'problems', but here this is more to do with realism and artistic merit than misogyny. The implication, particularly from Rife's assertion that 'to its detriment, [the film] starts taking itself seriously', is that *Fifty Shades of Grey* is simply not the *kind* of film that should be making the audience feel anything negative, or attempting to make a serious point. In turn, this says a great deal about the low cultural value placed on the romance genre, and on women's cinema more broadly, both of which are seen as homogenous and artistically bereft (Hollows 2003; Frantz and Selinger 2012; MacDowell 2013; Faraci 2015). Thus, while *Fifty Shades* employs an unusual tonal shift from escapism towards verisimilitude, the problem that some critics had with this was not one of confusion or ambiguity, but that they felt this film did not have the *right* to do it. I have demonstrated throughout this article that the film was repeatedly characterised as boring, clichéd and unadventurous—three labels that are seemingly incompatible with the sophisticated ambiguity that I have credited it with.

Conclusion

Fifty Shades of Grey is a film that seems intent on deliberately turning audience expectations on their heads: too much sex for a mainstream romance, yet deemed far too tame to be quality erotica; clichéd in places, but far too self-aware and competently directed to be celebrated as 'so bad it's good'; and a story that contains many of the generic trappings of popular romance, but also seems to want to upset and frustrate its audiences rather than please them. In all of this discussion about this film and 'difficult' pleasures, the reference point I keep returning to is Paul Verhoeven's infamous *Showgirls* (1995). Both films were roundly dismissed as trash upon their release. Both were lambasted for their implausible characters, dialogue and acting. Both were vilified for featuring a huge amount of sexual content that 'failed' to titillate. Yet *Showgirls* has enjoyed a modicum of critical re-evaluation since its release, with a growing number of people entertaining the idea that its

'unpleasantness' is actually intentional satire, not incompetence (Hunter 2000; Mizuta Lippit et al. 2003; Nayman 2014).[5] However, it is important to acknowledge that, as demonstrated by Jeffrey Sconce's account of his own journey to 'enlightenment', these 'serious' re-evaluations of the movie required *time and repeat viewings* in order to be allowed to develop and mature (Mizuta Lippit et al. 2003: 45). *Fifty Shades* already has all the trappings of a stone cold cult classic—a chaotic production process (Grigoriadis 2015), critical derision, passionate fans, wildly divergent interpretations, and cultural notoriety. However, while I suspect that more positive readings of the film will be forthcoming at some point in the future, arriving at such a conclusion requires a degree of distance, whether physical, temporal or critical, from the kinds of debates that are still circulating around this film at the time of writing. It is significant that almost every person I have talked to about my admiration for the film has reacted with derisory laughter, bemusement, or utter confusion. The film has been nominated for six Razzie awards, designating it as one of the worst films of 2015 (Rosen 2016). We know that taste has the power to divide as well as unite social groups (Bourdieu 1984/2010; Sconce 1995), but outside of the academy, there currently seem to be few places where a positive reading of *Fifty Shades* is truly accepted.

One of the most baffling (but by no means unrepresentative) reviews that I came across during my research was a BBC radio interview with Camilla Long from *The Sunday Times*, who was annoyed that the movie was better than she thought it should be:

> I literally can't believe that we've been denied a terrible film. I can't believe that the subconscious [i.e. Ana's infamous 'inner goddess' in the book] has been lost from the film. I was really hoping it was going to be there and I don't know who they would have cast. I mean if it was my subconscious, obviously it would be Danny DeVito playing The Penguin. [...] I think [female audiences are] probably hoping for a bit of comedy, and it sounds as if it's not amusing at all. I think it's a pity that the characters have been made to be more real, to be more like somebody you'd meet on the street, because with something like this, why would you want it made more real? Why would you want it in your life? Why would you want it to be made

sense of? It's ridiculous (Anon. 2015).

To summarise: Long is disappointed that the film is *not* terrible, that it *doesn't* contain a ludicrous voice-over, and that it is *more* believable than the book. When she says 'it sounds as if it's not amusing at all', she also seems to have inadvertently revealed that she has not even seen the film, something that is actually surprisingly common among outspoken critics of notorious films (cf. Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath 2001). In relation to my overarching defence of *Fifty Shades* throughout this article, all of this is important because it draws attention to a very clear correlation between a text's perceived legitimacy and the willingness of various audiences to take it seriously and analyse it in detail. I have demonstrated that *Fifty Shades* contains many instances of irony, self-reflexivity, ambiguity and tonal shifts, yet most of this detail is curiously absent from the film's critical reception. By no means do I expect everybody (or even anybody) else to arrive at identical conclusions to me, but it is surprising that more people have not talked about how the film breaks with convention in unusual and occasionally very sophisticated ways. What this suggests is that the process of taking pleasure from 'difficult' films is as much a question of negotiating intertextual and social obstacles as it is about detailed textual analysis.

Notes

[1] There are clear overlaps here with the films of *The Twilight Saga*, which, as Nia Edwards-Behi (2014) has argued, have frequently been positioned (and therefore judged) as failed horror.

[2] Although no such audience study of the *Fifty Shades* movie exists at the time of writing, see Deller and Smith (2013) for an interesting reader-response study of the book's audiences. Similarly, Fred Greene, Keith Johnston and Ed Vollans' ongoing research on trailer audiences—'Watching The Trailer'—is a study-in-progress that will surely yield some valuable findings over the coming years (Greene et al. n.d.).

[3] Hess's argument here is also a knowing nod to the fact that E.L. James's novel was developed from her Twilight fan-fiction, *Master of the Universe*.

[4] Hess implies that fan-fiction is generally seeking to transform and/or improve on the source material,

which is not always the case. See Hills (2014) for an excellent discussion of the problematic transformational/affirmational binary within previous scholarship on fandom.

[5] Also see *Eden* (Dir. Mia Hansen-Løve, 2014), which features a scene in which several characters debate *Showgirls*' political subtext and satirical intent.

Richard McCulloch is Lecturer in Film and Cultural Studies at the University of Huddersfield. His research focuses on film and television audiences and reception, with a particular emphasis on taste and cultural value. His work has been published in *Participations*, and he is currently working on three book projects. The first, based on his PhD thesis, is a monograph on the critical reception of the Pixar animation brand, while the other two are edited collections (both with William Proctor) entitled *The Scandinavian Invasion: The Nordic Noir Phenomenon and Beyond* (Peter Lang), and *Disney's Star Wars: Forces of Production, Promotion, and Reception* (University of Iowa Press). Richard received his PhD from the University of East Anglia, and he is on the board of the Fan Studies Network.

References

Anon. (n.d.) '#50ShadesIsAbuse BlogRing', *50Shades IsAbuseBlogRing*, 13 February. Online at: https://50shadesisabuseblogring.wordpress. com/the-links/ (Accessed 10 March 2015).

Anon. (2015) 'Fifty Shades review: "It's fifty shades of vanilla"', *BBC*, 12 February. Online at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-31435716 (Accessed 15 April 2015).

Barker, M. (2011) 'Watching Rape, Enjoying Watching Rape ...: How Does a Study of Audience Cha(lle)nge Mainstream Film Studies Approaches' in T. Horeck and T. Kendall (eds.) *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 105-116.

Bourdieu, P. (1984/2010) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge.

Carroll, L. (1865/1916) *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. New York: Samuel Gabriel Sons & Company.

Chang, J. (2015) 'Fifty Shades of Grey', *Variety*, 10 February. Online at: http://variety.com/2015/film/reviews/film-review-fifty-shades-of-grey-1201429062/ (Accessed 20 May 2015).

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 11 March 2015).

Deller, R., and Smith, C. (2013) 'Reading the BDSM Romance: Reader Responses to *Fifty Shades*', *Sexualities*, vol. 16, no. 8, 932-950.

Dillon, M. (2015) 'Slave to Love', *American Cinematographer*, March, 32-47.

Eco, U. (1992) 'Overinterpreting Texts', in S. Collini (ed.) *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 45-66.

Edwards, D. (2015) 'Fifty Shades of Grey review: The man's view is it's S&M for the M&S generation', *The Mirror*, 11 February 2015. Online at: http://www.mirror.co.uk/tv/tv-reviews/fifty-shades-grey-review-mans-5147642 (Accessed 10 March 2015).

Edwards-Behi, N. (2014) '"Flicks for Chicks (and Chicks with Dicks) Who Can't Take Serious Horror": The Generic Misrecognition of *The Twilight Saga*' in W. Clayton and S. Harman (eds.) *Screening Twilight: Critical Approaches to a Cinematic Phenomenon*. London: I.B. Tauris, 40-48.

Faraci, D. (2015) '*Fifty Shades* and the Cultural Narrative that Women's Movies Suck', *Birth. Movies. Death.*, 13 February. Online at: http://birthmoviesdeath.com/2015/02/13/fifty-shades-and-the-cultural-narrative-that-womens-movies-suck (Accessed 20 May 2015).

Fifty Shades of Grey (2014) 'Fifty Shades of Grey – Official Teaser Trailer', *YouTube*, 24 July. Online at: https://youtu.be/z4nJX8snP4s (Accessed 3 April 2015).

Flood, A. (2012) 'Fifty Shades of Grey condemned as "manual for sexual torture"', *The Guardian*, 24 August. Online at: http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/aug/24/fifty-shades-grey-domestic-violence-campaigners (Accessed 7 April 2015).

Frantz, S.S.G., and Selinger, E.M. (eds.) (2012) *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction: Critical Essays*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company.

Gray, J. (2010) *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*. London: New York University Press.

Green, E. (2015) 'Consent Isn't Enough: The Troubling Sex of *Fifty Shades*', *The Atlantic*, 10 February. Online at: http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/02/consent-isnt-enough-in-fifty-shades-of-grey/385267/ (Accessed 7 April 2015).

Greene, F., Johnston, K., and Vollans, E. (n.d.) 'About the Project', *Watching The Trailer*. Online at: http://www.watchingthetrailer.com/about-the-project.html (Accessed 7 April 2015).

Grigoriadis, V. (2015) 'The Rocky Road to the Making of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* Movie', *Vanity Fair*, February. Online at: http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2015/01/fifty-shades-of-grey-sex-scenes (Accessed 25 April 2015).

Hall, S. (1980) 'Encoding/Decoding' in S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, and P. Willis (eds.) *Culture, Media, Language*. London: Hutchinson, 128-138.

Harman, S., and Jones, B. (2013) 'Fifty shades of ghey: Snark fandom and the figure of the anti-fan', *Sexualities*, vol. 16, no. 8, 951-968.

Hawker, P. (2015) 'Fifty Shades of Grey review: Expecting trash? You might be in for a surprise – but not a pleasant one', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 February. Online at: http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/movies/fifty-shades-of-grey-review-expecting-trash-you-might-be-in-for-a-surprise--but-not-a-pleasant-one-20150211-13cc93.html (Accessed 10 March 2015).

Hess, A. (2015) '*Fifty Shades of Grey* Is Not a "Good" Movie. I Loved It', *Slate*, 12 February. Online at: http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2015/02/12/fifty_shades_of_grey_is_a_great_bad_movie_it_s_perfect_for_hate_readers.html (Accessed 5 April 2015).

Hills, M. (2014) 'From Dalek half balls to Daft Punk helmets: Mimetic fandom and the crafting of replicas', *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 16. Online at:

http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index. php/twc/article/view/531/448 (Accessed 5 April 2015).

Hollows, J. (2003) 'The Masculinity of Cult', in M. Jancovich, A. Lázaro-Reboll, J. Stringer and A. Willis (eds.) *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 35-53.

Hunter, I.Q. (2000) 'Beaver Las Vegas! A Fan-Boy's Defence of *Showgirls*' in X. Mendik and G. Harper (eds.) *Unruly Pleasures: The Cult Film and its Critics*. Guildford: FAB Press, 189-201.

Hutcheon, L. (1994) *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. London: Routledge.

Hutcheon, L. (2006) *A Theory of Adaptation*. London: Routledge.

Hyland, K. (2014) 'Watch 50 Shades Full Trailer: Warning – Jamie Dornan appears topless, a lot!', *Mirror*, 24 July. Online at: http://www. mirror.co.uk/tv/tv-news/watch-50-shades-grey-full-3906630 (Accessed 5 April 2015).

James, E. L. (2011) *Fifty Shades of Grey*. London: Arrow.

Kearney, L. (2015) '*Fifty Shades of Grey* – a movie where misogyny never looked so mesmerising', *Independent.ie*, 14 February. Online at: http://www.independent.ie/opinion/comment /fifty-shades-of-grey-a-movie-where-misog yny-never-looked-so-mesmerising-30991454. html (Accessed 3 April 2015).

Kies, B. (2015) 'Fifty Shades of Paratexts: Fan Videos vs. Commercial Trailers', *Watching the Trailer*, 11 February. Online at: http://www.watching thetrailer.com/trailers-blog/fiftyshades (Accessed 21 May 2015).

King, G. (2009) *Indiewood, USA: Where Hollywood Meets Independent Cinema*. London: I.B. Tauris.

King, G. (2011) 'Striking a balance between culture and fun: 'quality' meets hitman genre in *In Bruges*', *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, June, 132-151.

Klinger, B. (1997) 'Film History, terminable and interminable: recovering the past in reception studies', *Screen*, vol. 38, no. 2, 107-28.

Klinger, B. (2006) *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home*. London: University of California Press.

Kuhn, A. (1997) 'Women's Genres: Melodrama, Soap Opera, and Theory' in C. Brunsdon, J. D'Acci and L. Spigel (eds.) *Feminist Television Criticsim: A Reader*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 145-154.

Lane, A. (2015) 'No Pain, No Gain', *The New Yorker*, 23 February. Online at: http://www.newyorker. com/magazine/2015/02/23/pain-gain (Accessed 13 April 2015).

Lavik, E. (2008) 'The battle for the blockbuster: discourses of spectacle and excess', *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, 169-187.

Lübecker, N. (2015) *The Feel-Bad Film*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

MacDowell, J. (2012) 'Wes Anderson, tone, and the quirky sensibility', *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1, 6-27.

MacDowell, J. (2013) *Hollywood Happy Endings: Cliché, Convention and the Final Couple*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Margolis, Z. (2015) '50 Shades of Grey: a film about male power, idealising emotional abuse as sexy when it isn't', *New Statesman*, 13 February 2015. Online at: http://www.new statesman.com/culture/2015/02/50-shades-grey-film-about-male-power-idealising-emotional-abuse-sexy-when-it-isnt (Accessed 3 April 2015).

McCulloch, R. (2011) '"Most People Bring Their Own Spoons": *The Room*'s participatory audiences as comedy mediators', *Participations*, vol. 8, no. 2, 189-218.

McGeorge, A. (2015) '*Fifty Shades of Grey* trailer: Watch Anastasia Steele meet Christian's parents in steamy teaser', *Mirror*, 12 January. Online at: http://www.mirror.co.uk/tv/tv-news/ fifty-shades-grey-trailer-watch-4964179 (Accessed 20 May 2015).

Mizuta Lippit, A., Burch, N., Noriega, C., Osterweil, A., Williams, L., Schaefer, E., and Sconce, J. (2003) 'Roundtable: *Showgirls*', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 56, no. 3, 32-46.

Moir, J. (2015) 'Sorry ladies, but the Fifty Shades movie is a spanking great bore!', *Daily Mail*, 11 February. Online at: http://www.dailymail. co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2949883/Sorry-ladies-

Fifty-Shades-movie-spanking-great-bore-JAN-MOIR-sees-world-premiere-year-s-hyped-film-t-whip-enthusiasm.html (Accessed 11 March 2015).

Morgan, S. (2012) 'I like submissive sex but Fifty Shades is not about fun: it's about abuse', *The Guardian*, 25 August. Online at: http://www.theguardian.com/society/2012/aug/25/fifty-shades-submissive-sophie-morgan (Accessed 10 March 2015).

Muir, K. (2015) 'Painful to watch but bonkbuster is bound to satisfy hardcore fans', *The Times*, 12 February, 3.

Nayman, A. (2014) *It Doesn't Suck: Showgirls*. Toronto: ECW Press.

Phillips, M. (2015) 'Review: "Fifty Shades of Grey"', *Chicago Tribune*, 12 February. Online at: http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/movies/chi-fifty-shades-of-grey-review-20150211-column.html (Accessed 20 May 2015).

Plantinga, C. (2009) *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience*. London: University of California Press.

Puig, C. (2015) '"Fifty Shades" lacks gray matter, as well as heat', *USA Today*, 12 February. Online at: http://www.usatoday.com/story/life/movies/2015/02/10/50-shades-of-grey-review/23154403/ (Accessed 10 March 2015).

Rahman, A. (2015) 'Jamie Dornan: "Fifty Shades of Grey" Not Misogynistic', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 2 January. Online at: http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/jamie-dornan-fifty-shades-grey-760904 (Accessed 7 April 2015).

Redmon, A. H. (2015) '"After Everything I've Seen...": Rewatching *Shutter Island* as a Knowing Audience', *Adaptation*, vol. 8, no. 2, 254-267.

Rife, K. (2015) 'More ironic than erotic, at least *Fifty Shades of Grey* improves on the book', *AVClub*, 12 February. Online at: http://www.avclub.com/review/more-ironic-erotic-least-fifty-shades-grey-improve-215154 (Accessed 20 May 2015).

Rosen, C. (2016) 'Razzies nominations 2016: *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Pixels* lead pack of year's worst', *Entertainment Weekly*, 13 January. Online at:

http://www.ew.com/article/2016/01/13/razzies-nominations-2016-list (Accessed 15 January 2016).

Salisbury, B. (2015) '"Fifty Shades of Grey" review: An Abhorrent & Misogynistic Rape Fantasy', *Flickchart*, 13 February. Online at: http://www.flickchart.com/blog/fifty-shades-of-grey-review-an-abhorrent-misogynistic-rape-fantasy/ (Accessed 7 April 2015).

Schwarzbaum, L. (2015) '*Fifty Shades of Grey* review: Aspirational erotic romance, by the book', *Entertainment Weekly*, 10 February. Online at: http://www.ew.com/article/2015/02/10/fifty-shades-grey-ew-review (Accessed 11 March 2015).

Sconce, J. (1995) 'Trashing the academy: taste, excess, and an emerging politics of cinematic style', *Screen*, vol. 36, no. 4, 371-93.

Sconce, J. (2002) 'Irony, nihilism, and the new American 'smart' film', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 43, no. 4, 349-69.

Taibi, C. (2015) 'News Anchor Goes Off On "Fifty Shades of Grey": "Worst Movie I Have Ever Seen"', *Huffington Post*, 12 February. Online at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/12/fifty-shades-of-grey-worst-movie-ever-news-anchor_n_6671622.html (Accessed 7 April 2015).

Travers, P. (2015) 'Fifty Shades of Grey', *Rolling Stone*, 11 February. Online at: http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/reviews/fifty-shades-of-grey-20150211 (Accessed 11 March 2015).

Tucker, R. (2015) 'Movie review: 50 shades of vanilla', *Vancouver Sun*, 13 February. Online at: http://www.vancouversun.com/entertainment/movie-guide/Movie+review+shades+vanilla/10810783/story.html (Accessed 20 May 2015).

Waugh, H. (2015) 'Welcome to My World: Anastasia meets Christian's parents in new steamy trailer for *Fifty Shades of Grey* aired during Golden Globes', *Mail Online*. Online at: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2906143/Anastasia-meets-Christian-s-parents-new-extended-trailer-Fifty-Shades-Grey-aired-Golden-Globes.html (Accessed 20 May 2015).

Weitzman, E. (2015) '"Fifty Shades of Grey" stays true

to book's centerpiece sex scenes, but doesn't push the envelope: movie review', *New York Daily News*, 9 February. Online at: http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/movies/fifty-shades-grey-movie-review-article-1.2109147 (Accessed 11 March 2015).

Wheat, A. (2015) '*Fifty Shades of Grey* Review: Is the Erotic Drama a Bang or a Whimper?', *People*, 11 February. Online at: http://www.people.com/article/fifty-shades-of-grey-people-review-dakota-johnson-jamie-dornan (Accessed 20 May 2015)

X., Gracie (2015) 'A Sex-Positive Feminist Laments "50 Shades of Boredom"', *Huffington Post*, 26 February. Online at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gracie-x/a-sex-positive-feminist-laments-50-shades-of-boredom_b_6755860.html (Accessed 10 March 2015).

Zhao, H. (2014) 'Biting her lip in anticipation! Dakota Johnson strikes a sultry pose for a sexy new Fifty Shades of Grey poster', *Daily Mail*, 12 November. Online at: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2830793/Dakota-Johnson-strikes-sultry-pose-sexy-new-Fifty-Shades-Grey-poster.html (Accessed 25 May 2015).