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## Art, Porn, and Schlock: *Fifty Shades of Grey* and the Perplexed Film Critic

*Fifty Shades may not make you come, but you'll still be glad you went.*

– David Ehrlich, “Fifty Shades of Grey,”  
*Time Out*, Feb. 11, 2015

Sam-Taylor Johnson’s R-rated *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015), starring Jamie Dornan and Dakota Johnson, did not peak critics’ prurient interests nor their insatiable appetites for sex in the cinema. They decried the film for its pornographic representations while also observing the ways it is not a work of pornography. To these critics, erotically-charged feature films were most successful when filmmakers adopted the mode and style of art cinema, and *Fifty Shades* failed to meet these standards of art film. Some critics also admitted that they wanted the film to unintentionally veer in the direction of “so bad it’s good,” but they more or less agreed that *Fifty Shades* was not incompetently crafted. Neither art, nor porn, nor schlock, then, how did critics position the film and what did they not like about it?

This article provides an overview of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* reviews published in the popular press at the time of the film’s release on Valentine’s Day Weekend 2015. As Rick Altman argues, critics are responsible for commenting upon and conserving film genres (124), thus determining the consensus on the film’s genre interventions highlights the ones that are pressing and relevant in contemporary criticism. Through a careful look at the reviews, I assess which genre references resonated with critics. In my reading of the *Fifty Shades* criticism, given that the film was neither art, nor porn, nor schlock, the only low genre left for critics to assess it was the “woman’s film.” The woman’s film designation allowed critics to denigrate the film and provide disparaging commentary about it to thereby prop up their authority and demonstrate their good taste. This follows from the view that

criticism is in a state of perpetual crisis over its claims to authority and legitimacy and, in the digital era, this state of anxiety is all the more pressing as fans post reviews on a host of websites (Frey, *Permanent Crisis* 125-139). There is no shortage of websites that allow for competition among amateur critics, e.g., review sites such as Letterboxd and Metacritic, and social media such *Twitter*. For critics, then, genre comparisons and investigations are not deployed to simply better understand a film, its production, or reception. Indeed, the appearance of a carefully constructed genre study evinces a critic’s cultural capital. However, the *Fifty Shades* critics reinforced and reproduced the distinction between high and low genres while neglecting to provide more nuanced reflections on genre filmmaking, the pleasures of genre film spectatorship, and the film’s problematic representations of contemporary romance.

Before assessing the critical commentary on *Fifty Shades*, it is worth examining the role critics play in film culture. The value of the critic has been a topic of debate almost since cinema’s beginnings (Frey, *Permanent Crisis*). In part, critics are the gatekeepers of culture rather than its consumers; critics help determine which works are worthy of inclusion inside the sacred vaults (both literal and figurative) of film history. From this perspective, critics do not assist in the constitution of film genres but are its observers (Altman 28-9). A more robust approach, however, reveals that genre formation depends upon a complex intercommunicative network of producers, audiences, and critics. For our purposes, the latter deploy their knowledge of “generic competence” to make a case for a film’s participation in or miscalculations of one or more genres (123-26). Critics’ understanding of and commentary on genres trickle down to film producers who then incorporate or shed specific generic qualities in future productions (162). In this sense, filmmaking (by way of investments by and direction

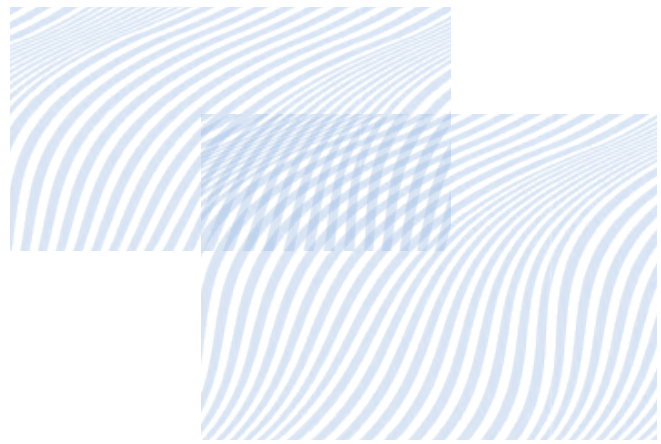
from producers) is a practice of applied film criticism (44).

The genres of *Fifty Shades* became a stumbling block for critics as their reviews often focused on what the film was not. I examined the available reviews hyperlinked from Metacritic and a few from elsewhere on the Web. I chose this starting point because critics, besides writing for their press's audience, are also writing for the audiences of aggregate sites such as Metacritic and Rotten Tomatoes. For *Variety*'s Anne Thompson, young cinephiles browse these sites with less of an interest in individual critics than for digestible critical consensus on a given film (qtd. in Frey, *Permanent Crisis* 126). Reviews, similar to other internet-circulated media such as viral videos and memes, vie for attention. For *Fifty Shades* criticism, despite Metacritic scores ranging from 0 to 80 (out of 100), with an average of 46, most reviews follow the same formula and reach similar conclusions.

Reviews often begin with an attempt to locate a genre: *Fifty Shades* is a fairy tale, romance, and BDSM-romance, not falling far from the Metacritic characterization on the film's main page: "Drama, Romance, Adult." To grab readers' attention, a more frequently used approach opens the review by embellishing the film's inability to arouse. Exemplary in this regard is Megan Daum's opening salvo, published in *Slate*:

If you come to *Fifty Shades of Grey* looking for true kink, you will have come to the wrong place. You'll get peacock feathers and satiny blindfolds, horsehair whips better for tickling than flogging and, of course, many expensive silk ties. The *Fifty Shades* phenomenon... may have courted controversy for its exploration of a dom-sub relationship, but *Story of O* (or even *Secretary*, for that matter) this is not. (par. 1)

Some critics similarly invoke softcore porn in their commentary, while others, following the line of inquiry opened by Daum, observe that *Fifty Shades* will fail to whet sexual appetites (Ehrlich par. 1, 3; Hoffman par. 5; Persall par. 8-9, 11; Stewart par. 1). Critics (metaphorically) refer to their "Peter-Meters"<sup>1</sup> as they tabulate the film's spanks and whips, identify the sex toys and bondage gear, and note the brief instances of Dornan's and Johnson's flesh. In sum, then, what critics saw was much less than the sadomasochistic porn they had seen (or pretended to



have seen) on pornography websites and, "for a movie where people are naked for a large chunk of time and play at bondage and dominance..., it sure is boring" (par. 3; cf. Bernardinelli par. 1).

Why did critics think pornography was a legitimate comparison? *Time*'s Richard Corliss provides an answer. He informs readers that he is a "virgin" when it comes to the film's source material, E.L. James's *Fifty Shades* Trilogy (2011-12), having never read a word (par. 1). A few paragraphs down, however, he expresses disappointment in discovering that "a very X-rated book" has transformed into "a genteel R-rated film" (par. 9). Corliss and others, virgins or not, must believe that since *Fifty Shades* is an X-rated book, its film adaptation should be equally gratuitous. Yet these critics forgot the lesson of American film history, namely, literature enjoys a freedom of expression that Hollywood does not – Hollywood has a habit of sanitizing adaptations (Athanasourelis, 325-338; Biesen).

The uncritical observation that *Fifty Shades* does not live up to the graphic nature of the source material also serves the larger aim to denigrate the film. Corliss follows his unenthusiastic commentary on the sex scenes with the opinion that sadomasochism should be a theme for filmmaking "because it touches on the power vectors in any relationship, and because each person frequently switches roles of dominant and submissive" (par. 9). The critic cites *Last Tango in Paris* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1972) and *Intimacy* (Patrice Chereau, 2001) as successful films in this genre. (Of course, neither of these films have anything to do with BDSM but illicit sexual encounters.) Corliss's approach to evaluating the film as somehow part of the mode of art cinema is not unique. On the whole, the *Fifty Shades* critics – now confident that the film is not hardcore porn – compare it to the classics of BDSM-romance, with *Last Tango*, *9 ½ Weeks* (Adrian Lyne, 1986), and *Secretary* (Steven Shainberg, 2002) oft-cited alongside acclaimed art cinema directors

1. The Peter-Meter was a system used by Al Goldstein of Screw in the 1970s to assess a film's capacity to arouse. See Williams, *Screening Sex* 120-123

such as Catherine Breillat and key BDSM-themed films such as *Belle de Jour* (Luis Buñuel, 1967), *The Night Porter* (Liliana Cavani, 1974), and *The Duke of Burgundy* (Peter Strickland, 2014).<sup>2</sup>

Critics play cultural gatekeepers as they cite better examples of filmic eroticism that are more expertly crafted or authentic in their depictions. However, this is an ill-suited comparison given that the mode of art cinema champions realism, psychological ambiguity,

reading protocol for spectators to enact “a calculated strategy of shock and confrontation against fellow cultural elites” and champion a counter-aesthetic and counter-canon of films that have been “rejected or ignored by legitimate film culture” (Sconce 376, 372).<sup>4</sup> Yet Taylor-Johnson fails to meet this standard of failure. For instance, *Vulture*’s David Edelstein calls *Fifty Shades* “elegantly made”: it is “nowhere near as laughable as you might have feared (or perversely

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## ***Fifty Shades*’s criticism demonstrates a circular internal logic.**

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and adult-themes in a way that Hollywood filmmaking does not (Bordwell 558-573). Combining the dual observation that *Fifty Shades* is neither art nor porn, Elliot Burton declares, “If you seek a truly erotic film made for women by women, you’d do much better with Catherine Breillat’s exquisite *Romance*. If you seek mere titillation, you’d do much better with actual pornography” (par. 7). Such a comparison to art cinema and pornography allows the critic to demonstrate their cultural capital, but the turn to cultural capital comes at the expense of meaningful investigations of what the film offers as a Hollywood production in an era that has been less restrained in terms of depictions of sexuality (Williams, *Screening Sex* 216-257).<sup>3</sup> Thus criticism fails to engage a Hollywood film within the parameters of its production and audience.

Before their screenings, some critics thought *Fifty Shades* may produce visual pleasure through its technical incompetence and trite narrative (Shea par. 8). It would then become a cult phenomenon, or what many cult cinema scholars refer to as “badfilm.” A badfilm is established when a “film or filmmaker seems to attempt to achieve something, seems to fail, and yet is valued for this seeming failure” (MacDowell and Zborowski par. 6). It is not a set of codes or conventions; rather, the designation of badfilm is a

hoped for” (par. 1). Critics note Taylor-Johnson’s short but successful filmography and the merits of her foray into Hollywood filmmaking with *Fifty Shades*, particularly her construction of the infamous contract signing scene, and Johnson’s performance is generally declared superb. Moreover, James’s insufferable prose and poorly written dialogue are transformed into a feature film that is somewhat entertaining or, at worst, only mildly insufferable.<sup>5</sup> Critics, therefore, could not recuperate *Fifty Shades* as a badfilm to “carve out an interpretive space” and distance their perverse love of a trashy film from the dominant views of film art set by earlier generations of academics and critics (Hunter 32). Similar to my above remarks on critics’ invocation of art cinema to bolster their cultural capital, identifying oneself as a connoisseur of trashy films also enhances one’s cultural capital (31-32). The lack of technical ineptitudes and narrative clichés in *Fifty Shades*, however, did not grant critics the opportunity to articulate their ironic and detached praise or enact the badfilm reading protocols.

*Fifty Shades*’s criticism demonstrates a circular internal logic. BDSM puns fly through critics’ fingers as they try to express what they found so painful about their film experience, namely, that it failed to be erotic/pornographic, art, or “so bad it’s good.” Through

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2. Jane Giles observes that although BDSM themes have appeared in art cinema for decades, *9 ½ Weeks* is the only appropriate comparison to *Fifty Shades* since it is also a Hollywood production. For Giles, one of the few critics to take this nuanced path, *Fifty Shades* is not as good of a film as *9 ½ Weeks* because she cannot imagine a “watercooler moment or destined-to-be-classic scene” in the former (par. 12).

3. For a critical consideration of representations of sex in contemporary art cinema, see Bordun 99-122

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4. While I recognize that in the quoted passages Sconce is referring, not specifically to badfilm, but to his proposed umbrella-category of “paracinema” that includes badfilm, in the interest of simplicity I have opted to treat these terms as synonymous.

5. As many critics note, Ana only says “Holy cow” once in the film while the silly catchphrase abounds in the novel. Although, according to Kadeen Griffiths, “Holy cow!” only appears 19 times in 514 pages, thus the frequency of the catchphrase is overemphasized (par. 2).

its inability to participate in these genres and styles, it is articulated just as a bad film. But what is worse than this trashy movie? “[T]he real sadism arrives at the very end of the film, and it is breathtaking in its cruelty: the promise of a sequel” (Goodykoontz par. 16).

So, what is *Fifty Shades of Grey* according to some of its reviewers? It is a film that women, in record numbers, will flock to the cinemas to see since it appeals to “the lowest common denominator of female fantasy” (Stewart par. 8; Daum par. 2; cf. Kang par. 2, 12). In short, *Fifty Shades* is a “woman’s film,” a film that features a woman as the protagonist while engaging the subjectivities of women in the audience. Altman observes that while the woman’s film era is associated with the 1940s, it was not until the interventions of scholars such as Molly Haskell and Mary Ann Doane in the 1970s and 1980s, respectively, that the genre was established. The genre has been a robust site of study for scholars in the 21st century as well.

Typically, the woman’s film places a woman’s desire for familial relationships, romantic/sexual relationships, or financial independence at its center (Grevin 36-37). Scholars agree that the core thematic element of the genre is a transgressive female subjectivity. The lead character’s emancipatory project from traditional sites of women’s experience, such as the domestic and familial spheres as wife and mother, is “a failure to accept the repressive, subjectivity-denying structures of patriarchal femininity” (Pravadelli 102-107; Lang qtd. in Grevin 39-40). In short, competing notions of femininity come into conflict. Of course, the patriarchy did not wane in the latter half of the 20th century, thus the thematic elements of the 1940s woman’s film have been carried forward into more recent productions. For example, Roberta Garrett argues that “chick flicks” from the early 1990s and into the 21st century are a continuation of the woman’s film (63-65). Films such as *Ghost* (Jerry Zucker, 1990) and *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (Sharon Maguire, 2001) update the genre by transplanting the site of conflict from the domestic and familial spheres to liberal feminism’s ongoing project of equality. “Postmodern chick flicks,” while still calling traditional notions of femininity into question, thus move the focal point to the protagonists’ educational and career aspirations (208). This is relevant for the *Fifty Shades* series as Christian, prone to exercising “control in all things,” must relinquish his desire for complete control over his sexual partners while Ana explores her career goals, friendships, and bodily autonomy: in the first film, at a literal bargaining table, the two lovers hash

out the terms of the BDSM contract; in the second film, Ana pursues her career as an editor while Christian pines for her to live with him and, later, asks her to become his wife; and in the final film, Christian and Ana tussle over the terms of married life and parenthood. These conflicts and tensions are oft-used themes for the “woman’s film.”

Although the *Fifty Shades* critics do not deploy the term “woman’s film,” they would categorize it as such for its generic qualities (Ana’s tussles with Christian over the form and shape of their romantic relationship), its address to women fans (as critics Sara Stewart and Daum declare), and as a shorthand to deride it. As scholars note, the term “woman’s film” is sometimes used to dismiss a film, so my reading of the genre from the critics’ perspective should not be controversial. As this genre details the everyday problems unique to women, it also renders the problems of the romantic and domestic spheres insignificant when compared to the public activities of men. Moreover, emotional responses are out of place in a patriarchal society, thus when the woman’s film makes us weep, Haskell suggests that we feel like we need to be on our guard and suspicious of these filmic assaults (154). Providing the designation of woman’s film is also disparaging as it conjures “up the image of the pinched-virgin or little-old-lady-writer, spilling out her secret longings in wish fulfillment or glorious martyrdom, and transmitting these fantasies to the frustrated housewife.” To come to the point, the “‘woman’s film’ fills a masturbatory need, it is soft core emotional porn for the frustrated housewife” (154-155).

By positioning *Fifty Shades* in one of the low genres (Williams, “Film Bodies” 604-605), then, critics reinforce not only the divisions between high and popular culture, thereby bolstering their authority on matters of film culture, but also the division between films for men, which are exemplary of good taste, and films for women, here indicating poor taste. This is all the more troubling as “the male critics had a good old laugh at the film as they vied to write the most disparaging and entertaining review” (Giles par. 1). For *Fifty Shades* criticism, the woman’s film as a genre and its accompanying fans are to blame for the film’s inability to arouse, operate in the mode of art cinema, or be part of the badfilm experience. Critics’ disparaging remarks, therefore, have a dual aim: to elevate film criticism while denigrating lovers of genre films, particularly, woman’s films and their respective fans.

One of the tasks of film criticism is to evaluate (Frey, “Introduction” 2-4), yet critics sought to

evaluate this film with the assumption that the sexy novel should have been adapted into an eroticized art film or, at worst, at least a piece of schlock cinema. Preestablishing the film's genre blocked the practice of film criticism such that critics failed to understand the film within the slowly growing body of Hollywood movies that explore sexuality in R-rated visual depictions. Better understanding the film's genre interventions would allow these critics to better assess the problematic depictions of BDSM-romance. Although some critics were keen to observe that *Fifty Shades*'s narrative is a masterclass in sexual and psychological abuse, they nevertheless framed the film in terms of genres that are not there and refused to explicitly assess and critique it from a position within the woman's film genre.<sup>6</sup> Had critics more closely considered the film within its historical situatedness, they would have argued that *Fifty Shades* should be the final nail in the coffin for Hollywood's recourse to misogyny as a narrative device.

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6. Katha Pollitt concisely frames the film's problems: "the troubling aspect of it isn't the porn but the romance.... *Fifty Shades* romanticizes the angry, unpredictable, potentially dangerous man. It says that deep inside, he's a victim... it is a woman's job to heal him, and suffering in this cause is what love is. That's the fantasy that keeps women with abusers, not the one about being tied to the bedpost with a fancy necktie" (11).

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