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## School of shock: film, television and anal education

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Since their inception, film and television have been accused of having all kinds of magical powers to alter behaviour, coerce malfasance and encourage debauchery. Decades of media theory later, the powers of persuasion are in fact thought to be much more modest. One area where popular media is considered to be particularly influential is education, with film and television being perceived to have a role in teaching audiences about certain topics, notably sexuality. This paper focuses specifically on the education provided by film and television about anal heterosex. Screen depictions have a function in not just putting such a sex act onto the audience agenda but in guiding viewers' reception. In this paper, the use of pleasure, pain and power frames is examined to explore the specifics of the anal education provided by screen fiction.

**Keywords:** sexuality; framing; heterosexuality; media; deviance

Since their inception, film and television have been accused of possessing all kinds of magical powers to alter behaviour, coerce malfasance and encourage debauchery. Decades on from the hypodermic syringe and magic bullet powerful effects theories of the media, however, their influence is presumed as much more modest. In contemporary understandings, media power centres less on propaganda and more on cherry-picking the issues that get the spotlight and orchestrating how those issues are framed. In this paper, I focus on the presentation of anal heterosex in narrative film and television. I contend that while the screen depiction of this long-standing taboo places it on the audience's agenda as behaviour worth thinking about, more specifically I suggest that film and television have an educative role, and that depictions teach viewers about anal heterosex, a practice noticeably absent from traditional sex education sources.

This paper begins with a discussion of the anal taboo in society and, more specifically, in media. I outline that while the widespread absence is attributable to the verboten nature of the sex act itself, its limited presence on screen is, at least partly, attributable to contemporary pornification. The idea of the screen as providing an education is outlined, examined and then problematised as an entertaining, yet complicated, education source. Anal scenes from film and television are then described and categorised according to the narrative frames of pleasure, pain and power. Finally, the educative function of media is analysed in relation to society's evolving relationship with taboo sex.

The rarity of anal sex presentations in mainstream – or at least, non-pornographic – film and television means that there is not a deluge of scenes available to analyse. The few screen examples discussed in this paper, therefore, are those that have been identified in previous academic discussions as containing depictions of anal heterosex (Rosewarne 2011; Keesey 2012), as well as those tagged as such on websites (for example, the Internet

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Movie Database). Resultantly, the examples discussed here emerge from a variety of genres. Due to the paucity of representations, conducting a change over time analysis or a genre-comparison study would be difficult and thus, this paper focuses more narrowly on narrative frames which are common across anal heterosexual portrayals. Because there is so little anal heterosexual in mainstream entertainment, it is possible to use frames to make meaningful generalisations about how anal sex is depicted; an analysis that would be much more difficult to accomplish for a practice like vaginal sex which is so widespread, familiar and represented in a much wider variety of ways.

The depictions discussed highlight that in spite of the long history of the anal sex taboo, media does not actually offer a homogenous portrayal of the act. While there are indeed brimstone-type representations – where the act is not merely sexually but socially transgressive – non-vanilla sex is becoming increasingly normalised and thus, in line with changing mores, in some examples anal sex is actually presented as intimate and even pleasurable.

### **The anal taboo**

Anal heterosexual exists as one of the last remaining sexual taboos – described by social researcher Kath Albury (2002, 147) as the ‘last frontier’. While my discussion centres on fictional representations, it is of course necessary to outline the real-life moral and, in turn, legal prohibitions that have imbued anal sex with such a long tradition of controversy.

The concept of the mainstream is, of course, highly contested. Notably, it is a notion underpinned by extensive hypocrisy given that while a range of sexual practices are positioned as deviant, non-vanilla or fringe, a paradox exists in that these are not only routinely practised privately, but commonly enjoyed vicariously and voyeuristically through film and television (Rosewarne 2011). Queer theorist Gayle Rubin (1993, 16) summarised the range of acts that are commonly considered non-mainstream, non-vanilla and, in turn, deviant:

Bad sex may be homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, or commercial. It may be masturbatory or take place at orgies, may be casual, may cross generational lines, and may take place in “public” or at least in the bushes or the baths. It may involve the use of pornography, fetish objects, sex toys or unusual roles.

Each of these taboo practices has a history as to the whys of their demonisation, but the ‘non-procreative’ element is of course, one key insight into the condemnation of anal sex specifically.

Anti-sodomy laws have their origins in biblical opposition to homosexual relations; as political scientist Raymond Smith (1998, 73) notes, the anal taboo ‘functions as a social control on homosexuality’. While most Western countries have repealed anti-sodomy laws, a number of African and Asian nations retain them and they remain in the legislation of several US states. The long history of anal sex being illegal lays the basis for its taboo; however, other factors centred on psychology and society also help to explain this.

An extension of the prohibition against homosexuality – of which anal sex is commonly considered metonymic – is the routine connection of such sex to disease: since the 1980s, anal sex has been framed as a high-risk sexual practice with potentially deadly consequences. Along with the risk of disease, anal taboos have roots grounded in disgust. Smith (1998, 73), for example, identified that many anal taboos begin in toilet training ‘when children are taught that the anus, which infants experience as pleasurable, is unclean and the symbol of all that is disgusting.’ Into adulthood, the continued linking of the anus with waste manifests in anxieties about bodily excreta, specifically faeces (Menninghaus

2003), and thus works to demonise those who consider the orifice as erotic as disgusting if not also fetishistic.

While anal heterosex is an uncommon depiction on screen, it is indeed detectable and therefore the whys of its presentation need to be examined, particularly in the context of contemporary debates around the influence of pornography on the mainstream. Elsewhere, I have contended that the increased visibility of taboo topics (at least partly) reflects audiences wanting to vicariously experience kinky sex with the benefit of distance and safety (Rosewarne 2011). Others have proposed that the increased interest in practices like anal heterosex – something identifiable in popular media as well as sources like women’s magazines and sex advice literature – is attributable to the mainstreaming of porn (Sabo 2012; Ringrose 2013).

### The mainstreaming of pornography

Pornification describes the process whereby sexually explicit material once only associated with the seedy and often illegal is now more visible and acceptable. In his book *Striptease Culture*, for example, media theorist Brian McNair (2002, 61) discussed signs of mainstreaming, identifying it as evident in: ‘the representation of porn in non-pornographic art and culture; the pastiche and parody of, the homage to and investigation of porn; the postmodern transformation of porn into mainstream cultural artefact for a variety of purposes.’

While discussions of mainstreaming have largely been dominated by feminists concerned with stereotyping, sexualisation and objectification (Sørensen 2003; Levy 2005; Paul 2005; Walter 2010), politics aside, the simple reality is that such mainstreaming has occurred and the presence of sexual practices which once were exclusively contained within porn is now readily found outside of it. While the politics of pornification are not largely relevant to this discussion, the presence of anal heterosex does relate well to feminist concerns with mainstreaming. Anal heterosex in fact, presents quite a literal depiction of such concerns, that its presence in film and television is yet another example of the mainstreaming of men’s rights to pleasure at the cost to women’s discomfort, if not pain (Jeffreys 1996). While, as noted, there is not a homogenous presentation of anal heterosex in film and television, it is interesting to note that women’s pain is indeed one frame identifiable in screen depictions.

Most theorists link pornification to the Internet age: that the Internet is essential as both a disseminator of explicit content but also as a way for audiences – regardless of age, sex, geographic location or personal disinclination to frequent sex shops – to access it. Popular media produced in the Internet age, however, is not the first to include sexually transgressive presentations. Anal heterosex is detectable in numerous films predating pornification such as *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), *The Devil in Miss Jones* (1973), *Je t’aime moi non plus (I Love You, I Don’t)* (1976), *Body Heat* (1981) and *Body of Evidence* (1993). Such isolated examples, however, are the exception not the rule and, in the Internet age, explicit mainstream film and television depictions of sex are far more easily sourced.

It should be recognised that Internet-driven pornification is not the only explanation for the increase in non-vanilla content. The successes of liberal and third-wave feminism have meant that risqué sexual presentations involving women are no longer exclusively construed as exploitative. While radical feminists frequently interpret such liberalising as a signifier of a backlash against feminism (Faludi 1991; Levy 2005), pro-sex feminists see capacity for such material to be construed as reflecting female sexual agency and, in the cases of non-vanilla representations, as an acknowledgement that female desire is not

necessarily staid or gentle (Rosewarne 2014). Equally, the rise of pro-sex and sexual reform movements has helped the picture of acceptable intimacy to evolve. The film theorist Douglas Keesey (2012, 12) in his work on erotic film, for example, notes: ‘restrictions on what is and is not an erogenous zone have been opened up beyond the merely genital...’

Another factor contributing to the increased presence of non-vanilla depictions is the success of gay and lesbian activism. As a result of the criticism of clichéd and mocking depictions of homosexuality on screen – as well as the growing social acceptance of same-sex desire – the visibility of queer characters has increased as has the depiction of sexualities more broadly (Rosewarne 2013).

### The anal taboo in film and television

Whereas prior to the 1990s, the depiction of anal sex in porn was considered an ‘extreme’ presentation (Purcell 2012), nowadays, it is actually a staple. For reasons centred on religion, law, disease and disgust, however, the act remains largely absent from popular culture – a situation that has not gone unnoticed. Keesey (2012, 18) for example, highlights that, even at a time when cinema is liberalising in regard to sexuality, there are still some glaring omissions: ‘mainstream film almost never shows the ass or anus as exciting in themselves, despite the latter’s lasciviously sensitive nerve endings and the fact that anal intercourse can stimulate the prostate and the clitoris.’ While the absence of anal eroticism is likely partly attributable to the aforementioned taboos, elsewhere I present some medium-specific explanations noting that mainstream presentations rarely provide sufficient visual information to know exactly what kind of sex is happening: ‘cinema almost never includes enough detail for audiences to confidentially ascertain the kind of touch that is transpiring – or even whether vaginal or anal penetration is occurring’ (Rosewarne 2014, 85).

Apart from in films uniquely controversial in their display of real sex – such as *9 Songs* (2004) where the anal heterosexual was unsimulated – in most popular media sex acts are feigned and thus actual penetration is never shown. Much, for example, was made of the anal heterosexual in the drama *Crash* (1996) (Creed 1998; Hallam 2012; Robinson 2012). On one level, there are numerous reasons to assume that anal sex was occurring: the narrative centred on transgressive and ‘unusual’ sexual practices and much camera attention was devoted to female buttocks, in turn imbuing the film with atypical anal eroticism. Equally, in a scene where James (James Spader) and Catherine (Deborah Kara Unger) were having sex in a spooning position, the fact that Catherine was talking about James possibly ‘sodomising’ their associate Vaughan (Elias Koteas) links her fantasy to the penetration she was experiencing.

In some scenes, however, a kind of hedging transpires where anal sex *might* be happening but where the act is also open to interpretation. A good example of anal ambiguity transpired in the pilot episode of *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013): Walter (Bryan Cranston) and his wife Skylar (Anna Gunn) were in bed kissing when he abruptly rolled her onto her side. Just as he appeared to be positioned to penetrate her from behind, Skylar asked, ‘Walter, is that you?’ and then sharply inhaled: the implication is that the sex that they were having was unusual for them: anal sex is implied – via tropes such as allusions to pain and shock – but is not explicitly shown.

While the anal scenes that I discuss in this article are ones where it seems reasonable to assume that such sex is occurring, in most examples scenes are not explicit enough to show penetration and thus a vaginal reading is still possible.

### Film and television as agenda setter

Mentioned earlier was the concept of film and television helping to put anal heterosex onto the agenda. Developed by social scientists Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972), agenda setting theory initially narrated the findings of a study undertaken during the 1968 US presidential election where a correlation was found between issues that constituents considered most important and those which the news media covered most heavily. While the origins of agenda setting lie in political science, the theory has been widely used in media studies. For the purposes of this paper, my interest is on agenda setting in the context of the placement of anal heterosex onto an audience's radar via its depiction in popular media. Communication theorists Jane Brown and Susannah Stern (2002, 99) provide a good summary of the relationship between agenda setting and, as specifically relevant to this paper, sex education:

Although rarely thought of as sex educators ... [media] at the very least help keep sexual behaviour salient ... The media are in a unique position to get people thinking and talking about specific issues ...

Elsewhere I have discussed agenda setting in the context of anal sex, highlighting popular media's role in tabling the act without providing specific instructions on how an audience should think about it:

The media does not force us into treating the anus as a penetrable orifice, but by portraying it, celebrating it, and potentially even normalising its sexual use, undoubtedly anal play is put on our radar. Anal sex becomes sexual behaviour to consider. We might fantasise, we might engage, and we might just watch or listen and allow a representation to substitute for our desire to have it ... (Rosewarne 2011, 23)

One signifier of anal sex being on the agenda is people acknowledging having thought about it. One of the most interesting findings from sex researchers Cicely Marston and Ruth Lewis' (2014) work on heterosex, for example, was that anal sex was mentioned by research participants in conversations about their sexuality prior to them receiving any prompting from researchers.

More than simply *thinking* about a sex act, however, is its integration into sex life. Sex research documents a notable rise in reported anal heterosex participation over the past two decades (Johnson, Mercer, and Erens 2001; Hardy 2006; Gindi, Ghanem, and Erbeling 2008; Chandra, Mosher, and Copen 2011; Mercer, Tanton, and Prah 2013; Marston and Lewis 2014). Such research highlights that anal sex is on the public radar and that some people have not merely thought about it, but actually participated in it. While numerous factors influence this, the changing portrayals in popular media undoubtedly play a role. In this paper, I propose agenda setting and education roles for anal sex scenes in film and television but it should, of course, be noted that such presentations can also be construed simply as fantasy. The question of how fantasy might play a role in everyday behaviour is a complex one, but it is certainly not a simple cause-and-effect (Burgin, Donald, and Kaplan 1986; Donald 1989; Mulvey 1989; Kaplan 1990; Penley 1992).

### Film, television and framing

Framing is a theory that describes how a story is packaged. While in the context of news this concept is often used to explore a type of bias whereby an audience is manipulated into taking a side and making a moral judgment, framing as related to fictional media explains the way something is depicted within a storyline and thus how audience perceptions about it can alter; something explained by the pioneer of the theory, communications theorist Robert Entman (1993, 51–52): 'Analysis of frames illuminate the precise way in which influence

over a human consciousness is exerted by the transfer (or communication) of information from one location – such as a speech, utterance, news report, or novel – to that consciousness.’

As related to sexuality, research highlights how framing can be used to guide perceptions about transgressive sexual behaviours: political scientist Alan Yang (2001, 344), for example, discussed the ‘media’s shift in coverage from framing homosexuals as deviant or ill to a framing of homosexuality as a minority group fighting for their civil rights’. The sociologists Gary Kinsman and Patrizia Gentile (2010, 292) similarly discuss media’s common framing of radical feminists ‘as bra-burners, man-haters, and, often, as lesbians’. While there is not specific work on how anal heterosex is framed in popular media, the three frames I propose here – pleasure, pain, and power – are ones that I suggest have impacts on how media educates audiences about the practice and, in turn, influences how the act is construed in the popular imagination. A small range of literature explores the impact of framing on a student’s education experience – for example in Joel Amernic and Russell Craig’s (2014) work on accounting education – in this discussion the frames of pleasure, pain and power are examined as instrumental in shaping informal education about anal sex.

### Film and television as educator

Narrative film and television are fictional productions: they centre on fabricated stories. While there is an expectation of truth and accuracy in news articles, conversely, audiences watch film and television because of the fiction. Fiction, therefore, raises interesting concerns regarding education: the very fact that representations are contained within a made-up story highlights that not only is the presentation fictional but that the information source is potentially unreliable. A media item being fictitious does not, of course, preclude it serving as an informant: fairytales and folk stories have long been used to provide moral lessons (Bottigheimer 2004), and equally a role for narrative film and television in the teaching of subjects including history (Marcus 2010), politics (Glover and Tagliarina 2013), and sociology (Gerster and Zlogar 2006; Russell 2009) has been documented. Questions nevertheless need to be asked about the veracity of education delivered in this manner.

In all areas of study, information gleaned from fiction can be problematic: Hollywood’s shortcomings in delivering an accurate portrayal of history, for example, have been discussed at length (Carnes 1995; Palmer 2009; Mintz and Roberts 2010). Similarly, while research highlights how common it is for ‘informal’ sex education to be gleaned from friends and, most notably, popular media (Hall 1996; Balding 1997; Falk and Falk 2005; Levin and Kilbourne 2008; Kaima 2010), it also identifies that such informal education can create knowledge gaps and misunderstandings (Parmelee 1996; Price and Gwin 2012). While this paper does not focus on the accuracy of anal heterosex depictions – and ‘accuracy’ in this context is problematic anyhow given that ‘truths’ are more likely grounded in morality and individual ethics rather than fact – it is nonetheless worth acknowledging that the screen has been documented as sometimes presenting inaccurate sex information. Equally, as discussed throughout this paper, anal sex scenes are invariably brief, often ambiguous and generally provide very little information about the practice beyond tabling it as a sexual possibility. Given the paucity of content therefore, the nature of how the sex act is framed holds particular significance.

Another limitation of popular media as a source of sex education is spotlighted in cultural theorist Kenneth Kidd’s (2004, 96) work on the information provided by teen films like *But I’m a Cheerleader* (1999) and *American Pie* (1999): ‘we cannot always

know how they are received.’ Media theorist Alan McKee (2003, 1) addresses this issue in his work on methodology, identifying that in any kind of textual analysis ‘we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text.’ While approaches such as audience reception theory interpret the factors impacting upon interpretation (Jensen 1987; Hall 1993), for this paper educated guesses are made about the messages received based upon the frames apparent with the acknowledgement that there is no guarantee of exactly how an audience will actually process such information: depictions might be dismissed as pure fantasy, they may cultivate status quo ideas about sexuality, alternatively they may encourage – or even repel – copycat behaviour.

Representations of sex in the context of fiction are more difficult to analyse than a news report or sex education manual because there is a range of factors at play that are less relevant to news, for example, storyline, intended audience and genre conventions. The biggest difficulty is simply that the provision of sex education is not the goal of narrative film and television. While it is possible that a filmmaker has a social or political agenda (Rosewarne 2012), entertainment and profit are likely stronger drivers.

While information provision may not be the intention – in fact, it might be something filmmakers claim to actively not be doing – film and television nevertheless do have an educative role: they not only transmit information to audiences, but are an enormously influential source of it. Much research, for example, identifies the informal sex education role of popular media (Spanier 1976; Bourke 1994; Hall 1996; Balding 1997; Measor, Miller, and Tiffin 2000; Kidd 2004; Falk and Falk 2005; Freeman 2008). In social scientists Janet Hyde and John De Lamater’s (2010, 7) work on sexuality, they go so far as to contend that ‘the average American’s views about sexuality are more likely to be influenced by the mass media than by scientific findings.’ Kidd (2004, 95) makes a similar claim:

[F]ilms made for teens provide distinct and often disturbing lessons in sex and romance – and that teens probably take those lessons to heart... Certainly such films are experienced by more teenagers – and much more often – than are instructional films or other classroom materials.

Kidd’s point on young people being more likely to engage with film than other sex education material underpins part of the reason why media depictions of sexuality – specifically non-vanilla sexuality – are worth examining: the intention may not be to inform but this is nevertheless a consequence. A number of education theorists identify the role of the proverbial ‘spoonful of sugar’ in education, or the idea that when content is presented as fun and enjoyable, young students (Okon 2013) as well as mature ones (Hoult 2006) are more likely to learn. As entertainment products, film and television serve in this enjoyable educative role. Equally, in spite of the accuracy concerns identified earlier, the merit of popular media in pedagogy has been noted (Sealey 2008). Not only is there a point to be made that media portrayals of sex are erotic education via a pleasurable medium, but also that there is a relevant numbers game at play: many more people will watch – and, likely, pay more attention to – a popular film or television series than they ever would to a purpose-built education production.

Not only are film and television ‘fun’ sources of education, but in fact, they may actually fill gaps that exist in more formal sex education. Marston and Lewis (2014) spotlight such a role for media: ‘anal sex between men and women – although commonly depicted in sexually explicit media – is usually absent from mainstream sexuality education and seems unmentionable in many social contexts.’ In the absence of formal anal sex information, popular media both steps in, and potentially even has amplified influence given the paucity of competing education sources. While the education provided

about anal sex is generally restricted to cursory information linked to pleasure, pain and power, the fact that it is mentioned at all is likely more of an education on the topic than the audience would receive elsewhere.

As noted earlier, while there is no guarantee about how an audience will receive a media message, there nevertheless are some relevant studies that indicate at least some level of impact. In my work on menstruation (2012), I contended that popular media is repeatedly identified as a central source of menstrual information for both men and women. Equally, in my work on menstruation, as well as in my subsequent work on masturbation (2014), I identify a strong interplay between depictions of taboo topics – notably with their recurring themes of catastrophe, humiliation and privacy – and men and women’s thoughts about these topics in real life. While I acknowledge that popular culture is rarely an audience’s sole source of information about such subjects – personal experiences and interactions are likely also substantial contributors – I nevertheless contend that media is an important educator, particularly on the topic of sexual transgression:

Something doesn’t become a taboo out of thin air and taboos are not maintained without repetition. Those around us of course contribute, but media portrayals are a key source in influencing how we think and feel about self-stimulation and thus have an important role in framing our perceptions and providing ongoing reinforcement of it as erotic and guilt-worthy and best done in seclusion. (Rosewarne 2014, 297)

The presentation of diverse sexual portrayals, and their framing inside screen narratives, are the key areas where I contend that media effects – particularly in the context of anal sex – are most easily witnessed.

### **Framing anal heterosex on screen**

Attributable to its continued status as taboo, anal heterosex is not yet a screen or sex-life staple. While not common, depictions of the act are nevertheless identifiable. While there is not the space to provide a comprehensive survey of anal heterosex scenes across film and television – and, as noted, there is not a large sample of such depictions anyhow – instead in this section I discuss a selection of scenes from popular media that illustrate three frames: pleasure, pain and power.

#### ***Pleasure***

Discussed earlier was the anal scene from *Crash*. Not only was Catherine talking dirty throughout the scene – conveying an impression of enthusiastic participation – but it also appears she orgasmed in the end. The capacity for women to actually – and notably *transgressively* – enjoy anal sex is detectable in a number of examples.

In the romantic-comedy *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2001), after sex the title character (Renée Zellweger) commented, ‘Daniel [Hugh Grant], what you just did is actually illegal in several countries.’ While – in line with the censorship restrictions placed on mainstream film and television – anal sex is not explicitly shown, the mention of the *illegality* and notably Daniel’s follow-up comment – ‘Shut up, or I’ll do it again... I’m going to give you something to bite on. Here,’ – make it seem reasonable to assume that anal sex has not only transpired, but that it was actually *mutually* pleasurable.

In the suburban-drama *Little Children* (2006), during Sarah’s (Kate Winslet) affair with Brad (Patrick Wilson) the two characters seemingly had anal sex; an act that, again while not made anatomically obvious, coincided neatly with Sarah’s book group reading Gustave Flaubert’s *Madam Bovary* (1856) and discussing the presence of anal sex.

In the comedy *Bad Santa* (2003), while only the legs of a man and woman were visible at the bottom of a change-room, a woman is heard loudly moaning and begging Willie (Billy Bob Thornton) to ‘keep going’. In reply, Willie is heard saying, ‘you won’t shit right for a week.’

In the drama *Lie With Me* (2005), Leila (Eric Blafour) and David (Lauren Lee Smith) have anal sex for what appears to be the first time. This scene in fact, exists on the cusp of pleasure and pain: Leila moans, seemingly in pain but, as is common in visual depictions of sexual pleasure, agony and ecstasy are often indistinguishable and by the end of the scene it is difficult to determine whether Leila pants out the word ‘harder’ or if, in fact, it is just heavy breathing.

While presenting anal sex as something pleasurable is a positive frame, such scenes also have some very specific educative uses. Discussed throughout this chapter is the role of popular media in putting anal heterosex onto the audience’s agenda. More than simply *thinking* about such a sex act however, is its presentation as behaviour worth trying. Such a frame may therefore explain the link between the act being tabled, considered and also sometimes participated in. Marston and Lewis (2014), for example, noted that among the reasons given by research participants for their engagement in anal sex, the perception that ‘people must like it if they do it’ was a popular one. Film and television are likely contributors to this by providing depictions of people doing it and also framing scenes in a way that flaunts pleasure.

### **Pain**

Mentioned earlier was *9 Songs*. In one scene, Lisa (Margo Stilley) snorted cocaine in an attempt, seemingly, to sufficiently relax her for anal sex: this scene, however, was more indicative of Lisa’s expectation that sex would hurt rather than her reality. In other examples the pain is made more explicit.

In the ‘Bottoms Up’ episode of the drama series *Entourage* (2004–2011), Eric (Kevin Connolly) and his fiancé Sloan (Emmanuelle Chriqui) attempted anal sex for the first time. It was visibly painful for Sloan and they both quickly gave up. Something similar transpired in the pilot episode of *Girls* (2012): Hannah (Lena Dunham) and Adam (Adam Driver) attempted anal sex but Hannah declared, ‘please don’t do that. That feels awful, thanks,’ and they stopped.

In a sex scene from the comedy-drama *Storytelling* (2001), college student Vi (Selma Blair) was instructed by her creative writing professor, Mr Scott (Robert Wisdom), to ‘turn around’. She does this and it appears that they have anal sex against a wall causing Vi a great deal of pain; so much so in fact, that she could barely speak. While it appeared that Vi went through with the act consensually, afterwards, she in fact pondered whether it was rape.

Within a scene pain fulfils a narrative function – to showcase, for example, the dynamic between the characters – such pain also frames the sex act in a certain way: it suggests this is an act that men get pleasure from, that women find painful and that women submit to for men and for the sake of their relationships. In real life, pain in fact is the central explanation provided by women for their disinclination to participate in anal sex (Carter et al. 2010; Marston and Lewis 2014). While of course, other factors influence this – personal experience, the experience of associates, and so on – the screen framing of anal sex as something that hurts is likely a contributing factor to women’s real-life fear of, and aversion to it.

While I do not discuss demonisation as a specific frame in this paper, this can nevertheless be construed as an outcome of the pain frame. Referring back to the negative

associations of anal sex discussed earlier, one interpretation for the pain frame can be punishment for participation in an ‘unnatural’ sex act and, in turn, serve as a subtle deterrent.

While pain-frame presentations may fuel the perception that anal sex is agonising and an act that a woman would only engage with under duress, another way to think about this is the perception that such sex would only happen because of a man’s coercion, if not his force. In their research on anal heterosex, for example, sex researchers Jonathan Stadler, Sinead Delany, and Mdu Mntambo (2007) identified that while on some occasions women participate for pleasure, at many other times it is about coercion. Coercion is also discussed in Marston and Lewis’ (2014) research. That a woman would not go through with anal sex without a man’s insistence frames the act as potentially one of dominance and submission and raises a number of concerns regarding gender equality on screen.

### **Power**

A particularly common screen portrayal is anal sex framed not merely as painful, but as part of an act of aggression. Keeseey (2012, 52), for example, discussed the aforementioned anal scene in *Lie With Me* in the context of Leila and David’s complicated relationship:

By forcing himself on her anally, he [David] puts himself in place of the other man’s body and reclaims his own ‘rightful possession’ of her. He also punishes her [Leila] for thinking she has a right to her own desire . . .

While I did not actually construe the *Lie With Me* scene as necessarily ‘forceful’, the narrative nonetheless implies David’s desire to dominate the sexually liberated – and, in turn, sexually intimidating – Leila. Dominance, equally, is a theme in the *Storytelling* scene which emphasised not only the power disparity of the sex act – Vi looks tiny and fragile compared to Mr Scott; Vi endures pain while Mr Scott gets pleasure – but also the official status disparity between teacher and student.

While the idea of rape in *Lie With Me* and *Storytelling* is ambiguous, in a large number of films anal sexual violence is presented explicitly. Film theorist Joe Wlodarz (2001) discussed the extensive presence of same-sex anal rape in cinema – contending that only through force can this taboo be experienced in our homophobic culture. Similarly, most screen examples of anal heterosex are indeed ones of rape. Anal rape of women, for example, transpires in the French films *Romance* (1999), *Baise-moi (Rape Me)* (2000), *À ma soeur! (Fat Girl)* (2001), and *Irréversible (Irreversible)* (2002) as well as a variety of non-French films including *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995), *Teeth* (2007), *Män som hatar kvinnor (The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo)* (2009) and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011). In each scene, women experience varying degrees of agony; in both the Swedish and the American versions of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Lisbeth (Noomi Rapace/Rooney Mara) is actually shown having difficulty walking afterwards and is depicted showering off blood; something that also transpired in *Leaving Las Vegas* for Sera (Elisabeth Shue).

Discussed earlier were feminist criticisms of pornification of media, specifically the advancing of men’s pleasure at the cost of women’s discomfort or pain. An extension of this transpires through the power frame whereby audiences receive an education about anal heterosex as an aggressive act. While the idea of it being potentially painful has already been discussed, the power frame more specifically positions it as an act of *violation*. In feminist theorist Natalie Purcell’s (2012, 132) work on pornography, she notes that ‘Anal sex is a notable example of a sexual act that has no inherent valence, but is used by contemporary pornographers to signal debasement’, and that in porn ample

examples exist where ‘taking anal sex is the job of the humiliated and the inferior’. Similar readings can be applied to the scenes discussed in this section: anal sex is framed as a lesson in violation and subordination and something done *to* a woman.

## Conclusion

This paper has spotlighted that film and television have roles not merely in putting anal heterosex onto an audience’s radar, but in specifically providing education about the practice. The lack of a homogenous frame for presentations highlights that no single message is being delivered, but instead, that anal heterosex is commonly framed in a range of ways, in turn, offering numerous different lessons. In this paper, the frames of pleasure, pain and power were presented to highlight three ways in which anal heterosex is packaged in film and television and, thus, three different lessons that an audience receives about a traditionally taboo sex act that is seldom mentioned in standard sex education.

This paper has highlighted that media have a pivotal, albeit informal, role in presenting certain sexual practices as topics to think about, to consider, and to then hold a place – be it a positive or negative one – in the popular imaginary. The fact that anal heterosex is treated to such diverse frames reflects that the position of anal sex in society is still in flux and is inevitably open to further manipulation, specifically by popular media.

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