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Bodies, Sexualities and Women Leaders in Popular Culture: From Spectacle to Metapicture

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Abstract

Purpose: In this article we focus on visual representation of women leaders and how women leaders' bodies and sexualities are rendered visible in particular ways.

Methodology: Our arguments are based on a reading of the Danish television drama series, *Borgen.* We interpret the meaning of this text and consider what audiences might gain from watching it.

Findings: Our analysis of *Borgen* highlights the role of popular culture in resisting patriarchal values and enabling women to reclaim leadership.

Originality: The metaphor of the spectacle enables explanation of the representation of women leaders in popular culture as passive, fetishised objects of the masculine gaze. These pervasive representational practices place considerable pressure on women leaders to manage their bodies and sexualities in particular ways. However, popular culture also provides alternative representations of women leaders as embodied and agentic. The notion of the metapicture offers a means of destabilising confining notions of female leadership within popular culture and opening up alternatives.

Key words: leadership; bodies; embodiment; sexuality; vision

Introduction

A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. (John Berger 1972: 46)

'well-behaved women seldom make history' (Laurel Thatcher Ulrich 1976: 20)

As more women come to occupy senior organizational roles, there is continuing evidence that significant obstacles remain for capable women aspiring to top jobs (Eagly and Lau Chin, 2010). Scholarly work has sought to measure and analyse the obstacles facing women and to suggest how they might respond in contexts where effective leadership is seen as stereotypically masculine (Eagly, 2011; Ibarra *et al.*, 2013). Despite this important research, conventional analyses often fail to capture some of the most immediate, pressing and powerful aspects of women's lived experiences of leadership. This includes the visibility and gendered scrutiny that accompanies senior women through commentating on their bodies, clothes, sexuality and demeanour.

In this article we suggest that popular culture, including film and television, provides a rich source of data for exploring these gendered ways of seeing (Bell, 2008). Female protagonists are commonly portrayed in these texts as torn between passive femininity (the good mother, wife, girlfriend), and active masculinity (the ruthless, aggressive careerist); either unable to achieve a stable sexual identity, or becoming a 'career bitch' as in the *Devil Wears Prada* (2006). Narrative conventions apply whereby a strong female character, such as *Erin Brockovich* (2000), succeeds only by conforming to masculine values and standards (Constable, 2005). However, by exploring a recent, and we suggest, innovative popular cultural text, the Danish television series *Borgen*, we demonstrate the disruptive potential associated with alternative representations of women leaders in popular culture. We suggest that disruptive images of female leadership in popular culture have the potential to destabilise confining notions of female leadership and open up alternatives.

We begin by exploring changes and continuities in the representation of women's leadership in popular culture as a key site through which gendered notions of the leaderly body are formed. We demonstrate how women leaders are represented primarily as bodies in a wide range of popular cultural media, showing how these representations often undermine the

credibility of women in leadership positions. In the theoretical section that follows, we introduce the metaphor of the spectacle and the concept of the masculine gaze in order to explain what happens when the camera lens is turned on women leaders. We then present our analysis which is organised around three conceptual themes: disrupting the patriarchal order; erotic leadership and exploring an alternative 'feminine imaginary' (Irigaray, 1993). We argue that, taken together, these themes constitute an act of resistance in response to patriarchal values and practices and which can be understood as an exercise in reclaiming women's leadership.

Ways of seeing women leaders

A significant obstacle facing women leaders arises through them being seen primarily as bodies, rather than as leaders. In contrast to white male leaders' bodies, which enjoy the privilege of not being 'seen', 'women's identities, gender and bodies are routinely tied together and attributed meanings antithetical to leadership' (Sinclair, 2013: 242). Research confirms that women in senior societal and organizational positions are routinely scrutinised and measured against a masculine stereotype which are applied to their bodies, clothes, demeanour and sexuality in ways which conflict with images of good leadership (Eagly, 2011; Ilbarra Ely *et al.*, 2013). Even when senior women are judged as equally competent as male colleagues they are typically penalised for their success and considered 'less likeable' (Heilman *et al.*, 2004; Ely *et al.*, 2011; Ibarra *et al.*, 2013).

Such gendered representations are not a recent phenomenon: historians of women's leadership have shown how women have been constructed as ineligible or unsuitable for leadership due to a range of embodied stereotypes. Women have been cast as too weak and fragile, too foolish and hysterical, too passionate and subject to their desires and therefore immoral, too captive of their roles as child bearers, and so on, to be able to occupy leadership roles (Francis et.al., 2012; Damousi et.al., 2014; Wright, 2014). Women's efforts to empower communities and effect change have often been labelled as something other than leadership (Ulrich 1976; Sinclair 2012).

Contemporary media images of women in leadership continue to focus on their bodies in ways which portray them as disreputable, untrustworthy and tarnished, and consequently unfit for leadership (Hall and Donaghue, 2012; Sinclair, 2011, 2013). Popular commentaries,

such as provided by Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook in her book *Lean In* (2013), suggest it is the individual woman's responsibility to manage herself and her 'difference', often by actively camouflaging gender and sexuality (Sinclair, 1995, 1998; Trethewey, 1999). Examples include self-medication to manage menstruation, menopause and surgically-timing childbirth to ensure being present for an important product launch (Martin, 2000; Kenny and Bell, 2011).

The combined effects of these portrayals is that women feel they must 'create an androgynized presentation of ambition' (Hall and Donaghue, 2012) and undertake extra 'identity work' in the transition to leadership (Ely *et al.*, 2011; Ibarra *et al.*, 2013). These studies thus expose the embodied double bind that women leaders face (Hochschild, 1990): to be successful they must be concerned about how they look, (cultivating a not too ambitious or power-hungry demeanour), but they should not *look* like they are worried about how they look, because they then appear self-absorbed, rather than being suitably concerned about the common good. These symbolic norms highlight the impossibility for women in leadership positions to act without continual, critical surveillance, and self-surveillance, of their embodied selfhood.

Woman as spectacle

Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning. (Mulvey, 2009: 15)

Examples such as those discussed above, where women in leadership are critically scrutinized based on their visual appearance and embodied ways of being, are perhaps unsurprising when it is considered that for centuries, women have been the object of the masculine gaze. As Berger notes, the social presence of a woman is qualitatively different from that of a man, the latter being 'dependent on the promise of power which he embodies' (1972: 45). A man's presence is based on suggesting what 'he is capable of doing to you or for you'. It is thus oriented towards a 'power which he exercises on others', whereas a woman's presence 'expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her' (1972: 46). Presence for a woman is therefore manifest in 'her gestures, voice,

opinions, expressions, clothes, chosen surroundings, taste – indeed there is nothing she can do which does not contribute to her presence' (1972: 46). Consequently, a woman's identity is comprised of two elements - the *surveyor* and the *surveyed*, as she must continually survey all that she is and does, because how she appears to men determines how she is treated by them and this is crucial to her success. The surveyor is thus an interiorized aspect of the woman's being; she uses it to communicate to others how she would like her 'whole self' to be treated... 'this exemplary treatment of herself by herself constitutes her presence' (1972: 46). As Berger concludes, '*men act* and *women appear*' (1972: 47, emphasis in original). This shapes not only the relations between women and men but the relation of woman to herself as an 'object of vision: a sight', of sexuality, beauty and so on, through her awareness of being seen by a spectator. Hence the dominant metaphor is of the woman as spectacle, a visually striking picture or display.

While Berger explores static traditions of visual representation in art, feminists such as Mulvey (1975, 2009) focus on the moving image. Mulvey argues that mainstream Hollywood cinema is based on a language of symbolic representation that constitutes the woman as *narrative-freezing* spectacle in order to visualise and secure sexual difference. This style of representation codes the erotic into the language of the dominant partriarchal order (Mulvey, 2009). The male character is the main controlling figure with whom the audience identifies, whereas the woman is the passive, erotic object of male character's and the film spectator's gaze. Men are central to narrative flow, advancing the story and making things happen whereas women are 'acted upon rather than active, desired rather than desiring' (Bell, 2008: 140). Mulvey distinguishes between two forms of pleasure that audiences derive from their engagement with these representations. The first, scopophilia, is the pleasure of looking, 'taking other people as objects and subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze' (Mulvey, 2009: 17). Mulvey argues that these conventions arise from anxiety that is provoked in the male unconscious by the female image as castration threat. The response to this involves turning the represented figure into a fetish, building up the physical beauty of the object and transforming it into something satisfying, in the form of a glamourous, sexualised female movie star. Fetishized images of female body parts such as legs, breasts or lips are 'used to distract us from something that has the potential to threaten male power... by drawing attention to her essential difference' (Bell, 2008: 141). However, the male unconscious also responds by constituting the woman as the bearer of guilt, 'asserting control and subjugating the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness'

(Mulvey, 2009: 22) in an act of sadistic voyeurism. Again, the metaphor that is drawn upon is of the woman as spectacle.

Through her failure to conform to representational norms that constitute her as the passive object of the gaze, and her desire to be seen as the active subject, the woman leader produces a particular form of anxiety in the collective masculine unconscious. This gives rise to sadistic voyeurism, directed towards achieving control and subjugation over the female leader. The metaphor of the spectacle is pervasive in the representation of women leaders in popular culture. For example, in American television series *Suits* (2011, 2012, 2013), about New York law firm, Pearson Hardman, the Managing Partner of the firm is a woman, and the portrayal of her leadership is fetishized. Statuesque and commanding, she wears tight skirts and stilettos. The camera lingers on her body and the series gives her lines that are full of innuendo, for example when she asserts that she likes 'playing with tigers' (i.e. the men in the firm). Despite her steely achievement, she is shown to be a tragic figure, lonely and married to the job. She is thus sexualised by the gaze while her own sexuality is rendered impotent. This reinforces the message that for women to lead they must be single-minded and sexually attractive, but without sexual agency.

Looking at leadership differently

However, popular culture does not simply reinforce and intensify historically-dominant visual metaphors of women-as-bodies which are gazed upon rather than agentic (Coleman 2008). While it remains important to critique the new ways in which women are objectified and subordinated through media representation, including social media (Penny, 2014), cultural texts such as film and television offer opportunities to repudiate norms and re-present phenomena such as women's leadership.[i] Popular media offers the potential to represent convincing lived experience, to be meaning-making (Czarnaiwska, 1999, 2006), and politically mobilising, providing spectators with role models which they may choose to emulate (Bell, 2008; D'Enbeau and Buzzanell, 2014).

As we have already suggested, conventional research methods for studying inequality often do not capture the embodied experience of gendered power in organisations (Martin, 1992; Czarniawska, 2011). As shown in Patricia Yancey Martin's classic study, organisational gendering practices are often fleeting and 'under the radar'; participants of both genders

simply 'hop into the gender river and swim' (2003: 346). Close scrutiny of gendered organisational and leadership practices can be enabled by 'widening the repertoire of representation modes…' and exploring their aesthetic force (Czarniawska, 2011: 106). Media such as film and television allow the audience to both literally and metaphorically 'freeze-frame' vivid moments, giving space and opportunity to explore their meaning and impact. As Pullen and Rhodes suggest, popular culture not only reveals gendered power regimes in organizations but also 'contains within it the resources for the critique and even subversion of those norms' (2011: 52). For example, researchers investigating the effects of social media images on young women, show that women are not passive recipients of those images (Coleman, 2008; Kelan, 2012). Rather, the process is more likely to be one whereby leaders *become* and adapt their physical selves through interaction and experimentation with, reflection and repudiation of the images and models to which they are exposed. Similarly, and as argued by Phillips and Knowles in their study of fictional entrepreneurial women, novels provide forms of 'cultural fantasy', sites in which conventional, gendered 'truths' about entrepreneurs can be upended (2012: 422). The reader thereby becomes an active interpreter in the processes whereby some characters espouse dominant narratives while others escape straightforward signification within dominant gender discourses. We suggest that working with such media can invite both critique of gender norms and a means of disrupting those norms and doing leadership differently.

Our analysis draws on ideas from visual theory to explain how the dominant metaphor of the spectacle can be subverted. The television series *Borgen* can be understood as a 'picture', in the form of 'a concrete constructed object or ensemble... and the virtual, phenomenal appearance that it provides for a beholder' (Mitchell, 1994: 4). However, what makes this particular picture distinctive and enables traditional representations of women leaders to be recast is that it constitutes a 'metapicture' or a self referential picture. A metapicture draws on and refers to other pictures to show what a picture is. This involves first as well as second-order representation, or pictures within pictures. Such pictures are self-reflexive, exposing the multiple gazes of subjects, spectator and painter. Metapictures thus deploy a 'self-knowledge of representation to activate the beholder's self-knowledge by questioning the identity of the spectator's position' (Mitchell, 1994: 61). We suggest that through the construction of a metapicture, *Borgen* alters the direction of the gaze and reconfigures it in way which has the potential to challenge rather than perpetuate traditional gendered representations of women leaders in a way which enables them to reclaim leadership.

Our reading of Borgen also draws on recent developments in feminist film theory and the work of Irigaray (1993, 2002a, 2002b) to suggest that a different way of envisaging women is emerging in some popular cultural texts, one which escapes the parameters of patriarchal discourse through focusing on sexual difference, rather than traditional male/female binarism, and indicating a 'possible way for women to think about themselves other than phallocratically' (Bolton, 2011: 2-3). 'For Irigaray, the female sex is not a "lack" or an "Other" that immanently and negatively defines the subject in its masculinity. On the contrary, the female sex eludes the very requirements of representation, for she is neither "Other" nor the "lack"' (Butler, 1990: 16). Based on analysis of recent films where female characters are central to the narrative, Bolton (2011) suggests that in focusing on the process of transition or transformation, these texts invite more nuanced consideration of female subjectivity. They invite the spectator into dialogue with the female characters and provide more open, optimistic endings that enable the future explorations of the characters to be the abiding focus of the film (Bolton, 2011: 3).

Bolton's observations have implications for representations of women in positions of leadership. While current discourses of leadership valourize the masculine subject and define leadership according to codes that women 'cannot master' (Irigaray, 1993: 118), Irigaray suggests it is possible to alter the identity formation of the subject through the construction of a *feminine imaginary*, 'a self-defined woman who would not be satisfied with sameness, but whose otherness and difference would be given social and symbolic representation' (Whitford, 1991: 24-5). Irigaray's work provides the basis for developing a less phallocentric conception of the feminine subject by ceasing to define femininity as lack and thereby opening new spaces for symbolization and representation (Vacchani, 2012). In the next section, we explore how *Borgen* introduces the possibility of a feminine imaginary by disrupting the patriarchal order and highlighting the erotic nature of leadership.

Looking into leadership in *Borgen*

Borgen (2010, 2011 and 2013) is a three-series political drama that tells the story of Birgitte Nyborg, the leader of the Moderate Party, who unexpectedly becomes the first female Prime minister of Denmark. Aimed at Scandinavian audiences, the popularity of the series with international audiences was unanticipated by its creators. Series screenwriter, Adam Price,

set out to create a 'strong but feminine central character' in a situation of power in order to generate a discussion among viewers about the personal and political aspects of the narrative, and the moral actions of characters[ii]. After filming the second series, Denmark elected female Prime minister, Helle Thorning-Schmidt, in a case of life imitating art[iii].

Borgen was chosen as the focus for this current analysis because, with our particular interests and specialisms – Author 1 in film and popular culture and Author 2 in women's leadership – we felt that it provided innovative representations of women in leadership. Each of us conducted our initial analysis separately (on opposite sides of the globe and over different time periods) in the first phase. We watched and took extensive notes on each of the 30 1-hour episodes that comprise Series 1-3, with many episodes viewed multiple times. We separately constructed episode-by-episode tables of key events with detailed notes on scenes we regarded as pivotal in their dialogue or visual representations of the key women characters. At this point we began sharing our interpretations and collaboratively selected critical examples and incidents in the text where we felt leadership was being enacted and represented in non-traditional ways. We then wrote detailed analytical descriptions of these segments of the text and transcribed the dialogue that occurred between characters verbatim. This formed the basis for identifying recurrent patterns in the data through which we developed our three conceptual themes: disrupting the patriarchal order; erotic leadership and exploring an alternative 'feminine imaginary' (Irigaray, 1993). In the following discussion we provide examples of textual segments in these three categories.

The main narrative of *Borgen* revolves around the central character's transformation as she encounters the demands of a political career. At the beginning of the first series the mood is triumphant as Birgitte assumes her position as Denmark's prime minister. But by the end of Series 1 and throughout Series 3, Birgitte's private life has gone off the rails. She begins to speak to her children and her soon to be ex-husband as though they are subordinates. She works around the clock (including in bed) and makes trade-offs which leave the family a low priority. Birgitte is judged by the media and the public – for putting her family second, and then later, for putting them first. Her career trajectory is interrupted: politics forces her to make changes in her personal life, and life forces her to make changes in her politics, sometimes too late. The richness of the text as a resource for exploring women and leadership is enhanced by other strong female characters in the narrative. These include: Katrine, the successful television journalist who by the third series, becomes 'spin doctor' for Birgitte's new political party while parenting a young child; seasoned journalist Hanne; news

producer Pia; and other female politicians with whom Birgitte collaborates and competes. These women are shown as they confront their flaws and demons, adapt and learn. But they are shown to do so in embodied ways, which do not offer over-simplified, normative resolutions. The narrative thus powerfully depicts the demands and tensions associated with leadership, including how this impacts at a physical and emotional level (Ladkin and Taylor, 2014). The viewer is encouraged to vividly experience the material and mundane consequences, the trade-offs and contradictions that are part of navigating leadership.

Disrupting the patriarchal order

From the first episode of the first series, the interconnections between embodied selfhood and enacted leadership that shape the overall narrative are established, as the following description highlights:

> It is the run up to the Danish general election. Birgitte is at home with her family preparing for a final pre-election televised leader debate. She puts on a red frilled front blouse and black skirt suit. Her daughter says: 'Give it up mom, Dad talk to her. She's too fat for that skirt'. Birgitte says to her husband, Phillip, 'If I push it here, it doesn't show does it?' squeezing her bulging waistline and trying to close the zip. 'Do I look ok?' she asks. 'The honest or loving response?', Phillip asks. Birgitte demands - 'the truth'. Philip: 'Your arse is too big for that skirt. You'd need to lose five kilos at best.' He follows up with the loving response, telling her how proud he and the children are of her. Birgitte concludes she will have to wear a purple dress as this is the only item of clothing that fits her; Phillip observes that she always puts on weight in opposition. Later, Birgitte gives a brilliant closing speech in the televised debate, going off her prepared speech, and joking that she will be in trouble with her spin doctor for wearing the wrong clothes, 'the trouble is I've got too fat for them', she explains. She goes on to turn this into a political point: 'I believe we should own up to our mistakes... I became a politician because I once held strong views on how this world should be – I still do.'

Rather than being undermined by her out-of-control body, which must be disciplined and subjugated to masculine bodily norms (Trethewey, 1999; Kenny and Bell, 2011), in her televised speech Birgitte makes her excessive body the focus of attention. Referring initially to herself as having become 'too fat' and wearing the 'wrong clothes', she then disrupts these conventional self criticisms by arguing for a focus on the 'important' issues. Deliberately drawing attention to her own body and its otherness, she acknowledges the effect that

wearing the 'wrong clothes' is likely to have on her political career. She then uses this to highlight the triviality of such concerns, as articulated by her spin doctor, contrasting them with political ideals of honesty and idealism that form the focus for her leadership.

Despite the disruptive nature of these early acts, as Birgitte transitions into a political leader, her body becomes more disciplined; her long, wavy hair is pulled back into a tightly coiffed bun, her suits and blouses are buttoned up, she gets off her bike and rides in the back of a chauffeur driven car (and in a later episode the chauffeur becomes a confidante and briefly, lover). As she does so, her political actions become more pragmatic and less idealistic; for example she alienates a trusted friend and adviser, driving him out of her sphere of influence. But she also succeeds in important aspects of reform. Thus in our first category of embodied leadership actions are those instances where women leaders act against patriarchal norms. Though these may be conveyed in ways that make such actions look temporary and perhaps inconclusive, our view is that putting a woman leader in charge of her own body, who frames how it may be seen, is potentially a radical act (Meyerson and Scully, 1995).

Erotic leadership

The second category of representations of embodied leadership draws on the work of scholars who argue for the importance of inserting (rather than suppressing) the body, pleasure and physicality into the influencing and change work of leadership (D'Enbeau and Buzzannell, 2013; Ladkin, 2008; Ropo and Sauer, 2008). While the erotic in organizational life has come to be defined as sexual, its fuller meaning emphasises the importance of pleasure and love as human feelings (Bell and Sinclair, 2014; Sinclair, 2014). D'Enbeau and Buzzanell's (2013) exploration of 'erotic heroines' in popular culture such as the television series *Mad Men*, focuses on female characters who are not defined by binaries such as erotic/chaste or feminine/masculine. These female characters also provide opportunities for audience exploration of aspects of leadership that are typically obscured. Erotic leadership in *Borgen* involves women putting a value on their sexual lives, identities and opportunities for erotic pleasure as the following scene from Series 1, episode 4 shows:

> Birgitte has been Prime Minister for a hundred days. The demands of the job are causing her to spend less time at home, dropping by at home around dinnertime only briefly to see the children before going back to work again in the evening. When she is at home, she is

> continually taking and making phone calls or working on her laptop, even when in bed, prompting Philip to ask her, if she must work, to at least 'go and do it in the other room'. One evening, she arrives home late in the evening, again. Philip has been waiting up. They are in the bedroom, both apparently interested in sex, despite the hour and their son being in an adjacent room, not yet asleep. Philip starts to pull off her tights. It is a crumpled, urgent yet mundane scene with little flesh or titillation. The following morning, Birgitte is in the kitchen with Phillip, who is unloading the dishwasher. She is in her work clothes, he is wearing a vest. Birgitte says, 'it's been three weeks since we last had sex because I've been so busy. What if we had a few regular days, Tuesdays and Saturdays?' Phillip: 'I'm having scheduled sex sessions with the prime minister?' Later, Birgitte tells Philip, 'your wife loves you'. Philip replies 'I love her too. But I'm not sure about that Prime Minister lady.'

The portrayal of Birgitte and Phillip convey the complexity of the changes they are experiencing: her trying to keep their sex life alive through rational scheduling; his goodwill being eroded as they both come to realise what the leadership role means for their relationship. The sex scene is rushed and awkward, rather than erotic, afterwards it is tender yet fertile in the suggestion that everything they have taken for granted about their private lives is changing. The scene invites our identification with the dilemma: do we side with Birgitte, in her regrettable yet pragmatic response to circumstance, or do we align ourselves with Philip in his resignation? As series screenwriter, Adam Price, commented, Phillip's initial tolerance and understanding, and his later assertion of sexuality and relationship needs, was intended to tease the audience:

> Many viewers of the show were on Phillip's side when he finally turned and re-established his... well, let's call it his masculinity. In other words, they were saying: 'Why didn't Birgitte see this coming?' But Sidse [Babett Knudsen who plays Birgitte]... actually never felt that way. She felt he was weak to give in at the stage he did, despite the couple's problems, and sad that he bailed out of the marriage too early and should have hung in there longer. Sidse said this with such forcefulness that I thought: 'I'm going to give her character that line of dialogue! Which I did.'[iv]

Series 3 opens with a glossy and successful Birgitte, living the life of an international corporate board director and leadership speaker, and being wooed by her English boyfriend Jeremy. She is portrayed as comfortable in her sexuality and freedom, her hair now much more likely to be out and curled, rather than tied back. Despite the apparent pleasures of this

lifestyle, Birgitte is drawn back in to Danish politics, establishing a new centre party, the New Democrats. Eschewing the sponsorship of a prominent businessman, the party takes up its new office in an old dressmaking factory. Birgitte and her family exchange their luxury apartment for a cramped one, she gets back on her bike to go to work, but her pleasure in re-involving herself in important causes is palpable.

Audiences are encouraged to see and explore how sex, sexual relationships, attraction and the pleasures of physical connection on the one hand, and sexual abuse and exploitation on the other, are played out for people working in intense, and often lonely, leadership jobs. This theme also draws attention to the materiality of leadership, both in public and private spaces, including how physicality works and doesn't work in leadership and how the body interacts with the cerebral, and forces change, such as when Birgitte receives treatment for precancerous cells in her breasts. Initially she tells no-one and fits treatments around her demanding work schedule, but eventually her children's intuitions force her to acknowledge to them, others and herself, the significance of what she is facing.

What is distinctive in *Borgen*'s treatment of these issues is that the portrayal is not voyeuristic; rather it is on a human scale - intimate, comprehensible, and not easily resolved, as illustrated by the following scene from Episode 25, Series 3.

> The scene opens with a raid on a Copenhagen brothel where women have been held as sex slaves. A coalition of women politicians reacts by arguing to criminalise prostitution. However, Birgitte and Katrine, who is now working as Birgitte's media officer, find research showing criminalisation will not tackle the trafficking problem and possibly make conditions more dangerous for prostitutes. They try to counter the increasingly moralistic, reactionary tone and consult with a spokeswoman for prostitutes, who argues against criminalization. Agreeing to participate in a press panel discussion to debate the issue, it is a 'set up' with vociferous arguments against prostitution from the expert academics and ex-prostitutes on the panel. The argument put by the New Democrat supported prostitute – that it is her choice to work as she does – is undermined by the counter argument that she doesn't understand the real costs. She is savaged and regrets getting involved. Birgitte eventually decides to not back the criminalization bill, arguing that it doesn't fix the trafficking problem or respect the rights of prostitutes to make choices. She is positioned as having dramatically let women down.

This episode provides an opportunity to explore the wide range of views women themselves have about prostitution, and at a more personal level, sex. In a later scene from this episode Katrine visits the prostitute who has agreed to put the view against criminalisation:

> Katrine asks: 'I just don't see how you can do it. She replies 'I give people pleasure'. Katrine: 'But you sell your body!' 'No, I sell a service'. 'To anyone who wants it?' asks Katrine. 'No, to who wants it most,' she replies, 'everyone deserves tenderness and intimacy'. Katrine: 'Don't you feel used?' to which she responds, 'why? I chose it myself. I'm good at my job. My customers are happy. So if you really want to know, I feel strong, desired.' Katrine asks if there are some days she doesn't feel like it and she replies 'Some days are less fun than others, just like in your work'. Katrine: 'Yes, there are'. After her conversation with the prostitute Katrine also has a conversation with her ex-boyfriend and father of her child, Kasper, who she still has strong feelings for. He says he loves her as the mother of his son, but he doesn't see her as sexually attractive anymore. The implication is because of his own past he can't put sex and love together. Later, Alex, a young television executive who she has had a one-night stand with, calls by her flat. She invites him up and when he comes in the door she is standing in her black bra waiting for him – sex for its own sake.

The women in the series, including both main characters and minor ones, are shown as having very different attitudes to sex, and it playing very differently in their self-identity. For example, Nette, one of the parliamentarians who joins Birgitte's New Democrats, describes having no qualms about having sex with the leader of the Moderates at a former Party Conference. *Borgen* thus offers many ways of envisaging how women experience their sexual and erotic selves in and around positions of leadership, and the choices others make about sex, power and sexual exploitation.

Creating an alternative, feminine imaginary

Borgen also contains portrayals that show women acting and conceiving of their actions not according to patriarchal rules, but in a world governed by alternative values. Irigaray (2002a; 2002b) articulates the case for explicit recognition of sexual difference between men and women, and of honouring the connection that women potentially have to their bodies, their senses and nature as an alternative basis for living and being, and, we suggest, leadership. She argues that in Western traditions, men are the 'guarantors of texts and laws', a regime in which we are told to conquer our bodies (2002b: 60). For her, the alternative feminine

imaginary involves 'the cultivation of sensible perceptions', the recognition and co-existence of 'the other' based not on patriarchal-generated 'equality' but on love, respect of the body, the natural world and the senses (2002b: 55). The possibility of an alternative set of values to explored towards the end of the second series of *Borgen*, when Birgitte's daughter, Laura is struggling with depression:

> Following Laura's collapse and her move into a rehabilitation facility, Birgitte addresses journalists at a press conference: 'I am astonished to see how brutal the press coverage of me and my private life has become. It is vital for my family to overcome these hardships – and for the government to get peace to work. And so I implore you, the media, to respect my daughter's need to be left in peace. However, a PM can't avoid the attention of the press. This story has become one of public interest. This has led me to make the difficult, but necessary decision to obtain leave as PM in order to focus on my family and daughter. Vice PM H.C. Thorsen will be taking over my official duties.' Katrine: 'How long will you be on leave for?' Birgitte: 'That depends on my daughter'. Hanne: 'Will you call an election?' Birgitte: 'No. This is only about me, the PM, not Parliament'. Later, in the clinic where Laura is being treated, Birgitte meets with the clinic director, 'look Birgitte, Laura has learnt a lot during her stay. She's a very bright and strong girl. Your divorce took its toll on her, naturally.' The conversation draws to a close and Birgitte moves toward the door, thanking the clinic director. The clinic director adds, 'Birgitte, I'm also a mother and I have a career. I've made millions of mistakes. They've made me all the wiser. You can't work 24 hours a day and be a good mother at the same time. But you can't stop working. What kind of role model would that make you?' Birgitte: 'I don't feel like a role model'. Sometimes I'm happier working and not having to deal with my family.' Director: 'Join the club. I think all workaholics feel like that.' Moving closer and looking her in the face, 'let me make this clear: Laura did not get ill because you became PM. Do you understand?' Birgitte gives a slight nod, 'thank you' she says, before leaving.

In the scenes described above, Birgitte is portrayed coming to some powerful and difficult realisations and making a different kind of 'deal' with herself, her family and political stakeholders. The binary values associated with patriarchal culture still exist: home versus work, politician versus mother; as do the dominant norms: 'keep private matters private', 'commit to the job 100% or resign'. But rather than take a position within this culture, or be defined by press scrutiny and condemnation, she finds an alternative way to be in the space of her daughter's illness, with power, agency and compassion, including for herself.

Metapictures of women in leadership

In this article we have argued that academic analyses and popular portrayals about women in leadership often fail to engage with the lived and embodied experiences of women leaders, including the scrutiny, pressures and contradictions they experience. The norms and conventions that position men, their bodies and sexualities as 'natural' leaders, render women more visible and problematic in leadership. Women's struggles to gain and hold leadership positions and be seen as credible leaders cannot be separated from issues of image and representation. In many representations of leadership in film and television, women occupy a spectacular role, serving only as mirrors or counter-displays in narratives that are defined and driven by male characters. Drawing on psychoanalytic feminist theory, we have argued that the visual representation of women leaders as fetishized subjects - passive objects of the male gaze – means they cannot be taken seriously as leaders. Such representations rely on the metaphor of the spectacle. This draws attention to the role of spectatorship, including practices of observation, surveillance and visual pleasure, in constituting leadership, and potentially making women unable or too flawed to occupy leadership positions.

We have also explored the construction of alternative ways of representing women in leadership. Focusing on the television series *Borgen*, where women leaders are central to the narrative, we have shown how this makes visible dominant rules regarding gender and leadership and offers examples of women doing leadership differently. *Borgen* illuminates some alternative ways of being in leadership for women: disrupting patriarchal norms, enacting erotic leadership and pursuing a feminine imaginary not defined by conventional male-female dichotomies. Rather than illustrating the difficulties of 'having it all', *Borgen* explicitly focuses on gendered organisational practices, including the gendered nature of power, and the multiple, sometimes contradictory ways characters respond to these pressures. It thus shows, vividly and viscerally, the multiple and diverse ways of being in leadership that women adopt. Through this, the text explores embodied aspects of leadership often neglected in scholarly accounts. Although the central female characters are portrayed as subject to gendered power discourses, and are required to perform certain gendered dispositions, they do so in ways that often contest, disrupt or transcend traditional gender distinctions, and notions of 'good' leadership. *Borgen* also represents the trade-offs faced by contemporary women, their partners, friends and families as they fulfil their leadership roles, including the

sacrifices they are encouraged to make in hyper-masculine, 'win or die' (Acker 2004) organizational environments where erotic pleasure and passion is achieved through achieving domination over others in the corporate hierarchy (Acker 2004). However, this text does not offer a single role model of a woman leader; instead it implies that it is sometimes possible to exercise agency and to resist gendered role expectations. It thereby enables exploration of alternatives to performing gender according to values of hegemonic masculinity, or acting 'like a man' (Panayiotou, 2010: 6; see also D'Enbeau and Buzzanell, 2014). As Panayiotou notes, such representations provide a 'critical testing ground' for exploring alternative gender forms, 'so that popular culture is not merely entertainment but a way of exploring and challenging the dominant ethos of contemporary patriarchy'(2010: 20-21).

The concept of the metapicture (Mitchell, 1994) enables understanding of what makes *Borgen* distinctive and potentially disruptive. We suggest that popular cultural texts like *Borgen* enable audiences to reflect on the nature of representation itself, by providing 'a second-order discourse that tells us – or at least shows us – something about pictures' (Michell, 1994: 38). A key setting in *Borgen* is the news broadcasting organization, TV1, where journalists are engaged in representing leaders; this second-order representation of the media representation of women leaders exposes the effects of the masculine gaze on women in leadership. *Borgen* is a particularly complex kind of metapicture in its labyrinthine depiction of the interplay between Birgitte (a frequent object of representation); the people who produce representations of this object ('spin doctors', journalists, some of whom are women who are in turn positioning and positioned within the representations); and the spectators who consume these representations (Birgitte herself, her partner and children, in addition to the general public). This complex cycle of exchanges and relationships enables a perceptual switching between the perspectives of the characters, revealing the power relations involved in representing women leaders and holding these practices up for exploration. The effects of this on the spectator are profound in that through deploying 'self-knowledge' of representation, the text 'activates the beholder's self-knowledge by questioning the identity of the spectator position' (Mitchell, 1994: 61). Hence by destabilizing the spectator position, *Borgen* offers a critique that is directed at the entire discourse of women and leadership. It not only enables questioning of the ways in which women leaders are represented as objects of the masculine gaze, but opens up spaces for representing them differently, in ways which destabilize the gaze and upstage and subvert the public spectacle. *Borgen* thus has the potential to influence and shape understandings of what it means to be a leader, through the

potential pleasures that audiences may gain from these alternative representations, and by potentially encouraging audiences to do leadership in non-normative, embodied and disruptive ways.

Conclusion and Implications

In this article we have argued that popular culture, including news and social media as well as fictionalised portrayals in film and television, provide a means of representing women leaders that often reinforces powerful gender norms. Numerous examples of 'real' woman leaders demonstrate the effects of these portrayals on their ability to be seen as successful leaders. For example, current US presidential candidate Hillary Clinton describes the effects of pervasive media scrutiny of her body, clothes and hair on her career and describes the strategies she has deliberately adopted in response to this (Clinton, 2014). Similarly, in her autobiography former Australian Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, has spoken of the role of news and social media in damaging her credibility as a leader by focusing on her gender and portraying her body as unsuitable for leadership (Gillard, 2014; **authors, forthcoming**). Women's leadership is constituted through these visual and embodied representations in ways which tend to constrain and curtail their engagement with leadership.

Our argument here is that all audiences, but in particular women and those interested in supporting women in leadership, need to find ways of reading these images that recognise the norms and power dynamics associated with these gendered representations. We have used the example of *Borgen* to show how a popular television series can reveal the metapicture of women's embodiment in leadership in a way which disrupts the conventional representation of treating women as spectacle that has dominated popular culture. By not just representing, but revealing some of the gendered codes of representation, this text equips viewers with multiple and dynamic ways of participating in women's experiences of leadership. There is considerable emerging evidence that, especially for younger generations of women, these kinds of texts and forms of representation inform their choices about whether to engage with leadership. However, there is also evidence that audiences are not passive recipients of texts. Providing ways of reading texts using conceptual tools that render these norms visible could be used to support aspiring women leaders by enabling them to interrogate representations and contribute towards the development of alternative images.

We have also suggested that innovative representations can be affirming and politically mobilising. Popular cultural texts such as *Borgen* can enable an alternative symbolic representation of women leading, not as lack or based on imitation of men but based on the creation of a new symbolic structure. Our view is that these texts thereby offer a means of critique, potentially disrupting and opening up new possibilities for imagining and realising women's leadership.

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