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## 'Re-envisaging Leadership through the Feminine Imaginary in Film and Television

**Emma Bell and Amanda Sinclair**

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Leadership is widely seen to be a central, if often inadequately taught, part of the management education curriculum. While it has traditionally been taught by imparting theories, normative models of what makes a good leader, and case studies of well-known corporate heroes (Doh 2003), there is some doubt as to whether leadership can be effectively taught using such conventional pedagogic methods (Parks 2005; Sinclair 2007a). Some suggest there is a need for alternative ways of conveying the complex, contradictory and embodied pressures associated with the lived experience of trying to 'do' leadership. This includes the use of experiential approaches which use the classroom as an opportunity 'in the here and now' for participants to embody and experience leadership among their peers, and do their own leadership 'identity work' (Sinclair 2007b; Carroll and Levy 2010; Nicholson and Carroll 2013).

Experiential approaches to learning about leadership include the use of film and television in management education, which can act as a vicarious substitute for personal experience (Bell 2008; Billsberry et.al 2012), and is therefore suggested to represent 'an untapped source of leadership wisdom' (Clemens and Wolff 1999). However, the vast majority of these recommended texts feature male leaders exercising influence in a variety of political and organisational settings and the leadership styles that are represented are heroic and hyper-masculinised. From *The Sopranos* to *The West Wing*, such texts invite audiences to emotionally invest in the morally complex and wayward behaviours of men with power (Martin 2013: 5). On the rare occasions where women are represented doing leadership in film and television, they are often stereotypically and negatively represented (McDowell 1998; Brewis 2004). It is therefore important to challenge the assumption that such texts provide a direct or 'reflectional' correspondence to the 'real' world. Such treatment ignores the ideological aspects of these texts in shaping individual subjectivities in ways which constitute and reinforce power relations. We therefore propose a critical approach to reading film and television texts which enables students to challenge stereotypes and embodied norms and explore alternative understandings of leadership. Such critical readings can provide a means of revealing important aspects of leadership that are often obscured by conventional academic perspectives and methods, including the role of bodies, materiality and physicality (Pullen and

Vachhani 2013). This also enables critique of the ways in which women leaders' bodies are represented in positions of leadership.

Our chapter begins by reviewing the use of film and television in management education. We then discuss the media representation of former Australian Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, as an example that illustrates of the gendered visibility and critical scrutiny that accompanies women in leadership. Next we turn to representations in film and television, drawing on feminist film theory to explore 'what's going on' when the camera is turned on women leaders, showing how the masculine 'gaze' transforms women's power and sexualities into more benign forms through 'fictionalised' representation. We then turn to the Danish TV series *Borgen*, which we suggest is important in enabling the representation of women leaders in dynamic and embodied ways. This involves female characters enacting leadership in ways which contest dominant forms and convey agency and possibility. Our analysis focuses on three categories of leadership: disrupting the patriarchal order; erotic leadership and acting on a 'feminine imaginary'. We conclude by suggesting that engagement with diverse, innovative texts such as *Borgen* opens up opportunities for management educators and students to re-envisage leadership.

### **Using Film and Television to Understand Leadership**

The use of film and television in management education has increased in recent years as a consequence of the influence of the narrative turn. This calls into question the objectivity of scientific conventions that have traditionally guided management studies, and advocates the development of new ways of understanding management as a creative, emotional and embodied practice (Czarniawska-Joerges and de Monthoux 1994; Gagliardi and Czarniawska 2006). Our experience as management educators suggests that managers and students may learn more about how to talk and act like a leader via popular culture, than from scholarly articles or business school cases (Czarniawska and Rhodes 2006). Film and television are useful in understanding the importance of bodies in leadership because they create a 'sense of active, exploratory touch which involves all the senses simultaneously' and 'demands participation and involvement in depth of the whole being' (McLuhan and Fiore 1967). This enables educators and students to literally and metaphorically 'freeze-frame' vivid moments of leadership-in-action, giving space and opportunity to explore their meaning and impact.

Popular culture thus provides resources to investigate and challenge representations of leadership, in a way that traditional cases and classroom materials do not. 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). They draw on Tyler and Cohen's (2008) deconstruction of *The Office*, where the self-proclaimed 'transformational leadership' of manager, David Brent, is parodied, inviting the audience to recognise and critique the effects of ubiquitous leadership jargon. Similar dynamics can be found in other aspects of popular culture such as novels; Phillips and Knowles in their study of fictional entrepreneurial women, suggest that novels provide a form of 'cultural fantasy', sites where conventional, gendered 'truths' about entrepreneurs can be upended (2012: 422). Research on the impact of media on young people confirms that audiences are not passive recipients of idealized images, but rather select and reject according to understandings of the norms of image presentation (Coleman 2008). The observer/reader is thus an active interpreter of the text who is able to explore the processes whereby some characters espouse dominant narratives, while others escape straightforward signification within dominant gender discourses. By 'widening the repertoire of representation modes...' and exploring their aesthetic force (Czarniawska 2011: 106), students are given space, not only to critique the gender norms that are represented on screen, but also to disrupt them by envisaging ways of doing leadership differently.

To illustrate what is entailed in this, we focus on the Danish TV series *Borgen* (2010, 2011 and 2013), a political drama set and made in Denmark. We suggest that the importance of TV series like *Borgen* arises from their potential as a means of representing lived experience and offering mobilising representations of leadership to audiences. Such narratives are meaning-making through offering convincing interpretations (Czarniawska 1999, 2006). They provide spectators with role models of embodied organizational behaviour which they may choose to emulate (Bell 2012; D'Enbeau and Buzzanell 2013). This is particularly useful in understanding gendered power in organisations because of the difficulty of using conventional research methods for studying gender (Martin 1992; Czarniawska 2011). Our reading of *Borgen* focuses on the representation of women leaders as influential, embodied protagonists. We suggest that the characters' responses to patriarchal values and practices constitute significant acts of resistance, subversion, reclaiming – and leadership. We use our reading to explore the potential of these portrayals in enabling students to envisage alternative conceptions of leadership and ushering in a fundamental shift towards more diverse and inclusive understandings of what good leadership looks like.

### **Traditional ways of seeing women leaders**

The rise of a minority of women to highly visible positions of leadership provides a rich resource in understanding societal norms that surround the embodiment of leadership subject positions – indeed women experience a disproportionate visibility because of their gender. Examples include

women who occupy positions of political leadership (Genovese and Steckenrider 2013), as well as those who those who occupy senior roles in business, public sector and other organisations. For the purposes of this chapter, we adopt a broad definition of leadership, encompassing societal as well as organisational roles, and including informal as well as formal leadership positions. Our discussion also deliberately blurs the boundaries between 'cinematic' and 'everyday' realities, drawing on examples that illustrate how women leaders are represented in the news media, as well as representations in film and television dramas which are largely fictive. This is because the cultural myths about leadership that sustain these cultural texts are closely interrelated, to the extent that the everyday is defined by the cinematic and vice versa (Denzin 1995).

Research highlights the importance of leaders embodying a leader-ly or leader-like, identity, which typically conforms to a masculine stereotype (Eagly 2011; Ely et al. 2011). In contrast to white, male leaders' bodies, which usually 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 has also documented how women in senior positions are routinely scrutinised and measured against sex stereotypes – which are applied to their bodies, clothes, demeanour and sexuality in ways which conflict with conventional images of 'good' leadership and cause them to be viewed as less leader-like and less successful. 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; Ibarra et al. 2013). A fundamental and deeply embedded tension thus exists between norms of acceptable female embodiment and notions of effective leadership. This tension is particularly evident in on screen images (Hall and Donaghue 2013; Sinclair 2011), where women's bodies are often represented in ways which render them disreputable as leaders.

The question of what women leaders should do in response to high levels of visibility, scrutiny and gendered criticism is far from resolved. Women are expected to actively camouflage their gender and sexuality to manage their 'difference' (Sinclair 1995, 1998; Trethewey 1999). This has given rise to a proliferation of analysis and advice about how women should act, or manage their image to steer a path through this gendered minefield, often implying that it is the individual woman's responsibility to manage her body and her image to minimise these effects (Hochschild 1990). Academic analyses have identified the double binds that women leaders face, for example, the need to mute personal ambition and only focus on the common good (Hall and Donaghue 2013), and the need to do the necessary extra 'identity work' involved in the transition to leadership (Ely et al. 2011; Ibarra et al. 2013). While some have argued that women's visibility and consequent scrutiny will eventually subside as more women come into leadership roles, and they cease to be remarkable and speculated upon, there is little evidence to support this critical mass argument. Sheryl Sandberg,

COO of Facebook, has recommended that women 'lean in' in order to gain access to organizational leadership opportunities (Sandberg 2013); yet she has more recently acknowledged that such efforts by women have not substantively impacted the numbers or pay equity of women in leadership. Thus such discourses of neoliberal individualism (Rottenburg 2014) provide women leaders with few resources to navigate structural obstacles such as scrutiny of their embodied leadership.

The treatment of former Australian Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, provides a powerful illustration of the role of news and social media in damaging the credibility of a female leader by focusing on her gender and portraying her body as unsuitable for leadership. Gillard was ultimately forced into a contest for leadership within her own Party, but many observers argue this was an inevitable outcome of the orchestrated gendered attack that involved mainstream and social media and included slogans like 'ditch the witch', repeated by the leader of the Opposition'. As Gillard explains in her recent autobiography (2014), throughout her leadership her body shape and clothing were considered newsworthy in ways which did not apply to male counterparts. Cameras were trained on her bottom; news reports focused on her choice of clothes; and a situation when she tripped over in India was reported frame-by-frame in a front page spread of a leading Australian newspaper. In the initial stages of her leadership she ignored negative coverage of her body image, assuming that eventually it would eventually subside, but then later realised that it had 'morphed into a judgement of who she was as a person' (Gillard 2014: 103). Towards the end of her prime ministerial career, she made an impassioned speech to Parliament on just this issue - the concerted campaign of misogynistic, sexist attacks from the opposition party and some of their associates, not just towards herself but toward Australian women in general. While her speech attracted sour commentary from the established Australian media, it went viral internationally, with now more than 2.5 million hits on YouTube. As Gillard now reflects:

For many people I meet around the world, it is really the only thing they know about me. For many in Australia, even with everything else in my prime ministership, it is the only thing they want to talk about. The speech has been raised with me by world leaders. By mothers who said they watched with their daughters and cried and then watched it again... By corporate leaders who have told me that it started a huge conversation about gender in their workplace. By union leaders who have told me the same thing about discussions on the shop floor. That speech brought me the reputation of being the one who was brave enough to name sexism and misogyny. (Gillard 2014: 111-2)

One reason the speech struck a chord with so many, (and indeed Gillard's Australian approval ratings went up for some months), was that it named an underbelly of leadership rarely discussed in

either academic literature or mainstream media. It exhorted audiences to notice the ways sexism continues in the media and other public platforms to suggest women's ineligibility for leadership.

Gillard's experience illustrates that women who exercise leadership are subject to gendered visibility and critical scrutiny in many media forms, including online and social media. Other recent examples include online abuse directed towards University of Cambridge academic Mary Beard, Caroline Criado-Perez, who led a campaign to put more women on UK banknotes, and UK MP Stella Creasy, all of whom have been berated not primarily for what they said or did, but for how they looked. Gendered visibility and critical surveillance, including self-surveillance, of the body is thus a pervasive aspect of the lived experience of women in positions of leadership.

### **Change and continuity in representing women leaders on screen**

Although women leaders are sometimes represented in film and television, they are often represented in negative, stereotypical ways. TV series such as *Suits* (2011-14) and *Mad Men* (2007-14) portray senior women as obsessed by work, sexually frustrated or manipulative, lonely and ruthless. For example, in *Suits*, the managing partner of New York law firm, Pearson Hardman, is a woman who appears statuesque and commanding, wearing tight skirts and stilettos. The camera lingers on her body and the series gives her lines that are full of innuendo, for example, she asserts she likes 'playing with tigers' (i.e. men in the firm). For all her steely achievement, she is shown to be a tragic figure, lonely and married to the job. She is thereby sexualised by the gaze while her own sexuality is rendered impotent by the job. This reinforces the idea that to become a woman leader one must be single-minded and sexually attractive, but without sexual agency. Such on screen images guide in-use understandings of how to behave and dress as a leader in ways that are gendered and highly normative (Kelan 2012).

Similar conventions apply in films where a woman is a leading character in the narrative. Typically shown as torn between passive femininity (the good mother, wife, girlfriend), and active masculinity (the ruthless, aggressive career bitch), women are portrayed as oscillating between the two and unable to achieve a stable sexual identity. Women leaders are also represented disciplining their bodies, through fitness, diet and dress, into forms that conform to masculine or gendered norms (Trethewey 1999; Kenny and Bell 2011), although this is often portrayed as a doomed project that ends in failure and a return to more traditional gender role identities (e.g. *Working Girl*, 1998). Even in films where the narrative revolves around a strong female character who exercises leadership, such as *Erin Brockovich* (2000), the story of a single-mother's legal fight to expose a corporate cover-up involving contaminated water in a local community, the heroine only succeeds by conforming to

masculine values and standards. Moreover, the female protagonist's oscillation between passive femininity and active masculinity often runs throughout the film, and is only ultimately resolved by her rejection of the latter in favour of the former (*The Devil Wears Prada*, 2006).

However, more recently women have been placed at the centre of the action in recent TV series such as *Madam Secretary* (2014) and films such as *The Hunger Games* (2012, 2013, 2014). These representations and others like them (e.g. *Game of Thrones*, 2011-14) often feature fantastical worlds, populated by leaders who are only partially identifiable as human. While we may be inspired by their bravery, there is limited opportunity to identify with or learn from their leadership. Moreover, despite representing an ostensibly enlightened world where women can be leaders, characters such as Katniss Everdeen in *the Hunger Games*, lead through highly conventional masculine performances, such as winning battles, while also being represented as beautiful, selfless, and caring for the weak.

Various initiatives have reviewed the treatment of women in the media, such as the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media,<sup>ii</sup> which analyses gender prevalence in on screen representations. A recent study shows that the percentage of female speaking characters in top grossing movies has not changed in over half a century, 'only 23% of the films had a girl or woman as a lead or co-lead driving the plot' (Smith et al. 2014: 2), with few female characters holding occupations of power and importance on screen. It further shows that female characters were twice as likely to be 'shown in sexually revealing clothing, partially or fully naked, thin, and five times as likely to be referenced as attractive' (ibid.). The documentary film *Miss Representation* (2011) traces the role of the media in shaping the body image of girls and women in ways which severely constrain their participation in political and social life. It is argued that objectification of women in the media encourages women to see themselves as object, such self-objectification making them less likely to engage in leadership practice. Featuring interviews with some of the most powerful women in US society, such as former US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, and analysing media portrayals of Hilary Clinton and Sarah Palin, the film exposes processes of 'symbolic annihilation', as these powerful women are systematically attacked by the media, either by being fetishized and 'pornified' in the case of Palin, or in the case of Clinton, labelled as an emotionless 'bitch'. The film portrays this as a backlash, as women have gained greater power in the concrete realm, attacks on them in the symbolic realm have intensified.

The relationship between on screen images and women's bodies is an enduring preoccupation of feminist theorists in the field of film studies. Feminist psychoanalytic theory suggests that on screen images operate through a notion of male desire, which position women as passive objects of the male subject's gaze. We belong to a visual culture within which 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 masculine power. In her classic article, feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey argued from a psychoanalytic perspective 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 (Mulvey 1975). This style of representation codes the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal 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, yet impotent, for example in the form of a sexualised female movie star. This is a form of sadistic voyeurism which constitutes the woman as the bearer of guilt, 'asserting control and subjugating the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness' (Mulvey 2009: 22). 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. Theorists such as Mulvey therefore call for the destruction of such oppressive portrayals and the construction of alternative aesthetics that are more favourable to women.

In the next section we draw on the example of *Borgen*, focusing on the representation of embodied women leaders as influential protagonists. We suggest the responses of the women leaders to patriarchal values and practices constitute significant acts of resistance, subversion, reclaiming – and leadership. We suggest that, in addition to providing an alternative way of *seeing* women in leadership, this text provides audiences with a means of interrogating and thereby disrupting the notion of leadership, especially its implicit normative masculinity.

### **Looking into leadership in *Borgen***

*Borgen* is a political drama that tells the story of Birgitte Nyborg, 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 screenwriter, Adam Price, who set out to create a 'strong but feminine central character'<sup>iii</sup> in a situation of power. The series was also intended to initiate discussion among viewers about the personal and political aspects of the narrative, and the moral actions of characters. The narrative revolves around the central character's transformation as she encounters the demands of a developing political career. At the beginning of the first series the mood is triumphant as Birgitte assumes the position of prime minister. But by the end of Series One and throughout Series Two, Birgitte's private life is in disarray, as she works around the clock (including in bed) and makes trade-offs which leave her family a low priority. She is judged by the media and the public – for putting her family second, and then later, for putting them first. The richness of the *Borgen* text as a resource for exploring women in leadership is enhanced by other strong female characters: Katrine, the TV journalist and presenter who by the third series, becomes Birgitte's political 'spin doctor' while single-parenting a young child, as well as journalist Hanne, TV producer Pia, and other female politicians with whom Birgitte collaborates and competes. These influential women confront their flaws and demons, adapt and learn, but they are shown doing this in embodied ways, ways which do not show simple resolutions or ways forward. The narrative thus powerfully depicts the demands and tensions associated with leadership, including how this impacts on leaders at a personal and relationship level. The viewer is encouraged to vividly experience the material and mundane consequences of leadership choices, revealing the complexity and the trade-offs that are part of navigating leadership, for women and, perhaps to a lesser extent, for men.

After filming the second series, Denmark elected female prime minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt, in a case perhaps of life imitating art<sup>iv</sup>. Further blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction occurred when recently appointed Scottish First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, commented of the series that it was 'one of the most credible fictional accounts of life in politics that I've seen on television, and it's from a woman's perspective too, which is rare'<sup>v</sup>. Our view is that this blurring and interweaving of on screen characters and experience with 'real' life, is important in helping to explain how the experiences of notionally fictional characters can be influential in challenging normative models of leadership.

In the following section we identify three categories of embodied response by the women protagonists in *Borgen*: disrupting the patriarchal order; erotic leadership and creating an alternative, feminine imaginary. We describe and analyse representations drawing on one or a series of scenes.

### ***Disrupting the patriarchal order***

In 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'. Phillip: 'Your arse is too big for that skirt. You'd need to lose five kilos at best.' He follows up with the loving response, joking that the dry cleaner must have shrunk the skirt and 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.'

The description above is from the first episode of the first series, and the interconnections between embodied selfhood and enacted leadership that shape the overall narrative are immediately established. Rather than being undermined by her out-of-control body, which, according to tradition must be disciplined and subjugated to masculine norms during the televised speech, Birgitte makes her too-plump-for-the-skirt body the focus of attention. In so doing, she disrupts the patriarchal order, deliberately drawing attention to her own body and its otherness, and acknowledging 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.

### ***Erotic leadership***

Scholars of leadership have argued the need to recognise - rather than deny or suppress - the body, pleasure and physicality into the influencing and change work of leadership (see also Ladkin 2008; Ropo and Sauer 2008). For example, Buzzanell and D'Enbeau (2013) explore erotic mentoring and 'erotic heroines' in *Mad Men* showing how women navigate eroticism in their leadership, rather than being defined by binaries such as erotic/chaste or feminine/masculine. The female characters are portrayed as 'doing' leadership while also allowing audiences to explore aspects of leadership which tend to be obscured.

Erotic leadership in *Borgen* involves women putting a value on their sexual lives, identities and opportunities for erotic pleasure. 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), and we suggest that leadership life involves, and should be portrayed as including, these elements. In *Borgen* an interest in sex, love and pleasure are depicted through, for example, political debates about prostitution and the possibility of women having sex without love; and when Birgitte, in a lonely, unguarded moment, gives into sexual desire and sleeps with a driver assigned to her. We are encouraged to see and explore how sex, 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 may force change, such as when Birgitte receives treatment for precancerous cells in her breasts. What is distinctive in *Borgen's* treatment of these issues is that the portrayal is not voyeuristic; rather it is both identifiable, and not easily resolved, as illustrated in scenes from the first series, described below:

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 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 sex scene. 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.'

Birgitte and Phillip's demeanour convey the complexity of these changes: her trying to make their sexual arrangements work through problem-solving and rational management, his goodwill being eroded as they come to realise what the leadership role means for their relationship. The sex scene is rushed and awkward, 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 regret and resignation? Through both major and minor characters, *Borgen* thus offers diverse ways of envisaging how the sexual and erotic, how pleasure and love, are experienced and negotiated in and around positions of leadership.

### ***Creating an alternative, feminine imaginary***

As we have argued, current discourses of leadership tend to valorize the masculine subject and define leadership according to embodied codes that women literally and figuratively ‘cannot master’ (Irigaray 1993: 118). The male leader is the subject against which the woman leader’s body is compared; by constructing her as different from men but without granting her any positive content, she is defined as the aberrant sex; her sex must therefore be controlled or suppressed. Women’s participation in leadership therefore comes at a high physical and psychological price. To change this, Irigaray suggests, involves altering 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 further argues that in Western traditions, men are the ‘guarantors of texts and laws’, a regime in which we are told to conquer our bodies (2002: 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 (2002: 55). Construction of a feminine imaginary requires recognition of ‘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).

Drawing on the work of Irigaray, recent film theorists have suggested a different way of envisaging women, one which escapes the parameters of patriarchal discourse through focusing on genuine sexual difference, rather than traditional male/female binarism, and indicating a ‘possible way for women to think about themselves other than phallogratically’ (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). Through constituting sexual difference as a duality, rather than a dualism, these representations provide a basis for altering the status of women in the symbolic realm. Based on analysis of recent films where female characters are central to the narrative, Bolton suggests that in focusing on the process of transition or transformation, these texts invite consideration of female subjectivity.

These films are doing something different with female subjectivity: they create space for the female characters to explore themselves and others, using language, the body, and consciousness, offering a vision of a possible alternative way of being for women in cinema. They invite the spectator into dialogue with the female characters and provide open, optimistic endings that enable the future explorations of the characters to be the abiding focus of the films. (Bolton 2011: 3)

Film and television that shows women acting and conceiving of their actions not according to patriarchal rules, but in a world governed by alternative values, is therefore a potentially important resource in enabling management students to explore what such alternatives might look like. The following example comes from the first series of *Borgen*, when Birgitte's teenage daughter is struggling with depression:

Following a period in which her teenage daughter, Laura, experiences mental health problems associated with her high-profile life as the daughter of the Prime Minister, 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, who 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, the clinic director then says, 'Let me make this clear: Laura did not get ill because you became PM. Do you understand?' Birgitte gives a slight nod, says 'thank you', and leaves.

Birgitte is portrayed in this scene 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 and other women).

## **Discussion and conclusion**

*'You can't be what you can't see'*

Marian Wright Edelman<sup>vi</sup>

We have argued that academic and some popular discourses about women in leadership fail to engage with the lived and embodied experiences of women, including the everyday pressures and contradictions that women specifically experience in positions of leadership. These discourses also fail to convey the ways in which leadership continues to be gendered - that is, the ways norms and conventions make men seem more 'natural' leaders, while making women visible and their embodiment as leaders flawed (Sinclair 2013). Despite promoting attention to diversity and gender in leadership, management education has not generally provided ways of teaching and helping students understand these issues. It has, rather, sometimes colluded in keeping leadership masculine by, for example, keeping gender a problem that is about women, and that women must fix by 'leaning in' (Sandberg 2013).

In order to re-embodiment leadership generally and address the distorted ways in which women leaders have been represented and evaluated, we have suggested a focus on film and television can provide opportunities for a different kind of encounter with being in leadership. As other researchers increasingly argue, men and women's experiences of leadership and influence may be more readily revealed, critiqued and subverted by engaging with representations in media such as film and television. Women's struggles to gain and hold leadership positions, and be seen as credible leaders, we suggest, cannot be separated from issues of image and representation.

In most traditional representations of management and leadership in film and television, women occupy a 'spectacular' role, serving only to interrupt a narrative that is defined and driven by male characters. In this chapter we have focused on a TV series where women are central to the narrative, showing how it makes visible dominant cultural rules regarding gender, and offering examples of women doing leadership differently. *Borgen* introduces the possibility of a feminine imaginary that disrupts the patriarchal order and highlights the erotic nature of leadership, in the full sense of that term. This involves explicit recognition of sexual differences between men and women, and honouring the connection women potentially have to their bodies, their senses and nature as an

alternative basis for living and being, and, we suggest, enacting leadership. Although the central female characters are portrayed as subject to gendered power discourses, and required to perform certain gendered dispositions, they do so in ways that often contest, disrupt or transcend traditional gender distinctions, and thereby challenge notions of what good leadership looks like. *Borgen* also starkly represents the trade-offs faced by leaders, their friends and families as they fulfil their roles, including the sacrifices they make in hyper-masculine, 'win or die' organizational environments where erotic pleasure and passion is achieved through achieving domination over others in the corporate hierarchy (Acker 2004).

The text also brings to the foreground gendered organisational practices and the gendered nature of power, alongside 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, it gives permission to explore embodied aspects of leadership often neglected in scholarly accounts. However, *Borgen* does not tell women or men what to do, nor does it 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'. As Panayiotou notes, such representations provide a 'critical testing ground' for exploring alternative gender forms, 'so that popular culture is not merely entertainment but away of exploring and challenging the dominant ethos of contemporary patriarchy'(2010: 20-21). While we have focused in this chapter on *Borgen*, there are other examples – sometimes made by women writers and directors - of TV series which offer non-stereotyped yet embodied and complex representations of women and men leading. These images have the potential to shape understandings of what it means to be a leader, perhaps more powerfully than academic research, through the potential pleasures that audiences may gain from these alternative representations, and by encouraging viewers to enact leadership in ways not defined by conventional patriarchal norms or gender binaries.



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<sup>i</sup> See for example Moira Rayner 'Gillard, Bligh and Leadership in a Crisis' *Eureka Street* January 7, 2011 see also more recent commentary in the November 2012 issue of *The Monthly* by Amanda Lohrey 'A matter of context: Gillard and the press gallery' and by Judith Brett 'They had it coming: Gillard and the misogynists'.

<sup>ii</sup> <http://seejane.org/>

<sup>iii</sup> Interview with Borgen Screenwriter Adam Price in *Nordic Noir Magazine*, Autumn/Winter 2013, p. 10

<sup>iv</sup> Crace, J. (2012) Sidse Babett Knudsen: 'We had no idea Borgen would have any appeal outside Denmark', *Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2012/feb/01/sidse-babett-knudsen-borgens-appeal>

<sup>v</sup> Brooks, L. 'Nicola Sturgeon: Salmond's deputy is on the brink of unprecedented power', *Guardian*, Sept. 5<sup>th</sup> 2014 <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/sep/05/nicola-sturgeon-salmond-deputy-brink-power>

<sup>vi</sup> Quoted in *MissRepresentation* (2011)