

## **Why Censor Female Ejaculation? Tensions in the Taxonomy of Female Pleasure**

Isobel Talks

Taking part in the GI422 'Sexuality, Gender and Globalisation' conference was an enriching experience. Not only did I get to develop my own abilities, both in academic writing and public speaking, but also I got the invaluable opportunity to learn from my peers. Just by being present in the conference room I became aware of such a wide range of fascinating topics, from the heteronormativity of postcolonial state politics in the Gambia to the intimacies of trans-parenting in the US. Conventional essay-based assessment does not foster this fruitful sharing of knowledge. Constructive and supportive feedback towards my final essay was also made possible by the inclusive conference environment, and I will continue to take these points forward in all future academic endeavours.

## **Why Censor Female Ejaculation? Tensions in the Taxonomy of Female Pleasure**

On 1 December 2014 the British Board of Film Classification (henceforth BBFC) passed a new regulation that officially prohibits female ejaculation, as well as a number of other sexual practices, from appearing in offline *and* online British films. The media erupted in debate over the implications of the ‘Audiovisual Media Services Regulations’ (AMSR), and I too felt a sense of utter incomprehension as to why female ejaculation, in particular, required censorship. This paper hopes to provide some tentative suggestions as to *why* the BBFC may have decided to censor this embodied sexual practice, and *how* they have been able to do so, by tracing the key discourses that surround and construct female ejaculation as something that should and can be censored (Foucault, [1978] 1990). I will also show, however, that there are clear tensions within the discursive frame surrounding female ejaculation, and that within these contestations lies the possibility of a positive shift from censorship to celebration, from the reification of gendered binaries to the deconstruction of them.

### The Knowability of Bodies vs. The Mystery of Female Sexuality

The BBFC (2014) justifies censoring female ejaculate on the basis that it is urine, not prostatic fluid, and therefore contravenes the ‘no urolagnia’ policy of the Obscene Publications Act 1959. Numerous works have been subjected to cuts due to the BBFC’s (2015) stance that “unless it’s very clear that what is being shown is indeed ‘female ejaculation’, as opposed to urolagnia, the Board’s position has to be that scenes of this nature featuring liquid that *might* be urine have to be cut” (my emphasis). Feminist pornographer Anna Span (Blue, 2009) and the group Feminists Against Censorship (FAC) (Achille and Wilkinson, 2001) are amongst those who have contested this ruling, with Anna arguing that in fact “the speed, volume, viscosity, smell and sight [is] all very different from urine”, but to little avail.

The BBFC's argument that female ejaculation is censorable urine would not be conceivable, however, without the existence of the dominant "post-Enlightenment belief in a knowable world", the notion that the human body, and all other entities, can be definitely 'known' and then acted upon (Dean, 2011:78). This masculinist discourse of rational, scientific knowability is traceable not only within the dozens of contemporary scientific studies investigating the exact chemical composition of female ejaculate (Cabello, 1997), but also far earlier in the 4<sup>th</sup> century Taoist texts and 3000 BC writings of Aristotle on this practice (Korda et al., 2010). Whilst Hippocrates claimed female ejaculate to be reproductive, De Graaf ([1672] 1972) dismissed it as playing a 'merely' pleasurable role following his cadaver dissections in the 1700s, and this dismissal turned to demonisation in the Victorian era when Krafft-Ebing ([1886] 1985) declared it to be a sickness of weak "sexually neurasthenic females". This long legacy of scientific claims, existent due to the patriarchal discourse of knowability, suggests that it *is* possible to know female ejaculation and then act on that knowledge, and therefore may suggest why the BBFC feels it can also claim to 'know' that the female ejaculation in films is urine, and then act on that by censoring it from them.

Despite being subjected to the male medicalised gaze for millennia, however, female ejaculation remains a definitive scientific 'unknown.' In the most recent 'urine or not urine' debate, for example, the vast majority of papers remain inconclusive rather than taking a clear side. After 2000 years of study some still claim that it doesn't exist (Drill et al., 1999) and the exact bodily genesis of female ejaculate remains hotly debated (Rubio-Casillas and Jannini, 2011). The equally long-running Western discourse of 'mysterious' female sexuality, which is locatable within Shakespeare's sonnets to his confusingly irresistible 'dark love' (Burrow, 2002), contemporary best-sellers such as *Secrets of the Sexually Satisfied Woman* (Berman and Berman, 2005) and in Freud's (1933) writings on the "riddle" of female sexuality, has no doubt helped shape female ejaculation, and female sexual pleasure more generally, into seemingly elusive entities (Loe, 2004). This widely prevailing discourse of

untenable female sexuality may suggest why the BBFC (2001b) also refuses to take a clear position on the matter. Instead, they publically maintain that “the Board does not in fact take *any* view on whether or not female ejaculation exists” (my emphasis) and “remains open minded about the issue”, despite continuing to censor it.

This tension between the discourses of bodily knowability and female sexual mystery helps us to understand why and how the BBFC has chosen to censor female ejaculation in the way that it has. Within their regulatory practices these opposing discourses can simultaneously operate to their advantage, as they can continue to censor female ejaculation with minimum resistance by appearing to maintain this theoretical position of ‘mysterious ambivalence’ whilst in practice continuing to ‘know’ and censor this female bodily practice from our screens.

### Expertise vs. Experience

The BBFC does not, however, simply refer to the reams of inconclusive medical literature to direct and justify their actions. They also draw explicitly on the dominant discourse of the ‘medical expert’ whilst continuing to ignore women’s own testimonies, indicating a discursive tension between expertise and everyday experience. Foucault (1981) argues that the medical expert is a powerful figure in the Western discursive context as not only does the medical institution utilise established ways of talking about bodies, but it actually creates and constructs what can be said in the first place. By simply stating that they rely upon “expert medical advice” to make their censorship decisions the BBFC (2001a) is thus tapping into a well-established convention that “the doctor knows best” (Freedman, 2002: 327). Who this expert is, and what race, age or class they identify as is omitted, maintaining the patriarchal mirage of objective, professional knowledge (Haraway, 1991). In response to the complaint submitted by Feminists Against Censorship, the BBFC (2001b) did later add that their advice came from “a *female* sexual health expert”, as if this detail provided a valid defence to FAC’s critique. Whilst the ability of women to represent other women has been critically questioned by feminist scholars such as bell hooks (1990), aggregating all women into one essentialist

category (Spivak, 1988) remains a well-used strategy by feminist campaigners for gaining political efficacy in popular discourse (Valentine, 2001). The powerful discursive positioning of medical expertise, and of female experts for ‘female problems,’ suggests how the BBFC may be able to justify and bring about the censorship of female ejaculation by referring to their female ‘medical expert.’

The Western discourse of valid knowledge that values medical expertise for its objective, distant gaze does not, however, construct women’s own subjective experiences of ejaculation as enlightening, and thus they are largely disregarded. Even where they are represented, the dominant conventions of science are also drawn upon. For example, Gilliland’s (2009) study of thirteen questionnaire-responding women’s mixture of shame and wonder at their ejaculate maintains the objective distance of the ‘expert,’ and Anna Span (Blue, 2009) and the FAC’s (Achilles and Wilkinson, 2001) complaints to the BBFC combine scientific papers with testimonies to corroborate their point. Sharon Bell and Queen’s self-enacted ‘how to ejaculate’ videos offer a rarely-seen glimpse into women’s individual experiences of ejaculation, with their footage containing no close-up pornographic shots of one body part at a time, and their dual role as presenter and actor overcoming the objective/subjective dualism (Johnson, 1999). However, if one looks to the relatively open-to-all realm that is the Internet, then within blogs, forums and website ‘comments sections’ a larger number of ejaculating women’s testimonies can be found. For example, Twitter user Azura Rose (2015) tweeted: “It doesn’t even feel like peeing. I’m pretty sure I know what peeing feels like after doing it for over 2 decades, and squirting is #notpee.” Blogger Lesley Kinzel (2012) also wrote “I know it's not urine and so I'm comfortable and wouldn't mind if it happened more often.” Each post like this is contributing to a growing democratic counter-discourse against the expert-based, scientific tyranny over female ejaculation. Yet due to the current Western discursive framing of ‘knowledge’ as objective, rational and expert-led, these subjective statements continue to be discounted, at least in legislative decision making processes like the censorship rulings of the BBFC.

The hierarchical discursive tension between superiorly positioned medical expertise and inferiorly positioned women's individual experience suggests that the BBFC is able to censor female ejaculation by drawing on the power of the 'expert'. However, it also suggests why the BBFC may want to censor it in the first place, as women's own testimonies that their ejaculate does not resemble urine are not considered valid, whilst the distant and objective gaze of an expert who thinks the liquid shown on screen 'might be urine' is.

### The Masculine vs. The Feminine

Whilst recognising the two aforementioned discursive binaries of knowability vs. mystique and expertise vs. experience thus proves to be somewhat insightful as to why and how the BBFC has censored female ejaculation, it must also be noted that there is one key hierarchical dualism underlying these binaries and all other post-Enlightenment dichotomised thinking: the masculine vs. the feminine. Western epistemology is founded upon hierarchical oppositions such as mind vs. body and science vs. nature, with the superior mind and science sides of these dualisms attributed to males, and the inferior body and nature sides attributed to females (Rose, 1993). Considering how this pivotal binary of masculine vs. feminine frames female ejaculation provides three further possible suggestions as to why the BBFC has chosen to censor this practice, and how they have been able to do so.

Firstly, this binary highlights the possibility that it is the very femaleness of female ejaculation that has led to it being disregarded, demonised and censored. After all, in binary thinking the feminine is positioned as inherently inferior. Whilst female and male bodies were once considered physiologically identical, just with the parts and ejaculations located differently, when the one-sex model was replaced by the two-sex version around 1800, the male body and its fluids became the 'normal,' known standard against which the lesser female body and its untenable fluids were to be judged against (Lacquer, 1987). Indeed, whilst a male distancing of female sexuality as mysterious may partly explain the BBFC and others' ambiguity towards female ejaculation, there is a deeper misogyny at work here as well, a deep-rooted sense of abjection and revulsion derived from female fluids in

comparison to a tolerance of the male variety (Kristeva, 1982). For centuries, Western women have been made to feel like their bodily fluids are somehow dirty and disgusting, and “men’s body fluids have not been regarded as polluting and contaminating for women in the same way as women’s have been for men” (Longhurst, 2001:32). Therefore is it that surprising that, in the words of Ms Naughty (2010), “the government gives the thumbs up to facial cumshots but declares female ejaculation to be wrong”?

It could be argued, however, that the fear and marginalisation of female ejaculation lies not in its femaleness and reinforcement of Western dualisms, but rather in its threat to them. As Bell (2002) notes, female ejaculation is an active display of female sexuality and thus poses a challenge to the active/passive gendered dichotomy. In the words of Linda Williams (1999: 336), female ejaculation proves that “money shots are not the sole province of male sexual performers”, challenging the positioning of female sexual responses as mysterious, hidden and passive. Perhaps then it is the stereotypical ‘maleness’ of female ejaculation, and its transgression of conventionally fixed male and female categories, that has led to the dismissal of its existence and its portrayal instead as censorable urine by the BBFC and others.

Yet perhaps female ejaculation goes further still than simply controversially attributing male qualities to the female form. Perhaps instead of shifting the binary, it collapses the distinction between male and female bodies, upon which the notion of male superiority and patriarchy is formed, entirely. As Bell (1994: 534) notes “to accept... female ejaculation one has to accept the sameness of male and female bodies”, and it is this, she argues, that has kept patriarchs and essentialist feminists alike from recognising female ejaculation as separate from urine. To fully acknowledge female ejaculation one must also appreciate that female bodies have prostates just like their male counterpart, and that along with the anterior vagina, clitoris, and vulva these prostate glands are part of one linked system, just as male sexual functioning is considered to be (Sevely, 1987). One also becomes aware that both men and women can ejaculate multiple times (Straayer, 1993) and that both

men and women can ejaculate without orgasm (Robbins and Jensen, 1978). Whilst we would not want to return to the 'one sex' model entirely, as the picture it paints of the female anatomy is rather misleading, continuing to focus on the similarities rather than differences between female and male bodies does actively deconstruct the powerful hierarchical dualism of male vs. female, as well as the patriarchal 'progress narrative' of post-Enlightenment knowledge. The power of female ejaculation to draw attention to these anatomical symmetries and thus also the insubstantiality of a fixed male/female separation thus perhaps explains why the exclusion and censorship of it by the BBFC and others has come about and why this is justified within a phallogentric culture.

#### Conclusion: A future of celebration rather than censorship?

In conclusion, then, by identifying some of the key discursive 'ways of speaking' about female ejaculation currently circulating in Western socio-cultural space, and the tensions that exist within them, this paper has provided some tentative suggestions as to why and how the BBFC censors female ejaculation from British screens. The numerous scientific papers on female ejaculation suggest that it is knowable, yet they remain inconclusive in line with the notion of inherent female sexual mystery, enabling the BBFC to remain publically ambivalent whilst knowingly censoring it on a case-by-case basis. Due to the inferior positioning of subjective, experiential knowledge the BBFC can also ignore women's own testimonies regarding the non-urinary nature of female ejaculate and instead align with the more powerfully positioned 'medical expert' of their choice. These two dualistic tensions would not exist, however, without the pivotal male vs. female binary upon which all other Western epistemological dichotomies rest, and female ejaculation's reaffirmation, shifting and total deconstruction of this male/female divide thus provides perhaps the key reason why it has been, and continues to be, ignored, demonised, and censored by the BBFC and other powerful actors and institutions.

However, I want to end on (perhaps unusually for sexuality studies) an upbeat note by arguing that a positive shift from censorship to celebration of female ejaculation *is* possible.

This is because, as this paper has shown, there are clear tensions within the discursive frame that currently surrounds this practice, and, as Foucault (1990) argues, it is along such fault lines of contestation that there is room for manoeuvre and transformation to occur. Of course, there are potential pitfalls within such a transformation that require critical reflection; we wouldn't want to exalt female ejaculation to the extent that women who do not ejaculate become labelled as 'inferior' (Ehrenreich et al., 1986), and, as Bell (1994) points out, we need to be careful that the power over female ejaculation remains with women, rather than it being taken over as another way to prove successful masculine sexual skill. But it cannot be denied that respecting female ejaculation as a sexual practice that exists and that it is pleasurable *would* necessarily involve appreciating women's testimonies over those of 'expert' scientists, refusing the notion that female sexuality is intangibly mysterious and challenging the rigidity of the male/female binary. Appreciating the pleasurable reality of female ejaculation would thus also go some way to deconstructing some of the restrictive gendered binaries that discursively construct our world, creating the potential for more sexually egalitarian relationships where ejaculation is permissible for all in the future.

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