MM
MEDIAMAGAZINE

AFROFUTURISM

OH COMELY
THOR RAGNAROK
CHILDISH GAMBINO
ASSASSIN'S CREED
STORIES WE TELL
TAXI TEHRAN
TIDE ADVERTISING
MR ROBOT

EMC
MediaMagazine

Contents

08

22

26

14

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48

56

60

35

52

Making the Most of MediaMag

Examining the Hegemony Illustration

Look again at the main Hegemony illustration on page 19. In this image, Tom Zaino uses a classic Hollywood genre to highlight how much of the media we consume is conceived, produced and controlled by white, middle-class males. (Notice how women and BAME people are present but marginalised.)

Use Zaino's structure to draw a diagram of a media text that you are studying or are interested in. Begin with conception: whose idea was it, who wrote the script or original storyline? Once you have a few names, Google around and see if you can get an idea of their gender, ethnicity and class. (Look at their education here: did they attend a private or grammar school? Are they university educated? If so, is it Russell Group, was it before the 80s when fewer people went to University? See if Wikipedia lists their parents' jobs etc.)

Do the same research into the director and, if you can find it out, the commissioner at the channel.

Then look again at the text itself.

- Does it show the dominant group (white, middle class, male) to be more powerful or even just more visible in the texts?
- How are women depicted?
- Are there plural representations of gender, class and race or do they rely on stereotypes that could cultivate negative ideas about different social groups over time?

For further reading, have a look at this profile of Donald Glover aka Childish Gambino (see Tom Gatti's article on page 14) in the *New Yorker*. He says 'blackness is always seen through the lens of whiteness – the lens of how white people can profit from that moment'. He relates this to *12 Years a Slave* which is the story of black slaves, made by black people but in a white system with a white paying audience in mind. Glover's comedy drama series, *Atlanta*, is created by black people for a black audience. Try and track down a few episodes and watch them. Are the representations in Atlanta more positive or plural as a result? Do you think the fact that it was made for FX (a subsidiary of Fox in the U.S.) affects the content?

It's a Tide Ad

In the Tide article on page 38, Jonathan Nunns suggests that to understand a place and time, you need to look at its advertising. So why not use an ad or a series of ads to practise analysing context? In most of your exam questions, you will be required to link texts to their cultural, social, political and economic contexts.

In 2018 Tide spent tens of millions of dollars on a series of ads by advertising giants Saatchi & Saatchi which were broadcast during the Super Bowl, one of the most expensive advertising slots on U.S. television. The slot alone cost $15million without factoring in production costs, talent etc.

The ad starred David Harbour who plays Jim Hopper from *Stranger Things*. Google 'Tide Ad Super Bowl' to watch it now.

The advert is made up of a sequence of ads for immediately recognisable products presented in familiar and/or stereotypical ways. There are more than 10 ads being 'parodied' here. Watch it through and see if you can identify what the different products are that are being advertised. How do they reflect Western society? Can you identify any cultural or political ideas that are representative of American or British society?

Now think about the final bit of dialogue: 'So, does this make every Super Bowl ad a Tide ad? I think it does, watch and see.' By including this line, they extend their message across the ads that follow, hoping that whenever the audience spots bright clean clothes in the other ads, they'll think of Tide. Is this post-modern advertising genius or is this representative of a more aggressively capitalist attitude? Discuss it with your class.

You could also use this approach to examine the context of some of your set exam texts, especially if you're studying media texts from the past. You could use print ads in much the same way.

The MediaMag Production Awards 2018
Better than Ever!

and music videos were still by far the most popular form, and clearly much enjoyed by the filmmakers.

So what to look for in judging music videos? Nik's comments here were hugely useful – they're all about story-telling, even the most non-linear and abstract ones, and they *don't* have to be all about sophisticated effects and high-end kit. Ultimately our favourites were those which used props, costume, space and attention to visual detail to generate high-energy, quirky original performances – see *Sweet Dreams* by students from the Latymer School, for example. Pace and skilful editing are crucial, and our Best Editing Award also went to a music video, *White Noise*, which combined narrative, varied locations and lively animated effects.

Other more general issues were the narrative significance of a strong soundtrack, the power of humour (see our winners *The Freeze* and the *National Sleep Campaign*), the role of really well-planned cinematography and lighting (*Incognito* was an amazing example), and again, the importance of a clear storyline, both in fiction and documentary.

After a brilliant showreel, our filmmakers and families celebrated, socialised, selfied and networked over liquid refreshment in the BFI's Blue Room – a joyful end to an inspiring afternoon. Many thanks to Nik Powell, BFI's Mark and Dominika. EMC's Fran and Lucy H, Claire and Trav from Highams Park School, and Isabelle Nabanja for her fabulous photographs. And of course to all of you who participated, whether you were shortlisted or not. We're hoping to see you all again next year – in fact we can't wait!

H eatwave conditions and unreliable trainlines did not deter a stream of student filmmakers, their families, friends and teachers from making the trip to BFI Southbank from all over England for our favourite afternoon of the year – and what an afternoon it was!

This year we were privileged to recruit the film producer Nik Powell as our chief judge. Nik's slate of brilliant films and his entrepreneurial expertise, coupled with 14 years of experience as the Head of the National Film and Television School, made him the perfect fit for the job, and his comments on each shortlisted production were spot on.

For this first year of the new A Level specs with reduced emphasis on production work, we'd expected fewer entries than previously, and that there would be a larger proportion of short films. Wrong on both counts. Our numbers were significantly up on last year,

englishandmedia.co.uk/competitions/mediamag-production-competition-2018-the-winners

Simon Gardiner began his teaching career at a time of crisis for A Level Media Studies. Here he explains why the subject is still going strong and outlines what students new to the subject might expect.

MEDIA STUDIES:
WHY THE BAD PRESS?

In a world that is now more media-reliant than ever and where media is an increasingly manipulative tool (Fake News, Cambridge Analytica, Trump, Facebook etc.) it is imperative that young people are educated in Media Studies. As such, I was surprised and saddened by government proposals a few years ago to drop the subject entirely from the British national curriculum. Government conversations around that time, led by Michael Gove, concluded that qualifications needed to become 'harder' and 'more traditional' and many subjects were axed completely (goodbye Anthropology, Engineering, Creative Writing). Ironically, there is a staggering level of ignorance in government and the UK media about what Media Studies is. At the time they felt that it was neither an academic area of study, like English Literature, nor a valuable training route into the media industries, like a BTEC. Thankfully, it didn't get axed. But they did beef up the theoretical elements and cut the practical work from 50%

of your overall grade to just 30%.

The qualification you are about to embark upon, or are half way through, is significantly more academic and challenging than ever before. David Buckingham (a key theorist in all of the A Level Media Studies specifications and an influential campaigner in the battle to keep the subject alive) hopes that the latest curriculum developments will add credibility to the subject. Year 12 students who have just started their course should be proud that over the next two years, they will be tackling some extremely complex theories and ideas covering issues of ownership and regulation, post-colonial theory and gender studies. I was thrilled when I heard about the way the subject would progress in light of these developments. I have spent a year in the staff room listening to various teachers' consistently unoriginal (and inconsistently hilarious) jokes about Media Studies simply involving colouring in with crayons and pressing play on a DVD player (for what it's

worth, I always struggle to get DVDs playing on the school computers and have never been able to stay between the lines when colouring in).

Of course, I have no problem at all with these jokes, but beneath the humour lies a more serious negative stereotype surrounding the subject, driven by a perception that Media Studies is a 'doss option'. This attitude towards the subject may also be the reason why only two Universities in the south of the country offered specialist teacher training courses for aspiring Media Studies teachers when I applied to teach four years ago.

I believe it is vital that today's young people are taught to become discerning consumers of the media to avoid subconscious influences on their thoughts and behaviour. That's why, despite the threat to the subject, I remained determined to pursue a career teaching Media Studies.

My students enjoy learning about things that are current and relevant to their lives. I believe that this is a key reason behind the popularity of the

Year 12 students who have just started their course should be proud that over the next two years, they will be tackling some extremely complex theories and ideas covering issues of ownership and regulation, post-colonial theory and gender studies.

URBAN
HIP HOP
REVOLUTION

MYSTIQUE

Rap and the 21st Century audience
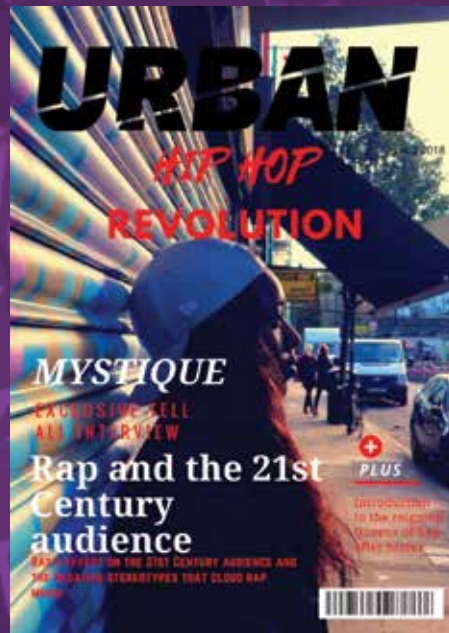
Year 13 magazine production work at Ark Academy, Wembley

subject. Media Studies students can be extremely creative and imaginative, but this creativity must come from a foundation of some quite complex theories and issues. My job is to provide this foundation and allow the students' imaginative ideas to take shape. I have really enjoyed working alongside some of my Year 11 students, students who sometimes struggle in other subjects, and watching them take pride in the practical work that they have produced. From designing and creating an advertising campaign for their own fragrance, to planning and producing the opening five minutes of a crime drama, there have been a variety of different production tasks that have captivated my students.

They have enjoyed the process but that's not to say that it hasn't been challenging. I believe that an unfair link is often made between subjects that are 'fun' and subjects that are 'easy'. I enjoy playing football very much, for example, but have found my attempts to become the next Thierry Henry extremely difficult.

Ironically, there is a staggering level of ignorance in government and the UK media about what Media Studies is.

My Year 13s this year have been exploring the role that the media play in shaping the identity of minority groups. Case studies that have been explored include; the negative representation of Muslims in light of the ISIS moral panic, how transgender people have utilised new media to develop more pluralistic identities, and how governments reinforce heterosexual ideologies through manipulative representation. Students have used theorists and concepts like Baudrillard's post-modernism and Butler's Gender Trouble to further examine these case studies. Within this module we have delved into sociology, cultural studies, politics, psychology, philosophy, history and

more. Try telling these students that Media Studies is a 'doss option'.

The new curriculum changes include a much greater emphasis on theory; students are required to explore some challenging debates and concepts. This may or may not add credibility to the subject. I don't know whether it will or not, and I don't really care. It is not the reputation of the subject that bothers me, it is the need for it to stay part of the curriculum in some form so that young people can continue to be exposed to this highly relevant and stimulating subject. I am happy with the direction my subject is heading in and I am relieved to hear that it's here to stay for the next few years at least. I didn't spend my teacher training year perfecting my colouring in technique for nothing.

Simon Gardiner Head of Media Studies at Ark Academy, Wembley.

WAKANDA FOREVER!

Photo: Film Frame, ©Marvel Studios 2018

Black Panther has gained near-universal acclaim and a worldwide gross somewhere north of $1.3 billion and rising. It has been a startling success for a comic book character who, only ten years ago, would have been a non-starter for a major movie franchise. There is no shortage of essays that could be written about the range of themes and theories in it. In this one, Giles Gough looks at how the film deals with post-colonialism, plural representations and Afrofuturism.

Let's start by unpacking some key terms: 'colonialism' stems from colonising, the process of invading and taking over a different country and subjugating the indigenous population. European countries like Britain, France and Spain got really good at colonising far-flung foreign countries in the 16th to 19th centuries. With that came attitudes that are collectively known as 'colonialism' – the belief that native people were intellectually inferior, and that white colonisers had a moral right to steal the resources and subjugate the local populace as they were 'civilising them'. In other words, trying to make them more like western European society. As Edward Said put it, 'Every single empire in its official discourse has said that it is not like all the others […] that it has a mission to enlighten, civilize, bring order and democracy, and that it uses force only as a last resort'. Said is also critical of the intellectual voices that then attempt to justify this process.

The process of 'de-colonisation' gathered speed in the 20th

century and with it, many of the attitudes associated with colonialism began to be challenged. Post-colonialism, like postmodernism, refers less to a time period and more to a critiquing of a school of thought that came before it. Post-colonialism exists to question white patriarchal views with a particular reference to how they relate to race. Questioning the stereotypes associated with colonialism is important. As Chinua Achebe, a famous post-colonial writer once put it:

'The whole idea of a stereotype is to simplify. Instead of going through the problem of all this great diversity – that it's this or maybe that – you have just one large statement; it is this'.

Modern producers of texts have sometimes struggled with representations of Black people. Some texts have sought to make characters non-threatening by stripping them of any of the idiosyncrasies of their culture. For the latter part of the twentieth century, it was enough to simply present Black people in the text to be seen as progressive, with little thought as to how they were represented.

Afrofuturism: 'an ability to celebrate African heritage without the burden of colonialism but also to be able to imagine a future where society doesn't seek to limit them'.

The sci-fi/fantasy genre has, historically, been an area where Black people have been under represented. For its first twenty years, *Star Wars* had only one major character who was Black. *Star Trek*, in some ways, blazed a trail in terms of representation when it came out in 1966, but it would be another 27 years before there were two Black series regulars on the same show. Similarly, many of the classics of the genre – *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and *Bladerunner* – have a largely white cast of characters. As Ira Glass from *This American Life* puts it:

'while there have been Black characters in sci-fi for a while now, they're almost never the protagonists. They're never the ones driving the action. And for so long…in so much science fiction, there were no Black people at all'.

It's possible then that one of the catalysts for the Afrofuturist movement grew out of a need for Black people to see themselves in a future setting. But what is 'Afrofuturism'?

Post-colonialism exists to question white patriarchal views with a particular reference to how they relate to race.

© Marvel Studios 2018

© Marvel Studios 2018

Janelle Monae by Tankboy / Flickr

Singer Janelle Monae is part of a new generation of artists exploring Afrofuturism

Photo: Film Frame. © Marvel Studios 2018

Afrofuturism is a cultural aesthetic that can be found in art, music and literature. The film critic Clarisse Loughrey gave a useful definition of it when she reviewed *Black Panther* on *Kermode and Mayo's Film Review*. She defined Afrofuturism as:

'an ability to celebrate African heritage without the burden of colonialism but also to be able to imagine a future where society doesn't seek to limit them'.

Afrofuturism is not new, it has existed in George Clinton's music and Octavia Butler's science fiction stories since the 1970s. However, it is only recently that it has started to move into the mainstream. Outkast and Janelle Monae are recording artists frequently associated with Afrofuturism and *A Wrinkle In Time*, released in cinemas last March, was a mainstream film that positioned a Black female protagonist in the central role of a fantasy film. *Black Panther* is a perfect example of Afrofuturism, starting with the setting.

Right from its creation by Stan Lee & Jack Kirby in 1966, *Black Panther*'s fictional country of Wakanda has been a wonderful portrayal of Afrofuturism. A sub-Saharan African country shrouded in mystery to the outside world,

Wakanda has never been colonised due to its hostile topography. It is an isolationist country, rich in a resource called 'vibranium' (the most famous example of it being Captain America's shield). In the comics and the Marvel cinematic universe, it is the most technologically advanced country on the planet. It is possible that the concept of Wakanda appeals to many Black people because of the diaspora created by the slave trade. If a person is unable to trace their family roots to their country of origin, it is possible that the idea of a country where an African culture has never been suppressed may seem more appealing.

Now let's consider T'Challa, the eponymous Black Panther. Lee and Kirby broke ground when they created *Black Panther* in 1966. They managed to show that a black character could be just as effective as their other heroes who had, at that point, come from the same white, straight, all-American background. But in doing so, Lee and Kirby borrowed heavily from the stereotype of the 'noble savage'. The noble savage stereotype, as mentioned in Stuart Hall's 'Grammar of Race' theory, offered white readers a representation of black men uncorrupted by the moral failings of the modern world and

possessing an innate wisdom. While Boseman's portrayal does indeed come across as noble and wise, it is undercut with humour when we see him bickering with his little sister Shuri or trying to get his ex to stay in Wakanda. This humanises the character while filling him with aspirational traits. While the representation of T'Challa is overwhelmingly positive, it is important to remember that one single representation of an ethnic minority, that lacks depth or plurality, can be as damaging as a negative representation.

Erik Killmonger serves as the central antagonist to the film. However, there is something that sets him apart from most Marvel villains. Growing up in Oakland, California, Killmonger witnesses the systemic oppression of black people by the authorities. Consequently, Erik is motivated to support and liberate black people around the world from oppressive governments. He is understandably jealous of the liberty and wealth enjoyed by the people of Wakanda. His plan is to use their superior firepower to bring about revolution in countries where black people are oppressed. Ryan Coogler, the film's director, stated that they portrayed Killmonger like this in order 'to bring the energy of Tupac to a Marvel movie'. Tupac Shakur was a prominent rapper in the mid-nineties whose aggressive style mixed with radical politics brought him to fame. However, even his staunchest supporters would have to admit that there were aspects of his personality that were problematic and inconsistent. This complicated representation not only serves as a contrast to the positive, Afrofuturist representation of T'Challa, but also highlights some of his flaws. *Black Panther* is one of the few films where the hero learns a moral lesson from the villain. By the end, T'Challa has been inspired to share Wakanda's technology with the rest of the world, for altruistic, rather than destructive purposes. The decision to make Killmonger motivated by a different philosophy rather than purely evil intentions provides us with a plurality of representations that makes for a richer text.

Black Panther will, no doubt, be the source of academic discussion for months and years to come. Its post-colonial desire to show a plurality of representations for Black people, as well as bringing the Afrofuturist aesthetic into the mainstream along with all its hope and optimism is overwhelmingly positive. But when all the hype dies down, it will surely endure in the hearts and minds of a younger generation because as Roy Wood Jr. from the *Daily Show* put it: 'It's nice to have a Black movie that's not about slavery, singing or slanging dope…it's a dope ass movie'.

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Giles Gough teaches English and Media Studies and leads participatory filmmaking workshops at www.daskfilms.com.

THIS IS AMERICA

Music, Politics and Protest

Childish Gambino's compelling take on violence and race was a viral hit - but he's not the only rapper that's taking a stand. Hip-hop is rediscovering its political roots, says Tom Gatti.
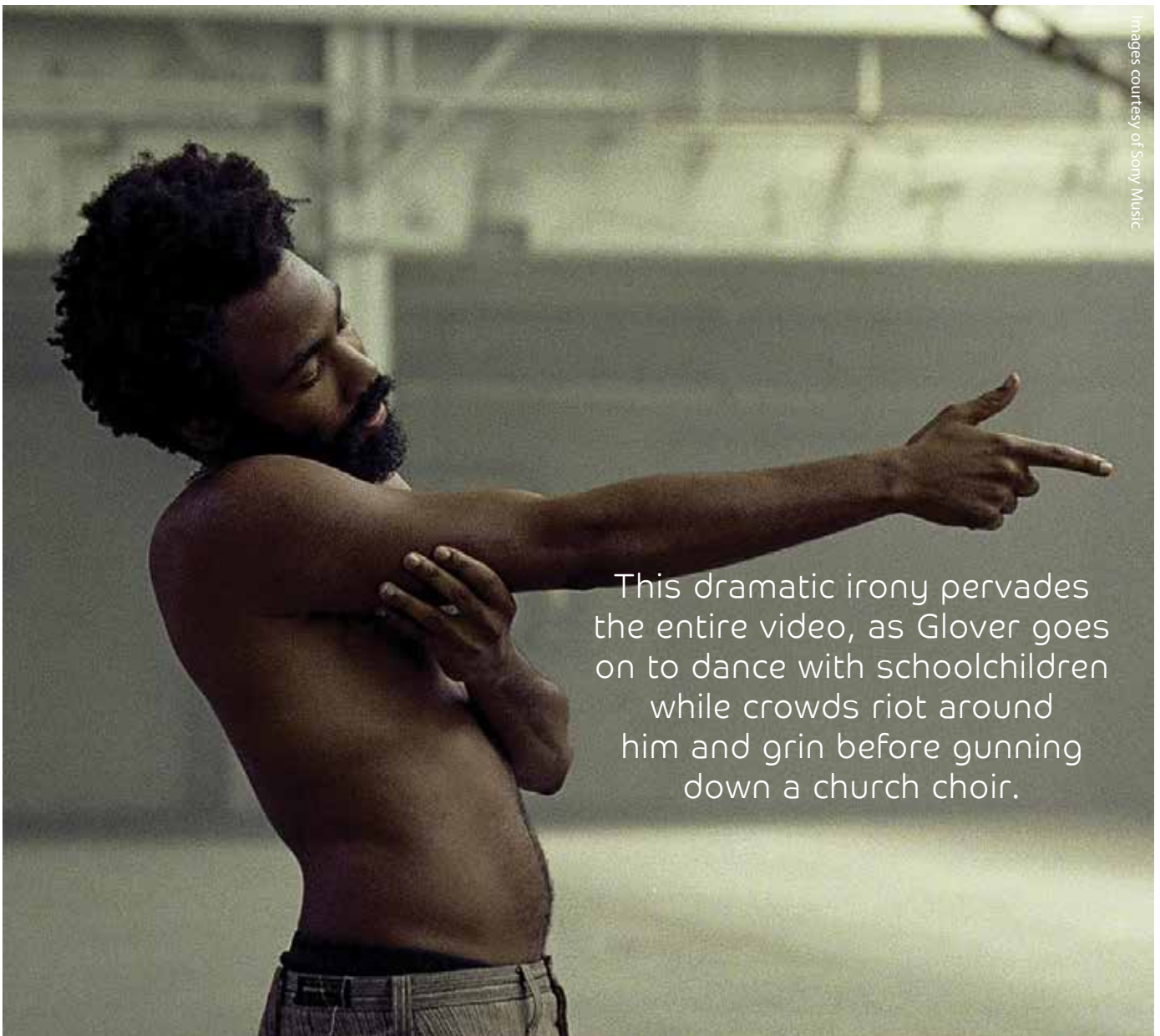
This dramatic irony pervades the entire video, as Glover goes on to dance with schoolchildren while crowds riot around him and grin before gunning down a church choir.

Childish Gambino (aka Donald Glover) in his video 'This is America'

'This is America' takes a rich tradition of political hip-hop and gives it a modern twist, employing tropes of the genre.
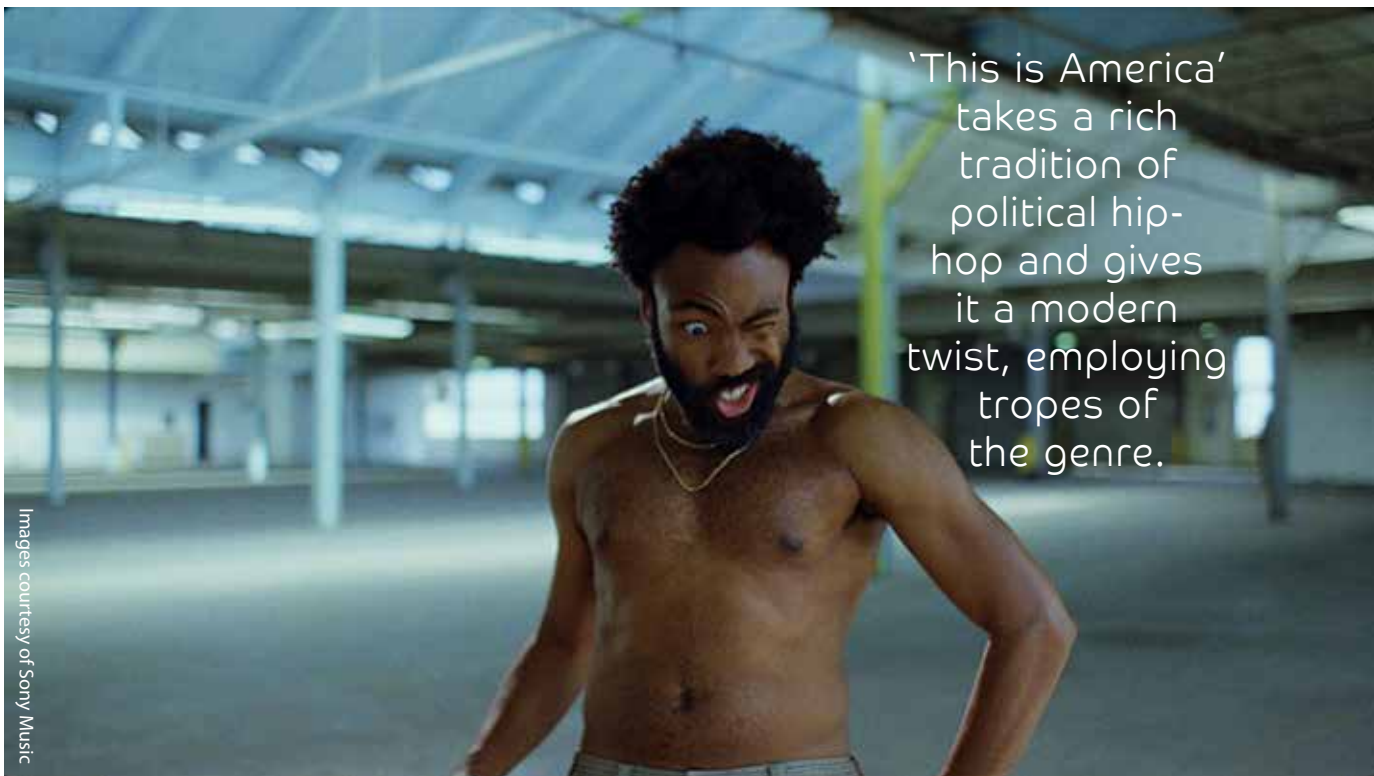
The video for 'This is America' begins with a sequence so tonally jarring that it is still shocking the second, third and 10th time you watch it. In a vast warehouse, we hear an African choir chant what sounds like a joyous refrain as a barefoot man plays a finger-picking melody on an acoustic guitar. As the camera pans, we see a topless figure – Donald Glover aka Childish Gambino – standing in the middle of the warehouse. He jerks his body in time to the beat. As he turns and starts to dance towards us, his movements become more exaggerated: his body rolls, he grimaces, pops one eye wide open, and stops behind the seated man, who is now hooded and without his guitar. The topless dancer pulls a gun from thin air, aims for the head, and shoots. As the dead body falls, a rumbling hip-hop rhythm kicks in and Glover turns to the camera, casually saying: 'This is America'.

The four-minute video that follows - directed by Glover's regular collaborator Hiro Murai – was released on May 5, 2018, and watched 12.9 million times in its first 24 hours; since then it has had more than 250 million views.

The song went straight in at No 1 on the American music chart (the Billboard Hot 100) and prompted an avalanche of tweets, reaction videos and think pieces, followed by internet users rushing to meme it and then a third wave of commentators piling in to censure those making the memes. 'This is America' quickly became the most talked-about and analysed music video since Beyoncé's 'Formation' in 2016.

The opening of 'This is America' creates a zone of dissonance. The inclusivity of the chanting clashes with the violence of the gunshot; Glover's old-style trousers (similar to those worn by the pro-slavery Confederate army during the American civil war) jar both with his skin colour and the modern warehouse; his racially loaded movements (referencing the 19th-century 'Jim Crow' character that popularized negative ideas about African Americans) seem to contradict the empowering black music. This irony pervades the entire video, as Glover goes on to dance with schoolchildren while crowds riot around him and grin before gunning down a church choir.

Why has 'This is America' become such a viral hit? The violence has straightforward shock value, but the video's real power lies in the uncomfortable but mesmerising tension between

Thomas Dartmouth Rice as 'Jim Crow' in 1832

> Both 'This is America' and 'Formation' were praised for their undiluted blackness, which in a culture of white hegemony is seen as a powerful political statement in itself. But they do not exist in a vacuum: hip-hop has been an inherently political form since its inception

its images. Hiro Murai also offers a huge amount of detail: as the camera follows Glover around the warehouse, there is constant movement behind him: cars abandoned or on fire, a white horse, people on a platform filming with their mobile phones. The video demands repeated viewings to catch all of these 'Easter eggs' (hidden messages or features) and audiences have expended great energy decoding them online.

It is useful to know, for example, that the church choir shooting is a reference to the 2015 massacre of nine African Americans in Charleston, South Carolina, by a white supremacist, Dylann Roof; or that the abandoned cars recall the black men who have been killed by police during traffic stops; or that the video's conclusion, with Glover running at the camera through darkness, is a nod to Jordan Peele's film *Get Out*. The video's political themes are clear: it interrogates and criticises American gun culture and racism past and present. But its 'message' is not so easily unlocked. In fact, it is deliberately problematic: the video's entirely black cast means that its 'crimes' are all perpetrated by black people; while the dancing – which references styles such as the Gwara Gwara, a South African dance popularised by Rihanna – can be read both as a celebration of black culture and, as Aida Amoaka writes on the *Atlantic* website, as a 'denunciation of the distractions that keep many Americans from noticing how the world around them is falling apart'. Glover's refusal to comment on the video has maintained this ambiguity: 'I don't want to give it any context,' he said to Chris Van Vliet of WSVN-TV.

This absence leads viewers to seek out their own context, recalling Beyoncé's 'Formation', which juxtaposes imagery referencing the New

Orleans floods, the antebellum South, and modern police brutality. It even has its own Easter eggs: for example, a fleeting shot of graffiti reading 'Stop shooting us', a message associated with Black Lives Matter. Beyoncé and her director Melina Matsoukas leave it to the viewer to connect the dots, though the video's more conventional aspects– the highly choreographed dance routines and direct-to-camera singing from its star – mean there is less potential for the sort of discomfort so fruitfully employed by Glover.

Although Beyoncé's fame is much greater than Glover's, there is a parallel in their careers (which have recently dovetailed: they lend their voices to Simba and Nala in the forthcoming *Lion King* film). They both spent years playing to mass white audiences: Beyoncé with world-conquering hits such as 'Single Ladies' and mainstream film roles such as *The Pink Panther*; Glover writing for the sitcom 30 Rock and acting in TV shows such as *Parks and Recreation* and *Girls*. In his 2011 song 'Fire Fly' he described himself as 'the only black kid at a Sufjan concert' – that is, a black kid who identifies with white hipsters (in this case via the white indie musician Sufjan Stevens). But more recently their work has put race centre stage: Beyoncé's 'Formation' made headlines for its 'unapologetic blackness', leading to *Saturday Night Live*'s sketch 'The Day Beyoncé Turned Black', which parodied the confused reactions the song provoked in white people. Glover, in a March 2018 New Yorker profile, described how hanging out with his younger brother Stephen – who is 'scarier to white people' and has suffered repeated affronts as a result – made him 'super-black'. He hired Stephen to work on his comedy drama *Atlanta* partly because he wanted to have an all-

black writing team – a rarity in the TV industry. The show was notable for its refusal to 'translate' the black experience for a white audience.

Both 'This is America' and 'Formation' were praised for their undiluted blackness, which in a culture of white hegemony is seen as a powerful political statement in itself. But they do not exist in a vacuum: hip-hop has been an inherently political form since its inception as far back as 1971, when Gil Scott-Heron's spoken-word song 'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised' used the vocabulary of white mass media to satirise its grip on America. The video for NWA's 'Fuck tha Police' (1988), with its images of police harassment, was a prescient comment on a situation that would reach a tipping point with the beating of Rodney King in 1991 and the ensuing Los Angeles riots. The extended version of Public Enemy's 'Fight the Power' video (1989), directed by Spike Lee, juxtaposes clips from the 1963 civil rights march on Washington (at which Martin Luther King Jr delivered the famous 'I have a dream' speech) with a present-day political rally in Brooklyn to end racial violence.

But as gangsta rap took off in the 1990s, violence became interrogated less and celebrated more, and as hip-hop became increasingly mainstream and lucrative later in that decade, politics was more often than not lost in a sea of money, sex and brand names. Around the turn of the millennium, videos such as Jay-Z's 'Big Pimpin' (1999) and Nelly's 'Hot in Here' (2002) caught the spirit of the age: excess.

A decade later, though, things were different. In the US a series of black men had died at the hands of the police – Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and Eric Garner – and as a result activists connected on social media in 2013 to form a movement: Black Lives Matter. As the Obama era was drawing to a close, race relations were worsening: polls asking 'is racism a big problem?' had achieved a record low result in 2009 with 26% saying yes but by 2015, that number had risen to 50% (slightly higher than it was in 1995). This social shift has been reflected in hip-hop videos: from Janelle Monae's simple protest song 'Hell You Talmbout' (2015), which lists the names of black Americans killed by police, to Kendrick Lamar's 'Element' (2017), which draws on Gordon Parks' photographs of black America from the 1940s onwards, the genre has rediscovered its political voice. In doing so it is returning to its roots: just as Spike Lee did for Public Enemy, the Uprising Creative trio behind Rihanna's 'American Oxygen' (2015) spliced together footage from historic civil marches with contemporary ones.

'This is America', then, takes a rich tradition of political hip-hop and gives it a modern twist, employing tropes of the genre both at its most unthinking (dollar bills and guns) and most challenging (dramatically juxtaposed images and dense inter-textual references). Like the best art, it does not provide neat answers but demands that we participate in its meaning – that we also walk Glover's tightrope between dance and damnation.

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Tom Gatti is Head of Books and Features at *The New Statesman*.

The Theory Drop

Hegemony

What is Hegemony?

Hegemony is basically the idea that the media continually reproduces images of a dominant group as superior or powerful. In Western society, the dominant group is middle class white males and because the media are predominantly produced by middle class white males, they tend to represent middle class white males as superior. And the rest of society – working class, BAME, LGBT, disabled, female – as less powerful or inferior. But the key point about hegemony is that it is so subtle that arguably the white guys making the media don't even realise they are doing it, and nobody challenges it; and thus the established hierarchies in society that are constantly reflected back to us in the media become the accepted norm. This is what theorists such as Antonio Gramsci and later, Noam Chomsky, meant by saying the media 'manufactures consent'.

I like to teach Hegemony because in the messy relationship between the media and society, it's the theory I most agree with. I always see it as offering a chance to think about the current *status quo* – where we are now – in terms of how audiences interact with or are influenced by the media. It can also be seen as part of a continuum: a long line of developments in audience theory that stretch back to the beginnings of mass media.

Behaviourism: The 'Original' Audience Theory

With every new form of media comes a wave of panic about the 'effects' it will have on the individual and society. Many of you will be familiar with the Magic Bullet theory – certainly it's a fave with my own students from GCSE to A2. It's the very simple idea that the media fires messages into our brains; that we are passive consumers of the media who believe everything we are told. Similar to this is the Hypodermic Needle theory; that media messages are injected into our bloodstream. Both of these ideas are 'Behaviourist' or 'passive audience' theories – simply put, the media have a direct impact on our behaviour. Most of us would probably agree that this idea of media consumers as almost lobotomised zombie-people reacting to or copying what we see in the media is both patronising and utterly ridiculous; and yet it's still pulled out from time to time to deflect from more serious issues in society. For example, Donald Trump this year insisted that violent video games and films were to blame for the high school shooting in Florida, rather than acknowledge that the problem might be with the America gun laws. This tragedy subsequently inspired the March For Our Lives movement where thousands of high school students marched in Washington DC to call for gun reform. So not quite the passive, docile consumers that gun-loving Trump would have us believe.

Uses and Gratifications

As the media became more commonplace, 'active audience' theories developed. Many of you will have studied Maslow's Needs and Motivation theory, but the GCSE Media big-hitter is Uses and Gratifications. Mostly attributed to Blumler and Katz (although, as the media evolves, so
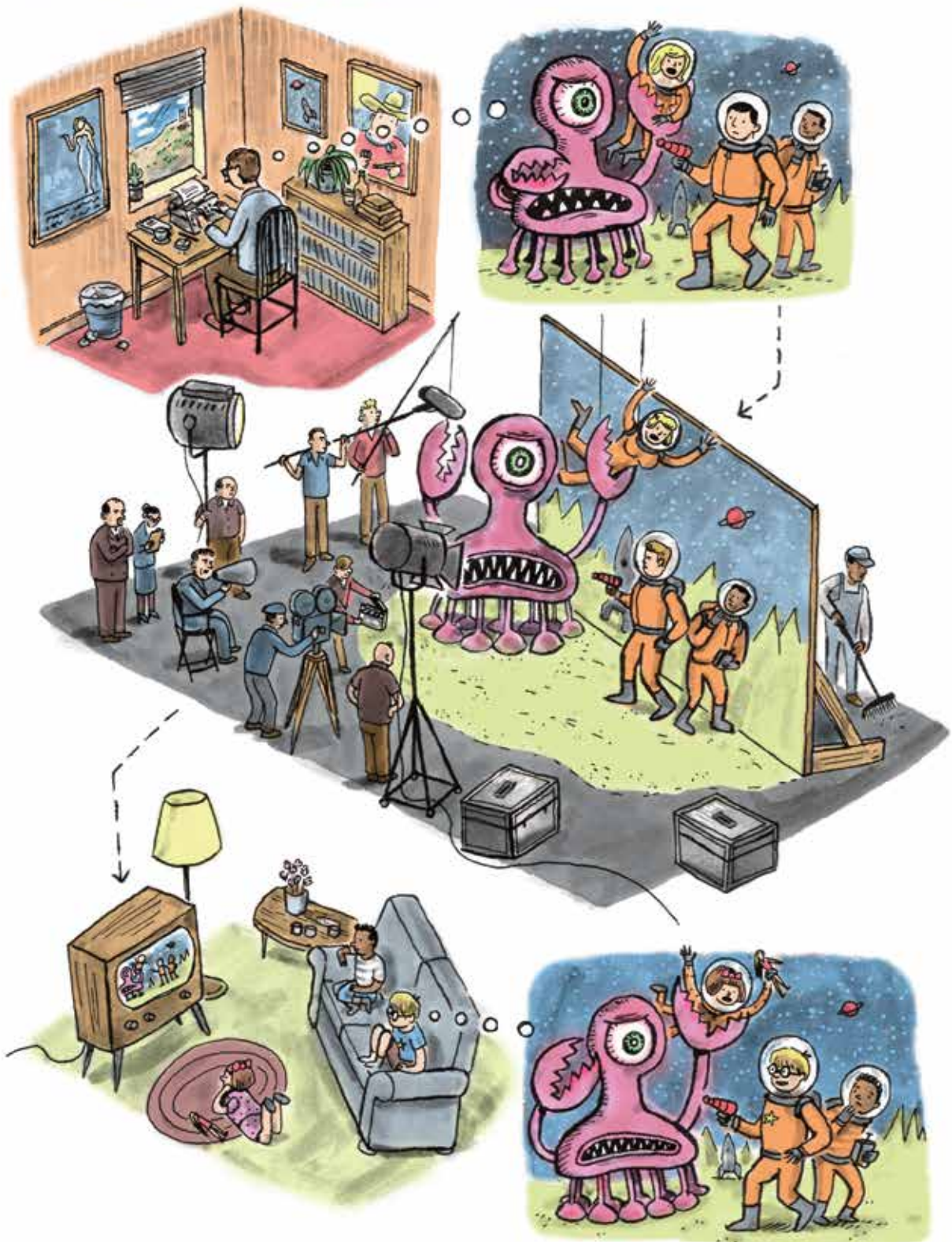
Legally Black's recreations of famous movie posters were spotted online by advertising activists Special Patrol Group who distributed them across the capital

does the theory – see the Wikipedia entry on Uses and Gratifications for the full evolution) the theory suggests that audiences have control over the media they consume – they pick and choose different media for various needs (uses) and desires (gratifications). This is the antithesis of the magic bullet theory, with the consumer in the driving seat sifting through the available media, rejecting and selecting based on what we like and what we want. Much better! I feel powerful now.

These two theories are in binary opposition to each other. I often ask my classes to choose a side, decide whether they think audiences are active or passive. But it's a trick question. The truth about how audiences and the media interact, lies in the massive grey area between the two.

A Corrupt System

So that's an abbreviated summary of some of the more popular and easier to understand audience theories. Let's get back to the messy business of Hegemony. Women make up more than half the population of this country yet only 13% of working film directors in the UK are women. BAME people make up 14% of our population but according to Ofcom, the regulator for the UK broadcast media, only 12% of employees in the industry and only 6% at senior levels where decisions about what stories get told and how they get told are made. Disabled people are grossly underrepresented. It's a problem. And what these stats don't tell us is about the backgrounds of those people.

Research carried out by the

Sutton Trust found that over half (54%) of today's top journalists were educated in private schools. This is beyond disproportionate when you consider only 7% of the population attend private schools in the first place. A further 33% of journalists went to selective grammar schools, while just 14% attended comprehensive schools, which now educate almost 90% of children.

So it's not easy for the average, lower middle or working class person to get a job in the media, let alone the underprivileged, transgender, ethnic minority or immigrants. And when the lives of these groups are depicted in the news, written into stories or framed by directors, styled by production designers, cast by casting agents in the UK media industry, representations are likely to be constructed from a

Behaviourism/Passive audience
(Magic bullet, Hypodermic needle)

Uses and Gratifications/Active audience

> Images like this are immediately eye catching – they do seem weird to most people and if they do to you too, it's not because you're racist, it's because the media is.

middle class, usually white, privileged, and often male, perspective.

If the people who decide what gets filmed, published, reported, screened etc. attended private school from a young age or grammar school as teenagers, their understanding of British society and culture is immediately cut in two as they interact only with the privileged people, the dominant people. How accurate can their understanding of the rest of the population be?

And how do we consent to this system? Well, unless we actively fight against it or complain about it or call it out, we are consenting to it. If we don't trust a politician because he or she doesn't 'look the part', or if

we don't challenge the ideas fed to children from a very young age that doctors, pilots and astronauts, are all posh white dudes, and cute dollies and Barbies are white, blonde and blue eyed with wonderful friends then we are consenting to a corrupt system that prevents us from developing more varied, plural depictions in the media.

Pluralism

The flipside to hegemony, its nemesis, the Black Panther to its Klaw, is 'Pluralism' – the idea that in order to change the way we all think we need to see many and varied representations of people from different social groups, rather than the repeated stereotypical ones. The single best example of the need for pluralism is the poster campaign carried out earlier this year by Legally Black. I almost don't even need to make the point here as they did it so perfectly. Images like this are immediately eye catching – they do seem weird to most people and if they do to you too, it's not because you're racist, it's because the media is. As long as the media is created and dominated by privileged white people then we will never get the pluralism of our society reflected in the media we consume.

Claire Pollard is editor of *MediaMagazine.*

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> Research carried out by the Sutton Trust found that over half (54%) of today's top journalists were educated in private schools. This is beyond disproportionate when you consider only 7% of the population attend private schools in the first place.

Cultivation Theory

Gerbner's 'Cultivation theory' sits nicely between the polar opposites of the passive and active audience. This theory suggests that although we do pick and choose the media we consume, we are not oblivious to the effects of repeated ideas or images which are constantly reproduced and, over a period of time, can subtly affect our views.

A friend's mum who is an RE teacher in a rural British county once told me that the children she teaches are 'terrified' of Muslims. In a school where there were very few Muslims in a fairly affluent and mostly white area, their only experiences and understanding of the Islamic faith come from stories they see in the news: stories of violence and extremism. This cultivates a fear and a lack of understanding that will, in almost all cases, influence their opinions of Muslim individuals they encounter in daily life. This is still a 'behaviourist' theory but more subtle that the Magic Bullet Theory.

TAINTED LOVE

TOURING THE MUSIC OF *SIGHTSEERS*

Mark Ramey plugs into the *Sightseers* soundtrack to see how director, Ben Wheatley, uses music to underscore meaning in this dark British comedy.

Steve Oram and Alice Lowe as the star-crossed lovers of Ben Wheatley's *Sightseers* (2012)

The idea of 'tainted love' undercuts their liberation, at least for the spectator, sowing an uneasy seed of disquiet: perhaps Chris and Tina are not as harmless and woolly as they first appear.

Sometimes a song says it all and *Sightseers* is full of them. The 80s pop song 'Tainted Love' for example that leads from the film's prologue into the title sequence tells us all we need to know about Tina, the film's protagonist, her oppressive mother, and her lover, Chris, with whom she is going on a sightseeing caravan tour of Northern England.

'Sometimes I feel I've got to…Run away, I've got to…Get away from the pain you drive into…the heart of me…The love we share…Seems to go nowhere…And I've lost my light…For I toss and turn, I can't sleep at night…I love you though you hurt me so…Now I'm gonna pack my things and go…Tainted love' (Soft Cell, 1981)

Tina is 35 and wants to escape her stifling mum and their boring domesticated life; she wants to move on from her guilt over the death of the idolised family dog, Poppy; and finally and most importantly, Tina wants to spend time with Chris, her newly acquired knight in shining armour: a man who has swapped his metallic war gear for the white fibre-glass carapace of a caravan.

Chris, in turn, is looking for adventure and inspiration. Tina is his muse. They are on a romantic odyssey. He wants to help her grow. 'Show me your world, Chris!' says Tina as they drive off under the disapproving stare of Carol, Tina's Mum. His intimations of a troubled life (he is 'ginger' and was both bullied and invisible at school) suggests that for him too this holiday is more than just a sightseeing jaunt: it's an escape into a world of opportunity. However, the idea of 'tainted love' undercuts their liberation, at least for the spectator, sowing an uneasy seed of disquiet: perhaps Chris and Tina are not as harmless and woolly as they first appear.

Four other songs are used later in the film that offer further narrative detail and opportunities for deeper analysis.

Firstly, there is 'The Season of the Witch', a classic example of 60s psychedelia, which first fades in when Chris is murdering his second victim, Ian, on the hills above the caravan park, where Tina is feverishly dreaming and Janet, Ian's wife, is preparing breakfast.

'When I look out my window…Many sights to see…And when I look in my window…So many different people to be…That it's strange…So strange…You got to pick up every stitch…Mmmm, must be the season of the witch…' (Vanilla Fudge, 1968).

These hallucinatory lyrics help illustrate the psychotic fantasy world that Chris and Tina are now entering as well as suggesting how insecure they are in their identities ('so many different people to be'). However, there is another thread that the song opens up. In an interview in November 2017 (see YouTube link below) Ben Wheatley, the film's director, explained that there was a supernatural strand in the film. Tina's dream sequence is where this strand starts, accompanied as it is by the eerie lyrics and music of 'The Season of the Witch'. In the following montage the film moves beyond the conventions of social realist comic drama into darker more sinister territory. The editing of this sequence shows that there is parallelism at work: a shot of Chris battering Ian's head with a rock cuts to a match on action as Janice cracks an egg into a frying pan. Then, as Chris, in his red hooded coat, marches past the pagan revellers in the adjacent field to his caravan, and Tina tosses and turns in her bed, the observant film viewer may note Wheatley's homage to a classic supernatural story from UK 70s cinema, *Don't Look Now*. The allusion to the

supernatural is subtle but it is there and the sound design enhances this reading: a reading it should be noted that Wheatley is very keen to support.

Later in the film, Tina embarks on her very own psychotic odyssey, murdering a bride-to-be at a hen party, and Wheatley scores the murder to a different 60s version of 'Season of the Witch', (this time by 60s prog rock band Julie Driscoll, Brian Auger and the Trinity). Once again a form of parallelism in the use of sound links Chris and Tina on a more profound, subconscious level. Soon after the killing, in yet a further parallelism, it is Chris's turn to have a nightmare. His hellish vision not only deepens the psychic connection between himself and Tina but also hints at the forces of destiny at work in their lives. Wheatley links the two dream sequences, partly through using a similar montage editing style but also through the use of music, this time Wieniawski's violin concerto No 2, called 'Romance'. In Chris's bleak and terrifying vision of Tina we see her as a black robed vampiric monster feeding on his flesh and the flesh of a bride. We also glimpse a prescient moment from the future where Tina is alone and under arrest.

Chris's third murder is arguably the turning point of the film. It is witnessed by Tina who finally comes to understand and accept the brutal psychotic logic that drives her lover. However, the scene also references another key theme of the film: England and the countryside. Films like *The Wicker Man* and Wheatley's very own *Kill List* have all drawn on the idea of the UK as a primitive place with a dark and bloody past. The scene discussed accordingly locates itself in a pagan heritage, in an ancient stone circle, supposedly owned by the National Trust. The victim is a passing walker, a middle class man, who enrages Chris with his presumed sense of entitlement. In a parody of an honourable peasant protecting his true love from the cruel attentions of a member of the corrupt nobility, Chris batters to death the nameless hiker and justifies his actions as a form of class revenge. The

death scene is once again (like with the death of Ian) played in slow motion to a musical track, this time the reading of a William Blake poem, the patriotic anthem, 'Jerusalem' (scored by Elgar). The irony of the scene speaks of the UK's blood-soaked history and the repressed rage that lurks beneath our civilised skins. The National Trust in Wheatley's hands is thus transformed from a quaint middle class experience of heritage fetishism and cream teas into a destructive and horrifying spectacle of murder and gore.

'And did those feet in ancient time … Walk upon England's mountains green… And was the holy Lamb of God…On England's pleasant pastures seen!

And did the Countenance Divine…Shine forth upon our clouded hills…And was Jerusalem builded here…Among these dark Satanic Mills?' (William Blake, 1808)

The final and arguably most potent use of music comes in the film's climatic scenes. Martin, a bumbling easy going friend of Chris's, has been murdered by Tina, thus equalling Chris's body count in the film, and suggesting that there is no room in her life for a rival to Chris's affection. Initially angry, Chris soon realises that Tina is a force of nature, 'You're a powder keg!' he says admiringly before Wheatley cuts to an extreme long shot of Chris burning the caravan with petrol. The holiday has liberated Tina, and – to an extent – Chris, and now they can make love as equals. They passionately re-consummate their relationship, which had been significantly cooling, and then watch their burning caravan before running to the Ribble Viaduct where they intend to commit suicide.

The music that accompanies this scene, The Power of Love, (Frankie goes to Hollywood, 1984), is another 80s song full of meaning for the spectator. Indeed, the choice of dated retro music was intentional as Wheatley wanted Tina and Chris to seem incongruous and the music
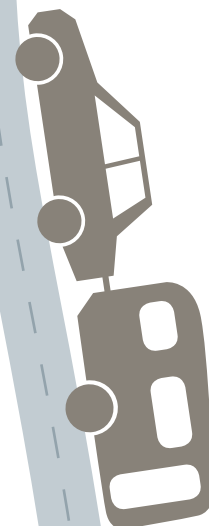
The close-up slow motion shots
of Chris and Tina looking at their
burning caravan (but also directly at
us through a fourth wall break) all
have the effect of lifting their story
beyond the psychotic and murderous
and into the realms of the mythic.

AF archive / Alamy Stock Photo

adds to that connotation. Their clothing (knitwear for example) makes them seem older than perhaps they are, and as a counterpoint they are frequently shown playing in playgrounds: children who haven't grown up. Until now.

Lyrically the song is a beautiful and passionate eulogy to love but there are further references to the supernatural (angels/dreams/vampires) as well as references to love's redemptive qualities ('A force from above…Cleaning my soul'). Indeed, it is this later quality that makes *Sightseers* problematic for many viewers as we are positioned to follow and enjoy the journey of Tina's growth despite the mounting body count and comic treatment of some of the deaths. However, the film's dénouement is powerfully and evocatively underscored by this audial testament to love's power to conquer everything; and the close-up slow motion shots of Chris and Tina

looking at their burning caravan (but also directly at us through a fourth wall break) all has the effect of lifting their story beyond the psychotic and murderous and into the realms of the mythic. As the final song and film seems to suggest, 'Love is the light…Scaring darkness away.'

Mark Ramey is Head of Film Studies at Collyers College, Horsham.

Further reading
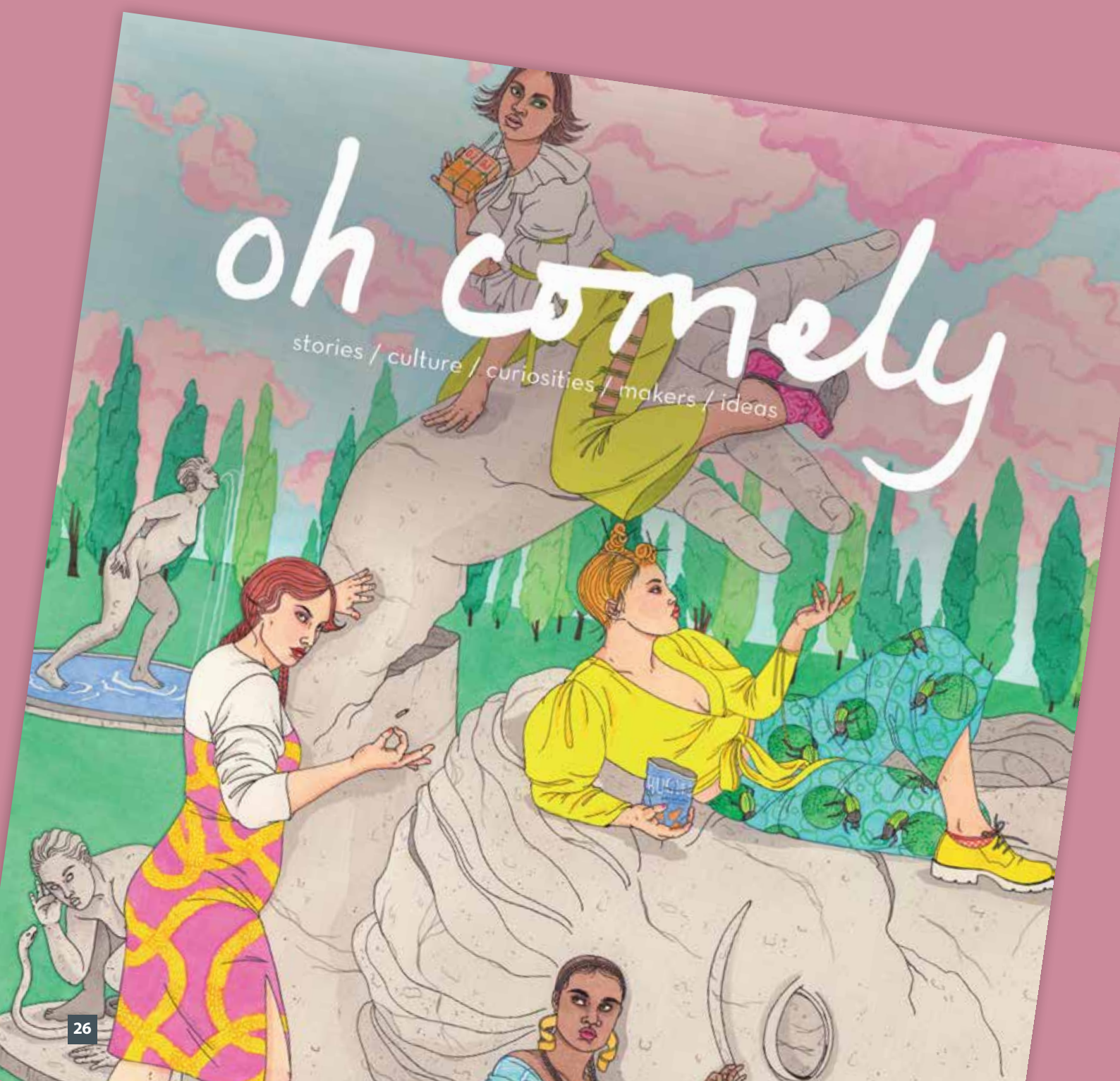
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meet the editor

oh comely

stories / culture / curiosities / makers / ideas

Alice Snape, editor of
Oh Comely **magazine**

Oh Comely readers are educated and politically aware and looking for a unique and thought-provoking look at the kind of lives they aspire to lead.

Ownership and production

Who founded the magazine and with what remit/intention?

Oh Comely was started by three friends at Oxford University around eight years ago. They wanted to create the antidote to the women's magazines on the market. Photoshopped covers and features on diets saturated the women's magazine market at the time. And the founders felt like they wanted to offer something much more than that: meaningful content, thoughtful stories, creative writing, and a safe space for honest discussion, arty photography and illustration. It surprises me that those magazines with regurgitated diet content and circled cellulite etc. still exist, but even if they all disappeared there's still a place for thoughtful mags like *Oh Comely*.

Who owns the magazine?

Iceberg Press owns *Oh Comely*, which is an independent publishing company set up by three friends who all worked together in a large magazine publishing company. They wanted to bring their expertise to independent magazines to allow them to shine and thrive. The original three friends who set up the magazine sold it to Iceberg around two and a half years ago.

In what ways is *Oh Comely* **similar to Iceberg Press's other title:** *The Simple Things***?**

We like to consider *The Simple Things* to be *Oh Comely*'s big sister. TST all about slow, simple living, and if it covers typical women's mag topics it does it in a more thoughtful way. Both magazines are about women banding together and supporting each other, they are not about passing judgement. Reading them should make people feel much better about themselves, and they should come away feeling empowered and positive. I would say *TST* is for an older market, and *Oh Comely* is for women in their teens/20s/30s and above. Although, both magazines would relate to all people if they picked up a copy I think.

What is the print circulation of *Oh Comely***?**

The circulation per issue is around 10,000 copies. Print is difficult, I think most people know that print magazines are struggling – not as many people are buying them as they used to. We have a large subscription base and send out more than

Above: images from the sustainable fashion photo shoot

Left: *Oh Comely* commissioned illustrations to promote the magazine's mission statement

3,000 copies of each issue to loyal subscribers. We also sell lots through our online shop, but most copies are sold through retailers. We increased our price from our latest issue (issue 42) from £5 to £6, which will make a huge difference to us – even if sales stay as they are now. But our sales appear to be increasing and we're now available in way more places – Waitrose, WHSmith (including travel stores at airports and station) and we have also just had a one-month trial in Sainsbury's.

Finance and marketing

How is the magazine funded?

The magazine is funded and supported by Iceberg Press. So most of our income comes from sales, ads and the events we create. We don't make lots of money and we do need more people to buy it in order to create a more sustainable future. But, we're trying to do more events, not just to make more money but also to get our brand out there to more people. For example, we recently did an issue launch dinner in the private dining room inside Spring in Somerset House. And we hosted a panel discussion for International Women's Day featuring amazing women who have featured on our pages.

We also like to work with advertisers on a more personal level; if we create content for them, we have to believe in what they're selling. Therefore, it feels much more genuine. We only sell ads to eclectic and ethical companies who fit with our ethos. We don't want ads to stand out, or ads to make us look like we're selling something just because we have been given a pot of money, that's not what we're about at all.

Although you are a print publication, how much do you reply on the internet and social media to promote and market your magazine?

I think it would be very hard not to have a presence online these days, especially as a form of media. We still always encourage people to buy the print magazine, and most of the content will never be posted online, but places like Instagram are a great place for us to meet our readers and form a sort of online community. We love seeing people post pics of themselves reading the magazine for example.

Every time we post a picture of the magazine on social media or on our blog, it encourages people to buy a copy of the print magazine directly from us, we usually sell a few magazines from our online shop on the back of that post.

Audience

Could you characterise the typical *Oh Comely* reader?

18-35-year-old creative, intelligent women who may or may not be settled into careers and are looking for inspiration from other women/interesting characters. *Oh Comely* readers are educated and politically aware and looking for a unique and thought-provoking look at the kind of lives they aspire to lead. They like spending money and time on the things that matter to them – art, culture, music, theatre, clothes, jewellery, experiences, travel, home, craft/creative projects... Most don't have children yet, but if they do, they're not the kind of mothers who just want to read baby magazines.

The mission of *Oh Comely* is to create a community for like-minded creative women who want interesting/reflective/

Every time we post a picture of the magazine on social media or on our blog, it encourages people to buy a copy of the print magazine directly from us

oh comely

stories / culture / curiosities / makers / ideas

Learnings from lipstick
Re-dressing gender • Writing in cafés
make up a life

issue 43 · £

thoughtful features. It provides inspiration, humour, intellect and fun times.

It's a voice speaking to open-minded women in an interesting way, helping them to form their views on the world, their lives, their careers and what they buy and make.

Media Language

How would you characterise the design aesthetic?

The magazine's design reflects the words, it's thoughtful, beautiful – the clean and minimal layout allows the words and pictures to shine. We work very closely with illustrators who create original works of art for our features. We love natural portrait photos to accompany interviews too, capturing people – no matter how famous – as themselves, as they are in that moment. No photoshopping or editing – I do not believe in airbrushing, and I am surprised at how many magazines still do that.

We do more styled beauty and fashion shoots. But again, they always have a meaning, for example, our issue 42 fashion story, Yours Sustainably, featured only ethical brands and sent a clear message about questioning our attitude to 'fast fashion', making us question our own impact on the world.

Why do you have illustrated covers?

I came on board as editor for issue 38 – this issue marked our first ever illustrated cover. I wanted to make a change. Every issue before that had a woman on the cover, the idea was that it was an unknown woman, but mostly it was just a model – which to me didn't reflect what the mag was all about. So I changed the formula; every issue we work with an illustrator to create a piece of art that speaks – even in an abstract way – about what's in the issue. We also decided that every cover illustration should have a female form of some kind on it.

The latest issue's cover (issue 42) is by Laura Callaghan. This is the only cover under my editorship that hasn't been commissioned for us. The piece is from Laura's body of work, but it couldn't have spoken about the issue better if we'd got her to create it from scratch – which is why we picked it. The issue's theme is Spring Clean, so quite literally there's the rubbish

Photo by Tean Roberts

on the floor, but it also shows hints at wider themes – the symbol of fallen patriarchy, the confident and strong looking intersectional women and the colours/clothes hint at what's in our sustainable fashion feature.

Representation

What percentage of your team are women? How important is it that the magazine is made by women?

We're a core small team of four women and we all work part time on the magazine. We work with a number or freelancers too – both men and women. I think it's important that a magazine for women is created by lots of women – but I always want our contributors to include men too. I made a decision when I came on board that I only wanted to feature interviews with women in the media and arts – men have enough platforms – and this felt like the right move at that time, although this may not always be the case, magazines should be reactive and change to fit the times they are talking about. That's the whole point. They can't stay the same or follow the same formula forever, so who knows what might change even by our next issue.

And finally...

How do you feel about the future of the print/ magazine publishing?

The trickiest question of all. I'd like to think that now's the time that magazines like us will come into our own and truly thrive. My heart will always be with print magazines, and reading on screen just isn't the same. It truly breaks my heart when I see another print title die, but I guess we just have to keep creating a magazine that people actually want to read, that makes them feel a bit better about themselves. I truly believe there will always be a place for print.

Print is special, and so much love goes into each and every issue of *Oh Comely*. We make sure that every page is filled with magic, it's supposed to be a luxurious read, one that cannot be achieved with online content. I believe that magazines will start to rise again, as many people realise the danger of too much time glued to their screens.

Alice Snape is editor of *Oh Comely* magazine.

Further reading

www.ohcomely.co.uk

Read the full, unedited interview in our subscribers area https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/media-magazine/mmag-login

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stories / culture / curiosities / makers / ideas

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We also like to work with advertisers
on a more personal level, if we create
content for them, we have to believe
in what they're selling. Therefore,
it feels much more genuine.

ARE YOU TELLING THE TRUTH?

Roy Stafford examines issues of reality and authenticity in Sarah Polley's brilliant film, *Stories We Tell*.

Documentary filmmakers have long tried to find 'better' ways to 'capture reality' through new camera technologies but ultimately this is a futile exercise.

What's your story? If you had to write the story of your life so far, what events would you include and how would you present them? If you asked your family to write a story about you, would they each pick the same events and present them in the same way? What about your best friend or that person you think doesn't like you? Whose would be the 'true' story?

We all use stories. They help us to explore the world and to find our place in it. We need stories to help us determine our identity. Stories told within and about families are potentially the most intimate and the most scary if we discover things we hadn't known about before. To make your family's stories public is a brave or perhaps foolish enterprise, yet that is what Sarah Polley did with the 2012 film *Stories We Tell*.

The process of 'telling' (or 'narrating' as media/literary theory would have it) a story is just as important as selecting events and characters and structuring a narrative. In her film, Sarah Polley begins by asking her father, one of the principal narrators of the Polley family story, to read an extract from Margaret Atwood's novel *Alias Grace* to illustrate this:

> **When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you're telling it, to yourself or to someone else.**

This is the key to *Stories We Tell*. During Sarah Polley's eventful young life as a child star of film and TV, one of her siblings remarked that she didn't look much like her Dad. It became a family joke but it haunted the child. In the week of Sarah's 11th birthday her mother, Diane, died and Sarah and her father Michael became close as her older siblings were now all living away. In her late twenties and by now a successful filmmaker, having switched roles to producer, writer and director, Sarah decided to investigate the stories about her family and about her own birth. She found herself 'in' the story and then had to decide how to structure it and how to narrate it.

Self-reflexivity

The Eduqas A Level specification describes Polley's approach to documentary as 'self-reflexive'. In simple terms this means that as she presents the events in her documentary, Polley also foregrounds the process of recording and editing the material she has created and selected (the limited 'found' footage from the family archive and from Canadian TV). In a sense she is making a documentary about documentaries, reflecting on her film's formal properties as well as what it means in terms of representations. We see her setting up microphones and lights to interview her siblings, three of whom have film industry experience. Perhaps the only aspect she doesn't reflect on is her film's institutional status: we don't see the crucial negotiations with her producer at the National Film Board of Canada (NFB).

One of the most revealing and moving moments of the film (it happens two or three times) is when Polley herself is seated at the mixing desk in a recording studio while her father Michael is in the audio booth reading from his version of the family story. Sarah stops him and asks him to repeat a line. These repeated lines usually come at emotional moments in the narrative. Does Michael speak the line differently the second time? These moments, in a film lasting 108 minutes, may seem relatively insignificant but when we reflect on them, they offer up several insights about documentary.

Michael is reading his story. In interrupting him, Sarah is taking control. His second reading has been mediated by her intervention. By staging the scene in this way, Polley is foregrounding the process of making her film. She is also 'performing' in her own film – in which she is seen asking questions of interviewees or

The multi-talented actor, writer, producer and director, Sarah Polley

wielding a hand-held movie camera (these scenes are all shot by the film's cinematographer Iris Ng). Her documentary is therefore both self-reflexive and performative. These are two of the 'modes' of documentary discussed by Stella Bruzzi (2000/2006) engaging with the work of Bill Nichols (1991). Polley's approach could be seen to be oppositional to other modes such as the expository, observational or interactive. The first of these, expository, makes the unseen filmmaker seem almost omniscient in the construction of a narrative. The other two present a narrative in which events appear to be simply captured by a camera rather than mediated by a self-conscious filmmaker, although in the interactive we do see the filmmakers engaging with their subjects.

Grierson, Pennebaker and the NFB

The OCR specification requires students to study the significance of John Grierson and D. A. Pennebaker – filmmakers who, in some ways, are identified with the expository (Grierson) and observational (Pennebaker) modes. Grierson founded the National Film Board of Canada and by the 1960s the NFB was a leading producer of all kinds of documentaries and was internationally recognised as innovative in the development of new camera technologies for Direct Cinema and cinéma vérité (specific observational and interactive documentary modes). Innovation didn't end there and when Sarah Polley spoke to Anita Lee at the NFB in 2008 they discussed ideas which would lead to Polley being bracketed with filmmakers such as Michael Moore and Nick Broomfield – two of the 'filmmaker theorists' listed in the Eduqas specification – as performative documentarists who appear in their films as leading actors in their own narratives.

Truth and Formal Experimentation

Stories We Tell is a controversial film, not just because of the 'reveal' about Sarah Polley's 'genetic father' (and the pressure that Sarah puts on some interviewees), but also because of its formal strategies. Although Diane Polley, Sarah's mother, was a well-known actor in Canada on stage and on TV, audiences watching *Stories We Tell* may still be surprised at the amount

of 'home movie' footage of the Polley family that appeared to be available to use in the film. It's not until the final credits that some audiences realise they have been watching re-created scenes shot on Super 8mm film and featuring actors playing the younger versions of the principal characters in the story. Does this invalidate the principles of documentary? Not really. When John Grierson directed his own film *Drifters* in 1929 and then became the leading producer of British documentary films in the 1930s, it was common practice to 're-construct' scenes that could not be filmed in situ because of the limitations of camera technology (e.g. shooting scenes below deck in a trawler or down a coal mine). The 'truth' of the actions performed was not in doubt, even if the process was not authentic.

There is some genuine home movie footage in *Stories We Tell*, such as that shot by Michael Polley on a trip to England with Diane. But doesn't Sarah trick us with use of Super 8 mm film to deliberately re-construct 'home movies'? Or is this just her attempt to create a 'realism effect'? Documentary filmmakers have long tried to find 'better' ways to 'capture reality' through new camera technologies but ultimately this is a futile exercise.

Since the 1990s, digital cameras and computer-generated images (CGI) have undermined the idea of 'photographic truth' – the claim to a direct connection between the real world and images captured through a camera lens. Apart from the 8 mm footage, *Stories We Tell* was a digital shoot. Are the shots of Sarah and her interviewees any more or any less 'truthful' than the re-created scenes?

One of Sarah Polley's interviewees states that 'the crucial function of art is to tell the truth' and Polley herself has invested in the various versions of the truth as told by each of her interviewees. Polley finds her truth by attempting to tell not just her own story, but also that of all the other members of her family and the various friends and colleagues of Diane and Michael.

Stories We Tell was well received by critics and was distributed widely, winning many prizes – an unusual experience for English language Canadian films which, unlike French language Canadian films, struggle to find audiences at home or abroad. At a time of concern about opportunities for female filmmakers and female stories it also represents a film about a woman's story produced, written, directed and photographed by women.

Roy Stafford hosts The Case for Global Film, a blog discussing everything that isn't Hollywood (and a little bit that is). The blog lists 117 posts on Hollywood. Check them out at https://itpworld. wordpress. com/category/hollywood/

Moviestore collection Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

Polley on the set of *Stories We Tell* (2012)

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Producer Anita Lee discusses the genesis of *Stories We Tell* in this clip:

http://www.cbc.ca/arts/the-filmmakers/considering-the-unflinching-honesty-of-sarah-polley-and-the-stories-she-s-told-1.4224320

Sarah Polley

Stories We Tell is listed as one of the study film options for Documentary in both the Eduqas and OCR A Level Film specifications.

Director Sarah Polley (born 1979) is a major figure in Canadian film culture as well as an important social/political activist. She started as a child actor aged 4 and appeared in many films and TV productions up to 2010. Since then she has focused on producing, writing and directing. Her most recent work, as both producer and writer, was the six-part mini-series *Alias Grace*, an adaptation of the novel by Margaret Atwood which is currently available on Netflix.

In a sense she is making a documentary about documentaries, reflecting on her film's formal properties as well as what it means in terms of representations. We see her setting up microphones and lights to interview her siblings, three of whom have film industry experience.

Sam Hiscock explains why Jafar Panahi's *Taxi Tehran* is essential viewing for those studying global cinema.

TAXI
FOR PANAHI

Convicted in 2010 for 'colluding with the intention to commit crimes against the country's national security and propaganda against the Islamic Republic', Jafar Panahi, director of the rather wonderful *Taxi Tehran* (2015) is currently banned from making films for 20 years. He's also banned from travelling abroad, banned from giving interviews and, for the first part of his sentence he was banned from going outside, effectively living under house-arrest in Iran. Throughout all this he's managed to make three films. The first, pointedly titled *This Is Not A Film* (2011), was famously smuggled out of Iran to the Cannes film Festival on a flash-drive secreted inside a cake, which could only have been more exciting if Panahi had been inside the cake himself. *Taxi Tehran* (2015) is the third of his post-ban films and it's fair to say that it acts as heartening evidence of a filmmaker who despite all attempts to quieten him, refuses to be silent.

On the surface the film is deceptive in its simplicity; filmmaker, turned taxi driver Panahi drives around Tehran picking up a cross section of the kind of people you tend to find hailing cabs in Tehran. During their cab rides they talk about what's happening in their lives and the issues within society that affect them. It looks like a documentary and yet, it isn't. These people are, to varying degrees, acting. Some of them, like Panahi's niece Hana Saeidi are playing versions of themselves, others are very clearly

playing pre-constructed roles. The film feels like it occupies a space somewhere between documentary and fiction. This is a space that Iranian films have occupied before. The meta-cinema of Abbas Kiarostami is clearly an influence, particularly his 2002 film *Ten*, which depicts a series of ten conversations between a female driver and her various passengers. Panahi's film is warmer in tone than Kiarostami's but the small, human concerns are similar.

Filmed surreptitiously over 15 days, using a predominantly unnamed cast – Panahi feared the risk of reprisals for people colluding with him to make the film – he kept the production as swift and as low-key as possible. According to his daughter, speaking to French newspaper, *Le Monde* in 2015, this included going to the lengths of removing the roof of the car to let in

Panahi's niece Hana, as herself, in *Taxi Tehran* (2015)

natural light so as to avoid having to use lighting equipment on the outside of the car, which might arouse suspicion. Quite how driving around in a homemade convertible taxi failed to draw the attention of the authorities one can only wonder, but one thing is for certain; the film is not merely a product of the constraints in which it was made, it is a defiant, artistic rejection of them. And the closer you look the clearer this becomes.

The Aesthetic

Let's begin with the aesthetic. The film looks like a documentary and this is mainly due to the cinematography. We are made fully aware of the camera from the opening shot of the film. A camera sits on a dashboard as the taxi drives through the streets of Tehran picking up passengers. We hear them talk but because the camera remains static we can't see who they are. The filming feels surreptitious, like we're privy to real conversations unfettered by the knowledge of being recorded. This looks like the kind of footage we're used to seeing not only in documentaries but in the user-created content of YouTube. Then suddenly, jerkily, we're pulled round to face the front passenger seat and the first of our 'characters' a man who turns out to be a thief who asks whether it is some kind of security device. Panahi uses other cameras that help construct this documentary aesthetic. The iPhone camera used to record the dying man's last will and testament, the back-seat camera positioned like a security camera just behind the front passenger seat and, most importantly Hana's camera; handheld, shaky, and inquisitive. Not only is Panahi making a film but others are too. And they're documenting what they see.

Hana and her Camera

Hana is arguably the star of the film. She's feisty, funny and has developed a taste for frappuccinos. She's also an aspiring filmmaker, working on a project for school. Hana is keen to document the journey home with her Uncle and she's determined to fulfil her school teacher's checklist for a distributable film under Iranian law. The overarching rule is that she must avoid the depiction of 'sordid reality' a disturbing concept that, in conversation with Panahi, is made to seem ridiculous.

Just before the hour mark Panahi leaves Hana on her own in the taxi. She films a street kid stealing dropped money from a newly married couple. They are oblivious to the theft as they're busy being filmed in their own narrative, the one of their wedding day. Her failed attempts to get him to return the money in anything more

Hana's failure to get the boy to give the money back successfully could also represent a wider concern about film's power to enact change; is Panahi suggesting that his 'political' power has been greatly over-estimated by the Iranian authorities?

Images courtesy of New Wave Films

Left: Jafar Panahi

Below: Iranian human rights lawyer, Nasrin Sotoudeh

Images courtesy of New Wave Films

than a half-hearted way are prompted by her concern that his theft has rendered her footage too real. It's a funny scene, and one that feels like it's begging to be read in a number of ways. On the one hand Hana's intervention lays bare the absurdity of the conditions she's attempting to fulfil; on the other, through the wedding videographer we're reminded of the process of selection that helps to construct the artificial 'reality' of all filmic documents. Hana's failure to get the boy to give the money back successfully could also represent a wider concern about film's power to enact change; is Panahi suggesting that his 'political' power has been greatly over-estimated by the Iranian authorities? By the end of the scene Hana's childlike desire to do what she's been told has stopped her creative process in its tracks. She's discovered how hard it is to make sense of a rule that doesn't. As Panahi drives her away from the kid and the newlyweds, Hana's silent frustration mirrors Panahi's; two filmmakers struggling to make sense of the constraints they've been forced to work under.

Nasrin Sotoudeh

Their journey takes them to Nasrin Sotoudeh, Panahi's final, and most defiantly symbolic pick-up. Sotoudeh is an Iranian human rights lawyer of international renown. Inevitably, her line of work has led to harassment, threats and, like Panahi, imprisonment. Also like Panahi, she spent part of her time in jail on hunger strike in response to her treatment.

This is when the film's performances and dialogue most feel like documentary. Sotoudeh sits up front carrying roses, the warmth between her and Panahi obvious. There's evidently little in the way of a script. They talk about work and their experiences. If we look at the mise-en-scène, the contrast with the film's opening shot is stark. At the start of the film the female teacher sat in the back seat, partly obscured by the imposing figure of the mugger, whose loud, mocking pronouncements similarly obscure her attempts to promote a more enlightened view of criminal punishment within Iran. Now, Sotoudeh sits alongside Panahi, at least an equal, her voice heard. The change feels deliberate and, despite the subject of their conversation, uplifting. Sotoudeh's presence also leads to the film's clearest moment of visual poetry; Hana picks up the rose, offered by Sotoudeh to the 'people of cinema' and she films it with her little camera. It's a lovely moment, a poetic contrast to the abrupt violence of the film's end.

Taxi Tehran (2015) is the third of his post-ban films and it's fair to say that it acts as heartening evidence of a filmmaker who despite all attempts to quieten him, refuses to be silent.

The Resolution

Panahi drives to Cheshmeh-Ali (Ali's Spring) to return a purse to one of the two old women who'd left it in the back of his cab. He parks up, checks they're at the spring before walking off with Hana to find them. We're left in the taxi, looking out past the rose on the dashboard, through the windscreen at them walking away. Moments later two helmeted men arrive on the back of a motorcycle. From the moment they appear it's clear they're up to something and Panahi's Taxi is the target. Are they thieves? Are they working for the police? The government? For the first time, from our position, alone inside the taxi we are made to feel vulnerable, to experience something of the worry and fear that Panahi himself might feel. As one of the men jogs towards the taxi the subsequent break-in feels inevitable. The sound of the smashing glass and the wrenching of the camera feel jarringly destructive. The black screen that follows acts as a symbol of their violent censure. And yet, here we are, having watched the film that survives, reassured by their failure to silence Panahi and impressed by the endurance of his art.

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TIDE
TO THE
KITCHEN SINK

If you want to understand a place and time, then look at their advertising. It is as good an indication of society's values, ideologies and aspirations as anything else. In this article, Jonathan Nunns examines a 1955 advertisement for Tide washing powder to see what it reveals about the socio-political context.

Advertising is, by nature, a condensed form of communication intended to imprint messages upon the psyche of its' demographic in seconds. Even in the past when methods of persuasion were less evolved, landing a powerful message quickly and memorably was paramount. This has been so for at least a hundred years, during which the mass media has marched, (largely) to the beat of advertising's drum. Funded by and therefore serving the needs of paymasters in the advertising industry, the media has sought to make itself a comfortable ideological home for the advertisements that jostle for space between and within the TV shows, articles, web pages and social media streams that make up their other content.

EDUQAS Media Studies features as a core text a Procter and Gamble washing powder advertisement from 1955, 'Tide's Got What Women Want'.

Understanding any text involves the skills of textual deconstruction. The vibrancy and excitement of the reds, the purity of the whites, the simplicity of language and direct mode of address; these things are important and will comprise a core element of your examination analysis. However, context remains king. Deep and thoughtful insight can only be had from understanding the historical moment, outlook and zeitgeist that determined the style/content of the message. That is the focus of this article.

Pixabay

The new America sought to reward returning servicemen with 'homes fit for heroes'. These new homes were the 'castles' that American husbands could be king of, with a dutiful wife and adoring children.

What (American) Women Want?

It was certainly a successful campaign; ad agency D'Arcy, Masius, Benton and Bowles' campaign helped make Tide the market leader for years to come. As an American ad, it was calibrated to reflect the aspirations and attitudes of the time and place. America had recently emerged from the trauma of World War Two and before that had suffered the economic devastation of the Great Depression. Emerging into the post war period, a new America was envisaged by the politicians and CEOs of the time. Stability and prosperity would be the foundation of this new USA.

Like the UK, wartime America had accommodated the enlistment of much of its male workforce into the military, by encouraging women out of the traditional homemaking roles expected of them and into the workplace. Women were trained to take on roles previously seen as for men only. Hence the famous 1940's propaganda poster 'Rosie the Riveter'.

After the war, policy makers feared that women, having tasted economic independence, would be reluctant to move aside for men expecting to resume their previous dominant socio-economic role. Film noir represented this in the character of the femme fatale, reflecting the fears of men who saw empowered, independent women as a threat to their economic and social entitlement.

In response, a concerted effort was made, spearheaded by the media, to force women from the workplace and back into the home, to take up their erstwhile roles as wives and mothers. This drive was further energised by other forces of the era. The new America sought to reward returning servicemen with 'homes fit for heroes' which were actually the mass-produced 'little boxes made of ticky-tacky'; huge suburbs that soon sprawled from the congested cities. These new homes were the 'castles' that American husbands could be king of, with a dutiful wife and adoring children. Each of these homes could be filled with the new consumer goods entering the market, making for a handy confluence of interests between government and business. Women needed to be persuaded to make the home their aspirational focus and to define themselves by consumerism as primary spenders of their husband's incomes.

> The image of the 'perfect' housewife embracing her box of Tide contains a deeper meaning. She was symbolically embracing her family/ role in the world by literally embracing a domestic product, an Indexical Signifier of those values.

No wonder you women buy more TIDE than any other washday product!

TIDE'S GOT WHAT WOMEN WANT!

NO SOAP-NO OTHER "SUDS"-NO OTHER WASHING PRODUCT KNOWN-WILL GET YOUR WASH AS CLEAN AS TIDE!

ONLY TIDE DOES ALL THREE:

1. World's CLEANEST wash!
2. World's WHITEST wash!
3. Actually BRIGHTENS colors!

TIDE'S A SUDSING WHIZZ EVEN IN HARDEST WATER

THERE'S NOTHING LIKE PROCTER & GAMBLE'S TIDE

REMEMBER! TIDE GETS CLOTHES CLEANER THAN ANY OTHER WASHDAY PRODUCT YOU CAN BUY!

The Tide campaign acts as a microcosm of a broader onslaught inflicted on American women in the 1950s enforcing conformity. As Laura Mulvey and Stuart Hall might have it, patriarchal domination of the American elite led to Male Gaze media that prioritised the interests of men.

Time and Tide Wait for no Man

DMB&B's Tide campaign was, for a while, a successful attempt to turn back the clock on gender politics, redefining the idea of what the aspirational and successful American women should be. She would be trim and white, straight, concerned with her looks and eager to please her family and her man. Her focus would be domestic. Her success would be judged in terms of the perfection of that home and family. There she would find affirmation and fulfilment in the acceptance of her peers and the love of her family. The man might 'wear the trousers' and 'bring home the bacon' but she would fashion the perfect home.

Other female identities (gay, black, single, careerist etc.) were viewed as unacceptable in comparison to the ideal of the perfect wife and mother. Women were encouraged to view work as a stopgap on the way to marriage and motherhood. Those forced to work by circumstance or ambition were disdained as failures as true women.

In this climate of intense social pressure, the attitudes of Tide's Got What Women Want and similar ads of the era make sense. If women's fulfilment was to be found in the home and American industry enriched by their spending, then the image of the 'perfect' housewife embracing her box of Tide contains a deeper meaning. She was symbolically embracing her family/role in the world by literally embracing a domestic product, an Indexical Signifier of those values. Notice the love hearts fluttering, reinforcing the 'emotionality' expected in the stereotype of the 'perfect' woman. It reflects the perception that in her eyes and those of all who mattered, this product (and those like it), embodied the pathway to her success, and fulfilment.

Sexism and racism were common and much of the advertising of the day encouraged it. A woman who looked outside the home for fulfilment was un-American and selfish. Few ads featured women outside the house. Men were often absent, since their role was to be at work. The male in the home, when there, was expected to treat it as a haven. This was where he relaxed and his wife worked. Adverts such as the campaigns for Van Heusen clothing and Chase and Sanborn coffee (featuring a man spanking his wife for buying bad coffee) made clear who was expected to serve whom and the 'jokey' consequences of failure. Some ads made light of abuse, using straplines such as 'Have some fun, beat your wife tonight' with the 'funny' coda that he was actually being invited to beat her at bowling or some 'female' activity, such as cooking.

The Tide campaign acts as a microcosm of a broader onslaught inflicted on American women in the 1950s

enforcing conformity. As Laura Mulvey and Stuart Hall might have it, patriarchal domination of the American elite led to Male Gaze media that prioritised the interests of men. What was encoded was the need of the elite to control society, the intended decoded consumer response was to see the ideologies conveyed as normalised, natural and aspirational.

Mother's Little Helpers

The pressure to conform drove the majority of American women into early marriage and domesticity, whether that suited them or not. However, there was a price. Many women wondered if, with family, house and consumer goods in place 'this was it'? Was serving others all that life had to offer? Not surprisingly, the consumption of prescription anti-depressants amongst American women began to skyrocket. The boredom and social isolation of a domestic life took its toll. Women struggled to find the fulfilment which Tide and others promised.

This led, within a decade, to change. Educated women in particular began to coalesce around a movement that would seek to redefine gender politics and free women from the oppression of the 1950's. This movement would become Second Wave Feminism, creating a pathway to changes that would include legal entitlement to equal pay, birth control, abortion and anti-discrimination.

Currently, when *The Handmaid's Tale*, (Hulu, USA, 2017) looks like the manifesto for a second term Trump/Pence Presidency, the prospects for American women might seem grim. However, the Tide ad shows how much things have improved. We need to understand and learn from the past to make the future a more equal place. Ads contain no fundamental morality. It is 'the gaze' behind them that has the power. Control 'the gaze', control the message. The past may be set; the future is not. Is this the modern moral of Tide's sinister primary coloured time capsule?

Jonathan Nunns is a Coursework Moderator and Head of Media Studies at Collyer's College.

Grace *and* Frankie

An Exploration of Sexual Identity and Relationships

Erica Parise / Netflix

Boy meets girls, boy marries girl, they live happily ever after, right? Maybe not. Caroline Reid suggest a shift in the way relationships are portrayed in mainstream entertainment.

Martin Sheen and Sam Waterston as Richard and Sol, struggling to carve a new identity as a homosexual couple in Grace and Frankie

A s a nation in love with the sitcom format, where we regularly absorb simple relationship narratives as a form of escapism, we have arguably become used to the idea of heteronormativity in mainstream Western entertainment. We are almost 'conditioned' or – to use Gerbner's term – 'cultivated' to accept heterosexual relationships as the 'norm' in the media we regularly consume.

In the 90s and early 00s, many UK and US sitcoms strongly promoted the idea of heteronormativity as part of the narrative strands within the overarching series themes. Sitcoms such as 90s favourite *Friends* (Warner Bros. 1994-2004), depicted heterosexual relationships as conventional and preferable (Ross and Rachel, Monica and Chandler, Joey and whichever supermodel was cameoing in that episode). They regularly mocked the idea of same-sex relationships: Ross's ex-wife Carol and her new partner, Susan are the butt of many jokes and Chandler is ridiculed throughout for having homosexual 'qualities'. There are also clear signs of transphobia in the way that his drag queen father is depicted – they refuse to use the feminine pronoun when talking about her and

We seem to be living in a time of notable shift in the representations of sexuality, gender and relationships on our screens, both big and small, which is encouraging audiences to reconsider what we see as 'normal.'

Lily Tomlin and Jane Fonda star as unlikely besties, Grace and Frankie

Erica Parise / Netflix

she's addressed more frequently as Charles than Helen. The addition of *Friends* to Netflix has opened up a whole new audience of millennials who have been outraged by the out-dated representation of gender and LGBT themes within the programme. A recent YouTube video by Tijana Mimula assembled all the sexist and homophobic references and it amounted to a whopping 50 minutes of footage. Were the creators of *Friends* homophobic, or were attitudes so significantly less progressive back then?

We seem to be living in a time of notable shift in the representations of sexuality, gender and relationships on our screens, both big and small, which is encouraging audiences to reconsider what we see as 'normal.' Netflix's Emmy Award nominated *Grace and Frankie* (2015- present), attempts to secede from the constraints of heteronormative relationships that we have come to expect from sitcoms, and instead, lends focus to the positive promotion of strong female relationships and same-sex marriage.

Grace and Frankie establishes a break away from heterosexual constraints by focusing largely on the developing 'queer' female friendship between the titular characters. Critical film theorist, Sarah Smyth, developed this theory in her analysis of *Frances Ha* (Baumbach, 2012). Smyth argues that the friendship between the two female characters in the film has a similar structure to a conventional romantic narrative, minus a sexual relationship. Smyth said:

'Within the heteronormative romcom genre and, indeed, wider Western society… the friendship between Frances and Sophie is distinctly queer.'

This queer friendship is never explicitly homosexual, but is also not confined to being purely asexual.

This notion of queer friendship flourishes in *Grace and Frankie* as the direct result of a life-changing disruption: Grace and Frankie's husbands, Sol and Richard, leave them after years of marriage to pursue a homosexual relationship together.

The narrative set-up of the series is vital as it connects to the concept that female friendships within film and television are often centralised around radical themes and ideas; the opening episode where Sol and Richard declare their love for each other and request divorce from their respective wives, demonstrates this notion. The initial conflict forces these unlikely friends together and despite class and cultural differences they develop a friendship based on the shared experience of the men in their lives letting them down.

What is interesting about the relationships within the Netflix series is that in this new dynamic, the relationship which flourishes the most isn't that of the long-repressed homosexual husbands but of the two female friends. Grace and Frankie become dependent on each other, support and love each other; much like a heterosexual couple. This, again, relates to the concept of queer female friendship and the pleasure and satisfaction that the women are able to find platonically with each other rather than with men.

Erica Parise / Netflix

As the female relationship between Grace and Frankie develops, the women find ways to satisfy their natural urges, largely without the need for a man by banding together to design vibrators for women their age; yet another way to show that they do not need a member of the opposite sex in their lives as they take their desires and needs into their own hands. However, the narrative shifts slightly, as both silver-haired singletons experiment with heterosexual relationships. This challenges the platonic relationship the characters have built together, as for a time, Frankie believes she finds her new soul mate in the form of her boyfriend, Jacob, who tempts her away from Grace to Santa Fe.

This narrative twist in *Grace and Frankie* is a familiar trope that we see in many sitcoms, often between protagonists of the opposite sex, and it closely follows Todorov's Equilibrium Theory. First there is balance between the two friends in which their queer female relationship develops, and then the arrival of Jacob disrupts this equilibrium. The true value of the women's friendship is demonstrated when Frankie realises she cannot live without Grace. She leaves Jacob, thus returning to Grace and repairing the equilibrium. What remains unusual about this narrative twist is that the focus is on female intimacy which flourishes, rather than a heteronormative romantic sexual relationship, which, ultimately fails. This narrative disruption is instrumental in reaffirming Grace and Frankie's queer friendship as the women discover

that female friendship is a much more meaningful form of intimacy than romance from the opposite sex.

Grace and Frankie's queer female friendship is juxtaposed by the flourishing homosexual relationship between their ex-husbands, Sol and Richard, who are the binary opposites of the title characters. For the most part, Sol and Richard struggle to find their footing as older gay men. Born in an era when queer sexual identity was largely closeted, their new 'out' marriage brings strain into their once hidden relationship. This is further complicated by Richard's conservative, middle-class upbringing and his complex relationship with his estranged mother who does not agree with his new lifestyle. When these respected and conventional lawyers find themselves faced with a whole new world of possibilities and lifestyle choices, Richard in particular, finds it difficult to adapt.

The men spend the majority of the season attempting to establish their new identities. They become gay rights activists, join an all gay theatre and experiment with an open relationship with a younger man.

To an extent, Sol and Richard neglect each other in favour of exploring these new identities. This suggests that their individual sexual identities take precedence over their marriage. David Gauntlett said that

> **'Gender and sexuality remain at the core of how we think about our identities'.**

This statement supports the complexity of Sol and Richard's characters and how their new lifestyle contributes heavily to their exploration into their individual sexuality.

If we contrast this homosexual relationship to the less complicated and fulfilling female friendship between Grace and Frankie, we can see that, to an extent, the women find it easier to adjust to their new identities than their male counterparts.

Grace and Frankie also challenges representations of age. The leading characters are at a stage of life which many might see as a time for retirement, however for our titular leading ladies, this is the beginning of their new lives. There are very few sitcoms that focus on characters in their 70s and fewer still that focus on their sex lives. This contrasts

Erica Parise / Netflix

Netflix is an on-demand platform that has less constraints than terrestrial television and so can afford to allow for more varied themes and representations which might otherwise be considered too risky.

Glossary

Queer Theory
Queer theory emerged from women's studies and queer studies; it includes both queer readings of texts and the theorisation of 'queerness' itself. The word 'queer' can also refer to the mismatch between gender and sex. This mismatched peculiarity can be seen throughout the comedy series, not just between the female characters, but also between Grace and Frankie's ex-husbands, Sol and Richard.

Queer Female Friendship
Is a concept that was introduced by Sarah Smyth where she notes the complex relationship between the lead female characters in 2012 film, *Frances Ha*. Smyth explores the idea that rather than the conventional 'heterosexual' relationships we expect to see on our screens, instead, the film promotes the idea that women can find love, satisfaction and fulfilment from their female friendships without the need to rely on the tired trope of 'woman wants man, woman chases man, woman gets man'.

Heteronormative/Heteronormativity
This relates to the idea that heterosexuality is promoted as the typical or preferred sexual orientation and relationships are mostly between people of the opposite sex.

with how older male and female characters are often represented in the media as frail and sexless. *Grace and Frankie* does not shy away from exploring age and sexuality in great detail, partly due to the institutional context.

Netflix is an on-demand platform that has less constraints than terrestrial television and so can afford to allow for more varied themes and representations which might otherwise be considered too risky. Netflix continue to challenge audience's expectations. For example, 2017 sitcom *Disjointed* focuses on an older single woman running a medical marijuana dispensary. This demonstrates the distinct shift in the sitcom format by focusing on radical themes and representations – much like *Grace and Frankie* which pushes relationship and sexual boundaries.

Grace and Frankie is predominantly designed to target an older audience with the key focus on female friendship and same sex relationships. However, the sitcom also appeals to a younger, open-minded audience due to the accessibility of Netflix and the fresh themes and ideas. The contrast of characters, relationships and identities in *Grace and Frankie* make for an entertaining, engaging and bracing series that will hopefully continue to push the boundaries of representation and sexual identity we see on our screens today.

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Melissa Moseley / Netflix

Merchant, Slave, Assassin
Aveline

O ver the last decade, debates surrounding the representation of women in video games have rapidly progressed. Just ten years ago, we would expect to see damsels in distress, women frequently framed as rewards, and Lara Croft still being squeezed into a boob tube and hot pants. Harmful and immature representations like these resulted in eye-rolling from the mainstream media well into the late noughties.

Whilst the days of female misrepresentation in video games are far from over, the paradigm has measurably changed since the industry started receiving widespread scrutiny. In 2017 alone, we saw so many women in mainstream video games that the 2018 BAFTA games awards gave five of their six nominations for best performer in a video game to female voice actresses. Ashly Burch as Aloy in *Horizon Zero Dawn*, Laura Bailey as Nadine Ross in *Uncharted: The Lost Legacy*, and Melina Juergens as Senua in *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* were just three of the nominees.

Before feminism and video games became popularly associated around 2014, strong female characters in games were much rarer, and not always well marketed. Legends like Jill Valentine, Faith Connors, and Samus Aran have become timeless cultural touchstones of gaming fandom, but not all revolutionary women in gaming enjoy such prevalence.

Laurence Russell examines this unique and layered character and asks why games companies are so afraid to write female and BAME characters.
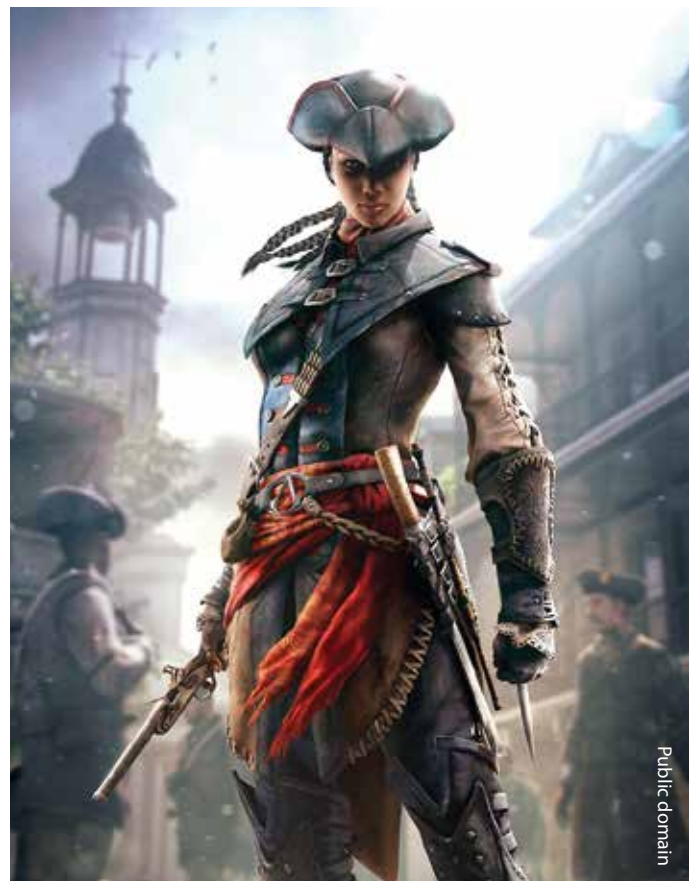
Aveline de Grandpré, the female protagonist from *Assasin's Creed: Liberation*

Public domain

Introducing Aveline

Aveline de Grandpré is one such underrated figure. Aveline is the protagonist of *Assassin's Creed: Liberation* a game released on Playstation's new PSVita handheld gaming device in 2012 (created in an attempt to tap into the mobile gaming boom) and then later re-released for home consoles in 2014 as *Assassin's Creed: Liberation HD*. Aveline is the first ever playable female assassin in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, and arguably the most well-implemented.

Liberation takes place in 18th century Louisiana before the abolition of slavery. Aveline, the game's protagonist, is a mixed-race assassin born of a wealthy French merchant and an African slave. She joins the Assassins in secret to spearhead their campaign to end slavery and maintain peace and liberty in New Orleans, whilst publicly running her father's merchant company.

What makes Aveline unique is her mechanics: Liberation was designed with the most extensive social stealth system of all of the *Assassin's Creed* games, which was closely linked to Aveline's gender and ethnicity. In addition to her assassin armour, Aveline has two special disguises that help her infiltrate guarded locations and catch her targets unawares.

Plural Identities

She can don the 'lady outfit', a lavish green dress and feathered hat. Whilst in this disguise Aveline can bribe guards to allow her to pass checkpoints, charm them into escorting her around the city, and enter exclusive parties of colonial high society. In this disguise, men fawn over her, enchanted with her elegance, wit, and beauty. Whilst they are enamoured with her, Aveline can glean clues from her enemies, or lure them away to dark corners where she can assassinate them.

She can also adopt the 'slave outfit' of rough and innocuous labourers' clothes. In this disguise, Aveline can pretend to run errands or perform menial labour, making her unimportant in the eyes of guards, who think nothing of her presence in servants'

quarters, dockyards, or plantations. This disguise gives her the biggest advantage in stealth, allowing her the mobility that her restrictive dress does not allow. However when the player commits any crime in this disguise guards will respond much more quickly and violently. Even bumping into a guard in the street can cause them to lash out at Aveline.

The commentary behind these mechanics is quite clear. As a high society lady, Aveline is assumed to be a tanned white woman, worthy of all the privilege, courtesy, and protection that patriarchal colonial culture can muster. As a light-skinned black slave, she is seen as property – if she is seen at all – and deserving of harsh discipline if she steps an inch out of line.

By expertly weaving in between social hierarchies, Aveline becomes the perfect assassin, able to elude, locate, kill, and even manipulate her targets wherever they protect themselves. Aveline is just as capable of the combat superiority and death-defying acrobatics of her predecessors, but unlike them, she uses her identity as a weapon too. By using her enemies' underestimation of her against them, she turns the fragile systems of oppression, designed to subjugate both women and African Americans, into her strength. Legendary black and creole women in colonial history, such as the white-passing entrepreneur Mary Ellen Pleasant, or the legendary abolitionist spy Harriet Tubman, directly inspire Aveline.

> What makes Aveline unique is her mechanics: *Liberation* was designed with the most extensive social stealth system of all of the Assassin's Creed games, which was closely linked to Aveline's gender and ethnicity.

Choose your weapon!
Aveline's multiple identities

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The Silent Assassin

Systems of oppression have long been established to be the antagonists of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, as the player hunts down tyrants and oppressors who exploit their people. Naturally, you might expect the assassins themselves to be made up of those who have suffered most from historical oppression, although this isn't always the case. Of the eight playable assassins set in American or European settings, Aveline is one of only three who are not white, and one of just two who are not male.

Of these playable assassins, Aveline is unfortunately one of the least known, probably due to the fact that *Assassin's Creed: Liberation* was being developed with a tight budget and schedule and given a quietly advertised release on an unpopular system. Whilst innovatively designed and ambitious, the game is quite short, reuses an enormous number of assets from previous games, and is filled with bugs. Although it shares many foibles with other games in the franchise, it was not reviewed well, and many fans of the franchise were barely even aware of Aveline before the game was re-released for home consoles.

Marketing *Liberation*

From the integrated features and marketing of Liberation, we can see that the game was produced somewhat experimentally, trying to minimise risk and maximise audiences through expanded horizontal integration.

Advertising material produced for *Liberation*'s release emphasised themes like urban settings, the boredom of the commute to work, the game's theme of fighting slavery, and light-skinned black actresses presented centrally and dynamically, both playing the game and portraying Aveline herself. From this we can assume that *Liberation*'s marketing in America targeted liberal, urban commuters, happy to see African American women represented powerfully. This contrasts with common western media marketing designed to appeal to traditionalist white male audiences who prefer to keep their video games at home.

Liberation was released on the same day as *Assassin's Creed III*, and made use of a special 'linking' feature, which would connect the player's PSVita running *Liberation* to their Playstation 3 running *Assassin's Creed III*. This would unlock valuable exclusive content integral to the plot of Liberation. This system was an experimental and somewhat reprehensible foray into Ubisoft's methods of ensuring horizontal integration, since it prevented the handheld player from experiencing the game's full story unless they owned a costly home console and an additional triple A *Assassin's Creed* game.

Despite the quality of *Assassin's Creed: Liberation* and its marketing, Aveline is recognised today in the *Assassin's Creed* fandom as a unique, likeable character who has inspired her own fandom online. In fact, despite *Liberation* only making 25% of the sales that *Assassin's Creed III* did, Aveline is almost universally ranked as a better written, superior character to *Assassin's Creed III's* protagonist, Connor, when fans retroactively compare the assassins.

The Representation of women in the Games Industry

Female characters in video games have come a long way over the last ten years. Well-designed, likeable, and conscientious female characters are more common in modern video games, in keeping with a series of high profile feminist events in popular culture. *Liberation*'s release in 2012 arrived just before this paradigm shift started gathering steam in 2014, and predates the new practically designed Lara Croft reboot in 2013.

In this way, Aveline is ahead of her time. She is a sensibly dressed, powerful woman of colour with natural hair, embracing both sides of her heritage, who frequently questions patriarchy from a position of physical and intellectual power. In short, Aveline is something of a living wish-list of modern feminist representation theory, and doesn't get half the recognition she deserves.

2018 is ready for more women like Aveline de Grandpré. We live in an era crying out for better representation of our marginalised communities, eager to support them whenever they appear. In a post-*Black Panther* world, there is no need to quietly experiment with characters like Aveline to gauge audience demand before considering them as protagonists in mainstream media texts. Aveline is ahead of her time for the era we are entering, where women and people of colour can claim their fair share of powerful representation in media, and inspire a fairer world.

Laurence Russell is an A Level media technician, a freelance media journalist, and an aspiring author.

In his book, 'The Cultural Industries', David Hesmondhalgh said that companies tried to minimise risk and maximise audiences through vertical and horizontal integration. *Assassin's Creed: Liberation* fits this theory perfectly. When developing and publishing a game featuring a non-white, non-male protagonist (not the norm in the games industry), the production company, Ubisoft in a media partnership with Sony Playstation, are taking a risk – will audiences engage with female mixed race characters? To minimise this risk, they developed the game's initial release exclusively for the portable, more niche PSVita console. This meant they wouldn't run the risk of alienating their core audience using the PS3 home console.

However to maximise the audience Playstation used horizontal integration by using this 'linking' feature so that gamers with both a PSVita and a PS3 home console could unlock special material. This sort of exclusive content encourages enthusiastic gamers to own additional gaming hardware in order to enjoy the full story of Liberation. In this way, Playstation are also maximising their audience because they produce and sell the device required to access the content (the consoles).

Ubisoft minimise risk by testing out the reception of their game on one console before porting it across multiple platforms as *Assassins Creed: Liberation HD* for the Xbox and Microsoft Windows (via the Playstation Network, Xbox Live Arcade and Steam).

Images of Aveline from the U.S. marketing campaign

From the integrated features and marketing of *Liberation*, we can see that the game was produced somewhat experimentally, trying to minimise risk and maximise audiences through expanded horizontal integration.
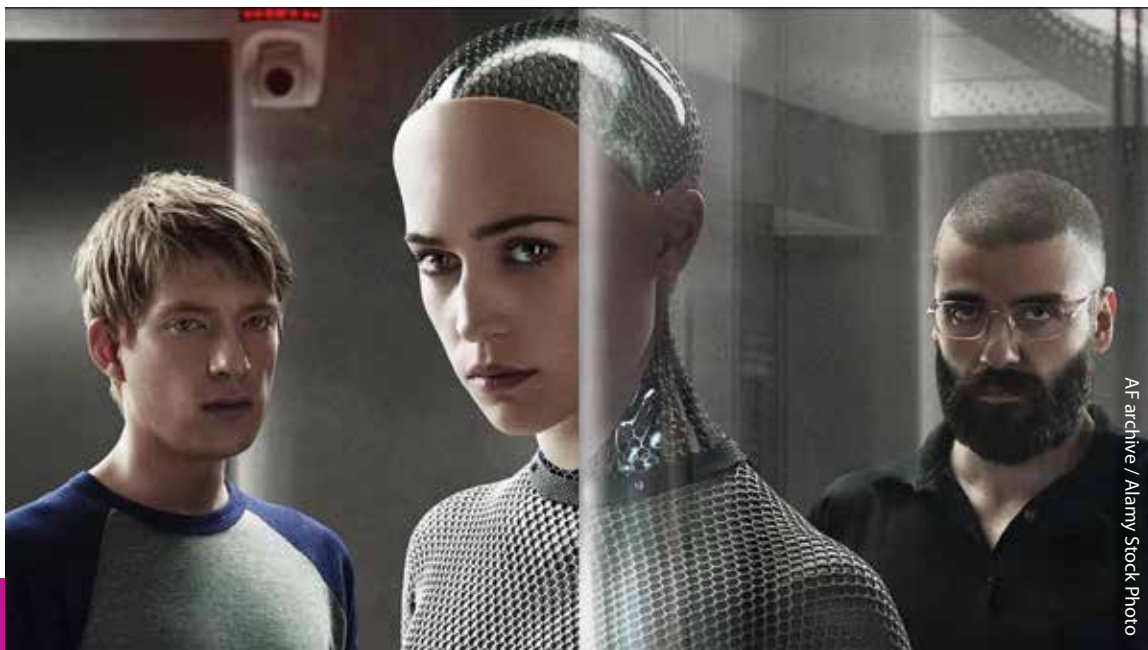
(S)EX_MACHINA

AF archive / Alamy Stock Photo

Alex Garland's sci-fi Drama *Ex Machina* certainly raises questions about the reality of the looming artificial intelligence threat, but it's the underpinning issues of voyeurism that make us question gender representations and more specifically, the way in which we are forced to view female characters as disposable objects through the eyes of a heterosexual man. Ella Johnston investigates.

Alex Garland's directorial debut, *Ex Machina*, follows the journey of young coding and computer enthusiast Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson) who seemingly wins a competition to take part in the ultimate Turing test: Nathan (Oscar Isaacs) has created a humanoid robot, Ava, the most sophisticated artificial intelligence prototype ever made, and Caleb must interact with her to judge whether she is capable of thought, emotion and connection. As Caleb becomes entranced by Ava's charm and delicacy, Nathan's darker side becomes more apparent. With Caleb trapped between the two, Nathan is cast in a different light, and Ava might not be as delicate or human and she once seemed.

Aside from the gender politics, *Ex Machina* in my opinion makes for a great film. The HD CGI enhances the performances from an eclectic cast to create the most (in Ava and Kyoko's cases, ironically) real characters. The use of colour and visual style is slick and clean, everything you expect for a film about artificial life, with the narrative enigmas and plot twists hard to second guess, creating a fresh and entertaining sci-fi film. The chemistry between the characters makes it easy to believe that artificial intelligence could be vividly real and interactive, but it's the blatant juxtaposition of male power versus female subservience within *Ex Machina* that really steals the show.

Sexy, or just Sexist?

There is plenty of material within the film to suggest that *Ex Machina* is an overtly sexist film through its objectification of women and the microcosm of patriarchal society in which it is set. This is most evident within Nathan's secluded bachelor pad and laboratory, where Caleb and Nathan create and observe, whilst Ava sits passively being observed, and Nathan's servile maid, Kyoko, is only seen attending to all of Nathan's needs. The film brings to mind Laura Mulvey's theory of the Male Gaze and voyeurism; the female characters, primarily Ava, are there to be studied or looked at – a key element of Mulvey's theories. The focus on Caleb, as the main protagonist, forces the audience to view the film through a heterosexual male's perspective, everything down to the cinematography – the camera lingering on Ava and Kyoko's bodies – to the intertextual references within the dialogue: 'through the looking glass' encourages the audience to gaze upon the female body from a man's perspective. The cameras in Ava's room allow the male characters to watch her, creating themes of voyeurism as we watch Ava undress, while the point of view shots from Caleb's position as Ava flirts with him easily allow for narcissistic identification – possibly leading to men believing that having robot women (or in

The focus on Caleb, as the main protagonist, forces the audience to view the film through a heterosexual male's perspective.

Lord of the dance! Oscaar Isaacs as the megalomaniac, Nathan, with his dancing clone, Kyoko, played by Sonoya Mizuno

Moviestore collection Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

There is plenty of material within the film to suggest that *Ex Machina* is an overtly sexist film through its objectification of women and the microcosm of patriarchal society in which it is set.

fact just women as objects) would allow them to seduce and attract as easily as Caleb does.

The voyeuristic encouragement within the film wouldn't be quite as bad if it wasn't for the constant states of undress that the female characters display throughout. Although Ava isn't exposing naked flesh for the majority of the film, arguably, seeing underneath her skin is even more exposing. However it's Nathan's countless 'old models' of A.I humoids stored away in cupboards bearing completely naked (albeit synthetic) skin on female bodies that is most disturbing; the collection of these bodies furthers the paradigm that women are objects of desire to be owned by men. Kyoko is the only exception to the nakedness of the female characters; however Garland's (or within the context of the film, Nathan's) use of costume (hot pants, white mini-dresses) could hardly be deemed modest.

Christine Geraghty's ideology that women are represented as belonging in the private space is clearly exemplified by Ava spending her entire life inside her room, like a domesticated pet, whilst Caleb and Nathan occupy the public domain; leaving the house whenever they please, and being connected with the outside world – all of which suggests that the film is keen to represent women in the dated ideology that patriarchal societies should leave women in submissive, backseat positions.

Female Agency

So, all of these clear gender representation divides should leave the film as a blatant promotion of sexism, right? Well, it isn't a black and white film either in terms of colour or potential readings, with the final act of *Ex Machina* possibly turning all of the previous representations on their head.

Bogogames / Flickr

Not only was the ending sequence of the film a commendably unexpected plot twist, it also saw the emergence of representations of strong, powerful women. Ava goes from being passive, victimised by her imprisonment in Nathan's patriarchal confinements, into an active and overtly powerful character. She defeats Nathan using her intelligence and new-found ability to present or express emotions thus falling into Molly Haskell's theory of the 'third type' of female representation within the media: a woman risen from an ordinary, passive character into the extraordinary. Ava becomes an active character, a mistress of her own fate as she decides her future.

The narrative's ending (spoiler alert), as Ava not only defeats her captors but murders Nathan and traps Caleb in the room she was once trapped in, not only highlights a female rise to dominance and freedom, but also sees all the previous gender arrangements and positioning reversed. Caleb is now trapped in one single room for the rest of his life – even if it will turn out to be a short-lived one – and Nathan's omnipresence and voyeurism into

Pictorial Press Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

Alicia Vikander and Alex Garland on the set of Ex Machina

Christine Geraghty's ideology that women are represented as belonging in the private space is clearly exemplified by Ava spending her entire life inside her room, like a domesticated pet, whilst Caleb and Nathan occupy the public domain

Ava's life eradicated. She is free to live her own life, be a master of her own fate and exist in what Geraghty would describe as the public domain. Whilst you could argue that Ava's abandoning Caleb trapped in her old bastille could be seen as morbid, particularly as the camera focuses on the character's panicked pleas to change Ava's mind as his fate is sealed by the opposite sex, this is exactly how Ava was treated her entire life. Caleb represents a more subtle threat. Despite being the beta male to the more overtly dominant Nathan, and showing sympathy for Ava, he is still complicit in her confinement and there is a momentary suggestion, towards the end of the narrative, that he might have the power to stop her.

We are left with an image of Ava, as triumphant over her antagonist (see Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous Feminine*) becoming the powerful woman she needs to be to free herself. The ending – with Ava on top and Nathan (and Caleb presumably soon to be) dead – counteracts the

previous representations, as the instigators of male dominance and patriarchy are punished for their actions through their death.

While there definitely isn't a clear preferred reading on gender that Garland wants the audience to take away from *Ex Machina*, I believe that the film's exploration of gender representations – particularly through the narrative – highlights the oppressive state many women find themselves in, and generates the ideology that with a rise in powerful women, this system will soon be broken down.

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Everett Collection Inc / Alamy Stock Photo

Thor: Ragnarok centres on a superhero/god born of European macho mythology, arguably the epitome of white male privilege. Ragnarok didn't look like a contender for anything more than the usual crowd-pleasing but ultimately 'safe' Hollywood high-concept spectacle. Certainly, no-one expected it to be progressive or challenging.

Wikimedia commons

The three white Chrises of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Chris Evans : *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). Chris Pratt: *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* (2017). Chris Hemsworth: Thor (2011), *Thor: The Dark World* (2013) and *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017)

Kirsty Worrow asks if *Thor: Ragnarok* is the first significantly progressive superhero movie.

Superhero films have been regarded as an important site of Western cultural catharsis and diversion since 9/11, and their ideologies have often been cautiously conservative. In 2014, Marvel Studios unveiled their slate of films for 'phase three' of their behemoth mega-franchise based on the much-loved Marvel superhero canon. This announcement included *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018) and *Captain Marvel* (Boden & Fleck, 2019) which garnered more attention as they represented the first MCU features not to centre on a Caucasian male hero. For many, the MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe) was lacking in diversity, illustrated by the fact that Marvel had released eight films fronted by a white guy named Chris before *Black Panther* hit cinemas in 2017 (its tenth anniversary). By most reasonable standards, that's a startling lack of diversity. Preceding it in the release schedule was the 17th instalment, *Thor: Ragnarok*, which centres on a superhero/god born of European macho mythology, arguably the epitome of white male privilege. Ragnarok didn't look like a contender for anything more than the usual crowd-pleasing but ultimately 'safe' Hollywood high-concept spectacle. Certainly, no-one expected it to be progressive or challenging.

Then Marvel announced New Zealand Maori director Taika Waititi was to helm the third standalone outing for the God of Thunder. As the first director of colour to take a director's chair in the MCU, there were whispers that Marvel Studio's head honcho, Kevin Fiege, was keen to diversify behind the camera too. To most cinema-goers, Waititi was an unfamiliar name, but his track record for producing distinctive, tragi-comic and offbeat films like *Eagle vs. Shark* (2007), *Boy* (2010) and *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* (2015) had earned him praise on the independent festival circuit. His employment by Marvel wasn't completely without precedent, though. *Guardians of the*
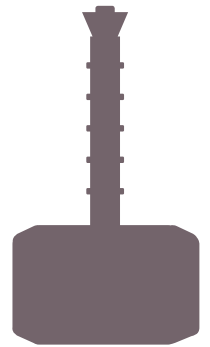
Cate Blanchett as Hela, the first female villain in the MCU

> Valkyrie doesn't fall foul of being pigeon-holed into the roles of love interest or damsel-in-distress. Her costumes are practical, and not constructed for the male gaze.

**Elite warrior, Valkyrie (Tessa Thompson), takes on rich kid Loki (Tom Hiddleston)**

Galaxy (2014) was realised by James Gunn – a director with a somewhat similar profile, and that was a pleasing, if perhaps unexpected, success.

In the context of mainstream Hollywood, to be a progressive filmmaker is not uncommon – many on the right-wing in America decry the left-wing liberalism of Tinseltown – but a progressive Hollywood film is a rarer beast. Progressive here means challenging traditional notions, often with the intention of creating a fairer world. In Media, Film and Cultural Studies we often consider the messages and values encoded in representations of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, cultural and national identity, etc. If a text is progressive, then the messages and values which rise from its representations will challenge hegemony, promoting equity for all. One doesn't have to look too far in to the past to realise that Hollywood is often not as progressive as it likes to think, evidenced by campaigns like #HollywoodSoWhite, and #AskHerMore.

Marvel is not the only studio trying to boost representation of diversity. In early 2017 DC stole a march in terms of redressing the balance with *Wonder Woman* which was praised not only for being female-centric, but for offering a vision of female empowerment which wasn't primarily predicated on the protagonist's attractiveness. The film's success was anchored to DC's first female director Patty Jenkins. After an impressive box office total, DC had proven that the traditional fanboy demographic was not put off by more progressive films.

Except that *Wonder Woman* wasn't as progressive as it seemed. Much has been made about the redefinition of the Amazon's costumes for *Justice League* (2017) and this has turned a more critical eye on the original film. *Wonder Woman* is rooted in the naivety of the hero's journey from her homeland to the war-torn Western world. For all its charm, Diana ultimately finds her home of Themyscira unfulfilling, positioning the spectator to see the 'real' world as more dynamic and exciting. Diana's social and cultural guide in this strange land is good-looking, all-American pilot, Steve Trevor. It's Trevor who undertakes the most overtly heroic act; his sacrifice fits with the dominant narrative of our Western society; that the 'right' set of ideals is worth dying for.

Perhaps the seed of what makes *Ragnarok* more progressive than *Wonder Woman* lies with Waititi's status as an outsider to the Hollywood machine; he is what bell hooks famously described as 'Other'. By not being White and middle class, and by ensuring that his Maori and working class roots are present in his work, Waititi's films are different from Anglo-European mainstream cinema, and therefore reflect an atypical perspective. His 'Taika-esque' style is clearly something that Marvel thought would fit well within their established cinematic universe, and that might even be attractive to audiences. The film offers a critique of Western imperialism and colonialism, insofar as Thor comes to realise that Odin's legacy is built on war and exploitation.
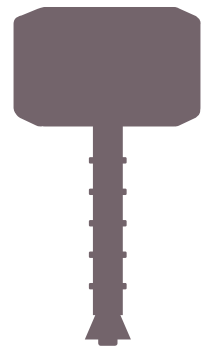
He learns that Asgard's history is a fiction spun to cover-up the destruction and to reframe Asgard as benevolent protectors rather than colonial oppressors. Waititi's willingness to place this emphasis on the canon reflects his own non-White, colonised, indigenous cultural heritage. Waititi is not oblivious to the inherent privilege of the two main characters: 'Thor and Loki are just two rich kids from outer space and we shouldn't really give a sh*t about what their problems are.'

Waititi's films have often made traditional (and even toxic) masculinity a focus for humour, using comedy as a channel for critique. *Ragnarok* is no different, reflected in Thor and Hulk discussing their feelings after an argument; a comic and refreshing vision of these über-masculine characters. Korg (the Kronan rock monster played by Waititi himself) is another reflection of a more progressive realisation of masculinity: His exterior is an exaggerated distillation of macho archetypes – large, hard, and aggressive in his physicality – which is juxtaposed with a soft, polite, sensitive and playful personality.

Asgardian elite warrior Valkyrie is blonde and Caucasian in the original comics. In *Ragnarok*, she's race-flipped and Tessa Thompson's Valkyrie is also a more distinctly feminist construction than her comic-counterpart. Waititi likens her to Han Solo – a hard drinking, likeable rogue – and refreshingly, Valkyrie doesn't fall foul of being pigeon-holed into the roles of love interest or damsel-in-distress. Her costumes are practical, and not constructed for the male gaze. In fact, there isn't a moment in the film where she's objectified for the camera in the way that Mulvey described. This is juxtaposed (perhaps most rebelliously) with clear objectification of Chris Hemsworth, providing material for a desiring gaze. *Ragnarok* also provides the MCU with its first female villain. Cate Blanchett is the first actress to take on the role of the antagonist in the franchise. Her initial dramatic action is to destroy Thor's hammer, thereby shattering its mythology that he was the only one worthy to wield it (and thereby highlighting the fallacy of Thor's White, male, aristocratic privilege).

Ragnarok is not as progressive on all of the key fronts, though. It's depictions of LGBTQ+ characters, for example, have been contentious. In the comics, both Valkyrie and Loki are queer characters, but in *Ragnarok*, the clear identification of Valkyrie as bisexual was cut, and Loki gets the briefest of moments which implies his queerness if you squint (and many have).

The film's title refers to the destruction of Asgard, and so its climax is not unexpected, and yet it feels no less significant ideologically. Trump and Brexit have proved that nationalism

Waititi is not oblivious to the inherent privilege of the two main characters: 'Thor and Loki are just two rich kids from outer space and we shouldn't really give a sh*t about what their problems are.'
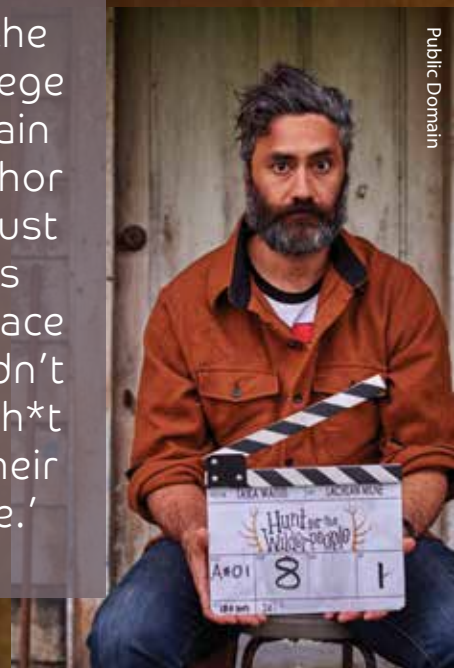
Public Domain

Director, Taika Waiti, on the set of his 2016 film, *Hunt for the Wilderpeople*

and isolationism sell, and compassion towards 'othered' peoples is regarded with scepticism and disdain. Thor's transformation from an icon of the fictions of ancient Western cultural superiority and institutional power, to the leader of a refugee population, together with the utter, irrevocable destruction of the physical Asgard is a parable of how quickly empires and ideologies can fall.

With a global box office of $850 million plus, *Ragnarok*'s progressive agenda certainly didn't alienate mainstream audiences, if it was even registered at all. It primed the MCU's core demographic nicely for the more obviously progressive *Black Panther*, which now stands as the studio's most profitable film. As for Waititi, doors have certainly been opened for him in Hollywood; he's been linked with *Star Wars* and has expressed a desire to helm the historically problematic Hollywood adaptation of *Akira*. For now though, he's content in working on projects which seem more distinctly Taika-esque – *Bubbles*, a stop-motion animation about Michael Jackson's pet chimp and *Jojo Rabbit*, in which he will also star as an imaginary child-like vision of Adolf Hitler.

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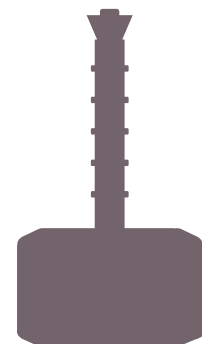
Cyberattack

More than a paranoid fantasy, it is the new normal!

Elaine Scarratt explores *Mr Robot*'s anti-capitalist theme, its unconventional representations and the impact of positioning viewers in the mind of a highly-skilled but mentally unstable computer hacker.

MR. ROBOT

In *Mr Robot*, it's not politicians who control society but this dominant financial class; the invisible 'top 1% of the top 1%...that play God without permission' represented by shadowy figures in E Corp's boardroom

Capitalism

The main storyline of 'eps1.0_hellofriend.mov' is, on the surface, one of simple binary opposition. On the one hand there is the evil financial conglomerate E Corp which represents the kind of callous capitalism that seeks to maximise profit with no regard for human cost and on the other is the anti-capitalist liberalism that drives the main protagonist, Elliot, and the hacktivists of the underground organisation, fsociety. These oppositions are emphasised through the personal lives of the liberals who suffer at the hands of E Corp – in the first episode we find out they denied responsibility for Elliot's father's death, and Angela is crippled by her financial indebtedness to them.

In *Mr Robot*, it's not politicians who control society but this dominant financial class; the invisible 'top 1% of the top 1%...that play God without permission' represented by shadowy figures in E Corp's boardroom where the high rise spaciousness and light contrasts with derelict Coney Island HQ of fsociety, signifying the corporation's power. Symbolically, Colby, liking the view from Allsafe's meeting room, takes pleasure in looking down on those below. After the 2008 global financial crisis, there is a distrust in western society of the reckless and unethical financial risk-taking of men like Colby and this is the socio-economic context for *Mr Robot* which has captured the minds of an alienated millennial audience.

Elliot's disappointment with society, however, goes far beyond that financial elite. In Krista's office, he internally rails against the false heroes and exploitative technology companies of Apple and Facebook. Noticing Krista's belongings he adds rigged elections ('I voted' sticker), escapism through buying things, popular culture, medication (designer accessories, The Hunger Game, her prescription bottle). Like the majority, she's fallen for what Noam Chomsky would describe as the 'necessary Illusions', the distractions of consumerist life shaped by powerful élites that divert us from active political engagement and challenge.

Race

The E Corp 'suits' who visit Allsafe fulfill the stereotypes of dominant white patriarchy, by contrast fsociety's racial and gender diversity renders them the good guys. You could argue that they still conform to racial and gender stereotypes: the overweight untidy bespectacled geek (Mobley), quiet female Muslim (Trenton), African-American male with attitude (Leslie), rebellious young female (Darlene), but the focus in first episodes is on the main character

However, New York's racial diversity is naturalised through a range of characters in episode one: the protagonist Elliot (played by Rami Malek) is Egyptian-Greek-American and we see intersectionality in Krista's

African-American professional female. At one point we see a camp African-American passerby occupying the shot as Elliot hugs frame right. Unusually Middle-Eastern and Asian characters are highly visible and their individuated characters subvert typical terrorist stereotypes.

Subjective viewpoints are essential to authentic representation such as the anxieties of minority groups living in dominant cultures. Ron/Rohit (Indian-American) tackles his sense of difference by anglicising his name. The show's creator, Sam Esmail, says experiences of racism subconsciously made him 'write about alienated figures who can't connect with others and who are…distant from American culture…That was probably the cause of… my social anxiety…and I think it informs a lot of Elliot's character – his sense of alienation, his…loneliness.'

Sexuality and Gender

The extrovert camp passerby and Gideon, a private middle-aged white metrosexual, illustrate diversity within social groups. Homosexuality is the one issue treated explicitly in 'Hellofriend' when Gideon comes out to Elliot, but it is gently and humorously underplayed. The only scene with warm lighting and colour it's more about each learning to trust and Gideon attempting to make a connection with the otherwise aloof Elliot.

The women in *Mr Robot* are active agents of their own lives, successful in male dominated organisations, but flawed by poor choices in men. Angela's costume and 'highly-strung' behaviour mark her as corporate, but 'she's one of the good ones'. Colby's dismissive sexist treatment of her implies E Corp deserves to be hacked and Colby deserves to be framed, prompting Elliot to join fsociety. Elliot's friend since childhood and the only one who understands his social anxiety, Angela seems a girl-next-door type but she's handling Allsafe's biggest account and is furious at Elliot's well-meaning attempts to protect her. She's not a damsel in distress, 'Even if I'm losing, let me lose, okay?'

Psychologist Krista is more than a narrative device. Her distraction after Michael's rejection indicates a slip in her professionalism but she's at a low ebb and, it's suggested, a fighter like *The Hunger Games*' Katniss Everdeen. Costumed in streetwise/vintage clothes Shayla's drug dealing and Darlene's bolshiness place them in hipster counter culture, which rejects mass conformity. Given Elliot's shock at learning she wrote the DDoS malware suggests her aggression is also justified.

Mental Illness

Being plunged into Elliot's subjective viewpoint is a powerfully affecting way to represent mental illness as natural to the human condition. Elliot's mind has buckled under profound childhood traumas exacerbated by socio-economic causes. Krista's professional care guides him towards his wish to connect and care, 'Communication is key, Elliot, real human interaction', but he relies on hacking as his coping mechanism to understand people and control the unpredictability of social interactions. A further

> Like the majority, she's fallen for what Noam Chomsky would describe as the 'necessary Illusions', the distractions of consumerist life shaped by powerful élites that divert us from active political engagement and challenge.

complication is that hacking is a powerful psychological lure for people like Elliot who feels disconnected from, but intellectually superior to the world around him. He craves 'normality' but perceives it as 'the reality of the naïve'.

Mr Robot was praised by psychologists for its accurate portrayal of cognitive behaviour therapy, which aims to change a person's perception (cognition) of an event, and Gloria Reuben's performance as therapist, Krista, evokes serious concern for a patient. Though frustrated at times, Krista isn't fooled and steers him away from old behaviour patterns, 'You're hiding again Elliot. When you hide, your delusions come back.'

We meet Elliot the moment his mind unravels into two other 'personalities'. The first person address immediately implicates the viewer as a newly formed imaginary friend. Revealed in 'eps1.8' *Mr Robot* is a self-protective entity formed by Elliot's Dissociative Identity Disorder to separate himself from the unbearable pain of his mother's cruelty, father's death and overwhelming anger at society and E Corp for causing it. Elliot is comfortable with the imaginary friend (we, the viewers) but *Mr Robot* exposes his terror at losing trust in his own mind, 'I'm crazy… Have I really lost it this time?...I created you. I didn't create this.' Elliot's complex mental illness is compounded by drug addiction and its classic delusion of control.

The key dramatic tension is whether we're watching Elliot's skewed mind or the real diegetic world. We're beguiled into believing the latter through being Elliot's confidante, his impressive cleverness and repeated close-ups of Malek's compelling face, but he's an unreliable narrator. We're disorientated from the start (the disturbing dialogue-only opening, flashback disruptions, bizarre paranoid framing) and diverted from the clues signifying otherwise: Krista's warning (above) and Elliot's 'You're only in my head. We have to remember that'; his internalised phrase 'Evil Corp' is said by Angela, Gideon, the TV news; in two shots with real people we're intimately positioned as Elliot looking at the speaker, but we're outsiders to his centred placing in *Mr Robot* thus implying Elliot's own disconnection.

He leads a lonely life. Rami Malek as troubled hacker, Eliot Alderson

AF archive / Alamy Stock Photo

Read more

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Kim Zetter, '*Mr Robot* is the best hacking show yet – but it's not perfect', Wired, 07/08/2015 https://www.wired.com/2015/07/mr-robot-fact-check/

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Hacking and Anti-Capitalism

A small hacker group as the nemesis of global capitalism may seem unrealistic but Esmail was inspired by social media technology enabling individuals to combine for revolutionary change in Egypt's 2010 Arab Spring (group of protests that resulted in regime changes in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt and Libya). Elliot's shift from personal to political motives echoes Anonymous, who began by pranking individuals to battling child pornographers and passing law enforcement information to Occupy Wall Street protesters.

Anonymous, the high profile hacking group on which fsociety is loosely based, praised *Mr Robot* as 'the most accurate portrayal of security and hacking culture ever'. *Mr Robot*'s technology and methods are scrupulously authentic like Ron's inadequate Tor anonymity network and Elliot using the most effective hacking methods: exploiting social media's poor security and social engineering (gaining personal information by tricking people).

However, vigilante hacking as a vehicle for moral justice, doing unlawful things for good purposes, is morally ambiguous. Elliot first appears simply good, handing Ron over to the law with no interest in exploiting him for money, but hacking to protect the women he likes is only a justification and is creepily intrusive. Fsociety's familiar Robin Hood plan is excitingly attractive but it goes beyond exposing wrongdoing to criminal sabotage. It is simplistic and entails the danger of major unintended consequences. Far from simple binary opposition the evil corporate world has its good people and the justifiably angry hackers can be naïvely destructive.

Elliot's iconic hoodie close up signifies the attractions and hidden dangers of the Internet. You have been warned!

Elaine Scarratt is a freelance media educator, writer examiner and former Head of Media Studies.

> The key dramatic tension is whether we're watching Elliot's skewed mind or the real diegetic world.

Careers download

What is your job title?

Creative Editor at Deluxe Entertainment Services Ltd. It's Disney's in-house post production facility.

What does that mean?

I make trailers and promos for Disney Entertainment. Typically, a producer would come to me with some episodes of a TV show like Mech X-4 or Lego Freemakers Adventures and give me a script and a music track. It is my job to look through the episodes to find the best bits – the shots with most energy, action, drama – anything that fits well with the script. I would also have to look for appropriate 'synch lines' which means finding lines that the characters say that would enhance the script and drive it forward. I would then do a 'rough assembly' which means piecing together all the best bits to time with the beat of the music and eventually edit together into a 30 second trailer or promo. Sometimes, this would be to promote a show and at other times, we tailor it to a certain point in the year. For example, at Christmas, we would have lots of sparkles and give it a festive spirit. I sometimes also create some graphics that might help the piece, for example, creating some nice text or transitions between shots.
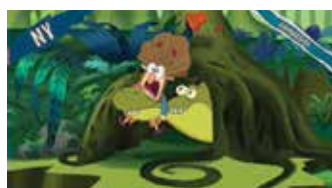
What's the best thing about the job you do or the company you work for?

I get a real sense of satisfaction from having a lot of material, sometimes hours and hours, and whittling it down to a fast-paced and exciting 30 second spot. I also enjoy editing to music; building a rhythm and a pace to time with the music can really be fun! The company is great and the people are fantastic. It's important to enjoy the people you work with as much as actually doing the job as there is plenty to learn from people doing the same job as you and plenty to gain from having fun with your work mates and being able to have a laugh.

What's the worst thing about your job?

The hours can sometimes be long and hard and the pressures and deadlines can mount.

What was your route into the media industry?

I started as a 'runner' in an editing studio. This basically involved making coffees and teas for the editors and producers. We would have to go out and buy their lunches, serve it to them, wash the dishes afterwards and make a LOT more teas and coffees, all day long. It was back breaking work but again, as I really got on with the other runners, we had a lot of fun while doing it.

We formed a little 'company' called Runner Films Inc. and we would come in on weekends and make little films together. I would then come in to work on my days off and use the spare edit suites to train myself to use the software. Our company was very good at encouraging us to use their kit and to train us up; they would have screenings of our films in the meeting room and really make an event of it. That was a great way to learn how to edit, by actually DOING it rather than doing courses about it. The internet is brilliant for providing tutorials for editors which would help us when we got stuck.

I then moved my way up into the Machine Room of the company, getting trained on the technical aspects of the job. It's not just creativity, but a good solid knowledge of the kit and the technological changes. I then got work as an Edit Assistant where I provided technical support for the Editors. Once again, I pushed myself to pick up any spare work that they were too busy to do and when a position became available, I was trained up and ready to take on the job.

What advice would you give young people wanting to work in the media industry?

The best way to get going is to start working as soon as possible – I'd say that it's the best schooling – learning while on the job and motivating yourself to train up in your spare time. Runner jobs and assistant jobs give you a knowledge from the basic level up so you really understand the workings of what an editor does from the roots up.

What's next?

I have been editing trailers and commercials for a while now so I'd quite like to try my hand at something longer, maybe a drama or a comedy show. While it's great fun to edit trailers, I'd like to vary it up a bit and move over to something where the pace of the piece is more gentle and you have more time to build up a rhythm and tell a story.

What are you watching at the moment?

I've been watching a lot of documentaries as there are so many good ones at the moment! *The Defiant Ones* on Netflix is fabulous - really well told story both narratively as well as musically. It's one of the best uses of music that I've seen in a long time. I was also really immersed in *Wild Wild Country* and *Evil Genius*, both Netflix docs. It's great that well-told real-life stories are finding a place alongside all the fiction and fantasy on TV.

> Runner jobs and assistant jobs give you knowledge from the basic level up so you really understand the workings of what an editor does.

Film Notes

Title: *Elephant* (dir. Alan Clarke)

Production context: BBC Northern Ireland, 1989

18 murders in 39 minutes! *Elephant*'s gotta be one of the most entertaining short films on the exam specs, hasn't it?

Er, no. Clarke's film portrays one killing after another in a relentless sequence of unexplained murders. Most viewers find it boring and alienating when they first watch it.

But aren't filmmakers supposed to provide us with fantastic stories that enable us to escape the hum-drum reality of our own lives?

Sometimes, yes, but Clarke was using this TV film for a different purpose.

Such as…?

Clarke felt that people had become desensitised to the real-life killings in Northern Ireland during the period known as 'The Troubles'. He wanted viewers to question the repetitive cycle of sectarian murders and change society.

But he could have made it more visually appealing, couldn't he? Surely films should entertain viewers?

Elephant was purposely very different from the highly stylised films that were common at the time of its release. Its director wasn't interested in showing the slow motion, cinematic deaths of characters that were common in populist cinema, such as *Cross of Iron* (Sam Peckinpah, 1977). And Tarantino hadn't even conceived of the splatter-fest of *Django Unchained* (2012).

OK, so I get that *Elephant* was trying to be realistic, but isn't it better to make viewers care about characters? Shouldn't viewers be enabled to lose themselves in the story?

For sure, sometimes. Indeed, that's the usual way of making movies. But there could be reasons for breaking those 'rules'.

And what, exactly, might those have been?

Well, it's been suggested that Clarke felt that television and cinema should better reflect real lives and be used as agents of social change. *Elephant* is part of the tradition of 'counter-cinema' that stands in opposition to mainstream movies and which follow the predictable formula of Hollywood cinema.

OK, but what about its title? What's that got to do with anything?

Bernard MacLaverty, *Elephant*'s screenwriter, had said that the Northern Ireland conflict had become 'the elephant in the room' – everybody knew it was a problem, but nobody was brave enough to talk about it. Clarke's film certainly got people talking.

So, how is watching the film gonna be any use to me? Don't you know I've got to produce my own short film and write an evaluative analysis!

Yes – and referencing a short film that challenges conventions and viewers' expectations might make you stand out from the crowd.

Er, okay. I guess I'd better think pretty carefully about my own creative choices and influences then.

Yes. And, don't write: *Elephant* impressed me with its varied characterisation, glossy aesthetics and escapist narrative.

Do write: Clarke's film is a classic of the British realist tradition, which breaks many of the conventions of mainstream filmmaking in order to provoke a reaction from passive audiences.

Poster by enthusiasm.org
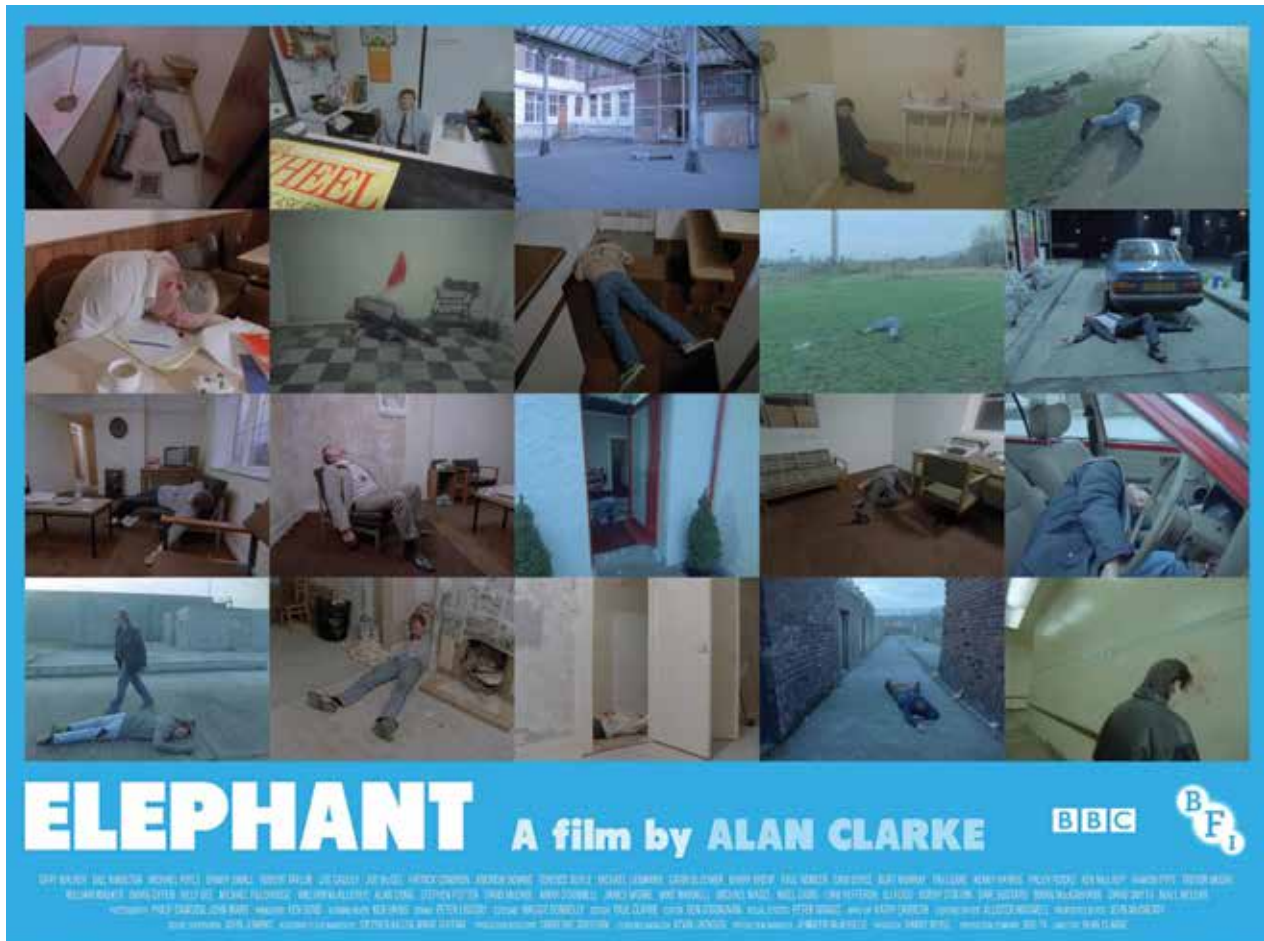
Further, fascinating facts for film geeks:

- *Elephant* was produced by Danny Boyle through BBC Northern Ireland. Boyle went on to become one of the UK's leading filmmakers with credits including *Trainspotting*, *Slumdog Millionaire* and the 2012 London Olympics opening ceremony
- Gus Van Sant made a feature-length movie with the same name in 2003, which depicted the Columbine High School killings. Van Sant believes that school shootings (and the bigger issue of gun-control) are the 'elephant' in American society that needs to be talked about. Is this finally happening with the #marchforourlives movement?
- Clarke's use of long, uninterrupted steadicam shots positions viewers alongside or close to the killers in the film. This might suggest that we are complicit with the murders that we just watch in cold blood
- Clarke was notorious for making films that pushed the boundaries of social acceptability. *Scum* (1979), was originally commissioned by the BBC as a TV play about borstal life, but was subsequently banned. *Made in Britain* (1983) explored skinhead violence and *Rita, Sue and Bob, Too* (1987) explored sexual freedom and social outsiders.

Follow it up

BFI Screen online: http://www. bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/features/fast-track-fandom-where-begin-alan-clarke

Sense of Cinema profile: http:// sensesofcinema.com/2005/ great-directors/clarke/

The Guardian online: https:// www.theguardian.com/film/2002/ feb/01/artsfeatures1

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