

# MM

**MEDIA**MAGAZINE

# SEX EDUCATION

BLUE STORY  
CURRAN AND SEATON  
MEN'S HEALTH  
THE MANDALORIAN  
LES REVENANTS  
UNDER THE SKIN  
PETER WATKINS



**EMC**

MediaMagazine

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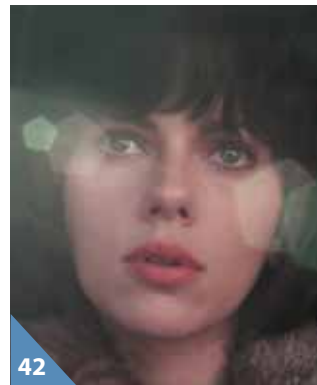
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# Making the Most of MediaMag



## David Copperfield



*David Copperfield*, the novel has been adapted many times since the first silent movie in 1911. In the 109 years since then, there have been eight TV miniseries, three children's versions (including two animations), six foreign language features, six silent films, eight full-length features, and countless stage and radio adaptations. Each version offers a snapshot of the time in which it was made, in terms of its selection of key moments, the structure of its narrative, its media language and visual style, casting, use of technology, and forms of representation. And as you will know by now, the quickest way to identify these issues is through a study of the trailer.

Have a look at the Iannucci trailer, which you can find here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5740NUhsQMY>

Imagine you are an alien, learning about David Copperfield for the first time. All you know is that the film is based on a very famous and much-loved 19th Century novel. In groups, discuss how the trailer sets up your expectations of the novel through its use of:

- Media/film language
- Casting and characterisation
- Editing
- Representation – messages and values about the narrative

Now, pick one of the other trailers listed below, and compare it with the Iannucci version, using the same bullet points.

What kind of view of the novel does your second trailer seem to suggest? Try and summarise your views in no more than 25 words. Compare your interpretations with the rest of class. Discuss which trailer you find most interesting, relevant or engaging, and why. Which trailer would encourage you to watch the movie and/or read the actual novel?

Two trailers for 1935 version (US adaptation, MGM Studios, Director George Cukor, Producer David O Selznick)  
<https://www.microsoft.com/en-ie/p/david-copperfield/8d6kgwz15dt5?activetab=pivot%3aoverviewtab>  
<https://youtu.be/A4w12st-5Sg>

Trailer for 1911 version (modern titles for an Italian reissue)  
<https://youtu.be/0vV6QKZcRK0>

Trailer for 2000 TV adaptation  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AP3XvzW5CtA>

## Men's Health to Our Health

Here's an activity which will help you get to grips with the conventions of *Men's Health* magazine, but will also help you to develop some Photoshop skills to prepare for your print coursework. It combines two really useful learning processes: swedding, and the *commutation test*. The remaking or changing of one or more elements of an image or text to create new or challenging representations is an interesting way of exploring values and representation of the original, and is sometimes called the *commutation test*.

You are going to construct a sweded version of the *Men's Health* cover on page 7. This means recreating as closely as possible the exact details of the cover, using the image manipulation software at your disposal. BUT here's the twist: your sweded version is for a cover of a new magazine called *Our Health*, which targets young people, both binary and non-binary, so you will need to substitute different images and text, which creates a *commutation* or change to the meaning of the cover.

So you will take the format, design and conventions of the original cover, and populate it with images and text of your own, while keeping the overall layout as close to the original as possible. You will need to think about:

- Colour scheme, style and connotations of chosen fonts
- Your central image and what it should represent
- The content and wording of your cover lines, and the associations they suggest.

Depending on how far you've mastered the technology, you should be able to come up with some interesting practical ways of discovering just how each changed element of your cover will alter the meaning and appeal to its intended audience.

And if you can't access the technology, or are new to Photoshop, a hand-drawn version will do (nearly) as well.

# Did you know...

You can access *MediaMagazine* articles right now as PDFs on your devices at home or anywhere in the school?

If you're interested in reading more widely about the world of media or just interested to hear different perspectives on popular and classic films, ask your teacher for your school's *MediaMagazine* login details.

Ask your teacher or librarian for your school's log in details NOW!

Be the first to access the most recent edition as soon as it goes live, as well as being able to access the full archive from wherever you are. Search over 1500 articles, sort by your area of interest or by the exam board you are studying or browse all past PDFs of the magazine which include interviews with industry professionals, practical production tips, our easy to understand 'Theory Drop' feature, comics and illustrations to support understanding of difficult concepts as well as the usual quality, accessible features and articles on film, TV, radio, games, social media, the music industry and more.



Grrrrr...unlock your  
inner beast with  
*Men's Health*

**Fighting Fit or  
Bad Medicine?**

# Men's Health

.....  
Sharply-defined muscles, hard stares  
and intimidating abs: are these what  
constitute an ideal image of masculine  
vitality? Georgia Platman scratches  
below the glossy surface of the UK's  
best-selling men's magazine with an  
in-depth textual analysis.  
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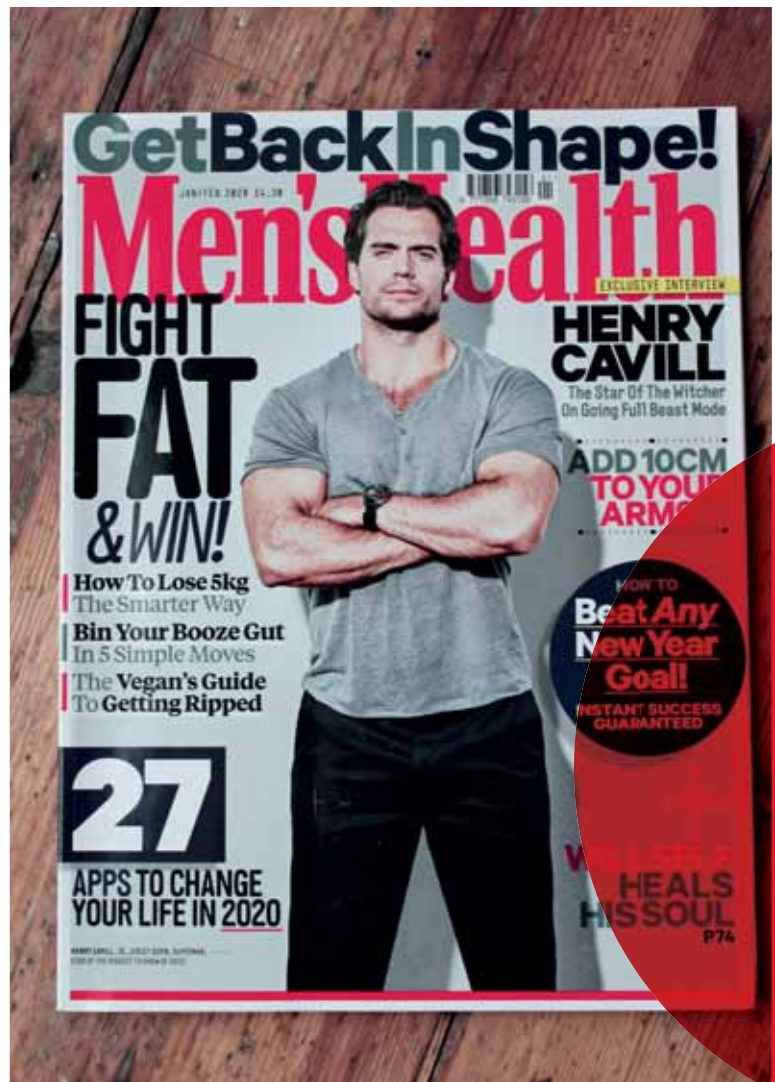
**I**t is the first time I have ever read, let alone bought *Men's Health* magazine. Everything about it seems foreign to me: I have never been to a gym; my diet is abundant in all those things that we're told are bad for us (carbs, refined sugar, processed foods, fat); plus, I am a woman (i.e. not the target audience); oh, and to top it off, I'm not even familiar with its cover star, Henry Cavill.

I take it in, horrified by all the imperatives being SHOUTED AT ME in bold and often capitalised text in various typefaces, with plenty of exclamation marks: 'FIGHT FAT & WIN!'; 'Bin Your Booze Gut'; 'Get Back In Shape!'; 'ADD 10CM TO YOUR ARMS'. Cavill looks down his nose sternly at the camera, arms crossed: I feel like I've already failed before I've even opened the magazine. But I compose myself. I must complete my task: a textual analysis of this front cover. I need to get over my initial culture shock, put my Media Studies goggles on and start again. Here in front of me is a rich text, full of meaning, symbolism, and words to unpick. I dive in...

I realise that my strong aversion to this magazine was in fact what theorist Stuart Hall called an *oppositional* reading, meaning I interpreted it the opposite way (or at least extremely differently) than its producers intended. Hall believed that those who make media products encode them with various meanings, but that we as individuals decode them and create our own meanings based on our upbringing, culture, and background, which is why some people might have a very different reaction from me. Some might decode this magazine in a way that leaves them feeling positive, connected to the content, or motivated, which would be the *preferred* reading; the one the producers hope to provoke in order to sell magazines. If, on the other hand, you think the article about life-changing apps looks interesting, but that the magazine's bold claims about how it can improve your life ('INSTANT SUCCESS GUARANTEED') might be a bit farfetched, you would be doing what Hall classifies as a *negotiated* reading of the text; weighing up its pros and cons before deciding to buy into it.

## Sex Symbols

Part of the way we come up with our reading of the text is down to semiosis – how signs and symbols produce meaning. One of the most famous semioticians, Roland Barthes (1915–1980), said that not only do signs have straightforward meanings (a red rose is a type of flower), but we find other connotations in the signs depending on our background (in our culture, red roses connote love and romance). Before turning to the



His pose is strong, with his arms folded across his chest and legs hip-width apart; his gaze is cool, a hard stare down his nose straight into the camera.

The disapproving stare of Henry Cavill, a real-life Superman

main image on the cover, we can apply semiology to the colour palette, composition, and the size and placement of the text. For example, the main colours used are red, black, grey and navy blue: strong, dark, and traditionally masculine colours. Furthermore, red also evokes blood and meat, which, via associations with strength, hunting and protein, are also associated with ancestral male roles. Navy blue, meanwhile, is literally named after one arm of the military and is a colour used in other institutional uniforms, such as the police. Not only do these institutions convey strength, discipline, and power, but both are traditionally male-orientated professions.

Another connotation that came to my mind, thanks to the little splashes of yellow, is Superman (a role Cavill has portrayed before) whose costume is red, yellow and blue.

Believe it or not, the magazine has certainly boosted my sense of identity, but not in the way its producers might hope: it has made me clearer than ever that I am a feminist who believes that gender is (for the most part) a social construct.



A double page spread from the January issue of the magazine

The superhuman connotations are further anchored by the text for the feature on Henry Cavill: 'On Going Full Beast Mode' as well as Cavill himself. His pose is strong, with his arms folded across his chest and legs hip-width apart; his gaze is cool, a hard stare down his nose straight into the camera; and his position on the cover, with his head covering the 'H' of Health in the magazine's title, suggests that he is the embodiment of health, a real-life super-man.

### Speaking to the Reader

The letters and punctuation used on the cover create connotations too. The word FAT is not only in uppercase lettering, but the fact it has been made the largest word on the entire page, turning it into a persuasive and grotesquely disproportionate symbol that demands our attention. It screams at us: ARE YOU FAT? YOU PROBABLY ARE. DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. LIKE BUY THIS MAGAZINE. The cover employs other linguistic devices in order to persuade readers to buy the magazine. There's alliteration ('Fight Fat', 'Bin Your Booze Gut'), direct mode of address ('Add 10cm To **Your** Arms', '27 Apps To Change **Your** Life') and the use of verbs conjuring up war and combat (win, beat, fight, rip), and the words that let you know that *Men's Health* has the answers (smart, simple, instant, success).

But would anyone really fall for all that? Psychologist Albert Bandura might say so. His famous Bobo doll experiment seemed to prove that the media can directly influence us. Indeed, academic George Gerbner said that the more messages are repeated in the media, the more we are likely to accept and internalise them (and boy are there a lot of messages on this cover about body image). I reassure myself that both these theories have been largely discredited

by contemporary media academics and that we're wiser to the ways of the media these days. Yet I can't shake the feeling that this barrage of messages will make men fall prey to feeling bad about themselves; that any man looking at this cover would be made to feel bad by these cover lines encouraging them to shape up.

But perhaps I'm being too negative: this immensely popular magazine must appeal to many men. What am I missing? I grasp for other theorists who might be able to help me analyse in a more cool-headed way. Thankfully, I come across David Gauntlett's ideas around the media and identity. Gauntlett argues that the media helps us develop our sense of who we are. We might come across ideas or ways of living or points of view in the media that we identify with (or indeed oppose), and this can strengthen our core ideas and beliefs about ourselves and the world, allowing us to speak with more confidence. So, in the case of *Men's Health* front covers, it could be argued that the myriad messages on the front cover could actually help the magazine appeal to a wider audience, as each one could catch someone's eye and forge a connection. For example, 'FIGHT FAT & WIN!' might appeal to someone who is already feeling fat, while 'Beat Any New Year Goal!' is vague enough to appeal to anyone who made a new year resolution and is worried about breaking it. Similarly, the personalities the magazine promotes will appeal to different types of men. The mainstream aspirational prowess of Henry Cavill will make some pick up the magazine, while the mention of the sardonic journalist Will Self will appeal to others. So, in providing a wide array of messages, the magazine might grab the attention of more readers than simply those interested in their health or fitness alone.

## Performing Gender Identities

Believe it or not, the magazine has certainly boosted my sense of identity, but not in the way its producers might hope: it has made me clearer than ever that I am a feminist who believes that gender is (for the most part) a social construct. My beliefs are in line with theorist Judith Butler, who believes that gender (masculinity and femininity) is performative and something we learn via nurture (as opposed to something in our natures). This representation of modern masculinity as portrayed by *Men's Health* could thus contribute to men feeling that muscles will make you more manly. Butler's contemporary, Liesbet van Zoonen might agree, but would also point out that our gender expectations can change over time. For proof, one need look no further than Henry Cavill himself, who makes a remarkably beefier Superman than those in decades past. Simply Google 'Superman through the years' to see how men's bodies have been subjected to increasingly more aggressive intervention over the past century.

I sit back and look at this cover again. Have I been too harsh? Is *Men's Health* simply a positive, aspirational and motivational celebration of fitness? One thing's for sure: it's not in any way for me. Growing up in the 1990s, when women's magazines were at their most aggressive when it came to perpetuating punishing beauty ideals (heroin chic, anyone?), I learnt the hard way that we must read media products for what they usually are: vehicles to sell things. I learnt to blinker myself to the constant messages to women that they should be thinner, blonder, whiter, or more tanned, depending on the season. So, I can only hope young men growing up now take solace in the array of different multimedia products and representations out there, rather than subscribe to the unattainable body and beauty standards being touted here as something to do with health.

Georgia Platman is a writer, copy editor, filmmaker and teacher based in London.



I take it in, horrified by all the imperatives being SHOUTED AT ME in bold and often capitalised text in various typefaces.

*Men's Health* readers aspire to masculine perfection, whatever that means



## Links and further reading

'Superman through the years'

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Superman\\_\(franchise\)#/media/File:Superman\\_actors.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Superman_(franchise)#/media/File:Superman_actors.jpg)

Dev Patel as the  
eponymous David  
Copperfield

# A MODERN CLASSIC

Images courtesy of Lionsgate

## THE PERSONAL HISTORY OF DAVID COPPERFIELD

Jenny Grahame gets to grips with another adaptation of the Dickens classic she loved as a child and finds that Armando Iannucci's fearless adaptation of *David Copperfield* ticks all the boxes.



Armando Iannucci on the set of *The Personal History of David Copperfield*

Images courtesy of Lionsgate

So. Armando Iannucci, arguably Britain's greatest contemporary satirist, creator of *Brass Eye*, *The Day Today*, *Alan Partridge*, *The Thick of It*, *The Death of Stalin*, and more. Plus, Charles' Dickens' *David Copperfield*, one of the best-loved coming-of-age stories in English literary heritage, exposing abusive parenting, child labour, urban poverty, the huge contrasts between country and city, wealth and poverty, ambition and humility, and England in the process of becoming a capitalist Empire. An unlikely match. So what could it offer Film and Media Studies students in an era crowded with cinematic universes, prescribed close study products and tempting box sets?

There have been at least 14 screen adaptations of *Copperfield*, dating back to 1911 – and they make wonderful viewing, revealing fascinating insights into the social and technical contexts of their production. My own first experience of *David Copperfield* was as a five-year-old, many years ago, when my mum told me the story. Not read, mind you, but *told*, in extraordinary narrative detail and in nearly as many words as Dickens himself actually wrote. The telling lasted many weeks of bedtimes and a lifetime of memories, and no other version ever came close. I was shocked to discover that many of my favourite characters and turns

It actually feels simply irrelevant that David's friend, the arrogant cad Steerforth, is white and Welsh while his aristocratic mother (Nikki Amuka-Bird) is black, or that Wickfield is portrayed by an actor of East Asian descent (Benedict Wong) with a British-Ghanaian daughter.

**Rosalind Eleazar and Dev Patel join a cast of actors from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds to depict Dickens' characters**



Images courtesy of Lionsgate

of phrase were actually often side lined, or even deleted, in the umpteen screen and audio versions I consumed in later life. This made me wary of the choices and editorial decisions made by screenwriters and directors hoping to adapt this sprawling adventure story for 21st century audiences.

Iannucci's 2019 film *A Personal History of David Copperfield* is a visual translation so Dickensian in spirit, so contemporary in style, and so accessible to modern audiences that it made me rethink the purpose and process of adapting a classic 'literary heritage' text. This adaptation joyfully breaks all the rules, and then reinvents them for the 2020s Britain of Johnson and Brexit. Here – just for starters – are four reasons why students of film and literature should watch this film.

## The Narrative

This is a great story. *David Copperfield* is essentially a writer's 'coming of age' first person narrative, loosely based on Dickens' own life. David's idyllic and loving early childhood is disrupted by his mother's abusive remarriage to a bullying stepfather, resulting in a series of life-changing adventures: banishment to factory labour in London, a rundown boarding school, a thankless clerical job, an unsuitable love affair, financial ruin, disillusionment, self-understanding. Meanwhile, David is nurtured by a cast of eccentric and caring surrogate parents including his nanny Peggotty and her seafaring Yarmouth family, the impoverished but eternally optimistic Micawbers, his unconventional aunt Betsey and her companion the childlike and mentally fragile Mr Dick. It is by carefully transcribing their foibles, sayings and catchphrases on scraps of paper that David becomes a writer – possibly the first documented example of the creative uses of the Post-it note in the literary process.

The original is a rambling and episodic narrative of 600 pages, and Iannucci is fearless in abridging it. Within seconds of the opening our expectations of Dickensian melodrama are exploded as the adult David smashes through the fourth wall of a Victorian theatre into a bright world



Images courtesy of Lionsgate

Like Dickens did in real life, Copperfield reads his stories aloud to a theatre audience in the film

of rural sunshine in a race to recapture the experience of his own birth. This will not be an authentically realist version. Many sub-plots and eccentric minor characters (Mr Traddles!) bite the dust. Iannucci foregrounds, in a very modern way, many of the issues Dickens addressed, and which are so current today: mental health (Mr Dick), corruption, security fraud and scamming (in the oily form of Uriah Heep), the under-resourcing of education. Migration – country to city, England to Australia, child to adulthood – the quest for status (and more importantly identity) are themes which resonate today; while Dickens himself tended to leaven them with complex plot twists and internal monologues, Iannucci's light touch editing and inspired casting enable us to observe, recognise and reflect.

## Casting, Colour-blindness and Challenging Expectations

Of course the key factor in this contemporaneity is the film's colour-blind casting, most notably of Dev Patel as the goodhearted David, but also the random diversity of its world and gallery of characters. Although our very first glimpse of the adult David is onstage, lit from the footlights just as Dickens himself appeared on stage in Victorian London, we're seated in a multicultural audience which foreshadows the mixed ethnicity of the then emergent British Empire. Within minutes it has become entirely natural to see a cast

of characters where race and class are uncoupled, where aristocracy and wealth can be as inclusive as poverty and abuse. Iannucci has commented that his casting of the film

**wasn't a conscious reaction to Brexit, but the conversation has gone very insular in terms of what Britain is and what it doesn't want to be. I wanted to celebrate what Britain actually is, and it's much more of a carefree, enjoyable, humorous kind of zesty, energetic place.**

So it actually feels simply irrelevant that David's friend, the arrogant cad Steerforth, is white and Welsh while his aristocratic mother (Nikki Amuka-Bird) is black, or that Wickfield is portrayed by an actor of East Asian descent (Benedict Wong) with a British-Ghanaian daughter. This casting is neither motivated by historical accuracy – although Victorian London was in no way as monocultural as most literary adaptations suggest – or faithfulness to the original novel: it is about 'people playing people, like actors are meant to do', as Dev Patel has commented. That's quite a sea change for contemporary audiences used to thinking of Dickens as a dead white male, representing issues of class and status in an elitist tradition. As Patel remarks:

**In past iterations, I haven't seen myself represented on that screen. I definitely didn't think it would appeal to me or speak to me, but Dickens is a truly universal story. I see Dickens**

on the streets every time I go to India, and it's relevant to America too [...] I'm from North West London, and the idea that we've spun a version of this film that allows kids from there to find a face they can relate to is really exciting.

## Intertextuality

This inclusivity is emphasised by our intertextual knowledge of the past roles of its cast. There's lots of fun to be had spotting the famous faces – Paul Whitehouse, the glorious Tilda Swinton, Daisy Mae Cooper. And although it's not actually essential to know that Dev Patel started his career in youth drama *Skins* and in *Slumdog Millionaire*, that Mr Dick is the Hugh Laurie of *Blackadder*, *House* and *The Night Manager*, or that the affable Mr Micawber (Peter Capaldi) has played both *Doctor Who* and the furiously scheming Malcolm Tucker in the political TV series *The Thick of It*, the inventiveness of such casting adds a layer of wit and playfulness to the experience.

This intertextuality extends to a range of other references. Opening with the device of the theatrical readings for which Dickens was famous, we're never far away from the biographical facts of Dickens' own life. There are moments of sped up silent cinema farce when David entertains his drunken schoolfriends – which also suggest the rowdy arrogance of Boris Johnson's Bullingdon Club; street scenes which visually reference Hogarth's engravings of 18th Century London. A 'high school graduation sequence' feels weirdly similar to many US teen movies, albeit in Victorian dress.

## The Visual Style – Postmodern Point/s of View

Traditionally Dickens adaptations have tended to reflect a particular visual cinematic sensibility, immersed in the dark world of the poorhouse, the factory and the prison. The best-known – David Lean's *Oliver Twist* or *Great Expectations*, for example, or Andrew Davies' *Bleak House* – share a high-contrast expressionist aesthetic

of looming shadows, heightened performances, and exaggerated naturalism. Iannucci's vision and cinematography is lighter, sunnier, and more surreal. There's lots of sky, green grass, flat countryside, and pastel shades on the Yarmouth docks; a bright world seen through David's curious eyes, and edited at an exuberant pace full of visual surprises.

Visually and structurally, the film – like David himself – is highly self-conscious of its own construction. Throughout, the narrative is filtered through David's point of view: he stands beside his mother as she gives birth to him; our first glimpses of his surroundings and carers are shot through his eyes as faces and objects swim in and out of focus, blurred by the caul with which he was born. His early struggles with reading and concentration are represented by words dancing on the page; the giant hand of his abusive stepfather literally plucks him into the air to punish him for his supposed lack of aptitude. His love of Peggotty's upturned boat home on Yarmouth beach darkens from the fairy-lit fantasy of his childhood to a more gritty downbeat realism when seen in the presence of the aristocratic Steerforth.

So. Dickens + Iannucci. Does it work, and why should film and media students watch it? Speaking for myself, the film has finally surpassed my personal experience of my mum's storytelling skills. It has proved to me that it's possible to recreate the spirit

Hugh Laurie as Mr Dick but perhaps better known for *Blackadder*, *Jeeves and Wooster*, *The Night Manager* or *House*



Images courtesy of Lionsgate



It has proved to me that it's possible to recreate the spirit and themes of a Great Big Literary Classic for a new generation by upending the conventions of traditional adaptations through inclusive casting, postmodern structure and contemporary visual style.

Images courtesy of Lionsgate


and themes of a Great Big Literary Classic for a new generation by upending the conventions of traditional adaptations through inclusive casting, postmodern structure and contemporary visual style. I now know I'll go back to the original text to enjoy the complexity of the original prose; but I'll also rewatch some of the earlier TV adaptations to compare, contrast and reconsider what I can learn from past interpretations and production approaches. Most importantly, it has reminded me that there is no

definitive 'right' version, and that a truly great narrative, in the hands of an inspirational and inclusive filmmaker, can speak across generations to those who may have previously felt excluded by class, status or ethnicity.

.....  
**Jenny Grahame is a freelance media educator and was editor *MediaMagazine* for 16 years.**

 **from the MM vaults**

Soap Opera Classics: *Bleak House* on TV – Jeremy Points, MM22



# WHAT'S THE STORY WITH BLUE STORY?

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Dangerous gang violence movie or sober reflection on the realities of urban Britain? Samantha James looks at the furore around *Blue Story* and the moral panic it provoked.

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**B** *Blue Story*, a 2019 British film directed by Rapman (aka Andrew Onwubolu) was released in cinemas this November and spurred a series of mixed emotions and – more controversially – actions from the public and press. While *Blue Story's* narrative is – according to its director, at least – about ‘what people do for the people they love and how love can make people make the wrong decisions – and the right decisions sometimes’, the depiction of gangs, violence and drugs in London suburbs is the narrative that was presented to audiences by the press. This narrative came to a head when a brawl between teenagers broke out in a Birmingham Vue cinema on the Saturday after the film’s release, thus leading to the temporary banning of the film by Vue and Showcase Cinemas in a move described as ‘kneejerk’ by critics and linked by some to a long history of censorship of black artists. The ban added to *Blue Story's* notoriety, perhaps making it the ‘anti-establishment’ film to see. Meanwhile, Vue Cinemas have since suggested that there were a number of other incidents that they linked to the screening of *Blue Story*, (25 incidents at 16 cinemas), rather than the single incident that was widely reported.

### The Same Old Story?

Amid a recorded increase in knife violence in the UK and ‘county lines’ hitting the headlines, the reaction of the cinema chains (who did reinstate the film, Showcase much quicker than Vue) and more specifically the right-wing tabloid press and its readers is a telling example of a moral panic. Echoing the ideas of Stanley Cohen and later Stuart Hall, we can see that audiences have been bombarded with stories from the right-wing press, scapegoating and demonising young black men rather than trying to understand the root causes of these issues: notably poverty and social deprivation.

Rapman reacted to the pulling of the film with understandable upset. ‘The idea that the film is so exciting that a group of young black kids will start stabbing each other is just insulting’. Rapman, alongside a number of academics, questioned the reasoning behind the censorship of the film by these cinema chains, asking if ‘there is a colour thing’ and whether there is institutional racism and unconscious bias evident in their reaction. There is inconsistent evidence to suggest that the brawl was definitely linked to the screening of *Blue Story*, but equally, the argument suggested by Rapman – that the 12 and 13-year-olds that were arrested were there to see *Frozen 2* – is also impossible to prove.

The censorship of any media product is likely to incite feelings of disheartenment and upset and to create further divisions between those who have chosen to do the censoring and the groups represented in the censored media. A gay Romanian student recently discussed eloquently in my class the feelings evoked in her after learning about the number of gay scenes that are cut from Romanian television before broadcast. More recently, in a discussion of the censorship of *Blue Story* regarding media regulation, I could feel the unease from the minority



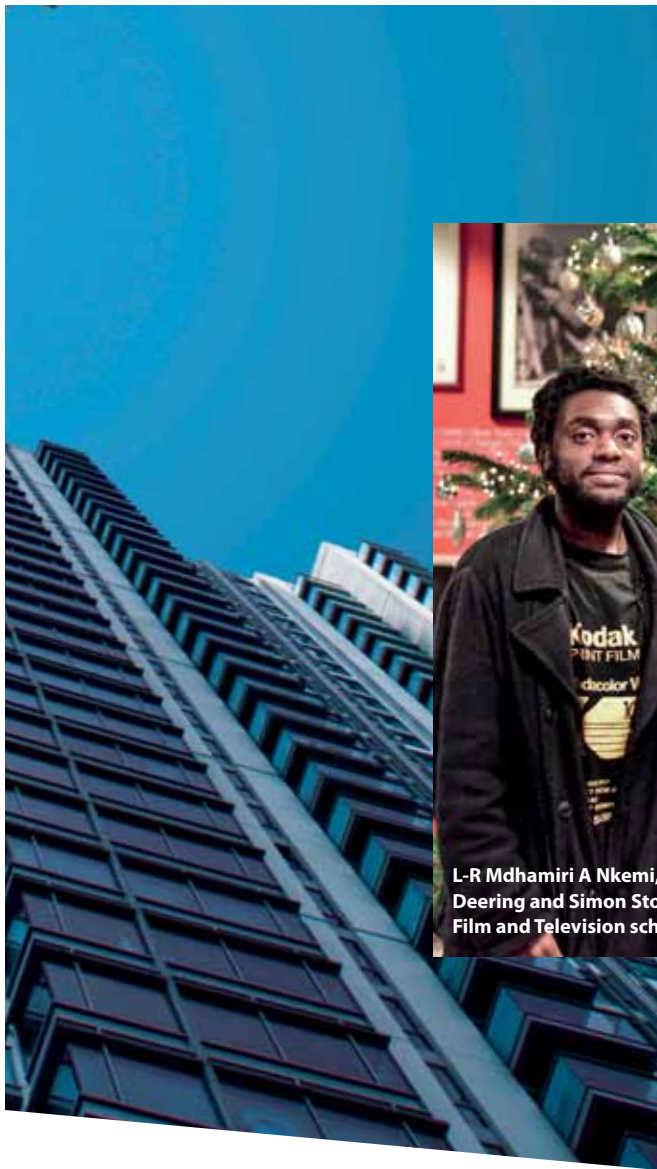
I feel like it’s always upwards hurdles coming from our background... But we crack on. They take our legs and we still crawl. We crawl and we still come number three in the box office. (Rapman)

of black students in the class when the majority white students were unable to understand the reason why the cutting of *Blue Story* might be a cause for upset. In a further discussion about the representation of young black men in society, it transpired that the young black male students had been stopped and searched a number of times whilst none of the white male students had.

### Violent Fantasies

Media products have always been scapegoats used by cultural gatekeepers to lay blame for violent acts or social unease, rather than addressing social/political failings or individuals who are at fault. If the suggestion that media products could really incite violence in society is plausible, why are heavily violent products such as *Game of Thrones* (questioned by Rapman himself) allowed to be streamed for anyone to see? Fantasy violence has always been treated differently to violence that depicts a real-life situation or context. The 12A rating and lack of censorship of the likes of *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games*, *Star Wars*, *Game of Thrones* etc, suggest that the narratives depicted in these genres are not reflective of real societal issues and unease, when in fact they can often offer a truer and more honest reflection, (in some cases) of the problems faced.

So was *Blue Story's* problem that it wasn’t fantastical enough? Perhaps it offered a depiction of gang life and



L-R Mdamiri A Nkemi, Rapman, Jonathon Deering and Simon Stolland at the National Film and Television school in December

the backstory behind it that was too realistic. But stopping young black men from seeing this representation is stopping them from seeing a product whose intention was to warn them away from gang life (as Rapman himself has suggested). BAME groups are severely underrepresented in the British film industry, according to DirectorsUK.com only '2.6% of directors come from BAME backgrounds and 59% of UK films have no black actors in a named character role.' For an already under-represented social group (i.e. BAME actors and filmmakers), the censorship of *Blue Story* is exacerbating their on-screen under-representation, limiting their opportunities behind the camera and failing to adequately represent modern Britain.

### Balancing Relevance with Responsibility

When should the cultural relevance of a product outweigh the supposed danger it might cause? Whether or not the apparent violence at the *Blue Story* screening was reported accurately, it might still be appropriate to suggest that *Blue Story* itself cannot be held completely responsible for what occurred. The autobiographical narrative shown by Rapman of gang and drug culture

amongst primarily young black men in society could be argued to give some young black men a voice, the feeling that they were being listened to and represented, that their struggle could be heard. Should this outweigh any potential dangers associated with the product? Should any product that isn't safe or doesn't offer an ideologically mainstream stance fear censorship? There is also a knock-on effect. For the audiences who aren't depicted in *Blue Story*, censorship denies them a view and understanding of a part of society they wouldn't normally get to see. In effect, the wider (white) audience who might see *Blue Story* and learn something from it are denied that by censorship.

Regulation and censorship in the current media landscape is a contentious topic. Videos can be watched on YouTube by anyone, with content warnings being clicked through: the same is true on many of the streaming platforms, so programmes such as *Top Boy* (which *Blue Story* has been compared to, partly because of Micheal Ward's appearance in both) can be accessed by its audience without a problem. Streaming services have allowed for more niche products to reach a mainstream audience, as articulated by Anderson's Long Tail Theory, and the distribution of these products online means the representation of BAME groups is reaching more than their intended audiences, which is a positive move. There are a number of problems with the lack of regulation of online content, but it has at least allowed for minorities to be represented to majorities from a wider range of contexts and backgrounds. The public nature of the censorship of the film – pulling it from cinemas amid a media furore – harks back to a more traditional viewing experience and makes *Blue Story* look more dangerous than a film quietly removed from a streaming service with little publicity.

## Making Paper but Not the Shortlist

Despite the censorship of *Blue Story* in its first week by Vue and Showcase, the film did very well in the box office, coming in third behind *Frozen 2* and *Last Christmas* in its first weekend, and by the second weekend it had reached nearly £3 million in box office takings. The censorship of this film may have made its target audience even more determined to see it. After the initial backlash, the film gained some critical acclaim. However it was still snubbed from the recent Bafta nominations, with Rapman tweeting

**@BAFTA 's done *Blue Story* dirty!! Numbers, Impact, Critic reviews we ticked all boxes but we were still snubbed from all nominations. Minus the rising star list. The lack of black faces is ridiculous. #whosonthepanel.**

This Bafta snub, along with a lack of diversity in other nominations, gives further reason to raise questions surrounding how representations of societal diversity and BAME films and audiences are being received by the mainstream and those with the power to decide. In the words of Rapman, speaking to the BBC

**I feel like it's always upwards hurdles coming from our background...But we crack on. They take our legs and we still crawl. We crawl and we still come number three in the box office.**

Samantha James is Subject Leader for Media Production at Barton Peveril College in Eastleigh.



### from the MM vaults

*There's a Riot Going On* – David Buckingham, MM38

*Is it Cos I is British?! Issues Around Black Britishness* – Jennifer G. Robinson, MM42

*Careers Download* – Mdamiri À Nkemi, MM71

### Links and further reading

BBC News Birmingham: *Blue Story*: Cinema chains pull gang film after 'machete' brawl, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-50541204>

Mason, W. Knife crime: folk devils and moral panics? Centre for Crime and Justice Studies <https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/resources/knife-crime-folk-devils-and-moral-panics> Accessed 13 Jan. 2020.

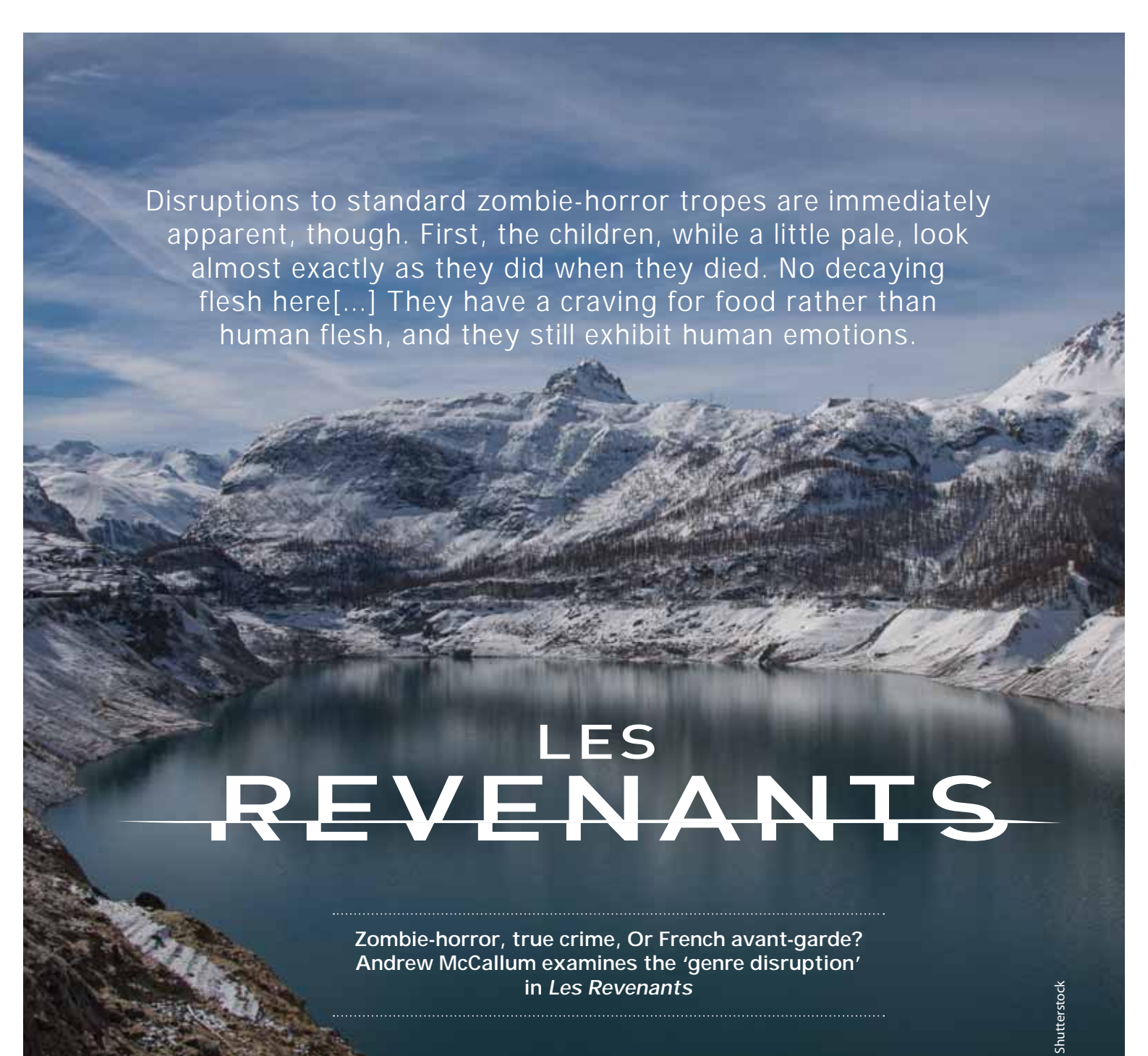
A Sociological Understanding of Moral Panic (from ThoughtCo website) <https://www.thoughtco.com/moral-panic-3026420>

Q&A with Rapman and NFTS graduate Mdamiri A Nkemi <https://nfts.co.uk/blog/blue-story-s-writer-director-rapman-and-crew-visit-nfts-screening-and-qa>



Rapman spoke to NFTS students about the process of writing and promoting the film. The NFTS is a post-graduate film school in Buckinghamshire (see link below for more info)

Fantasy violence has always been treated differently to violence that depicts a real-life situation or context. The 12A rating and lack of censorship of the likes of *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games*, *Star Wars*, *Game of Thrones* etc, suggest that the narratives depicted in these genres are not reflective of real societal issues and unease, when in fact they can often offer a truer and more honest reflection, (in some cases) of the problems faced.



Disruptions to standard zombie-horror tropes are immediately apparent, though. First, the children, while a little pale, look almost exactly as they did when they died. No decaying flesh here[...] They have a craving for food rather than human flesh, and they still exhibit human emotions.

# LES REVENANTS

Zombie-horror, true crime, Or French avant-garde?  
Andrew McCallum examines the 'genre disruption'  
in *Les Revenants*

Shutterstock

**L**es *Revenants* (Season 1, 2012), a French language TV drama that translates as 'The Returned' is a classic example of what we might call 'genre disruption'. Genre disruption is akin to Todorov's notion of narrative disruption, a key driver in maintaining audience interest. It self-consciously explores how a text breaks the 'equilibrium' of traditional genre conventions, while still paying attention to them. It drives audience engagement by challenging their expectations and also by presenting them with an experience that is simultaneously familiar and radically new. How, a viewer might ask, will the ruptures to this genre be resolved?

*Les Revenants* sits most obviously within the zombie-horror genre. Starting with an exploration of how this genre is both drawn on and disrupted is key to understanding the show's effect.

Episode 1 (the sole focus of this article) sees a number of children, all of whom drowned in a lake in a coach crash, returning to their home town in the French Alps, four years after their deaths. In zombie fashion, they are the 'living dead', or the 'undead'. There are no explanations as to why they have returned, but the episode is infused with horror tropes sitting alongside the zombie ones. For example, towards the beginning a butterfly comes back to life and smashes through a glass display case; and electrical lights flicker and go out when the returning children pass by. The town itself is presented in zombie apocalypse terms. Its streets, shot in washed out film stock, are almost entirely deserted, but for the returnees. Concrete modernist structures sit incongruously within the Alpine setting, as though abandoned to nature. The



## Les Revenants (2012)



living are either alone in their own homes or clustered together, in one case as a literal group of survivors – the left-behind parents of the dead children, gathered together for therapy.

Disruptions to standard zombie-horror tropes are immediately apparent, though. First, the children, while a little pale, look almost exactly as they did when they died. No decaying flesh here. They speak as they used to and have no idea that four years have elapsed since they were last seen or, indeed, that their coach crashed. They have a craving for food rather than human flesh, and they still exhibit human emotions.

Other genres also come into play. For example, a barmaid, Lucy, is stabbed to death in an underpass in an attack more suited to crime than zombie. Her attacker uses a knife and appears human rather than undead. The incident raises the possibility that there will be a standard

**Watch the avant-garde opening sequence on [artofthetitle.com](http://artofthetitle.com)**



**Victor and his mother in *Les Revenants***



Collection Christophel / Alamy Stock Photo

**Simon, who died a decade ago returning to his fiancée Adele and the daughter he never met**

murder hunt alongside an exploration of why the children have come back. Viewers assume the two must be linked in some way, but there appears to be an incongruity at work. How do crime and zombie genres fit together? How will this particular disruption be resolved?

There are also typically French avant-garde moments. The butterflies escaping from the display case seem to represent more than just horror; we get shots in the opening credits of dead stags floating in the town's lake; and we return several times to shots of the town's concrete dam. Taken together, these images suggest that *Les Revenants* belongs to the genre of poetic realism. Developed by French filmmakers in the 1930s, poetic realism relies on a heightened, aestheticised idea of the real, often drawing attention to representational aspects of a narrative. The butterflies, stags and dam all symbolise a liminal (in-between) state, just like the returned children who exist between life and death. Butterflies transition from pupae into their final form; the stags are suspended, lifelike, in the water; the dam holds water on one side, land on the other.

The various genre disruptions allow the show to ask bigger questions of its audience than standard genre offerings might. On one level, these questions are at the level of genre itself. It's impossible to watch without being aware that genre is being played with and so, as a viewer, you begin to reflect on the limits and

possibilities of working within and disrupting familiar forms. The possibilities are existential too: how do these particular genre disruptions allow for reflections on aspects of life itself?

Significantly, the lifelike appearance and behaviour of the returned enables a complex exploration of the psychological effects on parents of losing a child. Episode 1 focuses in large part on a girl called Camille. We know that her mother has not fully recovered from her loss when we see her in Camille's bedroom, sitting in front of a shrine made of photographs and sentimental objects. When Camille enters the house as though not a day has passed since she died, her mother exhibits a series of emotions, one of which is happiness at her daughter's return.

Here *Les Revenants* slips into what might be called the 'lost children' genre, in which children who once disappeared are reunited with their families after a period of time has elapsed. In returning, the children fulfil their parents' desires, but viewers know that the final outcome is unlikely to be positive.

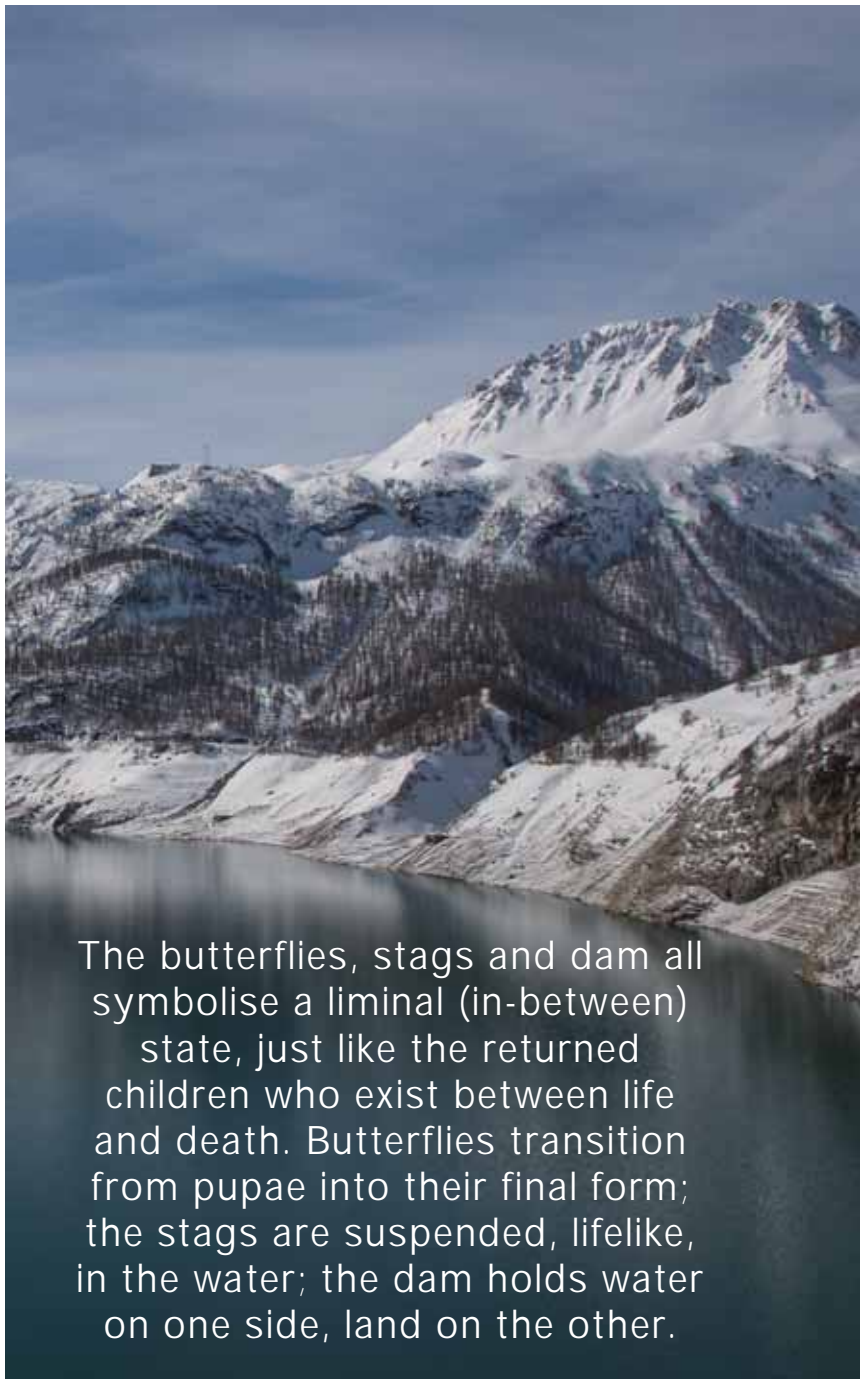
There is even an overlap here with 'true crime'. Real-world child abductions and disappearances generate huge media coverage. The most widely reported in the UK was that of 3-year-old Madeleine McCann. She disappeared from her bedroom while on holiday with her parents in Portugal in 2007 and has never been seen since. Her image, though, still appears

in print and on screen, so preserving her at the same point in time across decades. The popular press plays with this further by periodically producing computer-generated 'reconstructions' of what she might look like now if she really were still alive, an actual if remote possibility. Any lost child returning to parents would resemble their reconstruction, rather than their disappeared self. Their return would also be infused with dread: what happened to them in the intervening years? Are they forever damaged? How can they possibly settle back into family life?

*Les Revenants* cleverly manages to juxtapose the child at the time of disappearance with the 'reconstructed' child several years on. The Camille who returns is about 14, as she was when she died; her twin sister, Lena, who was not on the coach, is four years older. Both are hugely distressed when they come face-to-face: the disruption in their own sense of time and identity matching the various genre disruptions experienced by viewers. Lena is a troubled young woman, a heavy drinker and sexually promiscuous. We learn at the end of episode one that she is, in a way, responsible for her sister's death. She missed the school trip so that she could sleep with a boy whom Camille was in love with. Drawing on another horror trope, that of twins communicating telepathically, Camille becomes agitated as Lena nears orgasm. She rushes to the front of the coach and distracts the driver, in part, causing the crash. Lena is presented as the kind of troubled child who might return several years after an abduction. Camille represents the innocent, pre-abducted child.

If this reading feels a little far-fetched, it's worth comparing *Les Revenants* with the English television drama, *The Missing*, particularly series two, in which an abducted girl apparently returns to her family several years after her disappearance, with highly disruptive consequences. In style and visual effect, *The Missing* clearly draws on *Les Revenants*. It uses the same washed out film stock and features similarly modernist architecture. The returning girl, bedraggled and malnourished, even looks like a zombie. Given the children in *Les Revenants* don't look like zombies, *The Missing* is perhaps engaging in some genre disruption of its own. It primarily draws on crime tropes, but overlaying these with zombie horror disrupts a standard reading, allowing for more sophisticated storytelling and a more complex audience experience.

Genre disruption might also be read as a 'deconstructive' strategy, an aspect of



The butterflies, stags and dam all symbolise a liminal (in-between) state, just like the returned children who exist between life and death. Butterflies transition from pupae into their final form; the stags are suspended, lifelike, in the water; the dam holds water on one side, land on the other.

postmodernism by which the underlying structures of a text are teased apart and laid bare. The brilliance of *Les Revenants* lies in how it offers a sophisticated exploration – and deconstruction – of genre, while at the same time providing high-quality entertainment. It's a brilliant show, well worth watching over the length of the series to see how and if its many genre disruptions are resolved.

.....  
**Andrew McCallum is the director of the English and Media Centre.**




**from the MM vaults**

*Missing Links* – Andrew McCallum, MM67



# SEX EDUCATION

A young man with dark hair, wearing a maroon hoodie, a denim vest, and light blue jeans, sits on a toilet in a graffiti-covered bathroom stall. The stall walls are covered in various graffiti, including a large drawing of a face with a wide smile. The man has a serious expression and is looking off to the side. The lighting is somewhat dim, creating a moody atmosphere.

Moordale High, a community in need of some serious sex therapy

Raunchy, hilarious, and informative, the hit Netflix show presents a diverse cast of charming characters grappling with their sexuality and identity. Tilly Sapiano explains how *Sex Education* defies cultural norms.

Sam Taylor / Netflix



The hit Netflix show *Sex Education* casts a long shadow over previous media representations of sex. Superior to anything that has come before it, *Sex Education* handles challenging topics better than most, providing a real insight into the personal and sexual lives of 16-year-olds at Moordale High School.

Otis (Asa Butterfield) is the epitome of the awkward teenager and is one of many characters grappling with their sexual identity in the series. His sex-therapist mother (Gillian Anderson) is always getting him into meddling situations and intervening in his private life but it is her influence that gives him the confidence to talk to others about their sex lives, even though he has limited real-life experience. In effect, the show is entirely relatable, providing naturalistic characters grappling with real gender and sex-related problems and blending humour with real sexual advice, making it a positive and arguably healthy influence on teenagers watching the show.

Most notably, the minor and minority characters who in other shows are typically ignored or often clichéd are given (gasp!) actual screen time, with their problems being just as important as the white male protagonist. Both Maeve (Emma Mackey) the rebellious cool girl, and Eric (Ncuti Gatwa), Otis's best friend, are remarkable characters to see represented onscreen: Maeve is open and comfortable with her sexuality, despite being constantly shamed for it by her peers, and Eric being one of only two openly gay students at Moordale. Indeed, Eric has one of the most powerful narratives of the show, in coming to terms with his sexuality, religion and African culture in a modern environment, and helping his concerned father to do the same; it is both refreshing and inspiring to see a representation of a gay black man not following the conventional tropes of a gay character in television. Initially, Eric is very much focused on how he presents himself to the world, remaining delightfully positive and funny, despite most around him trying to bring him down. However, after Eric experiences a homophobic assault, his sense of identity and confidence are disrupted. Eric's character has more depth and complexity than most gay characters on TV and his journey back from this distressing event – exploring and experimenting with his own definition of sexuality – demonstrates brave and engaging character writing.

Likewise, the construction of Maeve as a strong, badass feminist female character is extremely relevant in today's social and political climate. Not only is she smart and independent, but her journey throughout the show casts light upon some of the toughest aspects of being a woman, really emphasising the importance of standing up for one another in difficult times. Episode three for example, sees Maeve have an abortion. It is rare for television to present abortion in a way that mirrors the reality of the experience itself, the actual procedure being quite simple for many women. However, for a girl of 17 who lives alone, with no real dependable friends or family she deals with it remarkably well, connecting with a fellow patient in

Eric and Otis:  
just a couple of  
average guys  
negotiating their  
sexual identities



Sam Taylor / Netflix

Emma Mackey  
as Maeve



Jon Hall / Netflix



I think there's something between them – could be love or a plastic condom demonstrator just out of shot

the clinic. Another patient, who has evidently been there before, clearly attempts to boost morale by reassuring and grabbing the girls' hands whilst doing a Mexican wave. The simple power of this scene only serves to further highlight and encompass some of the strength it takes to be a woman and that there is strength in humour. Unlike so many leading ladies, Maeve knows her worth, and her open outlook towards sex is truly refreshing to see. Furthermore, as a character she constantly encourages feminism, battling patriarchal and chauvinistic attitudes with her everyday words and actions; refusing to let slut shaming or peer harassment bother her. Similarly, the portrayal of Otis offers a progressive representation of a modern young man, his awkwardness and general positivity remodelling the toxic view of masculinity enforced on society. The unconventional Otis gives a new and improved template for masculinity, generating a new type of role model – one who has problems and insecurities which are realistic, relatable, and ultimately, reassuring.

The show itself still offers traditional archetypes, just with a contemporary twist: bullies and mean girls still have their place in the ever-present social hierarchy of high schools, which – in media representations at least – favours wealth and cruelty. Yet, *Sex Education's* anxieties are modern ones, and even the popular kids have their struggles, both internal and external, which we get to see. Jackson (Kedar Williams-Stirling) for example, is the most popular boy at school, yet he suffers severely from mental health problems as a result of the pressure he is under from his disintegrating relationship with his mother, alongside the stress of being Mooredale's star athlete. Indeed, creator Laurie Nunn has stated that 'the show is about universal experiences, and I felt everyone should be able to see themselves on screen. I

Sex can be a lot of fun, but it can also be embarrassing, weird and even at times traumatic. *Sex Education* suggests that although most adults are aware of these variables, many teenagers are not well informed enough about the complexities of sex and relationships.

wanted to take the genre and update certain parts of it'. In creating a show that encompasses these beliefs, Nunn (with the help of Netflix, who were happy to take a risk on the series) has undoubtedly subverted the entire teenage genre for the better, illuminating the real teenage experience and promoting a positive message of being yourself.

Throughout each episode, Otis addresses classmates' new relationships and sexual taboos, whilst dealing with his own sexual reservations. Notably, with Otis acting as a sex therapist for the sixteen-year-olds in the show, an audience can see what it would be like if teenagers had an informative and non-judgemental person to talk to about real sexual concerns. The advice Otis gives out in the show is educational and accurate, and can help viewers solve or, at the very least, make sense of real-life problems, as it exposes and debunks many common myths surrounding sex, which sex education in schools tends to play down, deny or bypass entirely.

Maeve, the  
feminist heart of  
*Sex Education*



Sam Taylor / Netflix



Gillian Anderson as Otis's sex-therapist mother, Jean

Sex can be a lot of fun, but it can also be embarrassing, weird and even at times traumatic. *Sex Education* suggests that although most adults are aware of these variables, many teenagers are not well-informed enough about the complexities of sex and relationships. More importantly, many modern TV shows and films still abstain from depictions of sex in anything but simplistic terms, particularly in regards to teenagers. It is an exceedingly common trope in film and TV to see everything happen perfectly, with the characters getting straight down to it, with no discussion of foreplay, contraception or comfort. Popular culture, therefore, is simply lacking in its depictions of the trials of sexual discovery. What seem to be missing are the challenges of simply forming a caring, equal and fulfilling sexual relationship. This is where *Sex Education* comes in; it breaks down the barriers and boundaries formed through the stifling of progressive sex education

The construction of Maeve as a strong, badass feminist female character is extremely relevant in today's social and political climate. Not only is she smart and independent, but her journey throughout the show casts light upon some of the toughest aspects of being a woman, really emphasising the importance of standing up for one another in difficult times.

by discussing everything, from masturbation, performance anxieties, unrequited love, sexually transmitted diseases, to the problems of pornography and almost everything else in between. No issue is represented without serious thought or discussion, with the use of raunchy dark comedy mixed with humiliating and interesting (to say the least!) sexual experiences, stemming from common societal beliefs regarding sex. So while it may not be everyone's cup of tea, *Sex Education* certainly reflects the importance of teenage emotions and accurately represents many of the various struggles facing the young people of today in terms of culture and sexuality. Ultimately, the series teaches its audience, as well as its characters, that it is okay to be whoever you want to be.

The stigmatisation around the presentation of sex in the mainstream media is partly a result of poor representation and extremely clichéd television. *Sex Education* offers a refreshingly honest portrayal of the sexual struggles of a modern teenager, presenting common insecurities, mental health issues, and the discovery of one's sexual identity in ways television just hasn't seen before. It is arguably the lack of sex education at Moordale school that is reflective of our own generation's anxieties, or wider society's reluctance to communicate openly about sexuality, gender and equality. It is a show which is paving the way for the future of representation, enabling characters to act and feel like real people with common issues that we have all experienced as young men and women. Indeed, at times the show is overwhelming, but in all, it beautifully displays the reality of the teenage mind and the links between sexuality and identity.

Tilly Sapiano is an aspiring journalist currently studying Media, Communications and Culture at Oxford Brookes University.

## Links and further reading

<https://rts.org.uk/article/sex-education-creator-laurie-nunn-transforming-awkward-teenage-experience-tv-masterpiece>

The Theory Drop  
The Theory Drop  
The Theory Drop  
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# Curran and Seaton

Jonathan Nunns explains how ideas from *Power Without Responsibility* can be applied to the Disney empire which is set to launch a new streaming service in March that has the potential to sink its competitors.

The pursuit of profit and power leads to a few very powerful players dominating an industry and reduces the range not the quantity of creative products available to audiences.

**W**hat does power mean to you? Well, most of us enjoy some, if only in terms of our relationships, cultural tastes, purchasing decisions and career choice; but genuine power, authentic power, raw power, what does that look like?

Bluntly, it can be defined as the ability to shape the world around you and the lives of all those living in it to your design. The more of it you have, the more people you can influence. Positive examples might include 19th century industrial philanthropists such as the Cadbury family, who used profit from their confectionery empire to build a whole new town, offering their workers escape from the dreadful slum housing common then. Or the Gates Foundation, run by the Microsoft billionaire Bill Gates, funding initiatives to eradicate disease.

In much darker terms, however, power is the ability to enforce your will, crushing resistance and making life or death decisions for the millions living under your influence. In the political arena, this can lead to murderous dictatorships, such as those of Joseph Stalin or Saddam Hussein. In industrial terms, this can enable powerful

companies, when unencumbered by morality, to ravage populations and environments in the search for profit

In 1981, James Curran and Jean Seaton used that loaded word in the title of their book, *Power Without Responsibility*. They were attempting to explore how the media worked within western capitalist societies and the outcome of their work is, at least superficially, straightforward to understand and apply.

## Profit and Power

The two theorists observed that commercial media companies aim to maximise their profit and their power by becoming dominant within a profitable marketplace, then use their earnings to achieve further market domination. Anyone familiar with the game 'Monopoly' would recognise the objective: gain all the money, buy up all the property, force the competition out of the game. This is the essential logic behind the big conglomerates that dominate western media. It applies to all the current major players, such as Google, Facebook, Apple, Netflix and Amazon. When faced with a serious competitor, use your deep financial reserves to

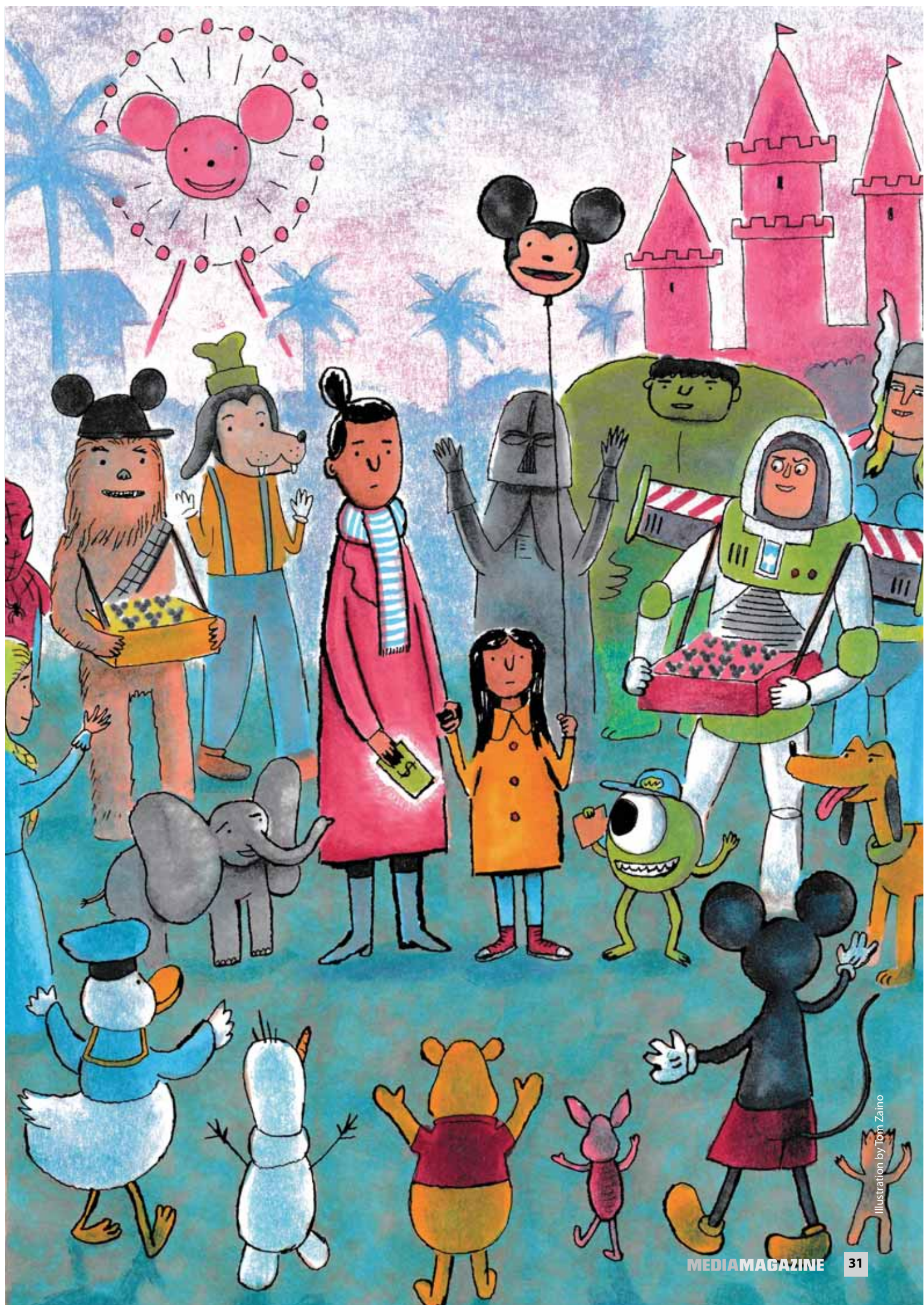


Illustration by Tom Zaino

slash your prices and hold them low, for long enough to drive them out of business. Alternatively, if they have an idea/product that you want, buy them out, so that you own what they have. Such has been the fate of many imaginative start-ups. This leads to a small number of companies obtaining dominance and power within a given market, a situation known as oligopoly. Examples of this process might include Facebook's purchase of WhatsApp or Microsoft's takeover of LinkedIn.

What does this mean for you, as a consumer and user of media products? Why should you care? Well, you might be directly invested from the perspective of being a student expected to apply Curran and Seaton in your exam. But beyond that, why should you be interested? Profit and power are gained through knowing your demographics and producing things you know will sell. Hence the power of brands and in the instance of the film and TV industry, the attraction of the franchise. Why make creative and original films/shows that take a risk? You might lose money. Much better to make versions of existing properties which give the public what you already know they like. Hence the almost endless list of successful film and TV adaptations, remakes and franchises (think Marvel, *Star Wars* and *The Fast and the Furious*). Better still, in a market where your power allows you to exclude, suppress or buy out competition, others will be less likely to take risks either for fear of financial ruin.

So goes the theory. The pursuit of profit and power leads to a few very powerful players dominating an industry and reduces the range, not the quantity of creative products available to audiences. The business model reduces the range of content to a hard core of very well-known genres and franchises from which audiences can finally choose. This reduces the consumer's power to choose, by limiting the range to only those products companies are confident will increase their profits. The same principle has worked well in other industries. McDonalds' worldwide uniformity of branding has turned the one-off burger bar in

Let Mickey take you to the magical kingdom (subscriptions start at £49.99 for a limited time only)



Martin Beddall / Alamy Stock Photo

California in the 1950s into a multi-billion-dollar global household name.

So what case study could you use to test and explore the relevance of Curran and Seaton in the current age? For that, you should take a look at Disney.

## The Magic Kingdom

In the late 1950s, the animator and founder Walt Disney literally drew a diagram of his plans for cross promotion between his various branded businesses in film, TV, comics, and theme parks. But could he even have begun to imagine the global empire his company would become? If his original plans were anything to go by, he might be very pleased indeed.

Since the 1980s Disney has diversified (spread out across different sectors) and sought to own or control the major competitors within its respective market places. Disney itself already had a major reputation

as an animation studio and had a range of characters and brands ready for further exploitation. However, faced with competition from the animation newcomer Pixar, Disney's own products suddenly seemed old fashioned to consumers. Their response was to buy Pixar, so now when you watch *Toy Story* (1996) or *The Incredibles*, (2004) you watch a product that brings profit to Disney.

Perhaps most famously, Disney saw the potential of the superhero genre (and the potential for this genre to be more successful than the Disney Pixar films) and in 2009 bought Marvel Studios, giving the Disney Company the copyrights and control of *The Marvel Universe*, the huge stable of exploitable Marvel characters and interconnected stories that have been a dominant fixture on our screens ever since. The other huge coup for Disney, was the multi-billion-dollar purchase in 2012 of the *Star Wars* universe of characters and

storylines from the originating director and copyright holder George Lucas.

The result of all this expensive acquisition has been the creation of the most concentrated array of movie and TV brands ever seen. No movie studio, not even in the Hollywood era, has ever enjoyed this much dominance. In 2019, the biggest box office successes were Disney brands, including *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, *Toy Story 4*, and *Frozen 2*.

So who can compete with such a tsunami of content? In the past, players like 21st Century Fox, with their own major roster of franchises such as *X-Men* and *Avatar* might have accepted the challenge. However, Disney's buy out of Fox Studios in early 2019 provided the mighty conglomerate with yet more exploitable franchises and one less competitor. So, what or who is left to do battle with Disney for the screens and attention of the wider world?

## The Rise of the Disruptors

The major force undermining the 'profit and power' model of Hollywood recently has been the growth of streaming services. This disruptive presence undermined Hollywood's established pattern of movie distribution: theatrical release (cinema), followed by DVD/Blu-ray, then pay-per-view services, subscription channels and finally free-to-air TV. This was the established model for years and it allowed the major studios decades of financial control over access to their product. Recently however, in the space of just a few years, the development and rapid expansion of online streaming sites broke the business models of both the Hollywood studios and subscription TV services such as Sky.

Once again financial power and profit lead to market dominance and a seemingly unstoppable flow of subscribers and cash. Give the public what it wants and give it to them now – as long as you control all the rights and revenue streams. But therein lies a potentially decisive weakness. The debt-financed rise of the market leader Netflix, was dependent on access to other people's content to populate it and drive subscriptions

Anyone familiar with the game 'Monopoly' would recognise the objective: gain all the money, buy up all the property, force the competition out of the game. This is the essential logic behind the big conglomerates that dominate Western media.

to its service. Netflix is well known for the big budgets that it pours into making its own original content but that pales in comparison to Disney's avalanche of brands and franchises.

Disney intends to complete the circle. Having dominance of content, it now wants dominance in distribution. As the Disney+ streaming service launches in March 2020, it will have access to unrivalled content. Other streaming services are finding that Disney content is dwindling in availability, as the content provider draws back its copyrights to ensure that all their premium franchises and brands will only be available by subscription to Disney+. Battle is about to commence between Disney and Netflix as well as Amazon, Apple and the rest. Curran and Seaton's theory of 'profit and power' could hardly be more relevant. What does this mean for the consumer? There might be discounts in the short term, as the media giants slash prices in the battle for supremacy. But in the longer term, there could well be less choice and more expensive subscriptions as the mega companies that survive set about consolidating their profit and power, deciding what choice consumers should have. Disney generated \$69 billion dollars of income in 2019, so if they win their war with Netflix, the real big bucks could be yet to come.

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Jonathan Nunns is Head of Media Studies at Collyer's College in Horsham.

## Glossary

**Diversify:** to branch out into new areas. For example, a film company that begins to make games and build leisure parks or hotels.

**Oligopoly:** where a particular market – here the film industry – is dominated by only one or two powerful companies

**Conglomerate:** a company made up of lots of little companies. Often there is a parent company which has bought up subsidiary companies within the same market

**Vertical integration:** an arrangement whereby a company owns every stage of production and distribution. In this case, Disney owns the studios that make the film as well as a film distribution company, multiple media channels on which it can advertise for free and now (among other things) an online streaming service.

## from the MM vaults

*The Marvel Intertextual Universe*  
– Pete Turner, MM54

*Power Without Responsibility:  
Selling Your Soul to Social  
Media* – Nick Lacey, MM61

*Netflix and the Cultural Industries*  
– Nick Lacey, MM63

**THE BALLAD OF**

# **BABY YODA**

Aw...so cute!

Laurence Russell tracks the intergalactic progress of one of 2020's most popular memes and discusses what it means for *The Mandalorian's* creators.

**O**n November 12th 2019, *The Mandalorian*, the space-western *Star Wars* spin-off series, was launched on the Disney+ platform in the US, initially to modest acclaim. But its popularity soared when a certain new character was revealed – a character likely to outlast the power of mainline *Star Wars* figures from the new trilogy. This was of course, Baby Yoda. The character is referred to as *the child* or *the asset*, and isn't the infant version of the Yoda we all know and love (the show is set 5 years after Yoda senior's death) but a juvenile version of whatever alien species Yoda was.

The iconic image of Yoda, modified for maximum cuteness, was a genius move of brand recognition that launched the show into the public consciousness (it isn't even scheduled for release in UK until March and even then, only to Disney+ subscribers). Why and how such a thing could occur is a remarkable tale of our time, one which requires some context.

*The Mandalorian* doesn't endeavour to please all the fans by keeping every possible plate in the narrative spinning all at once. Instead, the series sets the far more modest goal of writing around the action-packed 'hive of scum and villainy' of Tatooine, adopting the space-western aesthetic established in the first act of *A New Hope*.

## A Fistful of Credits: How *The Mandalorian* Mastered the Space Western

*The Mandalorian* is one of many spin-off projects created outside of the original *Star Wars* films that attempts to build an expanded universe, similar to the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* (MCU) expansion phase that we saw in the early 2010s. Hesmondhalgh's theories of cultural industries are relevant here, as both the *Marvel* and *Star Wars* franchises choose to build on narratives and characters that they know already have an audience and have been lucrative in the past. Rather than create new worlds and new characters and risk audiences rejecting them, they commodify what they already own thus minimising risk and maximising profit.

*The Mandalorian* was created by Jon Favreau, a veteran *Marvel Studios* executive producer and the director of a number of fairly average science fiction features like *Zathura: A Space Adventure* and *Cowboys & Aliens*. Dave Filoni, an art and animation maestro known for his work on the highly acclaimed *Star Wars* animated series *The Clone Wars*, *Rebels*, and more recently *Resistance*, co-wrote and directed several episodes. Both men had cut their teeth on dynamic science fiction and developing strong artistic styles, which are arguably core selling points of *Star Wars* products.

Unlike the new *Star Wars* trilogy (*The Force Awakens*, *The Last Jedi*, and *The Rise of Skywalker*), *The Mandalorian* doesn't endeavour to please all the fans by keeping every possible plate in the narrative spinning all at once. Instead, the series sets the far more modest goal of writing around the action-packed 'hive of scum and villainy' of Tatooine, adopting the space-western aesthetic established in the first act of *A New Hope*.

The show centres on an unnamed Mandalorian, a member of an ancient warrior order who now works as a bounty hunter, similar to fan favourite Boba Fett. The story is set five years after *Return of the Jedi* (and 25 years before we meet Ray and Finn), during the recovery from the fall of the empire, in which the New Republic struggles to enforce law in frontier worlds like Tatooine. Setting it during this bittersweet era feels like a wonderfully nostalgic supplement, or commentary for the original film trilogy (*Star Wars*, *Return of the Jedi* and *The Empire Strikes Back*), cathartic background to celebrate the original trilogy, in which desperate aliens and weary veterans scramble to make ends meet in the unstable world left behind by the destruction depicted in the original films.

The Mandalorian (played by Pedro Pascal) now



The memes captured the spirit of a generation

hunts and captures petty criminals at the edges of galactic civilisation for a living. When he is offered an under-the-table commission from a mysterious 'client' to find and capture a fifty-year-old target. The Mandalorian reluctantly joins forces with an IG-series assassin droid (voiced by Taika Waititi who wrote and directed some episodes) to fight his way to the bounty. The first episode ends on the reveal that the bounty signal is originating from a levitating cradle. And inside is the little guy likely to eclipse the entire narrative: Baby Yoda.

In true western style, the series goes on to

pit our Mandalorian anti-hero against a number of challenges and face several ethical quandaries, most often regarding the fate of Baby Yoda. Like so many classical gunslingers, the Mandalorian knows it's foolhardy to start to develop emotions in a world where the strong always find a way to manipulate the weak, but is always brought around by a sentimentality that quietly resents but cannot resist. The show pulled the world of *Star Wars* back to its western roots; a world steeped in scum and villainy in which gunslinger bounty hunters and wizened wise men linger about innocent homesteads.

The series pleased many: it conjured a suitably low-stakes *Star Wars* tale, beautifully imagined with myriad practical and special effects. The show's credits sequences scroll through a beautiful selection of concept art

commissioned for the show, depicting the environments and character designs used for the episode in question, which the show itself paid detailed attention to, deliberately recreating and framing scenes exactly as they were drawn. Putting such emphasis on concept art reminds fans of the sense of wonder and excitement so many of us felt when we encountered the series for the first time.

## Baby Yoda Meme

*The Mandalorian* is easy to watch, engaging, and overflowing with multi-faceted, likeable characters. It had every reason to succeed, but it didn't just succeed, it thrived. The character was revealed in the final moments of the first episode but because hundreds of thousands instantly flocked to social media to share the image of Baby Yoda before most people had even seen the show. At a time when *Star Wars* fatigue was rife amongst the fandom (*The Rise of Skywalker* was largely panned by critics and fans alike) Baby Yoda quickly became a meme, one which grew with the show as new gifs and meme formats surfaced week on week reenergising interest in the franchise and driving audiences, who may otherwise not have bothered, to watch *The Mandalorian*.

We were treated to such momentary classics as 'Baby Yoda reaches for something', 'Baby Yoda tells Mando to take the shot', 'Baby Yoda minds their business sipping soup', and my favourite: 'Baby Yoda keeps turning on Lizzo.'

The memes appeared to be outpacing traditional advertising methods, giving the show a greater degree of recognition than similar products such as *Solo: A Star Wars Story* or *Rogue One*, and no doubt baffling entertainment executives in the process.

## The 'Lifecycle' of Memes

Memes can only truly be experienced online, in the precise cultural moment in which they emerge. The world of memes is a fleeting, dreamlike microculture which is difficult to appreciate from the outside-in. Like an in-joke which can run and run (if you're in on it), from the outside it may seem inaccessible and irrelevant.

The Baby Yoda wave lasted longer than most memes, but the joke had peaked after a few weeks. Memetic evolution is often a remarkably unclear process, with the images often taking on a meaning totally unrelated to the original source text. Like many memes of our day, the evolution progressed along an absurdist route, swerving in all directions, and Baby Yoda became something of an emblem for Generation Z and millennials.

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As a young person today watching the world from the internet, it's hard not to feel like a helpless alien baby, with little influence over the cruel, collapsing galaxy you're being ferried around.

The Baby Yoda memes reflected themes of helplessness in an increasingly unstable world, feelings of weakness or innocence, and complexity beneath an unassuming exterior. In other words, we loved Baby Yoda, and perhaps we increasingly chose to see ourselves in them. As a young person today watching the world from the internet, it's hard not to feel like a helpless alien baby, with little influence over the cruel, collapsing galaxy you're being ferried around.

This subtext is a good example of the ideas put forward by Gauntlett: audiences become producers and co-construct culture in a way that reflects their identity, as opposed to accepting the representations created by the formal media institutions they exist outside of.

Sadly, the Baby Yoda memes eventually went mainstream and died. You know a meme is dead when your mum has heard of it, and even more so when corporate Twitter tries to join in. The meme fell into the cultural undercurrent, no doubt yet to enjoy a nostalgic second wind when the second season of *The Mandalorian* is released in October 2020.

It will be interesting to see how the show's

creators respond to the meme culture it spawned. Whether the show chooses to ignore that reputation and stay focused on the narrative they have planned, or whether they attempt to capitalise on its success might have a direct effect on the communities that gave life to the meme, who historically despise being pandered to.

Memes are not built in boardrooms to be plastered about like advertising; they are twisted into shape chaotically, often subtly reflecting the creator. Simply put, there is a sense of primitive ownership to today's memes very reflective of the culture they were born in. Whether the showrunners, and Disney at large realise that remains to be seen, and may well go on to better define the corporate relationship with memes as commercial assets.

Laurence Russell is a technology journalist and a former Media Studies technician.



Just one example of the 'Baby Yoda drinking' meme

# REPRESENTING W WLES



There's more to Wales and Welshness than *Gavin & Stacey*, argues Giles Gough as he takes a look at the recent rise of Welsh language drama and the battle against lazy stereotypes.

The *Gavin & Stacey Christmas Special* 2019 raked in viewing figures of 11.6 million at 8.30pm on Christmas Day, making it the most watched scripted TV show of the decade. In Wales it was estimated to have been watched by 1.3 million people, roughly a third of the population. While *Gavin & Stacey* is clearly popular in Wales and beyond, it does offer the people of Wales something of a dilemma. To many Welsh people, it's not a question of disliking the representation that the show offers of their country: it's that they don't like that being the only representation of their country. Perhaps it narrows the accepted perception of what it means to be Welsh and creates a stereotype around Welsh identity. To understand why this might be an issue, we need a brief history lesson on how Wales has been represented in broadcast media.

## Welsh Language TV

During the 1970s, there was a campaign for a Welsh language TV channel. This resulted in S4C. Sianel Pedwar Cymru (Channel 4 Wales) began broadcasting in Wales on the 1st of November, 1982, one day before Channel 4 began broadcasting in the rest of the UK. S4C as an analogue channel was bilingual, sharing much of its programming with Channel 4, with Welsh language shows dropped into its schedule throughout the day. When TV switched to digital, viewers throughout Wales could now get the same Channel 4 that the rest of the country got and



there was no need to continue the bilingual channel. S4C exists as a wholly Welsh language channel, with much of S4C's Welsh language content being provided by the BBC. One of the Public Purposes of the BBC is to serve, reflect and represent the diverse communities of the UK and this was how they fulfilled that part of their Charter.

This does present some interesting problems. Welsh is the official language of Wales and yet, as of 2018, only 29.3% of the population speak Welsh, according to a survey by the Office for National Statistics. With this in mind it could be said the channel that used to represent Wales has actually ended up excluding two thirds of the population. Obviously, a Welsh language channel is hugely important for promoting the Welsh language, but an unintended consequence is that there are few representations of Wales and Welsh people in English-speaking television. Lee Waters, a member of the Welsh Assembly's Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee, said: 'the unwitting side-effect of creating a Welsh language television channel has been to take Welsh off the screens of the majority'. It is as if by having a Welsh language channel, broadcasters have given themselves the moral license to largely ignore Wales in English-speaking TV programmes.

When Welsh people do show up, they are often not portrayed in the best light. A 2018 Ofcom review into Representation and Portrayal in BBC Television showed that audiences were concerned about people from Wales being portrayed as 'stupid or



L-R Matthew Horne, Joanna Page, James Corden and Ruth Jones as Gavin, Stacey, Smithy and Nessa

Whilst the media can't be wholly responsible for this identity crisis for Welsh people who speak English only, it does contribute to the problem by perpetuating narrow stereotypes.

restricted to comedy roles'. Ofcom pointed out that: 'Audiences also made comments about the overuse of national stereotypes on programmes on TV channels beyond the BBC. The higher frequency of stereotypical portrayal in some programmes meant that they were more likely to be remembered'. This is a view that is reflected by my own research into the area. When asked, people said:

**I cringe almost every time there's a Welsh person in TV. They're almost always portrayed as a bit simple, and it's always an exaggerated bubbly persona. (Katie, Manchester)**

**[The Welsh are] always portrayed as uneducated, the accent is always exaggerated and it's almost as if we're just there to be made a mockery of. (Claire, Swansea)**

### Nationality, Identity and Belonging

This stereotyping narrows the accepted definition of what it means to be Welsh in a country where that definition was already pretty narrow. Daniel Evans pointed out in his paper 'Welshness in British Wales: negotiating national identity at the margins'

**The complex and uneven historic penetration of first, English colonialism... and later, industrialization, have helped produce a remarkable heterogeneity in such a small country.**

Heterogeneity is the quality of being diverse in character or content and it is this diversity among Welsh people that is failing to be recognised. For most people, nationality is simply the country they come from, and yet in some parts of Wales there seem to be added criteria, as one person told me,

**My mum and dad being English and me not speaking Welsh means that despite being born there and spending the first 18 years of my life there, I don't identify as Welsh much at all really. (Cate, Oxford)**

In other words, because she did not fit the stereotype that a Welsh person is born in Wales, to Welsh parents and speaks Welsh fluently, she did not feel she could identify as Welsh. Whilst the media can't be wholly responsible for this identity crisis for Welsh people who speak English only, it does contribute to the problem by perpetuating narrow stereotypes. If one were to take a stereotypical presentation of what it means to be



Josh O'Connor as the Prince of Wales in the Netflix drama *The Crown*



BBC iPlayer

English, for example, *Downton Abbey*, English people may be offended if they were expected to conform to Received Pronunciation accents and have impeccable social etiquette. They would be even more offended if the world at large associated their country with a representation like *Austin Powers*.

Thankfully, this problem has not gone completely unnoticed and some broadcasters, particularly the BBC, have taken steps to address it. Ofcom stated that 'There was a widely held view in Wales that the BBC is performing better than other broadcasters in terms of reflecting their nation'. The BBC have managed to not only increase representation of people in Wales, but also improve the authenticity of that representation, partially by filming much of its scripted drama content such as *Doctor Who* at its Roath Lock studios in Cardiff Bay. (It's probably worth noting that Russell T. Davies is almost single-handedly responsible

for massively improving the representation of Welsh people on screen). However, the best efforts thus far to create authentic representations of Wales have come about in a very novel way, owing a debt to Scandi-noir TV shows like *The Killing*. *Hinterland* is produced for BBC Cymru Wales in partnership with S4C. Set in and around Aberystwyth (a university town on the coast of mid-Wales), this detective drama exists in two versions. Firstly, the Welsh version was broadcast on S4C in October 2013 as *Y Gwyll* (literally translated as *The Dusk*). Following this, another version appeared on BBC One Wales in January 2014. Each scene is filmed twice, in the English and Welsh languages, apart from a few scenes where Welsh with subtitles is used for the English version. It was the first BBC television drama with dialogue in



Netflix

A 2018 Ofcom review into Representation and Portrayal in BBC Television showed that audiences were concerned about people from Wales being portrayed as 'Stupid or restricted to comedy roles'.



both English and Welsh. *Hinterland* has been sold to broadcasters in eleven different countries and managed to kick off a small subgenre of TV shows, affectionately called 'Cymru noir'. *Craith* or *Hidden*, set in the woefully under-represented North Wales, followed the same pattern when it was broadcast in January 2018 on S4C and then on BBC Wales later in the year. At the time of writing, *Hidden* has made it into the prized Saturday 9pm slot on BBC4. These shows were remarkable in the way that they presented Welsh life, although the second bilingual version may arguably have been the more authentic. During the course of the narrative of both shows we see characters seamlessly switch from English to Welsh depending on who they are talking to, what context they are speaking in or whichever word or phrase better conveys a nuanced point. In short, they show Welsh speakers how they actually are.

This sense of authentic representation was consolidated when Netflix released the third season of its flagship show, *The Crown*. The sixth

episode, *Tywysog Cymru* (Prince of Wales) has large sections of dialogue spoken exclusively in Welsh, as Edward 'Tedi' Millward (played by Mark Lewis Jones) teaches the young Charles to speak Welsh in order to give his speech at his investiture as Prince of Wales. In shows like this, Welsh people are shown as complex, political, resolute, warm-hearted, contradictory, sympathetic, loving and intelligent: in short, they were shown as well-rounded human beings. The show was praised as being highly useful in promoting the Welsh language around the world and was invaluable for letting Welsh people see themselves on an international platform.

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I cringe almost every time there's a Welsh person in TV. They're almost always portrayed as a bit simple, and it's always an exaggerated bubbly persona. (Katie, Manchester)



BBC iPlayer

Jonathan Glazer's  
baffling but brilliant  
*Under the Skin*  
requires the audience  
to step up and  
participate in the act  
of decoding meaning.  
Claire Pollard isn't  
sure where her  
sympathies should  
lie, but demonstrates  
that the freedom to  
be able to make your  
own meanings can  
be exhilarating.

UNDER



# THE SKIN

**A**t first watch it's hard to see how *Under the Skin* follows a traditional narrative arc though it does adhere to some of the rules of narrative. Our main character is not human – at least to begin with – and we don't know what she wants or what motivates her. Is she gathering information? Observing and plotting? Somehow using the men who she subsumes as fuel? If so, fuel for what? Or is she just a minion of the motorcycle guy who in turn may be a minion of some other higher, alien power? The director, Jonathan Glazer leaves a lot to the viewer to interpret. This can be frustrating if you're not used to this type of film but, as with poetry, once you realise that this opens up the possibility of multiple readings, it can be quite exciting.

Roland Barthes, who media students will know as 'the semiotics theorist', posed the idea that some texts (written, moving image – it doesn't matter) are 'readerly', meaning they require no special effort from the reader to understand:

they follow familiar patterns and show or tell everything necessary to understand the story. But other books and films are 'writerly': they require a bit more work from the audience, forcing the reader to step up and participate in the process of making the meaning in a text. *Under the Skin* is a film of two halves, and in this piece I argue that the second half follows a predictable course. But the first part, the main focus of this article, is most definitely writerly, surprising and confusing the audience with an unpredictable sequence of events, arrhythmic editing (long takes followed by abrupt cuts) and distorted sound that has us constantly asking 'what's going on?'. What you're about to read is just this reader's interpretation – what will yours be?

The film's opening gets the viewer working straight away. What we see is abstract: black and white shapes that could be an eclipse, or an eye, or a graphic of a rocket shooting to earth. There are layers of abstract noise, at first indistinguishable from each other but eventually we start

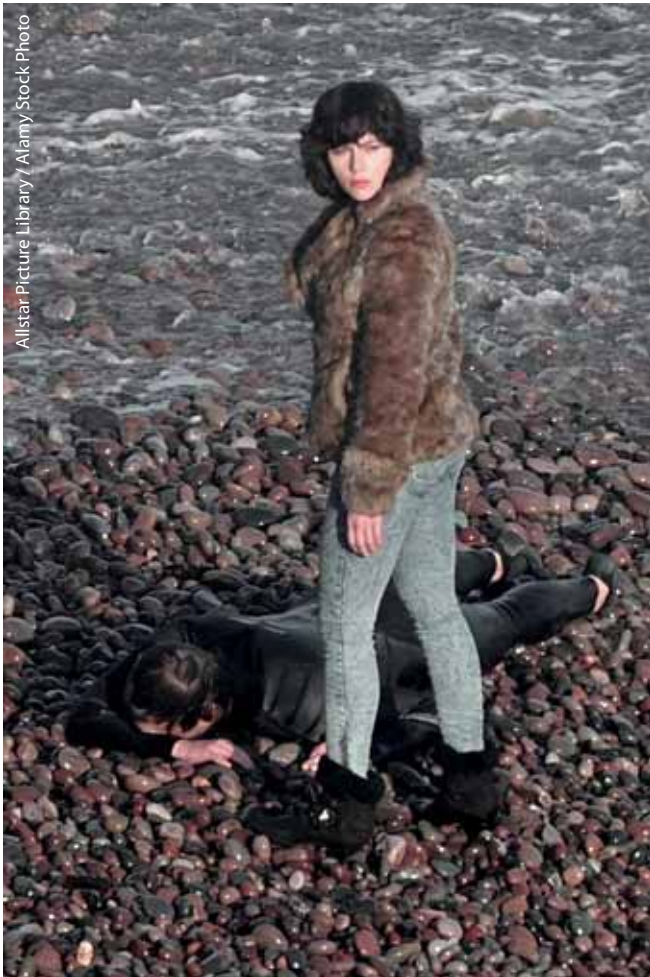


ACollection Christophel / Alamy Stock Photo

**What is she thinking?  
Scarlett Johansson as  
The Woman**

Glazer leaves a lot to the viewer to interpret. This can be frustrating if you're not used to this type of film but, as with poetry, once you realise that this opens up the possibility of multiple readings, it can be quite exciting.

Often, we're looking out from a POV shot, seeing what she sees, guessing what she might be looking for. We begin to wonder, what is she thinking? What does she make of this montage of humanity? Clinton Cards, makeovers, drunks, chicken shops, combovers?



Allstar Picture Library / Alamy Stock Photo

**The Woman is programmed to entrap men (and ignore crying babies)**

to pick out dialogue 'N-n-n-n. F-f-f, fear, feel, fills, filled, foil, fail'. What we seem to be hearing is the sound of speech being learned or uploaded into a being we haven't yet met. And almost at the moment we come to this realisation, the image becomes an extreme close up of a human eye.

Our first view of the alien being (who we'll refer to as The Woman) is surprisingly fleshy. A naked Scarlett Johansson is wrestling clothes off a dead girl. We see skin and flesh at first in a sequence of close ups, immediately drawing our attention to the human-ness of her body. It is full and shapely, and overtly feminine – nothing to suggest this is an alien form. There is no care though, in the way she strips the corpse. In this opening scene we are presented with the binaries of human and inhuman, softness and harshness, living and dead, that continue to preoccupy us throughout the film.

The camerawork and editing also have us constantly guessing: is this a sentient being or just a 'bot on a mission? The camera is frequently close to Johansson. Often, we're looking out from a POV shot, seeing what she sees, guessing what she might be looking for. We begin to wonder, what is she thinking? What does she make of this montage of humanity? Clinton Cards, makeovers, drunks, chicken shops, combovers? But then an ECU of a single eye at other times suggests she's not making anything of it, just recording or scanning, with a singular predatory focus. The viewer is suddenly forced to see the banality of our world through the cold robotic eye of this interloper.

When The Woman consumes her first man, she does so efficiently and without emotion. It's an alarming moment; we don't know what has happened or why at this point. In the scene that follows we see her eyes again, both this time, in the rear-view mirror of the van. The combination of camera, editing and sound force us to anthropomorphise this creature; close ups are, according to general film grammar, supposed to show a character's feelings, tricking us into imagining motives, motivations and regrets. It's a long take, 50 seconds, and the sounds of the street – shouting, clattering bottles – become

**Johansson's character develops from a ruthless alien into a sentient being, but don't expect a happy ending**



Allstar Picture Library / Alamy Stock Photo

slightly muted, suggesting that there are thoughts here, possibly even emotions, that are blocking out the noise. As the diegetic audio starts to fade back in and sharpen, it initially seems like we're hearing the sound of cars passing her on the highway but it's actually a sound bridge into the next scene on the beach. The spectator is being carefully manipulated here, jolted once again out of a scene where we might be thinking she is starting to feel to one in which she witnesses a horrific tragedy and leaves a baby to die. Suddenly humanity in all its triviality is preferable to whatever it is she is. Again, Glazer is playing with these binaries of human and inhuman, perceived softness then sudden cold, hard-heartedness.

Until of course she does start to feel. About 45 minutes in, she begins to become aware of women in the streets – this is a deviation from her programming; her mission here is to seduce and consume men – and the beginning of self-realisation. This is followed by an extreme close up of the eye, but not the cold stare or static shot of before – this eye is wild with emotion, the shot handheld. Images of women are layered over each other to create a chaotic effect; she's processing this differently, making connections. The images become a shimmering wash of gold, forming a halo or heat map around her head. Character development, then? A narrative disruption – albeit a little later than in most films?

At the moment of consuming her next victim, something extraordinary happens. It's an interesting turning point in the narrative, and also in the way we relate (or not) to *The Woman*: as well as the two of them naked in the black space, there are cuts away to an alien form, whether part of her or something else that's in the room, we're not sure. It's certainly a reminder that we are dealing with aliens here, but then they're not in the same shot, they're not

I dislike this second part of the film for a couple of reasons. It's much more 'readerly'. As a spectator I am no longer required to work, I'm passive now and the last section of the narrative is a depressing romp through the worst parts of female experience.

the same person. Our character is becoming human.

Glazer seems to highlight this idea in a scene where the van becomes enshrouded by mist. She gets out and stands looking into the thick fog, unsure what is happening. This is a rare moment of absolute silence in the film's soundtrack. She tilts her head trying to work out what this means – is she disappearing? Is she losing reception – is the picture she was seeing now washed out and fading? Is she being called back to the mothership, now that she has disobeyed orders? The audio, when it comes back, is sharp: birds, a voice singing. She waits, half expecting this to be the end but then in a long shot we see her walk out of the mist. She's OK, she's reborn, she's free, she is a woman.

In this reincarnation, the polite conversation learned for the purposes of her mission has vanished. She's a baby, mute, full of wonder, and her gag reflex kicks in when she tries to eat. As she interacts with men she learns gradually what it means to be a girl, a woman. Examining her naked body in the mirror it's as if she's trying to work out what all the fuss is about – she's confused, perhaps slightly disgusted, at how men have reacted to it.

It's worth pausing here to say that I dislike this second part of the film for a couple of reasons. It's much more 'readerly'. As a spectator I am no longer required to work, I'm passive now and the last section of the narrative is a depressing romp through the worst parts of female experience. Suddenly she needs looking after and she seeks the protection of a man. She feels fear and cold, but her man lends her his jacket and keeps her safe. She repays this by giving him what he wants; but then, at

the moment of physical penetration, she runs scared. My reading is that she suddenly instinctively feels that to be penetrated is to be made vulnerable, though others have read this moment as her disappointment, realising she doesn't actually have a vagina and therefore cannot please her man. Neither interpretation leaves me feeling particularly empowered. Maybe that's the point. This is Glazer playing with me all over again.

The way the two halves of the film contrast is a curious thing. As *The Woman* goes from being the predator to being the prey it leaves me unsure of where my sympathies should lie and although Glazer initially encourages us to find her actions inhuman and monstrous, the alternative he presents is a fragile, passive femininity that's equally appalling.

Infuriating, right? But for the viewer, it's the film's writerly qualities – its ambiguity, its constant playing with human/inhuman binaries, its unconventional camerawork and editing – that make watching it both a deeply engaging and frustrating experience.

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Claire Pollard is the editor of MediaMagazine.

**Glazer shows us very little about what happens to these men and why. We're left with a lot of questions but that's half the fun**

Collection Christopher / Alamy Stock Photo





# Straight Eye for the Queer Role

Eddie Redmayne played transgender woman Lili Elbe in *The Danish Girl*

AF archive / Alamy Stock Photo

With LGBT identities achieving more mainstream recognition and respect, Megan Ingles asks whether the film and TV industries should catch up and give more gay roles to gay actors.

In recent years, LGBT culture has been slowly integrating into mainstream media through the growing success of hit shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race* and feature-length films such as *Love, Simon* (2018). But despite its ever-increasing profile, the LGBT community still faces one major obstacle: roles that might be played by actors with queer identities are still being stolen by Hollywood's biggest names, who more often than not identify as heterosexual and cisgender (their gender identity corresponds with their gender assigned at birth).

While the intentions of producers might be to create more diverse texts

and provide LGBT audiences with characters they can empathise with, the way in which these productions are cast could certainly use some improvement. The uproar surrounding this topic reached a peak last year when it was announced that Scarlett Johansson would play trans masculine (an individual who was born female but now identifies as male) character Gill in the film *Rub and Tug*. Johansson quit the role as a result of the immediate backlash, but this hasn't stopped the conversation spiralling, with many LGBT activists calling out other production companies for similar situations.

## Suspending Disbelief?

Some argue that hundreds of gay, lesbian and transgender roles have been played by Hollywood's biggest names over the years to an excellent standard and level of believability, so why should it be an issue? Cate Blanchett is one of several in recent years to respond to comments against the casting dilemma, claiming that actors should always 'suspend disbelief' and play roles 'beyond experience'. These claims come following her starring in the 2015 critically-acclaimed *Carol*, where Blanchett played the lead – a lesbian woman – despite being a heterosexual woman herself. Although Blanchett is an acclaimed actor, and her role as Carol was very well-executed, it doesn't compensate for the lack of genuine or authentic lesbian representation. It is extremely important for minorities to be offered the same opportunities as their straight counterparts, and with a heterosexual woman taking on the role of Carol, some felt that it was extremely belittling to the many up

Being a part of the LGBT community isn't a dressing up game.

and coming lesbian actors who are trying to make a name for themselves.

This issue doesn't stop at non-inclusive casting for gay, lesbian and bisexual actors; it is also becoming an issue for transgender individuals. Straight, cisgender men taking on the roles of transgender women has been an issue for years, even dating back to classic queer films such as *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994). Actor Terence Stamp played the character of Bernadette, a transgender woman, even though Stamp himself identifies as solely male. Despite this, the film has been acclaimed by the LGBT community, but it cannot be ignored that the role of Bernadette was yet another character role lost to a straight and cisgender actor, who despite giving a great performance, could never truly comprehend the hardships faced by transgender people every single day.

## (Red)Mayne, I Feel Like a Woman

A more recent example of a similar situation is Eddie Redmayne nominated for the Academy Award for Best Actor following his role as Lili Elbe in 2015's *The Danish Girl*, which follows the true story of Elbe, a transgender woman who died in the early 1930s of complications from a uterus transplant. Not only did Elbe face a lifetime of oppression, her medical transition was in fact what killed her due to the

It is incredibly important for producers to think twice about their casting decisions when it comes to sexual orientation and gender identity.

crude state of surgery at the time. This again raises the question, is it right that a cisgender man plays the role of a transgender woman, when there are so many trans women trying to make their mark in Hollywood?

The argument here is that being a part of the LGBT community isn't a dressing up game. Though representation is an important consideration, the fact remains that while a straight man who has just played a transgender woman returns home to his everyday privileged lifestyle, real transgender women are part of the 1 in 5 LGBT people who will be the victim of a hate crime per year. That's just one example of what these individuals face in their day to day lives. Being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender is not the individual's choice, and to treat their identities as a costume that can just be taken off – when in reality they don't have that option – is harmful to the entire community.

## Doing Time and Doing Titans

It isn't all bad though: increasing numbers of transgender actors have been cast in recent years across many genres, one of the most famous being Laverne Cox, who plays Sophia Burset in *Orange is the New Black* (2013 - 2019), a transgender woman serving time in a minimum-security women's prison for credit card fraud. Not only is this casting decision more credible, but



Bisexual actor Stephanie Beatriz as bisexual detective Rosa Diaz in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*



Everett Collection Inc / Alamy Stock Photo

Cox adds a level of realism to the role of Sophia Burset in *Orange is the New Black* as a transgender actor



Myles Aronowitz/Netflix

Cox is able to add a level of realism and understanding of the role that no cisgender man or woman ever could.

Likewise, the casting of Chella Man (a transgender man and social media influencer who is also deaf) in the upcoming DC Universe's *Titans* is an enormous step forward for both the disabled and LGBT community; oppressed groups are finally being offered roles that would have previously been handed to more privileged, heterosexual and cisgender actors. The list of more appropriate casting decisions goes on, from box office hits to American sitcoms like *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, where bisexual actor Stephanie Beatriz plays bisexual detective Rosa Diaz, but this is still a rarity. More can certainly be done for LGBT actors, considering that 52 apparently straight actors have been nominated for an Academy Award for their portrayal of gay roles, despite an out gay actor never being nominated for a Best Actor award.

Even though improvements are being made, the film industry isn't the only one at fault when it comes to inappropriate casting; British television can also make questionable decisions. Channel 4's soap opera *Hollyoaks* has frequently been criticised for handing LGBT roles to non-LGBT actors. This dates back to 2010, when cisgender Victoria Atkin played Jason, a transgender man, and in 2014 when Daisy Wood-Davis entered the show as Kim Butterfield, a lesbian woman. It has since been confirmed that Wood-Davis is in a heterosexual relationship with another cast member, demonstrating that she is clearly not a lesbian woman, despite playing one until her departure in 2018. Although the show works alongside The Gender Trust to portray 'sensitive and realistic' storylines, it is still clear that more could be done, starting with basic representative casting.

## Signs of Progress

Other soaps have also made similar choices, but some are beginning to move in the right direction in terms of accurate casting decisions. Riley Carter Millington's portrayal of transgender Kyle Slater in *EastEnders* gives a completely genuine presentation of a transgender man, while Sean Tulley (a gay character frequently featured in *Coronation Street*) is played by Antony Cotton, who is an openly gay man.

It is incredibly important for producers to think twice about their casting decisions when it comes to sexual orientation and gender identity. Yes, some of Hollywood's biggest names like Will Smith in *Six Degrees of Separation* (1993) and Tom Hanks in *Philadelphia* deliver immaculate performances of LGBT characters, but it is about more than just what is shown in front of the camera. Casting directors are yet to consider the years of oppression and harassment many aspiring LGBT actors may have faced throughout their lives, only for a role that finally represents them to be handed to an actor who could never truly understand it. Many who have been the victim of homophobic abuse, or even hate crimes, might argue that being LGBT is not something to temporarily personify as an acting role; it can be seriously dangerous in real life, and they don't have the chance to step out of the costume at the end of the day.

And it's not just about actors either: it affects the audiences too. If young LGBT individuals can never see themselves being presented by genuine depictions in the mainstream media they are consuming, they may begin to feel invalidated, forgotten or even inferior.

Megan Ingles is an A level Media Studies student and aspiring artist at Chipping Campden School in Gloucestershire

Some argue that hundreds of gay, lesbian and transgender roles have been played by Hollywood's biggest names over the years to an excellent standard and level of believability, so why should it be an issue?



Laverne Cox attends the season 5 premiere

## Links and further reading

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# BEWARE the MONOFORM!

Peter Watkins is a revolutionary documentary filmmaker who first used dramatic reconstruction in his war critique *Culloden*. Mark Ramey looks at how his work and ideas relate to the field of documentary filmmaking.

**B**eware the Monoform! Beware mass audio-visual media and its complicity in our social and environmental destruction! These are the clarion calls of documentarist, Peter Watkins, a maverick filmmaker who is required study in the EDUQAS A Level Film documentary unit, sitting alongside three other documentarists: Michael Moore, Nick Broomfield and Kim Longinotto. Arguably Watkins is the most interesting 'theorist' of the quartet with his strident critique of mainstream media and his influential artistic experimentation, not least in the form of the docudrama.

Born in England in 1935, Watkins segments his work as a film director and writer into two periods. There is the formative and most critically successful period of the 1960s where he worked largely in the UK and in 1967 achieved his career highlight: a Best Documentary Academy Award for *The War Game*. Then there is his mature period of largely European-financed creativity from the mid 70s onwards

Peter Watkins in the 1960s



Everett Collection Inc. / Alamy Stock Photo



TCD/rod.DB / Alamy Stock Photo

Distressing scenes from Watkins' nuclear strike reconstruction *The War Game*

where he developed his theory of the Monoform and its relationship to our contemporary culture of Mass Audio Visual Media (MAVM).

In the first period of his working life as a filmmaker, Watkins was employed by the BBC and developed the docudrama, the now familiar, but then radical, genre of factual reconstruction. His first ground-breaking and still profoundly affecting work was *Culloden* (1964). This hour-long docudrama with amateur actors was shot on location in Scotland and radically restaged the final crushing defeat in 1746 of the Jacobite Rebellion at the Battle of Culloden. There the Scottish army led by (Bonnie) Prince Charlie was crushed by the English army of King George II.

This gripping docudrama pioneered the restaging of reality for TV documentary purposes. The narrative film industry had been restaging the past for entertainment for years but not in the classical documentary tradition which saw re-enactments as subjective and opposed to the objective essence of the form. The topic at first seems obscure but on closer inspection the anti-war message (in particular the plight of the low-ranking working-class foot soldiers on both sides) chimed with similar anti-war sentiment at the time. The Vietnam War was escalating and its harrowing televised coverage commonplace; the Cold War was at its height and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament gaining political traction.

This is also the period of youth-orientated radical left-wing politics and egalitarian initiatives such as the civil rights movement in the USA. Against this cultural backdrop of dissent Watkins' decision to critique rather than celebrate the battle and its aftermath is understandable. His reading of events is revisionist: the victory of the English forces of civilisation and Protestantism over the Catholic usurper and his degenerate Scots army is an act of military incompetence and brutality; a tragedy of government-sanctioned mass murder and genocide. Watkins' disdain for establishment authority and political propaganda permeates his work and it began with *Culloden*.

*Culloden* also set a template for Watkins' early docudrama style and was heavily influenced by the cinéma vérité reporting coming out of Vietnam. Watkins took this sense of realism and immediacy which reporters in the conflict were achieving with their battlefield coverage and gave it his own spin. *Culloden's* style can be summed up as follows: Watkins delivers his own faintly damning voiceover whilst maintaining a well-researched tone of objectivity; using amateur actors, often cast in roles mirroring their own ideological positions, increases the realism of performances; handheld footage creates intensity in battle scenes; tightly framed close ups of battle-haunted participants communicates individuality and the

'The Monoform is only one of countless different ways of combining images and sound. The cinema is like a rainbow, and the Monoform one small sliver in the vast spectrum of colours and shades.'

tragedy of war, along with in-the-field interviews with key protagonists and harrowing images of victims being maimed or murdered.

The visual style of *Culloden* was reproduced for Watkins' next film *The War Game* (1966). Unlike *Culloden* which reimagined the past, this film was a reimagining of the near future. It concerned the prelude to, and aftermath of, a nuclear strike on the South East of England. Having the same anti-authoritarian critique as *Culloden*, the film was not broadcast by the BBC but it did have a limited cinematic release. It wasn't until 1986 (even despite its Oscar win) that it got a UK TV broadcast. Influenced by images and statistics from Nagasaki and Hiroshima as well as Vietnam reportage, the film makes the powerful claim that



TCD/Proed.DB / Alamy Stock Photo

*The War Game* (1966)

The narrative film industry had been restaging the past for entertainment for years but not in the classical documentary tradition which saw re-enactments as subjective and opposed to the objective essence of the form.

a Nuclear War is unwinnable. It critiques the lie that humanity and order would survive an attack and also, like *Culloden*, it personalises participants.

*Culloden* and *The War Game* championed the docudrama movement and secured Watkins' position in the pantheon of great documentarists. This is despite his evident sense of failure with both works:

**My hope was to initiate a dialogue within my profession, and with the public, on the manipulative dangers of the so called 'realist' film or 'objective' documentary. I feel deeply that I have been unsuccessful in this task.**

His subsequent mature work, produced largely in and by European partners such as France, Sweden, Norway and Denmark, focuses on European characters and events such as the outsider Norwegian artist Munch (*Edvard Munch*, 1976) or the brutal suppression of the revolutionary Paris Commune in 1871 (*La Commune*, 2000). These films also reflect Watkins' theorising on the issues of the Monoform and MAVM.

Watkins' position on the need to radically transform the media landscape is best illustrated in his own words:

**I do not believe that the anti-globalisation protest will ever reach its true fruition if we leave the cinema and television and the radio in the present position we're in. (2001)**

The heart of Watkins' dismay with contemporary media culture is that it encourages passivity in the spectator, is hierarchical in terms of its industrial processes and is focussed on spectacle and simplistic expression through such conventional devices as continuity editing and climatic resolutions. The totality of such media he pejoratively termed The Monoform on account of its standardised structure, simplistic treatment of time and space and audience manipulation.

Watkins notes in an essay on his website that the Monoform, '...began early in the 20th century with the development of the language form used by Hollywood to narrate and structure cinema films. This language form, which fundamentally has never changed, was adopted by international

TV in the 1950s and is now taken on by the internet, YouTube, social media, etc. One negative consequence of the Monoform's dominance is, 'the increasing acceptance of global authoritarianism and the rise of populism.' Another consequence is decreasing shot lengths and a steady decline in attention spans leading to an increasing inability to make sense of the cacophonous collage of 24/7 media content.

Industry practices have led to the Monoform's dominance via such practices as the 'six-minute pitch' and the adoption of the 'universal clock' which defines content in terms of regulated packages of information: thus, a one-hour documentary needs to be 52 minutes long to work in the global market and allow for the inclusion of commercials.

Watkins goes on to note that:

**This development of a formatted and repetitive TV language form of rapidly edited and fragmented images accompanied by a dense bombardment of sound, all held together by the classical narrative structure...is use[d] throughout virtually all contemporary TV programming, from soap operas to news broadcasting.**

Watkins is also very specific on documentary as a form which has been seriously harmed by the dominance of the Monoform:

**Many documentary films have become circus acts full of explosive impact and aggressive audio-visual tricks, with an ever-present 'ringmaster' (the director or narrator – often the same person) facing the camera. The aim of the filmmaker certainly may be genuine, but he or she almost invariably smothers the work (and the**

**subject) in an 'entertaining', aggressive, and hierarchical language-form – the Monoform.**

Michael Moore is namechecked by Watkins as an unknowing advocate of MAVM. According to Watkins, Moore may well be delivering radical content but he is still prey to the structures of the Monoform:

**Michael Moore was recently quoted as saying that he wants his audience to be engaged in their democracy, that he wants them 'to get off the bench and become active'. The paradox here is that he himself uses a very hierarchical structural form to 'engage' his audience.**

Watkins' theories of the Monoform and the MAVM may be too radical for a fragmented, time sensitive and money chasing media industry and the ideas themselves are perhaps less radical than he suggests: Marxist cultural critique must be an influence on his views. But the urgency of Watkins' views and the brilliance of some of his work is a refreshing counterpoint to the mainstream.

As he himself notes:

**The Monoform is only one of countless different ways of combining images and sound. The cinema is like a rainbow, and the Monoform one small sliver in the vast spectrum of colours and shades. The MAVM have usurped and magnified their use of this sliver to Orwellian proportions, but I believe that the situation can be challenged. It must be – for the sake of the planet.**

Mark Ramey is Head of Film Studies at Collyer's College in Horsham.

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## Links and further reading

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# HOLLYWOOD

# CHINA

## A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP



China is now considered the world's second largest theatrical release market with the expectation that it will soon become the largest. China now has more cinema screens than the US; an average of 27 new cinema screens were built per day in 2016 alone.

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Nicola Ross explores whether developments in technology and studios prioritising appeal to the Chinese film market are killing the art of film.

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**V**isit any cinema up and down the country and the selection of films on offer may be modern and exhilarating but they are also generic. *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*; *Jumanji: The Next Level*; or the next offering in the many phases of *Marvel*. The fact is every Hollywood smash these days is either a sequel, remake or serialisation and all are films that thrive off Hollywood's SFX technology.

### Why Has the Film Industry Become So Risk-Averse?

In the early days of Hollywood every film was a possible liability for its producers and distributors. Most films were stand-alone; a one-off enterprise that had to capture the audience's imagination or risk becoming a rotten tomato. The successful ones took audiences on a rollercoaster of emotion, had mesmerising



narratives or followed the arcs of compelling characters, such as Rick Blaine in *Casablanca* or Forrest Gump in the eponymous film. As A Level Media Studies students, you may have studied independent film and the heart wrenching story arcs in *Chicken or I*, *Daniel Blake*; or as a Film Studies student, global cinema or British independent films – often films that prioritise artistic expression and the emotion and spiritual fulfilment of their audiences over profit. However, in the last decade something has changed the film industry. The availability of technology that aids piracy, and now the technology that enables film streaming, have caused the studios of Hollywood to re-evaluate their output. This type of technology has killed off DVDs and, as these sales deteriorate and this profit stream dries up, so does Hollywood's safety net. As a result, the studios have had to reconsider the markets that will continue to be profitable and make films that will appeal to them. So where is this new market?

### The International Market

When the digital technology boom occurred, the cushion for every film conglomerate – the DVD – died a death. Film studios all over Hollywood saw their profits fall and all looked desperately for new ways to be financially viable.

The answer: the international film market. A market that continues to grow, particularly in China and Russia, and as a result, the films we watch today are developed particularly for these markets. China is now considered the world's second largest theatrical release market with the expectation that it will soon become the largest. China now has more cinema screens than the US; an average of 27 new cinema screens were built per day in 2016 alone.

### What do They Want?

The Chinese audience want familiar brands, 3D and Special FX. They want the spectacle that only the American film studio can deliver with its big budgets and investment in post-production CGI. A good example is *Transformers: Age of Extinction*. This is a film that was co-produced by Paramount Pictures and China Movie Channel, making it the most high-profile example of Hollywood's developing relationship with China to date. The film was criticised by reviewers for its weak plot line; however it was the only film in 2014 to make over \$1 billion dollars worldwide at the box office and this was the result of its popularity in China. If you've watched the film, you may have noticed that scenes were littered with Chinese product placement; the mise-en-scène was

**Chinese cinemas will only screen 34 imported films each year so competition for the market is tough**



Tom Cruise at the movie premiere of *Oblivion* in Taipei, China in April 2013

Alamy Photos

stamped with numerous Chinese brands and logos and cameos were made by high-profile Chinese personalities, such as world champion boxer Zou Shiming. If you missed these details, well that was because they weren't for you. They were there to attract and resonate with the Chinese viewer.

Additionally, if you're studying EDUQAS Media Studies you will have studied how Disney marketed *Black Panther* to the Chinese market, making sure that the audience wouldn't be discouraged by the risks they had taken to attract new, mainstream audiences in other parts of the globe. Although the predominantly black cast may have been considered a high-risk strategy – potentially dividing audiences – Disney's use of frontline stars, such as Michael B. Jordan and a soundtrack by

Kendrick Lamar, helped to secure the mainstream audience they desired and reduce risk through star power. David Hesmondhalgh states that media companies use star power to attract audiences through their high-profile reputations, helping to reduce the risk of a film flop. But did it engage the Chinese audience? Unfortunately, not, and as a result Disney 'decolourised' their marketing to suit. The *Black Panther* posters for the Chinese market featured a masked Chadwick Boseman, heavily concealed under his superhero costume, and a Wakandan skyline that looked far more like a Beijing cityscape than an African plain. To Disney, China was worth over millions of dollars in box office takings which is important for a company that is driven by profit and power. Consider Curran and Seaton's Power and Media Industries theory. Is Disney a powerful conglomerate that restricts creativity and diversity in favour of profit?

Overall, it could be argued that Hollywood no longer pays attention to character or plotline. Instead, modern franchises appeal to the Chinese market through effects-driven plots, the reimagining of well-known brands, such as Marvel, and 3D technology. China wants the Hollywood spectacle, the Hollywood blockbuster, and therefore the big conglomerates that dominate the industry – Disney, Paramount et al. – are moulding their artform to suit. The generic formula of franchised blockbusters that will draw audiences worldwide through their predictability and high production values are the way forward but how does this affect smaller film makers and us, the audience?

Imagine a cinema landscape where generic formula replaces culturally significant plot lines.

And how do producers create relatable characters when their brief is to develop homogeneous characters to suit all?

## What Choice Do We Have?

We end this article roughly where we began. Visit any cinema up and down the country and investigate what selection of films is on offer? The need for success in an industry that is being hindered by some of its technological advancements has caused the 'big six' to focus on remakes and serialisations, genre-based formatting and risk reduction (Hesmondhalgh) and as a result plough all their budget into the blockbusters that Chinese audiences yearn for.

In addition, the domination of these vertically integrated conglomerates means that the stand-alone film is becoming a thing of the past. Without it, how do smaller, maybe independent, filmmakers stand a chance? Starting out as a filmmaker becomes much harder when your main market wants big budget, high-concept films. And how does this affect the output? Well, imagine a future without the next *Taxi Driver* or *Raging Bull*, the next *Get Out* or *Lady Bird*? Imagine a cinema landscape where generic formula replaces culturally significant plot lines. And how do producers create relatable characters when their brief is to develop homogeneous characters to suit all?

So, we are left with very little choice. Our cinemas will be dominated by sequels, franchises and blockbusters and the products of the most powerful film companies for the countries that grow in power. This is what has become of film in the digital era and we can only stand by and watch the Hollywood landscape change film into what Martin Scorsese described as 'closer to theme parks than they are to movies as I've known and loved them throughout my life'.

Nicola Ross is the Head of Media and Film Studies at The Boswells School, Chelmsford.



The Chinese poster for *Black Panther* focused on the Beijing-like cityscape rather than the actors

Scenes were littered with Chinese product placement; the mise-en-scène was stamped with numerous Chinese brands and logos and cameos were made by high-profile Chinese personalities.

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# the Theory of Everything



## Using YouTubers to understand MEDIA THEORY

When Jon Meier's A Level class showed him the latest Emma Chamberlain video, it struck him that the phenomenon of YouTube celebrity could be used to illustrate some quite complex media audience and industry theories.



YouTube

### Emma Chamberlain: The Audience Are Now the Creators

Clay Shirky suggests that modern audiences are no longer just passive consumers of media content; they can create and participate too. A great example of this is Emma Chamberlain, the 18-year-old YouTuber who began broadcasting in 2017 quickly growing her subscribers, currently at 8.6m as of Feb 2020. For Shirky, digital media is social and participatory, with anyone having the means to become a creator; this is perfectly echoed in Chamberlain's work which invites her audience to share, comment and join the conversation. Like so many popular YouTubers, she creates a bond with her audience by being natural and informal,

talking to them on their level and the direct address (talking to camera) intensifies this. The division between audience and presenter is blurred.

Emma Chamberlain proves Shirky's view that amateurs – rather than professionals inside of established gate-keeping broadcasting institutions – can now become producers of global media content. The YouTube platform has democratised media creativity, with ordinary users uploading their own content: they are 'producers' (producer-users) and 'prosumers' (producer-consumers). Content is published first and then filtered or judged later by audiences. So, success is measured by the number of views and the reaction of the 'fans' rather than the judgement and financial power of an industry editor/producer.

### Globalisation or Americanisation?

In the 1960s Marshall McLuhan described how the world was shrinking, becoming more interconnected due to technological progress. For him, improved communications turned the world into a global village, and this was decades before the internet. Not all famous YouTubers, like Emma Chamberlain, are American but Americans certainly make up the majority. The universality of the English language undoubtedly plays an important part here. We could argue that YouTube influencers encourage the spread of US cultural references, language and attitudes. This form of globalisation implies a dominance of Western cultural attitudes (cultural



Emma Chamberlain,  
the teen influencer

emmachamberlain / Instagram

The vlog is a highly self-reflective media form. This postmodern self-consciousness involves breaking the fourth wall by revealing the 'nuts and bolts' of video shooting and editing. Jean Baudrillard called these fake representations of reality 'hyperreality'

### Should Vloggers Be Regulated?

Internet-based media is notoriously hard to regulate and control. Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt point out that there is a dilemma about whether to permit freedom of speech in the online space or regulate it, to protect the public. The content of viral video clips is often subversive, the mode of address is informal. This raises the question of age suitability and availability to younger audiences. It is difficult to restrict access to such sites to younger children who may be more impressionable and less able to distance themselves critically and emotionally from what they are viewing. Bandura's work in the 1960s claimed that there was a link between media content and the imitative 'copycat' behaviour of younger viewers which is a concern for some.

More worryingly, the organisation Data and Society recently published a report that shows the role YouTube plays in radicalising users of the platform. The recommendation algorithms on YouTube act as breadcrumb trails to videos that promote extreme ideologies. For example, the aforementioned gaming blogger PewDiePie, who at the start of this year

hegemony) – 'the West vs the Rest'.

Most globally popular YouTubers also promote materialism and consumption. Once they become successful, YouTube stars are often sponsored by commercial companies and become endorsers of products. Their posts illustrate the commercialisation or commodification of entertainment which, although in some ways more honest and explicitly done than the subtle product placement of the past, still channels audiences into conformist ways of thinking and behaving, encouraging them to buy products and aspire towards material improvement.

### Breaking Down Barriers Between Presenter and Spectator

Typical YouTuber videos tend to subvert the codes and conventions of traditional cinematography. They

use techniques such as handheld camera, cartoon-like captions and sounds, crash zooms into extreme close ups, jump cuts and other obvious editing devices which emphasise the artificiality of their filmmaking. The vlog is a highly self-reflective media form. This postmodern self-consciousness involves breaking the fourth wall by revealing the 'nuts and bolts' of video shooting and editing. Jean Baudrillard called these fake representations of reality 'hyperreality'. For him, the artificial reality is more real to modern screen-centred audiences than authentic reality but how far do consumers of massively successful vloggers such as Zoella or PewDiePie – who at this stage in their careers are creating videos as part of their job rather than as an authentic expression of themselves – still understand that what they are seeing is hyperreality, a constructed version of the authentic?



For Shirky digital media is social and participatory, with anyone having the means to become a creator; this is perfectly echoed in Chamberlain's work which invites her audience to share, comment and join the conversation. We could argue that YouTube influencers encourage the spread of US cultural references, language and attitudes. This form of globalisation implies a dominance of Western cultural attitudes.



had 103 million subscribers, has been accused of disseminating anti-Semitic, alt-right messages, recommending channels and video essays that might lead unsuspecting fans into dark and disturbing places. While to some, the idea of regulating YouTube seems like unnecessary 'censorship', many others argue that platforms have to take responsibility for protecting their users. This is precisely the sort of debate media students should be having in relation to Livingstone and Lunt's ideas: are PewDiePie's subscribers citizens, in which case it is the job of regulators to protect their interests, or are they 'consumers', and therefore

have the right to pick and choose from the full range of content available?

### **Free Spirits or Corporate Puppets?**

On one level, YouTubers represent a spirit of exuberant individualism. In many ways they are charismatic mavericks. They are the ideal creative and productive audience described by Clay Shirky. Superficially, they seem anti-corporate, counter-hegemonic and democratised.

On the other hand, as previously mentioned, many YouTubers become involved in sponsorship deals with fashion, cosmetics or games companies. This celebrity endorsement fits in with the political economy group of theories which states that ultimately all media is tied into practices of maximising profit for large corporations. A strong argument is that a primary role of the media is to deliver audiences to advertisers. YouTube, and

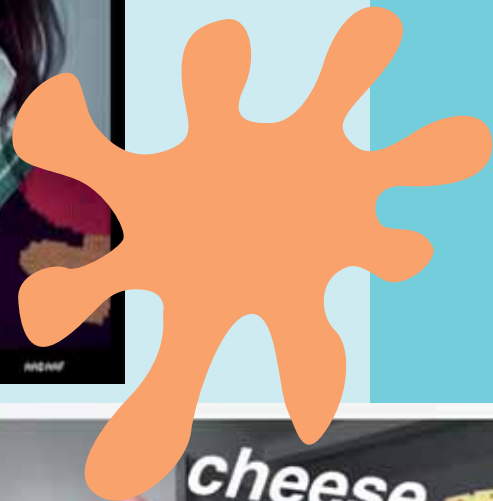
its owner Google, rely on advertising for their substantial earnings and arguably, celebrity vloggers act as a promotional vehicle for advertisers and commercial sponsors. In a phrase: it's all about clicks. So, this supports the ideas of both David Hesmondhalgh and Curran and Seaton that the cultural industries are driven by corporate power and the pursuit of profit. When enormous conglomerates, like Google and Facebook buy up platforms and apps that were previously their competitors, they become leaders in the market and leave little room for independence, individualism and democracy. (See *The Theory Drop* p.30)

### **YouTubers and Identity**

David Gauntlett asserts that online media encourages ordinary users to experiment with other personas, projecting identity as multiple and fluid. There are many and varied YouTubers to choose from, allowing



The many non-airbrushed faces of Emma Chamberlain



audiences to see different ways of being and different points of view. The attraction of many YouTubers to younger audiences is that they see themselves reflected in their YouTube heroes. Emma Chamberlain's screen presence seems natural, relaxed and authentic. This is refreshing for audiences who are used to actors playing a role or presenters adopting a particularly performative set of speech patterns and mannerisms.

However, the creation of a YouTube video involves a lot of time, effort and painstaking editing to create a fluent, confident and natural result. Many of the posted videos often involve a high degree of construction and this mediation also applies to the creation of an on-screen persona.

It is also worth considering the influence of these young YouTubers on impressionable teenage audiences who may measure themselves in some way against their on-screen role models. Self-surveillance, scrutiny and personal identity are part of the Uses and Gratifications Theory. Do these videos normalise a cheery consumerism? They might, on the

Emma Chamberlain's low-fi production and conversational style are key to making a connection with her audience



one hand, seem rebellious, but on the other they seem conventional as they tend to promote 'image': looks, fashion, the latest cool games. YouTube presenting is essentially a performance but how many people realise this?

### Too Much Theory?

Having analysed (or possibly over-analysed) this particular media form, there is no doubt that a study of the output of YouTube stars such as Emma

Chamberlain can help us to unlock some challenging media theories. We should not feel obliged to apply theory to every media product we encounter but to fully understand the issues and debates in the media theoretical framework it's excellent practice to explore how applicable they are to the media you consume. Plus it means you can spoil it for everyone else!

Jon Meier is head of A Level Media Studies at a school in North London.

### Links and further reading

Emma Chamberlain profile <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2019/07/emma-chamberlain-and-rise-relatable-influencer/593230/>



## Khally Saarman-Jones

In this issue we find out from Khally Saarman-Jones about her job in the video games industry.

### What is your job/ job title?

HR and Facilities Manager for Payload Studios, makers of award-winning sandbox adventure video game *TerraTech* (available on PC and consoles).

### What does that mean?

To put it simply, I'm responsible for the way our staff are managed and for ensuring that our studio is a safe and pleasant place to work. Human Resources (HR) covers a wide variety of areas including recruitment (finding the best people to hire), staff training and company policies. Facilities revolves around making sure that our studio office meets the requirements of our staff. This can range from making sure the office is well stocked to project managing refurbishment work. I also manage a Facilities Assistant and an IT Technician, who are a big help in keeping everything running!

Because Payload Studios is a relatively small company I'm able to be involved in a variety of things that may not traditionally be included in my role. These include coordinating events, spearheading our diversity initiative (the steps we are taking to support and promote diversity and inclusion in our studio), and company photography. I also have the opportunity to attend industry events, such as EGX (a trade fair for video games), and to have input into how our games are made.



Khally Saarman-Jones

Research the area that you're interested in and make sure you know what the job involves. Remember that there are lots of different ways to be part of the creative industries, not just the obvious ones.

### What was your route into the media industry?

I studied Media as one of my A levels and then completed a degree in Film and Television at the University of Warwick. It was a theory-based course but we set up a film club and made short films in our own time.

It was a challenge to get my first paid job in the industry but after completing some work experience I got a job as a runner at a large post production house (where they edit film and TV



Scenes from *Terratech*, the award-winning sandbox adventure game from Payload Studios

shows). This essentially involved making lots of tea and coffee but despite this, I was able to gain experience in the industry and get my next job as a Production Assistant at a small animation company. From there I moved to a big AAA games company and eventually ended up at Payload Studios. When I was at school I enjoyed playing video games but didn't realise working in games was an option. I'm very happy that's where I ended up!

### What is the best thing about the job that you do?

I'm lucky to work with a fantastic team of people in a creative environment. It's great to see games come to life! However, my favourite thing so far has been running our monthly events focused on diversity and inclusion in the games industry. The games industry can be awesome to be part of, but it doesn't always include the widest variety of people or fully reflect the people who play games. If you want to build a successful studio, with the best talent, it's important to attract a wide variety of employees. We run events to educate our studio, and the wider games industry, about the advantages of diversity and how we can ensure our industry is welcoming and inclusive for everyone.

### What's the worst thing about your job?

As well as making games we also run a co-working space, called the Tentacle Zone. This is a community of independent games companies who share a communal work and office space. It has been really rewarding to see the community grow; however managing the facilities for a shared workspace can be a challenge. There are often conflicting opinions and preferences which can be tricky but we try to take everyone's opinions into account when making decisions.

It can also get pretty busy at times with lots of different priorities, but I've developed techniques to manage my workload and responsibilities.

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

Research the area that you're interested in and make sure you know what the job involves. Remember that there are lots of different ways to be part of the creative industries, not just the obvious ones.

If you're interested in a practical area (cinematography, editing, sound etc) try to do your own projects in your spare time, this will help you learn new skills. When I was a student you needed lots of different equipment to learn about making a movie but now you can learn things just from experimenting with a phone!

Try to get as much experience of the industry as you can. Work experience can teach you a lot but also allows you to make contacts that may be useful later in your careers. Also try to apply for any schemes or competitions that are available.

And finally, it may sound boring but listen to your teachers and ask them questions – they probably know more about the media industry than you think.

### What's next for you?

I'm looking forward to learning more about HR and continuing to work to support and promote diversity in the games industry. I recently spoke on a panel for the first time and hope to do more of these in the future. The studio is working on some exciting stuff so I'm looking forward to seeing what's next for us. One of the best things about the games industry is there's always lots of exciting things going, and it's great to be a part of that!

My favourite thing so far has been running our monthly events focused on diversity and inclusion in the games industry. The games industry can be awesome to be part of, but it doesn't always include the widest variety of people or fully reflect the people who play games.



# DASK FILMS PRODUCTION TIPS

Dask Films recommends four essential pieces of kit that every filmmaker should own and some cheap alternatives if you're skint!

If you're interested in filmmaking then chances are you have some friends or frenemies who are as well. Quite often being a film fanatic can feel like being in an arms race, with someone always willing to tell you that the kit you just bought is out of date and they've already moved onto the next big thing. Whilst it's true that better kit can often result in better sound and visuals, they are not everything. Masterpieces can be shot on a shoestring and billion-dollar budget films can be barely watchable, as anyone familiar with a Michael Bay film can attest. With that in mind, below is a list of items that should be in the arsenal of any filmmaker, and if you can't get your hands on them, then there are some alternatives that work well for filmmakers on a beg/borrow/steal budget.



Dask Films is a Northwest-based video production company



## ACRYLIC DRY ERASE CLAPPERBOARD

The clapperboard exists to serve two functions; firstly, at the start of each clip the clapperboard appears to show the scene, shot and take that you're currently on. This means that when you're looking at the clip in your editing software you can tell exactly which take is which. Secondly, the 'clap' sound as the arm hits the board helps to sync the sound to the video.

**Price range: £7 - £30**



## A3/A4 WHITEBOARD

A simple whiteboard will perform much the same function as a clapperboard and you can almost certainly find one going spare in a classroom in any school or college. Yes, you will miss out on the arm attached to the board but you can replicate that sound by tapping it with your drywipe marker.

**Price range: Free - £10**



### LIGHT REFLECTOR

This is a useful piece of kit that allows you to soften the shadows on a person's face. It comes in particularly handy if you're shooting them close up outside or if you have limited light sources for your filming. The Neewer light reflector is a flexible disc that collapses into a small package that is easily stored and transported. I tend to use the white option as it diffuses the light source and reflects it onto your subject nicely.

**Price range: £10 - £18**



### POLYSTYRENE SHEET

If you're short of options, a large piece of polystyrene packing sheet will reflect light really nicely. If you know someone who has recently bought a new fridge or dishwasher then chances are you can talk your way into getting the polystyrene sheets that it came in. A little bulky to store, so if you find yourself trading up to a proper light reflector make sure to dispose of this responsibly.

**Price range Free - £10 if you get it from B&Q**



### DIMMABLE LED ULTRA HIGH POWER VIDEO LIGHT

These little lights can be an absolute godsend and will help you to light a shot in such a way that it increases the production value exponentially. These little lights can be powered by rechargeable Li-ion batteries or simple AAs. The dimmer switch allows you to project exactly as much light as you want and the LEDs produce no heat, meaning they're not a health and safety risk. They come with little diffusers to brighten your space without giving a harsh glare and have fixtures that will allow them to attach to most DSLRs or tripods.

**Price range: £20 - £25**



### DESK LAMP

Whilst not as powerful as an LED light, sometimes you just need anything you can to light a scene. It's helpful if you can get your hands on a desk lamp with a flexible neck. Make sure to turn the lamp off between shots to conserve energy and remember to tape down any cables to the floor to avoid trip hazards. Sometimes you may find that pointing the light up at the wall will give you a more balanced light to the scene rather than the harsher effect of pointing the light straight at your subject.

**Price range: Free**



### RODE BOOM POLE

The boom pole is what is used for recording most dialogue scenes in fiction pieces. The idea is that the boom operator holds a directional microphone on the end of the pole over the actors' heads just out of shot. In order to do this right, you probably also need a directional Rode mic, a Zoom H4n mic, audio cables, noise cancelling headphones. As you can imagine, it gets very expensive very quickly!

**Price range £80+**



### A BROOM HANDLE, A SMART PHONE, AND A LOT OF DUCT TAPE

I have yet to try this one out myself but iPhones have been known to produce pretty decent sound quality so long as the microphone is close to the subject and pointed in the right direction. It is not out of the realms of possibility that a person could jury-rig a homemade boom pole that, if nothing else, would definitely produce better audio than the mic on the camera, which can often sound quite tinny.

**Price range: Free if you can find the parts in your cleaning cupboard!**