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NOMADLAND

EMC
MediaMagazine

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Making the Most of MediaMag

Representing LGBTQIA+ Lives

Both April McCarthy (Patriarchy is a Drag, p.18) and Matthew Daintrey-Hall (Flaming Creatures LGBTQIA+ Lives in Silent Cinema, p.36) explore the importance of reflecting trans and non-binary lives and narratives in the media and the positive impact of doing so. Some areas of the media are actively trying to increase representation of these groups, but how well are they doing?

Watch

As a class watch the following advert, 'Every Name's a Story' from Starbucks: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcSP1r9eCWw

Discussion

The nature of advertising means that in all cases trans or non-binary models and narratives in these ads are being used to sell a product.

- How do you feel about this? When big companies choose to present challenging representations is it ok, if they're doing so to make profit? Might the term 'rainbow-washing' be applicable here?
- How authentic or accurate do you find these representations?
- How do you think different audiences (including people in your school, friendship group and family) might respond to these advertising campaigns (think about Stuart Hall's Reception Theory)?
- With the exception of the Starbucks advert, the other companies representing trans and non-binary people are in the fashion or beauty industries – why do you think this is?
- How could David Gauntlett's ideas about 'pick and mix' identities be applied to these adverts?

Research

Research other advertising campaigns that have represented the trans or non-binary community. Below are some reasonably recent suggestions at the time of going to print but you might be able to find better ones.

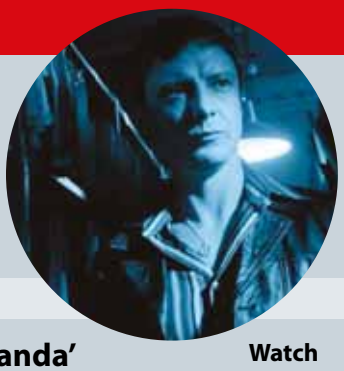
- Selfridges 'Agender' campaign
- Zara's 'Ungendered' campaign
- Pantene 'Grow Strong' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQspsuSZB4A
- Missguided's 'Keep on Being You' advert from 2017 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_w_F9F_7Co

Creative Task

In small groups imagine you work for a creative agency who have been given the chance to pitch advertising campaign ideas to a major sports brand. The representatives of the sports brand are keen to reach out to a young, woke audience through progressive gender representation. Come up with an idea for a cross platform campaign to include 2 or 3 still billboard images as well as a 30 second video that could be shared on social media platforms. Think about how to target your audience and how you'd expect people to share and repost this content on social media. Perhaps consider whether to use celebrities or influencers.

To make sure you are being considerate in your portrayal of the LGBTQIA+ community, consider the arguments that arose from the earlier discussion task: how can you ensure your campaign is authentic and sensitive to the communities you represent?

(Looking at the websites of organisations like 'Unstereotype Alliance' and 'NotaPhase' might give you some ideas about how to do this.)



'Copaganda'

Police procedurals, like *Life on Mars* – as discussed in Jonathan Nunns' article Good Cop, Bad Cop? p.6 – often show police officers in a positive light; either as heroes or as good people damaged by the demands of the job. Even when corruption is addressed in these shows, it's often only the actions of one or two bad apples as opposed to a wider systemic issue – which some would argue does not accurately reflect the reality.

In the most recent *MMPodcast* (What is Intersectionality? Available to download at https://mediamag.podbean.com) presenter Giles Gough talks about 'the Dragnet effect' which refers to the 1950s police procedural series *Dragnet*. The creators of this drama used the LAPD to consult on the authenticity of crimes included in the show – in return they agreed they would present the police positively (you can read more about it here: https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2015/06/the-brutal-facts-that-sergeant-joe-friday-ignored/395591/). It is argued that this convention – of presenting the police as heroic and good – hasn't changed in the 50 years since Dragnet.

Watch

Brainstorm some police dramas that you know and watch 5 or 6 trailers. You might want to use the suggestions below:

- *Luther* (BBC, 2010)
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQ0HDYZQvWs
- *Broadchurch* (ITV, 2013)
  https://wwwmise n scene.youtube.com/watch?v=jjJzPdbzGuY
- *Happy Valley* (BBC, 2014)
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GeSSqcgzWss
- *Cuffs* (BBC, 2015)
  https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1024108850942866
- *No Offence* (Channel 4, 2018)
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e9_IAFLVqME
- *The Responder* (BBC, 2022)
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZYc3I9BfPw

Analyse

See if you can spot similarities that run through all the trailers – what do they have in common and what stands out as different or unconventional in the shows you have chosen?

Pay attention to the following:

- How sound and music are used to create an emotional response in the viewer
- Which lines of dialogue are included in the trailer? Why do you think these were chosen?
- What do you find out about the lives and personalities of the police officers?
- Does it focus mostly on the police or the criminal?
- How are criminals presented? Are they presented sympathetically or are they demonised or 'othered'?
- What binary oppositions can you spot?

You could also film or storyboard your own trailer or opening sequence for a new crime drama – how could you create something that subverts the generic conventions?

Theory Drop: Livingstone and Lunt

Discuss these questions about *Love Island* and regulation with a partner or in your class:

- Are reality shows like *Love Island* popular because they deliver conflict-fuelled narratives? Is a diet of conflict-fuelled drama healthy for audiences?
- Should media producers be compelled to show more material that has a civic steer?
- Should ITV be compelled to make more educational shows instead of reality TV?
- Is the BBFC's and PEGI's age-rating classification system successful in preventing younger viewers from accessing unsuitable content? Why not?
- What restrictions do you think should be placed on social media providers? What issues would those restrictions prevent?
- Does the presence of problematic content help to make a media product popular? Should there be tougher rules to restrict shocking narrative moments?

The Metropolitan police arrest a woman protesting against police misogyny

REUTERS / Alamy Stock Photo

good cop, bad cop?

Life on Mars after the murder of Sarah Everard

Police corruption has been prominent in the news in the past two years. After the murder of Sarah Everard, can the casual misogyny and racism of *Life on Mars*' Gene Hunt, originally intended to be entertaining, be seen as anything but offensive? Jonathan Nunns re-examines this set text in light of the recent context.

The murder of Sarah Everard in March 2021 by serving police officer Wayne Couzens horrified the nation, not just because of the crime itself but because of what it implied about the police. Couzens, an officer with a history of suspect sexual behaviour, entrapped Everard by abusing his police powers. Stopping Everard on a darkened street, Couzens falsely arrested her to carry out the kidnap, rape and murder that followed. The Metropolitan police's later suggestion that women frightened when being stopped by an officer, should flag down a bus or shout out to strangers, was met with public disbelief. It was women who were being invited to inhibit their behaviour to avoid attack, rather than addressing the culture of misogynistic entitlement that tacitly enabled/endorsed the attacks in the first place. After the Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman murders, the Met was strongly criticised for the lack of urgency shown when the sisters initially disappeared. Subsequently, two officers guarding the crime scene were arrested. In court, they pleaded guilty to taking 'inappropriate' photographs of the bodies and sharing them with other officers in a WhatsApp group. The officers concerned, Deniz Jaffer and Jamie Lewis were later jailed.

The defining issue with these recent crimes is what they imply about the culture of the police: at best, misogynistic and disrespectful, at worst, in the case of Couzens, actively homicidal. As with the domestic homicides, the horror was in the abuse of trust. The Metropolitan police promote

Is there *Life on Mars*?

Apart from her name – Suzi Tripper – she has no identity nor anyone to miss her. The only backstory, her supposed promiscuity, stereotypically implying that she brought it on herself.

their values as 'Professionalism, integrity, courage and compassion'. Offenders like Couzens break that trust on every level, undermining public faith.

Life on Mars (BBC 2006-08) has a lot to offer Media Studies students – it's a rich postmodern text that opens up provocative debates in A Level lessons. We are invited to critique the outdated attitudes of the 70s and are shocked and offended by Gene Hunt's vintage, unreconstructed-cop persona. But after so many high-profile cases of police corruption and misogyny coming to light in the 2020s we might question how far attitudes to race, gender and sexuality in the police force have actually come in the 50 years since cops like Gene Hunt were the norm. It's likely that many students will find this text highly problematic, and, to apply Hall's reception theory, take an oppositional reading.

To reposition the show within the context of the 'Culture Wars' debate, Gene as the co-protagonist (alongside 'modern' Sam Tyler), looks increasingly like an anti-woke hero and dark role model, enabling men who dislike and feel threatened by women, to feel validated in holding views like those of 'heroic' Gene. This demonstrates the gulf between the attitudes of the mid-noughties – when the show was produced – and attitudes now. The concept was a nostalgic trip back to the sexist 70s, intertextually referencing the iconic 70s cop-show *The Sweeney* (itself a time capsule of unreconstructed values). In so doing, the creators intended a relatively light-hearted romp, providing entertaining hits of nostalgia and clever postmodernity. However, viewed today in the light of the #MeToo movement and extremes of police wrongdoing, the show leaves a more unpleasant after-taste. During development, the writers toned down Hunt's racism to avoid alienating the audience (the token black character Nelson, was originally referred to as 'Chalky'). However, in 2006, no changes were thought necessary to reduce the sexism. Of the odd-couple pairing, Gene is played as the more engagingly charismatic to Sam Tyler's starchy and technocratic noughties new-man. Gene's attitudes get the pass because, as he claims in episode 1, 'I may be a sheriff, but I'm a deputy to the law', implying that beneath the rough diamond exterior, there is a desire for justice and a heart of gold.

More broadly, in terms of the wider representations, as Sam might say, 'Let's secure the scene and follow the evidence'.

Early on, before Sam's time travel, his free spirited and independent fellow officer/ girlfriend Maya, is made to pay for her feminist empowerment. Putting herself needlessly in danger by taking on the killer alone, she is kidnapped herself. Knowing her murder will soon follow, Sam races against time to save her. After this set up, she is never seen again, later to be rescued off screen during a postmodern 1973 coda-twist, in which Kramer, the 70s killer, is revealed as also the 2006 antagonist, freshly released from prison and killing again. In the twist, Sam buries the report that would result in a shortened sentence for Kramer, changing the future so Maya's kidnapping never happened. Hence Maya, one of the show's token female cops, is reduced from 21st century role model to Proppian Princess, helplessly awaiting rescue by Sam's male protagonist.

Once in 1973, Sam spots the connection between the '73 and '06 murders in one of those voyeuristic mortuary scenes so characteristic of the genre. A bunch of 70s cops (white males naturally), gather around the objectified body of a female victim. Having earlier mocked and disparaged her sexual behaviour ('She was giving them downhill racing!'), Sam's

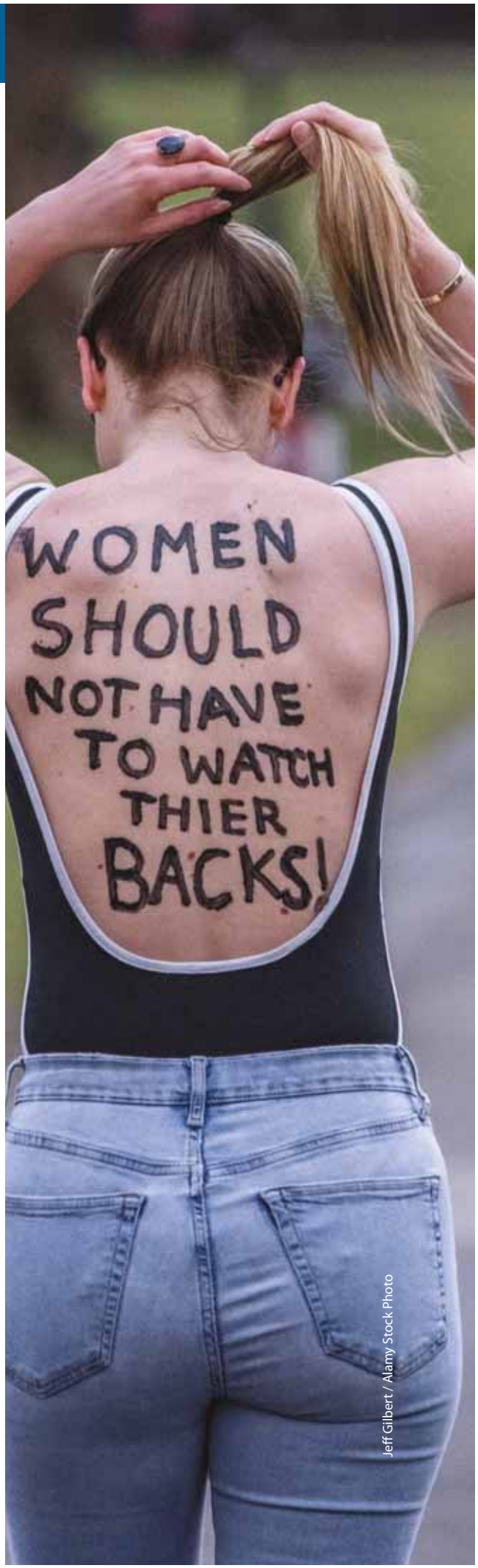
The defining issue with these recent crimes is what they imply about the culture of the police: at best, misogynistic and disrespectful, at worst, in the case of Couzens, actively homicidal.

seventies colleagues smoke and joke whilst the corpse is prodded for evidence. Apart from her name – Suzi Tripper – she has no identity nor anyone to miss her. The only backstory, her supposed promiscuity, stereotypically implying that she brought it on herself.

Another woman is interviewed as a witness, verbally sparring with Hunt. Articulate and empowered, she is neither impressed nor intimidated by Hunt's macho display. Unsurprisingly, she is soon cut down to size and kidnapped, providing the narrative drive for a 1973 race to save her that parallels Sam's postmodern rescue of Maya. Should the message not be clear, another empowered woman recklessly makes herself vulnerable. Macho values triumph as Gene crashes in to beat the bad guy senseless.

The show's other female cop, Sam's 70s colleague Annie Cartwright, is remorselessly disrespected and cat-called throughout. A graduate psychologist and beneficiary of 60s second wave feminism, Annie profiles the killer, accurately skewering the obsessive and resentful male psyche behind the crimes. 'You'd get embarrassed, angry, you'd start to blame the girl, it's her fault…' only to be immediately undermined by the 'banter' of a male colleague 'I look at your lips all the time Cartwright, think I should turn meself in?'. Whilst the writers have the get-out of the unreconstructed sexual politics of 1973, the treatment of the episode's key female characters makes for an unpleasant package. The moral of the 2006 and 1973 strands implies the world would be better and women safer, if only they knew their place.

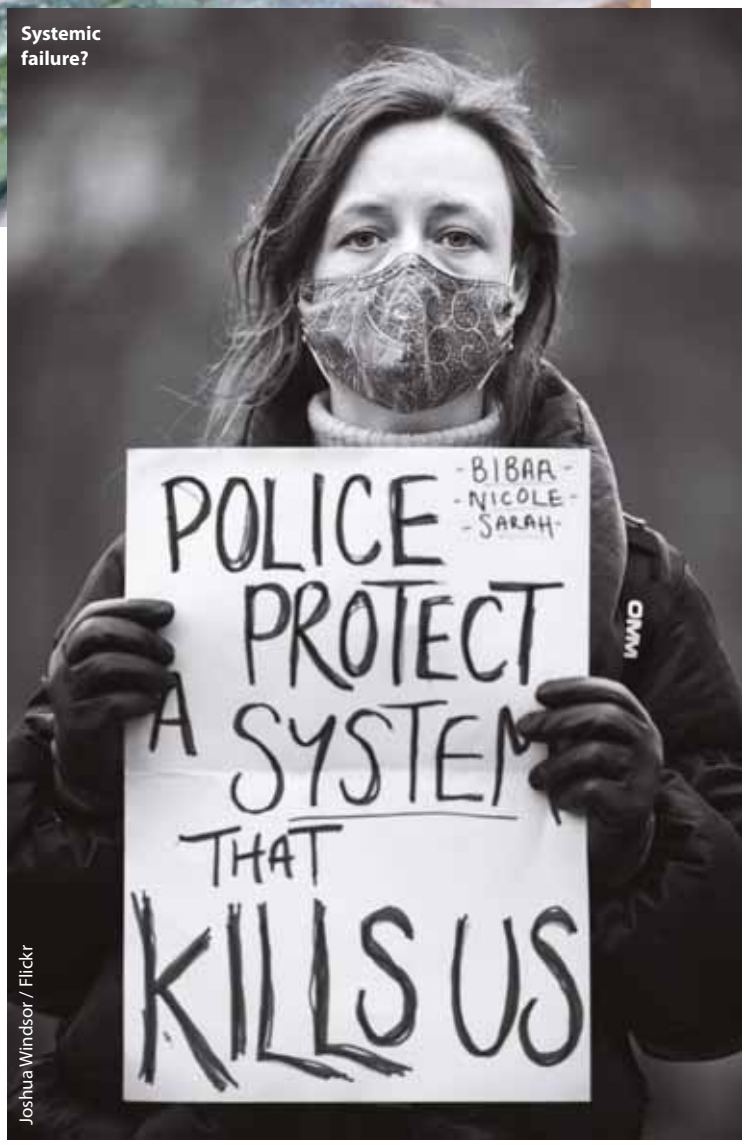
Most fascinating is the final reveal, the unmasking of Kramer the killer. Silent throughout, faceless and dysfunctional, he symbolises the kind of furiously resentful man who makes up the



Jeff Gilbert / Alamy Stock Photo

Tim Dennell / Flickr

Not all men, but all women



Systemic failure?

Joshua Windsor / Flickr

modern incel movement: 'involuntary celibates' who is brimming with thwarted entitlement for the denial of sexual access to women, which he considers his birth right. We only get his actions and Cartwright's psychological profile to know him by. Chillingly, he is revealed to have been grooming a child, Colin Rhames, to carry on his murderous ways: a character Sam arrests in 2006 as a fully formed murderer.

Life on Mars was clearly intended to be decoded differently and should be seen as a product of its time. Inevitably, it looks different through the filter of contemporary context. Seen again, it begins to look like an unintentional playbook for the attitudes and behaviours that drive contemporary misogyny. Gene may catch the killer but normalises the values that made him. Being 'a deputy to the law' should make him a role model but not a role model to those looking to justify their own misogyny.

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A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

BIGELOW AND THE MALE PSYCHE

Darren Bird takes a look through filmmaker Kathryn Bigelow's back catalogue and identifies themes, ideas and stylistic features that suggest she is a modern auteur.

Bigelow: big in Hollywood

Collection Christophel / Alamy Stock Photo

Kathryn Bigelow makes for an interesting director to study in relation to auteur theory and ideology, largely because she works specifically within traditionally male-dominated genres, such as crime, action and war, and also because her work is often compared to male directors. For example, she is a lone female director in a choice of six for the 'Ideology of Conflict', paper two, section C of the OCR A Level Film Studies examination. The film *The Hurt Locker* (2009), for which she won the Oscar for Best Director, is the key text that students must study, and will form the focus here.

A simple definition for auteur theory, and one that's useful for the purposes of this article, comes from film academic Aneek Chaudhuri who describes it as when a 'film reflects the director's personal creative vision, as if they were the primary 'auteur' (the French word for author)'.

Collection Christophel / Alamy Stock Photo

Bombs away! Jeremy Renner in *The Hurt Locker*, 2009

Furthermore, the theory holds that 'the auteur's creative voice is distinct enough to shine through all kinds of studio interference and through the collective process'. Auteur directors also often explore similar themes and ideas across their body of work. Bigelow, I would argue, is one such director.

Themes and Style

The first thing we might notice about Bigelow as an auteur is that she likes to set her films within violent, high-stakes backdrops, such as street shootings, bank robberies and fields of battle. In one of her earlier films, *Blue Steel* (1990), a female lead policewoman, played by Jamie Lee Curtis, struggles to clear her name after her handgun is used in a series of killings. However, since *Blue Steel*, her films have mainly been populated by fearless alpha males and it can be argued that her films lack female representation. For example, the Harrison Ford-led submarine actioner *K-19: The Widowmaker* (2002), has an all-male cast.

> Although her films can be defined by conflict, in *The Hurt Locker* Bigelow seems more concerned by a different consequence of violence, the damage that war does to the male psyche.

Zero Dark Thirty (2015) does appear to redress this balance with a return to the central female character, Maya (Jessica Chastain), as she battles for her claim that she has found the hiding place of Osama Bin Laden to be taken seriously by her male colleagues. However, she is also conspicuously absent for the last half an hour of the film, where an all-male special forces team swoops in to do the dirty work of locating and entering the compound of the former Taliban leader.

Bigelow, therefore, seems more interested in placing masculinity under the camera's gaze. In *Point Break* (1991), the male leads are adrenaline junkies who surf and skydive, funding their lifestyle through a series of bank heists. Johnny Utah (Keanu Reeves), is the FBI agent tasked with catching the criminals and is in continual conflict with his superiors over his methods of infiltrating the group and being swept up in the thrill of the adrenaline rush. Staff Sergeant James (Jeremy Renner) comes from the same lineage in *The Hurt Locker*. He appears to love his job as a weapons technician who must race against time to defuse bombs. The film even warns us with a quote at the very beginning that 'the rush of battle is often a potent and lethal addiction'. Like other lead characters in Bigelow films, James has to battle to prove himself, coming into conflict with Sergeant Sanborn (Anthony Mackie), a by-the-book soldier who despises James' individualistic and 'hot shot' ways.

Adrenaline rush: Keanu Reeves and Patrick Swayze in *Point Break*, 1991

Allstar Picture Library Ltd. / Alamy Stock Photo

Consequences of Violence

Although her films can be defined by conflict, in *The Hurt Locker* Bigelow seems more concerned by a different consequence of violence: the damage that war does to the male psyche. In a scene towards the end of the film, James and Sanborn are seen driving an armoured vehicle away from the site of a suicide bombing. Despite being in the same physical space, Bigelow keeps them in separate shots throughout this scene to emphasise the divide in their outlooks; we see each character in close-up as they come to terms with the emotions provoked by this war. Sanborn confesses that he doesn't understand James' motivations to be on the front line, especially as he has a young son waiting for him back home and he could be killed any moment. James is unable to explain himself. For these reasons, *The Hurt Locker* is sometimes considered an anti-war film as, ultimately, it shows the emotional damage that the conflict is causing for these soldiers; this scene demonstrates how they are unable to communicate their feelings to each other.

However, this is where Bigelow's ideology is a little harder to pin down, as she could also be accused of glamourising the violence that her films appear to condemn. In the opening credit sequence of *Blue Steel*, the camera films a police issue handgun in a series of micro close-ups, we see the intricate detail of bullets being loaded into the barrel and given the ice-blue lighting, makes the weapon look menacing, yes, but also pretty cool. It is perhaps worth noting that Bigelow was briefly married to James Cameron, another director whose films, such as *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991) and *Avatar* (2009), feature striking, big-budget scenes of action and violence and hyper-masculine central protagonists. Cameron has also produced some of Bigelow's films, indicating that they may share a creative vision and ideology.

There is no doubting that Bigelow is a stylish director who, as well as being

The first thing we might notice about Bigelow as an auteur is that she likes to set her films within violent, high-stakes backdrops, such as street shootings, bank robberies and fields of battle.

skilled in exploring the consequences of violence, has a flair for depicting violence on film. In *Point Break*, there is a scene where the lead bank robber, Bodhi (Patrick Swayze) attempts to escape capture by setting fire to the nozzle of a petrol pump, engulfing the petrol station in flames. This is filmed in slow motion and is made thrilling for the spectator. Soon after, Utah chases Bodhi through a series of suburban homes and gardens and this is made gripping for the audience by her use of kinetic tracking shots. Similarly, in another scene from *The Hurt Locker*, Sergeant Thompson (Guy Pearce) is killed early on in the film; he is too close to a bomb detonation. Again this scene is filmed in super slow motion; the bullet-time images of Thompson's body as it falls to the ground make the violent scene strangely beautiful to look at.

Open Endings

Nowhere is the ambiguity in Bigelow's films more keenly felt than at the very end. A common device she uses is open, enigmatic endings which leave the spectator to decide what happens next. In *Point Break*, as Utah finally captures Bodhi on an Australian beach, he releases him to let him surf one last monster wave. As Bodhi paddles out to sea, Utah can be seen throwing his police badge into the sea and the audience is left to wonder what this signifies. Similarly, after the successful capture and execution of Osama Bin Laden in *Zero Dark Thirty*, Maya is left sitting alone on an empty airplane, directly addressing the camera in silence, seemingly taking no joy in the fact that her work is done. The audience are again left to fill in the pieces and perhaps this is the point that the director wishes to make: when work becomes your obsession, and when that work involves violence, what fills this void when the job is complete?

The ending of *The Hurt Locker* deals with the same ideas. When Staff Sergeant James briefly returns to America at the end of the film, Bigelow uses a low angle long shot of him shopping for groceries at the local supermarket. He is depicted as a small figure dwarfed by the immense choice of products in the cereal aisle. He appears to have become so conditioned to his life in the military that he can no longer relate to the routine of his life back at home. And normal life, in this scene, is depicted as overwhelmingly trivial and meaningless. For James, the void can only be filled by resuming his role as a bomb disposal technician. In the final moments we see him return to the field of battle accompanied by a heavy rock soundtrack. Even though his decision is alien to us, we maybe come to understand the rush that this gives James. As he walks purposefully towards a new bomb threat, he is shown to be an important and significant man on the battlefield. As the graphic on the screen informs us, James now has a further 365 days in this conflict and we are left to wonder what will happen to James and even his family back home? Or it could be argued that order has been restored – in his case the chaos of the battlefield is order.

It would seem that with her interest in violent genres and recurring character types – young 'hot shots' who have to battle the system – coupled with the stylish camerawork that can go where it wants, from taking us into the barrel of a gun, to the famous tracking shots of the chase in *Point Break*, Kathryn Bigelow has a distinct style that allows her creative voice to shine through as an auteur.

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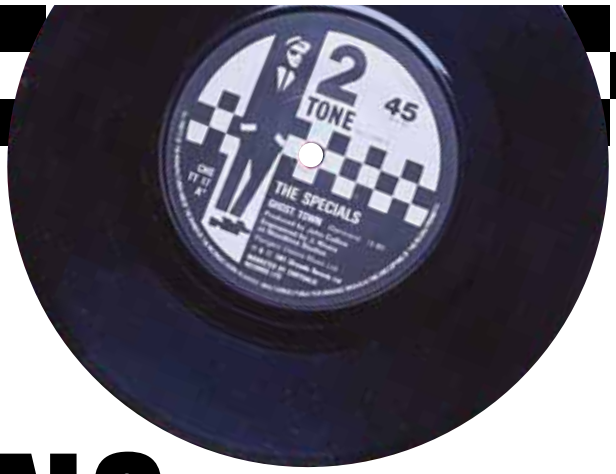
from the MM vaults

The Context of Conflict: Media Representations of War – John Fitzgerald, *MM30*



DO YOU REMEMBER THE GOOD OLD DAYS BEFORE THE GHOST TOWN?

Deserted streets, an eerily empty City of London… no, it's not lockdown 2020; it's the video for The Specials' 1981 single, 'Ghost Town', which is now a set text for AQA Media Studies A-Level. We asked Specials' bass player and founding member, Horace Panter to reflect on the video then and now.

Two Tone: black and white unite

Forty years on from its release in 1981, 'Ghost Town' is still a haunting song. The Specials were one of the most interesting bands of the immediate post-punk period where the door that had been kicked down by bands like Sex Pistols and The Clash was being gleefully charged through by shouty streetpunks like Sham 69 and The Angelic Upstarts, darker and more spikey bands like The Damned and Siouxsie and the Banshees, and a whole range of new wave and experimental bands from all over the UK. The Specials came out of a different tradition – inspired by the directness and independent spirit of punk but informed by the sounds of Caribbean rocksteady and ska music and the look of 1960s mods and rudeboys – and produced some of the most exciting and thoughtful music of the era.

When 'Ghost Town' was released in 1981 it became their second number 1 single in the UK and the video seemed to capture the time perfectly. As *Guardian* music journalist Alexis Petridis writes in his appreciation of what his paper ranked the 2nd greatest UK number 1,

> **The day before 'Ghost Town' reached No 1, Britain erupted. There had been riots in Brixton the previous month, sparked by a new police stop-and-search policy named Operation Swamp 81 after Margaret Thatcher's 1978 assertion that the UK 'might be rather swamped by people of a different culture': 943 people – the vast majority of them black – were stopped by plainclothes officers in six days.**

In the months to come, there were more riots and disturbances all over the UK, often related to racist and oppressive policing or festering anger at conditions for young working-class people.

The video, directed by Barney Bubbles, is a muted, shadowy affair, shot at night in London's East End and the morning after in a deserted City of London. Coupled with the bleak and mournful lyrics, it seemed to encapsulate one aspect of

Image courtesy of Horace Panter

Horace Panter: an original Special

'The political/social context of the song didn't really materialise until the Brixton/Toxteth/ Handsworth riots in July 1981, by which time the song was No.1 in the singles chart [...] It captured the zeitgeist.'

kthtrnr / Flickr

The Specials performing in 2015

this time but also managed to convey a kind of unhinged playfulness with all seven members of the band crammed into a car, weaving across empty streets, lipsyncing and mugging for the camera. But what did the band think about it all? We talked to Horace Panter, Specials bass player and the man who drove the car in the video.

Can you tell us a bit about the ideas behind the video? We know that Barney Bubbles directed it, but how much input did you have as a band, or as individuals, into the video?

The video was a Barney Bubbles project, if anyone from the band had any input into it, it would have been Jerry Dammers. I had no idea that I would be driving a 1962 Vauxhall Cresta through the Blackwell Tunnel all night when we went down to London to film it, after a particularly violent free concert in Rotherham.

The video is seen by many people to really capture the spirit of the song – with its sense of a country falling apart and cities haunted by desperate people. Is that true for you too and if so, how do you think it does that?

I think the video works (a) because it was done in the middle of the night with all the brooding and menace that comes with the dark, and (b) when dawn finally broke and we drove through the City district, there was nobody else around. The political/social context of the song didn't really materialise until the Brixton/ Toxteth/Handsworth riots in July 1981, by which time the song was No.1 in the singles chart.

Are there any particular moments in the video that really stand out for you?

The camera was fixed to the bonnet of the car by a big rubber sucker. On one of the passes, the camera comes loose and falls over. We kept that bit – it is my favourite moment. The camera falling onto the bonnet and the subsequent mark it made did not go down well with the car's owner!

There's a lot of focus on the social context to the song. How is that captured in the video?

I don't think it is. It's just 7 people crammed into a car. The lyrics focus on the social context,

Pictorial Press Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

The Specials: looking sharp in 1980

the video was pretty moody, the miming was very deadpan. If it had been released a year before, or a year later, I doubt it would have had the same impact. It captured the zeitgeist.

Can you remember seeing the video for the first time? What was your reaction to it? How do you feel about it now 40 years on?

I thought it was very cool. I got to drive the car. Three-speed column-shift gear stick. This was 1981, at the advent of the promotional video – a couple of years before MTV. I remember thinking it was very different, but the music was different too. It wasn't like those Madness 'cheeky chappie' – 'you don't have to be mad to work here but it helps' videos.

When the video was released, the video art form was still in its very early stages. What do you make of how it's developed and how do you use the form now as a band with your more recent work?

I detest making videos. 'Ghost Town' was probably the best and least painful one I've been involved in. I am a musician, not an actor. I perform, yes, but on stage with a guitar. That whole MTV formula, slo-mo breaking mirrors and leggy models thing was toe-

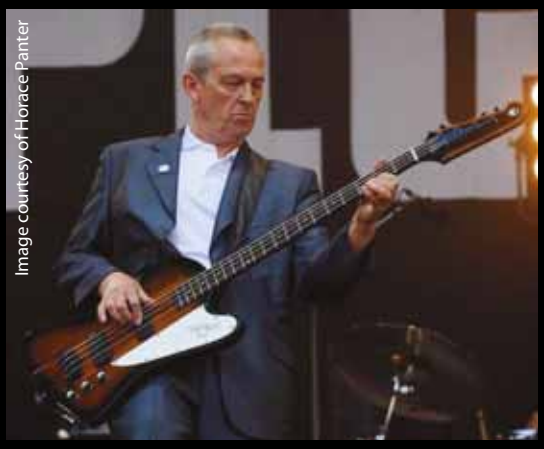


Image courtesy of Horace Panter

There's a weird sense of claustrophobia and when the fairground-style voices kick in, that's transformed into something closer to hysteria.

curling. More recently, we've been filmed and super-imposed into stock footage. That was shit too (see the 'Freedom Highway' video).

How does it feel to see that the 'Ghost Town' video has racked up over 12 million views on You Tube since the remastered version was uploaded in 2015? Did you ever think the song and the video you made 40 years ago would still be intriguing people now?

Yes, it's pretty cool. These days I like to concentrate on Jerry in the back seat. If you look closely, you can see him grinding his teeth, having ingested a little too much amphetamine sulphate. That's his jumper I'm wearing.

Analysing Ghost Town

As an AQA Close Study Product for A-Level Media Studies, the video for 'Ghost Town' can be analysed using a focus on Media Representations and Media Language. As alluded to earlier, the mise-en-scène and cinematography are crucial to the mood evoked in the video. The use of twilight and dawn help to create an uneasy hinterland between night and day, and when the dark has really fallen later in the video, the lighting is used to splash oversized shadows of the car against brick walls. The only vivid colours in these sequences come from within the car where band members are underlit to show their shirts and faces. There's a weird sense of claustrophobia and when the fairground-style voices kick in, that's transformed into something closer to hysteria.

In terms of narrative structure, there's not much to go on, but the journey through empty city streets and from night into day – a common trope in many music videos – links effectively to the song's lyrics and supports one of the song's potential interpretations.

As Panter himself implies, some of the interpretation of the context to the video is imposed by different viewers after the event, and in this case, the riots across the UK gave 'Ghost Town' an added resonance that may not have been intended in the original song or video. And while Jerry Dammers' lyrics were, according to those who know, very much a product of the desolate, downtrodden towns and cities the band had toured during the formative years of Thatcherism, the perspective of time allows different readings. We're not talking a complete Roland Barthes death of the author scenario here, but we could certainly look at 'Ghost Town' through a different, pandemic-inflected lens now as well. The eery, empty streets might bring to mind the streets of Britain's towns and cities during our recent lockdowns and the video might stir different emotions in a modern viewer. It's also worth remembering that the creators of texts (even the bass-player on the song!) don't always have the final word when it comes to interpreting the meanings of the art they're involved in!

Horace Panter was interviewed by Dan Clayton, Associate Editor of *MediaMagazine*.

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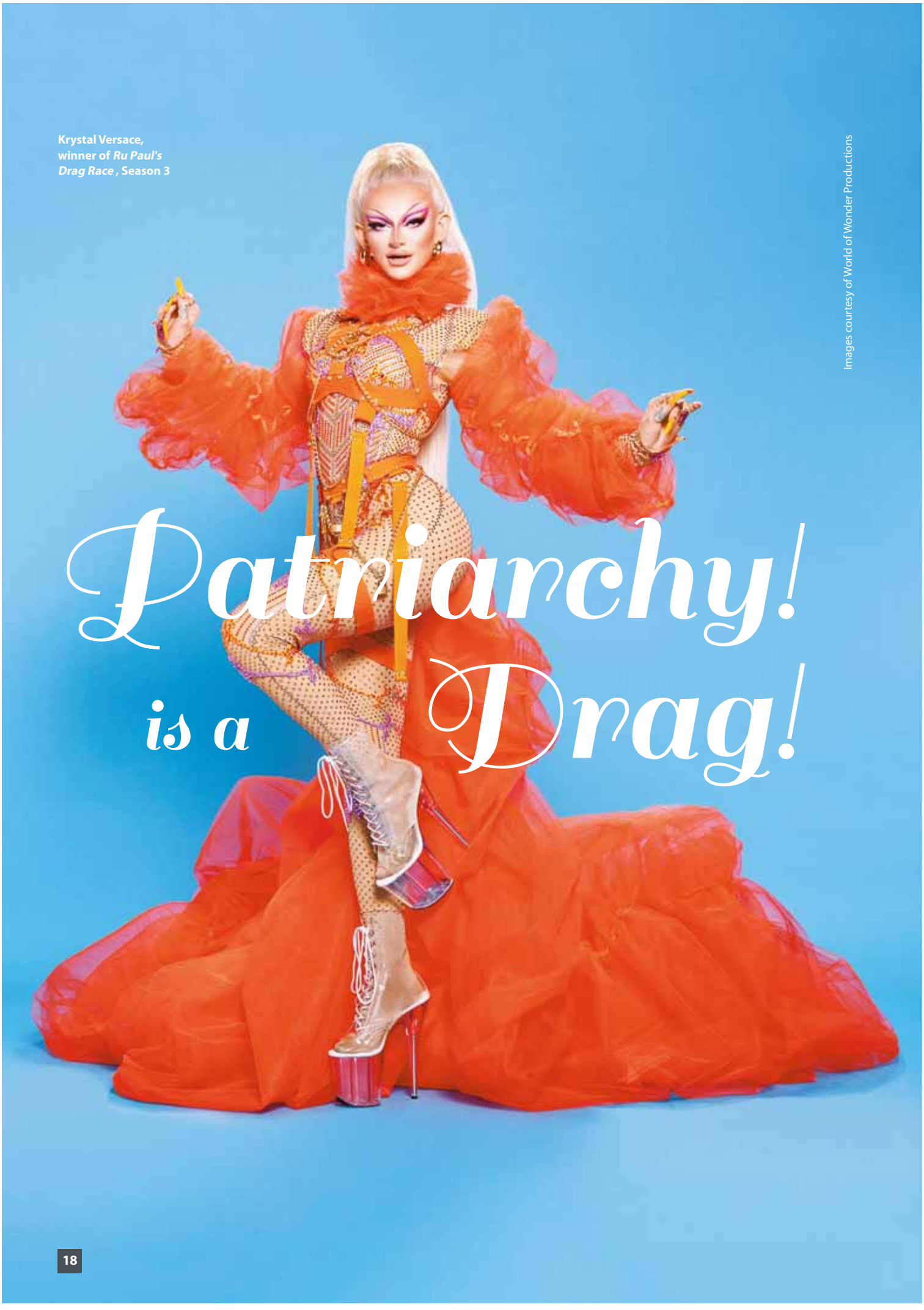

Krystal Versace, winner of *Ru Paul's Drag Race*, Season 3

Images courtesy of World of Wonder Productions

Patriarchy! is a Drag!

Ru Paul: refusing to flag

Images courtesy of World of Wonder Productions

April McCarthy explains how the popular drag-queen reality show, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, challenges patriarchal power, with a little help from feminist theorist, Judith Butler.

Ru Paul's Drag Race is a radical mainstream television show, if such a thing exists. It makes the clear link between female empowerment and positive representations that challenge heteronormativity (the idea that the 'normal' mode of sexual orientation is between a man and a women) as uniting forces that work to destabilise patriarchal power structures. As such, it constructs a version of reality framed by a radically different set of values, attitudes and beliefs.

Ru Paul's Drag Race is a show that is very 'conscious' about representation and this is, arguably, because there has never been any choice in the matter. Writing in the 1990s, Judith Butler, author of *Gender Trouble*, argued that to assume a non-heteronormative identity is incredibly difficult because heteronormative ideals are so deeply embedded in our culture. This could be seen in the media where non-heteronormative representations were largely absent and, if shown at all, were constructed as a painful subversive act where the character had to struggle to seek acceptance. First shown in the US in 2009, *Ru Paul's Drag Race* is one of a number of American TV programmes, alongside shows like *Queer Eye* and *Will and Grace*, credited with changing mainstream perceptions of LGBTQ+ people, representing them as positive role models who flourish in their non-heteronormativity and who are dignified, relatable, even wholesome. Part parody of *America's Next Top Model*, part homage to New York 1980's Ballroom Culture (see the 1990 *Paris Is Burning* documentary or BBC's drama *Pose* for context), *Ru Paul's Drag Race* has been going for 13 seasons. The UK version of the show premiered in October 2019 and whilst it seems to have the production values of a Christmas panto, as well as a similar amount of innuendo and slapstick humour, it's also a prestigious competition which offers serious critique of the craft of being a drag queen and respects drag as an artform. However, it does much more than just celebrate drag culture. Through the editing and formatting processes, it also constructs a world, and within that world it promotes a set of values around the idea of female empowerment using both mini and maxi-challenges to challenge gender binarism. In doing so, this 'mainstream' show is a rare voice that challenges dominant hegemonic beliefs.

'Parodic identities'

As we know from studying representation in Media Studies, how a certain group is presented in the media can be extremely influential in the way we shape our sense of self. Butler argues that our gendered identities are constructed through our actions or what she calls tiny 'performances'. For example, putting on mascara or wearing heels are the small actions through which we 'perform' our gender identity. These gender-based cues are often modelled for us by media products and we copy them to signal our female or male identity to others. According to Butler, drag queens can help us to explore this idea because

RuPaul's DRAG RACE UK

Goddess: Tayce a Season 2 finalist

Images courtesy of World of Wonder Productions

it is these 'parodic identities' (highly exaggerated versions of femininity) that 'reveal the imitative structure of gender itself' (Butler, 1990). Interestingly, when Ru Paul speaks to the contestants when they are not in drag, they are still referred to as 'girls' and this works not to label them but to do the opposite; it refers to their identity in a moment in time when they are playing their role as contestants in a show with celebrates the 'performance' of being a woman.

However, nowhere are Butler's ideas more evident than in one of the series' mini-challenges where constants are asked to perform as a heteronormative man, what Ru Paul refers to as 'macho queens' or 'butch drag'. In Series 2, Episode 8, Ru-Paul asks the contestants to perform a rendition of his song. They have 15 minutes to get into their 'macho drag' and the result is far more of a 'parodic identity' than when they perform as their much more serious drag queen personas. Crudely drawn on facial hair and deep gruff voices are used for an unconvincing effect and when singing, they interrupt the song to say heteronormative things like 'I love you' to their fictional girlfriends in the pretend crowd. These representations challenge the idea of gender binarism because both male and female gender identities must be performed with effort, using props, costumes and make up. The contestants' alternative models of gender are centre stage and are represented as the norm or 'default' mode in the version of reality constructed by the show.

'Hun' Culture

So, how does the female empowerment aspect fit into all this?

Butler argues that dominant narratives about what being a woman is like come to appear 'natural' or 'common sense' through their repetition in the media. These narratives often leave out the women who do not fit the very limited beauty standards or privileged experiences which are presented to us as the feminine 'norm'. The show challenges this narrative through an inclusive and body-positive approach

By positioning the audience to see the drag queen contestants as beautiful starlets, the media producers construct the idea that beauty is for everyone. It shows that achieving the beauty standard really is an illusion achieved with the creative application of make-up, lighting and shapewear. As they strut down the catwalk every

U OK, hun?

Judith Butler, author of *Gender Trouble*, argued that to assume a non-heteronormative identity is incredibly difficult because heteronormative ideals are so deeply embedded in our culture.

Relatable femininity from 'LoveofHuns'

episode, each contestant provides their own commentary about what they are serving and how they are serving it, something like: 'I'm serving Greek goddess realness! Aphrodite, who? The judges are worshipping me and they should be, I'm a goddess!'. Contestants on *Ru Paul's Drag Race* model self-confidence, self-affirmation and self-love in their 'female' personas. Ru Paul ensures this is always the moral of the story, ending every show with the line 'now remember, if you can't love yourself how in the hell are you gonna love someone else? Can I get an 'Amen' up in here?'

Similarly, by showing the processes of their transformation into drag queens, the show appeals to what is being called 'hun culture', a subculture or perhaps, a genre of humour, where it's all about relatable scenarios and idolising alternative female role models. A typical joke would be the depressing but hilarious moment when there is a huge disparity between the fashion trend or attempt at sophistication and the failed execution of said trend or attempt. In short, this part of the show is very relatable for women; using lipstick to neutralise your facial hair is not so different from shaving your legs, which the contestants also do. It is a kind of solidarity for women and the struggle to achieve something close to the impossible beauty standard. In doing so, it makes a female audience feel both seen and heard. The producers of the show know this as Gemma Collins and Kat Slater, icons of 'hun culture', are referenced frequently.

Some people might feel that the show is a poor excuse for female empowerment because it is a show that is essentially a beauty pageant which tests skills traditionally associated with being a good 'woman'; sewing, dancing, hair and make-up. However, I might argue that it is also valuing something about the female experience that might otherwise be hidden or considered trivial. Representing something about the reality of achieving female beauty standards as opposed to just focussing on the ideal shows a healthy separation between the performance of beauty and the experience of the human being. Not only that, but the towering matriarchal presence of Ru Paul and Michelle Visage set the tone of the show; in this reality, 'female' traditions and 'female' spaces are revered.

Overall, *Ru Paul's Drag Race* shows the radical potential of what a reality TV show, with a judging panel format, might achieve using positive representation. It is a show that offers a sense of hope to the audience, that they may be accepted in their version of beauty. It demonstrates the ways in which heteronormativity, gender binarism and limiting beauty standards for women can be challenged and in doing so, destabilises the internalising power of patriarchal oppression.

By positioning the audience to see the drag queen contestants as beautiful starlets, the media producers construct the idea that beauty is for everyone. It shows that achieving the beauty standard really is an illusion achieved with the creative application of make-up, lighting and shapewear.

April McCarthy teaches Media Studies and English at Hampstead School in London and is a Media Consultant at the English and Media Centre.

Pretty in...purple! Lawrence Chane, winner of Season 2

Images courtesy of World of Wonder Productions

The Theory Drop
The Theory Drop
The Theory Drop
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The Theory Drop

Livingstone and Lunt

Car-crash reality TV show, *Love Island* gets an increasing number of complaints every summer. Does that mean it should be taken off air? Mark Dixon explains the arguments around regulation and consumer choice.

Confession time. I watched every single episode of *Love Island* last summer. Yes indeedy, Mr. Dixon consumed EVERY last minute of *Love Island* action 2021. I even watched the eye wateringly bad *After Sun* spin-off show – mostly, to see whether the six-figure sum reportedly paid to Laura Whitmore translated into quality viewing.

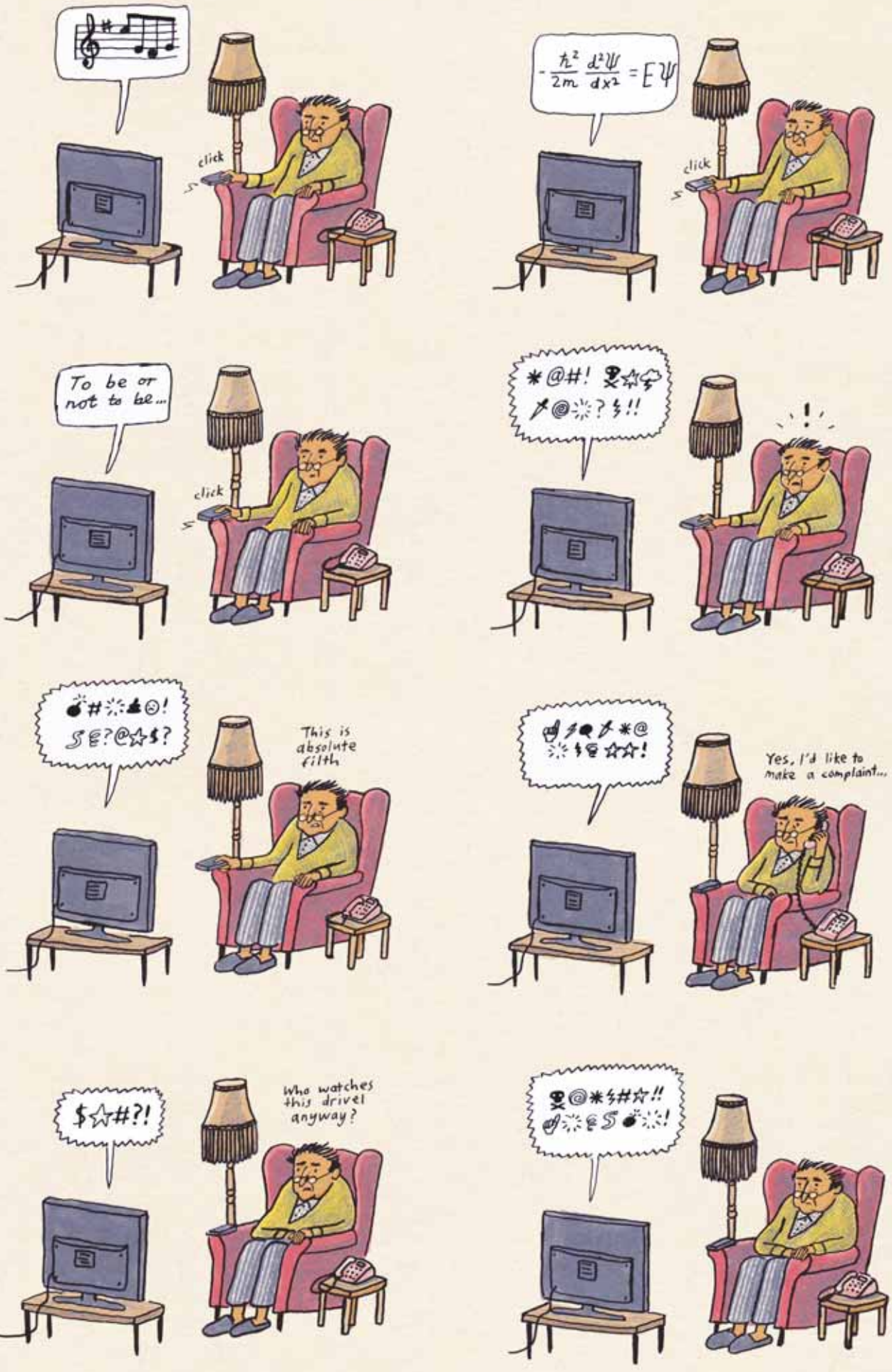
'Why, Mr Dixon? Why?' my year 12s screamed when I accidentally revealed how I'd spent a sizeable slab of the six-week holidays. Why indeed? I asked myself, because at the heart of it, *Love Island* is a cruel television format that revels in the stretching and snapping of heart strings. A show that promotes infidelity for the purposes of entertainment, wherein love matches are crudely forged so that they might be later tested. *Love Island*'s appeal, I realised, lay in its ability to both enthral and appal in equal measure.

The fits and starts of Faye and Teddy's onscreen romance exemplify the voyeuristic horrors of ITV's flagship summer programme, with over 25,000 complaints made to Ofcom regarding the distress viewers experienced as a result of Faye's outburst when she suspected that boyfriend Teddy's loyalty had been found wanting. Clearly, Faye's reaction was engineered by the makers of the show, a postcard delivered from the evil shadowy producer-folk that evidenced the boys' affections for the show's new female contestants in graphic detail. Producers, of course, are charged with the job of securing viewer ratings, and the producer postcard delivered to the *Love Island* house was deliberately fronted with a series of racy snaps that were sure to enrage the respective girlfriends of their straying partners.

When the boys returned from Casa Amor, Faye dutifully responded with an expletive-ridden rant that lasted the best part of a Wednesday night episode, making it one of the most complained about moments in 2021 UK television. Ofcom, in turn, rejected those viewer concerns, arguing that, 'scenes were within viewers' likely expectations of this programme's established format': that, in other words, the audience had elected to watch the show knowing that *Love Island* was likely to depict sweary arguments and scenes (ahem) of an adult nature.

In many ways, Ofcom's *Love Island* adjudication exemplifies what Livingstone and Lunt outline as the UK's consumer-oriented regulatory approach – an approach that places decisions regarding the consumption of difficult content in the hands of audiences.

The reluctance by successive governments to introduce a harder regulatory approach, Livingstone and Lunt tell us, has been given media-makers the freedom to produce a range of content that clearly benefits producers.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To be or not to be...
click
*@#!
?!!
This is absolute filth
Yes, I'd like to make a complaint...
$☆#?!
Who watches this drivel anyway?

The government want UK media makers to be able to compete in the fiercely competitive global media market. Setting content quotas that forced broadcasters to make less popular educational shows, for example, would give UK media makers a huge disadvantage in that global market.

The consumer-oriented model, Livingstone and Lunt argue, is the by-product of the various light-weight editorial codes that the ASA, Ofcom, BBFC, PEGI and IPSO outline for UK media producers: a disparate smorgasbord of industry-penned, self-regulatory guidelines that exist, in the main, to protect vulnerable audiences (children, groups with disabilities and so on) and that outline basic editorial standards only.

Both PEGI and the BBFC's age-based classification systems provide excellent examples of the way that the UK regulatory system tries to protect those vulnerable viewers. Games, for example, that contain, 'violence towards defenceless characters' or 'the glamourisation of illegal drugs' are certificated as 18s by PEGI, while films that use frequent strong language are restricted to viewers under the age of 15 by the BBFC. The BBFC, importantly, states that once viewers reach adult age they, 'should be free to choose their own entertainment.'

The widely critiqued Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) - the UK's press regulator - also places emphasis on the protection of children's' rights in its editorial code, while also providing an adjudication service that oversees complaints from individuals who perceive story content to be inaccurate, unfair, discriminatory or overly intrusive.

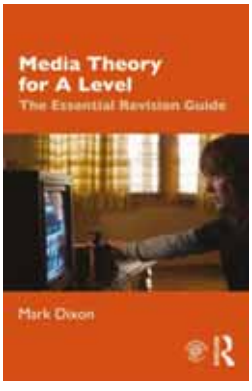
Importantly, IPSO has the power to impose fines of up to £1 million if complaints are upheld; but so far it hasn't issued a single financial penalty since it was founded in 2014 – a fact that has attracted much criticism of this self-regulating organisation. Ordinarily, apologies and retractions are all newspapers have to provide if IPSO deems a publication to have flouted its code: a fairly flimsy deterrent for news titles that are tempted to pursue sensationalist headlines in order to attract mass audience interest.

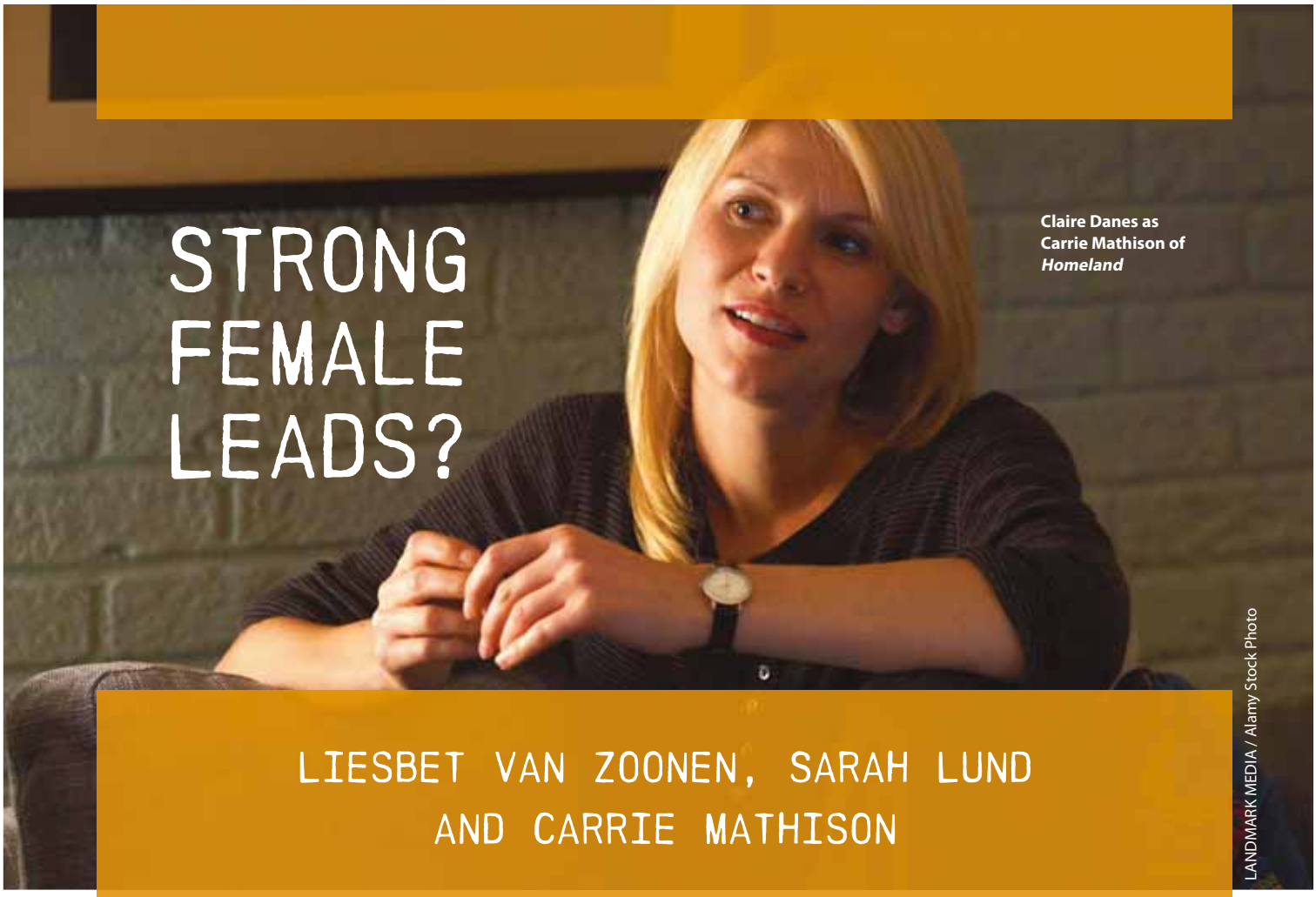
The varied approaches to regulation across the different media sectors, coupled with the almost total lack of regulatory control for digital media services, has resulted, Livingstone and Lunt argue, in a system that has substantial faults. They suggest that the reluctance by successive governments to introduce a harder regulatory approach, has given media-makers the freedom to produce a range of content that clearly benefits producers. Newspapers, broadcasters, and media makers, too, have successfully lobbied to prevent successive governments from imposing a more robust cross-media regulatory system. Such a system might prevent them from making popular content. Imposing stricter privacy rules, for example, would prevent newspapers from publishing questionable, but hugely popular, celebrity-oriented 'kiss and tells'. Governments have also been reluctant to enact firmer regulatory controls because they want UK media makers to be able to compete in the fiercely competitive global media market. Setting content quotas that forced broadcasters to make less popular educational shows, for example, would give UK media makers a huge disadvantage in that global market.

Livingstone and Lunt's criticism of the consumer-oriented approach, as such, draws attention to the idea that the job of the various UK regulators to police problematic or offensive content is a secondary concern. 'Ofcom's guiding principles,' Livingstone and Lunt tell us, for example, 'have been to encourage competition' (Livingstone and Lunt, 2012).

Having a choice is good, but the lightweight regulatory landscape that nurtures that choice means that problematic material is placed in the public sphere. Indeed, it could even be argued that shocking or taboo material is more likely to be (re)commissioned given the word-of-mouth publicity produced. Certainly, the extensive coverage given to reality television car crashes by the print media fans the flames of material that isn't necessarily all that wholesome. Given the reluctance by Ofcom, for example, to censor *Love Island* for broadcasting Faye's shocking outburst, it feels inevitable – commercially sensible even – that the show will continue to broadcast the very best and very worst of human behaviour next season. The question we ought to ask ourselves, perhaps, is whether we should continue watching those moments or not?

Mark Dixon is a senior examiner for A level Media Studies and author of *Media Theory for A Level.*
Follow him on Twitter @markdixonmedia or check out the resources on his website www.essentialmedia.theory.com





Claire Danes as Carrie Mathison of *Homeland*

LANDMARK MEDIA / Alamy Stock Photo

STRONG FEMALE LEADS?

LIESBET VAN ZOONEN, SARAH LUND AND CARRIE MATHISON

Empowered female role models or just more eye candy for the male gaze? Claire Pollard takes a look at Sarah Lund and Carrie Mathison through the lens of van Zoonen.

On the surface, both *Homeland* (2011-2020) and *The Killing* (2007-2012) might be considered to be feminist texts: they revolve around strong female leads who are in positions of authority and power in male-dominated careers. Sarah Lund's cool, confident control over the events that unravel after 'the killing' of Nanna Birk Larsen, and her management of her hothead male colleague, Jan Meyer, might be seen as a challenge to the patriarchal structures that Liesbet van Zoonen argues are repeated and reinforced in the media. Homeland's Carrie Mathison, in contrast, is impulsive and passionate (typically considered more female traits) but has an impressive commitment and drive and is outstanding at what she does. Unlike Lund, she doesn't shy away from conflict or violence and will cross a line to achieve the necessary ends.

But despite having strong central female characters, do these shows actually challenge gender stereotypes in any meaningful way? This article aims to use van Zoonen's ideas about female objectification, economic contexts and images of male strength to suggest that they only reproduce the already established patriarchal structures of society.

Objectification

Mulvey, van Zoonen and Butler have all criticised the way the media depicts the female body as 'a spectacle' – something to be looked at. Both *Homeland* and *The Killing* are guilty of using the male gaze. In the opening scenes of *The Killing*, Nanna is introduced to us alone in the middle of a forest, the terrified victim of an unknown male aggressor. She has been sexually assaulted, implied through the use of costume: she's in a slip which is bloodied and torn, revealing her underwear beneath. The state of dishevelled undress in itself serves to establish her as passive and weak, and the female body itself vulnerable to violation.

Liesbet van Zoonen is also interested in the more subtle ways that the media uses female stereotypes and feminine traits to uphold patriarchal ideas of male power and female submissiveness. In the next scene, Detective Sarah Lund is startled awake at 6.30am, with a sudden sense of anxiety. This establishes a connection between Nanna and Sarah, and that there is some instinct or 'female intuition' at play here – something that is also used as a narrative device in *Homeland* as Carrie doggedly pursues her hunch (based on some fairly sketchy intelligence gleaned years before) that

Sergeant Nick Brody has been 'turned' in Iraq and poses a threat to national security. The writers of both shows, then, are repeating stereotypical ideas about gender, implying that the reason these women are so good has less to do with training or skill and more to do with some mystical feminine quality.

But back to the objectification: once Lund has been woken, she wanders around her house and her character is established through her domestic space and situation; in her role as a mother (she looks in on Mark, sleeping peacefully) and as a romantic partner and object of desire to Bengt. As she reaches her arms around Bengt's neck, we even get a cheeky shot of her rear end as her night shirt rides up to reveal black lace knickers. It's not enough for a 15 certificate but does slightly undermine everything Lund becomes as the show, and her character, evolve.

Throughout the rest of the series, she is modestly dressed in jeans and a jumper. Sofie Gråbøl, the actress who played Lund, said of that jumper,

It tells of a woman who has so much confidence in herself that she doesn't have to use her sex to get what she wants. She's herself.

But that didn't stop the UK press objectifying her and her jumper in the rampant coverage of the show when it aired here in 2011. *The Times* referred to Lund as a Danish 'pin up' and the writer Polly Vernon even posed 'Three ways with that sweater' in leather hotpants and stilettos astride a Danish-designed chair.

No sweat: Sarah Lund of *The Killing*

Moviestore Collection Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo


THE SUNDAY TIMES

Jumpers, sex, murder: who's Sarah Lund?

The Danish pin-up: Sofie Gråbøl on her role as the crimefighter in The Killing who is 'in tune with darkness'

Male gaze: Sofie Gråbøl

Homeland also serves the viewer an early shot (4 minutes in) of Agent Mathison undressing. It's momentary and undermined by an 'unladylike' moment with a flannel which follows but nonetheless, there it is: we've seen her in her underwear, and it's black and lacey – phew! This is a depressingly common trait of so many first episodes of TV dramas that offer up nudity or hot sex as a way of hooking audiences.

More disappointing is the representation of Jessica Brody (Sergeant Nick Brody's wife). She is introduced to us in the act of love-making, literally 'riding' Mike, her new boyfriend, in a scene that is explicit enough to be deeply uncomfortable to watch in the classroom. Her character certainly lacks depth throughout the show and the casting of Morena Baccarin, who is undeniably beautiful but way too young to be the mother of two teenage children, seems to be motivated by the male gaze. The actress was 31 in 2011 when the show was aired so must have been cast at 30 to be the mother of Dana who is 17 in a version of the script posted online (Morgan Saylor, who plays Dana was 17 when the show aired). Incidentally in the same script, Jessica is introduced in an office setting, getting the call from Brody at work, as opposed to in the bedroom.

Economic Context

In the decade since both shows aired, small steps have been made in terms of diversity of the stories that get told and the people who have the power to tell them. The noughties were the decade of critically acclaimed, highly influential long-form TV dramas. But box-set behemoths like *The Sopranos*, *The West Wing* and *The Wire* still centred around male protagonists and were written and created by men (though some of the female characters in these shows, Kima Greggs and Carmela Soprano in particular, were very well drawn).

As the noughties drew to a close, more female-fronted narratives started to emerge but, like *Homeland* and *The Killing*, were still written and directed predominantly by men. Liesbet van Zoonen argues that the inequalities in the industry feed into the representations that we see on our screens. According to Mark Dixon, author of *Media Theory for A-level*, of all the long-form TV dramas available to study for A-level Media, only one, *Deutschland 83*, had a lead female writer and only 2 of all 18 drama episodes identified by the 3 national exam boards had a female director.

Masculine Strength

The act of looking, generally speaking, is perceived as active and powerful whereas to be looked at is to be passive or weak. So, when male bodies are objectified, it should be the case that the very act of objectification diminishes male power. However, van Zoonen argues that even when male bodies are objectified in the media, they are framed as physically strong and powerful and therefore remain dominant, thereby safeguarding the gender hierarchy (explained brilliantly in Mark Dixon's Theory Drop and Tom Zaino's comic strip in *MM76*).

In Mike and Jessica's sex scene, the camera is centred on her body and face but we can glimpse, around the edges, that he is ripped. He is a soldier, so that makes sense within the narrative. When Brody undresses later on, for Jessica's second, more harrowing sex scene, his body is strong and toned (despite eight years in captivity) but scarred and marked by the suffering he has endured. He has been beaten, made weak and passive, yet his marks become a symbol of his endurance and survival and he is still framed for the audience as the protector. He comforts Jessica as she cries and in this patriarchal power dynamic she becomes aroused and initiates sex. Brody, suddenly overcome with lust, becomes dominant and aggressive and basically rapes her. That Carrie chooses to watch this, and later becomes his lover is interesting. I'll leave you to form your own ideas about what this might signify or how plausible it is. Did I mention this was written by a man?

We don't see as much male flesh on display in *The Killing* but there are other ways to display male strength. The relationship between Pernille and Theis Birk Larsen is quite sweet and balanced in the first half of the episode. But when their daughter is reported missing, a clear line is drawn: Pernille remains home, in the domestic space, while Theis, the action man, jumps in his van to hunt for his daughter declaring, 'I'll find her and bring her home'.

Mayoral candidate Troels Hartmann by contrast is first shown to us standing tearful at his wife's grave, not exactly the stereotype of masculine strength that we might expect to see from a powerful politician. But fear not, his position of power is soon restored as he arrives at his party headquarters where people hang on his every word and we discover that while he is widowed and sensitive he has also moved on and is in a relationship with his senior advisor, Rie Skovgaard. Their relationship in this episode is characterised by sex: his watch was lost under her bed and later, when they visit the school for a public political debate,

Anyone fancy a Danish?

he lustfully pushes Rie onto a desk and closes the blinds, establishing his sexual dominance. But his lust is framed – as is often the case, according to van Zoonen – within a romance-oriented context. He isn't just after sex, 'Move in with me,' he tells her, showing his relationship potential.

In 2011, Carrie Mathison and Sarah Lund were, I admit, exciting to watch as they seemed like progressive representations. But in the decade since – with long-form TV dramas like *Top of the Lake, Killing Eve, Big Little Lies* and *A Handmaid's Tale* – there have been better characters and narratives, produced by female creatives, that challenge the stereotypes that uphold the patriarchy. Hopefully by 2031 we will see even more plurality of gender representations both in the media industry and the products it produces. And of course, the exam boards will have some catching up to do!

Claire Pollard is the editor of *MediaMagazine*.

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from the MM vaults

What Lies Beneath: Lund and Salander, the Feminist Icons of Nordic Noir – Jonathan Nunns, *MM41*

Nordic Noir: Back to the Originals? – Emma Calway, *MM49*

It's all in the Mind: Detectives on Screen – Malcolm Hebron, *MM56*

Homeland and *24*: Ideas About the War on Terror – Jonathan Nunns, *MM44*

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The Godfather of New Hollywood: Coppola

Want somebody to explain to you how Francis Ford Coppola is an auteur? Mark Ramey makes us an offer we can't refuse.

Francis Ford Coppola is a name that still conjures the idea of epic movie magic despite the man himself now nearing the end of an illustrious 70-year career as producer, director, and screenwriter (76, 36 and 29 IMDB credits respectively). He was a legendary figure of the New Hollywood period (approx. 1960-1980), a maverick creative who set up his own studio, Zoetrope, to challenge the mainstream studio system; the man who wrote, directed, and produced the first contemporary blockbuster franchise, *The Godfather* (1972) and the man who did the same for what was arguably the last great film of the auteur interregnum, *Apocalypse Now* (1979).

The idea of the 'film auteur' is eloquently discussed elsewhere (see the Alex Garland article in *MM77*) but in essence I understand it to be a

filmmaker with a significant body of work whose films often express a personal vision through their close control of the filmmaking process, the development of narrative themes and the use of certain stylistic features. Under such a definition Coppola appears to merit auteur status but it is perhaps not that obvious what themes and styles typify his generically wide-ranging output. With that in mind, it is best I think to focus on a particular period of Coppola's career – the 1970s – and his two most famous films, *The Godfather* and *Apocalypse Now*, that neatly bookend this period.

The dynamics and nature of 'family' (in both its literal and wider meaning) is one angle by which we can approach Coppola, starting with *The Godfather* and its focus on the mafia's reverence for powerful, violent patriarchs and familial clans. In *Apocalypse Now* too we will meet surrogate military families represented firstly by the four-man crew of the small boat ferrying Willard upriver into Cambodia and then the object of his voyage, the patriarchal warlord, Colonel Kurtz, and his native army, whom he regards as 'his children'.

Another angle by which to assess Coppola is through his philosophical focus on anti-heroes and their personal battles with 'good and evil'. Coppola's protagonists in *The Godfather* and *Apocalypse Now* – Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) and Captain Willard (Martin Sheen) respectively are not so unalike: as their tragic narrative arcs close, they have journeyed into their souls and found no redemption. As the door literally closes on Michael Corleone's damnation in the final shot of *The Godfather* and, very near the end of *Apocalypse Now*, as Willard sails away from Kurtz's butchered corpse and the hellish heart of the jungle, both men are spiritually lost.

Coppola's outlook, as befitting an artist of a 1960s Californian Film School is liberal and critical of establishment narratives. Thus, both *The Godfather* and *Apocalypse Now*, as we will see, satirise the misuse of power by establishment figures such as the police and high-ranking soldiers, as well as the Catholic Church and the mass media.

Finally, we have the more technical aspects of Coppola's work. He has an interest in realism, favouring location work, long takes, naturalistic dialogue and method acting. But he is also as happy to use expressive techniques to deepen meaning such as chiaroscuro lighting, diegetic and non-diegetic music, and inventive montage editing, building on his early fascination with Eisenstein.

With these ideas in mind let us now explore some sequences from his work starting with *The Godfather*.

Both Michael Corleone and Captain Willard are men defined by their violent milieu, the towering personalities of flawed patriarchs whom they idolise and their own troubled, moral decline.

The Devil and His Detail

A pivotal sequence, occurring towards the end of the film, involves mafia boss Michael Corleone becoming godfather to his sister's daughter whilst at the same time employing assassins to murder his rivals in crime. The sequence begins in a grand Catholic church and Coppola parallel cuts between the service and the various assassins Michael has commissioned. The use of diegetic organ music cutting across the parallel edits powerfully highlights Michael's final descent into evil. As part of the service's liturgy, he literally 'renounces the devil' as we ironically witness the various gory tableaux of his victims and hear the church organ thunder chords of disapproval.

Marlon Brando as Vito Corleone in *The Godfather*

AF archive / Alamy Stock Photo

We see similar ideas developing in *Apocalypse Now* starting with the opening montage and Willard's breakdown in a Saigon hotel room. This long sequence starts with an extreme long shot of beautiful jungle palms suddenly bursting into lurid flame from a napalm strike ('paradise' becomes 'hell'). We then see a composite shot with a BCU face of a serene Buddhist statue on one side of the frame, and on the other side of the frame, an upside down BCU of the film's main protagonist, Willard, a soldier haunted by the traumatising experience of the Vietnam war. Between both faces the war-torn jungle burns and helicopters swoop like vultures. The implication is clear: the West is troubled, aggressive, and lost; the East more grounded, passive, and spiritual. The use of music by counter-culture band The Doors is played non-diegetically throughout the sequence, the visuals often mirroring the lyrics – 'lost in a…wilderness of pain…' etc. The sequence also highlights Sheen's method approach: the final scene ends famously with a naked, drunk, and disturbed Sheen who, unscripted, hits and breaks a mirror and inadvertently cuts himself. Refusing on-set medical aid the camera keeps rolling as he smears blood over his face and dissolves into tears. In the brilliant 1991 making-of documentary *Apocalypse Now*: *The Heart of Darkness*, shot by Coppola's wife, Coppola can be heard encouraging Sheen to go even deeper into his own personal apocalypse to bring out Willard's deranged state. Willard is then a tragic anti-hero, like Michael Corleone, a man whose passive exterior hides a philosophically

Coppola explores narrative themes such as 'good and evil' and broad ideas of 'the family' with a focus on non-classical male anti-heroes and their troubled, questioning lives.

and emotionally charged interior world. Both Michael Corleone and Captain Willard are men defined by their violent milieu, the towering personalities of flawed patriarchs whom they idolise and their own troubled, moral decline.

Alongside depicting, through method actors, a more authentic performance style, Coppola also sought greater realism in his treatment of mise-en-scène and camerawork. *Apocalypse Now* was shot on location in the Philippines and infamously featured numerous catastrophic events that would have finished a project made by a less determined and obsessive filmmaker: for example, Sheen had a heart attack, and a vast jungle set was destroyed by a typhoon. The film went seriously over budget and Coppola, at great personal risk, had to use his own money to guarantee its completion. It is not surprising therefore that he referred to *Apocalypse Now* not as a film about the Vietnam war but as the war itself!

'I love the smell of napalm in the morning', Robert Duvall as Colonel Kilgore

'The bullshit piled up so fast in Vietnam, you needed wings to stay above it. '

Captain Willard, *Apocalypse Now*

Another sequence of interest features Colonel Kilgore, the leader of the Helicopter Squadron tasked to help Willard. Kilgore's squadron raids a peaceful VC village dominated by women and children and poorly armed peasant soldiers. Despite the Air Cavalry moniker, the bugler sending off the squadron and Kilgore's cowboy hat, the attack is not represented as a heroic act of war like in a John Ford Western from the 1940s. As the helicopter pilots and gunners destroy the ill-equipped peasant army, Kilgore awards kegs of beer to successful gun crews and calls the VC 'savages'. It is very clear who Coppola regards as 'savages'. The attack is accompanied diegetically by Wagner's, Ride of the Valkyries a stirring and bombastic piece of music which in this context satirises the visceral excitement conventional war movies offer the spectator. Like in *The Godfather* sequence discussed earlier, the use of music is initially diegetic, blasting out from industrial-sized speakers attached to the helicopters and then later, non-diegetically, ironically underscoring the violence. The playfulness of Kilgore's approach to war is then further highlighted as he sends soldiers into the sea to surf amidst the gunfight. Only a

comprehensively destructive napalm strike wipes out all opposition in a final act of 'overkill', causing Kilgore to infamously confess, 'I love the smell of napalm in the morning,' and then to morosely conclude that, 'One day this war is going to end.'

A final sequence worth looking at is at the end of the film when we revisit the song from the film's opening, The End by The Doors. Here again, Coppola uses parallel editing to cut from chiaroscuro shots of Kurtz's brutal death at the hands of Willard to shots of a bull being sacrificed by the tribesmen of Kurtz's army. Kurtz's death and his military disobedience is thus aligned, through montage, with the idea of sacrifice and Willard's dutiful 'following of orders' is shown to be compromised at the expense of his own spiritual wellbeing.

'Just when I thought I was out, the pull me back in.'

Michael Corleone, *Godfather III*

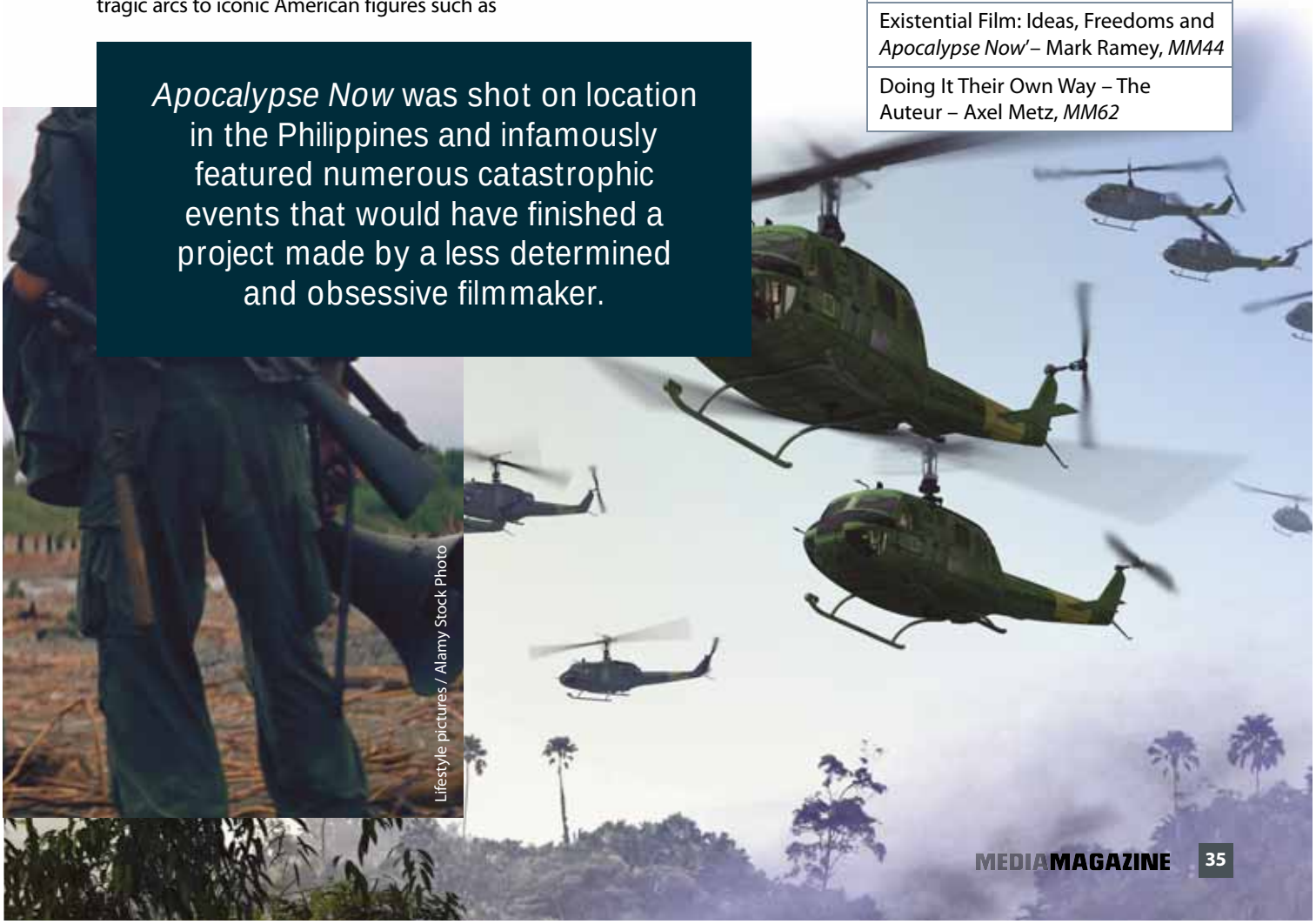
In Coppola's hands neither *The Godfather* nor *Apocalypse Now* can thus be read simply as genre films – they are rather explorations of the interiority of their main protagonists, giving tragic arcs to iconic American figures such as mob bosses and high-ranking soldiers. Coppola explores narrative themes such as 'good and evil' and broad ideas of 'the family' with a focus on non-classical male anti-heroes and their troubled, questioning lives. This focus mirrors important societal developments in contemporary USA life such as the rise of organised crime and the Vietnam War as well as philosophically satirising establishment conventions. On a technical level too, we can see Coppola's hand in finely realised mise-en-scène involving complex long takes, location-shooting and the use of method actors. Finally, the use of montage and parallel editing is further complemented by his rich use of music (diegetic and non-diegetic) to add meaning. If the artist Coppola, on this reading, isn't an auteur, then the notion of the auteur itself is redundant.

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

from the MM vaults

- Alex Garland – A New Auteur – Kirsty Worrow, *MM77*
- The Work of Auteur Stanley Kubrick – Owen Davey, *MM13*
- Existential Film: Ideas, Freedoms and *Apocalypse Now'* – Mark Ramey, *MM44*
- Doing It Their Own Way – The Auteur – Axel Metz, *MM62*

Apocalypse Now was shot on location in the Philippines and infamously featured numerous catastrophic events that would have finished a project made by a less determined and obsessive filmmaker.



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Flaming Creatures

Wikicommons

Sexual rights activist Magnus Hirschfeld and his partner Karl Giese

LGBTQIA+ Lives in Silent Film

Matthew Daintrey-Hall explores the remarkable representations of queer life in early 20th century Hollywood and Weimar Germany.

Since the 1990s, there has been an explosion of movies that explore gender and sexuality in a progressive way. Films with queer characters like *Boys Don't Cry* (Peirce, 1999), *Brokeback Mountain* (Lee, 2005) and *Moonlight* (Jenkins, 2016) have even won big at the Oscars. Before this, the movies weren't so progressive, particularly during the 'golden age' of Classical Hollywood (1930-60). In this period, the (Hays) Production Code outrightly forbade any depictions of LGBTQIA+ experiences, labelling them as 'sexual perversity'. Nonetheless, Hollywood films produced between 1930 and 1960 did manage to feature many queer stories, but the depictions had to be indirect and 'coded' – i.e. they're there if you know what you're looking for, but the subtleties would go unnoticed by the censor.

If we look back further, however, at films made in Hollywood before the Code – and at filmmakers outside the USA – we can encounter some remarkably frank and progressive portrayals of queerness. These movies, that some thought lost or destroyed, offer a valuable insight into LGBTQIA+ lives in the early 20th century.

Life is a cabaret! The Kit Kat club as depicted in the 1973 film *Cabaret*

United Archives GmbH / Alamy Stock Photo

The 1920s Berlin club scene – as immortalised in the film *Cabaret* – was a thriving LGBTQIA+ community.

The Early 20th Century: Changing Roles in Changing Times

The years 1900-1930 were extraordinarily turbulent. Huge social, economic and cultural changes were being felt around the world, and these had a considerable impact on gender and sexual norms.

In many countries, women were campaigning for suffrage (the right to vote), which directly challenged the entrenched patriarchy. Male identity was also becoming problematic. The growth of the middle classes meant the traditional male workplace, dominated by heavy labour, was shifting to the 'feminised' space of the office, where women could perform as effectively as men. The horrors of the First World War also questioned core masculine values such as strength, bravery and honour; those who survived returned home with (what might be later diagnosed as) severe PTSD.

***Anders als die Andern*, 1919**

YouTube

'Trouser roles' Ossi Oswalda in *Ich möchte kein Mann sein in 1918*

'Butch' women were usually 'saved' from their gender-bending and lesbian experimentation by marriage to a male character, restoring the heteronormative order by the story's end.

Numerous men on the frontline experienced sexual and romantic relationships with their fellow soldiers; many women had similar experiences in the absence of boyfriends and husbands – and some were unwilling to return to the way things had been before. Magazines and newspapers of the time fixated on 'masculinity in crisis', what made a 'real man' or 'real woman', or the threat posed by gender-bending 'flappers'. It's no surprise, then, that these issues were being explored in the newest and most popular art form: cinema.

'Sissy' men and 'Butch' women

One of the first representations of queerness in Hollywood history is the 'Sissy', as seen in *Algie The Miner* (Guy Blaché, 1912).

The Sissy was a stock character in early American silent comedy. He was an overly-effeminate, usually upper-middle class man, obsessed with his appearance and adopting a range of camp affectations: pouting lips, fluttering eyelashes, and other exaggerated 'female' behaviour. The Sissy was a figure of ridicule, poking fun at men who dared to challenge gender norms of the time. Never explicitly gay, most Sissy characters were sexless, and were usually 'rescued' from their queer lives by the love of a good woman.

Once at the Frontier, Algie encounters Big Jim, a typical rough'n'tough gold prospector. (Note the scene where the men compare guns!) Big Jim appears at first to be a gruff, violent alcoholic, but soon it becomes obvious he probably needs Algie more than Algie needs him. The two form a strong emotional bond; Algie learns how to use a bigger gun; and with his 'manliness' achieved, the two return to Algie's home to claim his fianceé's hand. As the couple embrace, Jim looks saddened to have lost his friend and partner.

'Gender swap' comedies like *Algie The Miner* were extremely popular in the 1920s, especially those featuring female stars like Gloria Swanson. Stories where women challenged gender norms were deemed more acceptable than those featuring men. The films were often inspired by the scandalous 'flappers' (1920s high society young women, who donned 'unladylike' fashions). Movies like *The Clinging Vine* (Slone, 1926) and *I Don't Want To Be A Man* (Lubitsch, 1918) featured women in what were termed 'trouser roles' – female protagonists who manage to 'pass' as men to experience the social freedoms women could not. In *The Danger Girl* (Badger 1916) and *A Florida Enchantment* (Drew, 1914), this includes flirting with and seducing other women! Like the Sissy, these 'Butch' women were usually 'saved' from their gender-bending and lesbian experimentation by marriage to a male character, restoring the heteronormative order by the story's end.

Weimar Germany: a Place for Queerness

Though homosexuality was still illegal in Germany, the Weimar Republic (1918-33) was famed for its sexual permissiveness. In contrast to the conservative USA, Germany post-WW1 was a place where queerness was not only tolerated, but even celebrated. The 1920s Berlin club scene – as immortalised in the film *Cabaret* – was a thriving LGBTQIA+ community. According to one 1927 guide for adventurous visitors, there were over 400 gay and transvestite clubs in the city. Academic society, too, was developing a more enlightened approach to sexuality. The work of Sigmund Freud sought to explore the psychological context for desire and liberate people from sexual repression.

A leading German doctor, Magnus Hirschfield was perhaps the first gay activist. He proposed the then radical idea that homosexuals were a 'third sex', and that this was as 'natural' as heterosexuality, rather than a 'disease' that needed to be cured.

The First Gay Rights Film?

In 1919, Hirschfield co-wrote and appeared in *Anders als die Andern* (Different From The Others), perhaps the first film to openly advocate gay rights. It's a tale of a loving, explicitly gay couple, one of whom becomes the victim of a homophobic blackmail plot. Even though queerness was tolerated in Berlin, homosexuality was still a crime, so this was a serious threat.

In flashback, we see the young protagonist struggling to fit in with the ribald womanising of his male peers. Anxiously, he seeks a 'cure' with a hypnotist. When this fails, he visits a sexologist (played by Hirschfield) who gives an impassioned speech about the diverse nature of human sexualities. He also condemns the 'hell' society and the law make for queer lives. Unfortunately, the film angered the growing right wing, and when the Nazis came to power in the 1933, much of Hirschfield's work (and all complete prints of the film) were burnt.

Around the same time in America, under pressure from the Catholic League of Decency, the restrictive Production Code was adopted by Hollywood studios. This set of rules was intended to 'clean up' Hollywood. Over the following thirty years, any kind of sexuality – but especially portrayals of queerness – was heavily censored. The relative freedoms of the century's first cinematic decades were over.

Matthew Daintrey-Hall is a Film Studies writer and lecturer. He works closely with BFI and Eduqas/WJEC producing resources for GCSE and A level students.

Film links for viewing:

Algie The Miner (Guy Blaché, 1912)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCYYa0WxLXA&t=25s

Different From The Others (Oswald, 1919)
Clip 1 'Love and blackmail'
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-U_SJf1gf34
Clip 2 'A visit to the sexologist' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mmoSJonRlVs&t=3s

Ich möchte kein Mann sein (Ernst Lubitsch, 1918)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7jp4Xg4T-OU

Download a free discussion guide with questions to guide your viewing of these films at https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/media-magazine/

from the MM vaults

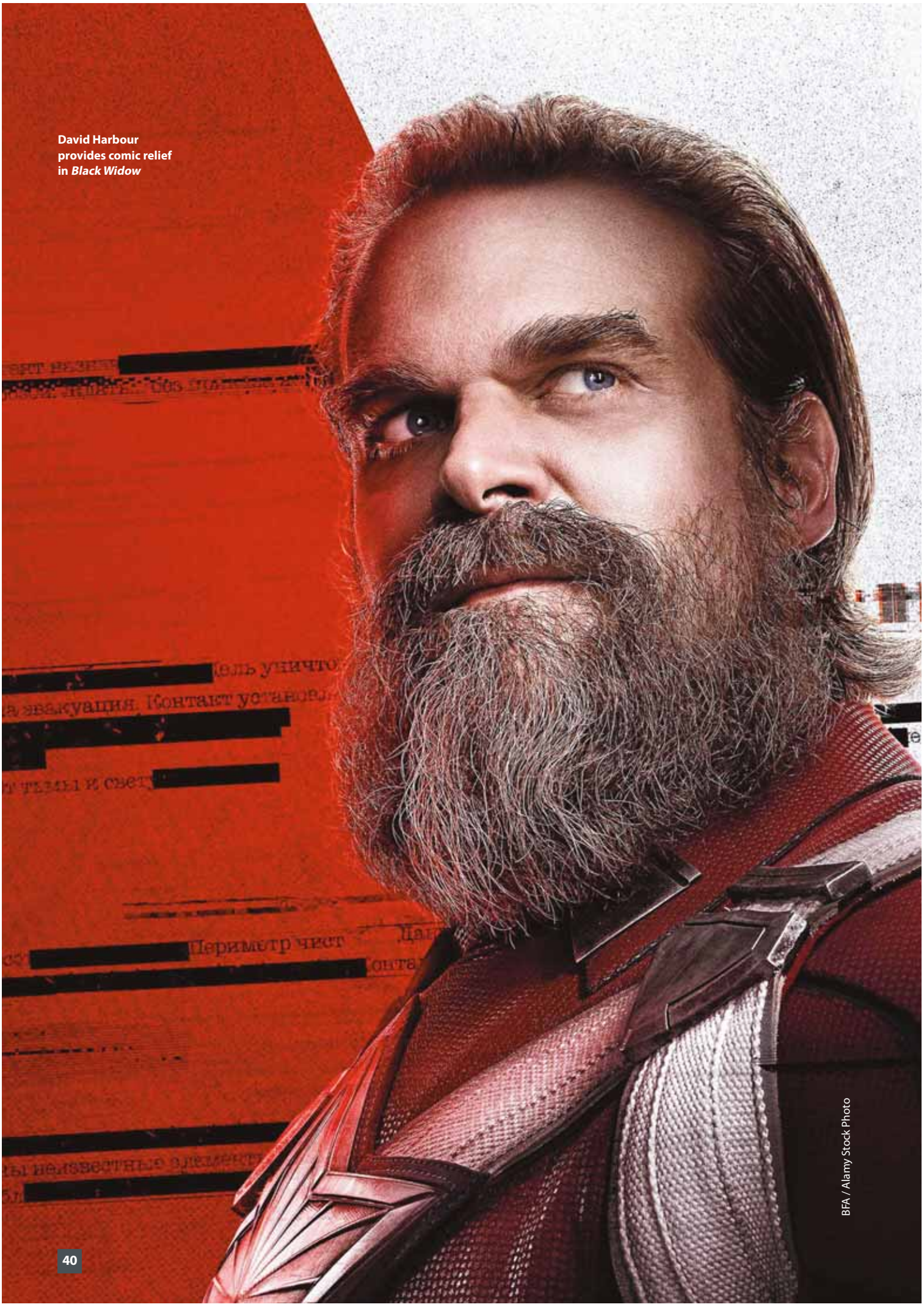
Re-visiting *Brokeback Mountain* – Chris Bruce, *MM16*

An analysis of the 2014 British film, *Pride* – Charlotte Harrison, *MM74*

#Oscars So Straight – Amy Pollard, *MM64*

Straight Eye for the Queer Role– Megan Ingles, *MM72*

Magazines and newspapers of the time fixated on 'masculinity in crisis', what made a 'real man' or 'real woman', or the threat posed by gender-bending 'flappers'.



David Harbour provides comic relief in *Black Widow*

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'THERE'S NOTHING FOR ME TO DO'

BLACK WIDOW'S MEN

Taking the solo lead for the first time, Scarlett Johansson's *Black Widow* shows the superhero genre in fine and playful form. Vicki Carter takes a look at a female superhero who's high-kicking against stereotypes.

> It is the reluctance to let go of his superhero title that presents Alexei as a comedic figure, specifically as he constantly subverts the expectations of the patriarch he is trying to portray.

Throughout the study of both film, popular culture and literature, superhero narratives have been constantly criticised for the regurgitation of patriarchal ideologies that portray a hegemonic, idealised, unattainable form of masculinity. Usually written and created by men, these narratives have stereotypically appealed to a male audience, presenting the muscular, heroic, 'superman' as a kind of masculine ideal. However, in recent years, it has become apparent that audiences of all genders are interested in the genre. With the rise of female-dominated superhero films such as DC's *Birds of Prey* (2020) and *Wonder Woman* (2017), as well as Marvel's own *Captain Marvel* (2019), it is unsurprising that the most recent, *Black Widow* (2021) starring Scarlett Johansson, has been a hit, grossing over $200 million dollars on its opening weekend. Hailed for its positive (and timely) depiction of 'girl power' and sisterhood, praise for the latest Marvel stand-alone has focused on its impact as an empowering feminist film.

Girl (Super) Power

Described as 'reflective of the era of the Time's Up and #MeToo movements' by Johansson herself, *Black Widow* certainly aligns itself with fourth-wave feminist values, whilst still providing that classic Marvel drama that's suitable for all. Since its July 2021 release, the film has gained attention for its feminist outlook as the narrative moves beyond portraying Natasha (Scarlett

Johansson) as the sexy sidekick of previous films such as *Iron Man 2* (2010) and *The Avengers* (2012), a credit due partially to director Cate Shortland, the MCU's (Marvel Cinematic Universe) first solo female director. Acting as a swansong to the much-loved Avenger, the narrative is dedicated to the relationship between Natasha and younger sister Yelena (Florence Pugh) as she passes the baton (and alias) over to the next generation, ready for the next 'phase' of the MCU. It also looks back, winking a knowing eye at previous incarnations of Black Widow in the MCU, with Yelena poking fun at Natasha's 'posing' on several occasions, mimicking her stance for comic effect.

While the narrative focus of *Black Widow* is certainly upon the women and their personal fight for freedom, the film presents the audience with typical, archetypal masculine heroes who, just a few years ago, would have probably saved the day single-handedly while the women watched from the sidelines. There is a conscious effort to challenge audience expectations, especially when it comes to subverting gender norms as the male characters become reliant on the Widows. These are the powerful but mind-controlled army of waifs and strays collected from around the world in the Red Room by the film's villain General Dreykov and transformed into a formidable private army. As Dreykov (Ray Winstone) puts it, the Widows have been assembled 'using the only natural resource the world has too much of: girls'.

Natasha's surrogate mother, Melina (Rachel Weisz), is depicted as cold and distant - the opposite of typical notions of maternal care - and she does not hesitate to turn on her 'children', while it is her husband Alexei (David Harbour) who takes on the nurturing role. Despite being a Russian super soldier who fancies himself as a Soviet counterpart to Captain America, he is extremely sensitive when it comes to his 'girls', a vulnerability which is frequently portrayed for laughs.

Adding to the overarching theme of family relationships explored in the film, Natasha's relationship with Rick Mason (O-T Fagbenle) who acts as her contact to the 'real-world' provides another angle. Despite their conversations

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bordering on flirtatious, there is no hint that their relationship is anything other than platonic, making *Black Widow* one of the only MCU movies in which Natasha does not have a love interest. In fact, this is the first movie in which she has been partnered with anyone other than a man. Mason is mocked by Yelena and Natasha for being too sensitive when standing up for himself against their complaints over the equipment he provides for them. Traditionally, media narratives would never dare question a man's skillset, and the throw-away line is meant in jest to the man who is unashamed to show his feelings. It is in this portrayal of honest and open male characters that the traditional values of hegemony are loosened, yet the narrative mocks the men for acting this way, as they appear to be used solely for comic relief.

Fighting pose: Scarlett Johansson as Natasha Romanoff aka Black Widow

TCD/Prod.DB / Alamy Stock Photo

Father Figure or Figure of Fun?

Despite being a character from the comic books, Alexei's alter-ego as The Red Guardian and his backstory are largely ignored, with Natasha even commenting on the fact that this fight is not about him – just as the film is not. Within what might be called the the 'wainscot narrative' (i.e. the storyline related to the hidden world of the superheroes), we only hear about his superhero 'glory days' through his own telling, as, much like in the real-world, (unless you've read the comics), no one seems to have heard of The Red Guardian. Acting as a not-so-subtle analogy for the crisis of masculinity, Alexei, who views himself to be on the same level as Captain America (a typical representation of hegemonic masculinity), is forced to step aside to allow the women to take his place.

In the 21 years since his prison sentence, the real-world feminist movement has created a space to uplift and empower women, campaigning for equality among the sexes, meaning this outdated version of masculinity is no longer needed in today's society. It is the reluctance to let go of his superhero title that presents Alexei as a comedic figure, specifically as he constantly subverts the expectations of the patriarch he is trying to portray. Now free, he has lost the power he held, becoming a has-been hero, who has lost all purpose, becoming the forgotten hero who has 'got fat' whilst no longer in action. In a comedic moment, he struggles to fit into his Red Guardian suit; the once muscular body of a powerful hero now becomes a joke, his cartoonish costume becoming little more than dress-up. Despite him wearing the costume for the rest of the film, Alexei provides few real heroics, as the majority of fighting is performed by the Widows, who do not need protection from the male. In the end, it is Natasha, Yelena, and Melina who work together to defeat Dreykov and the Red Room, bringing an end to the patriarchal masculinity he represents.

BFA / Alamy Stock Photo

Who Save the World? (Girls)

It is through the acknowledgement of equal status between men and women that narratives such as Black Widow exist, as female superheroes are finally being given the same spotlight as their male counterparts. With the likes of *WandaVision* (2021), and the proposed 2022 releases of *Ms. Marvel* and *She-Hulk*, it is obvious that this new 'phase' of the MCU is making an effort to utilise its plethora of women characters beyond presenting them as purely romantic or sexual objects.

However, there is still a long way to go in order to complete the transition towards independent female superheroes, as although Natasha may have her own agency, almost every action is fuelled by at least one of the men. In fact, her entire presence within the MCU has been dependent upon male validation and subjectivity; she would not be the skilled hero she is if it were not for Dreykov, and would not be an Avenger if it were not for Hawkeye – without these men, would anyone know Natasha Romanoff?

Viki Carter is a freelance media professional and educator

from the MM vaults

- 'Will She 'Ms.' the Mark?' – Shaheena Uddin, *MM78*
- 'Only Human But All Woman – The Representation of Gender in *Captain Marvel*' – Caroline Reid, *MM69*
- 'Boys Keep Swinging' - Giles Gough, *MM76*
- 'The *Marvel* Intertextual Universe' – Pete Turner, *MM54*

The film has gained attention for its feminist outlook as the narrative moves beyond portraying Natasha as the sexy sidekick of previous films, a credit due partially to director Cate Shortland, the MCU's first solo female director.

Sisters are doing it for themselves

BFA / Alamy Stock Photo

The Future of AI Authors

Can a robot ever be an author? In 2021 'creative technologist' Ross Goodwin invented an AI that could write novels. Shaheena Uddin questions whether a computer could ever write a great work of art.

Goodwin also has no idea what his machine will create: the words produced are decided by the AI using a mind of their own.

Ross Goodwin and the manuscript for *1 the Road* emerging line by line

@RossGoodwin on Twitter

Any student of English or Media will know that all narrative texts, whether written as books or made for the screen, are meticulously constructed by skilled artists or creatives. We carefully analyse all the curated images, symbols, and metaphors, which have been tenderly woven together by human hands. We can't resist, then, analysing and considering the writer's intentions behind a piece, which is why we often study the contextual and biographical details of the author's life to see how they might consciously or subconsciously shape the story.

A lot of the appeal behind reading and studying narratives is that it helps us to immerse ourselves in the emotions and psychological states of other people. Through them, we seek to learn profound and meaningful things about the world around us and life itself. Novels, poetry, films and art all contain the power to teach us more about ourselves and try to capture the essence of what it means to be human.

Public domain.

But what happens when the pen is in the hands of a robot? More specifically, an Artificial Intelligence that is programmed with some of the greatest works of literature of all time? What if a robot is trained to think and write like an author? Who do we assign the ownership to then? The programmer? The collected data of novels? Or the robot itself? So here's the crucial question – *can a robot ever be considered an author*?

The idea seems disturbing. How can a clinical machine, no matter how much data it carries, ever be capable of reproducing the nuances of human thought and creativity? Yet, in today's fast-paced changing world, technology has progressed to a point where this *Black Mirror*-esque, possibility has become a reality.

The blurb for the book reads

> ***1 The Road*** **is a book written using a car as a pen. Ross Goodwin is not a poet. As a prominent Artificial Intelligence creator, he outfitted a Cadillac car with a surveillance camera, a GPS unit, a microphone and a clock, all connected to a portable AI writing-machine that fed from these input data in real time. Together, they travelled from New York to New Orleans, in an experimental automation of the American literary road trip. As they drove, a manuscript emerged line by line from the machine's printer on long scrolls of receipt paper that filled the car's rear seats over the course of their journey.**

In this case the creator of this mad, but insanely cool, invention, Ross Goodwin completely separates himself from his creation. He is 'not a poet', but somehow the Artificial Intelligence is. The blurb also interestingly refers to the robot using the pronoun 'they' rather than 'it', implying some human-like quality. Goodwin also has no idea what his machine will create: the words produced are decided by the AI using a mind of their own. The novelty of an AI novel has sparked a lot of intrigue and appeal from readers. But what does it mean for the future of how we define or view authorship?

The Ultimate Death of the Author?

Although books are written with a deliberate intention to make the reader think and feel, we as readers also have agency over how we

understand or interpret the texts we read. And that's part of what makes literature so great! The meaning of a poem or a story comes out of that interaction between the reader and the text itself. We bring our own experiences and personalities to our interpretation, arguably imprinting parts of ourselves onto the work. Roland Barthes argues this in his famous essay titled 'Death of the Author', contesting that the work of an author belongs to the reader, whose reading of the text is more important than the author's original intentions (hence the author is essentially 'dead').

In the era of cancel culture, this sentiment has provided relief and comfort to many who may love the music, books or films of a problematic creator. It allows them to still enjoy the art itself and the fandoms born out of the original artwork, despite no longer supporting the author/artists' beliefs.

Another more modern and well-known author, John Green who wrote *The Fault in Our Stars*, made a similar comment in his YouTube video Open Letter to Authorial Intent which puts these ideas in simpler terms:

Dear Authorial Intent,

As an author, let me speak to you directly. You don't matter! Look I'm not willing to go as far as the postmodernist and say that the author is dead, because that would make me very nervous. However, the author is not that important. Whether an author intended a symbolic resonance to exist in her/his book is irrelevant. All that matters is whether it's there, because the book does not exist for the benefit of the author. The book exists for the benefit of you (the reader). If we as readers can have a bigger and richer experience with the world as a result of reading a symbol, and that symbol wasn't intended by the author, WE STILL WIN! Yes, inevitably, reading is a conversation between an author and reader, but give yourself some power in that conversation reader! GO OUT THERE AND MAKE A WORLD!

Best wishes, John Green

Although I agree with Green's statement, it's also important to resist searching for meaning

A camera was used to gather data from the road trip

An intriguing book like *1 The Road* complicates our traditional views of how to read literature. After all, how can we as readers find meaning in a book that has no intended meaning?

in literary texts where none was intended. To use a well-known example (which we often poke fun at), suppose a text states that 'the curtains are blue'. Your English teacher, or someone prone to over-interpretation, may be inclined to read into that, suggesting that it symbolises the depths of despair and misery, when in reality, the author may have just really liked the colour blue.

An intriguing book like *1 The Road* complicates our traditional views of how to read literature. After all, how can we as readers find meaning in a book that has no intended meaning?

Robot Gibberish or Refined Art?

Upon closer inspection of the experimental book *1 The Road*, one is confronted with the inadequacies of machine technology at this stage in time. While the AI managed to construct a somewhat poetic opening line:

> **It was nine seventeen in the morning, and the house was heavy' [Timestamp 09:17:34]**

at times it drifts into less comprehensible nonsense:

> **The time was ten forty-seven in the morning, and the picnic showed a past that already had hair from the side of the track somewhere in the middle of the room. [Timestamp 10:47:25]**

The AI's expressions centre formulaically on times of the day and location. Yet this sentence doesn't make coherent sense, because the nouns 'hair', 'past' and 'picnic' don't really fit together. It is also impossible for the setting to be simultaneously on the 'side of the track' and in the 'middle of the room'.

These logical inconsistencies seem to suggest that even today, machines cannot fully replicate the human artistry required for literature and instead produce nonsensical sentences. Ross Goodwin himself acknowledges the pitfalls in his creation, stating: 'It's not quite human level, more like an insect brain that's learned to write.' This apt analogy captures both the frailty of this technology and yet the sentiment that it is still somehow 'alive'.

Significantly, AI still requires human programming, hence Goodwin's title 'Writer of Writer'. It also relies on 200 existing data entries of human literature to form its algorithm. Equally, once the work these machines produce

'What's your writing process?' the AI at work

is generated, they require human eyes to search for meaning within the nonsense.

Ultimately, Artificial Intelligence may be programmed to think, but as of yet, they have not been programmed to truly feel. I personally think it will be a long time before robots are ever able to fully replace human creativity and more importantly emotion. Although what this AI work does serve to highlight is the anxieties around humans being replaced and how far technology could potentially progress in the future.

But who knows what the future could possibly hold? Could technology ever reach a point where a robot's literature has an uncanny resemblance to human literature? Is there room for AI authors and art in the world? And more importantly would you want to read it?

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from the MM vaults

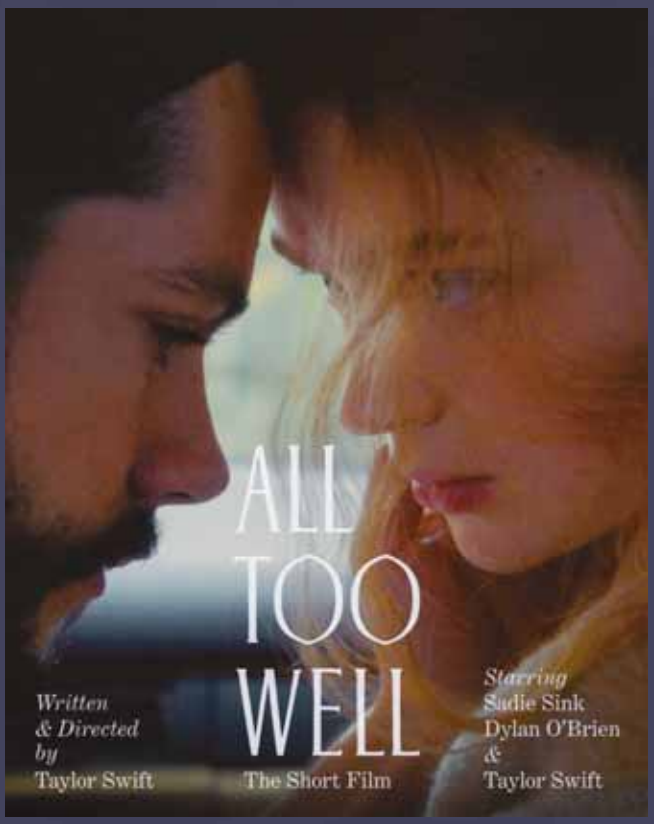
Grindelwald: Can We Separate Art from the Artist? – Fleur Feeney, *MM66*

ALL TOO WELL

AN ARTIST LOST AND FOUND

Taylor Swift's re-release of her album *Red* was accompanied by a short film, *All Too Well*, written and directed by the artist herself. Matt Taylor explores what this demonstrates about Swift's ability to control her own narrative.

'Taylor's Version' of *Red* sold in record breaking numbers

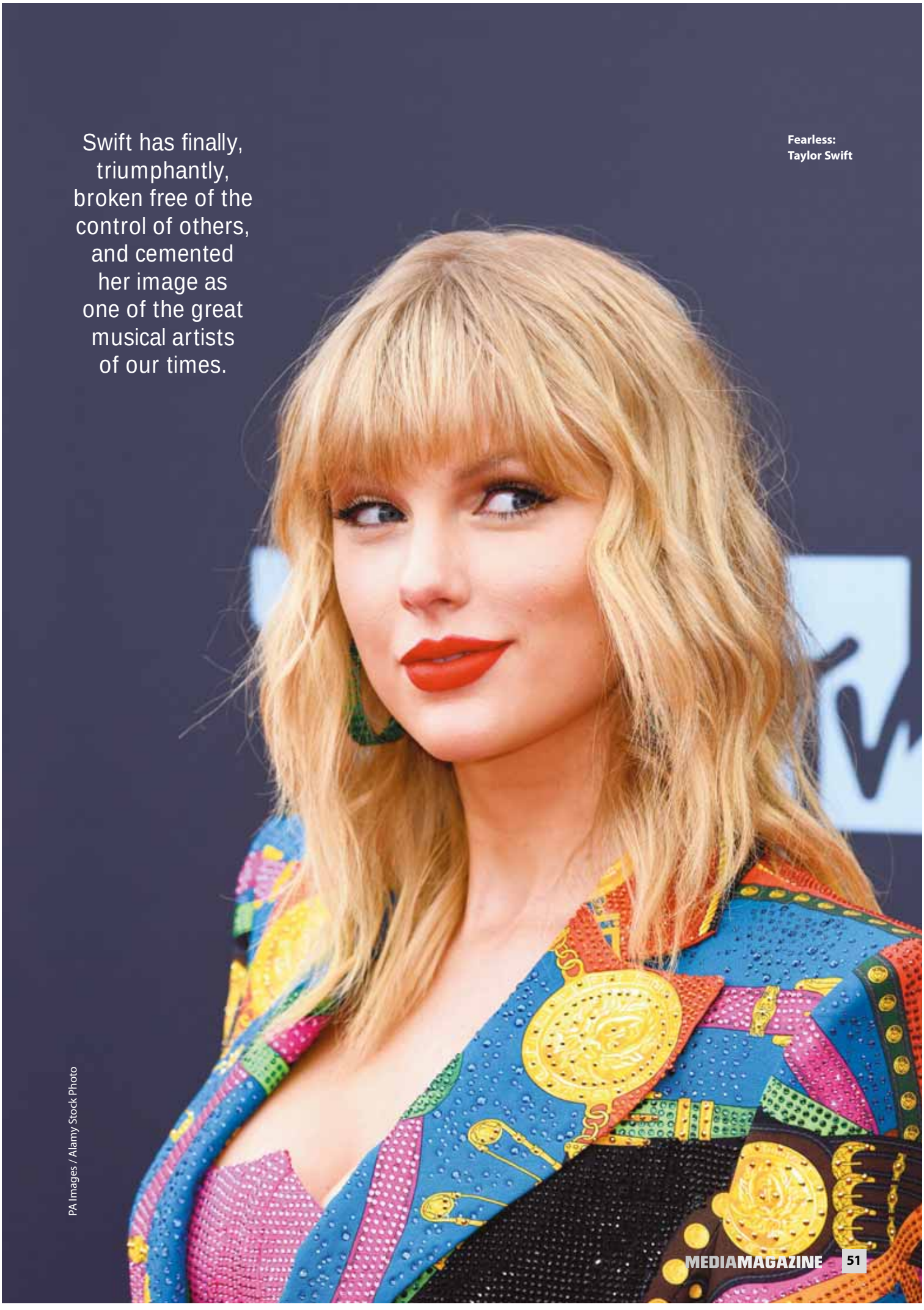


In the music industry, an artist's image is everything. Image helps dictate anything from public perception to record sales, and for many male artists is easy to control. But for women in the industry, this is usually something of an uphill struggle – and it's one that Taylor Swift has been fighting since her rise to fame with 2008's *Fearless*. Now, thirteen years on, and with the re-release of her multi-award-winning album *Red* and its accompanying short film *All Too Well*, Swift has finally, triumphantly, broken free of the control of others, and cemented her image as one of the great musical artists of our times.

For a little background on why this taking back control is necessary for Swift, we must look back at Big Machine, the singer's former record label. In 2005, aged just 15, Swift signed a record deal with the label which gave it ownership of the masters to her first six studio albums. Swift's deal with Big Machine ended in 2018 and she signed with Republic Records, but the masters remained with her former label, which was subsequently purchased by American businessman Scooter Braun for a reported $300m – with his purchase of the label, Braun became the owner of Swift's masters, which he sold to Disney's Shamrock Holdings (a private investment firm run by the Disney family) in late 2020 on the condition that he would continue to financially profit from them.

Swift quickly announced her intentions to re-record her Big Machine albums, which would give her complete ownership of the records and nullify Braun's involvement. So far two re-recordings have been released, to both huge critical and commercial success – *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* and *Red (Taylor's Version)*. The latter album is Swift's most successful in her entire discography to date, and is a mark of her continued resurgence against those who would dictate her career.

Swift has finally, triumphantly, broken free of the control of others, and cemented her image as one of the great musical artists of our times.



Fearless: Taylor Swift

PA Images / Alamy Stock Photo

Art is not only a way of dealing with their grief, but of choosing to tell their own stories themselves, rather than waiting for other people to tell them first. This is important for both artists, because narrative dictates public image, and public image dictates all.

PA Images / Alamy Stock Photo

@taylorswift13 on Twitter

Wind In My Hair…

All Too Well: The Short Film was released in tandem with *Red (Taylor's Version)* in November 2021. Directed by Swift herself, shot on 35mm, and starring Sadie Sink (*Stranger Things*) and Dylan O'Brien (*The Maze Runner*) as its protagonists, the film makes visual the ten-minute version of '*All Too Well*,' a song that aches from heartbreak and longing. In choosing to make the song into a short film, rather than just a music video, Swift has consciously chosen to push her professional creative boundaries for the sake of her art and her storytelling – and that's something we can only admire her for.

Swift has largely led a very public romantic life, and that has historically been the source of much of the criticism levelled at her: that she 'goes on too many dates', and 'can't make 'em stay'. The song, 'All Too Well' is allegedly about Swift's relationship with actor Jake Gyllenhaal, with Sink playing the role of Swift and O'Brien the role of Gyllenhaal (the age gap of eleven years between the two performers is close to the real-life age gap between Swift and Gyllenhaal). The film charts the downfall of the relationship between 'Her' and 'Him,' as the characters are dubbed in the credits, due to a variety of factors that all seem to point the blame at Him.

Much of the film is dialogue-free, as Swift chooses to rely on her song to tell the story and her actors merely to sell it. The film contains only one scene of actual dialogue, acted beautifully by Sink and O'Brien, which comes in the film's second section, entitled 'The First Crack in the Glass.' The exchange is an argument between Her and Him, and in it we see what little regard he has for her emotions. A weak apology is issued and the two hug, but we see that the damage is done: the look in Her eyes tells the audience she isn't going to forget this – and she doesn't.

Things get worse for the couple and they eventually break up – though we only see the aftermath, not the breakup itself. Thirteen years pass and we meet Her again, this time played by Swift. She's become an author, and her debut novel is titled (you guessed it) *All Too Well*. At a signing of the book she reads an excerpt, and the film ends with a shot of Him looking through the shop window, still wearing that scarf left by Her all those years ago.

By the end of the film, Her is a deliberate mirror of Swift herself: not only is the song 'All Too Well' autobiographical, but in the world of the film Her takes control of the narrative herself – the same way that Swift does by writing the song and making the film. For both Swift and Her, art comes out of grief, and that art is not only a way of dealing with their grief, but of choosing to tell their own stories themselves, rather than waiting for other people to tell them first. This is important for both artists, because narrative dictates public image, and public image dictates all. For both women to take control of that is a powerful and understandable move – but it isn't the first time Swift has had to do it.

Down The Stairs…

Since the original release of *Red* all the way back in 2012, Swift has been forced to control virtually every aspect of her public image. Many aspects of her follow-up album *1989* (2014) were a direct response to criticisms about her private life: the entirety of 'Shake It Off' is dedicated to telling Swift's haters how little she cares for their opinions, while the video for 'Bad Blood' is yet another showcase of her filmmaking talents.

The video sees Swift create a pseudo-dystopian London and pack it with female singers and models, each playing members of various factions, with Swift and fellow singer Selena Gomez taking on the lead roles as the heads of the two groups. The video's narrative charts a feud between Swift and Gomez's characters, alleged to be based on Swift's fallout with Katy Perry. As with *All Too Well: The Short Film*, we see Swift using not only her music, but her visual output too, to tell her stories herself.

Though the settings and messages of the two are completely different ('Bad Blood' being something of a fantastical action flick, while *All Too Well* is much more of a heartbreaker), their ultimate purpose is the same: to allow Swift to tell the story in her own words, and through that maintain control of her image.

This idea of image control remained at the fore with Swift's next album, *Reputation* in 2017. Here, she divorces herself from her former personas entirely with both her musical styles and her look: around this time, she donned darker clothing and black eye shadow, which, paired with Swift's black or red lipstick, gave an impression of maturity she hadn't previously adopted. The album's lead single, 'Look What You Made Me Do,' furthered this idea with the lyric, 'I'm sorry, but the old Taylor can't come to the phone right now. Why? Cos she's dead.'

This was clearly all theatrics and experimentation by Swift, as *Lover* (2019) saw her return to the pop style of *1989*, complete with love ballads and pinks galore. Nevertheless, the core idea remains: Swift is using her music to control her image. But this is nothing new. She's been doing it for her entire career; what's different now is her motivation.

> Whereas Swift's former changes in image [...] came from a place of artistic experimentation, the re-recording of her old albums comes from a place of necessity and artistic control.

@taylorswift13 on Twitter

It Was Rare…

Whereas Swift's former changes in image (which included forays into cottagecore aesthetics with *Folklore* and *Evermore*, both 2020) came from a place of artistic experimentation, the re-recording of her old albums comes from a place of necessity and artistic control. But it also raises questions about the amount of power and control people like Scooter Braun have in the music industry: why should they be allowed to profit from someone else's hard work?

Swift's answer to that question is very clear: they shouldn't be. That's why she's gone to such lengths to take back her masters: to remove control from the hands of the wealthy and powerful, and place it back in the hands of those who deserve it – and it just so happens that, in the process, she's proven herself to be not only an artist for the ages, but an incredibly prolific filmmaker to boot. All she needed was an opportunity to finally do things for herself.

Matt Taylor is a freelance journalist who specialises in film, television and music.

from the MM vaults

Deconstructing Taylor – Lydia McDougall, *MM51*

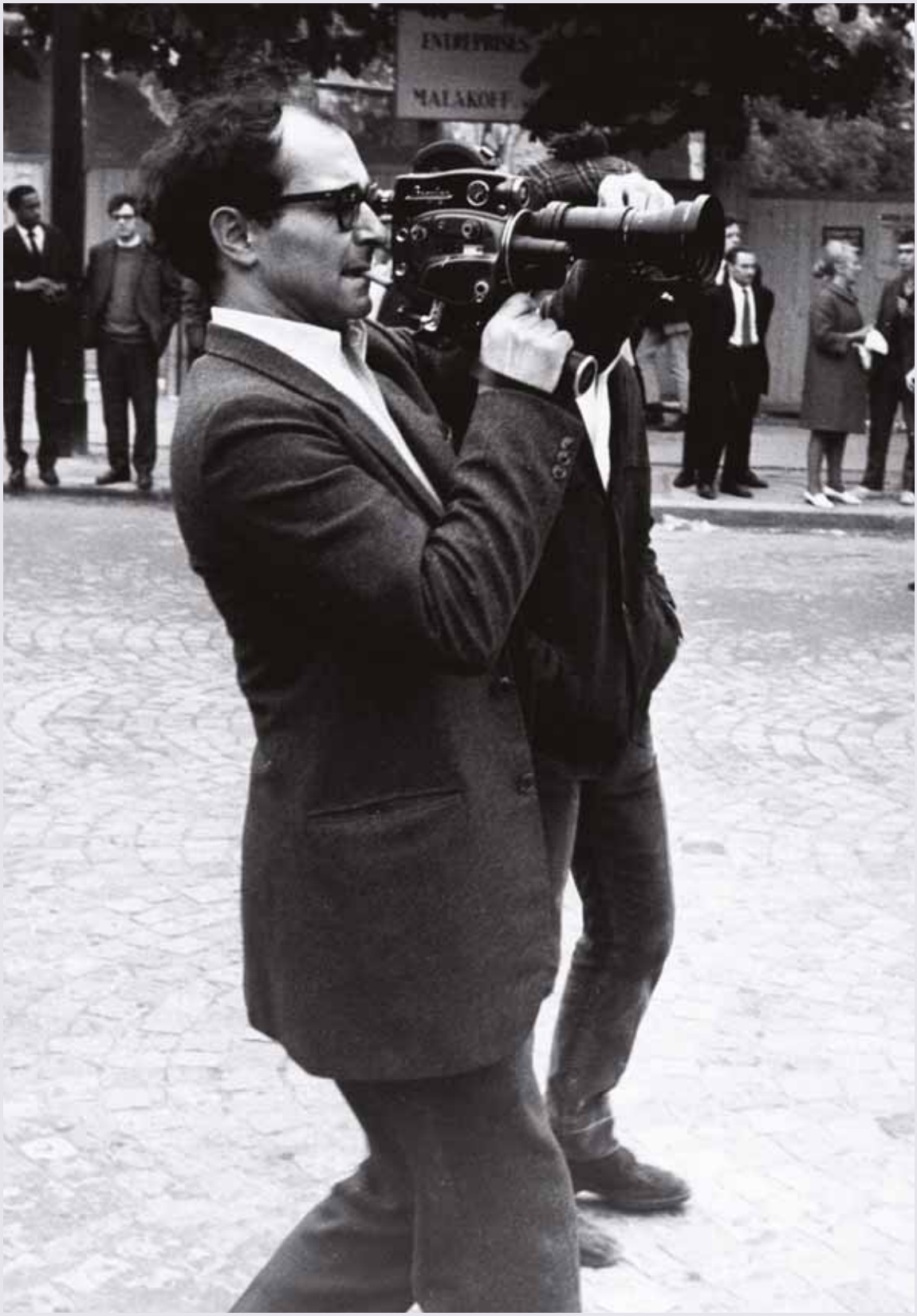
Spot(ify) the Difference: Swift, Bragg and the Maths of Making Money in the Music Industry – Christopher Budd, *MM53*

A LIFE IN 12 CHAPTERS

Jean-Luc Godard is widely hailed as revolutionising cinema in the 1960s but what is it about his classic *Vivre Sa Vie* that makes it so ground-breaking and unconventional? Sophie Muir explores the techniques involved and the philosophy behind them.

La Nouvelle Fag

Collection Christophel / Alamy Stock Photo



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Godard: through the lens of an auteur

Vivre Sa Vie is a 1962 film written and directed by Jean-Luc Godard, a filmmaker who made his name known during the La Nouvelle Vague (the French new wave) of the sixties. He debuted his first feature length film *À Bout De Souffle* in 1960 and followed it up with *Une Femme est une Femme* in 1961. Then *Vivre Sa Vie* came along.

The 'French new wave' is a term coined by the cinephiles and critics of the influential Cahiers du Cinéma magazine that rose to prominence in the 1950s and 60s. The writers of the film journal, such as François Truffaut, Jacques Rivette, Claude Chabrol and Godard himself, felt a disdain toward the cinema they were then faced with. It was in January 1954 when Truffaut's article denounced many critically popular movies of the time, claiming they were mundane and unimaginative – even immoral – adaptations of literary works. The writers of the magazine, sometimes referred to as the 'Young Turks', established the theory of the auteur (see definition on p.31-32 of this issue) which led to a shift in the way movies were to be constructed and received. The critics went on to make movies which would be considered non-conventional; they replaced some cuts with camera movements, synchronous with asynchronous sound, and popularised the modern use of the jump cut.

Godard aimed to alienate his audience from their prior notion of what a film is and what it is to experience watching one.

Breaking Boundaries and Challenging Conventions

Much like many of the films which emerged and paved the way of the French new wave, *Vivre Sa Vie* is experimental by nature: Godard thoroughly exploring the pre-established boundaries and confines of cinema through Coutard's cinematography. In the first scene of the movie after the opening titles, the camera remains wholly behind the protagonist, Nana. Whilst her and a man named Paul smoke cigarettes and drink coffee at a bar, the lens hesitates behind these two, only revealing an out of focus glimpse of the characters in a mirror in front of them both. Godard is immediately establishing the relationship between the audience and the subject by oddly positioning the protagonist in a way that jolts the audience and it is a reminder that what they are consuming is a constructed piece of media; it reinforces the screen dividing the spectator and subject and thus forces perception of the narrative from a distance, in opposition to a more traditional, conventional, and therefore more visceral, interpretation.

Similarly, this idea is further established at the beginning of chapter 6 when the camera follows Nana down the street from behind. At the beginning of the scene there is a moment in which Anna Karina (Nana) is seen to be waiting to act. By allowing the viewer to witness this moment which occurs outside of Nana's experience as a character, Godard is bending the fourth wall, fusing together Karina's reality with Nana's, and exploring how cinema conveys truth and what can be considered truth. Godard famously said 'film is truth 24 times a second and every cut is a lie'.

As the scene progresses, Nana bumps into a friend, Yvette whose face is not revealed until about 30 seconds into the conversation. By capturing the friend – evident initially only through the use of asynchronous sound – out of the frame, the spectator is reminded that Nana is the subject and the focus of the story. It is as though the film takes on an observational, docustyle, mode as it refuses to interrupt the interaction and simply observes what is important, namely Nana. This cinematography, along with the editing style and sound design of the movie, employs the audience to take on a critical perspective as the language of the movie does not allow them to become lost in the film world unlike other mainstream movies of the time.

Alienation, Distance and Estrangement

Godard aimed to alienate his audience from their prior notion of what a film is and what it is to experience watching one. Bertolt Brecht, a theatre practitioner, had a similar ideology which was also rooted in a dislike toward the conventional, bourgeois theatre of his time. Brecht developed his theory of 'Verfremdungseffekt', also known as the alienation effect, in order to provoke the audience to feel estranged from the characters in ways which they had not before. Brecht would break the fourth wall or use techniques such as 'the social gestus', that would draw attention to the staged and socially constructed nature of the art form itself.

It is evident that Godard was striving towards a similar goal. Not only is the storyline told in

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It's my life! Anna Karina as Nana Kleinfrankenheim in *Vivre sa Vie*, 1962

Godard is immediately establishing the relationship between the audience and the subject by oddly positioning the protagonist in a way that jolts the audience and it is a reminder that what they are consuming is a constructed piece of media.

Gary Stevens / wikicommons

chapters as if it were a play or novella, which creates a less immersive or realist experience and thus a more active spectator, but it also is self-reflexive in its relation to other movies. The one moment in the movie where we are able to peek into Nana's feelings a little more than before is in the cinema. Watching Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan* of Arc, Nana cries in pity at Falconetti's portrayal of the martyr but also in self-pity. It is a moment of self-reflection for Nana but also for the director. Godard iconised the cinémathèque française lifestyle and an entire generation's discovery of film as an art form. He imbues his work with the quintessentially Godardian idea that movies are always about their own 'movieness', making them not an escapist alternative to our lives, but a part of them. It was rare that an audience would be so specifically asked to empathise with the act of movie-going, but it was also the perfect time to ask.

Self-reflexivity is not the only philosophically concerned aspect of the movie. A characteristic of many of the French new wave films was to be philosophically involved somehow. In *Vivre Sa Vie* Nana meets a philosopher in a cafe, Brice Parain, who mentored Godard himself. This scene is overtly philosophical and further self-reflexive as the pair discuss language and silence, an area of enquiry that the movie deals with itself. The conversation not only reflects the non-conventional tone of the movie by highlighting and exploring ideas only popular to a certain niche, but is also experimental in introducing characters from the real world into the film world in which Nana lives. The subject of enquiry between Nana and Parain is a theme explored throughout the film. For example, the first two scenes in the movie end with quotes accompanied by camera movements to shift focus away from characters and onto the dialogue as if to ponder the relationship between the two.

Ultimately, *Vivre Sa Vie* is a non-conventional movie that continues to defy even the expectations of today's cinema. The movie is a political one. Godard opens the audience's eyes to the discourse surrounding movie-going and the movies themselves. Through Parain, the viewer comes to understand the deep philosophical undertones, mirrored by imaginative cinematography and other macro elements. The unadulterated authenticity of Godard as an auteur renders this movie wholly subversive and rare in a world that was, and arguably still is, besieged with mercenary movies which favour passivity and escapism over active spectatorship.

Sophie Muir is an aspiring writer and journalist.

from the MM vaults

Looking Back at 50 years of *Breathless* – Jonathan Nunns, *MM35*
New Wave Culture: Changing Identities and the Language of style – Brenda Hamlet, *MM35*
Riding the New Wave – David Nock, *MM9*

NOMADLAND

A FOCUS ON THE EPIC

While focusing on tiny details of a woman's life, Chloé Zhao's *Nomadland* also reveals a much bigger picture about human existence. James Middleditch admires this epic film.

Some films are special, not just in the enjoyment or escapism they provide, but in the way they can train us in the art of 'reading' film itself. These films, which often gain popularity or critical acclaim for their 'art' or even 'poetry', can be ideal for providing us with visual symbols and narrative structures that generate thought and conversation – the types of films you may enjoy thinking about or discussing long after seeing, and which provide great practice for the consideration of deeper themes and messages, encoded in the filmmakers' choices.

Nomadland is a recent film that fits this description. Written and directed by Chloé Zhao, it rose to prominence through wins at the 2021 Golden Globes and Academy Awards among others. On the surface it seems to be a highly focused film following one woman, Fern, as she travels America as a 'nomad' in her campervan. However, it soon becomes clear through the choices of setting, symbol and structure that a much more epic scale is being considered, which builds to present nothing less than a vision of human life itself, and our place as individuals in a wide universe.

Space

One of the pleasures of watching *Nomadland* is quickly established as the presentation of the expanse of the American wilderness Fern travels through and the scale of the objects found there. Although often juxtaposed with the mundane realities of life on the road (cleaning, repairing and even coping with bodily functions), the awe and beauty of the open spaces always linger in shot to compensate for her troubles. Desert landscapes and sunsets are some of the earliest and simplest indicators of this grand scale, but they become more complex and expansive as the film progresses.

Plant life is used to provide scale, usefully giving us context for the sheer openness of the environment Fern is living in. A single cactus is shown, silhouetted against the sky, heralding the regular gatherings of nomads and therefore infusing them with a sense of resilience and endurance. Its stoic shape and water-holding nature is suggestive of an oasis, signposting a rigidity against the vast, open plains. Even bigger are the trees Fern wanders through. She appears tiny beneath them, and while they, in contrast, seem epic and invincible, she also finds fallen ones, hinting at a scale of time that includes the death of ancient giants. Alone, she can't articulate the thoughts this might prompt in her, and likewise we as viewers are left to ponder why these silent but meaningful scenes have been included. As other ingredients are added, we will soon find our answers.

The space being considered only expands further as the film continues. Fern encounters 'the sublime', or the immense scale of nature,

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Frances McDormand in *Nomadland* (2020) directed by Chloé Zhao

in both its beautiful and terrifying forms, in her naked swims in lakes and in her precarious walk along clifftops in a raging thunderstorm. At one point she becomes lost amid the otherworldly rocky outcrops of the Badlands National Park, which reminds us not only of the long history of the indigenous American cultures who lived there but the geological history of the Earth itself. These settings connect us to moments of childlike wonder and when Fern sees Jupiter through a telescope, we are reminded that our physical make up originates in the stars, linking her and us to a truly cosmic scale of planets and suns and the vast spaces in-between.

Time

As the space covered by the film seems to unfold, so does the span of time we are being asked to consider. The fallen trees and rocky landscapes mentioned earlier have already hinted at a 'deep time' or 'geological time' that Fern is moving through. The inclusion of fossils and dinosaurs furthers this, reminding us that our planet has existed through spans of time before human life that we can only just imagine. Even the choice of the name 'Fern' is significant here. As part of the decision to present an authentic depiction of nomad culture, the other 'characters' use the actors' real names and stories, so Fern is the only artificially named main character in the film. Of all the names that could have been chosen, it is also the name of one of the oldest surviving plants, with some types having remained unchanged in structure and processes for 180 million years. While we may feel small and awed at the scale of time being described, we can also be reassured that, like Fern and her plant namesakes, we are part of an enduring natural system.

Establishing this span of time changes the way we see the human efforts in the film. The ways in which we divide time, such as marking Christmas and New Year, can now seem small and irrelevant, and we become aligned with Fern as she rejects the traditional ecstatic celebration of these moments. Endeavours such as the gypsum industry that generated whole communities, which then fell apart as the economy changed, again seem small and fragile, symbolised by the Fern's return visit to the desolate, abandoned Empire where she once lived a more traditional American life. Again the name is significant – the 'Empire', as powerful as it once was, has fallen, like the trees, displaced cultures and even the dinosaurs before them. How should we now view the giant Amazon warehouse that holds Fern and others in its seemingly invincible grip on our shopping habits? Perhaps as another empire that will one day follow the others into the past, while the nature around it goes on.

Being reminded of our smallness in the scale of bigger spans of space and time can produce an uncomfortable feeling, and while the film quietly expresses Fern's own reactions to this, it also provides us with a belief system that we can use as consolation.

Memory

Being reminded of our smallness in the scale of bigger spans of space and time can produce an uncomfortable feeling, and while the film quietly expresses Fern's own reactions to this, it also provides us with a belief system that we can use as consolation. Early in the film, Fern rejects the help of the Christian church when offered to her, allowing space for her to find an alternative. This is presented to us through careful placement of characters within the structure of the film, to reassure us that emotional support and memory are an equally important part of life, out there to be sought and found.

The character of Bob fulfils the role of 'wise man' at both the start and end of the film, providing the security and support of the meet ups, swaps and networks for the nomads, who otherwise might be scattered far, wide and alone. His return within this cyclical narrative structure provides proof of his reassurance that goodbyes are never

When Fern sees Jupiter through a telescope, we are reminded that our physical make up originates in the stars, linking her and us to a truly cosmic scale of planets and suns and the vast spaces in-between.

LANDMARK MEDIA / Alamy Stock Photo

On the road to somewhere: Fern in *Nomadland*

final and that what is remembered 'does not die'. Even his promise that nomads meet 'further down the road' is upheld through the character of Derek, who likewise appears at either end of the film. The 'objects' they trade on these occasions – a lighter to symbolise the essential element of fire and a Shakespearean sonnet for a letter to a girl he likes – evoke timelessness and memory, and ways in which our individual human lives endure despite the epic scale we find ourselves in. They also evoke connection, community and intimate relationships, as seen in the photos of Fern's own lost family life, which she revisits during the overlapping voiceover of the poem. If Bob's promise that we will be reunited 'down the road' is true in life, we can also hope it may be true beyond as well.

Conclusion

It may seem strange that a short and highly focused film has ranged outwards to include such grand topics as the nature of existence, the history of the planet and our place within it. Such is the skill of the film and its writer/director, as well as the interweaving of all of the contributions of acting, landscape and object, that it is achieved in such a quiet and thought-provoking way. The tightness of the focus on one woman's experience gives a dominance and dignity to her unique view. The relative shortness of the running time of *Nomadland* (108 minutes) unfurls to a much longer span as we ponder our history and future long after the end credits finish. And what could be a presentation of a scary, uncaring world with its harsh realities of economics and survival is enhanced by other values, of tenderness, affection and connection, and things that really last.

James Middleditch teaches English and Media at Havant and South Downs College in Hampshire and is the author of the *Doctor Who* spin-off novel *Lethbridge-Stewart: The Overseers*

Careers download

Lee Reacord

In this issue Lee Reacord, an aspiring editor, tells us about his role as a documentary Edit Assistant

What is your job?

I'm an Edit Assistant in the television industry, working on factual entertainment programmes (documentary, not drama).

What does that mean?

I act as the link between the producer and directors, shooting material for our TV programmes, and the editors who assemble the footage into the final episodes. I receive the footage after it's been captured, make sure it's all backed up, labelled and logged correctly, and then I bring the footage into our editing software (Avid Media Composer) to prepare it for the editor. Organisation is key! We often deal with large volumes of material across multiple shows at the same time, so it's really important to keep a record of where everything is and make sure it's all easily accessible.

To prepare the footage for the editor, I go through all of it in Avid and sync anything that was shot on multiple cameras or using separate sound mics. This allows the editor to see all the available angles of a scene at the same time, so they can more easily judge the best shots to use and when to cut. On some programmes I also watch all of the footage and pick out the most useful parts – this can save time for the editor and producer as they can focus on the best shots, or the most interesting parts of a conversation, without having to watch the whole thing. Unlike scripted drama/comedy, we don't necessarily know what's going to happen or what someone is going to say before filming starts, which can create some pretty unexpected results! It's really important to pay attention to everything that's happening and find the bits that will help the editor craft an engaging story.

I studied Film Studies at college and completed a Film and Video Production degree at the University of Derby. After that, I applied (and applied, and applied) for runner positions until I finally got hired by a post-production house.

What was your route into the media industry?

The first time I thought about media as a career was during high school, when my friend would often create silly comedy or sports videos in his spare time and show them to me. I started to join in, and I fell in love with editing – assembling all of the footage, music and effects together into the final pieces. As a big football fan, I would often find loads of highlights from my favourite team online and cut together little montages of the previous season, or previews of the games ahead.

I studied Film Studies at college and completed a Film and Video Production degree at the University of Derby. After that, I applied (and applied, and applied) for runner positions until I finally got hired by a post-production house in London. I started as a runner – making teas, getting lunch for people, delivering letters, and most importantly getting to know people who were already working in the industry. After a while I became part of the Edit Assistant team, later becoming the team leader, taking care of the more technical processes that happen in the background to keep the facility ticking along. After a few years I moved to a production company that produces new and long-running TV programmes, where I'm one of only two Edit Assistants responsible for keeping the edits running on all of our productions. It can be a bit daunting, but it's also a nice challenge!

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

There's always something new to learn! I enjoy problem-solving, and I'm constantly finding new ways to find solutions or complete tasks more efficiently. Learning about new technology and software is fun (and crucial), but it's also been really interesting to delve deeper into how television is made from conception and development all the way to broadcast. There are lots of moving parts at all times –loads of people are involved in creating a television programme, and each person has an important role to play. I'm an aspiring editor, so I make sure I talk to the editors, producers and directors I work with at every opportunity, trying to take on board as much as I can about how they work and what it takes to be successful. It's also pretty great to see your hard work air live on TV – it brings a real feeling of accomplishment.

I'd also strongly suggest working on your own projects or projects in your community in your free time. It helps you to learn new skills; you might get a better idea of where your passions lie, and most importantly it'll help you meet people with similar interests and ambitions.

What is the worst thing about your job?

The industry is extremely competitive, especially at entry-level, so it's important not to give up easily if you're passionate. The hours can be very long, and those long hours often accompany high-pressure situations with strict deadlines. Good communication skills are vital to ensure everyone stays on the same page during times of possible tension.

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

Perseverance is important – don't be afraid of rejection. Someone with a positive attitude who tries to be proactive and helps solve problems will stand out. My first employer once told me that my initial interview went poorly, but I essentially 'annoyed' them into taking me on a trial and from that point I never looked back!

I'd also strongly suggest working on your own projects or projects in your community in your free time. It helps you to learn new skills; you might get a better idea of where your passions lie, and most importantly it'll help you meet people with similar interests and ambitions. Make as many connections as you can. I still keep in regular contact with many of the people I worked with during college and university, and we've continued to work together and help each other out when we can.

What's next for you?

At the moment I'm doing some light editing on one of our programmes currently in production, which is a lot of fun. My main goal is to move towards editing full-time in the future, so hopefully I'm on the right path!

DASK FILMS PRODUCTION TIPS

How to shoot and edit an interview

Interviews are a staple for documentary filmmaking. They are also an important part of promotional content. It's often an opportunity for you to hone your sound and lighting skills without the added complexities of shooting a piece of fiction.

PREP

- Preparing the interviewee is an important step that can't be neglected. Depending on the kind of interview you're doing, you may want to give your subject questions ahead of time. Unless you're conducting a piece of hard-hitting journalism, you want your subjects to be as comfortable as possible. Reassure them that it's OK to make mistakes as they can be cut out.

SHOOT

- Firstly, you really want the interviewer and the camera operator to be separate people. Making a subject feel listened to and appreciated requires a lot of attention, and you just can't do that if you're also looking at the monitor. Secondly, you really need two cameras for this job. If you're tight on equipment, it could be tempting to film the subject and just film the questioner afterwards, but this can create problems. You might misremember the question, put emphasis in a different place, or slightly rephrase it. This could end up with your subject looking foolish if their answer doesn't quite match how you've phrased the question.
- In an ideal world, you would have two cameras of the same level of quality, but if you have one that is slightly better, make sure that is pointed at the interviewee, as that's who we'll be focusing on for the most part.

Pexels - Bruno Massao

- Normally you'd frame a person right in the centre of the shot, but for an interview, it's a good idea to put them just off centre. Give a bit of empty space in front of where they are facing. This gives them space to 'talk into', as it were. It's standard practice to put the cameras at the same height on the tripods so that both parties look like they are on an equal footing.
- In the first instance, you'll probably just use the microphones on the cameras. If you find that audio isn't as clean as you'd like it to be, you may end up using separate audio recorders. I use lapel mics for both people, and hook them up to either my Zoom H4n (Around £200) or my Olympus 650 (around £139). This means I get nice, clear audio from both speakers. If you can't get this, try recording the audio on phones and place them just out of sight of the camera.
- When playing back an audio clip, it's not always obvious what the clip might relate to, so it's important to say what you're doing when you press record e.g: 'Rolling on the zoom h4n Patricia interview take 1' means you'll know what clip is what within seconds. It's important to make sure you can sync up the audio to the visuals. In the absence of a clapper board, you can just CLAP loudly.

Dask Films is a Northwest-based video production company

Pexels - Cottonbro

EDIT

- In the edit, you want to take video and audio clips and stack them on top of each other. When looking at the audio waveform, you'll see a sharp spike where the clap is. Line all the clips up to this point so you've got all the audio synced up.
- Cutting bits out of the interview is an important part of the job. Jump cuts are something you want to avoid at all costs: it just looks a bit…janky. If you have the video clips on top of each other (I usually put the interviewer at the bottom and the subject on top), you can cut out any waffle or irrelevant speech from the interviewee. A good trick is to just cut back to the interviewer responding (it could be as simple as a smile). Then you can cut back to the interviewee talking, so long as the speech still makes sense when you listen back to it.
- It's a good idea to think about how you can make the interview more visually engaging. One way to do this is to add in photos or video footage on top of the speaker, to illustrate what they're saying. If, for example, they're talking about their life story you can usually ask the person for any photos related to the time they're talking about, and they're usually only too happy to supply them. Once you've got them, you'll need to make sure they move or zoom in in some way; look up the 'Ken Burns effect' to get an idea. Once you've done this you should have an interview that is concise and engaging. Good luck!

Pexels - Cowomen

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KEY DATES

- Deadline for your entries: **Friday 22nd April**
- Shortlist announced: **Friday 20th May**
- Showcase and Winners announced: **Monday 6th July**

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