

# MM

MEDIA MAGAZINE



## BARBIE

A FEMINIST FILM?

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- CORINNE BAILEY RAE
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EMC

MediaMagazine

*MediaMagazine* is published by the English and Media Centre, a non-profit making organisation. The Centre publishes a wide range of classroom materials and runs courses for teachers. If you're studying English at A Level, look out for *emagazine*, also published by the Centre.

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Cover: Margot Robbie and  
Ryan Gosling in *Barbie*  
TCD/Prod.DB / Alamy Stock Photo

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They may sound like a law firm or an estate agents but as you know, James Curran and Jean Seaton are leading media academics. Jonathan Nunns uses the Murdoch dynasty to explain their ideas about profit and power.

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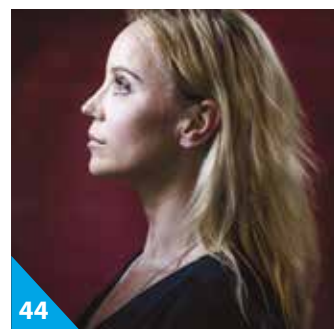
Stephen O'Connor didn't think it was possible to create a TV or film adaptation of an immersive video game that would be able to do the original text justice. But the recent HBO adaptation of *The Last of Us* has got him reconsidering this thesis.

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Most A level students won't regularly listen to radio unless they're in a car or a shop. They're more likely to consume other audio such as podcasts. Steve Merrell crunches the numbers and explains what's happening with radio audiences.

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# Making the Most of MediaMag

## Barbie, Audiences and Institutions

Part of the reason for Barbie's blockbuster success was its effective viral marketing campaign and the knock-on effect of being one of the most talked about 'event' films in recent years. People went to see it dressed in pink, as a double bill with Oppenheimer (the Christopher Nolan film that came out in the same release window) and Picturehouse cinemas even ran a season of Barbenheimer double bills showing Gerwig and Nolan's previous movies in similarly tonally-mismatched pairings (Ladybird and Dunkirk, anyone?)

### Discussion

In groups, talk about whether you went to see the Barbie film and what role official marketing or word of mouth marketing played in your decision to go or not go. Did you wear pink? If so, why and – more crucially – did you share images of your visit on social media? See how many people in your group or whole class contributed to the word of mouth marketing of the film.

Below and to the right are a few examples of 'textual poaching', where individuals or groups have reappropriated the Barbie text to create new meanings. In some cases 'authorised' by the producers of the text and in other cases not. Discuss them first so you get a sense of what they are and what they mean.

There are also 4 statements that relate to these images and the wider marketing of Barbie. See if any of the statements below directly connect to what's going on in the images – some may apply to more than one image.

- Fan fiction plugs the gap that exists between the needs of the audience and the commercially safe output of the media they consume.
- Jenkins groups fan output into different categories, for example, 'crossovers', 'personalisations', 'moral realignments' and 'eroticisations'.
- Contemporary media producers court and nourish fan bases to construct brand awareness and maintain product loyalty. In other words, media producers use fan labour to distribute marketing materials.
- The internet has the capacity to translate community-based discussion where fans make and share DIY media (what Jenkin's calls participatory culture) into political engagement.

A TikTok duet with Matt Hancock posted by the Women's Equality Party



T-shirt available on Redbubble



Some guerrilla activism put up in London bus stops





The official Barbie 'Selfie Generator'



Stone Cold Jane Austen on Twitter

## A Marketing Campaign

Look again at the film marketing campaigns that you are studying for your exams (all of which were PRE-Barbenheimer).

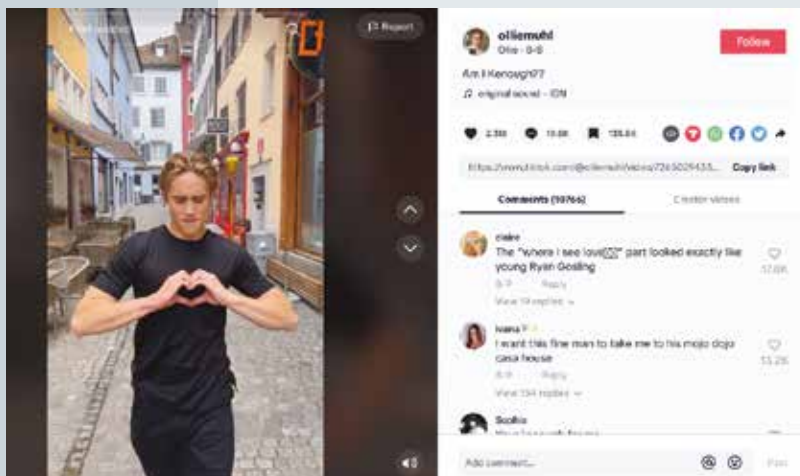
Imagine that your film is about to have a director's cut re-release across cinemas in the UK and your class has been asked to suggest ways of using viral marketing and word-of-mouth advertising in social media to encourage audiences to come out and see the new version of the film in the cinema.

Consider the use of content generators, product placement or brand tie-ins, paired screenings with other releases (or re-releases), 'event' ideas such as dressing up for screenings, media partnerships (film, TV, music etc.).

Do you think you would need to be concerned about 'fans' reappropriating the meanings of your marketing campaign in ways that are unauthorised by the producers of the film and the marketing campaign?

Present your ideas back to each other.

Ollie Muhl on Instagram



Is this what a feminist look like?  
We're not so sure.



Never Enough:  
the Kens take  
back power

Moviestore Collection Ltd. / Alamy Stock Photo

# Barbie

## A FEMINIST FILM?

It broke records at the box office but is the *Barbie* movie, like the doll, bright, beautiful but ultimately hollow and superficial? April McCarthy suspects it may be.

If you wish to evaluate whether *Barbie* was really a feminist film or not, you should ask yourself this question – what was the message for women? I left the cinema not knowing this and having thought about it, I still don't know what it is. bell hooks said feminism is a struggle to end patriarchal oppression and the ideology of domination. In other words, you cannot challenge an oppressive system and uphold it at the same time. *Barbie* attempts to do both and in doing so, says nothing.

I anticipated this to some extent because making a feminist film about Barbie was always going to be challenging unless the story resolved in a way that smashed the narrow beauty ideals Barbie promotes. Whilst she might represent an aspirational lifestyle where she is not domestic, selfless or financially dependent on a man, Barbie is still very much shaped by the male gaze and the white western beauty ideal. The marketing for the film promises the spectacle of this beauty ideal realised – Margot Robbie looks like a real Barbie and that is a big part of the appeal of

TCD/Prod.DB / Alamy Stock Photo

Ryan Gosling and  
Margot Robbie as  
Ken and Barbie



Barbie

Barbie

Barbie

Barbie

Barbie

Barbie

Barbie's narrative is resolved when she enters our world and becomes human – in a sense she literally stops being an object and becomes a woman. But why would she choose to come to a world where she has no power? Does the narrative resolve to suggest this is the better option?

the film. The narrator's almost apologetic aside about Mattel making a bad casting decision halfway through the film doesn't stop that being true. It cannot be overstated that the narrow beauty standard and the sexual objectification of women is a major part of the patriarchy - it reinforces gender stereotypes, dehumanises women and it is still, often, the way that a girl or woman's value is measured by our culture. It is a tyranny and in this way the spectacle of Margot Robbie as Barbie overrules the plot.

'What do I expect from a mainstream film?' you might ask. Mainstream films seek to appeal to the widest possible audience in order to make a profit, and we know from Liesbet van Zoonen that 'the dominant visual economy is still organised along traditional gender lines; men look at women; women watch themselves being looked at'. You can also tell from the large marketing budget that this film was perhaps already considered a risk due to its 'feminist' angle. To be fair to Gerwig, she had to deliver a mainstream feminist film that kept stakeholders happy, and this tension between quality of content and profits may well be why we have the film we have (there were a lot of tedious parts focused on Mattel's board of directors, for example). To give her credit, we do get fragments of feminist ideas that might have been very interesting with a lot more exploration. The idea that Barbies, who represent women, are the default humans and Kens, who represent men, are the 'other' is a reversal of what Simone de Beauvoir wrote about out in her book *The Second Sex*. This is an important part of feminist

Whilst she might represent an aspirational lifestyle where she is not domestic, selfless or financially dependent on a man, Barbie is still very much shaped by the male gaze and the white western beauty ideal.

thinking. The idea that women are 'other' (less human) compared to men in the way Ken was 'other' to Barbie is definitely an important idea to bring to a mainstream audience. But I would argue that we don't spend enough time in Barbie's world to explore this properly before it was reversed in the opposite direction (back to our normal). When Barbie's world experienced male dominance, why were the Barbies so ready to submit and why did they have to use seduction to distract them and get their power back? What is the message here for women? Flirting will take down the patriarchy? Another point that might have been explored further was how emotional the characters were when they realised that they were 'other' (Barbie for the first time and Ken for the second time). It reflected, somewhat, the pain of that experience. For me, this was ruined by the cartoonish way Ken cried – it was not supposed to be taken seriously. It would have been interesting if Ken's oppression was explored more instead of a few scenes with him being attention-seeking and moody. This is not a true gender reversal. Furthermore, intersectionality didn't seem to factor in the reversal of the hierarchy in Barbie's world and so, with that being absent, the film does not accurately represent how the patriarchy works.

I would not show someone the scene with Barbie and Ken arriving in the real world to show how gender representation works because it didn't really do a good job at showing this – Barbie and Ken had a 'feeling' and it was more like a shared joke with the audience already in the know. The feminist speeches, whilst they said a lot of valid things, seemed shoe-horned in. The characters spoke about their experiences as women in the real world, but these seemed sort of jarringly serious for the 'meta' and parodic world of the film. They could have shown us some of that suffering to make this hit home. It was a classic case of telling us how it is rather than showing us how it is which is always less impactful.

Ken is actually the most likeable character in the whole film. He is fun, he struggles, learns and then he is put back in his place again, which seems like an odd resolution because this doesn't end up helping Barbie the protagonist in any way. Instead, it simply reinforces the idea that one group must always dominate another which, according to bell hooks, is the ideology of the patriarchy. Barbie's narrative is resolved when she enters our world and becomes human – in a sense she literally stops being an object and becomes a woman. But why would she choose

Barbie

Barbie

Barbie

Barbie



America Ferrera during the 'pink carpet' premiere in Mexico City.

ZUMA Press, Inc. / Alamy Stock Photo

to come to a world where she has no power? Does the narrative resolve to suggest this is the better option? Overall, I found this film conflicted and very ambiguous about something which needs to be clear – why use this platform to be vague when the sexist oppression of women is ruining the lives of both men and women the world over through prejudice, discrimination and violence? In fact, if you wanted to convince someone that feminism is confusing and that a more equal world would disempower men this film would probably do it.

Overall, this film is essentially an advert that seeks to convince a generation of women that buying a Barbie for their child is feminist choice. Mattel have sought to change the meaning of Barbie and turn the Barbie doll into a symbol for progressiveness. Through the film and the marketing, they have created a 'myth' of feminism.

April McCarthy is Head of Film and Media Studies at Hampstead School and a media education consultant at the English and Media Centre.

You can also tell from the large marketing budget that this film was perhaps already considered a risk due to its 'feminist' angle. To be fair to Gerwig, she had to deliver a mainstream feminist film that kept stakeholders happy, and this tension between quality of content and profits may well be why we have the film we have.

 from the MM vaults

Doll Domination: Barbie and the Risk of Role Model – Emma Rafferty, MM59

Theory Drop: Liesbet van Zoonen, MM76

Barbie

Barbie

Barbie

Barbie

Barbie

A photograph of Iron Man (Robert Downey Jr.) in his red and gold armor, looking towards Pepper Potts (Gwyneth Paltrow). She is wearing a black dress and looking back at him. The background is a warm, reddish-orange color.

Tough guy: Iron man (Robert Downey Jr.) overpowers Pepper Potts (Gwyneth Paltrow)

# MARVEL'S MASCULINITIES

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The landscape of America's male-dominated popcorn superhero flicks is changing, argues Dez Collings. We are now presented with loving, mature role models for boys and men to look up to, rather than the emotion-suppressing, rashly violent characters we're used to.

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**T**he Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is a franchise of American superhero films based on the *Marvel* comics which has earned over \$29 billion worldwide, creating stories that follow well-known characters

such as Iron Man, Captain America and Spider-Man and it is part of the dominant culture of young people all over the world. At the birth of the MCU, masculinity was a prevalent theme and representations of masculinity would have been aggressive, dominant and bordering on misogynistic - what we would call toxic masculinity nowadays but, at the time, may not have been called into question. In recent years,, the *Marvel* franchise seems to be chipping away at toxic masculinity through healthier characterisation. The MCU has a significant global influence within the film industry – *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo brothers, 2019) alone has been translated into 19 languages and drew a box office haul of \$2.7 billion, second only to *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009) and it would be naïve to ignore its cultural influence, specifically with younger boys.

Toxic masculinity can present itself in many ways: stoicism (enduring hardship whilst concealing emotions), glorifying violence, taking risks, suppressing fear and feeling the need to conform to traditional conservative gender roles at any cost. The MCU began by enforcing and promoting some of these negative masculine stereotypes, but as society has progressed and changed over the last 15 years, male heroes are characterised as less violent and less destructive and have become emotionally mature, depicted sometimes in caring roles and as role models for young boys and men alike to look up to.

## The Early Phases

2008 saw the introduction of the proclaimed 'father of the MCU', Iron Man (*Iron Man*, Favreau, 2008). The film, whilst enjoyable, depicts several of the toxic masculine stereotypes of the 'American hero'. It follows Tony Stark, a billionaire tech genius, who is kidnapped by terrorists and escapes

**We're all in this together: The Guardians of the Galaxy**



The 2023 releases of *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania* and *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol.3* showcase the power of family and healthy emotional expression.

by building a suit of weaponised armour, which he then perfects to become Iron Man. In the aftermath of his traumatic kidnapping, Tony decides not to take time to recover or be checked over at a hospital, instead calls a press conference which he presides over as a returning hero, with a cheeseburger in one hand. His glib stoicism seems to affirm the toxic stereotype that men should conceal their emotions and remain strong despite having experienced something pretty traumatic. Not only that, but the film is also riddled with classic, glorified violence: slow motion marches away from explosions, murdering terrorists, and conducting weapons tests for the army. The violence depicted seems to be unnecessary and illogical; not borne out of necessity, but included presumably because war and conflict are deemed to be 'cool'.

Eight years on, *Captain America: Civil War* (Russo brothers, 2016) is released. Violence here is even more unnecessary, risks are taken which cause division and conflict, fear is suppressed and raw emotions are manifested in targeted anger and aggressive payback. The film follows a conflict between Tony Stark and the famous Captain America/Steve Rogers – the epitome of a 'perfect' brave, patriotic, and noble American soldier – after they disagree on the Sokovia accords (laws governing where the superheroes could intervene and fight). Tony discovers that Steve



knew who had murdered his parents, leading to an intense fight between the pair and the inevitable separation of the Avengers (the Avengers being the group of heroes assembled to protect Earth). In both *Iron Man* and *Civil War*, the superheroes appear selfish, focusing on personal vendettas or simply not taking into account the consequences of their violent actions on those around them. Whilst Iron Man's violence could be more justified due to his salvation of hostages and defeat of a terrorist group, he himself unknowingly supplied the same terrorists with his weaponry and was indirectly responsible for many innocent deaths and suffering. The glorified violence, used to show him as a great hero, masks his lack of responsibility in taking care of others and using his wealth for good. In *Civil*



Album / Alamy Stock Photo

As society has progressed and changed over the last 15 years, male heroes are characterised as less violent and less destructive and have become emotionally mature, depicted sometimes in caring roles and as role models.

War, the conflict arises from selfish, vengeful acts and emotions that are not discussed rationally. Instead, the heroes turn to fists and guns to resolve it.

### Changing Context

In the last 15 years, society has undergone significant change, change that is reflected in the representation of masculinity in all film but perhaps more importantly than elsewhere the MCU. The world came to a halt in 2020 as bush fires raged, the death of George Floyd sparked protests globally, and the Covid-19 pandemic kept people locked inside for months. Audiences no longer desired the violence and glorifications of war, but instead stories of how humanity and family could endure and support each other during times of

hardship. Not only that, the increasing reliance on social media every year meant that politics and ethics were being discussed among larger, more diverse range of people, and society began to recognise and address where equality was lacking. Discussions about men's mental health and the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment and rape culture in particular began to chip away the patriarchy and allow for rational debate surrounding the effects of patriarchal standards on both women and men. This is what seemed to spark a change within the MCU, resulting in a clear shift in the masculine heroes depicted. The recent *Marvel* series *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (Skogland, 2021) and *She Hulk* (Coiro, 2022) directly address some of these issues including police brutality and the amount of 'incels' online who

actively troll feminist women because they feel are responsible for their lack of sexual gratification.

### Phase 5

After the loss of big-name characters in *Avengers Endgame*, including Captain America and Iron Man, the new leading, male characters began to take on more familial roles and self-sacrifice became more common, contradicting the more selfish nature of the earlier phases. In particular, the 2023 releases of *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania* (Reed, 2023) and *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol.3* (Gunn, 2023) showcase the power of family and healthy emotional expression.

In *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania*, Scott Lang and his family shrink down to the Quantum Realm, a miniscule realm beneath our own, and battle Kang the

Run! This toxic masculinity is about to blow



Moviestore Collection Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

Now, the MCU is changing and showcasing positive representations of masculinity – depicting love and family as something to be desired, cherished, and protected.

from the MM vaults

Marketing Campaign: Gillette – Samantha James, MM70

Only Human But All Woman – The Representation of Gender in *Captain Marvel* – Caroline Reid, MM69

A Look at the Films of Taika Waititi, with a Focus on Performative and Dysfunctional Masculinity – Kirsty Worrow, MM68

Conqueror. It seems as though Scott, the hero, will succumb to Kang and he prepares to let himself die in order to save his daughter and the world. Throughout the film, Scott is driven to fight by his love for his daughter rather than by his anger or vengefulness. The violence depicted is no longer out of rage, but from love and a desire to protect his family – pictured as a last resort rather than glorified, vicious problem solving.

In *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3*, we are shown the backstory of Rocket Raccoon, an intelligent talking raccoon who was tortured as a cub by a twisted cosmic being called the High Evolutionary. He was fitted with a kill switch in his chest, and so the narrative is focused on the quest of his found family (the Guardians) to save his life after it is activated. Healthy masculinity is shown throughout the film as we watch the male characters embrace their emotions and engage in protective, familial relationships. In

particular, Peter Quill (Chris Pratt), a white, American hypermasculine man and the leader of the Guardians, talks about the grief of losing his mother and Rocket himself experiences flashbacks to his family in the lab and faces his own grief over their brutal murder. In addition, they repeatedly state that they do not want to kill anyone, and Rocket even refrains from killing the man who tortured him and his family. The violence is no longer haphazard and hate-filled as seen in *Civil War*, but deployed only when it is required to save innocent lives and protect each other. Both *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania* and *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3* show the triumph of love and family, and true expression of emotions, instead of concealing them and allowing them to cause hostility.

Overall, the MCU began by producing films that used action and violence to glorify war and did not allow men to express their feelings through communication and love. However,

now, the MCU is changing and showcasing positive representations of masculinity – depicting love and family as something to be desired, cherished, and protected instead of disregarded in favour of war and disagreement. In future, I think the MCU could explore healthy masculinity even further and allow for more masculine figures to express complex personalities and perhaps explore further issues in society such as inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community or promoting the ending of war, particularly when set against a backdrop of ongoing hostility and war in both Europe and the Middle East.

Dez Collings studies Philosophy, Film Studies and Art at The Spires College in Torquay.

# THE MEDIUM AND THE MESSAGE

## WAR REPORTING OVER TIME

From hastily scribbled notes and telegrams to blogs and live feeds, war reporting has changed as technology has developed. Sarah Kiernan Webb takes a look at what's changed and how the message and medium can sometimes be so intertwined.

March forward over a century, and war reporting is a complex mission that involves digging about in the trenches of disinformation and deepfake.

**T**he *Times* Irish war correspondent of 1854, William Howard Russell, passed judgement on the overly nationalistic reporting of the Crimean War with these words: 'The mismanagement of this war is something incredible... sickness, death, and mutilation caused by sheer incapacity of those at the helm of affairs.'

Even more remarkable than the sentiments, these observations were formed while tapping out the battlefield death toll over the telegraph. March forward over a century, and war reporting is a complex mission that involves digging about in the trenches of disinformation and deepfake. Just as swords evolved into missiles, news too steeled and hardened itself into a mighty media machine of 24-hour

information, breaking news and citizen journalists rallying against the old guard gatekeepers at the news desks.

So why does this journey from telegraph taps to pixels really matter? Canadian philosopher and media theorist, Marshall McLuhan, argued that the 'medium is the message'. In the case of war reporting, the way war is reported (the how) might be seen to be more impactful on people's understanding and response to that conflict than the content (the what). As the rise and fall of 20th century superpowers reshaped borders, created new nations and shifted political ideologies, the mediation of these events played an equally strategic part, with the 'how' firmly shaping public opinion.



Vietnam: the 'living-room war'



## TV Wars

In the 1960s extensive television coverage of the war in Vietnam by networks like ABC and CBS brought the real human cost of conflict to light. Dubbed 'the living-room war', due to the stark images of violence and suffering citizens that were beamed into people's homes, Vietnam coverage fuelled anti-war sentiment and fanning the flames even more was celebrity journalist, Walter Cronkite. Known as 'the most trusted man in America', he expressed scepticism about the war's progress in a 1968 TV editorial, which then had a profound impact on public support for the war and contributed to the de-escalation and withdrawal of US forces. The black and white footage of the conflict was a powerful storytelling medium that connected the US public to another perspective. As the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words or, in this case, a newsreel has more sway than the printed press.

With the 1990s came another global power conflict: the Gulf war. This war saw not only a precisely targeted military campaign, but the media too dedicated itself to a precision-guided operation of American patriotism. Advancements in technology meant that the Gulf war was one of the first conflicts to be extensively covered by 24-hour news channels, such as CNN. This constant coverage provided viewers with real-time updates, breaking news, and analysis, allowing them to stay informed about the latest developments. The immediacy of news

reporting during the Gulf war kept the public engaged and created a sense of urgency around the conflict. Soon referred to as the 'CNN effect', the dramatisation of events played out across the network like *Call of Duty* in multiplayer mode.

What's more, journalists leapt from their news desks and into the field. Embedded journalism (where reporters are given access to military units and provided first-hand accounts from the battlefield) became the new approach. This allowed journalists to report directly from the frontlines, providing a unique perspective on the conflict. Satellite communication allowed for live broadcasts from the war zone, and advanced camera systems provided high-quality footage. These technological advancements brought the war into people's homes like never before and had a profound impact on how the conflict was perceived. Narrative framing positioned US soldiers as heroes, while the Middle East's image of the archetypal villain, intent on world destruction, was cemented. Once again, the medium of moving images crafted the realities of war like another weekly TV serial drama, all while families ate their dinners in front of the box.

## Blogging from the Battlefield

Another decade, another global flashpoint: this time involving supposed 'weapons of mass destruction' and Web 2.0. The 2003 Iraq War again saw the

This innovative medium of blogging made way for interactive engagement with readers commenting, discussing and fostering a sense of community and connection. The power of participatory media created a dialogue and exchange of ideas, expanding the reach and influence of Salam Pax's message beyond traditional media boundaries.



mass media outlets flood their pages and screens with non-stop coverage. But what nobody was really prepared for was Iraq's most powerful war machine: a blogger writing under the pseudonym, Salam Pax.

Armed with new media technology, this Baghdad blogger created, *Where is Raed?*. His unfiltered writing bypassed conventional media channels and captured attention worldwide. Offering an authentic, often humorous, and insightful glimpse into the realities faced by ordinary Iraqis amidst the conflict, the blog became an influential platform, shedding light on the human stories and complexities behind the headlines. This innovative medium of blogging made way for interactive engagement with readers commenting, discussing and fostering a sense of community and connection. The power of participatory media created a dialogue and exchange of ideas, expanding the reach and influence of Salam Pax's message beyond traditional media boundaries. The medium of the blog carried its own message: a message of individual voices, personal experiences, and the power of grassroots storytelling. It challenged the dominant narratives and provided an alternative perspective that humanised the Iraqi people - perhaps they were not the bad guys that the Gulf war episode one had led us to believe?

## Reel Conflict

Now, as we head into the second year of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the democratising potential of new media platforms has highlighted even more the power of personal narratives in shaping public perception. Whereas once audiences were passive spectators of battlefields in distant lands, the medium of social media has given rise to active debate, multiple viewpoints and decentralisation of

information even further away from the controlled narrative of heritage media. Speed and immediacy of news has now become an integral part of the message itself. As Meta's platforms (Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp), along with YouTube and TikTok rapidly fire out information from the frontline, it has become strikingly apparent that the new WMD is the iPhone. Complex issues are spliced, edited and filtered inside bombed-out homes into easily shareable and digestible formats: reels, stories and viral memes.

As the military battle for Ukraine rages, influencers are playing their part in this new conflict. However, amongst the bloody battlefields there is a new war: the war of disinformation and truth. Like the conflict on the ground, this fight also has real consequences for the people whose lives it touches. Maxim, a 25-year-old living in Ukraine, was a victim of Russia's first days of invasion and was forced to flee his shelled apartment and sleep in an air raid shelter. A blogger and children's TV presenter with four million followers on TikTok, Maxim soon swapped his upbeat feed for horror posts of the invasion. However, reels of dead bodies on the street and the ruins of the bombing did not have the reaction he expected. Instead, Maxim received a stream of Russian comments accusing him of lying. As Maxim challenged the trolls he found deactivated accounts and faceless profiles - they were malicious bots and likely part of Russia's online disinformation campaign. Where the medium of social media once amplified authentic voices, it had now mutated into a weapon that could shut down debate and present the illusion of mass public opinion, distorting both reality and facts. Now the medium has dangerously twisted the message.

There is a famous saying from the turn of the 20th century, 'The first casualty of war is truth' and without a doubt, this continues to hold true.

As Meta's platforms (Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, along with YouTube and TikTok rapidly fire out information from the frontline, it has become strikingly apparent that the new WMD is the iPhone.

The question is, do we have a fighting chance of finding reality in this tech-determined era of 'truthiness'? Amongst the onslaught of information and algorithms, how do we navigate what is real? McLuhan's theory, although conceived long before the bots or even the web, encouraged thinking beyond the content of the message and to critically analyse the medium. Above all, it should prompt us to question the biases, agendas, and assumptions embedded in the abundance of media we consume.

Sarah Kiernan Webb is Head of Media Studies at Doha College in Qatar

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# Corinne Bailey Rae

*is Non-Stop*

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**Corinne Bailey Rae is back and journalist Ellen Peirson-Hagger recently interviewed her about her career. We asked Ellen to look back at the meaning and ideas in the 'Stop Where you Are' music video.**

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'Stop Where You Are' draws on Bailey Rae's own revelation that, even after the worst loss imaginable, you can find happiness again – if you are ready to embrace it. It's also an ode to acceptance.

Photography by Koto Bololo



**I**n 2016 Corinne Bailey Rae was under pressure. Her record label expected big things from her. She wasn't sure that she could deliver – or that she even wanted to.

A decade previously, Bailey Rae had known huge success. In 2005 the pop singer, who was born in Leeds in 1979, released her debut single, the jazz-inflected love song 'Like a Star'. A few months later, 'Put Your Records On', which remains her best-known track, reached number two in the UK singles chart (she was pipped to the top spot by Madonna's 'Sorry'). Upon the release of her self-titled debut album in February 2006, 26-year-old Bailey Rae became the fourth female British act in history to have her first record debut at number one.

Her life changed. She was hanging out with Stevie Wonder and Oprah Winfrey. Prince came to watch her perform live. And then, in 2008, everything changed again when her husband Jason Rae died from an accidental drug overdose. A saxophonist with the Haggis Horns (who often gigged with Mark Ronson), Jason had played on 'Put Your Records On', among other Bailey Rae songs. Many of her lyrical admissions of love,

**I'd, I'd like to put my fingers on you/I'd, I'd like to paint a picture for you**

from 'I'd Like To' were about him. Theirs was a complicated marriage, full of passion that led to anger as well as love.



Photography by Koto Bolefo

**Still I wonder why it is/I don't argue like this/  
With anyone but you**

she sang on 'Like a Star'.

When an artist has a particularly successful debut album, it is typical for them to feel immense pressure when making their second: will it be as popular? Will their record label still want them if it doesn't sell as well? Bailey Rae had started writing her second record before Jason died, and she finished it after his death. *On The Sea* (2010), which was nominated for the Mercury Prize, explored their tumultuous marriage and the grief she felt after losing him. Given the circumstances, her team 'stepped back' and let her write that record as she wanted, Bailey Rae said in an interview in 2023.

'There were a lot of people saying: 'That's a record you needed to make.' But when it came to a third record, she felt it was 'very back to business. 'Let's get some hits.' And that was just impossible for me. I mean, as it turned out – actually impossible to get hits from that record.'

That record was *The Heart Speaks in Whispers*, which was released on 13 May 2016. Its lead single, 'Stop Where You Are', premiered on Jo Whiley's BBC Radio 2 show. The song is 'about being in the moment and being present, and stopping and ritualising the moment, celebrating it',

Promotional art for Bailey-Rae's new album 'Black Rainbows'

The song is 'about being in the moment and being present, and stopping and ritualising the moment, celebrating it', Bailey Rae said at the time. It is a feel-good ballad with an inspiring, sing-along chorus.

Bromine/Pixabay

Photography by Ulrike Rinderman



Bailey Rae said at the time. It is a feel-good ballad with an inspiring, sing-along chorus. It begins pared-back, Bailey Rae's distinctive breathy voice accompanied only by gentle acoustic guitars.

In the music video, which was filmed in the brutalist concrete staircases of London's Southbank, Bailey Rae wears a bright red dress and high heels. In fact, it's her stilettos that we see first, as Bailey Rae plays a seductive figure, persuading us to follow her into the shadowy urban backdrop. There is a soft glow around her head for much of the song, her brightness contrasting with the drab grey backdrop.

As the song progresses, the texture thickens – now we have piano, then electric guitar, drums – and the video's characters multiply. As Bailey Rae comforts a sad-looking girl in a blue hoodie, it becomes apparent that here she is a figure of care and of hope. The song reaches its chorus and Bailey Rae is invigorated.

**Stop where you are/Under fading stars/This is the world we've made/And there is no better place, it's true/Light a fire where you are**

she sings, pushing her hands out to stop a raucous gang, who fall into slow-motion at her gesture.

After the heartbreak of losing Jason, Bailey Rae remarried in 2013. Her second husband, the musician Steve Brown, had worked with her since the start of her career, co-producing much of her music. In the immediate aftermath of Jason's death, Bailey Rae assumed she wouldn't meet anyone else, and thought she'd lost her opportunity to have children. (Bailey Rae and Brown now have two girls, aged three and five.) In this context, 'Stop Where You Are' draws on Bailey Rae's own revelation that, even after the worst loss imaginable, you can find happiness again – if you are ready to embrace it.

It's also an ode to acceptance. In the bridge, the song's climactic height, Bailey Rae runs up the stairs, jumping as she reaches the top. 'You can't stop the wild wind roaring/ but you can stop my poor heart from calling out,' she sings, over the loudest, most percussive music yet. For the first time, the video's stereotypically outcast characters turn their faces to the sunlight, and Bailey Rae raises her arms to the sky, as if succumbing to whatever lies ahead.

Despite the pressure the singer felt from her record label to 'get a hit', *The Heart Speaks in Whispers* wasn't commercially successful, and none of its singles charted. (Justin Timberlake, Calvin Harris, Rihanna and Sia were topping the charts at the time, the public favouring their

straightforward high-pop anthems over Bailey Rae's more introspective approach.) Looking back on the process of making the album now, Bailey Rae remembers feeling 'crushed under the weight of gate-keeping myself. I would think: 'What's the point of even finishing this, this doesn't sound like an international mega smash!' Which is so sad.'

But the process made her realise what she really wanted out of her music career. When she was struggling to finish the album, a record executive said to her: 'It's like trying to get into a club – you have to have the right tie on, or the right shoes.' She was 'desperately' trying to figure out the 'right' kind of song that would give her another hit. Until she realised: 'Actually, I don't want to be at this club. I want to be outside.'

On 'Stop Where You Are', Bailey Rae guides others towards happiness. It was only after releasing the song that she allowed herself to truly find it too. For her subsequent album, *Black Rainbows* (2023), she ignored public and industry expectations of what a Bailey Rae song is and instead followed her own interests, releasing a wide-ranging collection of pop, rock, punk, electronica and soul songs. Bailey Rae had found musical freedom, and the sentiment of 'Stop Where You Are' rang truer than ever:

**Life's shining around you/Don't miss a day/  
If you're caught up the chase/You hold your  
happiness away from you.**

Ellen Peirson-Hagger is Assistant Culture Editor at the *New Statesman* magazine

Looking back on the process of making the album now, Bailey Rae remembers feeling 'crushed under the weight of gate-keeping myself. I would think: 'What's the point of even finishing this, this doesn't sound like an international mega smash!' Which is so sad.'



Photography by Koto Bololo

Victor Martin/Unsplash



from the *MM* vaults

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Read Ellen's full interview with Corinne Bailey Rae in the *New Statesman*: <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/music/2023/09/corinne-bailey-raes-radical-return>

The Theory Drop  
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## Curran and Seaton and the Murdoch Dynasty

Curran and Seaton may sound like a law firm or an estate agents but as you know, James Curran and Jean Seaton are leading media academics and feature on the list of set theorists, as part of your A Level Media Studies course. Jonathan Nunns uses the Murdoch dynasty to explain their ideas about profit and power.

**W**hat is Curran and Seaton's big idea about the media? In short, that the global capitalist companies that control most of the western media, are fixated on obtaining two things- Profit and Power.

So what does that mean in practice? The global media players, such as Facebook, Google, Apple and Disney seek to develop a vice-like control over the sectors in which they operate. They do this by buying out or bankrupting the competition. Take for instance, Disney's acquisition of Pixar Studios, Lucasfilm, Marvel and 21st Century Fox. The purchase of these companies removed large swathes

of the direct market competition to Disney, provided them with a wide range of exploitable film franchises and enhanced Disney's increasing dominance within the Hollywood film industry. Such concentration of ownership, according to Curran and Seaton, not only restricts competition; it also restricts the products available to the public to those the vertically and horizontally integrated conglomerates want to provide. These tend to be franchise properties with large fan bases and strong brand awareness. These can be exploited across multiple platforms, such as film, TV, video games and merchandize. See for instance Disney's success with

Star Wars across the existing film franchise and TV spin-offs such as *The Mandalorian*. The problem, as pointed out by the renowned director Martin Scorsese, is that they produce 'Perfect products manufactured for immediate consumption' but lacking in 'The unifying vision of an individual artist': a viewpoint which suggests corporate Hollywood strongly favours proven franchise formulas over risk taking auteurs.

Concentration of ownership leads to concentration of financial power, as a lucrative sector increasingly falls into the hands of a shrinking group of exceptionally powerful CEOs. As with the influence demonstrated by tech

Since the Murdoch paper's (successful) endorsement of Margaret Thatcher for Conservative Prime Minister in 1979, every subsequent Prime Ministerial hopeful has sought to kiss the ring and gain the approval of the Murdoch Press.

giants such as Amazon and Facebook, such global companies are frequently able to escape national regulation by offshoring their assets and minimising their tax liabilities (the practice of companies registering in countries with very low tax rates, to minimise their tax bills on profits made elsewhere in the world).

Such influence includes the application of pressure to politicians to create national economic and political environments sympathetic to continued corporate profitability and growth. In practice, this might include pressure upon governments to remove restrictive national media regulations or to allow the normalization of international corporate influence over national cultures: see the influence of Disney over mainstream TV/film content and distribution, in the US and the wider western world. This is a strategy which has made these companies politically influential and very rich. Apple for instance, is now the wealthiest company that has ever existed. That, in essence, is Curran and Seaton's thesis: that profit leads to power and power over a successful industry in turn leads to further profit.

## Is Old Media Old News?

So what of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation: a global media empire, heavily invested in News and TV, which in September 2023 saw something it had not experienced in the previous 70 years. Rupert Murdoch, the founder and chairman of News Corporation stepped back at the age of 92, passing the chairmanship (and the corporate reins) to his son Lachlan, the most politically right-wing of the Murdoch children and in the end, the most attuned to the views and aspirations of Rupert Murdoch himself. In so doing, Murdoch ended an ongoing saga which has fascinated media pundits and theorists for the last twenty years. To whom would the crown go, once the old man stepped down?

This question became such an enduring obsession, that it became the subject of a wide range of books, several TV documentaries, endless articles like this one and the highly acclaimed HBO TV series *Succession*.



Based on the Murdochs,  
*Succession's* Roy family

In the Emmy award winning show, the utterly horrible adult children of the tyrannical patriarch and media boss Logan Roy, fight 'like cats in a bag' to obtain the succession. The ultimate prize? To become the anointed one, the next in the dynasty to lead the fictional Waystar-Royco Corporation into the future. Able to control the news agenda, subvert or control governments and most importantly, sift, select and effectively appoint the next candidate to become President of the United States.

The key Roy siblings Kendal, Roman and Siobhan, bear some literal and figurative resemblance to real life Murdoch siblings, James, Lachlan and Elizabeth, all of whom have at one time or another, been tipped to take the crown that now belongs to Lachlan.

So why should we care if an old media company, a one-time apex predator, but now well past the peak of its power, changes hands? After all, Murdoch senior sold most of the company's entertainment assets in 2019, with 21st Century Fox going to Disney and Sky TV sold to the TV giant Comcast, in a staggeringly lucrative seventy-one billion dollar deal. Well, whilst those companies certainly

delivered profit, they were perhaps less effective in delivering power. Sky News for instance, was locked into the same regulatory rules on impartiality as the other major UK TV news outlets like the BBC and Channel 4. Ironically, it has been the smaller, noisier (and non-Murdoch) hard-right channel GB News that has been able to promote right wing causes, agendas and conspiracy theories in the UK, leading to almost constant fights with the broadcast media regulator Ofcom.

## Profit and Power

In Murdoch senior's world, it was his UK newspapers, his broadsheet outlet *The Times* and his tabloid, *The Sun*, which gave him the power to bully and manipulate politicians. In particular, the 'attack dog' reputation of *The Sun*, a specialist in political take downs, has always had politicians of all parties scrambling for Murdoch's approval. Since the Murdoch paper's (successful) endorsement of Margaret Thatcher for Conservative Prime Minister in 1979, every subsequent Prime Ministerial hopeful has sought to kiss the ring and gain the approval of the Murdoch Press. Even now, at



Concentration of ownership leads to concentration of financial power, as a lucrative sector increasingly falls into the hands of a shrinking group of exceptionally powerful CEOs.

time of writing, there is speculation as to whether it will be Keir Starmer's Labour or Rishi Sunak's Conservatives that will secure the Murdoch family nod and the undoubted political advantage that goes with it. As major UK news outlets, *The Times* and *The Sun* seek to influence their readerships, pushing hard to swing their votes behind the political party which makes the most credible offer to Murdoch or, as is often speculated, simply becomes the most likely to win. Rupert Murdoch always loved to back a winner, in order to be seen as a winner and kingmaker himself.

For years, the Murdoch press supported the idea of a Brexit referendum, preparing the ground with a political drip effect, generating and normalising anti-European stereotypes based on constant negative reporting. In so doing, pro-leave public opinion was hardened in preparation for the referendum which followed.

In the US, it was Murdoch senior's Fox News Channel which dominated. A right-wing, politically influential channel, unencumbered by the impartiality rules that shape mainstream UK news outlets, it is a near perfect demonstration of how

profit and power accumulate. Fox News overtook its established US TV rivals to become massively lucrative by pushing ideologically-driven right-wing 'infotainment' into millions of American homes. Fox News supported and empowered Donald Trump as the Murdoch-approved candidate, boosting his successful Presidential run in 2016. Since both the Brexit referendum and the original Trump election were close contests, without Murdoch it is possible that the world might not have been subjected to either.

In fairness, Rupert Murdoch cannot be blamed for all the chaos and division of the modern world, there have been so many who have contributed to that, but without him, it would almost certainly be less fractious and divided than it currently is. Look at the existential problem of climate change. A long-time climate sceptic, Murdoch's media power in Australia promoted climate scepticism in the Australian government for years, delaying essential steps from being taken on the road to net-zero.

So, should we care that Rupert Murdoch has stepped back, moving at least metaphorically to the back seat of the car? Should we care that

his billionaire son has been gifted so much power? Yes, we should. At a key historical moment, the most right-wing of the Murdoch children has been given immense influence in the shaping of the world to come. With pivotal elections coming in the US and UK in 2024/2025, Murdoch media power can and will inevitably make a difference. Curran and Seaton's theory features in their book *Power Without Responsibility*: a title that has always been meaningful, never more so that it is right now.

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

### from the MM vaults

Curran and Seaton – Is Rupert Murdoch 'fit and proper' to run Sky Television? – Nick Lacey, MM62

Hacked to Death: How Humble Pie Arrived on Murdoch's Menu – Rona Murray, MM38

A close-up photograph of a woman's face, focusing on her eyes and lips. She has red lipstick on. A blue object, possibly a pen or pencil, is held near her eye. The background is blurred.

*Promising  
Young Woman*





Not as sweet as she looks:  
Carey Mulligan as Cassie

When a new selection of films is introduced to specifications, it's always exciting, especially when the films reflect the cultural zeitgeist and offer teachers and students opportunities to have socially and culturally relevant conversations in the classroom. *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell 2020) is such a film and one that will divide opinion. *The Guardian's* Peter Bradshaw describes it as a 'playfully provocative and ingenious rape-revenge satire' which explores gender roles as well as alleged class entitlement. In the wake of multiple high-profile sexual assault trials in the entertainment industry and greater global awareness of the treatment of women, the film is a potent reminder that women can fight back and seek out justice.

### Context and #MeToo

In 2017 the #MeToo movement became viral in the wake of claims, largely by Hollywood actresses and crew members, of sexual assault by high-profile film producers, directors and industry personnel. It was instrumental in fuelling a much wider debate on the prevalence of toxic masculinity and the difficulty that women have in

The narrative themes could make audiences uncomfortable, the entrapment of these men by Cassie will provoke debate. There will, justifiably, be arguments to suggest that not all men would take advantage of drunk women in a vulnerable situation but Fennell's movie positions us to see, through the eyes of the singularly-focused Cassie, the potential danger in all men.



Moviestore Collection Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

seeking out justice for sexual assault on a global scale. In Hollywood, many studio heads would threaten to ruin an actress' career if they went public. However, as a result of so many victims coming forward, convictions against some of these predators were made, including producer Harvey Weinstein who is now serving a 39-year sentence for his attacks on women.

## A Promising Young Woman

*Promising Young Woman* is a brilliant black comedy that examines the frustration and anger felt by women who have been assaulted: the protagonist embracing her rage and redirecting back at men in an attempt to remedy the problem. Cassandra or 'Cassie' (an aptly named main character based on the Greek myth who entangles men and then betrays them) played by Carrie Mulligan, is a medical school dropout who left after an undefined personal trauma involving her best friend and now works in a coffee shop. She is an emotionally-wounded sociopath who lives with her parents (Jennifer Coolidge and Clancy Brown) who are deeply concerned over her lack of social life and partner (they buy her a suitcase for her 30th birthday as a less than subtle hint to move out). This relationship with her parents and sense of unfulfillment in her job is overruled by a deep loneliness and

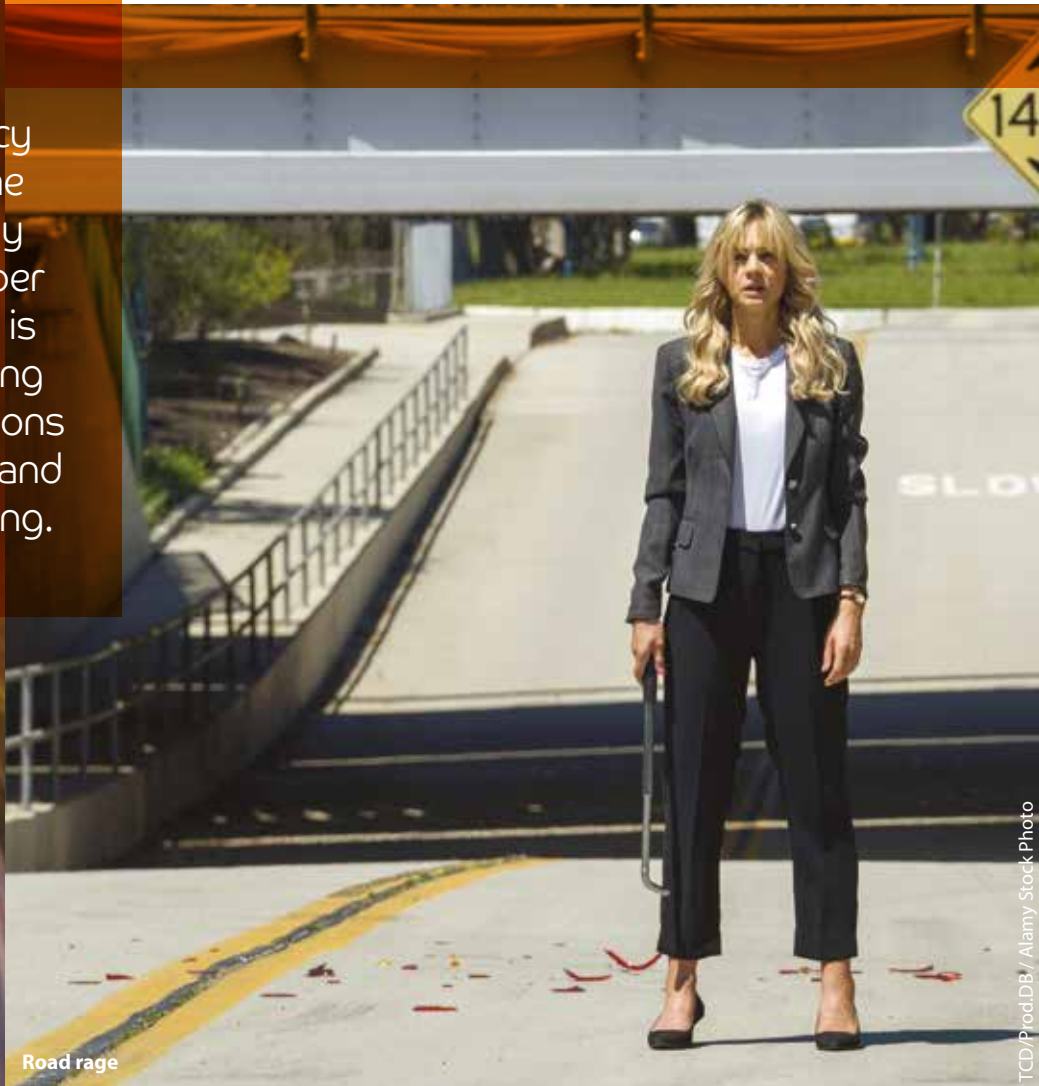
grieving for her friend Nina. The mise-en-scène constantly refers to images of them playing as children and the friendship necklaces that they each wore. Cassie exudes traditional notions of femininity through her pastel clothing, floral patterns and hair ribbons as well as her quiet disposition in her daytime activities which is an obvious misguidance for the audience. The grief and trauma that Cassie feels fuels her alternative night-time pursuits. She trawls nightclubs pretending to be drunk in order to lure men who claim to be 'nice guys', these men attempting to take advantage of her until her sobriety makes them question their actions. Mulligan's icy stare as she immediately appears sober to the men, is quite terrifying as she questions their actions and moral standing.

## Audience Perspective

From an audience perspective, the film is fascinating as, from the outset *Promising Young Woman* has the ability to provoke a range of responses. The narrative and themes could make audiences uncomfortable, the entrapment of these men by Cassie will provoke debate. There will, justifiably, be arguments to suggest that not all men would take advantage of drunk women in a vulnerable situation but Fennell's movie positions us to see, through the eyes of the singularly-focused Cassie, the potential danger in *all* men, even the 'nice guys'. An aspect of Barbara Creed's 'Monstrous feminine' theory suggests that female sexual agency is presented as a threat; this can certainly be applied here (and in many other rape-revenge films). Female viewers may find themselves empowered by the 'castrating' woman taking her revenge on male predators.

The opening scene is worth analysing from an audience perspective but also in establishing the clear ideological viewpoints in the film, linked to feminism and toxic masculinity. We are positioned in a club with the diegetic soundtrack 'Boys' by Charli XCX playing over close-up shots of men's crotches thrusting ridiculously on the dancefloor in unison as they hold beers in their hands. The men are all in their thirties and forties and are wearing work attire suggesting a post-work all-male gathering. There are very few women in the room. This blatant depiction of 'lad culture' immediately sets up a toxic atmosphere which is reiterated by a group of men at the bar who are criticising a female colleague who has complained about holding meetings in an all-male golf club ('Fuck her' is the first line in the film in reference to her). It is following this conversation that their attention is drawn to a woman (Cassie) who is sprawled across a banquette and they begin commenting on how morally wrong it is for girls

Mulligan's icy stare as she immediately appears sober to the men, is quite terrifying as she questions their actions and moral standing.



Road rage

TCD/Prod.DB / Alamy Stock Photo

to 'put themselves in that position, especially with the guys in this place'. Jerry, the most sensible and smart 'nice guy' clearly disturbed by his friends' willingness to exploit the situation, offers to help her by getting a cab only to take her to his apartment to ply her with more drinks. As he puts her on the bed and attempts to have sex with her Cassie breaks the fourth wall by looking directly at the camera and now completely sober, says: 'Hey what are you doing?'. This shocks both the audience and Jerry who were not expecting this outcome and it's our first insight into her revenge agenda. As daylight dawns in the following scene, we see Cassie nonchalantly walking back from Jerry's apartment eating a sandwich. There are splashes of red on her clothing. She later marks his name off in her notebook suggesting her retribution enacted on these men goes beyond a verbal exchange into something much deeper and much darker.

### Cassandra's Endgame

Cassandra's revenge journey is structured into chapters, a series of revenge 'missions' leading to a big finale. It's gradually revealed that Cassie's childhood friend Nina has taken her own life,

having been overcome with shame following the attack at college. The rape, we learn, was carried out at a party by the now highly successful doctor Al Munroe, when Nina was drunk. The rape was witnessed by a group of male med students, filmed and shared around campus. A female former med student who has now married and become a 'respectable' wife and mom, following her wild days at college, is Cassie's first revenge mission. She gets her drunk and makes her believe, to her horror, that she has slept with a stranger. When she finally confronts Cassie about this and is told the truth she gives Cassie an old Blackberry which has the video of Nina's attack saved onto it. Cassie also targets a female Dean at the medical school who knew about the rape but in the absence of concrete proof, chose to protect Al Munroe's reputation and future career. Fennel is creating a commentary here on middle-class privilege and suggesting that these men have 'got away with it' because of their position and wealth. Her final act is to disrupt the bachelor party and wedding of Al, the successful doctor and his bikini-model partner Anastasia, thereby bringing about a form of justice for her friend.

The denouement of the film will divide the audience as many will actively question why Cassie has essentially sacrificed herself in the name of revenge against the patriarchal system. The sexy nurse outfit with pastel wig and red lipstick that she wears to Al's bachelor party is almost clownlike in its appearance, yet she convincingly enters the party and manages to drug all the men with laced alcohol. She then takes Al upstairs who, when confronted about Nina, panics and suffocates Cassie in a horrific drawn-out sequence. Her screams are heard, Al repeatedly shouts at her to stop moving and the sinister diegetic music that accompanies the scene, ends as she lies motionless. Her face is not shown again, only her body in an overhead shot lying prostrate on the bed. Fennel deliberately takes her time over the death, making the viewing even more disturbing and the act more visceral and upsetting. We are led to believe this outcome was not Cassie's intention but in a final act of revenge we learn of the insurance plan she has put in place should she meet her demise.

As the final sequence begins, the audience are provoked into anger that Al and his accomplice Joe (who helps dispose of Cassie's body) have not been punished; they are shown enjoying Al's wedding celebrations in a beautiful forest setting. This is soon remedied though, when Ryan, who Cassie had been dating, receives a scheduled text from her stating 'You didn't think this was the end did you?'. This is crosscut with footage of a lawyer receiving the phone containing the video of Nina's attack. Police sirens are heard and Al is arrested for Cassie's murder. Although the ending feels a little rushed and somewhat contrived it nevertheless delivers to the audience a satisfactory conclusion in that the 'promising young men' so protected and coveted by the patriarchy and privilege, have finally been punished for their actions. It will certainly provide students with a wealth of material to construct valid discussions on spectatorship and ideologies.

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Sue Barnard teaches Film Studies at Durham Sixth Form Centre.

## In loving memory of our colleague and friend, Sue Barnard.



Sue Barnard has been a regular contributor to *MediaMagazine* in recent years. She was a talented writer, artist

and illustrator with a deep passion for film, education and creativity. Sue worked for a number of years as a locations manager and assistant director in the film industry before completing two MAs: one in Film and another in Education. She taught a variety of subjects for over 20 years but her main focus was Film and Media Studies.

As Sue's editor, she was a dream to work with – passionate and knowledgeable, able to write beautifully on any film I commissioned her to write about. She was funny and interesting over email and I enjoyed swapping opinions and recommendations for films and books. I will miss her very much.

She leaves behind a husband, Chris and two daughters, Milla and Maisie who describe her as a beautiful, happy and caring mother.

Rest in peace Sue Barnard – 1970- 2023

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Claire Pollard, *MM* Editor



from the *MM* vaults

Mothers and Other Monsters –  
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# Creating Connections

## COVID, Context and Animal Crossing New Horizons

All images from Nookipedia



The much-anticipated release of Nintendo's *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* coincided with a time when many people were confined to their homes during the pandemic. Grace Eardley asks if this example of the social simulation genre was the perfect lockdown game.

A better world:  
images from  
*Animal Crossing  
New Horizons*

Picture the scene: it's March 20th 2020. Around the world, the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic are finally hitting home. In many nations, stricter social distancing laws are being enforced and limitations are being placed on how we live our day-to-day lives. In many cases, schools were shut, workers furloughed and social circles reduced. As people started to accept this new reality, many people quite understandably looked to media for comfort and solace.

### Release Timing

If we zoom in on that exact date - March 20th, 2020 - this was not only the date Netflix dropped all the episodes of *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness*, but also the day Nintendo released the much-anticipated fifth instalment of the *Animal Crossing* franchise, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*.



This game went on to be a pandemic sensation, breaking numerous records. The release even caused a spike in Nintendo Switch console sales as new players wanted to join in. The soothing, slow-paced mechanics and the ability to meet up with others in-game meant that *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* appeared to meet many of our basic human needs for community, engagement, purpose, and autonomy which were all hard to come by at this time of isolation.

## A Franchise 20 Years in the Making

It must be said that the phenomenal sales in 2020 of *Animal Crossing* were not purely brought about by the fortuitous release date. At the time of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*' release the franchise had been almost twenty years in the making. The original *Animal Crossing* game was developed and released in 2001 in Japan for The GameCube console, with multiple versions available since across various Nintendo consoles and typically 4-year gaps between each release.

2012's *Animal Crossing A New Leaf*, available on the Nintendo 3DS showcased the most customisation thus far, remaining a firm fan favourite possibly due to these customisation opportunities (naming your town, planting trees, designing a town flag and spending countless hours beautifying your village). Although other iterations in the franchise did attain some commercial successes, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* broke the console game record for most digital units sold in a single month: 11.77 million copies in just 12 days! (For comparison, *A New Leaf* sold 2 million copies in the first 2 months.) A few weeks later, the total figure recorded was 13.41 million.

## The Genre

Social simulation games are, as the name suggests, a sub-genre of games that simulate certain aspects of human social life. Typically, in 'social sims' players can do things like have conversations, host parties, and maybe even build or cultivate something. In some games you might raise a family or build or sustain a civilisation. In this genre there are often opportunities for

optimal customising, and more recently sharing customisations has become a big part of game participation and online culture. Additionally, in social sims narratives are quite often open-ended; meaning that there is not one set linear route and players can have autonomy over how they go about gameplay.

## Connecting and Meeting Human Needs in Gameplay

In David Gauntlett's *Making is Connecting* (2018) he writes that

**Making is connecting because acts of creativity usually involve, at some point, a social dimension, and connect us with other people' and 'through making things and sharing them in the world, we increase our engagement and connection with our social and physical environments.**

In the book Gauntlett points to some happiness/well-being research. The factors that make for 'flourishing' and happy humans have been debated. Although it is mostly agreed that some form of social participation is important for our well-being. Gauntlett points to Anand (2016) who puts forward the case that for humans

The soothing, slow-paced mechanics and the ability to meet up with others in-game meant that *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* appeared to meet many of our basic human needs for community, engagement, purpose, and autonomy.



to truly 'flourish', they need to have access to things like: fairness, autonomy, community, and engagement. These were things that, for many people, vanished during the lockdowns. Yet accessing these needs became readily available through *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* participation.

## Engagement via Updates and Expansions

Developers' updates are one way that video games institutions can maintain longevity for a title. Rolling out regular free updates is an important and strategic way to keep audiences (players) engaged over time. Nintendo's 'Nintendo Directs' are a central strategy for this institution. The run up to these presentations cause much hype, speculation and sharing online. One significant European update for *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* landed in Autumn 2020. This free update (the '1.5.0 - Fall Update') landed approximately six months after the game's release, seeing additions like Pumpkin Farming and the Halloween event which included the arrival of Jack, the Czar of Halloween, who players could interact with. This seasonal update boosted engagement if it was ever lulling and contributed to creative sharing online.

There were more free updates across 2020-2021. And just under a year after the 2020 'Fall Update', the free 2.0 updated version of the game landed in November 2021. To tie in with this free update, Nintendo also released a paid product which took the form of 'The Happy Home Paradise' Expansion Pack. This paid DLC (downloadable content) sustained engagement further with extended customisation opportunities. In this DLC player can travel to some luxury holiday islands and design holiday homes for a host of villagers.



## Purpose and Slow Pace: Extended Engagement

Slow gameplay is integral to *Animal Crossing*; the game's mechanics work to keep players engaged at a gentle but purposeful pace. The soothing aspect has led to some people to categorise the game under the 'cosy game' label. For example, in gameplay you can only progress so far in one day. It takes a couple of days before you unlock the airport to invite and visit others, and tasks like collecting and donating enough creatures to open a museum can take 2-3 days. This aspect of delaying progression each day leaves players with prolonged time to engage in seemingly menial island tasks like collecting weeds or searching the beach. Players can also take their customised designs to new levels.

## Autonomy: Deep Customisation and Sharing

As you may have deduced, *Animal Crossing* as a franchise has minimal peril, little combat and the open narratives in this game and other social sims mean that the games are in some way unwinnable. What *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* does have in abundance is opportunities for customising and sharing said customisations.

The game offers many customisation options



One of the taglines used in original marketing was, 'Your island, your life...your way.' Willing away hours and days customising your island space was, of course, a great salve for many during the lockdown periods.



In fact, one of the taglines used in original marketing was, 'Your island, your life...your way.' Willing away hours and days customising your island space was, of course, a great salve for many during the lockdown periods. You can customise buildings, your environment, outfits, your appearance. Getting the custom designs app on the in-game Nook phone allows players to create and scan QR codes to get designs created by others.

## Community

Players can share customisations on online platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and YouTube, and Nookipedia – the community-driven AC encyclopaedia. On YouTube, UK-based creators like '@Fleurs' have established a solid community via sharing tips and their customised builds. These builds are often around a theme and show some major commitment, including quite recently a Barbie dreamhouse. These participatory community spaces remain meaningful social spaces for connecting with others, sharing and learning well beyond *Animal Crossing: New Horizons'* initial release in 2020.

So, what can we take away from all this? Firstly, the release date for *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* was significant and did have significant impact on Nintendo's profits, but it's also important to remember other factors. After all, this franchise had been almost 20 years in the making, and

Nintendo draw upon decades of marketing strategies to gain and extend participation amongst audiences. In terms of the social sim genre, the conventions of this play a part in the appeal of the franchise and aspects such as the slow-paced progression and customisation provide enduring ways to participate and share.

In *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* the ways in which the game's mechanics carved out a space for human needs like engagement, autonomy and community are all noteworthy. These aspects could be a good starting point for steering research. If you are compiling a case study, you could be asking questions about what sort of communities are out there. Do the game's mechanics or Nintendo's marketing contribute to the franchise's enduring appeal? How does sharing within online communities encourage participation and meaning amongst players? And, as online participation is always evolving, it is worth investigating up-to-date *Animal Crossing* user-generated content, especially customisations shared on platforms such as Twitch, Discord and Nookipedia.

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**Grace Eardley is a film and media educator, writer and researcher.**

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A photograph of Pedro Pascal and Bella Ramsey from the HBO series 'The Last of Us'. Pedro Pascal is on the left, wearing a dark jacket and a watch, with a rifle slung over his shoulder. Bella Ramsey is on the right, wearing a red jacket and a backpack. They are standing behind a stone wall with green ivy growing on it. The background is a brick wall with more ivy.

# THE LAST OF US

## AND TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING

Pedro Pascal and Bella Ramsey as  
Joel and Ellie in the HBO series

**Stephen O'Connor didn't think it was possible to create a TV or film adaptation of an immersive video game that would be able to do the original text justice. But the recent HBO adaptation of *The Last of Us* has got him reconsidering this thesis.**

In 2012, I finished the final touches to my undergraduate dissertation. It was titled '*Resident Evil* and the Videogame Adaptation'. Quite a simple title, for a simple premise - to summarise in less than 10,000 words: film adaptations of videogames are rubbish. I had focused particularly on the *Resident Evil* franchise, and had generally found that the films showed little fidelity to the original texts, and because of this, they were lacking in the atmosphere that made the survival horror games so fantastic.

Cut forward two years to 2014 - I am finishing my Masters dissertation, this time speaking more generally about 7th and 8th generation videogames and adaptation of narrative tropes. I focused on a game that had just swept the videogame awards circuit: *The Last of Us*. I was enamoured with this game - a beautiful story set in a dying and desperate post-apocalyptic landscape. The basic premise is that a fungal parasite (Cordyceps) has infected the human race, and has left a desperate world in its wake, ravaged by ongoing battles between a totalitarian



government trying to retain control, and a violent, rebel group calling themselves 'the Fireflies' attempting to fight back. The player joins this story by playing alternately as two characters – Joel, a jaded, middle-aged man struggling to stay afloat in the middle of this conflict, and Ellie, an orphaned teenager who has developed immunity to the parasite. Both end up on the same journey from East to West in the United States, potentially trying to secure the future of humanity.

The game's many themes are broad, but pulled off fantastically: love,

fatherhood, loneliness, brutality and the ultimate choice of saving the world vs saving one person. In my eyes, it was perfect, and I used it as an example to show that videogames were meeting the competing needs of consumers that sought cinematic spectacle in new forms. Henry Jenkins might call them 'transmedia narratives' - narratives that cross different technologies and old/new media forms. At this time, I didn't really think about whether it would make a good TV adaptation – *Game of Thrones* was just finding its feet, and *The Walking Dead* was shambling its way to a fourth series, its quality degrading with each episode like a zombie without sustenance. Deep down, I thought this game was already perfect – how could a film or TV adaptation do it justice? I parked my brain, and let the overwhelming wave of streaming, gaming and social media wash over me for the following decade.

Slow fade out, and even slower fade into the intertitle, 'January 2023'. Gustavo Santaolalla's famous theme music plays...

## 'Please Hold to My Hand'

Before we visit the show itself, we need to discuss ludology vs narratology. Media theorists for several decades now have explored how the main difference between videogames and traditional audio-visual media is that videogames are defined by their interactivity and playability (ludology); the active audience (the player) must make conscious choices throughout their game playing experience, whereas the film or TV viewer is, to some extent passive: they must consume the narrative that the director has presented to them.

For example, in the all-conquering *Minecraft* - a very different game to *The Last of Us* and the best-selling individual game of all time, the player must make active decisions constantly – crafting items and surviving the many enemies and hazards the world entails. Yes, you can go slay the Ender Dragon (maybe the only real form of traditional narratology embedded in the story), but that's not really the point is it...



An existing, highly successful and popular franchise to base the show on? Check.

A conventional narrative of a dystopian, zombie infested future – à la George Romero & NBC's *The Walking Dead*? You bet.

A popular lead actor? Pedro Pascal, the TikTok-famous charisma machine, steps right up.

In fact, on paper, *The Last of Us* has very little to suggest that it could be a failure. It seems like a checklist of popular and safe genre tropes, with a sizable budget (reportedly over \$100 million) and a strong cast of known actors. However, it carries one particular piece of baggage - the one I started this article by describing and that has plagued TV and film ever since the days of the dreaded *Super Mario Bros* (1993) - film adaptations of videogames are rubbish.

### 'When We Are In Need'

When the show was finally released in the UK of January 2023 (broadcasting early morning on Sky Atlantic, but perhaps more importantly streaming on Sky and Now TV), the first episode gave viewers a mixture of fidelity to the original text, but also a realisation that

you have a blocky universe to build and survive in!

However, many other Triple AAA games are clearly trying to tell a more linear story - such as Rockstar's *Red Dead Redemption 2* or Sony Interactive's *God of War*. You become a specific character, voiced by a real actor and the cutscenes in the game will usually direct you to a certain narrative conclusion. These games craft and develop characters and narratives just as films do, with one major difference. Whereas in a film it tends to be all over in 90-150 minutes (maybe more if it's a recent superhero film), and in a TV show maybe 10 hours, in a game you might spend between 15-100+ hours with a character or cast of characters. There is far more time to develop characterisation and immerse yourself in the world.

Many who feel videogames do not translate across to TV and film, do so because of this lack of development of character; hence many poorly received films such as *Assassin's Creed* (2016), which cannot develop a narrative that pleases either critics or general audiences (*Assassin's Creed* failed on both counts, with a 19% critic and 42% audience score on Rotten Tomatoes).

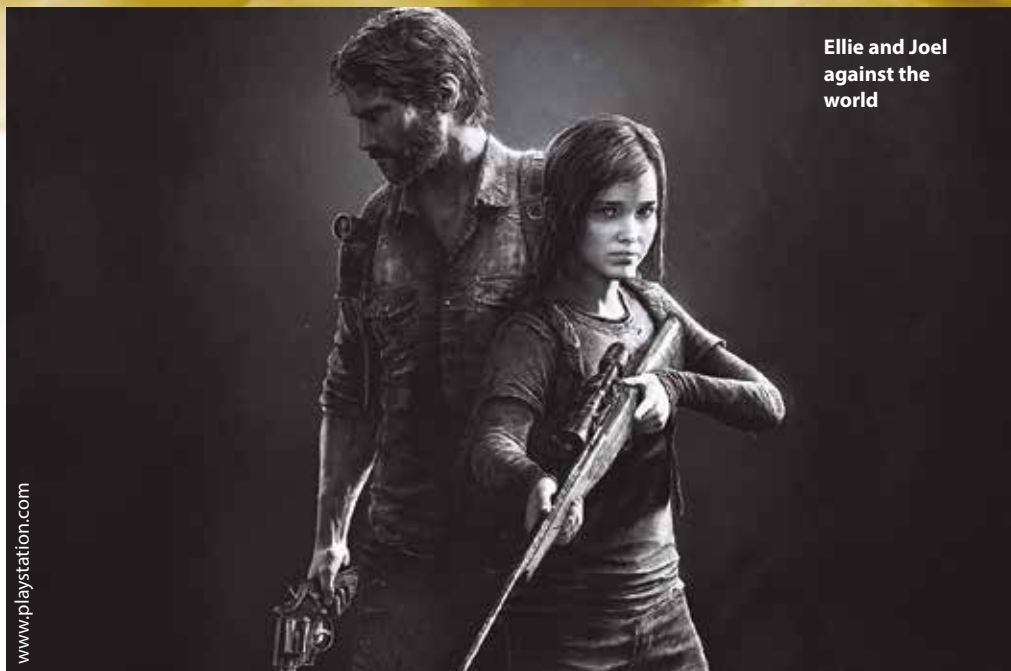
So, does *The Last of Us* break through, where other videogame adaptations have failed in the past?

### 'Endure and Survive'

David Hesmondhalgh's work, as referred to as part of the A Level media framework, discusses how cultural industries often minimise risk to maximise profit. Although not a fully integrated product of one particular conglomerate (*The Last of Us* TV show being a product of Sony and Warner), the show can be analysed through the lens of this part of Hesmondhalgh's theory.



Ellie and Joel  
against the  
world



At the end of the series, the show was critically well received by new audiences, unfamiliar with the game and with the notoriously-hard-to-please videogame die-hards.

a carbon copy would not suffice as a 10 episode long-form television drama.

Creator Craig Mazin, and the original game's Creative Director, Neil Druckmann, were two figures instrumental in the game coming alive on the screen. HBO clearly showed that minimising risk was key in the production by giving Druckmann such a key role in the adaptation

The original game centres around two main protagonists, Joel and Ellie, and the introduction to the game, and first episode of the TV Show, shows how Joel's world cruelly comes crashing down when the fungus grips his neighbourhood. Joel's daughter, Sarah, takes centre stage, just as the player takes control of her character at the start of the game. The key, pivotal events in the first episode of the HBO drama are almost a shot-for-shot remake of the game's cutscenes showing faith in the original text and the emotional pay-off of Sarah's death remains the same as it did 10 years ago on my first playthrough.

The show's third episode 'A Long, Long Time' which has been lauded by some critics and fans as one of the best pieces of television of the 2020s, did something slightly different by giving two characters with relatively limited screen time in the game, a much more developed backstory. The directors were brave and creative in the way they adapted the original text focusing in more depth on the touching relationship between Bill and Frank.

At the end of the series, the show was critically well received by new audiences, unfamiliar with the game and with the notoriously-hard-to-please videogame die-hards.

### 'Look for the Light'

So, does *The Last of Us's* success mean that the curse of the critically-panned and lazy video game adaptation is over? Well... maybe?!

In April of 2023, a *Super Mario Bros* adaptation was released which has currently grossed over \$1 billion - and although is far more mainstream and simplistic than *The Last of Us*, it would seem the doorway for videogame-to-film adaptations has swung right open.

*The Last of Us* proves that you can be faithful to a text, but certain elements can be refreshed and changed to supply an element of the unknown to new audiences. There is a certain safety

net for large conglomerates with the familiarity of the franchise recognition, and a pre-existing audience already waiting for a faithfully adapted, shorter form of AV media. Perhaps *The Last of Us* shows that long-form television can be a new haven for critically lauded, narrative-driven video games - with some breathing room to develop characters, but also defined boundaries to keep budgets in check.

Now, to wait for *The Last of Us* season 2 in 2025, and that *Bioshock* adaptation, currently being produced by Netflix. Fingers crossed!

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### from the MM vaults

Press X to Skip – Nick Samsworth, MM62

Games Without Frontiers: An interview with Keith Stuart - MM85



# IRANIAN CINEMA

Beyzaa Yurtkuran/Pexels

**The politics of Iran have always shaped the films produced both at home and abroad. Keith Roberts discusses how cultural and political contexts are reflected in *A Separation* and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* and wonders how the Iranian films will respond to recent feminist protests.**

**C**inema in Iran has a long, fascinating and often troubled history. Cinemas first opened up in Tehran in 1904 but it wasn't until the early 1990s that women were first allowed to enter cinemas. Throughout this history, the relationship between Iran's cinema, its people and its government is a fractious and complex one.

A closer study of Iranian cinema and a look at the incomprehensible list of restrictions within which its film industry operates, reveals the dominant attitudes in this fundamentalist, theocratic state and highlights everything that the regime opposes.

Film has always been seen and used as a political tool in Iran. During the Islamic Revolution of 1979 cinema in Iran became a focal point, targeted by both the regime and their opponents. Ayatollah Khomeini set the tone for his policies in the early days of the revolution by inciting his followers to set fire to Cinema Rex in Abadan, burning more than 350 moviegoers alive. After the revolution the same Ayatollah harnessed the power of cinema as a key tool in enforcing his fundamentalist, theocratic, patriarchal ideologies. What is fascinating about Iranian cinema is that it actually thrived under the severe restrictions imposed by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance post-revolution. In his interview with the Iranian journalist Shiva Rahbaran before his death in 2016, legendary filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami, compared Iranian filmmakers to

creative architects who 'might say that they built their best houses on a very difficult piece of land'. The creativity of filmmakers to work around such restrictions, combined with the fact that foreign films were banned, led to enormous popularity for Iranian cinema within Iran. That, in turn, led to more attention for Iranian cinema at international film festivals. Initially this development was also welcomed by the authorities as the regime realised it could use its National cinema as a means for showing a 'friendly face' abroad and to foster trade. However, it wasn't long before the filmmakers themselves started to use the status of Iranian film as a means of standing up for the rights of those oppressed and targeted by the regime. It is a fractious relationship and one that still creates many anomalies for filmmakers and the authorities today.

Ashgar Farhadi's heartbreakingly stunning *A Separation* (2016), a film about a marriage that dissolves over the question of whether or not to leave Iran for a better life, perfectly encapsulates the subtle ways in which filmmakers inwardly imply their concerns, rather than outwardly express them. When asked by a court judge 'So the children living in this country don't have a future?' Simin, her expression cast in stone, replies, 'As a mother, I'd rather she didn't grow up in these circumstances.' And here lies the anomaly. Farhadi's multi-award-winning film, including the Oscar for best foreign language film, walks that tightrope between a harrowing



*A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* remains an empowering protest against patriarchal rule and toxic masculinity. Amirpour readily admits that there's no way she would ever have been able to make the film in Iran.

and at times explosive examination of life under such a regime and the international acclaim and kudos that winning the Oscar brings. The win, at the time a first for an Iranian film, was celebrated on the streets of Iran in much the same way their football team is celebrated when qualifying for the World Cup Finals. *A Separation* also perfectly demonstrates the art of the Iranian filmmaker by using many of the subtle, established techniques employed to tell their difficult stories (often from the perspective of a child, or the aged). Look at how Nader's elderly father, lost to dementia, is symbolic of the traditional fundamentalist regime; detached and out of touch with its younger people; how the daughter, in a commanding performance by the director's then 13-year-old daughter Sarina Farhadi, reflects the agonising conflict faced by the younger population whose loyalties between old and new ideologies are challenged on a daily basis. Note also how Farhadi continuously uses walls, doors and windows to obstruct our view and trap his characters into their situations. He creates an entire aesthetic of entrapment and oppression. Through these beautifully crafted visuals, the truth is there to be seen, not spoken through dialogue or actions, as that would raise suspicion and subject the film to serious censorship from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

It is this extreme level of censorship that has empowered filmmakers for decades now to create what Iranian journalist Naz Massoumi

describes as 'a cinema born out of poetry and resistance'. Today, Iranian cinema reveals many of the contradictions of life under a theocracy. The Ministry of Culture forbids unflattering portrayals of Islam, women, the nation and its history. But these rules are vague, and censorship of Iranian films is inconsistent, often based on the tastes of individual officials. Under these rules the representation and portrayal of women is one of the most controversial in all of world cinema. Women have been forbidden to be shown without their head scarves, even at home and whilst sleeping. Women aren't allowed to be seen in a bedroom with any man. And in 2021 Iranian women were banned from eating pizza and drinking soft drinks on screen.


Most recently, of course, Iran has experienced unprecedented levels of public protest which erupted in the late summer of 2022 following the death in custody of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old woman who was detained by morality police for allegedly wearing her hijab, or headscarf, 'improperly'. Thousands of people, including many Iranian actors, musicians and other celebrities have publicly backed the protests against the clerical establishment.

Against this background then, a viewing of Ana Lily Amirpour's *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* makes the film even more remarkable. Conceived, written and directed by Amirpour, a displaced Iranian woman living in Los Angeles, so much of the film takes on great symbolic defiance. Despite working in an environment that is poles apart from those of her compatriots and filming entirely in Taft, California, it is hard not to view this as a very clear finger in the eye of those who seek to silence protest against male control and the regime. Shot in stunning anamorphic, high-contrast black and white, accompanied with a dynamic and mesmerising soundtrack, the film subverts the freedoms that females are granted in Iran. Despite the title of the film

**Theocracy**  
– a country governed by religious leaders

**Recent protests in Iran**






Payman Maadi and Sareh Bayat in  
Farhadi's *A Separation*

Farhadi continuously uses walls, doors and windows to obstruct our view and trap his characters into their situations. He creates an entire aesthetic of entrapment and oppression.

playing into western notions of the girl as 'victim, Amirpour makes her young female lead a hero. The girl is not a victim of her environment, the fictitious Iranian 'Bad City': she is the predator, the judge and jury, targeting men around the city who abuse their powers and the women they ruthlessly exploit. The girl makes her unassuming appearance her weapon, empowering the very dress code that in western ideologies has become a potent symbol of oppression. In one of the film's key moments the girl warns the young street urchin to 'be a good boy' in a manner so terrifying it feels like a warning to all men everywhere to look closely at their attitudes and actions towards women. With a clear nod to abstract Lynchian worlds, spaghetti westerns, classic horror and even anime, Amirpour weaves an utterly compelling story that stands its ground against those who would might dismiss it as simply a 'strong feminist text'. It is that, but it does much more. Cinema is what the spectator makes of it, and for many, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* remains an empowering protest

against patriarchal rule and toxic masculinity. Amirpour readily admits that there's no way she would ever have been able to make the film in Iran and any attempt to do so would have led to imprisonment. One cannot help but wonder therefore how the film will have been received by those who have seen it (through the thriving Iranian market of illegal imports and bootlegged copies) particularly those in power.

As a result of the turmoil and protests currently taking place, in an interview with BBC news an Iranian film critic who wished to remain anonymous, stated that, like its country Iranian cinema is also facing a great dilemma as it can no longer film scenes where women are covering their hair in the house or sleeping with their headscarves on. Many big names have supported the protests or have removed their headscarves. Even if the Islamic Republic doesn't ban their acting, they wouldn't go back and wear headscarves in movies again as it would symbolise a retreat for them and a slap in the face of protesters.



An example of the sort of thing that can not be shown in Iranian films

Tima Miroshnichenko/Pexels

The representation and portrayal of women is one of the most controversial in all of world cinema [...] Women aren't allowed to be seen in a bedroom with any man. And in 2021 Iranian women were banned from eating pizza and drinking soft drinks on screen.

TCD/Prod.DB / Alamy Stock Photo

And so, amid all the protests, the arrests and the defiance of women through the removal of their hijabs, it is difficult to see how filmmakers based in Iran can ignore the crisis that is currently taking place. Surely their films will need to reflect the voice of the people if they are to stand any chance of maintaining relevance and importance in the cultural progression of the world's oldest country?

Keith Roberts is a Media Studies teacher and Professional Co-ordinating Mentor at Graveney School in London.

### Recommended Iranian Filmmakers to explore

Tamineh Milani  
Samira Makhmalbaf  
Pouan Derakhshandeh  
Jafar Panahi  
Abbas Kiarostami  
Mohsen Makhmalbaf



from the MM vaults

Taxi for Panahi – Sam Hiscock, MM65

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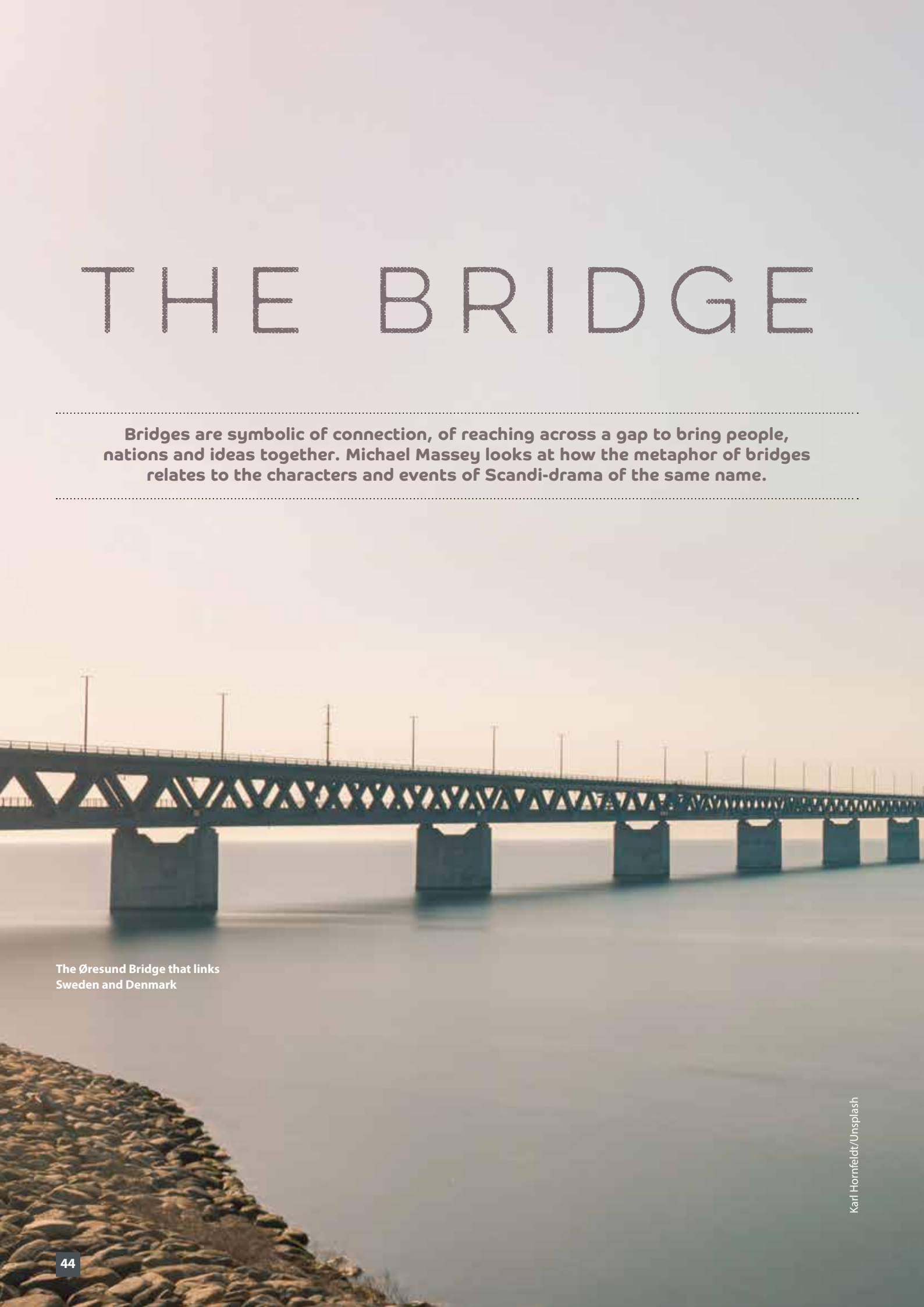
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# THE BRIDGE

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**Bridges are symbolic of connection, of reaching across a gap to bring people, nations and ideas together. Michael Massey looks at how the metaphor of bridges relates to the characters and events of Scandi-drama of the same name.**

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The Øresund Bridge that links Sweden and Denmark



Take a moment to think about what a bridge is and what it does. Firstly, it's a structure designed to connect at least two locations which were previously unconnected, but it quickly becomes a metaphor for any such connection:

physical, emotional, spiritual, psychological. And what about the locations which are connected? They could be communities on either side of a river or other geographical feature; they could be two people divided by emotional turmoil - we often speak of 'building bridges' to describe how such people could be 'reconnected'. In the case of the Scandi-Noir classic crime drama *The Bridge*, they are different countries, different cultures, different mindsets: Sweden and Denmark. But they are much more than that.

The first thing we need to understand about The Øresund Bridge, which connects Sweden and Denmark, is that it is, in fact, both a bridge and a tunnel, with two thirds of its 12-kilometre length above ground, in the open air, clearly visible, and one third below ground, in darkness, unseen. The ensuing metaphors are boundless, as we confront crimes, their perpetrators, police officers and innocent people often caught almost literally in the crossfire. They all have their visible and invisible sides: sometimes the connections are clear and sometimes they are not.

In Series 3, the protagonist, brilliantly efficient police detective, Saga Noren, has to investigate what turns out, over the series, to be a number of particularly gruesome murders. Because they have taken place on Swedish soil but involve Danish victims, she must work again with a Danish detective, necessitating the building of a bridge between the two forces.

In the previous two series she worked with a Danish detective, Martin Rohde, to solve murders involving both countries, but that partnership ended with Martin's own conviction for the murder of his son's killer, Jens, at the end of Series 2, a conviction secured by Saga's discovery and presentation of the evidence that Martin had poisoned Jens. Consequently, the Danish force are reluctant to work with Saga, even though, in her eyes, she did the right thing; it's clear, the bridges of trust between her and the Danish force need to be repaired.

Saga Noren is depicted as a seemingly very complex person. Her name is interesting - it means 'a prophetess, storyteller, or seer from the North'. This is no doubt deliberately ironic, since, although she is able to see her way clearly through the maze of clues and evidence to reach a conviction, where others fail to see the connections, she cannot see the nuances and subtleties of her fellow human beings. Although no definitive explanations are offered in the shows, it is suggested that she exhibits symptoms of being on the autistic spectrum. She is always confronting potentially complicated situations with a ruthless logic, deriving most of her knowledge and experience from textbooks and other sources of 'factual' information. Saga struggles to sustain relationships of any kind, except with her older police superior, Hans Petterson, and with Martin Rohde, her original Danish colleague, both of whom understand and respect her complex psychology, whereas the rest of the world regard her as an incomprehensible oddball. Once again, we can see how bridges of mutual understanding are required to ease the collaboration between Saga and her colleagues.

It is clear from the very first meeting between Saga and her new Danish colleague, Hanne Thomsen, that the

It's inevitable that the first episode of a new season will pose questions and not provide answers. The audience, are positioned as off-screen colleagues of the police, not privy to much more information than that discovered by the detectives.

relationship might be doomed to failure. Saga criticises Hanne's bad parking, then later tries to use clumsy small talk which leaves him bewildered. She also undermines Hanne's sympathetic treatment of a victim's wife by failing to understand how showing the distraught widow graphic photographs of her dead partner found in gruesome surroundings might be considered insensitive. Bridges of any kind are clearly lacking here!

For Saga to cooperate with others in her professional world she needs to have functioning bridges of communication between her and her closest colleagues, but she fails to construct them. She also lacks any kind of emotional connection to her parents, who she believes are to blame for the tragic death of her younger sister. The unexpected appearance of her mother, who has come to tell Saga that her father is dying, is greeted by her with a blank refusal to listen to her mother's appeals and a door being slammed in her face. Sometimes, it seems, there are just no chances of a bridge being reconstructed. Towards

the end of the series, we learn that Saga's mother has died. At first her death appears to be suicide, but an accumulation of evidence puts Saga in the frame for her killing. Saga, however, believes that her mother has deliberately planted a trail of false evidence in order to incriminate her.

Any kind of police investigation in such dramas requires the amassing of evidence and the ability to see how such evidence is connected. It is the business of such dramas to position the audience so that they can begin to attempt to solve the mystery, working out what is relevant, where the red herrings and distractions are.

It is inevitable that the first episode of a new season will pose questions and not provide answers. Instead, we, the audience, are positioned as off-screen colleagues of the police, not privy to much more information than that discovered by the detectives: they discover the female murder victim posed in a bizarre setting; they become aware of an outspoken female vlogger, who has attacked the views of the victim; we meet the victim's wife and older

Sofia Helin plays  
Saga Norén in  
*The Bridge*



son as Saga and her Danish colleague, Hanne, interview her; we are there when Hanne is seriously injured in an explosion caused by the victim's son's booby trap.

It is true that we are also presented with four seemingly unconnected male characters: a young cleaner who works for the vlogger; a young art gallery assistant with a good knowledge of the paintings on display; an older man who has just been released from custody, but manages to absent himself from the accommodation provided for him; and a man who appears to have a wife and two daughters, but is seen attending singles events, apparently with their knowledge and support. He is revealed at the end of the episode to be Saga's future colleague, Henrik Sabroe. Henrik means something like 'strong family man' in Swedish, a title which we will discover is quite ironic, given his family circumstances.

We learn in later episodes that Henrik's wife and children simply disappeared about seven or eight years previously, but he still has visions of them, and often converses with them in his flat. Henrik blames himself for not being able to protect them, and he freely uses prescription drugs to mask his grief.

So it is that, as the episodes progress, Saga and Henrik begin to build bridges and connections between the clues, jumbled together at first, like a pile of disconnected Lego bricks, but now beginning to create a recognisable shape. For example, Saga and Henrik finally discover that the mysterious Babylonian numeric codes found burnt inside each victim's mouth are, when taken together, the

fertility clinic file reference to a sperm donor, Freddy Holst, and to the recipient, who is the perpetrator's mother, thus identifying Holst as the father of the perpetrator. As the multiple connections gradually form an identifiable structure, like the bridge, it is revealed that the perpetrator's miserable foster-childhood was, in his view, caused by the victims, who either treated him with cruelty or failed to protect him. Saga works out that he has chosen all the methods used to execute convicted criminals around the world, from electrocution to decapitation, also removing body parts to represent their 'crimes', thus forming for him a statement of 'justice'.

If you get the chance, watch the rest of the series - 10 episodes in all - and trace for yourself all the links and connections, some of which have been mentioned above, some in plain sight, others seriously below the surface - just like The Øresund Bridge.

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**Michael Massey is a freelance author and former Head of Media Education at Southgate School in Enfield.**


Bridges of mutual understanding are required to ease the collaboration between Saga and her colleagues.

He has chosen all the methods used to execute convicted criminals around the world, from electrocution to decapitation, also removing body parts to represent their 'crimes'.

 **from the MM vaults**

Out of the Past: *The Bridge* and the Dark Heart of Nordic Noir – Jonathan Nunns, *MM63*

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

A close-up photograph of Sigourney Weaver as Ripley in the movie Alien. She is wearing a white space helmet with a clear visor. Her face is visible through the visor, showing a serious and determined expression. The background is dark and filled with the intricate details of the spacecraft's interior, including various panels, buttons, and mechanical components. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting her features and the metallic textures of the helmet and suit.

Scott's auteur features include a sense of convincing 'world building' and the positive portrayal of female protagonists, most famously with Ripley in *Alien*.

**Sigourney Weaver:**  
the first 'final girl' in  
Ridley Scott's *Alien*

# ALIEN

## - IT'S STILL A SCREAM!

**Ridley Scott's 1979 sci-fi classic is way more than just a dumb monster movie, argues Mark Ramey. Whether you're looking at gender representation, genre hybridity or hegemony, this 'new Hollywood' film has a lot for A Level film students to sink their teeth into.**

Try and imagine floating through the lonely void of space, light years from home, in a claustrophobic spaceship whilst being hunted, and if you are unlucky, impregnated, by a fanged, acid-drooling, alien killing-machine. That's *Alien* in a nutshell. One of the writers pitched it even more succinctly as, 'Jaws in space'. The famous tagline: 'In space no one can hear you scream' is a smart reminder of the dreadful isolation of deep space, where even sound is muted by the interstellar vacuum: in the inky, black emptiness of the cosmos, our terror and our death, are events of utter insignificance. Something that good science fiction does so well is speculation. *Alien* speculates: 'What if a hostile alien of great power, endurance and resourcefulness hitched a ride on a spaceship?' The film's tagline also offers us a generic entry point into the movie – this is a horror film, and it will terrorise you! On that claim it succeeds, particularly in one scene. The death of the spaceship's captain, Dallas, is an exemplar in sustaining

unbearable tension and delivering a powerful jump scare.

However, the film isn't just a dumb 'monster movie' (an unjustly maligned sub-genre of sci-fi). Rather, it unpacks a Pandora's box of terrors, not least the amalgamated fears of being alone, far from humanity, in a confined space, with a murderous, unknown and transformative entity. Add in anxieties about birth, reproductive violation and oral rape and you can see that *Alien* is a hybrid sci-fi-horror movie, that packs a sophisticated and primal punch. The top four most feared animals are apparently ravenous, toothsome beasts: bears, wolves, piranhas and sharks. Avoiding them is built into our DNA but in space there is nowhere to run or hide. To make matters worse, the eponymous 'alien' is a genetically advanced, parasitic version of these creatures, from whom escape is futile: *Alien* seals the crew and spectator into a tin can and tosses it into the abyss.

*Alien* (1979) was Ridley Scott's second feature and is now an Eduqas Film Studies exam option in a unit focused on New Hollywood. In contrast to the institutional and production backgrounds of the films studied in the Classical Hollywood section of the unit, New Hollywood films are, according to the Eduqas specification, '[when] a new generation of [auteur] directors began to show new influences, especially from European cinema.' Scott fits the bill. Born in the north of England in 1937, he started his film career after leaving art college in the early 1960s and working in the world of broadcast TV and mainstream advertising. As much a producer as a film director, in

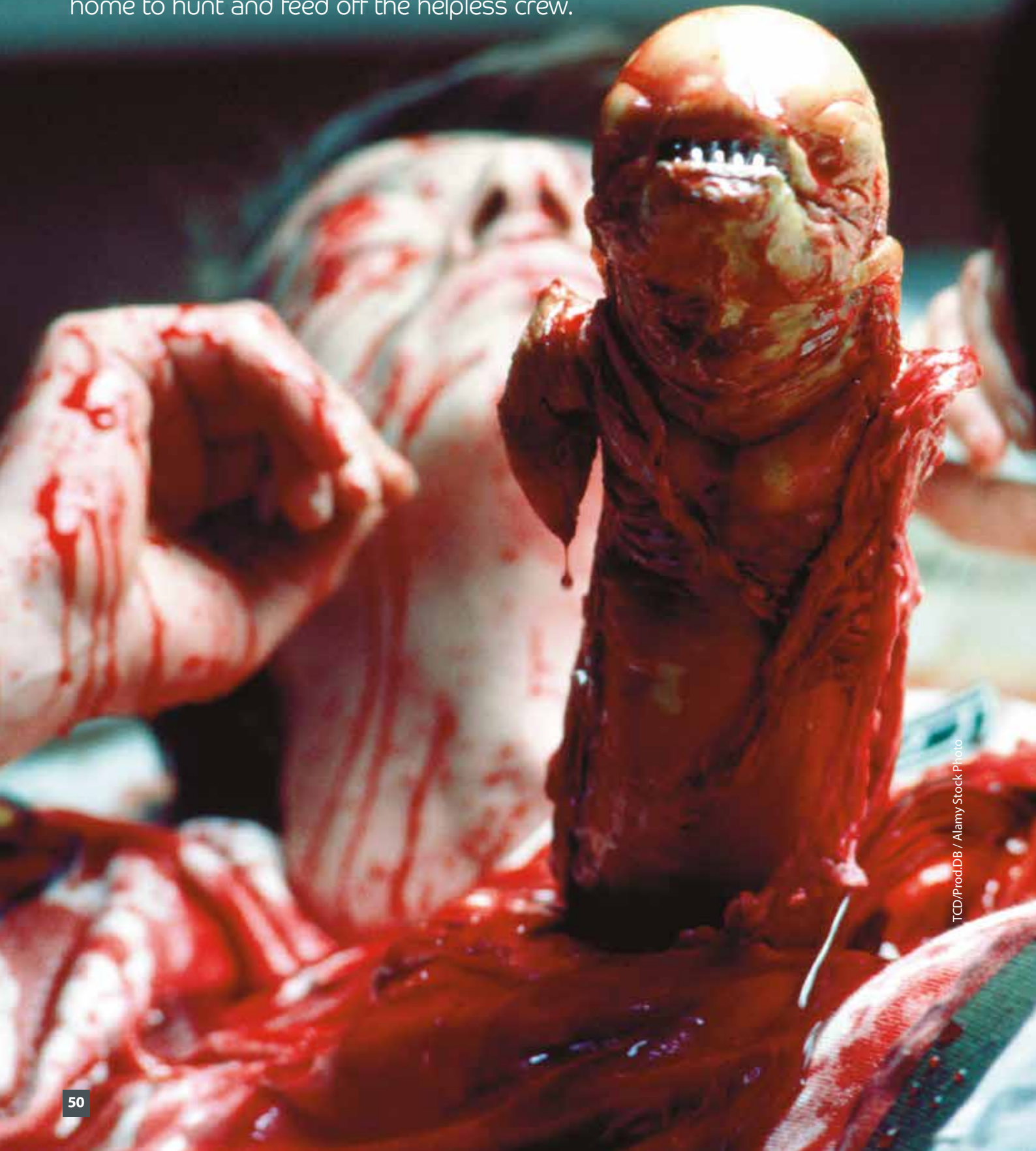
1968, Scott and his late brother, Tony, set up a film and production company, RSA, which made some of the iconic TV adverts of the 1970s. Later, in 1995, the Scott brothers set up LA-based Scott Free Productions, under which banner all of Ridley's subsequent features have been produced. In the same year the brothers purchased a controlling interest in Shepperton Studios. The Scott's are therefore very much part of the mainstream filmmaking world, bridging the auteur-led period of the 1960s and 1970s, and offering a link to the high-concept, franchise blockbusters that followed: Tony Scott, for example directed, *Top Gun* in 1986 and Ridley directed *Gladiator* in 2000.

Ridley Scott is the consummate genre magpie working on a wide range of films so, aside from the science fiction, for which he is most famous, he has also made (to name but a few): *Robin Hood, Legend, American Gangster, Thelma and Louise, Black Hawk Down* and, in 2015, *The Martian*, which is Scott's most profitable film at the box office. He has also worked on prequels to *Alien* (*Prometheus* - 2012 and *Alien: Covenant* - 2018) as well as executive producing the 2017 *Bladerunner* sequel, *Bladerunner 2049*.

Scott's auteur features are arguably a sense of convincing 'world building' and the positive portrayal of female protagonists, most famously with Ripley in *Alien* and the eponymous characters, *Thelma and Louise* in 1991. Certainly, *Alien* achieves a remarkable sense of realism in its futuristic depiction of a space mining vessel: 'truckers in space' was how one critic described the film and it's

Better out than in: the baby-alien chestbuster

The Nostromo is a gothic web of entrapment, a vampire's lair, in which the alien sets up home to hunt and feed off the helpless crew.



TCD/Prod.DB / Alamy Stock Photo

easy to see why. The Nostromo is not a sleek, chrome star ship, piloted by an elite crew of alpha astronauts but rather an industrial facility, a monstrous castellated refinery, and some of the crew are blue collar, baseball-cap-wearing workers, keen to get home and spend their bonuses. Even the rest of the crew, the officers, wear their learning light and their hair long. The Nostromo is a gothic web of entrapment, a vampire's lair, in which the alien sets up home to hunt and feed off the helpless crew. The monster's design also alludes to vampires as well as its violating method of attack: a phallic, fanged, overtly sexualised beast, lubed-up with gallons of KY jelly (they really did this!). Some critics, dismissive of the film on its release, bemoaned that it was really just a 'haunted house' film set in space. The chiaroscuro lighting (a favourite lighting design of Scott's), the gradual elimination of crew members and the enigma of a murderous monster at large, is certainly suggestive of the haunted house genre, but *Alien* is, as already noted, a smart 'monster movie' open to deep theorising. For example, it is worth remembering that in the context of space 'we' are the aliens and any attempt to disguise that fact will, in analysis, reveal ideological hegemony at work.

The thematic nuances built into *Alien* are rich and too varied to explore here in any depth but look out for an early outing of the 'Final Girl' trope – Ripley's stand-off with the alien in the final sequence. (Scott wanted *Alien* to be 'The Texas Chainsaw Massacre of science fiction!') Then there is the production design of the spacecraft with its low-tech realism - chains and leaking pipes in the cargo decks; grinding air vents thick with rust; flamethrowers rather than light sabres. There is also an undercurrent of class conflict amongst the crew and the topical issue of how humans interact with AI. Scott's, 1982 produced, *Bladerunner*, his third film, is based on the science fiction novel by Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids dream of Electric Sheep?* and champions an android work force of slaves seeking freedom. There is too, the deconstruction of

Escape is futile:  
*Alien* seals  
the crew and  
spectator into  
a tin can and  
tosses it into  
the abyss.

gender roles by having the largely male crew die and letting Ripley, a sleeper-protagonist, surprisingly emerge as the heroine of the narrative; not least because she survives and dispatches the monster but also because she discovers the malign influence of science officer, Ash. A robotic spy, he is hoping to bring the alien, 'the asset', back to earth where it can be studied by 'the company' and perhaps weaponised. The crew are therefore expendable cogs in the capitalist machine. This theme of immoral capitalist exploitation is also explored in *Bladerunner* and in *Alien's* subsequent sequels and prequels, where the sinister 'company' leads Ripley to develop a begrudging respect for the alien – a mother like herself, crushed by a rapacious, profit-obsessed patriarchy. Clearly feminist, as well as political and psychological perspectives, are worth using in an analysis of the film: the ship's computer is called 'Mother' and the most famous sequence of the film (the chest-burster scene!) explores patriarchal anxieties of reproduction and birth.

Perhaps the enduring heart of the film is however the alien itself, a creation of artist H.R. Giger and cunningly revealed gradually throughout the film. The monster possesses a visceral realism a million miles away from the laughable creatures of 1950s and 1960s sci-fi B-movies. *Alien's* reptilian genetic marvel is virtually indestructible and Ash, the android, acknowledges its superiority over humanity. He says it's

**The perfect organism. Its structural perfection is matched**

**only by its hostility...I admire its purity. A survivor... unclouded by conscience, remorse, or delusions of morality.**

Dan O'Bannon, *Alien's* screenwriter, had worked previously on an American sci-fi comedy, *Dark Star* (1974) directed by horror icon John Carpenter (*Halloween*). *Dark Star* follows another space crew of bored and bearded workers, a space demolition gang, whose dreary job is to identify 'unstable planets' and destroy them. The delusional morality of this, just like in *Alien*, is unquestioned: humanity can farm the universe's resources and destroy worlds at its leisure.

In *Dark Star* one of the crew befriends a mischievous and cute, orange alien, literally an ultra-low-budget beach-ball with glued-on rubber claws. Played for comic effect this alien is the benign cousin of the malignant monster in *Alien*. As O'Bannon noted:

**I knew I wanted to do a scary movie on a spaceship with a small number of astronauts... *Dark Star* as a horror movie instead of a comedy.**

He also wanted to create a more realistic alien. With Ridley Scott and H.R. Giger's help, O'Bannon achieved his dream, and left us all still screaming - silently - in space.

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

 **from the MM vaults**

21st Century Final Girl – Matt Taylor, *MM76*

Girl Power: the Politics of the Slasher Movie, James Rose, *MM38*

*Jaws vs Alien*: Dental Nightmares – Mark Ramey, *MM31*

*Alien* series: Fear of the 'Other' – Elaine Scarratt, *MM27*

# BBFC: FROM CENSORSHIP TO CLASSIFICATION

When the BBFC were faced with a film about their own work, it gave Wallis Seaton, an employee of the BBFC, a chance to reflect on the organisation's role. Here, she looks back at how censors became classifiers.

Niamh Algar in  
Prano Bailey-  
Bond's *Censor*

TCD/Prod.DB / Alamy Stock Photo



## Brief history of the BBFC

### 1910s

#### 1912

- The British Board of Film Censors is created by the film industry to ensure consistency of classification decision across all films in the UK

#### 1913

- Classification system is introduced, along with categories U (suitable for all) and A (suitable for adults)

#### 1916

- T. P. O'Connor becomes President of the BBFC and publishes the '43 Grounds for Deletion', listing material likely to be cut from films

### 1930s

#### 1932

- Introduction of the H category (meaning 'horrific'), advising that a film is not suitable for children

### 1950s

#### 1951

- The X classification replaces the H and is the first category to pose an age restriction of 16 years

### 1970s

#### 1970

- Introduction of new rating system, which includes U (universal for all), A (unsuitable for younger children), AA (over 14s only) and X classifications (age-restriction raised from 16 to 18)

Recently, some of my colleagues at the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) were presented with the rather meta experience of classifying a film about classifying films. *Censor*, directed by Prano Bailey-Bond, is a psychological horror film following a woman working at a fictional film censorship board in 1980s Britain. Enid Baines, played by Niamh Algar, is a diligent examiner among a team of people who must decide if a film is appropriate for public consumption. Bailey-Bond and *Censor's* co-scriptwriter, Anthony Fletcher, took inspiration from the BBFC, conducting extensive research at its offices, interviewing film examiners and poring over some of the reports written about the, sometimes controversial, material submitted for classification.

Among the material that proved to be particularly challenging for the BBFC in the 1980s were films that became known as the 'video nasties': a list of films published in 1983 by the Department of Public Prosecutions, often of the horror or exploitation genre, which provoked concern among some sections of society for their potential to 'corrupt' the minds of those who watched them. These fears were particularly pertinent because videos were not yet subject to regulation in the same way films were in cinemas. This meant that videos that the BBFC would most likely subject to cuts or even find unsuitable for classification - including some video nasties - were in circulation and available to watch, potentially by children.

The Video Recordings Act (VRA), a landmark piece of legislation, was introduced in 1984 to address this discrepancy, requiring videos to be classified by the BBFC before release. In the same year, the British Board of Film Censors changed its name from the British Board of Film Classification, which better describes the nature of its work today: helping audiences choose what's right for them. The nature of what audiences deem acceptable has also changed over time. For instance, many of the video nasties are available today with modern age ratings and their cuts restored. It is also very rare for the BBFC to refuse a film or video a classification. I'd like to trace some key developments in the BBFC's history, to help unpack this shift away from censorship.

### Video Nasties and the BBFC

*Censor* takes us back to a period of British history which saw significant social, political and industrial upheaval. The increasing availability of unregulated videos in the early 1980s led to heightened anxieties about the influence of violence in media content and its potential to 'deprave and corrupt' members of society, particularly children. The dark subways and dingy corridors of the censorship offices which Enid inhabits in *Censor* can be seen as a metaphor for this ominous feeling about society. The red

The dark subways and dingy corridors of the censorship offices which Enid inhabits in *Censor* can be seen as a metaphor for this ominous feeling about society.

and blue lights from police sirens and dubious video shops selling 'banned' films evoke a sense of simmering anxiety. *Censor's* opening credits highlight the public fears at the heart of the video nasty debate: it intercuts acts of bloody film violence with news reports on Britain being 'invaded by a wave of depraved and corrupt horror videos' which are 'gnawing at society's moral fabric' and 'penetrating the minds of impressionable young children'.

The film examiners in *Censor* are responsible for upholding the laws of censorship and protecting society from such harmful content. Like the legislative powers awarded to the BBFC in 1984, Enid and her colleagues must identify any potentially 'dangerous' material, while also considering 'government guidelines', or whether something is harmful enough to



## 1980s

### 1980

- Unregulated nature of violent content on video causes concern, with some films including 'video nasties' being prosecuted for being 'obscene'

### 1982

- The BBFC overhauls its classification system with new PG, 15 and 18 categories, which replaced the AA, X and the A respectively

### 1984

- The Video Recordings Act (VRA) is passed granting the BBFC powers to classify all videos released in the UK and assign them an appropriate age rating
- The BBFC changes its name to the British Board of Film Classification to better reflect its work

### 1989

- The 12 classification is introduced for films released in cinemas, meaning only children of 12 years and above could attend
- Tim Burton's *Batman* becomes the first film to receive this new classification



warrant intervention. The film often illustrates the delicate push and pull between the censorship board and other external factors, such as political and media institutions and their audiences. For example, Enid and another examiner are questioned by their boss about a film they passed 18 which has sparked a furore among the press. 'Censors to blame? Video Nasty inspires gruesome murder', reads a newspaper headline following a shocking real-life killing. As well as there being pressures on the censorship board, Enid begins to receive threatening phone calls and is cornered by a swell of reporters outside the offices. Growing fears about the influence of media did materialise in this way for the BBFC, with headlines linking particular films with real-life acts of violence. Individual examiners also found themselves the personal target of journalists and newspaper headlines.

## A Shift Towards Classification

Over the course of the 1980s, the BBFC underwent rapid expansion of its workforce in order to deal with the sudden influx of video material under its new remit as home entertainment regulator. More film examiners were needed to apply a wider range of age categories and to consider other issues that had begun to arise across a variety

of material, such as drugs, explicit depictions of war and comic-book representations of violence. Indeed, notable franchises like *Indiana Jones* (1981-) and *James Bond* (1962-) had great commercial appeal to children and families, but often presented concerns in terms of their depictions of violence. With only PG and 15 age categories available at the time (the 12 would not be introduced until 1989), the BBFC needed to consider such decisions carefully.

Moving into the 1990s, the BBFC continued to grapple with the proliferation of media content, heated press attention, the film industry and filmgoers, as well as the parameters of their role under the VRA. 1994 saw an amendment to this legislation directing the BBFC to pay 'special regard to any harm that may be caused to potential viewers...or society' from a video or video game. Although harm has always been heavily debated, it remains an important part of film regulation in the UK. The internal policies directing the work of film examiners were based on audience attitudes, concern and notions of acceptability, but there was a dearth of research-based analysis to support their decisions. This made their work very difficult and left the organisation vulnerable to scrutiny from others. The BBFC's then Director, James Ferman, knew that a change of approach was needed, one that was

Among the material that proved to be particularly challenging for the BBFC in the 1980s were films that became known as the 'video nasties'.

reliant on evidence and approval from audiences, and which would inspire trust in their work. Writing in the 1993 BBFC Annual Report, Ferman states:

**Increasingly...regulation is going to have to be self-imposed... In the end, it is up to adults to police their own viewing and the viewing of their children.**

The new millennium marked a turning point for the BBFC, which, in 2000, following a year-long consultation involving surveys, questionnaires, audience debates and forums, published its first set of guidelines covering all aspects of classification from U to 18, as well as the legal basis for decisions. The general consensus garnered from this research was that adults should be free to make their own viewing decisions - provided that a film or video contained nothing illegal or harmful. There still remained concern over what was inappropriate or harmful for children, but the guidelines incorporated advice from experts on child welfare and development to clarify the BBFC's approach. This proved to be a seismic

## 1990s

### 1994

- The VRA is amended which requires the BBFC to consider how videos might cause harm to potential viewers or to society by influencing certain behaviours. The BBFC are required to remove any material that is deemed harmful before a video can be granted a classification

### 1999

- The BBFC embarks on a year-long consultation with people across the UK to ascertain attitudes towards classification and standards at each age category

## 2000s

### 2000

- Based on the previous year's research project, the BBFC publishes its Classification Guidelines for the first time, reflecting the organisation's mission to be transparent and to accurately reflect the views of people in the UK

shift towards a more open, objective and transparent way of working. With guidelines shaped by the wishes of UK audiences, the BBFC could stand by its decisions with more authority, building trust as a result of a more systematic approach to classification.

The BBFC reviews the guidelines via consultation every four or five years so that decisions remain in step with people's changing opinions. As well as adapting in this way, the BBFC has expanded its remit to a number of streaming platforms. Although it is not a legal requirement for companies such as Netflix and Prime Video, these companies choose to adopt BBFC standards because they recognise the value of age ratings in helping their subscribers choose what's right for them and their families to watch. Indeed, the age rating symbols that were once only to be seen on cinema 'Black Cards', film posters and video packaging now perform a similar function online. Underpinning the symbols is the assurance that the material has been classified according to BBFC standards - meaning it is legal, unlikely to be harmful, and appropriate for the age group specified by the age rating.

In *Censor*, Enid is sure of this mission: 'I do it to protect people', she says. But the film adds a bloody dollop of irony to this statement when Enid goes on to commit acts of violence not unlike those scenes she readily sends to the cutting room. In so doing, *Censor* calls up the age-old debates about censorship and its relevance in a free society. In consulting with UK audiences, the

BBFC is in a stronger position than ever not only to gauge but to strike a balance between the strictures of UK law, public concern and freedom of expression - however difficult this might be in practice. Indeed, this shift towards classification has also seen the BBFC pivot to an increasingly important role in championing the provision of information to empower audiences. Detailed content advice accompanying all film and video content further supports audiences, particularly parents in their attempts to choose what's best for their children. The BBFC's wider educational offering includes resources that equip children and younger people, in particular, with the relevant tools to assist them in navigating a media-saturated world. In the face of fresh challenges, the BBFC continues to adapt and enhance its classification processes, while remaining true to its origins.

.....  
**Wallis Seaton is a Compliance and Education Officer at the British Board of Film Classification.**

### from the MM vaults

Controversial Classifications:  
 The BBFC in the 21st Century –  
 Pete Turner, *MM73*

Classifying Film: an Interview with  
 the BBFC – Neil Paddison, *MM49*

The general consensus garnered from this research was that adults should be free to make their own viewing decisions – provided that a film or video contained nothing illegal or harmful.

### Follow it up

Find out more about the history of the BBFC in: Lamberti, E. (ed.) 2012. *Behind the Scenes at the BBFC: Film Classification from the Silver Screen to the Digital Age*, London: Palgrave Macmillan

#### 2002

- The 12A classification is introduced for cinema releases, replacing the 12. The 12A allows a child younger than 12 to see a 12A film if accompanied by an adult
- The Bourne Identity was the first film to receive the new 12A category

#### 2007

- The BBFC introduces extension of its content advice to accompany its classifications

#### 2012

- The BBFC celebrates its 100th year

#### 2020

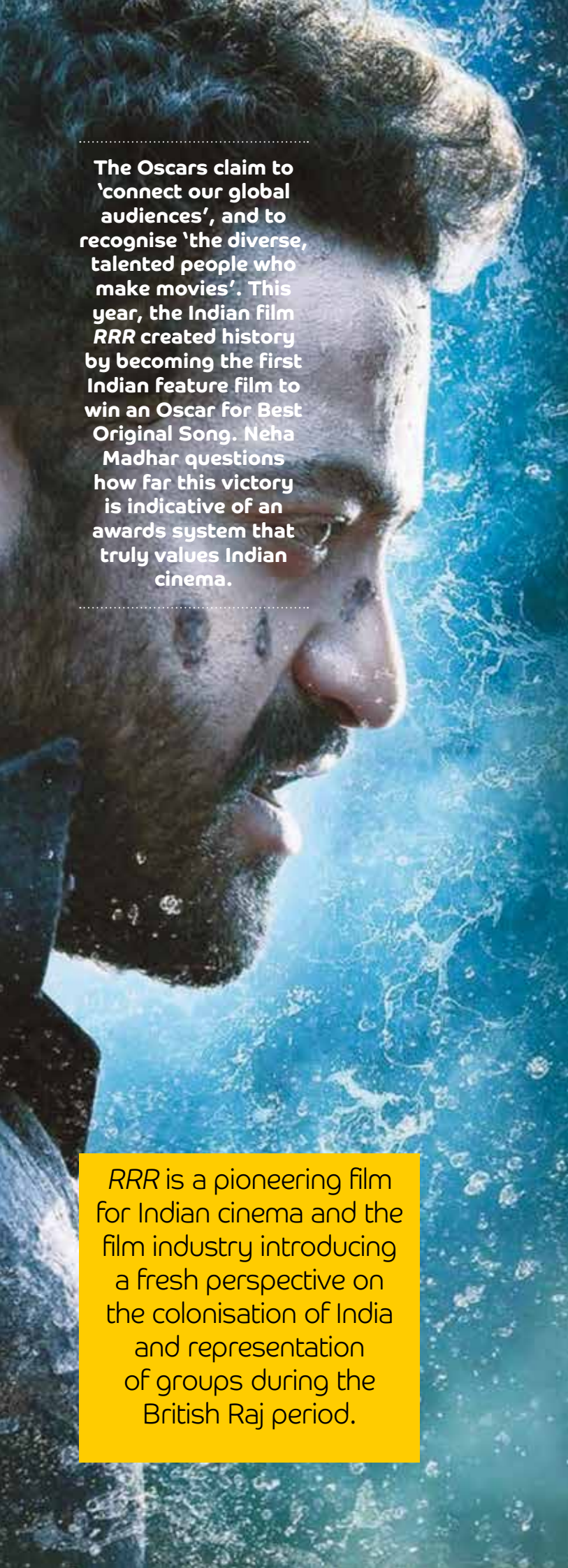
- Netflix becomes the first UK streaming service to carry a BBFC age rating on 100% of its content

#### 2022

- The BBFC introduces a new visually enhanced ratings feature to their content advice for cinema releases

# INDIAN CINEMA AND THE OSCARS

Ram Charan and  
Jr. N.T.R. star as  
Ram and Bheem  
in *RRR*



The Oscars claim to 'connect our global audiences', and to recognise 'the diverse, talented people who make movies'. This year, the Indian film *RRR* created history by becoming the first Indian feature film to win an Oscar for Best Original Song. Neha Madhar questions how far this victory is indicative of an awards system that truly values Indian cinema.

*RRR* is a pioneering film for Indian cinema and the film industry introducing a fresh perspective on the colonisation of India and representation of groups during the British Raj period.

Released in 2022, the Telugu epic historical-drama starring Ram Charan and Jr. N.T.R. tells the story of the successful revolt against the tyrannical rulers during the 1920s British Raj (the period from 1858 to 1947 where the British Crown ruled in India). *RRR* is a pioneering film for Indian cinema and the film industry introducing a fresh perspective on the colonisation of India and representation of groups during the British Raj period. Bheem – guardian of the Gond Tribe – travels to Delhi to rescue a young girl, Mali, abducted from the tribe by the Governor and his wife. After being warned of impending danger, the Governor and his wife enlist the valorous officer Ram to go undercover and extinguish the threat. Unaware of their opposing loyalties, Bheem and Ram meet and form a heartwarming friendship. After learning of Bheem's identity, Ram must then betray his closest friend. However, after Bheem escapes with Mali, he unexpectedly meets Sita, Ram's fiancée who reveals Ram's anti-colonialist objectives and the revolution he is planning under the ruse of him being an officer working for the British. After hearing this, Bheem returns to help his friend.

Although the film does not depict a true event, it has elements of historical accuracy and shows the oppression individuals faced during the time the British government reigned over India. The representation of women is interesting and the ruthless Governor's wife seems to have elements of the 'femme fatale' archetype. In the film she encourages extreme violence against Bheem and the tribespeople, displaying no maternal quality towards Mali after she abducts her and treats her as a slave to entertain her and her friends and holding her in a cell.

Her callous behaviour is intimidating and contrasts greatly with previous representations of women during the 1920s, as well as other women in the film. Unlike women during that period (who were seen as objects owned by their husbands and to be seen not heard), she is of equal status to the Governor and flaunts her status through lavish clothing like fur coats and pearl necklaces. The film also opposes white saviourism often seen in post-colonial narratives where the white characters in the film often use extreme violence towards the local characters, who themselves fight for their freedom.

Binary oppositions between the white characters and the local characters are built through costume and dialogue to communicate the power and authority the British have over the locals. The white characters wear bright expensive clothing compared to the Indian characters that wear dirty, old, dull clothing. Throughout the film, the local characters are mocked for



Zendaya at the Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre in Mumbai

speaking broken English and are antagonised and intimidated by the British characters through threat of violence.

The action sequences are incredible. The climax battle scene features the (CGI) wild animals - such as tigers, leopards and wolves - that the Gond Tribe captured. During some of the earlier fight scenes, motifs of fire and water are used to symbolise the opposing forces of Ram (working for the British Force) and Bheem (trying to undermine the British). However, at the end, when they fight against the British, the imagery of fire and water come together reflecting how Bheem and Ram are a force of nature when united. The costume captures the zeitgeist of the popular costumes from period dramas like *Bridgerton* as well as staying true to the traditional Indian clothing from the 1920s with bright colours and intricate jewellery pieces.

### RRR at the Oscars

Naatu Naatu, the song that put the film on the western radar, won both an Oscar and a Golden Globe in last year's ceremonies. Indian actress Deepika Padukone - who introduced the song at the Oscars - described the 'irresistibly catchy chorus, electrifying beats and killer dance moves' that made it a global sensation and declared it an 'absolute banger'. The corresponding scene in the film features the freedom fighters Bheem and Ram facing off with the British men and women in a dancing competition. The dance was not performed by the actors in the film but was sung live by singers Rahul Sipligunj and Kaala Bhairava. However, many criticised the academy for the lack of South Asian dancers on stage in the performance. This re-sparked the use of the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite which trended once again, 8 years after the online debate first started.

I believe that the Oscars' intention was to present 'Naatu Naatu' as a song that can be enjoyed by everyone and all ethnicities, to be inclusive - anchored by the diversity of dancers in the performance. However, it can be argued, the Academy failed to fully celebrate the monumental achievement for India by failing to provide the underrepresented south Asian dance community an opportunity to perform at such a prestigious film event. All in all, the epic, energetic performance of 'Naatu Naatu' received a standing ovation from everyone including stars like Colin Farrell and the dance became an internet sensation: the whole world was falling in love with *RRR*!

However, it is hard to ignore the irony of *RRR* winning best original song. For singing and dancing. Even though singing and dancing is a notable aspect of Indian cinema, it should

not be the defining element. As RRR proves, Indian cinema has incredible action sequences, gripping plots, political commentary and breathtaking sets and cinematography, in addition to the magical soundtracks. RRR could have easily been nominated for best picture or international feature film. Since, the Oscars claim to celebrate the whole film industry, not just the 'Hollywood' film industry, it can be argued that the category for international film is not needed or restricts global talent to only one category. Previously, Hindi Drama film *Lagaan* (set in 1890s, followed a high-stakes cricket match between a British commander and village residents) was nominated for an Oscar in 2001, but no other Indian film has been nominated since. Perhaps the strong anti-colonial themes and the racist abuse from the white characters in both *Lagaan* and *RRR* made them less favourable to win many awards. Or maybe western audiences are just not as familiar with Indian cinema for it to win big and beat Hollywood.

## Recent Positive South Asian Representation

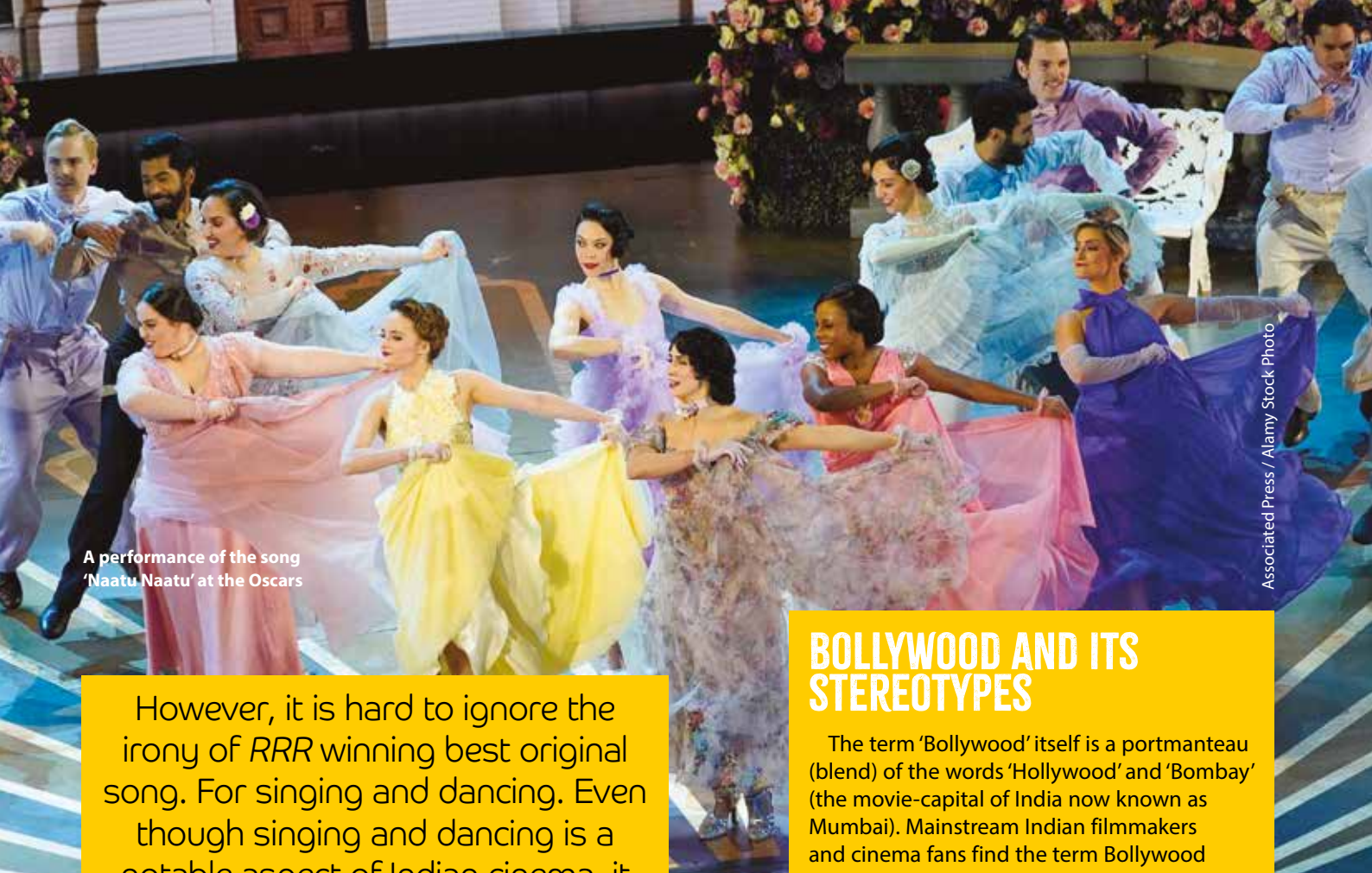
These past few months have been an incredible year for the convergence of Indian culture and western audiences. Countless events have happened that brought together people of all cultures and brought some Asian representation to the white-dominated media. Popular Netflix series *Never Have I Ever* released its final season featuring a dance performance to the Tamil version of the song 'Saami Saami' in the last episode. Star actress Maitreyi Ramakrishnan spoke out about the importance of 'brown girl' representation for young girls, a group previously under-represented or absent from the mainstream media. Diljit Dosanjh, the first ever Punjabi artist to perform at Coachella this year, has collaborated with multiple internationally-renowned artists such as Camilo and Anne Marie! Personally, as a young British Punjabi woman (and a massive fan of Diljit) this felt like such a historic moment and made me feel so proud seeing clips of the Coachella gig go viral and witnessing the love he was receiving from people worldwide, including stars like Diplo and Lilly Singh. Also, the Nita Mukesh Ambani Culture Centre (NMACC) opened this year. Based in Mumbai it showcases music, theatre and fine arts from all over India and celebrates the history of Indian culture. The launch and opening ceremony for the centre involved performances from huge stars in the Indian arts such as actor Shah Rukh Khan and Punjabi music artist AP Dhillon (who also sang at the Juno awards and The Women's Premier League Cricket final) as well as Hollywood stars

Diljit Dosanjh performing at Coachella in 2023



Associated Press / Alamy Stock Photo

like Nick Jonas and Tom Holland. Stars Gigi Hadid and Zendaya, who also attended the opening ceremony, were praised for embracing Indian glamour in their stunning outfits; Hadid wearing a gold embroidered sari made from the Lucknow region of India and Zendaya who wore a gorgeous modern violet Saree with gold beaded top. The coverage of the event made it look magical and hearing the stars show appreciation for south Asian culture in media interviews felt very special.



Associated Press / Alamy Stock Photo

A performance of the song 'Naatu Naatu' at the Oscars

However, it is hard to ignore the irony of *RRR* winning best original song. For singing and dancing. Even though singing and dancing is a notable aspect of Indian cinema, it should not be the defining element.

Overall, the south Asian community is being represented more and more in mainstream media, however there is still more to be done. The continuation of this positive representation of Indian culture alongside the appreciation and popularity from western audiences will hopefully make Indian Cinema more respected by the Academy and viewed seriously as an equal to the American film industry. Over the next few years I'd love to see more people that look like me in film, TV and music, and an appreciation of Indian culture and cinema at more awards.

Neha Madhar studies A Level Media Studies at Sutton Coldfield Grammar School for Girls

### Recommendations

Neha's recommendations for anyone wanting to give Indian cinema a go:

- *3 Idiots* (coming of age comedy drama)
- *Veer Zaara* (romantic drama)
- *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani* (romantic comedy)
- *Dhoom franchise* (action heist)

## BOLLYWOOD AND ITS STEREOTYPES

The term 'Bollywood' itself is a portmanteau (blend) of the words 'Hollywood' and 'Bombay' (the movie-capital of India now known as Mumbai). Mainstream Indian filmmakers and cinema fans find the term Bollywood outdated and derogatory. It suggests that Indian cinema is borrowed from the west or seeing all Indian cinema as one genre, described under the same umbrella term; 'Bollywood'. Western audiences often generalise Bollywood films as dramatic romantic comedies with big musical numbers; the typical plot being about a handsome young man who falls in love with a beautiful young woman punctuated with singing and dancing. This depiction of Bollywood is derogatory and repeated frequently in mainstream media. Many TV shows like *New Girl*, *The Big Bang Theory* and *The Office* feature a sequence where characters sing and dance in an over exaggerated imitation of a Bollywood film, although it is important to mention these are all comedy serials full of over exaggerated archetypes and, especially in the case of the office Diwali episode, seem to poke fun at the oblivious nature of the white characters which reflects the lack of familiarity with Indian culture and western audiences. Also, the term Bollywood suggests that all the films are made from Mumbai or are Hindi language films, when in actuality Indian cinema consists of Punjabi, Tamil, Telugu, Bengali and many more different language films. *RRR* itself is a Telugu language film (which has been dubbed in other Indian regional languages), not a Hindi language film made from Mumbai.



# IS RADIO ABOUT TO DISAPPEAR OFF THE DIAL?

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**Most A Level students won't regularly listen to radio unless they're in a car or a shop. They're more likely to consume other audio such as podcasts. Steve Merrell crunches the numbers and explains what's happening with radio audiences.**  
.....

**T**here is an American radio comedy sketch from the mid-1960s titled, 'Anybody here remember radio?' By this time, in America and for many homes in Britain, the television set was a familiar installation in most households. In the radio sketch, the comedian, Stan Freberg, instructs that, 'a 500-foot mountain of whipped cream be dropped into Lake Michigan which has been drained and filled with hot chocolate...; all of this accompanied with elaborate sound effects. A ten-ton cherry is dropped into the world's biggest sundae to the cheers of 25,000 extras. Freberg cynically concludes, 'Now you wanna try that on television?' It is instructive, not only because it shows the creativity of radio but it also suggests that the demise of the medium was predicted nearly fifty years ago. Yet here we are, well into the 21st century and the technology is still with us, now digitised, able to be controlled by voice commands and in many ways

even more innovative and entertaining than it was half a century ago.

The underlying facts are that most young people do not listen to live radio, certainly not in the numbers that tuned in in the last century.

Listener numbers are compiled by a French multinational market research group, IPSOS (Institut Public de Sondage d'Opinion Secteur), and then delivered to RAJAR (Radio Joint Audience Research) who share the data with radio providers, the three biggest being the BBC (Radio 1-6, World Service etc.), Global (Classic FM, Capital, Heart) and Bauer (Absolute, Jazz FM, Kiss).

Senior Research Executive, Andy Mouldycliff at IPSOS explains how the figures are compiled:

**Around 100,000 people are interviewed in a year, representing a spread of age, gender and social class. They are asked to keep a weekly diary of their listening for any period over a quarter of an hour.**



Charlotte May/Pexels

If 'Radio' seems alien to you, something your parents or probably grandparents listen to, then you are confirming the statistical trend. A RAJAR research document from late 2017 found only 50% of 15-24 years olds listened to live radio

Results are compiled and analysed by the IPSOS team and sent to RAJAR who issue a quarterly report. An overview of listening can be found at the RAJAR website with more precise details for subscribers.

The results are distributed to around 300 radio providers and this helps them see the effectiveness of their broadcasting, whether listener figures are rising or falling and when and how listeners are tuning in. Almost all the radio stations apart from the BBC – which is funded by a licence fee – rely on commercial input, whether selling advertising time or sponsorship. The statistics, provided every quarter, are a valuable tool for guiding the radio station on attracting listeners and encouraging their finance sources.

The RAJAR data release from the first quarter of 2023 showed that 88% of the UK population tune into radio each week and, on average, a listener tunes into 20.5 hours of live radio each week. These figures have remained constant for the last two years of available public data and show no decline in listening, despite the many competing technologies available.

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RAJAR research document from late 2017 found only 50% of 15-24 years olds listened to live radio compared to 63% of 25-34 years olds.

What are teenagers and young people listening to then? The answer is podcasts. Following the radio authority's issuing of radio licences almost fifty years ago (first out of the blocks was LBC, followed by Capital), the most revolutionary move in radio listening is the rise of the self-produced podcast.

At this point it might be wiser to drop the term 'radio' as all those I spoke to referred to 'non-visual media' or more simply: audio. As with the trend with television viewing, young people do not embrace scheduled programming but greatly prefer an on-demand service. The many access points for podcasts (Podcast Addict, Apple Music, Spotify etc.) make it hard to find accurate listening figures for podcasts but a recent article from IPSOS presents a figure of 9.4 million people in the UK listening to podcasts every week. According to research, 16% of 16-34-year-old internet users listen for an average of 38 minutes a day at least once a week. Much like television streaming services, there can be a tendency to binge listen once you find a podcast you like and, as mentioned,

it can be hard to identify listeners other than through responses to the shows, via email and social media, or by surveying a cross-section of society.

Research also showed that just 6% of those over 35 listened to podcasts for an average of 19 minutes a day. The highest level of usage is in London and this corresponds with those who commute to work. The other factor in the rapid rise of podcast listening is that they can be conveniently downloaded to a smartphone and smartphone ownership amongst 16-24-year olds was 99% in 2022, published by Statista in 2023.

The side table lists the ten most popular podcasts and the themes have obvious attractions for the younger listener. The often chatty, informal style of podcasts (almost all have co-presenters riffing off each other) has a more instant appeal than many carefully written and edited programmes, more common to stations such as BBC Radio 4. A further advantage for podcast makers and for the enjoyment of young listeners is that presenters can be more liberal with their language and with subject matter. The fact that the podcast has to be chosen by the listener puts the commitment on the listener, whereas national broadcasting has a responsibility to judge its output, aware that anyone can tune in or overhear content.

So, is live radio listening a dying medium for young people? Not according to Gregory Watson, Managing Director and co-founder of the radio station, 'Fun Kids'. Established for 18 years and once under the Global umbrella, Fun Kids has broken away and claims an audience of around 2 ½ million each month. It reaches its audience online and presents a lively website with access

## The Ten Most Popular UK Podcasts

(As of August 2023 from Podbiblemag.com)

- Diary of a CEO – Business and entrepreneurship
- The Rest Is Politics – Political debate
- The Therapy Couch – Love and Relationships
- Sh\*\*ged. Married. Annoyed – Living and Relationship
- The News Agents – Current Affairs and politics
- The Rest Is History – History discussion
- Off Menu – Celebrity interviews, food based
- Zoe – Science and Nutrition
- Scamanda – Cancer memoir
- Brydon & – Rob Brydon Interviews celebrities

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to the programmes, plus animations, competitions, audience involvement and interviews. The target audience is Key Stage 2, 8-12-year olds, and programmes are not interrupted on the half hour by news bulletins. In fact, there is no news but the station may pick up on topics in the news, for example, rather than report an earthquake disaster it might well explain why earthquakes happen. Fun Kids has received funding from the National Lottery and other sponsors including energy providers and book publishers. The station's success has been by being nimble, adapting quickly to the emerging technologies and presenting professional production values. 'Providing content that young people want to listen to,' opines Gregory Watson, 'and trying new ideas.' For fans of 'radio', it is heartening that 'Fun Kids' can stimulate a listening habit in the new generation that should continue as they grow.

Figures from RAJAR also show very little change in live radio listening. Results from the most recent quarter suggest 33% of adults aged 15+ who listen to live radio via a smartphone or tablet at least once per month.

Another advantage of opening-up the airwaves through licensing is the lively local radio station, sometimes so local it might only target and entertain one region within a city. Westside Radio is based in Hanwell, West London and is a community radio station. Music choices, well-suited to the area, are rap and hip hop and news items are focused on the local streets. In fact, in London alone there are around a staggering 187 local stations which can be listened to on digital devices such as DAB, smart speakers and computers.

The continued popularity of podcasts and their appeal for those under 35 suggests no diminishment in audio-only programmes. I am from a generation that grew up on radio (almost entirely the BBC), and it seems podcasts offer the same enjoyable listening experience, just that they do not sit inside a rigorous schedule.

Andy Mouldycliff from IPSOS comments:

**Radio has been with us with us for 100 years and has adapted... its popularity is because people are passionate about radio, whether it is a**

**station, a programme or a particular presenter.**

Stan Freberg's radio sketch concludes with the young person defending television as being able to stretch the imagination. Freberg cynically responds with, 'Yes, but only to 21 inches.' Radio or Audio has the power – and always had the power – to give us news, travel, entertainment, debate, comedy, music and drama that can put us in a kitchen or on another planet. It is a medium that is very much here to stay.

.....  
**Steve Merrell is a former Head of Film and Media, King's Ely.**



## Aisha Clarke

### What is your job?

I am a freelance television Assistant Producer working on television documentaries and factual entertainment programmes. As a freelancer I have had the opportunity to work on a diverse range of programmes including BBC1's *The Apprentice*, BBC2's *Inside Dubai* and Channel 4's *Night Coppers*.

### What does that mean?

An assistant producer is part of the creative team making a television programme. The tasks might differ slightly depending on the show but the main role of an assistant producer is to help the director and producer bring their vision to life. Assistant producers tend to work in both the pre-production stage and production stage. In pre-production an assistant producer's responsibilities may include helping to cast the programme, which essentially means finding people to be on-screen. This could be contestants, presenters or experts. The role may also require the assistant producer to gain access to organisations the TV crew may wish to film with or find filming locations. The production stage of a programme means the filming period. On the shoot an assistant producer will do a number of tasks from assisting the director, briefing on-screen talent or participants, writing shoot scripts and operating a camera.

With the internet and popularity of social media platforms you can create your own content, self-publish it and build your portfolio.

## What was your route into the media industry?

While I was at university, I took part in Global Girl Media UK's Summer Academy which is all about training young women in video journalism. I loved the experience and decided that I definitely wanted to pursue a career in media. Being part of the Summer Academy helped me develop media skills and be part of a media community. From there I was able to get a place on the Grierson Doc Lab scheme which gave me the opportunity to meet lots of television professionals and complete a paid internship at a television production company. My first official television job was with The Garden Productions as part of the Channel 4 Production Trainee scheme. I was able to work on several of the factual productions including *24 Hours in Police Custody*. One of the great things about television is you don't need a qualification to work in the industry, it's about getting your foot in the door and using transferable skills. Most people in television, including myself, start as a runner. A runner's role is to essentially assist the crew by ensuring everyone is fed and watered, fetching equipment and cleaning sets and green rooms (used for talent). Being a runner is a great way to start in television as it's a paid opportunity to observe how all the different television departments operate and decide which one you would like to work in.

## What's the best thing about the job you do?

Working in television is a real privilege as you get the opportunity to experience things you may not have otherwise had the chance to do. The shows I have worked on have allowed me to watch and film heart surgery, babies being born on a maternity ward in Birmingham and travel to some amazing places internationally including South Africa, Finland and Dubai. I also love meeting and talking to people and tv is the perfect industry for this. As a freelancer, I am constantly changing companies and working on different programmes which gives me the chance to meet lots of new people.

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

Television can require you to be working on location away from your home. While this can be an amazing chance to see the world, it does mean that you can miss your family.

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

Reach out to people! Directors and producers love to hear from people who have enjoyed watching their programmes and want to work on similar shows. Also, make your own content! Some great companies, like Wall to Wall and SBTv, were started by young people producing their own content and sharing it online. With the internet and popularity of social media platforms you can create your own content, self-publish it and build your portfolio. The final bit of advice I would share is to try different things. There are so many departments and types of jobs in the television industry, not just directing or producing. There is production management, set art, talent booking, marketing, accounting, floor managing, just to name a few. You don't have to know which department you would like to work in before starting your career, you can get stuck in and figure it out.

## What's next for you?

I am currently working on an exciting travel show for a major streaming platform which unfortunately I am not allowed to say too much about as it's still in production!



# MARVEL

## CINEMATIC UNIVERSITY

### What can *Avengers: Endgame* teach us about success and power?

It is difficult to imagine that Marvel Entertainment was once a mostly struggling independent company, with flop releases such as *Howard the Duck* (1986) and *Daredevil* (2003) to their name. Arguably, it wasn't until the success of *Iron Man* (2009), the first instalment of what would be an (as of today) 29 movie-strong franchise, that Marvel was thrust into the limelight, becoming the ultimate cash-cow for Disney, who bought the studios in 2009 for the sum of \$4 billion.

The companies that reside under the Disney umbrella continue to multiply, with the recent procurement of 20th Century Fox in 2019. Disney now owns an estimated 27% of the film industry, enabling the conglomerate to expand their ideas and messages to audiences across the globe, securing their place in the 'big five' of the major production studios, alongside Universal, Paramount, Sony Pictures, and Warner Bros.

Theorists, Curran and Seaton (1981) argue that when the media, in this instance, the film industry, is owned by large monopolies such as Disney, who are mostly driven by the need for profit and power, it can spawn repetitive media that limits creativity, quality and variety. Curran and Seaton claim that if the media is more diverse, it will help to bring more adventurous media productions to an active audience seeking entertainment. They reason that media monopolies like Disney should be regulated to make the market fairer, saying 'Anti-monopoly media regulation is needed not only to maintain fair competition but also to prevent the distortion of democracy.'

Disney has control over many smaller studios, such as Marvel, so it could be argued that they can take more risks with their releases to keep content diverse. For example, *Black Panther* (2018) became a box office hit and a cultural sensation, with its Black-led cast and representation of African culture being a key reason for its success. However, former CEO, Bob Iger insisted that if Disney only followed the 'data' of what audiences wanted to see, then *Black Panther* might never have been made. 'If we had tried to mine all the data that we had at the time to determine whether we should make a superhero movie that was essentially about an Afrofuturistic world,' said Iger to The New York Times, 'the data probably would have said, don't do that.'

In 2019, three out of four of the highest grossing films were owned by Disney, including, *Avengers: Endgame*, *The Lion King* and *Frozen 2*. Sony Studio, Disney's competition, took the fourth spot on the list with *Spider-man: Far from Home*. This limited competition supports Curran and Seaton's argument of conglomerate ownership flooding the media, and the belief that there should be alternatives to such ownership. 'Media policy should seek to create the conditions of the greatest possible competition,' Curran and Seaton state, 'Thus enabling consumers to exercise sovereign control. This produces media that people want, a wide range of choice, and media independence (from the government).'

Marvel's *Avengers: Endgame* secured Disney its biggest profit that year, nabbing the top spot in the list, becoming the first film to reach more

than \$1 billion in its opening weekend, turning out to be the biggest pre-sale title ever. Ticket sales caused sites such as Fandango to crash within minutes of sales being announced, with one pair of IMAX tickets being resold online for a whopping \$15,000, and theatres such as Cinemark and AMC added overnight screenings to accommodate the demand.

The release of *Avengers: Endgame* became a huge media event, with clever marketing and fan service. The directors of the film, Anthony and Joseph Russo reached out personally to their fanbase on social media, writing them a letter and thanking them for their loyalty. They wanted to ask their fans not to spoil the ending for others with the hashtag #DontSpoilTheEndgame. This personal beseeching was a clever way of affirming the relationship between Marvel and their fans, putting further emphasis on the importance of the event surrounding the release of *Endgame*.

Due to eager anticipation, *Endgame* took just eleven days to reach over \$2 billion at the box office, which was twice the amount that its predecessor, *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), made. In the process, it knocked James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) off the top spot of the highest grossing movie of all time. It was only recently that *Endgame* would once again drop to the second spot, with *Avatar* (now also under Disney ownership as of the 2019 Fox merger) moving back up to first place in 2021, albeit only just.

After the tremendous success that *Endgame* had at the box office, Marvel has struggled to retain the same



Some are claiming that 'superhero fatigue' is setting in, as audiences tire of the genre due to its repetition.

momentum, with recent cinematic releases such as *Antman and the Wasp: Quantumania* (2023), failing to impress. Some are claiming that 'superhero fatigue' is setting in, as audiences tire of the genre due to its repetition. This reinforces the notion of the limitation of media products due to ownership, as audiences lose interest quickly. As Curran and Seaton point out, 'Diversity is in the public interest – but modern societies suffer from collective attention deficit disorders.'

Streaming site, Disney+ has also faltered, losing 2.4 million subscribers between October and December 2022. There are several reasons for its downturn in success, with the main being its limited library of content. Disney relies on Marvel to tempt people to sign up to its streaming service and keep viewers engaged. However, in recent months there has been minimal new content and mixed reviews surrounding what has been released, with mini-series, *Secret Invasion* (2023) becoming one of the lowest rated Marvel Studios episodes ever on Rotten Tomatoes, even die-hard fans begrudgingly siding with critic reviews.



Despite some bumps in the road, Disney, along with Marvel Studios, will no doubt continue to dominate the box office, with the latest instalment of Phase Five in the MCU, *The Marvels*, due to be released in November 2023, already predicted to do well. And with a net worth of over \$152 billion, a few lost subscriptions are not likely to keep Disney from remaining one of the most influential studios in film history.

Caroline Reid is a media, film and journalism lecturer at Exeter College.

Disney now owns an estimated 27% of the film industry, enabling the conglomerate to expand their ideas and messages to audiences across the globe.

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