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HARRY STYLES

THE TRAITORS
WHY I HATE CAPTAIN FANTASTIC
THE BIG ISSUE
DEL TORO'S FRANKENSTEIN
THIIIRD MAGAZINE
EXIT THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP
MOGUL MOWGLI
BUTLER AND MAKE-UP INFLUENCERS

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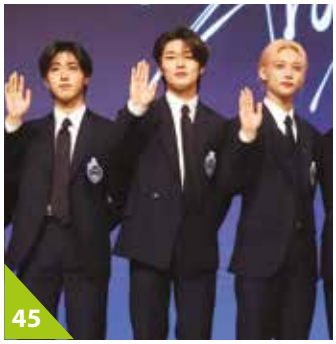

Making the Most of MediaMag

Regulating the News

In 'Taking Sides: Interpreting the Impartiality of the News' (p.38), a team of academic researchers from Cardiff University analyse the substance behind claims that UK broadcast news coverage is biased. They find little evidence to show that it is, instead concluding that by-and-large, news broadcasting sticks to Ofcom impartiality guidelines.

Research

You are going to do your own research into TV news. You might conclude that there is some level of impartiality, or you might at least get an idea of different editorial directions and levels of sophistication, depending on the target audience.

Watch a news broadcast put out on the same day by three different broadcasters. You should be able to access BBC, ITV and Channel 4 for free. If you have access to other sources, like GB News of Sky News, you might choose to look at them as well.

Make a note of the following:

- Which stories lead coverage
- Which political parties, if any, are mentioned in coverage
- Which stories occur across all channels and which on only one or two.

Analyse

Choose a story that mentions at least one political party that features on all three channels. Make a critical reading of how the story is presented on each channel focusing on:

- The language used
- The time given to different sides of the argument
- What's left out of the story, as well as what's included
- How the story tries to be impartial and whether or not you think it succeeds.

Comparing news on different platforms

The impartiality regulations do not apply to how newspapers or social content generators on social media platforms present the news.

Find coverage of a story you looked at on TV on social media and in a newspaper. Compare how they present the story in relation to TV.

Write

Finally write or film a short statement from Ofcom that does one of the following two things:

- Reinstates the organisations current position, explaining why it believes that broadcast news should display impartiality, but such regulation is not possible for other media.
- Announces a change of approach – either it will drop the impartiality requirements for TV news, or extend them to other media.

The Joy of Hate-watching

Hate-watching involves consuming media, usually TV or film, with the intention of finding joy in rooting out its contradictions, failures and absurdities. It's not the kindest of pursuits, but it is one way of fighting back against the imposition of cultural tastes on a population by powerful media machines.

Ben Cavan doesn't quite do that in 'Why I Hate *Captain Fantastic*' (p.21). He just seems to hate the film! But there's probably some joy for him in kicking back against popular opinion. Personally, I enjoy a frisson of excitement badmouthing recently Oscar-nominated *Hamnet*. How can a film featuring Shakespeare countenance such terrible dialogue? As for Jessie Buckley's performance … great actor she may be, but Academy Award winner for mainly mooching around in Shakespearean undergrowth? It's a travesty!

Rant about it!

This is your chance to find the joy in hate-watching. Choose a popular media product that for some reason you cannot abide and have a rant about it. Given expressions of hate-watching tend to manifest themselves on social media, you might vent your spleen as a post or series of posts on a platform of your choice. Or you might choose to write or film in a more extended form, as a blog or vlog for example.

Repetition with Variation

In 'Faithful to the Format' (p.6), James Middleditch argues that the success of reality show *The Traitors* lies in how it follows Steve Neale's genre theory – by blending repetition with variation.

Get creative!

Write or film a pitch to the producers of a reality show that you know well with your suggestions for how they can vary a tried and tested format in ways guaranteed to boost audience share.

FAITHFUL TO THE FORMAT?

Stephen Libby: Fashion, falsehoods and facial expressions

BBC/Studio Lambert/Euan Cherry

FrankyFromGermany/Pexels

The finale of Series 4 of *The Traitors* on BBC1 achieved impressive viewing figures in today's atomised media landscape. So why are audiences remaining faithful to the format and what are the creators, Studio Lambert doing to seduce new audiences? Steve Neale's genre theory might be the answer, suggests James Middleditch.

If you stumble on success, you have to understand what you did, so you can do it again. In the context of television production, however, that may not be enough. Simple repetition of a formula cannot be relied upon for long. Television audiences are unreliable; generally in decline amid an increasingly fragmented set of media options, they give their loyalty sparingly and drift away easily. They are always looking for something new.

So how can we explain the consistent increase in success for the BBC's reality game show, *The Traitors*? Viewing figures have increased for every series of the annual public competition and other measures of engagement, approval and discussion are on a similar upswing. It seems to be challenging many assumed trends such as the inevitable declines of appointment, broadcast viewing (as opposed to anytime streaming) and programmes that appeal to multiple generations who watch together.

One theorist could provide the key to understanding the blend of repetition and variation that ensures both a loyal army of regular viewers and a steady stream of new recruits. Steve Neale uses those very words, repetition and variation, to explain how genres evolve. By applying it to *The Traitors* we can try to identify the elusive secret of success so essential to the survival of media institutions.

Recognisable conventions

Neale identifies one of the main benefits to repetition as its ability to import an existing audience and minimise the danger of something being so unfamiliar that it puts viewers off. A 'new' series should perhaps then not be considered entirely original but a hybrid of familiar elements.

The first series of *The Traitors* was a modest success when it launched in November 2022, averaging 3.7 million viewers across the series but crucially as a measure of potential, figures rose consistently to a peak of 4.7 million for the final. This early success could be attributed to a sense of familiarity and comfort in elements drawn from reliably popular texts of the twin genres of reality television and game show.

Members of the public occupying an iconic location and competing for a cash prize is just one element borrowed from the quintessential reality television series *Big Brother* (Channel 4, then Channel 5, now ITV). The 'round table' votes for banishment are similar to *Big Brother*'s

'nominations', although they are face-to-face rather than in the secrecy of the 'diary room'. In this sense, and in the writing of names on slates, *The Traitors* is conjuring memories of *The Weakest Link*, a popular BBC gameshow of the early 2000s. These strategies are designed to stoke confrontation, weaving in the more youthful appeal of the 2010s' 'scripted reality' genre, such as *The Only Way is Essex* (ITV) and *Made in Chelsea* (E4).

A key element of each episode of *The Traitors* is 'the task', a challenge designed to increase the money for the eventual winner(s). These tasks also evoke past successes. The variety of physical, mental and strategic games is reminiscent of *The Crystal Maze* (Channel 4) with its categories of challenge and timers counting down to penalty. Further back in this strand of television DNA is *The Krypton Factor* (BBC), potentially drawing in even older audience members with a nostalgic memory and contributing to the wide demographic profile of viewers.

Neale would therefore recognise *The Traitors* as an effective demonstration of genre hybridization. Interestingly, the series also seems to have fed back into its own generic ancestors; *The Weakest Link* and *Big Brother* continue to enjoy recent revivals as interest in the genre peaks once more, while *The Apprentice* now benefits from cross-promotion to lure the bereft audience over to it once *The Traitors* ends. Ensuring loyalty to *The Traitors* itself, however, would require more repetition in Series 2.

A distinctive identity

During a second series, a show's iconography and grammar can be confirmed, and viewers discover which textual elements stay the same to be enjoyed once more. The castle in the Scottish Highlands returned, its external visual appeal enhanced through drone shots while close-ups of the quirky, gothic props within the castle have built a distinctive visual style all of its own. We now expect that contestants will be filmed both naturally while conversing and eating, and with an elevated, filmic style via slow-motion as they process to the ritualistic 'round table'. Music has also emerged as a key part of the series' identity; as well as rousing incidental music, melodramatic covers of familiar pop songs underscore the binary themes of loyalty and betrayal. Props and costumes enhance the gothic horror iconography

A Winkleman welcome

Steve Neale uses those very words, repetition and variation, to explain how genres evolve. By applying it to *The Traitors* we can try to identify the elusive secret of success.


BBC/Studio Lambert/Euan Cherry

The breakfast of champions (well, one champion, two losers)

further; we are now used to the hooded cloaks of the Traitors, the blank masks of 'the Druids' and burning wooden statues in tasks.

Episodes recognisably contained similar key structures each time: breakfast, task, round table, then a climactic turret meeting for the Traitors to establish the next cliffhanger. The series had established its familiar identity, providing what Neale describes as a 'predictability' that viewers find 'pleasurable.' We know, however, that too much repetition leads to boredom and abandonment. Having established its patterns, *The Traitors* needed variation.

Shocking revelations

It can in fact be argued that variation is as baked into *The Traitors'* formula as repetition, and was from the very beginning. Even before any reliable repetition had been established, an early shock told viewers that as familiar as it seemed, *The Traitors* would be unlike anything else. Two contestants appeared to be eliminated in the very first episode, even before the game had started. This would eventually turn out to be a trick, further reinforcing the idea that viewers would never really know what might happen, even if they felt they could guess from its genre familiarity.

Shocks continued throughout the first series, including ones for contestants that viewers knew about in advance. These included the now-traditional 'secret relationships' and 'hidden careers', revelations which viewers would look forward to, having enjoyed the dramatic irony of knowing not just the identity of the Traitors but also a number of other potentially explosive truths. These provided what Neale calls the 'novelty, surprise and innovation' needed to avoid stagnation.

The second series provided the pleasing surprise that even the seemingly repeated patterns from the first series couldn't be relied upon. The same elimination trick was hinted at in the opening episode but then abandoned, a playful reminder that no amount of foreknowledge was useful. Although not necessarily planned, this series also confirmed the ultimate flexibility of the format in which a Traitor went all the way to win, challenging viewers who might instinctively be rooting for the 'goodies' and instead taking guilty pleasure in deception and 'traitorous behaviour' of Harry, the charming and skillful series 2 winner. This finale drew 6.9 million live viewers. There is always a fear of a peak, however, and further variations would be needed to continue this upward trend.

Traitorous twists

The challenge for Series 3 and 4 has been to maintain the level of variation amid the on-going familiarity as it becomes more consolidated for higher numbers of viewers. This has involved variations of past tricks such as early, fake eliminations and more secret relationships and careers. New twists have been needed too, prompting the introduction of the controversial 'Seer' role in Series 3, which for some viewers was a 'change too far', a case of the balance tipping too far towards variation, perhaps.

The biggest ratings-grabbing twist occurred with the broadcast of a *Celebrity Traitors* series in October 2025, in which the familiarity of the contestants provided the ultimate variation on the format. Perhaps to balance this significant variation, much of the series was more familiar than usual, even down to repeats of previously used tasks, reportedly putting some viewers off. The novelty of the celebrities won through

Into the darkness again…

BBC/Studio Lambert/Euan Cherry

Television audiences are unreliable; generally in decline amid an increasingly fragmented set of media options, they give their loyalty sparingly and drift away easily.

however, with bigger ratings overall than any of the 'civilian' series and a huge live final total of 11 million.

The most recent series has continued the upward viewing trend for the regular ones, with finale figures rising from 7.4 million for Series 3 to 9.4 million. This could be attributed to the success of the Celebrity variant which brought the format to new audiences, but its own unique twists surely played a part, such as the red-cloaked secret Traitor, temporarily unknown by viewers and contestants alike, and tamer variants on the 'seer' role such as the 'Talk to the Traitors' and 'Double-vote Dagger' rewards. A variant winning combination (two Traitors – Stephen and Rachel – together for the first time) also provided a new narrative thrust, as viewers found themselves rooting for the faithful qualities of loyalty and trust in those tasked with the opposite. In early 2026, *The Traitors* therefore reached new heights of popularity through this ideal balance of repetition and variation.

Next time on *The Traitors*…

The emphasis Neale puts on balance means the situation remains tentative; constant vigilance is required. With a second Celebrity series planned and further annual civilian ones too, can the producers continue to provide the right amount of both repetition and variation? And are other producers watching and learning in their own quest for new and faithful viewers, and those who might betray The Traitors after all?

James Middleditch teaches Media Studies at the Havant Campus of HSDC in the South of England and writes Doctor Who spin-off fiction for Candy Jar Books and Obverse.

The Traitors live viewing figures at a glance

First ever episode:	3.9 million
Series 1 finale:	4.7 million
Series 2 finale:	6.9 million
Series 3 finale:	7.4 million
Celebrity traitors finale:	11 million
Series 4 finale:	9.4 million

Viewing figures are compiled by BARB (The Broadcasters' Audience Research Bureau), and are available in 'overnight' form for live viewers, then 7-days and 28-days to take into account later streaming. They are usefully reported on by such sources as overnights.tv, deadline.com and radiotimes.com.

All 5 series are available to watch on iPlayer

https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episodes/p0db9b2t/the-traitors

from the MM vaults

The Theory Drop: Steve Neale – Mark Dixon, *MM90*

Treading a fine line : Harry Styles filming the 'Daylight' music video

Mr Pics / Alamy Stock Photo

HARRY STYLES

A FINE LINE BETWEEN EXPLOITATION AND ALLYSHIP

Debate surrounding Harry Styles' sexuality and gender expression can be traced back to his One Direction days and is back in the spotlight again with the announcement of a new solo album and tour. Molly Fallows charts the history of this intense speculation and questions the authenticity of Styles' image and allyship.

Harry Styles' return to the music industry has been nothing short of transformative. From the new electrifying dance-pop single 'Aperture' and the announcement of his fourth solo album *Kiss All The Time. Disco, Occasionally*, a new era of house-influenced pop music has emerged with Styles at the forefront. On top of the single, Styles has announced his next tour: 'Together, Together', which promotes themes of love, connection and intimacy, and, with special guest Shania Twain at his dates in London, fans have high expectations. However, despite the initial popular reception, conversations have reopened about Styles' authenticity as a star. The graphic tour promotion combined with his well-established flamboyant star persona could be acting as a complex façade to obscure the legitimacy of the supposed authenticity of his LGBTQ+ allyship and, in the wake of the announcements, the debate over queerbaiting his fans to drive interest in his solo career is more relevant than ever.

Queerbaiting is an unethical marketing strategy used to deceptively portray a star or individual as a member of the LGBTQ+ community without them actually being so – effectively attempting to 'bait' audiences with the potential for queer representation and capitalise off the community's underrepresentation in the media. Accusations of popstars queerbaiting have been around for years, with Billie Eilish and Bad Bunny most recently the topics of speculation, but theories about Harry Styles' sexuality have been bubbling since his early days in One Direction with co-member Louis Tomlinson, and have only skyrocketed since his hit 'Love On Tour' and controversial 2020 *Vogue* cover issue – making fans angry about, but deeply intrigued by, his personal life.

The story of his life

Styles has been exposed to the media since his debut on *The X Factor* in 2010, before the formation of the legendary boy band One Direction, which launched five teenage boys into immense stardom and cemented their legacy as teenage heartthrobs. Despite the obvious female-directed appeal, this did not prevent fans, albeit the more obsessive ones, from accusing members Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson of having a secret relationship, circulating rumours of 'Larry Stylinson' – the ship name for the 'couple' – which fans argued was concealed to protect their predominantly heterosexual female appeal. Many audiences took a queer reading to decode their intimacy, leading fans to interpret homosexual narratives to find hints of representation and validation in both the fandom and the band itself. While the theories were denied by both members, the rumours continued to spread like wildfire across the fandom, as well as the media, and allegedly created a rift between Styles and Tomlinson's friendship. As much as the members protested, the impact these rumours had on fan and audience engagement is undeniable. It acted as an enormous grassroots engagement tool, driving their rise to generational stardom, and possibly increasing the longevity of their star images. These conspiracies blurred the line between Styles' persona and his personal life. This is what I find most captivating about the queerbaiting debate: fans delving into the most intimate parts of stars' lives in order to fulfil a personal need for recognition and representation within an industry. It could certainly be suggested that 'Larry' built the foundation for early scepticism and ambiguity around Styles' sexuality and personal life, which companies would unfortunately attempt to monetise.

Queerbaiting is an unethical marketing strategy used to deceptively portray a star or individual as a member of the LGBTQ+ community without them actually being so – effectively attempting to 'bait' audiences

Snogalicious: the marketing images for Harry's 'Together, Together' tour

https://www.instagram.com/harrystyles

Pexels

The tour was characterised by feather boas, heart sunglasses and his 'treat people with kindness' slogan [...] However, the authenticity of this stage persona he pioneers remains interestingly unclear.

Challenging gender performativity… performatively?

When debating sexuality and gender identity versus gender performativity, Judith Butler's theory surrounding gender expression is extremely relevant. She argues that 'gender proves to be a performance', suggesting that 'gender' doesn't exist and has become defined by acts and expressions. Styles' persona has become synonymous with breaking gender conventions and bending stereotypes in recent years. From appearing on a 2020 *Vogue* cover in a periwinkle Gucci dress to dancing on stage waving his fans' rainbow flags, Styles has received both support and disbelief surrounding his 'gender expression'. Styles made history as the first solo man to feature on a *Vogue* cover and sought to collapse rigid 'masculine' conventions surrounding fashion, sparking a conversation around gender expression, particularly that of men. The 2020 global pandemic led to many queer audiences feeling isolated and segregated, but the community was able to find comfort in as major a star as Styles attempting to break down gender barriers through this 'stick it to the man' cover. However, did *Vogue* see the cancellation of Pride festivals and the closure of gay bars as a way to effectively monetise their brand at the expense of others feeling historically underrepresented? Did Styles choose to wear the dress as an attempt to remove the taboo around male gender expression, and 'make [his] own rules', as the anchorage suggests; or did he do this because he, like *Vogue*, realised he could create a cultural stir and capitalise off a 'gender-fluid' persona? 40,000 new subscriptions were created after this cover, causing Condé Nast to issue a second print run of the issue – it's clear both parties benefited from 'Harry making his own rules', whether authentic or not.

The *Vogue* cover catapulted Styles into the spotlight of the gender conversation, which he welcomed with open arms and the arrival of a new tour – 'Love On Tour'. While his gender expression should not hold a link to his sexuality, it certainly opened fans' eyes to the possibility of Styles being LGBTQ+. This invited a more diverse fan base, slightly away from the squealing teenage girls of the 2010s. 'Love On Tour' began in 2021 and was used to promote his albums Fine Line and Harry's House, but was also created to foster a safe and comfortable environment for fans, which helped raise $1 million for the humanitarian aid charity, Choose Love. Styles helped couples propose, reveal baby genders, and interestingly, come out. The

Ooh, careful with those dungaree buckles, Harry!

Raph_PH/Flickr

tour was characterised by feather boas, heart sunglasses and his 'treat people with kindness' slogan – at least that was the impression when I attended in 2021. Screaming 'Cherry' at the top of my lungs, surrounded by like-minded fans who too went crazy when he ran on stage waving rainbow flags, is one of my favourite memories. However, the authenticity of this stage persona he pioneers remains interestingly unclear. Despite 'publicly' being with women, Styles claims he has never 'publicly been with anyone' – suggesting some ambiguity around his sexuality and links with his flamboyant gender expression. Despite attempting to keep this area of his life private, it's almost impossible to ignore how his expression of self has created social discourse, as well as an economically profitable image of himself: 'Love On Tour' generated $617.3 million in revenue for Styles.

In 2022, Styles diversified his brand by starring in Michael Grandage's *My Policeman* – a film which disappointed film fans and the LGBTQ+ community, primarily because of an arguably stiff and unnatural acting performance from Styles, presenting a 'surface level' portrayal of living as a homosexual man in the 1950s. *My Policeman* divided critics, with some questioning the ethics of an apparently straight man playing a gay character and others insisting that he was just acting a part. Regardless, Styles' inclusion in the film and alignment with a homosexual character again promoted ambiguity surrounding his sexuality, driving audience interest and engagement. The negative reviews the film received arguably encouraged more interest in the film – after all, audiences want to feel included in discussions, especially around celebrity gossip.

New era, same questions

Looking ahead to the new album and tour, Styles is once again encouraging the idea of inclusivity and promoting 'love is love' as he returns to the music scene. In the wake of the tour announcement, Styles released on Instagram a carousel of tour posters for various cities intersected with highly graphic images of people of both the opposite and the same gender kissing, images which were so graphic they were flagged as 18+ content. While Styles' previous tours encouraged empathy and kindness, it seems that this new era for Styles leans more into the lustful side of love – perhaps to open more mature conversations around love and sexuality alongside once again promoting inclusion and LGBTQ+ love. For his London shows, Styles will be joined by an icon of the queer community, Shania Twain, firmly labelling the show as a safe space for the community. But is Twain's presence on tour once again drawing attention to the ambiguity of Styles' sexuality for revenue? I would like to believe it isn't and that he genuinely wants to create a comfortable environment for all his fans; but with the music industry's construction of stars and its capitalistic greed, some scepticism is, I think, warranted.

I would love for Styles and more artists to authentically portray themselves as strong allies; however, what I feel uncomfortable about, as a fan myself, is the dangerous line Styles is walking between his confident allyship and breaking down of gender stereotypes and his coming off as queer to capitalise on historic underrepresentation. As fans, admiration should never outweigh our responsibility to question those in the spotlight.

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from the MM vaults

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THE POSTMODERN GIFT SHOP

Banksy's stencil graffiti art has gone from street corners to art galleries, while also defining the look of the 2000s. It's also gone into cinemas with 'Exit through the Gift Shop'. James Rose explores this meta-text and asks if it's just too postmodern for its own good.

Sean Jackson / Flickr

One nation under CCTV

Claire Doherty/Alamy Live News

Top banana – Banksy's 'Pulp Fiction' on display at Chiswick Auctioneers in 2005

Exit through the Gift Shop (2010) is a complicated film, an aspect compounded by its director, the acclaimed British stencil graffiti street artist Banksy. Throughout the majority of his work, Banksy has purposefully played with ambiguity, a distinct quality that applies to both the art and the artist himself: nobody knows who Banksy actually is. He exists as both an anonymous vandal creating satirical street art for the masses and a respected artist whose works are highly sought after. In this shift, from the walls of the everyday street to the walls of elitist art galleries and closed private collections, the postmodernism of Banksy, his artworks and his only film start to become apparent.

Defining the postmodern

To define Banksy as postmodern is not too difficult but, to define the postmodern is not so easy. Postmodernism is a much contested concept due to the numerous approaches theorists have taken to define and understand the concept. But while there are then many different ideas about what postmodernism is, there is at least some agreement on the visual forms it takes. This includes an emphasis on style over content, the conflict between high art (fine art, classic music and literature) and low art (popular culture, kitsch, advertisements and mainstream media) alongside a celebration of the latter, the use of simulacrum and intertextuality, using satire and parody to make comment upon or critique existing creative works and formats coupled with the use of irony, instances of pastiche and expressions of the hyper conscious. Theorist Jean Baudrillard draws a number of these aspects together in his acclaimed text *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), where he suggests that we are living in an era of a 'copy of the copy' and, as result, the idea of the original as well the original itself has been lost to culture. Discussing cinema, Baudrillard suggests that film has entered a phase where it simply 'plagiarises itself, recopies itself, remakes its classics.' He also discusses how the occurrence of the copy of the copy has resulted in hyperreality, a condition where the distinction between what is real and is a representation of the real has completely collapsed. Within postmodern thinking, hyperreality occurs most blatantly in branding and the hype that surrounds it, an instance which results in consumers purchasing the brand (its logo, the hype attached to it and the implied lifestyle) as opposed to the product and its functional value. In a culmination of all these conditions, the representation (as opposed to the real object or the real event) takes on the qualities of the real and so becomes 'more real than real.'

Banksy, A Postmodern Life in Art and Crime

1990	Banksy begins his career as a freehand graffiti artist as part of Bristol's DryBreadZ Crew, alongside fellow graffiti artists Kato and Tes.
1997	Banksy's first large-scale wall mural appears over an advertisement for a solicitor's office in Bristol. Titled 'The Mild Mild West', the image depicts a soft toy teddy bear throwing a Molotov cocktail at a group of riot police.
2000	Banksy turns to stencil graffiti, claiming the idea came to him whilst he was hiding from local police under a parked refuse collection lorry.
2002	Banksy holds his first LA art exhibition at the 331/3 Gallery titled 'Existencilism, an Exhibition of Art, Lies and Deviousness'.
2004	Banksy mass produces a number of counterfeit ten pound notes in which the image of the Queen has been replaced with an image of Princess Diana and the text Bank of England is replaced with Banksy of England. An unknown person throws a large wad of these notes into the crowd at the Notting Hill Carnival. Some of those who picked up these notes try to spend them in the local shops.
2006	Christina Aguilera buys two prints of Banksy's work alongside the original artwork 'Queen Vic' (2003) which depicts Queen Victoria engaged in what appears to be an act of lesbian intimacy. Aguilera pays £25,000 for these works.
2007	Within a year, the auction value of Banksy's artwork rises dramatically: Sotheby's auctions Banksy's 'Bombing Middle England' for a staggering £102,000. Later in the year, 'Space Girl and Bird', Banksy's original cover art for the Blur album *Think Tank* sells at auction for £288,000 to an anonymous American bidder. The final bid represented around 20 times the recorded estimate value for this painting.
2008	Westminster City Council decides to paint over Banksy's 'One Nation Under CCTV' (2008), categorising it not as an artwork but as graffiti. The council stated that Banksy 'has no more right to paint graffiti than a child.' The work was painted over in April 2009.
2010	Banksy's documentary *Exit through the Gift Shop* makes its debut at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival. It is later nominated for the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature Film at the 83rd Academy Awards. It doesn't win.
2018	The artwork 'Girl with a Balloon' was sold at Sotheby's for £1.04million. Immediately after the hammer fell, the artwork automatically destroyed itself by passing through a shredder hidden within the frame. Despite the destruction, the buyer kept the artwork and later sold it, in 2021, for £18.6million. Commenting on the event/stunt, Banksy said the artwork was supposed to completely shred. In an Instagram post he stated that 'in rehearsals it worked every time.'

This brief timeline demonstrates the shift Banksy has undertaken from street artist to contemporary artist, a clear and tangible postmodern instance of Low Art becoming High Art, the shift from the throw-away to the highly desired, highly collectable and highly (financially) valued. These instances also draw attention to the artwork functioning as a practical joke and so further emphasises the collapse of 'low art' into 'high art' and the possibility that Banksy, through these works, is continually questioning and mocking the art world despite the fact it pays him large sums of money to do so. Then again, perhaps this is the punchline to the joke that Banksy repeatedly tells?

Banksy and the postmodern

Throughout his career, Banksy has (purposefully or not) engaged with postmodern forms. He often uses intertextuality in his work. A prime example of this is *Pulp Fiction* (2002) in which the iconic image of John Travolta and Samuel L. Jackson from Quentin Tarantino's film of the same name is rendered as a large-scale stencil graffiti work but, instead of holding guns, Travolta and Jackson are holding vivid yellow bananas. In this replacement, Banksy makes a satirical anti-gun statement and so mocks the glorified and often celebrated violence within both the film itself and Tarantino's other work. There is also a sense of postmodern parody in this and other works, with Banksy's graffiti mocking this infamously violent scene as absurd, again reinforcing the anti-gun/anti-violence subtext of the artwork. In some respects, this example also correlates with Baudrillard's ideas because Banksy's artwork is an act of plagiarism, a repurposing of a contemporary classic. This is all compounded by Banksy creating a series of limited edition prints of the same image. In an instance of Low Art (graffiti) creating tension with High Art (the limited edition print), signed copies of the print sell for between £45,000 to £70,000 in contemporary auctions. These postmodern approaches can be applied to any number of Banksy's works (see, for example, the intertextual anti-war message of Napalm [2004]) and therefore clearly frame Banksy as a postmodern artist. How then might we ask, is Banksy's only film, the documentary *Exit through the Gift Shop*, postmodern?

Daquella manera/Flickr

Banksy and Brainwash exiting through the gift shop

Exit through the Gift Shop concerns LA based French immigrant Thierry Guetta, a vintage fashion retailer who obsessively and compulsively documents his everyday life through a hand-held camcorder. A family connection leads him to filming acclaimed street artist Invader alongside other famed graffiti artists. This enables Guetta to connect with the highly secretive and equally elusive Banksy. After watching the street art 'documentary' Guetta has constructed from the hours of footage, Banksy describes the 90 minute rapid montage (titled 'Life Remote Control') as 'unwatchable' and urges Guetta to make his own art instead of the film.

Taking Banksy's advice, Guetta returns to Los Angeles and, taking on the pseudonym of Mr. Brainwash, he adopts 'the formula he had seen work so well for the world's biggest street artists' and sets 'about creating his own alter ego and iconic visual style.' Beneath this voiceover, the audience watch Guetta illegally pasting his posters around the streets of Los Angeles in grainy hand-held footage. While the narration suggests that these posters are rendered in Guetta's own style, this is difficult to see as the posters are, essentially, Banksy-esque stencil prints of famous people – the Mona Lisa, Winston Churchill, Alfred Hitchcock and Pop Artist Andy Warhol for example – to which Guetta has simply added a pair of sunglasses. Commenting on these artworks, Banksy warily states in the film, 'There's no one quite like Thierry really, even if his art does seem quite a lot like everyone else's.' There is then a sense of the 'copy of a copy' here, an instance which can be seen when Guetta pastes an image of a gun slinging Elvis Presley to a wall (00:57:19) – the image, the pose, and the style are almost the same as Andy Warhol's famous painting Triple Elvis (1963). Read this way, Guetta's Elvis image is an example of a 'copy of a copy' for Warhol's painting is based on a publicity still from the Western *Flaming Star* (Don Siegel, 1960) – Guetta's stencil poster is similar to Warhol's painting which is taken from a publicity still. The postmodern resonates further in Guetta's

Banksy's street art – part of the landscape

work because, in its replication, Guetta both makes (a possibly unintentional) intertextual comment by referencing/copying Warhol whilst simultaneously reinforcing the subtextual message of Warhol's painting through his own imagery – a commentary on the nature of celebrity and repetitious reproduction.

Not satisfied with simply pasting posters across LA, Guetta seeks to mirror Banksy's rise to art culture fame by staging his first solo gallery exhibition 'Life is Beautiful'. The documentary follows the preparations for the show where, it soon becomes apparent that, as the narration states, Guetta 'busies himself with a different concern altogether: hype.' Using a quote from Banksy and other notable street artists, Guetta begins a campaign of almost ruthless self-publicity – large-scale posters across LA and a billboard of Banksy's quote, all of which endorse Mr. Brainwash and are 'picked up by the media' resulting in further publicity and self-exposure. Overnight, Mr. Brainwash becomes 'the next big thing', he (and his art) become more 'real than real.' As hundreds queue up for the exhibition opening, these audience members seek to participate with the brand of Mr. Brainwash, they wish to be part of the hype that surrounds him, as much as to enjoy his art. Suddenly, his pseudonym takes on a postmodern meaning – the audience, the art elite, have been brainwashed through brand and hype. And, as the hype around Mr. Brainwash continues, 'his pieces appeared in galleries and shows around the world.' In this moment, multiple aspects of the art world are bought into question (predominantly style over content and the conflict between high art and pop culture and the [self-] advertisement) and are succinctly paraphrased by Banksy:

> **Most artists spend years perfecting their craft, finding their style. Thierry seemed to miss out on all those bits.**

Brand and hype replace hard work and talent with postmodern repetition; anyone, it seems, can become an artist and, as the narration states,

> **The ultimate validation was measured in dollars and cents: by the end of his opening week Thierry would sell nearly a million dollars of art.**

What this ultimately means remains ambiguous, leaving more questions than answers. As Banksy comments at the film's end:

> **I don't know what it means, Thierry's huge success and his arrival in the art world. Maybe Thierry was a genius all along. Maybe he got a bit lucky. Maybe it means art is a bit of a joke.**

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Why I Hate CAPTAIN FANTASTIC

At school, Ben Caven hated the film *Captain Fantastic* but couldn't understand why it was so hard for him to express that dislike in his unit on spectatorship. Now, years later, he tries to put his finger on what he found so objectionable.

I have a bad relationship with *Captain Fantastic*. The 2016 Kevin Ross feature has irked me since sixth form. I hated watching the film for my A Level studies; I loathed discussing its every scene and I resented every revision session that covered *Captain Fantastic* right up to the days of my final exam. And yet, in all those years of secondary school, I was never able to articulate why. Odd considering that my introduction to *Captain Fantastic* was as a set-text in modules concerning spectatorship.

I spent two years of education discussing audience reception to the themes of *Captain Fantastic* – shouldn't I have been able to develop and express my own response to the film? In retrospect, my reaction to *Captain Fantastic* was too personal and possibly superficial to be codified by the tools of the A Level syllabus - an exploration of themes didn't seem to allow me to express what I disliked about it. But something fundamental about the portrayal of Ben Cash upset me in a way that couldn't be articulated through the thematic interpretation carried out in my lessons. So, when presented with an opportunity to revisit *Captain Fantastic* for this publication, I decided to forgo interpretative analysis and instead focus on my own response to what is depicted on screen. And what I discovered is that I have a bad relationship with Ben Cash, the fantastic captain himself.

On first encounter, the film's titular Ben Cash is established as a singularly eccentric though not wholly incomprehensible character. Portrayed by Viggo Mortensen, Ben arrives on our screen caked in mud and conducting some facsimile of a ritual ceremony – his eldest son has slain a deer, and Ben urges him to eat its heart as an initiation into manhood. The vista is surely one outside the experience of a conventional audience member, yet Mortensen's performance indicates this is not an unusual occurrence for his character; his expression is calm and serene in close-up as the film's title fades into view. Signposting to a spectator is clear – this is

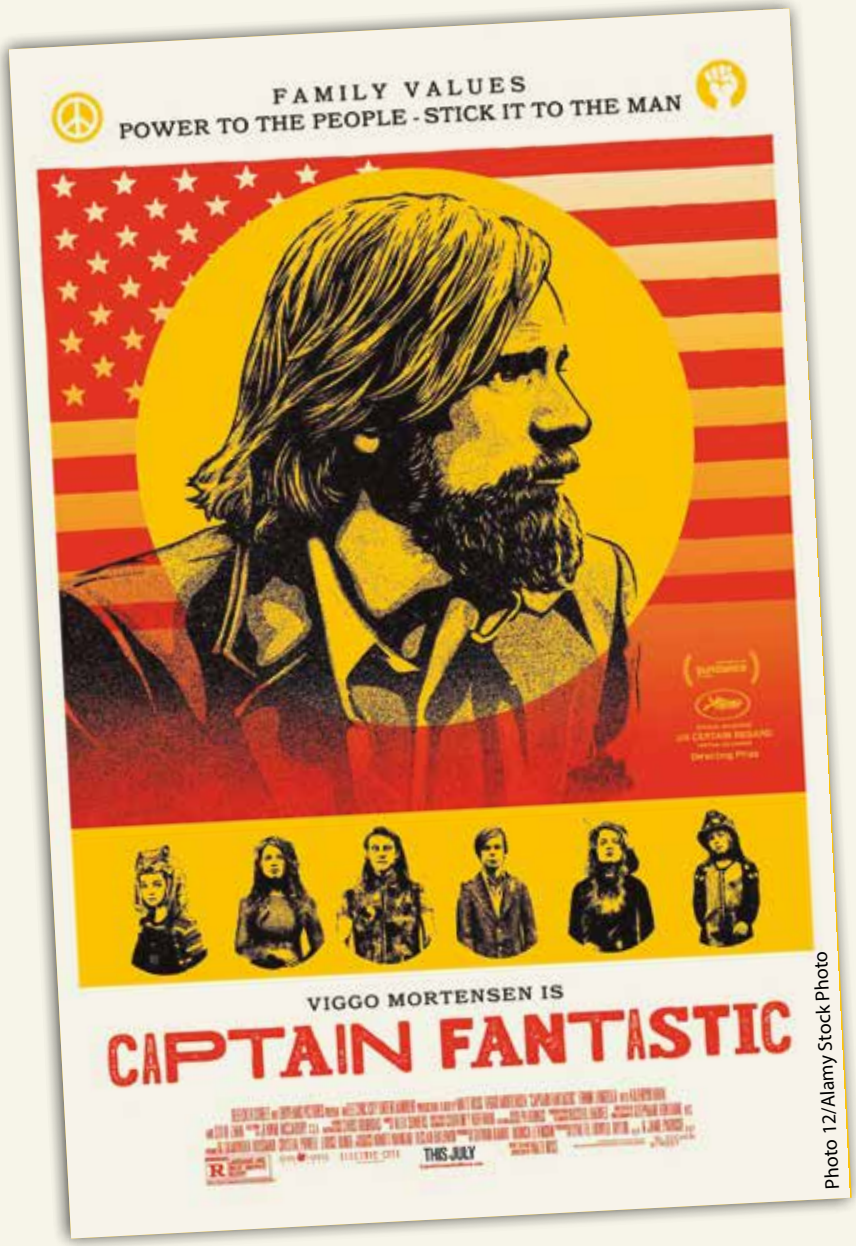


Photo 12/Alamy Stock Photo

'Captain Fantastic', and this is the life he leads. The film then cuts to a montage, bringing further confirmation of the Cash clan's unusual lifestyle through mise-en-scène. We see glimpses of shared living spaces, flashes of communal farms and close-up of the children's unfamiliar names – Vespry, Naja, Bodevan and Rellian. By this stage of *Captain Fantastic*, I still had not developed any strong feelings about Ben; although I found his lifestyle unrelatable, I had no strong alignment or opposition to the character. I did not even understand his place in the narrative other than as a father to an unconventional family. All that changed in the ensuing scene.

As the day and montage draws to a close, the Cash clan gather to read around a campfire. Through close-ups, we are shown that their reading-level far exceeds that of your average American school kid; despite leading a subsistence lifestyle, they happily plough through Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* and the works of Tolstoy. When Ben breaks the evening silence with his guitar, we see another aspect of the family as they all meekly join and play along to his pace. All that is, except Rellian. Ben's middle-child brings the first instance of conflict to *Captain Fantastic*, causing dissonance to the family song through a thumping drumbeat. The camera cuts between reaction shots of Rellian and his siblings, all of them looking to gauge their father's response to this insurgence. For a few moments father and son are held in a shot-reverse shot stand-off, their eye-line level as Ben patiently stares down his recalcitrant son. Then the tension breaks; Ben matches his son with a livelier tune and the whole family joyfully follow suit. Throughout the entire campfire scene, the cinematography emphasises how the Cash children look to their father before following his example. From here on, my understanding of Ben was clear – in a family of highly educated individuals, Ben holds all the social capital. He knows he can respond to any challenge with the full support of his offspring.

My opinion of Ben takes a turn for the worst midway through *Captain Fantastic*, specifically during Noam Chomsky's birthday. While on their south-bound trip across America, the Cash clan pull up by a sheltered stream and prepare a picnic. All seems in line with a conventional family outing until Ben's eldest son Bo emerges with a placard of the American philosopher Noam Chomksy, where upon the Cash children burst into song: 'Uncle Noam', they proclaim, 'it is the day of your birth'. The scene is undeniably strange and once again serves to alienate the Cashes from a conventional audience. After all – as Rellian states – most people do not celebrate Chomsky's birthday; they celebrate religious festivals like Christmas. I remember the scene causing much debate in my Film lessons. *Captain Fantastic* gives little indication of why Ben venerates Chomsky. When challenged by Rellian, he merely retorts that he'd rather celebrate a real magnanimous man than a "fictional elf" (it is unclear if he is referring to Father Christmas or Jesus). Since Chomksy's inclusion in the mise-en-scène lacks any overt narrative significance, the visual lends itself to thematic interpretation. Outside of his linguistic career, Uncle Noam is best known for his anti-authoritarian political stance; he is described by some as an anarchist, a school of thought strongly reflected in Ben's actions thus far in the film. It was the consensus in my class that the scene thus reflected the wider ideological conflict of *Captain Fantastic* – Ben is forced to defend his lifestyle to Rellian, who stands for the conventions of a status quo. Personally, I never found this interpretation particularly compelling. I do not disagree with the analysis, but I equally do not

Photo 12/Alamy Stock Photo

The Cash kids: Matt Ross George MacKay, Charlie Shotwell, Nicholas Hamilton, Samantha Isler

feel it reflects my experience of the scene.

In her 1964 essay *Against Interpretation* literary critic Susan Sontag argued for a view of art not as a series of symbols to be decoded but as a medium to be experienced. Sontag's view was that a critic's task is

> **not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art...[it is] to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all.**

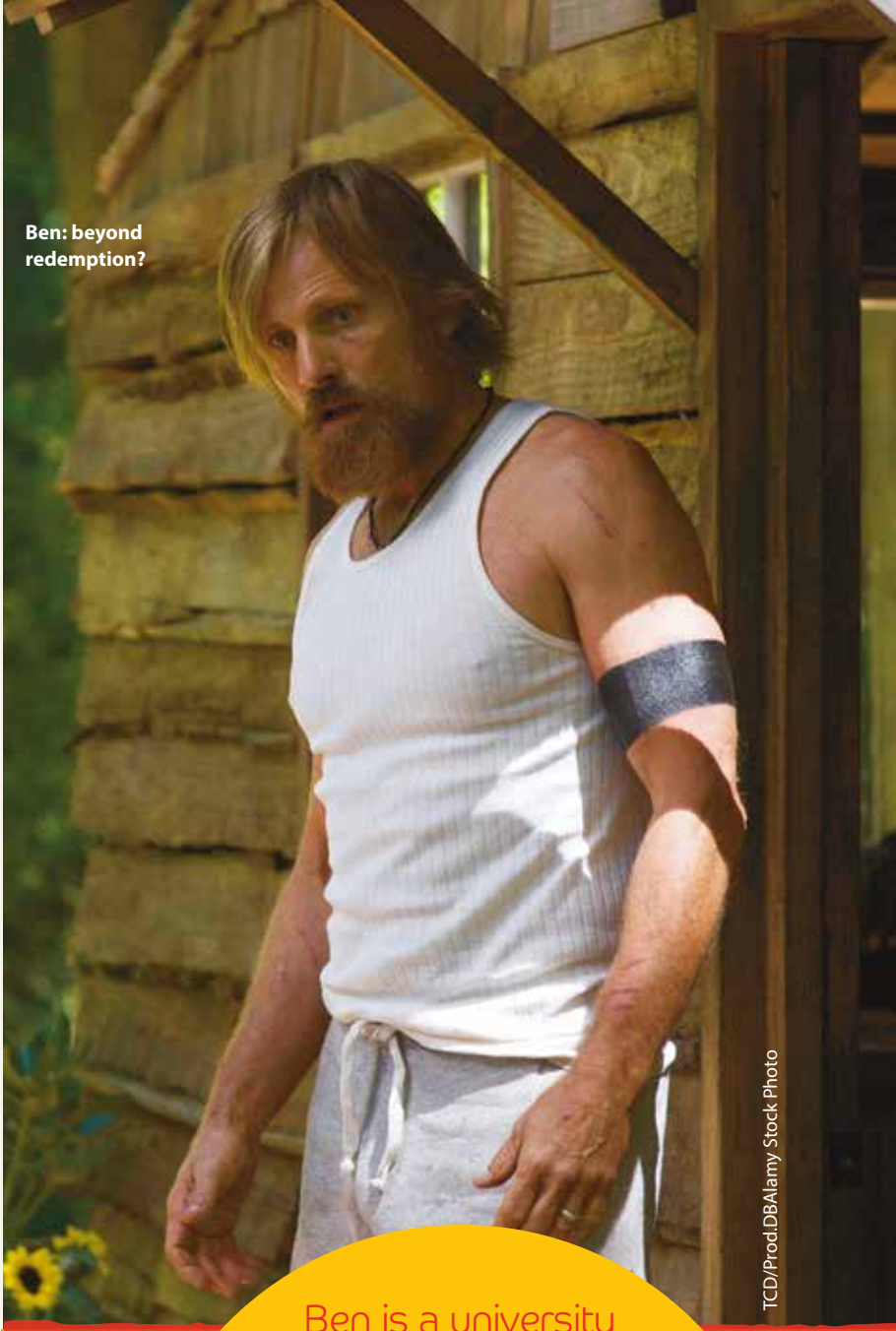
My experience as a spectator is not founded on symbolic interpretation. I came away from Chomsky's birthday disliking Ben for what he does, not for what he represents. His verbal clash with Rellian left me feeling deeply uncomfortable because I know this man has the full weight of family support behind him, and I can see him manipulate this to his advantage. Ben Cash counters his son by challenging him

I spent two years of education discussing audience reception to the themes of *Captain Fantastic* – shouldn't I be able to express my own response film?

to a debate, and almost immediately the other children enthuse about this idea. Like all 'gotcha' debates, the court is empirically uneven. Ben is a university-educated man challenging his teenage son to a debate before a jury of biased peers; he is socially pressuring Rellian to back down. Nicholas Hamilton's performance as Rellian sells this perfectly – he looks bitter; defeated. Ben in this scene is presented as a bully. Which is why I find it so strange that *Captain Fantastic* expects my empathy for the character.

I have a bad relationship with *Captain Fantastic* for expecting me to empathise with a character who I actively resent. I have known men like Ben Cash; men who dominate their family in selfish ways. His choice to leave his children at the end of the film always struck me as cowardly. Rather than work to make amends or to change, he gives custody to their maternal grandparents and drives off alone into the desert. The scene is mournful, the music plaintive and the close-ups of Ben's face augment Mortensen's performance of regret. It is the epitome of remorse, despite Ben doing nothing textual in reparation for his actions outside of shaving his beard. And yet, Rellian and his siblings forgive Ben, emerging from some hidden compartment to comfort their father. Together they set off to forge a new life, one which synthesises Ben's eccentric living with a more conventional family structure. *Captain Fantastic*'s arc was foreshadowed right in the film's opening moments when Ben matches his guitar to Rellian's drum-beat; to a new rhythm of life. And I do not buy it. I never find myself sympathising with this scene. Whatever thematic analysis you may make of it – that Ben has finally rejected Chomsky's philosophy or whatnot – I am not convinced Ben has earned this closure. I dislike Ben Cash for his actions, not what he stands for. And I dislike *Captain Fantastic* for expecting me to forgive him against all evidence to the contrary.

Ben Caven is the pen name of Luca Veronese, a freelance content writer based in Cambridge.



Ben: beyond redemption?

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Ben is a university educated man challenging his teenage son to a debate before a jury of biased peers; he is socially pressuring Rellian to back down [...] Ben in this scene is presented as a bully. Which is why I find it so strange that *Captain Fantastic* expects my empathy for the character.

from the MM vaults

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MOGUL MOWGLI

'WHERE ARE YOU *REALLY* FROM?'

Mogul Mowgli **highlights the importance of embracing one's culture and ridding one's subconscious of the legacy of colonialism. In this article we get two perspectives: Mark Ramey explores this complex process and its elevated resonance amid Britain's current culture war and student writer Rukhsar Hussain examines the way second generation immigrant children are presented.**

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Riz Ahmed in *Mogul Mowgli* (2002)

They ever ask you, 'Where you from?' Like, 'Where you really from?' The question seems simple, but the answer's kinda long.'

So begins actor, activist and rapper Riz Ahmed's song, 'Where you From', taken from his album *The Long Goodbye* and Oscar-winning short film of the same name. The song also appears in *Mogul Mowgli* (Tariq, 2020), a feature film Ahmed co-wrote with director Bassam Tariq. Ahmed plays the film's protagonist, Zed, a British-Pakistani rapper who, whilst on the brink of achieving commercial success, suddenly develops a mysterious illness that threatens to derail his career and leave him paralysed. The reason for his illness is never established but, as the film gives us access to Zed's subjectivity, we are left in little doubt that the problem is psychological: a physical and metaphorical paralysis caused by his confused national and cultural identity.

This is currently a charged topic, and it was no different at the time of the film's release back in 2020 when the UK officially withdrew from the European Union. That political rupture followed years of pro-Brexit campaigning, most notably by Nigel Farage's UKIP. Ten years later, UKIP and Farage have morphed into the populist Reform Party, and anti-immigration demonstrations and the flying of nationalistic flags have sadly become commonplace. Riz Ahmed's rap therefore seems particularly resonant:

Now everybody everywhere wantin' their country back. If you want me back to where I'm from, then bruv, I need a map.

The legacy of partition

For Zed that map goes back to India, where his father, Bashir (Alyy Khan), a first-generation immigrant, has traumatic childhood memories of the forced movement of people across India in what is known as The Partition of India (1947). This shameful, tragically violent moment in history saw British colonial rule in India, The Raj, come to an end with the formation of three countries: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Partition was the enforced and arbitrary separation of the sub-continent's three dominant religious groups – Hindu, Sikh and Muslim. The trauma of division is therefore buried deep in Bashir's subconscious (he is reluctant to discuss it), and something the film develops in many conflicting binaries. The film's title is itself an unhappy binary foregrounding Zed's divided sense of self. The 'Mogul' or Mughal empire was a pre-Raj, Muslim power that once ruled large parts of India and famously built, amongst many wonders, the Taj Mahal. 'Mogul' is therefore an expression of cultural strength and pride and juxtaposes the notion of a 'Mowgli' – a feral child, uncivilised, homeless and lost – a creation of an imperialistic and colonising culture as well as a fictional character appearing in *The Jungle Book* (1894) and written by one of the Raj's pre-eminent chroniclers, Rudyard Kipling.

The idea of 'division' is then set up in the film's very title and developed in the opening scenes. These blend, in a magical realist style, between what looks like an old train carriage full of people sleeping and Zed performing in New York. There his tough Muslim-American girlfriend reminds him of his disavowal of his cultural roots: 'For someone who raps so much about where you're from, when was the last time you went home?' Returning to London to visit his family, Zed takes a taxi from the airport, and subjectively we witness his nostalgic memories of a British childhood (Ahmed's real home movies). These memories are counterpointed with stereotypical images of red London buses, a statue of Winston Churchill and Trafalgar Square. The implication is clear – Zed is a tourist in his own country. This sense of displacement and alienation is further anchored when Zed meets his mum. He is dismissive of her traditional superstitions – she burns red chillis to ward off evil, and still hasn't unpacked a washing machine Zed sent the family as a gift, an implicit rejection of Zed's materialism.

Lessons from a literary legend

Later, Zed is looking through boxes stored in his old bedroom. There he finds an audio cassette of traditional Pakistani music over which, as a child and wannabe rapper, Zed taped his juvenile 'junglist' raps – a symbolic and unconscious act of cultural erasure. Listening again to his younger self rapping, Zed dismisses his parents' cultural

Zed is looking through boxes stored in his old bedroom. There he finds an audio cassette of traditional Pakistani music over which, as a child and wannabe rapper, Zed taped his juvenile 'junglist' raps – a symbolic and unconscious act of cultural erasure.

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Vision: Toba Tek Singh in the film

traditions in the only openly racist moment in the whole film – 'Crazy fucking Pakis!' he says under his breath when the tape's original music starts to play. We are also here fleetingly introduced to an important character who will soon start to haunt Zed's subconscious – a character glimpsed in close up on the cassette cover, Toba Tek Singh.

Toba Tek Singh is the titular character of a famous short story written in Urdu by Saadat Hasan Manto and published in 1955. Set in 1949, it concerns a Lahore mental hospital whose Sikh and Hindu inmates, following the principles of Partition, are soon to be transferred to India. One inmate is however very concerned about whether his hometown of Toba Tek Singh is to become Indian or Pakistani – it is now in Pakistan. He becomes so associated with the town that his original name is forgotten, and the name of the town is foisted upon him; thus, he becomes an embodiment of the actual Toba Tek Singh, the sum of the confusion and violence involved with Partition. When the inmates are eventually transferred, Toba Tek Singh runs off into the no man's land between the two new countries and refuses to move.

In *Mogul Mowgli*, Toba Tek Singh is first seen briefly on the cover of the audio cassette cover as discussed above. He is wearing a traditional Indian wedding headdress called a sehra – a floral item that veils the groom. When we later meet Toba Tek Singh in the flesh but still veiled, his appearance is more threatening than festive. Zed has just collapsed after a confrontation with a fellow worshipper outside a mosque and what follows is a manic fever-dream, a childhood memory, full of jump cuts, disorientating handheld camerawork and sound distortion. We see Zed's father, Bashir, struggling to cater for a boisterous and chaotic Pakistani wedding party. Bashir desperately needs Zed's help, but he is churlish and reluctant. This memory of Bashir failing at one of his many improbable business schemes and Zed's subsequent shame is accordingly amplified by his childish disinterest. When Toba Tek Singh speaks directly to the Zed of today in an extreme close up his words are now ominous, his veiled appearance sinister, presaging the storm now raging through Zed's mind and body:

> **They drew a line in the sand. India and Pakistan. East and West. Us and them. I was born from this rupture. And I am the sickness from this separation. I am Toba Tek Singh.**

Returning to London to visit his family, Zed takes a taxi from the airport, and subjectively we witness his nostalgic memories of a British childhood (Ahmed's real home movies). These memories are counterpointed with stereotypical images of red London buses, a statue of Winston Churchill and Trafalgar Square. The implication is clear – Zed is a tourist in his own country.

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The Riz (mic) test

After this first subjective encounter, Toba Tek Singh makes further appearances in the hospital where Zed is receiving treatment. His manner is mocking and oppressive and when Zed tumbles from his bed, Toba Tek Singh's foot appears on Zed's back, pushing him back to the floor, taunting him for his weakness, crushing Zed with the weight of a culture he has dared to reject.

Collectively rejecting colonialism

Zed's real-world nemesis is the 'commercial' rapper, RPG. Barely articulate and a figure of fun, RPG is nevertheless a fan of Zed's and so represents the idea of legacy just as much as Zed's cultural and familial roots. One other function of Toba Tek Singh's wedding veil is then as an ironic taunt, for Zed's chances of having the physical legacy of children may be harmed by his treatment. This leads Zed into trying to freeze his sperm in a scene of humiliation on a par with the many shots of Zed incapacitated on the toilet or shuffling through hospital corridors in a hospital gown.

The film even concludes in a toilet. Zed hears a song of his on the radio. It's the song he's conceived in hospital, a song called 'Toba Tek Singh'. It is now being sung by RPG, a reluctant gift from Zed. Initially Zed wants the song turned off but Bashir starts trying to sing the chorus – a chant of Toba Tek Singh's name. Zed coaches his father on how to put inflection into the rap and as they sing together Zed seems to find the strength to stand. Chanting, they hug in a scene of mutual acceptance and deep affection. Toba Tek Singh it seems has healed their division as it may have healed Zed. The legacy of a traumatised culture and diaspora is faced – no longer forgotten, not even by the next generation of British Asians like RPG.

Mogul Mowgli isn't explicitly about the misrepresentation of the British Asian community or the lack of positive representations of Muslim culture in mainstream media. Nevertheless, Zed's personal battle to accept his cultural identity can be read as synonymous with a wider cultural battle of challenging misrepresentation and finding the space for personal growth within a pluralistic, post-colonial culture. As Ahmed's rap 'Where You From' says:

> **I make my own space in this business of Britishness…Stop trying to make a box for us, I'll make my own and break your poxy concept of us.**

Ahmed's message is therefore powerful and timely. The psychological battle Zed fights is now manifesting itself in St George's Cross flags flying from roadside lampposts and demonstrations outside refugee centres. Toba Tek Singh, the voice of the dispossessed, is still with us, and like Zed and Bashir show, the only way forward is mutual understanding and acceptance – division will lead to catastrophe.

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Student perspective

Bassam Tariq's *Mogul Mowgli* offers a nuanced representation of the Muslim experience post-Partition of India, depicting the complexity of losing oneself to fit into a new environment and culture. The film resonates with Muslims who have equally struggled to balance these aspects of their lives, just like Zed (abbreviated from Zaheer) – Riz Ahmed's character.

Tariq uses spoken language to highlight the divide between the traditionalism of Zed's parents and his own modernism – at times he speaks in English to his mother and in Urdu to his father, creating a disconnect between them as a family. Zed's parents represent all the Muslims who moved far from home in search of a better life. Tariq explores the generational impact of this on second-generation immigrants, with society's systemic pressure leading Zed to lose his own sense of self.

Whilst many young Muslims – like myself – haven't changed our homes much, I believe we all at some point feel trapped. We begin to wonder where we fit in, but many of us find our way back to our heritage. I believe the reason Zed finds himself conflicted for so long is due to his stubborn defence of societal expectations – something his family does not conform to. Rap was his escape, but it took over his life. The heritage he holds onto in his lyrics doesn't exist for him. It exists for his family members, but not for him. Hence, when Bina asks him, 'Why haven't you been home?', he has no answer. Ultimately, Zed is still lost. He represents a young generation who may also be trying to find themselves despite the expectations placed on them.

Further, *Mogul Mowgli* shows the struggle of hard-working parents who will do anything to integrate into society, namely his father who works multiple careers. Tariq blends this with Zed's childhood trauma – for example, when he was asked to help at his father's workplace. This connects with some memories of my own childhood when I was always dressed up in cultural clothing instead of more Western styles like other kids my age, giving me an odd hatred towards this public representation of my culture. With time, I overcame this and began loving the colour and stories behind the clothes, much like Tariq's choice to end the film with Zed and his father chanting 'Toba Tek Singh'. Although his father begins offbeat, he quickly catches up to Zed, serving as a metaphor for them coming together and finding middle ground. I deeply connect with this scene – coming from a place of disagreement to a blossoming embrace of culture.

To me, *Mogul Mowgli* offers more than just a narrative centred around a rapper struggling with his health. Tariq explores deep and relatable themes often underrepresented in Western film – Zed's character holds a mirror to society offering understanding and recognition to those who may themselves be lost.

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from the MM vaults

The Riz Test – Dr. Sadia Habib, *MM67*

The Theory Drop
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The Theory Drop

Gender Performativity

April McCarthy applies Judith Butler's ideas about gender performativity to make-up influencers and the 'Sephora Squad'.

You are probably aware of people in your life that might be described as more typically 'feminine' or more typically 'masculine' than others. You might even know people who 'turn up' their 'feminine' traits or 'masculine' traits around certain people i.e. consider how girls act around 'the girls' or boys act around 'the lads'.

Butler might say that this is because our gender identities are socially constructed and that we 'perform' them for ourselves and others. These performances are made up of small, repeated actions or rituals; for example, the ritual of applying make-up is one way you might 'perform' being a woman. Make-up, in a sense, can be like wearing your female identity and the act of putting it on is a daily ritual that signals to you and to others that you are feminine. It's like putting on a costume for a performance, or as Butler might say, a gender performance! These repeated actions create the illusion of a 'natural' and fixed gender identity ('That's just what women are like, right? They're obsessed with make-up.'). But we know putting on make-up is not inherent to being a woman and the desire to do so doesn't come from somewhere deep within a person but from the influence of a culture and society. Butler suggests we learn how to perform our gender from society, including, of course, the media. Make-up tutorial videos, found on TikTok, Instagram or YouTube, are prime examples of this.

But first, let's talk about 'gender trouble'. Butler uses the phrase 'gender trouble' to refer to representations that disrupt the traditional gender norms where men perform actions expected of men and women perform actions expected of women. It's when we see those people who do not fit the male/female gender binary in a traditional way or people who actively express their gender identity in ways that subvert social expectations. In particular, she talks about the 'parodic identities' of drag queens who exaggerate femininity through their mannerisms, costumes and behaviours. By doing this, Butler suggests that drag queens expose the fact that femininity is a performance (you put on a wig, make-up, shapewear and you become 'feminine'). As RuPaul puts it, 'you're born naked, and the rest is drag'.

Recent innovations in make-up can be attributed to drag queens. Contouring is now a standard practice that may have only been the gatekept secrets of make-up artists decades before. The transformation of more masculine faces into a hyper-feminine ideal is a spectacle often seen on Instagram and TikTok by make-up influencers. It has been a fantastic spectacle for make-up brands like Sephora, whose products are now so sought after that they have security guards and queues to get into their stores (at least in my local Westfield).

The sheer abundance of make-up influencers just shows us how much the media constantly teaches women how to perform their gender identity. The problem with this, of course, is that this socially constructed idea of a woman is also reinforced and is very much based on traditional notions of gender. Influencing people to spend lots of time and money on make-up is one way of reinforcing that a woman's beauty is very important. This, in turn, reinforces the idea that a woman's value is strongly connected to her appearance. Similarly, a man's value is to always be dominant, physically strong (think about the abundance of gym influencers) and unemotional. By performing this role, a man might internalise the idea that you are not manly if you're not 'dominant' over others, in particular, over women. The problem with gender norms, of course, is that they reinforce patriarchal power, limit self-expression and marginalise people who don't comfortably fit into

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these traditional gender identities.

This brings me back to make-up brand Sephora and one of the new Sephora Squad influencers of 2026. Taylor Ann Gallo (@taggedbeautyy), whose videos offer a dramatic spectacle of transformation with an aggressive voiceover, is a great example of someone who performs their 'female' gender identity in a way that also slightly exposes the myth of it being inherent, natural or stable. She usually starts by adopting a very firm, slightly threatening mode of address towards the viewer with strong New Jersey accent. However, once transformed by make-up, she often adopts a softer mode of address and even stops talking. The skilful way she handles her brushes and the expert knowledge behind the steps she takes is all part of the gender performance. Taylor Ann Gallo is giving a female audience the tools they need to perform a more ideal and therefore more socially acceptable female identity. However, what's interesting about her videos is the fact that we could also argue that they expose the idea of gender as 'performance' in the same way drag queens do. This is because of the role of 'transformation' in the narrative. The 'before' and 'after' reveals the gender performance because the 'real' contrasts so deliberately with the more 'feminine' persona created through the make-up.

At the same time as reinforcing gender roles, make-up tutorial videos are also a genre where these roles are often subverted. This could be due to the influence of drag culture on the beauty industry which has worked to create a sort of enhanced hyper-femininity as the new beauty ideal. I have seen lots of videos of men trying out Gallo's steps, reviewing the effectiveness of her recipe for beauty. We also get lots of tutorials from trans, non-binary or male influencers. Butler might say that this is because the socially accepted idea that sex, gender identity and sexual orientation are in a 'natural alignment' is a myth. As we know, there are plenty of men who perform a gender identity that is, perhaps, more feminine. Another of the Sephora Squad 2026 is Alfred Lewis III who does Vlogs as well as tutorials on making wigs look realistic. In one Vlog entitled 'is ok to evolve, kill the old version of yourself', they talk about their childhood playing with their grandmother's hair mannequins and how they stopped playing football. They go on to talk about how some people don't have the courage to go outside of what's expected of them because of their gender. Alfred Lewis III, like a lot of influencers making beauty and make-up tutorial videos, is a positive role model for people who don't fall into the rigid gender binary or traditional roles that reinforce heteronormativity. If we treat the beauty community online as a 'fan community' of brands like Sephora for example, which Sephora are absolutely encouraging through the whole idea of having a 'Sephora Squad', then queer representation often flourishes in such communities to fill the gap of representation that's missing in the mainstream media. Perhaps this explains all the 'gender trouble' in make-up tutorial videos in 2026.

However, as much as make-up community online does seem to be an inclusive hub of creativity, the vast majority of make-up influencer content is absolutely reinforcing the idea that we should conform to a narrow and western beauty ideal. It is also reinforcing gender roles by constructing ideas, through repetition, about how women should behave in order to be socially acceptable.

> Butler uses 'gender trouble' to refer to representations that disrupt the traditional gender norms.

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The brilliant Taylor Ann Gallo

> The 'before' and 'after' reveals the gender performance because the 'real' contrasts so deliberately with the more 'feminine' persona created through the make-up.

SEEING SUNRISE

Released nearly 100 years ago, *Sunrise* is sometimes overlooked but never underappreciated. Michael Massey takes another look at this early classic of cinema.

RGR Collection/Alamy Stock Photo

Wherever you lived in the UK in 1927, you wouldn't have been very far from a cinema. Some were 'flea pits' and some were the last word in luxury. Programmes typically ran from about 10.30 in the morning for about twelve hours, non-stop. For about one shilling (5p), you could go in when you liked, and watch round the programme cycle until you got back 'to where you came in'.

The programmes featured cartoons, shorts, newsreels, perhaps a B-picture and then the main film. The 'silent' movies were never really 'silent', but accompanied by music – full orchestras in the great picture palaces, a lone pianist in the back-street establishments. The main features in 1927 would have included Hitchcock's atmospheric thriller *The Lodger*; Wilcox's period romance *Madame Pompadour*; DeMille's biblical epic *The King of Kings*; *Wings* a WWI aviation drama from the US and Fritz Lang's sci-fi fantasy masterpiece, *Metropolis*.

By the 1920s [...] engineers were trying out a new sound-on-film technique. This involved converting cameras to create a 'soundtrack' which could be 'read' optically by a special bulb in the projector. Because the track was recorded literally side-by-side with the image frames, synchronisation was guaranteed.

Two humans: George O' Brien and Margaret Livingston getting cosy on the marshes

Let's roll! Murnau and crew on the set of *Sunrise*

Now, imagine, you've seen many of these sorts of films, not forgetting comedies with Harold Lloyd, Laurel and Hardy, et al, all accompanied in your local by that omnipresent piano. Now, this week, you're going to see *Sunrise – a Song of Two Humans* directed by F.W. Murnau. It sounds like it might be a romance, so you're holding your partner's hand (this is 1927!), waiting for the piano to play a bit of impressionistic Chopin. But there is no piano! Instead, after the initial titles appear, the cast list is suddenly accompanied by the sound of an orchestra. On the soundtrack. And, as the images begin to play on screen, there are synchronised sound effects!

All this two weeks before the first so-called 'talkie' *The Jazz Singer* is premiered! And that's not all: from the first frame you are dumbstruck as double, triple, quadruple exposures flash across the screen – steam trains, ships, cityscapes, coastal resorts. OK, so it's not CGI but in 1927 it is certainly 'state of the art'. In fact, it won the first and only Oscar for 'High Artistic Quality'. So, let's see why.

Other *MediaMagazine* articles have talked about important details of the film, such as the dualities of the narrative (Studying *Sunrise*, Caroline Birks, *MM64*) and the psychology of the leading characters (*Sunrise - A Song of Two Humans,* Sue Barnard, *MM85*), but try to put yourself in the shoes of the first audiences one hundred years ago. You are watching moving pictures, and those pictures are not always as easy to understand as other things you have seen. There are very few inter-titles for a start, so you have to imagine the dialogue. The images are sometimes confusing, chaotic, an assault on your eyes, jumbled, disjointed, overlapping, disturbing. It's disorientating. Where are we? On a train, in a bustling city, in a lakeside village, in a forest, on the marshes, in a rowing boat, in a storm, on


Masheter Movie Archive/Alamy Stock Photo

a trolley car? Or are we just in the minds of the three main characters: the rural wife, the city woman, and the husband torn between the two?

Murnau used moving cameras mounted on overhead tracks to put us, quite literally, in the picture as we walk alongside the characters, even overtaking them to see the details as they were seeing them. He also used the multiple exposures to reflect the thoughts and reactions of the characters confronted by the dizzying complexities of the bustling city, the visual onslaught of the fairground, the cacophonous dance hall, the relentless and dangerous traffic in the city centre, all metaphors for their psychological states.

One way that Murnau portrayed the sheer size of the city was to employ a visual technique called 'forced perspective'. This involved building smaller-scale sets for the background, where children dressed as adults and smaller actors created a sense of distance in the shots. He also used unusual camera angles, sloping floors and ceilings leading to reduced size doors and walls. Such effects produced not just exaggerated dimensions but also contributed to feelings of oppression and claustrophobia to reflect the psychology of the characters.

Even though he shows us the risks the husband and wife face in the urban environment, it is, ironically, in the rural setting that they confront their biggest peril: a violent storm that sinks their small boat and almost drowns the wife. Equally ironically, she is saved by the very bundles of reeds that the city woman has prepared to save the husband, her lover. Murnau, here, shows us shots of real and natural elements of the rustic environment in real time, natural sequences, contrasting them with the montages of city life, which he reflects in the technical artificiality of a world which exists only in the 'magical universe of images'. So, Murnau's use of complex imagery was undoubtedly one way that he convinced the Academy of his unique artistic vision. His revolutionary use of sound must have been another.

Several people had been experimenting with adding sound to vision, almost from the beginning of cinema. One such was the female French producer and director, Alice Guy-Blaché. Yes, you did hear correctly: 'female'! She produced something like 100 to 150 synchronised sound shorts between 1902 and 1907! The sound was recorded on wax cylinders, the state-of-the-art system, and then synchronised on playback.

By the 1920s, just before Murnau embarked on 'Sunrise', sound engineers were trying out a new sound-on-film technique. This involved converting cameras to create a 'soundtrack' which could be 'read' optically by a special bulb in the projector. Because the track was recorded literally side-by-side with the image frames, synchronisation was guaranteed. One such system was called 'Movietone', developed for Fox, and Murnau employed this on *Sunrise*. A rival system, developed for Warner Brothers, called Vitaphone, was used for the 'synchronised' soundtrack of *The Jazz Singer*. Unfortunately, it used large wax discs, similar to today's vinyl LPs, played on massive gramophone decks, which could not be guaranteed to run the soundtrack 'in-sync' with the images from the film projector. Much fun is made of this problem in the 1952 film *Singin' In The Rain* (See my article in *MM87*), where sound and vision slip dangerously out-of-sync, leaving Don's male voice speaking lines from Lina, and vice versa!

No such problem with *Sunrise*. The film features a continuous soundtrack of music and sound

From left: F.W. Murnau, Margaret Livingston, George O'Brien and Janet Gaynor

Everett Collection Inc/Alamy Stock Photo

One way that Murnau portrayed the sheer size of the city was to employ a visual technique called 'forced perspective'. This involved building smaller-scale sets for the background, where children dressed as adults and smaller actors created a sense of distance in the shots.

Sueddeutsche Zeitung Photo / Alamy Stock Photo

effects, and even an occasional word or two. The musical score was composed and arranged by Hugo Riesenfeld, combining original themes with parts of established works by classical composers. It was designed, though, not as 'incidental' music, but to reflect the pace, mood, emotion and tone of the visual story, and the result is that you, in the audience, begin to learn how to 'read' a film by both its visual and its sound elements.

The cinema is dark, so that you can concentrate on the images on the screen, but many sequences were deliberately filmed with minimal, often low-key, lighting. Once again Murnau reflects the husband's psychological conflict by the use of shadows dissolving into darkness, and it may seem as though the darkness on the screen almost blends into the darkness of the cinema auditorium, so that you will be drawn into the world of the film and the worlds of the characters.

In the midst of the disturbing gloom, the wife is often represented as a beacon of light, as though imbued with an almost angelic glow. It is noticeable, though, that the floodlit urban sequences all seem to suggest excess, as though light in such environments might be interpreted as danger and risk, rather than goodness and hope.

It's 10.30 pm and the cinema programme is finally over. You emerge from the picture palace into a dark night, or, perhaps, into a town centre's bright lights. Either way, you'll be carrying with you Murnau's view of a world of duality and conflict. Never mind. In two years' time, you'll be coming to see Hollywood's first 'all talking, all singing, all dancing' blockbuster 'The Broadway Melody'! The bright lights will have completely eclipsed the darkness – one sequence was even shot in early Technicolor! You will have to wait until the late 1930s and the advent of film noir to revisit Murnau's bleaker vision of the human condition.

So, why, then, is it called *Sunrise*? Only the last frames reveal a possible answer, as a blazing sun fills the screen. As Scarlett O'Hara says, twelve years later, at the end of *Gone With The Wind*, 'After all... tomorrow is another day!'

'It's OK, *Jaws* doesn't get released for another 50 years!'

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

from the MM vaults

Studying *Sunrise* – Caroline Birks, *MM64*

Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans – Sue Barnard, *MM85*

Taking sides?

Interpreting the impartiality of news

Impartiality has been all over the news of late, and very much about the news too, but what does it mean to be impartial and how does this relate to UK broadcasters? With lots of opinions out there but little hard evidence, a team of academics at Cardiff University set out to offer some systematic analysis of public opinion in their 'Enhancing the Impartiality of News Project' which they introduce here.

Broadcasters have licenses that legally require them to comply with the UK's due impartiality guidelines. Unlike newspapers, online or social media platforms, they cannot present news and current affairs programming in a partisan way that reflects only one side of the political argument. However, the 'due' part of the guidelines gives broadcasters a considerable degree of editorial flexibility in how they report politics. Ofcom regulates the due impartiality of TV and radio, as well as BBC output, although the UK's main public service broadcaster also has an internal system of dealing with editorial standards.

Over recent years, the impartiality of broadcasters, notably the BBC, has become a hotly debated topic, often fueled on social media where heavily edited clips and sensationalist headlines are widely circulated. But there is limited systematic analysis of news output over time or representative audience research that understands what the public think. Our new Arts and Humanities Research Council project was funded to provide hard evidence on the impartiality of political news. This article provides a flavour of the research we produced in 2025, including a You Gov commissioned survey of 2,153 adults between 5 and 6 October, an analysis of TV news bulletins and complaints made to Ofcom about standards in broadcast content.

Politicians presenting programming: what do the public think?

Ofcom regulation currently allows politicians to present programmes on TV and radio. For example, Reform UK's leader, Nigel Farage, has his own show on GB News while politicians, such as

Complaints to Ofcom

We are tracking every Ofcom complaint and ruling to uncover patterns in how impartiality and bias are regulated on UK broadcast media.

www.enhancingimpartiality.com

Labour's David Lammy or the Liberal Democrats' leader, Ed Davey, occasionally present on LBC. They are allowed to act as presenters because Ofcom does not view them as news programmes. They are categorised as current affairs shows, which allows politicians to debate political issues but not present news such as anchoring a TV news bulletin.

Ofcom has justified allowing politicians to present on TV and radio on the grounds of promoting broadcasters' editorial freedom. The regulator has also referenced focus group research it commissioned in 2024 that found no consensus against it. But focus groups do not accurately represent public opinion and the research still found the 'most prevalent opinion' – among focus group participants – 'was feeling uncomfortable with politicians presenting current affairs content'.

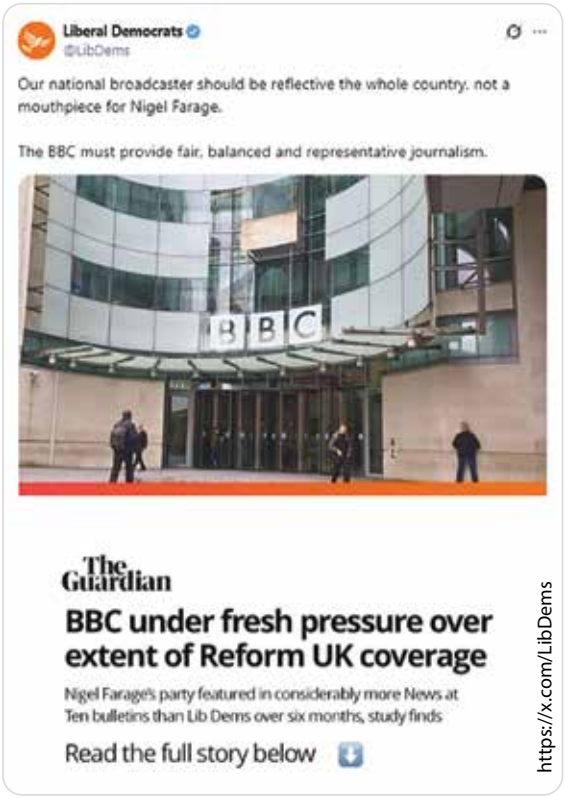
Our You Gov survey provided a representative picture of people's attitudes towards broadcast impartiality in the UK, including whether they supported or opposed relaxing the rules, and whether they wanted politicians to present programming on TV and radio.

Above all, we found a large majority of people (68%) thought broadcasters in the UK should be regulated for their impartiality in news and current affairs programming, 14% thought they should not, while 18% were unsure. This level of support was far higher for older than younger people, although a majority of 18-24 year olds still agreed broadcasters should be impartial.

When questioned further, a majority of people (58%) opposed relaxing the rules on due impartiality to allow broadcasters to become more politically opinionated, while 22% agreed, and a fifth were unclear. On whether politicians should be allowed to present programming about the day's news, 51% of people thought they should not be allowed compared to 29% who agreed and 19% who didn't express an opinion. If don't knows were excluded, almost thirds of people – 64% – opposed politicians presenting on TV and radio, while 36% thought they should be allowed.

Despite broadcasters being regularly accused of political bias, overall, our survey showed

Our study of BBC and ITV News at Ten between January and July 2025 found Reform UK was referenced in 22.7% bulletins, compared with 12.6% for the Liberal Democrats.



https://x.com/LibDems

Impartiality: a political football

Television and podcast news

We're comparing how political stories are told on TV news versus podcasts – from what makes it onto flagship bulletins, to the tone, style, and interpretation of political claims across different broadcasters and platforms.

www.enhancingimpartiality.com

the public agreed with the rules on impartial programming on TV and radio, were against relaxing them, and more people opposed than supported Ofcom's decision to allow politicians to present programming.

Understanding impartiality: what do the public complain about?

In order to explore public concerns about broadcast content generally and impartiality specifically, we systematically examined complaints submitted to Ofcom. We found Ofcom received 33,108 complaints about television and radio content between January and August 2025. Almost three quarters of these complaints related to ITV (23,736), most notably high-profile entertainment programmes such as *Love Island* (13,846), *Celebrity Big Brother* (1,200) and *Britain's Got Talent* (1,302). Channels more frequently discussed in debates about political bias, including GB News (1,697) and Sky News (1,555), received far fewer complaints overall.

More than half of all complaints (18,507) concerned 'generally accepted standards', a category covering issues such as offensive language, discriminatory content and violence. Complaints relating specifically to impartiality were comparatively rare: just 1,077 cases – around 3% of the total.

Of the 33,108 complaints submitted during this period: 31,715 (99.97%) were dismissed and only nine were upheld. These upheld cases typically involved clear and identifiable breaches – for example, offensive language broadcast at times when children were likely to be listening. None related to impartiality.

Yet our YouGov survey found widespread public confusion about how often broadcasters had broken the UK's impartiality rules since 2021. We found, for instance, over seven in ten people either overestimated the number of breaches Ofcom upheld or they could not estimate the proportion. If the public do not understand how impartiality is enforced by Ofcom or overrate how often broadcasters breach the rules, it could undermine trust in broadcast news output. Indeed, when we asked how well broadcasters were currently complying with rules on impartiality, more people felt compliance was poor (41%) than good (33%), with 26% who were unclear.

While many news headlines and social media posts focus on so-called media bias, our systematic analysis of complaints to Ofcom discovered a tiny fraction related to the impartiality of the UK's major broadcasters and only a few of these led to upheld cases. The findings point towards a broader uncertainty about how media regulation is interpreted and enforced – an issue that broadcasters should address given that support for impartiality was the lowest among respondents aged 18-24.

A large majority of people (68%) thought broadcasters in the UK should be regulated for their impartiality in news and current affairs programming.

www.enhancingimpartiality.com

Panellists on political discussion shows

We're examining who gets a voice on major political panel shows – including *Question Time*, *Sunday with Laura Kuenssberg*, *Peston* and *Sunday Morning with Trevor Phillips* – tracking which parties are represented, how often they appear, and how they're introduced to viewers.

Interpreting impartiality: How do broadcasters allocate airtime to parties?

Over the last year, the BBC and other broadcasters have been criticised for allocating too much airtime to Reform UK. Our study of BBC and ITV News at Ten between January and July 2025 found Reform UK was referenced in 22.7% bulletins, compared with 12.6% for the Liberal Democrats. While coverage of both parties was broadly balanced ahead of May's local elections, the reporting of Reform UK subsequently spiked due to its electoral success and opinion poll lead.

The BBC acknowledged it had received many complaints from people who felt there was too much coverage of Reform UK. The public service broadcaster explained it was responding to a new political environment where support for the two main parties – Labour and Conservative – had collapsed over the last decade. Critics have often argued Reform UK receives a disproportionate level of coverage compared to other parties because it only has five MPs compared to the Liberal Democrats' 72 MPs.

But the number of MPs a party has is not the only factor broadcasters use to allocate airtime to parties. The BBC has justified its prominent coverage of Reform UK in four ways. First, Reform UK had the third largest vote share in the 2024 General Election (behind Labour and the Conservatives). Second, Reform UK was the most successful party in the May 2025 local elections. Third, Reform UK has consistently been the most popular party according to UK opinion polls tracking voting intention. Fourth, Reform UK is 'making the political weather' by setting the agenda on issues, such as controlling levels of immigration.

To explore how the public would allocate airtime to parties, our You Gov survey asked respondents to express a preference on how broadcasters should balance coverage. The question was asked without naming specific parties, which might lead to responses that reflected their current political preferences. We discovered that 13% of people said the party leading in the polls should get more airtime, compared to 12% who said the party with more MPs should, while 14% did not give a view. That meant a majority of people – 60% – believed both Reform and the Liberal Democrats should receive equal airtime.

Overall, our TV news study found broadcasters weighted coverage of parties according to a range of factors, including opinion polls and setting the political agenda. Yet our You Gov survey suggested the public would prefer more equal coverage of the main parties.

Summary

Taken together, our research does not show broadcasters have broken the UK's impartiality rules given the editorial freedom they have. But we found much of the public appeared confused and frustrated with how the guidelines have been interpreted over recent years. From politicians presenting programming, to the allocation of airtime to parties and leaders, in our view Ofcom and broadcasters could be more transparent in how they interpret impartiality in ways that both inform and engage people in politics and public affairs.

Professor Stephen Cushion, Dr. Keighley Perkins and Dr. Maxwell Modell work on the Enhancing the Impartiality of News Project at the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University.

Further reading

https://www.enhancingimpartiality.com/
https://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/broadcast-standards/section-five-due-impartiality-accuracy
https://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/broadcast-standards/ofcom-updates-guidance-around-politicians-presenting-news
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https://www.bbc.co.uk/contact/complaint/bbcnewsreformukcoverage

VALUES AND IDEOLOGIES IN THE BIG ISSUE

The Big Issue has been a fixture of the UK's media landscape for decades now, its values and principles worn proudly on its sleeve. But what do the covers reveal about their messaging and cultural reference points? Hannah Pettit puts them uner the analytical microscope.

The Big Issue is on a mission to dismantle poverty in the UK and strives to be a voice for positive social change. To do this, a unique distribution method is employed: homeless people and individuals experiencing financial hardship can become vendors, buying the magazine and then selling it on at a profit. They are 'micro-businesses', according to *The Big Issue*, and this business model provides them with a legitimate source of income, flexible working hours and the opportunity to boost transferable financial and social skills. It aims to build a sense of self-sufficiency and to decrease their dependence on charity or the state – 'a hand up not a handout', as the slogan goes.

While sales of the magazine are of course important, so too is its content. Its use of media language and the representation it favours help to communicate the core values of the magazine: innovation, awareness, social justice and inclusion. A left-leaning, socially, politically and environmentally conscious attitude can be assumed from its past critique of Conservative government policy, its advocacy for state-supported change and its prioritised coverage of issues such as climate change. However, *The Big Issue* stands out through its blend of clear ideological messaging on the one hand and entertainment and celebrity-focused content on the other. Interviews with stars such as Cillian Murphy, Cynthia Erivo and Jarvis Cocker have led recent issues, and topics of mainstream cultural significance such as film, television, music and lifestyle are frequently discussed in the magazine's pages. This creates mass audience appeal and the celebrity endorsement allows the magazine to compete with other high-profile publications.

This article will analyse the cover of Issue 1561 ('Rocky Horror at 50') from April 2023, which was the unseen cover that came up in last year's OCR Media Messages paper, and the cover of Issue 1704 ('Choose to celebrate *Trainspotting* at 30') from February 2026. These were both anniversary issues, celebrating 50 years of the musical, *The Rocky Horror Show*, and a new art exhibition celebrating 30 years of the iconic British film, *Trainspotting*, respectively. These issues are not celebrity-led, nor do they focus on more 'serious' topics like failing water systems across the globe, the cost of living crisis or support for homeless veterans as other recent issues have, but in selecting these two specific landmarks of popular culture for commemoration, a lot can be learned about *The Big Issue*'s values and how its content always reflects its mission for social justice.

There is the obvious appeal to readers' interests – *The Big Issue* describes its audience as 'affluent and environmentally, socially and ethically aware', with 72% of its readers in the ABC1 demographic, of which 42% are AB. This means it's likely that the audience is culturally educated and will be familiar with both *The Rocky Horror Show* and *Trainspotting*, both of which are particularly significant to the British public. *The Rocky Horror Show* was originally a London theatre production written by British-New Zealand actor Richard O'Brien and performed by a mainly British cast, many of whom went on to star in the iconic film adaptation two years after its 1973 stage debut. *Trainspotting*, meanwhile, is considered to be one of the best British films ever made, was directed by English director Danny Boyle, whose films have defined British cinema in recent decades, and was based on the book by Scottish author Irvine Welsh. These factors may have influenced both *The Rocky Horror Show* and *Trainspotting*'s lasting legacy in Britain, and as a magazine that is deeply concerned with social issues in the UK and heavily focused on matters tailored to the British public's interests, it's no surprise that *The Big Issue* has chosen to highlight them both. Indeed, *Trainspotting* has led several previous issues

www.bigissue.com

Issue #1561 of *The Big Issue* was a recent 'unseen' text in the OCR Media Studies exam

The Rocky Horror Show actively encouraged positive social change, destigmatisation and gave a voice and a safe space to the marginalised, which is very similar to *The Big Issue*'s mission for homeless people and people living in poverty.

of *The Big Issue*, notably one in 2013 in which Welsh wrote a short sequel story exclusively for the magazine which led to the movie sequel, *T2 Trainspotting*, in 2017.

However, the themes and impact of both *The Rocky Horror Show* and *Trainspotting* also align with those of *The Big Issue*. *The Rocky Horror Show* tells the story of a newly engaged couple, Janet and Brad, who get caught in a storm and seek help at the home of mad cross-dressing scientist, Dr Frank-N-Furter, who unveils to them his new creation, a physically perfect, Frankenstein's creature-like man called Rocky. The musical (and the 1975 film adaptation) is considered a landmark of LGBTQ+ representation, as it was an eccentric, unapologetic expression of queerness and actively encouraged the bending of gender norms – the protagonist, Frank-N-Furter, as seen on this cover, wore stockings, makeup, corsets and heels, and was highly and overtly camp, persuading the other characters to follow suit. Such flamboyant non-conformity for the time contributed to a shift in attitudes toward the queer community, going beyond the cult status the musical and film achieved and seeping into the mainstream consciousness.

This aligns with *The Big Issue*'s values – *The Rocky Horror Show* actively encouraged positive social change, destigmatisation and gave a voice and a safe space to the marginalised, which is very similar to *The Big Issue*'s mission for homeless people and people living in poverty. In representing the queer icon, Frank-N-Furter, on the front cover, *The Big Issue* is perhaps aligning itself with progressive, left-leaning values. This is anchored by the coverline, 'Just a step to the right', written in the instantly recognisable Rocky Horror typeface. Inspired by the lyrics of the musical's iconic song, 'Time Warp', the coverline cleverly refers to both the musical and the political spectrum, a key topic of discussion in Richard O'Brien's enclosed interview with *The Big Issue* on *The Rocky Horror Show*'s legacy 50 years on: 'Rocky Horror, culture wars and 50 essential years of sweet subversion'. With 'culture wars' raging and the world taking 'a step to the right', *The Rocky Horror Show*'s challenging of exclusion and mainstream conservatism is still very relevant and spiritually in line with what *The Big Issue* also tries to do in its advocacy for social justice.

Importantly, it's not all bad – the recognisable and fun campness of 'Time Warp' is transferred to the coverline and the humour slightly offsets what could otherwise be quite a negative stance. *The Big Issue*, is, after all, out to provide solutions, not merely complain about the grim state of political, economic or social affairs. This can be seen in some of the smaller coverlines – 'fighting' and 'taking a stand' convey the urgency and energy with which *The Big Issue* aims to respond to issues. It is active, not passive, much like the magazine's 'hand up not a handout' philosophy.

Similarly, *Trainspotting* is very closely aligned with *The Big Issue*'s values. Set in Edinburgh in the mid-90s, the film follows the life of an unemployed heroin addict called Mark Renton, played by Ewan McGregor. Renton, trying to get clean, navigates poverty, unemployment and the cycle of drug abuse along with his colourful group of friends: 'Sick Boy', 'Spud', Begbie and

Choose a life, choose a job, choose a magazine.

Trainspotting actively tackles ideas surrounding social welfare, disillusionment with the institution, and rebellion against consumerism, but also deals with the state of society in post-Thatcher Britain – the parallels with *The Big Issue's* coverage are clear.

Tommy. *Trainspotting* is known for its gritty and grimy portrayal of heroin addiction and its consequences, but balances its unflinching intensity with dark humour and a vibrant style of filmmaking. Three decades later, it continues to fizz with the same spirit and irreverence as the Britpop bands of the 90s' 'Cool Britannia' era, of which *Trainspotting* is a pillar.

However, the subject matter of *Trainspotting* is particularly resonant with *The Big Issue*, since a large number of people experiencing homelessness also use drugs – 32% of all deaths among homeless people in England were a result of drug poisoning, according to a gov.uk study in 2019, compared to just under 1% of the general population. *Trainspotting* actively tackles ideas about social welfare, alienation, and rebellion against consumerism, but also deals with the state of society in post-Thatcher Britain – the parallels with *The Big Issue*'s coverage are clear. Indeed, an issue published in October 2025 marked 100 years since Margaret Thatcher's birth and discussed 'The long shadow of her legacy and the state we're in'. However bleak it is, though, *Trainspotting* is, in part, a story of friendship, and crucially ends on a more hopeful note with a callback to Renton's famous 'Choose Life' opening monologue, most of which is printed on Issue 1704's cover. The ability to 'choose life' and 'a job' and 'a career' and 'a family' is, after all, what *The Big Issue* wants to provide for its vendors. The word 'Choose' is notably centred and stands out from the subsequent list of words.

Analysis of these two covers indicates that *The Big Issue* always aims to imbue its content with its core values and philosophies. While other Big Issue covers might focus more heavily on political, social or economic issues or exploit celebrity star power, even simple anniversary covers such as these are clearly composed with intent. Through the ideologies represented and the considered coverlines, *The Big Issue*'s drive for social change is continuously reinforced.

Hannah Pettit is *MediaMagazine*'s copy-editor and a freelance writer.

from the MM vaults

- *The Big Issue* and the Ideology of the Possible – Andrew McCallum, *MM80*
- *The Big Issue*: Industry Focus – students at St Mary's School, *MM70*
- Selling *The Big Issue* – Helen Williams, *MM70*

References

Read the Government's report into homelessness and drug misuse here: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/report-into-homelessness-and-drug-misuse-published--2

www.etsy.com

Why Stray Kids Made Me Finally Give in to K-Pop

Image courtesy of Kirsty Worrow

A shrine to K-Pop: Kirsty's daughter's peg board

Reluctant K-pop convert Kirsty Worrow explores what the band Stray Kids reveals about K-pop, fandom and the future of popular music in the age of global social media content.

Despite living with three dedicated Stray Kids fans, I held onto my K-pop resistance with the weary stubbornness of someone who has spent years studying pop culture. At my family's insistence, I joined them in a small-town cinema to watch *Stray Kids: The DominATE Experience*, a concert film from their 2025 world tour. I went in prepared for cutesy bubblegum K-overwhelm; I came out stunned by the sense of cohesion and joy in the room. I found myself wondering why on earth I had resisted this for so long. The bigger question followed: why does K-pop inspire such intense loyalty, when contemporary Western pop groups often struggle to maintain the same level of fan commitment?

The global appetite for Korean media has shifted far beyond being considered just a trend. *Squid Games* is still Netflix's most-watched series of all time, clocking more than 265 million views in its first 28 days. K-dramas such as *Crash Landing on You* and *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* attract huge Western audiences, often through word of mouth and social media. Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019) broke ground at the Oscars. These illustrate the ongoing impact of Hallyu (the Korean Wave) which is now a major global cultural force rather than a passing fascination. With the sensational impact of *K-Pop Demon Hunters* (2025), a film that leans fully into the myths, performance styles and fandom structures of K-pop idol culture, it feels timely to look closely at how K-pop works and why it connects so effectively with people way beyond South Korea's borders.

Stray Kids are a useful case study because their rise is unusually measurable. At the time of writing, they are the second biggest selling act globally (after Taylor Swift, obviously). They have secured eight consecutive US Billboard 200 No. 1 albums, becoming the first act from any country in history to debut at No. 1 with their first eight chart entries. When they headlined Lollapalooza Paris in 2023, they were the first K-pop act headliners. In 2026, the DominATE Experience was the first K-pop film to top the global cinema box office. This signals a cultural shift: these groups aren't guests in Western pop culture anymore. They are shaping it. Stray Kids are managed by JYP Entertainment, one of South Korea's big three agencies, whose training systems and global strategies have played a major role in standardising how K-pop groups are developed and promoted.

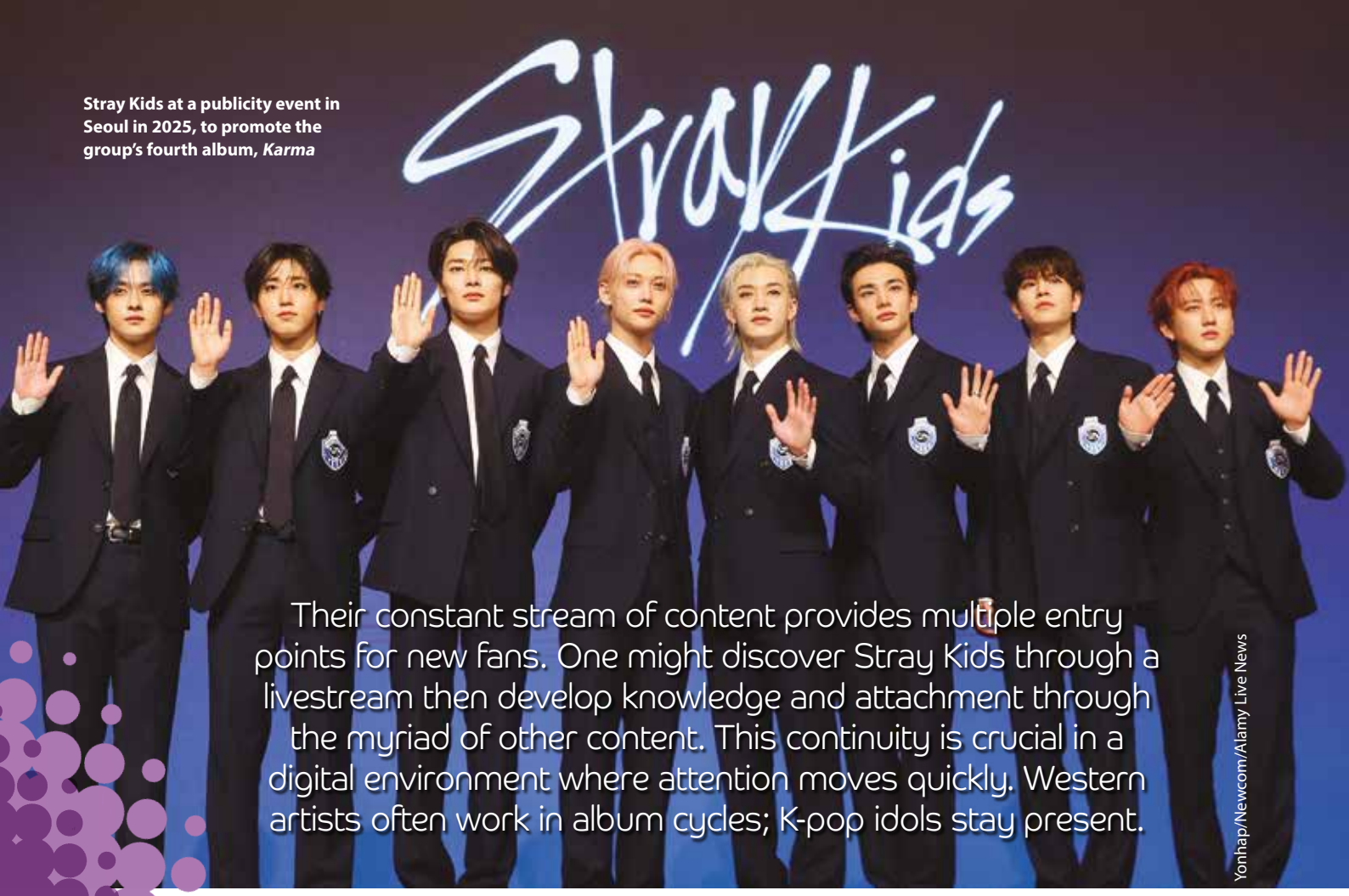
Visual semiotics is an important aspect of cultural mythmaking. K-pop's era-based branding uses distinct colour palettes, costuming, motifs and visual themes to create instantly recognisable identities.

JYP Entertainment / Wikicommons

Once you've K-popped, you can't stop!

Stray Kids' success, however, is not simply the result of popularity. It grows out of a finely-tuned system that brings together professional discipline, transmedia-storytelling, routine intimacy, flexible gender performance and participatory fandom. The band represent this system particularly well; they are self-producing, narratively consistent, culturally-hybrid and responsive to their fans. Understanding their approach offers insight not just into K-pop's global rise but into where celebrity and fandom are heading.

A key element of K-pop is the visibility of labour. Stray Kids' formation through JYP's 2017 survival show made their development unusually transparent. While Western artist development often happens privately, through informal training, chance opportunities or inaccessible industry networks, K-pop idol training is structured, intense and carefully documented. Trainees learn dance, vocals,



Stray Kids at a publicity event in Seoul in 2025, to promote the group's fourth album, *Karma*

Their constant stream of content provides multiple entry points for new fans. One might discover Stray Kids through a livestream then develop knowledge and attachment through the myriad of other content. This continuity is crucial in a digital environment where attention moves quickly. Western artists often work in album cycles; K-pop idols stay present.

Yonhap/Newcom/Alamy Live News

performance, branding, communication and emotional management. Their journey, produced for television, allows audiences to see their failures, negotiations, arguments and improvements. Richard Dyer's theory of the star as labour is particularly relevant here. He argues that authenticity is built not by showing celebrities as naturally real but by highlighting their work. Graeme Turner's idea of manufactured authenticity also fits; idols seem authentic because their labour is turned into a narrative the audience can follow, believe in and root for. The emphasis on visible effort echoes the wider Korean media culture. K-pop sits within this culture of craft. Fans see the work and value it.

Transmedia storytelling is common in South Korean media culture, and this is the environment Stray Kids operate within. Their world doesn't exist only in albums and music videos; it extends into a variety of online platforms and content like SKZ Code, SKZ Player, frequent TikToks, YouTube content, dance practices, behind-the-scenes logs and livestreams. JYP even have their own fan-app, Bubble, to provide a dedicated hub for this content. Henry Jenkins' definition of transmedia storytelling – a narrative spread across multiple platforms where each part adds something unique – captures this perfectly. Their constant stream of content provides multiple entry points for new fans. One might discover Stray Kids through a livestream then develop knowledge and attachment through the myriad of other content. This continuity is crucial in a digital environment where attention moves quickly. Western artists often work in album cycles; K-pop idols stay present.

Routine parasocial intimacy deepens this presence. Parasocial interaction, described by Horton and Wohl, refers to the one-sided relationships audiences develop with media figures. Digital culture has intensified this phenomenon, and K-pop uses it effectively. Stray Kids excel at ambient intimacy – the steady, low-level presence created through livestreams, messages, voice notes, vlogs and casual interactions. Bang Chan's weekly livestream, Chan's Room, is especially significant. It is informal, warm and consistent, allowing fans to feel part of a familiar routine. Western pop often relies on mystique and carefully controlled public appearances. K-pop prioritises frequent, personable contact. This steady availability helps build loyalty that feels genuinely emotional.

Persona and gender performance contribute further to this system. K-pop idol groups are designed as ensembles of distinct personalities. The production unit 3RACHA – Bang Chan, Changbin and Han – are credited as primary songwriters and producers across most of their work, reinforcing a self-producing idol identity that challenges Western assumptions about idol groups being manufactured or passive. Bang

Chan is associated with emotional intelligence and care, fitting Sun Jung's idea of soft masculinity. Hyunjin embodies the flower boy aesthetic, with an emphasis on beauty, elegance and a high-fashion image. Felix often appears in academic discussions because of his gender-fluid styling, which relates to theories of hybrid masculinity. Lee Know's calm intensity, Changbin's powerful stage charisma, Han's humour and warmth, Seungmin's classic K-drama-style masculinity and I.N's coming-of-age narrative all contribute to a rich range of masculinities that complement each other. Judith Butler argues that gender is not something we are, but something we repeatedly perform. Stray Kids' varied styling, performances and personas show gender as flexible and expressive rather than fixed. Raewyn Connell's theory of multiple masculinities also fits, highlighting how different versions of masculinity coexist and interact. This diversity is a major part of K-pop's global appeal, offering more room for identification than Western boy/girl bands typically provide.

Fandom culture brings all these dynamics together. Stray Kids' fandom, STAY, is highly organised and deeply participatory. Drawing on Henry Jenkins' ideas about participatory culture and Matt Hills' work on fan identity, STAYs engage in streaming parties, coordinated voting, charity projects, photocard trading, gift-giving and detailed interpretation of visual and narrative clues. This collective labour produces real results. Stray Kids frequently trend globally during releases, generate millions of hashtag uses and achieve rapid music video view counts. These outcomes are not accidental; they emerge from structured, community-driven effort by industry producers and fans.

Visual semiotics is an important aspect of cultural mythmaking. K-pop's era-based branding uses distinct colour palettes, costuming, motifs and visual themes to create instantly recognisable identities. Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* helps explain how repeated imagery becomes symbolic and powerful. Stray Kids' eras – the industrial reds of God's Menu, the neo-folkloric energy of Thunderous, the glitch-green surrealism of Maniac – create strong visual worlds that are ideal for TikTok and Instagram, where recognisability drives engagement.

The economics of K-pop also matter. Industry data shows that K-pop continues to dominate global physical album sales. Multiple album versions, photocards, light sticks, soft toy mascots, exclusive events, limited editions and cinema screenings encourage fans to participate materially as well as digitally. Physical objects enhance identity, communicate belonging and

create tangible connection to the band that streaming cannot match. Physical K-pop shops are popping up globally to cater to this demand and to provide hubs for fans.

K-Pop Demon Hunters emphasises the performative, mythic and emotional qualities of idol culture, making it even clearer that K-pop is more than a musical genre. It is a cultural system linking training, performance, storytelling, community and emotion. Stray Kids demonstrate how powerful this system can be when all its parts work together. The Western music industry is struggling with volatility – trends change quickly, algorithms shift and viral moments can disappear overnight. K-pop operates differently by building long-term worlds, cultivating belonging and sustaining attachment. The future of global pop culture is likely to be with those who create ecosystems of connection. Stray Kids offer a clear example of how this works. Loyalty is not accidental in K-pop. It is designed, nurtured and woven into every part of the system, and it's a powerful drug.

Kirsty Worrow is a teacher of Film Studies at Shrewsbury Colleges Group.

from the MM vaults

The Rise of K-Pop – Melodie Karczewski, *MM63*

Ken Woroner/Netflix

Guillermo del Toro

Fathers, Monsters and Frankenstein

Master and monster? Oscar Isaac as Victor Frankenstein and Jacob Elordi (inset) as The Creature

Grotesquely beautiful creatures and complicated father figures have characterised Guillermo del Toro's stylish, distinctive films. Here, Stephen O'Connor takes a look at del Toro's career and focuses on *Pan's Labyrinth* and his recent *Frankenstein* adaptation to explore the director's recurring narrative and visual themes.

'The world was to me a secret which I desired to divine.' A quote from Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein*, and perhaps one befitting of Mexican filmmaker Guillermo del Toro. His hugely successful career, including an Academy Award for Best Picture for 2017's *The Shape of Water*, has been a journey through a love of the maligned, the weird, the wonderful and the monstrous. *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) is perhaps his best-loved film (both critically and by fans), and has been part of the Eduqas A Level Film Studies specification since 2017, while his recent Netflix-distributed adaptation of *Frankenstein* is being hailed by some as his 'magnum opus'. I will briefly look at how both films deal with two elements of the theoretical framework: meaning and response, as well as one of the key elements of film form, mise-en-scène.

Young Victor prepares to greet his terrifying father

'That boy will bear my name and my father's name. Save him.'

In a recent article in *The Times*, del Toro spoke about how he viewed the binary opposition of himself and his father: 'I was pale, indoorsy, obsessed with anatomy and biology and disease, reading constantly and into movies… My father was a hunter, a race-car driver, a motorcycle champion, so he saw me as something odd. An intriguing disappointment.'

It is no surprise then, that tempestuous father-child relationships are present in almost all of del Toro's films, from the Professor and his adopted hellspawn son in *Hellboy* (2004) & *Hellboy 2: The Golden Army* (2008), to Ofelia and her adoptive father, Captain Vidal, in *Pan's Labyrinth*. Even the more conventional mainstream blockbuster, 2013's *Pacific Rim*, fits a father-son duo of Jaeger Pilots into a narrative of rampaging monsters destroying cities across the globe. Del Toro is consistent with his themes, and the influence of Mary Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein*, lurks throughout his

Creature and creator meet. That high-angle shot of Victor suggests a power imbalance here!

His hugely successful career [...] has been a journey through a love of the maligned, the weird, the wonderful and the monstrous.

Images courtesy of Netflix

Ken Woroner/Netflix

Pan's Labyrinth uses a 'detailed and idiosyncratic approach to mise-en-scène' according to the Eduqas factsheet resource [...] a collaborative effort between hundreds of prop designers, make-up artists, VFX artists and other creatives.

Ken Woroner/Netflix

Guillermo del Toro and Jacob Elordi watching cute cat vids presumably?

filmography as a seminal text that deals with the ultimate version of fatherhood – a 'son' and his creator.

The fatherhood theme in *Pan's Labyrinth* is well-documented in academic texts, as well as in exam board material. Ofelia is forced to live with and respect Captain Vidal, a fascist captain hunting rebels in post-Civil War Spain, who prioritises his unborn son over his wife (Ofelia's mother), and his new adoptive daughter. The climax of the film, taking place after the death of Ofelia at the hands of her monstrous stepfather, shows the fall of the 'creator'. Vidal's obsession with a male heir has been his sole purpose –aside from the joy he took from torture and sadism – and has perhaps, in his eyes, excused his violence, callousness and complete lack of empathy. He is cornered by his housekeeper Mercedes, who is in fact a secret double agent, and armed anti-fascist rebels led by Mercedes' brother, Pedro. They refuse to allow him a self-aggrandising and pompous speech he has been passed down about his own father, preferring to kill him and erase him from existence.

Like father like son… Victor's cold father sets the tone

Del Toro is consistent with his themes, and the influence of Mary Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein*, lurks throughout his filmography as a seminal text that deals with the ultimate version of fatherhood – a 'son' and his creator.

It is an undignified (and deserved) end to this character, who del Toro clearly sees as representing an authoritarian, cold, cruel version of fatherhood. It is two female characters, Mercedes and Ofelia, who are the 'heroes' of this tale, and they stand up to Vidal's viciousness in various ways throughout the film.

'In you, I have created something truly horrible.'

Just as Vidal in *Pan's Labyrinth* represents a callous, vain form of paternal masculinity, so does Victor in *Frankenstein* (2025). Victor is driven by lust and a need to define himself as superior to others – creating his creature through the means of a benefactor he later (accidentally?) murders whilst trying to simultaneously spite and prove himself to his late father. Victor is eventually successful in bringing his creature to life, but later abandons it when it doesn't live up to his preconceived ideals. However, through a fidelity to the source text rarely seen in adaptations of Mary Shelley's novel, del Toro doesn't fully render Victor as an irredeemable form of 'toxic masculinity'. Near the end of the film, Victor asks for forgiveness from the creature before he passes. Victor is no Vidal – he is a flawed, selfish and often cruel man, but in his adaptation, del Toro wants us to see the forgiveness between 'father' and 'son', ending the film on an optimistic and somewhat hopeful note.

Once again, it is two other characters in the narrative that supply the heart and human empathy that we as an audience are clearly directed to see – Mia Goth's Lady Elizabeth Harlander and Jacob Elordi's Creature. The Lady Elizabeth character does sometimes slip into a stereotypical version of femininity that forms a binary to Victor – she is kind, empathetic and fascinated with the Creature, she is clearly the character with whom we are meant to sympathise. Her demise is reminiscent of many a tragic damsel used to fuel the grief of the main protagonist, however her agency in her scenes is also clear. The Creature is the real heart of the film – as would be expected from a director who has always loved the monstrous protagonist (*Hellboy, The Shape of Water, Nightmare Alley, Blade II*). Jacob Elordi portrays a version of the monster that can perform violent, brutal actions, yet is the only other character in the film, aside from Elizabeth, who we are positioned to empathise with.

A cabinet of curiosities

Del Toro may well have developed an auteur status in Hollywood by producing a thematically consistent body of work, however many will say he is a director more defined by his use of costume, physical effects and props (though this, in turn, creates a distinct visual language which contributes to his auteur image). This is a key feature of film form which is very much tied into the meaning and response we may gather from his films – as with almost all elements of the theoretical framework, they do not exist in a vacuum.

From his very first feature film, *Cronos* (1992), in which a scarab-like device becomes a key piece of iconography that represents the vampiric main character's desperate need for blood, we could see that del Toro also loves the mechanical, the wondrous and the curious. In *Hellboy II: The Golden Army*,

Guillermo del Toro with Tamara Deverell

the whole plot is driven by key objects that Prince Nuada needs to return to reclaim power over the Golden Army. *Pan's Labyrinth* uses a 'detailed and idiosyncratic approach to mise-en-scène' according to the Eduqas factsheet resource, and you can see that the mise-en-scène element has the most detail of all the sections in the document. This reflects the fantastic prop and set design in his films – a collaborative effort between hundreds of prop designers, make-up artists, VFX artists and other creatives.

Frankenstein similarly uses props and sets to build a gothic-influenced world that fits in with del Toro's visual style. In a key scene near the beginning of the film, Victor tries to prove the merits of his work to the Royal College of Surgeons by bringing a cadaver back to life in front of a shocked and enthralled audience. The cadaver itself reflects the well-known aesthetics and visual iconography of the *Frankenstein* story and canon – however, you can see a distinct parallel between this use of an animatronic prop and the resurrection of a corpse in *Hellboy*, where Hellboy resurrects Ivan and carries him around to help guide them to their final encounter with Rasputin.

Another repeated iconographic element of del Toro's films is that of insects. Del Toro has said that as a child he was fascinated by bugs and insects, and you can see this in the mise-en-scène of both *Frankenstein* and *Pan's Labyrinth*. In *Frankenstein* it is Elizabeth who has a fascination with insects –showing Victor her scientific books, and later staring sadly at a butterfly trapped in a cage – a metaphor for her own personal circumstances. There are also references to insects in the patterns, fabrics and shapes used in the clothes designed for Elizabeth by costume designer Kate Hawley who won the Oscar for Best Costume Design in March 2026. In *Pan's Labyrinth*, insects feature in multiple scenes, such as when Ofelia travels with her mother to Vidal at the beginning, and an insectoid creature appears out of a statue, bridging the fairytale world and the real world. Del Toro clearly sees the 'magical' nature of these creatures, and we later find out that these are the 'real world' forms of the fairies guiding Ofelia on her quest. These recurring features are honed between del Toro and frequent collaborators Pilar Revuelta (Production Designer for *Pan's Labyrinth* & *The Devil's Backbone*), and Tamara Deverell (*Nightmare Alley, Frankenstein*).

'…visible only to those who know where to look.'

It is always worth thinking of certain filmmakers as artists that imprint themselves upon their work. In a modern Hollywood landscape that some believe is becoming more focused on franchises that follow repeated, and often unoriginal and uninspiring, patterns of production to achieve success, del Toro stands out as a filmmaker who will unapologetically maintain his distinct themes and visual style in all of his films, whether that be a smaller, more personal project (*Pan's Labyrinth*), a Hollywood blockbuster (the *Hellboy* series), or perhaps his coup de grâce – his recent, and widely praised adaptation of *Frankenstein*.

Stephen O' Connor is Head of Media Studies at Sandringham School in St Albans.

from the MM vaults

Monsters Real and Imagined – Luca Veronese, *MM80*
Pan's Labyrinth – Elaine Scarratt, *MM64*

RETURN OF THE AUTEUR?

With stale mainstream movies flopping at the box office and audiences becoming tired of endless remakes and sequels, is it time for the return of visionary auteurs as Hollywood money-spinners? Well... yes and no, argues Alexander de Cruz.

In 2023, 504 films were released in America. This number stood at 460 the previous year. With the film industry currently being swamped by swathes of monotonous and lifeless sequels, prequels and remakes, it often seems impossible for new and original voices to get a word in edgeways. In fact, the gulf between mainstream and independent filmmaking is now so wide that the budget for an entire 'indie' production is often just a fraction of what a studio like Disney might spend on marketing alone. However, it's not all bad news for creative individuals in the industry: we have seen that both producers and audiences are taking a chance on 'auteur' directors. Even the 'Big Five' film companies have all funded the passion projects of auteurs like Greta Gerwig and Christopher Nolan, showering them with generous budgets and creative freedom on bold and potentially risky projects. Could it be that the studios are finally 'getting' auteur directors and appreciating their artistic worth? Possibly, but probably not. Rather, this recent trend in mainstream filmmaking can, inevitably, be explained by one thing: money.

Risks and rewards

Directors are often seen as troublemakers by producers, fighting for their vision, regardless of how subversive and unprofitable it may be. Given the high-risk, high-reward nature of the film industry, it almost seems

Adrien Brody in *The Brutalist* (2024)

Brookstreet Pictures / Kaplan Morrison / Album

absurd that major studios would place so much money into their hands. As David Hesmondhalgh argues in *The Cultural Industries*, all media institutions navigate an enormous amount of risk when producing new content. This is particularly true in the film industry as many companies hold themselves to the gold standard of 150%, the idea that a film must break even and then make a further 50% of its budget to be deemed a success. Such a high benchmark means that institutions fall back on tried-and-tested methods of formatting, such as serialisation, which should theoretically create a risk-averse, commercially viable box office success. Yet, this strategy of churning out 'blockbuster material' now seems to be failing the mainstream studios, with independent productions sometimes outperforming established franchises in popularity.

A particularly potent example of this has been the dramatic decline of the superhero sub-genre. Since 2008 (with the joint releases of *Iron Man* and *The Dark Knight*), superhero movies have dominated box office charts and proved to be highly reliable money-makers. Before hitting its peak with *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), the Marvel Cinematic Universe was making an average of $797,528,571 per film, an impressive box office return considering that most pre-*Endgame* Marvel movies were made for around $130-170 million. However, more recent instalments in the franchise have failed to pass the 150% gold standard, including *The Marvels* (2023), *Captain America: Brave New World* and *Thunderbolts* (both 2025). The reason for this dip is not that the audience for superhero movies has disappeared altogether, but rather that they seem to have become disillusioned with this particular brand of cinema.

Even before 2019, critics and audiences lamented the sameness of modern superhero flicks, arguing that a lack of variation had given rise to 'superhero fatigue'. As genre theorist Steve Neale might put it: too much repetition, not enough difference. And the generation that grew up in the superhero heyday has now come of age, developing new tastes and preferences. For instance, an initial glimpse at 2025's box office records would suggest that nothing is new in Hollywood. Franchise movies like *Jurassic World: Rebirth* and *Superman* and remakes like *Lilo & Stitch* and *The Naked Gun* have all made comfortable profits against their budgets. However, a closer analysis reveals an interesting pattern: the rising popularity of auteur-led films.

Money S(p)inners

Though not reaching the same heights as major blockbusters, the 1930s-set vampire movie *Sinners* brought in a significant audience due to the star appeal of director Ryan Coogler. In fact, *Sinners* held its position as the Number 1 release in America for two weeks, which was the same amount of time that *A Minecraft Movie* spent in this position, despite the latter being Warner Bros' major release of the Spring season. *Sinners* has since won critical acclaim with three BAFTAs and four Oscars in the 2026 awards season. As Wesley Morris, host of the *Cannonball* podcast, argued, the success of *Sinners* 'should be a message that we want more of this – more wild and crazy, more risk'. Certainly, *Sinners* is not alone in sending that message to Hollywood. Other modern films have also made considerable box office returns even though they defiantly flaunted the notion that they were 'blockbuster material', such as the sci-fi satire *Mickey 17* by the Oscar-winning Bong Joon Ho. The recent underperformance and falling popularity of blockbusters versus the steady demand for auteur-helmed productions raises an interesting question: are auteurs the future of Hollywood?

The style of an auteur is unmistakable, meaning that their work is ripe for 'textual poaching'. Whether in the form of loving homage or ironic parody, Henry Jenkins explored in *Convergence Culture* the idea that the emergence of the internet has nurtured a climate of participatory culture and fan labour. In other words, online media has brought fandoms together, allowing them to organise themselves into communities bound by a shared passion in the work

Could it be that the studios are finally 'getting' auteur directors and appreciating their artistic worth?

Even Florence Pugh suffers from superhero fatigue

Collection Christophel/Alamy Stock Photo

of auteurs. Film-specific platforms like Letterboxd have supported this, giving movie buffs the opportunity to build a sense of personal companionship with others or to act as opinion leaders, disseminating fan theories. The result of this is not only that auteurs have had their work appropriated by fans, like the 'Make It Wes Anderson' trend on TikTok, but it also has given rise to a new demographic: the cine-literate. In recent years, major studios have struggled to retain cine-literate audiences as the quality of the output by these companies can vary significantly. Conversely, 'indie' production companies have succeeded in retaining cine-literate audiences as they build their brand identity on promising high-quality content.

Independence Day?

The independent studio A24 has developed, for example, a committed following by consistently working with acclaimed directors, even though its films often vastly differ in style and genre. Consequently, A24 has seen critical and commercial success with a variety of films, from the coming-of-age drama *Moonlight* (2016) to the comedy-fantasy *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022). Fans of A24 were even undeterred by *The Brutalist* (2024), which ran to more than three and a half hours. Though none of A24's films have achieved the same box office success as studio-financed blockbusters, they nevertheless show how auteur filmmaking, no matter how challenging or subversive, can be a safe investment when it targets its natural audience.

So, is auteur filmmaking really more profitable than mainstream blockbusters? Well, it's unlikely that we'll see an A24 film reach the mind-boggling commercial success of *Avatar* (2009) or *Titanic* (1997), yet it's clear that this recent trend is more than simply a blip on the radar. In their book *Power Without Responsibility*, James Curran and Jean Seaton argued, perhaps cynically, that media institutions were inherently driven by profit and power. Commercial concerns therefore always superseded creativity, particularly in the current age of media concentration – an oligopoly in which only a handful of conglomerates dominate the film industry. Even though the studios seem to be embracing more creative auteurs nowadays, this is not a departure from their power-and-profit approach, but rather an evolution of it. Instead of rejecting creativity, major studios are embracing it to further commercialism. A contradiction emerges here: just as much as creativity is dependent on money, money is now dependent on creativity.

Recently, Hollywood studios have taken films and franchises from their back catalogue and revived them long after the expiry date of their cultural relevance. Logically, an established franchise with a pre-existing fan base sounds like guaranteed success. However, time and again, we see that this supposed safe bet is unreliable and potentially ruinous for studios. For example, industry insiders claimed that Disney spent as much as $270 million to remake *Snow White*, a property 87 years old, only for it to make a fraction over $200 million. Compare this with the consistent success and popularity of films by auteur directors and the results are clear. Instead of a big-budget franchise movie, the blockbusters of years to come may well be the modestly financed, creatively innovative work of an auteur.

Alexander de Cruz is currently studying Film Studies and German at the University of Manchester.

Instead of rejecting creativity, major studios are embracing it to further commercialism.

from the MM vaults

- We 'Auteur' Know Better – Mark Ramey, *MM83*
- *Sinners*, Cinema and Singing the Blues – Giles Gough, *MM93*
- Style Over Substance? Wes Anderson the Auteur – Steve Merrell, *MM84*
- Doing It Their Own Way – The Auteur – Axel Metz, *MM62*

III IS THE MAGIC NUMBER

Photo: Tony Moniva

Rhona Ezuma, Editor of *THIIIRD Magazine*

Interviewing **Rhona Ezuma** from THIIIRD Magazine

Offering both an annual print magazine and more frequent digital content through podcasts, socials and newsletters, THIIIRD is a community for creative minds that like to challenge the consensus. *MediaMagazine* editor Claire Pollard interviews Rhona Ezuma about the magazine.

Images from www.thiiirdmagazine.co.uk

> Advertisers are important in the magazine industry – they allow magazines to produce the beautiful creative work that they do. However, with that support does come a pressure.

Claire: How does *THIIIRD* differ from traditional magazines?

Rhona: We're quite proud of being an online media platform that also exists in print. We feel print is quite a special form - print magazines are closer to books. It's something physical that people can acquire in their spaces, and in this digital age, that's something that we really invest in. We do more than just print the magazine. We are multimedia-based, we have a podcast, we do events and workshops. And we also see *THIIIRD* as a creative community.

Claire: How would you characterise your audience?

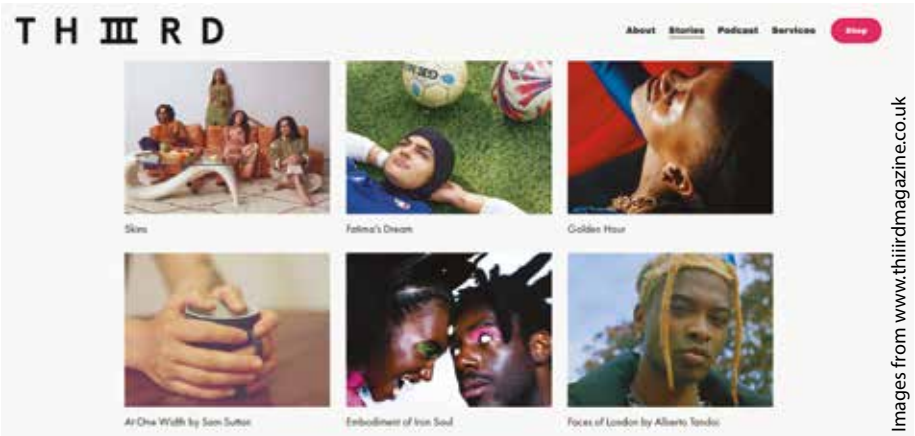
Rhona: We prefer the word community. I think the term 'audience' really is quite passive, but we do recognise that we have one. Generally they're very diverse, open-minded, youthful – I don't like the term young, because that suggests age but I mean youthful spirits. They are those who care about social issues, and are extremely attracted to creative means, and creative expressions that might ignite social change.

Claire: Who owns the magazine and as an editor do you have an overview of all the content and activities that fall under the *THIIIRD* umbrella to ensure it serves the needs of your community?

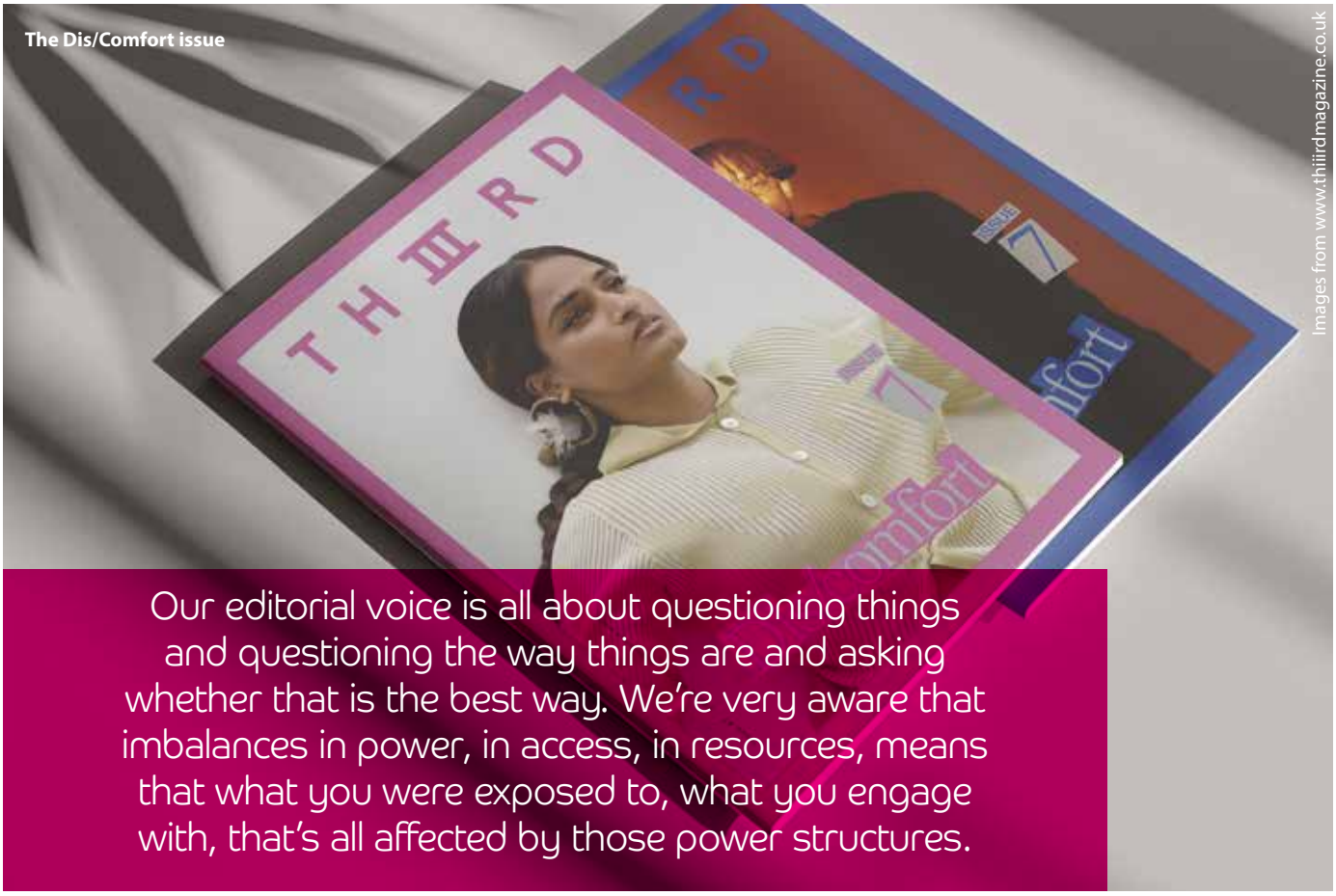
Rhona: I do and I own it. *THIIIRD* has been my baby from the very beginning, I understand its mission and making sure that everything we do is aligned with that is super important to me. But we also have a board of trustees – one of them has been there from the very beginning and we also have a former designer as part of the board.

Claire: And do you draw on your experience as a stylist to contribute to the overall aesthetic and design of the magazine?

Rhona: The look of the magazine is something that's evolved over time, and we've just been really lucky to have great collaborators help us along the way. I'm always talking about collaboration, because I think it's so key to how great creative projects happen. Often, you only ever hear about the photographer or director working on a project, but there are always a lot of other people who are working together to bring a vision to



Images from www.thiiirdmagazine.co.uk



Our editorial voice is all about questioning things and questioning the way things are and asking whether that is the best way. We're very aware that imbalances in power, in access, in resources, means that what you were exposed to, what you engage with, that's all affected by those power structures.

life. That's our story too: I don't have all the skills that it would take to design a magazine, make a website and all of that. So, it is important to collaborate with people who get the ethos, who are about it as well, and have the skills to bring that to life.

Claire: Print media has been in 'crisis' for a long time. What do you do at *THIIIRD* to stay relevant?

Rhona: For us it's about being present on all the channels that we use. We have a newsletter, we're on Instagram, all of that keeps us present in the worlds of our followers. We produce one issue a year and that's our happiness for the year. The content for the magazine is completely original in the print version and we explore a theme in each issue. Our last issue was called 'Dis/Comfort' and in it we were exploring spaces and places where we find 'comfortability' and also 'uncomfortability', so we talked about things like grief, dysmorphia, body changes and loss as well as things like finding a home, finding a connection in nature or with people or animals.

Claire: The newsletter, events and podcasts that you do – as well as being important for your community, are these also used to generate revenue for *THIIIRD*?

Rhona: We do all of that mainly because of our community but we are also an independent platform, so, we don't have funding for everything that we do. It's essential for us to find ways to monetise what we do to be sustainable.

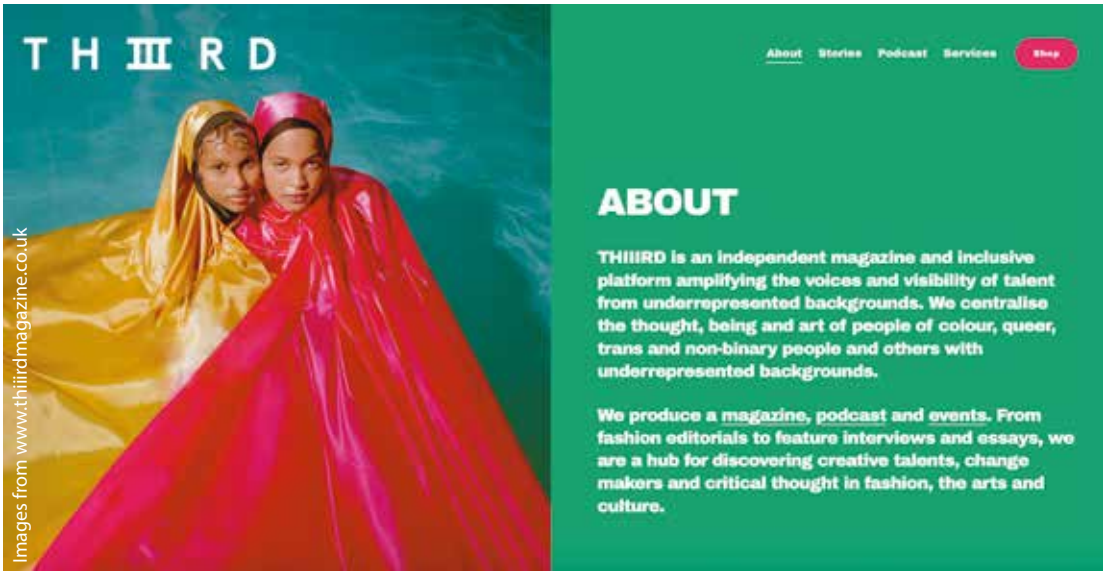
We try and do this in quite a socially conscious way though; we offer scaled tickets to some of our events, and the revenue that we generate from the magazine, like the revenue that we generate from events, podcasts, etc., is what allows us to keep going.

The difference with *THIIIRD* compared to commercial magazines is that we're not at the demands of advertisers. We do partner with brands but we like to use the word 'partnership'. We have avoided the whole top-down relationship that is very traditional in magazine production between brands or companies and creatives. Advertisers are important in the magazine industry – they allow magazines to produce the beautiful creative work that they do. However, with that support does come a pressure. There is a silent agreement that if you're gonna have a brand as an advertiser, you have to include them in the content that you're doing. There's also a pressure in those situations to make sure that anything you do also aligns with advertising brands, which is where things become a bit murky. It becomes a question about what people don't do or don't write about, because they don't want to scare off their advertisers.

Our stance has always been that we're driven by creating content around what we feel is relevant in the moment and what the people need to see rather than being led by other relationships.

Claire: How do you go about setting up or seeking out partnerships?

Rhona: We spend time going into advertising agencies, giving talks and speaking to them about general inclusion, diversity, media production, creativity – all those sorts of things. So this isn't necessarily always creative



More than a magazine: read more about *THIIIRD*'s mission on their website

stuff that we're producing with brands, it can be stuff that is having an impact on how things get made behind the scenes in the industry.

Claire: So like offering creative consultancy to brands?

Rhona: Yeah, exactly. Another example is when we've given talks to creative agencies around being outsider creatives and how we help them bring in outsider creatives.

Claire: Do you feel optimistic about ad agencies' capacity to do diversity and inclusion sensitively?

Rhona: Our pessimism is what creates the optimism. We understand that a lot of tokenism is happening in the media and we want to change that, because we're committed to exploring and enacting how we can to do things differently. But there's only so much we can do as an independent platform, so for us its about bridging that gap. Our creative output isn't the be-all and end-all, you also have to make changes in the wider commercial environment which takes making them more ethical and inclusive.

Claire: Do you have actively inclusive recruitment processes, or do you favour positive discrimination to make sure you have the right team and contributors who can realise that vision?

Rhona: Yeah, we do. It's really important for us that the same demographic that we're intending to appeal to is also reflected in the work that we produce. So, to give you an example of this, we have a wide range of contributors who send their work in to the magazine and as an editor, I'm looking to see authenticity between the ideas that they present to us and the work that the contributor has been creating. As much as we are an inclusive platform, it's also really important to us that everyone who is part of it, whose work is championed by this platform, is also about what we stand for.

Claire: You have said that the triple 'i' in third stands for 3 things: third space theory, third kid culture, and the third eye, and I just wondered if you could tell us about something from the 'dis/comfort' issue that speaks particularly to those ideas?

Rhona: There's a first-person piece, written by a trans man who recounts their story of a visit they had to India, in their trans identity, for the death of a family member who they've been estranged from. They discover the practice of Mehndi which is something they did when they identified as being a woman, during the trip. And they find comfort in that practice for them as it connects them to memories that they have of female members of their family. Doing it now, in their identity as a trans man becomes a bridge for their identity and for them to connect with their mother when they return to the UK.

When you take that piece and think back to those concepts you have: the idea of being third-cultured, which is understanding that people have identities which are shaped by heritage and the places that they live in, and that's something that's important to them. The idea of third space which is when you take juxtaposing ideas, and that comes through in that story in the experience of Mehndi, which is aligned with femininity, juxtaposing with their identity as a trans man. And with the concept of the third eye – it's like the thought and the thinking and the resolution that comes from the new understanding in the piece.

Claire: Students might get asked to apply Gilroy's ideas about post-colonialism to *THIIIRD Magazine*. Across everything you do, which would be the best place for them to look to be able to apply those ideas?

Rhona: Our editorial voice is all about questioning things and questioning the way things are and asking whether that is the best way. We're very aware that imbalances in power, in access, in resources, means that what you are exposed to, what you engage with, that's all affected by those power structures.

We're invested in things that are not necessarily always 'trendy' or what is accepted as 'respected'. We do this a lot in our conversations and engagement around race and heritage – post-colonialism is very a much a lens for our whole magazine.

Claire: Thank you for speaking to us Rhona!

Rhona Ezuma spoke to Claire Pollard, editor of *MediaMagazine*.

Careers download

Moyosola Akinsowon

Photo: India Hasnip

As well as talking to the editor, Rhona Ezuma, we wanted to find out about up and coming creatives working on THIIIRD. Editorial Assistant Moyosola Akinsowon tells us what its like to work on the magazine.

What is your job?

I am an editorial assistant at *THIIIRD Magazine*, and I am also a freelance photographer.

What does that mean?

For me, being an editorial assistant means assisting in photoshoots and event production, communicating and liaising with collaborators or companies, handling social media and content creation, interviewing artists, attending press events, and writing the newsletter. It's a very well-rounded role for me, with my hands dipped into a bit of everything; it's allowed me to learn so much, not just about magazines and journalism, but about communicating effectively, problem-solving and turning ideas into reality.

What was your route into the media industry?

My route into the media industry was initially through studying fashion design at college. During that time, I decided that I wanted to focus more on creating imagery as opposed to the actual making and designing of clothes. I then went on to study photography at university. Whilst I was there, I had been continuously interviewing my friends for university and personal projects, and I realised that it was something I could pursue professionally alongside my photographic work.

I have always been interested in the visual arts and wanted to make my own magazine when I was very young, so when I saw an opportunity open up at *THIIIRD*, I knew it would be the perfect fit for me, and I went for it. I started at *THIIIRD* as an events and production intern.

'Shaznay in her Room', by Moyosola Akinsowon

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

There are three things that I would say are the best things about my job. One is getting to witness the inner workings of a magazine. Seeing all the individual elements being created over time and understanding how everything comes together at the end, from the editing to the production of photoshoots and the write-ups. I love being able to proofread the written pieces before they get shared.

The second thing is being able to work with a range of emerging artists from all kinds of backgrounds, all over the world. It really allows me to feel like I am a part of something important and that I belong to the community that *THIIIRD* fosters, which is an incredibly rich and diverse one. It really is a joy to be able to contribute to it.

And the third and perhaps most important is working for an independent Black woman-owned platform. It's so important to have these spaces for us and by us, especially in today's political climate. Spaces and platforms that speak to you directly and not just to satisfy a quota or to seem trendy and cool. I know I can come to work and be seen and understood, which is not an opportunity that everyone is afforded, but should be.

What's the worst thing about your job?

That's a hard question to answer because I really do enjoy it all, honestly. But the worst thing is when people don't send emails back to everyone who was in cc. It may seem small and insignificant, but it breaks the chain of communication and makes it easy to miss important things. This can be very frustrating when you are trying to plan and solidify something important, especially when there are time constraints.

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

My advice is to take your time, never give up and always go for what you want. The industry can be competitive and foreign at times, and it's very easy to compare yourself to others, especially on social media, but we are all on our own journeys that have different destinations. There can be this pressure to rush into your career, to know who you are, what you are doing, and to be constantly creating, but these things can only happen with time. All those whom I look up to within the industry or in general have spent time living their lives, exploring who they are, as well as working on their craft, and most notably, they believe in themselves above all else. That's something I try to do, even when it feels difficult.

What's next for you?

That feels like a big question, but for me, I want to continue working with *THIIIRD*, interviewing up-and-coming artists and practitioners, adding to the community that *THIIIRD* has created, giving a platform and amplifying the voices of the underrepresented. But I also want to continue working as a freelance photographer, expanding my craft and visual language, with intentions to create a living archive, displaying the ever-growing and changing artistic landscape around me. I feel as though the two line up quite neatly for me.

The Film List

Regular *MM* contributor and Golden Globes voter Niellah Arboine chooses two films from the current Eduqas A Level Film Studies curriculum and suggests the addition of one of the biggest winners of the 2026 awards season.

Beasts of the Southern Wild

(Zeitlin, 2012)

Beasts of the Southern Wild is one of the greatest examples of magical realism in modern cinema. Directed and co-written by Benh Zeitlin, the plot follows Hushpuppy, a young child and her community in the 'bathtub', an island in the Bayou of Louisiana. They are one of the last groups of people to be evacuated from the area in the aftermath of a hurricane.

Similar to films like *The Life of Pi* and *Pan's Labyrinth*, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* is told from the perspective of a child, which lends itself to the genre. We aren't sure what is real or what is a manifestation of grief, fear, or a vivid imagination. At only 6-years-old at the time of filming, Quvenzhané Wallis gives a standout performance portraying a childhood that feels adventurous and full of wonder, which feels rare for young black children on screen. We watch her navigate her father's unconventional parenting, being raised by a close-knit community on the outside of society. It's understandable why she became one of the youngest people to be nominated for an Oscar for best actress.

The incredible world-building and rich cinematography turns a community impacted by poverty into an almost romanticised fairytale-like setting, to the point that it's easy to forget the film is set in America in modern times, let alone as a response to the real-life tragedies that happened, like Hurricane Katrina, which displaced thousands of people.

The whole film acts as a humanising example of the impact of climate disaster and environmental racism. Making a film centred on these themes without it being an apocalyptic blockbuster, but instead gentle, humanising storytelling, is truly where the magic lies. *Beasts of the Southern Wild* does what cinema should do best: ignite imagination and emotion.

Moonlight

(Jenkins, 2016)

A film like *Moonlight* feels like it only comes around a few times in a generation. Ultimately, it changed what modern cinema could be.

Split into three acts, *Moonlight* is set in Miami and follows Chiron through his childhood in the 80s, his adolescent years and then adulthood as he navigates his sexuality and how it will go on to impact his life and decisions.

An exploration of black queerness and masculinity that is handled with such care hasn't been seen on a global screen like this before. The storytelling tenderly illustrates how childhood affects the outcome of adulthood, as Chiron, a character who is hardened by the world and may feel like he falls into stereotypes without any context, is humanised and given empathy through a triptych narrative and three different actors.

But it was also the making of the film that felt captivating. Barry Jenkins and cinematographer James Laxton paid special attention to the colour grading, showing a real understanding of how people with darker complexions need to be lit for cinema. The film is also a treat for the eyes; you can pause the film at almost any point, and it would read as a photographic work of art.

Moonlight illustrates the complexity of the human experience in a way that is compassionate and commands complete attention and investment in the characters. This film proves that you can tell a story unique to a minority and still have universal themes everyone can relate to. It manages to have a quietness and heart that many box office successes lack.

Barry Jenkins and cinematographer James Laxton paid special attention to the colour grading, showing a real understanding of how people with darker complexions need to be lit for cinema.

Sinners

(Coogler, 2025)

In an era of never-ending remakes and superhero franchises dominating box offices, multi-award-winning *Sinners* stands out in a league of its own, proving that there is a craving and a respect for new and original cinema.

Set in the 1930s, in Jim Crow-era in Mississippi, the story follows Sammy, a young man who is struggling between being a good son to his preacher father and his yearning to be a musician. One day, his infamous twin cousins come to town from Chicago to set up a new business, and the next 24 hours are spent in their juke joint as supernatural forces come knocking.

Genre-wise, *Sinners* is moonlighting as a dusk-till-dawn horror, when below the surface, it's also a romance, a musical and a love letter to the black diaspora's creativity. Although there is an incredible cast at the helm with Michael B. Jordan taking on twins Smoke and Stack, it's really the direction from Ryan Coogler that makes the film such a stand-out and him one of the best directors of this generation.

Whether it's through shooting in IMAX format or collaborating with award-winning costume designer, Ruth E. Carter, Coogler puts his stamp of attention to detail and worldbuilding to the forefront, making for thrilling viewing. He doesn't spoonfeed audiences or tell you what to think; instead, he offers rich layers of context to dig into, creating even more impact on a second or third watch.

Looking at the business side of the film industry, *Sinners* is also a first, potentially changing how films will be made going forward. Coogler managed to get a rare and monumental deal with Warner Bros., meaning he will own the film he created after 25 years. This mirrors the plight of the characters in the film who seek ownership of a juke joint for their community in a time when it was even harder for black people to own anything in America.

Sinners is proof of what happens when you centre creativity over low-hanging fruit and profit, and trust audiences to follow talent and inventive storytelling

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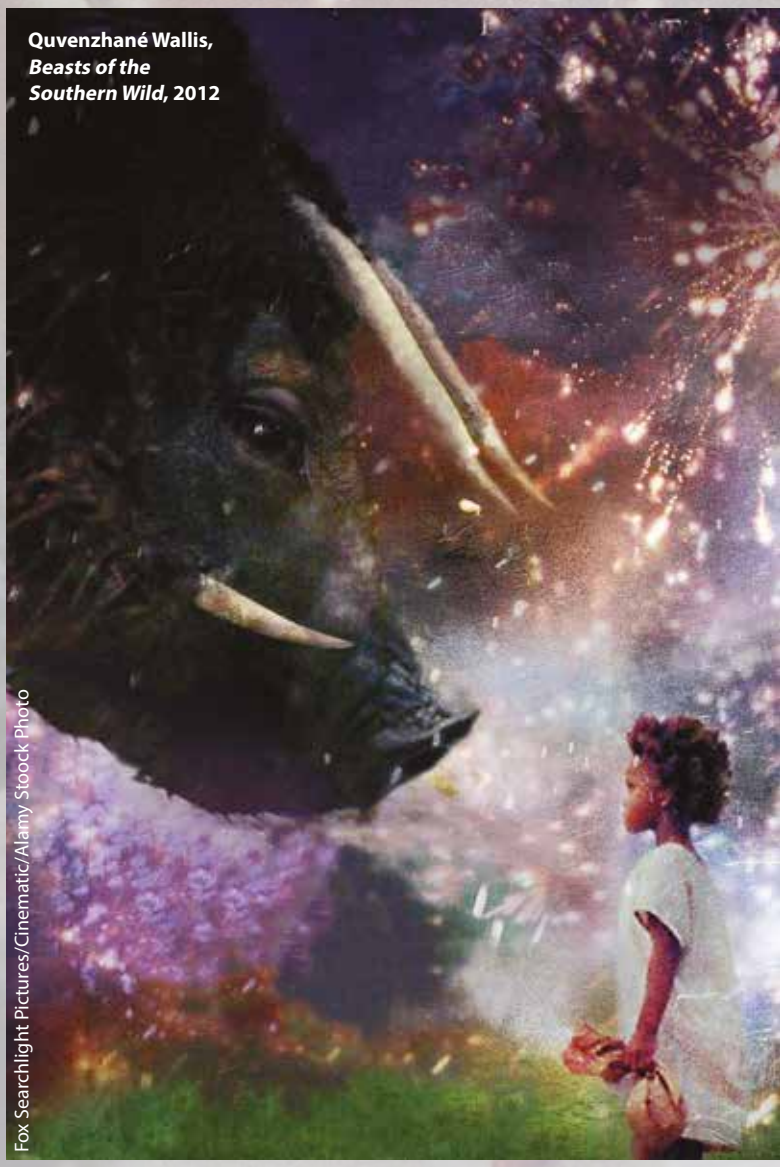

Quvenzhané Wallis, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, 2012

Fox Searchlight Pictures/Cinematic/Alamy Stock Photo

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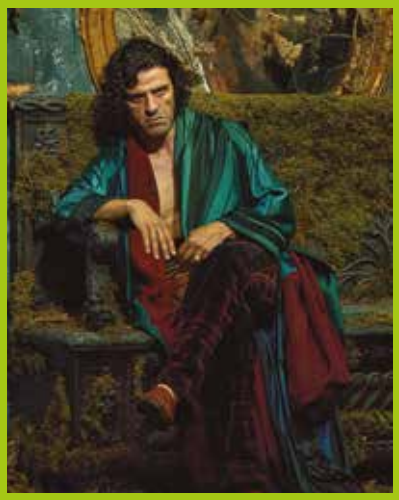
Beasts of the Southern Wild and Magic Realism – Niki Smith *MM64*

Niellah Arboine is a writer, editor and broadcaster and a voter for the Golden Globe Awards.

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