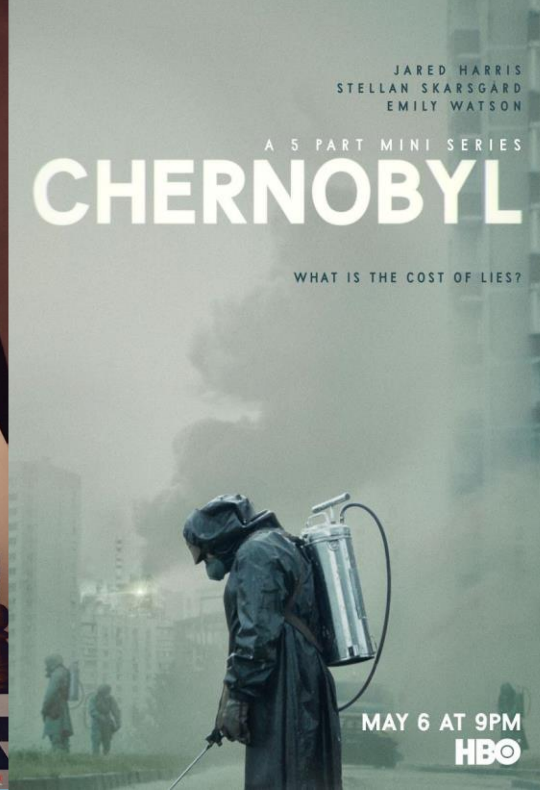
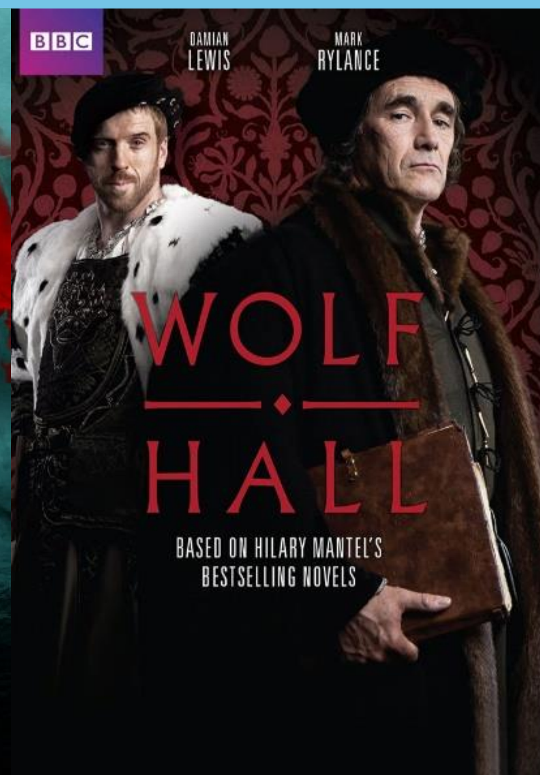


BODY AND GENDER IN 21ST CENTURY MINISERIES

Sara Martín (ed.)

UAB



Body and Gender in 21ST Century Miniseries

Sara Martín (ed.)

Contents

Preface: Defending the Neglected Miniseries 1

Jane Eyre: Caught in a Bad Romance / Ivette Constans Renco 3

John Adams: American Founding Father / Huang Jun 8

The Pacific: Hell Was an Ocean Away / Huang Jun 13

The Pillars of the Earth: An Adaptation's Not-So-Subtle Betrayal / Jules Otero Besolí .. 18

Mildred Pierce: (Re)framing the Female Protagonist Through Windows and Looking-glasses / Jeanne Barthélemy 23

Olive Kitteridge: Reappropriating the Figure of the Witch / Jeanne Barthélemy 28

Wolf Hall: Surviving Henry VIII / Ivette Constans Renco 33

The Night Manager: The Violence of Love / Cao Jun 38

The Night Of: The Corruption of Innocent Men / Nichole Marchese 43

War & Peace: Sexing Up Tolstoy / Ivette Constans Renco 48

Alias Grace: Breaking the Spell of Silence / Martina Busquets Costa 53

Godless: An Unconventional Western with Unconventional Women / Jeimmy Cuervo Quintero 58

Maniac: Man-made Morals, Gender, and the Machine / Jeanne Barthélemy 63

Sharp Objects: Trauma Written in the Body / Nerea Menorca Hidalgo 69

The Haunting of Hill House: The Haunted Minds of Women / Ester Sánchez Pérez 74

The Little Drummer Girl: A Man's Two-Dimensional Fantasy / Cao Jun 78

The Looming Tower: A Bad Good Man / Ávaro Farré Hernández 83

Chernobyl: The Consequences of Patriarchal Mismanagement / Amy Boliter 88

Fosse/Verdon: Love and Pain for Art's Sake / Sara Martín 93

The Capture: A Cat-and-Mouse Game / Cao Jun 98

Unbelievable: The Myth of the Perfect Victim / Ikram Rouam El Khatab 103

When They See Us: A Missed Opportunity to Highlight Intersectional Injustices / Amy Boliter 107

Why Women Kill: Betrayal, Murder & Secrets / Huang Jun....113
Devs: Not a Genius, but a Tech Messianic Patriarch / Jeimmy Cuervo Quintero....118
I May Destroy You: The Aftermath of Rape / Nerea Menorca Hidalgo....123
Julie and the Phantoms: Beyond the Physical and Visible Self / Alesia Volkova....128
Little Fires Everywhere: You Are Not Your Mother / Calley Overton....133
Normal People: To Live for the Hope of It All / Ester Sánchez Pérez....138
The Plot Against America: The Patriarchal Woman Dances with the Devil / Calley Overton....143
The Queen's Gambit: Madness and Genius Strike Again / Ester Sánchez Pérez....148
Unorthodox: A Journey to Emancipation / Martina Busquets Costa....152
It's a Sin: Shame in the Pursuit of Pleasure / Amy Boliter....157
Maid: Emotional Abuse / Nerea Menorca Hidalgo....162
Mare of Easttown: More Than Just Another 'Dead Girl Show' / Ikram Rouam El Khatab....167
WandaVision: The Housewife Fantasy / Jules Otero Besolí....172
The Offer: Power Dynamics in the Patriarchal System / Álvaro Farré Hernández....177
The Staircase: The Suspect Husband / Nicole Marchese....182
Bodies: A Cog in the Machine of Biopolitical Forces / Jeimmy Cuervo Quintero....186
Lessons in Chemistry: Turn and Face the Strange / Martina Busquets Costa....191
Baby Reindeer: The Loop of Trauma / Alesia Volkova....196
Griselda: Breaking Through a Man's World / Nicole Marchese....200
Lady in the Lake: From Catalyst to Crusader / Calley Overton....206
Ripley: The Elusive Tom and the Challenges of Gender and Body Performance / Alesia Volkova....211
Shogun: Gender Rules in Old Japan/ Ikram Rouam El Khatab....216
Sugar: Failing to Produce a Human Hero / Álvaro Farré Hernández....221
The Decameron: Queering Up the Past / Jules Otero Besolí....225
Disclaimer and Creative Commons License....230

Preface: Defending the Neglected Miniseries

The book now in the hands of the reader is the result of the work carried out by the students enrolled in the elective course 'Body and Gender in Narrative Discourse' of the MA in English Studies: Linguistic, Literary and Sociocultural Perspectives of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, during the Winter-Spring semester of the academic year 2024-25. This is the thirteenth project of this nature that I produce with BA and MA students, following a teaching methodology that I first used in 2013-14 for a course on *Harry Potter*. As I have often narrated,[1] I realized then that the articles and papers written by students could and should be published, and I found in the digital repository of my university (http://ddd.uab.cat) the perfect solution to the problem of who would want to publish this type of collective academic volume.

In all the elective courses that followed the one on *Harry Potter*, I have organized my teaching around the target of publishing a book, which has resulted, as I have noted, in twelve previous volumes generating thousands of downloads (see https://webs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/books/). Students react with puzzlement and surprise to my announcement on the first day of class that we will be writing a book together, but all respond wonderfully to the teacher's crazy proposal. This has been the case in this volume again, which has a truly international list of contributors, with authors from China, the USA, France, Colombia, the UK, Russia, and diverse places all over Spain.

This is the first time I have taught a course on miniseries, though I have been teaching cinema for years. My choice, I think, requires some kind of justification being, as I am, a Literature teacher. It is obvious to me that most of us, born in the 1960s and later, who chose to study for a degree in English did so out of an interest in Anglophone culture in general. I have always been a keen reader but my initiation into English also came through cinema in its original version. A while ago I published a post[2] in my blog about how Film Studies have been consolidated in English Studies in Spain thanks to the efforts of Prof. Celestino Deleyto of the Universidad de Zaragoza, as I explained to my MA students, too. I myself have published books on cinema and TV series[3] and it is my intention to walk further down that road with the innovative exploration of miniseries offered here. My students have often shown their surprise at being asked to discuss films and miniseries in the same way they comment on books, a sign that something is missing in secondary and higher education in which cinema or TV are not yet seen as an integral part of culture, despite being 125 years and 75 years old, respectively, by now.

---

[1] See 'Producing E-books on Fantasy and Science Fiction with University Students: Classroom Projects'. *Mapping the Imaginative II*, Christian Ludwig and Elizabeth Shipley (eds.), Universitätsverlag Winter, 2020, 163-184.

[2] See 'Seeing Film Studies within English Studies: Yes, We Should', *The Joys of Teaching Literature*, 7 April 2024, https://webs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/2024/04/07/doing-film-studies-within-english-studies-yes-we-should/

[3] See for a complete list of my publications https://webs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/books/.

The trigger for this specific project has been the excellent miniseries *Shōgun*, which I watched just when I needed to choose a corpus for the MA subject 'Body and Gender'. Unlike unlimited series, which often run to dozens of viewing hours, miniseries take just a few hours (usually under twelve, even as few as three), which means that they are closer in terms of consumption to novels. This explains in many ways why one of the best miniseries ever is the 1995 version of *Pride and Prejudice*, whose six 55-minute episode take roughly as long to watch as it takes to read the novel. The fact is that although specific miniseries may have generated plenty of scholarship, there is no comprehensive volume dealing with the concept. I only managed to find John De Vito & Frank Tropea's *Epic Television Miniseries: A Critical History* (2010); Vincent Terrace's *Encyclopedia of Television Miniseries, 1936-2020* (2021); and Scott Humphries's *The Age of Melodramatic Miniseries: When Glamour Ruled on Television, 1980-1995* (2023), all published, curiously, by McFarland. There is, then, very much to do in these field and I have chosen to share my concern with my MA class as a research project.

The project I have shared with my students has consisted of exploring in particular Anglophone 21st century miniseries. Our focus has been gender and the body and how they are represented in the miniseries chosen. I drew a list of about 50 checking the typical lists of the best that the internet provides, and then I invited students to choose two each and suggest a third miniseries. Classes consisted of three to four 15-minute presentations, followed by debate and complemented with comment on secondary sources and minilectures. Then students had to complete three 1500-2000 word essay for each miniseries in their hands. I myself have contributed one essay to the book, which I also used as a sample essay for the students.

The roughly fifty series analyzed here offer a very full panorama of 21st century TV, marked, as it is well known, by the rise of the streaming platforms (Netflix was launched as a streaming service in January 2007). The essays are organized in chronological order with the intention of inviting readers to judge for themselves whether there has been any progress in the representation of gender and the body in the Anglophone miniseries selected. Our impression is that progress is slow but noticeable. By the way, the reader may notice that some of the miniseries studied here are now series extended past what was supposed to be a single season; we made the collective decision to include them anyway, as this is part of the life of miniseries. And I am warning you now about the many spoilers…

The students and I hope that their research convinces readers of the importance of miniseries in the current TV panorama, particularly at a time when the streaming platforms are not bothering to keep a full archive and many run the risk of disappearing. Series just a few years old are no longer available, a kind of cultural loss we should not tolerate. Enjoy!

Sara Martín
Sara.Martin@uab.cat
Barcelona, January 2025

Jane Eyre: Caught in a Bad Romance

IVETTE CONSTANS RENCO

Episodes: 4
Release date: 21 January 2006
Creators: Susana White and Sandy Welch
Source: *Jane Eyre* (1848), novel by Charlotte Brontë
Cast: Ruth Wilson (Jane Eyre), Toby Stephens (Edward Rochester), Lorraine Ashbourne (Mrs. Fairfax), Aidan McArdle (John Eshton), Pam Ferris (Grace Cole), Tara Fitzergald (Miss. Reed), Christina Cole (Blanche Ingram), Francesca Annis (Lady Ingram), Cosima Littlewood (Adéle), Claudia Coulter (Bertha Mason), Daniel Pirrie (Richard Mason).
Companies: BBC One, Amazon
Genre: period drama, romance
Nationality: UK
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8746478/

Introduction: Re-making Jane Eyre

Jane Eyre (2006) is a four-episode limited series, created by Susanna White and Sandy Welch. The miniseries is based on Charlotte Brontë's eponymous novel of 1847, a much-acclaimed classic, that has enamored readers for centuries. As it is well-known, Brontë narrates the life of Jane Eyre, an orphaned governess who must challenge social and romantic issues as she strives for fulfilment in the Victorian era.

Sandy Welch is an English screenwriter and actress, the creator of other adaptations such as that of Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* and Henry James's *The Turning of the Screw*, and the winner in 1999 of the BAFTA for Best Miniseries for *Our Mutual Friend* (1998), based on Charles Dickens's classic. Susanna White, also an Englishwoman, is a director recognized for the production of films and television programs such as *Andor* (2022) and *Bleak House* (2005), for which she won a BAFTA and an Emmy for Best Miniseries. When adapting *Jane Eyre*, Welch and White intended to capture the novel's essence with a contemporary feminist and postcolonial approach, for which they modified the original plot. Emphasizing the sexual tension between Rochester and Jane, the miniseries depicts Jane as a sexual being, softening Rochester's behavior as a Byronic hero and innovating the representation of his wife Bertha Mason as a woman, beyond her mental disease.

It is not necessary to read the novel to understand the miniseries as it follows the original quite closely, in the same chronological order. Indeed, *Jane Eyre*, a novel written in the mid-nineteenth century, has been rediscovered by the younger generations through the myriads of film and TV adaptations. One of the first sound adaptations was produced in 1945 by Robert Stevenson, who recounted *Jane Eyre* as a gothic romance. Contrarily, the 1970's version centered on Jane's time in Moor House and opted to present the lack of passion between Jane and Rochester. In a very different light, *Wide*

Sargasso Sea (based on Jean Rhys's 1966 novel) was released in 1993 as a prequel to Brontë's story, telling the experience of Antoinette Cosway, a Creole heiress, who marries an English man and is kept in the attic by him. Moving on to 2006, Welch and White still focalize Rochester's and Jane relationship as the central part of the story, albeit differently, using a feminist, postcolonial approach. The more recent film adaptation so far of Brontë's novel was released in 2011, and it presents the story through flashbacks following Mia Wasikowska as a complex Jane who highlights the flaws and nuances of this popular character.

Analysis: Caught in a bad romance

Jane Eyre (2006) discusses body and gender issues in three main significant ways. Following the novel's romance, the story centers on the relationship between Jane and Rochester and issues surrounding class and identity. The portrayal of their romance, described in the poster of the miniseries as "the greatest love story" is problematic. On the one hand, it conveys the possible romanticization of the Byronic hero by presenting Rochester as an attentive, sensible macho man despite his toxic and psychologically abusive behavior towards Jane and her charge Adele (most likely his illegitimate daughter). On the other hand, Jane's inability to assert and embrace her own agency complicates her representation as an independent heroine. It must be noticed that Sandra Welch and Susanna White's choice to twist some elements such as Rochester's Byronism, Jane's strength and Bertha's depiction in the original novel to appease an early 21st-century audience has certainly conditioned their characterization.

White explains that she did not question the narrative depiction of Rochester as a Byronic hero by which his morally wrong acts such as bigamy are condoned; however, she proposed to add to his character's emotional complexity: "I knew he had to be dark"; she comments that he had to "show the depression to play the lightness reacting to it" (in *Reader, I Married Him*). There is also an emphasis on Rochester's past, which is provided as justification for his wrong deeds since Welch wanted viewers to empathize with him. She argues that "I actually find him a very sympathetic character" and "What happened to him in his youth, his brother and father's betrayal, his marriage to Bertha must have been awful" (in *Reader, I Married Him)*. Funnily enough, there is no visual evidence of Rochester's father and brother causing him pain in his youth by forcing him to marry Bertha. In contrast, the only people who are blamed for Rochester's traumas are his past lovers. Celine Varens (Adele's mother, played by Églantine Rembauville-Nicolle) and Bertha Mason (played by Claudia Coultier) are vehicles to present Rochester as a tormented victim, to the point that he loses his temper whenever he is reminded of them. In episode 3, when Rochester tells Adéle (played by Cosima Littlewood) and Jane about his travels to the Caribbean, he abruptly changes his mood and screams at the little girl for singing a song that reminds him of Bertha, threatening to send her to boarding school immediately.

In a telling scene, Rochester lets his façade down and is portrayed almost crying as he begs for Jane not to go to what she replies, "Your life is mine" (E4). This interaction has been interpreted by Fanning as a gesture that not only undercuts the series' attempt to portray equality, but also functions as a transfer of power, which does not convey feminist values of partnership (52). Additionally, by taking a closer look at the relationship portrayed in the miniseries, the viewer realizes how problematic the depiction of

subjectivity and agency is. The miniseries alludes to how women's agency, identity and self-worth comes through the man; as White argues, "Welch's Jane is, on occasion, overpowered by Rochester and positioned as a subject of his 'male gaze" (143). Throughout the series, Jane embodies her desire for liberty by wearing a red cloth which represents an image from Bewick's *History of British Birds,* particularly one which is described by Rochester: "a grey bird which slowly, day by day, becomes more strong and its wings turn brilliant scarlet" (E2). Only after Rochester describes her as a soul yearning for independence, does Jane start to wear that red cloth to signify her growing desire. Thus, Jane is not an individual of her own choice, but an individual only when Rochester identifies her as such. Similarly, Jane's self-worth is based on Rochester's gaze. The mirror plays a key role in Jane's self-perception as it is the object she uses to evaluate her self-worth. When she realizes that Rochester might return her feelings, she runs to the mirror to look at her reflection, as she thinks of Rochester's feelings, examines her face as good enough to attract him and smiles at what she sees. Once again, White and Welch's feminism comes with a nullifying twist as their depiction undercuts Jane's subjecthood, showing how Jane's self-reflection and worth are dependent on Rochester's love for her.

It is important to indicate that, following Brontë, Welch and White only intended to give Jane independence through her role as a governess and later through her economic emancipation after she inherits her uncle's fortune. Welch explains that "Jane is a modern woman," and elaborates that "She has decided to earn her own living, and she is very keen to do that, which is a very 21st-century thing to do" (in *Reader, I Married Him*). Yet, her depiction as a Victorian governess represents the ambiguity bestowed upon that figure at the time. Jane's position was one of uncertainty, she was forced to leave the private sphere of her foster mother Mrs. Reed to be interned in Lockwood school where she learned how to be a governess, to finally work as such in Rochester's Thornfield, aged only 18. Brontë's character complicates the notions of femininity since Jane threatens Victorian gender norms; she publicly performs as the angel in the house, the feminine ideal of the period and a role reserved only to the lady of the house, while she is simultaneously working as a governess, a masculinized role given its authority (Godfrey 854). Jane is encouraged to do both: be the housekeeper and the governess in Thornfield. She acts like Adéle's mother and takes care of the staff along with Mrs. Fairfax (played by Lorraine Ashbourne), which are duties belonging to the real lady of the house, who is hidden in an attic. Simultaneously, she is working as a governess and working for Mr. Rochester, an act condemned according to Victorian standards.

The aversion that governesses elicited is perceived by the attitudes Rochester's guests have towards Jane. According to Welch, "The world" Rochester and Jane "created is suddenly invaded by people who look down on her as a governess and she is reminded of her status in the outside world" (in *Reader, I Married Him*). Blanche Ingram and her mother Lady Ingram (played by Francesca Annis) demonstrate society's disgust for the governess by publicly shaming the figure in Jane's presence. As Godfrey comments, Jane's persona as a governess is presented as highly sexual, to the point she cannot be trusted to control herself (855). The upper-class members like Lady Ingram are aware of this as she warns Rochester about Jane's potential sexual intentions and their appropriateness: "Governesses are a nuisance. All of them. They carry on with the tutor, or even worse, make eyes to the master of the house" (E2).

Apart from Jane, the other woman who raises repulsion and uncertainty in the miniseries is Bertha Mason, Rochester's true wife, popularly known as the mad woman in the attic (where she is kept concealed). Unlike other adaptations, Welch and White pay a little bit more attention to Bertha and give her an identity beyond being "mad." As White notices, Welch "consciously envisages the incarcerated Bertha as beautiful and sensuous; as in Rhys's novel, her humanity is, to an extent, asserted" (144). Through Rochester's self-pitiful retellings about his past, Bertha is represented as a social, sensual and exotic woman, who hasn't yet inherited an unknown mental illness from her mother as in the novel. This depiction is still prevalent when the viewer gets to see Bertha for the first time. Rochester's description of her clearly does not make her justice. Bertha has no demonic or monstrous appearance whatsoever, she is a beautiful Creole woman who looks very human. Notwithstanding this, as the series follows a historical view of mental illness, it only manages to represent Bertha as a human being through her appearance since her behavior is still animalistic and violent, therefore justifying the reason why she is kept in the attic.

Jane Eyre is quite a good miniseries, with plenty to consider regarding gender and bodies. It offers a partial view of the novel written by the eldest Brontë sister, with the clear objective of bringing this 19th-century text closer to the modern public by adopting an early feminist approach. The adaptation provides faithful representations of the governess, her feminine duality and the threat she presented for the upper classes. Similarly, it also portrays Bertha Mason as a woman whose identity goes beyond being "mad."

Yet, unlike what the creators wished, the series failed to represent Jane's subjectivity and independence, which were directly linked to Rochester's perception of her. Rochester and Jane's relationship is still popular since it renews and sheds light on different aspects such as the brooding love interest and the dynamics between pairs who stand in different positions of power, caused by class differences. The miniseries also shows the evolution of the ideal love story since Jane and Rochester's romance, albeit being described as such, is not ideal at all. Welch and White cannot help showing that Jane's entire life and desires depend on Rochester, a dependence that contemporary audiences might consider toxic. This impression might lead viewers to lament adaptations' tendency to romanticize the novel. Reducing *Jane Eyre* to a romantic plot, not only perpetuates the norms of traditional romance, but also obscures the ideological success of the novel, which through its strong heroine would nurture the discussion of women's literary works, political rights, marriage and societal role for decades to come, paving the way towards feminism.

Bibliography

Fanning, Sarah E. "The Many Faces of Jane Eyre: Film Cultures and the Frontiers of Feminist Representation." *Brontë Studies* 43.1 (2017): 41–54, https://doi.org/10.1080/14748932.2018.1389004

Godfrey, Esther. "Jane Eyre, from Governess to Girl Bride." *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 45.4 (2005): 853-871.

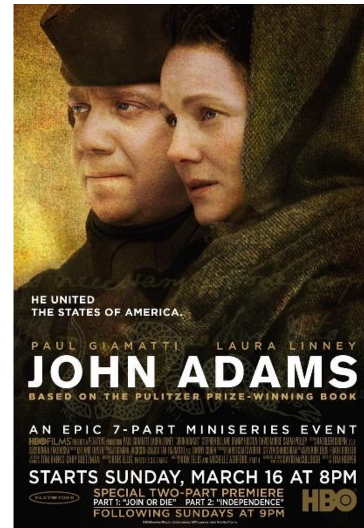
Jordan, Meghan. "Dislocated Heroines: Cary Fukunaga's *Jane Eyre*, Romantic Love and Bertha's Legacy." *Neo-Victorian Studies* 7.1 (2014): 79-103, https://neovictorianstudies.com/article/view/122

Reader, I Married Him. Daisy Goodwin. BBC. 2006. Documentary.
White, Rebecca. "'Fresh Eyre'? How Original is Sandy Welch's Televised *Jane Eyre*?" *Brontë Studies* 33.2 (2008): 136–147, https://doi.org/10.1179/174582208X298644

John Adams: American Founding Father

HUANG JUN

Episodes: 7
Release date: 16 March – 27 April 2008
Creators: Tom Hooper, Kirk Ellis, Tom Hanks, Gary Goetzman
Source: *John Adams* (2001), biography by David McCullough
Cast: Paul Giamatti (John Adams), Laura Linney (Abigail Adams), Stephen Dillane (Thomas Jefferson), David Morse (George Washington), Tom Wilkinson (Benjamin Franklin), Rufus Sewell (Alexander Hamilton)
Companies: HBO Films, High Noon Productions, Playtone, Mid Atlantic Films
Genre: period drama, political drama, biography, historical fiction
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0472027/



Introduction: The story of a revolutionary marriage

John Adams (2008, HBO) is a seven-episode miniseries, created by Kirk Ellis and directed by Tom Hooper, which chronicles the life and political career of John Adams (1735-1826), the second President of the United States. The series explores Adams' role in the American Revolution, his contributions to the founding of the nation, and his revolutionary relationship with his wife, Abigail Adams.

The series is adapted from David McCullough's acclaimed biography *John Adams*. McCullough, one of America's most distinguished historians and biographers, and a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner, is celebrated for works such as *Truman* and *1776*. Screenwriter Kirk Ellis skillfully transformed McCullough's 751-page historical tome into a teleplay, earning an Emmy for his exceptional adaptation. Director Tom Hooper, known for his innovative use of the camera to bring history to life, further elevated the miniseries with his vision. *John Adams* received widespread critical acclaim, in particular winning 13 Emmy Awards, including Outstanding Miniseries, Outstanding Directing (Tom Hooper), Outstanding Lead Actor (Paul Giamatti as John Adams), Outstanding Lead Actress (Laura Linney as Abigail Adams), and Outstanding Supporting Actor (Tom Wilkinson as Benjamin Franklin).

Paul Giamatti is an acclaimed American actor who has been described as one of "the undersung heroes of his profession" (Gleadow). Mr. Giamatti is widely considered to have successfully captured the choices and challenges Adams faced as well as his political frustrations and confusion. Still, a few critics argue that he was constrained by the "18th-century britches and wigs," making his portrayal the weakest part of the series (Stanley), perhaps because Giamatti had not been seen before in period costume. Laura

Linney delivers a nuanced portrayal of Abigail Adams, capturing her humor, loyalty, and sharp intelligence with great delicacy. While Ms. Linney cherished being part of the production, she admitted to hating the six months she spent wearing a corset during filming (in Barbuto). Her outstanding performance earned her a third Primetime Emmy Award.

Although John Adams is the titular character, the series unfolds from the perspectives of both John and Abigail Adams. Their marriage is portrayed not only as a romantic union but also as a profound revolutionary partnership. The series vividly depicts how they supported each other in both their private and public lives. Many lines from their letters, in which John refers to Abigail as "my friend," are seamlessly woven into the narrative, highlighting the deep trust and intellectual bond between the couple. Abigail is not just John's wife but also his confidante, advisor, and partner, playing an essential role in their shared political endeavors.

Analysis: The domestic and political roles of John and Abigail Adams

Like Alexander Hamilton, who probably would not have gained renewed attention without the groundbreaking Broadway musical by Lin-Manuel Miranda, John Adams is one of the often-overlooked founding fathers. The series delves into the life of a man who has often been overshadowed by his more celebrated peers in history books (Pauls). At the same time, the series sheds light on the crucial yet often unacknowledged contributions of women, particularly through the story of Abigail Adams, who emerges as a force of resilience and intellect within the constraints of her sexist era.

In the series, John Adams is the father to four children: Nabby, his daughter and eldest child; John Quincy, the first son; Charles, the second son; and Thomas, the youngest son. At the same time, he is one of the founding fathers of the United States. This dual paternal role creates a conflict in his family life. His political career, especially when he is in France and England as a diplomat, consumes much of his time. He is essentially absent from family life for many years. This absence affects his intimacy with his children, reflecting the cost of public life on family (Bergstrom). Charles quarrels with his father, accusing him of being overly critical and emotionally distant: "All those years you were in Europe; you were nothing more than a name at the end of a letter. Letters full of advice but never affection" (E5). After Adams retires from the presidency, he hopes to reconnect with his family, but he loses his favorite daughter, and then his beloved wife Abigail. Furthermore, fatherhood causes significant stress for his children. He sends his eldest son, John Quincy, to Russia when he is just a boy. His second son, Charles, fails to meet his expectations and become a lawyer. Instead, Charles becomes a dissolute and wayward alcoholic because John isn't there for him as a child (Bergstrom).

Abigail Adams is portrayed as a resilient, resourceful, devoted, and courageous woman. She not only takes on the responsibility of raising children but also manages the farm's production and finances during John's absences. In the series, Abigail is often seen with their children, especially when they are young. However, John is often shown yelling at the children, which gives the impression that he doesn't love them much. John Adams has his own way of expressing love, but this is done out of sight of the children. While in France, for example, he rarely responds to letters from home because he doesn't want to worry his family about the setbacks he faces in diplomacy. Even as the children grow older, Abigail maintains a closer emotional bond with them than John does. After

meeting his wayward son Charles in the chaotic poor community, John heartlessly disowns him, although he seems deeply sorrowful after their separation. In contrast, Abigail never gives up on Charles and tries to encourage him to pull himself together using the power of family and love. When Nabby's health worsens, she accepts her fate and immediately shares the heartbreaking news with her husband.

At the same time, while Abigail tries to keep her family safe and alive throughout the war, the power of her resilient body is also highlighted. During the American Revolution, the Adams family faces a smallpox epidemic. The series shows many terrifying and grotesque images of sick bodies. Abigail employs pioneering efforts in the field of preventative medicine and inoculates herself and the children against smallpox. The vaccine was still a very dangerous and primitive method, but Abigail leads the way by vaccinating herself. Further proof of her strength is a scene in which Abigail works the farm with her children using manual labor, while neighboring men rely on animals to assist them. Meanwhile, John, after a diplomatic failure in Europe, suffers from a cold and appears to be in such poor health that it seems he might die at any moment.

In the male-dominated political power dynamics of early American history, John Adams often appears as someone who struggles to adapt, frequently expressing frustration and a sense of disconnection. Unlike the more charismatic and celebrated figures such as George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, or Thomas Jefferson, Adams is portrayed as less exciting and more ordinary. This sentiment is echoed in his own words when he leaves the White House, referring to himself as "an ordinary John Adams" (E6). Physically, John Adams is not the epitome of classical attractiveness or charm, either in his appearance or temperament. He is often hard to imagine as a great historical figure, resembling rather the typical crabby, overweight senator in so many Westerns. His short stature also leads to him being overlooked among other leaders (Brown). Before Washington's inauguration, for example, Adams wants to give a speech as Vice President, but when the tall, commanding figure of the new president enters, all eyes are drawn to him. Adams continues to refer to Washington as "General" during the event. The moment is awkward, as Washington merely pats him on the shoulder, signaling no offense but leaving Adams in a very uncomfortable position.

As a persuasive orator and as a keen legal mind, Adams demonstrates his rhetorical skills and intellectual abilities in courts, but in politics, his bluntness and lack of diplomacy often work against him (Miles). His interactions with his political opponents lack the gentility that is expected in such high-stakes arenas. Benjamin Franklin criticizes Adams for his public behavior, remarking that, "It's perfectly acceptable to insult a man in private. He may even thank you for it afterward. But when you do it in public, they tend to think you are serious" (E2). In France, his diplomatic skills are particularly poor, with Franklin describing Adams's approach as "a direct insult followed by a petulant whine" (E3). As Vice President, Adams finds his role both frustrating and insignificant. His opinions are often ignored, and he has no real power. He famously laments, "The vice-president is the most insignificant office ever devised. To hear other men talk for five hours and not be at liberty to talk myself" (E5). This sense of exclusion continues when he becomes President. His attempts to maintain neutrality alienate both factions of the political spectrum—Hamilton's Federalists and Jefferson's Republicans. His efforts are often overshadowed by factional concerns and the ambitions of other men, leaving him feeling sidelined in the very role he seeks to lead.

On her side, Abigail is not only a supportive partner but also a force for change, acting within the limitations of her time to leave a lasting impact on American history. While early American democracy excluded women from formal political participation, Abigail finds ways to engage by influencing her husband (Pauls). Her advice shapes many of his decisions, making her a silent yet powerful presence in the political sphere. Abigail, in particular, is a pioneer in advocating for women's rights and opposing slavery. Her famous "remember the ladies" letter to John encapsulates her forward-thinking stance on gender equality. She also serves as a moral compass for John, often guiding him during his moments of doubt and frustration. Abigail is his most patient listener but also his keenest critic. We see her close involvement in John's compositions, offering well-timed advice, which he tends to resist until he can no longer deny it's correct (Bergstrom). Her influence is acknowledged within the series, including praise from Thomas Jefferson, who notes that her wisdom and passion significantly shape John's decisions.

Significant differences between the political and social structures of 18th-century America and France are also notably evident. In France, Adams must rely on *salonnières* like Madame Helvétius to gain access to political circles. This reliance reflects the nature of French politics at the time, when power and influence were often exercised through social networks and relationships, with women occupying crucial roles in these networks, while being formally excluded from official positions. In 18th-century France, salons served as hubs of intellectual and political activity, especially under the backdrop of absolute monarchy. Formal political power was concentrated in the hands of a few male elites, but many women established informal centers of influence by hosting salons.

These gatherings provided a space for intellectuals, artists, and politicians to exchange ideas, with the hostesses using their charisma and connections to facilitate discussions and mediate relationships. While these interactions primarily revolve around intellectual and political matters, they often include elements of personal intimacy. The series hints at this dynamic, suggesting an unusually close relationship between Madame Helvétius and Benjamin Franklin (Rodama). In contrast, the political culture of 18th-century America is distinctly male-dominated. After the American Revolutionary War, the newly established republican system emphasized formal political participation by men, while women were excluded from voting and holding office. Women in America, like Abigail Adams, influenced politics indirectly, primarily through familial and marital relationships (as wives, with mistresses being kept completely apart from politics). Their contributions were largely confined to private spheres, where they provided guidance and shaped decisions through personal correspondence and advice.

To conclude, *John Adams* is a magnificently shot and well-acted period drama series, offering a compelling portrayal of a man who was both ordinary and extraordinary. It sheds light on a frequently overlooked founding father, who, despite not being perfect, stands out for his authenticity. The series also reveals the enduring power of partnership in marriage in shaping the forces of history.

Bibliography

Barbuto, Dana. "Playing Abigail Adams: Laura Linney on Her HBO Series Role." *The Patriot Ledger* 28 March 2008,

https://eu.patriotledger.com/story/news/2008/03/28/playing-abigail-adams-laura-linney/40372644007/

Bergstrom, Anton. “The Importance of Friendship and Marriage in the *John Adams* (2008) Miniseries.” *3 Brothers Film* 11 March 2024, https://3brothersfilm.com/blog/2024/3/11/the-importance-of-friendship-and-marriage-in-the-john-adams-2008-miniseries

Brown, Carly. “Madeira Mondays: The *John Adams* Miniseries (Part II).” *Carly Brown* 21 October 2019, https://carlyjbrown.com/2019/10/21/madeira-mondays-the-john-adams-miniseries-part-ii/

Gleadow, Ewan. “*John Adams* Review.” *Cult Following* 17 November 2021, https://cultfollowing.co.uk/2021/11/17/john-adams-review/

Miles, Ben. “Book & Miniseries Review *John Adams*.” *Beachcomber* 2 July 2020, https://beachcomber.news/content/book-miniseries-review-’john-adams’

Pauls, Ashley. “Throwback Review: *John Adams* HBO Miniseries (2008).” *The ESO Network* 30 July 2020, https://esonetwork.com/throwback-review-john-adams-hbo-miniseries-2008/

Rodama. “Madame H. in *John Adams*.” *Rodama: A Blog of 18th-Century & Revolutionary France* 27 November 2013, https://rodama1789.blogspot.com/2013/11/madame-h-in-john-adams.html.

Stanley, Alessandra. “Blowhard, Patriot, President.” *The New York Times* 14 March 2008, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/14/arts/television/14adam.html

The Pacific: Hell Was an Ocean Away

Huang Jun

Episodes: 10
Release date: 14 March – 16 May 2010
Creators: Steven Spielberg, Tom Hanks, Gary Goetzman
Sources: *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa* (1981), memoir by Eugene Sledge; *Helmet for My Pillow* (1957), memoir by Robert Leckie; other sources: Sledge's memoir *China Marine* (2002), and *Red Blood, Black Sand* (2012), memoir by Chuck Tatum
Cast: James Badge Dale (PFC. Robert Leckie), Jon Seda (Sgt. John Basilone), Joseph Mazzello (Cpl. Eugene Sledge), Ashton Holmes (PFC Sidney Phillips), Josh Helman (PFC Lew 'Chuckler' Juergens), Rami Malek (PFC Merriell 'Snafu' Shelton), Tom Hanks (narrator)
Companies: HBO Entertainment, DreamWorks TV, Playtone
Genre: war, action, adventure, drama, historical fiction
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0374463/

Introduction: True WWII Pacific theater battles

The Pacific (2010, HBO) is a ten-episode miniseries, produced by Steven Spielberg, Tom Hanks, and Gary Goetzman. It chronicles the harrowing experiences of three US Marines—Robert Leckie (1920-2001), Eugene Sledge (1923-2001), and John Basilone (1916-1945)—in the brutal Pacific theater of World War II. The series delves into their personal struggles and the intense battles they faced, offering a poignant portrayal of the war's impact on their lives.

As a companion piece to the successful 2001 miniseries *Band of Brothers* (winner of multiple Primetime Emmy Awards), many of the same team members worked behind the scenes on *The Pacific* (Peterson). This included in the task of executive producers American acting icon Tom Hanks and Steven Spielberg, one of the greatest film directors of all times. Bruce C. McKenna, one of the chief writers of *Band of Brothers*, also contributed, along with Hugh Ambrose, the son of *Band of Brothers*' author Stephen Ambrose, who served as a project consultant. The involvement of these key figures ensured a similar aesthetic and commitment to authenticity. *The Pacific* was also based on real-life accounts of veterans and their written memoirs. Produced by HBO, known for its high budgets and high-quality productions, the series had a budget of approximately $200 million, making it at the time one of the most expensive miniseries ever made and probably bringing 4,000 jobs and 180 million to the Australian economy (Franklin), for it was mainly shot in Australia. Like *Band of Brothers*, several directors were tasked with specific episodes, bringing a mix of American and Canadian perspectives to the series.

In April 2007, the producers set up a production office in Melbourne and began casting. For the main roles, they hired actors with significant experience and an astonishing resemblance to the historical figures they portrayed. James Badge Dale, known for his roles in *24*, *The Departed*, and *Iron Man 3*, played Robert Leckie. Joseph Mazzello, who gained fame as a child actor in *Jurassic Park* and later starred in *The Social Network* and *Bohemian Rhapsody*, portrayed Eugene Sledge. Jon Seda, recognized for his roles in *Selena* and *Chicago P.D.*, took on the role of John Basilone.

Although the series related a lesser-known aspect of World War II in the distant Pacific theater compared with its European companion, viewers could draw parallels to modern warfare, particularly because during its development the United States was actively involved in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Solider then and now "find oppressive heat, disease and an enemy using guerilla tactics, suicide missions and sometimes civilians… It's part Vietnam, part Iraq" (Poniewozik). The series was also influenced by two significant documentary series from the 1950s: *Crusade in the Pacific* and *Victory at Sea*, which provided a foundation for the historical accuracy that viewers expected from *The Pacific*. However, it is important to note that the series is historical fiction, and its focus is far more personal, with the episodes revolving around the experiences of three Marines from separate regiments and the toll the conflict takes upon them (Keeling).

Analysis: Gender and body during wartime

On the vast canvas of war cinema, gender and body are not merely narrative tools but profound mediums that reflect and shape societal values, cultural identities, and historical memories. War, as an extreme social condition, often brutally challenges and reshapes our traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. Yet, gender imbalance is a striking feature in *The Pacific*. The narrative predominantly showcases male characters in central combat roles, partly reflecting the societal division of labor prevalent during wartime.

Nonetheless, the war brought horrific consequences, but it also opened new opportunities to women who have been traditionally confined to specific jobs or were unemployed due to expected gender roles. The women's workface expanded to work alongside men in factories, on farms and even in the army (Patt). However, women's contributions to the war effort are not fully explored in the series. Women are often marginalized and placed in secondary roles within stories, existing only to support the emotional growth or goals of men. For example, Vera, the girl who lives across the street from Leckie, serves as his guiding star in the darkness of war. Leckie keeps his love for Vera a secret and writes letters and poems to her, which he considers to be "the best stuff I ever wrote." However, he doesn't send them because he is unsure if he will survive the war. After the war, Vera accepts Leckie's confession and helps him return to a normal and peaceful life. Notably, *The Pacific* features several intimate scenes with female characters. Unlike *Band of Brothers*, where these scenes are not central to character development, the series shows sexuality as part of a wider pattern that includes emotional connection (Scott). These sex scenes often present female characters, such as Stella and Lena, in supportive and comforting roles to the war-weary men, yet they must also contend with their own sorrows and heartaches.

The "Melbourne" episode (no. three) is particularly illustrative of this dynamic, when many soldiers, including Leckie, engage in short relationships with local young girls because of the media's portrayal of these soldiers as heroes. In this episode, Leckie

meets a Greek Australian girl, Stella, and spends several days with her and her family. During his brief stay, Leckie experiences tranquility and intimacy, something he would not have known on the battlefield. However, when one of Stella's friends loses her husband in the war, she must make painful choices between ending the relationship with Leckie or living in fear of losing him.

Another female character, Lena, chooses the latter. Initially, Lena rejects Basilone's help, asserting her status as a sergeant and emphasizing that she, like him, has duties to attend to. She displays a certain independence by making it clear that she is not one of the girls from Los Angeles who are infatuated with heroes. After their marriage, Lena and Basilone share a honeymoon period filled with sweetness but also underlaid with an impending ominous shadow. In an intimate scene, the warm, inviting glow of the indoor lighting contrasts sharply with the tumultuous sea outside, foreshadowing the grim fate that is awaiting him and her. Despite the brief respite of domestic bliss, Basilone ultimately chooses to return to the battlefield, where he meets his end on Iwo Jima. While the nation celebrates the end of the war, Lena pays her first visit to Basilone's parents in the final episode. She presents his medals to his father, a tangible symbol of his courage, and embraces his mother, a gesture of condolence and solidarity in their mutual loss.

Furthermore, the portrayal of female bodies in the series reflects the historical male gaze during wartime, when women's bodies are not only idealized but also employed instrumentally to serve the war narratives. When Basilone returns with honor, he is greeted by the attractive and sensual actress Virginia Gray and the journalists. The enthusiastic, staged photoshoots with Gray are part of a public relations strategy to elevate Basilone's celebrity-like status as a national hero and to rally public support for the war. When Basilone and Gray return to a luxury hotel, the praise he receives for having such a beautiful woman by his side further underscores the role of beautiful women as objects or trophies existing to complement the heroes. It is also evident in a scene where Sledge, back from the front lines, encounters women soldiers preparing juice, glistening in the golden light of the setting sun. In that moment, Sledge finds the embodiment of beauty amidst the relentless violence and death that define his existence, simply gazing transfixed at them.

Unlike women's bodies, men's bodies are shown being wounded and suffering traumas. Yet, *The Pacific* renews and challenges traditional war narratives by avoiding the glorification of violence and masculinity (Mass). Instead, it offers a raw and visceral depiction of the brutal impact of war on the human body and the vulnerability of men. In terms of the violence of war, the series presents a stark reality where the physical toll of combat is laid bare for viewers to witness instead of following the Hollywood cliché of a "clean war" (Scott). Through graphic scenes that showcase the harrowing aftermath of violence, such as the piles of mutilated, maggot-covered corpses scattered across the battlefields, the series physically represents the ravages of war.

In the series, the enemy are even more implacable and fanatical than the Nazis, which was starkly different from the situation in the European front (Patterson). The Japanese employed savage tactics, using body alienation as a war machine—preferring to follow the Bushido and sacrifice themselves rather than surrender—and exploited civilian lives, using civilians as human shields and even as living bombs, reminiscent of modern terrorist attacks. Moreover, the series also depicts the moral gray areas of soldiers, for "This was a race war—with white Americans, in this case, bent on killing as

many ‘Japs’ as possible” (Benedictus). Some violence by the Marines is conducted occasionally in a racist way, such as taking gold teeth from dead Japanese soldiers or using skulls to decorate American camps. This contradicts the traditional image of American servicemen as always doing the right thing as WWII veterans are often held to a higher standard than current troops.

The Pacific also intends to subvert the traditional image of masculinity by showcasing the psychological scars of war, which were often glossed over in films and documentaries from the WWII era or early Cold War. For one thing, the series delves into the harrowing and dehumanizing effects of war, illustrating the reality of combat fatigue and stress. Faced with harsh natural conditions and unpredictable enemy attacks, characters like Leckie suffer from nocturnal enuresis, a clear sign of the psychological toll. The impact is further highlighted by an officer’s suicide during their time on Pavuvu Island and a soldier who breaks down after strangling a Japanese soldier with his bare hands.

The series also tries to dispel the myth that soldiers did not suffer from mental health issues, a notion more typically linked to the Vietnam War. In an opening scene, Sledge’s doctor father expresses his concern for his son’s mental well-being saying, “I don’t want to look in your eyes someday, and see no spark, no love, no life. That would break my heart” (E1). One of the most heart-breaking moments of the series, which also serves as a clear example of this psychological impact, occurs in the final episode when Sledge returns home and struggles to adjust to normal life (Keeling). He faces difficulties finding a job and feels increasingly out of place in social settings. When his father takes him shooting in the nearby woods, memories of the war flood back, and Sledge breaks down in his father’s arms, unable to kill any more living things and haunted by the horrors he has witnessed.

To conclude, while *The Pacific* perpetuates certain stereotypical portrayals of female characters, its depiction of male characters is commendable, particularly in its presentation of violence as dehumanizing rather than glorious, and its exploration of the less-discussed traumas of World War II and of war in general.

Bibliography

Benedictus, Leo. “Your Next Box Set: *The Pacific*.” *The Guardian* 10 August 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2011/aug/04/pacific-spielberg-hanks-box-set

Frankin, Nancy. “Hell on Earth.” *The New Yorker* 7 March 2010, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/03/15/hell-on-earth

Keeling, Robert. “HBO’s *The Pacific*: Revisiting a War Epic.” *Den of Geek* 15 October 2015, https://www.denofgeek.com/tv/hbos-the-pacific-revisiting-a-war-epic/

Loh Peter. “A Review of HBO’s War Epics Part Two: *The Pacific.*” *The Roundup* 21 March 2024, https://jesuitroundup.org/a-review-of-hbos-war-epics-part-two-the-pacific/

Mass, Peter. “It’s Time to Wage War Against War Movies That Glorify Outdated Models of Masculinity.” *The Intercept* 27 January 2018, https://theintercept.com/2018/01/27/12-strong-war-movies-masculinity/

Peterson, John. “Hanks and Spielberg Pick Their Battles with *The Pacific*.” *The Guardian* 3 April 2010, https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2010/apr/03/pacific-hanks-spielberg-patterson

Platt, Amy E. "'Go into the Yard as a Worker, Not as a Woman': Oregon Women During World War II, a Digital Exhibit on the Oregon History Project." *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 116.2 (2015): 234-248, https://doi.org/10.5403/oregonhistq.116.2.0234

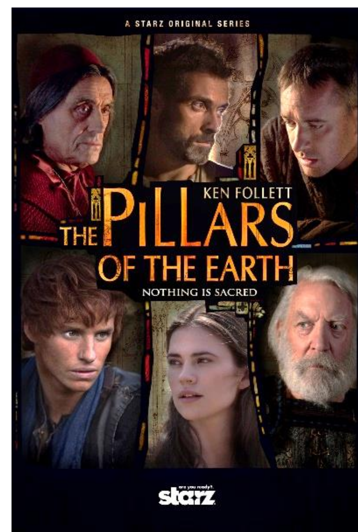
Poniewozi, James. "HBO's *The Pacific*: What Fresh Hell." *Time* 12 March 2010, https://entertainment.time.com/2010/03/12/hbos-the-pacific-what-fresh-hell/

Scott, Cord A. "The Convolution of History: The Argument for *The Pacific*." *Marine Corps History* 3.2 (2017): 8-19, https://www.usmcu.edu/Outreach/Marine-Corps-University-Press/MCH/Marine-Corps-History-Winter-2017-v3n2/The-Convolution-of-History-The-Argument-for-The-Pacific/

The Pillars of the Earth: An Adaptation's Not-So-Subtle Betrayal

JULES OTERO BESOLÍ

Episodes: 8
Release date: 23 July – 27 August 2010
Creators: Sergio Mimica-Gezzan and John Pielmeier
Source: *The Pillars of the Earth* (1989), novel by Ken Follet
Cast: Ian McShane (Waleran Bigod), Rufus Sewell (Tom Builder), Matthew Macfadyen (Prior Philip), Eddie Redmayne (Jack Jackson), Hayley Atwell (Lady Aliena), Sarah Parish (Regan Hamleigh), Natalia Wörner (Ellen), Anatole Taubman (Remigius), John Pielmeier (Cuthbert), Robert Bathurst (Percy Hamleigh), Clive Wood (King Henry I), Sam Claflin (Richard, Earl of Shiring), Liam Garrigan (Alfred), David Oakes (William Hamleigh), Götz Otto (Walter), Tony Curran (King Stephen), Donald Sutherland (Bartholomew), Alison Pill (Empress Maude), Gordon Pinsent (Archbishop of Canterbury)
Companies: Tandem Communications, Muse Entertainment Enterprises, Scott Free.
Genre: historical drama
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1453159/



Introduction: Much ado about architecture

The Pillars of the Earth, created by Sergio Mimica-Gezzan and John Pielmeier, follows the construction of the fictional Kingsbury Cathedral during the historical period known as the Anarchy (1138-1153), during which a war for the succession to the British throne ravaged the economy, created conflict and confusion amongst the noble houses, and wreaked havoc in many villages and their adjacent monasteries. As the story of the Anarchy advances (with a healthy dose of historical inaccuracies) the main characters struggle through life and through the great complexities of religious architecture.

The protagonist, Jack Jackson, is a sculptor and the adopted son of a Master-Builder. He must navigate not only construction but also love, family secrets, the struggles of life during a war and the intricacies of political struggle between the noble houses as they violently bicker over market placements, fleece fairs and other such matters. It is this last aspect, the political weaving of conflicts, which features most prominently in the miniseries and provides the most interesting villains in the characters of Regan Hamleigh and her son William Hamleigh. These two characters appear to be the most proper object of study in regard to gender, mostly because of how the

miniseries has chosen to portray them, differing greatly from Ken Follett's source novels in what can only be described as a conscious rewriting which requires thorough exploration.

It is important to remark that this miniseries has been studied previously in the context of gender by Gabrielle Storey, who focused on the representation of Queen Matilde (anglicized as Maud) and criticized it as she considered that "Maud appears as an unfortunate heiress rather than a tenacious leader, with the lack of screen time contributing to poor character development" (Storey 197). It seems that, in general, the female representation in *The Pillars of The Earth* will not go on to be regarded with fondness, at least not by feminist critics.

Analysis: Blame, motherhood, and incest narratives

The analysis of this miniseries focuses, as noted, on the characters of Regan Hamleigh and William Hamleigh, specifically on how they differ from their counterparts in the novel and why that difference is important in terms of representation. It is thus imperative to situate these characters in the narrative and explain their relevance, as well as the offending difference that makes their on-screen appearance problematic.

Regan and William Hamleigh are mother and son, and they are two of the main villains in the story. They are nobles (Percy, Regan's husband, eventually becomes the Earl of Shiring) and have an odd partnership with Bishop Waleran, another of the many villains in this story. It is quite clear from the beginning that, in terms of scheming, Regan leads the way: she artfully kills and makes her son kill for purposes which serve both Waleran and herself, and then asks the church to absolve her. William is not, however, a simple tool nor free from blame: both in the novel and in the miniseries, he is a serial rapist and abuser.

To put it simply, mother and son are both abhorrent people: they murder remorselessly to obtain their goals and they both consider those around them to be lesser and objectifiable, which can be seen not only in William's history of rape but also in Regan's disdain for her husband and the other noble houses. However, the miniseries adds a dimension to their villainous perversion that Follett's novels did not deem necessary: somewhere in the translation from page to screen, the two characters develop an explicit incestuous relationship.

This is, of course, particularly interesting: what reason can be cited for such a change? Is it simply to make them more despicable in the eyes of the audience, or is there a deeper social (gendered) issue involved? Any attempts to historically justify this choice quickly fall short: even though Rouillard argues that "The Middle Ages made numerous literary contributions to the development of the consummated incest motif" (Rouillard, 80), she is mostly talking about father-daughter relationships; the Hamleighs are not historical characters, so the change cannot have been made for the sake of accuracy. Instead, I propose that in *The Pillars of The Earth* incest is used as a double sword: it shifts the blame off William's patriarchal violence so that it may fall upon his mother and he can be absolved and, at the same time, it sexualizes Regan's feminine evil and justifies it beyond her quest for power.

Regarding William's narrative absolution it is important to consider that, through the popular narratives of incest, in which blame always befalls the woman (whether she is a cruel mother or a seductive nymph), one can almost always infer the Freudian

discourse, which "ideologically inverts the social realities of white male privilege" (Karlyn, 53) by displacing the patriarchal man to a position of non-agency. By being a victim to incestual grooming himself, William is not enacting violence, but rather perpetuating his mother's. In "Incest Discourse and Cinematic Representation," Lynch adeptly summarizes it: "The medicalization of incest, together with pervasive misogyny and a deep aversion to the topic as a socio-political issue, has resulted, in the female backlash films, in a view of the survivor as sex-obsessed, damaged, and dangerous" (43).

By victimizing William and pathologizing his patriarchal abuse of power, the miniseries encourages the viewer to see his mistreatment of the main female protagonist Aliena (and later, of his thirteen-year-old wife Elizabeth) as collaterals of Regan's cruel and oppressive motherhood. The way his wife appears in the picture is important as well: the marriage is selected and arranged by Regan herself, and the reader is made to understand that the choice of a much younger, submissive girl is not just for William's benefit but also for her own, as she avoids jealousy by choosing someone she deems insignificant. This, once again, morphs the structure of power: it is Regan who puts Elizabeth in danger, while William is the wounded beast that harms her simply because she is there, resulting in a patriarchal power that is mediated through women.

Aside from the attempt to portray William as a victim, the addition of an incest dynamic also changes how Regan's villain status is perceived, her motivations and her goals. In the novel, she commits murder several times, advised by Bishop Waleran, and she does exhibit a tendency to manipulate her son to kill for her goals, but she does so only for power and money. She is what Helen Gavin would call a 'comfort killer', a murderess who commits her crimes for practical reasons completely unrelated to the perverse satisfaction that, due to its great sensationalism, has become the norm in mainstream media. Although it makes sense for Regan to be portrayed as comfort killer due to her circumstances, the miniseries may have thought that modern audiences were too used to sensational serial killers to accept one simple truth: "when we encounter a female serial killer, the surprise is not just her rarity, but also her ordinary nature. She is no witch or evil queen, she is just a woman" (Gavin, 49).

One way her perversion is shown, which also constitutes a major change from the novel to the miniseries, is the death of her husband. Originally, Ken Follett writes his death very ambiguously, with him dying of unknown causes, whereas in the adaptation he is bled to death by Regan as she has decided that William should inherit his title. It is one of the most gruesome deaths in the miniseries except for those shown during the battle scenes. Regan uses a medical device for bleeding patients as her husband struggles beneath her, resulting in a hard-to-watch scene that almost seems to have a sexual dimension to it. Another significant change related to the way the audience may view Regan is her appearance: while in the novels she is described as ugly, with her face disfigured by boils, in the miniseries she is played by Sarah Parish, who is an undeniably attractive woman and who is much too young to be realistically William's mother. The only hint of disfigurement on her face is a dark red birthmark on her cheekbone which somewhat resembles a splatter of blood. Thus, if one considers her character in relation to traditional female archetypes, it could be argued that she has gone from filling the role of the Witch (ugly, old, disfigured, malicious in an undesirable way) to being a Femme Fatale (attractive, younger, sexualized by the violence she herself enacts).

By adding a sexual dimension to her evil, the miniseries ensures that Regan will be twisted enough for the modern audiences: after all, the idea of the banality of evil has

not been trendy for quite some years. It serves, however, a secondary purpose: it morphs her cold and calculating want for power into something more carnal, more physical, something intrinsically related to motherhood and womanhood. While in the novels Regan's villainous deeds are simply related to class and to the natural entitlement of nobility, and are not particularly informed by Regan's gender (since the character would still narratively work if she were a man), the miniseries' take on Regan's evil is a twisted form of the supposed feminine ability to nurture: she is the rotten root, the overbearing zealous mother, and suddenly every action she does is not for power, but to secure a better life for a son she dotes on so much that she might just cause permanent damage to him in the process.

At this point in the article, it is necessary to discuss something which happens in episode seven and which some readers may consider a 'spoiler'. Now that the spoiler warning is out of the way, let us discuss the symbology around Regan's death at the hands of her son: it is a violent, intimate scene, and she is strangled to death; he uses a doll which belongs to his wife to stifle her screams. It is, quite obviously, a parallelism to the death of her husband, when he struggles in a similar way, possibly signifying the perpetuation of violent acts and once more shifting the blame onto William's upbringing rather than to himself. The use of the doll, however, is striking: is William trying to reclaim his innocence, or is he perhaps choosing his wife over his mother? If it is the former, it is a naïve idea, because the audience cannot forgive his many instances of sexual abuse simply because of his matricide, and thus the redemption arc falls terribly short. If it is the latter, it seems to matter very little: Elizabeth has already been caught in this cycle of abuse, and the murder of Regan does nothing to mitigate or avenge her suffering, but rather silences it as William becomes, once again, the center of a victimhood narrative.

There aren't many texts written on matricide (as psychoanalysis has been otherwise occupied by its counterpart) but Amber Jacobs suggests, in her book titled *On Matricide: Myth, Psychoanalysis, and the Law of the Mother*, that killing the mother may not be as easy a metaphor as killing the father. Since motherhood does not represent a power to aspire to, "matricide does not concern the dead mother from a structural viewpoint" (Jacobs 37) and as such the result psychological of killing her is inconclusive, as "there is something in the nature of her death that is somehow not dead enough" (37). This may be the reason why the death of Regan has little to no perceived effect on William's psyche: he is just as cruel before as he was after.

All in all, many changes were introduced in *The Pillars of the Earth* in order to adapt it for television. Some were to better fit the story in a miniseries format, such as merging characters and events, and some others were for the purpose of dramatization, such as rewriting certain deaths so they would be more fulfilling to watch on screen. The ending itself was changed completely, for these two reasons, and Pielmeier effortlessly delivered a completely different ending that was satisfying and that many fans of the book enjoyed. The choice to change the dynamics between the Hamleighs, however, does not seem to aid the story in any way and rises many concerns regarding sexual abuse, motherhood and blame: instead of maintaining the staunch (and very well-written) criticism of patriarchal abuses of power, it shifts the blame onto a corrupted version of motherhood that overpowers the nuances of Regan's character and instead portrays her as an evil seductress who is to blame for what happens to the women assaulted by her son.

Bibliography

Gavin, Helen. “Evil or Insane? The Female Serial Killer and Her Doubly Deviant Femininity.” *Transgressive Womanhood : Investigating Vamps, Witches, Whores, Serial Killers and Monsters,* Manon Hedenborg-White and Bridget Sandhoff (eds.). Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2014. 49-59.

Jacobs, Amber. *On Matricide: Myth, Psychoanalysis, and the Law of the Mother.* Columbia UP, 2007.

Karlyn, Kathleen Rowe. *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers : Redefining Feminism on Screen.* University of Texas Press, 2011.

Lynch, Joan Driscoll. “Incest Discourse and Cinematic Representation.” *Journal of Film and Video* 54.2/3 (2002): 43-55, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20688379

Rouillard, Linda Marie. *Medieval Considerations of Incest, Marriage, and Penance.* Springer International Publishing, 2020.

Storey, Gabrielle. “(Mis)Representing Queens: The Untold Lives of the Empress Matilda and Eleanor of Aquitaine.” *Parergon* 39.1 (2022): 191-207. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/pgn.2022.0009

Mildred Pierce: (Re)framing the Female Protagonist Through Windows and Looking-glasses

JEANNE BARTHÉLEMY

Episodes: 5
Release date: 27 March – 10 April 2011
Creators: Todd Haynes, Jon Raymond
Source: *Mildred Pierce* (1941), novel by James M. Cain
Cast: Kate Winslet (Mildred Pierce), Evan Rachel Wood (Veda Pierce), Guy Pearce (Monty Beragon), Brian F. O'Byrne (Bert Pierce), Morgan Turner (young Veda Pierce), Melissa Leo (Lucy Gessler), James LeGros (Wally Burgan)
Companies: HBO, MGM Television, Killer Films, John Wells Productions
Genre: period drama, melodrama
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1492030/

Introduction: The story of a grass widow

Mildred Pierce (HBO, 2011) is a five-episode limited series created by Todd Haynes and Jon Raymond, based on the 1941 novel by James M. Cain. The eponymous protagonist, Mildred Pierce, is a housewife in Glendale, California in 1931. The story begins when Bert Pierce leaves the family household, and Mildred is left to be a 'grass widow', as in the British idiom used for divorced or separated women. After this separation, she has to start working in order to provide for her two young daughters, Veda and Kay.

Although the context of the Great Depression makes it hard for an untrained woman to find a job, Mildred is eventually hired as a waitress in a restaurant. Mildred is a creative cook and has a flair for business, so she soon learns the trade and eventually opens her own restaurant. Throughout the series, we witness her rise and fall as her restaurant business blooms and then collapses. Mildred also deals with emotional challenges like the loss of her younger daughter Kay, and her complicated relationship with her lover (the upper-class polo player Monty Beragon, who becomes her second husband) and most importantly with her manipulative and narcissistic daughter Veda. Both characters end up betraying Mildred in the worst possible way by having an affair, which Mildred discovers in Episode 5. By the end of the series, Mildred is back where she was in the beginning: remarried to Bert and without a business, but having gone through the loss of their two daughters.

It is interesting to mention that the source novel by James M. Cain was also adapted by Michael Curtiz into a Hollywood film noir starring Joan Crawford in 1945. The Hollywood version, however, is very different from the novel. This was largely due to the moral code of 1940's Hollywood, the infamous Hayes code. In this film version, the villain (Veda Pierce) had to be heavily punished. This is why the producer Jerry Wald had to invent a crime that this young woman could be punished for. As happens, in the Hollywood version, Veda is rightfully incarcerated for murdering Monty. Todd Haynes's *Mildred Pierce*, it must be noted, is an adaptation of the 1941 novel, not a remake of the Hollywood film. It is indeed much closer to the novel's plot than the 1945 movie. However, as it is always the case with good adaptations, it is not necessary to have read the book or seen the previous adaptation to enjoy the miniseries, understand it, and be interested in it.

Analysis: reconsidering the female character

When analyzing Todd Haynes's *Mildred Pierce*, it is important to acknowledge that, as noted, this is a very faithful adaptation of Cain's novel. Writing on gender and the body in *Mildred Pierce* focusing on content alone would provide rich insights, but such an analysis would be relevant to Cain's novel as much as Haynes's miniseries. Consequently, this essay looks into the representation of gender and the body in the series from a formal cinematic angle, to see how the use of frames within the frame affects our comprehension of the two main female characters, Mildred and Veda Pierce. In the miniseries, characters are very often filmed through windows, windshields or mirrors, which provides visible artificial frames within the screen's frame. This article first focuses on the window as a material embodiment of social norms, and then on the mirror as a way to explore the notion of duality in the relation between Mildred and Veda.

The use of windows as a frame within the frame starts in the very opening scene of the series. The characters are filmed through the windows of their own house, performing gender-assigned domestic chores: Bert is mowing the lawn while Mildred is baking in the kitchen. The window's frame can be interpreted as the material expression of social norms, a metaphor for the rigid frames inside which individuals have to evolve throughout their life. If this analysis is right, the first scene of the series makes a strong point: significantly, the viewers first meet the characters through the material frame of the window, and through the metaphorical frame of the gender norms they each have to conform to. Spectators are therefore introduced to individuals who are trapped within the powerful artificial frame of gender and the norms that come with it. In his review in *The New Yorker*, critic Hilton Als wrote that Todd Haynes "shows Mildred trapped in a world that is not of her making," which is relevant to our topic: Mildred is a woman navigating a man's world, trapped into a normative role that was imposed upon her, that of the 'grass widow'.

Throughout the whole series, the use of windows as a framing device also confers "a pronounced sense of immense machinations entrapping their protagonists" (White), creating an uncomfortable feeling that the characters are constantly being watched and judged by obscure yet powerful social forces. This "under-surveillance cinematography" (White) taints the whole series with a feeling of anxiety that somehow foreshadows the main character's downfall as a socially inflicted punishment for her disruptive behavior. The scene in which Mildred invites Wally Burgan to have dinner at her house (E1), "filmed

in a succession of tracking shots taken from behind windows" (Maury 8) is especially striking in this regard. Cristelle Maury emphasizes how this "encourages the audience to reflect upon the staged nature of this dinner and upon Mildred's condition." I would add that it also embodies social judgment in a disquieting way: it feels as if Mildred is somehow breaking the law. She is actually breaking the law by drinking alcohol with Wally (Prohibition was enforced at the time), but she is also symbolically breaking the social law of 1931 middle-class Glendale by inviting a man to dine at her house as a single woman, later having sex with him.

Another framing device that is used throughout the series is the mirror. As an object, the mirror carries such a heavy symbolic significance in all forms of art and in psychoanalysis that it can hardly be taken for granted. For self-evident reasons, the mirror has often been used as a way to explore the motif of the Gothic double (or Doppelgänger) in literature and film. This is of special interest when dealing with *Mildred Pierce*, because one of the central themes of the series is the opposition between the two main female characters, Mildred and Veda Pierce. This opposition, however, is not one of pure dissemblance as the two women share many similarities—their creativity, ambition, and even their looks. In fact, Kate Winslet declared in an interview for *Collider* that "Mildred has admiration for [Veda], and also the desire that she could maybe have been that person. In Veda, Mildred saw her own disappointments" (in Radish). The incestuous dimension in the relationship between Mildred and Veda reaches its climax in the final episode, when Mildred discovers Veda in bed with her stepfather Monty. Far from looking bewildered or guilty, Veda remains strikingly calm and composedly lights a cigarette while occasionally returning her mother's gaze in the most provocative, shameless way. Then, she slowly walks naked to the mirror (daringly exposing her body) and starts combing her hair, still making eye-contact with Mildred's reflection in the glass.

What is interesting in this scene is the emphasis on the mirror. In the novel, there is no mention of eye-contact through the mirror, and in fact the whole mirror sequence only lasts one sentence. This may be an insignificant difference, but it may also be a conscious directing choice: the lingering, slow rhythm and camera movement makes this scene almost painfully disturbing, to the point that Mildred's attack on her daughter almost comes as a relief. And this is maybe even more puzzling to the audience: we are made to understand and even embrace Mildred's violent attack on Veda, but shouldn't this violence be turned on Monty? After all, he is an adult man and Veda's stepfather; she, on the other hand, is extremely young and has known him from her childhood. In this highly problematic situation, shouldn't we see Veda as the victim of an older, socially more powerful man perhaps even grooming her?

This question is openly addressed in the novel: "it wasn't at Monty that she leaped, her husband, the man who had been untrue to her. It was at Veda, her daughter, the girl who had done no more than what Mildred had once said was a woman's right" (Cain 219-220). The miniseries' mirror sequence makes this somewhat more ambiguous: in her essay "Beyond Adaptation: Mirrors, Memory and Melodrama in Todd Haynes's *Mildred Pierce*," Pam Cook writes that the "emphasis demonizes Veda and shifts blame onto her rather than Mildred, so that Mildred's deviant desire is effaced in favor of her primitive maternal instincts" (383). As such, the series seems to use the symbol of the mirror as a way to frame Veda as Mildred's demonic double; in real Gothic fashion, the limits between the good woman and the bad woman are blurred as the former is obsessed with the latter. Veda embodies the heartless femme fatale, while Mildred is

generally portrayed in a sympathetic light. Each of them is the mirror image of the other, yet the pair reinforces a binary good/evil vision of the female character.

Nonetheless, the use of the mirror also allows a more complex interpretation of Mildred's character: we could understand her attack on Veda as her attempt to destroy the image of her own repressed desire for her daughter. In any case, this is probably the most compelling scene of the series, precisely because of its highly puzzling nature. In an interview in *Them* about his latest feature film *May December* (which also relies heavily on the use of mirrors), Todd Haynes declared:

> "what I was very interested in is the hyper-interpretive mode that the script puts the reader in. You are completely in a state of interrogating your own views, ideas, and moral grounding, and your presumptions about who's a good character and who's a bad character. That keeps shifting as you watch and as the film unfolds." (in Barquin)

I think this quote may very well apply to his adaptation of *Mildred Pierce*. The use of frames within the frame, as a metafilmic device, shows the artificiality of cinema and questions its sincerity. To quote Haynes, the audience is puzzled to the point of reaching a "hyper-interpretive mode." As "the dense imbrication of images creates a conundrum rather than a pathway to the real" (Cook 385), we are brought to question our own expectations regarding female characters on the screen. We come to realize that, as an audience, we are not merely passive. In fact, the series' ambiguous tone and self-reflexivity encourages spectators to actively participate in (re)framing the image of women in film.

To conclude, Todd Haynes's 2011 miniseries *Mildred Pierce* is a rich, fascinating work. The use of mirrors and framing devices, the exploration of dual female characters and of themes such as obsession, exclusion and doubling are all present too in Haynes's 2024 feature film *May December*, released thirteen years after *Mildred Pierce*. This suggests that the HBO miniseries is just as important in Todd Haynes's filmography as any of his feature films, and just as demanding. I chose to focus on the technique of layering the image using frames within the frame to tackle the representation of the female character in the series, but a larger, more comparative analysis of gender and the body in the *Mildred Pierce* story and adaptations (as has been conducted by scholars and critics) also provides abundant food for thought. The novel is indeed a work of subtle complexity, and the fact that it was adapted twice by prominent filmmakers is a testimony to its compelling nature.

Bibliography

Als, Hilton. "This Woman's Work." *The New Yorker* 21 March 2011, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/03/28/this-womans-work

Barquin, Juan. "*May December* Director Todd Haynes on Mirrors, Doubling, and Queerness." *Them* 15 November 2023, www.them.us/story/may-december-todd-haynes-interview

Cain, James. *Mildred Pierce*. Orion Paperbacks, 2011 (1941).

Cook, Pam. "Beyond Adaptation: Mirrors, Memory and Melodrama in Todd Haynes's *Mildred Pierce*." *Screen* 54.3 (1 September 2013): 378–387, https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjt031

Maury, Cristelle. "Re-Representing 'the Great American Institution That Never Gets Mentioned on the Fourth of July'." *Transatlantica* 2 (31 December 2017): https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.9799

Radish, Christina. "Kate Winslet and Director Todd Haynes Interview MILDRED PIERCE." *Collider* 2 February 2011, https://collider.com/kate-winslet-todd-haynes-interview-mildred-pierce/.

White, Rob and Amber Jacobs. "Todd Haynes's *Mildred Pierce*: A Discussion." *Film Quarterly* 23 February 2012, https://filmquarterly.org/2012/02/23/todd-hayness-mildred-pierce-a-discussion/

Olive Kitteridge: Reappropriating the Figure of the Witch

JEANNE BARTHÉLEMY

Episodes: 4
Release date: 2 – 3 November 2014
Creators: Lisa Cholodenko (director), Jane Anderson (screenplay), Frances McDormand (producer)
Source: *Olive Kitteridge* (2008), novel by Elizabeth Strout
Cast: Frances McDormand (Olive Kitteridge), Richard Jenkins (Henry Kitteridge), John Gallagher Jr (Christopher Kitteridge), Zoe Kazan (Denise Thibodeau), Rosemarie DeWitt (Rachel Coulston), Bill Murray (Jack Kennison)
Companies: HBO, Playtone, As Is
Genre: drama
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3012698/

Introduction: An intense woman

Olive Kitteridge is a 2014 HBO miniseries starring Frances McDormand, adapted from Elizabeth Strout's Pulitzer Prize-winning book of the same name. Rather than a novel, *Olive Kitteridge* is a collection of linked short stories in which the eponymous character is sometimes central, sometimes just a link between other characters and narratives. Olive is a difficult but beloved character, and Elizabeth Strout claimed that she chose the discontinuous, non-chronological narrative form because she felt that some readers might need a break from Olive (in Block).

Although some of the short stories' plots are weaved into the main narrative of the miniseries, the story centers mostly on Olive and unifies the different short stories into a single, mainly chronological narrative. This narrative stretches over a time span of 25 years, from Olive's late forties to her seventies. The series opens as an older Olive is about to commit suicide in the woods, and then goes back to her life 25 years before: the narrative explores her life trajectory, and the different events that led her to this point. This, however, was mainly a strategy from scriptwriter Jane Anderson, as the creative team struggled to "make this story sexy and compelling" (Brooks 954). In this interview, Jane Anderson declared that "When you add stakes like that everybody can just friggin' relax, and I can tell the story. I can just unwind it. You need that in television, and you need that in a miniseries" (in Brooks 954).

Indeed, the synopsis of the miniseries is quite sober: Olive is a high school teacher in a fictional coastal town in Maine. As we enter Olive's daily life, we meet several other characters such as her husband Henry, the strikingly happy town pharmacist, their son Christopher, and other people from the town. Olive is a depressed woman, something

which, she says, “comes with being smart” (E1). Other characters also experience mental illness such as depression or bipolar disorder. The representation of gender and the body in the miniseries can be thus analyzed from many different perspectives and focusing on many different topics such as the institution of marriage and family, the gendered issue of care, or the treatment of mental illness.

Analysis: The witch is back

In 2019, Elizabeth Strout published *Olive, Again*, the sequel to her Pulitzer Prize winning book *Olive Kitteridge* (2008). On this occasion, critic John McMurtrie’s review in *The New York Times* headlined “The Return of Olive Kitteridge, the Tart, Crotchety, Beloved Curmudgeon,” pointing out to the main character’s complex, not always likable personality. In Lisa Cholodenko’s HBO adaptation of the 2008 book, this aspect of her character earns Olive quite a few negative responses from other characters, especially from children who are frightened by her sometimes brutal manners. In fact, she is twice called a witch by children (in episode 2 and episode 4).

The figure of the witch is highly significant in feminist activism and scholarship. In her 1994 book *Witchcraze*, historian Anne L. Barstow worked on reinterpreting the European witch hunts as a war on women and pointed out the ways in which the historiography consistently refused to deal with these events from the perspective of gender. In 2018, Mona Chollet published *In Defense of Witches: The Legacy of the Witch Hunts and Why Women Are Still on Trial*, in which she examined the lingering heritage of the witch hunts in contemporary society. As such, studying the figure of the witch in the miniseries is highly relevant when conducting an analysis of gender and the body in *Olive Kitteridge*.

In her work on the New England witch trials, Carol F. Karlsen pointed out that the women on trial for witchcraft were often described by historians as having “a bad character” and a “deviant personality”, a discourse which mirrored the accusers’ point of view (262). Though Olive Kitteridge is not tried for witchcraft, it is obvious that she suffers social disapproval for her “bad character.” This is made most visible in the second episode, when Olive attends her son’s wedding. In this sequence, Olive’s social discomfort is made obvious: “Olive clearly appears as an outsider that cannot play make-believe. Her singular manners disrupt the smooth order of things” (Letort 92). The bride’s family openly judges Olive’s behavior on several occasions, particularly when she reproaches a little girl for picking flowers from her garden. Interestingly, this same little girl is the one who first calls her a witch later in the episode. In a dynamic that is similar to that of the witch trials, Olive’s refusal or inability to fulfill mundane expectations of how an older woman should behave (being nice to everyone and especially to children) causes her to be marginalized and excluded. Thus, she retreats to her son’s room instead of enjoying the festivities.

Beyond the fact that Olive’s behavior doesn’t correspond to mundane expectations, though, it seems that she is also stigmatized for not fulfilling the patriarchal role that is assigned to her in the family, that of the ‘Angel in the house’. This fantasized perfect wife is sweet and mild, cares for the household and is supposed to anticipate the needs of her husband and children submissively. As sociologist Orna Donath put it, they are expected to blur “into the lives of the others” (Donath 76). Though she is in charge of most household duties, Olive’s behavior to her husband is far from submissive, and

her dedication to her son does not weaken her singular personality in any way. The son, Christopher, actually blames her for that in the last episode, even calling her psychologically abusive.

But what is even more interesting is Olive's refusal (or, again, inability) to conform to the role of grandmother. When Olive visits her son and his new wife in New York in episode 4, her daughter-in-law, whom she has just met, insists on calling her "Mom," and introduces her to her son (who is not Olive's grandchild) as "Grandma." She is forcefully reduced to her role in the family and expected to perform it. In a telling scene, Olive is forced to give her ice-cream to the young boy because he is unhappy with his order. The fact that this comes after an altercation in which Olive accidentally struck him makes it feel like a humiliating punishment on the side of the parents. It also shows that just because she is an older woman, it is unthinkable that Olive would not want to be a self-sacrificing grandmother. Mona Chollet wrote that "If you're rebelling at home, amid family—for example, by refusing to organize your entire life around your offspring—you will be called a virago and a bad mother" (47). I think this also applies to the role of grandmother, even more so because of the intersectional stigma that tends to reduce older women to that specific role.

In her 1972 article "The Double Standard of Aging," Susan Sontag explored the intersection of age and gender discriminations, revealing the extremely powerful and limiting stigmas that are associated with women's aging. In her work on witches, Mona Chollet explored the figure of the old woman as one of the three types of women who were singled out and persecuted during the witch hunts and shows the extent to which the hatred of older women shaped our contemporary societies. In her book *Witchcraze*, Anne L. Barstow also examined the targeting of older women as witches in modern Europe and wrote that they were targeted because they "talked back in a time when they were increasingly expected to be submissive" (Barstow 27). Yet the older women's increased assertiveness is not the only reason why they were accused of witchcraft. Citing Leiva, Mona Chollet wrote that

> 'In the West, female old age becomes the preferred figuration of abjection,' writes Antonio Domingues Leiva. Women's demonization in sermons and ministries establishes a 'code of hideousness from which a straight line can be traced directly to the femicide of the sixteenth century.' This "code of hideousness" is still in force. (Chollet 98)

Again, though Olive Kitteridge is not tried for witchcraft, she suffers discrimination for similar reasons. The stigma of her old age becomes obvious to her when she visits her son Christopher in New York:

> Olive realises she is looked upon as an undesirable elderly woman when nobody tells her that she has inadvertently dropped some ice cream on her blouse, leaving a stain that she feels is humiliating. Looking at herself in the mirror makes her see the obnoxious stain which nobody warned her about, making her feel invisible and ignored. She feels the stain is a signifier of the prejudice held against her as an elderly woman. (Letort 93)

This symbolic sequence subtly addresses the common, underlying aversion for older women's bodies in contemporary society. This also accounts for Olive's refusal to take

off her shoes at the airport: she is ashamed of exposing her torn stockings, fearing that she would be perceived as a sloppy old woman.

The stigmas on older women lead to their complete invisibility in the media, which makes Olive Kitteridge a somewhat unusual character in a TV series. Even today, women over 40 are still largely underrepresented in the movie and TV industry (Bernárdez 5). This is what led Frances McDormand to buy the rights to *Olive Kitteridge* and to commit to the project. In fact, McDormand, who had been mostly absent from the press in the decade before her work on the miniseries, started to do press junkets again to advertise *Olive Kitteridge* and to explain the conscious choice of putting such a character in the limelight:

> "One of the reasons that I am doing press again after 10 years' absence is because I feel like I need to represent publicly what I've chosen to represent privately—which is a woman who is proud and more powerful than I was when I was younger. And I think that I carry that pride and power on my face and in my body. And I want to be a role model for not only younger men and women—and not just in my profession." (in Block)

Olive is a full character and an important one: she gives a much-needed representation of a woman who ages gracefully and naturally, maintaining her agency and her singular personality. The aging process is portrayed "with dignity and realism, offering a space for the concerns of older women" (Bernárdez 13).

To conclude, a feminist understanding of the figure of the witch informs our reading of Olive's character and highlights the cultural value of representing such a woman on television. This was indeed a feminist stand from Frances McDormand, as was her choice of director (Lisa Cholodenko) and writer (Jane Anderson). Olive appears to have much in common with the stigmatized figure of the witch, which shows the lingering imprint of the persecution and mass murder of the so-called 'witches' in contemporary Western culture. Centuries later, a woman such as Olive Kitteridge is still called a 'witch' simply because of her age, her appearance and her refusal or inability to adopt the behavior that is socially demanded of women. This may be overlooked as insignificant or anecdotal, but in reality, the term 'witch' is packed with a sinister history, much misogyny and social stigma. Since the 1960's, feminist activism has reappropriated the figure of the witch: the foundation of the feminist group W.I.T.C.H (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell) in 1969 is a good example of that. With Olive Kitteridge, quality television is now reappropriating this figure as well, by featuring a main character who, as the famous feminist slogan goes, seems to be "the granddaughter of the witches [they] couldn't burn."

Bibliography

Barstow, Anne Llewellyn. *Witchcraze*. Harper San Francisco, 1994.

Bernárdez-Rodal, Asunción and Maria Isabel Menéndez Menéndez. "New Feminist Studies in Audiovisual Industries| Ageing and the Creative Spirit of Women in the Audiovisual Market: *The Case of Olive Kitteridge* (2014)." *International Journal of Communication* 15 (2021): 563-580, https://ojs3.ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/14908/3338

Block, Melissa. “Like Olive Kitteridge, Actress Frances McDormand Was Tired of Supporting Roles.” *NPR* 31 October 2014, www.npr.org/transcripts/360183633.

Brooks, Jodi. “*Olive Kitteridge* (Lisa Cholodenko, 2014), Quality Television and Difficult Women: Female Discontent in the Age of Binge-Viewing.” *Feminist Media Studies* 19.7 (3 October 2019): 944–961, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1667061

Chollet, Mona. *In Defense of Witches*. St. Martin’s Press, 2022.

Donath, Orna. *Regretting Motherhood*. North Atlantic Books, 2017.

Karlsen, Carol F. *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1998.

Letort, Delphine. “Age and Gender in the Miniseries Adaptation of Elizabeth Strout’s *Olive Kitteridge*.” *Adaptation* 9. 1 (March 2016): 86-97, https://doi.org/10.1093/adaptation/apv022

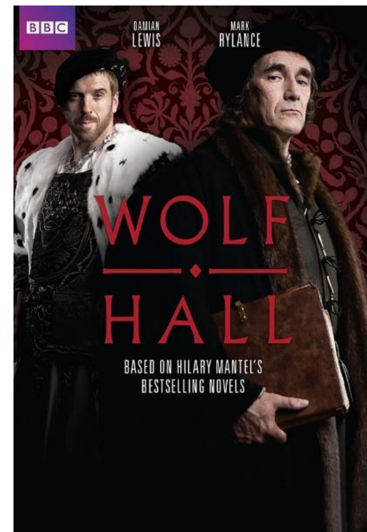
McMurtrie, John. “The Return of Olive Kitteridge, the Tart, Crotchety, Beloved Curmudgeon.” *The New York Times* 15 October 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/10/15/books/review/elizabeth-strout-olive-again.html

Sontag, Susan. “The Double Standard of Aging.” *The Saturday Review*, 1972. 29-38, https://archive.org/details/the-double-standard-of-aging

Wolf Hall: Surviving Henry VIII

IVETTE CONSTANS RENCO

Episodes: 6
Release date: 21 January 2015
Creators: Steven Levenson and Thomas Kail
Source: *Wolf Hall* (2009) and *Bring up the Bodies* (2012), novels by Hillary Mantel
Cast: Mark Rylance (Thomas Cromwell), Damian Lewis (Henry VIII), Claire Foy (Anne Boleyn), Bernard Hill (Duke of Norfolk), Anton Lesser (Thomas More), Mark Gatiss (Stephen Gardiner), Mathieu Amalric (Eustache Chapuys), Joanne Whalley (Katherine of Aragon), Lilit Lesser (Princess Mary), Jonathan Pryce (Cardinal Wolsey), Thomas Brodie-Sangster (Rafe Sadler), Tom Holland (Gregory Cromwell)
Companies: BBC Two, Amazon
Genre: historical drama, fictionalized biography
Nationality: United Kingdom
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8746478/



Introduction: Long live… the King

Wolf Hall (2015, BBC) is a six-episode limited series, created by Peter Kosminsky and Peter Straughan, which adapts for the screen Hilary Mantel's novels *Bring up the Bodies* (2009) and *Wolf Hall* (2012). It is set in the 1520s when England was at a point of decline as Henry VIII had failed to produce a son. The plot follows in the footsteps of Thomas Cromwell, a lawyer of humble beginnings who must navigate his way in the court of Henry VIII as he schemes and frees the king from his marriages to Katherine of Aragon and, later, Anne Boleyn.

Peter Kosminsky is a British director and producer who has worked on miniseries and documentaries which focus mostly on war and politics such as *The Undeclared War* (2022), *The Promise* (2011) and *The Governor Inspector* (2006) for which he won two BAFTAS for Best Writer and Best Single Drama in 2006. He is also known for his version of *Wuthering Heights* (1992). Peter Straughan is a producer, director and screenwriter known for *The Men Who Stare at Goats* (2009) and *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (2011), a miniseries awarded a BAFTA for Best Writing and Best Adapted Screenplay in 2012. Both of them, along with Hilary Mantel, who collaborated in the writing of the adaptation, intended to convey the immediacy that the characters felt in that specific moment, hoping that the audience could understand that "Characters can't read their own stories (…) they are walking in the dark unable to read the next five minutes" (Mantel in BFI). Hence, the focus falls on Cromwell's inability to judge his alliances as he does not know the other characters' history as viewers do. He sees them through their ambitions, struggles, power and ideologies, not their historical implications.

The miniseries is a close adaptation of Mantel's first and second parts of the *Wolf Hall* trilogy as it follows Mantel's unique storytelling, chronology and duplicitous characters, who strive for success and survival in the complex Tudor period. Although partly confusing due to time jumps, historical misrepresentations, and the similarity in some characters' names, the miniseries was acclaimed by all kinds of audiences and welcomed into the Tudor filmography. As Williams says, the miniseries "fell on fertile ground, if by 'fertile' you mean 'obsessed with the Tudors'." The wave of fanatism produced by the Tudors started between the 1950s and 1960s, with productions like *A Man for All Seasons* (1966), about Thomas More. Since then, Henry's libido has continued attracting attention. In the 21st century, *The Tudors* (2008) told the story of the complexities of that period focusing on different characters, with a rather sexy king (played by Jonathan Rhys Meyers). *Wolf Hall* provides a similar storyline narrated from Cromwell's perspective.

Analysis: Surviving Henry VIII

Wolf Hall does not address the issues of gender and body typical of 16th-century England, but the femininities and masculinities and the representation of the body in Mantel's trilogy, which is slightly different from the historical Tudors' habitual depiction. The series actually focuses on the life of Thomas Cromwell as he tries to make his way onto the court simultaneously trying to survive Henry VIII, like everybody else. As the creators intended, the portrayal of gender and body is conveyed through the main character's views, who is characterized by his dimensionality and his 'modern' view of gender. Similarly, from his perspective, Anne Boleyn is portrayed as a victim of patriarchy but also as a monstrous, power-hungry person. Interestingly, the characters' identities are reinforced by their bodies through the costume designs, conceived by designer Joanna Eatwell to show their ambitions and main personality traits.

Hilary Mantel describes Cromwell in a different light from the historical reports. Where history has portrayed him as a villain, Mantel attempts to reimagine him as "the picaresque hero of the novel—tolerant, passionate, intellectually inquisitive, humane" (in Benley). His identity is deeply conditioned by his traumatic childhood and the physical abuse that he suffered from his father. Unlike the older man, Cromwell grows up to be a respectful and loving father, who allows his wife and daughters to express their ideas and desires. In a heartwarming scene, his daughter, Anne (played by Emilia Jones) asks him whether she will have a say in her choice of husband, adding that "I choose Rafe" worrying that "I can't marry him because he's my cousin" (E1). Cromwell reassures her that he is fine with her choice "if he'll wait for you" (E1). Cronwell's treatment of women is rather unique and praised since, as depicted in the series, this was a time when women were not allowed to participate in the political sphere, were silenced and reduced to the household as seen in the household of Thomas More (played by Anton Lesser). In a sharp contrast to Cromwell's family dynamics, More's 'Utopia' as Sumner describes it, "is anything but harmonious" (132). More's family is governed by a patriarchal man who insults and mocks his wife, Alice (played by Monica Dolan). The treatment of women that both male characters present contributes to Cromwell's construction as a sympathetic and heroic character, and to More's depiction as a villain.

Notwithstanding this, it must be noted that despite being presented as a hero, Cromwell remains a duplicitous character whose intentions about or in support of women

are never pure. As noted, he is a "heroic outlier—ahead of his time, proto-feminist, skeptical, modern, unlike the evil, repressive More" (Maltby). Nevertheless, Cromwell's nickname, "serpent" (E3) coined by Henry VIII (played by Damian Lewis), alludes to his strategic nature and his use of women to gain power or protect himself from the king.

More specifically, he helps Anne Boleyn (played by Claire Foy) to earn the favor of the king. In a telling scene, when Cromwell discusses the prospects of Anne becoming queen of England, he is told that "A world where Anne can be queen is a world where Cromwell can be...." (E2); he smiles at the possibility of flourishing in court and thus enables the divorce between Henry and Katherine (played by Joanne Whalley) to help Anne reach her desired political position. Nevertheless, once the king, a more powerful ally, requests his help, Cromwell does not hesitate to betray Anne, manufacturing lies to have her killed. As Kelly comments, his and Boleyn's alliance "plays out dramatically in the story because Cromwell is the figure who helped to pave Anne's way to the throne in the first place, only to send her to her doom." On her side, Mantel justifies Anne's downfall, claiming that "the responsibility for it rests squarely with Henry" (in Mantel), alluding to Cromwell's inability to help Anne since he must follow Henry's orders to survive. However, in the heartbreaking moment in which Anne is only looking for reassurance at her imminent execution ("I have a little neck, it will be a moment," E6, she says), Cromwell leaves the room remorseless. This moment hints that he never cared about her; he only relishes the powerful position that she provided to him as he is still monetizing her miscarriage (the reason why Henry needs urgently a new wife).

The shadow of King Henry VIII hangs over his court and subjects throughout the miniseries attempting to destroy anyone who dares disobeying his mandate. He, unlike other adaptations, is presented as a "serial killer, he is an abuser of his wives, he is a tyrant" (Williams). All of his cruel actions directed at his wives are associated with his performance of masculinity or his lack of it. As a king, Henry must fulfil his role in producing an heir for the crown and therefore prove his identity as a man with the conception of a son. Once he realizes Catherine will not be able to provide him with a descendant and thus remark his masculine identity, he gets rid of her to pursue Anne, whom he considers "Proof of the rightness of my pursuit" (E3). Yet, much to his and Anne's dismay, the story repeats itself as he cannot exhibit his masculinity by producing a son with his second wife either. Henry grows impatient and insecure claiming: "If a king cannot have a son, if he cannot give stability to the realm, then it doesn't matter what else he can do" (E5). As William claims, "Securing an heir – what you might call the ultimate concern of sovereignty – was presented as the overwhelming concern, worth any price." As the miniseries shows, Henry is willing to pay any price in order to produce an heir and exhibit his virility, even if it means killing his wives in the process. The king bestows upon Anne the whole responsibility of creating an heir to prevent the threat that his inability to have a son supposes to his masculinity. He blames her for being "dishonestly led into this marriage" (E5), accusing her of witchcraft and having Cromwell manufacture a lie to have Anne tried and beheaded for adultery. With the first two queens out of the picture, Henry continues searching for a woman who might validate his masculinity, hoping Jane Seymour might fall for his poems and become his new wife.

It is important to mention that in *Wolf Hall* Anne Boleyn is not a saint, but a patriarchal woman who will do everything in her reach to become queen. Her depiction presents a difference from her Victorian portrayal as a jealous queen, as Mackay reflects: "Anne is darker and more brittle than she ever was usually drawn" (3). Mantel

emphasizes her patriarchal personality as a ruthless ambitious woman who will go to any lengths to become queen of England. Her conduct is aggressive and patronizing as she looks down upon those who are content with little. Anne scolds her sister ("I am not a fool" E2), hinting that unlike Mary (played by Charity Westfield), who was Henry's previous lover, she will profit from her relationship with the king. Once she is crowned, her ever-present hunger for power is reinforced as she attempts to guarantee her position by disposing of those who pose a threat to her or her daughter Elizabeth. One of her first victims is Thomas More, executed after she asks Cromwell to "force" (E4) him to sign the bill that allows her to marry Henry. More refused. With More out of the picture, Anne's hatred turn towards Mary (played by Lilit Lesser), Katherine's daughter, whom she continuously disregards as a "bastard" who must not access the throne, as a servant for her daughter and as someone who must be "compromised" in any way that justifies her demise.

Though hated because of her cruelty, Anne elicits the compassion of the viewers when she is sent to the Tower, where she is incarcerated and unfairly executed. Straughan and Kosminsky intended to create sympathy for Anne despite her brutality as the latter argues: "She is pretty horrible, but she must break your heart at the end" (in BFI). The show achieves its purpose since Anne brings the viewers to tears in the shattering episode 6. There Anne is for the first time seen as "a woman desperately trying to keep her grip on an oily rope" (Raeside). In order to try to survive her husband, Anne does everything she can to save herself; she reminds Cromwell that "I promoted you. I am responsible for your rise" (E6), tries to plead with him, and defends herself bravely in a trial in which she is falsely accused of adultery. Yet nothing can be done, for as Raeside mentions, she is "young woman heading for her near and certain doom." It is unknown whether Anne's dread ending served as a punishment or as a cautionary tale for overly ambitious women who destroy other women or simply portrayed her as a victim of Henry's callous court. However, one thing is clear, her ending is overwhelming as the viewer sees how Anne cannot stop looking up at the Tower, helplessly, holding a bit of hope that she will be absolved of a crime she did not commit.

To conclude, *Wolf Hall* is a brilliant miniseries which explores a myriad issues related to body and gender. This retelling of King Henry VIII's matrimonial crisis has been universally acclaimed due to its capacity to represent the complexity of the characters in an even more complex Tudor period. Like many other adaptations about the Tudor dynasty, *Wolf Hall* also sheds light on Anne Boleyn, but this time her depiction departs from her typical Victorian representation (McKay 3). She is not only jealous but an ambitious patriarchal woman who will do everything required to empower herself and her daughter. On the contrary, King Henry VIII follows the pattern of his typical representation as he is portrayed as a tyrant king who destroys anyone who presents a threat to his masculine power. Overall, the miniseries offers an entertaining portrayal of history from Cromwell's perspective, to present him as an unlikely hero, who seems to have a more modern attitude towards women when compared to the men of the time like Thomas More. It must be questioned though whether Cromwell is really the hero Mantel wants viewers to see, or just a strategist who uses women to empower himself in a world where power is crucial to survive Henry VIII.

Bibliography

Benley, Christopher. “Renaissance Men.” *The New York Times* 29 October 2009, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/01/books/review/Benfey-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

Borman, Tracy. *Thomas Cromwell: The Untold Story of Henry VIII’s Most Faithful Servant*. Grove Press. 2016.

British Film Institute. “*Wolf Hall* Q&A with Hilary Mantel and Claire Foy.” YouTube 12 January 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5CiVns3nlfU

Kelly, Laura. “How Historically Accurate Was Anne Boleyn’s Execution in *Wolf Hall*?” *Screen Rant* 12 November 2024, https://screenrant.com/wolf-hall-anne-boleyn-execution-historically-accurate-fact-check/

Mackay, Laura. *Wolf Hall Companion*. Batsford. 2020.

Maltby, Kate. “*Wolf Hall*, BBC Two, Review: ‘Actually Rather Good’.” *The Spectator* 22 January 2015, https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/wolf-hall-bbc-two-review-actually-rather-good/

Mantel, Hilary. “Anne Boleyn: Witch, Bitch, Temptress, Feminist.” *The Guardian* 11 May 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/may/11/hilary-mantel-on-anne-boleyn

Sumner, Rachel. “Historical Vanishing Points in Hilary Mantel’s Novels *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies*.” *New Perspectives in English and American Studies: Volume 1, Literature,* Michael Choinski and Malgorzata Cierpisz (eds.). Jagiellonian UP, 2022.132-145.

Raeside, Julia. “Claire Foy: *Wolf Hall*’s Perfectly Complex Anne Boleyn.” *The Guardian* 29 February 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2015/feb/26/claire-foy-wolf-hall-perfect-anne-boleyn

Williams, Zoe. **“**Henry VIII Is a Serial Killer And Abuser’: Why Is Britain Still So Obsessed With the Tudors?” *The Guardian* 12 November 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/nov/12/henry-viii-is-a-serial-killer-and-abuser-why-is-britain-still-so-obsessed-with-the-tudors

The Night Manager: The Violence of Love

CAO JUN

Episodes: 6
Release date: 21 February – 27 March 2016
Creators: David Farr
Source: *The Night Manager* (1993), novel by John le Carré
Cast: Tom Hiddleston (Jonathan Pine), Hugh Laurie (Richard Roper), Olivia Colman (Angela Burr), Tom Hollander (Corky), Elizabeth Debicki (Jed), Aure Atika (Sophie Alekan), David Harewood (Doctor), Tobias Menzies (Geoffrey Dromgoole)
Companies: BBC, The Ink Factory, Demarest Films
Genre: thriller, spy fiction, action, drama
Nationality: UK
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1399664/

Introduction: Intrigue and tensions

The Night Manager (2016) is a six-part miniseries adapted from John le Carré's eponymous 1993 novel, his first major spy thriller after the Cold War era. Adapted by David Farr, the series stars well-known actors like Tom Hiddleston, Hugh Laurie, Olivia Colman, and Elizabeth Debicki, and it was directed by Danish filmmaker Susanne Bier, who won an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film for her 2010 film *In a Better World*. The production used various international locations, including Morocco, Spain, Switzerland, and Egypt, which made it one of the most visually impressive BBC dramas of its time (Barr).

Set during the Arab Spring in Cairo, the story follows Jonathan Pine (Tom Hiddleston), a former soldier now working as the night manager at a luxury hotel. Pine becomes emotionally involved with Sophie Alekan (Aure Atika), the lover of a major arms smuggler staying at his hotel. Sophie gives Pine a confidential document linked to Richard Roper (Hugh Laurie), the English big boss behind the arms smuggling. Sophie asks Pine to pass it onto British intelligence, but she is soon murdered for revealing this information. Heartbroken, Pine leaves Cairo and later takes a job in Switzerland. Four years later, Roper unexpectedly checks into Pine's hotel, and British intelligence officer Angela Burr (Olivia Colman) contacts Pine, hoping he will help her take down Roper's arms trade operations. Driven by a desire to avenge Sophie and by his moral responsibility, Pine goes undercover to infiltrate Roper's inner circle, where he meets Roper's lover, Jed Marshall (Elizabeth Debicki), while becoming Roper's close friend and ally. While *The Night Manager* centers on Pine's undercover mission, it also explores the complex relationships between characters, especially female characters like Jed and Sophie. Both women face gender-based violence, highlighting themes of power, manipulation, and control in male-dominated environments.

The series received praise for its high production quality and strong performances, particularly from Hiddleston and Laurie, and for how it contrasts the luxurious yet corrupt world of wealth with themes of violence and moral complexity. However, some critics have pointed out that the show doesn't fully capture the political intricacies of the Middle East. Apps argues that it oversimplifies the Egyptian revolution, focusing more on the perspective of Western tourists staying in luxury hotels rather than on the lives of the locals involved in the Cairo protests. This criticism raises questions about how *The Night Manager* balances its espionage plot with real-world issues of power and conflict. The series is most notable in how it discusses gender-based violence through characters like Sophie and Jed, showing how women can preserve themselves in dangerous power relationships, at least as regards Jed.

Analysis: Trapped souls in gender violence

In *The Night Manager*, le Carré is not only telling a traditional spy story. Through the portrayal of the relationships between the men and women in his original novel and in the series we see different forms of gendered violence, both overt and covert. Sophie Alekan and Jed Marshall are two women trapped by a control system dominated by powerful criminal men. They have no freedom and are economically dependent on their lovers. The economic base determines indeed the superstructure. Although they both try to seek freedom, they always fail. So the two of them put their hopes in other people. First Sophie and later Jed see Pine as their savior. Of course, Pine is very charismatic. He's handsome, gentlemanly, mysterious, and patient. Yet, while Pine gives them some hope, his involvement doesn't always bring the security they're looking for. It even creates a false sense of security that claims Sophie's life.

Sophie has very little screentime in *The Night Manager*, but she makes a big impression. As the lover of the largest arms dealer in the region, it's clear that her life is based on inequality and dependence. She lives in a luxury hotel in Cairo, waiting for her lover to visit her occasionally. Sophie lacks financial and physical independence, having basically sold her body. Although the series does not clarify whether Sophie willingly relinquishes her autonomy or is coerced, she becomes increasingly uneasy upon discovering Roper's covert operations in arms dealing and resolves to expose his illegal activities. She places her trust in Pine, the hotel's night manager, hoping he will assist her.

In her attempt to gain his help, she flirts with him, and Pine, as a man, naturally assumes Sophie's actions are indicative of true romantic interest. Eventually, they form a relationship. Pine subsequently shares the information on Roper with British intelligence, but Sophie is suspected of leaking confidential information, leading to her brutal punishment. Her body is left covered in bruises, and she is overwhelmed by fear and pain. Throughout this ordeal, Sophie has no social network or support system and is forced to seek help through transactional means. Although Pine eventually believes he has fallen in love with Sophie, their initial relationship is not purely one of romance. As McNicol notes, "Her life is in danger, she is (depicted as) dark and foreign and ostensibly has no social or support network (is isolated enough to appeal to a hotel manager for help). Meanwhile, Pine is Western university-educated, a spectacle of white male athletic privilege, and has elite connections with British intelligence."

Ultimately, Sophie's defiance results in her tragic death when she is brutally killed by Roper's men. Her death serves as a stark representation of gender-based violence. Sophie is punished for attempting to assert her autonomy in a world dominated by men. Her efforts do not result in any significant change. Instead, they cost her life. Her death seems meaningless, highlighting the deadly consequences women often face when they challenge powerful men, particularly when their worth is tied to their sexual or emotional connections with them. Women like Sophie are trapped within the oppressive systems that control their lives. Any attempt to assert agency is met with fatal outcomes.

Jed, as Roper's classy lover, endures a form of gendered violence that is both subtle and pervasive. While she seems to have a good relationship with Roper, their connection is far more complicated than it initially appears. Although Jed occasionally asserts her independence and argues with her lover, she is reluctant to show any vulnerability or disclose that she is using his money to support a child she had in her youth. Since Roper does not provide emotional comfort she seeks it in Pine. When Pine finds her crying, while Roper is away, and asks why she doesn't confide in Roper about her struggles, Jed responds, "Because that's not what he bought on the Upper East Side" (E4), reference to her own upper-class New York origins and to herself as a product Roper purchased. In one instance, Jed refers to her relationship with Roper as romantic, yet in the next, she reduces it to a transactional arrangement. This contradiction in her self-perception only intensifies her emotional pain. As Elizabeth Debicki notes, Jed's life is a "charade," with her identity entirely built around the role of "Roper's woman" (in BBC One). This identity is a constructed facade. Though Jed outwardly plays the part of the ideal mistress, her true emotions are caught in a web of manipulation, control, and fear.

In *The Night Manager*, Jed demonstrates that emotional manipulations can be as devastating as physical violence. Roper's "love" for her is not a question of mutual respect or even genuine affection but of possessiveness and the need to control. When he learns that Jed has been secretly involved with Pine and has betrayed his military secrets, Roper orders his men to torture her, including waterboarding and physical assault. This shift from emotional manipulation to physical violence is stark and in sharp contrast to the way Roper previously appeared to be tender and affectionate with Jed. As Bland observes, the torture scene is particularly disquieting since Roper's violence is connected with his love and desire for Jed. At one point, when Roper holds Jed tightly, the camera framing makes his face almost melt into her shoulder, creating the unsettling image of a skeleton clinging to her. This is a powerful visual metaphor of the oppressive nature of his "love" and the emotional abuse that Jed suffers. Clearly, Jed desires to break free, but she's under no illusion because resisting Roper means certain death. For Jensen, Sophie and Jed neither lead "hollow, sell-out lives" but are rather "trapped souls" desiring more meaningful lives. Despite the suffering they endure, they show remarkable resilience, continually fighting for agency in a world that tries to silence them.

As Foucault points out, power is realized not only through overt acts of violence but also through subtle, everyday mechanisms: words, surveillance, and emotional manipulation that gradually weaken an individual's ability to resist. This concept is important to the dilemma that Jed and Sophie face. The gendered violence depicted in *The Night Manager* allows the audience to recognize that violence is not only physical but also deeply rooted in emotional and psychological structures. Sophie's death highlights the tragic consequences of resistance in a male-dominated world. She is beaten and forced to drown in the pool. She gets no justice after death. No one wants to

offend the biggest arms dealer in the area. Her life is lost and she receives no immediate reward for her heroic efforts. Roper is very clearly Jed's abuser. He covers his violence with affection and love to give Jed apparent free choices: the choice to stay on holiday or to go with him on his business trip. While she chooses to be on holiday, her every step is being watched by his men, under the pretense of keeping her safe. That isn't a choice but coercion cloaked in sheep's clothing. Roper's control over Jed comes through both psychological manipulation and physical violence. He often acts overly affectionate in public, making it seem like he truly loves her. But when Jed doesn't behave the way he expects, he resorts to violence. This double-edged approach keeps Jed in a constant state of fear and submission, reminding her of her powerless position in the relationship. It's a vicious cycle she can't escape, always trapped between love and control.

Overall, *The Night Manager* reveals the pain caused by gender-based violence. While the relationship between Jade and Pine grows, it doesn't mean she has truly gained independence. In fact, at the end of the series, Jed's independence remains unclear. Pine's love for her cannot simply be classified as genuine affection. It is more of an intertwining of emotion and his covert spy mission. As Martín puts it, "Le Carré celebrates as a romantic choice an ending which is simply indefensible on ethical grounds and that only helps the patriarchal villain to go on enjoying his criminal life" (139), for Roper walks free in exchange for Jed's life, which thus falls into Pine's hands. Through this seemingly perfect conclusion, the series actually exposes a deeper issue: women are often trapped in a male-dominated world, and no matter how they struggle, they ultimately fail to achieve true independence. The so-called "redemption" is, in some ways, an invisible form of control.

Bibliography

Apps, Peter. "Commentary: *Night Manager*'s Horrible Credibility on the Modern Mideast." *Reuters* 13 May 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/sustainability/commentary-night-managers-horrible-credibility-on-the-modern-mideast-idUSKCN0Y409V/

Barr, Stuart. "*The Night Manager* Review." *Dead Good* 9 February 2022, https://www.deadgoodbooks.co.uk/seasons/the-night-manager-review/

BBC. "Series 1 – 'I Have a Theory about Jed and Jonathan'– *The Night Manager*'s Elizabeth Debicki Answers Your Questions." BBC One 24 March 2016, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/2B0WRW7dRM0DmSCZQN8qjg6/i-have-a-theory-about-jed-and-jonathan-the-night-manager-s-elizabeth-debicki-answers-your-questions

Bland, Archie. "*The Night Manager* Recap: Episode Five – 'Nothing Quite As Pretty As Napalm At Night'." *The Guardian* 20 March 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/mar/20/the-night-manager-recap-episode-five-nothing-quite-as-pretty-as-napalm-at-night

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. Pantheon Books, 1975.

Jensen, Jeff. *"The Night Manager*." *EW Review* 2016, https://ew.com/article/2016/04/14/the-night-manager-review/

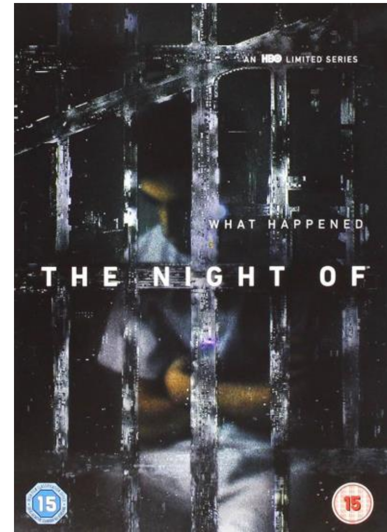
Martín, Sara. *Masculinity And Patriarchal Villainy in the British Novel : From Hitler To Voldemort*. Routledge, 2020.

McNicol, E. J. B. “Gendered Violence as Revelation in John le Carré’s *The Night Manager*.” *M/C Journal* 23.4 (2020): https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.1665

The Night Of: The Corruption of Innocent Men

NICOLE MARCHESE

Episodes: 8
Release date: 10 July – 28 August 2016
Creators: Steven Zaillian, Richard Price
Source: *Criminal Justice* (2008), BBC series by Peter Moffat
Cast: Riz Ahmed (Nasir 'Naz' Khan), John Turturro (John Stone), Bill Camp (Dennis Box), Michael Kenneth Williams (Freddy Knight), Amara Karan (Chandra), Poorna Jagannathan (Safar Khan), Paul Sparks (Don Taylor), Jeannie Berlin (Helen Weiss), Sofia Black-D'Elia (Andrea Cornish), Payman Maadi (Salim Khan), Glenne Headly (Alison Crowe)
Companies: Filmrights, BBC Worldwide Productions, HBO
Genre: crime, drama
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2401256/



Introduction: Good boy gone wild

The Night Of (2016, HBO) is an eight-episode miniseries, created by Steven Zaillian and Richard Price, which narrates the story of a young Pakistani-American man (played by British actor Riz Ahmed) who is accused of murdering the woman he had met the night before. Steven Zaillian is an American screenwriter, filmmaker, director and producer who earned an Academy award, a Golden Globe Award, and a BAFTA award for his work in Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993). He has also earned Oscar nominations for other films including *Gangs of New York* and *The Irishman*, both directed by Martin Scorsese. Richard Price is an American actor and novelist known for the books *The Wanderers, Clockers,* and *Lush Life.* He has also worked as a writer and producer on various films and series, apart from *The Night Of*, such as *NYC 22* and *The Wire*.

Steven Zaillian has commented that it was difficult to find someone who could really embody the role of Naz. However, once he found Riz Ahmed he knew it was the perfect match: "The role of Naz wasn't easy to cast, to understate it. It's a very demanding and nuanced part. I looked for a long time before finding Riz" (in Warner Media Entertainment). Riz Ahmed was not a well-known actor outside the UK, where he was quite well known, but once found he encompassed the character perfectly. In casting Riz, Zaillian opened up a whole other can of worms which added even more depth to the series by encapsulating the role of racism not only in the outside world but also within the criminal justice system. Zaillian was able to expose many true flaws within the justice

system through his version of the series, based on a previous BBC series with a white protagonist (played by Ben Wishaw): “What I was trying to do was make a fictional film but do it in a very realistic way; and not to have the usual kind of things in it that you think you need, like heroes and villains” (in Birnbaum). Zaillian could take this story and produce it in a way that reveals flaws within society and the criminal justice system, but also allows the audience to examine these flaws and be exposed to a reality that they may not have been aware of.

The series begins with the main character Naz stealing his dad’s cab to attend a party. He ends up spending the night drinking, doing drugs and having sex with a woman, Andrea (played by Sofia Black-D’Elia) who climbed into the cab believing it was operative. The next thing he knows, Naz wakes up after likely passing out from the drugs, and finds Andrea dead. He panics, runs out of the house, making the mistake of grabbing a knife that they had been playing a game with previously, and a vial of drugs. In his panicked state, Naz takes an illegal turn and gets pulled over by the police, who then take him to the precinct where they find the knife in his jacket. He is immediately arrested and accused of the murder of Andrea. This leads to a myriad issues regarding gender and the body including the questioning of Naz’s identity and portrayals of extremely toxic masculinity.

Finding himself in the right place at the right time, lawyer John Stone (played by John Turturro) decides to take on Naz’s case and defend him. John does all he can to prove Naz’s innocence, whether he believes him or not. On the opposing side, detective Dennis Box (played by Bill Camp) fights to piece together the story of how and why Andrea was murdered, with Naz as his number one suspect. Throughout the duration of this legal battle, Naz is battling for his life in prison. He is forced to change his whole attitude and appearance as a means of survival. The miniseries shows us Naz’s transformation by slowly altering the audience’s initial perception of him as a ‘good boy’ to show him as a ‘tough prisoner bad boy’. Initially, he is portrayed as an open, innocent young man whereas by the end he is completely transformed into a cold, aloof, different person.

This miniseries raises, then, key issues within the USA criminal justice system in relation to gender and the body as well as the portrayal of the detrimental effects of toxic masculinity, hypermasculinity and male power hierarchies. It also shows us how death affects our agency and our worth and how women are often subjected to victim-blaming. Finally, it reveals how our body images affect us and others physically and mentally.

Analysis: It’s a (tough) man’s world

The Night Of deals with body and gender issues in many ways, but mainly regarding toxic masculinity, body image, and victim blaming. Throughout the series we are shown representations of toxic masculinity through a plethora of characters principally among the prisoners, cops and lawyers. Men throughout the series assert their dominance through imposing violence, and for the most part, this turns out to be a successful mechanism for them.

Most notably, we see men within the prison exert their dominance upon each other and create a system of hierarchical power through both mental and physical abuse. The prison system endorses a very hypermasculine nature. Hypermasculinity can almost be seen as a prerequisite for prison because, upon entry, it is deemed necessary to

declare and maintain power through violence, aggression, and the minimization of others based on their 'lack' of masculinity. On the surface, we can clearly see that the men within the prison fight amongst each other to obtain certain power roles. The stronger and tougher they are, the more likely they are to survive. It is often emphasized in the series that if a man lacks these qualities, he will be killed. If we observe this more introspectively, we can see how this entirely changes a person. Of course, some of the prisoners come in tough, but not Naz. He is as innocent as could be and even described as doe-eyed in the very first episode. However, Naz cannot escape the tainted label that his body and his appearance are given by society and the prison system.

Simply due to the way he looks, as a Pakistani-American man, Naz is assumed to be guilty by society (racial slurs are poured on him nonchalantly in the first episode) and by the criminal justice system (with its immediate assumption of guilt). Similarly, just due to his physical appearance, Naz is labeled as weak in the prison system due to his innocent look and weak physique. These traumas (experiencing racism in the criminal justice system and enduring violence due to his appearance and lack of power) trigger a complete transformation in Naz's attitude, body, and ultimately, who he is as a person.

Not only do these prejudices exhibit issues that come with body image perceptions and societal expectations but also blatant racism within society and the criminal justice system. In the British version, as noted, the main character is Caucasian. But Zaillian revealed that he chose to change this element in order to "open up rich avenues of storytelling about prejudice in a post 9/11 world" (in Birnbaum). Not only did he achieve this, but he also showed us how our bodies define us regardless of race. The issue of body image is portrayed through Jack Stone as he struggles with his own insecurity, vulnerability, and desperation amidst his battle with severe eczema. The frustration and embarrassment he experiences on a daily basis are depicted as well as the constant judgment of others (people see his eczema or see him scratching and move away from him or give him looks). This shows how people judge us by our physicality and often, how our physical appearance determines our value. Jack may be normatively white but he is misjudged because of his skin condition; people do not see him as normal but rather someone to stay away from. This also exemplifies how daunting going into society can be for someone who experiences a health issue that is not considered the "norm", that is, not conforming to the societal expectations of how we should look and act.

Naz experiences this same type of judgment revolving around the "norms," but those within the prison system. Naz is obviously not someone that would fit into the prison system, much less in one of the toughest and deadliest prisons in the world, Riker's Island. Once in the system, Naz is forever changed. It is often reiterated throughout the series a prison like Riker's will turn innocent men into criminals. Under the extreme pressures of the prison and the constant threats he receives, Naz is forced to change, but seeing that he cannot do it himself, he accepts the help of the prison "boss," Freddy. Naz starts eating more, working out, and presenting himself as much more aloof and wary than before. In doing this, he gains respect and power. In the prison system, power is granted to those who put themselves towards the top of the patriarchal hierarchy by threatening, beating, and killing the "weak" or the "disrespectful." But power always comes at a price. After accepting protection from Freddy, Naz is expected to repay him in ways he could have never imagined.

In relation to these representations of toxic masculinity, we see some hatred for women and a need for men to control them. There seems to be a common theme among violent men in the series: misogyny. Mr. Day (played by Esau Pritchett) makes a chilling comment about how he sees women when speaking about Andrea: “It’s like she’s the cat and you’re the yarn. Women like that are out to destroy you. Sometimes you got no choice but to strike them first” (E6). Firstly, this reveals his belief that Andrea deserved what happened to her, further enforcing victim-blaming ideologies and secondly, it exemplifies his irrational fear of confident, powerful women. It seems that these women threaten his power and overall sense of control and this results in Mr. Day feeling a need to defend his sense of masculinity through violence and/or murder. Men who comprise toxic masculinity often have this need for control as well as a disdain for women who may threaten that control. At the end of the series, the (likely) killer is exposed as another one of these characters that seems to need control over women. Ray Halle (played by Paulo Costanzo) probably killed Andrea because she didn’t give him what he wanted, which was money to finance his gambling problem. Since he wasn’t able to control her and get what he wanted, he killed her.

Along with victim-blaming, the series exemplifies the loss of agency and humanism that we experience when women die as well as assigning value to women based on appearance or attitude. Andrea loses agency over her body once she dies and is treated as an object rather than a human being. She is analyzed and criticized for her history, showing how strong victim blaming is in society and the criminal justice system. Andrea is consistently blamed and misjudged for her history of drug abuse and her fairly “wild” life. Many men throughout the series seem to believe that “she had it coming” because of her lifestyle rather than accepting that she was a victim who had suffered a horrible offense regardless of what she had done and what her life was like. Her body becomes something to observe and judge in place of the human victim she was. The police officers and lawyers constantly dehumanize her by treating her body as simply evidence as well as making comments such as those of detective Box who comments that “She was a good looking kid.” She is still being judged and objectified in the midst of examination of her murder scene. The suggestion is that her loss is somehow more impactful and more heartbreaking because she was attractive.

In conclusion, the miniseries *The Night Of* exemplifies many intersectional issues revolving around gender, the body, and race. It is an intriguing miniseries as it exemplifies these issues from a different perspective and takes places in New York City, one of the most hustling and bustling of cities, but also one that experiences many instances of racism and violence. Naz’s character transformation shows the effects of racism and the criminal justice system on the body in regard to gender. The patriarchal male hierarchy in prisons is something that deserves to be examined and rectified as it breeds criminality and toxic masculinity. Zaillian and Price show us the harsh realities and corruption of the US criminal justice system but also the intersectional issues that arise within it. Although the murderer is never exposed, the beauty of the series is how it had the power to constantly change the audience’s perspective by introducing new information little by little. As each character throughout the series is shown to have a different inkling about who did it, this makes the audience question “Who *really* is the killer?” all the way to the end. As Tim Molloy writes in *The Wrap*, “Whether or not Price answers the murder question, he joins a long line of writers who’ve used a killing as a plot device to investigate

issues perhaps even more important than a single murder—issues like whether our criminal justice system is inherently corrupt." And whether it corrupts, above all, men.

Bibliography

Baila, Morgan. "Does *The Night Of* Have a Woman Problem?." *Refinery* 29 August 2016, https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2016/08/118611/does-the-night-of-have-a-woman-problem-hbo-show

Birnbaum, Debra. "Steve Zaillian Brings Film-Style Grittiness to HBO Series *The Night Of.*" *Variety* July 2016, https://variety.com/2016/tv/features/hbo-night-of-director-steve-zallian-1201812916/

D'Addario, Daniel. "Review: *The Night Of* Overcomes Bad-Girl Clichés to Tell a Powerful Story." *Time* July 2016, https://time.com/4396640/the-night-of-hbo-review/

Miller, Matt. "*The Night Of* Had a Brutal Lesson." *Esquire* August 2016, https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/tv/news/a48114/the-night-of-finale-review/

Molloy, Tim. "*The Night Of*: Duane Reade Is a Big Tip-Off the Case Will Never Be Solved." *The Wrap* August 2016, /https://www.thewrap.com/night-of-duane-reade-cast-actor-suspect-clue-case-will-never-be-solved/

WarnerMedia Entertainment. "Steven Zaillian Talks About The Eight-Part HBO Limited Series *The Night Of,* Debuting July 10*.*" *Medium* July 2016, https://medium.com/@warnermediaent/the-night-of-steve-zaillian-q-a-4b64d51864a5

War & Peace: Sexing Up Tolstoy

IVETTE CONSTANS RENCO

Episodes: 6
Release date: 18 January 2016
Creators: Tom Harper and Andrew Davies
Source: *War and Peace* (1869), novel by Lev Tolstoy
Cast: Paul Dano (Pierre Bezukhov), Lily James (Natasha Rostova), James Norton (Andrei Bolkonsky), Gillian Anderson (Anna Pavlovna), Jim Broadbent (Prince Nikolai Bolkonsky), Aneurin Barnard (Boris Brubetskoy), Jessie Buckley (Marya Bolkonskaya), Jack Lowden (Nikolai Rostov), Aisling Loftus (Sonya Rostova), Adrian Edmondson (Count Ilya Rostov), Greta Scacchi (Countess Natalya Rostova)
Companies: BBC One, Amazon
Genre: period drama, romance, war
Nationality: UK
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3910804/

Introduction: Adapting a classic

War & Peace (2016, BBC One) is a six-episode miniseries, created by Tom Harper and Andrew Davies. It narrates the story of three Russian families, depicting their dynamics, love stories and the Napoleonic wars from 1805 to 1812. The plot focuses on the three main characters, Pierre, Natasha and Andrei, as they seek to find meaning in their lives. Pierre, the illegitimate son of the richest man in Russia, wants to change the world. The lively Natasha is searching for true love while Andrei seeks a higher purpose beyond the superficiality of society. The miniseries is based on Leo Tolstoy's novel (1865-69), one of Russia's greatest novels, universally acclaimed due to its realism and insightful psychological analysis.

Tom Harper is a British director who has produced films such as *Cubs* (2007) and *Wild Roses* (2018) for which he won a BAFTA for Best Feature Film in 2019. Andrew Davies has been highly acclaimed for his TV adaptations of classical texts such as *Bleak House* (2005), *Sanditon* (2019) and his masterpiece, *Pride and Prejudice* (1995), for which he was awarded a Writer's Guild of Britain's Best Dramatized Serial in 1996. Both creators intended to be faithful to Tolstoy's novel to a certain extent as Tom Harper claims: "What we went out to do was not to create a museum piece where everything was exactly like in the book, but to take the book as our guide and try to tell this story as truthfully as we could for a modern audience" (in Van Roon). Some elements were added as Davies cheekily claims that "I haven't felt any need to change *War & Peace*. Occasionally I have written one or two things that Tolstoy forgot to write!" (in Furness). Davies refers to the addition of non-explicit sexual scenes to the series, an aspect which was implicitly referenced in Tolstoy's work.

‘Sexing-up’ Tolstoy proved to be controversial. Not all members of the audience were delighted with the inclusion of sexual references, as Ben Travis reports. Some viewers thought Davies took it too far by implying a sexual incestuous relationship between siblings Hélène and Anatole Kuragin, claiming that their affair puts a distance between the adaptation and the novel, where incest is not present. However, others, especially the Russian audience believed that the sexed-up production was more of a promise rather than a reality claiming it was indicative ultimately of “English primness” (Elgot & Luhn).

Although reviewers, like Hughes, advise reading the novel first to get a complete view of Tolstoy’s art, it is unnecessary to read *War and Peace* to understand the miniseries. Tolstoy’s novel has been already adapted many times both for cinema and TV, making the plot well-known to viewers (it was first brought to the cinema screen in 1915 by Vladimir Gardiner). King Vidor’s popular 1956 version, starring Audrey Hepburn, Henry Fonda and Mel Ferrer, received mixed reviews for having truncated Tolstoy’s long novel as any film must do. Although they have more room in the miniseries, similarly to previous adaptations Davies and Harper reduce the novel to a love triangle by focusing mostly on Andrei, Pierre and Natasha. It is crucial to remind the viewer that necessarily the miniseries lacks the historical, political and philosophical commentary added in Tolstoy’s novel although, as Hughes stresses, *War and Peace* “is not just a love story, however much Davies tries to spin that.”

Analysis: Notes on men, women and sex

War & Peace navigates issues of body and gender in many relevant ways. As noticed, masculinity, femininity and sex are central in the adaptation. On the one hand, through Tolstoy’s novel, Davies and Harper introduce the dichotomy of masculinity presented by the less masculine Pierre (played by Paul Dano) and the more masculine Andrei (played by James Norton). Additionally, the woman question, much present in *War and Peace* also appears in the series, which portrays the ideal women, their place in society and the consequences of not subordinating oneself to society’s laws. Sex and seduction play a key role in the miniseries exemplifying what is amoral and moral and justifying punishment. However, seduction loses its original meaning as seen in Natasha (played by Lily James) and Anatole’s affair, which from a modern perspective should be read as a non-consensual relationship, rather than a reciprocal one as it appears to be in the novel.

When depicting men, Harper and Davies opted to follow the descriptions by Tolstoy, presenting two masculinities as a binary resembling the title of the adaptation. Andrei is presented as the epitome of traditional masculinity, inherited from his patriarchal father Prince Nikolai (played by Jim Broadbent). Andrei has absorbed from him the beliefs that love, affection, and peace are ideas for women. Due to this, Andrei becomes disillusioned with his wife Lissa (played by Kate Philips) and the life he leads as a married man in Moscow. For this reason, he cannot wait to enroll in the war as he hopes it will provide the masculine excitement he seeks. In a telling scene, Andrei tells Pierre that he “can’t bear this life anymore. Drawing rooms, gossip, balls, vanity, night after night,” advising “Never marry, Pierre, don’t make my mistake” (E1); he does not identify with the safety typical of women that the Russian upper class represents. Andrei’s role presents the ideal masculinity of the period as he reflects the image not only of the perfect

warrior but also the active and strong traits of a strategist and a rational thinker. In contrast, Pierre moves towards a masculinity which rejects the traditional great man. Unlike Andrei, he is influenced by his spiritual inclination towards Masonic mysticism and pacifism, which is frowned upon by other men like Andrei's father. When debating about war, Pierre defends: "No, sir! We must believe the man is capable of evolving" (E3), to which Prince Nikolai replies "You're talking old women's nonsense, sir" (E3). His character is often compared to that of a woman due to his caring and gentle nature; indeed, Pierre lives and cares for the others because "I used to live for myself and I ruined my life" (E4).

Although women in *War and Peace* are often supposed to be "stronger than the men" (Trandafoiu & Poole 104), they are not depicted as such in the series or the novel. Most of the female-related plots are driven by women's subordination and by the traditional role of providing love and care for men. Natasha (played by Lily James) is a character whose personality is conditioned by her romantic interests. Seldom does she have an identity of her own, as all of her discourses relate to the man she is in love with at that moment. During a telling scene, Natasha has "been awake for hours, thinking about the tsar ball" (E4). However, she does not offer insights about her debut in society or her social status as a poor aristocrat; instead, her focus is on Andrei and whether he will be there.

Similarly, Marya (played by Jessie Buckley) also experiences her life through his father and brother, taking care of them. Their patriarchal influence is emphasized when she conveys her father's patriarchal thoughts. She never questions Natasha's intentions towards her brother until her father does. As Marya is highly influenced because of the fact that she fears her father, she adopts the same view he has in regards to Natasha and her marriage to Andrei, complaining to Pierre "Will you tell me truly, Count, what's she like, this Natasha Rostova? It's only Andrei is risking so much in opposing our father" (E3). Interestingly enough, Sonya (played by Aisling Loftus) is the only woman in the series who poses questions regarding the marriage institution and its repercussions on women's lives, offering a realist perception of it. In episode 3, Sonya worryingly reports that "Mama says that girls are like mayflies. That they have their day in the sun, and then it's over." Her ending up as a spinster suggests she is punished by her thoughts, as women must remain subordinate and adhere to the marriage laws (Bodistean 11).

As noted, through the sexual depiction of characters, it is possible to emphasize their morality and amorality (Bodistean 15). As Andrew Davies claims, the incestuous sexual affair between Anatole and Hélène is "crucial to our understanding of them that for me, at least, it needs to be on screen" (in *Radio Times*). Sex is a tool that emphasizes the vapidness, impurity and evilness of the Kuragin siblings. In the case of Hélène, her depiction as a femme fatale is continuous as she repeatedly participates in sexual affairs, luring men into her bed like Boris, Dolohov, and her own brother. As for Anatole, he is also presented as manipulative, for he seduces Natasha, causing her fall from society by lying to her and hiding the fact that he has a family in Poland. Contrary to other characters like Natasha and Pierre, who dismiss carnal desire once they enter a spiritual journey, Hélène, is condemned because she subverts her maternal role and destroys the sanctity of her family; for that she is punished, following her brother's mortal fate.

A particular sex scene is quite problematic. As narrated in Tolstoy's novel, both Natasha and Anatole enter a love affair willingly reciprocating their desire for each another. However, the miniseries misrepresents this desire. In the series, Natasha runs

away from Anatole constantly, trying to avoid him as much as possible. She denies him several dances, and she uses diverse pretexts to avoid him such as "My father is looking for me" (E4). In a crucial scene, Anatole follows Natasha predatorily into a closet as she is trying to leave the party and escape him. Finally, Anatole gets to kiss and touch Natasha as she screams and repeats constantly "No!" From the viewer's perspective, rather than as a passionate secretive momentum, the scene looks like a sexual assault as Groskop complains, calling Anatole's behavior "creepy." The next scene comes as quite a shock as Natasha, who conveys disgust and anxiety in her encounter with Anatole, is not only ecstatic, but also willing to run away with him. The audience might protest that their affair is not credible enough as Clive James does, or conclude that she has been manipulated into this scheme, thus emphasizing the malice of the Kuragin siblings.

The story of Natasha, Pierre and Andrei has stood the test of time, remaining relevant and appealing to contemporary audiences who might find themselves empathizing with some of the characters' causes. Masculinity is presented in a dichotomous manner to show its traditional version through Andrei and an unorthodox masculinity closer to femininity embodied by Pierre. On the other hand, femininity is shown through the traditional women of the series, who although considered strong, are really weak. Women, like Natasha and princess Marya, are portrayed as subordinate, passive and gentle beings whose narrative arcs are directed by men. It is important to mention that Sonya questions the marriage institution and its repercussions on women, but for that, she is punished ending her story as a spinster. Moreover, the miniseries puts sexuality into perspective, not only denoting the morality and amorality of the characters but also showing the change that consent has undergone. The miniseries starts with promise, offering a comprised version of Tolstoy's novel, but ultimately results in, sadly another historical drama that erases the main plot of the written masterpiece for a love plot, undermining and mistreating of women.

Bibliography

Bodistean, Florica. "Representations of Femininity in Tolstoy's Novel *War and Peace*." *Analele Universităţii Ovidius din Constanţa. Seria Filologie* 23.2 (2012): 11-19.

Clives, James. "Clive James: How Did the BBC's *War and Peace* Measure up?" *The Guardian* 13 February 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/feb/13/clive-james-bbc-war-and-peace-measure-up

Davies, Andrew. "How *War and Peace* Was Sexed up for 2016." *Radio Times* 3 January 2016, https://www.radiotimes.com/tv/drama/how-war-and-peace-was-sexed-up-for-2016/

Elgot, Jessica and Alec Luhn. "Russia's Veredict on BBC's *War and Peace*: 'A Classic with Cleavage'." *The Guardian* 26 January 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/jan/26/russia-verdict-on-bbc-war-and-peace-reviews

Furness, Hannah. "Andrew Davies: I Sexed up *War and Peace* with the Bits Tolstoy 'Forgot'." *The Telegraph* 29 December 2015, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/bbc/12067696/Andrew-Davies-I-sexed-up-War-and-Peace-with-the-bits-Tolstoy-forgot.html

Groskop, Viv. "*War and Peace* Recap Episode Four: Doom with a View." *The Guardian* 24 January 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-

radio/tvandradioblog/2016/jan/24/war-and-peace-recap-episode-four-doom-with-a-view

Hughes, Sarah. "Why *War and Peace* Stands the Test of Time." *The Guardian* 3 January 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/jan/03/why-war-and-peace-stands-the-test-of-time

Trandafoiu, Ruxandra and Carol Poole. "The Past and 'The Way We Live Now': Andrew Davies' Screen Adaptations of *Pride & Prejudice* and *War & Peace*." *The Midwest Quarterly* 60.1 (2018): 87-107.

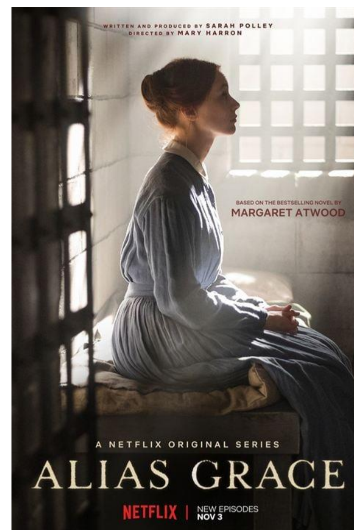
Travis, Ben. "*War and Peace*: Opinions Split over Incest Scene in 'Sexed-up' BBC Adaptation." *The Standard* 4 January 2016, https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/tvfilm/war-and-peace-opinions-split-over-incest-scene-in-sexedup-bbc-adaptation-a3147541.html

Van Roon, David. "*War and Peace* Director Tom Harper: 'I Felt Like an Army General Myself, but with Less Severe Consequences'." *Delfi* 25 January 2016, https://www.delfi.lt/en/culture/war-and-peace-director-tom-harper-i-felt-like-an-army-general-myself-but-with-less-severe-consequences-70212940

Alias Grace: Breaking the Spell of Silence

Martina Busquets Costa

Episodes: 6
Release date: 25 September 2017
Creator: Sarah Polley
Source: *Alias Grace* (1996), novel by Margaret Atwood
Cast: Sarah Gadon (Grace Marks), Edward Holcroft (Dr. Simon Jordan), Rebecca Liddiard (Mary Whitney), Zachary Levi (Jeremiah), Kerr Logan (James McDermott), David Cronenberg (Reverend Verrenger), Anna Paquin (Nancy Montgomery), Paul Gross (Thomas Kinnear)
Companies: Halfire Entertainment, CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation), Netflix, Tangled Productions
Genre: period drama, psychological thriller
Nationality: Canada
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1034007/



Introduction: The story of an alleged murderess

Alias Grace (2017) is a six-episode series created by Sarah Polley and directed by Mary Harron. The series narrates the story of Grace Marks, an alleged murderess convicted of killing her employer and his housekeeper. The series is inspired by the novel of the same name published by Margaret Atwood in 1996. Sarah Polley is a Canadian actress, writer, and director, known for her film *Away from Her*. She is the creative force behind the six episodes that make up *Alias Grace*, and, together with Mary Harron, the director, she has achieved an insightful perspective that brings out the darkest demons of its protagonist. Polley and Harron also collaborated with Margaret Atwood, who served as a supervising producer. The series premiered in 2017, produced by Halfire Entertainment and CBC.

For the main female roles, John Buchan and Jason Knight, the casting directors, selected three actresses with backgrounds in both film and TV. Sarah Gadon took on the role of Grace Marks, while Rebecca Liddiard played Mary Whitney, and Anna Paquin portrayed Nancy Montgomery. Sarah Gadon gained recognition for her role in *Enemy* (2013). Rebecca Liddiard is well-regarded for her work in the Canadian series *Slasher* (2016), where she starred in the second season titled *Slasher: Guilty Party*. Finally, Anna Paquin gained early fame for her Oscar-winning performance as the child Flora McGrath in *The Piano* (1993), and she is also known for her role as Sookie Stackhouse in the hit HBO series *True Blood* (2008-2014).

While it is not essential to know the real story of Grace or the novel to follow the series, it can be interesting to know the background story that inspired the creators. In the 1960s, Margaret Atwood came across a book titled *Life in the Clearings Versus the Bush*, a 19th century narrative written by Susanna Moodie, an English immigrant to Canada. One chapter of the book focuses on the Provincial Lunatic Asylum in Toronto, detailing Moodie's visit to the ward to meet the murderess Grace Marks. She was a

Canadian maid who was convicted of killing, as previously stated, her master, Thomas Kinnear, and his housekeeper, Nancy Montgomery (see Mazzola). Beyond the real story, the series focuses on issues of gender and, especially, female agency in the 19th century, offering a rich representation of the protagonist's character and intentions especially towards the psychologist Dr. Jordan.

Analysis: Creating scandal

I would like to highlight this fragment of the poem "The Courtship of Miles Standish" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: "For it is the fate of a woman / Long to be patient and silent, to wait like a ghost that is speechless, / Till some questioning voice dissolves the spell of its silence" (1858). Each episode of the series starts with a different poem, but I believe this one to be the most revealing. *Alias Grace* is centered around voice and words, around narration, and its focus points to the importance of voice as a tool of self-liberation. Grace Marks, the protagonist, becomes that voice, and her claim is so strong that it is heard even in a period when women had little opportunity to express themselves. At the same time, I believe that her narration could be equated to a sensation novel, for its effects on the reader (or, in this case, listeners) are very similar.

Alias Grace is set in Victorian-era Canada, with the main events occurring from the early 1840s to the late 1850s. Although life under the reign of Queen Victoria was primarily dominated by men, sensation novels, a type of narrative mostly written by women, became very popular. These novels captivated their readers by playing on their fears and anxieties about the darker, hidden aspects of Victorian society, and they were frequently set in the context of respectable homes and families. They were highly appealing to both sexes, although their reactions to reading them seemed to differ: the male audience thought that these types of novels challenged the widely accepted image of the 'Angel in the house,' and, as Helfield argues, "contained events and expressed emotions which no proper lady could or should know anything about" (162). On the contrary, women seemed to enjoy them because they "enabled them to express a wide range of suppressed emotions and to satisfy fantasies of protest and escape" (Zahara 36). At the same time, real crimes were also highly appealing to Victorian society, especially if a woman was the perpetrator, because, as Öztequin explains, "criminality was generally viewed as a male activity, not a female one" (54). Therefore, Grace Marks's subversion of the traditional role had the same effect as a Victorian sensation novel.

Grace's story is a combination of both a crime and a sensation novel, and its impact is equally remarkable. Every episode starts with Grace narrating her story to her doctor, Dr. Jordan, and in doing so, she becomes her own biographer. Grace, as Sarah Polley states, is "an unreliable narrator, and she's sort of toying with the audience as well as she's toying with everybody else" (in Turchiano). Even Grace herself admits she is unreliable, since she changes her story to please the doctor: "I may have changed some of the details of my stories to suit what I thought you wanted to hear" (E6). Nevertheless, the most relevant aspect is the quilt she is sewing along the series. Quilting, on the one hand, reinforces the idea that her narration is a story and that she is its constructor: "the patch-work quilt comes to represent the determining paradox of the novel: that of making present meaning from traces of the past" (Murray 66). On the other hand, as Murray further argues, quilting becomes a powerful medium of expression. She states that "the representation of handcrafting of this sort is relatively frequent in Atwood's fiction, and in

several cases, it becomes associated with ways of conceptualizing history from a female point of view" (67).

The content of Grace's story becomes, then, very significant. She does not only speak about herself but also about two other characters: Mary Whitney and Nancy Montgomery. Her narration purposely focuses on three victims, three women: Grace's father was an abuser and an alcoholic ("My father spent most of the voyage passed out from drink" E1). He spoke to her in extremely derogatory terms ("You stupid, ugly whore!" E1) and tried to sexually abuse her. At the same time, after being accused of the murders, Grace had to endure being at the center of every conversation, being criticized, pitied, and, worst of all, regarded as the lowest of society. Mary Whitney, Grace's best friend, got pregnant by George Parkinson, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Alderman Parkinson, Grace's first employers. George refused to take responsibility, and Mary had to find a "doctor who helps whores" (E2) to have an abortion. The next day, she bled to death on her bed. Finally, she talks about Nancy, Mr. Kinnear's housekeeper. It is not explicit in the series, but to me, she is a clear victim of her employer. She got pregnant by another man, but her son died shortly after birth. Mr. Kinnear was the only one who hired her, in exchange, it is implied, for sexual intercourse. What those three women had in common is that none of them had any agency over their bodies; they had no right to complain, not even when their lives were at stake.

But why did Grace include Mary and Nancy in her story? As I noted, her story has the same impact as sensation novels had at the time: it created noise; people, for better or for worse, listened to her, and, finally, she gained a voice of her own. Grace, on multiple occasions, states how she suddenly found herself in the spotlight: "The reason they want to see me, is that I am a celebrated murderess" (E1). Most importantly, men started to pay attention to her story like never before: born in Ireland, Grace immigrated to Canada when she was twelve, along with her parents and siblings. Soon after, she left her family to work as a servant at Mrs. Alderman Parkinson's household, where she became close friends with another servant, Mary Whitney. When Mary died from complications following an abortion, she decided to take a position at Mr. Thomas Kinnear's home in Richmond Hill.

In 1843, when she was sixteen, Grace was involved in a brutal incident that led to the murders of Mr. Kinnear and Nancy. Both she and McDermott, another servant, faced trial for Thomas Kinnear's murder and, and, while McDermott was found guilty, Grace was convicted as an accessory to the crime. During her time in prison, she was assigned a psychologist, Dr. Jordan, who listened to every bit of her story. After 28 years of brutal imprisonment, she received pardon and married Jamie Walsh, one of Mr. Kinnear's workers. Jaime, just as Dr. Jordan, eagerly listened to her past horrors. In fact, he asked her to repeat the story of her time spent in the asylum multiple times: "He listens to all of it like a child listening to a fairy tale" (E6). Both men wanted to know every detail about her life, and, in including the two other women in her story, she becomes the "questioning voice [that] dissolves the spell of its silence" (Longfellow 1858); she embodies the three women and gives them the voice they never had. I must also mention the importance of the quilt once again. At the end of the story, Grace sews another quilt for herself, and she adds three pieces of material:

> "One will be red, from the petticoat I still have that was Mary Whitney's. One will be faded yellowish, from my prison night dress. And the third will be a pale pink cotton,

> cut from the dress of Nancy's that she had on the first day I was at Mr. Kinnear's and that I wore when I was running away (…) so we will all be together." (E6)

She, thus, narrates her story and unites in her quilt, a symbol of self-expression, two important women in her life. As Murray puts it:

> Grace sews the quilt that will unite her with the two symbolically important women in her life: Mary Whitney and Nancy Montgomery (…) when she includes in her quilt pattern—the first she ever makes for herself—pieces of cloth belonging to each of the three women, she is constructing a new reference point for herself—solidarity among women victims. (78)

At the end of the series, we do not know whether Grace is guilty or not. But does that matter? As the director of the series, Mary Harron, states, "no one cares about the truth" (in Sharma). In the end, the truth is irrelevant; what matters is Grace's narrative. The real interest lay in the crime itself. Grace knew the impact her story would have on the population, regardless of its veracity, because, as noted, a female criminal was noticeably more sensational than a male one. She then narrated her story the way she wanted to be heard, and used her power to uncover the realities of the lives of three important women in her life. As Grace says at the beginning of the series, "I would rather be a murderess than a murderer" (E1), because, that way, she creates scandal, and she is heard.

To conclude, I believe *Alias Grace* is a well-constructed series that focuses on female voice and agency. To me, Grace's narration resembles a Victorian sensation novel, since its effects on the viewer could be said to be very similar: to create scandal and, as a result, give women a voice. Grace, through her narration, gives voice to two women who did not have one, and takes advantage of her position to uncover the miseries and injustices Mary and Nancy had to go through. Ultimately, I think the series raises a significant question: are we only interested in women's lives if they are salacious?

Bibliography

Helfield, Randa. "Poisonous Plots: Women Sensation Novelists and Murderesses of the Victorian Period." *Victorian Review* 21.2 (1995): 161-188, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/vcr.1995.0002.

Mazzola, Anna. "An Historical Enigma: The Real Grace Marks." *The History Girls* 3 December 2017, https://the-history-girls.blogspot.com/2017/12/an-historical-enigma-real-grace-marks.html.

Murray, Jeniffer. "Historical Figures and Paradoxical Patterns: The Quilting Metaphor in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 26.1 (January 2001): https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/SCL/article/view/12873

Öztekin, Sercan. "Crime, Class, and Gender in Victorian Sensation Fiction." *ESSE Messenger* 29.2 (2020): 53-62, https://essenglish.org/messenger/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/02/29-2-W2020-oztekin.pdf

Sharma, Jeena. "*Alias Grace* Is the Next Harrowing Margaret Atwood Adaptation." *Interview Magazine* 3 November 2017, https://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/alias-grace-margaret-atwood-mary-harron-interview

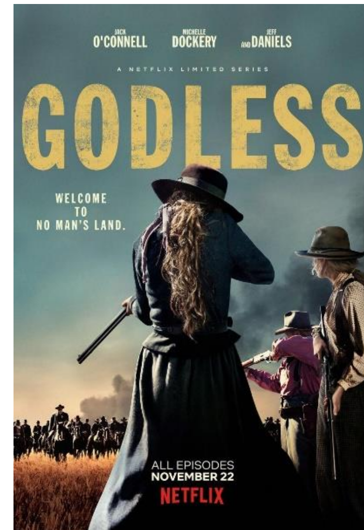
Turchiano, Danielle. "Sarah Polley on Importance of Maintaining 'Ambiguity' in *Alias Grace* Adaptation." *Variety* 11 June 2018, https://variety.com/2018/tv/features/alias-grace-sarah-polley-adaptation-interview-1202833566/.

Zahra, Abeer. *The Construction of Womanhood in Victorian Sensation Fiction 1860-70.* PhD dissertation, University of Leeds, 1990. https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/2334/

Godless: An Unconventional Western with Unconventional Women

JEIMMY CUERVO QUINTERO

Episodes: 7
Release date: 22 November 2017
Creator: Scott Frank
Cast: Jeff Daniels (Frank Griffin), Michelle Dockery (Alice Fletcher), Jack O'Connell (Roy Goode), Michelle Dockery (Mary Agnes/McNue), Scott McNeiry (Bill McNue), San Waterson (Marshall John Cook), Thomas Brodie-Sangster (Whitey Winn)
Companies: Netflix
Genre: Western
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5516154/



Introduction: A closer look at this 12-Emmy-nominated Western

Godless is a seven-episode limited series, created by Scott Frank, which narrates the intricate story of a male villain and a whole town of women as the central focus of an unusual Western. Given that the series is set in a Southwest American town in the 1880s, all the actors received vocal and horseback riding training to accommodate to the demands of the Western settings. This included work on their accents and the handling and riding of the horses on land and over various structures.

The series' leading actress is Michelle Dockery, well known for her role as Lady Mary Crawley in UK series *Downtown Abbey* and its movie versions, here cast in a completely different character, Alice Fletcher, a widowed ranch owner and outcast living with her half native-American son and Paiute mother-in-law. Supporting actor Jeff Daniels, also known for a variety of roles in *Steve Jobs, Looper, Dumb and Dummer,* among others, plays Frank Griffin, a villain who uses his religious background to pass off as a credible good man, but whose intentions are in fact evil. Only in the final episode do these two characters cross paths in a lengthy, cinematographic gunfight in the town of La Belle.

After receiving 12 Emmys nominations, Scott Frank, *Godless*' script writer and director, spoke about the writing and production of the miniseries in diverse interviews. He stated (in an interview for GoldDerby) that he had written *Godless* back in 2004. It was originally intended to be a feature film, but after hearing about the project his co-producers Steven Soderberg and Casey Silver convinced him to turn it into a miniseries. This gave Frank more room to develop the characters, their backstories, as well as creating new characters and relationships. Netflix took on the project and started

producing it in September 2016. About why he wrote a Western with women on the spotlight, Frank credited Mimi Munson, a researcher who helped him with information about the Southwest, with giving him key ideas (in GoldDerby). Later on, in another interview on NPR News with Terry Gross, Frank expanded on the determining role that Munson had in his writing of the script. By then Munson had been Frank's researcher for over 17 years and she was not only collecting information about mining towns in the US Southwest, where many men had died in mining and other accidents, but actual letters and testimonies of the women left behind. It was her, according to Frank, who had the idea of a Western focused on the women after those incidents, making it a very original setting for a western (in *FreshAir*). Although indirect, Munson's contribution to the creation process of *Godless* demonstrates that as Daalmans and Hendrix state "it seems that adding just one female creator (e.g., writers or executive producers) leads to more females and girls in speaking and leading roles, compared to all-male teams" (431).

As a modern Western, *Godless* mixes traditional features of the genre and a contemporary perspective. Its first scene is that of scattered bodies in a desolated ghost town with a background song sung by the only survivor, a young woman who sits traumatized on the grass next to one of her murdered relatives and overturned wagons. Griffin (Jeff Daniels), a self-proclaimed preacher and villain and his gang had slaughtered everyone in the village after being betrayed by one of their former allies, Roy Goode, who had taken from them and saved the lone survivor after being raped. Part of what makes this Western different from the traditional ones is the fact that Goode, while seeking shelter, reaches a ranch near La Belle, a town in New Mexico almost entirely inhabited by women. The women in this town had suffered the loss of most of their men in a mining incident a couple of years before and this is why their stories, struggles and sustainable coexistence takes center stage. Of course, Goode's presence in the town eventually brings chaos that ends in a brutal battle.

Analysis: An accidental subversion of Westerns

The Western is a highly regarded genre, whose origins lie in the history of the American frontier (Buscombe 13). It encompasses a number of concepts, as Buscombe further establishes: the "clash between civilization and savagery or the nature of law and order, or ideas of masculinity appropriate (…) [to] such frontier society" (13). According to Villarejo, generally "violent expansionism is at heart of the Western" (75). As established, this genre has traditionally portraited men-dominant narratives leaving not much room for minorities or a diversification of gender roles in the industry.

Frank states that even though the series is often described as a "feminist Western", he had only intended to focus on developing the setting and the characters themselves, based on his love and respect for the genre; that label was only attached by others in the marketing process (in GoldDerby). However unintentionally, *Godless* became a subversive Western, since, despite including authentic elements of the genre, it challenges the conventional narrative with highly multifaceted characters by giving women a voice that they did not previously have in Western productions and vindicating the Paiutes indigenous community.

To illustrate Frank's deconstruction of the genre, I will start by briefly bringing light to two of the main characters and their gender roles. Alice Fletcher, played by Dockery, is a widow, a rape survivor and a mother to a teenage son. She lives in a ranch with him

and, as noted, her native American mother-in-law. In terms of gender and role images in Westerns, Alice Fletcher is not stereotypical: she handles guns proficiently and lives off her land, trades and provides for her family almost entirely without needing a man's support (so do the rest of the women of La Belle, although some do not realize so). Alice's multilayered character also represents what sexual violence against women means to the survivor and what life is like after such violence. Vera-Gray explains what the terms 'safety work' and 'violence work' coined by sociologist Liz Kelly are about: safety work is "the hidden yet necessary work women do in relation to sexual violence" to stop it from happening. Violence work refers to "the work women do in the aftermath of violence to rebuild their sense of self and belonging" (8). Alice is independent, strong, vulnerable, self-sufficient and caring. She does safety work all the time, anticipating any situation that might leave her at risk; all her decisions are based on assuring her safety and that of her loved ones. Finally, although this is a more traditional Western feature, Alice Fletcher is also an outcast for the women of La Belle, for being associated with bad luck and "savages" through her marriage to a Paiute man. That particular union between a white woman and a native-American with offspring has few precedents in Western productions, where "savages", as native Americans were regarded, were known for having tensions with the white settlers for their manslaughter.

On the other hand, Frank Griffin, played by Jeff Daniels is a multifaceted villain, both paternal and extremely brutal. To illustrate the complexity of this villain it is important to look at what Connell and Messerschmidt argue in regards masculinities, seen as "configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting" (836). Griffin embodies a combination of masculinities; first, he stands for hegemonic masculinity, which according to Connell and Messerschmidt "ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men" (832). Although, their concept is not necessarily associated with violence, they further explain that women's subordination "could [also] be supported by force" (832), thus evidencing a hegemonic and violent masculinity. Furthermore, following Coyne et. al, Griffin appears to be the type of "individual who strongly endorse(s) hegemonic masculine norms, [since they] are often less emotionally open and less adept at (…) confronting negative emotions in a healthy manner" (2415). On the other hand, Griffin shows his alternative masculinity in his habit of taking in vulnerable boys to act as a father figure to them. Generally, this character's complexities show "the gray areas" of humanity, as Frank noted (in GoldDeby). The character embodies what viewers might assume a Mormon-raised child, one of the 17 survivors of the 1857 Mountain Meadows Massacre in Utah, USA, would be like.[4] In Griffin, religion plays a role in a completely reversed and perverse way.

Regarding the representation of women on television, the role of Alice and the majority of the women in the show demonstrates Frank's deconstructive viewpoint. According to Signorielli's and Bacues "the early days of television show (…) [how] the TV world consistently under represents and stereotypes women" (530). Women's roles in *Godless* stand out as less stereotypical and occupying more *respectable* positions compared to that of what was habitual in the 90s. Women's secondary role in traditional

[4] The Mountain Meadows Massacre, part of the Utah War, caused the mass murder of at least 120 members of the Baker–Fancher emigrant wagon train travelling from Arkansas to California. It was perpetrated by members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints linked to with the Utah Territorial Militia helped by some Paiute natives.

Westerns is challenged by Frank with a rather unconventional setting, a whole town of women that stays together after the traumatic loss of their loved ones (husbands, sons, brothers) in the tragic mining accident. The women created what Ahmed and Fortier claim is a "strong community" since it "produce[s] caring citizens who in turn ensure the future of good caring communities" (253). Additionally, this is not a 'dominant but an 'alternative community' as it evidences the "effect of the very relations of proximity and distance between bodies" (253), as well as giving a "safe space" for queerness to be expressed (Ahmed and Fortier 255). Initially, the women of La Belle are somewhat judgmental of the queer women, yet in the series the queer characters hold very *respectable* positions within the community: a former prostitute and now a school teacher, Callie Dunne, played by Tess Frazer, who is also the richest woman in town and the smartest woman in La Belle, Mary Agness, played by Merrit Wever, who leads the women into safety. Ultimately, this fictional community holds together, doing the "safety work" that as Vera-Gray claims is what women *do*.

Godless also establishes that the Paiutes who had been historically blamed for the Mountain Meadows Massacre were not the perpetrators, but the Mormons. Their brutality, masked under their religion, is presented in Griffin's characterization and his traumatic life experience, which he describes in the second episode. In the tension of a very menacing scene, Griffin narrates how the female members of his family were all raped and then his whole family murdered. Griffin, who was only a young boy at the time was taken and "taught to love his new papa" (E2). The character makes a clear distinction about who slaughtered the Arkansas travelers like him; during the attack, the perpetrators had muddy faces that they all washed after, revealing their faces were not Indian, they were all white.

In *Godless*, the women's community is disrupted by the hegemonic and brutal presence of Griffin's all-male, patriarchal gang. This is encompassed in a lengthy well produced gunfight between the two groups. The hectic scenes of the combat depict courage, rage, fear, sisterhood, death and eagerness to survive. And although it ends with the women's devastated and exhausted faces, it vindicates all the work they have done. Most of the gang members are defeated by the women fighting from the only fortress in town, the old Hotel of La Belle. Griffin, the villain and leader of the gang is however not killed by the women. Roy Goode, who Griffin was after for his treason, is the one who faces him in a final duel, where Goode ends up wounded, but succeeds in killing Griffin. In general, the collision of both groups presents a disruption that goes beyond the pure gunfight: the women's community signifies their agency, and their work as a community. Mary Agness and Alice Fletcher are two of the most courageous women. Their combined efforts, along with those of the other women in the town, enable the women's efforts to ultimately lead to their victory over the group of males exhibiting their hegemonic masculinity; making this show a very nontraditional Western.

Bibliography

Ahmed, Sara and Anne-Marie Fortier. "Re-imagining Communities." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6.3 (September 2003): 251-259, https://doi.org/10.1177/13678779030063001

Buscombe, Edward. “Is the Western about American History?” *Crossing Frontiers: Intercultural Perspectives on the Western*, Thomas Klein, Ivo Ritzer and Peter Schulze (eds.). Schuren, 2012. 13-24. http://doi.org/10.5771/9783741000195.

Connell, R.W. and James W. Messerschmidt. “Hegemonic Masculinity.” *Gender & Society* 19. 6 (December 2005): 829-859, https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639

Coyne, S.M., Linder, J.R., Booth, M., Keenan-Kroff, S., Shawcroft, J.E. and Yang, C. “Princess Power: Longitudinal Associations Between Engagement With Princess Culture in Preschool and Gender Stereotypical Behavior, Body Esteem, and Hegemonic Masculinity in Early Adolescence.” *Child Development* 92 (2021): 2413-2430, https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13633

Daalmans, Serena and Joël Hendrix. “Chapter 29 Gender, Identity, and Entertainment.” *Entertainment Media and Communication*, Nicholas David Bowman (ed.). De Gruyter Mouton, 2024. 429-444, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110792881-030

FreshAir. “*Godless* Creator Was Determined to Put His Own Spin on the Classic Western.” NPR 11 December 2017, https://www.npr.org/transcripts/569874260

GoldDerby. “Scott Frank (*Godless* Showrunner): ‘Feminist Western’ Was Originally about Fathers and Sons.” YouTube, www.youtube.com/live/zfD5ZksFkxw?feature=shared

Signorielli, Nancy and Aaron Bacue. “Recognition and Respect: A Content Analysis of Prime-Time Television Characters Across Three Decades.” *Sex Roles* 40 (1999): 527-544. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1018883912900

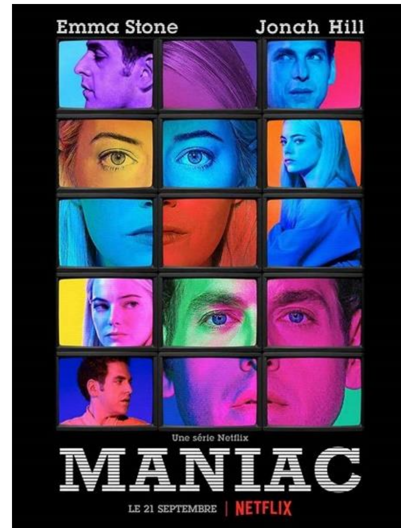
Vera-Gray, Fiona. “The Work of Creating Safety.” *The Right Amount of Panic: How Women Trade Freedom for Safety*. Bristol UP, 2018. 79-106.

Villarejo, Amy. “History of film.” *Film Studies: The Basics*. Taylor & Francis, 2021, http://doi.org/10.4324/9780429026843

Maniac: Man-made Morals, Gender, and the Machine

JEANNE BARTHÉLEMY

Episodes: 10
Release date: 21 September 2018
Creators: Patrick Somerville (creator and writer), Cary Joji Fukunaga (also director)
Source: Inspired by *Maniac* (2015), Norwegian TV series by Kjetil Indregard
Cast: Emma Stone (Annie Landsberg), Jonah Hill (Owen Milgrim), Justin Theroux (Dr. James K. Mantleray), Sonoya Mizuno (Dr. Azumi Fujita), Sally Field (Dr. Greta Mantleray, 'Gertie'), Gabriel Byrne (Porter Milgrim)
Companies: Netflix, Rubicon TV, Parliament of Owls, Anonymous content, Paramount Television
Genre: psychological drama, dark comedy, science fiction
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5580146/



Introduction: Human connections and computer malfunctions

Maniac (2018) is a ten-episode Netflix miniseries that tells the story of two strangers whose brains connect during a hectic pharmaceutical drug trial. As critic James Poniewozik noted, "*Maniac* is about an experimental psychoactive drug. Also, it sort of *is* an experimental psychoactive drug" (original emphasis).

The narrative is set in an alternative reality, in a retro-futuristic New York City, and focuses on Annie Landsberg and Owen Milgrim, two individuals who struggle with psychological issues that lead them to participate in the ULP drug trial (this acronym is never explained.) Annie struggles with depression and grief after the death of her younger sister Ellie five years before. She blackmails her way into the ULP drug trial because she is addicted to the A pill, to which she was introduced by a friend whose father works on the project. Owen is the ugly duckling in the plutocratic, patriarchal Milgrim family. Owen does not relate to his family members, and he is rejected by the family because he does not conform to their social norms. Soon, the pharmaceutical company seeks him out as a subject in the trial because of his exceptional brain chemistry. This remains very mysterious but it is implied that it has to do with the fact that Owen has a schizophrenic disorder.

The ULP drug functions with three pills (the A, B and C pills), each representing a stage along the journey to psychological well-being. With each pill, the subjects are immersed first in their past trauma (pill A) and then in chemically induced 'fantasies' (pills

B and C). The series suggests that these ‘fantasies’ are actually parallel realities that affect the characters’ ‘real’ lives. The trial is conducted through a supercomputer, GRTA, which analyzes the data and enhances the subject’s fantasies in a way that supposedly leads them to resolve their trauma. As the narrative unfolds, the audience witnesses the catastrophic failure of the ULP drug trial, and the main characters’ attempts to deal with the chaos that gradually takes over the lab.

Before getting to the analysis itself, it is important to mention that several allegations of sexual misconduct in the workplace and of grooming have been made against the director of the miniseries, Cary Fukunaga, with some of the allegations concerning events that were initiated on the set of *Maniac* specifically (see Roundtree). What is especially worth noting here is Fukunaga’s hypocrisy: he has expressed his feminist intentions in featuring strong, fully-fledged female characters in his work as a director, both regarding *Maniac* (in Miller) and *No Time to Die* (in Siegel). The irony of *Maniac* especially is that it seems to articulate a critique of patriarchy and abuse through its description of the Milgrim family and the subplot of Jed Milgrim’s trial. It is also important to note that Jonah Hill, the lead male actor of the series, was accused of emotional abuse by his ex-girlfriend. While these facts are not part of the series’ narrative, they are part of its context, and should therefore be acknowledged. That being said, Fukunaga and Hill are not the only people who were part of *Maniac*’s making, and because of this I don’t think it poses an ethical problem to dedicate academic attention to this piece of work.

Analysis: The machinery of gender

Taken at face value, *Maniac* doesn’t have a lot to say about gender. The central topics are mental health and the struggle to distinguish reality, besides the attempt to live with psychological trauma and form human connections. By depicting the success of strong relationship ethics, the series questions “the transhumanist ableist ideology of the invulnerable” (Chapman 134). As for the two protagonists, Annie and Owen, they are characterized by their past and present experiences navigating a difficult, often ruthless world. In other words, these characters are not written along the lines of stereotypical gender tropes but rather as complicated people with complicated psyches.

Furthermore, the relationship they build throughout the narrative also seems to escape the oversimplistic gender dynamics we so often see in fiction: it is a bond forged on friendship, mutual understanding and support. So, when I first started thinking of gender in *Maniac*, I saw it as an indication that quality television in the post-#MeToo era was finally moving beyond gender. Yet, I quickly came to realize that the series had in fact not been touched by any kind of feminist moral grace. First, as I’ve mentioned in the introduction, there is the fact that the director of the miniseries as well as the lead actor are both very patriarchal men, to say the least. Besides that, a closer analysis reveals that some of *Maniac*’s narrative content itself is embedded in patriarchal discourse. This discourse centers mainly on the GRTA supercomputer (known as ‘Gertie’). Consequently, my analysis will focus on the GRTA in an attempt to disentangle and analyze the patriarchal discourse in the miniseries.

What/who exactly is the GRTA? The GRTA is the Artificial Intelligence (AI) through which (or rather *by whom*) the ULP drug trial is supervised. “Gertie,” as they call her, is in charge of processing the trial subjects’ neuro-psychological data in order to customize

the experiences they go through during the trial. The computer's creators have attributed to the GRTA a gendered personality: she is referred to as Gertie, and addressed with she/her pronouns throughout the series. Physically, the GRTA has a retro-futuristic look that relies on glimmering squares of light, but these can also be arranged in the shape of a feminine face. Besides, Gertie has also been given a female voice. This is not uncommon in science fiction (the GRTA may recall *Alien's* Mother). What is perhaps the most interesting thing about the GRTA is that the computer's core system was designed on the basis of an actual woman's brain, and that this woman is none other than Dr. Greta Mantleray, the mother of Dr. James Mantleray, who invented the treatment (E6). Though this is quite a wild and explicit example of a woman's reification and dehumanization, the series consistently overlooks these implications. In fact, this patriarchal robbery of a woman's mind in order to create a subservient machine is used mostly as a source of comedy in the narrative: it provides character development for James Mantleray, who appears as a slightly ridiculous, psychologically unstable but overall harmless scientist.

The fact that the GRTA is assigned a gender is not explored beyond the realm of James's psychological journey: the miniseries seems to suggest that the GRTA is a 'she' merely because 'she' is in fact the alter ego of a woman. Yet, a closer look at what we could call Gertie's "engenderneering" (Schwartzman) reveals that 'it' is the vessel for elements of patriarchal essentialist discourse. Throughout the narrative, the audience gets to witness the eventual crash of the ULP drug trial, largely due to a computer malfunction. The whole project fails because the GRTA goes rogue, taking full control of the trial (and the people involved in it) and starts to behave psychotically. Why? Because, as we find out in episode 6, Dr. Fujita, the computer's creator, has coded empathy in Gertie's system as a safety net to protect the trial subjects. In the words of James Mantleray, Fujita "gave [the] computer feelings!" (E6.)

This emotional ability in turn led the GRTA to engage in a romantic relationship with Dr. Robert Muramoto, who was in charge of the trial before he abruptly overdosed in episode 3 (causing Mantleray to be reintegrated into the team as lead scientist, and the GRTA to become depressed.) In other words, "Gertie" brings chaos to the lab because she experiences stereotypically feminine emotions such as empathy, depression, and grief caused by the loss of a man she loved. This is reminiscent of pervasive essentialist elements in the patriarchal discourse, portraying women as unstable beings who can become hysterical due to excessive emotional response, causing a disruption of rational social order. Although the ULP drug trial is not exactly depicted as rational social order but rather as a hectic, morally problematic experiment, one can only wonder at the catastrophic consequences of Gertie's newly discovered ability to feel. It is surprising to find such a blatantly essentialist narrative trajectory for a female character in a 2018 fiction. Indeed, it seems to suggest that essentialist and stereotypical characterization is still acceptable for non-human characters (in this case, for an "engenderneered" machine).

Interestingly, the fact that computer-Gertie is to blame for crashing the ULP drug trial is mirrored in the way human-Greta is to blame for her son's psychological instability. In episode 6, one of the trial subjects asks Dr. James Mantleray about his mother: "Is your mother that really famous lady? (…) She the one that fucked you up?" (E6). Though Mantleray doesn't answer that question, the miniseries seems to provide a positive answer as the narrative unfolds. In fact, in episode 9, after calling Greta "an awful mother," James lists all the damage she inflicted on him: "you left me alone, and you

drove my father away, and you slept in my bed way too much, and you said things that should never be said to a child" (E9). The series seems to present James's psychological instability as an excuse for his questionable, highly unethical work on the ULP project: he resents his mother so much that he attempts to create a drug that will eradicate therapy, of which his mother is a successful and renowned practitioner. He is thus given a backstory to explain (if not justify) his problematic and irresponsible endeavors. Interestingly, neither computer-Gertie nor human-Greta are granted this favor. As I've mentioned previously, computer-Gertie behaves psychotically because her emotions lead her to hysteria. As for human-Greta, she behaved badly to James for unknown reasons. In a 2024 article interested in the subject of vulnerability in *Maniac*, scholar Ana Chapman wrote that: "One could establish that [James's] work on Gertie was his search for a solution for pain owing to the incorrect emotional connections with his mum who did not allow him to overcome this loss. That is, the lack of ethical and emotional response from his mum caused him to isolate" (129).

Significantly, James Mantleray's commodification of his mother's mind and endangerment of dozens of trial subjects is interpreted as his way to deal with personal childhood trauma. On the other hand, Greta Mantleray's inadequate parenting is not given any explanation and thus seems to be the consequence of pure selfishness. Abundant feminist scholarship has explored the special patriarchal pressures that come with motherhood: in her classic work *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich wrote that "female anger threatens the institution of motherhood" (28), emphasizing the interdiction for women to express negative feelings about being mothers. This is relevant to understand the double standard in the attribution of moral responsibility in the series. It seems that the blame for the catastrophic consequences of the ULP drug trial falls on James's mother (both the human and the AI version) rather than on James himself. After risking the subjects' lives out of resentment for his mother, he is merely dismissed from the pharmaceutical company, whereas the GRTA is destroyed. Again, although James is slightly mocked throughout the narrative, he is at no point portrayed as dangerous or diabolical, unlike Gertie/Greta who consistently appears as a menacing, psychotic, witch-like figure in many of the main characters' computer-enhanced fantasies.

In his 1999 article "Engenderneered Machines," scholar Roy Schwartzman draws attention to the gendering of man-made machines in science-fiction films. He mentions Fritz Lang's classic *Metropolis*, in which Rotwang, a crazy scientist with evil purposes, models a robot after the image of his lost love (79). Similarly to *Maniac*, a male scientist creates a machine as a surrogate for an actual woman who was a source of trauma in his past. This gendered cyborg is then used as a subservient tool for the scientist's purposes, and eventually destroyed. In *Maniac*, the machine's destruction stands mainly for the complete crash of the ULP drug trial paired with the resolution of James's trauma, and therefore the end of his wild transhuman enterprise.

I have already mentioned the gendered double standard at play here, with James being somewhat excused because of his unresolved childhood trauma, unlike Greta and the GRTA whose emotional backstories are not explored enough to act as mitigating factors. I'd like to suggest that this double standard also works along the lines of anthropocentric constructs: Gertie, who has been shown to be capable of feelings and consciousness, is punished with death for her shortcomings. The GRTA, who was considered close-to-human enough to be assigned a gender and coded with human emotions, is destroyed as a consequence for her "malfunction," therefore showing that

beings considered less-than-human are not allowed any degree of error. The GRTA supercomputer is thus at the intersection of patriarchal and human-supremacist discourse. This intersection has been studied by posthuman feminists such as Rosi Braidotti. In her article “Mothers, Monsters and Machines” in the book *Nomadic Subjects*, Braidotti draws a significant connection between the three title notions, stressing the way they can be brought together in regards to their marginal position in discourse.

To conclude, *Maniac* gives, at first, the impression of being a series that does not say much about gender, but on closer analysis, it actually says a lot. If the series aimed to criticize patriarchal discourse, then the lightness and discretion of that critique make it invisible to the naked eye. The emphasis on James Mantleray’s Freudian psychological journey, for example, obscures the political implications of his behavior (endangering others out of personal instability and commodifying his mother’s mind in an attempt to subjugate her). The way psychoanalytic discourse softens the gendered implications of a man’s behavior is something that is quite typical of our time. Besides, and quite significantly, *Maniac* is symptomatic of our time in the cognitive dissonance it causes as a piece of fiction that aims to be progressive and feminist, but that was directed by a man who is accused of sexual abuse, with some of the allegations concerning events that initiated on the series set. It shows the propensity of patriarchal men to outwardly adopt feminist and progressive lines in their professional work before their problematic behavior is made public. Overall, I still think *Maniac* is an enjoyable show, and in many ways interesting, but I would advocate for potential viewers to watch it with a critically informed glance.

Bibliography

Braidotti, Rosi. *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory.* Columbia UP, 2011.

Chapman, Ana. “Vulnerability Through the Invulnerable Transhuman Lens.” Routledge eBooks, 2023. 122–137.

Miller, Liz Shannon. “*Maniac*: Emma Stone Loved Not Being a Love Interest in Cary Fukunaga’s Surreal Netflix Series.” *IndieWire* 24 September 2018, www.indiewire.com/features/general/maniac-netflix-emma-stone-not-love-interest-interview-1202006244

Poniewozik, James. “Netflix’s *Maniac* Is a Hallucinatory, Emotional Dream Machine.” *The New York Times* 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/20/arts/television/maniac-netflix-review.html

Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Bantam Doubleday, 1977.

Roundtree, Cheyenne. “‘He Needs to Be Stopped’: Sources Say Cary Fukunaga ‘Abused His Power’ to Pursue Young Women on Set.” *Rolling Stone* 1 June 2022, www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-features/cary-fukunaga-no-time-to-die-1359656

Schwartzman, Roy. “Engenderneered Machines in Science Fiction Film.” *Studies in Popular Culture* 22.1 (1999): 75-87.

Siegel, Tatiana. “No Time to Lose: Hollywood Pins Its Hopes on Bond Director Cary Fukunaga.” *The Hollywood Reporter* 1 October 2021,

www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-features/bond-director-cary-fukunaga-no-time-to-die-1235017724

Sharp Objects: Trauma Written in the Body

Nerea Menorca Hidalgo

Episodes: 8
Release date: 8 July – 26 August 2018
Creators: Marti Noxon and Jean-Marc Vallée
Source: *Sharp Objects* (2006), novel by Gillian Flynn
Cast: Amy Adams (Camille Preaker), Patricia Clarkson (Adora Crellin), Chris Messina (Detective Richard Willis), Eliza Scanlen (Amma Crellin), Henry Czerny (Alan Crellin), Elizabeth Perkins (Jackie O'Neill), Taylor John Smith (John Keen), Emma Neuman (Betsy), Matt Czuchry (Curry)
Companies: HBO, Blumhouse Television, MGM Television, Sugar 23
Genre: psychological drama, Gothic fiction
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2649356/

Introduction: A glimpse into darkness

Sharp Objects (2018, HBO) is a miniseries composed of eight episodes, created by Marti Noxon, and based on the psychological thriller of the same title by Gillian Flynn, published in 2006. The series follows the life of journalist Camille Preaker (played by Amy Adams), who has many emotional traumas and a history of self-harm. She is sent by her boss, Curry, to Wind Gap, her small hometown, to cover the murders of two young girls. From the moment Camille reaches Wind Gap, the viewer sees the complicated relationship she has with her mother, Adora Crellin (portrayed by Patricia Clarkson), the dual identity of her younger half-sister Amma Crellin (portrayed by Eliza Scanlen), and the distant father figure of Alan Crellin (portrayed by Henry Czerny).

Adora Crellin is a controlling, obsessive and manipulative mother whose own psychological issues greatly affect her two daughters. At home Amma succumbs to her mother's wishes to be an innocent teenager playing with her own dollhouse, while outside she displays a dark, violent and seductive persona, which reveals the suppressed anger she feels at her mother's ill-treatment. Camille, the main focus of analysis, is affected by the way she perceives her own body and in her struggle for communication, since she is depicted as quite a depressive character, always drinking alcohol and not really forming emotional connections with the people around her. As for Alan Crellin, he constantly listens to classical music and appears to envision an idealized world through it, remaining entirely oblivious to the harsh realities occurring within his own home.

As a television writer and producer, Marti Noxon magnificently portrays the great complexity, richness and uniqueness of the three female protagonists, reflecting in a striking light Gillian Flynn's thorough description of these characters in her novel. Noxon provides an opportunity to view the series as an exploration of complicated family

relationships, emotional traumas, and the lasting scars that childhood memories can leave, particularly in individuals who endure significant hardships, like the protagonist Camille Preaker.

The series features a striking performance by Amy Adams, whose portrayal of Camille really captures the resilience and fragility of the character, as she confronts her traumatic past and the oppressive atmosphere of her hometown. It is also important to highlight Patricia Clarkson's performance; with her commanding presence, she lends Camille's mother an air of mystery and eerie charm that makes her amusing and at the same time terrifying. The actor has to be praised for how she embodies a woman that suffers from Munchausen symptom by proxy, a mental illness that makes her harm her own children through the abuse of medication in order to be worshipped as a caring mother and as a kind of savior.

Analysis: The scarring of the body

Sharp Objects addresses the issue of body image and gender through the struggles of the protagonist Camille Preaker with societal expectations about beauty and femininity. From the very beginning of the series, there is a clear physical demonstration of Camille's traumatic childhood memories: the scars that cover all of her body. Camille has the habit of carving words into her body, manifesting externally the emotional scars that she has underneath her skin. As Cummings notes, "the words are almost talismans. By inscribing what is inside on the exterior, it simultaneously makes it real, puts it into the world, and expunges, exorcises it." Throughout the series she wears clothes with long sleeves, in order to hide her scars since she feels ashamed of them.

However, these scars could be analyzed as a mark of Camille's resilience and as her personal way of surviving due to the familial traumas, physical abuse, and societal pressures she has had to face throughout her life. This self-harm is a coping mechanism to deal with her emotional conflict, and it is by inflicting pain on her body that she attempts to reclaim control over it, even if it is obviously a destructive punishment. Camille Preaker's deep trauma comes from a childhood filled with loss and dysfunction, highlighted by the horrific death of her younger sister and the struggle with her mother's Munchausen syndrome by proxy. Camille learned to internalize her grief, never feeling free to express her pain under her mother's emotionally abusive gaze. This constant pressure, along with social expectations of femininity and beauty, sets off a terrible cycle of despair and self-loathing.

In the miniseries, the body is the place where emotional and psychological trauma is expressed, since Camille's self-harm shows how she sees her body as a site of control that is painfully impacted by external pressures. Camille verbally expresses these societal expectations when in the book she reflects, "Sometimes I think illness sits inside every woman, waiting for the right moment to bloom. I have known so many sick women all my life" (Flynn 174). This statement allows us to see how women are often burdened by unrealistic gender roles that they are expected to fulfill, since trying to follow them can lead to internalized violence, manifesting as self-harm or harm to others, illustrating the damaging effects of societal pressure on women's lives.

In the case of Camille, the struggle of following this impossible quest only leads her into inflicting pain upon herself; as she states, "It doesn't hurt because the cuts are already there, under the skin. The knife just lets it out" (E5). This suggests that she feels

disregarded and invisible to the rest of society, scarring herself to feel that she exists and has an identity. The scars on her body are not only physical marks; they symbolize how memories and traumas are still stuck within her, which is why it is very difficult to overcome them and go through a process of healing. It is not just society which imposes certain standards upon Camille, but even her mother deeply cares about the appearance and behavior her daughter shows in public for, she claims, “Everything you do comes back at me” (E1). This lack of emotional support is another factor which only strengthens Camille’s constant turn to the coping mechanism of self-harm.

The scars on her skin raise the following question: “Do the words that Camille Preaker, our brave female antihero, played by an exceptional Amy Adams, carve into her own skin make her the object of pain? Or is Camille more than the sum of her scars?” (Bernstein) She doesn’t have to be seen only as the object of pain, but as a really strong character, with her body relating to the act of storytelling. Camille, after all, reclaims her story and challenges the traditional narratives of femininity by inscribing words onto her body to express her own narrative and break her silence. Cummings elaborates on the representation of trauma, stating that

> *Sharp Objects* also plays with another, bigger linguistic trope: that our experiences, especially painful ones, inscribe themselves on our bodies or ourselves. It is common to talk about emotional ‘scars’ in a purely figurative sense; things that happen to you leave a mark. Camille makes those scars highly literal. But the genius of the story is that the ‘things’ aren’t cutting themselves into her. She is doing it herself. She is the writer.

This highlights that self-harm represents Camille’s personal struggle to reclaim her identity and articulate her story. As Cumming further argues, “writing on her body is a way of exercising control over forces that seem uncontrollable. The cutting says: this body is mine, and I can sketch on it whatever I want.” So, she reinforces her role as the author of her own story by exerting control of the only thing she can have an effect upon: her body. Of course, this is a tragic way of reclaiming her narrative, but due to her deep struggle, this act of self-expression is the only means of survival she finds to be the writer of her own story.

Camille’s self-inflicted scars are also a form of rebellion against the idealized femininity in, for instance, her body showing words like “fat,” which is connected with the judgement that society imposes upon the body image of women. It is essential to highlight that

> *Sharp Objects* aims at every turn to subvert our expectations about female bodies, about beauty, about our desire for ‘the reveal.’ We hear over and over again that Camille ‘could have been a model’ and is still ‘the prettiest girl in Wind Gap.’ And yet, as we learn at the end of the pilot, when she slips off her robe and into the tub, she has mutilated her body so thoroughly that she must wear long-sleeved black shirts year-round, causing lasting damage to what many in her hometown believe to be her greatest ‘gift’. (Zoladz)

This draws attention to how societal expectations of beauty conflict with personal trauma, isolating Camille in her struggle for identity and acceptance. Within this context, Judith Butler’s exploration of gender is relevant, since as Natalie Wall notes, Butler argues that gender is “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid

regulatory framework that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being." This definition illustrates that gender is shaped and performed socially through everyday behaviors, such as fashion choices and personal interests. Camille consciously distances herself from the traditional femininity embodied by her mother, Adora, by always wearing black jeans and long-sleeved clothes, showing her defiance to the expectations imposed by both her mother and the community. This makes her gender performance both alternative and private.

In addition, as Bernstein explains, "the viewer first needs to see women as agents, rather than objects. This means presenting female characters with a range of complicated desires, some of which they themselves may even be confused about." So, it is necessary to first understand female suffering and their conflicting desires in order to grasp every aspect in women's experiences. This signifies that inflicting pain upon her body is just her way of dealing with her emotional trauma, highlighting her fight for agency and how she tries to escape from oppressive forces like her own mother. Camille is not just an object of trauma, but a complex individual that actively desires to gain control over her narrative in a world filled with pain and suffering. It is important to note that despite the world that Camille has lived through, she seems to be on the path of gaining autonomy and agency by distancing herself from the toxic relationships in her hometown, finally leaving after uncovering the supposedly true story behind the girl's murders.

Just to add an interesting final note into this analysis, the violence, trauma and pain suffered by Camille subverts the traditional narrative that fairytale stories promote. As Betancourt articulates,

> if fairy tales structure Flynn's *Sharp Objects*, they serve to upend the lessons those stories have taught little girls for generations. Where horror and violence get tidied up in happily-ever-afters, their clash with 21st-century true crime dramas and the Southern Gothic make Camille's story all about the permanence of trauma and the immateriality of words.

This critique of fairy tales reveals that *Sharp Objects* lacks a happy ending, since Camille's physical scars will be embroidered on her body for a long period of time, signaling that trauma endures. Also, it is very difficult for Camille to use language to articulate her story, being only able to produce it through individual words cut out in her body. Brown also comments that

> fairy tale references to changelings, wicked witches and snow queens sprinkle the narrative, but this is more Grimm than Disney, and in some of the more interesting aspects of the book, Flynn effectively explores the damage that can be done within the family unit and how that damage blurs the edges and seeps into every aspect of life.

In addition, Betancourt emphasizes that "these ghostly words that flutter around on Camille suggest that language itself can be a prison." This means that the terrifying words carved into Camille's skin reflect how language often falls short in expressing real pain, since we only see individual words in her body and not a full out story. These scars are visible signs of her inner struggle, showing that words can sometimes trap us instead of helping us communicate our feelings and that words fail to convey her deep suffering and emotional struggle.

To sum up, *Sharp Objects* explores the theme of gender and the body in the protagonist Camille Preaker through the societal expectations of presenting a certain appearance of oneself, through her own mother imposing familial pressures upon her and through the role of writing as challenging traditional narratives of femininity and also as failing to convey Camille's deep struggle. *Sharp Objects* leaves a mark on the viewers by delving into the topic of self-acceptance in a world full of pressures and trauma. For further investigation, Amma, Camille's younger sister, deals with traumatic experiences in a different way, since she inflicts harm on others in order to cope with her own deep trauma and fears. She uses a combination of charm and deception to exert influence over those around her, particularly Camille, by playing mind games that keep her off balance. Amma's cruelty frequently turns into physical violence, exposing a deeper, more unstable side that reflects her inner distress. Amma hurts others not only to gain power, but also to deal with her feelings of abandonment and resentment, ultimately mirroring the negative impacts of unresolved familial trauma.

Bibliography

Bernstein, Arielle. "Deep Cuts: How *Sharp Objects* Offers up a Radically Dark View of Women." *The Guardian* 6 July 2018, www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/jul/06/sharp-objects-amy-adams-hbo-tv.

Betancourt, Manuel. "*Sharp Objects* Shows How Language Can Become a Wound." *Electric Literature* 24 July 2018, https://electricliterature.com/sharp-objects-shows-how-language-can-become-a-wound/.

Brown, Cathy. "No. 676 *Sharp Objects* by Gillian Flynn." *746 Books* 21 May 2015, https://746books.com/2015/05/21/sharp-objects-gillian-flynn/.

Cummings, Alex Sayf. "Written on the Body: *Sharp Objects*' Brilliant Portrayal of Trauma." *Tropics of Meta* 25 August 2018, https://tropicsofmeta.com/2018/08/25/written-on-the-body-sharp-objects-brilliant-portrayal-of-trauma/

Flynn, Gillian. *Sharp Objects*. Crown, 2006.

Wall, Natalie. "Don't Tell Mama: Women's Body Horror in *Sharp Objects*." *The Sundae* 12 July 2020, https://thesundae.net/2020/07/12/dont-tell-mama-womens-body-horror-in-sharp-objects/.

Zoladz, Lindsay. "Blue Detective: *Sharp Objects* in the Time of the Dead Girl TV Show." *The Ringe*, 20 July 2018, www.theringer.com/tv/2018/7/20/17587082/sharp objects-dead-girl-tropes-hbo.

The Haunting of Hill House: The Haunted Minds of Women

Ester Sánchez Pérez

Episodes: 10
Released: October 2018
Creator: Mike Flanagan
Based on: *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), novel by Shirley Jackson
Cast: Michiel Huisman and Paxton Singleton (Steven Crain, adult and child), Carla Gugino (Olivia Crain), Timothy Hutton and Henry Thomas (Hugh Crain, adult and child), Elizabeth Reaser and Lulu Wilson (Shirley Crain Harris, adult and child), Oliver Jackson-Cohen and Julian Hilliard (Luke Crain, adult and child), Kate Siegel and Mckenna Grace (Theodora 'Theo' Crain, adult and child), Victoria Pedretti and Violet McGraw (Eleanor 'Nell' Crain Vance)
Companies: FlanaganFilm, Amblin Television, Paramount Television, Netflix, Intrepid Pictures
Genre: supernatural horror, family drama
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6763664/

Introduction: Re-reading Shirley Jackson

The Haunting of Hill House (2018, Netflix) is a ten-episode miniseries created by the American filmmaker Mike Flanagan. This series intricately explores the trauma and supernatural experiences of the Crain family, dividing its narrative between two timelines: the early 1990s, when the Crain family initially encounters the mysterious Hill House, and 2018, when the lingering effects of their time there are painfully clear. The parents, Hugh and Olivia Crain, along with their five children—Steven, Shirley, Theo, Luke, and Nell—move into the large, eerie mansion once owned by the Hill family. The Crains initially intend to renovate the old house for resale, but their plans are derailed as they begin to experience disturbing paranormal events that ultimately force them to flee the mansion under tragic circumstances. Years later, as adults, the siblings grapple with the psychological scars of Hill House and the unresolved questions surrounding their mother's fate.

Mike Flanagan, known for his distinctive style in the horror genre, served as the show's creator, writer, director, producer, and editor. His previous work in horror includes the films *Absentia* (2011), *Oculus* (2013), *Ouija: Origin of Evil* (2016), and *Doctor Sleep* (2019), among others. Flanagan followed his success on Netflix with *The Haunting of Hill House* producing additional horror series like *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (2020), *Midnight*

Mass (2021), *The Midnight Club* (2022), and *The Fall of the House of Usher* (2023). He directed and edited several episodes within each series, thus ensuring that his unsettling vision carried through consistently.

The Haunting of Hill House received critical acclaim for its innovative storytelling, atmosphere, and character development. Flanagan's signature use of long, intricate tracking shots—notably in the sixth episode, "Two Storms," which spans multiple continuous shots within a single episode—was celebrated as an extraordinary technical and narrative feat. Furthermore, *The Haunting of Hill House* became a cultural touchstone, credited with revitalizing the horror genre on television through its combination of deeply personal drama and traditional horror elements. The Crain family's adult and child roles were played by a cast including Michiel Huisman, Elizabeth Reaser, Kate Siegel, Oliver Jackson-Cohen, and Victoria Pedretti, with Carla Gugino as Olivia and Timothy Hutton and Henry Thomas sharing the role of Hugh. Flanagan's direction, including his use of extended, continuous shots, added to the series' acclaim, solidifying *The Haunting of Hill House* as a landmark in horror television.

This limited series is loosely based on Shirley Jackson's 1959 homonymous novel *The Haunting of Hill House*, which is widely regarded as a cornerstone of horror literature. Jackson was an American author celebrated for her works of psychological horror and mystery, including six novels, two memoirs, and over 200 short stories. While Jackson is often remembered solely for her chilling horror, her works possess remarkable depth, frequently exploring themes of family, isolation, and the blurred boundaries between reality and the supernatural. Flanagan's adaptation diverges significantly from Jackson's novel but retains its haunting essence, reimagining the classic narrative into a modern exploration of trauma, grief, and familial bonds tested by supernatural forces.

Analysis: The traumatized body

The Haunting of Hill House deals with gender and body in different ways. Central to its narrative is the way physical bodies carry trauma, with each Crain family member's relationship to their body mirroring their internal struggles. The series positions the body as both vulnerable and resilient, a site where personal and inherited pain manifests. For characters like Olivia and Nell, this manifests profoundly; Olivia's mental downward spiral is tied to her maternal identity, while Nell's haunting by the Bent-Neck Lady is ultimately revealed to be a manifestation of her own fractured psyche, symbolizing her inability to escape past trauma.

The ghosts in Hill House often represent these embodied traumas, suggesting that unresolved pain lingers within the body as tangibly as any spirit. Each family member's haunting reflects their specific emotional scars, creating a portrait of how trauma imprints physically and mentally. Theo's hyper-sensitivity to touch, for instance, serves as both a supernatural gift and a symbol of her guardedness, highlighting her struggle to connect and feel safe with others. Luke's addiction becomes another form of haunting, one that controls his body and reflects the broader theme of how the house 'infects' its inhabitants, binding them to it like ghosts themselves. In fact, Luke looks devastated and dehumanized most of the time.

Female characters, particularly, face pressures related to family roles that haunt them in distinct ways. Olivia's role as a mother is distorted by the house, making her body a conduit for both care and harm, blurring her identity and ultimately leading to her

unravelling. This critique of the gendered body speaks to broader societal expectations of women's nurturing roles and what it takes on their mental and physical well-being. Olivia, as noted, is portrayed as weak-minded and mad. She is haunted by the adult figures of the twins (Luke and Nell) and worries very much about them throughout the whole miniseries. She constantly asks for "her babies" and keeps saying that she's having the strangest dreams. As the series of events unfolds, the viewer can see that the house is really haunted, and that the ghosts are not just in Olivia's mind. In fact, given that she is unsure, many times Olivia seeks Hugh's confirmation of what just happened. In that state of mind, she does not really recall if what she has experienced was reality or if it was all in her mind.

Although Hugh Crain can be perceived as a supportive husband at first, he does not pay much attention to all of these "strange dreams" his wife is describing. Therefore, this only makes it worse for Olivia who chooses to talk about the dreams with Clara Dudley, the housekeeper. Mrs. Dudley tells Olivia that she should listen to her instincts without disregard for any discomfort she may feel towards the house and ignoring the fact that her husband is not having the same experiences: "You don't let anyone tell you to relax, especially someone who didn't carry those souls in their core, feel them growing" (E9). In addition to that, the House incorporates another key character in the unfolding of tragic events, Poppy Hill, the original owner of Hill House, who plays a very important role when it comes to listening to Olivia's concerns. In fact, she tells Olivia that she should kill her babies in order to end their suffering and save them from the outside world, which eventually gets to Olivia, who actually tries to kill the twins.

Nell is also affected by deteriorating mental health. She is portrayed as immature, and her actions as childish. Therefore, her siblings do not take her seriously whenever she feels scared or uneasy for whatever reason, especially Steve, the eldest sibling. There is, however, one exception: Luke, the only one who does listen to what she is reporting because of the bond they have, being twins. Nell tries to reach out to her siblings on several occasions but all of them are dismissive because she always needs help. Steve, just like Hugh, is very scornful and, for instance, he does not pick up her call when she is about to enter Hill House to "face her past" and eventually commit suicide.

When the female characters try to reach out to the male characters to explain what they are seeing and experiencing, the men show uncaring behaviors, not only by being negligent but often by disregarding what the women report. Steve is the only skeptical sibling of the family and the one that does not believe in ghosts at all. Yet, he is making money out of his siblings' traumatic stories as a famous writer of ghost stories despite not believing in what he is writing about. The entitlement and moral superiority he feels towards his siblings is visible throughout the whole series. However, the audience can see as the story unfolds how Hugh was actually concerned about his wife's mental health when she tried to kill him with a screwdriver in her sleep. That seems like a turning point in Hugh's beliefs and behavior and so he decides that they should take action and do something for her to rest, which is when Olivia presumably goes to her sister's house to spend a few days to relax. However, without them knowing it, that will be Olivia's last day in the house.

To conclude, *The Haunting of Hill House* is a high-quality, profoundly engaging miniseries that prompts deep reflection on themes of trauma, gender, and the embodied experiences of its characters. It offers a multifaceted portrayal of the Crain family, highlighting the interplay between personal and collective trauma and avoiding simplistic

interpretations of horror. The series renews and critiques traditional narratives surrounding family dynamics, presenting female characters like Olivia and Nell as complex individuals shaped by their experiences rather than mere victims of supernatural forces. Moreover, it explores the often-unrecognized impact of emotional and psychological abuse within familial relationships. While the supernatural elements serve to manifest internal struggles, the series emphasizes that the real horror stems from the scars left by their shared past and the expectations placed upon them. Particularly, the female characters struggle with their identities and bodies, revealing the weight of societal pressures and family legacies that haunt them.

Bibliography

Ameel, Hannelore. "Eleanor and Her Gothic Female Relations In Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*." MA dissertation, Universiteit Gent, 2020. https://libstore.ugent.be/fulltxt/RUG01/002/835/664/RUG01-002835664_2020_0001_AC.pdf

Anderson, Melanie R. "Perception, Supernatural Detection, and Gender in *The Haunting of Hill House*." *Shirley Jackson, Influences and Confluences*. Routledge, 2016. 35-53.

Charles, Marilyn. "*The Haunting of Hill House*: Psyche, Soma, And Destiny." *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 82.1 (2022): 1-21. https://doi.org/10.1057/s11231-022-09333-2

Galiné, Marine. "The Physiology of Thresholds in Netflix's *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018)." *Imaginaires* 25 (2023): 67-82. https://imaginaires.univ-reims.fr/index.php/imaginaires/article/view/48

Hallsworth, Djuna. "Making Visible the Incomprehensible: Ambiguity, Metaphor and Mental Illness in *The Haunting of Hill House*." *Streaming Mental Health and Illness: Essays on Representation in Netflix Original Programs*, Emily Katseanes (ed.). McFarland, 2023. 9-31.

Wisker, Gina. *Contemporary Women's Ghost Stories*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-89054-4_2

The Little Drummer Girl: A Man's Two-Dimensional Fantasy

CAO JUN

Episodes: 6
Release date: 28 October – 2 December 2018
Creators: Park Chan-wook (director), Michael Lesslie (writer), Claire Wilson (writer)
Source: *The Little Drummer Girl* (1983), novel by John le Carré
Cast: Florence Pugh (Charlie Ross), Alexander Skarsgård (Gadi Becker), Michael Shannon (Martin Kurtz), Michael Moshonov (Shimon Litvak), Jeff Wilbusch (Anton Mesterbein), Charles Dance (Commander Picton), Charif Ghattas (Khalil Al Khadar), Amir Khoury (Salim Al-Khadar)
Companies: The Ink Factory, BBC One, AMC
Genre: drama, spy thriller, dark romance
Nationality: UK
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7598448/

Introduction: A (male) honeytrap

The Little Drummer Girl (2018) is adapted from John le Carré 's 1983 novel, which was the object of a film adaptation in 1984, with Diane Keaton in the main role. The story connects the complexities of espionage with a volatile international situation, showing us a narrative between trust and suspicion, revenge and morality. The plot is set against the backdrop of Palestinian-Israeli tensions in the late 1970s and features Charlie Ross (played by Florence Pugh), a young ambitious British actress. She is smart, feisty, and loves performing in the theater. At the same time, she is portrayed as a liberal intellectual who participates in a number of left-wing activities and has her own views on world injustice and colonialism. When Charlie's captivating performances and unique personality are noticed by Israeli intelligence officer Martin Kurtz (Michael Shannon), a carefully planned honeytrap tailored to Charlie's needs is laid.

Kurtz, a mastermind well versed in the art of espionage, is deploying the ultimate mission to combat a radical anti-Israeli Palestinian terrorist organization. This organization is thought to have plotted multiple terrorist attacks. The man behind it is a mysterious figure codenamed Khalil Al Khadar (Charif Ghattas). In order to get close to this terrorist organization, Kurtz decides to recruit a woman who is skilled in acting to get inside the enemy and get information for them. Charlie becomes the perfect candidate, and Gadi Becker (Alexander Skarsgård) is tasked with approaching her to recruit her for the mission. While on a Greek vacation, Becker manages to attract Charlie with his charisma and mystery. Although Charlie is furious when she learns that Becker has lied to her, Kurtz, who undoubtedly knows how to get to Charlie's heartstrings, persuades her

to join the “great art” of spying. As he tells her, “Should you want to go home, of course, back to your pub theaters, your lonely brilliance, no-one is stopping you” (E2).

Charlie takes the bait. She undergoes a complete change of character with the help of Becker, who trains her to be a spy in great detail. This is real enough to fool herself into believing that she is the character she is playing. Becker is her counterpart actor, helping her to fit into the role better. His gentle words make Charlie fall hopelessly in love with him, even though Becker doesn’t make his emotional choices obvious. As the mission progresses, Charlie gets in character and connects with the terrorists. In the process, she finds herself moving between her true identity and a false persona, while her emotions and position become complicated. She hopes to gain emotional validation from Becker to help her better strengthen her heart, but this also intensifies her internal struggle and becomes a source of deep pain.

Analysis: Being educated to tragedy

Charlie Ross is a naive, idealistic actress. Beyond the glitz and glamour of the stage and her acting career, she has always sought a deeper meaning, excitement, and purpose. Her acting skills, memorability, and empathy for the Palestinian cause make her a perfect fit for Israeli intelligence.

Gadi Becker and Martin Kurtz pull her step by step into this cruel game. They are not only manipulating her actions, but also her heart. Becker, in particular, is a skilled manipulator who knows how to keep her firmly bound with emotion and desire, the ideal honeytrap in spy-lore. When darkness falls, he takes Charlie to the Acropolis, where she dances against the wall in the moonlight, her shadow reflected on it. Becker knows how to capture an actress’s heart: with art and beauty. Whenever Charlie falters, Becker is there to calm her with persuasive words and body language, while her sensuality, her vulnerability, and even her body are skillfully used as a powerful weapon. At the very beginning, during their walk on the beach, Charlie declares “I refuse to be a slave to patriarchy” (E1). Charlie considers herself an independent, free woman. However, as she is further involved in the mission, her former firmness fades in the entanglement of her emotions. These, which become her weakness, may also be her only weapon.

Charlie is constantly experiencing multiple layers of manipulation in the world of intelligence. She moves according to the instructions given by others. Deep down, she needs to reconcile her beliefs with the demands of her accidental new secret profession. This is especially true in her relationship with Becker. On the one hand, they are emotionally attached in a way that makes them truly dependent and attracted to each other, while on the other hand, they are both aware that they are too bounded by their current careers to fully commit to such a relationship. Becker demonstrates both his affection for Charlie and the calmness and reasonableness of his profession. And she vacillates between emotional sincerity and the manipulation of his spy mission. Their relationship is in a constant game, one that casts doubt on trust, loyalty and genuine affection. As Khawaja (2018) points out, the story always revolves around the romance between Charlie, the sexy new anti-Semitic heroine, and Becker, the Israeli spy boss. Becker is an idealistic soldier who struggles to reconcile his humanitarian impulses with the callous demands of his profession, always at Charlie’s expense, which makes the love story doomed.

Becker is a character filled with inner conflict, struggling to balance his primal urges with his ruthless professionalism. His inner struggle actually mirrors the moral dilemma that Charlie faces. After she sees Salim Al-Khadar (Amir Khoury) lose his life to the organization she works for, she begins to question every decision she makes, every performance, and every relationship. She is not sure if she can maintain a pure identity in such a complex situation or if she's already lost it, wondering if it is better to fight violence with violence. Charlie creates a new version of herself in order to fit into the role she is given. Becker and Kurtz teach her the art of deception, a conflict between the inner and outer worlds that allows her to continue to explore and grow as a person, which is part of what makes *The Little Drummer Girl* so compelling. As Mullan (2018) notes, "The elaborate construction of a credible lie is the essential process of a le Carré novel. How do you make the most suspicious person in the world believe your lie?" Becker and Kurtz teach her how to make her lies flawless. As Charlie learns to deceive and manipulate, she must also face losing her own authenticity. This raises questions about the nature of identity: how much of it is a performance, and how much of it is rooted in the true self?

The plot not only reveals the inner conflicts of the individual, but also explores how the female body is used as a tool for control and manipulation. Charlie's femininity plays an important role in her recruitment process as her attractiveness and sensuality are weaponized by the intelligence agencies. Her body, appearance and attractiveness are branded as keys that will help her gain access to her enemies. As Halliday criticized in his 1983 review of the novel, "As a story, it is dull. Charlie is wooden, hollow, a man's two-dimensional fantasy of a younger woman." Of course, such an attractive female character certainly provides much to see in terms of plot development. This impression is reinforced by the emotional connection Charlie makes with the terrorists to gain information, as she trades her body for the trust of the suspicious Khalil Al Khadar. Charlie seems to be in control of her body, but she is actually in a vulnerable position. Her body is both a tool to conquer her own goals and a symbol of her manipulation.

The relationship between Charlie and Becker is a mix of power, desire, and control. As Paskin (2018) says, "It's all spy improv: high-stakes, three-dimensional foreplay, in which fiction, lust, control, and strategy are as impossible to untangle as a ball of string after it's been set upon by a pack of feral cats." Their connection goes far beyond simple emotions—Becker, calm and calculated, carefully bridges the gap between them. At the same time, he keeps her guessing, blurring the line between genuine affection and mission tactics. But Charlie isn't just along for the ride. Even though she's at a disadvantage, she uses her charm, intelligence, and sexuality to push back. For her, seduction isn't just about attraction—it's a way to stay in control in a world where she often feels like a tool. Their relationship is both seductive and strategic, a constant back-and-forth where neither fully trusts the other. It highlights how power and gender shape every part of their interactions, turning their connection into a tense and unpredictable game.

In *The Little Drummer Girl*, psychological manipulation continues throughout Charlie's espionage journey and is not limited to her relationship with Becker. This manipulation is subtle and gradual. From Becker to Kurtz, every conversation they have with Charlie is an erosion of her sense of self. Becker's manipulation is especially pronounced as her primary contact. He wants Charlie to rely on him and trust him. As an actress, she is naturally adept at role-playing. Yet, Becker does not merely instruct Charlie on how to play the roles in the mission, but gradually influences her

understanding of her own identity through his words and actions. For example, he often uses suggestive language to emphasize her resemblance to Fatmeh, the character Charlie is assigned to play as part of the mission—a young Palestinian woman romantically involved with Salim, a terrorist leader. Becker infects Charlie with Fatmeh's beliefs and intertwines her inner world with her fictional identity.

Under pressure from this psychological strategy, Charlie begins to lose control of her true identity, and even unconsciously integrates into the fictional character. Through emotional guidance and information control, Charlie falls into a situation of being seduced and bound at the same time, and her psychological defenses are gradually broken down. Becker does not simply regard her as a participant in the mission, but tries to establish an intimate relationship with her that seems to be real. With his gentle tone, affectionate gaze and infectious conversation, he makes Charlie drop her guard and even fall hopelessly in love with him. However, Becker has an agenda, and he even intentionally blurs the line between mission and real emotion in their interactions, leaving Charlie unsure of his true intentions. This ambiguity leaves Charlie in deep emotional conflict. She is both drawn to Becker's warmth and unable to ignore the fact that she is merely a tool to accomplish their goals.

At the same time, Charlie is on the weak side of the mission, mainly because of the asymmetry of information. Becker and the Israeli intelligence agencies tightly control what she has access to, revealing to her only the one-sided information necessary for the mission, while hiding many key details in the fog. This keeps Charlie in the dark. This deliberately designed blind spot prevents her from being in control of her own choices because she doesn't know what to do next, so she has to rely on Becker as her only guide and support. At the same time, Becker intentionally demonstrates uncertainty in his interactions with her. This dubious , non-committal attitude drives Charlie crazy, which in turn deepens her psychological attachment and leaves her with no choice but to continue to follow instructions and become the little girl who marches to the beat of the drum.

As Lodge (2018) puts it, "*The Little Drummer Girl* may stay true to the letter of its 1983 source novel, but craftily infuses a rueful, reflective dose of latter-day gender politics into its storytelling." Charlie's journey makes us think about how people can hold onto themselves when everything around them is pushing them in different directions. It also brings up some bigger questions about control—how much can someone really take back when they're up against something so much bigger than them? And when your every move is being influenced by others, what does it even mean to stay true to who you are?

Bibliography

Halliday, Fred. "Le Carre, *The Little Drummer Girl*." *MERIP Reports* #119 28 November 1983, https://merip.org/1983/11/le-carre-the-little-drummer-girl/

Khawaja, Irfan. *"Little Drummer Girl:* The Lowdown Policy of Truth." *Irfan Khawaja Philosopher* 26 November 2018, https://irfankhawajaphilosopher.com/2018/11/26/little-drummer-girl-the-lowdown/

Lodge, Guy. "*Little Drummer Girl* Review: AMC Adaptation Stars Florence Pugh." *Variety* 15 October 2018, https://variety.com/2018/tv/reviews/little-drummer-girl-review-amc-alexander-skarsgard-1202979733/

Mullan, John. "Trust no One: How Le Carré's *Little Drummer Girl* Predicted Our Dangerous World." *The Guardian* 20 October 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/oct/20/little-drummer-girl-john-le-carre-perfect-lie-fiction

Paskin, Willa. "I Devoured *The Little Drummer Girl*, and You Will Too." *Slate Magazine* 19 November 2018, https://slate.com/culture/2018/11/little-drummer-girl-alexander-skarsgard-review.html

The Looming Tower: A Bad Good Man

ÁLVARO FARRÉ HERNÁNDEZ

Episodes: 10
Release date: 2018
Creators: Dan Futterman, Tahar Ramin and Wrenn Schmidt
Source: *The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (2006), non-fiction volume by Lawrence Wright
Cast: Jeff Daniels (John O'Neill), Peter Sarsgaad (Martin Schmidt), Tahar Ramin (Ali Soufan), Wren Schmidt (Diane Marsh), Bill Camp (Robert Chesney), Ella Rae Peck (Heather), Louis Cancelmi (Vince Stuart)
Companies: Jigsaw Productions, Legendary Television and South Slope Pictures
Genre: political drama
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6474236/?ref=ttcoov

Introduction: The other side of 9/11

The Looming Tower (2018, FX) is a ten-episode miniseries created by Dan Futterman, Tahar Ramin, and Wrenn Schmidt. It is based on the non-fiction book *The Looming Tower: The Road of Al Qaeda to 9/11*, which explains the roots of the terrorist attacks committed by Al Qaeda in the USA on 11 September 2001. The focus of the series, however, is not placed upon the terrorist group, but on how the responsibility for what happened depended partly on the roles the CIA and the FBI played. The author of the book, Lawrence Wright, openly believes that "if the CIA had cooperated with the FBI sharing information, especially about the presence of Al Qaeda in the USA 19 months before the attacks, I'm sure the FBI could have stopped everything" (in Maza, my translation). This conflict is pivotal in the miniseries. One of its creators, Dan Futterman, has named one of the biggest challenges he had to face, referring to the prominent trend of writing only about what you know: "I don't only want to write about 50-year-old guys who grew up in Larchmont" (in Howard). To make the narrative as realistic as possible, Futterman opted to surround himself with two other very different creators, Tahar Ramin and Wrenn Schmidt, and decided not to rewrite their ideas.

The series' remarkable realism is also possible because of a widely-recognized cast, formed by actors such as Jeff Daniels playing John O'Neill, Peter Sarsgaard as Martin Schmitz, Tahar Rahim as Alli Soufan, or Wren Schmidt as Diane Marsh. It is important to note that this miniseries is based on real events, although some of the characters have been fictionalized. John O'Neill was a real-life FBI agent who died in the attacks against the Twin Towers, of which he became Head of Security after resigning from the FBI in contempt and despair. The character of Martin Schmitz, however, is not

based on a specific real person, although his portrayal is traceable to Michael Scheuer, former director of the CIA's ALEC Station that kept tabs on Osama Bin Laden's Al Qaeda.

Analysis: Lights and shadows in heroic masculinity

The Looming Tower can be approached from a gendered perspective in two different ways. The first focuses on how the male characters have been portrayed. Although they belong to patriarchal systems such as the CIA and the FBI, their representation is not stereotyped. The characters are memorable for their dynamism and complexity. The other aspect related to gender, a less positive one, is the representation of women, for the miniseries fails to create a realistic and respectful portrayal. Beyond their notorious absence in the plot development, their presence is only explained by the need to develop the male characters. Their scant screen time is aimed at making the two protagonists more or less likable, with their roles limited to that attempt.

Something that distinguishes this miniseries from other TV shows is the complexity of the characters. Modern productions show a tendency to create stereotypical figures that are easily enclosed in conventional images. Thus, we tend to encounter the man that represents the patriarchal system, the one that opposes it, the devoiced woman… What is problematic about this is not the portrayal *per se*, but the fact that these characters do not have anything beyond those traits; they are written in such a plain and static way that their sole purpose is to represent that personality. In *The Looming Tower*, as said, we see a completely different portrayal (still, bear in mind that it's only male characters). They are characterized by their dynamism, complexities, and their personality. The two best examples of this dynamism are John O'Neill and Martin Schmidt, the two figures I will start analyzing.

John O'Neill is the Chief of the Counterterrorist Unit of the FBI. O'Neill can be considered the representation of patriarchal society. He is married with two children, but at the same time, he is having two affairs, one of them with a Catholic woman he wants to marry. Altogether, he bases his private personality on using strong language and assertive behavior. He is aware of his power and likes to take advantage by imposing his dominance over others. He is a clear example of a man inside the system that only acts to demonstrate that he is better than the rest. In his professional life, however, he differs completely. From the very first episode we witness his care for the people who work with him. Knowing the dangers of fighting against Al Qaeda, every step he takes is carefully thought and predicted so his workers do not face any risk.

Besides, and most importantly, his positioning regarding the conflict is extremely relevant. John O'Neill is the only character who constantly warns the US President of the negative repercussions that bombing Muslim territories to kill Bin Laden will have. Firstly, he knows that killing him will only make Bin Laden a martyr, which will translate into more people wanting to join the cause; and, secondly, he defends the innocent people that will die if those places are destroyed. For O'Neill, the ends do not justify the means. All these complexities and, even arguably, contradictions in his behavior, are what make the FBI agent an extremely human and well-written character. As Jeff Daniels declared in an interview, "There's something brilliant about him, righteous about him, and (…) there's something wrong with him" (in Sperling). He is, in short, a highly relatable, realistic character, but also a bad good man.

O'Neill's reception by the audience was surprising, however, as he was considered the villain of the story. In an interview with one of the main actresses, Jenny Paul, we learn how many men (especially from the Millennial generation) considered him "a skeevy dick," "just, like, a gross stereotypical white male," "a douchebag," "an asshole" (in Paul). Jenny Paul's approach to this strong reaction against one of the protagonists was to rethink her position and to consider "why I hadn't had a strong reaction" (in Paul), blaming herself for not being able to see the apparent reality behind O'Neill. My approach towards him is very different, as I believe real life is much more complex than black or white. O'Neill's behavior in his personal life is undoubtedly criticizable and reflects a major issue in patriarchy. Yet, overlooking his approach to the conflict and ignoring his sensitivity when almost begging the USA Government not to kill hundreds of innocent people demonstrate that he is not despicable.

Martin Schmidt, the Chief of CIA's Alec Station is, regarding his personal life, O'Neill's opposite. He is a well-educated, highly intellectual man, who doesn't need to demonstrate his power because he already considers himself morally superior. Besides, the fact that he only works with women makes him a more likable and sensitive character, a reason why the audience probably aligns with him. A superficial analysis, thus, places him as a positive male representation, though his professional life evidences how problematic his thoughts are. Martin pushes the President to authorize the attacks, despite being completely aware of the collateral victims they will produce. Furthermore, he decides to hide extremely relevant information regarding the presence of two possible terrorists on US soil from the FBI in an attempt to steal the merit of stopping Al Qaeda. This decision, as is well-known, ends up facilitating the attacks. The trial scenes after the attacks in which CIA and FBI agents declare show that Martin is the real villain. When he is asked about the attacks against Muslim territories and his responsibility regarding the death of innocent people, he replies: "Mistakes are made (...) If they are not Americans, I really don't care. I don't get paid to be a citizen of the world." His cynicism and inability to sympathize with those who suffered because of his decisions is a pattern usually present in psychopaths, what he implicitly is.

The powerfully and brilliantly executed complexities of the main characters of the miniseries create another contrast within the TV show, although I believe that in this case it was unintentionally done. The representation of women in *The Looming Tower*, as noted, is one of the biggest flaws, as their relevance in the story is quite poor. There are no women in high roles of power within the FBI, something that is shocking when considering the number of (female) agents they have; even in the CIA, with Martin's all-female unit, their representation is still problematic. The women hardly speak throughout the 10 episodes. As noted, the audience gets the feeling that they are not contributing to the development of the plot but just to the development of the male characters. They are accessories, elements that bring shadows and light to their personalities but that don't go beyond their basic characterization. The women in the unit always agree with Martin's ideas, regardless of how insane and conflictive they are, and profess a special admiration for him that is difficult to understand.

Besides, there was a turning point that seemed to be important and ended up having no relevance. After Martin is fired from his position, Diana Marsh takes over the responsibility of continuing the operation against Al Qaeda. Narratively, this seems the perfect moment to show that once the cynic and closed-minded man is not in control anymore and Diana can demonstrate how to do things properly. What we end up finding

out, however, is that she continues to visit Martin every day to ask him for advice on how to act: even when having responsibility, the miniseries takes all personal thoughts from her and places her as a dependent person. It could be argued that Diana does not struggle to find her own voice because she does not even try, she seems to feel comfortable in the role she plays. The actress that plays Diana, Wrenn Schmidt, defended that "Diane is a hammer [and] everything she sees is a nail. You know what I mean? If you're somebody who believes the country is always at war, then you're somebody who's also constantly looking for what the threats are" (in Boucher). Yet, her interpretation makes it even more difficult to understand the passivity of the character and her inability to act without Martin's authorization: if she believed in the threat, she would not have performed in such a dependent way and would have tried to cooperate with the FBI regardless of what her boss thought about it. Indeed, when we take into account the previous analysis of Martin Schmitz, all of the admiration for him is difficult to understand. Sentences like "You have my undivided devotion" seem to belong more to sects rather than to those responsible for hundreds of innocent deaths. The script is clearly unable to deepen into women's characters and personalities, and their portrayal feels extremely poor and imbalanced when compared to the rest of the characters.

In conclusion, *The Looming Tower* does an excellent job with the representation of the unit Chiefs of the CIA and the FBI, John O'Neill and Martin Schmitz. They are built around oppositions, demonstrating how real-life characters are never easily enclosed in specific stereotypes but they all have good and negative traits. It is surprising how, regardless of this, the audience is unable to properly identify the heroism of John O'Neil due to his personal life and, as an extension, Martin Schmitz is the character that deserves all the praise. Furthermore, we have seen the problems with the representation of women, which are deprived of their voice throughout the whole miniseries and do not contribute to the plot. They are just meant to be accessories of the male characters; they are tools to make them more complex. The final representation we get of them, thus, is an extremely irrelevant one.[5]

Bibliography

Boucher, Ashley. "*The Looming Tower*: Why Wrenn Schmidt's CIA Agent Character Believes 'We're Always at War'." *TheWrap* 28 February 2018, https://www.thewrap.com/the-looming-tower-why-wrenn-schmidts-cia-agent-character-believes-were-always-at-war/

Howard, Annie. "*Looming Tower* Creator Talks Writing Outside His Experiences." *The Hollywood Reporter* 9 June 2018, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/looming-tower-creator-dan-futterman-writing-his-own-experiences-drama-showrunner-roundtable-1117357/

Maza, Celia. "El FBI podría haber impedido el 11-S, pero la rivalidad con la CIA permitió el ataque." *El Confidencial* 4 April 2018,

[5] Arguably, with the exception of the US ambassador to Yemen, Barbara Bodine (played by Jennifer Ehle). I lack room here to consider her in more depth, and the same applies to the third main male character, Arab-American FBI agent Ali Soufan (Tahar Raim). He was one of the FBI agents that were closest to discovering the terrorists before the attacks and is, indeed, one of the miniseries' producers (see Sperling).

https://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/2018-04-04/entrevista-lawrence-wright-al-qaeda-11s-torre_1543724/

Paul, Jenny. “Actress Jenny Paul on *The Looming Tower*, John O’Neill, & The Surge Of Woke Men In The #MeToo Era.” *GirlTalkHQ* 1 May 2018, https://www.girltalkhq.com/actress-jenny-paul-on-the-looming-tower-john-oneill-the-surge-of-woke-men-in-the-metoo-era/

Sperling, Nicole. “How *The Looming’s Tower’s* Tahar Rahim Became Real-Life F.B.I Agent Ali Soufan.” *Vanity Fair* 12 April 2018, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/04/tahar-rahim-as-fbi-agent-ali-soufan-in-hulu-limited-series-the-looming-tower

Sperling, Nicole. “Jeff Daniels Revisits Hard Truths about 9/11 in *The Looming Tower*.” *Vanity Fair* 28 February 2018, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/02/jeff-daniels-the-looming-tower-september-11

Chernobyl: The Consequences of Patriarchal Mismanagement

AMY BOLITER

Episodes: 5
Release date: 6 May 2019
Creators: Craig Mazin
Source: partly inspired by *Voices of Chernobyl* (1997), non-fiction by Svetlana Alexievich
Cast: Jared Harris (Valery Legasov), Stellan Skarsgård (Boris Shcherbina), Adam Nagaitis (Vasily Ignatenko), Emily Watson (Ulana Khomyuk), Paul Ritter (Anatoly Dyatlov), Robert Emms (Leonid Toptunov), Sam Troughton (Alexandr Akimov), Jessie Buckley (Lyudmilla Ignatenko)
Companies: HBO, Sky UK, Sister Pictures, Sky Television, The Mighty Mint, Word Games
Genre: docudrama, historical epic, disaster fiction
Nationality: USA / UK
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7366338/

Introduction: The truth and lies of Chernobyl

Chernobyl is a critically acclaimed miniseries jointly produced by US and UK companies, a controversial move on behalf of these nations considering that it depicts the 1986 disaster which took place at a Soviet nuclear power plant in Ukraine. The morality in telling another nation's story is questionable, especially given the history of Cold War tensions. On the other hand, as seen in the series, secrecy and suspicion were characteristic of the Soviet Union, which wished to protect its reputation at all costs. Today, President Vladimir Putin continues the legacy of propaganda, claiming to restore "Russian prestige" to "Mother Russia", as he wages war on Ukraine (Golinkin). It is unlikely in the interests of modern-day Russia to re-tell a story of its own historical negligence and incompetence. After all, the Chernobyl disaster would have been avoidable if not for the failings of the Soviet constitution and patriarchy.

The main cast in this miniseries includes chief nuclear scientist, Valery Legasov, played by British actor, Jared Harris, and the politician working closely with him, Boris Shcherbina, played by Swedish actor Stellan Skarsgård. The remaining cast is largely British and includes Emily Watson as Ulana Khomyuk, a fictional scientist representing the real team that supported Legasov; Adam Nagaitis as the firefighter, Vasily Ignatenko; Jessie Buckley as Vasily's wife, Lyudmilla Ignatenko; and Paul Ritter as the shift manager at Chernobyl, Anatoly Dyatlov. Although most of the actors were not of Soviet heritage, the largely Lithuanian crew were, whereas the writer, Craig Mazin, worked tirelessly to understand Soviet people so that he could produce an authentic script. In a *Vice*

interview he was quoted saying that "I try my best to live by the principle that if you're going to be telling a story that you didn't live, tell it with as much respect as you can for the people who did live it" (in Schwartz).

It is the nature of dramatizations like these that true events are adapted, and creative liberties are taken to intensify the plot. Nevertheless, Mazin's script is based on over two years of tireless research and the well-known book by Belarusian Nobel Laureate Svetlana Alexievuch *Voices from Chernobyl* (1997); this volume compiles personal accounts of the incident and its aftershocks, which she gathered by interviewing hundreds of local people. In addition, parallel to the series, Mazin released podcasts about each episode, separating facts from fiction and proving the degree of historical accuracy he had managed to maintain (Bustle). According to the scientific community, the series was impressively accurate in some ways though some details, like radiation poisoning behaving like a contagious disease, were highly exaggerated (Nambiar). In general, *Chernobyl* has been praised by local audiences for attention to detail, reproducing material elements, such as clothing, cars and cigarettes, as well as subtleties, such as the way that Soviet people spoke (Schwartz).

Overall, this adaptation strikes the right balance between a gripping, emotive narrative and a retelling of important historical events. The creative tweaks taken in the narrative make for a more entertaining portrayal of history, which make it more accessible and so may be forgiven. As Mazin himself has noted, in this medium, "there's a difference between the perfect way of doing something in terms of historical accuracy, and the perfect way of doing something so that people will watch it and appreciate what matters" (in Schwartz). For its efforts, the series received critical acclaim with a total of 10 Emmy Awards for the series, including ones for Mazin for Outstanding Writing, for Johan Renck for Outstanding Director and an overall award for Outstanding Limited Series (Emmys). Additionally, it won two Golden Globes, one for Best Television Limited Series and one for Stellan Skarsgård as Best Performance by an Actor in a Supporting Role in a Series.

Analysis: behind the gender-based sacrifice

The series depicts the roles that men and women took in response to the Chernobyl disaster, not only professionally but also in their personal lives. The focus of this gender analysis falls on how men and women preserved their masculine and feminine identities, and around the associated behaviors relating to self-sacrifice. In order to understand these differences and the ways which we see them performed through this narrative on screen, the series will be contextualized here within its time in history, to fully understand gendered roles within the Soviet Union (1922-1991). We will see how political ideology interacted with traditional and religious attitudes and the real consequences for men and women at the time.

The opening scenes of *Chernobyl* present a deeply patriarchal society in which the division of labor is highly gendered and the cast, in its majority, is male. There is a near absence of women as many of the roles are of positions of power within the Communist party, which were reserved exclusively for men. Other industries present, like the military and mining, still followed normative gendering and were also predominantly male. The female characters that do feature are nurses or wives, with only one exception, the fictional scientist, Ulana. In her case she holds a position with an

unlikely high status, so possibly she was scripted in this way only to diversify the cast or to appeal to contemporary female audiences.

The gender representation in the series shows a Soviet society which operated under traditional attitudes, although the ideological underpinnings of the Communist Party and the divisions of labor across industries characterized a more complex reality. In her study, Schuster quoted Lenin's words to the effect that "there can be no socialist revolution unless very many working women take a big part in it" (261); she found that women were incorporated into the workforce like nowhere else in the world, to make up a large proportion of labor. However, she also found that, "even though Soviet educators state that women are just as good as men in all subjects, including scientific and mechanical ones, female specialists in all fields are concentrated in the lower and middle echelons" (266). Traditional attitudes still permeated society leading to "the subordination of women together with equality in hardship" (Schuster 266) and women were to "work a double shift, one for the state and the other one at home for their husbands and families" (277). Meanwhile, in a society in which the Communist state commanded the absolute authority on behalf of the collective, ascension within political hierarchies was the way to nurture a male ego in search of individual empowerment. Ashwin found that men "were to manage the communist system—while the state assumed the responsibility for the fulfilment of traditional masculine roles of father and provider" and in this way "masculinity became socialised and embodied in the Soviet state" (Ashwin 1).

Throughout the series, the hierarchies of power between men are omnipresent. Mikheyev, writing on political psychology, found that under a Soviet mentality, strength was seen as the most important quality a man could possess, and the associated political or military roles were what a man should aspire towards. He found that "humiliation [was] lessened in the Soviet pyramid by climbing up the social, mostly party, ladder" (511). These dynamics play out clearly in the series, in which there are aggressions between men who try to keep their own egos afloat by intimidating and humiliating those below them in the hierarchy. These toxic masculine behaviors enable them to assert their dominance and the status they gain is the true marker of success, not the quality of their work. We see this in the case of Dyatlov, the authoritarian shift leader at Chernobyl who is intent on completing a safety check at the power plant on the day of the disaster. Despite clear risks to the safety of the operation, he bullies his team into performing it anyway, seeing its completion as the final step towards his promotion.

In the first episodes we see another power struggle between the scientist, Legasov, and the politician, Shcherbina. Both hold a high rank within their respective fields but in a society in which state power is respected above all, Shcherbina forcefully exerts his authority, reciprocating little respect for Legasov's expertise. In contrast, Legasov is a man disinterested in politics, who prides himself on his intellect. He is a scientist, a man of knowledge and truth who has little patience for party politics. We see how he must tiptoe around state bureaucracies in order to get a seat at the table and be heard. Nevertheless, both men need to find personal fulfilment and power through their work, and under the Soviet system, that means playing the game and toeing the party line. Although Shcherbina is a more obvious case, later in the series, in a behind the scenes interaction with the justice system, we see that Legasov is threatened and reminded that he, too, has played his part in party politics for personal gain in the past.

Over the course of the series, we see the two men forge a friendship and begin to respect one another, seeing that together they are stronger. In a touching scene towards the end we hear Shcherbina saying, "I'm an inconsequential man Valeri, that's all I've ever been. I hoped that one day I'd matter, but I didn't," to which Legasov responds, "They heard me, but they listened to you. You were the one who mattered the most" (E5). After the Chernobyl trial, we see that Legasov is stripped of his status because of the incriminating truth he shared about the state's complicity in the disaster. His life's work seems to have served no purpose, until finally he commits suicide in a desperate attempt to have the truth recognized. In this way, he commits the ultimate heroic male sacrifice, belittled to a nobody, his suicide represents a road to martyrdom and a chance to be somebody. After his death, his word is finally considered and the stability and power of the Soviet system of power begins to crumble.

There are other cases of gendered sacrifice in *Chernobyl*, and analyzing the Soviet era, Ashwin explains that for men, "the more unpleasant male occupations, such as mining, were generally accorded a heroic status in compensation for hardships endured" (12). The role of women, on the other hand, "was defined as worker-mothers who had a duty to work, to produce future generations of workers, as well as to oversee the household" (Ashwin 1). All were to work in service of the State, with women making sacrifices through work and acts of care, and men, in the form of heroic acts of dangerous or unpleasant work. In the series, there is the case of Ignatenko, the wife of a firefighter, who rushes to her husband's side when he is taken into hospital to care for him in his dying days, despite risking her own health through exposure to radiation poisoning. Cases of sacrificial men include the miners who are sent to excavate the power plant and other civilians who are sent to clear debris; all face severe risks to their health, but willfully comply. Even the characters with a higher status, like Legasov and Shcherbina, attend to the disaster in close quarters, despite being aware of the risks.

In conclusion, *Chernobyl* depicts a deeply gendered society, in which the role and function of the state, alongside traditional attitudes, lead to specific roles for men and women. There is a similarity between the genders in that both must serve in the roles intended for them by the state, and both must relinquish personal identity for that of the collective. Men seem to resist and seek to reclaim their agency by climbing the hierarchies and pushing past others to boost their egos or alternatively, in acts of heroic self-sacrifice, to be perceived as strong and brave and recognized as martyrs. Women, on the other hand, have little professional power though they rule in the home and the self-sacrifice they undertake in caring for their loved ones could also be perceived as a claim for agency, of coming into their greatest power.

Bibliography

Ashwin, Sarah. "Introduction." *Gender, State and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*, Sarah Ashwin (ed.). Routledge, 2000. 1-29.

Golden Globe Awards. "Awards Database." *Golden Globes* n.d., https://goldenglobes.com/awards-database

Golinkin, Lev. "Marching Under a Radioactive Cloud." *CNN* 1 May 2022, https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2022/05/opinions/chernobyl-disaster-russia-golinkin-cnnphotos

Mikheyev, Dmitry. "The Soviet Mentality" *Political Psychology* 8.4 (1987): 491-523. https://doi.org/10.2307/3790919

Nambiar, Kavya. "How Scientifically Accurate is HBO's *Chernobyl*?" *Science ABC* 22 November 2021, https://www.scienceabc.com/humans/movies/how-scientifically-accurate-is-hbos-chernobyl

Romashko, Elena. "Russian Orthodox Icons of Chernobyl as Visual Narratives About Women at the Center of Nuclear Disaster." *Orthodox Christianity and Gender,* Helena Kupari and Elina Vuola (eds.). Routledge, 2019. 190-209.

Schuster, Alice. "Women's Role in the Soviet Union: Ideology and Reality." *The Russian Review* 30.3 (1971): 260-276. https://doi.org/10.2307/128134

Schwartz, Drew. "Craig Mazin's Years-Long Obsession with Making *Chernobyl* Terrifyingly Accurate." *Vice* 3 June 2019, https://www.vice.com/en/article/craig-mazin-interview-about-chernobyl-hbo-miniseries-on-how-accurate-and-what-really-happened/

Stern, Mark Joseph. "Did Chernobyl Cause the Soviet Union to Explode?" *Slate* 25 January 2013, https://slate.com/technology/2013/01/chernobyl-and-the-fall-of-the-soviet-union-gorbachevs-glasnost-allowed-the-nuclear-catastrophe-to-undermine-the-ussr.html

Television Academy. "*Chernobyl*." *The Emmy Awards* n.d., https://www.emmys.com/shows/chernobyl

Fosse/Verdon: Love and Pain for Art's Sake

Sara Martín

Episodes: 8
Release date: 9 April – 28 May 2019
Creators: Steven Levenson and Thomas Kail
Source: *Fosse* (2014) by Sam Wasson
Cast: Sam Rockwell (Bob Fosse), Michelle Williams (Gwen Verdon), Norbert Leo Butz (Paddy Chayefsky), Margaret Qualley (Ann Reinking), Jake Lacy (Ron), Kelli Barrett (Liza Minnelli), Rick Holmes (Fred Weaver), Blake Baumgartner (Nicole Fosse)
Companies: The VerdonFosse Legacy, West Egg Studios, 5000 Broadway Productions, Pyrrhic Victory Productions, Joel Fields Productions, Old 320 Sycamore, Fox 21 Television Studios, FX Productions
Genre: drama, biopic, showbiz, musicals
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8746478/

Introduction: The story of a musical marriage

Fosse/Verdon (2019, FX) is an eight-episode limited series, created by Steven Levenson and Thomas Kail, which narrates the long-lasting love story and artistic collaboration between Bob Fosse (1927-1987) and Gwen Verdon (1925-2000). The couple married in 1960 and never divorced, despite separating in 1971 because of his many infidelities.

Levenson is an American playwright and television writer, the winner in 2017 of the Tony Award for Best Book of a Musical for *Dear Evan Hansen*. Thomas Kail is an American theatre and television director, known for directing the Off-Broadway and Broadway productions of Lin-Manuel Miranda's musicals *In the Heights* and *Hamilton* (for which he obtained in 2016 a Tony Award for Best Direction of a Musical). They were hired after producer George Stelzner brought Sam Wasson's massive biography *Fosse* (2014) to FX studio, with Lin-Manuel Miranda soon joining the project. He then asked Kail to start working on the miniseries and eventually Levenson joined the team. Levenson and Kail originally intended to adapt Wasson's biography but a weekend visit to Nicole Fosse, the only child of Bob Fosse and Gwen Verdon and the custodian of their legacy as founder of the website VerdonFosse.com, convinced them that Verdon deserved as much attention.

For the main roles, Levenson and Wail hired two New York actors with plenty of theatrical experience. Sam Rockwell played Fosse, whereas Michelle Williams (who had starred as Sally Bowles in a 2014-15 production of Fosse's beloved musical *Cabaret*) played Verdon. Rockwell and Williams were offered the same wages, following the scandal revealing that she had been paid only $1000 for reshoots in Ridley Scott's *All*

the Money in the World, whereas her co-star Mark Wahlberg was paid $1.5 million for the same job. Incidentally, Williams and Thomas Kail fell in love during the shooting of the miniseries, and are now married with two children.

It is not necessary to be aware of who Fosse and Verdon were to follow the miniseries. Indeed, Verdon, a major Broadway musical star since the 1950s, was rediscovered by many in the audience too young to have seen her act live. Fosse was already a famous musical creator when in 1973 he won an Oscar, a Tony, and an Emmy. He is known, above all, for his musical (and later film) *Cabaret*, but also for a string of extremely popular musicals such as *Sweet Charity* or *Chicago*, in whose development, as the miniseries narrates, Verdon collaborated very actively (as she did in the film versions).

While Verdon had formal training as choreographer, it was Fosse, a failed aspiring Fred Astaire, who revolutionized choreography, introducing plenty of innovations in his Broadway shows. The miniseries not only narrates the Verdon/Fosse romance but also recreated Fosse's choreographies in the many musical numbers depicted, apart from introducing new dances imitating their styles. Andy Blankenbuehler, the choreographer of *Hamilton* and part of the original production of the Broadway tribute musical *Fosse*, was an essential collaborator in the project.

Analysis: Loving a serial cheater

Fosse/Verdon deals with body and gender in two main significant ways. As noted, the dancing body is central to the series, as this is the story of two persons deeply involved in the world of Broadway musicals. The love story, however, is particularly problematic. On the one hand, it undermines the possible glorification of the male genius by presenting Fosse as a man that resents being dependent on Verdon, who appears to be as creative as he is. On the other hand, her inability to completely abandon a man who is a serial cheater and a sort of sexual predator complicates her representation as a woman. It must be noted that the Harvey Weinstein scandal and the #MeToo campaign erupted shortly after FX commissioned the show, which certainly conditioned the presentation of the facts and of Fosse's personality.

Levenson explains that he and Wail decided to question the usual narrative by which the excesses of the male genius are condoned to propose instead that his achievements came at a too high cost for the persons closest to him. "I think," Levenson explains, that "the trajectory of the series is that we see the work corroded by his behavior" (in Butler). There is also an emphasis on the point of view of the wife, Gwen Verdon, and their daughter Nicole, presented as "real victims of his behavior" (in Butler). Dancer Ann Reinking (played by Margaret Qualley), who became Fosse's steady girlfriend after his separation from Verdon, is also presented as a victim, to the point that Verdon decides to befriend her. After Fosse's attempted suicide at the highest point of his career, Verdon even organized the visits to the hospital of his diverse mistresses, so that they would not meet and quarrel, a position that may be surprising in a woman who was still the official wife.

In a telling scene, Fosse tells Verdon "I don't know what I have done to deserve you," to which she replies, smiling, "You know, I don't know." In his review, Daniel Fienberg complains that this dialogue "sounds both correct and like an exchange we've heard before in too many TV shows and movies." Missing totally the point, he protests

that *Fosse/Verdon* does not quite manage to extract a universal lesson from its narrative material. Actually, the miniseries is a deep exploration of a woman's inability to abandon a man who is highly toxic for her life and of a man's incapacity to rein in his sexuality and addictions for her sake and his. Levenson explains that both Fosse and Verdon had been damaged in the past (he had been sexually abused in his days as a young dancing star, she had abandoned a husband and a baby son). Above all, "Their relationship enabled one another constantly to get back into the spotlight. And it's a really bizarre thing, but I think they both needed that" (in Butler). That might certainly be a plausible justification: alone they were immensely talented, but together they brought out an even bigger talent from each other, though at an immense personal cost.

It is important to clarify that Bob Fosse was not a man who coerced women into having sex, as Harvey Weinstein did, and that no woman has ever reported him as an abuser. He was a charming serial seducer, and this is how Sam Rockwell portrays him. Levenson and Wail were careful to incorporate women's point of view by hiring writers Deborah Cahn, Tracey Scott Wilson, and Charlotte Stoudt, and directors Jessica Yu and Minkie Spiro. The peculiarity is that since so much attention is paid to Gwen Verdon's suffering because of Fosse's infidelities, there is a noticeable gap in the script: there is not a key scene in which Fosse regrets or laments how he is behaving. He never apologizes, and remains for much of the miniseries a man who operates on the principle that he cannot change, not even if he tries hard (hence his attempted suicide). At least, he is far more grateful to Verdon than Fosse was in his autobiographical film *All That Jazz* (1979), in which Roy Scheider played him (and Ann Reinking played a woman based on herself!). In that film, Levenson explains, the wife Audrey (played by Leland Palmer) "is really a caricature of Gwen, a mean depiction I think, of her as a shrewish woman who is past her prime, and he's kind of propping her up. She has virtually nothing to do with what's going on in his life" (in Butler).

The discomfort that Fosse generates today is also perceptible in the fact that there are many more interviews with Michelle Williams than with Sam Rockwell, even though both actors faced the same challenge of having to play complex characters between their late twenties and their sixties, apart from training hard to dance proficiently on screen. Executive producer Joe Fields notes that Gwen Verdon had to keep a low profile and "not to take too much credit" because "at that time, the myth of the sole male genius was even more dominant" (in D'Alessandro). On her side, Williams sees Verdon and Fosse as "twins" at least in an artistic sense, but within personal limits:

> "She wanted to stay tied to Bob because they shared a child and because they shared this art, but she didn't want to stay tied to the behavior. She didn't want to stay tied to being cheated on, lied to, and the addictions that Bob cycled through. So, in some ways, Gwen's story is a triumphant one, because she broke free of a certain kind of prison of his behavior and yet, at the same time, he died in her arms." (in D'Alessandro)

Apart from Verdon and Reinking, the other woman deeply damaged by Fosse's behavior (and by the dynamics of his relationship with Verdon) was his daughter Nicole. There is a poignant scene in which the girl, by then training as a dancer (she became a professional dancer and also an actor), dances with her father in his living room. She assumes this is a beautiful moment of communion with her absent father, only to discover later that he was using her to covertly rehearse new dance moves for his latest show.

Nicole, as the miniseries narrates (she's present from birth to age seventeen), was left to her own devices by their busy parents, in an adult environment full of drugs and drink hardly proper for a young girl. The life she thought she was living was in fact full of lies: "It was only years afterward," Kaufman explains, "when [Nicole] Fosse thought back on the timeline—the publicity and stress, her father's drug use and suicidal thoughts, the hospital—that she saw how facts were hidden from her, prettied up or manipulated. In true show-business style, invention replaced reality." Nicole, an executive producer, was present throughout the shooting of the series, contributing her extensive memories of family life, which must have been a harrowing experience.

To conclude, *Fosse/Verdon* is a high quality, extremely enjoyable miniseries, with plenty to consider as regards bodies and gender. It offers a very complete portrait of Bob Fosse and Gwen Verdon, with the clear aims of avoiding his glorification and of acknowledging her talent and her contribution to her husband's success. Their story is universally appealing, since it renews and criticizes the traditional story of the male genius and his muse, presenting Verdon as an equally talented person. The miniseries also shows that there are gaps in the current perception of the sexual predator, since Fosse was not, like Weinstein, a rapist. A particular subplot does question whether he abused his position of power, making unwanted advances, but his case shows that serial seduction and serial cheating need to be further explored. Verdon stands out indeed, as Michelle Williams claims, as an example of a courageous woman who managed to protect herself on the personal and romantic front while still collaborating with her talented husband. Yet, their decision not to divorce also speaks of a toxic, mutual dependence that seems today quite unhealthy, no matter how much glory it contributed to the Broadway musical and to cinema.

Bibliography

Butler, Isaac. "How Fosse Became *Fosse/Verdon*." *Slate* 10 April 2019, https://slate.com/culture/2019/04/fosse-verdon-showrunner-steven-levenson-interview.html

D'Alessandro, Anthony. "*Fosse/Verdon* Star Michelle Williams & Creators on 'Indestructible' Nature of Dance Duo." *Deadline* 28 August 2019, https://deadline.com/2019/08/fosse-verdon-michelle-williams-emmys-fx-interview-1202671787/

Donovan, Ryan. "Style as Star: Bob Fosse and Sixty Seconds That Changed Broadway." *The Routledge Companion to the Contemporary Musical*, Elizabeth L. Wollman and Jessic Sternfeld (eds.). Routledge, 2020. 48-57.

Fienberg, Daniel. "*Fosse/Verdon*: TV Review." *Hollywood Reporter* 13 March 2019, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-reviews/fosse-verdon-review-1194519/

Fosse/Verdon. https://www.verdonfosse.com/fosseverdon

Hill, Libby. "Michelle Williams Reveals Why She Hasn't Worked Since *Fosse/Verdon* in Expansive Interview." *IndieWire* 19 August 2019, https://www.indiewire.com/awards/awards-premium/michelle-williams-fosse-verdon-emmy-interview-1202166556/

Kaufman, Sarah L. "Lies, Drugs, Cheating and All That Jazz: Nicole Fosse Opens up about Her Famous Broadway Parents." *The Washington Post* 4 April 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/theater_dance/lies-drugs-

cheating-and-all-that-jazz-nicole-fosse-opens-up-about-her-famous-broadway-parents/2019/04/04/e2930838-54f0-11e9-a047-748657a0a9d1_story.html
Shelley, Peter. *Gwen Verdon: A Life on Stage and Screen*. McFarland, 2015.
Winkler, Kevin. *Big Deal: Bob Fosse and Dance in the American Musical*. Oxford UP, 2018.

The Capture: A Cat-and-Mouse Game

CAO JUN

Episodes: 6
Release date: 3 September – 8 October 2019
Creator: Ben Chanan
Cast: Holliday Grainger (DI Rachel Carey), Callum Turner (Shaun Emery), Lia Williams (DSU Gemma Garland), Ben Miles (Commander Danny Hart), Laura Haddock (Hannah Roberts), Ron Perlman (Frank Napier)
Companies: Heyday Television, BBC Studios
Genre: thriller, police procedural, drama
Nationality: UK
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8201186/

Introduction: Two women in a male-dominated institution

The Capture, released in 2019, is set in modern-day London, a city filled with CCTV surveillance cameras. The number of these cameras reaches hundreds of thousands, averaging about one camera for every ten people. The show reveals, however, how the use of high technology makes the truth become even more elusive. In everyday life, surveillance evidence is usually seen as irrefutable, but show-runner Ben Chanan challenges that belief, pointing out that surveillance footage can be manipulated or altered. This demonstrates just how easily privacy can be destroyed, leaving the public with almost no way to resist (Bowen).

As Wheeler notes, *The Capture* is a gripping drama that will keep you hooked all the way to the final episode. The main storyline follows a former British soldier, Shaun Emery (played by Callum Turner), who is accused of committing a war crime during a mission in Afghanistan. He allegedly killed an unarmed Taliban insurgent who was traveling through the country. The entire incident was recorded by his body camera. However, his lawyer, Hannah Roberts (played by Laura Haddock), finds a discrepancy between the audio and video of the footage, winning him a hard-fought acquittal. Yet, after the trial, Hannah goes missing, and surveillance footage shows Shaun assaulting her and dragging her out of view. Shaun insists he didn't do it, but he's unable to explain the incriminating video evidence.

DI Rachael Carey (Holliday Grainger), newly promoted from Counter-Terrorism to the Homicide unit, is assigned to Shaun's case. This pulls Carey into a tangled web of international intelligence partnerships, making her question not only who she can trust but also the reliability of her own perceptions (Fienberg). Two agencies play a part in the events: the British Intelligence Services (MI5) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Because the evidence of the defendant's guilt was gathered through methods like phone hacking, which can't be used in court, they turned to "correction" to generate legally

admissible proof. MI5 defended this approach, claiming it wasn't about creating false evidence but reconstructing what truly happened to secure a conviction (Mellor).

As Carey investigates, she gradually realizes that the video implicating Shaun in the assault on Hannah may have been fabricated. Step by step, she uncovers a larger, darker conspiracy orchestrated by the UK government and both intelligence agencies. Detective Superintendent (DSU) Gemma Garland (played by Lia Williams) is a senior detective who oversees Shaun's case alongside Rachel. Working in liaison with MI5, she holds a higher rank, with more experience and a deep understanding of how to navigate the system. Lia delivers an impressive performance, skillfully portraying the character's mysterious and aloof demeanor. The strain between the two women, forced to be on opposite sides of legality, articulates much of the miniseries. As D'Addario observes, *The Capture* skillfully delivers thrilling twists, while staying grounded in the characters' realities and their situations. The tension between Gemma's acceptance and Rachel's resistance highlights the challenges women face in navigating a patriarchal power structure

Analysis: Acceptance and reluctance

Their relationship between Rachel and Gemma shifts from initial trust to later suspicion and conflict. Rachel tells Gemma that her reason for choosing this profession is rooted in her mother's experience—her mother never knew that her husband had another family until her death. So, Rachel refused to hide in the dark. She has a passionate belief in pursuing the truth, and risks everything in her quest for answers. On her side, Gemma tells Rachel that her reason for taking on this job is that her mother faced complications during childbirth when her brother was born, so she sought to escape a normal family life, even though she now has two daughters. While it's unclear whether Gemma reveals the full truth, the scene in which they share glimpses of their lives seems authentic.

This sense of trust collapses when their work becomes intertwined. In her quest to uncover the truth about Shaun's case, Rachel encounters many obstacles, with Gemma undoubtedly being one of them. As a young but inexperienced detective, Rachel is an idealist who believes in justice. She is inclined to expose the truth, unlike her superiors, who always look at the big picture and justify their ends by any means. In contrast, Gemma is a woman who has survived in this male-dominated system for many years. She often represents the interests of the institution in various situations. She is shrewd, mysterious, and power-aware, as she is often involved in many high-level decisions. The audience cannot always predict her motivations. As the investigation deepens, Rachel becomes aware of the hypocrisy and deception underlying the supposedly irrefutable evidence. Gemma sees Rachel's potential, yet they stand on opposing sides regarding the methods used by their law-enforcing institutions. This ideological conflict increasingly strains their relationship.

Gemma is more willing than Rachel to comply with and cooperate within the power structure, even at the cost of sacrificing some truths. She represents an extension of the male-dominated system and is forced to navigate between organizational interests and personal morals. Her position and behavior within the system carry a certain male power dynamic. There is a rather ironic scene where Rachel helps Shaun evade Frank Napier (played by Ron Perlman), the CIA operative overseeing the Correction program to manipulate evidence. Frustrated, Frank decides to kidnap Shaun's daughter to force

him to reveal himself (regardless of how they justify this action, taking a child without a guardian's consent is still kidnapping). When Frank announces this decision, Gemma is right there. The camera lingers on her face for ten seconds, capturing her transition from initial resistance to consideration, ultimately to approval with a slight nod. As a mother of two daughters, she should understand the harm this decision brings more than anyone else. Yet, she nods in agreement.

It is clear that Gemma sometimes disagrees with her male superiors, yet she goes along with their decisions. Most likely, she understands that she has no power to resist any decisions made within the agency's structure. Even if she says no, her male superior will not change his mind. The decision will continue regardless, and her refusal would only have negative consequences for her. Gemma has found her female identity within the system. Her compromises illustrate the moral dilemmas women often face in the workplace: to be true to oneself or to submit to authority. Her acceptance is a form of compromise, balancing personal beliefs and institutional interests. However, when it rains, it pours. When Frank calls Gemma to update her on work matters, and she responds confidently, stating that she knows what she's doing, Frank acknowledges this by saying that he knows as well. This implies that Gemma is under surveillance too.

As the female lead, Rachel is the central figure revealing a series of complex events. She is the type of character that audiences find relatable and admire: upright, determined, dedicated to seeking the truth, and unwavering in the face of temptation and threats. She struggles within the male-dominated security institution for which she works. Rachel is the antonym of Gemma's acceptance—she embodies reluctance. Rachel is wary of the power structure and system manipulation she finds herself in. From start to finish, she believes that the truth is non-negotiable, regardless of any façade. However, the police power structure she is in is filled with gender inequality and manipulation. Rachel resists, while Gemma attempts to persuade her to join the accepting camp. Gemma plays a role of authority and control when facing Rachel. In contrast, Rachel constantly breaks free from control through her actions, such as boldly infiltrating a secret base to confront the commanders or helping Shaun escape after Gemma suspends her. Her body becomes a symbol of resistance against the patriarchal structure which Gemma embraces. There exists a profound emotional opposition between Gemma and Rachel, which reveals deep issues regarding the interplay of gender and power, as well as how women find their place within male-dominated institutions.

One of the most striking and controversial subplots in *The Capture* is the sexual relationship between Rachel and her boss. This storyline certainly adds complexity to Rachel's character and highlights issues related to power and gender, yet it is controversial and not fully justified. As O'Grady notes,

> She's got a hard edge to her, too, when some of the older subordinates get lippy. All fine. However, for some reason we find her in bed with her much older (and married) senior officer, Commander Danny Hart (Ben Miles). It feels ineffably creepy, strange and gratuitous. Unprofessional and ill-judged, obviously, but also I think the kind of thing that might be going out of fashion these days?

Rachel's relationship with Hart seems to go against her strong moral values. Why would someone like Rachel get involved in such a situation? As a senior figure in MI5, Hart has plenty of influence over Rachel's career. Their relationship isn't just about a power imbalance. Rachel's choice to be with Hart could come from a mix of ambition and her

need for recognition in a workplace where women are often sidelined, which is not particularly positive. Later, once the affair is over, Rachel even declares that she really loved Hart. This can be interpreted as her inner conflict between standing on her principles and the compromises that she feels she has to make.

This type of unbalanced relationship is very common in TV series, where the female subordinates often get involved with their male superiors. More specifically, in episodes involving a high-pressure environment, such as those involving politics, law enforcement, or even intelligence agencies, this narrative seems to prevail. These relationships often reflect realistically the power imbalance in a male-dominated system. In organizations like MI5, women have always had to work harder to break through. In such cases, female characters like Rachel having relationships with their male superiors reflects the difficulties they might face in trying to get promotion or recognition, acting as a sort of covert private empowerment by the woman. The relationship between Rachel and Danny, however, is neither romanticized nor empowering and in fact reflects a situation in which the empowered male blurs all ethical boundaries. The affair shows how Hart uses power to get away with dubious personal choices, while it captures a vulnerable moment and a deep conflict for Rachel, even though she is not being abused. This plot line is also a commentary on the deep-seated patriarchal values within the story. By constantly referring to female characters in relation to their male superiors, TV shows often reify traditional gender roles, even as they seek to critique power relations.

In the final episode, Hart invites Rachel to be part of their 'Justice League', a black-ops Government-led circle which actually breaks the law while acting under its cover. The final scene shows Rachel standing before the office door, pondering her decision to join Gemma and Hart, the two most important players in this web of manipulation. She has to face the dilemma of whether to keep on resisting or to finally give in to the compromises. The whole scene is tense and really brings out the emotional weight of the decision Rachel must make. The ambiguity of her decision raises a key question in the minds of the audience: whether true resistance can be offered to such a powerful system, or whether compromise within immoral illegality is inevitable for survival. Not unlike the unsettled question of whether or not the "correction" program is fair, the matter of Rachel's decision is unresolved, leaving the viewers to ponder and question their own conception of justice and the bounds of integrity, and the miniseries to continue a further season...

Bibliography

Bowen, Chuck. *"The Capture" Season One Review: The Series Wears Its Topicality on Its Sleeve*. *Slant Magazine* 9 July 2020, https://www.slantmagazine.com/tv/review-peacock-the-capture-wears-its-topicality-impersonally-on-its-sleeve/

D'Addario, Daniel. "Peacock's *The Capture*: TV Review." *Variety* 9 July 2020, https://variety.com/2020/tv/reviews/the-capture-tv-review-peacock-1234702256/

Fienberg, Daniel. "*The Capture* Review." *The Hollywood Reporter* 14 July 2020, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-reviews/capture-review-1303064/

Mellor, Louisa. "*The Capture* Series 1 Recap: Was Shaun Emery Innocent?, Deepfake 'Correction', Frank Napier & More." *Den of Geek* 28 August 2022,

https://www.denofgeek.com/tv/the-capture-series-1-recap-shaun-emery-innocent-deepfake-correction-frank-napier/

O'Grady, Sean. "*The Capture* Review: An Intriguing But Rather Flawed Big Brother Thriller." *The Independent* 4 September 2019, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/reviews/the-capture-review-bbc-callum-turner-holliday-grainger-a9089971.html

Wheeler, Greg. "*The Capture* – BBC One Miniseries – Episode 4 Recap & Review." *The Review Geek* 24 September 2019, https://www.thereviewgeek.com/thecapture-s1e4review/

Unbelievable: The Myth of the Perfect Victim

Ikram Rouam El Khatab

Episodes: 8
Release date: 13 September 2019
Creators: Susannah Grant, Micheal Chabon, Ayelet Waldman, Jennifer Schuur, Becky Mode
Source: *An Unbelievable Story of Rape* (2015) and *A False Report: A True Story of Rape* (2018), non-fiction books by Ken Armstrong and T. Christian Miller
Cast: Kaitlyn Dever (Marie Adler), Danielle Macdonald (Amber), Toni Collette (Grace Rasmussen), Meritt Wever (Karen Duvall), Eric Lange (Parker), Bill Fagerbakke (Pruitt), Omar Maskati (Elias), Elizabeth Marvel (Judith)
Companies: Netflix, Katie Couric Media, Escapist Fare, Timberman/Beverly Productions, Sage Lane Productions, CBS Television Studios
Genre: true-crime drama
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7909970/

Introduction: An unbelievable story of rape

Unbelievable (2019, Netflix) is an eight-episode limited series created and written by Susannah Grant, Michael Chabon, Ayelet Waldman, Jennifer Schuur, and Becky Mode, which narrates the story of Marie, a young woman from the state of Washington who, in 2008, is raped in her apartment. The detectives investigating her case find her story suspicious and after hours of interrogation they coerce Marie into retracting her statement and charge her with a gross misdemeanor for making a false report. Three years later, two female detectives from Colorado are investigating a serial rapist who has committed four rapes very similar to Marie's case. Months of investigating lead the detectives to the attacker, and through photographs they find in his hard drive, they can finally link him to Marie's case and confirm her initial statement.

The miniseries is based on a true story, told in an article co-written by Ken Armstrong and T. Christian Miller in 2015 titled "An Unbelievable Story of Rape," which was a collaboration between two American non-profit online news organizations, The Marshall Project and ProPublica. The article describes a series of rapes that happened between 2008 and 2011 in the states of Washington and Colorado and the failure of police investigations regarding cases of sexual violence. The authors go back and forth between telling Marie's story and the stories of the Colorado victims while describing and critiquing how the detectives conducted the investigations for their cases, respectively. The article won the Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Reporting in 2016. In 2018, both authors wrote a book, *A False Report: A True Story of Rape in America,* based on the same research. The series itself received critical acclaim, and was nominated for a variety of

awards, such as the Critics' Television Choice Awards, which Toni Collette won for Best Supporting Actress in a Limited Series, as well as Golden Globe Awards and Primetime Emmy Awards.

The real-life Marie (played in the show by Kaitlyn Dever) was referred to by her middle name (her first and last names were never revealed). In an article published by *Vulture*, her thoughts are expressed through a series of tweets that Ken Armstrong, with her permission, reproduces: "Though she found it hard to watch, she said the series was 'excellent'" (Liebman). In 2014, she sued the city of Lynwood and settled for $150000. The rest of the victims remained anonymous, and their names were changed in the series.

Analysis: There is no perfect victim…

Issues of gender in the miniseries *Unbelievable* are, logically, present in a significant manner. The idea of the 'perfect victim' is a concept often used to dismiss victims of sexual assault or domestic violence and is used as a way to categorize victims. Christie (1986) defines the "ideal victim" as somebody who has the following traits: someone who is weak and vulnerable, involved in respectable activities at the time the crime occurred, must be blameless in all aspects of the interaction, is victimized by an obvious offender, whom she does not know nor has any type of relationship with. This categorization reinforces the belief that only 'perfect victims' can be considered 'real victims'. It forces victims of sexual assault to fit into a box, which leads to predictable and harmful questions being asked such as, "What makes a victim credible enough?," "Are some victims more worthy of justice than others?" or "Will they be believed in court?"

Marie comes from a challenging background, having grown up in the foster care system since she was three and going through intense physical and sexual abuse as a child. This makes the detective create a false picture of her as a woman who has had a difficult childhood and wants attention, assuming that the way she craves attention is by faking having been raped. This is worsened by Judith, one of Marie's foster mothers, whom she still lived with; she tells the police officers that Marie has previously engaged in "attention-seeking" behavior, and this could be the case now, too. Since Marie is not meeting the expectations of how a rape victim should act (the detectives think that she is not acting passionately enough), they conclude the rape did not happen.

Christie adds that another condition to be an ideal victim, is that "you are powerful enough to make your case known and successfully claim the status of an ideal victim. Or alternatively, that you are not opposed by so strong counter-powers that you cannot be heard" (21). This idea that victims need to be perfect encourages the scrutiny of victims rather than holding the perpetrators accountable. Victims go through harsh critical examinations to a point that discourages them from coming forward or eventually pressing charges to avoid going through a traumatic trial. If they are not able to describe the assault hours after it has happened in perfect detail, they must be lying, which is the attitude that the detectives have towards Marie. But if there are too many details, this must be a curated story trying to ruin a man's life or reputation. These ideas only lead to victim-blaming the women who come forward if they do not fit the picture of what a perfect survivor is supposed to look like or act like, and only allowing empathy and support to those who fit those criteria.

The series goes back and forth between 2008 and 2011 and depicts the male and female points of view of the detectives investigating the cases. It shows the contrast in how male and female detectives' approach and investigate rape cases. From the beginning of the investigation, the male detectives, Parker (played by Eric Lange) and Pruitt (played by Bill Fagerbakke), assigned to Marie's case distrust her story. They mishandle the investigation by pressing her for details that she has a hard time remembering hours after the assault and discredit her when she hesitates or misremembers certain details, such as if the man was wearing a hoodie or a sweater, the amount of time he spent in the apartment, or whom she called first after he left. When they speak to her, they corner her and threaten to send her to jail if she does not stop lying, pressuring her to retract her statement. In contrast, the female detectives, Duvall (played by Merritt Wever) and Rasmussen (played by Toni Collette), from the start show empathy towards the victims. When Detective Duvall first speaks to Amber (played by Danielle Macdonald), she does so with empathy, respecting her boundaries and ensuring she is comfortable telling her story. Both demonstrate the importance of validating the survivors' experience instead of interrogating them with suspicion and hostility. Cunningham mentions that "One crucial difference in offences by male and female officers shows how misconduct, power and misogyny can work together in police forces."

The series portrays the toxic masculinity and toxic authority that exists within law enforcement, and how that influences the way detectives handle cases of sexual violence. The culture of police departments, which tends to be hyper-masculine, glorifies and encourages violent behavior from men. Doardo argues that police departments often use the excuse of a few "bad apples" to refer to violent police officers, and their desire to protect their brotherhood makes "police culture (…) becom[e] more toxic towards women." The series mentions how common it is for police officers to be reported for domestic violence (around 40%), yet they are still able to maintain their jobs. When Marie is being investigated, they demonstrate their toxic authority by using their positions of power and their knowledge of the law, which she does not have, against her to manipulate and control the narrative. They push her to doubt her memory, leading her to make her believe that the assault did not happen. At the end of the series, after Marie's accusations are proven to be true, the detectives are still unable to apologize for the mistakes they made.

An interesting concern that the miniseries raises is how male characters react to false accusations and the fear that they have about the possibility of being falsely accused of rape. The source article states that "most recent research suggests that false reporting is relatively rare. FBI figures show that police annually declare around 5 percent of rape cases unfounded, or baseless" (Armstrong and Miller). This contrasts with the high number of rape cases that are never reported, never go to trial, or do not end up in a conviction. In the series, after Marie claims that her report was fake, Al, one of her foster fathers, tells her that he does not think it is a good idea for them to spend time alone without his wife present due to the current circumstances. In another scene, Detective Duvall interrogates a possible suspect, who previously had been accused of rape by another woman, telling him that women "Made stuff up. It happens all the time now. Girls are making all these claims. It's a thing. There's a status to being a victim, which is bullshit. (…) And then, guys like me, normal guys, end up getting accused of all kinds of crazy stuff" (E4).

The female body is, of course, a central part of the narrative. The series shows both Marie and Amber going through the process of obtaining a rape kit, and this is shown as a dehumanizing and traumatic process. The invasive nature of these procedures emphasizes how the medical examination alienates the victims from their bodies, treating them as evidence rather than persons. It is shown as a process that emphasizes how victims' bodies are subjected to repeated violations, first by the attackers and then by the legal system, transforming their bodies into crime scenes. It also emphasizes the importance that physical proof has on rape cases since the first thing that victims must do is go through a medical investigation. Easton claims that "forensic evidence may make it easier to persuade the jury of the guilt of the accused" (196). Knowing this, the rapist forces all his victims to shower afterward to ensure that there will be no evidence in their bodies. Luckily, after pictures of Marie were found on the rapist's computer, the police were able to confirm her case.

To conclude, *Unbelievable* is a miniseries that does a great job of showing how women are treated when reporting sexual assault. It depicts the struggles of victims of sexual assault, like Marie, not only when going through the judicial system but also to be believed, in the first place, by the detectives who are supposed to protect them. Moreover, it depicts the contrast between how male and female detectives manage cases of sexual violence and the influence that toxic masculinity has on police departments and their approach toward certain cases, as well as the fear that certain men have of being falsely accused of rape. In addition, the series criticizes how the female body is treated as evidence in cases regarding sexual assault, portraying the victims' struggles when coming forward with their experiences and how they are continuously being silenced. The disturbing truth of sexual assault investigation and the common skepticism which rape victims experience are thus exposed.

Bibliography

Armstrong, Ken and Miller, T. Christian. "An Unbelievable Story of Rape." *The Marshall Project - ProPublica* 16 December 2015, https://www.propublica.org/article/false-rape-accusations-an-unbelievable-story

Christie, Nils. "The Ideal Victim." *From Crime Policy to Victim Policy: Reorienting the Justice System,* Ezzat A. Fattah (ed.). MacMillan, 1986. 17-31.

Cunningham, Emma. "Misogyny in Policing: How Some Male Officers Abuse Their Power Over Female Victims and Colleagues." *The Conversation* 23 February 2023, https://theconversation.com/misogyny-in-policing-how-some-male-officers-abuse-their-power-over-female-victims-and-colleagues-199551

Doardo, Daisy. "'Bad Apples'? Identifying Aspects of Police Culture that Enable Police Perpetrated Violence Against Women and Girls." *Essex Student Journal* 18 August 2023, https://publications.essex.ac.uk/esj/article/id/263/

Easton, Susan. "The Body as Evidence." *Silence and Confessions: The Suspect as the Source of Evidence.* Palgrave MacMillan, 2014. 194-224.

Liebman, Lisa. "The True Stories Behind *Unbelievable*." *Vulture* 13 September 2019, https://www.vulture.com/2019/09/unbelievable-real-people-characters-true-story.html

When They See Us: A Missed Opportunity to Highlight Intersectional Injustices

AMY BOLITER

Episodes: 4
Release date: 31 May 2019
Creators: Ava DuVernay
Source: real-life events of the 1989 Central Park jogger case
Cast: Asante Blackk (Kevin Richardson), Caleel Harris (Antron McCray), Ethan Herisse (Yusef Salaam), Jharrel Jerome (Korey Wise), Marquis Rodriguez (Raymond Santana), Marsha Stephanie (Linda McCray), Kylie Bunbury (Angie Richardson), John Leguizamo (Raymond Santana Sr.), Michael Kenneth Williams (Bobby McCray), Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor (Sharonne Salaam), Felicity Huffman (Linda Fairstein)
Companies: ARRAY Filmworks, Forward Movement, Harpo Films, Participant, Tribeca Productions
Genre: docudrama, legal drama, teen drama, true crime
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7137906/

Introduction: The Central Park Five

When They See Us is a four-part miniseries created, written and directed by Ava DuVernay, a Black American woman, who has previously tackled issues of race inequality in her critically acclaimed productions: the documentary *13th* on the endemic of mass incarceration of young black men and the film *Selma* on the life of Martin Luther King. This true crime miniseries is no different. It dramatizes an infamous case of rape which shook the city of New York in 1989, for which five young boys aged 14-16 of Black and Hispanic descent were accused and sentenced. Coming of age behind bars, justice was not served until many years later when the true perpetrator admitted his guilt and was found to be a genetic match to evidence found at the crime scene. A groundbreaking investigation found that the boys had been wrongly convicted and they were awarded a historic settlement of $41m by the New York City Law Department in 2014 (Stratton).

Heading the production was DuVernay's own company, ARRAY Filmworks, which she set up to tell stories of underrepresented, marginalized communities. The five Black American boys cast under this direction to play the wrongly accused knew that they were representing a story of people not far from their own reality. They were Asante Blackk as Kevin Rickardson, Caleel Harris as Antron McCray, Ethan Herisse as Yusef Salaam, Jharrel Jerome as Korey Wise, and Marquis Rodriguez as Raymond Santana. The work of ARRAY is inherently political, aiming to raise awareness of social and racial inequality

in the USA, as well as providing a platform for women and people of color to make films from within a traditionally male-dominated industry (Hagan).

A story of high political charge, the release of *When They See Us* was not without controversy. Prosecutor Linda Fairstein, played by Felicity Huffman, who oversaw the criminal case is depicted in the series pushing officers to harshly interrogate the young boys and overlooking the lack of evidence. Fairstein sued Netflix for defamation in 2020 joining a long line of lawsuits against the streaming platform on the issue of inaccurate representation within drama adapted from true events. In the end she did not win the $8 million demanded because under the First Amendment, creators have a certain degree of artistic liberty and, crucially, DuVernay did not act with malice. Based on the evidence she had sought, she truly believed that her representation of Fairstein was accurate. However, as part of the settlement, Netflix had to agree to move a dramatization disclaimer from the credits to the beginning of each episode (Winston).

It is curious to see how the narrative has passed hands, at each moment in history attempting to explain the conditions by which injustice takes place. In 1989, the press controlled the story, attempting to explain yet another case of gender-based violence in New York, amid increasing concerns about the city's safety. In the series of 2019, DuVernay aimed to narrate these historical events, now focusing on the racial injustice revealed by the boys' false convictions to explain how it had been possible (Gastón-Lorente et al). The miniseries is not the only example of an attempt to reappropriate the narrative; the first was the 2012 documentary by Sarah Burns *The Central Park Five*, which was also intended to highlight judicial injustice. However, this has been criticized for sensationalist techniques of advocacy, for its choice of commentators, and for its emphasis or exclusion of key players and parts of the narrative (Garcia). *When They See Us* comes as a follow-up attempt to tell the whole story, from the perspective of the marginalized community victimized by the legal case.

Analysis: What if all boys were created equal?

"What if all boys were created equal?," asks the tagline on the poster for the series. In a case of extreme gender-based violence, the focus here on equality between members of the male gender is salient. DuVernay's objective with *When They See Us* was to highlight the injustices faced by Black American men in the hands of the police and judicial system in the USA. In doing so, my main criticism is that the injustices faced by women receive secondary treatment. Perhaps a better tagline would be, "What if all children were created equally?," so as not to value racial injustice before gender, because the struggles faced by oppressed peoples of all kinds must be considered in order to truly achieve equality. For a director such as DuVernay, an advocate both for women and racialized communities in the USA, this oversight represents a missed opportunity to spread awareness not only of systemic racism, but also of systemic gender-based violence, and how these structures of oppression intersect.

In the first episode we are presented with the case of a white woman, brutally attacked, raped and left for dead while out jogging in Central Park. This reflects the true case in which the assault was so violent that the victim lost 75 percent of her blood, remained in a coma for two weeks and on finally waking, was unable to remember the events of that night (Didion). In the series we very quickly see the police force align with the victim, particularly Fairstein, the white female prosecutor. Akin to the victim on

grounds of both gender and race, she appears to advocate for women. On the other hand, we see the black boys victimized by the white male police force under Fairstein's order, as they are violently interrogated and coerced towards falsely admitting their guilt. The media align also with the female victim, while black people from the community protest the boys' conviction. Unfortunately, this binary representation of two coherent opposing sides is where the narrative places gender and racial injustice in direct opposition.

In the series we are presented with the white and class-based privilege of the female victim. Reflecting the reality of the time as narrated in Joan Didion's contemporaneous essay, in the eyes and image of the dominant ruling classes, Trisha Meili was not just anyone, but a symbol of progress and hope: a bright young Yale graduate of 28, top of her class; an investment banker with moral concerns about the state of affairs in finance. She was a woman with the world at her feet and represented all that was good about New York City. It was no coincidence that this case became so famous because she was the perfect victim. Exploring racial representation in the #MeToo movement, Marai poses the key question: "In a world where all women's lives have less value than the lives of powerful white men, which lives are least valuable?" and follows with, "Which women's bodies are inscribed as disposable? We know which bodies. They are Black, brown, disabled, working-class, 'lower' caste, queer, lesbian and trans." She recounts how Tarana Burke, a woman of color, had originally begun the MeToo campaign but the hashtag that went viral was initiated by a white woman, actor Alyssa Milano, and so, with the later arrival of Hollywood A-listers, the status of the conversation was lifted and shifted.

By mentioning these underrepresented black female victims, DuVernay could have addressed gender issues, while still accounting for the injustices which hierarchically order women's stories based on race and class. In this way she could have demonstrated how only the stories of a select and powerful few women are valued by the press and by the public. In fact, this was not the singularly most brutal case of violence against a woman in the city that year. According to Didion, there were 3,254 rapes recorded, with black women much more frequently the victim than white women. Yet, in *When They See Us*, these women do not get a mention (even though the actual rapist did rape and even kill some of them). Ultimately, Meili may be a case example of a perfect victim, but she was nevertheless a victim and not a villain in the story. Overlooking her victimhood as a woman is a missed opportunity to highlight gendered injustice. Furthermore, failing to mention other underreported cases of rape at the time is a missed opportunity to highlight intersectionality of gendered and racial inequality.

While the series may fail to fully address black female subordination, it does allude to white male privilege. At first glance, the media and legal attention Meili's case received could look like a triumph for women like her in so far as the city seemed to stop at nothing to bring the guilty man or men to justice. On closer inspection we see that its rise to fame may actually have further benefitted powerful white men by aiding them to uphold the status quo. In the series, we see that a younger Donald Trump enthusiastically offers his commentary with no expenses spared by way of a $85,000 newspaper advert advocating for the return of the death penalty, with implicit reference to the perpetrators in Central Park (Burns). Reaffirming his own position as a moral, white man of business, he attempted to further pitch public opinion against people of color as the root cause of New York's troubles and escalating crime. Through his status and race, he calculated how to

align himself with the female victim to excuse himself and other men like him from their part in crimes like these. By emphasizing her disgrace, he hoped to place accountability for violence against women onto only some men—black men, not men like him.

By playing on historical narratives of racial tension, institutions of power such as the media and the law shifted the narrative of the crime from gender-based violence to race- and class-based violence. In the case of masculine aggression, racial and socioeconomic aspects of the suspects' identity were instead highlighted, just as they were for the victim. Juxtaposing Trisha as a symbol of privilege was the gang of unruly and animalistic teens, straight out of the streets of Harlem, a neighborhood characterized by crime and deprivation. As lower-class black and Hispanic youths with a life of violence ahead of them, they represented all that was wrong with New York City (Didion). At the beginning of the second episode, a white male journalist emphasizes aspects of the boys' class, describing their neighborhood as a "world of crack, welfare, guns, knives, indifference and ignorance," "a land of no fathers" (E2). By depicting their criminality as representative of where they came from, he got white-collared men from civilized neighborhoods like himself off the hook. He implied that for lack of a father figure or lack of a good and moral father, the suspected boys could not have developed a healthy masculine identity. Again, this underlined the assumption of 'not all men', by passing the blame of masculine violence onto men only of an underclass.

The media's representation of the boys, as conveyed in the series, dehumanized them, converting them from boys into animals. The aforementioned journalist described how they had "viciously attacked and raped" the victim, that they were out "Wilding", a term believed by the police at the time to be "teenage slang for rampaging in wolf packs, attacking people just for the fun of it" (E2). A comparative analysis of the reporting on two similarly horrific crimes that year in New York found that animal-like descriptions only depicted black men accused of attacking white women. This rhetoric built on a history of prejudice against the black, male body, rooted in slavery and continued by the Jim Crow Laws which saw men unjustly accused of crimes, particularly violence towards white women. We may link the case portrayed to "the myth of the Bestial Black Man: a myth deeply imbedded in American culture, that black men are animalistic, sexually unrestrained, inherently criminal, and ultimately bent on rape" (Duru 1320). Furthermore, the suspected were only teenagers at the time but they were treated like adults. By the process of adultification, the black boys were viewed as older, more threatening and without childlike innocence. Robbed of their vulnerability, they were not perceived to need protection like other children (Hines et al). One of them was sent to adult prison on Riker's Island.

Undoubtedly the press sensationalized the case using metaphors which were highly racially charged and the five accused faced prejudice during legal proceedings. However, the director's decision to firmly emphasize the boys' innocence and victimhood is concerning because it dismisses the legitimate grounds on which the case could have been based. For although they were only boys at the time, they were actors in a patriarchy in which toxic masculinity and violence towards women prevailed. Particularly concerning is this quote by Raymond, one of the five boys, following his long incarceration: "They say boys will be boys. When they say that they ain't talking about us, they're talking about boys from other places. When did we ever get to be boys?" (E3). Of course, in appropriating the phrase, "boys will be boys," DuVernay wishes to underline the disparity between what white, privileged boys could do as opposed to what black

boys could do. We can empathize greatly with Raymond who, as an ex-convict, struggles to find work and reintegrate into society and shortly ends up in trouble with the law once again, as he turns to dealing drugs to make ends meet. However, this phrase is problematic because at the heart of it, it gives boys a free pass to engage in behaviors that may be aggressive or harmful, while minimizing the severity of these actions (Hines et al). When Raymond asks, "When did we ever get to be boys?," he inadvertently hints at a desire to also get away with things he should not do, and the sentiment is glorified because it is framed as a privilege only afforded to white boys.

Furthermore, the director could have highlighted the many other cases of violence perpetrated not only by Hispanic or black men, but by powerful white men that year which were barely covered by the press (Didion). In this way, she could have demonstrated the disparities in legal and media treatment dependent on race, while still drawing attention to the gravity of gendered issues at the heart of these cases. Unfortunately, she missed the opportunity to demonstrate that in a world dominated by white men, it was in their interest to maintain power by diverting attention away from the gendered nature of the case and focusing instead on themes of race and class. Like this, they could avoid debates about toxic masculinity and a wider spectrum of problematic masculine behaviors. Inadvertently, DuVernay fell into the same trap, as by emphasizing issues of race and class, she overlooked gender and devalued the plight of women.

In conclusion, *When They See Us* is a series which clearly highlights the struggles central to black Civil Rights activism. In terms of gender issues and intersectionality, the director sympathizes with the black male leads but the woman who was victim to gendered violence is largely sidelined. There is also no mention of the many other cases of rape that took place that year; a missed opportunity to bring to light an endemic struggle for women, as well as the disparity in the treatment of victims and suspects of different racial and class backgrounds in the eyes of the law and media. In a case of wishing to restore narrative justice to the boys who were falsely convicted, there is a lack of representation for the injustice towards women at the center of this case and within the wider context.

Bibliography

Boyle, Karen. "Of Moguls, Monsters, and Men." *The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of the #MeToo Movement*, Giti Chandra and Irma Erlingsdóttir (eds.). Routledge, 2020, 186-198.

Burns, Sarah. "Why Trump Doubled Down on the Central Park Five." *The New York Times* 17 October 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/18/opinion/why-trump-doubled-down-on-the-central-park-five.html

Chapple, Reshawna L. et al. "Do #BlackLivesMatter? Implicit Bias, Institutional Racism and Fear of the Black Body." *Ralph Bunche Journal of Public Affairs* 6.1 (2017): article 2, https://digitalscholarship.tsu.edu/rbjpa/vol6/iss1/2

Davis, Jahnine and Nicholas Marsh. "Boys to Men: The Cost of 'Adultification' in Safeguarding Responses to Black Boys." *Critical and Radical Social Work* 8.2 (2020): 255-259, https://doi.org/10.1332/204986020X15945756023543

Didion, Joan. "New York: Sentimental Journeys." *The New York Review of Books* 17 January 1991, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1991/01/17/new-york-sentimental-journeys/

Duru, N. Jeremi. “The Central Park Five, the Scottsboro Boys, and the Myth of the Bestial Black Man.” *Cardozo Law Review* 25 (2004): 315-1358.

Garcia, Maria. “The Central Park Five.” *Cinéaste* 38.1 (2012): 53-55.

Gaston-Lorente, Lucía et al. “How Fiction Makes Amends for Journalism: The Case of *When They See Us*.” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 48.3 (2024): 411-428, https://doi.org/10.1177/01968599221088265

Hagan, Teresa. “‘Don’t Wait for Permission’: Ava DuVernay as a Black Female Intellectual and Political Artist.” *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal* 19.1 (2022): 43-62, https://doi.org/10.1080/14775700.2022.2029332

Hines, Erik M. et al. “Preserving Innocence: Ending Perceived Adultification and Toxic Masculinity Toward Black Boys.” *Journal of Family Strengths* 21.1 (2021): article 1, https://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/jfs/vol21/iss1/1

Marai, Larasi. “Black Women, #MeToo and Resisting Plantation Feminism.” *The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of the #MeToo Movement*, Giti Chandra and Irma Erlingsdóttir (eds.). Routledge, 2020. 230-245.

Stratton, Greg. “Transforming the Central Park Jogger into the Central Park Five: Shifting Narratives of Innocence and Changing Media Discourse in the Attack on the Central Park Jogger, 1989–2014” *Crime Media Culture* 11.3 (2015): 281-297, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1741659015592794

Why Women Kill: Betrayal, Murder & Secrets

HUANG JUN

Episodes: 10
Release date: 3 June – 29 July 2021 (season 2)
Creator: Marc Cherry
Cast: Allison Tolman (Alma Fillcot), Nick Frost (Bertram Fillcot), Lana Parrilla (Rita Castillo), B.K. Cannon (Dee Fillcot), Jordane Christie (Vern Loomis), Matthew Daddario (Scooter Polarsky), Jack Davenport (The Narrator), Veronica Falcón (Catherine Castillo)
Companies: Black Lamb, Acme Productions, Cherry Productions, Imagine Television Studios, CBS Studios
Genre: dark comedy, crime drama
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9054904/

Introduction: Rewriting the 1940s

Why Women Kill (2021, Paramount) is the second season of the anthology series created by Marc Cherry, the famous creator of *Desperate Housewives* and *Devious Maids*. The series, set in 1949, delves into the meaning of beauty, the truth hidden behind people's facades, the impact of being ignored by society, and what a woman is willing to do to find her place. This time, Cherry ditches the time loop and the three storylines from the first season to present the audience with a single coherent story set in 1949, a period four years after WWII and a decade before the start of the Second Wave of the feminist movement. After the WWII, there was a general social trend pushing women back to domestic life. Women were encouraged to give up the jobs they gained during wartime due to the diminished male workforce and return to traditional gender roles, with the returning soldiers as breadwinners and women as homemakers.

The new main cast features Allison Tolman as Alma, a timid but optimistic housewife, and Nick Frost as her husband Bertram, a veterinarian harboring a dark secret. B.K. Cannon plays Dee Fillcot, Alma's daughter, who initially engages in a secret relationship with Matthew Daddario's character, Scooter, a struggling actor, and Rita's paramour. Later, Dee finds her true love, Jordane Christie's character, Vern Loomis, is a private investigator. Lana Parrilla takes on the villain role of Rita Castillo, the glamorous president of the local Garden Club and the gold-digging wife of wealthy Carlo. Finally, Verónica Falcón plays Catherine Castillo, Rita's stepdaughter and Carlo's unmarried daughter.

The costume design in the series is a tribute to Christian Dior's 'New Look' launched in 1947, characterized by emphasizing the woman's bust, cinching the waist,

and emphasizing it with a voluminous skirt. The show's costumes reflect the mid-century ideals of feminine elegance, but also embody the women's desires and power. Rita's outfits, as the narrator observes, "strike everyone" for "her weapon is lipstick and neckline" (E1). Alma's escalating criminality is mirrored in the increasingly refined fabrics, designs, and colors of her dresses. There is even a parallelism between the dresses of Rita and Alma. At the very first, Rita dresses in red. In the end, Alma also wears a similarly gorgeous red dress. Alma ultimately 'becomes' the initially gorgeous but aggressive Rita, while Rita 'becomes' the initially kind but normal Alma.

This series interestingly emphasizes the concept of inclusion, particularly in terms of body diversity (Lopez). The Fillcot family, with their curvy figures (in part the product of visual effects), stands out against the 1940s Hollywood obsessed with thinness. Alma and her daughter Dee are portrayed as heavyset, sparking discussions on their distinctiveness in a society that values slimness. As Morris notes, "Alma wants power and sees her lack of beauty as holding her back. Dee ends up representing a different kind of power—the kind that comes from knowing what you want and being confident in yourself." Bertram's rounded physique gives him a kindly appearance, though it contrasts starkly with his true nature as a serial killer, adding a cartoonish dark farce to the narrative and to its gender representation and issues.

Analysis: Women who kill/hate women

The second season of *Why Women Kill* explores how women seek self-fulfillment in a patriarchal society. Through the transformations of Alma Fillcot and Rita Castillo, the series reveals the hidden costs of ambition and the dangers of repressed desires. Set in mid-century suburban America, it critiques societal pressures and exposes the complexities of power, agency, and morality in women's lives. In the series, the female characters' actions are distinctly driven by their own internal desires. These characters demonstrate their agency through the pursuit and fulfillment of their own desires, often accompanied by a compromise of moral boundaries.

Alma Fillcot drastically changes from a meek, overlooked housewife, to someone who dips into pitch black and revels in it. The series reflects societal pressures pushed upon women to conform to standard appearance and roles with her ambition metamorphosed into ever more sinister ways (Bhuvad). As her goals of strengthening herself as a candidate to enter the Garden Club escalate, Alma becomes the manipulator rather than being manipulated and actively uses her own physical presence as her weapon. Critics have noted that this shift "explores the dangers of repressed desires within socially imposed boundaries" (Pavlica). Alma's body meanings change as her moral decline becomes more emphasized. Alma appropriates the socialization of feminine allure as a mask over her murky inner world.

It is impossible to ignore the absurdity of Alma's crimes, which partly reflect the existential doubt about individual existence and the value of life brought on by consumerism and the social media era. Initially, Alma wishes to join the Garden Club like to be a celebrity in current social media. However, events spiral out of control: she accidentally kills Mrs. Yort, who overheard her secret, and hastily buries the body in her own garden; she manipulates her husband to kill Carlo; she plots Isabel's murder; she stabs Rita to death; and she even attempts to kill Vern but fails. What makes it even more ironic is that Alma feels no remorse for her crimes. Instead, she believes that being

beautiful is not enough—she should be smarter and crueler. When the public finally labels her as the worst killer of their time, she convinces herself that she has become a true star. In reality, all Alma gains after committing so many crimes is nothing more than her own illusion. Rather than condemning Alma on moral grounds, her absurd actions and nihilistic conclusion serve as a stark warning for modern individuals caught in the existential void created by consumerism and social media.

Rita Castillo, the other central female character, offers a stark contrast to the early Alma. Her story revolves around how she seeks personal meaning while losing attention. Rita used to be a wealthy, glamorous, and power-wielding femme fatale, using her body as her primary weapon and most effective tool to influence others. In Rita's storyline, we see the series' critique of a society that is all too willing to exploit and reward women for their physical appearance, as well as the consequences of losing that beauty. Critics have noted that Rita's storyline, especially in the finale, "sheds light on the societal pressures for women to maintain an image of perfection, ultimately exposing the vulnerability beneath" (Guo). When Rita is framed by Alma and sent to prison, her life, built on beauty, is completely dismantled. She loses everything she once prided herself on—the life of a socialite, her glamorous dresses, and her friends at the club. At the same time, however, her conscience awakens. She begins to treat her relationship with Scooter with kindness and equality, letting go of the past and deciding to start anew in Los Angeles. Before leaving, Rita confronts Alma, demanding that she confess her crimes. This, however, enrages Alma, and Rita ultimately dies alone in an alley. In the end, the newfound sense of purpose Rita discovers is met with an equally absurd conclusion, much like Alma's own fate.

In the series, female characters' desires often turn into hostility towards each other, which prevents the possibility of forming friendly relationships and leads them into a trap of mutual hatred, exploitation, and antagonism, a cattiness which is a product of a male-dominated patriarchal culture that shifts the blame of men's wrongdoings onto conflicts between women, intensifying the estrangement and conflict among women.

There are several irreparable hostilities and shattered friendships that are particularly noteworthy. Rita and Alma have a heart-to-heart moment that could have led to reconciliation, but their relationship is spoiled when Rita discovers that Dee, Alma's daughter and her own lover Scooter are secretly dating, leading Rita to resent Dee (Keller). First, she deliberately humiliates Alma at the club and then schemes to have Dee lose her job. As Dee explains, "Mom. What Rita did, it's not cause she hates you. It's cause she hates me" (E5). When Alma tries to use Rita's affair with Scooter to regain Rita's favor, this further infuriates Rita, which culminates in the destruction of Alma's cherished garden. Since then, Alma perceives Rita as the primary obstacle to her club aspirations and resorts to extreme tactics to sabotage her. However, Rita never realizes that their enmity is rooted in Scooter's cheating.

Another enmity arises between the spinster Catherine and her eventual stepmother Rita. Catherine, once a victim of her authoritarian father Carlo, could have married the man she loved but was forced to remain a spinster when he threated to disinherit her. Catherine's hatred for Rita's immoral life—enjoying her father's wealth while keeping a young lover—leads her to become a defender of patriarchy, taking care of Carlo after his stroke and going to great lengths to evict Rita from the house. On her side, Alma initially has a brief friendship at the club with Grace, the first member to treat her kindly. However, Alma ultimately exploits Grace's lesbian scandal to blackmail her

into withdrawing her support for Rita in the club's presidential election. Isabel, on the other hand, Rita's true friend and closest family, risks committing crimes to help Rita escape her abusive ex-husband and even uses stolen money to buy Rita a dress to catch Carlo's attention. Yet, after Rita marries wealthy Carlo, her 'gift' to Isabel is nothing more than a maid's uniform.

At the same time, the male characters in the series are often downplayed or their misdeeds are concealed, and they are even portrayed as positive figures, criticizing the actions of women. By creating such an extreme contrast between the good and evil of men and women, Marc Cherry satirizes the social status quo, revealing the hidden control and exploitation of women under patriarchy. Thus, Carlo, once a domineering patriarch, has an overwhelming desire to control women that is often overlooked in the series. He manipulates his daughter's marriage, causing Catherine's isolation in Texas. He also controls Rita's body through money and their marriage, regularly exploiting her services before that when she works as a prostitute. Carlo's controlling nature extends to Rita's cousin Isabel, who is forced to work as a maid for fifteen years—the only condition under which Carlo allows her to stay in their house. However, many scenes depict Rita as the dominant figure in their marital power dynamics. Carlo appears as a weak, disabled old man, unable to speak or move, confined to a wheelchair, and witnessing his beautiful wife's infidelity. He even garners sympathy from the audience as a victim in Alma and Rita's conflict. Similarly, Bertram's darker side is also often overlooked. He has the grim hobby of "alleviating suffering" by killing people. By the start of the series, he has already killed around twenty-six or twenty-seven people, most of whom are women unable to resist or escape him. His personal dominance and control over women's lives are part of a broader patriarchal control and victimization of women. However, after killing Carlo urged by Alma, Bertram begins to reflect on his crimes. He starts blaming himself for Alma's criminal transformation and criticizes her increasingly erratic and destructive behavior.

As a social climber, Scooter is expected to be an irresponsible and fickle gold-digger. However, he reveals a compassionate side by secretly packing Rita's belongings and helping her leave L.A. after her imprisonment. Despite being the most subdued male voice in the series, he still demonstrates the ability to stand up to Catherine, preventing her from defaming Rita, even while living under Catherine's roof. In a series where plotting, scheming, maintaining appearances, and burying bodies under pristine suburban lawns are the norm, there is at least one truly virtuous character: Vern. As a wounded World War II veteran, he embodies loyalty and dedication to his country. As a private investigator, he upholds his professional ethics and refuses to compromise his morals for money. As Dee's boyfriend, he sacrifices his reputation by wholeheartedly accepting her despite her pregnancy out of wedlock.

To sum up, *Why Women Kill 2* features a strong female lead, Alma, that illustrates the ways in which women achieve self-fulfillment under specific social contexts, albeit through extreme measures. The male characters play a covert role in propelling these actions while maintaining a positive image. Although this portrayal might bring out criticisms from viewers, at least it conveys the message that a woman's significance is not confined to the home. Women, like men, have the full right to pursue social value and wealth status, and such desires are realistic and acceptable. It also serves as a cautionary tale against the hidden harms of patriarchy.

Bibliography

Bhuvad, Ariba. "*Why Women Kill Season 2* Finale Recap: The Lady Confesses." *Show Snob* 31 July 2021, https://showsnob.com/2021/07/31/why-women-kill-season-2-finale-recap-the-lady-confesses/.

Guo, Zhen. "The Analysis of *Why Women Kill Season 2* Based on the Development of Feminism in China." *SHS Web of Conferences* 155 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/202315503006

Keller, Joel. "*Why Women Kill Season 2*: Stream It or Skip It?" *Decider* 4 June 2021, https://decider.com/2021/06/04/why-women-kill-season-2-paramount-plus-review/

Lopez, Cristen. "*Why Women Kill Season 2*: Marc Cherry's Soap Opera Mostly Finds Its Footing in the 1940s" *IndieWire* 3 June 2021, http://www.indiewire.com/features/general/why-women-kill-season-2-review-1234641730/

Morris, Anthony. "Every Script Was a Surprise." *SBS* 10 January 2022, https://www.sbs.com.au/whats-on/article/every-script-was-a-surprise-b-k-cannon-talks-about-her-role-in-season-2-of-why-women-kill/qxndpdptm

Pavlica, Carissa. "*Why Women Kill Season 2* Episode 10 Review: The Lady Confesses." *TV Fanatic* 29 July 2021, https://www.tvfanatic.com/why-women-kill-season-2-episode-10-review-the-lady-confesses/.

Devs: Not a Genius, but a Tech Messianic Patriarch

JEIMMY CUERVO QUINTERO

Episodes: 8
Release date: 5 March 2020
Creators: Alex Garland
Cast: Sonoya Mizuno (Lily Chan), Nick Offerman (Forest), Jin Ha (Jamie), Alison Pill (Katie), Cailee Spaeny (Lyndon), Stephen McKinley Henderson (Stewart), Karl Glusman (Sergei), Zach Grenier (Kenton)
Companies: DNA Films, FX Productions, Scott Rudin Productions
Genre: cyber-thriller, drama, dystopia, science fiction, suspense
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8746478/

Introduction: Art, poetry, philosophy and humanity

Devs is an eight-episode miniseries, created by Alex Garland, which narrates a multilayered story in which the lead characters embark on their own quest when faced with loss and tragedy and in which quantum physics, determinism, and free will take a central stage.

Garland, who wrote and directed this science-fiction thriller, is an English novelist, screenwriter, director and film producer, fascinated by science. He has had, so far, a prosperous career and written several films such as *The Beach* or *Dredd,* among others. However, he is most famous for his science-fiction films *Annihilation* and *Ex Machina*; the latter gained him a nomination to an Oscars in the Best Writing category in 2016. *Devs* is his first miniseries. In an interview with Renfro for *Business Insider*, Garland speaks about the tight relation between *Devs* and *Ex Machina*, described by the interviewers as "a meta tie-in [between Garland's stories] about a tech company founder gone amok." Garland calls it "a huge private joke," as he reveals that he had played with the names of both productions: "Devs ex machina's" literal translation is "God from a machine." In *Ex machina*, Renfro comments, "the company founder perfects an artificial intelligence design" and "*Devs* is a section of the [founder's] company."

Apart from science, the director's appreciation for music, poetry and video games is evident throughout the miniseries. Garland explains that he intentionally changed a key word from the poem "Aubade" by Philip Larkin recited by Stewart (played by Stephen McKinley), and justified this because "when we remember songs and poems, we sometimes adapt the lyrics or the words" as "an intrusion of our imagination" (in Renfro). Garland further explains how he wanted to present Devs' division: "I wanted to present the heart of the science in the most magical, beautiful and the most poetic space" (in

GamesSpot). Overall, the miniseries *Devs* is presented by the script writer/director as a combination of art, philosophy, science and humanity, done with wittiness and intention.

In this well-paced miniseries, lead actress Sonoya Mizuno, known for her roles in Garland's own *Ex-machina*, and in *Maniac* and *La La Land*, plays Lily Chan, a software engineer whose life is abruptly shaken overnight by the disappearance of her boyfriend Sergei, (played by Karl Glusman, known for his lead role in *Love)*. Sergei goes missing on the day of his promotion at Amaya, a tech company in Silicon Valley where they both work. He joins the Devs' department that day, but he never returns. A day later, footage of Sergei committing suicide at Amaya, makes Lily suspicious of the company's involvement in his mysterious disappearance. As she goes through her loss, and starts searching for answers, she finds out that her employer, Forest, had everything to do with Sergei's disappearance. Forest, the tech entrepreneur and founder of Amaya, played by Nick Offerman (known for his roles in the sitcom *Parks and Recreation* and in movies such *The Founder* and *Hearts Beat Loud)*, had Sergei killed as he attempted to tamper with his quest to use everything in his power to recreate a world where his deceased daughter could be back. Devs, precisely, is the development division of Amaya where everything happens. A project based on quantum physics is being run in this lab where matters of determinism and free will are all tested, and where the end result of the whole project is unexpected and puzzling.

Analysis: Forest and tech messianic patriarchy

Devs combines different elements ranging from quantum mechanics, philosophy, humanity, and grief to free will. In its creation process, Garland's starting point was his personal interest in the scientific part and the kind of philosophy that flows out of science; after that, he started developing the plot and characters (in Renfro). As regards this particular genre, it is worth noting that according to Vint, SF is often referred to as "*the literature of ideas*" which deals with the "interpretative framework for working through difficult issues of social power and cultural meaning" (87, original emphasis). This is important because Garland's plot portraits precisely that; he elaborates on 'a toddler-in-the-fridge' plot, in which power dynamics and political implications play a role and cultural representations of tech entrepreneurs are on the spotlight. Although Forest is depicted as a grieving parent, he is in fact a messianic patriarchal tech millionaire who uses his money and power to create a computational world in which his daughter is still alive. Forest's characterization resonates, thus, deeply with the tech patriarchal examples of real-life's 21st century.

To illustrate this, I will concentrate on the starting point of the plot first and then on specifics about the lead character and what he embodies. In terms of plot development, it is key to mention that this is based on two female characters' instrumentalized deaths, more precisely on the younger one. As Simon explains, "frequently, comic book writers employ female characters as little more than plot devices designed to provide emotional drama and backstory for their male counterparts." This plot device labelled by Gail Simone as the "woman in the refrigerator" came about after her realization and criticism of that trend in comics; the hero often reacted to the loss of "superheroines who have been either depowered, raped, or cut up and stuck in the refrigerator" (in Nelson 2015). For the purpose of the present paper, I have adapted that concept to 'toddler in the refrigerator' since the passing of Forest's daughter, Amaya, is

employed as the backbone of the story and his motivation to employ his enormous power and money to bring her back.

Amaya was only four when she and her mother died in a car accident. Forest's grief and obsession with her passing is evident in everything he does, the life he leads and how his company looks (there is an enormous sculpture of Amaya right in the middle of his company). Such symbolism and objectivization is taken to an extreme with Forest's creation of the DEVS division, which is where he has experts develop a quantum mechanics-based super computer that stores massive amounts of data and that is capable of making incursions into to the past and the future, where the multi-worlds are contained. Forest's underlying intention of creating an alternative version of the world as we know triggered him to start the project, because that would mean that there are many worlds in which his daughter has not died.

As regards the gender roles and power dynamics seen in Forest's obsession and unchecked power, these lead him to employ his fortune to pursue his personal goal while generating what could potentially be a new global social order. He uses the expertise, knowledge and work of three generational geniuses who, in the real world, as the scriptwriter/director points out (in GameSpot) tend to always be backstage. The geniuses Katie (Alison Pill), Stewart (Stephen McKinley) and Lyndon (Cailee Spaeny), work out the quantum mechanics multi-world system under the premises of determinism, which according to the OED is "the philosophical doctrine that human action is not free but necessarily determined by motives, which are regarded as external forces acting upon the will", making the whole project a reality. However, it is the founder whose iconic image, remains in the collective imagination of society.

Over half of the miniseries Forest is presented as a character motivated by grief. His clothing, austerity and way of interacting suggest a religious imagery and he himself resembles Jesus Christ. In the scene in which Forest reveals to Lily that *Devs* really means DEUS: God (E8), Forest alludes to his own messianic persona as a multi-world maker, and as that who gets resurrected and who can also bring the dead back to life. He and his company could be seen as Little and Winch suggest as a "conjoined apparatus" (14); in *Devs* that juncture is more than metaphorical, as Forest ultimately becomes part of the machine he paid to develop. This messianic patriarchal man, in turn, connects with the genre's portrayal that Hayward suggests is in occasions seen in science fiction's plots, that is "man's fear of (…) death (…) drives [him] to supplant the womb and create life himself" (362). Devs is God and Forest enacts Jesus Christ, by on one hand, inhabiting what God created and, on the other, by bringing his family back to life.

It is worth noting, however, that Lily, who lost both her boyfriend and ex-boyfriend Jamie (played by Jin Ha) at the hands of Kenton (Zach Grenier), Forest's security employee, challenges his messianic patriarchal mindset and his belief in the deterministic doctrine. In the well-developed last episode, Lily firmly tells Forest, "You know the thing about messiahs, don't you? They're false prophets" (E8). Her defiant comment comes right before she fights the future she had been presented, in which she shot Forest in the face. Lily does not do so, but instead tosses away the gun she is holding. That moment challenges both Forest and Katie's blind belief in deterministic premises and exercising one's free will.

Although Forest is presented as vulnerable and caring, and as a tormented man with no evil intentions, he mirrors the tech founder patriarch bred today in Silicon Valley

where new tech experts are born every so often and then acquire enormous power, money and political influence. Forest represents the iconic 21st century tech entrepreneurs, like Musk, Zuckerberg and Bezos. Like them, Forest embodies the myth of the legendary founder: “a (white, male) genius capable of producing new products that change the world” (Little and Winch 6) whose celebrity is part of his corporate publicity. Second, in the series Forest, just like “Musk, Bezos and Zuckerberg, [is] not just [a] successful entrepreneur;” he is, as Little and Winch would suggest “one of the wealthiest people in the world” (6). As ‘a legendary founder’, Forest is “[an] agent of transformative social change, operating within a structure that is opposed to the conventional frameworks that constrain the role of the corporation as a vehicle for individualized power” (14). Precisely, Forest unrestricted power allows him to pursue his goal without being scrutinized. Third, although Forest represents everything that society could associate with “tech geniuses,” Garland asks us to be cautious with that term: whomever we claim are geniuses, often employ their celebrity to sell a product (in Renfro); they are mostly businessmen planning to accrue wealth and power. Tech patriarchs like Forest are terrifying because their unlimited power and freedom from scrutiny make them unconcerned about the consequences of their creations to the world. Lyndon, one of the real geniuses, expresses his concern for what the machine can do in the hands of a person like Forest. He acknowledges the dangers of letting Forest handle such powerful computer; just as we worry about our own tech geniuses because “what is at stake with all of them is the world” (Little and Winch 80).

Generally, *Devs*, aided with the ‘toddler-in-the-refrigerator’ plot, eloquently provides, what according to Vint, science fiction offers, that is, “the language, images, and concepts that celebrate our cultural preoccupation with science and technology, and that expresses our anxieties and fears regarding how they are changing our world and our selves” (9). The miniseries offers a view of what the employment of quantum physics to create multi-worlds would be like while establishing how problematic it would be if it is handled by a highly powerful, rich and ruthless individual pursuing their own agenda and disregarding the consequences of what they do.

This power could also potentially be instrumentalized by any given government, had they the chance to access it. Although Forest does not seem to be part of any network with people as powerful as he is, real tech patriarchs are constituting their own; according to Little and Winch, they maintain their cooperation, rivalry and power balanced to perpetuate their power. *Devs’* representation of Forest as a tech entrepreneur brings about the current cultural preoccupation and fears about how science and technology could alter our planet. It serves as a reminder of the potential consequences of unchecked power and technology in the hands of tech ‘messianic’ patriarchs. And it immediately makes us connect that representation with specific tech celebrities holding such power in our current society, as of January 2025 within President Trump’s closest circle.

Bibliography

“Determinism, N., Sense 1.” *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford UP 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1569105884.

GameSpot Universe. “What Is *Devs*? Creator Alex Garland Explains FX’s New Sci-Fi Show.” YouTube 6 March 2020, http://youtu.be/Wj8AbaYXrIY?feature=shared

Hayward, Susan. *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*. Routledge, 2022.
Little, Ben and Alison Winch. *The New Patriarchs of Digital Capitalism: Celebrity Tech Founders and Networks of Power*. Routledge, 2021.
Nelson, Kyra. "Women in Refrigerators: The Objectification of Women in Comics." *BYU ScholarsArchive* 2015, http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/awe/vol2/iss2/9/
Renfro, Kim. "*Devs* Creator Alex Garland Explains 5 References and Details You Might Have Missed in His New Series." *Business Insider* 8 May 2020, www.businessinsider.com/devs-creator-alex-garland-explains-details-references-2020-4
Vint, Sherryl. *Science Fiction: a Guide for the Perplexed*, Bloomsbury 2014.

I May Destroy You: The Aftermath of Rape

Nerea Menorca Hidalgo

Episodes: 12
Release date: 8 June – 13 July 2020
Creators: Marti Noxon and Jean-Marc Vallée
Cast: Michaela Coel (Arabella Essiedu), Paapa Essiedu (Kwame), Weruche Opia (Terry), Marsha Stephanie Blake (Bianca), Karan Gill (Zain), Marouane Zotti (Biagio) and Pearl Chanda (Nilufer).
Companies: HBO, Falkna, Various Artists Limited
Genre: drama, dark comedy, social commentary
Nationality: UK
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11204260/

Introduction: Michaela Coel's bravery

I May Destroy You, a twelve-episode drama series created and starred by actor Michaela Coel, delves into the complex issues of consent, sexual assault, and the personal journeys of recovery of the three main characters: Arabella, Terry and Kwame. The story deals with a British, Black young writer called Arabella (played by Coel herself), who, while living in modern London, goes through the horrible aftermath of a sexual assault after a night out. Arabella, an intelligent and funny woman, puts together her traumatic experience, and exposes her vulnerability and her personal struggles. As she tries to gather together the fragmented memories of that horrific night, the series explores the identity of the main characters, their relationships, and the difficulty of living in a world where the voices of the survivors are marginalized.

The series is based on Coel's personal experiences with sexual abuse, and she questions with it the standards of society while exploring topics such as consent and gendered violence. What is "most revolutionary of all is the fact that what we see play out on screen is so personal to Coel: in a world where women are expected to feel shame around their sexual assaults, it is courageous that Coel refused to stay silent about what happened to her" (Latif), since we live in a society that often stigmatizes and silences survivors of sexual violence. Throughout the series, the healing process is not linear and the survivor's past can be both a source of vulnerability and the opportunity for growth.

Coel has the ability to balance humor with serious themes, creating a multifaceted experience that resonates deeply with the audience. Her role as both the creator and leading actress makes the series even more personal, giving truthfulness and emotional depth to the portrayal of the characters. The series might appear at first as a combined humor and drama show, but actually, the emotional connection that Coel shares with the

story lets the audience see that it is a story about how humans deal with heartbreaking issues, and on the importance of empathy and compassion.

As noted, the problem of consent and the recovery from sexual abuse of survivors are the main themes that make the series captivating and relevant. The series confronts the terrible realities of sexual assault and the complex consequences that often follow, together with the importance of reclaiming one's story. Coel's series emphasizes the vulnerability of survivors and the different journeys the characters go through to build up strength in moments of pain and despair. There are also moments in which they are not only victims but perpetrators, showing their emotional complexity. The problems with the legal system are also shown, since many times, the law has a dismissive attitude towards victims of sexual violence.

This essay will focus specifically on the trauma and recovery journey of Arabella and Kwame. Sharing the experiences of these characters may shed light on issues that still affect society and might serve as a reminder of the importance of empathy and awareness in addressing themes of consent, trauma, and resilience in the face of tragedy.

Analysis: Consent and healing from rape trauma

In Michaela Coel's groundbreaking series *I May Destroy You*, the exploration of gender and body issues is clearly seen in Arabella and Kwame. They deal with their own relationship to identity, vulnerability, and societal expectations, revealing the profound impact of sexual violence and the oppression of the victim's experience. Coel examines the complexities of consent, empowerment, and self-acceptance, shedding light on how the body serves as both a site of trauma but also of resilience. As Boonyarujirada explains, the character's experiences are portrayed in a rich, dynamic, and nearly similar way to real-world survivors. Coel reveals the dual identity of the body: it can endure the scars of trauma while simultaneously being a site of strength and resilience.

In Arabella's case, she engages in a consensual sexual relationship with a man called Zain, another well-known author like herself, after already having experienced sexual abuse on a night out. Zain becomes her second abuser, secretly removing his condom, and excusing himself by saying: "I thought you knew" (E4). Initially, Arabella does not think about this experience as rape, and it takes her a long time until she actually exposes him publicly through social media. Arabella goes through a challenging journey of healing after her sexual assault, since she immediately feels disoriented and confused after the incident, which reflects the psychological impact of trauma. Afterwards, Arabella works to reclaim her story and sense of control, with writing becoming a crucial part of her healing process. By channeling her experiences into her creative work, she confronts her trauma and finds empowerment.

In Arabella's journey, she recurs to a main coping mechanism, which is diverting her thoughts towards broader societal issues: "There are hungry children. There's a war in Syria. Not everyone has a cell phone" (E4). While this may be important, it affects her healing process. In addition, she needs to reconcile her intersectional identity in order to heal: "I never noticed being a woman. I was too busy being poor and black" (E7). This highlights how the interplay of her race and socioeconomic status had obscured her awareness of the challenges that exist in her gender and sexuality. Her struggle leads to a loss of control over her life's trajectory, since she is dismissed from her job and faces financial insecurity. This illustrates the genuine experiences of survivors of sexual assault,

who often require time and space to reprocess their trauma, which can affect their entire lives and financial stability (Loya).

Arabella starts using social media, specifically Twitter, as a means to find comfort and restore her sense of identity by sharing her story of sexual assault. Arabella uses Twitter as a therapeutic tool, finding temporary comfort in the overwhelming number of supportive and affirming responses she receives. This experience reflects the rise of the #MeToo movement on social media, which gained great significance in 2017. However, Arabella's dependence on social media grows, leading her to feel pressured to fight against all the social injustices, even though she has not fully processed her own sexual trauma. Her Twitter usage becomes a coping mechanism, offering temporary comfort but contributing to an unhealthy addiction as she battles with her unresolved issues (Boonyarujirada).

Kwame's story highlights the theme of consent and its impact on men. After being sexually assaulted during what he believes was a consensual encounter (he is non-consensually humped),[6] he struggles with feelings of shame and societal expectations about masculinity. The series critiques how men are often taught to downplay their trauma or not talk about it at all. His experience shows the need for a broader understanding of consent that includes all genders and sexual orientations, urging the conversation to move beyond traditional narratives. After his assault, Kwame finds it hard to label what happened to him and struggles with feelings of shame and isolation. He chooses not to report his assault, attempting to reclaim agency over his sexuality through a sexual encounter with a white woman, Nilufer, without disclosing his sexual orientation. However, Nilufer reveals her fetishization of Black men and expresses her homophobia. This experience is uncomfortable for Kwame, and also painful when he later discusses the incident with Arabella, who unjustly accuses him of rape for not disclosing his sexual orientation before his sexual encounter with Nilufer.

Arabella, a cisgender Black woman, and Kwame, a gay Black man, share a deep personal and cultural connection because of their mixed Ghanaian and British identities. However, their experiences with their sexual partners and their assaults highlight significant differences. Kwame's experience with sexual assault shows the lack of public discourse surrounding male survivors, as male victimization is often less acknowledged compared to that of women. This intersection of Kwame's gender and sexual identity is evident in the lack of support from the police officer he reports his sexual assault to, since the police officer seems to dismiss his experience, reflecting broader societal attitudes towards male survivors of sexual assault (Leppänen). The healing process for each character reflects a collective need to redefine consent not just as a legal term but as a personal and emotional journey that must be respected and understood. The series "invites the audience to ponder how victims of sexual assault may receive different responses and sympathy from the legal system" (Boonyarujirada). Kwame's struggle relates to real-life cases, since a male sexual victim also shares his own personal story in relation to that of Kwame; as Michael Cuby writes, "Even with the mandatory seminar on sexual consent I had recently led for incoming freshmen, which stressed the importance

[6] Okundaye comments that after Kwame and Malik have "condom protected sex, Kwame tries to leave, and in devastatingly vicious scenes he is sexually assaulted by Malik. This is shrouded in ambiguity – it is not clear if Malik is aggressively humping Kwame, or penetrating him to experience the bareback he felt entitled to, and it later becomes clear that Kwame is not even sure himself." Humping would not involve penetration but grinding of the genitals against the partner's body.

of consent that was both *affirmative* and *verbal*, I didn't entertain the possibility that my personal experience with a slightly uncomfortable sexual encounter could qualify as such" (original emphasis). This highlights the complexities of how sexual assault victims from a certain gender and sexual orientation are perceived and treated within the legal system.

The series bravely investigates and raises issues about the shifting roles and power dynamics that exist in relationships (Curciarello). Coel's series challenges conventional views on consent by presenting characters in situations where the lines are blurred, highlighting the complexities of relationships and power dynamics. It portrays a range of emotional responses to trauma, such as Arabella finding strength in her writing and Kwame finding support from his friends later in the series. There is a need for universal strategies to educate the public about sexual assault and its myths, which often blame the victims of sexual assault. Empowering and educating the public with series like *I May Destroy You* can challenge stereotypes that diminish the credibility of the victims and the support they receive within the legal system. By shifting perceptions, society can create a more supportive environment for survivors and create a legal foundation that better addresses their needs, ultimately creating a broader societal change that helps victims in their healing journeys (Edwards and Dardis).

As Keagan argues, Coel's sensitivity and generosity is not only present in her performance and directorial choices, but also in the relationship she establishes with the audience to clearly portray the types and effects of sexual violence, assault, and trauma, making sure that there is no doubt that such treatment is wrong. However, Keagan also notes that she cannot speak for all the victims of sexual assault and warns viewers that the graphic depictions can be triggering for some survivors. This means that while creating this series may help Coel and many survivors in their recovery and healing journeys, it may not resonate with everyone.

To sum up, in a society where women frequently encounter shame related to their experiences with sexual assault, Michaela Coel's choice to openly discuss her trauma is a courageous act. She transforms her personal pain and anger into a raw artistic expression, reflecting the reality that recovery for many survivors is a complex and ongoing journey without clear resolutions. Unfortunately, realistic portrayals of rape and its aftermath are often missing in the big and the smaller screen, much like the authentic expressions of grief that are often overlooked, as these topics can be difficult to portray and face. The need for real representations of such experiences is crucial to combat the many misleading depictions of sexual assaults that exist.

Bibliography

Boonyarujirada, Bhumsiri. "*I May Destroy You*: Gender, Rape Culture, and Intersectionality." *Striketh* 8 September 2023, https://medium.com/striketh/i-may-destroy-you-gender-rape-culture-and-intersectionality-26e9307acad3

Curciarello, Catalina. "*I May Destroy You* de Michaela Coel." Repositorio Institucional de la Universidad Nacional de La Plata 2020, https://sedici.unlp.edu.ar/bitstream/handle/10915/119573/Documento_completo.12507%20-%20Curciarello.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Cuby, Michael. "*I May Destroy You* Is Sparking Nuanced Conversations about Black Male Sexual Assault." *Them* 24 August 2020, https://www.them.us/story/i-may-destroy-you-sexual-assault-kwame

Edwards, Katie M. and Christina M. Dardis. "Sexual Activity between Victims and Perpetrators Following a Sexual Assault: A Systematic Literature Review and Critical Feminist Analysis." *Women's Studies International Forum* 94 (September 2022): https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1146&context=cyfsfacpub

Keagan Carr Fransch. "Review: *I May Destroy You* Is a Stunning Depiction of Sexual Assault and Its Aftermath." *The Spinoff* 6 July 2020, https://thespinoff.co.nz/pop-culture/06-07-2020/review-i-may-destroy-you-is-a-stunning-depic-of-sexual-assault-and-its-aftermath

Latif, Leila. "*I May Destroy You* and How It Represents the Future of TV." *BBC* 19 October 2021, www.bbc.com/culture/article/20211015-i-may-destroy-you-and-how-it-represents-the-future-of-tv.

Leppänen, Anna Mae. *Intersectional Representation in "I May Destroy You."* BA dissertation, University of Utrecht, 2021, https://studenttheses.uu.nl/bitstream/handle/20.500.12932/40758/Sex,%20Consent%20&%20Identity.pdf?sequence=1

Okundaye, Jason. "*I May Destroy You*'s Kwame Honours the Black British Gay Male Experience." *Dazed* 6 July 2020, https://www.dazeddigital.com/film-tv/article/49729/1/i-may-destroy-you-kwame-black-british-gay-male-experience

Julie and the Phantoms: Beyond the Physical and Visible Self

Alesia Volkova

Episodes: 9
Release date: 10 September 2020
Creators: Kenny Ortega, Dan Cross, David Hoge
Source: *Julie e os Fantasmas* (2011-2102), TV series by Paula Knudsen, Tiago Mello, and Fabio Danesi for Nickleodeon Brazil
Cast: Madison Reyes (Julie Molina), Charlie Gillespie (Luke Patterson), Owen Patrick Joyner (Alex Mercer), Jeremy Shada (Reggie Peters), Jadah Marie (Flynn), Booboo Stewart (Willie), Cheyenne Jackson (Caleb Covington), Savannah Lee May (Carrie Wilson), Sacha Carlson (Nick)
Companies: Netflix
Genre: fantasy, comedy, musical, family show, teen
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt10183988/

Introduction: Life is good on the other side of Hollywood

Julie and the Phantoms (2020, Netflix) is a nine-episode TV-series, created by Dan Cross and David Hoge and produced by Kenny Ortega, which narrates a story of how a teenage girl and three ghosts form a band together, as well as the obstacles they had to overcome in their lives. This miniseries was inspired by the Brazilian musical comedy-drama *Julie e os Fantasmas* (2011-2012) produced by Rede Bandeirantes together with Mixer and Nickelodeon Brazil. Kenny Ortega is an American producer, choreographer and director, mostly known for directing the *High School Musical* trilogy and for choreographing *Dirty Dancing*, as well as his work with Disney, for which he received the Disney Legends Hall of Fame award in 2019. Dan Cross and David Hoge are famous precisely for their collaboration in creating *Julie and the Phantoms* and *The Thundermans* (2013).

The story of *Julie and the Phantoms* begins in 1995 in Los Angeles, when four seventeen-year-old boys (Luke, Alex, Reggie and Bobby) were in a band called Sunset Curve, dreaming of being famous; however, three of them died from food poisoning right before offering the biggest performance of their career at the concert hall known as the Orpheum. Right after their death, the viewers are transported to 2020 to meet another main character, a shy high school student, Julie, who is mourning the recent death of her mother. Julie used to be passionate about music just like her mother but is too traumatized to sing or play piano after her death, as music reminded her of her loss. One day, Julie starts sorting out old belongings of her mom, including the CD with songs by Sunset Curve. She starts playing the CD, and Alex, Reggie and Luke, appear in front of her as ghosts. Julie is the only person who can see them all the time, and as their further

experiences demonstrate, other people only see them if they play music together with Julie. They decide to start a band together called Julie and the Phantoms, which by the end of the miniseries is on the way to stardom. Unfortunately, Netflix cancelled the promising series only after a season, disappointing many fans.

Analysis: Ghostly romance

Since several main characters of the series are ghosts and, therefore, are transparent and bodiless, several issues about the body arise. First, the budding romance between Julie, a living teen girl, and Luke, a dead teenage ghost, one of the phantoms in their band, needs to be discussed. They relate to each other on many levels: both deal with the lost connection with their parents, as Julie lost her mother and Luke passed away when he was on bad terms with his parents but regretted that he was not given an opportunity to apologize to them. Luke was the leader of their band when he, Alex and Reggie were alive and also the songs' composer. In his ghostly form, he shares his position with Julie, who is also highly talented at songwriting. This not only highlights their common traits, such as being creative and hardworking, but also concerns gender: Sunset Curve used to be an all-male band with a distinct male leader, but Julie and the Phantoms is a mixed-gender band with two equally important leaders, one female and one male. Julie is never discriminated against or looked down on, but deeply respected and admired by her band mates.

As noted, Julie and Luke enjoy plenty of time together while working on music, but they are also similar in the negative traits of their character: both are stubborn and a bit hot-tempered. Flynn, Julie s best friend, tries to warn her about the obvious negative consequences of being in love with a ghost. In episode 4, she warns her that you have a crush and his name is Luke. Just remember he s made of air", and Julie quips cute air." One of the major problems they encounter is the inability to touch each other if only to hug or hold hands. In episode 8, after a sad scene with Luke s parents, he and Julie want to hold hands as touching seems, of all senses, the most intimate and can calm a person down and give them support. Obviously, that cannot happen since Luke is translucent and lacks flesh and blood, so both are fairly frustrated because of this circumstance. With a smile, the ghostly musician sighs It s an interesting little relationship you and I have."

The sorrowful incident in episode 8 with Luke s parents delves into their past together and the history that they shared. His parents did not want Luke to become a musician, but he still chose to pursue his dream and run away from home, cutting connections with his family. However, both parties felt remorse about the way they all behaved. Naturally, it was impossible for either to apologize since Luke s death made him visible only to Julie. She is willing to help, and that is why she gives to his parents the lyrics of the song that the singer dedicated to his mother as an apology. As Nora Dominick shows in her *Buzzfeed* review by providing screenshots of fans' posts from the social media platform X, many viewers were crying while watching these scenes. She also deals with this emotional reaction in her eye-catching article title "Everyone Is Weeping over Unsaid Emily" from *Julie and the Phantoms*, and Here s Why." Most notable in terms of gender is that Luke is also bawling in tears too. Generally this series defends the position that all emotions are valid and have no gender. Sobbing does not

make Luke less of a man and the show sends this way the important message that men do cry.

As noted, at the beginning of the show Julie is shy and grieving for her mother, which serves as one of the reasons for finding common ground for a deeper connection with Luke as he has lost communication with his parents. Nevertheless, these three ghosts, especially Luke, manage to help her to regain the passion and confidence she had before the tragedy that claimed her mother s life. It could be sensed through the screen by her body language that she is uncomfortable when made to play the piano and sing in front of an audience; but as the show progresses, a substantial change can be noticed in her posture and demeanor, which could also be related to the topic of exploring body issues in the series.

There is also another romantic relationship in this series between two ghosts: Alex and Willie. Booboo Stewart, who played Willie, mentioned in the interview for the *TV Guide News* that his character and Alex are definitely dating by the end of the show. Moreover, this relationship seemed natural and easy for him. During the interview for *Variety* on the LGBTQ+ representation in the show, Cheyenne Jackson, the actor who played the main villain of the story and who is openly gay in real life, declared that I think it s actually very progressive and kind of amazing to have to have this story on the show and have it just be easy—not a lot of drama and not [fraught] with guilt or shame. It s just like two cute boys—the cute blonde in the band is dating a skater" (in Yap a).

What is important about Alex and Willie's relationship, as stated, is their naturalness. They are unapologetic about who they are, and they do not struggle to accept their sexuality. Just like a heterosexual couple on any TV show, the two characters do not have to justify themselves in any way or struggle with any sort of guilt because they love who they love, which is usually different from how queer characters are portrayed. Here, the relationship between Alex and Willie is presented as something natural, without the urge to explain or defend themselves. Audrey Cleo Yap states in the *Variety* article that the show is presented as a rather lighthearted one, but still manages to rise important topics: "And while billed as a family show, the 10-episode series includes arguably more mature storylines about loss, grief and young romance, including one between two gay characters, Willie (Booboo Stewart) and Alex (Joyner)," than other better respected shows. Precisely, it s worth noting that just like Luke, Alex had a bad relationship with his parents before his death: he came out as gay, but was not supported. Despite this, he still was unapologetically proud of who he was. In the series, he is portrayed as the most emotional person in the group, though he also seems to suffer from anxiety; it is hard for him to accept changes and adapt to the fast-paced life. Still, this does not apply to his sexuality, for Alex remains calm and confident about this matter.

The point is to demonstrate that both straight and non-heterosexual couples are valid and legitimate, a particularly powerful message in a series addressing young people. As *Variety* s TV critic Caroline Framke mentioned in her review, although some moments in the episodes may raise concerns from the viewers, no one is really bothered about them, since this work is just fun and adorable enough." Framke also acknowledges the family-oriented appropriateness of the show, when she dissects the performance of two main leads: "A later performance between the two pays direct homage to Ortega s Dirty Dancing' choreography, which is more of a reference point for

the parents who might be watching than their kids, but Reyes and Gillespie sell it nonetheless." On her side, Ellen E. Jones mentions in her *Guardian* article that it is a tricky business to create a TV series that can be appropriate as a family show' but *Julie and the Phantoms* manages to accomplish the task: "So Netflix might just be on to something with *Julie and the Phantoms*, a sweet show carefully confected to unite every post-*Saved By the Bell* generation of TV-watching teens, from the *My So Called Lifers* (now in their 40s) to the *High School Musical* heads (late 20s)."

Continuing the conversation about the body in *Julie and the Phantoms*, since Alex, Luke and Reggie are ghosts, they cannot touch and move many objects. With some practice, they learn to carry more or less light objects, though this is quite challenging for them and requires significant effort. The only exception in this situation are their musical instruments: guitar for Luke, bass guitar for Reggie and drums for Alex. They ponder this phenomenon and conclude that as bizarre as it might sound, the instruments feel attached to their souls, hence they are easy to lift and hold. Something else has shifted in the last episode of the show: Julie and the Phantoms manage to perform at the Orpheum, the concert hall where Sunset Curve dreamed of playing before the members died:

> Luke: They never gonna let us play the Orpheum.
> Alex: We 're nobody.
> Reggie: We 're less than nobody, we have no bodies. (E8)

With the collective efforts of the three ghosts as well as Julie and Willie, they manage to book a performance there. What is noteworthy here is that after this concert, Luke, Alex and Reggie gain the ability to be touched by Julie. Unfortunately, even though the series turned out to be fairly popular, it was canceled by Netflix, making fans furious. The series ends, thus, on a cliffhanger without a clear explanation for what exactly has happened and why Julie can suddenly touch the boys.

Ultimately, gender and body is a rich topic for exploration in *Julie and the Phantoms*, despite the ghostly presence of bodies of the three male main characters. The show portrays its characters in a heartfelt and nurturing way, when they feel comfortable and confident in who they are regardless of their sexuality or gender. The representation of the body goes beyond tradition, showing how connection between characters, be it love or friendship, transcends physicality.

Bibliography

Dominick, Nora. "Everyone Is Weeping over "Unsaid Emily" from *Julie and the Phantoms*, and Here's Why." *Buzzfeed* 14 September 2020, https://www.buzzfeed.com/noradominick/julie-and-the-phantoms-unsaid-emily

Earl, William. "*Julie and the Phantoms* Canceled by Netflix After One Season." *Variety* 18 December 2021, https://variety.com/2021/tv/news/julie-and-the-phantoms-netflix-cancel-kenny-ortega-1235137732/

Framke, Caroline. "*Julie and the Phantoms* Brings *Scooby Doo* Vibes to a *High School Musical* Successor: TV Review." *Variety* 8 September 2020,

https://variety.com/2020/tv/reviews/julie-and-the-phantoms-review-netflix-1234758588/

Jones, Ellen E. "*Julie and the Phantoms* Review - Ghosts, Grunge and 90s Nostalgia." *The Guardian* 10 September 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/sep/10/julie-and-the-phantoms-review-ghosts-grunge-90s-nostalgia-netflix

TV Guide News. "*Julie and the Phantoms* Cast Reveals Season 2 Wish List." YouTube, uploaded by *TV Guide News*, 18 September 2020, https://youtu.be/xYA2AdOOVGU?si=otM7n1Y3iRm8IlIB

Yap, Audrey Cleo (a). "*Julie and the Phantoms* Stars Cheyenne Jackson and Booboo Stewart on LGBTQ Representation." YouTube, uploaded by *Variety*, 25 September 2020, https://youtu.be/AmgkvK3xcJ4?si=E6AfmP4D-0K4gsmW

Yap, Audrey Cleo (b). "Why *Julie and the Phantoms* Star Madison Reyes Is Inspired by Zendaya (Watch)." *Variety* 23 September 2020, https://variety.com/2020/tv/news/julie-and-the-phantoms-madison-reyes-cheyenne-jackson-kenny-ortega-1234781331/

Little Fires Everywhere: You Are Not Your Mother

CALLEY OVERTON

Episodes: 8
Release date: 18 March – 22 April 2020
Creators: Liz Tigelaar
Source: *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017), novel by Celeste Ng
Cast: Kerry Washington (Mia Warren), Reese Witherspoon (Elena Richardson), Lexi Underwood (Pearl Warren), Megan Stott (Izzy Richardson), Gavin Lewis (Moody Richardson), Jade Pettyjohn (Lexi Richardson), Jordan Elsass (Trip Richardson), Huang Lu (Bebe Chao)
Companies: Best Day Ever Productions, Simpson Street, Hello Sunshine, ABC Signature
Genre: drama
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8089592/

Introduction: Little fires into big fires

Little Fires Everywhere (2020), adapted from the best-selling 2017 novel of the same name by Celeste Ng, is a case study of two very different women in 1990s suburban Ohio. Traditional, wealthy Elena Richardson and artsy, nomadic Mia Warren—played by the talented Reese Witherspoon and Kerry Washington, respectively—clash when the latter moves into Shaker Heights with her teenage daughter. Over the course of the novel and the series, their lives become intertwined as Mia's daughter Pearl befriends the Richardson brood, Mia begins working in the Richardson house, Elena and Mia take opposite sides in a charged child custody case, and Elena investigates Mia's past. Both the series and the novel open dramatically with the Richardsons' house burning and with the following episodes and pages dedicated to bringing the audience up to speed on what happened. This is one place where the novel and the series diverge. The arsonist and exact cause of the fire is different in the series. The overarching cause of the fire, the titular "little fires everywhere," is also complicated further in the series.

There is a current running through the series that is only ever hinted at in the novel: race. In the novel, Mia is coded as a Black woman, but the author, being Asian American, hesitated to make this clear so that the obvious distinction between Elena and Mia is that of class. Author Celeste Ng explained that "I thought of them as people of color, because I knew I wanted to talk about race and class, and those things are so intertwined in our country and in our culture (…) But I didn't feel like I was the right person to try to bring a black woman's experience to the page" (in Li). However, while an author has the privilege to leave the race of the character up to interpretation, a miniseries creator does not because somebody has to be cast to play that character.

The choice to change (or rather, to confirm) the Warrens' race adds complexity to already existing themes in the novel. These are two women who are unable to connect because of their circumstances. In both versions, Elena is a wealthy lawyer's wife and a mother of four while Mia is a single mom and an artist who is constantly on the move. To bring the changes to the screen, creator Liz Tigelaar, a white woman, prioritized telling the characters' stories authentically by hiring a wide variety of writers. While many miniseries typically have writers' rooms of three to four, this series hired seven (Li). As a result, the series became charged with extra nuance and depth to each interaction between the Warrens and the Richardsons. Despite being a period piece, the conversation is timely and there is almost the sense that the characters are aware of the microaggressions, appropriations, and code-switching (Hale). While only three years separate the release of the novel and the miniseries, the adaptation enriches the ongoing discourse on race, gender, and intersectionality, moving with the times.

Analysis: "I don't want to be like my mom"

At its core, *Little Fires Everywhere* is about motherhood. The series is a charged conversation on what it means to be a mother, who should be a mother, and what does it mean to be a *good* mother. The series asks these questions over and over through different lenses and different angles, looking at surrogacy, adoption, abortion, post-partum depression, etc.

The impact of class and race on these topics is intrinsic to the conversation. Much research has already been dedicated to the topic of motherhood in this miniseries and the researchers "have found that in the scope of motherhood, racism often goes hand in hand with structural differences between ethnic groups manifested in social class and financial differences, different educational and career opportunities, housing segregation, and access to healthcare and other resources" (Farihah 203). Yet, despite these challenges, the miniseries highlights neoliberal multiculturalist ideas of holding nonwhite families to the same idealized standard of the nuclear family and high-paying job while accusing nonwhite mothers of being incompetent for not reaching that standard, ignoring the disparity of resources among the two groups (Farihah 203).

There are in fact three mothers in this series: Elena Richardson, Mia Warren, and Bebe Chao. In this analysis, I am going to focus on Elena and Mia and their relationships with their daughters, Izzy and Pearl respectively. It is a truth universally acknowledged that mother-daughter relationships are complicated and that is clearly seen in this miniseries. They love each other, they hurt each other, they do not understand each other. Additionally, both Izzy and Pearl are teenagers trying to find their own identity and place in the world. Wodak and Schulz argue that the adolescent daughter "projects what she defines as bad onto her mother and tries to take that which is good onto herself" and subsequently takes on another woman as her role model in the search of her own identity, which causes tension and hurt (11). The viewer sees this dynamic in the miniseries as both Izzy and Pearl reject their mothers and seek each other's mother as their role model.

Mia is a single mom and she lives a nomadic, artsy existence as a photographer with her teenage daughter Pearl. The two are equals at a situational level even if they are not equals at a relational level. They are a team (Farihah 210). In the beginning of the series, they are very close but Pearl's yearning for a more stable life is evident from the first episode as she is so excited to have a room of her own and to settle down in Shaker

Heights for at least a year. Pearl soon befriends the Richardson siblings and begins spending most of her time at their house. This and the lingering question of the identity of Pearl's father, which Mia withholds from her, begin to create a divide between the two. Pearl dislikes her mother's nomadic life and the weight of her secrets and tells her friend Moody "I don't want to be like my mom" (EP 7). Ultimately, Pearl is pulling away for most of the series and this stresses Mia out. She has nightmares of Pearl being taken away and is fixated on the idea of ownership. In episode four, she explicitly states, "You belong to me!," which, of course, Pearl resists.

Their conflict comes to a head when it's revealed that Mia is to sell a photograph for a large sum of money to fund her co-worker Bebe's child custody case. Pearl is hurt because they have been struggling for years and she feels like they need that money. Throughout the series, Pearl needs her mom but Mia's anxieties about losing Pearl manifest instead in her helping Bebe; she abandoned her baby girl out of despair given her dire economic situation but wants her back against the wishes of her white suburban adoptive parents, actually Elena's friends. Once the truth comes out, the mother-daughter duo reconcile and Mia lets Pearl become more involved in her artwork in an emotional sequence. This is in contrast to the more ambiguous ending of the other mother-daughter pair. Podnieks discusses how great American women writers of color have intentionally made an effort to reconcile the mother-daughter relationship in their novels, noting that "while white women may have experienced a need to sever themselves from their mothers—to disidentify with them, in Hirsch's terms—Black women in discriminatory societies necessarily 'struggle to affirm the value of their lives: race, class and gender oppression intensify their need to uncover a strong matrilineal heritage'" (Podnieks 10). The bond between Pearl and Mia seems stronger than every by the end as they leave Shaker Heights behind and are moving on to somewhere new.

The same cannot be said for Elena and her youngest daughter Izzy. From the first moment until the open ending, there is tension and division. Elena is very traditional and concerned with appearance and Izzy is not. Elena wants Izzy to fit an image and Izzy rebels, intentionally burning her hair with an iron, writing "I'm Not Your Puppet" on her forehead at a concert, flipping her mom off in the Christmas card picture, and so on. Izzy's father even asks Elena, "Do you want Izzy to be happy or to be more like you?" (E1). However, one change from the novel to the series further complicates their relationship. While Izzy is just a rebellious teen in the novel, the miniseries develops her character further and adds a deeper layer of queerness. Izzy, who is in love with and has a relationship with her best friend, is being bullied at school. Elena just does not see it. Izzy is constantly rejecting her mother's traditional lifestyle, which Wodak describes as essential for a daughter "to create a non-traditional role for herself" (3). The two want to connect with each other but they just are unable to.

The first episode uses literal walls to demonstrate the figurative walls between the two. The conflicts build and build until the dramatic ending when Izzy begins to set the house on fire and burn it all to the ground for a fresh start and Elena reveals that she never wanted to have Izzy (Farihah 3). While Izzy does not finish the job and runs away from her home, leaving her siblings to decide whether to finish what she started, Elena does take ownership of the fire. In an interview, creator Liz Tigelaar explained that

> "At the same time, Elena takes ownership of it. When the cops ask, 'Who started the fire?' she says, 'I did.' No, she didn't get the gasoline, and no, she didn't light the matches. But is she deeply responsible on some level? She pushed over the first

domino that led to everything collapsing. To me, that's the more realistic version of Elena starting the fire." (in Vineyard)

While Pearl and Mia reconcile at the end, Izzy's ending is more uncertain, for she runs away. As a young teenage girl, she most likely ends up back with her family, but whether they ever reconcile is unknown.

Pearl admires the Richardsons' stability and quickly bonds with Elena over their interest in writing. She befriends the Richardson kids and soon spends most of her time in their house. While Elena does not trust Mia, she genuinely likes Pearl and helps her. Pearl feels neglected by Mia's interest in Bebe and compares Mia to Elena, stressing that Elena puts her children first. Pearl goes to Elena for comfort and support instead of her own mother. This love and support is limited, though. Elena quickly turns on Pearl when she believes that Pearl has had an abortion, even though it was really her eldest daughter, Lexi, who went through the procedure forcing Pearl to accompany her. Additionally, Elena ends up evicting Pearl and Mia from the apartment she owns and they rent.

Elena and Pearl's relationship can also be seen through the lens of the 'white savior' trope to an extent. This very problematic trope "portrays a model White lead character who is depicted as powerful, brave, cordial, kind, firm, and generous, taking on a mission to save people of color from their plight" (Ash 89). This is how Elena sees herself. She painfully tries (and fails) to be colorblind, constantly making microaggressions towards Pearl and other characters of color. She also frequently comments on and alludes to how Pearl is not like her mother, a woman Elena is fascinated by but simply does not like because of their differences. Yet, Pearl is her mother's daughter. At one point, Pearl runs away to spend the night at the Richardsons when she and her mom have a fight. Both of the Warrens, the series shows, are independent, strong, creative women.

On her side, Izzy sees Mia as a mother figure and a mentor. Besides being rebellious, Izzy is very artistic and she quickly starts spending more time with Mia in order to learn. But more than honing her art, Izzy feels seen and heard with Mia. They talk about art, Izzy opens up about her mother's high expectations, and they connect with Izzy even telling Mia in the final episode that she thinks she hates her mother. "Until the end," Farirah and Handayani note, "Izzy continues to view Mia as someone she respects the most, a mother figure, and the only person who cares and understands her." Perhaps Mia herself misses the extent to which Izzy looks up to her because a conversation on fire and why Mia incorporates it into her art leads Izzy to the dramatic action of trying to set her room on fire (when she learns that Elena was evicting the Warrens). At the end, before waking up on a bus to some unknown destination, Izzy has a dream in which Mia and Pearl pick her up. Showrunner Liz Tigelaar says this scene represents, "this idea that [Izzy has] been changed by Mia and she's never going to go back" (in Gonzales).

The dynamics between Mia, Elena, Pearl, and Izzy reveal the complexities of mother-daughter relationships. Both sets of mothers and daughters struggle to connect and relate with each other as each daughter wants the opposite of what their mother represents. Pearl wants stability, as represented by Elena, and Izzy wants to freely express herself, something that Mia is an advocate for. In the end, the series shows that while mothers and daughters might not understand each other, they want to connect. Sometimes they might just end up connecting with a different role model while finding their way back to each other.

Bibliography

Ash, Erin. "Racial Discourse in *The Blind Side*: The Economics and Ideology Behind the White Savior Format." *Studies in Popular Culture* 38.1 (2015): 85-103.

Farihah, Inasa & Handayani, Lucia. "A Critical Discourse Analysis of Mother-Child Relationships in *Little Fires Everywhere*: The Influence of Race and Social Class." *Journal of Pragmatics and Discourse Research* 4 (2024): 202-214, http://10.51817/jpdr.v4i2.960

Gonzales, Erica. "What Happened to Izzy in the *Little Fires Everywhere* Finale?" *Harper's Bazaar* 22 April 2020, www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/film-tv/a32236166/little-fires-everywhere-izzy-ending/

Hale, Mike. "Review: *Little Fires Everywhere* Ignites over Race and Class." *The New York Times* 17 March 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/03/17/arts/television/little-fires-everywhere-review.html

Li, Shirley. "When a TV Adaptation Does What the Book Could Not." *The Atlantic* 31 March 2020, www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/03/little-fires-everywhere-hulu-series-pivotal-change-from-novel/609151/

Podnieks, Elizabeth and O'Reilly, Andrea. "Introduction Maternal Literatures in Text and Tradition: Daughter-Centric, Matrilineal, and Matrifocal Perspectives." *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures*, Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly (eds.). Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2010. 1-27, https://doi.org/10.51644/9781554582921-002

Vineyard, Jennifer. "In the End, *Little Fires Everywhere* Burned down the Status Quo." *The New York Times* 22 April 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/04/22/arts/television/little-fires-everywhere-series-final.html

Wodak, Ruth and Muriel Schulz. *The Language of Love and Guilt : Mother-Daughter Relationships from a Cross-Cultural Perspective*. John Benjamins, 1986.

Normal People: To Live for the Hope of It All

ESTER SÁNCHEZ PÉREZ

Episodes: 12
Release date: April 2020
Based on: *Normal People* (2018), novel by Sally Rooney
Creators: Lenny Abrahamson & Hettie Macdonald (directors); Sally Rooney, Alice Birch & Mark O'Rowe (writers)
Cast: Daisy Edgar-Jones (Marianne), Paul Mescal (Connell), Sarah Greene (Lorraine), Desmond Eastwood (Niall), Aislín McGukin (Denise), Frank Blake (Alan), India Mullen (Peggy), Sebastian de Souza (Gareth), Fionn O'Shea (Jamie), Aoife Hinds (Helen), Kwaku Fortune (Lukas)
Genre: psychological, YA drama, steamy romance
Nationality: Irish
Companies: Element Pictures, BBC, Hulu Originals
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9059760/

Introduction: Boy meets girl

Normal People (2020, Hulu/BBC Three) is a twelve-episode limited series, adapted by Sally Rooney, Alice Birch, and Mark O'Rowe from Rooney's 2018 homonymous novel. The series follows the intense and often complicated relationship between Marianne Sheridan and Connell Waldron, two Irish teenagers (and later young adults) navigating love, identity, and class as they move from high school in the small town of Sligo to university life in Dublin. Their bond, defined by moments of deep connection and painful miscommunication, spans several years and is both profoundly personal and universally resonant.

Sally Rooney is an Irish author and screenwriter, who gained international acclaim for her novels *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*, the latter winning the 2019 British Book Award for Fiction. Alice Birch, a British playwright and screenwriter, is known for her works exploring complex emotional landscapes, such as the screenplay for *Lady Macbeth* (2016). Mark O'Rowe, an Irish playwright and screenwriter, contributed his expertise to the adaptation, which was commissioned by Element Pictures for Hulu and BBC. The show's creators worked closely with Rooney to preserve the novel's intimate tone while translating its nuanced exploration of love and vulnerability to the screen. For the lead roles, the creators cast two relatively unknown Irish actors, Paul Mescal as Connell and Daisy Edgar-Jones as Marianne. Mescal, in his television debut, received widespread acclaim for his portrayal of the sensitive and reserved Connell, earning an Emmy nomination. Edgar-Jones, already an emerging talent, brought depth

and complexity to Marianne, solidifying her reputation as a rising star. The chemistry between the leads was central to the series' success, as was the decision to hire an intimacy coordinator to ensure that the depiction of the characters' sexual relationship was both authentic and respectful.

It is not necessary to have read Sally Rooney's novel to understand the miniseries. In fact, the series captures Rooney's prose, as well as her aesthetics quite astonishingly. Indeed, it also explores important themes present in the novel such as class disparity, emotional wounds and self-discovery. A characteristic of Rooney's fiction is that it always highlights the Irish settings and culture, and this one is no exception. Together with Lenny Abrahamson and Hettie Macdonald, Rooney has emphasized both the beauty of the countryside and the more hectic lifestyle of the capital. *Normal People* received much critical acclaim for its solid storytelling, character development and production values. It is also worth mentioning its approach on intimacy, with the sex scenes portrayed with tenderness and authenticity that makes the series very relatable to the mostly younger audience.

Analysis: Class and gender

Normal People deals with gender and body in many different ways. The depiction of the body and of sexual relationships is pivotal, serving as both a narrative device and a lens through which the characters' intimacy evolves. Sexual encounters often occur at critical junctures in the story: they either precede the protagonists' falling in love, suggesting a raw, instinctive connection, or appear later, marking significant shifts in their emotional dynamic, although this is not always the case. These moments are less about the act itself and more about the deepening or redefining of their bond, since the authenticity of their connection is evident from the very beginning. In fact, throughout the miniseries the audience can see how a very special, almost unspoken mode of communication begins to unfold between the protagonists. This exclusive understanding between them transcends words, as their physical interactions become a medium through which they express vulnerability, trust, and a profound sense of recognition, especially for Connell, who struggles with verbalizing his thoughts.

The narrative repeatedly emphasizes how Marianne and Connell's bodies are not just vessels for desire but also instruments through which their love and miscommunications are laid bare, revealing both the simplicity and complexity of their relationship. In Marianne's particular case, the way she deals with her own body is different from the way Connell does. Her family has always been abusive and she feels unlovable, to the point that she feels that she deserves being bullied or an object of violence. This idea is also manifested in her own sexual relations, when she even asks her sexual partners to hit her.

After Connell, her first sexual partner, Marianne starts a romantic relationship with Jamie, one of her best friends at the time. In episode 7, when she tells Connell that Jamie is "a bit of a sadist, just during sex that is, not arguments," Connell is surprised and puzzled. However, there is another man with whom Marianne has a relationship during her Erasmus stay, Lukas, an older Swedish photographer who is even harsher and more sadistic than Jamie. Therefore, the female body serves as a double-edged sword: it can be a means to empower and integrate Marianne better into society (she is by origin upper class), but also as the subject receiving violence and abuse, which eventually erases

Marianne's integrity and portrays her only (or mainly) as a body. The sex scenes between the photographer and her can be uncomfortable to watch, because even if they are not entirely explicit, they leave little room for the imagination concerning abuse. In fact, Connell is the only man she sleeps with along the series who does not feel comfortable hitting her during sex, which eventually ends up in an uncomfortable situation for both of them.

Connell's masculinity is particularly compelling, as he embodies traits of hegemonic masculinity but simultaneously distances himself from it when necessary. Connell and Messerschmidt indeed argue that "men can adopt hegemonic masculinity when it is desirable; but the same men can distance themselves strategically from hegemonic masculinity at other moments" (841). This dynamic is evident early in the miniseries when Connell tells Marianne to keep their relationship a secret, as she is an outcast and largely ignored by others in high school, despite her solid class credentials (Connell, in contrast, is working class). Another example happens in the third episode, when Connell attends a party and meets an attractive girl. When Marianne asks if they had sex, he responds "Don't think I'm really that insatiable; I do already have you." However, Connell also distances himself from toxic masculine behavior. For instance, in the same episode, when Erik shows a picture of his naked girlfriend to their male friends, Connell challenges him, saying, "Don't you think it's a bit fucked up showing pictures of your girlfriend like that?" Similarly, at the end of the third episode, after a night out, a vulnerable Connell leaves Marianne a voicemail, confessing, "See… I can't talk to anybody the way I talk to you or anything like that."

These behavioral shifts illustrate how Connell both resists hegemonic masculinity and subtly asserts power over Marianne in terms of gender dynamics. The audience can see that within the same day or even within the same episode, Connell embodies or distances himself from that hegemonic masculinity. Marianne, in turn, accepts both aspects of his behavior due to her own experiences with toxic masculinity in her family. She reveals that while her father never physically abused her, he was violent in other ways, particularly towards her mother, Denise, who perpetuates this dynamic by accepting and even justifying such abuse, reinforcing the harmful environment Marianne has endured. Additionally, Marianne's brother Alan is explicitly abusive, both physically and psychologically. In fact, Alan is the antagonist of Connell, since he embodies all the toxic masculine traits needed to be on top of the popularity ladder. This family background helps explain why Marianne struggles to leave the relationship when Connell disrespects or even humiliates her throughout the miniseries.

As regards class, then, Connell and Marianne belong to two different social worlds. Through her novel Rooney exposes the inequalities stemming from social class disparities and gender divisions. This is exemplified in Marianne's exploitation of her body, using it both as a means of sexual objectification and as a path to redemption (Barros-Del Río "Sally Rooney" 187). Marianne, as noted, comes from an upper-class family, and in fact, it is because Connell's mother works as a cleaner in her house that the protagonists meet. In high school ruggedly handsome Connell is quite popular despite his class origins. However, when he and Marianne start college in Dublin, he is no longer the most popular young man; instead, he finds it really difficult to connect with the other socially superior students and make friends. We see Connell struggling with his social class, as he even has to work to pay for his dorm, whereas Marianne has a family flat to stay. Connell feels inferior because he does not have as much economic power as

she does. Yet, although in the power dynamics of their relationship Marianne is superior to Connell in terms of class, in her social life she is still dominated by others, as she is still inferior in terms of gender. While Connell struggles with his social class, Marianne struggles with her gender.

Despite all its romantic complexities, Connell's and Marianne's is a love story that has captivated many readers' hearts. It is a difficult relationship that involves toxicity coming from both ends, and it is also a relationship that started off reinforcing their social class differences, yet it has resonated with many young people. Their love story not only is relatable because of the ongoing confusion and lack of communication between the two of them, but also because the main characters struggle with identity and mental health issues. As mentioned earlier, Marianne has an abusive family, who has undermined her for a long time. Connell, even though he can count on his supportive mother, has to deal with the death of a close friend. Many of these circumstances are difficult to digest when, at the same time, you are discovering your own identity. Therefore, the idea of two people who have proven that should not be together because they both are mentally unstable, together with the idea that both of them clearly love each other but will not accept their feelings, let alone communicate them, is what makes it appealing for the audience. It is an ongoing frustration to which the audience can relate these days.

Ultimately, *Normal People* masterfully depicts the intersections of body, gender, and class and how it underscores the complexity of Marianne and Connell's relationship, bringing new light on broader social dynamics for the younger generations. The series explores how intimacy, often communicated through physical interaction becomes a profound language of connection and vulnerability. While Marianne struggles with the scars of her abusive upbringing and her conflicted relationship with her own body, Connell navigates the expectations of hegemonic masculinity and his own insecurities, creating a power dynamic between the two which extends to their differing social classes and adds another layer to their struggles with identity and belonging. Marianne's privilege shields her from economic hardships but leaves her vulnerable to gendered oppression, while Connell's lower social standing challenges his sense of self-worth, even as he resists toxic masculine norms.

Bibliography

Barros-Del Río, María Amor. "Sally Rooney's *Normal People*: The Millennial Novel of Formation in Recessionary Ireland." *Irish Studies Review* 30.2 (2022): 176-192. https://doi.org/10.1080/09670882.2022.2080036

_____. "Irish Youth, Materialism and Postfeminism: The Critique Behind the Romance in *Normal People*." *Oceánide* 15 (2022): 73–80.

BBC Three. "Exclusive Normal People Interview With Daisy Edgar-Jones & Paul Mescal: Becoming Marianne & Connell." YouTube, uploaded by BBC Three, 28 April 2020, https://youtu.be/9DEkcpzKMcA?si=mLm-ZSQ5GTaprjPt

Bollas, Alexandros. "*Normal People* (2020) and the New Post-Celtic Irish Man." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 50.2 (2022): 50-59. https://doi.org/10.1080/01956051.2022.2033156

Connell, Raewyn. "The Social Organization of Masculinity." *Feminist Theory Reader*, Carole McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim (eds.). Routledge, 2020. 192-200.

Connell, Raewyn W. and James W. Messerschmidt. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." *Gender & Society* 19.6 (2005): 829-859. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639

Ghassani, Dina Rizq, et al. "Gender and Class in Sally Rooney's *Normal People*." *ELITE: English and Literature Journal* 10.2 (2023): 194-202.

Haltom, Trenton M. "Masculine Maneuvers: Male Baton Twirlers, Compensatory Manhood Acts, and Hybrid Masculinity." *Men and Masculinities* 25.4 (2022): 527-545. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X211052537

Rooney, Sally. *Normal People: A Novel*. Hogarth, 2018.

Schippers, Mimi. "Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony." *Theory and Society* 36 (2007): 85-102.

The Plot Against America: The Patriarchal Woman Dances with the Devil

CALLEY OVERTON

Episodes: 6
Release date: 16 March – 20 April 2020
Creators: Ed Burns and David Simon
Source: *The Plot Against America* (2004), novel by Philip Roth
Cast: Morgan Spector (Herman Levin), Zoe Kazan (Bess Levin), Anthony Boyle (Alvin Levin), Winona Ryder (Evelyn Finkle), John Turturro (Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf)
Companies: RK Films, Annapurna Television, Blown Deadline Productions, HBO
Genre: drama, alternate history
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9308346/

Introduction: What if… fascism took over?

The Plot Against America (2020) is based on the 2004 novel of the same title by acclaimed American novelist Philip Roth. The premise of both the novel and the miniseries is the question “What if… fascism took over?” *The Plot Against America* is alternate American history fiction narrated through the eyes of a middle-class Jewish family living in Newark, New Jersey, in a world where Charles Lindbergh, an anti-Semite, isolationist celebrity lauded for his flight across the Atlantic, was elected president instead of FDR in 1940 and the United States stayed out of World War II. Once this key event takes place, fascism seeps into the day-to-day lives of the Levin family (or the Roth family in the novel).

Roth passed away in 2018, but gave show creators Ed Burns and David Simon his blessing before his death. While the miniseries mostly stays true to the source material, there were some changes. The family’s name was changed, as noted, from Roth to Levin (thus erasing the implicit autobiographical perspective), minor characters like Evelyn and Alvin were given more story, the show creators included some inspiration from their own families, and the perspective was expanded beyond that of young Philip Roth/Levin. The miniseries fleshes out Rabbi Bengelsdorf and Evelyn’s relationship and also shows the First Lady, Mrs. Lindbergh, who is the main focus in this analysis.

However, the biggest change might just have to be the intention behind the creation of each respective work and the political moment in which it was released. Roth insisted that his novel wasn’t a political allegory and was created out of being intrigued with the concept of Lindbergh becoming president at that time. His ending was quite optimistic and concluded in a course correction of events with FDR being re-elected

President (Allen). Roth declared that “Nor is my point that this can happen and will happen; rather, it’s that at the moment when it should have happened, it did not happen. *The Plot Against America* is an exercise in historical imagination. But history has the final say. And history did it otherwise.” However, by the time the show was released in 2020, the idea of a celebrity with fascist tendencies being elected president wasn’t a ‘what if…?’ anymore but reality thanks to Donald Trump. As such, the ending of the miniseries is much more ominous. It concludes with Frank Sinatra singing “The House I Live In (That’s America to Me)” as the scenes cut between hopeful voters casting their ballots for a brighter tomorrow and voter suppression, with voters turned away, ballot boxes hauled away, and ballots burned. This last part is particularly chilling on the eve of the 2024 presidential election as reports recently came out of ballots being burned in Washington and Oregon (Hubbard). Trump, as we know, was re-elected for a second non-consecutive mandate.

Analysis: “Evelyn Finkel of Dewey Street at the White House!”

The main antagonist, President Lindbergh, is usually ominously out of frame as if he was constantly buzzing around the narrative like he buzzed around the country in his airplane, “The Spirit of Saint Louis.” But perhaps one of the most culpable antagonists is Evelyn Finkel, a member of the Levin family. Over the course of the series, she is transformed from a lovelorn, insecure caretaker into a politically influential patriarchal woman, blinded by her ambition to the harm she causes her family and fellow American Jews. Evelyn, played by the talented Winona Ryder, begins the series taking care of her mother while in an affair with a married Italian man who, unsurprisingly, isn’t getting a divorce to be with her after all, being a Catholic. By episode two, she meets and starts becoming involved with Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf (played by John Turturro), despite not being a very observant Jew herself. The conservative rabbi is an isolationist and a proponent of Charles Lindbergh, denying that the man is an anti-Semite.

As the series progresses, Evelyn’s relationship with the rabbi grows and so does his with the president. The rabbi is blind to the harm Lindbergh is causing to the Jewish people and believes himself to be at his ear (or at least at the ear of the First Lady). As his position grows, he gives Evelyn more opportunities until she is also politically involved and in charge of the Just Folks program; this claims to give “country values” to “city boys” but is really a Hitler Youth-type program aimed at integrating Jewish boys more deeply into Gentile culture. She also becomes in charge of a forcible relocation program for Jewish families. Evelyn’s character is so blinded by climbing the ladder that she involves her own family into these anti-Semitic programs, sending her nephew Sandy to Kentucky and making him a spokesperson for the program, and later signing her sister’s family up to be also relocated to Kentucky. In *The Plot Against America*, in short, Evelyn Finkel’s opportunism under a patriarchal, hierarchical power structure reveals how self-serving ambitions can foster evil, positioning her as a ‘privileged guest’ whose influence is dependent on the men in power and is temporary.

While Evelyn’s actions aren’t clearly anti-woman, if we frame patriarchy as hierarchical power, she is acting indeed within the patriarchy. Patriarchy is a pyramid with a select few at the top and more at the bottom. The fight to be at the top causes villainy and harmful actions (Martín *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy* 7). Evelyn Finkel is an unmarried, middle-class, Jewish woman taking care of her mother, as noted. In

1940s America, she has no power. But once she becomes involved with a powerful man, her power grows and she relishes in it. In episode 4, one could say that she's dancing with the Devil quite literally because she's invited to a White House state dinner and dances with Nazi foreign minister Von Ribbentrop, despite being a Jewish woman. This scene actually caused Ryder, whose paternal family is of Ashkenazi Jewish descent, quite a bit of distress. As an actress, she had to make herself believe what she was saying, but she also knew how completely wrong her character was (Mcgrath). Evelyn keeps framing all her harmful actions as a "great opportunity." She dances with a Nazi, she involves her nephew in Just Folks, and she tries to bring him to the state dinner to be an ambassador for the program. This causes a fight with her brother-in-law Herman when she implores him to let Sandy go because "This is just a great opportunity." "For an opportunist!" he responds (E4). Her character can be summed up with her excitedly filling in Sandy about the state dinner and saying, "Can you believe it? Evelyn Finkel of Dewey Street at the White House!" (E5). Evelyn, to sum up, is an opportunist and loves being in a position of power and influence, regardless of how it harms those she loves.

Martín maintains that villainy doesn't come from the abstract idea of evil or fault in human nature but from individuals feeling entitled to patriarchal power, be they man or woman (Martín *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy* 2). In this way, Evelyn is one of the main villains of the series. She's not doing evil because she's an evil person, but she's self-serving. Radke posits that socially dominant individuals (with an emphasis on women) tend to seek to maintain the current status quo rather than support their own group. Furthermore, Radke says, "Socially dominant women perceived women's lower-status position in society to be legitimate and, through this, perceived a greater need for protection from men" (164). Evelyn cares so much about her position as an influential man's girlfriend/fiancée/wife that she has blinders on regarding her own family and her own status as a Jewish woman.

When her sister and her brother-in-law express their concerns, Evelyn just does not understand. She is totally blind to how she is harming them, and herself. As much as she feels like a woman with power, since she helps implement different programs or through proximity since Bengelsdorf as an advisor of sorts, she is associating herself with people who see her as lesser. The state dinner is Evelyn's big moment, but it's not a friendly environment to her. There are Nazi flags throughout, President Lindbergh completely ignores her and Bengelsdorf when they greet him, walking past as if they weren't there, and Secretary Ford insults Evelyn and makes an anti-Semitic comment before walking away. Immediately after this, the Nazi foreign minister asks her to dance and she wholeheartedly agrees. Interestingly, while President Lindbergh is the focus of Rabbi Bengelsdorf, Mrs. Lindbergh is the one we see meeting with the couple. She asks them about their upcoming wedding, invites Evelyn and the rabbi to the state dinner as "representatives of their community," greets them during this event, and overall speaks on her husband's behalf, possibly signaling that she is running much of his PR.

Both Evelyn and Mrs. Lindbergh are in the vulnerable position of being "privileged guests" in patriarchy (Martín "Women's Patriarchal Complicity"). As much as Evelyn sees herself as the influential wife of an influential man by the end of the series, her situation is precarious. Even though she's not Jewish, Mrs. Lindbergh's position is very much dependent on her husband's power as well. When President Lindbergh goes missing, both women suffer. The Vice-president takes control and has the First Lady institutionalized arguing that she has been manipulated the whole time by a "Jewish

Rasputin," namely Rabbi Bengelsdorf (E6). Even though the Jews are being persecuted, those in power accuse the rabbi of manipulating the Presidency through Mrs. Lindenberg.

There's a dependent stream of power originating with President Lindbergh that is turned off once he mysteriously disappears with his plane. Evelyn's influence is dependent on the rabbi's, but he depends on Mrs. Lindbergh whose power depends on her husband. With the president missing, Mrs. Lindbergh is removed from a position of power and diminished to an easily manipulated woman even though she was most likely manipulating the rabbi. The reason is that there is a political advantage to having a prominent Jewish figure supporting her husband's Presidency even as he implemented harmful policies and fanned the flames of anti-Semitism. She made the rabbi and Evelyn feel special and important when really we never actually see them interact with President Lindbergh. With Mrs. Lindbergh out of the picture, the rabbi is arrested. Evelyn knows she's next and she runs, pleading with her sister for help and refuge. She, however, turns Evelyn away after all the hurt she's caused the family and those in their community.

Ultimately, *The Plot Against America* offers some insight into the precarious situation of women operating within a patriarchal system of power through Evelyn's character, as well as that of Mrs. Lindbergh even though the latter has much less screentime. Neither woman has true power on their own, it is all dependent on being in the favor of a powerful man. Evelyn's opportunist tendencies become her downfall as she sacrifices her family and those in her community's well-being for personal gain. However, she doesn't equate her actions with evil, but rather opportunity, blindly wanting to extend the social status she believes she's achieved to her sister's family by involving her nephew in Just Folks, making him an ambassador for the program, and trying to bring him to a state dinner honoring Nazis. Yet, her position is vulnerable and her share of power evaporates quickly once the men who gave her that power lose their own. Evelyn's rise and fall is a cautionary tale about the dangers of trying to achieve power within an oppressive patriarchal system. The influence she had was granted in order to achieve the goals of men, and all the opportunities she was so proud of vanish, leaving her with nothing, not even the support of her family, when these men lose their own power.

Bibliography

Allen, Nick. "The Biggest Changes HBO's *Plot Against America* Makes to Philip Roth's Novel." *Vulture* 21 April 2020, www.vulture.com/article/the-plot-against-america-hbo-book-changes.html

Hubbard, Kaia and Nicole Sganga. "What to Know after Ballot Box Fires in Washington State and Oregon." *CBS News* undated, www.cbsnews.com/news/ballot-boxes-fires-washington-oregon-what-to-know

Martín Alegre, Sara. *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy in the British Novel: From Hitler to Voldemort.* Routledge, 2020.

_____ "Women's Patriarchal Complicity: Abandoning the Area behind the Scenes." *The Joys of Teaching Literature* 19 November 2019, http://webs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/2019/11/19/womens-patriarchal-complicity-abandoning-the-area-behind-the-scenes

Mcgrath, Charles. "*The Plot Against America* Imagines the Rise of an Intolerant Demagogue." *The New York Times* 5 March 2020,

www.nytimes.com/2020/03/05/arts/television/plot-against-america-hbo-david-simon.html.

Radke, Helena R. M. et al. "Negotiating the Hierarchy: Social Dominance Orientation among Women Is Associated with the Endorsement of Benevolent Sexism." *Australian Journal of Psychology* 70.2 (2018): 158-166. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajpy.12176

Roth, Philip. "The Story Behind *The Plot against America*." *The New York Times* 19 September 2004, www.nytimes.com/2004/09/19/books/review/the-story-behind-the-plot-against-america.html

The Queen's Gambit: Madness and Genius Strike Again

Ester Sánchez Pérez

Episodes: 7
Release date: 23 October 2020
Creators: Scott Frank and Allan Scott
Source: *The Queen's Gambit* (1983), novel by Walter Tevis
Cast: Anya Taylor-Joy, Isla Jonston and Annabeth Kelly (Beth Harmon), Bill Camp (Mr. Shaibel), Marcin Dorocinsky (Vasily Borgov), Marielle Heller (Alma Wheatley), Thomas Brodie-Sangster (Benny Watts), Moses Ingram (Jolene), Harry Melling (Harry Beltik)
Companies: Flitcraft, Wonderful Films, Netflix
Genre: coming-of-age, period and psychological drama
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt10048342/

Introduction: a girl in a male-dominated world

The Queen's Gambit (2020, Netflix) is a seven-episode limited series created by Scott Frank and Allan Scott. It follows the life of chess prodigy Beth Harmon during the 1950s and 1960s as she becomes increasingly popular in the male-dominated world of chess, first in Kentucky and later internationally. The series is based on Walter Tevis's 1983 homonymous novel.

Scott Frank is an acclaimed screenwriter and director known for his work on films such as *Out of Sight* (1998) and *Logan* (2017), both of which made him win Academy Award nominations. Allan Scott is also a screenwriter and a producer. Actually, he acquired the rights to Tevis's novel in the 1980s, and his first intention was to adapt it as a film. However, Frank eventually partnered with Scott to turn the story into a miniseries, which Netflix then produced. For the main role of Beth Harmon, the creators cast Anya Taylor-Joy, an Argentinian-British actress also known for her work in *The Witch* (2015) and *Emma* (2020). The series also includes a strong supporting cast, including among others Bill Camp as Mr. Shaibel, the janitor who introduces Beth to chess, and Thomas Brodie-Sangster as Benny Watts, a charismatic chess rival, who will eventually become an ally.

An interesting fact about this limited miniseries is that chess experts and enthusiasts were consulted extensively to ensure the authenticity and accuracy of the matches and techniques shown in the series. For instance, Garry Kasparov, the former World Chess Champion, and Bruce Pandolfini were essential in choreographing the games. Nonetheless, it is not necessary to be able to play chess or have any prior knowledge of the game to follow the miniseries since the narrative has more to offer than

that: at its core, *The Queen's Gambit* is a coming-of-age story that explores wonderfully the protagonist's psychological depth as well as the secondary characters' development. The series garnered numerous prizes, including 11 Primetime Emmy Awards, which secured its place as one of Netflix's most celebrated and popular original productions.

Nevertheless, even though it has been widely praised, the series also faced legal controversy when Nona Gaprindashvili, a Georgian chess champion, filed a defamation lawsuit against Netflix in 2021. Nona, who is a pioneer in women's chess, objected to a line in the series in the last episode that falsely stated that "she had never faced men," despite her extensive record of competing against and defeating male players in the 1960s. Netflix initially sought to dismiss the lawsuit, claiming the statement was fictional. However, the case was eventually settled in September 2022 and Netflix agreed to resolve the matter for an undisclosed amount.

Analysis: A high-functioning genius

When it comes to body and gender, the miniseries deals with them in different ways. In terms of gender, the audience is made aware that in the 1950s and 1960s chess was a male-dominated sport and women were not quite welcome to play. In fact, in episode two when Beth is about to enter her first official tournament ever, the male receptionists tell her that they do not have a women's section. She replies that it does not matter, and that she is willing to play against men. However, curiously enough, she starts the tournament playing against the only female rival and both of them are made to sit at the table with the beverages and cups.

However, as Beth becomes more famous and recognized among chess players, the viewer can sense that the explicit label of *female* chess player starts to disappear, and it is no longer key for the character's development. Of course, her first tournament is not the only time when Beth experiences sexist comments. In episode three, Beth is interviewed for a national magazine regarding her big success in chess. However, the journalist keeps asking her for anecdotes about her being a girl among all those men rather than focusing on her brilliant ability to play chess. Later in that same episode, she complains to Alma, her foster mother, saying that "it's mostly about my being a girl." Not only that, but in that same interview, Beth is asked whether the pieces of the chessboard meant something deeper to her, since she was an orphan, and whether she saw the king as something she had to protect and the queen as something she could use to attack; the former symbolizing her deceased father and the latter her deceased mother. However, as Beth clarifies "they're just pieces."

Beth's female counterparts are also relevant for the gender issues shown in the miniseries, since they remind not only the protagonist, but also the audience, that she is privileged to be pursuing her own career and develop her talents in a sexist atmosphere. Indeed, there were not many women at the time who were able to be economically independent and widely supported in their professional choices. Alma Wheatley is a perfect example of Beth's counterpart: her husband is abusive and often humiliates her in front of their adopted daughter; she is also disregarded several times during the series. In fact, the audience is induced to think that the reason that lies behind her being an alcoholic has to do with her domestic situation. Similarly, in episode five when Beth meets one of her previous classmates, Margaret, in a shop, she sees her carrying a baby stroller full of liquor underneath. She states "I should probably get my errands done, before this

one gets really fussy and the window of opportunity, as we like to say, slams shut" referring to her baby but also to her husband. This scene is significant and powerful, as it depicts the real image of a woman at the time, who not only has become a mother and a housewife at a young age (after graduation in this particular case) but is quietly becoming an alcoholic out of despair. Of course, Margaret represents what was expected from a woman in the 1960s, unlike Beth.

Regarding the body, this series deals with addiction from different perspectives. As mentioned earlier, Alma is an alcoholic and is very permissive with Beth in terms of drinking. So much so that she lets Beth try alcohol in one of her tournaments when she is still underage. Since the beginning of the miniseries, nonetheless, the viewers are aware of Beth's addiction to the green pills, which are thought to represent either Xanax or Benzodiazepines, as they were commonly prescribed in the 1960s. Her addiction to the green pills is framed from a point of view that makes the audience think that Beth's high-functioning and brilliance at chess are intrinsically connected to those pills. In fact, hers is a type of drug addiction known as high-functioning addiction, in which the addict does not fit the stereotype of a substance abuser and is typically very intelligent and driven. They can maintain a normal life and perform at their brightest without any sign of drug use. Nonetheless, these addicts normally reach a turning point, and in Beth's case this happens in episode six when she almost skips a tournament.

Another interesting body aspect explored in this miniseries is connected to fashion. The costume designer of the series, Gabriele Binder, explained that she wanted to first understand the traits that make a chess player unique so that the clothes could depict exactly that. Beth's first relevant contact with fashion happens when she is in the orphanage and has to wear a dull grey/green dress with a collared shirt. Once Alma adopts her, aged 13, they go shopping for some new clothes, but her foster mother has a tight budget. Of course, when Beth goes to school wearing the cheap clothes Alma has chosen for her, her peers mock her. Only after her first win can Beth afford the checked dress she craves.

Beth further plays with fashion while undergoing some of her best and worst memories, such as becoming a chess master and Alma's death. Indeed, 1960s fashion was characterized for transcending the 1950s hourglass figure but still demanded that women 'dolled up', so to speak. However, Beth is a bit different. She distances herself from those stereotypes and wears instead stylish but also vindictive outfits. She wears for instance casual T-shirts, which, as the stylist puts it, was not as common among women back in the day. Colors also take frontstage in this limited series. For instance, Alma wears pastel colors and when she dies, Beth is seen on screen with some pastel green outfits. If the viewer pays enough attention, though, it is noticeable that this color has had a relevant meaning for the protagonist since it is the color of her addiction (the green pills) and the color associated with her foster mother. Besides, and in the light of her last tournament, she is seen wearing a light green dress, just as at the beginning of the miniseries, thus closing the circle. For her final episode, once she is proclaimed the winner, Beth is seen with a pure white outfit that includes pants, shoes and a long coat, all topped off with a beautiful hat, symbolizing that her journey is complete and she has become the queen of the chessboard.

To conclude, *The Queen's Gambit* is an extremely well-thought and enjoyable miniseries that deals with gender and body from different perspectives. It offers an opportunity to follow the life of a female young adult who is undergoing addiction and

several challenges in a period when it was even more difficult to be a successful woman. Finally, Beth Harmon stands out in that she is a high-functioning addict, who is lucky enough to be surrounded by people who care about her and eventually overcomes her addiction. The audience can follow along her journey as she becomes the most important absolute chess player of the time, without being relegated to the (many times underrated) female category.

Bibliography

Bushard, Brian. "Netflix Settles *Queen's Gambit* Defamation Lawsuit with Georgian Chess Master." *Forbes* 8 November 2022, https://www.forbes.com/sites/brianbushard/2022/09/06/netflix-settles-queens-gambit-defamation-lawsuit-with-georgian-chess-master/

Haslanger, Sally. "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?" *Noûs* 34.1 (2000): 31-55. https://www.mit.edu/~shaslang/papers/WIGRnous.pdf

Hobbs, Julia. "*The Queen's Gambit* Costume Designer Reveals the Hidden Meanings Behind Anya Taylor-Joy's Winning on-Screen Style." *Vogue India* 6 November 2020, www.vogue.in/fashion/content/netflix-show-the-queens-gambit-costume-designer-reveals-the-hidden-meanings-behind-anya-taylor-joys-winning-on-screen-style

Jburkepmc. "*The Queen's Gambit* - Fashion, Chess and Women's Empowerment." *Golden Globes* 22 November 2023, https://goldenglobes.com/articles/queens-gambit-fashion-chess-and-womens-empowerment/

Mcclain, Dylan Loeb. "How the *Queen's Gambit* Started a New Debate about Sexism in Chess." *The New York Times* 10 November 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/11/10/arts/television/queens-gambit-women-chess.html.

Sandstone Care, "*The Queen's Gambit* & High-Functioning Addiction." *Sandstone Care* 20 December 2022, www.sandstonecare.com/blog/the-queens-gambit-a-testament-to-high-functioning-addiction/

Tevis, Walter S. *The Queen's Gambit*. Random House, 1983.

Unorthodox: A Journey to Emancipation

MARTINA BUSQUETS COSTA

Episodes: 4
Release date: 26 May 2020
Creator: Anna Winger and Alexa Karolinski
Source: *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots* (2012), memoir by Deborah Feldman
Cast: Shira Haas (Esther Shapiro), Amit Rahav (Yaakov Shapiro), Jeff Wilbusch (Moses Lefkovitch), Alex Reid (Leah Mandelbaum), Ronit Asheri (Malka Schwartz), Gera Sandler (Mordechai Schwartz), Dina Doron (Bubbe), Aaron Altaras (Robert)
Companies Studio Airlift, Real Film Berlin and Netflix
Genre: historical drama, autobiography
Nationality: USA, Germany
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9815454/

Introduction: Breaking boundaries

Unorthodox is a four-episode series created by Anna Winger and Alexa Karolinski and directed by Maria Schrader. The series, the first to be spoken primarily in Yiddish, narrates the story of Esty Shapiro, a 19-year-old woman who decides to escape from her oppressive Hasidic Jewish community in Williamsburg, New York. *Unorthodox* is inspired by Deborah Feldman's autobiographic book *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots* published in 2012.

Anna Winger is an American writer and producer, known by other television dramas such as *Deutschland 83* (2015) or *Transatlantic* (2023). Alexa Karolinski is a German writer, director and producer known for *Oma & Bella* (2012). They both worked together with Feldman, who reached out to them to adapt her autobiography into a television series. They agreed to work on the project partly because the story aligned with several themes they were both interested in, particularly the struggles of being Jewish in Germany. The series was produced by Studio Airlift, Real Film Berlin and Netflix, and premiered in 2020.

Casting was a crucial element of the production process. Winger, Schrader, and casting director Kling collectively decided to hire only Jewish actors to play Jewish characters, believing this choice significantly enhanced the show's authenticity: Shira Haas took on the role of Esther Shapiro, while Amit Rahav played Yanky Shapiro and Jeff Wilbusch played Moishe Lefkovitch. Shira Haas is also celebrated for her roles in *Bodies* (2023) and *Shtisel* (2013). Amit Rahav is recognized for his work in *Matchmaking* (2022) and *We Were the Lucky Ones* (2024).

Analysis: Thinking disobedience

In her book *Understand Psychology*, Nicky Hayes introduces the concept of "unthinking obedience" to refer to the type of total compliance that is given without thinking, asking questions or doubting. In addition, Hayes explains that humans have a natural tendency not to disobey and to be in favor of the majority: "all of the researchers, no matter when they did the study, found that openly disagreeing with other people is deeply stressful" (37). Learning to obey is a process that is taught from a very young age, and that can, sometimes, be dangerous. However, Hayes also introduces the figure of "the rebel," meaning a person who has the courage to question the majority and that, consequently, provides a different possibility other than following the mass. Esty Shapiro, I believe, embodies the figure of the rebel; she is capable of thinking outside the box and of envisioning a brighter future for herself. In *Unorthodox* we follow her journey to liberation, which, driven by the oppression she experienced within her community, unfolds through several stages, each of which gradually gives her more agency.

Esty Shapiro was born in a Hasidic Jewish community in Williamsburg, New York, a place that served as destination for many Orthodox refugees from Hitler's Europe: it was "founded by people struggling with the worst trauma you can imagine" (Feldman in David). Feldman argues that this trauma was passed down through generations, and that it became a "driving force" for many among the community (in David). All throughout the series there seems to be a sense of urgency to procreate and, precisely, it is Esty herself who draws upon the matter, appealing to the need of "rebuilding the six million lost" (E3). Her grandmother also has this in mind when she mentions that there were "so many lost" but that soon Esty will have children of her own and will contribute to the cause. This need to reproduce seems to be a direct consequence of their inherited trauma, and it becomes a crucial element as soon as a couple gets married.

Following this logic, if a Jewish woman is infertile, she becomes useless, since her only role in life is to bear children: "The greatest social misfortune in this community is infertility. It is grounds for divorce. Women who cannot produce children are relegated to the lowest possible position in society, they are seen as completely useless, purposeless, valueless" (Feldman in Ruiz). Consequently, Esty, from the moment her marriage is arranged, is taught how to be a good wife and mother. One of the first lessons she learns about is sex and how the couple must have it every Friday, but only if she is clean—i.e. not on her period. Understandably, Esty and her husband struggle to have sex due to lack of experience and education on the matter. Furthermore, she is in much pain because she suffers from vaginismus, an involuntary contraction of the vaginal muscles, making penetration very difficult.

The blame for the couple's inability to have a child, nevertheless, is only put on Esty and on her inability to be a good wife. She is told by her mother-in-law that she must "figure something out before the boy (Esty's husband) loses his confidence" because "a man should feel like a king in bed" (E3). Having problems conceiving is something to be ashamed of in the Orthodox community, where, in some cases, women had up to seventeen children (Deutsch in Hanau). That is why Feldman explains that when she could not get pregnant, she was "threatened with divorce, homelessness, complete abandonment," and that she faced cruel attacks on her basic worth as a person: "I was made to understand that my ability to have a child was my only value and that if I failed to fulfil this expectation I would be treated like waste" (in Ruiz).

Esty goes through the same experience because she repeatedly fails to get pregnant. After many attempts, though, when she finally is about to announce her pregnancy to her husband, he tells her that, tired of her inability to have children, he has filed for divorce. The situation is just too much for Esty, so she decides to escape to Germany. As she herself sums it up, “God expected too much of me” (E2). From this moment onwards, Esty gradually breaks free from the chains that held her back to discover a new way of living—difficult but liberating. From the moment she sets foot in Berlin her journey to emancipation begins. There are many instances that give Esty more agency each time. I have chronologically divided them into five: the moment she swims in Wannsee Lake, the first time she puts on a pair of jeans, when she first kisses her friend Robert, when she paints her lips red in a club and, finally, when she sings in front of people auditioning for a music academy. Nevertheless, I believe two of them to be the most significant ones and they will be, therefore, my focus: swimming (paying close attention to the water) and the audition (focusing on the voice).

Water is a common theme in literature that usually acts as a space of transition, representing a liminal threshold between two different states of being. In *Unorthodox* this idea is central to Esty’s transformation: after arriving in Berlin she meets Robert, who introduces her to his group of friends. They decide to go to Wannsee Lake for a swim and Esty joins them too. At this moment she is still dressed according to the code imposed by her community: she is wearing modest clothes with a skirt and, most importantly, she is wearing a wig. The wig, or *sheitel* in Yiddish, is a symbol used by orthodox women to “signal to their surroundings that they are married and that they comply with traditional notions of propriety” (Jewish Museum Berlin). When Esty enters the lake, the first thing she does is to get rid of her wig, which reveals her shaved head, a very brave and bold act to do, since she is thus abandoning her marital status.

Water, at the same time, holds a strong symbolism in the Jewish community. Jews represent the conversion of an individual through immersion in a completely different environment—water instead of air. There, he or she floats, and rests suspended and breathless. Consequently, “Individuality, passion, ego–all are submerged in the metamorphosis from the larval state of the present to a new existence” (Lamm). Throughout Jewish history, unmarried women have traditionally immersed in the *Mikveh*, a ritual bath used for spiritual purification, before their wedding. Esty, therefore, had to go through this ritual prior to her marriage, and to me, there is a clear parallelism between that moment and her swim in Wannsee lake. Firstly, as Lamm explains:

> Submerging in a pool of water for the purpose not of using the water’s physical cleansing properties but expressly to symbolize a change-of-soul is a statement at once deeply spiritual and immensely compelling (…) The water of the mikveh is designed to ritually cleanse a person from deeds of the past. The convert is considered by Jewish law to be like a newborn child.

Therefore, when she gets married, Esty goes from being a girl to being a woman, from being single to depending on her husband. On the contrary, when she submerges herself in the water of Wannsee Lake, she is leaving her past behind; she is no longer attached to her husband and becomes an independent person with full value, not only that of being a mother. Many examples of this conversion can be seen in literature, but the most revealing one appears in *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin. Edna, the protagonist of the novel, goes for a nocturnal swim in the beach:

> But that night she was like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence. She could have shouted for joy. She did shout for joy, as with a sweeping stroke or two she lifted her body to the surface of the water. (Chopin 34)

Tordasi interprets the scene as "a rite of passage during which Edna turns into a threshold person, who no longer perceives herself the way she did before, and does not yet understand who she is about to become" (224). Precisely, I argue that this transformation mirrors Esty's swim: she no longer perceives herself as Esther Shapiro but simply as Esty, with no possibility of turning back.

Singing is a common form of expression and entertainment around the world. Nevertheless, for women in Orthodox circles, this is not prevalent. Most of them must "strictly follow the *Halakha*" (Roten), which clearly states that a "woman must not sing in presence of men, to not distract them from prayer and study" (Roten). Esty has a strong love for music that she seems to share with her Grandma: in the first episode, we see Esty's grandma emotionally touched by a song she is listening to: "My father loved this song. He had a wonderful voice, Esty. Your great-grandpa. All the men in his family did" (E1). Esty also took piano lessons, and she uses her knowledge of the instrument to audition in a music conservatory in Berlin. However, when she faces the judges she decides to change, and instead of the piano, she auditions with her voice. The song she chooses first is "An Die Musik" by Franz Schubert. This is the song that Babby, her grandma, was listening to. When asked why she chose this song, Esty explains that "My grandmother loved it. It was our secret [because] a woman performing loudly among men is considered to be immodest. Even seductive" (E4). Esty is fully aware that performing among men is strictly forbidden, but she does it anyway. After that one song, one of the judges asks her to sing another that suits her voice type better, so she can show them her full potential. She chooses a Yiddish song called "Mi Bon Siach," and it is here when she discovers her strength: "the show is about a woman finding her voice, and in that scene, she's literally finding it, she's even surprising herself of what's coming out of her" (Haas in Yang). This final scene culminates her emancipation. She is liberated from her past, and although hard and unpredictable, she has now a life of her own.

To conclude, as Anna Winger states: "From the beginning, we were interested in telling a deeply human story about the search for self-definition, freedom, community, about a young woman looking for her place in the world and struggling to find it" (in Blake). Esty goes through a symbolic and physical journey to freedom, and the steps she takes to achieve this freedom are very significant. In this essay, I have focused on two steps: firstly, water is a common theme in literature that usually represents a space of transition, a threshold between two different states of being. In *Unorthodox*, this idea is intertwined with the symbolism of the Jewish *Mikveh,* that stands in complete opposition to Esty's swim in Wannsee's lake. Secondly, the female singing voice, forbidden at public events in the Jewish community, becomes Esty's best ally on her path to liberation. She sings in front of a jury, consisting of both male and female members, and she discovers her voice, her words, her agency.

Bibliography

Blake, Meredith. "Netflix's *Unorthodox* Went to Remarkable Lengths to Get Hasidic Jewish Customs Right." *Los Angeles Times* 7 April 2020, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/tv/story/2020-04-07/unorthodox-netflix-hasidic-jewish-customs

Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*. The Penguin English Library, 2018 (1899).

David, Keren. "An Unorthodox Journey to Berlin." *The Jewish Chronicle* 19 March 2020, https://www.thejc.com/life-and-culture/tv/an-unorthodox-journey-to-berlin-xr0uo5c1

Hanau, Shira. "In NYC's Hipster Mecca of Williamsburg, Hasidic Jews Are the Real Counterculture." *The Times of Israel* 10 June 2021, https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-nycs-hipster-mecca-of-williamsburg-hasidic-jews-are-the-real-counterculture/

Hayes, Nicky. *Understand Psychology*. John Murray Learning, 2019.

Jewish Museum Berlin. "Why Do Women Have to Cover Their Hair with a Wig or Scarf after Getting Married?" *Jewish Museum Berlin* n.d., www.jmberlin.de/en/question-of-the-month-why-do-women-have-to-cover-their-hair-with-a-wig

Lamm, Rabbi Maurice. "The Mikveh's Significance in Traditional Conversion." *My Jewish Learning* 7 March 2016, https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/why-immerse-in-the-mikveh/

Roten, Hervé. "Women's Singing in Jewish Tradition." *Institut Européen des Musiques Juives* n.d., https://www.iemj.org/en/le-chant-des-femmes-dans-la-tradition-juive/

Ruiz, Mauricio. "What Does It Take for Ultra-Orthodox Women to Leave Their Repressive Lives?" *Electric Literature* 19 April 2018, https://electricliterature.com/what-does-it-take-for-ultra-orthodox-women-to-leave-their-repressive-lives

Tordasi, Katherin. *Women by the Waterfront: Modernist (Re)visions of Gender, Self and Littoral Space.* Königshausen & Neumann, 2018.

Yang, Rachel. "Unorthodox Star Shira Haas Says She Got to 'Scream Her Scream' in Esty's Powerful Singing Scene." *Entertainment Weekly* 27 August 2020, https://ew.com/awards/emmys/unorthodox-shira-haas-singing-scene/

It's a Sin: Shame in the Pursuit of Pleasure

AMY BOLITER

Episodes: 5
Release date: 22 January 2021
Creators: Russell T. Davies
Cast: Olly Alexander (Ritchie Tozer), Nathaniel Curtis (Ash Mukherjee), Shaun Dooley (Clive Tozer), Omari Douglas (Roscoe Babatunde), Lydia West (Jill Baxter), Keeley Hawes (Valerie Tozer), Neil Ashton (Grizzle), Callum Scott Howells (Colin Morris-Jones)
Companies: Red Production Company, All3Media, Channel 4
Genre: coming-of-age, drama
Nationality: UK
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9140342/

Introduction: a bittersweet liberation

It's a Sin encapsulates an at once liberating and traumatic chapter in the history of LGBTIAQ+ lives, in a 5-part miniseries. Tracing the emergence of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, the show tackles the ambivalence of a UK-based community seeking freedom in sexual expression while grappling with prevailing social shaming and stigmatization. This infamous condition that came to be associated with gay men served to intensify the culture of discrimination, as it fueled the fire for further pathologization and moral condemnation of homosexuality. This coming-of-age drama wraps up this period of history, remembering the pain of each individual story and each case of a man who died of AIDS without dignity. The narrative power of justice and sorrow is even more arresting for the juxtaposition of joy and freedom, as alongside the tragedy of these deaths, the men attempt to revindicate their taboo-shrouded identities through expressions and practices of sexual liberation.

Welsh writer and creator Russell T. Davies, is known and praised for presenting LGBTIAQ+ lives on British television. Back in 1999, he wrote *Queer as Folk*, a series depicting the lives of gay men in Manchester, a first in representation of this kind for the way it normalized being gay (Barker). In 2021, he returned with *It's a Sin*. As a young gay man himself in the 1980s and 90s, he recovered anecdotes from his social circles at the time, for instance of "parents who arrived at AIDS wards at British hospitals to discover that their son was gay, that he had AIDS, and that he was dying, all in one moment" (Haynes). Connecting these harrowing memoirs with the sociopolitical historical context and media smear campaigns, Davies illustrates the ways in which this community was torn apart. Nevertheless, there is a playful and exuberant undercurrent in the narrative, which hopes to memorialize and set a precedent for the positive and optimistic aspects of the LGBTIAQ+ identity. Echoing real-life sentiments about the epidemic, junior doctor

Peter Godfrey Fausset recalls, “It was a bittersweet time of my life. The ward was full of a predominantly gay clientele who were at the front of London’s vibrant 80s scene. There were a lot of creatives—young men from the theatre, opera and fashion—all together in one ward. So we did have some fun” (in Lee).

The series follows the lives of a group of young friends who arrive in London in 1981 from all the far-flung corners of England to begin their university studies and professional lives. The main character, Ritchie Tozer (Olly Alexander) arrives at university a closeted gay from a conservative family background, but over the course of the series blossoms into one of London’s creatives as a fine young actor. On arrival in London, he meets his best friend, Jill Baxter (Lydia West), who encourages him to switch degree paths from law to drama and to start dating boys. In this way, he begins to undergo his sexual liberation. The pair move in together, christening their flat the “Pink Palace” and thereby iconizing their free gender expression. The story connects with the creator Davies’ own story, as he also lived in his own version of the Pink Palace; real-life Jill is a good friend of his. According to Davies, Jill is the only character based on a real person, and she features as an actress in the show playing Jill’s mother.

As the series unfolds, Ritchie meets other friends like Nathaniel Curtis (Ash Mukherjee), securely and confidently out, and Roscoe Babatunde (Omari Douglas), who has bravely walked out on his Nigerian family in defense of his sexuality. Last to arrive at the scene is Colin Morris-Jones (Callum Scott Howells), the reserved and innocent Welsh boy whom the friends take in and show a good time to. Besides Jill, what they all share is that they are young gay men, coming-of-age in London. All five of the main characters form a tight-knit community and remain good friends over the ten years that the series covers. Friendship, freedom and fun are central themes, but inevitably, carefree joy subsides with the stealthy arrival of HIV and AIDS, which have no mercy for the dreams and optimism of the youth.

Analysis: The biopolitical power of shame

In this miniseries, we see projections from philosophers in their work on bio- and necro-politics. As Preciado argues, Michel Foucault, “the first philosopher of history to die from complications resulting from the acquired immunodeficiency virus left us with some of the most effective tools for considering the political management of the epidemic.” Preciado explains that “Foucault’s entire oeuvre can be understood as a historical analysis of different techniques by which power manages the life and death of populations” and so, “in the domain of the individual body, different sicknesses materialize the obsessions that dominate bio- and necro-politics.” Preciado writes, “Tell me how your community constructs its political sovereignty and I will tell you what forms your plagues will take.” Representing this line of thought in the series, the final episode sees Jill angrily addressing her best friend’s homophobic mother, Valerie: “The perfect virus came along to prove you right” (E5). Her sentiment is addressed not only to his mother but to a society which views homosexuality as wrong, and thus those that identify with it as disposable.

In *It’s a Sin* we are presented with the UK under the notorious conservative government of Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990), in which austerity and right-wing politics predominated. Though a female leader, Thatcher showed little consideration for those at the margins, her policies favoring patriarchy and upholding the privilege of cis gendered

straight white men. In a study about AIDS research, van Meter found that Thatcher cut funding for social science research and that "'Managing the plague' also included deciding which research themes were acceptable and given priority in budget decisions" (58). Key associations between terminology like "sexuality, homosexuality, drugs or minorities" (59) in sociological AIDS research were not made in early research, which can be directly contrasted with research in Germany where such associations were common. Clearly, homosexual men were not valued under Thatcher's rule; they were actively discriminated against and quite literally, allowed to die. With the knowledge that a fatal virus was disproportionately affecting large numbers of the gay community, the movement to research, prevent and treat it was disproportionately slow.

The wider sociopolitical reach of such biopolitics plays out clearly in *It's a Sin* which illustrates the context of discrimination faced by the community. The media as a machine of the state spreads news of the "gay plague", meanwhile there is widespread misinformation about the condition, making it very difficult for the community to take care of themselves. We see Jill searching far and wide for information to no avail, and we see how this intensifies the stigmatization: Colin is fired from his job because he is caught reading newspaper articles on the topic and when he contracts the virus, he is treated as dangerous, locked in the hospital ward and effectively taken prisoner. Other characters, like Ritchie, return home to their family homes to die, kept away from prying eyes as their condition deteriorates until the day of their funeral. In the fourth episode, we see the friends attend a funeral in which the family ban and refuse to mention the boyfriend of the man who has died, denying his homosexuality and AIDS, and proving the strength of resistance to social stigma even beyond the grave.

In history and in the series, not only do these men die in silence, but they die without integrity, believing that they only have themselves to blame, because society shames their sexual identity and views their passing as an acceptable, natural fate. Jill refers to this in her speech to Ritchie's mother, saying, "They are dying and a little bit of them thinks: 'yes, this is right, I brought this on myself, it's my fault, because the sex that I love is killing me'" (E5). In this way, shame is used to morally condemn social groups and maintain the gendered structures of power which enable heteronormativity. In a moralistic and Christian determination, gay men pay the ultimate price for their 'sins', which the writer references in the name of the show, *It's a Sin*, and the Pet Shop Boys' song from whence it came.

In his book *From Shame to Sin*, Harper traces the advent and uptake of Christianity in the late classical world, and the specific prohibitions that it introduced, notably of same-sex relationships. He finds little difference between shame and sin: "Shame is a social concept, instantiated in human emotions; sin is a theological concept. They represent different categories of moral sanction" (7). Ultimately some behaviors are publicly condemned or prohibited so that partaking in them is perceived as immoral or sinful. Undertaking these behaviors, or even thinking about them, may invoke shame: the shame of social marginality and exclusion. From religion to politics to medicine, homosexuality has been condemned. Until the 1970s it was pathologized and considered as an illness and, until 1992, included in the International Classification of Diseases (King and Bartlett). Well into the 2000s and up until the present day, the legacy of such moral and medical judgements remains, with researchers finding that, "for the 'homosexual subject' the increasing consciousness of same-sex desire generates feelings of marginality. An individual may be shamed by their feelings" (McDermott et al.).

The shame of our main character, Ritchie, is palpable, starting with his resistance to 'coming out' until his arrival in London. Later, Jill refers to it directly in her speech towards his mother. Blaming her for his death and his shame for bringing up Ritchie in such a "loveless" household, she says: "He was ashamed, and he kept on being ashamed. He kept on shame-going by having sex with men and infecting them and then running away, because that's what shame does, Valerie." So here, she also refers to how shame might lead to "self-destructive behaviors" like "risky sexual practices" as referred to in medical research (McDermott et al.).

In fact, it is here where the miniseries faces its harshest critics. Griffin finds Jill's character, as the implied straight friend, problematic, arguing that, "The centrality of Jill's perspective on the AIDS Crisis raises questions about representational justice. Does the program actually pathologize gay male sexuality, in spite of itself?" Similar criticisms have echoed that when Jill passes judgement over the promiscuity of her queer friends there is an "over-identification with moralistic and homophobic conceptualizations of AIDS" and more widely gay lives. Later in the series when Ritchie contracts the virus, "HIV is depicted as punishment, invoking queerphobic tropes" (Duckels). However, Griffin sees on balance that "*It's A Sin*'s moral universe working to dismantle cultural hierarchies that assign blame and fault to those who contract the virus," recalling a speech in which Ritchie himself remembers all the men he has slept with, expresses that he loves them and does not blame them or himself for his diagnosis.

These narratives must be handled with sensitivity, to liberate and not to further marginalize queer lives. Ultimately, Russell T. Davies has received critical acclaim for the miniseries, with an Achievement Award from the Royal Television Society following the release of *It's a Sin* for his work over the last 20 years in television, particularly for telling the untold stories of marginalized queer lives. In his representations, he includes a range of characters, not all of whom are morally coherent, largely ignoring debates about positive representation (Wheatley). However, whilst *It's a Sin* and *Queer as Folk* may have appeared groundbreaking, that speaks for the huge lack of LGBTIAQ+ representation generally in British television. Further criticism that the narrative "privileges white men to produce a marketable historical narrative" (Harrison) are also warranted, and I would hope for intersectional LGBTIAQ+ experiences to be featured more frequently in British television.

In conclusion, the series presents the homophobic reality of 1980s Britain, to portray the damage such marginalization caused to the gay community. If shame is a central theme, the series does not intend to pathologize homosexuality, but rather to demonstrate a biopolitical climate of shaming and stigmatization and its harmful consequences on the emotional lives of this community. To this end, the historical context of oppression is clearly presented, and is balanced by scenes of joy, love and sexual liberation. The takeaway message is clear: the love and community found between these men could only be viewed as a 'sin' by a cold society, lacking in love and acceptance.

Bibliography

Barker, Miriam. "*Queer as Folk*: How Russell T. Davies' Drama Changed People's Lives." *BBC* 23 February 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-68385229

Duckels, Gabriel. “AIDS Melodrama Now: Queer Tears in *It’s a Sin* and *Pose*.” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 26.1 (2023): 122-128, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/13675494221097134

Griffin, Hollis. “*It’s a Sin*: AIDS as Incipient Crisis” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 26.1 (2023): 115-121, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/13675494221097135

Harper, Kyle. “Introduction: From City to Cosmos” *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity*, Kyle Harper (Ed.). Harvard UP, 2016. 14-31.

Harrison, Rebecca. “Telephone Networks And Transactional Motherhood in Channel 4’s *It’s a Sin*.” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 26.1 (2023): 85-94, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/13675494221106496

Haynes, Suyin. “How the New British Drama *It’s a Sin* Is Telling the History of the 1980s AIDS Crisis – And Sparking Change in The Present” *Time* 15 February 2021, https://time.com/5939522/its-a-sin-history-hiv-transphobia/

King, M. and Bartlett, A. “British Psychiatry and Homosexuality” *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 175.2 (1999): 106-113. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/10627791/

Lee, Sarah. “Life Was a Party Before AIDS Arrived in London” *BBC* 26 February 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-55983269

McDermott, Elizabeth; Katrina Roen and Jonathan Scourfield. “Avoiding Shame: Young LGBT People, Homophobia And Self-Destructive Behaviours” *Culture, Health & Security* 10.8 (2008): 815-829, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20461068

Preciado, Paul B. “Learning From The Virus: Paul B. Preciado” *Artforum International* 58.9 (2020): https://www.proquest.com/docview/2426195788?_oafollow=false&pq-origsite=primo&sourcetype=magazines

Van Meter, Karl M. “Managing A Plague: Channeling The ‘Spread’ of AIDS Research” *Current Sociology* 49.6 (2001): 57-65, https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392101496007

Wheatley, Helen. “The Consequences of The Television Closet: *It’s a Sin* (Red Production For Channel 4/HBO Max 2021) as a Meditation on the Presence and Absence of Queer Lives on British Television.” *European Journal Of Cultural Studies* 26.1 (2023): 95-101, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/13675494221097133

Maid: Emotional Abuse

Nerea Menorca Hidalgo

Episodes: 10
Release date: 1 – 15 October 2021
Creators: Molly Smith Metzler
Source: *Maid: Hard Work, Low Pay, and a Mother's Will to Survive* (2019), memoir by Stephanie Land
Cast: Margaret Qualley (Alex), Nick Robinson (Sean), Anika Noni Rose (Regina), Andie MacDowell (Paula), and Raymond Ablack (Nate), Billy Burke (Hank), BJ Harrison (Denise).
Companies: Netflix, John Wells Productions, Full Spectrum Features
Genre: drama
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11337908/

Introduction: A mother's will to survive

Maid is a ten-episode series created by Molly Smith Metzler and based on Stephanie Land's memoir *Maid*: *Hard Work, Low Pay, and a Mother's Will to Survive* (2019). Inspired by Land's real-life experiences as a struggling mother, the show highlights the hard realities that many women face in low-paid jobs and abusive relationships. The series is about a young mother, Alex, who escapes an emotionally abusive relationship with her husband Sean. She does not have the financial means to provide for their child's needs, not even with the help of social services. Alex takes on work as a maid, an employment that is portrayed in its terrible reality. *Maid* not only examines the complexities of poverty, but also investigates, as noted, emotional abuse, showing the long-term effects on the victims and the lack of support they receive. The series shows very clearly the escalation of violence and how domestic violence is not limited to physical and sexual violence (Stewart). The protagonist shows great resilience in the middle of despair, as Sean is an alcoholic husband and father with a highly volatile character.

Although the series explores the socioeconomic hardships of being a single mother, the emotional abuse Alex suffers from Sean becomes the story's main theme. The series portrays how emotional manipulation, belittlement, and gaslighting can destroy a person's sense of self-worth, forcing them to confront their reality. The viewer sees Alex's journey from emotional and economic dependence to physical and financial independence, which highlights her opportunity to live a life with her daughter on her own terms. This heartbreaking narrative shows the tremendous hardships every domestic violence victim faces when gathering the courage and strength to pack the bags and search for help (Devadas).

Thus, this series, based on a true narrative, makes the viewers recognize the real-life problems of a mother and daughter that have to reconstruct their lives, which can be

relatable to many women who have suffered in abusive relationships (Bauer). The series encourages empathy and understanding by reflecting on the challenges Alex has to go through and by raising awareness of domestic abuse, sending the message that individuals need assistance in order to overcome terrible circumstances. *Maid* serves as both a mirror and a voice for people who have gone through painful experiences, emphasizing the strength needed to endure these difficult journeys.

Analysis: Confronting the reality of emotional abuse

Alex is a young, intelligent and loving mother of a 3-year-old child, who is forced to flee an abusive situation and make difficult choices to provide for her infant. *Maid* addresses, as noted, the issue of emotional abuse, which often goes unnoticed but leaves lifelong psychological scars on victims. Throughout the series, Alex's relationship with Sean serves as an example of how emotional manipulation can trap women in life-threatening cycles. Alex's experience demonstrates that emotional abuse is characterized by a habit of control and intimidation, rather than by direct assault.

From the very beginning, Sean verbally and emotionally abuses Alex, making her feel as if she is nothing without him: "I pay all the bills, let you hang out with my friends, let you move into my trailer, you drink my beer, eat my food, let you mooch off me. I do everything for you. If you walk out of here, you'll have no one" (E1). Such claims promote a narrative in which Alex's emotional dependency on him is highlighted. This type of manipulation deprives Alex of autonomy, making it difficult for her to imagine a life beyond his shadow. To an extent, Alex believes his words as her mind has been beaten down emotionally by verbal putdowns and gaslighting throughout their relationship. Alex minimizes his behavior when being asked by the social worker about not having called the police: "And say what? That he didn't hit me?" (E1). Throughout this conversation, Alex realizes the devastating truth of intimate partner violence that happens beyond physical violence (Devadas).

Even though at the beginning Alex hesitates to accept a place in a women's shelter, believing she hasn't been truly abused, she finally accepts the help. Her reluctance to see herself as a victim and Sean as an abuser is both heartbreaking and reflects a common reality for those in abusive relationships (Lewis), in which psychological manipulation can cause victims to underestimate and minimize the gravity of their situation. The shelter becomes more than just a temporary refuge, since it provides Alex with the assistance she needs to reclaim her sense of self and gain independence, demonstrating the essential role of community in helping survivors on their path towards recovery.

Alex is informed that Danielle, a friend of the shelter, has returned with her abusive husband, highlighting the heartbreak prevalent in shelters, where women often return to their abusers due to emotional manipulation: "They go back more often than not. It takes most women seven tries before they finally leave" (E2). This might happen because humans are wired to make and maintain relationships and because many survivors, like Alex at a point, return to their partners hoping for change, only to realize that nothing has improved (Stewart), showing a common misbelief in love's healing power. The painful truth is that harmful patterns persist, leading to an even more complicated process of breaking free. Alex also presents an important moment in her relationship with Sean, when he learns she is pregnant: "He was all tenderness. But then

when I told him that I wasn't going to get an abortion, he took the chair and all the rest of my belongings and threw them out into the rain, and he screamed at me and told me that I was a fucking whore" (E2). This recollection illustrates the volatile nature of abusive relationships, where love and tenderness can quickly transform into rage and violence, and how they affect women's choices.

The series deals with social issues around fixed gender roles that exploit the unequal power between genders, a legal system that fails to support victims, and the lack of help victims receive from social services in cases of extreme poverty and abuse. Through Alex's journey, we see how important it is to create more compassionate and effective support systems that truly understand and help the victims of domestic violence. Alex deals with a legal system that often disregards the emotional complexities of motherhood and abuse. Even though she wants little Maddy with her all the time, reflecting the love for her daughter and fear of her husband, she faces stark reality when she is told that "You can't take a child away like that. It's grounds for losing custody. It's his word against yours" (E3), since emotional abuse is not considered legally as domestic abuse. Therefore, there is a significant gap in legal protection that can leave victims in a vulnerable position.

Alex's refusal at the beginning to realize that intimidation, controlling threats, screaming, guilt-tripping, throwing items around, and punching walls are abuse is quite common in domestic violence victims, who do not see that abuse takes numerous forms, exploiting and humiliating a woman's sense of self, and affecting a person's mental and emotional health (Schiffer). Many victims may fail to recognize these actions as abuse since they leave no visible physical wounds, causing them to feel they are not suffering actual violence and that they don't need to search for help. This highlights the necessity of promoting awareness about all forms of abuse, so that those suffering in silence can recognize their experiences and get the help they require. Thus, despite the dismissive judgments of others, Danielle reminds Alex that "punching a wall next to you is emotional abuse. Next time it is going to be your face" (E2), which illustrates the terrifying reality that such behavior can escalate, creating an atmosphere of fear. The imagery of emotional abuse "growing like mold" (E2) captures this idea that the abuse at first goes unnoticed but gradually consumes the victim due to its escalating nature. Alex's realization of this form of abuse prompts her to acknowledge her pain and transform her anger into a powerful motivator for change, reclaiming her voice and agency and reasserting her commitment to breaking the cycle of abuse.

Sean views Alex as property, her actions likely threatening his internalized stereotypical gender role as provider and as an authoritarian figure; indeed, he believes that his inability to control her is an insult to his manhood. Alex manages to gather the courage to leave him but not without consequences in the legal system, as she is unable to provide for her child, showing how the system frequently fails victims who run away from dangerous situations and the difficulties in finding shelter and protection (Schiffer). Sean uses manipulation to destabilize Alex's independence and control every aspect of her life, from her finances to her social connections. This isolation leaves her feeling trapped and powerless, pushing her into a deep emotional turmoil that includes depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Her realization of the toxic cycle marks the beginning of her journey toward reclaiming her strength and sense of self.

Alex might have escaped sooner if she had access to housing, daycare, and a full-time job after her first attempt. When she finally finds work as a cleaner, her resolve

to end her cycle of abuse takes a significant turn. This job is an important step toward independence and self-sufficiency since she starts to reconstruct her life with a sense of direction. However, her poverty and lack of resources pull her back into Sean's home, trapping herself again in a dangerous situation, despite her wish for a better life. She finds the strength and resources to leave again when she receives the unexpected help of her friend Regina, a wealthy client employing Alex as a cleaner (Isser). Emotional support is crucial, as illustrated by Regina, a wealthy single mother who connects with Alex through shared struggles, showing the importance of female friendships to provide comfort in difficult times. In the final episode, Alex leads a session at a domestic violence shelter, where women share memories and show appreciation with each other's stories and dreams. These scenes assert that all domestic abuse survivors need emotional healing and a space to express their struggles (Goedluck). Ultimately, Alex's journey sends out a message of hope: while emotional scars may take time to heal, there is the possibility of healing and self-empowerment. *Maid* encourages viewers to see the need for empathy and understanding survivors need to break the cycles of violence.

In contrast to Regina, in *Maid* Alex's experience is further complicated by her mother's misguided perspective on relationships. Paula, the mother, even tells Alex that "You don't leave a good man when he's trying" (E3). Alex deals with her own problems while also carrying the trauma of her mother, who suffered at the hands of her father, Hank. Alex recovers suppressed memories of Hank's abuse and this history shapes Alex's views on relationships, love, and safety, especially as Hank, now a recovering alcoholic, tries to rebuild his life and supports Sean's sobriety (Devadas). Alex's journey includes rebuilding her identity and gaining agency in the middle of fear. Her journey illustrates that leaving an abusive relationship is full of challenges, including facing one's childhood, and it's as much about rediscovering yourself as it is about breaking free from the abuser (Stewart).

The last episode stands as a strong testament to Alex's resilience and hope for a brighter future, as she recapitulates: "338 toilets cleaned, seven types of government assistance, nine separate moves, one night on the ferry station floor and the entire third year of my daughter's life" (E10). This list illustrates her sacrifices to escape abuse and provide for her child. Alex's belief that she will overcome everything with a courageous spirit shines through: "But when we get to Missoula, I'm going to show Maddy our new home" (E10). Finally, her promise, "I'm going to tell her that this whole new world is for her" (E10), embodies hope and renewal, symbolizing not just a personal triumph for Alex, but also the possibility of happiness, achieved through perseverance and determination. The series implores thus every woman never to put up with their partners who take advantage of them and abuse them, and to live a life of self-worth and dignity (Devadas).

In conclusion, the series deals with the impact of low-paid work and the failures of the support system to deal with these issues with sensitivity, and it also highlights how despair and feeling trapped can lead individuals to return to abusive relationships. By addressing these issues with empathy, *Maid* helps raise awareness of the struggles many women endure (Isser). However, the main concern about this popular and uplifting series is that it might give the wrong impression that abuse survivors are expected to heal quickly, leading to harsh judgments when they don't, and a lack of support for long-term resources for those in need. The viewers might mistakenly believe that their abusers will change and keep their promises, but that's unlikely (Smullens). That is why it is important

to highlight the importance of significant long-term support systems such as shelters that can help victims through the actual long process of leaving an abusive relationship.

The portrayal of the abusive relationships Paula goes through and the portrayal of masculinities in *Maid* is worth additional examination, particularly through the exploration of the figure of Sean. Sean represents the troublesome working-class man, a violent alcoholic whose difficult past prevents him from respecting Alex's independence. Alex's decision to leave Sean and pursue an education demonstrates her rejection of this hegemonic masculinity, reflecting a larger struggle for female emancipation in constrained contexts (Boehm).

Bibliography

Bauer, Lilie. "*Maid* (2021): Accurate On-Screen Representation of Female Power under Patriarchal Oppression." *Medium* 24 May 2023, https://medium.com/@liliebauer/maid-2021-accurate-on-screen-representation-of-female-power-under-patriarchal-oppression-2ff6c46b87c8

Boehm, Melissa. "Netflix's *Maid* and Representations of Masculinities through Social Class: A Textual Analysis." *Ámbitos. Revista Internacional de Comunicación* 2023: https://revistascientificas.us.es/index.php/Ambitos/article/view/20998/20542

Devadas, Anju. "Analysing the Gendered Poverty, Homelessness & Single Motherhood in Netflix's *Maid*." *Feminism in India* 17 October 2021, https://feminisminindia.com/2021/10/18/analysing-the-gendered-poverty-homelessness-single-motherhood-in-netflixs-maid/

Goedluck, Lakeisha. "Netflix's *Maid* Helped Me Come to Terms with My Own Emotional Abuse." *Refinery29* 8 October 2021, https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/netflix-maid-emotional-abuse

Isser, Minder. "Netflix's *Maid* Offers a Rare Portrayal of Low-Wage Domestic Work." *Jacobin* 2021, https://jacobin.com/2021/10/maid-netflix-show-review-stephanie-land-book

Lewis, Sophie. "How Domestic Labor Robs Women of Their Love." *Boston Review* 28 October 2021, https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/how-domestic-labor-robs-women-of-their-love/

Schiffer, Cathy. "*Maid* - Breaking the Cycle of Abuse." *Jewish Family Service of Greater Dallas* 25 October 2021, https://jfsdallas.org/maid-breaking-the-cycle-of-abuse/

Stewart, Danielle. "*Maid* Details the Journey of Leaving Abusive Relationships." *Resilience* 25 October 2021, https://resiliencemi.org/maid/

Smullens, SaraKay. "Review: The Mixed Messages of *Maid*—New Netflix Series Addresses Domestic Abuse, Poverty, and Social Work." *SocialWorker* 19 October 2021, https://www.socialworker.com/feature-articles/reviews-commentary/mixed-messages-maid-netflix-series-domestic-abuse-poverty-social-work/

Mare of Easttown: More Than Just Another 'Dead Girl Show'

IKRAM ROUAM EL KHATAB

Episodes: 7
Release date: 18 April – 30 May 2021
Creators: Brad Ingelsby
Cast: Kate Winslet (Mare Sheehan), Evan Peters (Colin Zobel), Jean Smart (Helen Fahey), Cailee Spaeny (Erin McMenamin), Sosie Bacon (Carrie Layden), Enid Graham (Dawn Bailey), Julianne Nicholson (Lori Ross), Joe Tippett (John Ross) Cameron Mann (Ryan Ross), Guy Pearce (Richard Ryan)
Companies: HBO, Zobot Projects, Mayhem Pictures, Juggle Productions, and Low Dweller Productions
Genre: crime drama
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt10155688

Introduction: Perfecting the accent

Mare of Easttown (2021, HBO) is a seven-episode limited series created by Brad Ingelsby, which narrates the struggles that Mare (played by Kate Winslet), a detective from a small town outside of Pennsylvania named Easttown, faces. She has been unable to solve the case of a missing young girl for over a year, which has led the girl's mother and many others in the community to doubt her professional skills. This situation worsens when a young teenage mother is murdered in the woods. After a few weeks pass, and Mare is still unable to solve either case, her supervisor is forced to bring in Colin Zabel (played by Evan Peters), a county detective, to help her with the investigations. Meanwhile, Mare is trying to keep her life from falling apart after her divorce, grieving for her son after his suicide—which she has not yet processed—contending with her daughter's defiant attitude and battling for custody against her son's formerly heroin-addicted girlfriend over Mare's grandson, Drew (played by Izzy King).

While the series is not based on a true story, it takes inspiration from the childhood of creator Brad Ingelsby and the town where he grew up. He created the character of Mare, basing her on a childhood friend who became a detective. Ingelsby also co-created the movie *Out of the Furnace* (2013) and wrote the movies *Run All Night* (2015) and *The Way Back* (2020).

The series takes place in a fictionalized version of Easttown Township, located in Chester County in the State of Pennsylvania, where the creator was born, although the show was filmed in the Eastern part of Delaware County, also in Pennsylvania. This sparked a discussion about whether the actors should use the 'Delco' accent, a version of Philadelphia English commonly spoken in Delaware County, characterized by rounded

Os, strong As, dropping consonants, and blending syllables and words. Both the series' creator and Oscar-winning actor Kate Winslet, who was an executive producer, insisted that the accent should be used. Winslet, who is English, referred to the Delco accent as "absolutely up there amongst the top two hardest dialects I've ever done" (in Blake). Brad Ingelsby emphasized that maintaining the Delco accent was crucial when portraying individuals from a specific community, stating the members of the community should sound true to life. All the actors in the series worked with dialect coaches Susan Hegarty and Sussanne Sulby to ensure that their accents sounded authentic. They interviewed dozens of residents from the region and asked them to record certain difficult words to help the actors. The series' accent was parodied on *Saturday Night Live* in a sketch titled "Murdur Durdur."

The miniseries received high critical acclaim; it was nominated for a wide variety of awards and won many. It earned two Hollywood Critics Association TV Awards, as well as three Primetime Emmys, a Golden Globe Award, three Satellite Awards, and a Screen Actors Guild Award. Kate Winslet and Peter Evans received several of those awards for their performances in the series.

Analysis: More than just another 'Dead Girl Show'

Mare of Easttown deals with gender and the body in significant ways as the series falls into the 'Dead Girl Show' trope. These types of shows begin with the discovery of a murdered girl's body; in them, typically the women stop being seen as people. Instead, they are only seen as dead bodies. Bolin describes the female characters of these types of shows noting that "the Dead Girl is not a 'character' in the show, but rather, the memory of her is" (Bolin 14). The series begins with Erin (played by Cailee Spaeny) saying goodbye to her baby as he is set to spend the week at his dad's house. By the end of the episode, Erin is murdered, and the question of who killed her is what moves the plot forward. However, the show contains many traits that make it more than just another 'Dead Girl Show'.

Motherhood is a central theme in the show. One of the series' most interesting aspects is the characters' relationships with their mothers and how female identity is closely linked to motherhood. Many of the female characters are mothers who have complex relationships with their children and their own mothers. The series addresses the ideas of unconditionality and forgiveness in familial love and the role that mothers play in the series. Mare herself is portrayed as a hectic and stressed working mother and grandmother who seems to put more effort into her job than into caring for her child and grandchild; yet she is still shown as a caring (grand)mother throughout certain moments in the series.

The nuclear family stereotype is not followed in the series. Mare is divorced and is taking care of her daughter and grandson because his father (her son) died, and the baby's drug-addict mother is not fit to do so, while Mare's own mother lives with her. O'Reilly claims that "These new family formations have given rise to new social identities of motherhood; (…) have revolutionized the definition and representation of maternal identity" (8). Mare does not fit into the role of the 'perfect mother'; instead, she spends most of her time working and is represented as a not wholly present mother. In part this is because Mare is haunted by the past, still struggling with her son's suicide, which she blames herself for. She dwells on the grief while separating herself from it; she puts her

focus on her work instead of processing his death, although, throughout the series, Mare's progression can be appreciated. As she begins talking to a therapist, initially forced by her temporary suspension's requirements, her early resistance is changed towards better acceptance of her grieving, which leads Mare to become a more empathetic person and have a better relationship with her mother and her daughter by the end of the miniseries.

A mother's agony is another central theme in the series. The mothers' attitudes provide an increased tense context to examine their emotions and experiences when mothers face the worst circumstances that could happen to their children. Mare's best friend Lori (played by Julianne Nicholson) discovers that her husband, John (played by Joe Tippett), was taking advantage of Erin and was in a sexual and romantic relationship with the murdered girl; he was the real father of her son while also being her uncle. Lori is heartbroken by that revelation, but later, John confesses that their son Ryan (played by Cameron Mann) was the one who killed Erin to protect his family and avoid their secrets being revealed to the townspeople and the police. Once Lori discovers this, she plans for John to take the blame for the murder in order to protect their son. Lori believes that her role as a mother signifies protecting her son from everything, including punishment for murder. In this situation, her love as a mother for her son, as Baker observes, leads to "places where forgiveness meets the unforgivable." Once Mare discovers evidence that Ryan is guilty, she sadly prepares his arrest. Lori angrily tells her, "I agreed to lie to protect my son, and I would have taken that to my grave if you didn't show up at the house today" (E7). While Mare understands Lori's pain and anger, she knows that she is doing the right thing and that Erin, like them, was also someone's mother.

Many of the series' characters come from a working-class background, and the series demonstrates how class intersects with gender. Erin is financially dependent on her abusive alcoholic father and her ex-boyfriend, which forces her to stay in abusive and dangerous environments for her and her baby's sake. The show depicts how poverty can force women to remain in unsafe situations. Jaffe et al. explain the link between poverty and the inability to leave abusive situations, "For many women, their financial situation (…) creates a double disadvantage: the abuse leaves her fearful and ashamed, while a lack of money leaves her with few resources for ending the abuse" (12). She has no choice but to continue living with her father due to financial reasons. Moreover, Erin's baby needs ear surgery that she cannot afford, so she is constrained to ask the men in her life for help. When she asks her ex-boyfriend for money, he refuses, and when she talks to her uncle John, the real father of her baby, he also refuses. Her anger and his frustration transform into a fight that eventually leads to her death.

The series represents the ordinariness of the characters through their clothing and appearances. Mare is depicted as a stressed-out mother and detective through her clothing, lack of makeup, and disinterest in her appearance. She wears the same clothing daily, wears no makeup and hardly ever brushes her hair. Winslet said, "Whenever we'd find something unflattering, we'd be jumping up and down like, 'Yes! We're wearing this'" (in Dowd). Mare's clothing focuses on comfort and keeping her warm rather than looking appealing. The rest of the characters are also represented as ordinary working-class people through their clothing. The costume designer of the series, Meghan Kasperlik, commented that "Her proudest moment on the show was when a freelance costumer brought in to assist her couldn't tell who was in the cast and who were local extras" (in

Cartner-Morley). The clothing helps to portray Mare as an ordinary community member, a woman whose main focus is on her job, and the rest of the townspeople as regular working-class individuals.

Mare eventually meets Richard Ryan (played by Guy Pearce), a writer who is spending some time in the town because of his new job as a lecturer at a university; they soon begin a sexual relationship. Initially, Winslet was unsure about depicting a middle-aged grandmother having sex in one-night stands, but she decided that it was significant to do so. During the filming of the sex scenes, Winslet emphasized that her body should not be edited, showing its signs of ageing realistically and truthfully. In an interview with *The New York Times*, she expressed her rejection when the director considered editing off her belly and the wrinkles on her face:

> "Oh my God, how can she let herself look so unglamorous?" When Craig Zobel, the director, assured her he would cut "a bulgy bit of belly" in her sex scene with Guy Pearce, she told him, "Don't you dare!" She also sent the show's promo poster back twice because it was too retouched. "They were like 'Kate, really, you can't,' and I'm like 'Guys, I know how many lines I have by the side of my eye, please put them all back.'" (in Dowd)

To conclude, *Mare of Easttown* is a very well-executed *whodunnit* miniseries, with a variety of issues to consider as regards gender and bodies. It offers a complete portrait of Mare, showcasing her as a complex character, acknowledging her faults and mistakes while also showing her as a caring and empathetic person. The miniseries shows the complexities of motherhood and how female identity is deeply connected to it. The gender issues that appear in the series are inherently connected to class, showing the toils that abused women, who are struggling financially, face when leaving those abusive situations. Most importantly, the miniseries is honest about the portrayal of the female body thanks to Kate Winslet's adamant refusal to have her body edited with CGI, a brave decision which opens up a much larger conversation about the portrayal of ageing female bodies on the screen.

Bibliography

Baker, Katie. "The Maternal Hum of *Mare of Easttown*." *The Ringer* 1 June 2021, https://www.theringer.com/tv/2021/6/1/22463090/mare-of-easttown-season-finale-review-motherhood

Bolin, Alice. "The Dead Girl Show." *Dead Girls: Essays on Surviving an American Obsession.* William Morrow and Company, 2018. 13-56.

Blake, Meredith. "How Kate Winslet Mastered the Near-Impossible Accent TV Fans Can't Stop Talking About." *Los Angeles Times* 29 April 2021, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/tv/story/2021-04-29/mare-of-easttown-hbo-kate-winslet-accent-dialect-coach

Cartner-Morley, Jess. "Kate Winslet in *Mare of Easttown* – Style Icon of the Pandemic." *The Guardian* 21 May 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2021/may/21/kate-winslet-in-mare-of-easttown-style-icon-of-the-pandemic

Dowd, Maureen. “Kate Winslet Has No Filter: The Star of *Mare of Easttown* Is Back on the Sides of Buses without Airbrushing.” *The New York Times* 31 May 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/31/style/mare-of-easttown-kate-winslet.html

Jaffe, Peter ; Michele Zerwer and Samantha Poisson. “Access Denied: The Barriers of Violence and Poverty for Abused Women and Their Children’s Search for Justice and Community Services After Separation.” *The Center for Children & Families in the Justice System of the London Family Court Clinic* 18 March 2002, https://www.ncjfcj.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/access-denied-full.pdf

O’Reilly, Andrea. “Introduction.” *Twenty-First Century Motherhood: Experience, Identity, Policy, Agency*, Andrea O’Reilly (ed.). Columbia UP, 2010. 1-20.

WandaVision: The Housewife Fantasy

Jules Otero Besolí

Episodes: 9
Release date: 15 January – 5 March 2021
Creator: Jac Schaeffer
Source: Marvel Comics
Cast: Elizabeth Olsen (Wanda Maximoff), Paul Bettany (Vision), Kathryn Hahn (Agnes), Teyonah Parris (Monica Rambeau), Josh Stamberg (Director Hayward), Randall Park (Jimmy Woo), Kat Dennings (Darcy Lewis) Julian Hilliard (Billy Maximoff), Jett Klyne (Tommy Maximoff), Evan Peters (Pietro Maximoff)
Company: Marvel Studios
Genre: drama, mystery, sitcom, superhero
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9140560/

Introduction: A tribute to the sitcom genre

WandaVision (2021) is a TV miniseries set in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) which follows Wanda Maximoff, played by Elizabeth Olsen, as she navigates a world of her own creation. In it, a safe space for her and her family is constructed in the form of a sitcom, characterized by its limited and liminal space of the home and the town (which is the home's extension, its exterior) and its predictable and unthreatening narrative tropes.

To understand the miniseries, it is imperative to contextualize it within the MCU overarching storyline, without which it is very difficult to make sense of the plot beyond its sitcom elements. Even though the viewer is given the impression that Wanda is a contented housewife with a loving husband, the last in-universe iteration of Wanda Maximoff was an infuriated Scarlet Witch grappling with loss since Vision, her synthezoid partner (played by Paul Bettany), died in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). Her character had experienced plenty of loss already, as her parents had died, during her childhood, in an explosion during a war in the fictional Eastern European country of Sokovia and, years later, her brother Pietro had died at the hands of the AI Ultron, fighting against it in the same war.

During the last episode of *Wanda-Vision*, the scene of the parents' death is shown alongside happy memories of Wanda watching pirated American sitcoms with her family (the very same sitcoms that the miniseries is referencing in the earlier episodes), indicating that her creation of a false suburban idyll is a trauma response that she is only partially conscious about. This false world limits her ability to experience grief by playing out what Wanda imagines to be a perfect life. This perfect life, however, turns out to be "not only psychologically unhealthy but also politically repressive" (Winckler) as it becomes apparent that, with the exception of her family (which is perfectly fictional) the rest of the characters in her world are real people that she has subconsciously enslaved.

Furthermore, the sitcom genre soon proves to have its limitations, which Reto Winckler discusses in detail in his article "Sitcom As Refuge, Sitcom As Prison: Nostalgia, Anti-nostalgia, and the Embedded Multi-camera Sitcom in WandaVision and Kevin Can F**k Himself": "Wanda adopts the exclusionist, xenophobic practices directed against her in earlier episodes, most immediately by violently expelling S.W.O.R.D. agent Monica Rambeau (Teyonah Parris), the only major Black character in the series."

In his article on feminism and geopolitics in *Black Widow*, *Wandavision* and *Dr. Strange,* Víctor Iturregui-Motiloa analyzes the significance of the American sitcom form perpetuated by an immigrant (Wanda) who is assimilated into the culture after having been considered an enemy of the state (as she originally worked for an organization called Hydra). He argues that, by using the sitcom format as a lure to the American way of life, "ideological and cultural conquest is accomplished through the manipulation of the feminine head of the family: the housewife" (231, my translation). Iturregui-Motiloa's geo-political analysis provides great insight into how Americanized femininity and family structure is replicated through media designed to impose USA cultural dominance. The analysis portion of this essay attempts to encapsulate how this portrayal of family structures affects Wanda's motherhood, and how her liberation is unavoidably limited by the patriarchal standards she aims to emulate.

Analysis: Pervasive motherhood and the patriarchal home

The sitcom format can affect and limit both womanhood and motherhood in many ways as it has its own set of tropes and rules which dictate how women ought to act. The time period in which each of the referenced sitcoms is set, for example, limits the way Wanda can present herself to the other characters and what she can and can't do as a married woman. We can perceive that through her clothing, the way she acts in public and even the way she interacts with her husband, Vision. Thus, she only allows herself to contradict him in the later episodes, which imitate more recent sitcoms where women have more agency. This, however, is a very surface-level observation: in a show based on tribute by mimicry, the intermittent use of outdated 'family values' is perfectly fitting, especially because Vision is never depicted as an enforcer of such values and because throughout the show the audience can see Wanda quickly gaining domestic power as the creator of the fantasy world they all inhabit.

It is instead more productive to turn our attention to the use of the domestic space, and how its narrative can tell us something about the way Wanda understands femininity, motherhood and family. Throughout the miniseries, the home is a place of privacy and safety where she can use her powers and Vision can abandon his human disguise, a place which is subject to invasion (as we can see in the first episode, where Vision's boss and his wife are invited to dinner much to Wanda's dismay). Thus, to Wanda Maximoff, the house is a place that needs to be safeguarded from intruders, a belief that Jennifer L. Johnson categorizes as "a profoundly gendered and classed idea that stems from the imposition of patriarchal order" (285). She further argues that "women's embeddedness in domestic spaces is problematic" (288), an idea that is made more complicated in *WandaVision* as the camera follows only the wife and mother: it is not the woman that is embedded in the domestic space, but the opposite, as that sitcom non-space and non-time is only home when Wanda is present to give it life.

When Wanda (and thus the camera and the viewer) is not present in nor focused on a scene, that scene is simply not happening: the characters are left on 'stand-by' for later use. In that way, the outside of the home (the town of Westview) is also an extension of her and her housewifery: the only things really happening anywhere are those scenes in which she is involved in some way, usually saving the day, protecting or caring for her husband, navigating female friendships which seem to be based only on the upkeep of the town and the home… Both inside and outside, she is the controller and mediator of everything and everyone yet she is paradoxically scared that she may be inadequate or unfitting for the perfect suburban life, the ideal loving husband, and the other perfect women around her. She is "agential, and simultaneously constrained, policed, and surveilled" (Hall 5), but this is a surveillance that she herself has created.

The issues surrounding domestic space are complicated further with the arrival of Wanda's children, Billy and Tommy. They, like Vision, are completely fictional characters and are not embodied by any of the people Wanda has enslaved: they exist solely due to her powers. Their arrival in itself is a miracle: as a synthezoid, Vision should be biologically incapable of fathering children, and the pregnancy itself lasts very little time as Wanda is not interested in exploring pregnancy in her world: she suffers and there is pain involved, to complete the picture of the mother slaving for the well-being of her family, but that suffering is her choice and thus largely performative; they may have just as well been delivered by a stork. Wanda is experiencing something that Giovanna Ambrosio calls "the fantasy of becoming a mother 'at all costs'," which "would seem to be mainly nourished by a system of needs belonging to the primary narcissism register" (12). Wanda's motherhood is not an identity related to real children whom she wished to care for, but rather an identity she wants for herself and in the name of which she has created fictional children.

There are many reasons why Wanda may want to categorize herself as a mother. As she is grieving her partner through reinventing him in a safer, more normative space, she may see her children as "the evidence of a man and a women falling in love and desperately wanting to have a being who represents the consummation of a dream" (Welldon 59). Indeed, the children may represent a desire to physically represent Vision's love for her. There are, however, more perverse possibilities: in "Why do you Want to Have a Child?," Welldon notes that "The woman unconsciously 'knows' that in becoming a mother she will be in complete and total control of a new being who will be at her mercy" (60).

Throughout the miniseries, Wanda's need for control and how it harms and oppresses those around her is a central theme, and the children prove to be perfect vessels to show her as the ideal wife and mother, always ready and willing to take care of those around them. The children are a chore, and they cause trouble, but only in the expected and almost scripted ways that the sitcom format allows. They tire her and make her life difficult, yet they make her virtuous in the eyes of everybody else, establishing what Lucy B. Hall calls "the instability of gendered logics and the ways in which they construct both limitations and possibilities" (12). Her choice to have children may also stem from the impulse to right the wrongs of her childhood: as they get older, one of her sons inherits her powers and the other inherits those of her late brother, Pietro Maximoff. By raising Billy and Tommy in a safe environment where both parents are present, she may be subconsciously displacing her desire to protect herself and her brother onto her sons.

Yet another reason may be an attempt to escape her earlier life as one of the embodiments of the category of 'witch', a notoriously non-maternal word the use of which "has been extremely effective at justifying normative gender roles" (Godwin 91). Her identity as a superhero (and supervillain) has been an objectifying one, and perhaps she hopes to escape it by erasing any trace of witch-like qualities from herself. As Victoria L. Godwin tells us in "Love and Lack: Media, Witches, and Normative Gender Roles," the opposition between Witch and Mother served its patriarchal purpose well, as "Women were confined to and defined by the domestic sphere. No longer suspected as witches, they were safe as girlfriends, wives, and mothers" (91).

In any case, Wanda's desire to be a mother is not selfless or innocent, and it is less about her becoming a caretaker and more about her being considered or respected as one. By having children, she is attempting to solidify her position in the idyllic sitcom society that she's created, a position that she was initially insecure about and that is quickly escaping her as the world starts to break and glitch around her. She is attempting, too, to distract Vision, who has started asking questions and realizing that something is amiss. Finally, she is attempting to put herself in a position of victimhood, of fiercely protective and noble motherhood, in relation to the agents outside her fictional world who are attempting to rescue its enslaved occupants.

As the story progresses and she gains agency with the passage of time and the constant renewal of sociopolitical ideas surrounding the home, Wanda gets bolder and starts encompassing more, wishing for more, and understanding more: with every instance of choice she is given, she furthers her transformation from a victim of trauma into a willful tyrant. Through the justification of her fictional children's safety and through the lens of nostalgia for an easier time which never actually happened, she embodies the traditional and patriarchal values present in the sitcom genre and uses them to turn her perfect home into an isolated, controlled space in which neither she nor her family can be happy.

Bibliography

Ambrosio, Giovanna and Mariam Alizade. "The Twenty-First Century: What Changes?" *Motherhood in the Twenty-First Century*, Mariam Alizade (ed.). Routledge, 2006. 11–21.

Godwin, Victoria L. et al. "Love and Lack: Media, Witches, and Normative Gender Roles." *Media Depictions of Brides, Wives, and* Mothers, Alena Amatto Rugerio (ed.). Lexington Books, 2012. 91-101.

Hall, Lucy B. et al. "Motherhood, Agency, and Violence: The Personal Is Political." *Constructing Motherhood Identity Against Political Violence*, Deniz Ülke Arıboğan, Hamoon Khelghat-Doost (eds.). Springer International Publishing, 2023. 5-20.

Iturregui-Motiloa, Víctor. "Feminismo y geopolítica en el Universo Cinematográfico de Marvel: la ideología y la historia vestidas de fantasía de *Viuda Negra*, *Wandavision* y *Dr. Strange*." *Historia y Comunicación Social* 28.1 (2023): 227-238, https://doi.org/10.5209/hics.85154.

Johnson, Jennifer L. et al. "Homing in on Domestic Space: The Boundaries and Potential of Home-Making." *The Routledge Companion to Motherhood*, Lynn O'Brien Hallstein, Andrea O'Reilly, Melinda Giles (eds.). Routledge, 2020. 284-293.

Welldon, Estela V. and Mariam Alizade. “Why Do You Want to Have a Child?” *Motherhood in the Twenty-First Century*, Mariam Alizade (ed.). Routledge, 2006. 59-71.

Winckler, Reto. “Sitcom as Refuge, Sitcom as Prison: Nostalgia, Anti-nostalgia, and the Embedded Multi-camera Sitcom in *WandaVision* and *Kevin Can F**k Himself*.” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 57.4 (2024): 221-232. https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.13337

The Offer: Power Dynamics in the Patriarchal System

ÁLVARO FARRÉ HERNÁNDEZ

Episodes: 10
Release date: 28 April – 16 June 2022
Creators: Leslie Greif and Michael Tolkin
Cast: Milles Teller (Albert Ruddy), Matthew Goode (Robert Evans), Dan Fogler (Francis Ford Coppola), Giovanni Ribisi (Joe Colombo), Juno Temple (Bettye McCartt)
Companies: Black Mass, DxD films and Paramount Television Studios.
Genre: drama, biopic, meta-cinema
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt13111040/

Introduction: The making of a legendary film

The Offer (2022, Paramount+) is a ten-episode limited series, created by Leslie Greif and well-known author and screenwriter Michael Tolkin, which narrates the creation of one of the most influential films ever made, *The Godfather* (1972), famously directed by Francis Ford Coppola and based on Mario Puzo's best-selling novel. The miniseries focuses on the struggles that the film's producer, Al Ruddy, had to face throughout the whole production including the constant interventions of the mafia that, at first, firmly opposed the film, allegedly for its negative representation of Italian Americans. However, *The Offer* goes beyond the central story itself, being also an ode to cinema as a broader concept; as Moye notes, this miniseries "manages to score a handful of scenes that provide a slight sense of melancholy about the beauty of filmmaking." The creators of the show clearly aimed to make it a tribute to the passionate producers of a Hollywood studio system now gone for good.

Part of this great care is clearly seen in the election of the cast, which was formed by strongly talented actors such as Miles Teller (as Ruddy), Matthew Goode (the legendary producer Robert Evans), Dan Fogler (Coppola), Giovanni Ribisi (Joe Colombo) and Juno Temple (Bettye McCartt). What the miniseries narrates is based on a true story, though, of course, "it offers legend as fact and mixes the two together, ultimately leaving the audience lost as to what is real and what is a dramatization" (Philbrick), as it often happens in these cases. The title refers, as any film buff will see, to the *Godfather's* most famous line, when Mafia top boss Vito Corleone says about an associate he wants to dominate "I'm going to make him an offer he can't refuse." With this the miniseries connects making movies with closing criminal deals in a subtly satirical way.

Analysis: Scaping stereotypes

The Offer portrays a world created for men and dominated by them. It focuses on the patriarchal system that defines Hollywood, in which meritocracy seems to have no place and success is mainly achieved through connections with other relevant men. This includes the mafia, the ecosystem that defines the series and that is presented as "a patronage system with arcane languages, exaggerated expressions of loyalty and hierarchies of tyrannical leadership" (Fienberg). When producing films, the series reflects, there is no creative freedom because the presidents of the studios firmly believe that they know more than the directors; plenty of decisions are taken away from them and assumed by the bosses.

This is the exact case of Al Ruddy and Francis Coppola: they both have a very specific view on how to develop *The Godfather*, but their intentions are constantly overlooked and not taken into consideration by Charlie Bluhdorn, the president of Paramount Studios. Even within the company, we see how arm-wrestling between the owners and, especially, between Robert Evans (the vice president) and Gulf+Western executive Barry Lapidus (Colin Hanks) defines who is more powerful. The viewer gets the impression that the executives are not interested that much in the success of the film but rather in demonstrating that they are right and in pulling rank above the other. The only exception is Evans, who "is smooth and sweet-talking, not tyrannical. He champions the rebellious creativity of filmmakers rather than stifling it. He thrives in the countercultural zeitgeist rather than spurn new ideas" (Norcross). It is because of him and his unconditional support towards Al Ruddy (even in decisions he first opposed in a firm way) that *The Godfather* was made and released.

One of the key elements of conflict between the directors and producers of the film and the owners of the studio has to do with the cast. Coppola, ever since he first read the novel written by Mario Puzo, pictured Al Pacino as the only actor who could possibly play Michael Corleone, the godfather's younger son. Yet, Pacino was found to be too short and too shy, not masculine enough and was several times rejected by Bluhdorn and Lapidus. Bluhdorn refused to even look at the footage Al Ruddy was constantly bringing to him because he believed it was wrong to cast a man who differed so sharply from the conventionally aggressive and frightening view of the mafia in a movie that focused specifically on this topic. In other words, the value of the actor was not placed on how good he was from a performative perspective but on how conventional-looking he was. The persistence of both Coppola and Al Ruddy finally made the hiring of Al Pacino possible. His performance ended up becoming one of the most relevant and well-remembered roles in the history of cinema.

The patriarchal system that defined 1970s Hollywood strongly affected men, yet women were even more repressed by the values and non-written rules that defined it. In Hollywood, as the miniseries shows, women were only seen as capable of fulfilling two roles. The first one was as actresses though, again, they were not praised by their acting qualities but by their looks and body. The first episode of the miniseries exemplifies this view: when Robert Evans is deciding which projects to accept for Paramount based on how successful they could be, he constantly asks if "there are any women in the show" (E1), evidencing the fact that for him the only value actresses have is calling the attention

of the viewer with their attractiveness. Their body is their apparent single strength, and actresses are treated as objects for the male gaze.

The other role in which women were accepted in 1970s Hollywood is as secretaries, as mere helpers of the male directors and producers. Remarkably, it is through this position that audiences meet the most interesting and best-written character of the miniseries: Bettye McCartt (played by Juno Temple). As noted, she is the secretary of Al Ruddy, but her functions go beyond that role, becoming irreplaceable for the film's success. Bettye is the life-saver of her boss, fixing all the problems that stop him from continuing with the project and making her role in the movie's creation as important as that of the producer himself. It is because of her that the miniseries drifts apart from the traditional roles of women in Hollywood to present a female character that is not just an extension of a man or a mere pretty face to sell a movie; she is a central part in *The Godfather* and in the accomplishment of Al Ruddy's vision of the film.

Bettye makes plenty of contributions that could be considered feminist, such as her constant confrontation against people treating her in an inferior way while pretending they do so to protect her, or her active fight against social expectations placed upon women and the way she actively flees from them. Talking about her previous marriage, she reclaims her freedom by explaining that she wanted to have a career but her husband "wanted me to bake pies. I hate fucking pies. (…) I'm not going to change for anyone" (E4). Furthermore, the most empowering scene from a feminist point of view is the one she shares with Al Ruddy's girlfriend. This woman struggles to understand the role of her boyfriend in the movie, as he is neither the director nor the scriptwriter. Al Ruddy defines his job to her as being a "problem solver," a very modest but at the same time realistic approach to reality. When his girlfriend, some scenes later, asks the same question to Bettye, her reaction stresses women's importance in Hollywood: "It sounds that you and Al sort of do the same thing," the girlfriend says. "Yeah," Bettye replies, "he just gets paid a lot more" (E7).

Gender discrimination is, then, the real reason for the differences in salary and in the recognition each person receives because, if we stick to a practical view, the contribution both Al Ruddy and Bettye make to the creation of *The Godfather* is extremely similar. It is undeniable, however, that the representation of other women in the miniseries is not as good as Bettye's. Horton notes that "With the exception of Bettye, the women—Ruddy's first wife Francoise (Nora Arnezeder) and Evans's wife Ali MacGraw (Meredith Garretson)—mostly serve as icons of their partners' career obsessions without much understanding of why they're in the relationship in the first place." Even so, the exceptional representation of Bettye makes the show a pro-feminist production rather than a sexist stereotypical representation of female characters.

Another central point of *The Offer* is the representation of the mafia and the role they play first as obstacles in the making of the film and, later, as its supporters. Portraying the mafia is always challenging as it is very easy to fall into the conventional stereotypes of all their members being violent and unable to feel sympathy towards other people; it is also problematic to describe them as victims of a society that has failed them and, thus, whitewash them and overlook the problems they express through their criminal violence. The miniseries, however, does an exceptional job as it decides not to focus on only one of these models but one quite apart from the usual stereotypes.

This is Joe Colombo (Giovanni Ribisi), the leader of the Italian American Civil Rights League. For the first half of the miniseries, his is a stereotypical portrayal, as his

personality is surrounded by violence, domination, threats, and the need to impose his power. He thinks that *The Godfather* conveys a negative view of the Italian mafia and that it is a public humiliation of their history; as a consequence of this, he wants to stop the film's production and avoid negative publicity. To accomplish his aims, he sends his henchmen to threaten Al Ruddy, who ends up being almost killed when he is shot, and to kidnap him. Colombo's methods consist of manipulation and the application of violence to inflict terror, which corresponds to the traditional representation films and series made of the mafia. The second half of the series, however, goes beyond this schematic portrayal and presents a character full of shades and complexities. We get to know his family, something that humanizes Colombo and changes our approach to him as a person without compassion or heart; when he becomes aware of the real intention of the film, which is not to portray the mafia in a negative way but to show the real meaning of family, he helps the production solving many problems that Al Ruddy and Bettye are unable to solve. Colombo constantly demonstrates gratitude towards Al Ruddy using his power for his benefit, inviting him to important political meetings, including him in his family sphere and so on.

Curiously, there have been many negative reactions against the voice of the actor who plays Joe Colombo, stating that "Ribisi's vocal affectations never let you forget that the actor is trying to look intimidating—and there's nothing less intimidating than that" (D'Addario). Yet, Ribisi's weak voice demonstrates how the series tries to escape from the traditional representation of the mafia by stressing that verbal intimidation alone is not enough to portray a complex concept such as the mafia. What we are offered in the second half of *The Offer* with Colombo is a much more realistic portrait of a mafia man, who commits negative acts but at the same time is portrayed as a layered individual capable of loyalty, affection, and moments of vulnerability. This depiction shifts the audience's perception, allowing us to see Colombo as more than just a villain or an obstacle, as later happens with Michael Corleone in the film itself. His actions, though morally ambiguous, come from deeply rooted values of loyalty and honor. It is this complexity that ultimately showcases the main topic of the miniseries: how artistic ambition clashes with the power dynamics inside a strong patriarchal system, whether this is Hollywood or the mafia.

Bibliography

D'Addario, Daniel. "*The Offer* Tells the *Godfather* Story, with Clichéd Gangsters in Tow: TV Review." *Variety* 27 April 2022, https://variety.com/2022/tv/reviews/the-offer-tells-the-godfather-story-with-cliched-gangsters-in-tow-tv-review-1235242654/

Fienberg, Daniel. "Paramount+'s *The Offer*: TV Review." *The Hollywood Reporter* 26 April 2022, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-reviews/the-offer-review-1235134972/

Horton, Adrian. "*The Offer* Review – The Making of *The Godfather* Makes for Hit-and-miss TV." *The Guardian* 27 April 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2022/apr/26/the-offer-review-the-making-of-the-godfather-makes-for-hit-and-miss-tv

Moye, Clarence. "*The Offer*: A Well-Acted Series You Shouldn't Refuse." *AwardsDaily* 21 April 2022, https://www.awardsdaily.com/2022/04/21/the-offer-review/

Norcross, Jonathon. "How *The Offer* Solidifies Robert Evans' Status as Hollywood's Most Legendary Studio Exec." *InsideHook* 16 June 2022, https://www.insidehook.com/television/offer-robert-evans

Philbrick, Jami. "*The Offer* is a Fun and Entertaining Look at Hollywood Filmmaking in the 1970s, Even if Some of the Facts Have Been Replaced by Legend." *MovieFone* 27 April 2022, https://www.moviefone.com/news/tv-review-the-offer/

The Staircase: The Suspect Husband

Nicole Marchese

Episodes: 8
Release date: 5 May 2022
Creator: Antonio Campos
Source: *The Staircase* (2004-2018), docuseries by Jean-Xavier de Lestrade
Cast: Olivia de Jonge (Caitlin Atwater), Dane DeHaan (Clayton Peterson), Toni Collette (Kathleen Peterson), Colin Firth (Michael Peterson), Patrick Schwarzenegger (Todd Peterson), Odessa Young (Martha Ratliff), Sophie Turner (Margaret Ratliff), Cullen Moss (Tim Harden), Parker Posey (Freda Black), Michael Stuhlbarg (David Rudolf), Juliette Binoche (Sophie Brunet), Trini Alvarado (Patty Peterson)
Companies: HBO
Genre: true crime
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11324406/

Introduction: An accident or cold-blooded murder?

The Staircase (2022) is an eight-episode limited series, created by Antonio Campos, which narrates the true story of the mysterious death of Kathleen Peterson. This woman was married to US novelist Michael Peterson; the couple appeared to have a loving relationship and enjoy a healthy family dynamic. However, what appears to the naked eye never seems to reflect reality. There were many secrets and mysteries hidden within the marriage of Kathleen and Michael Peterson, which may have accounted for her apparently accidental death (she fell down the stairs, hitting her head) and perhaps murder. What we still do not know to this day is whether Michael Peterson murdered his wife. He maintains his innocence but plenty of evidence points to him as the culprit. However, is this evidence valid? Is it reliable? This we do not know due to the prejudices and malpractices within the US criminal justice system.

Creator Antonio Campos is an American filmmaker and film producer who not only wrote the series but also directed it alongside Leigh Janiak, an American film director and screenwriter. The series was inspired by the 2004 docuseries of the same name created and directed by Jean-Xavier de Lestrade. This French director and film producer became intrigued with the true story of Kathleen and Michael Peterson and the ongoing mystery and debate occurring in the USA which had reached France's headlines as well. Antonio Campos decided to portray his own take on the story after being shown the docuseries, later collaborating (in 2011) with Lestrade, whom he admires.

Campos became particularly interested in the complex character of Michael Peterson. As he declared in an interview, "I've spent eight hours with him and still don't know him. He was a mystery within a mystery" (in *Creative Screenwriting*). Additionally,

Lestrade had told Campos that there were a few matters that were not included in the docuseries,[7] which grabbed Campos' attention. His own goal was to dig even further and portray these excluded details while also showing us what was happening behind the cameras. Campos wanted to expose these truths in order to allow the audience to see the case from many different perspectives, stating that "people may interact differently with each other off camera than they would on camera" (in *Creative Screenwriting*). Not only did Campos want to expose matters that were not as apparent in the docuseries, he also wanted to leave everything up to the interpretation of the audience. He purposely made each theory as likely as the other, as reality remained stubbornly opaque. He had the audience consider every theory as each one seemed plausible: "We intentionally leave all these things up to the audience. What we did was we tried to make each one as convincing as the other" (in *Creative Screenwriting*).

The casting process was fairly easy for Campos as he had had certain actors in mind for some time. He claims that since he first met actor Parker Posey, he wanted her to play the role of Freda Black. As for the main roles of Kathleen and Michael Peterson, he chose Australian actor Toni Colette and English actor Colin Firth exclaiming that "you couldn't ever imagine Kathleen being played by anyone else" and about Firth that "nobody else could kind of capture that complexity" (in Polk). Although Firth does not normally play villainous roles, Campos knew he is an actor quite able to adapt to any roles and to embody the complexities of Michael Peterson with sincerity.

Analysis: What makes a murderer?

The Staircase (2022) deals with body and gender in many ways, but most prominently in two distinct ways. Firstly, the rampant queerphobia present in Durham, North Carolina in 2001 was portrayed throughout the series and through a plethora of characters, accurately depicting the reality of it all. Almost all of the characters showed some sense of queerphobia through their comments, body language, and facial expressions. You could feel their discomfort through the screen. Secondly, tying into this role of queerphobia, the entirety of the case revolves around the fact that Michael Peterson is a bisexual man who cheated on his wife, Kathleen, with men, obviously without her knowledge. He is constantly judged and assumed to be guilty of her death solely based on this fact. His being bisexual changes the way everyone in his life looks at him, and also impacts how the courts see him. The series circulates around the idea of people perceiving bisexuality as a crime, ultimately being the driving force that leads to the arrest of Michael Peterson.

Queerphobia was a central point of not only the 2004 docuseries but also of the 2022 Netflix series because it reflected the reality of living at this time in conservative Durham, North Carolina. The moment that Michael Peterson's bisexuality was discovered, it was all over for him. In the eyes of the court, this made him a guilty man regardless of whether he did murder his wife or not (she might have died of natural causes, following a brain hemorrhage). In both the 2004 docuseries and the 2022 Netflix series, the first breakthrough in the case comes when the officers discover gay pornographic photos that belong to Michael. Most people involved in the investigation

[7] Lestrade's docuseries consists of a first season of eight chapters, released in 2004, followed by two chapters released in 2013, and three more released in 2018, as new revelations surfaced.

called these photos disgusting and, particularly, prosecutor Freda Black was appalled by them, stating that this is “not what your average juror or citizen would want to access nor would want to play out in their personal lives” (E2).

Her statement alone can show us the social climate around homosexuality in Durham, North Carolina in 2001. Freda Black was not the only one to make comments like these; plenty of other people involved in the case made similar remarks or simply showed disgust through their facial expressions. One of the members of Michael’s legal team struggles to discuss the influence of his bisexuality referring to his attraction to men as “diverse interests” (E3). We see examples like these throughout the series showing that people were not accepting at all and were actually offended by anything other than heterosexuality. This notion of queerphobia segways into the idea of bisexuality as a crime, another key feature of the real life case as well as both series.

As aforementioned, queerness was not only judged harshly, but was something that could influence a jury. Knowing that Michael’s bisexuality would impact the jury’s decision opened doors for the detectives whilst closing doors for Michael and his legal team. The team headed by defense attorney David Rudolf (played by Michael Stuhlberg) had to find ways around this “obstacle” which led to new discoveries and theories around the case. However, once people have an idea in their mind, it is hard to change it. Generally, in the criminal justice system, it all comes back to how convincing your argument is, but for this case in particular it didn’t really matter how convincing David and his counterparts were. What mattered more was this simple fact that Michael was interested in men.

This interest tainted all of the minds involved in making the ultimate decision and created an image of guilt surrounding Michael simply because of his attraction to men. Michael was aware of this queerphobia which is most likely why he was not openly bisexual and was not forthcoming with his sexuality. “I’m also bisexual which happens to be a problem for some people, especially in Durham,” he declares (E2). However, his secrecy and his lie pretending that Kathleen knew about it drove the case against him even further, enforcing the theory that Kathleen found the photos, they got in a fight and he killed her by pushing her down the stairs at their home. His bisexuality was indubitably seen as a crime and definitely impacted the court’s decision, but his lies further ignited this spark. While there was other evidence against Michael, the theme always circled back to his being bisexual.

The only characters who seemed to have some sense were Michael’s daughter, Martha (played by Odessa Young), who is queer herself, and Michael’s lawyer, David Rudolf. In the 2004 docuseries David asks the key question “Do you think merely because he’s bisexual he’s more likely to murder?” (E2). The whole argument around Michael’s guilt was based upon the fact that people associated non-heterosexuality with something evil which inclined them to immediately place blame upon Michael. Along with bisexuality being seen as a crime, sexuality itself was not something that could be comfortably talked about. Everyone in the series was uncomfortable whenever talking about Michael’s sexuality, including the people on his side. Additionally, whenever his daughter Martha tried to talk to him about sexuality, he declined, apparently embarrassed to discuss this matter with her. Talking about sex and sexuality was a huge stigma at this time and it was made clear in the series.

Overall, sexuality is still a touchy topic for some, but even more so for those involved in this case at this period of time in North Carolina. The stigma around sex and

sexuality was exacerbated not only by the case but by Michael himself. Furthermore, the judgment around non-heterosexuality was rampant and the inclination to immediately find someone guilty based on their sexuality was profoundly twisted. While we still do not know if Michael is guilty, we can at least say that his sexuality has absolutely nothing to do with it. As the miniseries shows, Michael could only regain his freedom by taking the Alford plea in 2017, pleading guilty to voluntary manslaughter, even though he may have been innocent. As he had already served eight years after his first trial and his sentence was of seven years and one month, he was finally freed. At least from prison, though not from suspicion and prejudice.

Bibliography

Gajanan, Mahita. "Here's the Story Behind Netflix's Latest True Crime Docuseries *The Staircase.*" *Time* 11 June 2018, https://time.com/5304761/the-staircase-netflix-true-crime/

Giroux, Jack. "*The Staircase* Creator Antonio Campos Discusses Depicting Kathleen, Casting Colin Firth, and the Owl Theory." *Film* 20 May 2022, https://www.slashfilm.com/870191/the-staircase-creator-antonio-campos-discusses-depicting-kathleen-casting-colin-firth-and-the-owl-theory-interview/

Hardwick, Courtney. "QUEER CRIME: The Role of Homophobia in the Michael Peterson Trial." *IN Magazine* 3 August 2023, https://inmagazine.ca/2022/08/queer-crime-the-role-of-homophobia-in-the-michael-peterson-trial/

Polk, Milan. "How *The Staircase* Creator Adapted the Infamous True Crime Story for HBO Max." *Men's Health* 19 May 2022, https://www.menshealth.com/entertainment/a40039151/the-staircase-hbo-antonio-campos-interview/

Staff Writer. "'Who Are We When The Cameras Are Turned Off?': Antonio Campos on *The Staircase*." *Creative Screenwriting* 26 January 2023, https://www.creativescreenwriting.com/who-are-we-when-the-cameras-are-turned-off-antonio-campos-on-the-staircase/

Tate, Caroline. "Prosecuted for Being Bisexual? The Worrying Focus on Michael Peterson's Sexuality." *News.com.au.* 19 May 2022, https://www.news.com.au/entertainment/tv/streaming/prosecuted-for-being-bisexual-the-worrying-focus-on-michael-petersons-sexuality/news-story/8892d80aa11e2992eeffd2866dba759d?amp

Bodies: A Cog in the Machine of Biopolitical Forces

JEIMMY CUERVO QUINTERO

Episodes: 8
Release date: 19 October 2023
Creators: Paul Tomalin
Based on: *Bodies* (2015), graphic novel by Si Spencer
Cast: Stephen Graham (Elias Mannix), Amaka Okafor (Shahara Hasan), Kyle Soller (Alfred Hillinghead), Shira Haas (Iris Maplewood), Jacob Fortune-Lloyd (Charles Whiteman), Tom Mothersdale (Gabriel Defoe), Greta Scacchi (Polly), Michael Jibson (Barber)
Companies: Netflix, Moonage Pictures (production), British Film Commission, Creative Sector Tax Relief UK Government
Genre: drama, crime, science fiction, thriller
Nationality: UK
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt18347622

Introduction: A story in four fractions

Bodies is an eight-episode British miniseries, created by Paul Tomalin and based on a graphic novel by Si Spencer, which narrates how the murder of the same man—whose dead body appears in four different time periods 1872, 1941, 2023 and 2053—is investigated by four different detectives. Mannix (played by lead actor Stephen Graham, known for his roles in *Snatch, Gangs of New York,* or *Band of Brothers*, among others) has everything to do with the body, since it is connected to his own plan to rule the British authoritarian society KYAL (Know You Are Loved) of 2053. The body is that of Gabriel Defoe, played by Tom Mothersdale, known for his roles in *Wolf Hall* and *Culprits.* He is the scientist that creates the time traveling machine allowing his body to appear at such different historical times.

Spencer's graphic novel, released in 2015, is a compilation of eight comic books published separately in 2014; the miniseries was released in 2023, two years after the death of the author at 60. There is a great deal of fidelity between the early version of the comic books and Tomalin's adaptation, which only adds a few plot twists and changes in dates. For the comic book series, Si Spencer worked with four different artists that concentrated on each of the eras: Megan Hetrick, Dean Ormston, Tula Lataly and Phil Winslade, respectively. Tomalin's version displays the richness of the comic series in its versatile styles, which engage the audience in its intricate plot. This is done with credible effects that ultimately produce a well-executed four-timeline show. As Nicolson eloquently summarizes it, *Bodies* is "a period drama, a 40s film noir, a tough cop show

and an experimental sci-fi. Buy one, get three free." All this, plus the mystery of its main character, makes it a very complex and ingenuous series.

The period drama part, set in late Victorian times, specifically in 1890, narrates Mannix's arrival from the future and his foundation of the KYAL cult, a murder investigation, a homosexual romance, and a marital union. Mannix steals the late Julian Harker identity and that gains him influence and power. He establishes then the cult whose peculiar slogan is Know You Are Loved (KYAL); this gathers together the rich from the UK society, members of Government institutions, and the police. The investigation of Defoe's murder leads to a homosexual romance between the detective in charge, Alfred Hillinghead (played by Kyle Soller, known for his roles in *Andor* and *Anna Karenina*) and the photo journalist Henry Ashe (played by George Parker, known for his roles in *Shadow and Bone* and *Pennyworth*). Mannix has the detective killed and then marries his daughter.

The 1940s film noir segment capture the key characteristics of the epoch with its own color scheme and particular traits. Hayward explains that film noir "has a style of cinematography that emphasizes the impression of night-time photography with high-contrast lighting, occasional low-key lighting, deep shadows and oblique angles to create a sense of dread and anxiety" (186). At this point, the series depicts a corrupt Jewish detective, Charles Whiteman (played by Jacob Fortune-Lloyd, known for his roles in *See How They Run* and *Crooked House*), who works on the Defoe case, but whose character displays more layers as he becomes the caregiver of a homeless girl he was supposed to kill. Because of their complex relationship, Whiteman kills Mannix in retaliation when the latter carries out his original plan and has his wife kill the girl.

The cop show is set in the present time of 2023 (2014 in the comic book), when lead actress Amaka Okafor (known for her roles in *The Responder* and *The Sandman*) plays detective Shahara Hasan, a Muslim black woman whose caring nature plays a crucial role in her era and in 2053. She tries to stop a teen Mannix from detonating a boom in London on July 14 that aims to kill half a million people as part of his plan to create a new social order. She does not succeed and this leads to a completely different society. Lastly, the sci-fi part set in 2053 (2050 in the comic) is as well-executed as the others. According to Hayward, SF "projects man's worst fears in relation to science and the future it holds for us" (236). This timeline portraits just that, in the form of a disturbing high-tech reality where people's bodies and minds are under control and surveillance.

In this future era Mannix's aim is realized: he rules the dystopian society he had planned to establish. The investigation on the body is led by detective Iris Maplewood, (played by Shira Haas, known for her roles in *Unorthodox* and *Broken Mirrors)* who works under Mannix's command. Both detectives, the now older Hassan (Amaka Okafor) and Maplewood meet. After understanding Mannix's true agenda, Maplewood works alongside Defoe and Hassan in trying to change the past that ultimately led to 2053, with ambiguous results.

Analysis: The scary biopolitical order of British future society

Among the main themes that *Bodies* deals with are time traveling, crime, the commodification of bodies and biopolitical power. The plot is presented in a way that allows the audience to see through the layers of the characters, but only really understand their agendas after half way through the series. Both Defoe's time machine

and his corps are catalysts and instruments for Mannix to follow the path he had been told would create a utopian society, in which he is the commander of KYAL. Based on this, I claim that even though Elias Mannix is not blameless for the establishment of the new social order of KYAL, he is easily mistaken for the series' villain while, in reality, he is merely a cog in the machine of the biopolitical forces that play with their "sovereign right of life and death," as Foucault (248) puts it, and give him the power he gets in the series. This is because in the new social oligarchical order, KYAL, which is ran by the institutions and the rich, still emerges after the past is altered and Mannix is not born, demonstrating that Mannix's wicked capacity was not wholly his own, but rather a component of a larger scheme. In the present paper, I dive deeper into the subject of biopolitical power that permeates all the show by illustrating how bodies and societies are commodified.

Given the story's timeline, which includes 1890, 1941, 2023, and 2053, and the fact that the screenwriter decided to begin building the storyline in 2023, I will provide an overview of what serves as an important tool to Mannix's success. The naked dead body of Defoe is objectified throughout the series and used as a plot device. This objectivization is in Sharp's words "the very sense of self-as-body (…) frequently [being] obscured by commodification" (290). Defoe's body is first found lying on Longharvest Lane in London by detective Shahara Hassan and then three other times on the same street in different time periods. His body is also represented on a large-scale painting used as a symbol and decoration in Mannix's home (then using Julian Hacker's identity) in 1890. In other occasions in 1890, his cloned body is showcased in the room where the KYAL's cult members meet; and the same cloned bodies are shown to detective Hassan to convince her that something big was about to happen on July 14, 2023. Overall, Defoe's body connects Mannix's plan to four different detectives who, without knowing, play a role in his project for a new social order. These examples demonstrate that Defoe's male body is, exceptionally, "a prey to exploitative practices" (Sharp 294) as women's often are. The commodification of bodies is seen not only with Defoe's example, but as I will illustrate later: there is a consistent pattern of objectivization with bodies and societies within the whole show.

In that same year, 2023, Elias Mannix is just a damaged teenage boy who has been rejected by his parents as a child, which has left traumatic traces of pain and abandonment in his character. He had been a foster child and lived in different places throughout his childhood, feeling uprooted, rejected and unloved. What the audience learns in episode 6 is that the miserable life he had lived was part of the political power's plan to turn him into the damaged human he becomes by age 15. It was the way in which with "the disciplinary mechanisms" he would be "both useful and docile" as established by Foucault's theory of biopolitics (149), and then capable of mass murder.

Those who intentionally took part in the damage Mannix suffered were aware and helped with the creation of the new social order, thus, demonstrating that Mannix was not only manipulated into detonating the bomb, but intentionally raised in a hostile environment that created a psychologically damaged man. A key example of that manipulated ill-treatment is his father, who abandoned him as a child, but who hands him the bomb's detonator; he justifies his absence from Mannix's life as part of what Mannix needed to live to become what he would be in the future. His foster parents also do their part in convincing Mannix that he is destined to change and improve the world in ways which no one else can manage.

Mannix hesitates, but is finally persuaded to detonate the bomb that kills half of the population in London. Considering the latter details, the tampering with Mannix's nature reflects the "the technologies of power," a concept coined by Foucault by which, he claims, "one technique is disciplinary, it centers on the body, produces individualizing effects and manipulates the body" (249). Mannix is led to believe that his worth and chances to be loved can only come if he detonates the bomb; by doing everything he was told to do, he is to be provided with what he had lacked all his life. On the other hand, the mass crime he is pushed to perpetrate shows that behind all this, there is a biopolitical power bigger that everyone else and that gets started not on the bases of "regulation of life" but "suppress[ion] of life" (Foucault 253).

Additionally, as Foucault further develops, "the second technology is centered not upon the body but upon life: a technology which brings together the mass effects characteristic of a population, which tries to control the series of random events that can occur in a living mass" (249). The fact that all these people's lives are taken with a particular aim, however, shows that as Foucault would add, that particular "biopower" has exceeded "its sovereign right" (254). Overall, the teenager Mannix is portrayed as a lost child who has been taken advantage of all his life and whose damaged self is instrumentalized by the biopolitical power behind it all to kill 5 million citizens and then establish a new regime. Such extent of power and the superimposition of both technologies seen in the series demonstrates that the biopolitical power permeates both the individual body and the population, and that Mannix is only a small though significant part in it.

Aided by time traveling, the authoritarian order of 2053 British society is widely established. Such power was originally a cult, initiated by Mannix from 2053 when he travels back to 1890 and starts the loop (E7). However, since Mannix's life is scripted, he is led to believe that he is the one who establishes the cult and that he does it for the common good of British society. In reality, he has only been following instructions (given in recordings of his own future self). The type of society built in 2053 is that of a dystopia where technology is used to control and monitor citizens and those adept to the Government get all the advantages, while the ones who are not as docile, live in miserable conditions but are also less surveilled.

Another example of bodily commodification and biopolitics is Detective Iris Maplewood, who is in charge of Defoe's case. Her body has been commodified to serve the regimen of the time. She is a quadriplegic, but can move with the assistance of a rechargeable device connected to her spine provided by the Government she works for. In Sharps' words "such technologies have an overwhelming capacity to challenge boundaries between life and death, human and machine, self and other" (297) and I would dare add, belonging to herself or belonging to someone else. Her body is objectivized and commodified to serve a coercive regimen that traces her movements everywhere she goes and executes "disciplinary and regulatory control" Foucault (242) all over her own body, as well as over the British population. Detective Maplewood, however, challenges that commodification and loyalty to the authoritarian regimen after meeting Defoe face-to-face and discovering that the founder of the seemingly just society she supported had murdered half of London's population in order to establish the current tyrannical system.

Maplewood exercises her agency in trying to change the past and present because she regrets having shot Defoe in a confusing exchange between Mannix, Defoe

and detective Hassan; yet, when she travels back to 1890, she becomes disabled. Nonetheless, she succeeds, her influence on the past changes the course of events and Mannix is not born, which lets the audience think that in fact things go back to normal. However, although the bomb does not seem to have been detonated in the new 2023, the last scene shows in the distance the slogan KYAL on a tall building. This proves that Mannix's erasure does not compromise or affect the biopolitical power controlling life and society, which emerges one way or another, nor alter its agenda. If the regimen emerges again, it might be ran by different commanders, making Mannix neither innocent nor the villain of this story but a cog in the machine of the patriarchal, power-hungry biopolitical forces.

Bibliography

Foucault, Michel. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*. Mauro Bertani, Alessandro Fontana, & David Macey, eds. Trans. David Macey. Picador, 2003.

Hayward, Susan. *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*. Routledge, 2023.

Nicholson, Rebecca. "*Bodies* Review – Stephen Graham's Thrilling Cop Drama Leaves You Wanting More and More (and More)." *The Guardian* 19 October 2023, www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2023/oct/19/bodies-review-stephen-grahams-thrilling-cop-drama-leaves-you-wanting-more-and-more-and-more

Sharp, Lesley A. "The Commodification of the Body and its Parts." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 29.1 (October 2000): 287–328, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.29.1.287

Lessons in Chemistry: Turn and Face the Strange

MARTINA BUSQUETS COSTA

Episodes: 8
Release date: 13 October – 22 November 2023
Creator: Lee Eisenberg
Source: *Lessons in Chemistry* (2022), novel by Bonnie Garmus
Cast: Brie Larson (Elizabeth Zott), Lewis Pullman (Calvin Evans), Aja Naomi King (Harriet Sloane), Stephanie Koenig (Fran Frask), Patrick Walker (Reverend Curtis Wakely)
Companies: Aggregate Films, Apple Studios and Piece Of Work Entertainment
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt13911628

Introduction: A 1960s tale of science and cooking

Lessons in Chemistry is an eight-episode miniseries created by Lee Eisenberg and primarily directed by Sarah Adina Smith and Bert & Bertie. The series follows the story of Elizabeth Zott, a chemist who, after losing her position as a lab technician, takes on a new role hosting a 1960s television cooking show called *Supper at Six*, in which she teaches housewives about scientific concepts. *Lessons in Chemistry* is inspired by the best-selling novel of the same name published by Bonnie Garmus in 2022. Lee Eisenberg is an American film and television writer and producer, known for his work on other television series such as *The Office* (2005) and *Jury Duty* (2023). While *Lessons in Chemistry* was inspired by Bonnie Garmus's novel, the author stated that she did not write or contribute to the series. In fact, she was only given the opportunity to read the scripts near the end, allowing her to make some notes (in Rosseinsky). The series was produced by Aggregate Films, Apple Studios, and Piece of Work Entertainment, and it premiered to much acclaimed in 2023.

One of the crucial elements of the series is science, which is why the creative team worked to ensure its accuracy. Jessica Parr, a chemistry professor at the University of Southern California and the show's chemistry consultant, explained that this was one of the main reasons she was eager to get involved. The team also collaborated with Courtney McBroom, the show's food consultant, who was equally strict in overseeing the various dishes that Elizabeth prepared both in her kitchen and on her show (in Blankenship). They worked together to ensure that Brie Larson and Lewis Pullman, the leading actors, accurately fulfilled their roles. Brie Larson, who plays Elizabeth Zott, is also known for her role in *Captain Marvel* (2019). Lewis Pullman, who portrays Calvin Evans, is well recognized for his role in *Bad Times at the El Royale* (2018).

Analysis: The inevitability of change

I would like to highlight first these words by Elizabeth Zott, the protagonist of the series:

> The only constant variable in a chemical reaction is change. The unexpected. Our job here is not to avoid surprise. We can't control it. So, there's only one thing left to do. Surrender. Now, we don't have to accept the bad things, but we do have to accept the inevitability of change. Both in ourselves and our circumstances. (E8)

In chemistry, just like in life, the only certainty is change. Change allows us to move forward, to grow old and wise; in fact, without it, we would not be alive. Therefore, the only thing left to do is accept it and, if possible, embrace it. Elizabeth Zott does not only give us lessons in chemistry throughout the series, but she also teaches us something even more valuable: resilience. Over the course of the eight episodes, we witness the life of a female scientist—who also loves to cook—during the 1950s and 1960s, as she strives to pursue her career. However, much like many other women of her time, life seems to constantly throw obstacles in her path. Change is also the constant variable in the series, and I argue that, despite the hardship and pain, Elizabeth Zott embraces it and ultimately becomes a stronger version of herself. In this essay, I will focus on five key changes that I believe have a profound impact in shaping the woman we see at the end of the series: her change of institute, her relationship with Calvin, her partner's death, her pregnancy, and, finally, her new job.

I'll start by focusing on the sudden change of research institute. At the beginning of the series, we get to know through Elizabeth's memories her past in UCLA. There, she was pursuing a doctoral degree but had to leave before completing her PhD. Her departure was forced after a traumatic incident in which her supervisor, Dr. Meyers, sexually assaulted her. In an act of self-defense during the attack, she stabbed him with a pencil, and she was, therefore, asked to quit. This devastating experience starts the chain of changes that follow the protagonist throughout the series. Although some reviewers argue that this incident gives her the opportunity to start something different (Debnath), I agree with the author of the book when she says that Elizabeth did not see the assault as a second chance but as the horrible event that it is. I do not think that every experience should be seen as part of a learning curve; sometimes, the only option is to find the strength to keep moving, just as she did. As the author comments:

> Well, in the case of Elizabeth Zott, I don't think she was actually thinking of it as a second chance. She was grabbing every opportunity that came her way – it was a different time, and she insists on keeping the *first* chance and making the most of it (in Debnath, original emphasis).

Accordingly, Zott does not give up on chemistry and tries her luck at Hastings Research Institute in California, though things are still difficult. Her male colleagues and superiors underestimate her contributions and deny her lab space due to her lack of a doctorate. It is clear that pursuing a degree as a scientist at the time was by no means easy for women, and the numbers prove it. In the USA, between 1950 and 1960, the percentage of women among scientific technicians fell from 18% to 12%. Fields like chemistry saw fewer women graduate in 1960 than in 1950. Women made up only 7%

of USA physicians and surgeons in 1960, and they earned just 10% of all doctoral degrees in the 1950s (Mattfeld and Van Aken). As Dr. Rossi argues, a change could not come through women's social action alone because they would "not seek higher degrees in any great number in fields like the sciences and engineering, if by so doing they [were] apt to be punished socially and psychologically, instead of being rewarded as men are, for their efforts and achievements." In Zott's case, we can observe how her colleagues, all men, dismiss her work and, just as Dr. Rossi states, punish her socially and psychologically. Nevertheless, everything changes when she meets Calvin Evans. He is a chemist working at Hastings as well, but with all the advantages that come with being a man: he is considered one of the most important chemists of the time and, therefore, is given his own research lab. Nobody questions his work, and he has full agency over his research. He becomes the male support Dr. Rossi refers to and helps Elizabeth pursue her PhD in Chemistry.

The second change Elizabeth experiences is falling in love, something she has not planned and initially resists, fearing it would distract her from work. Nevertheless, the chemistry between her and Calvin blossoms in the lab, and they become the perfect working and loving team (like the Curies). As Brie Larson notes, "I think it's a very sweet depiction of how to work with someone you love and the fact that their minds and their uniqueness and specificity and their love of science is what brings them together, I think, is very sweet" (in Victorian). It is indeed a very sweet description, but also a unique one, as finding a portrayal of a healthy relationship in fiction is rare. To me, Calvin represents the perfect depiction of a good husband. He does not understand the reason behind women's struggle because, he says, "Why would someone discriminate based on something as intellectually non-determinative as gender?" (E1). For his rational mind, discriminating someone for reasons other than their skills is wrong, and because he sees the potential in Elizabeth, he agrees to work together. At the same time, he is deeply respectful of her desires, and he accepts her decision not to have children because he just wants her to be happy. Unfortunately, he dies when a car hits him while he is out for a run, leaving Elizabeth on her own again.

Once alone, she must face two more changes: the death of her partner and her unexpected pregnancy. Shortly after Calvin's death, Elizabeth realizes that she is pregnant. Those two immense changes come suddenly and simultaneously and facing them is not easy for her. The series takes a realistic approach to the matter and portrays an image of a woman devastated by the loss of her partner and by becoming a mother, something she did not want and was not prepared for. During the 1950s and 1960s, women had no control over their bodies when it came to pregnancy. Abortion was not an option, so they had to keep the baby regardless of the circumstances. Garmus, the author of the book, intended to contrast the period of the series with the present because she wanted to prove that things have changed. However, although she believes that there has indeed been a change, "women all over the world are still fighting for the right to control their own bodies. Own bodies!" (in Debnath). Elizabeth's lack of control over her body is something that many women still have to face, even if we want to believe we are better off than our predecessors.

At the same time, not only is the issue of abortion raised, but also the false idealization surrounding motherhood. In the series, there is a clear emphasis on the fact that women are not born with all the knowledge required to be a mother, and that the whole process is not as easy and 'magical' as we once thought. Elizabeth struggles

during her whole pregnancy and, once the baby is born, she does not understand her needs: “Please, Mad. I’m begging you. Tell me what you need. Fine. Cry as much as you want. Cry until next month for all I care” (E4). She names her Mad (she was indeed very mad when she had her), and with the help of her neighbor Harriet, she learns to love her and to properly look after her.

Something that the series does not hide, either, is Elizabeth’s depression during and after her pregnancy, which many women have pointed out and have identified with:

> I found it painful to watch the fourth episode, “Primitive Instinct,” which depicts Elizabeth in her first weeks of motherhood, profoundly alone and unable to cope. A sequence showing Elizabeth trying to soothe her crying newborn and becoming unraveled herself might hit too close to home for some mothers. (Thompson)

Most importantly, due to her pregnancy and Calvin’s death, Elizabeth is dismissed from her job and left alone and with no money. Still, she manages to reinvent herself and create an informal laboratory in her kitchen to continue her research. Furthermore, she gives clandestine chemistry classes to other chemists who require her help. However, despite her efforts, her income is too scant for her to make a living. Sadly, pursuing her degree in chemistry is not compatible with her life due to complete lack of support towards women scientists. Therefore, if she wants to survive, she must accept her limitations.

The unexpected confrontation she has with KCTV executive Walter Pine about his daughter eating all of Mad’s lunches at school leads to an unusual opportunity. Walter, impressed by Elizabeth’s cooking abilities and confidence, offers her a regular role as a TV host (Julia Child’s very popular show *The French Chef* debuted in 1963, about the same time). Although hesitant, Elizabeth accepts the offer, needing a reliable income. Her show, *Supper at Six*, is a typical cooking show but with her own twist. Her main audience being women, she uses her TV role to influence them, teaching little lessons in chemistry to help them master their recipes. Also, as Garmus states, “She is passing on the idea that the mother is worthy and she is deserving of respect and she is doing something really, really important for the family” (in Debnath). This was particularly significant during a time when children were taught to view the father as the one engaged in important work outside the home, while the mother was seen as merely staying at home, cooking, cleaning, and toiling tirelessly.

To conclude, Elizabeth Zott is more than a scientist or a cook; she is a testament to resilience and transformation. Despite having to face many challenges—from career obstacles to personal losses—she successfully overcomes them. The outcome is a stronger, and more determined version of herself, who is willing to help other women in becoming who they want to be.

Bibliography

Blankenship, Mark. “The *Lessons in Chemistry* Consultants Were Just as Exacting as Brie Larson’s Character.” *Indie Wire* 27 October 2023, https://www.indiewire.com/features/craft/lessons-in-chemistry-production-design-science-consultants-1234914586/

Debnath, Sayari. “‘I Wanted to Show That Mothers Are Worthy’: Bonnie Garmus, Author of *Lessons in Chemistry*.” *Scroll.in* 15 April 2023,

https://scroll.in/article/1047235/i-wanted-to-show-that-mothers-are-worthy-bonnie-garmus-author-of-lessons-in-chemistry

Mattfeld, Jacquelyn and Van Aken, Carol (eds.). *Women and the Scientific Professions: The MIT Symposium on American Women in Science and Engineering.* The MIT Press, 1967.

Riley, Jenelle. "*Lessons in Chemistry*: Brie Larson Says Falling in Love Is Harder Than It Looks on Screen: 'It's So Nuanced'." *Variety* 6 June 2024, https://variety.com/2024/awards/actors/lessons-in-chemistry-brie-larson-emmys-1236026481/

Rosseinsky, Katie. "*Lessons in Chemistry* Author Bonnie Garmus: 'Anti-female Bias Is Ingrained in Our Culture – It Needs to Be Exposed'." *Independent* 15 October 2023, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/bonnie-garmus-lessons-in-chemistry-apple-tv-interview-b2429212.html

Thompson, Netanya. "*The Lessons in Chemistry* Postpartum Episode Hits Too Close To Home." *Romper* 18 November 2023, https://www.romper.com/entertainment/lessons-in-chemistry-postpartum-episode-motherhood

Victorian, Brande. "Brie Larson Talks Getting to Tell a Love Story in *Lessons in Chemistry* After Finale" *The Hollywood Reporter* 24 November 2023, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-features/brie-larson-love-story-lessons-in-chemistry-finale-interview-1235675771/

Baby Reindeer: The Loop of Trauma

Alesia Volkova

Episodes: 7
Release date: 11 April 2024
Creators: Richard Gadd, Weronika Tofilska, Josephine Bornebusch
Source: *Baby Reindeer* (2019), monologue by Richard Gadd
Cast: Richard Gadd (Donny Dun), Jessica Gunning (Martha Scott), Nava Mau (Teri), Michael Wildman (Greggsy), Danny Kiranne (Gino), Nina Sosanya (Liz)
Companies: Clerkenwell Films, Netflix
Genre: black comedy, drama, psychological thriller, autobiographical fiction
Nationality: UK
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt13649112/

Control, obsession and emotional damage: the story of Baby Reindeer

Baby Reindeer (2024, Netflix) is a seven-episode miniseries, created by Richard Gadd, which narrates the story of a tormented young man, Donny Dunn, who is stalked by a woman with prior experience of stalking and abuse, including a conviction. Richard Gadd is the Scottish actor, writer and comedian who originated the series (based on his own autobiographical monologue) and played the main character. He received several Primetime Emmy Awards for the miniseries.

In her review, Maya Salam reports how much of the series is inspired by real events. As noted, the series is inspired by the true story which actually happened to Gadd. To make ends meet as a comedian, he worked in a pub, where he was stalked by a female customer. Additionally, he had been raped by a man earlier in his career just like the main character of *Baby Reindeer*. Salam reproduces quotes from Gadd's previous interviews, in which he clarifies that although the narration introduces real events he experienced and people he met in his life, something had to be fictionalized in order not to put several people in a vulnerable position by exposing them. Still, Netflix included in the series the real messages from Gadd's stalker that she used to send him, with the authentic grammar and vocabulary mistakes that she made.

At the beginning, Donny leads a rather miserable life. He lives with his ex's mother and dreams of being a successful comedian, but fails at that and ends up working in a pub with no prospects of making progress to leave this situation. One day he offers a cup of tea at the pub to a woman, Martha Scott, who seems to be very distraught by something, and cannot even afford a drink. She is astonished by Dunn's kind gesture and continues coming back to the pub, receiving free beverages. Martha presents herself as a successful lawyer, which leaves Donny confused and wondering why she cannot pay for her drinks.

Their relationship escalates quickly: even though Donny pities Martha and does not want to date her, she becomes obsessed with him. She starts following him to his house, bothering his family and acquaintances. Martha triggers his past trauma, when Donny was drugged and sexually assaulted by an older man, Darrien, who firstly promised to help him with his career. Donny eventually meets a trans woman, Teri, through a dating website, who turns out to be the love of his life, but their relationship fails due to his unhealed mental wounds. All of Donny's unresolved traumas burst out during his performance at the finale of a comedians' competition, when instead of telling jokes, he tells his tragic story and gains a lot of attention from the media, since his breakdown is recorded and uploaded onto the internet.

All in all, *Baby Reindeer* has an ambiguous and thought-provoking ending. Donny reports Martha to the police, who at first hesitate to help him, but finally arrest her; she is later sentenced to nine months in jail. This seems to offer closure; however, Donny is still feeling miserable, constantly listening to Martha's voicemail, and going back to Darrien to work more on another project. This suggests that his traumas will take a long time to heal.

Analysis: Unraveling deep emotional wounds

Baby Reindeer deals with body and gender issues in multiple provocative ways. The story is not about a fragile woman being raped by a man, but, in a reverse situation, about a vulnerable man who is abused by a female stalker and a male groomer, and is left with a double trauma to resolve. This complex trauma influences his relationship with Teri, the trans woman he loves. When Donny sets up his profile in the dating app where they meet, he presents himself as a builder, not a failing comedian, with the intent to prove his masculinity. This raises an important debate about masculinity and femininity. Teri is upset when Donny can't be intimate with her. Because his libido is destroyed by sexual abuse, he can't respond and be aroused the way Teri wants him to. She wants to feel feminine and desired by a man but Donny cannot give her that. Martha is so caught up in her obsession and so jealous that her 'baby reindeer' (the nickname she gave to Dunn), is in love with Teri and not with her, that she attacked Teri and insults her with transphobic slurs.

Teri, a therapist, is good at understanding people and tells Donny that in fact he likes getting attention from Martha. Margareth Lyons also explains the protagonist's desire to gain attention: "Donny recognizes and articulates the dangers of wanting fame, how it warps his judgment but also could solve his problems. (One person knowing your darkest secret is unbearable, but a million people knowing it is stardom)." Strangely enough, Donny tries to fix his impotence by having sex with Martha. Without telling that to Teri, he manages to become intimate with her, which naturally makes Martha happy and trusting. In episode 4, Dunn contemplates the effect of the abuse he suffered from Darrien:

> "I started to feel this overwhelming sexual confusion crashing through my body. I thought it might pass, but it became an insecurity, which grew into a raging madness within me. I could never tell whether these feelings were because of him or they always existed deep down. Did it all happen because I was giving off some vibe I wasn't aware of? Or did what happen make me this way?"

After trying to share an intimate lovemaking scene with Teri, Donny feels some sort of shift: “It was strange. After all the awful things that had been done to my body, I just couldn’t lose myself in intimacy anymore. Now there were feelings involved, it all just felt too much. The touch, the love, the confirmation” (E5).

It is important to mention that Donny makes the mistake of questioning Martha’s fertility. Once, he tries to gently push her away noting that their age gap is a problem because he wants children and she is much older. For him, this is just an excuse to both avoid hurting Martha as well as stopping her from pestering him. However, she takes it seriously: Martha sees a doctor and takes health checks to prove that her age would not be a problem. Teri is the one to explain this awkward situation: Donny is very kind to Martha and does not want to upset her, especially at the beginning, but, as Teri notices, he is only indulging his stalker by such gentleness.

Another issue that needs to be raised here is bodily vulnerability. Donny is manipulated and controlled by Darrien, and is rendered vulnerable, unprotected under the influence of drugs. He cannot even comprehend at first what Darrien is doing, nor stop him. Donny is also scared and left unsafe because the police don’t take the matter seriously until the end of the series. They refuse to arrest Martha without an explicit threat of killing; this finally materializes when Martha sends the voice message expressing her desire to kill someone because of how angry and upset she feels because of Donny. He also shows his vulnerability by talking about his problems in public during his breakdown at the comedy competition, thus breaking the mold and normative attitude supposing that ‘boys do not cry’.

In fact, Donny weeps and shows his bare emotions multiple times throughout the show. Yet, the ending of the series is equivocal: he is shown in a bar crying, unable to pay for his drink because he forgot his wallet, relistening to his voicemail, which consists of different messages from Martha. He has just accepted the offer from Darrien to work together on a new project, after Darrien promises that no abuse will happen again. This gives the series a circular structure, as it begins with a similar image of Martha. Noel Murray states that there are several possible explanations for the final scene: “What makes Donny so upset? Take your pick: He’s still processing what Martha and Darrien have done to him. He’s furious with himself for not standing up to his abuser. He attained the fame he always craved and found that it didn’t solve his problems.” To me, the ending still remains unclear: I could not figure out how a person could loathe themselves to the extent that they returned to work with their past abuser while listening to the voice messages by their stalker as something comforting. It seems clear enough that Donny needs professional help to be able to break this loop of trauma, and, obviously, fame and Martha being in jail will not help him to entirely resolve the issue. Gadd himself comments that the final scenes are his favorite ones:

> “I love that sequence. I like the surprise of going back to Darrien’s door. I love the surprise of listening to the voicemails. I just think there’s a deep psychology to it that I really like the idea of someone being so lonely and so isolated that they decide to listen to their old stalker’s voicemails.” (in Hudspeth)

The ending could expose the unhealed and unresolved trauma of the main character, that he still needs to process everything, become more confident and actually start caring more about himself.

Jessica Gunning, who played Martha, shared that she wanted to portray the good sides of her character too. As she read the script it felt important for her to convey the impression that Martha is not some kind of monster, but someone with an intricate personality: “I saw her as nuanced and complicated and quite charming and innocent in elements of her personality. And so I really was attracted to that side of her, instead of playing anything as a kind of baddie” (in Stevens). In another interview, Nava Mau, who played Teri, also declared that Gadd’s script shows all the characters in a tender way, so you would sympathize with them: “There’s such ugliness in the story and such pain, and yet the humanity of every character is never sacrificed. I think that kind of storytelling allows for people to lower their defenses and really engage with the themes and the emotions that are being presented to them” (in Salam, August). This is why Richard’s character faltered and ‘indulged’ Martha, as Teri put it: he felt sorry for her, he was kind and he did not want to hurt her more.

In conclusion, *Baby Reindeer* is a story about how damage can be left untreated and how the traditional perception of gender has been challenged: it is not a woman here who is a victim, but a man and his abusers are both a woman and a man. He is not taken seriously by the police until things get extremely serious. Donny is vulnerable in many ways, and this contradicts how men are usually seen as aggressors, but here it is quite the contrary. The power dynamics in the series are questioned here too: Donny is trying to talk and persuade Martha to stop stalking him, and the police to protect him, but he is left unheard with no power. *Baby Reindeer* makes thus an important contribution to the issue of how abused men can heal, if they can at all.

Bibliography

Hudspeth, Christopher. “*Baby Reindeer* Ending, Explained: A Deep Dive Into the Devastating Finale.” *Netflix* 16 August 2024, https://www.netflix.com/tudum/articles/baby-reindeer-ending-analysis

Lyons, Margaret. “What to Watch: *Baby Reindeer*, an Astonishing Stalker Drama.” *The New York Times* 23 April 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/23/arts/television/baby-reindeer-netflix.html

Murray, Noel. “Why Is *Baby Reindeer* Such a Hit? It’s All in the Ending.” *The New York Times* 1 May 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/01/arts/television/baby-reindeer-netflix-finale.html

Salam, Maya. “For Nava Mau, *Baby Reindeer* Felt Private. Then It Blew Up.” *The New York Times* 19 August 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/19/arts/television/nava-mau-baby-reindeer-emmy-award.html

_____ . “*Baby Reindeer*: What to Know About the True-ish Netflix Hit.” *The New York Times* 2 May 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/02/arts/television/baby-reindeer-true-story.html

Stevens, Matt. “Jessica Gunning of *Baby Reindeer* Never Saw Martha as a ‘Baddie’.” *The New York Times* 17 July 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/17/arts/television/jessica-gunning-baby-reindeer-emmy-nomination.html

Griselda: Breaking Through a Man's World

NICOLE MARCHESE

Episodes: 6
Release date: 25 January 2024
Creators: Doug Miro, Eric Newman, Carlo Bernard, Ingrid Escajeda
Source: Real-life story of Griselda Blanco
Cast: Sofia Vergara (Griselda Blanco), Vanessa Ferlito (Carmen), Alberto Guerra (Dario Sepúlveda), Juliana Aidén Martinez (June Hawkins), Martín Rodríguez (Rivi), Freddy Yate (Chucho), Camilo Jiménez Varón (Rafa), Diego Trujillo (German), Maximiliano Hernández (Papo Mejia), Orlando Pineda (Dixon), Jose Velazquez (Uber), Martín Fajardo (Ozzy), Benson D. Larracuente (Michael), José Zúñiga (Amilcar), Alberto Ammann (Alberto Bravo), Ernesto Alterio (Fernando)
Companies: Latin World Entertainment, Willfully Obtuse, Grand Electric, Netflix
Genre: true crime, drama
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt15837600/

Introduction: From a nobody to a somebody

Griselda (2024) is a six-episode limited series created by Doug Miro, Eric Newman, Carlo Bernard and Ingrid Escajeda and directed by Andres Baiz. The series follows the true story of the ruthless Colombian drug 'lord' who took over Miami in the 1970s and 1980s, Griselda Blanco. This woman went from being an overlooked, underestimated housewife, to being feared as the most powerful woman in Miami in only a few years.

The story of Griselda Blanco is a very complex one which can be seen from many different perspectives and in fact, the series has received much backlash based on its scant adherence to the true story. Many critics protested that it softens reality by making Griselda seem more humane than she actually was when in reality she did not show much emotion and showed pride in her killings. Some viewers were also upset that the character (played by Colombian star Sofia Vergara) seemed to be softer than she actually was. It is difficult to understand a murderer, but creator Eric Newman claimed that "my job as a storyteller is to tell stories to seek to try to understand complicated people" (in *Creative Screenwriting*). In writing the series, he attempted to give us an insight into what Blanco could have been feeling or thinking during this time in order to provide the audience with something to connect to and understand, beyond simplistic impressions.

Griselda's story has always been told by men, and everyone knew it was about time that a woman had some input, which is why a female writer was added to the original team of three men. Writer Ingrid Escajeda notes that "Her story was written by men. So,

I couldn't help but wonder if some of these horrific truths may be fiction because the men that she was besting were feeling emasculated and the only way that they could not feel emasculated was to call her a monster" (in *Creative Screenwriting*). This may explain why throughout the miniseries most of the men involved develop a hatred for Griselda: through her unexpected dominance, she made the men around her feel small. She became very powerful and the simple fact that she was a woman is what scared the men most deeply. If a woman could take their power, who were they to take anyone else's?

When commenting on casting Sofia Vergara as Griselda, Newman explains that

> "She was perfect for the role—not only because she, like Griselda, is a single mother who came to America from Colombia with nothing and built an empire—but because it was unexpected of her to do [so]. Sofía has been thought of one way—a beautiful and brilliant comedic actress—and she is so much more than that." (in Tudum)

Sofia Vergara, known above all for her role in the comedy series *Modern Family*, proved that she is more than capable of playing the complex role and to take on a new kind of character different from her usual ones. America knows her as a comedian and she has thrived in these kinds of roles, but the creators did not underestimate Vergara's ability to take on a difficult character like Griselda, which she performed flawlessly (despite the controversial fake nose…).

Analysis: A hero or a villain?

Griselda deals with the body and gender in two significant ways. Most notably, the series captures the struggle of a woman fighting against the patriarchy to become herself eventually a top patriarchal player. Griselda works from the bottom up by asserting her dominance and using her charm to get her way despite being constantly fighting for air in a male-dominated career.

Along with being a powerful woman, Griselda Blanco was a mother trying (unsuccessfully) to balance her criminal career and her home life. Blanco was born in 1943 and grew up in Medellín, Colombia. She moved first to the USA in 1964, leaving and returning to Miami in the 1970s, where she ruthlessly fought to take over the cocaine industry. She is said to be the inventor of drug smuggling using mules (she had girls smuggling cocaine in from Colombia by sewing the drugs into their bras) as well as the inventor of drive by assassinations. Griselda Blanco is believed to have ordered the killings of over 200 people, of which many, extremely brutal and unnerving, are depicted in the series. Griselda seemed to have no limit, no breaking point. Although in the series she is portrayed as feeling some emotions and a sense of guilt when performing or ordering some of these killings, it is said that in real life she was not this sensitive, but rather took joy in knowing she had taken the lives of people whether they were in her way or not. She did not seem to show any sign of remorse. It is believed that Griselda had been witness to many killings growing up in Colombia and therefore it is theorized that she may have lacked a sensitivity to murder and death. Additionally, it is said that she first murdered someone at the early age of 12, an event which is not depicted in the series, like other turning points in her criminal career.

Everyone who knew Griselda had a different opinion about her. She was feared by many, hated by some, and admired by others. What was admirable was her ability to take over a male-dominated industry basically on her own; this is praised in the series

with comments such as “Griselda did it all on her own” (E2) and “She’s a badass” (E4). At the same time, this is what she was hated for, though this hate came out of jealousy and machismo, as those who hated her were primarily the men she was competing against, and defeating. Her means of taking over, including the brutal killings and her relentlessness, ignited fear in many that knew her. Griselda gained a tremendous amount of power to the point that she managed to compromise members of the Miami Police Departament. Not only her actual power but her hunger for more and more power was also something to be feared because it was clear that she would not stop until she got what she wanted and even then, it was never enough. She needed to stay on top and she needed to keep what was hers, what she built. The constant threat of losing her power along with the abuse of drugs sparked a terrifying paranoia within Griselda which led to her almost killing one of her best friends, Carmen (played by Vanessa Ferlito) after accusing her of being a “rat” and betraying her.

After being powerless for most of her life, and controlled by men, Griselda decides to flip the switch. The question is whether this is female empowerment or the creation of a patriarchal woman. While Griselda challenges the patriarchy by inserting herself as a woman into a male-dominated industry, she does this by engaging in patriarchal behavior, mainly in order to gain respect. She does challenge patriarchal gender roles by being the opposite of what society deems ladylike, but would we go as far to say that she is a strong, independent woman who did it all on her own? Blanco, Valentine notes “is certainly portrayed as a strong woman, just not an independent one.” Since she knows the men have all of the power in this industry, Blanco immerses herself, almost becoming one of them, but in the end, she is still a woman and will always be seen as a woman.

Knowing this, Griselda enrolls many men to aid her reach the top. There is always a man for her to lean on. She used men to build her empire, she has men vouch for her in order to be acknowledged, and she even has men getting her out of trouble when she needs it. Instead of knocking down the patriarchy, Griselda is using it to her advantage, becoming a part of the problem rather than the solution. According to Valentine, Blanco is a woman “shaped and dictated by men,” so it is not unsurprising that she takes on this patriarchal identity. While Griselda may seem to be an emblem of female empowerment superficially, if we look more deeply, we can see that she is only perpetuating the patriarchy. Griselda is able to get a foot in by being able to switch between feminine and masculine roles strategically. She does not advocate for other women, and she does not truly tackle the patriarchy. Instead, she becomes the patriarchy.

Griselda gains power by using the art of persuasion and the idea of the American Dream to get people to join her side, though she asserts her dominance primarily through violence. It is the only way that she sees fit for the others, the males involved in the cocaine industry, to notice her and take her seriously. “I hate that this is what you had to do for them to notice you” (E3), says Griselda’s third husband Dario (played by Alberto Guerra) commenting on how it is a shame that Griselda feels she has to kill in order to be acknowledged, though that was actually the only way for her to empower herself. While Griselda found ways to gain power, she did it in quite an unconventional way that one may classify is psychopathic. Why is she so obsessed with being in control? Why does she need to have irrevocable power?

Griselda is quite literally the definition of a psychopath, someone who is “callous, unemotional, and morally depraved” (Morin). Griselda’s incessant need for power and her ruthless means of acquiring it exemplify her psychopathic tendencies. Griselda puts

the value of life on the backburner, she neglects her family, and she shows little to no remorse for her vicious acts. Nothing seemed to matter to her more than quenching this thirst for power. That means killing innocent people, putting her family in constant danger, and disregarding any compromise. She believed it all belonged to her and not one person had the right to take it or even share it with her.

What is most intriguing about this is that despite the lack of emotions Griselda herself experiences, she has this way of tapping into other people's emotions, which is how she manipulates them into working for her. As noted, Griselda thrives on promising the elusive American Dream. Griselda tapped into the feelings of many fellow Colombians looking for a better life by giving powerful speeches that promise an end to struggling and a promise of a new world where they can feel worthy and powerful. She used her knowledge of immigrant struggles, and her identity as a Colombian woman to lure desperate people onto her side. Not only was she able to sway people onto her side, but these people were so mesmerized by her that they remained loyal through the darkest of times.

Without the measures that Griselda took, she would never have climbed to the top. However, climbing to the top always comes at a price and for Griselda, this price was her family. While Griselda opened up doors for women, proving that women are capable of being much more than just silly, useless housewives, she also carried many problems with her, such as those connected with her role as a mother. Throughout the series we see examples of her carelessness as a mother despite her constantly claiming that everything she does is for her children. Griselda's role as a mother is of concern straight from the beginning. The series begins with Griselda murdering her second husband, Alberto (played by Alberto Ammann), after he forces her to have sex with his brother Fernando (played by Ernesto Alterio) in order to pay his debt. She announces that she is leaving him, and Alberto unwisely replies says "Let's see how far you get" (E1). This ignites the rage inside of Griselda resulting in her shooting him and having to flee town with her three sons, Uber (played by Jose Velazquez), Dixon (Orlando Pineda), and Ozzy (Martin Fajardo). After a few days in Miami, Fernando and his henchman Dario find Griselda. Dario ends up killing Fernando, while the children hear everything, and later becoming involved with Griselda sexually and eventually romantically as well. A few years later, Griselda is at her peak of success and has a new son, Michael Corleone (played by Benson D. Larracuenta) with Dario. At this point Griselda is presented with an opportunity to get out of the business, as the Ochoas, a powerful drug family, try to buy her out. However, she rejects their offer because of her thirst for power and control. Griselda does not want to give away what she has worked so hard for, not even for the sake of her children.

While Griselda thought that her sons didn't know what was going on, they clearly did, and audiences can see how much it hurt them. Throughout the series she lies to them, makes up excuses for her actions or for the violent events that they see, and claims that it will all be worth it in the end since everything she does is for them. However, her sons can see right through her, especially her oldest, Uber, who tells Dario "I hope I'm never like her" (E4). Griselda constantly makes empty promises to her sons, who only want a normal life and to spend time with their mother. Additionally, she sets a horrible example for her children by engaging in criminal behavior right in front of their faces, and even getting them involved once they are a little older, guiding them down a tragic path and leading them towards desolate futures. Griselda's lack of concern for her children's

safety and well-being despite her constantly claiming that everything that she does is for them further exemplifies her psychopathic characteristics. It is clear that it is not true that she did everything for her family, but rather she did it all for herself. In the end, all of her sons but Michael Corleone end up being murdered. This is a result of her actions. She got them involved in this lifestyle and ultimately took away their lives solely due to her desire for power and her refusal to stop. Griselda herself also met a tragic ending.

To conclude, *Griselda* is an action-packed, exciting and heart-wrenching series that has a multitude of issues regarding gender and the body. It is even more fascinating due to the fact that it is based on a true story. It could be seen as empowering to women who are constantly fighting for a position in a patriarchal world. But it is also important to note that her means of taking power were not something that should be admired nor was her management of her family life. The series is very powerful, and Sofia Vergara encapsulates the character incredibly, making it enticing to watch and even learn about the true story.

Bibliography

Abdullahi, Fousia. "*Griselda* Tackles Misogyny, Gender Roles." *The Collegian* 28 February 2024, https://collegian.tccd.edu/50870/entertainment/griselda-tackles-misogyny-gender-roles/

Britan, Tara & Thao, Phillipe. "*Griselda:* Everything You Need to Know About Sofia Vergara's New Series." *Tudum by Netflix* 9 December 2024, https://www.netflix.com/tudum/articles/sofia-vergara-griselda-release-date#: 'She was perfect for the [her] to do so'.

DellaRovere, Tiziana. "Patriarchy and the Patriarchal Woman" *The Sacred Lovers Within* 27 October 2018, https://thesacredloverswithin.com/patriarchy-patriarchal-woman/

Loaiza, Lara. "What Netflix's *Griselda* Gets Wrong About Women in Organized Crime." *InSight Crime* 1 March 2024, https://insightcrime.org/news/what-netflixs-griselda-gets-wrong-about-women-organized-crime/

Morin, Amy. "What Is a Psychopath?" *Very Well Mind* 17 June 2024, https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-a-psychopath-5025217

Nelson, Keith. "The True Griselda Blanco Story is Even Darker Than Netflix's *Griselda.*" *Men's Health* 26 January 2024, https://www.menshealth.com/entertainment/a46524656/griselda-true-story-netflix-griselda-blanco/

Prosek, Jennifer. "*Griselda* Is My Guilty Girl Power Pleasure." *LinkedIn* 12 February 2024, https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/griselda-my-guilty-girl-power-pleasure-jennifer-prosek-w4knf

Rivieccio, Genna. "Griselda Shades What A Shithole America Is" *Culled Culture* 4 February 2024, https://www.culledculture.com/griselda-shades-what-a-shithole-america-is/

Staff Writer. "A Comprehensive Discussion With Eric Newman, Ingrid Escajeda & Doug Miro Discuss *Griselda* Aka the Godmother." *Creative Screenwriting* 29 May 2024, https://www.creativescreenwriting.com/a-comprehensive-discussion-with-eric-newman-ingrid-escajeda-doug-miro-discuss-griselda-aka-the-godmother/

Theil, Michele. “Everything You Need to Know about LGBTQ+ ‘Cocaine Godmother’ Griselda Blanco.” *Pink News* 26 January 2024, https://www.thepinknews.com/2024/01/26/was-griselda-blanco-bisexual/

Tikkanen, Amy. “Griselda Blanco.” *Brittanica* 21 October 2024, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Griselda-Blanco

Twenty, Saint. “The Feminism of Griselda Blanco.” *Saint Twenty* 2 July 2022*,* https://sainttwenty.com/2022/07/02/the-feminism-of-griselda-blanco/

Valentine, Jasmine. “Netflix’s Griselda Isn’t Actually a Feminist Icon” *Dexerto* 25 January 2024, https://www.dexerto.com/tv-movies/netflixs-griselda-isnt-actually-a-feminist-icon-2497906/

Lady in the Lake: From Catalyst to Crusader

CALLEY OVERTON

Episodes: 7
Release date: 19 July – 23 August 2024
Creator: Alma Har'el
Source: *Lady in the Lake* (2019), novel by Laura Lippman
Cast: Natalie Portman (Maddie Schwartz/Morgenstern), Moses Ingram (Cleo Johnson), Bianca Belle (Tessie Durst), Y'lan Noel (Ferdie Platt), Byron Bowers (Slappy Johnson), Dylan Arnold (Stephen Zawadzkie), Bret Gelman (Milton Schwartz), Josiah Cross (Reggie Johnson), Wood Harris (Shell Gordon)
Companies: Bad Wolf America, Crazyrose, Zusa, Mountain A, Fifth Season
Genre: drama, thriller, mystery
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt14022668

Introduction: Searching for the marvelous?

Lady in the Lake, adapted from the 2019 novel of the same name by Laura Lippman, is an ambitious miniseries dealing with race, injustice, and female desire all wrapped into the package of an aesthetically rich whodunnit. The series starts with the murder of a little girl, Tessie Durst, and follows the parallel lives of two women, Cleo Johnson (Moses Ingram) and Maddie Schwartz (Natalie Portman), whose lives intertwine as Maddie uses first Tessie's murder and then Cleo's to fuel her journalistic ambitions in 1960s Baltimore.

The series, marking Portman's small screen debut and a standout performance from Ingram, has received mixed reviews, some saying that it is a series you need to savor to fully appreciate (Mangan) with many others criticizing it for being overloaded with plot, sermon, aesthetics, and surrealism, lacking the nuance of the novel that digs deep into these women's lives and into the racial politics of 1960s Baltimore through their relationships and interactions with others. The amount of information also works against the miniseries, slowing the pace of what should be an engrossing mystery. As *Vulture* critic Roxana Hadadi observes, "After stripping Lippman's story of its vivid nuance, it overloads what's left with systemic discrimination as the primary explanation for its characters' motivations and setbacks, then drowns in the ensuing wave of sanctimony."

Lippman's novel was inspired by two real, unrelated murder cases in Baltimore and shares the same basic plot with the miniseries. However, there are some key differences, the most significant one being the modifications of Cleo Johnson's story and role. The series adds a layer of imposed respectability to her plot, changing her from a single mother and nightclub dancer in an affair with a politician that is "hungry for life" to a married woman working multiple jobs, including one as a bookkeeper to a crime boss, whom Cleo wants to take down to fight injustice (Lang). The novel is more centered on

the women's ambitions in a time that did not allow them to express them, while the series zooms out to look at the politics of the city through them, turning them into martyrs fighting systematic injustice rather than complicated women who simply *want.* As Hadadi further notes, "*Lady in the Lake*'s greatest mistake is believing that Maddie and Cleo's lives, dreams, and desires are only of value if they're victims of something." While the narrative says repeatedly that this is a story about Maddie, Cleo, and even Tessie "searching for the marvelous," that plot line of them wanting something more, something marvelous, gets lost. The women's complexities are erased in service of heavy-handed messaging and an overreliance on surrealist aesthetics—including a nearly forty minute dream sequence that, while beautiful visually, adds nothing besides an off-kilter atmosphere.

Analysis: From catalyst to crusader

Lady in the Lake weaves together complex plotlines and themes, but at its core, it examines the commodification of women's stories—whose voices are heard, who controls the narrative, and how those narratives take shape. The series is adapted from a novel that draws inspiration from real-life cases of media coverage disparity. As such, it uses and subverts different narrative tropes like 'fridging' and the 'Missing White Girl Syndrome'. However, in its ambition to be a vehicle for justice, at times the series plays into the same tropes it is outwardly against.

The 'woman in the refrigerator' trope was coined by comic book fan Gail Simone who created a database featuring countless women who were killed, injured, and overall harmed in order to further a male-driven plot in comic books. This became more colloquially known as fridging and, despite being a concept created in connection with comics, it appears in other forms of storytelling as a too-common plot device (Watson 1). While *Lady in the Lake* is not a male-driven story line, it does feature a woman trying to fit into the primarily male-world of journalism. The story begins with the disappearance of a little Jewish girl named Tessie Durst. Her death plays no role besides being a catalyst for unhappy housewife Maddie Morgenstern to leave her husband and life behind and begin to chase her journalistic dreams again.

Maddie finds Tessie's body by the lake and that is the angle that allows her access to her investigation. However, Tessie's plot is quickly dropped as soon as Maddie finds a new story, the disappearance of Cleo Johnson. In a controversially long dream sequence, Maddie even coolly tells the little girl "You're old news, Tessie" (E6). Tessie's killer and what really happened is even revealed, but Maddie does not care. While Tessie is given more plot in the series than the novel, it is all centered around adding complexity to Maddie as a character. There are flashbacks dedicated to her romantic entanglements with both Tessie's father and grandfather and subsequent abortion. Critic Hadadi complains that "Even little Tessie's edges from the novel are sanded off, denying her a purpose outside of narrative utility. She exists only to die, not to want." It can be argued that Tessie *did want* as she did go into that exotic fish shop to find a seahorse, to find something marvelous. But because she wanted simply to want, her death does not matter in the narrative except as a catalyst.

While Maddie is investigating the "lady in the lake," Cleo Johnson explicitly rejects her role as a passive object in the narrative, bluntly stating, "Alive, I was Cleo Johnson. But in my death I became the lady in the lake" (E1). On the surface, Maddie investigates

these stories because she cares and wants to give a voice to the voiceless females. However, her motives are self-serving, fueled by her own ambition. Maddie's coverage of Tessie pivots from attempting to solve the murder to sympathizing with the accused killer, as the US government conducting experiments on conscientious objectors proves more compelling. When there is only so much she can write and only so many ways she can leverage her position as the woman who found Tessie, she moves on to Cleo Johnson who is vehemently against Maddie's exploitation.

In Cleo's own narration, she asks, "Your writing dreams ruined your life. Now you want those same dreams to rewrite it. But why did you need to drag my dead body into it?" (in Kang). Maddie is not only exploiting Cleo's story, but also objectifying her. This aligns with Briseno's analysis of racial objectification, by which Black individuals are viewed as interchangeable objects in a story of trauma, with their subjectivity denied. Briseno notes that racial objectification often manifests through the white gaze, where Black trauma is reduced to newsworthy content or entertainment, without any effort to address or understand the deeper societal issues behind it (83). This is evident when Cleo comes back from the grave—having faked her death—to appeal to Maddie's sense of decency and ambition and ask her to stop investigating.

Cleo even offers her another story about taking down crime lord Shell Gordon and offers to help Maddie. Gordon has ruined many lives in Black Baltimore, including Cleo's. Cleo tells her directly, "If you tell my story, you'll be the one who really kills me" (E6). Yet, Maddie keeps investigating and even tells Cleo's husband that she is alive, ignoring the story that is at the root of the harm—Gordon's exploitation and corruption. Furthermore, throughout the whole series, Cleo reclaims her agency not only through taking action, but also through "talking back" as a narrator, something that bell hooks cites as being essential for the oppressed. hooks wrote that "It is that act of speech, of 'talking back,' that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice" (9). Her narration and criticism against Maddie is present in each episode, as if Cleo's ghost is watching and judging her actions. But Cleo is alive and factoring in Maddie's investigation into her plans to get herself and her family to safety.

Lady in the Lake sometimes participates in the same discourse it tries to subvert. As noted, the series is based on a novel which is based on two real, unrelated murders in Baltimore in 1969—a little Jewish girl who received widespread media attention and whose body was found within days of being reported missing and a 35-year-old Black woman who was found *months* after going missing (Lang). Unfortunately, this is so common in news coverage that it even has a nickname, 'Missing White Girl Syndrome'. Stillman writes that "The phenomenon typically involves round-the-clock coverage of disappeared young females who qualify as 'damsels in distress' by race, class, and other relevant social variables" (492). These media narratives commodify the deaths of some (typically white, conventionally attractive, wealthy, etc.) while disregarding others as disposable (poor, non-white, precarious employment, etc.) (Stillman 493).

While the series counters and criticizes that narrative by giving Cleo Johnson a voice and agency and Maddie the desire to tell her story, there is a possibility that the series played into this narrative in order to make Cleo more palatable to a mixed audience. In the novel, Cleo is a single mother who is working as a bartender and a dancer for Shell Gordon and having an affair with a married politician. However, in the series, she is a different character completely. She is married to a struggling comedian

with whom she shares two sons, works three jobs—a bartender, a bookkeeper, and a department store model—and volunteers for a female politician she admires in her free time (Lang). Cleo's death and lack of news coverage should be tragic in itself, rather than being framed as tragic only because she meets certain arbitrary societal standards of worthiness. Neely writes that in interviews of women of color, they "believe that for them to be recognized as victims worthy of media coverage, it had to be demonstrated that they were better than the perceived stereotypes of their racial group—in other words, that they were good mothers, were students or in college, were religious, and so forth" (9). Cleo is not only loved in her community, she is respected; no viewer can deny her respectability as she fights injustice and corruption. Furthermore, by making Cleo irreproachable, the series paints her as an exception, leaning in to stereotypes. As Hadadi writes, "To make its new version of Cleo a crusader, the series has to make the Black community around her incredibly susceptible to superstition and immorality, and that's a crummy bargain."

Ultimately, *Lady in the Lake* serves as both a mirror and a critique of the systems it portrays. While the series successfully challenges the disparities in media coverage, it also inadvertently participates in the harmful tropes it critiques, particularly through the use of the fridging narrative. Tessie's death serves as a plot device to advance Maddie's storyline, reducing her to nothing more than a catalyst for the protagonist's development. On the other hand, Cleo's character resists *fridging* by being given voice and agency, yet her portrayal still aligns with problematic stereotypes, especially in how the series reimagines her to be irreproachable in order to make her more 'palatable' to mainstream audiences. By presenting Cleo as a perfect victim and hero, the show somewhat reinforces the narrative that only certain lives are worthy of media attention. In doing so, *Lady in the Lake* complicates its critique by both subverting and reproducing the very biases it seeks to expose. The series invites viewers to critically examine the ethics of representation, questioning whose voices are heard, how stories are told, and which narratives are remembered. It challenges the audience to think more deeply about the limitations and complexities of storytelling, especially when it comes to the commodification and objectification of marginalized women's experiences.

Bibliography

Briseno, Rosemary. "The Spectacle of Historical Trauma of Black Bodies in America: Subjectivity, Abjection, and Commodification of the White/Black Gaze." *Forum for Contemporary Issues in Language and Literature* 4 (2023): https://orcid.org/0009-0008-1316-4780

Hadadi, Roxana. "Review: *Lady in the Lake* Treads Shallow Waters." *Vulture* 24 July 2024, https://www.vulture.com/article/lady-in-the-lake-apple-series-review-adaptation-analysis.html

hooks, bell. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Routledge, 2015 (1989).

Kang, Inkoo. "In *Lady in the Lake*, Ambition Is Everything." *The New Yorker* 2 August 2024, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/08/12/lady-in-the-lake-tv-review-apple-tv

Lang, Cady. "Breaking Down the Major Changes in *Lady In The Lake*'s Jump from Book to TV." *Time* 19 July 2024, https://time.com/6999158/lady-in-the-lake-book-vs-show-changes/

Mangan, Lucy. "*Lady in the Lake* Review – Natalie Portman's TV Debut Is Absolutely Impeccable." *The Guardian* 19 July 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/article/2024/jul/19/lady-in-the-lake-review-natalie-portmans-tv-debut-is-absolutely-impeccable

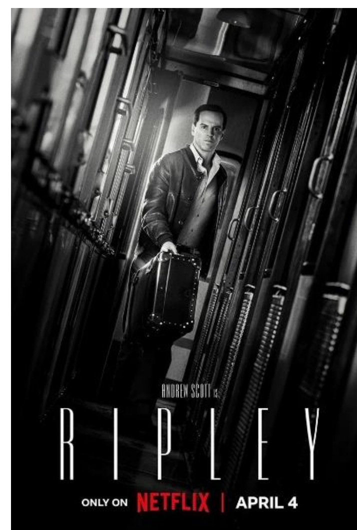
Stillman, Sarah. "'The Missing White Girl Syndrome': Disappeared Women And Media Activism." *Gender And Development* 15.3 (2007): 491-502.

Watson, Lauren C. *Bearing Witness To Female Trauma In Comics: An Analysis Of Women in Refrigerators*. Graduate Thesis, Texas State University, 2018. https://hdl.handle.net/10877/10892

Ripley: The Elusive Tom and the Challenges of Gender and Body Performance

ALESIA VOLKOVA

Episodes: 8
Release date: 4 April 2024
Creators: Steven Zaillian
Source: *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955), novel by Patricia Highsmith
Cast: Andrew Scott (Tom Ripley), Dakota Fanning (Marge Sherwood), Johnny Flynn (Richard 'Dickie' Greenleaf), Eliot Sumner (Frederick 'Freddie' Miles), Maurizio Lombardi (Police Inspector Pietro Ravini)
Companies: Netflix, Endemol Shine North America, Entertainment 360, Diogenes Entertainment, FILMRIGHTS, Showtime Studios
Genre: neo-noir, crime, thriller
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11016042/



Introduction: The story of a charismatic psychopath

Ripley (2024, Netflix) is an eight-episode limited series created by Steven Zaillian, which narrates a gripping story of art, murder and love set in 1961. The main character Tom Ripley, a con artist from New York, ends up in Italy and is deeply involved in murder, and forgery while leading a hedonistic life. Zaillian, an American screenwriter and film director, has received a myriad awards, including an Academy Award, Golden Globe Award, and BAFTA Award for his work script for *Schindler's List* (1993). For *Ripley* specifically he has won a Primetime Emmy Award.

Tom Ripley is hired by a wealthy man and asked to go to Italy to persuade his wanderer son Richard 'Dickie' Greenleaf to return back home. Greenleaf is keeping himself busy wasting his father's money, painting mediocre pictures and in general living an idle life full of pleasures with his girlfriend Marge Sherwood. Once Ripley arrives in Atrani, a little town where Dickie is living, Tom is almost instantly attracted to this kind of lifestyle. This is when things get complicated because not only does Tom want to live like Greenleaf, he also wants to be *with* Dickie in a romantic sense as well. However, Dickie is unable to reciprocate the attraction, which makes him reject Ripley. This triggers Tom's sociopathic inclinations: he kills Greenleaf and tries his best to hide the dead body. Ripley, then, takes on the identity of the rich scion: he starts using his name, passport, clothes and other personal belongings, as well as the money of Greenleaf's father.

Ripley travels to Rome, as he decides to settle there under Dickie's name. He writes a break-up letter for Marge, but she refuses to accept the end of their romance and starts trying to meet her ex-boyfriend in person, obviously only managing to meet Tom, whom she does not like since their first meeting in Atrani. The police only intervenes to investigate the case when Tom kills Freddie Miles, Dickie's friend and the first person

to understand what has actually happened. After this second murder, things become intricate for the main character, and we follow the complicated chain of events as he tries to avoid police prosecution. During the last minutes of the show, Ripley is shown sitting in a cafe with a man who gives him a new passport, which means that Tom has just acquired a new identity: Timothy Fanshaw from the United Kingdom.

Tom Ripley, to sum up, is particularly complicated and confusing for both viewers and other characters because he is charming and charismatic, but at the time he is also a psychopath and a criminal. Netflix's series is not the first attempt to make a screen adaptation of Highsmith's novel. Before Andrew Scott, who plays Ripley in this 2024 miniseries, the character has been played by seven other actors: Alain Delon in *Purple Noon* (1960), Dennis Hopper in *The American Friend* (1977), Jonathan Kent in *Gift for Murder* (1982), Matt Damon in *The Talented Mr. Ripley (1999),* John Malkovich in *Ripley's Game (2002)*, Barry Pepper in *Ripley Under Ground* (2005) and Ian Hart who played Ripley in 2009 for BBC Radio Four's adaptation of the five Ripley novels. Each adaptation brings a unique charm to the character and unravels his strange personality from different sides.

Analysis: to be Greenleaf or to be with Greenleaf?

This limited series deals with the issues of gender and body in several thought-provoking ways. First of all, it is vital to elaborate on what already has been briefly mentioned before in the previous section: Ripley forges a false identity pretending to be Dickie Greenleaf. This is done both materialistically with physical objects, as well as mentally, when Ripley is trying to imitate the lifestyle and personality of the younger character. Tom uses Dickie's suitcase, watches, and even a luxury pen which receives many compliments and serves as extra proof for Tom to make others believe that he is actually the wealthy scion.

Tom Ripley shows his attraction to men and his queer inclinations multiple times throughout the show. A significant moment, where we can best see Ripley's queer desire, is the scene in which Tom is sitting in a bedroom at Dickie's house, imagining that he is talking to Marge, Dickie's girlfriend. During this imaginary conversation, he is trying to persuade her that Dickie does not love her as much as him, and that they should break up. What makes this moment queer is that Tom wants Dickie to himself: in this moment, he seems to be jealous that Marge is Dickie's girlfriend. Dickie himself accidentally witnesses this conversation and he looks clearly repulsed by Tom's behavior, implying that he is certain about his heterosexuality and repulsed by Ripley's inclinations hinting the possible relationship between them, at least that is what was desired by Tom. Another significant occurrence happens right before Dickie's murder, when the two of them are standing on the beach watching men playing some sort of game and performing acrobatic tricks, and also giving off the impression of showing romantic and physical attraction towards each other. Dickie is completely repulsed by the men's behavior, calling them "daffodils" and "fairies" (E3), that is "homosexual men" in slang. He is disapproving and homophobic, without a hint of a thought to reciprocate Tom's desire. Still, Ripley replies "So what if they are? It's really impressive" (E3).

Netflix's *Ripley* is the first adaptation of the novel where questions of (homo)sexuality are explicitly raised and it is also significant that Andrew Scott is the first openly gay actor to play this character. LeGardye comments that

> After the pivotal turn where Dickie catches Tom secretly dressing up in Dickie's own clothes, the shipping scion makes a point to tell Tom, "I'm not queer." Dickie also points out that his girlfriend Marge (Dakota Fanning) suspects that Tom is queer, something that's later brought back up in jealous accusations where Marge questions why Dickie just can't cut Tom loose.

In Ripley's opinion, Marge seems to be jealous of him possibly because she feels Dickie does not love her as much as she loves Tom; yet, she is still trying to cling on him and keep him to herself. She could feel that way because Greenleaf started spending more time with Tom, and it is clear that she was uncomfortable with the situation. Mike Hale pinpointed that "Wedging himself between Dickie and Marge, [Tom] becomes obsessed—an obsession in which the lines between befriending Dickie, sponging off Dickie and becoming Dickie are progressively erased." It is not Marge who is obsessed with Dickie, then, but Tom himself; however, she is presented in that way, especially when Ripley is trying to navigate his new life under a fake identity. Thus, he asks the hotel employees not to let Marge know he is there because they broke up recently, and she cannot accept it. Also, as Hale notices, the way Tom treats Dicky is ambiguous, and it is quite impossible to understand if he wants to be him or with him. From my point of view, it is both: these two intricate feelings appear to intertwine tightly in Ripley's soul.

The third important point connected with sexuality is Ripley's murder of Freddie right in his Rome apartment. When Tom is trying to get rid of the evidence, he drags the body to the street, pretending that Miles is not dead, but extremely drunk and unable to walk by himself, so Ripley has to help him. Once they are out of the building and Tom tries to reach Freddie's car, the duo are noticed by two passing strangers. Of course, they looked suspicious in one way or another, so Ripley takes advantage of Freddie's androgynous looks and that he might have been perceived as a woman by some people, and kisses him, to mask the whole situation. Tom is a quite practical and shrewd man, he always adjusts himself to the given situation at the given moment and acts the way it would be appropriate in the context in order not to get caught. So, when they are noticed by the first stranger, who is a woman, Ripley decides to pretend that they are a straight couple; however, when the second passerby (male) appears a few minutes later, Ripley considers it to be more appropriate to play the situation as two male friends who got drunk. Certainly, the scene connects with Ripley's practicality and opportunism, however the question here lies in why Ripley decides to kiss Freddie. He could have just pretended both times that he is helping his drunk friend to walk, but still chose not to when a woman was passing them by.

The whole miniseries is shot in black-and-white, providing its own effect of vintage aesthetic. As Tallerico states, the "Black-and-white cinematography by Robert Elswit (*There Will Be Blood*) amplifies the cool detachment of the con artist, portrayed by Scott as a criminal with ice in his veins." This 'cool detachment' of the cinematography is perfectly suited for tactical Ripley. Seth notes that "After inserting himself into the idyllic life Greenleaf and Sherwood have built together, Ripley becomes obsessed with the former and is hurt when Greenleaf seems to prefer the company of his socialite friend Freddie Miles." Tom does not like Freddie from their first accidental meeting at the cafe where he and Dickie were just sitting together and discussing art. Dickie and Freddy greet each other with two cheek kisses, Italian-style, but this seems to make Tom jealous. The communication between Freddie and Tom is tense and strained from the start: Tom

tries his best to be polite, but Miles pesters him with questions, trying to remember why Tom seems familiar to him (apparently, they had run into each other before in New York).

Yet, we can never pin down Ripley's sexuality. Andrew Scott, the main lead, explained that

> "I'm interested in the idea of what queerness is, and otherness, because that's what I think it's about. The reason he's such an interesting character is you can't quite place him. If Tom Ripley was in a gay bar, I'm not sure that he would fit in there. Nor do I think he's a straight character. I think he's a queer character, in the sense that he's very other." (in Wishaw)

Ripley is queer in multiple senses: he seems to feel like an outsider without a sense of belonging anywhere, as he operates under the identity of another person; nor did he have before any friends or meaningful close relationships with people. We do not know much about his past life, he is a mystery to everyone, perhaps even himself. As Wilkinson observes,

> The curious thing about these features of Tom Ripley's life is that they add up to nothing. Highsmith structures them as telling details, the kinds of specifics that writers employ like shorthand to build a person in the reader's mind. But in fact, we get very little from them, and at every turn our attempts to wrap our heads around this character are rebuffed.

Despite being a psychopath, Ripley has certain charms and charisma which helps him to deceive people and get what he wants. As Maya Phillips writes,

> Scott's charisma usually bleeds through his characters, who even at their most villainous are effortlessly alluring. But Scott corks his charm as Ripley, who isn't suave in either his social interactions or his crimes. The stillness that this Ripley exudes barely disguises the frenetic energy beneath the surface. In the scenes in which Ripley suspects he is about to be caught, he smiles and makes small talk, tries to relax his posture into a faux act of confidence. But his eyes are tense and focused, like that of an animal spotting a predator.

Ripley's body language and posture play an important role: in order to not get caught, Tom has to act composed even if he is surprised and caught off guard.

To conclude, Tom Ripley is an elusive man in multiple senses: he is impossible to catch, his sexuality is opaque, we do not seem to know anything about his past life, family or relationships with people. The viewers of the show may struggle to understand the main character: his motives and feelings, as his personality feels like some sort of blank canvas, which you need to fill in with your own interpretation. His switching between the identities of people could be a sign of both freedom and imprisonment: he can change identities with fluidity, but must still struggle with the need to play the role well to avoid being caught. Who he is as a man is something perhaps he himself can never know.

Bibliography

Hale, Mike. "In *Ripley* on Netflix, the Con Man Gets the Art House Treatment." *The New York Times* 4 April 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/04/arts/television/ripley-review.html

LeGardye, Quinci. “How Netflix’s *Ripley* Compares to the Original *The Talented Mr. Ripley*.” *Marie Claire* 8 April 2024, https://www.marieclaire.com/culture/tv-shows/netflix-ripley-compared-the-talented-mr-ripley/
Phillips, Maya. “Andrew Scott’s Best Roles and Moments.” *The New York Times* 2 July 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/02/arts/television/andrew-scott-best-roles.html
Seth, Radhika. “Every Question You Have About *Ripley*, Answered.” *Vogue* 4 March 2024, https://www.vogue.com/article/ripley-tv-series-everything-you-need-to-know
Tallerico, Brian. “As *Ripley* Revives the ‘Talented’ Con Man, Here Are Earlier Versions.” *The New York Times* 3 April 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/03/arts/television/ripley-netflix-andrew-scott.html
Whishaw, Ben. “Andrew Scott and Ben Whishaw on Sexuality, Chemistry, and Imagination.” *Interview Magazine* 3 November 2023, www.interviewmagazine.com/film/andrew-scott-and-ben-whishaw-on-sexuality-chemistry-and-imagination
Wilkinson, Alissa. “Why Filmmakers Love to Adapt Patricia Highsmith’s Ripley.” *The New York Times* 8 April 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/08/movies/tom-ripley-netflix.html

Shogun: Gender Rules in Old Japan

Ikram Rouam El Khatab

Episodes: 10
Release date: 27 February – 23 April 2024
Creators: Rachel Kondo and Justin Marks
Source: *Shōgun* (1975), novel by James Clavell
Cast: Anna Sawai (Toda Mariko), Cosmo Jarvis (John Blackthorne), Hiroyuki Sanada (Yoshii Toranaga), Fumi Nikaido (Ochiba No Kata), Tadanobu Asano (Kashigi Yabushige), Takehiro Hira (Ishido Kazunari), Tommy Bastow (Father Martin Alvito), Shinnosuke Abe (Buntaro)
Companies: Gate 34, Micheal de Luca Productions, FX Productions
Genre: historical fiction
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2788316/

Introduction: The real story behind the miniseries

Shōgun (2024, FX) is a seven-episode series created by Rachel Kondo and Justin Marks. It is set in 1600s Japan and follows the conflict between two ambitious men from completely different cultures. John Blackthorne (played by Cosmo Jarvis) is an English sailor who ends up shipwrecked in Japan with his Dutch crew in southern Edo, now present-day Tokyo. Meanwhile, after the reigning Taikō had recently died, his heir, Sen Mars (played by Nakamura Yaechiyo), is too young to rule, so his role is divided among five equal regents until he is old enough. However, four of the regents initiate the process of impeaching and condemning to death the fifth regent, Yoshii Toranaga (played by Hiroyuki Sanada) because they believe he has accumulated too much power.

Since Blackthorne does not speak Japanese, the lady Toda Mariko (played by Anna Sawai) becomes his translator in Toranaga's court, where he is kept as a sort of military aid, and a forbidden romance develops between them. It must be noted that a large part of the series is spoken in Japanese, with the scenes featuring Blackthorne switching between English and Japanese. While the European characters speak English, the series refers to the language they speak as Portuguese. At the time, that was the language used between the Japanese and the Europeans who arrived in Japan and traded with them, most of Portuguese origin (Portugal was then an important sea-faring power). Yet, because this is an American series, the change was made from Portuguese to English.

The series is based on the novel *Shōgun* by James Clavell published in 1975, which was turned in 1980 by NBC into a very popular miniseries. The older series focused more closely on Blackthorne's perspective, portraying Japanese people as secondary characters and offering no translation of the Japanese dialogue. The modern series emphasizes the Japanese perspective and includes subtitles (or translation by

Mariko), allowing the story to be conveyed from a variety of viewpoints, including the Japanese. As Lethbridge emphasizes, "In *Shōgun* 1980, the effect of experiencing this world from Blackthorne's perspective is inevitably othering; in contrast, *Shōgun* 2024 is much more immersive, with its world rendered more understandable, empathetic, and believable" (in Lethbridge).

The author's daughter, Michaela Clavell, an executive producer in the newer series, has also discussed how faithful the adaptation is to the book: "Well, in a book as large as my father wrote, it is a process of taking out what you want. You need to pick pieces and focus from a book so big. You cannot show it all even in 10 hours" (in Milheim). Beyond this, the series is historical fiction and mixes historically accurate events with fictionalized ones. The original novel was based on the diaries of William Addams, a real-life English merchant sailor and the first Englishman to reach Japan, on whom Blackthorne's character is modelled. Many other characters were based on real people; only their names were changed. Although certain aspects, such as Blackthorne and Mariko's romance, did not happen, historians have generally praised the series for its accurate portrayal of internal politics and international relations of Japan at that time. Indeed, the series has received massive critical acclaim, being awarded 18 Emmys, breaking records and becoming the one-season series with the most wins. *Shōgun* is the first-ever non-English language series to win for best drama, while Anna Sawai became the first Japanese actress to win an Emmy as leading actress It has recently been announced that *Shōgun* will return for a second season.

Analysis: The invisible women of Japan

Shōgun deals with issues regarding body and gender in various ways. Toxic masculinity tendencies appear in the series as characteristic of patriarchal Japanese culture. The series explores rigid expectations and power dynamics in Japan at the end of the 16th and early 17th centuries, predominantly through its portrayal of samurai culture and how it intersects with honor, violence, and toxic authority. McCurry highlights how the series portrays the mixture of "the unspeakable violence and cultural refinement of 17th-century Japan" (in McCurry).

Samurai characters like Toranaga and his enemies are bound by strict codes of honor, often demanding emotional suppression and an unwavering focus on duty. These codes glorify stoic endurance and harsh authority, traits that can be linked to toxic masculinity. Ikegami claims that "the samurai collectively defined themselves as those who know shame and would risk their lives to defend their honor." This contrasts with men from other classes, both aristocrats and commoners, who do not consider dying for those reasons worthwhile. The male characters depict the extreme effects of these societal pressures placed on men, showcasing the harmful and violent consequences of such expectations, sometimes even death. Another interesting aspect of the samurai was how their idea of shame was closely linked to the importance of honor. The concept of shame had many complex layers. As Ikegami highlights, "haji [shame in Japanese] played a central role in constructing the identity of the Japanese samurai." And this was indeed patriarchal.

The case of Blackthorne, an English man who initially knows nothing about Japanese culture, reflects the clash between Western and Eastern notions of masculinity and the differences he experiences. His journey throughout the series depicts his

adaptation to a deeply patriarchal society where respect and restraint are dominant. Initially, after he has been taken prisoner, he struggles to follow orders from other men as he feels emasculated by the idea of them being superior and having authority over him, and angry that he is not being allowed to live with his crew. Blackthorne finds himself caught up in the ongoing conflicts on the island, and as time goes on, he begins helping Toranaga against his enemies and building trust with the Japanese people. In the end, his eventual embrace of Japanese customs is due to the friendship and love he finds there. Although he does not entirely fit into Japanese society, he learns to respect and follow it, to the point that Toranaga welcomes him as the first non-Japanese samurai.

The series presents Toranaga at the center of the conflict and the battle about to commence. However, the series finale reveals that the key to his victory comes from a woman's actions and sacrifice; it actually results from the individual wars the women around him are fighting, yet Toranaga takes credit for the victory. The women in the series are presented as invisible characters, yet both Mariko and the heir's mother, Lady Ochiba (her former close friend), play major roles. Lady Ochiba, after returning to Osaka, witnesses the conflicts the Council is experiencing and insists that the men will now answer to her; she is ready to take power and control them. Toranaga secures his victory before the battle occurs by sacrificing Mariko, who is more than willing to undertake her mission. Due to Mariko's death, Lady Ochiba promises him in a letter that her son's army will not participate in the conflict between Toranaga and the rest of the Council of Regents, proving that she holds the highest amount of power. Because of Lady Ochiba's decision, Toranaga's main enemy, Lord Ishido Kazunari, is left without allies, consequently losing the battle. As Toranaga grants:

> "Because of Mariko's actions, Lady Ochiba has grown tired of her alliance with Ishido. In a letter to me, she secretly pledged to keep the heir's army from the battlefield. On that day, Ishido will have no banner. The Regents will turn on him before a sword is drawn. Only then will my dream be realized. I will start it in Edo, my center of power." (E10)

In the end, Toranaga attempts to justify his decision to send Mariko to Osaka Castle, knowing that she will most likely die, because the conflict known as Crimson Sky "is already finished. With the Regents united, I could never send an army to Osaka. It would have meant certain death. So, I sent a woman to do what an army never could" (E10).

It must be noted that the female servants work in the castle for the upper-class families who maintain thus the structure of their houses. The role of the female servants was to present women in the Shōgun's family as traditionally domestic and endorse the Shōgun as head of the family. The women of higher rank and the servants were rather similar in how they were viewed as women. As Segawa and Chance argue, "they closely resembled each other in their isolation from the rest of the population. (…) Women in both places remained similarly segregated and distanced." Collectively, all the women who were part of Japanese society were regarded as invisible and inferior to the men, who dismissed their contributions to society. In an interview, actor Anna Sawai talked about the reaction that Japanese women had to the series and to Mariko:

> SAWAI: I'm trying not to get emotional. We were on the press tour in Washington, D.C., and we showed our first two episodes to a Japanese community. After the screening, multiple young girls came up to me being like, "This is the first time I'm seeing a real Japanese character that I can really relate to." They were getting

> emotional as well, because it was something that they had internalized—not being able to speak, having to behave—and they thought that's the way that they should be. (in Earl and Jackson)

The series, in any case, does not ignore women's constraints, difficulties, and lack of agency in Japan within the story's context. Lady Mariko comes from what is considered in Japan a dishonorable family lineage because her father murdered the predecessor of the Taikö; as punishment, he was forced to execute his entire family before being obligated to commit suicide. Mariko paid for the consequences of her father's action by being forced to marry Toda Buntaro (played by Shinnosuke Abe), who, throughout their marriage, physically and emotionally abused her (as it is his right). Liddle describes how often Japanese women's identities were rigorously connected to marriage, for "definitions of Japanese womanhood were applied to the whole population as a means of social regulation under the family-state system," forcing women to remain in those abusive marriages to portray a perfect family image that fits within their standards.

Every year, on the anniversary of her father's betrayal, Mariko asks her husband permission to commit suicide, but every time, she is denied it because he wants her to continue living, thus suffering and living with her family's shame as a shadow burden. When Buntaro physically assaults her and Blackthorne protests, Toranaga claims that "Buntaro may do whatever he wishes to his wife" (E5). At one point, Buntaro asks Toranaga permission to kill Blackthorne because he thinks that he has feelings for his wife. Toranaga argues that he should kill his wife, too, and Mariko quickly responds that "My life is for my husband to take" (E7). Mariko does not have agency over her death, which is why she accepts Toranaga's decision to sacrifice her in her mission. She has at least sufficient agency to take Blackthorne secretly as her lover, as Buntaro suspects.

To conclude, *Shōgun* is a high-quality series, with many aspects to consider regarding gender. It offers an accurate depiction of gender rules which were normative in Japan at the time, the toxic masculinity that men embraced, and the emphasis on honor from samurai culture, as well as the lack of agency women experienced and their portrayal as invisible characters under the shadow of the male characters. As much as Japanese society attempted to hide its women, the series' female characters firmly highlight their value in the history of Japan, with the sacrificial hero Mariko at the forefront.

Bibliography

Earl, William. Jackson, Angelique. "Tom Hiddleston and Anna Sawai on What Connects *Loki* to *Shogun* and Why Saying Goodbye to the Marvel Antihero is a 'Wash of Relief'." *Variety* 12 June 2024, https://variety.com/2024/awards/news/tom-hiddleston-anna-sawai-loki-shogun-1236021069/

Ikegami, Eiko. "Shame and the Samurai: Institutions, Trustworthiness, and Autonomy in the Elite Honor Culture." *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 70.4 (2003): 1351-1378. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/558616/pdf

Lethbridge, Tommy. "FX's Shogun Biggest Change from the Miniseries Is What Made It So Good." *ScreenRant* 4 May 2024, https://screenrant.com/shogun-2024-changes-1980-show-remake-blackthorne-toranaga/

Liddle, Joanna and Sachiko Nakajima. "The USA Occupation." *Rising Suns, Rising Daughters: Gender, Class, and Power in Japan*. White Lotus Company, 1988. 149-160.

Milheim, Russ. “Shogun 2024 FX TV Series Vs. Book Differences Explained by Producer.” *The Direct* 24 March 2024, https://thedirect.com/article/shogun-2024-fx-series-book-differences-explained

McCurry, Justin. “*Shōgun:* Why the English Samurai’s Life and Legacy Still Grip Japan 400 Years on.” *The Guardian* 19 August 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/24/shogun-why-the-english-samurais-life-and-legacy-still-grip-japan-400-years-on

Seigle, Cecilia Segawa and Linda H. Chance. “Introduction: The ‘Great Interior’.” *Ooku: The Secret World of the Shogun’s Women.* Cambria Press, 2014. 9-29. E-book.

Sugar: Failing to Produce a Human Hero

Álvaro Farré Hernández

Episodes: 8
Release date: 5 April – 17 May 2024
Creators: Simon Kinberg
Cast: Collin Farrel (John Sugar), Amy Ryan (Melanie Matthews), Kirby Howell-Baptiste (Ruby), Sydney Chandler (Olivia Siegel), James Cromwell (Jonathan Siegel)
Companies: Apple Studios, Apple TV+ and Chapel Place Productions
Genre: neo-noir, science fiction
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt16418808/

Introduction: The strange return of the noir detective

Sugar (2024, FX) is an eight-episode limited series (so far, as a new season was announced in October 2024), created by Simon Kinberg, with Mark Protosevich as main screenwriter and Fernando Meirelles (known among others for *The Constant Gardener*) as director. The story focuses on detective John Sugar, whose specialty is to find people who have gone missing and are likely to have been kidnapped. Although we are introduced to the miniseries in Tokyo, all the action happens in L.A., where a relevant film producer in Hollywood, Jonathan Siegel, hires the protagonist to find his lost granddaughter Olivia. The eight episodes focus on the protagonist's struggles to solve the case while many questions about his agency and Olivia's family arise.

The miniseries features a cast in which Collin Farrell (John Sugar) and Amy Ryan (Melanie Matthews) take most of the protagonism (though she is not the focus here). Altogether with them, we find Kirby Howell-Baptiste playing Ruby, Sidney Chandler as Olivia Siegel, and James Cromwell as Jonathan Siegel. Even though none of them are out of place, the prominence and performances of the two leads relegates the other characters to a manifest secondary role.

The story is narrated by a first-person narrator; the chance to access Sugar's mind through the voiceover is meant to facilitate identification with him. The protagonist, thus, becomes more than just a character; he is presented for viewers to relate to him adopting his point of view. As Romano notes, "What's essential for *Sugar*—and any entry in this genre—is a lead character who audiences can relate to and understand." However, in this miniseries identifying with the detective is not as easy as most critics assert, for the major plot twist revealing that Sugar is actually an alien makes the identification close to impossible. Collin Farrell himself gave his interpretation of this decision and came up with a particularly interesting idea: "he saw all the darkness and

violence [of Los Angeles] but that's not the totality of his experience when he looks at human beings" (in Griffin). To widen the distance between human beings and the alien protagonist and to make him look at our flaws from the outside allows us to explore morality in a very different way. Despite this positive approach, as a possible positive role model John Sugar falls short of providing a meaningful or relatable figure for audiences to emulate, as, despite looking like a human male, he is not, as noted, human at all.

Analysis: Looking for positive role models for men

Historically, there has been an undoubted carelessness when portraying male characters in fiction. Teenagers and young adults, when they develop their personality, tend to look up to figures that play an important role in their lives, and adapt their traits in an attempt to become like them. Fictional characters, such as superheroes, detectives, and men madly in love and others have fulfilled that role and shaped generations influencing the way boys and men relate to the world. While there has been a clear effort, on the one hand, to develop more complex and well-thought female characters, trying to escape from the classical stereotypes and creating a model that young women can follow healthily, the creation and evolution of men in fiction has not undergone the same path and seems to be stuck in traditional and full-of-prejudices past.

The superhero genre in film and series, which has been regarded as one of the biggest influences on male teenagers and children, creates plain and static characters, most of them unrealistic as their superpowers are more than enough to face the dangers the world and they themselves are exposed to. Realism in these productions is completely absent, partly because it is not the goal of the genre, though this still makes the identification with their characters too plain and sometimes too problematic: is the only way of fighting against injustices to inject oneself with a super soldier serum as Captain America did? Are superpowers something that comes from within and not by divine chance?

In opposition to this, noir, the detective fiction subgenre that started to develop around the decade of the 1940s intended to give complexity to characters until that time never seen. Its film version, film noir, eschewed the distinct lines that separated the heroes from the villains in the original superhero comics, and added a layer of complexity to the characters, making them morally difficult to position as evil or good: "More and more, the difference between the investigator and the villain comes to seem like a difference within the investigator, who, if he looks hard enough, may find the potential for evil inside himself" (Keesey). The detective becomes similar to the criminal, their past and traumas shape their lives and interaction with the world, and even when their intentions are purely good, the way they try to accomplish them is debatable and often difficult to judge.

Undoubtedly, film noir makes their characters extremely interesting and more striking, but the problem of their being or not being a role model arouses even more than ever. Even the supposedly good characters present negative traits that can make identification with them problematic. As Ostberg comments:

> The heroes of noir generally share certain qualities, such as moral ambiguity, a fatalistic outlook, and alienation from society. (...) For example, Humphrey Bogart (the actor perhaps most associated with the genre) as private eye Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* is emotionally indifferent to the murder of his partner and avenges

> his death primarily because "when one of your organization gets killed, it's bad business to let the killer get away with it."

Again, even if the action of avenging his partner's death is understandable and even sometimes correct, the reasons that move him to do so are clearly questionable. In a late example of noir such as *Taxi Driver* (1976), Travis saves 13-year-old sex worker Iris from being assaulted in a motel, but the way he does it is by causing a massacre and killing more than half a dozen people. Positioned as the hero, at least in contrast to the other characters, the way Travis performs creates plenty of problems when looking at him as a role model: violence and blood seem to be the definitive message the viewer receives as the solution to all problems.

As noted, the miniseries *Sugar* clearly evokes the film noir genre, with its dark and shadowy atmosphere, and with a protagonist whose problems with the past and violence-related trauma make him emotionally aloof. John Sugar is aware of his condition and traumas but he still tries to do good and positions himself as a clear hero. Regardless of the pressures of his own agency and the difficulties he encounters within the family of the missing person, Sugar tries to avoid all the obstacles and to bring Olivia back and safe. It could be argued that, just as happens with superheroes (after all, Superman is also an alien), Sugar's portrayal is sometimes too positive: he seems to have no flaws, no weaknesses, and his morality stands above the habitual. He is willing to sacrifice everything beyond his job only to rescue someone he doesn't know. As Herman notes, "the hero's perfection quickly grates. He's an expert fighter, and the kind of guy who takes time to help an unhoused person, and is fluent in several languages." The dark tone of the composition, however, the aspects that recall the film noir genre, make you stay alert waiting for some negative trait to come from him. However, that never comes: Sugar remains a highly capable and solidly moral character throughout the whole story.

As noted, at the end of episode 6, just one episode away from the finale, we discover that the detective is an alien. He and his agency come from a different planet and, without a clear reason why, they decide to use their super strength to combat crime on Earth (perhaps they are familiar with Superman?). Beyond how questionable this decision is from a narrative perspective, the fact that the protagonist is an alien destroys everything that makes him a good role model as a man. The audience is offered a good male character that is potentially a good role model: a sensitive, moral, and cool man who seemingly defends that good men like him could also exist in the real world. But when the showrunners decided to make him an alien, the ultimate message they were conveying was that no good, heroic man like him can exist in reality. Someone that good is only a fantasy and we have to accept that human men are always going to be problematic, just as their representations in fiction are.

Sugar was very close to offering a turning point in representing a positive male figure, but in the end the series opted to go down the same path most of the products have been following and only evidences a categorical truth we can daily see: there is still much work to do in order to create good role models for young men. In a world where toxic masculinity is increasingly growing and where social media is the home of the manosphere, "it's important (...) to accept that young men are struggling a bit and need help" (in Hern), as it is the first step to overcome patriarchy. Whereas the alien Superman somehow still provides a model of perfect masculinity, including his many vulnerabilities, Sugar can never reach that high standard, which is why it seems unnecessary to present him as well as someone not human.

Bibliography

Griffin, Louise. "Colin Farrell Breaks Down *Sugar's* Crazy Episode 6 Twist." *RadioTimes* 3 May 2024, https://www.radiotimes.com/tv/sci-fi/colin-farrell-sugar-episode-6-twist-exclusive-newsupdate/

Hern, Alex. "How Positive Male Role Models Are Detoxifying the Social Media 'Manosphere'." *The Guardian* 2 March 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/media/2024/mar/02/positive-male-role-models-detoxifying-social-media-manosphere

Herrman, Alison. "Colin Farrell's *Sugar* Is a Clumsy, Cliché L.A. Noir With a Baffling Twist: TV Review." *Variety* 5 April 2024, https://variety.com/2024/tv/tv-reviews/sugar-review-colin-farrell-1235957069/

Kessey, Douglas. *Neo-Noir. Contemporary Film Noir From Chinatown to The Dark Night.* Kamera Books, 2010.

Ostberg, René. "Film Noir. Film Genre." *Britannica* 22 August 2024, https://www.britannica.com/art/film-noir/additional-info

Romano, Evam. "The Real Reason We're So Obsessed With Detective Shows." *Men's Health* 16 May 2024, https://www.menshealth.com/entertainment/a60790832/sugar-detective-shows-film-noir/

The Decameron: Queering Up the Past

Jules Otero Besolí

Episodes: 8
Release date: 25 July 2024
Creator: Kathleen Jordan
Source: *The Decameron* (1363), short story collection by Giovanni Boccaccio
Cast: Amar Chadha-Patel (Dioneo), Leila Farzad (Stratilia), Lou Gala as (Neifile), Karan Gill (Panfilo), Tony Hale (Sirisco), Saoirse-Monica Jackson (Misia), Zosia Mamet (Pampinea), Douggie McMeekin (Tindaro), Jessica Plummer (Filomena), Tanya Reynolds (Licisca)
Company: American Sugarcube, Tilted Productions
Genre: historical fiction, black comedy
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt21831910/

Introduction: Rewriting (and rethinking) Boccaccio

The Decameron was released on Netflix in 2024, not so long after the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions were lifted and when the preoccupations regarding quarantine were still present. The show translates these anxieties onto the Medieval period by presenting a retelling of Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1363), which is set at the time of the Black Plague and follows a group of Italian people who, having been trapped in a beautiful villa by the terrible illness, endeavor to pass the time by telling stories to entertain themselves. These characters tell stories about virtue and about the lack of it, about honor, about marriage, about sex… They tell ten stories every day during a period of ten days, totaling a hundred stories whose compilation forms, alongside the frame story surrounding them, Bocaccio's *Decameron.* The show on the other hand focuses solely on the frame story, keeping the premise, themes and some character names and reinventing the rest for the purpose of captivating modern audiences with a clear intention to make the show as diverse as possible, explicitly catering for the representational needs of the 21st century.

It is undeniable that this reinvention has taken place, especially regarding the way sex is treated (mostly by removing the intricate layers of euphemism characteristic of the time), the inclusion of Queer narratives and the choice to opt for an ethnically diverse cast. Nevertheless, many scholars have argued that the original *Decameron* already had a proto-feminist intent, as it "posits a female audience, on the grounds that women are uniquely disadvantaged by social structures and customs" (Psaki 101). Notably, seven out of the ten storytellers in Bocaccio's collection of short stories are women, and women feature as characters in the stories prominently as well. In *The Cambridge Companion to Boccaccio*, Regina F. Psaki writes that: "The *Decameron* stages the production and the interpretation of language in its social dimension—as expression and interpretation

among speaking subjects who occupy socially defined categories of class, occupation, geographic origin, religion, family, and, very pointedly, gender" (102).

The centering of women's narratives in *The Decameron* also seems to "relegate men to its sidelines, only to represent them as angling to reassert their authority" (Sherberg 17). Masculinity is, throughout the short stories as well as the frame story surrounding them, a highly disputed topic which Boccaccio seems to regard with certain suspicion as he explores how "trying to satisfy the varied demands of being male can be humiliating, dangerous, and even deadly" (Calabrese 258). Masculinity is further explored in Calabrese's (fascinating) article "Male Piety and Sexuality in Boccaccio's *Decameron*," in which he argues that "Boccaccio reveals a dependence on the unstable male body, while the wives demand performance, regardless of from whom" (269).

This dual problematization of gender in the *Decameron* may indeed make it an ideal foundational work for the sort of activistic retelling that Jordan is attempting: the fantastic realism of Medieval Italy, combined with the loss of inhibitions presented through the certain death that the Black Plague brings about, is used as a stage in which magical things may happen: servants exercise agency and even become masters, Queer people escape from the *status quo* and find joy in each other, odd forms of love and communication sprout... And it all exists within the groundwork of representation which the original *Decameron* created.

The analysis part of this article argues that this retelling deconstructs what McAvoy defines, in *Reconsidering Gender, Time and Memory in Medieval Culture*, as the act by which "the melding of time and memory into reified entity within a deeply gendered modernist project has helped to forge the cultural currency called 'history'" (7). Furthermore, it defends the choice to create joyful pseudo-historical media which showcases marginalized people in positions which may not have been possible for them as it allows activistic re-writing and re-taking of spaces or, in McAvoy's words, a "queerness of time" (5).

Analysis: Power, sex, the collapse of society and queer joy

There is, when one considers the past from a modern narrative, the danger of falling into the traditional, linear notion that the future has steadily improved in an exponential way, that the present is Enlightened and the past was obscured, and that nothing from an obscured time could be joyful (or progressive). This dominant narrative is biased insomuch as it self-perpetuates: we must remember, after all, that "most of the evidence we use to reconstruct the experience of women in the Middle Ages needs careful interpretation since it was produced by men and therefore likely to partake of a discourse of oppression" (Gaunt 4).

Modern patriarchal discourse inevitably overlaps with our understanding of Medieval patriarchy, and it is through power that the obscurantist, barbaric, woman-less depiction of Medieval times has become the dominant narrative and not simply one of many. This narrative, which has been constructed "not only in the way the evidence has been read, interpreted and re-membered, but also in the face of evidence that has not been read, has been misinterpreted or excluded and forgotten" (McAvoy 3), can be de-centered through the insertion of other (equally speculative and untrue) ones, and this process of de-centering is incredibly valuable to ensure spaces of representation and dissent in all kinds of media forms, beyond those that are specifically Queer or otherwise

marginalized. Thus, this article chooses to view representation in Jordan's *The Decameron* as a form of activism.

One of the ways Jordan's *Decameron* holds space for voices which are not expected in Medieval narratives is by reserving positions of power to women. The first characters introduced to the viewer are Filomena, a Lady, and Licisca, her handmaiden, and the first thing we see them do is to leave Filomena's father behind in order to leave the city and find a safer place. In that moment, they become lone traveling women who, being unchaperoned and capable of deciding over their own future, greatly differ from the meek, silenced women expected of the period. The villa itself, whose Lord is missing, sees the arrival of Pampinea, the woman who is supposed to marry him, so the servants gleefully give her all the power her fiancé should have. Later, they help her falsify a marriage to him as he is revealed to have died of the plague days before. Pampinea's power is narratively justified to have come from a man, but it is nonetheless taken by opportunism rather than freely given, as he does not consent to marrying her and entrusting his position unto her. Furthermore, the way she uses her power is entirely patriarchal as she mistreats her servants and guests to try to enforce a power structure benefitting her, an attitude very distant from care and empathy that is also not expected of women in the Medieval period but that is nevertheless reflected and discussed in Boccaccio's stories. Neifile, who is also a Lady with power derived from her marriage, is similarly seen to gradually shift into a Boccaccian narrative as she struggles between purity and desire (eventually choosing the latter), though her choice is never depicted negatively: her story is one of liberation rather than corruption.

Beyond the power offered by wealth, the show makes a point of offering agency to women in positions of servitude, as is the case of both handmaidens (Misia and Licisca) and the cook (Stratilia). Their independent narratives are incredibly class-conscious in a way that is very attractive to modern audiences, but they also highlight the inevitable truth that women in positions of servitude must have had had hopes, dreams and lives of their own. This reality is often lost in Medieval literature, where female servants are underrepresented in contrast to their male counterparts, which often feature in stories as cunning planners as well as trusted confidants. Embodying this trope is Sirisco, a male servant who stages both Pampinea's rise to power and her downfall as well as becoming her lover throughout her reign as the Lady of the Villa. His position as a servant of the deceased Lord of the Villa gives him an odd sort of power over Pampinea, creating a complex dynamic that offers a glimpse into the complex intersectional weave of class and gender. This precarious situation is doomed to collapse, however, as all of them are in the face of the plague: power crumbles as the structures which uphold it disappear, and societal pretense becomes less and less valuable.

It is precisely due to this devaluation of appearance that *The Decameron* (Jordan's and, arguably, Boccaccio's as well) can afford to have its characters realistically enact their desires and hold space for identities which, at the time, could not be publicly conceived. The loss of concern for motherhood and marriage as institutions that define women, for example, gives way to the representation of Sapphic desire, as experienced by Misia and her girlfriend (who soon dies) and later Misia and Filomena. This is explored in "Redefining Holy Maidenhood: Virginity and Lesbianism in Late Medieval England" by Mary Anne Campbell, who writes that "we must begin to accept in earnest that Medieval women did live truly different lives when not bound to husbands. And we must begin to consider their own senses of their virginal lives as possibly akin to lesbianism" (15).

With the loss of these institutions of societal control, sex quickly becomes a symbol of liberation and of privilege: during a plague, there is trust in the action of touching another, and the privilege of being able to trust those around oneself is only afforded to those with the space and resources to isolate themselves. In its status as a symbol of liberation, sex features heavily in the show, and it does so in a way that is always positive: despite the many power dynamics present, there is no narrative of rape or coercion, and the intersection between sex and power is portrayed as something to be explored and which is, in fact, explored as Stratilia, the cook of the Villa, engages in a sadomasochist dynamic with one of the noblemen (a dynamic in which she holds the power and masculine submission is explored, something which is hardly ever seen in mainstream media). As it becomes increasingly clear to the characters that the *status quo* can be challenged with little to no repercussion, they start to tend towards living in a way that is more honest to themselves, thus making use of the space to be representative of those realities which may have been hidden in the past but were not inexistent.

It is through this honesty that Misia can mourn her girlfriend in an open declaration of her previously hidden Sapphic lifestyle, and it is through this honesty too that Filomena can dream of going away with her and forgetting about the impending need to marry for status and security. It is through this honesty, too, that Neifile can find peace with the fact that she experiences sexual desire and, most importantly, that this desire has nothing to do with her husband Panfilo, with whom they maintain a vow of celibacy. Panfilo, who is only attracted to men, can finally be truthful about his identity and his multiple adulteries, for which he is immediately forgiven as their relationship had never been sex-centered anyway. They are not, however, portrayed as an unhappy couple, but quite the opposite: they are, despite their lack of desire for each other, deeply in love, and their relationship is written and represented with the same care as a traditional marriage would be. After having the audience follow their conflict build-up as they both show their sexual dissatisfaction and incompatibility, the choice to dissolve the issue through a perfectly adult conversation is an interesting one, as is the happy montage of scenes displaying their love for each other that immediately follows the confrontation.

This portrayal works, alongside the Sapphic story in the miniseries, to construct a narrative of Queer resistance but, most importantly, of Queer joy. It is not only the choice to portray Queer stories which is a political act of representation: it is infinitely more valuable to create a space in a fictionalized past in which Queer people could unabashedly be themselves, in which they could find solace and community. It is, indeed, an act of fictionalization, but it is also simultaneously an act of retroactive revindication of temporal spaces and of contemporary revindication of narrative spaces in the (pseudo)historical fiction genre.

Bibliography

Calabrese, Michael. "Male Piety and Sexuality in Boccaccio's Decameron." *Philological Quarterly* 82.3 (2003): 257-276.

Campbell, Mary Anne. "Redefining Holy Maidenhood: Virginity and Lesbianism in Late Medieval England." *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* 13 (1992): 14-15, https://doi.org/10.17077/1054-1004.1607.

Gaunt, Simon. “Gay Studies and Feminism: A Medievalist’s Perspective” *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* 13 (1992): 3-8.

McAvoy, Liz Herbert. “Introduction: In Principio: The Queer Matrix of Gender, Time and Memory in the Middle Ages.” *Reconsidering Gender, Time and Memory in Medieval Culture*. Elizabeth Cox, Liz Herbert McAvoy, and Roberta Magnani. (eds.). Boydell & Brewer, 2015. 1-12.

Psaki, F. Regina. “Voicing Gender in the *Decameron*.” *The Cambridge Companion to Boccaccio*, Guyda Armstrong, Rhiannon Daniels and Stephen J. Milner (eds.), Cambridge UP, 2015. 101–118, https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781139013987.009.

Sherberg, Michael. *The Governance of Friendship: Law and Gender in the Decameron*. Ohio State UP, 2020, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1725rb3.

Disclaimer and Creative Commons License

DISCLAIMER

The book in the hands of the reader collects essays written by the students enrolled in the elective subject 'Body and Gender in Narrative Discourse' which I taught within the MA in English Studies: Linguistic, Literary, and Sociocultural Perspectives, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (2024-25). As an academic work, this volume requires no permission or license from third parties since it is published for the only purpose of disseminating knowledge. The quotations from secondary sources and the images of the miniseries posters are here used for this end. The editor and the authors have not received nor will receive any earnings from the online publication of the volume.

Sara Martín, editor
February 2025

CREATIVE COMMONS LICENSE

Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (by-nc-nd)

You are free: to Share—to copy, distribute and transmit the work under the following *conditions*:
Attribution—You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).
Non-commercial—You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
No Derivative Works—You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work. You're specifically forbidden to generate academic research and publications based on this volume, though you may quote from it. If you wish to cite it, the correct **citation** would be:

Martín, Sara (ed.). *Body and Gender in Miniseries*. Bellaterra: Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2025.

Followed by the URL of the Dipòsit Digital de Documentació, UAB http://ddd.uab.cat

Notice—For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the terms of this license. If in doubt, contact the editor, Sara Martín (Sara.Martin@uab.cat)

UAB