**Quality, Professional Legitimation and Diversity:**

**Propaganda Films and Anonymous Content**

**[Slide 1: Introduction/Title]**

Hi everyone. Firstly, I want to say how honoured I am to be here today and to have been invited by Pedro and the Centre to be part of this very exciting conference. My paper today is going to be discussing Quality in relation to issues of professional legitimacy and diversity. I won’t be focusing on Quality as a kind of collection of properties that can be objectively defined as such in the screen media texts. Instead, I will be focusing on Quality as a discursive construction that can be managed precisely because it is vague and malleable. As a way of explaining what I mean by this, I thought it would be useful to begin by talking a little bit about who I am and my research journey to help to contextualise my paper and its approach.

**[Slide 2: About Me]**

Later this year, my monograph, titled *Managing Auteurs: From Indie Film to Pay-TV* will be published by Edinburgh University Press. The monograph is based largely on my PhD, which I undertook from 2014 to 2018. The PhD focused on indie-auteurs, that is, authorial figures, usually directors, associated with contemporary American independent film. Rather than setting about decoding shot and scene constructions and compositions to try to determine what these authorial figures intended and what it says about their personalities, I focused on the auteur figure as a kind of brand; a brand that is constructed and mobilised within the industry to help the figure to secure the finance to get their projects made and to market them by creating certain positive ideas that appeal to audiences; ideas that are pertinent to this conference in that they usually include notions about the artist’s dedication to Quality and innovation.

**[Slide 3: The Coens & Circle Films]**

I also began my PhD with the intention of studying specifically the Coen brothers. I was, and continue to be, a big fan of the Coen brothers. Although I did write my first chapter on the Coens, I quickly realised that the brothers, who already had several books written about them, did not make the best case-study to allow me to make an original contribution to knowledge. Still, the first chapter of my PhD made me aware that although the Coens are often regarded to be creative geniuses with unique sensibilities, they have repeatedly worked with producers who have played a big role in constructing their reputations as indie-auteurs. The Coens’ first producers, Ben Barenholtz and Jim and Ted Pedas of Circle Films, cultivated their own reputations for being ‘ideal’ producers dedicated to supporting their directors’ unique visions and they positioned the Coens as innovative independent filmmakers making Quality work outside Hollywood.

**[Slide 4: The Coens and Joel Silver]**

Perhaps more interesting though was the Coens’ work with Joel Silver, an apparently big brash Hollywood producer known for making action movies such as *Lethal Weapon* and *Die Hard*. While many critics worried that Silver would erode the Coens’ creative autonomy and might mark the beginning of the brothers becoming sell outs to Hollywood, what I found was that the positioning of Silver and the Coens as opposites in critical and promotional discourse actually reinforced the impression that the Coens were essentially artists-at-heart. In short, it taught me that Quality as a discourse often finds its opposite in ideas of commercialism. So, while sociologists Horkheimer and Adorno argued that mass media was a threat to the creation of Quality cultural work, I came to believe that cultural work that is perceived to be Quality continues to be produced not just in spite of mass media but also because of and within it. As Claire Molloy argued in her own study of indie-auteurs and especially Christopher Nolan, it is in the interest of Hollywood studios to maintain the idea of the indie-auteur because they use the indie-auteur brand to differentiate between their own products; that is, between the more mainstream blockbusters and their own specialty productions.

**[Slide 5: Talent Intermediaries]**

As a result, I ultimately became interested in exploring the role that talent intermediaries, including not only producers but also talent agents and talent managers, play in constructing authorial brands, building their clients’ professional legitimacy, and generating their associations with Quality. As Violaine Roussel has pointed out, talent intermediaries participate in ‘classification struggles’ that shape perceptions about what constitutes art and who is granted artistic legitimacy (see Roussel 2017: 122–23). Although I began with a focus on independent film, what I found interesting was how these intermediaries manage authorial brands between and across different media and how the ideas of Quality, artistic authenticity, and innovation surrounding them migrate and evolve. Focusing on an era of media convergence, I considered case-studies in short-form production, including music video, advertising, and branded content, premium high-end television, and new digital media including VR. In doing so, I focused on two integrated talent management and media production companies named Propaganda Films and Anonymous Content that operate across many areas of screen media. While Roussel argues that intermediaries can be involved in the ‘progressive and collective rearrangement’ of industrial and cultural divisions and hierarchies (2017: 131), I was keen to explore whether this was true in the case of Propaganda and Anonymous.

**[Slide 6: Maverick Auteurs]**

As several scholars have already discussed, Quality is too often associated with whiteness and masculinity. Popular and scholarly discourse around American independent film, for instance, has tended to centre on white male indie-auteurs including Quentin Tarantino, Wes Anderson, Paul Thomas Anderson, Christopher Nolan, and many others. In television, where the label Quality has more often been used where indie or specialty has been used in film, high-end Quality television has historically been associated with white male showrunners from Gene Roddenberry and Steven Bochco to David Chase, David Simon, and Matthew Weiner. This is not to say that there aren’t black and female authorial figures, but those that do exist often fail to receive the same opportunities as their white male counterparts and get ignored by reviewers and scholars, or, as in the case of Spike Lee and Ava DuVernay, are treated as exceptional figures who have somehow transcended the limitations of their race and gender.

**[Slide 7: Quality, Whiteness and Masculinity]**

Indie film and Quality television have also privileged white characters and white middle-class and male audiences. Scholars, including Michael Newman and Elena Levine, Herman Gray, and John McMurria, have found that high-end television of a kind that is often used by pay-television services to hook subscribers are rarely regarded as being for Black audiences and are often distanced from feminized genres such as soap-operas. In their excellent book *Horrible White People,* Taylor Nygaard and Jorie Lagerway argue that ‘the aesthetics of innovation, complexity, and “art” typically labelled “Quality” television are in fact an aesthetics of Whiteness, a result of the racist historical understanding of desirably affluent audiences as White’ (2020: 155). Likewise, Jessica Ford argues that the evaluative criteria of television that privileges work perceived as cinematic undervalues and obscures women’s work, including a recent cycle that Ford calls ‘women’s indie television.’ While notions of cinematic television tend to centre on ‘male-centric series that draw on hi-fi film aesthetics and style’, Ford argues that women’s indie television, which includes shows such as *Girls*, *Insecure*, and *One Mississippi* that mostly take place in domestic settings, focus on the everyday and mundane, and adopt low-key production techniques, often get ignored.

**[Slide 8: Professional Legitimacy, Race and Gender]**

By focusing on talent intermediaries, I was able to show how these gendered and racialised conceptions of Quality were directly related to media industry figures’ professional legitimacy, the construction of their brands, and gender and racial inequalities in screen production. While I explored the privileging of white-ness and masculinity in my PhD, what I did not do sufficiently was explore how authorship is constructed and mobilised by talent intermediaries around black and female auteur-figures and how their work could be positioned within and against narrow white and masculinized conceptions of Quality. I have corrected this oversight in the adaptation of my PhD to my monograph in particular by adding chapters focusing on a relatively new talent management company named Macro that is dedicated to amplifying the voices of minorities. With all of this in mind, I’ll now turn to my case-studies, Propaganda Films and Anonymous Content.

**[Slide 9: Propaganda Films]**

Propaganda Films and Anonymous Content are two companies that were founded by producer Steve Golin and cultivated reputations for enabling creatives to make high-Quality exceptional work. In doing so, they also cultivated reputations for managing director-auteurs and offering them significant creative freedom to express their purportedly innovative cinematic visions. Propaganda Films, which was founded in 1986 and closed in 2001, began by specialising in representing directors in the production of music video. At the time, music video production was relatively cheap, and the market was relatively open. Propaganda’s director clients included David Fincher and Dominic Sena, who were also partners, and Michael Bay, Mark Romanek, Spike Jonze, Antoine Fuqua and others. By 1990, the company became the largest music video production company in the United States and branched out into more lucrative media including feature film, television and especially commercials. To do so, Propaganda made its music-video directors appear to be exceptional artists whose videos were akin to ‘short films’ and better than anything else appearing on MTV. Hence, Propaganda’s co-founder, Steve Golin, called Propaganda’s directors professionals creating results-driven work in contrast to amateurs making ‘shoddy’ videos (Ibid). Meanwhile, the head of Propaganda’s music video division, Anne Marie Mackay, said that Propaganda pushed record labels to commission videos with original concepts and dramatic narratives instead of ‘formulaic’ and ‘unimaginative’ performance-centred videos (Dupler, 1989). At the same time, Propaganda positioned its short form directors as immensely talented individuals who were destined to become feature film directors. Thus, Propaganda’s executives reframed its music video and commercial spot divisions as research and development centres dedicated to nurturing talent. By 1990, Propaganda’s co-executives, Golin and his partner Joni Sighvatsson, had gained a reputation for discovering hot young directors and turning them into ‘the kings of MTV’ (Richardson, 1990). In turn, the company’s fees increased along with those of its directors who also began to secure more lucrative commissions making commercials for brands including Nike, Levi and Pepsi.

**[Slide 10: Anonymous Content]**

After Propaganda was acquired by Seagram in 1998, Golin exited the company a year later to create Anonymous Content. Although Anonymous began as an integrated talent management and production company specialising in managing auteur directors in the production of commercials, over time the company has increasingly expanded into feature film and high-end scripted television production and grown its client roster to include a-list writers and actors. The feature films that Anonymous has produced include *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* with Michel Gondry, *Babel* and *The Revenant* both with its client Alejandro G. Iñárritu, *Spotlight* with Tom McCarthy, and *The Laundromat* with client Steven Soderbergh. Meanwhile, Anonymous has made high-end shows such as *True Detective*, *The Knick*, *Mr. Robot*, *Homecoming*, *The OA*, and *Maniac* doing so usually with its writer, director and actor clients.

**[Slide 11: Anonymous Content and Quality]**

By the mid-2010s, Anonymous was being celebrated widely by critics and awards bodies for making high-Quality work with auteur directors. The 2014 Karlovy Vary International Film Festival, for instance, organised a special tribute to Anonymous with screenings of *Eternal Sunshine*, *Winter’s Bone* and *True Detective*. Asked during the festival what the through line was in the company’s work, Anonymous partner and manager Michael Sugar emphasised Quality. Sugar stated:

The throughline of the movies and TV we make and even the clients we represent on the management side is a certain Quality of storytelling, the canvas — its size, shape — is less relevant. If the first two episodes of *True Detective* were a movie we would be very proud of it … We are very driven by the Quality of the filmmaker. The movies and television we are making are with what we feel are the best directors in the business (Holdsworth 2014).

Also at Karlovy Vary, Golin described Anonymous’ connective-tissue by emphasising its employees’ passion and sensibility and differentiated the company from Marvel and its focus on making blockbusters. Golin stated:

We don’t have blockbuster taste. We do movies we care about and TV we like … We like drama, which is very, very difficult to do in the movie business right now. And that’s what’s so exciting about TV … I would love to have a franchise, but I don’t see myself doing what Marvel does. I just don’t have the sensibility for it. I wish I did (Kay, 2014).

**[Slide 12: Anonymous Content and ‘Discovering Talent’]**

Although Propaganda and Anonymous’ executives’ comments appear to be merely explanations about the company’s operations and their creative preferences, they are in fact examples of what I call rhetorical manoeuvring; that is, extratextual and promotional commentaries that are designed to promote their products while simultaneously obscuring their commercial imperatives. Sugar’s claim that Anonymous is very driven by the Quality of the filmmaker, for instance, makes Anonymous’ clients appear to be highly autonomous and depicts the company as offering creative freedom. Sugar’s emphasis on working with directors that his company *feels* are the best, bestows upon Anonymous’ clients an aura of greatness while simultaneously building the talent managers’ reputations for having exceptional taste and spotting talent (see Roussel 2017: 119-20). Golin makes Anonymous’ producers and clients appear to be driven by their passion and dedication to art and depicts them as struggling against studios prioritising extraordinary profits from franchise and comic-book films.

**[Slide 13: Anonymous Content and Quality 2]**

Propaganda and Anonymous’ executives’ rhetorical manoeuvring not only elides their own commercial imperatives, it also obscures the full range of the companies’ work and deflects potential scrutiny about the talent manager’s ability to interfere in their clients’ career choices. Although Golin admits elsewhere that the growth in Anonymous’ business presented challenges in terms of Quality-control, narratives about the company’s dedication to Quality tend to foreground its specialty projects made by auteurs while omitting more mainstream films and television series produced by the company including teen comedies and dramas such as *Fun Size*, *13 Reasons Why*, and *Dickinson*, action films such as *Bastille Day* and *Triple 9*, and family-films such as *Big Miracle*. Although Golin differentiates Anonymous from Marvel, this elides the fact that many of Anonymous’ clients, including Edgar Wright, Patty Jenkins, Cary Fukunaga, Marc Webb and Gavin Hood, have worked on big budget blockbuster films. Yet Golin’s expression of regret that he lacks the sensibility necessary to make Marvel-type franchise films is diplomatic; it is an acknowledgement that although Anonymous must have its own brand identity, as a leading talent management company it also needs to continue trading with the major studios. As Violaine Roussel points out, ‘Agency leaders know that they must institutionalize the necessary circulation of their artists between complementary sectors, and toward what they believe to be the most promising new areas’ (2017: 47).

**[Slide 14: Michael Sugar and ‘The Canvas’]**

Sugar’s comment that ‘The throughline of the movies and TV [that Anonymous makes] *and even the* clients [they] represent on the management side is a certain Quality of storytelling,’ is revealing because it shows how Anonymous’ executives struggle to compartmentalise the company’s productions from those of their clients as they seek to retain the company’s reputation for Quality alongside that of its clients’ reputations as auteurs. Anonymous’ executives and talent managers, however, engage in this kind of rhetorical manoeuvring to protect their clients’ reputations as auteurs even as they work across a fairly wide range of projects. One rhetorical strategy that Sugar uses for sustaining his clients’ reputations as indie-auteurs is to describe media as a ‘canvas.’ Explaining how he actively convinces studio executives to hire clients coming off modestly budgeted features for big-budget blockbusters, Sugar stated, ‘I try to find the through line. I believe a storyteller is a storyteller and the canvas is dictated by the story, not the other way round … There are not that many great storytellers’ (Mowe 2014; see also Schilling 2013). Similarly, explaining Soderbergh’s (ultimately short-lived) decision to retire from making feature films to move to television to work with HBO, Sugar proclaimed, ‘I think he had told all the stories he had wanted to tell in the medium of cinema and now he is telling stories on a new canvas with things like [*Behind the*] *Candelabra* and the new show *The Knick* with Clive Owen which is fantastic’ (Mowe 2014; see also Thompson 2015).

**[Slide 15: ‘The Canvas’ and Indie Authenticity]**

Sugar’s canvas rhetoric is effective because it creates an impression of solitary artists whose work transcends industry modes of production. It retains impressions of his clients as innovative artists dedicated to pursuing Quality regardless of which employers they work with and in which media sectors. Indeed, it is precisely for this reason that Sugar invokes the canvas rhetoric when his auteur clients move from what is perceived to be their natural habitat of independent or indie film to less familiar environments that are regularly associated with commerce such as blockbuster film and television. As a result, this demonstrates how talent managers help to sustain their clients’ reputations as indie-auteurs even as they often work through the channels of the corporate mass media (see also Newman 2009: 20; Newman 2011: 45).

**[Slide 16: Spike Jonze’s Music Videos]**

Propaganda and Anonymous’ executives also engage in rhetorical manoeuvring to position specific projects as Quality and differentiate them from other screen media productions. Propaganda’s preference for concept music videos, for instance, positioned its music video directors as innovative artists and provided them with greater leeway to experiment with narrative and form. In his music videos for The Pharcyde’s *Drop* and Fatboy Slim’s *Praise You*, Spike Jonze employed framing devices that positioned him as the music video artist playing with and even breaking music video convention. Jonze’s video for *Drop*, which is played in reverse, ends with a glass pane symbolizing the fourth wall appearing in the space between The Pharcyde’s members and the camera. On the side of the glass pane nearest to the camera, an artist appears to complete his painting of the group before one of the Pharcyde’s members shatters the glass with a hammer in what can be read as Jonze’s breaking of convention.

**[Slide 17: Spike Jonze’s Music Videos 2]**

Jonze’s video for *Praise You* was made to appear to be an amateurish home-video recording, one edited with low-budget software and little skill, of an amateur dance troop, led by Richard Koufey played by Jonze himself, putting on what appeared to be an improvised performance. As a result, the video prompted comparisons between the amateur who breaks conventions because of their lack of knowledge and expertise, and Jonze who breaks convention as a highly-skilled and knowledgeable artist. This captures neatly the legitimation process underpinning Propaganda’s talent management strategies. After Propaganda produced Jonze’s feature film debut *Being John Malkovich*, critics unsurprisingly commented that Jonze had ‘rise[n] from the relative anonymity of commercial and music video directing with a voice and vision so astonishing as to overwhelm the cultural products [he was] meant to pimp’ (Olsen, 2000).

**[Slide 18: *The Hire* & Invention]**

Anonymous’ first flagship production was *The Hire*, a piece of branded content commissioned by BMW. Comprised of 5 commercials featuring one recurring character played by Clive Owen, directed by 5 different auteurs, and executive produced by Fincher, Anonymous positioned *The Hire* not as commercials but as a collection of short films that it effectively curated. Anonymous and BMW’s advertising agency Fallon did so by screening two instalments at the Cannes film festival, placing trailers for them on television, and encouraging critics to review them as movies. Each of the commercials were made to fit within the auteur’s catalogue. For instance, Iñárritu’s *Powder Keg* has a guerrilla style that recalled his work on *Amores Perros* and featured a war photographer explaining that his mother taught him to see differently. Wong Kar-Wai’s *The Follow* has a non-linear narrative and voice-over narrator speaking poetically in a manner typical of Kar-Wai’s feature films. And Guy Ritchie’s *Star* sees his then-wife Madonna playing a petulant celebrity and being thrown around in the back seat of a BMW in a darkly comedic manner reminiscent of Ritchie’s *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* and *Snatch*. With *The Hire* distributed online through BMW’s website, Golin positioned it as a new invention and Anonymous as its inventor. While ignoring the fact that there was nothing new about the use of authorship as a legitimating discourse, Golin made Anonymous appear to be a pioneer in a new and potentially lucrative market.

**[Slide 19: Anonymous and the Single-Series Director]**

In the 2010s, Anonymous has differentiated many of its shows above most other series by attaching a director-auteur to helm full seasons. Doing so represents a break from how most American television drama series have been made; that is, with a writer-producer overseeing production and individual directors being hired to shoot just one or two episodes. For example, Anonymous hired client Fukunaga to shoot the first season of *True Detective* and *Maniac*, hired Soderbergh to helm the first and second seasons of *The Knick*, got client Sam Esmail to shoot the first season of *Homecoming*, and hired Zal Batmanglij to direct the first season of *The OA*. As a result, Michael Sugar, who manages Fukunaga and Soderbergh and produced *The Knick* and *The OA*, commented that Anonymous’ ‘singular director’ shows were shot ‘like a movie’ and were ‘sexy for a film director’. Sugar’s abbreviation of the single-season director to the ‘singular director’ here is telling because it connoted the presence of a figure with a unique vision who has absolute authority over production. With Sugar also having described Anonymous’ model of production as a ‘paradigm-shifter’ and ‘evolution,’ it shows how Anonymous presented its productions as significant improvements on traditional television.

**[Slide 20: Anonymous Content and Cultural Hierarchies]**

Propaganda and Anonymous’ promotional strategies are problematic, however, because they have usually involved elevating its clients as auteurs and their work as Quality by denigrating something else. For instance, Propaganda and Anonymous positioned its directors as auteurs over amateur filmmakers. Anonymous positioned its television’s ‘singular’ directors over directors-for-hire. Anonymous positioned its specialty drama productions against Marvel, the blockbuster and mainstream genres. Propaganda and Anonymous elevated film production over other screen media production including television, commercial spots and music video. Both companies elevated new purportedly innovative ways of working above old more traditional ways of working, and niche forms of content over mass media. And always, both companies positioned art over commerce.

**[Slide 21: Propaganda and White Male Clients]**

In light of these cultural hierarchies and the role that the talent management companies play in building its clients’ brands and professional legitimacy, it is particularly concerning to find that Propaganda and Anonymous have historically privileged hiring white male directors and that narratives about their work and talent management strategies have been littered with a white masculinized and arguably colonial discourse that frames the directors as maverick innovators. At Propaganda’s peak in music video production in 1990, all of its directors were white men under 45 years’ old. When the company closed in 2001, Antoine Fuqua was the only music video and commercial spot director of colour that it ever represented and he has spoken about his frustration at being unable to secure commissions on music videos outside the hip-hop and R’n’B genres (Anon, 2020; Marshall, 2010).

**[Slide 22: Propaganda, ‘Edgy’ Features & Maverick Auteurs]**

Propaganda also favoured highly stylized crime films that appeared to have some kind of edge such as *Kill Me Again, Red Rock West*, *California*, *Wild at Heart*, and *The Game* that tended to be marketed with white male maverick auteurs such as Sena, Fincher, David Lynch and John Dahl. Exceptions among its feature films included *Heat Wave* (1991), a made-for-television movie about race-riots that occurred in Los Angeles in 1965 directed by African-American Kevin Hooks, *Portrait of a Lady* (1996), directed by Jane Campion, and *A Thousand Acres* (1997), directed by Jocelyn Moorhouse.

**[Slide 23: Propaganda and White Male Auteurs 2]**

Gender and racial inequalities also persisted in Propaganda’s hiring decisions on its television series. Propaganda’s *Fallen Angels*, for example, saw the company hire only one director of colour, Alfonso Cuarón, and one female director, Agnieszka Holland, from a total of 14. In fact, alongside established directors including Steven Soderbergh and Peter Bogdanovich, Propaganda preferred to give white male stars such as Tom Cruise and Tom Hanks opportunities to direct its episodes over other women and people of colour.

**[Slide 24:Anonymous and Greater Diversity?]**

As the charts on the screen show, the percentage of female directors and male directors of colour among Anonymous’ clients for commercial spot representation has gradually improved. Despite the improvements for women and people of colour among Anonymous’ roster for commercials, however, the percentages still fall short of being reflective of the diversity of the broader American population. Gains for women and especially female directors of colour have also been very slow and the shortfall in their numbers relative to the American population remains particularly stark. The extremely low improvement in the number of female directors of colour among Anonymous’ commercial spot roster between 2010 and 2020, from 0% to 3% after the company took on African American Dee Rees, confirms Kristen Warner’s finding that women of colour are doubly discriminated against; that is, both in terms of gender and race (2016: 172).

**[Slide 25: Anonymous and Greater Diversity?]**

Anonymous has given male directors of colour including Iñárritu, Fukunaga, Terence Nance, Kar-Wai and Ang Lee, all of whom have been clients, greater opportunities to make projects on larger budgets including on branded content, feature films, and television series. Anonymous has collaborated with white female directors, namely Debra Granik, Jodie Foster, and Lynn Shelton, on feature films including *Winter’s Bone*, *The Beaver*, and *Laggies*, respectively. Although Anonymous co-financed *I am the Night* with client Patty Jenkins and hired client Dee Rees to direct one episode of *Electric Dreams*, however, the company has severely neglected women when making decisions about who to hire to direct its television series. Given that female filmmakers regularly do not get offered the same opportunities to continue making films as their male counterparts and often come to depend on television work for their livelihood, Anonymous’ tendency to hire male directors and simultaneously depict its single-director series as an improvement in television Quality becomes particularly problematic.

**[Slide 26: Anonymous and World Cinema Auteurs]**

Instead of seeing Anonymous’ increase in diversity among its clients as a form of altruism, the company’s infrequent work with clients of colour and women can be understood as part of its response to cultural shifts and efforts to tap into particular market trends. Anonymous’ gains among male directors of colour, for instance, stems from its strategy of hiring auteurs from World Cinema. Of the 8 male directors of colour in Anonymous’ roster for commercials in 2015, 7 of those were listed as part of a more privileged group under the heading ‘feature-film directors for commercials.’ In contrast, only 5 of the 16 white men among Anonymous’ commercial spot roster were listed in this more privileged group. Although the greater number of male directors of colour among the group may seem to be quite positive, the imbalance indicates that Anonymous has usually only been inclined to work with directors of colour if they have already found substantial success in feature filmmaking and have established brands that the company could readily exploit.

**[Slide 27: Anonymous, ‘Masculine Cool’ and *The Hire*]**

In some cases, such as *The Hire*, Anonymous has recruited directors from World Cinema to market products to international audiences. Evidently, Anonymous’ importing of male directors of colour also reinforces gender hierarchies by drawing upon World Cinema’s historic privileging of male auteurs. These gender inequalities are manifested in the representations on screen. While many of Propaganda and Anonymous’ productions exhibited what Stella Bruzzi calls ‘masculine cool,’ an aesthetic style that prompts identification more with the filmmaker than the character, some also feature women in marginalized and problematic roles. *The Hire*, for instance, has just 3 female characters, each of whom occupy stereotypical roles (the mother, the love-interest or wife, and the Diva). Of these 3, the wife has no dialogue and the mother has very little dialogue, while the wife and diva are shown to be the victims of abuse.

**[Slide 28: Walmart and *The Receipt/The Box* and Dee Rees]**

With all of this in mind, I want to end today’s talk by briefly turning to a commercial directed by Anonymous’ first and only female director of colour, Dee Rees. In 2017, the retail giant Walmart struck a 3-year sponsorship deal with the Academy Awards. In 2017, as part of its sponsorship, Walmart commissioned 3 commercials directed by male filmmakers, namely Antoine Fuqua, Marc Forster, and Seth Rogan and Evan Goldberg, to air during ABC’s broadcast of the event. In each case, the filmmakers were required to create what Walmart’s press release described as ‘short films’ based on an imagined Walmart customer’s receipt. Walmart boasted about the creative freedom that it had purportedly offered the filmmakers and depicted the commercials as highly innovative productions. The response to Walmart’s *Receipt* commercials was mixed, however, as several critics and audience members highlighted the series’ absence of female directors. While Walmart Tweeted that it ‘did reach out to women directors and it didn’t work out, mainly due to scheduling,’ one astute Twitter user responded that it was unbelievable that the company had managed to hire in-demand male directors but was unable to hire any woman at a time when women directors are underemployed.

**[Slide 29: Walmart, *The Receipt/The Box* and Dee Rees]**

Between the 2017 and 2018 Academy Awards, revelations about sexual abuse committed by Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein prompted the #MeToo movement. Gender inequality and sexual abuse in Hollywood dominated much of the conversation in the run-up to the 2018 Academy Awards and became topics that the event was seen as needing to address and navigate (Theot, 2018; Barnes, 2018). Although Walmart made the dubious claim that it was not trying to cash in on the movement, the company responded by commissioning 3 commercials directed by women, namely Rees, Nancy Meyers, and Melissa McCarthy. Rees was an astute choice because she had just become the first black woman ever to be nominated by the Academy for Best Adapted Screenplay for her role on *Mudbound*, which she also directed, while *Mudbound*’s director of photography, Rachel Morrison, who later joined Rees in shooting her commercial, became the first woman ever to be nominated for Best Cinematography. These historic firsts brought Rees and *Mudbound* significant press attention and led to her being signed by Anonymous for commercial spot representation before she was commissioned by Walmart.

**[Slide 30: Walmart, *The Receipt/The Box* and Dee Rees]**

For these 3 new commercials, Walmart again reportedly offered the directors creative freedom and challenged them to create short films, this time each focusing on one of the company’s blue home delivery boxes. I’ll play Rees’ commercial now before discussing it.

**[Slide 31: Walmart, *The Receipt/The Box* and Dee Rees]**

Rees’ commercial was well received by audiences and critics. *The Mary Sue*’sVivian Kane called it ‘One of the year’s best movies’ and said that it surpassed much of what was being honoured at the Oscars itself (Kane, 2018). *IndieWire*’s Jude Dry said it was ‘pretty radical … for a Walmart commercial’ (Dry, 2018). The praise focused mainly on two areas: its protagonist being a little black girl and the girl appearing to have lesbian mothers. Although the sexuality of the women is only implied, Rees herself is a proud lesbian who created *Pariah*, a semi-autobiographical feature about a young black woman embracing her identity as a lesbian while struggling to come out to her parents. Thus, Rees’ commercial gestures to identity issues too, as the little girl imagines her own fantasy world and adopts the persona of 3 different characters to speak to her mother. The commercial’s play with identity and its presentation of a multi-dimensionality of character can be interpreted as cautioning against narrow readings of marginalized groups. Michael Gillespie argues, for instance, that black film is too often interpreted as a form of cinema that has a responsibility to authentically ‘embody the black lifeworld or provide answers in the sense of social problem solving’ (2016: 2). Such readings are problematic, Gillespie argues, because they involve drawing on and reinforcing predetermined notions about a singular black experience and because they are frequently underwritten by traditional ideas of masculinity and heterosexuality (2016: 6; Hall, 1993: 112; Gray, 1995; Gates, 2018: 113).

**[Slide 32: Walmart, *The Receipt/The Box* and Dee Rees]**

At the same time, however, Walmart’s mobilisation of discourses of authorship, its positioning of *The Box* commercials as Quality legitimated culture, and the commercials’ debut during the prestigious Academy Awards also creates certain problems. Rees’ commercial provides a positive image of a respectable, albeit non-traditional, middle-class black family who are non-threatening to the middle-class and upper-class audiences to whom it is designed to appeal. Hence, the characters shop at Walmart and value Quality family time together and movie watching just like the Oscars’ audience. Walmart’s positioning of *The Box* commercials as legitimated Quality works and Rees’ positive representations, therefore, may inadvertently risk further denigrating less respectable black images and culture. As Raquel J. Gates points out, the veneration of positive images can reinforce racist ideologies by further marginalizing black behaviours and people that deviate from white middle-class norms (2018: 12). Gates argues that ‘the burden of respectability places limitations on the forms that certain types of discussions can take’ (2018: 8). Although Rees has only 60 seconds to use, her adherence to the politics of respectability arguably sees her scrub from her commercial spot any significant engagement with issues of prejudice or socio-economic barriers. Indeed, this is true of Rees’ other commercials, including *Make it Yours* for Samsung, which debuted the same night during the Oscars broadcast, and *Never Stop Arriving* for Cadillac. While Rees’ *The Box* commercial expands ideas of blackness, its adherence to a politics of respectability and Quality aesthetics simultaneously risks constraining representations by reinforcing negative attitudes towards black people who do not conform to white middle class norms.

**[Slide 33: Conclusion]**

To conclude, I have shown how Quality can be discursively constructed, managed and mobilised, including by talent intermediaries, to enhance their clients’ professional legitimacy and brands and differentiate their work within the mediascape. I have explored the changes and continuities in how Quality is managed around a variety of media during an era of convergence, shed light on the connotations that it sometimes has, and highlighted implications that it may have in terms of reinforcing social and cultural hierarchies and racial and gender inequalities in media production. Thank you.