Introduction

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On 26 November 2019, at the height of the bitterly-fought General Election campaign which saw a landslide win for Boris Johnson's Conservative Party, Hugh Grant tweeted: 'Young people - today is your last chance. Register to vote or I will make another enchanting romantic comedy. #registertovote TACTICALLY.' (Grant 2019). The quip neatly encapsulates the actor's career trajectory, and underlines some of the key tensions and facets within his star persona that have drawn our interest for this issue: the trademark self-deprecation (with its strong connection to Englishness - more on this below), and the simultaneous disavowal and embracing of the genre he is most associated with in favour of a higher-brow political engagement. Like his romcom peer Matthew McConaughey, Grant had also very publicly moved away from the romantic comedy: his turn as a villainous washed-up actor in the box-office-hit *Paddington 2* (2017) had sparked rumours of an Oscar campaign (Ehrlich 2018), and he had received significant plaudits for his role as disgraced politician Jeremy Thorpe in Russell T. Davies and Stephen Frears's *A Very English Scandal* (2018), encompassing his first Emmy nomination and nods for the BAFTA TV, Golden Globes and Screen Actors Guild Awards. This pair of acclaimed performances was accompanied by an

intense promotional campaign (e.g. his appearances on *The Graham Norton Show* 2017, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* 2018, *Late Night with Seth Meyers* 2018), in which Grant reinforced his 'reluctant actor' persona (York 2018), while also offering new insights into the relationship between his off-screen life and his newfound enjoyment of acting. The media attention only intensified when Grant interpreted the charmingly murderous Jonathan Fraser, opposite Nicole Kidman in HBO's *The Undoing* (2020). Despite many reviewers remarking on the hammy plot, Grant's villainous turn was widely praised, often seen as the main strength of the show (Tellerico 2020, Baldwin 2020, Jones 2020). With *The Undoing*, Grant replicated the nominations at the Emmy, Golden Globes and Screen Actors Guild Awards, amongst the others, although once again a win eluded him. Interest in Hugh Grant has by no means diminished since, as recently demonstrated by the rumours spread by the British tabloid *Daily Mirror* (Pryer 2022), quickly debunked by the actor via Twitter (Grant 2022), that he would have played the 14th incarnation of the titular character in a 'Marvel-style' revamp of *Doctor Who*.

It was this career renaissance, and his increased political engagement, which sparked our interest in this Special Issue, as we first started to work on it in 2019. As his performances in *Paddington 2* and *A Very English Scandal* started to garner plaudits, critics began to talk of a 'Hugh Grant renaissance' (a 'Grantaissance'?), not dissimilar from the McConaissance (Syme 2016) that the other romcom leading man had experienced only a few years before. Hadley Freeman first introduced this notion writing in *The Guardian* about 'Grant's deeply enjoyable renaissance' in which 'he has produced the best work of his life', and compared his latest forays into acting to the more serious turn that Cary Grant's career – another Englishman who found success in Hollywood in romantic comedies – took through his artistic partnership with Alfred Hitchcock (Freeman 2018, n.d.). However, such a view

hinges on the perceived cultural inferiority of the romcom, seen as a highly formulaic, low-brow genre (Abbott and Jermyn 2008, Jeffers MacDonald 2008, Deleyto 2009, Guilluy 2021). Despite declaring herself a fan of Grant, Freeman negatively compares the enjoyment, both the actor's and the audiences', demonstrated in *Florence Foster Jenkins* (2016) or *Paddington 2* to the repetitiveness and lack of enthusiasm for his job, which Grant showed when trapped in 'romcom hell' between the 1990s and the late 2000s (Freeman 2018, n.d.). Thus, this renaissance is seen as a break from his previous career phase and, indeed, possible only in a binary opposition to it.

This is echoed in many profiles and interviews that have emerged since, where the term 'renaissance' is inextricably associated with the recognition of Grant's acting range beyond the mugging that had characterised his romcom performances (Robey 2022). Such commentaries also highlight the rupture between his typecast romcom years and the present phase, separated by a hiatus in which Grant dedicated himself to privacy campaigning (e.g. Kilkenny 2018, Blake 2020, Fletcher 2020). What Grant seems to have gained is not only the enjoyment of acting, as noted by Freeman (2018) and as explored by Hallet in this issue, but also nuance in balancing comedy with sinister Machiavellian tones in '*tour de force*' performances such as Thorpe (Utichi 2018). For this role in particular, interviews emphasise the long process of research that Grant went through, in an attempt to elevate his craft. Grant is complicit in such discourse, talking in detail about his 'deep journey' in the year leading up to the filming, when he read anything he could find about the Liberal politician, met people who had known him, and watched footage of the subject, further drawing inspiration from his own dealings with politics (Kilkenny 2018). Yet, Grant also underlines that his approach to acting has always been based on 'a ridiculous amount of homework and granular analysis' (Blake 2020, n.d.), even for films such as *Two Weeks Notice* (2002). Interviews with actors

and filmmakers who have worked with him support this. Mike Newell, the director of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), recalls his anxiety when Grant had to do some looping for the climatic love declaration, thinking the actor could not replicate his own delivery; only for Grant to get it right in a couple of takes thanks to a long process of rehearsal (Meslow 2022).

However, this late renaissance is less of a break than what media commentators assume. The constructedness and usefulness of such clear-cut periodisation is brought into relief by Emily Yoshida, who, in a profile of Grant, emphasises that 'the A-lister "comeback" is as much as a social phenomenon as an industry one these days, complete with memes, cameos, stunty interviews, and breathless revisionism' (2019, n.d.). Yoshida, however, sees Grant's return as unique 'in large part because it happened so gradually, and at first glance, it's not exactly clear where it began' (ibid, n.d.). Such continuity is also the focus of the articles in this special issue, which discuss the construction of 'Hugh Grant' as a celebrity from a variety of perspectives. As our contributors have demonstrated, while Grant's career has been understood in mainstream media in considerably compartmentalised phases, with clear breaks between them, his persona is instead characterised by ambiguities, tensions, echoes and resonances that blur such clear distinction and come to mark Grant as a complex celebrity. Yet, as a point of reference, it would be useful to sketch the three different phases that have been often evoked to make sense of his career, and which our contributors seek to deconstruct.

The three phases of Hugh Grant

In the first of these phases (mid-1980s to 1994), Grant was closely associated with heritage films, starting from his role as the aristocratic Clive Durham in *Maurice* (1987) and continuing with appearances in another Merchant Ivory production, *The Remains of the Day*

(1993), as well as films such as *Impromptu* (1991). His early career was also marked by his undertaking frequent supporting roles in European co-productions, encompassing historical settings (*White Mischief* [1987], *Rowing with the Wind* [1988], *The Bengali Night* [1988]) and thrillers (*Bitter Moon* [1992], *Night Train to Venice* [1993]). Grant often evokes these 'Europuddings' in anecdotes about the shenanigans during location shooting or miscommunications between actors and crew (Rose 2019). He further highlights the appeal of English actors in such productions 'because they thought that was the way to sell it to America' (Kamp 2003, p. 170), predating the UK-US 'special relationship' that has characterised his romcom years (Honess Roe, in Abbott and Jermyn 2008). At the same time, Grant also employs such examples to emphasise his bad career choices. When declaring 'the worse it [the film] was, the quicker I took it' at *The Hollywood Reporter* Roundtable (Rose 2019), the statement provokes laughter all around. Thus, Grant embraces such roles as youthful fun he remembers fondly, while also demonstrating ambivalence towards them, somewhat distancing himself from such artistic choices, as typical of the reluctant actor (York 2018). Despite the prolific nature of this phase, his early career is routinely obscured by his success in the romcom, even though, as Monk argues in this issue, we can already find the seeds of what then became the 'Hugh Grant' persona.

The unexpected international success of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* in 1994, and the media commentary around it, catapulted Grant into stardom by forging the connection with the romcom that was further solidified by his subsequent collaborations with Curtis (*Notting Hill* [1999], *Bridget Jones's Diary* [2001], *Love Actually* [2003], *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* [2004]) in particular. This romcom lead phase spans, with alternating fortunes and scandals, from this breakthrough role to the late 2000s, when Grant took a break from acting after the bombing at the box office of *Did Your Hear About the Morgans?* (2009). On-screen,

Four Weddings and a Funeral introduced audiences to the bumbling character with whom Grant is still identified, as we have seen. Spicer uses *this* Grant as a primary example of the 'Repressed Englishman', a 'flustered, tongue-tied, bewildered, upper-class "noodle"' that was highly exportable across the Atlantic (2006, p. 144). Extratextually, the media attention to his private life, in particular his relationship with actress and model Elizabeth Hurley, paraded on the red carpet at the *Four Weddings* premiere, made Grant a celebrity (Geraghty 2007). While the actor was initially understood to be playing himself on-screen, the 1995 sex scandal, in which Grant was caught engaging in sexual acts with sex worker Divine Brown and arrested, created a rupture in this perception. The significance of this scandal in the understanding of 'Hugh Grant' is demonstrated by the attention paid to it in most of the articles included in this issue. For instance, Middlemost sees it as a blueprint of the way in which Grant has come to engage with the press in most recent years, whereas Feasey traces the shift from the New Man to the New Lad to this event. However, as the articles demonstrate, the public perception of Grant might have altered then, but his career was only strengthened. Benoit (2009) attributes such success to the restoration strategies that Grant adopted in a series of late show appearances right after the incident, such as mortification, the admission of culpability or the seemingly humble demeanour. This resulted in a bolstered image for Grant, the box office success of *Nine Months* (1995), the film that he was then promoting, and his casting in *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) (ibid.). As Feasey argues in her article, the scandal also prompted a transformation in the performance of the bumbling romcom lead, which soon transformed into more caddish specimen such as Daniel Cleaver in the *Bridget Jones* trilogy. Soberon considers characters like Cleaver or Martin Tweed (*American Dreamz* [2006]) as 'a more predatory version of his romantic leads', anticipating his later turn to the full-fledged villains he analyses in his contribution.

The third and final phase (2010 - present) could be seen as divided into two closely related periods: the early part of the 2010s, in which Grant mainly withdrew from acting to dedicate his efforts to political activism and fatherhood, and the late 2010s, marked by his renaissance. Grant's involvement in politics was prompted by the *News of the World* phone-hacking scandal and the accusation that many of the journalists writing for the tabloid had engaged in activities that infringed on the privacy of ordinary citizens and celebrities alike. Grant came to the foreground when he published the exposé 'The Bugger, Bugged' in *The New Statesman*, in which he recounted his meeting with *News of the World* paparazzo Peter McMullan through whom he discovered he had been one of the targets of the tabloid (2011). Grant became then the vocal spokesperson of the Hacked Off campaign, fighting to defend privacy rights and appearing on various television shows to speak against the infringements of the British press. Grant was further called as a witness during the Levenson inquiry, the investigation launched by Prime Minister David Cameron, which is explored in detail by both Middlemost and Millington in this issue. His activism has continued throughout the decade, more directly, through his Twitter profile. The celebrity has also strategically used the social media platform in his opposition to Brexit, which culminated in his campaigning for tactical voting during the 2019 UK General Elections to stop a Conservative majority and Brexit, as the tweet that opens this Introduction shows. Whereas Grant has repeatedly professed not to have any specific party affiliation, he has also been very clear about the close connection between his public anti-Brexit stance and his newfound role as a father, declaring that 'As a father of five children, I want to save the country from catastrophe' (Knight 2019, n.d.).

While involved in political activism at the start of the decade, Grant also became a father of five children with two women, Tinglan Hong and his now-wife Anna Eberstein. The media focused on his fatherhood mainly because his first child with Eberstein and his second with

Hong were born three months apart. The scandal and the impact it had on Grant's persona is explored in detail by both Middlemost and Feasey in their articles. Yet, it is interesting here to note that both his political activism and his fatherhood have been framed as the catalyst for his renaissance in discourses circulating in the second part of the decade. Freeman hypotheses that Grant's shift in gears might be due to his fathering five children in a short time, making him realise that he 'had to stop dicking around and earn some money' (2018, n.d.). In another profile, Utichi highlights Grant's passion for acting after considering his political involvement with the Hacked Off campaign (2018). The connection between his private life and his artistic renewal is also emphasised by Grant, who constructs a narrative in which fatherhood in particular has transformed him from a 'Barbra Streisand in trousers', referring to the infamous demanding attitude of the star, to a more relaxed actor: 'And then I got a life. Had children' (Rose 2019, n.d.). Whereas the articles in our issue explore such a triangulation between politics, fatherhood, and acting in the construction of Grant's celebrity, in the following sections of the Introduction we explore some of the themes that underlie the contributions and that characterise the tensions in his persona.

The Quintessential Englishman?

Whilst our contributors highlight the complexities and nuances of Grant's often-oversimplified career-trajectory, one facet of his persona remains doggedly fixed: his Englishness. Indeed, media coverage over the last thirty years has consistently foregrounded his national identity in essentialist terms, and the term 'quintessence' (an alchemical term in Medieval Latin, signifying purity and – significantly – immovability) in particular is used repeatedly to introduce him: he is described as 'the quintessential English movie star' in his unofficial biography published in the late 1990s (Tressider 1997), as 'the ultimate Quintessential Englishman' by *the Evening Standard* (Foulkes 2009) a decade later at the tail

end of his romcom phase, and again as 'the quintessential bumbling English charmer' (Kemp 2019), in more recent coverage of his renaissance. Grant's star persona is thus repeatedly framed as a crystallization of Englishness.

Underpinning these descriptions is a widely-held conception of English national identity as fixed, or at least rigid and longstanding. This is echoed by Susan Condor's sociological work on English national stereotypes, where she notes that one of the most-frequent scripts about England by the English is that of a nation 'with history' (in Barfoot 1997). Grant's early association with the heritage film (explored in Claire Monk's contribution to this issue) is perhaps significant in this regard to cementing his star image to his national identity. However, and ironically considering Grant's profession, numerous scholars have on the contrary defined nationhood not as an essence but a performance: 'Nationhood is produced and reproduced in everyday life', write John Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idriss, notably via what they call '"performing the nation": the production of national sensibilities through the ritual enactment of symbols.' (2008, p. 537-8). Similarly, Tim Edensor notes that 'nations are continually in the process of construction' (1997, p. 21). Drawing on Benedict Anderson's landmark notion of nations as 'imagined communities' (1991), constructed notably via the media, Edensor notes that films play a significant role in this iterative process (1997, p. 3). In the case of Grant, we can certainly add stars as key texts onto and via which national identity is projected and constructed. Eric Hobsbawm famously highlighted the symbolic role played by football teams in reifying the nation: 'the imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people' (1991, p. 143). Film stardom further reduces (in the alchemical sense) this crystallization to just one individual: Grant has become – to quote the title of one of his early works – *the* Englishman (*Who Went up a Hill but Came Down a Mountain* [1995]).

Per Fox & Miller-Idriss: ‘national symbols – flags, anthems, statues and landmarks – are neatly packaged distillations of the nation: they are the linchpins that connect people to the nation’ (2008. p. 545). In this sense, Grant’s unwavering Englishness confers on him the role of a statue, or, to borrow a metaphor from another sociologist, Michael Billig, a flag. Billig has emphasised what he calls the ‘banality’ of nationalism in Western nation states where ‘there is a continual ‘flagging’, or reminding, of nationhood [...] However, this reminding is so familiar, so continual, that it is not consciously registered as reminding. The metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building’ (1995, p. 8). Here, the particular status of stars, whose relationship with spectators is a push and pull between ‘recognition and difference’ (Stacey 1994, p. 129) is significant. Grant is both extraordinary in his privilege and ordinary in his character, as noted by the oxymoronic phrases used to describe him: as a ‘stumbling aristocrat’ (Wilson 2021) or ‘bumbling gentleman’ (Steven 2022), he simultaneously acts as a waved and an unwaved flag. This is exemplified by a 2019 *Vanity Fair* promotional piece with Grant and his *The Gentlemen* (2019) co-stars Matthew McConaughey and Charlie Hunnam, in which the actors were asked to define various Anglo-American slang. Whilst both McConaughey’s and Hunnam’s identities are described in local terms (‘Texan’ and ‘Geordie’ respectively), Grant’s is national (‘British’). Hunnam’s northern-ness is also repeatedly othered: Grant takes on the role of British linguistic expert (a number of the comments describe him as a ‘professor’, one joking that they would ‘take [his] class’) noting the Scandinavian influence of Geordie slang such as ‘bairn’, with Hunnam jokingly described as a ‘viking’ (*Vanity Fair* 2019). This play-acting of authority simultaneously re-asserts Grant’s national authenticity as well as puts his class privilege on display, ‘that upper class perspective’ which Hunnam pokes fun at and that is also echoed through references to cricket and hunting.

The ‘quintessentiality’ of Grant’s English seems to stem from the fact that key to his performance – on and off-screen – are character traits strongly associated with the ‘English national character’: bumbling and self-deprecation. From early on in his career, both terms are used constantly to describe both the actor and his characters: a search for ‘Hugh Grant and bumbling’ on The British Newspaper Archive returns over 650 results between 1982 and 2022 for example, whilst the Toronto Film Festival celebrated the 20th anniversary of *Notting Hill* by releasing a supercut of ‘every single stammer’ in the film (TIFF Originals 2019). The same applies to self-deprecation: a post-*4 Weddings* profile of the actor in *The Evening Standard,* for example, hones in on his ‘self-deprecating approach to the fame game’ (Honisgbaum 1994, p. 28), whilst coverage of Grant’s campaign against phone hacking in *The Independent* in 2011 notes that the actor’s writing displays ‘the kind of self-deprecating irony we’ve come to associate with the character he plays’ (Patterson 2011). The national significance of these character traits is made clear in a defence of Grant’s romcom period in *Stylist*: ‘Hugh Grant’s self-deprecating approach to his romcom success is the most British thing I’ve ever seen’ (Murray 2019).

Indeed, both bumbling and self-deprecation form part of what anthropologist Kate Fox calls ‘the central “core of Englishness: social dis-ease”’:

> Social dis-ease is a shorthand term for all our chronic social inhibitions and handicaps. [...] It is our lack of ease, discomfort and incompetence in the field (minefield) of social interaction; our embarrassment, insularity, awkwardness, perverse obliqueness, emotional constipation, fear of intimacy and

> general inability to engage in a normal and straightforward fashion with other human beings (2014, p.401)

Other sources concur, with self-deprecation in particular being described as 'the cornerstone of British humour' (cited in Speer 2019 p. 807). According to the renowned British etiquette guide Debrett's, moreover, 'self-deprecation is a trait that permeates British culture. It is a national characteristic - evident in a sense of history that, possibly uniquely, dwells on "glorious" failures' (cited in Mills 2017, p. 67).

This takes us back to the stereotype of England as a country 'with history' described above. Ironically, of course, the association between Englishness and social dis-ease is not as age-old as Debrett's guide seems to indicate. What's more, the notion of a 'national character' itself, defined by Peter Mandler as 'the idea [...] that a people forming a given nation have some psychological or cultural characteristics in common that bind them together and separate them from other peoples' is, he notes, only two centuries old (2006, p.8). It comes to fruition in England with the works of thinkers like Edmund Burke, as a result of intellectual and political shifts (the Enlightenment and the Napoleonic Wars) but also – as Benedict Anderson has famously argued – technological ones (the invention of print media) (Mandler 2006, p. 8, Anderson 1991). Interestingly, Mandler suggests that a sense of national character requires, effectively, a sense of celebrity: 'Before the eighteenth century, it was possible for people to feel strong patriotic attachments to a land or a leader, though difficult for them to be aware of these commonalities because of barriers posed by distance, dialect, illiteracy and immobility [...] it assumes not only communication among a people but a detailed awareness of common characteristics' (Mandler 2006, p.8).

The notion of a fixed national character – indeed, of national identity itself – remains debated. Per Billig, for example: 'it is seldom clear what an "identity" is. What is this thing – this identity – that people are supposed to carry around with them? It cannot be an object like a mobile phone.' (1995, p. 7). But even if we do buy into the idea that nations have 'psychological roots' (Mandler 2006, p. 2), these have changed quite significantly over the last centuries. It has been suggested that the image of the stiff upper-lip and the association between Englishness and emotional restraint, incarnated by Grant, came about because of anxieties about political events abroad, particularly the French Revolution and the rule of Napoleon Bonaparte (BBC Two 2012). Before this, a fashionable trend in England was the cult of sensibility, popularised in novels such as Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1747), and famously debated in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) – the 1995 adaptation of which Grant starred in as Edward Ferrars, another socially 'dis-eased' posh Englishman.

Regardless of whether it exists, or how long it has existed in its current iteration, the notion of a 'national character' is an exclusionary, or othering, principle. Peter Mandler affirms: 'the changing menu of characteristics assigned to themselves by the English can tell us much about their changing perceptions of their place in the world and their relationship to other peoples' (2006, p. 1). In other words, it distinguishes those that have it ('the nation') from those who don't ('foreigners'). Thus, the notion of the stiff-upper lip evolved in fear of political events taking place in France (the Revolution of 1989, the Napoleonic Wars). Significantly, throughout much of his romantic-comedy phase, Grant's Englishness was re-asserted within the film texts in opposition to his (very often-American) romantic partners. This has been explored by Annabel Honess Roe (in Abbott and Jermyn 2008), Jay Bamber (in Brickman et al. 2020) and Andrew Higson (2011). The latter has also noted how the construction of Grant's Englishness fits into the wider brand of 'Film England', simplified for export to international markets (Higson 2011). This stereotyping is exemplified in the cartoon

of Grant in a *Vanity Fair* piece celebrating the actor's Renaissance (Yoshida, 2019), which engages in what Charlotte Brunsdon calls the 'hegemonic discourse of location [of] "Landmark London"' (2007, p. 23), with the actor surrounded by black cabs, double-decker buses, the Big Ben. Grant is also depicted wearing a three-piece suit and a bowler hat – an obvious marker of class and national identity which, whilst certainly fitting Grant's level of privilege, is quite far away from the actor's customary attire in his romcom roles: the off-white shirt with rolled-up sleeves (Sweeney 2001).

In conclusion to this section, then, whilst the contributions in this Special Issue have rightfully provided much-needed light and nuance on Grant's often-simplified career trajectory, an aspect for further exploration might be the continual construction and performance of Grant's Englishness, and indeed how the actor's political engagement has fed into this. In this regard, Grant is again not dissimilar to his fellow noughties-romcom male co-star, Matthew McConaughey. Both have developed significant political platforms in later stages of their careers (though McConaughey later than Grant): Grant's political involvement is discussed at length in this issue, whilst the former has become an outspoken campaigner for gun reform, recently giving a very-well received speech at the White House following a tragic shooting which took place in his home-town of Uvalde on 24 May 2022 (Sullivan 2022), and was rumoured to be considering a run for Texas Governor in the 2022 Gubernatorial Elections (Pengelly 2021). Notably however, both actors' engagement is squarely focussed on nationally-specific issues: gun reform, the British tabloid press, and tactical voting (though Grant's anti-Brexit stance is well-publicised).

Hugh Grant: between hegemonic masculinities and queer readings

The same tensions and ambiguities that characterise Hugh Grant's persona in relation to discourses of class and nationhood can be also traced in regard to gender and sexuality. The persistent association between Grant and the romcom might be construed as an alignment with a hegemonic heterosexual masculinity that is often left unquestioned. Yet, a close examination of the 'Hugh Grant' persona reveals a much more complex negotiation between different models of masculinity, as explored by Monk and Feasey in this issue.

As a genre cycle, the contemporary romcom, as emerged in Hollywood in the 1980s and in Britain in the 1990s, has been conventionally associated with heterosexual romance. Scholars have noted its ideological retrogradeness compared to more radical offerings from the 1970s (or even the 1930s and 1940s): the cycle has been labelled 'neo-traditional' (McDonald 2008, p.85), 'old-fashioned' (Neale 1998, p.298) and 'post-feminist' (Angyal 2014). As often noted in critiques of the genre, this is based on the formulaic repetition of a narrative structure in which 'boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back', which can be already traced in the triangular desires underpinning romance and its ideology (Shumway 2003). The happy ending that characterises this genre requires the main couple to get (back) together at the end of the film, a union often sealed through marriage or a kiss (Glitre 2006, p. 1).

The mediated construction of the renaissance consistently still identifies Grant with this genre. However, such over-emphasis obscures his pre-*Four Weddings* persona, which resonates with the present. In particular, while not recognised as a queer icon, Grant has been however linked to queer texts. Most recently, *A Very English Scandal* mainly focuses on the trial following the revelation that Thorpe had ordered the murder of his ex-lover, Norman Scott (Ben Whishaw). Importantly, it also contextualises such scandal from a historical

perspective, as indeed the dangerousness of the situation and much of the tension between characters arises from the fact that, at the time of the events covered in the trial, homosexual activities between men were still considered an offence by the Law.

Thorpe finds an antecedent in *Maurice*. The film provides a fertile ground to explore the tension between heteronormative and queer desires associated with Grant's persona. Claire Monk highlights that at the time of its release, just one month after the amendment of the Clause 28, which prohibited local authorities from promoting homosexuality, the film was tepidly received and considered quite conservative in both politics and sexuality (2011, p. 435). However, in the intervening years, *Maurice* has become a cult queer text, especially through the intensification of the fan engagement in online spaces such as Tumblr, which expanded the possibilities of the original text particularly regarding the Maurice-Alec pairing (ibid., p. 462). This association with queer texts and readings complicates the monolithic correspondence between heterosexual romance and romcom that has consistently marked Grant's persona. This further speaks to the constant rearticulation of masculinity that Grant has continued to negotiate through his persona throughout his career. Genz and Brabon highlight how, in the last thirty years, various models of masculinity have emerged in popular media, in relation to its commercialisation and in response to economic, political, demographic and social changes (2008, pp. 202-204). As emphasised by Tincknell, the nuclear family ideal has a central role in the rethinking of identities and relationships (2005, p. 2), whose fluidity has been negotiated through the pluralisation of family structures between the 1990s and the 2000s (ibid., p. 135). However, Grant's simultaneous fathering of two children with two women more openly challenges a (hetero-) normative conceptualisation of the family, that is still seen as uncommon despite the pluralisation underlined by Ticknell, since it is not just simply an extended family acquired through

divorce/separation and new unions. Yet, the 'scandalousness' of the simultaneous formation of two families (see Middlemost) is mitigated by the realignment with a new hegemonic model of masculinity such as the postfeminist father, as argued by Feasey. Hannah Hamad defines this contemporary ideal masculinity as characterised by emotional articulacy and expertise in the domestic sphere, especially with children (2013). As previously analysed, fatherhood has been framed as a catalyst for Grant's renaissance and Grant himself often foregrounds his role as a father in interviews. For example, he highlights the emotional openness that fatherhood has brought him, commenting that 'It's sort of taken the lid off my bottled-up English emotions' (Yoshida 2019, n.d.). Thus, such a negotiation between challenges to normative ideals, that further echo the queer associations previously traced, and the alignment with new hegemonic models expose the tensions that characterise masculinity from within.

Exposing privilege

As highlighted in the previous sections, tensions and ambiguities characterise Hugh Grant's celebrity across gendered, sexual, racial, classed and national identity categories. To paraphrase Dyer, Grant shows 'what it means to be' a particular type of 'human in contemporary society' (2004, p. 7), closely linked with the notion of privilege. Writing about the dark turn through which many of the 1990s/early 2000s romcom male leads have reinvented themselves, Hess writes that this 'offers a neat reflection of how public life has changed', specifically making reference to #MeToo (2020, n.d.). The evocation of #MeToo is appropriate as the hashtag exploded in October 2017, following the publication of the two reports that exposed the decade-long abuse perpetrated by Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein (Kantor and Twohey 2017, Farrow 2017), a mere couple of weeks before the release of *Paddington 2*. As Grant's renaissance was being celebrated, the consequences of

#MeToo and the quick backlash against it were still widely debated in mainstream media and over social media. At the same time, the Black Lives Matter movement expanded to the UK through a series of protests in various cities during the summer of 2016. The utopian neighbourhood depicted in *Paddington* stood in stark contrast not only with the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, but especially with the Grenfell Fire (June 2017), just around the corner from the gentrified Notting Hill, and the Windrush scandal (Spring 2018). The BLM protests further intensified after the killing of George Floyd in June 2020, culminating with the toppling of the statue of slave-trader Edward Colston in Bristol.

The renewed interest in Grant against this socio-cultural context is significant. This special issue, thus, offers a timely exploration of privilege through a celebrity that so visibly exposes power differentials in the embracement of his white, upper-class Englishness at a time in which these structural inequalities are being so visibly challenged. Importantly, while the renaissance has been mediated through the reception of Grant, as we have seen, he has also been an agent in his own construction, trying to reclaim the narrative of his persona through career choices, interviews, television appearances, and social media. The ambivalence that Grant shows towards his status in the public sphere and his career, as well as his trademark self-deprecation, are typical signs of the 'reluctant celebrity', which York emphasises is a 'product of privilege' most commonly exemplified by white male celebrities who thus try to re-establish a normative masculinity (2018). In this sense, Grant distinguishes himself from ordinary celebrities such as those emerging from reality television. Lacking any other talent that could be translated in other media, reality television celebrities can only offer their ordinary selves (Turner 2004). The lastingness of their fame is reliant on an over-exposure of their 'private' life in gossip or through social media (Meyers and Leppert 2018). Celebrities, not only ordinary ones, thus expose their lives to increase their following, engaging in

parasocial relations through social media (Marshall 2010). On the contrary, as analysed by Middlemost, Grant uses his Twitter platform to limit such an encroachment into his private life by the press, attempting to balance the public/private dichotomy on his own terms. In the age of culture wars however, there is a tension between the conservative values embedded (one might say, embalmed) in part of Grant's posh-Englishman persona, and the actor's own political engagement, which leans – without clear party-political affiliation – towards the progressive: this is tapped into by the actor's hammy performance as a racist and classist Oxbridge Professor in Netflix's *Death to 2020* & *Death to 2021*.

The Hugh Grant special issue

The contributions in this special issue of *Celebrity Studies* explore the complex 'Hugh Grant' persona from a rich variety of perspectives including mediated constructions through casting and publicity, questions of class and privilege, the 'reverse confessional' as a strategy of celebrity crisis management, the struggle for privacy in the digital age, performance and authenticity, humour and comedy, post-millennial masculinity, fatherhood and hegemony, ageing masculinity, the notion of enjoyment, Britishness and the Empire, typecasting and villain stardom.

Opening the issue, Claire Monk focuses on *Maurice* in a recuperative operation that explores Grant's proto-celebrity. Despite the success of the romcom that has often obscured this early career moment, Monk argues that this period offers a privileged site for the exploration of the mediation and self-construction of his persona, partly due to limited control by publicists at the time. Through an illuminating comparison with the other two stars of *Maurice* - James Wilby and Rupert Graves - from the casting process to the promotion of the film, Monk shows that while the other two actors were representative both on and off-screen of

emotionally open, non-dominant models of masculinity, Grant embodied a classed formation of gender through an emotional reluctance. Monk concludes by showing how the tensions in this proto-celebrity were also channelled through comedy and self-deprecation, which have kept returning in his performances.

The mediation of Grant through and in relation to the press is also central in Renée Middlemost's contribution, which zooms in on three scandals – the Divine Brown sex scandal, the *News of the World* phone-hacking and fatherhood – that have marked his celebrity and been mirrored on-screen. Middlemost argues that these three scandals show how Grant has consistently responded to the press through a form of 'reverse confessional' that exposes the changing nature of celebrity engagement with the media. Middlemost returns to the 1995 scandal as a watershed moment in Grant's career, creating a rupture with his on-screen persona and offering a blueprint for the crisis management strategies that the actor has subsequently adopted. The article further demonstrates that Grant has tried to reclaim control over his image through the direct engagement with the press on Twitter, from restoration discourses to his most recent acceptance and adaptation in his celebrity persona.

In the next article, Lydia Millington continues to explore Grant's attempts to control his image, with a particular attention to his performance during the testimony at the Levenson inquiry. Millington also returns to the 1995 scandal to address the incongruity between his off-screen persona and his romcom one on screen. In particular, she compares some of Grant's appearances on late night shows at the time, as performances aiming to market the celebrity persona, with that in the witness box to trace similarities and differences in his physicality and prosody between the two. Millington argues that, as a particular type of interview, his testimony offers a privileged site to explore how the actor mediates the tension

between his public persona and his ‘authentic self’ through a comedic self-presentation and self-deprecation that exposes identity as a set of performative acts.

The mediation of identity, most specifically in relation to gender and sexuality, is then explored by Rebecca Feasey. Like Middlemost, Feasey also traces three key moments in Grant’s career to demonstrate how this celebrity has mediated dominant constructions of masculinity both on-screen and extratextually, negotiating societal changes and ultimately embodying a ‘fluid bricolage of masculinity’. Feasey first considers his early romcom period as exemplary of a model of (unsexed) soft masculinity like the New Man, in opposition to older hegemonic models. Through the 1995 scandal, Feasey highlights the troubling of this model and the gradual shift to the New Lad, cemented through his bachelor status and cad roles in the 2000s. Finally, Feasey turns to Grant’s postfeminist fatherhood as another ideal model of post-millennial masculinity being negotiated. Feasey concludes that Grant’s fluctuating association with different hegemonic masculinities speaks to his relevance in the broader context of the performative crisis of masculinity.

In the following article, Marion Hallet further explores Grant’s masculinity through the lens of ageing and performance. Through the close textual analysis of the star’s on-screen roles during the renaissance, such as *Florence Foster Jenkins* and *Paddington 2*, Hallet highlights the enjoyment that now characterises Grant’s performance on screen, especially in highly performative sequences that put his own stereotyped image en abyme. Hallet connects this newfound joy to Grant’s enthusiasm off-screen through his engagement with politics and the emotional openness afforded by fatherhood. Yet, through the examination of villains such as Jonathan Fraser in *The Undoing*, Hallet also shows that Grant’s renaissance further exposes

the ambiguities of contemporary masculinity, in perpetual flux as he ages, as well as the cultural construction of privilege.

The link between villains and privilege is further explored by Lennart Soberon, whose article closes this issue. Also focusing on the period of the renaissance, Soberon shows that the turn to villain characters in the last few years has enabled Grant to renegotiate his career through the subversion of his well-established romcom image based on charm. By analysing the peculiarity of villain stardom in the industry, with particular reference to the transnational appeal of British actors in Hollywood, Soberon highlights that this renegotiation of Grant's persona is not only put into work by the actor through his reluctance, but also by filmmakers that rely on audience expectations to subvert them, in a weaponisation of Grant's performance for the success of the film. Yet, Soberon shows that such a subversion is also inextricably connected to the political aspect of Grant's persona. This type-inversion thus exposes the privilege inherent in capitalist imperialism that has always underlined his previous roles and now clearly emerges in relation to nationalist politics.

As we close this special issue, Grant in continuing to embrace villainous roles and the enjoyment of his craft, such as in the upcoming *Dungeons and Dragons: Honor Among Thieves* (2023), a role he has admitted accepting only because '*truly funny*' (as quoted in Griffiths 2022). At the same time, his political engagement through Twitter does not wane. Throughout the Tory leadership contest in the summer and autumn 2022, Grant has proven vocal in his opposition to the various candidates and, in particular, the former Prime Minister Boris Johnson, even encouraging the creation of a viral video in which images of Johnson were underscored by the Benny Hill theme (Stolworthy 2022). And yet, Grant was also proposed as a solution in a tweet advocating for 'proven leadership' and presenting his image

as the PM in *Love Actually* (Lenhoff 2022), which was retweeted nearly 6000 times. Standing outside 10 Downing Street in a suit and a self-deprecating smile, this is another image of Grant that stands for the nation, while also embodying the nexus of gendered, racial, and classed privilege at a time of social change. Therefore, the articles presented in this special issue prove indispensable to the nuanced understanding of an otherwise over-simplified persona and a blueprint for the negotiation between public and private that stars and celebrities enact in the present.

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