





Introduction

Welcome to the Long Good Read. This is an experimental, almost entirely automated newspaper that uses an algorithm to pick the week's best long-form journalism from the Guardian. The idea was started by developer Dan Catt, print-your own newspaper service Newspaper Club, the design team at Mohawk and the technology editorial team at the Guardian. We've put this together for you to read with your coffee. Enjoy! And please do tell us what you think - what else should we include in our experimental, automatic newspaper?
@thelonggoodread or
hello@thelonggoodread.com

Spend time listening to anyone in the media industry, you might think newspapers are dead. In fact it's just pulse of the big media businesses around the newspapers that is growing weaker, with readership and advertising revenues falling and increased competition from new technology just a part of that.

But newspapers themselves are a delightful, tactile, luxurious technology in their own right. The success of Newspaper Club, which lets anyone cheaply print their own newspaper, shows that newspapers have been reclaimed in a way.

Its success is partly down to our curiosity about being able to professionally print in a format that used to be hard for an individual to access, but it is also part of a wider craving for tangible, physical products to compensate for our digital dependency. Our screen lives make much of our life feel overwhelming, yet at the same time we have nothing physical to show for it. And there's a real human pleasure in being able to make and hold something in your hands.

Editorially, we get enormous satisfaction in exploring and playing with new projects. It's not about finding a future for paper, but a future for the stories that deserve telling. Where shall we go next?

Jemima Kiss

Head of technology - editorial

The Guardian

theguardian.com/tech

This newspaper is in beta. It's an experiment in combining the Guardian's readers, writers and robots with Newspaper Club's short-run printing tools, to produce a newspaper that's completely unlike the daily Guardian.

We're only printing 500 copies, and it's just for #guardiancoffee, so it needed to be quick and easy to produce. 'One person, one hour' was the goal, and achieving that required automating as much as possible, while still retaining an editorial eye.

First, the team at the Guardian wrote a small tool to sift through the most popular and interesting long form content, as driven by website analytics, comments and social media.

A selection of these are then imported into Newspaper Club's browser based tool, ARTHR, and they're quickly laid out into templates designed just for this project.

Then, it's onto one of Newspaper Club's printing presses, where it's printed, packed, and delivered straight to #guardiancoffee and into your hands.

Of course, this isn't designed to replace the daily Guardian paper. It's an experiment to see what's possible at the other end of the spectrum, using new technology and techniques to produce a newspaper as quickly as a webpage.

And if you like it, wait a little while and maybe we'll be able to generate one tailored just for you.

Tom Taylor

Co-founder and head of engineering

Newspaper Club

newspaperclub.com/longgoodread

How does the time go so quickly? Seems only a moment ago I was saying that about issue #003. Anyway, this kind of feels like a "Letter From The Editor" thing, in that I stare at a blank text input box and will the words to appear. The fact of the matter is that as the paper gets easier to put together each week there's less for me to write about.

Somewhere along the line its just gotten too simple, I'm like a barely steering hand on the tiller, being made somewhat redundant by the algorithms. Which is of course how it should be. In an ideal world I'd be on an island somewhere sipping chilled Margaritas, glancing over at the computer spat out newspaper to nod approval before getting back to the crossword. As it happens I'm in Shrewsbury with a cider, glancing over at the computer spat out newspaper to nod approval before getting back to wondering if we'll get snow this year or not.

No wait! I've just realised that maybe it's like a head chef in a kitchen who just checks the dishes before they head out the door while shouting at the workers. Where workers are the algorithms, dishes are articles and... oh, no, lost it again.

Takes another sip of cider

Right, got it. But for those dishes to be good, and the workers able to do their job, the ingredients need to be high quality and fresh. And that's just what we do.

To make each newspaper the system scans a weeks worth of articles, the social signals around articles, activity on the Guardian site and a few more markers to help it select the most suitable. That's quite a lot of stuff, around 1.3 Million words worth of stuff as it happens, the front cover this week shows the breakdown of words written per section so you can see where they all go.

But rather than me picking the cooking metaphor back up, I should probably just point you to the centre pages where a picture is worth pretty much exactly 1,275,647 words.

And now I can hit the publish button, go!

Dan Catt

Developer

revdancatt.com

Just 90 companies caused two-thirds of man-made global warming emissions

Chevron, Exxon and BP among companies most responsible for climate change since dawn of industrial age, figures show

By Suzanne Goldenberg, US environment correspondent

The climate crisis of the 21st century has been caused largely by just 90 companies, which between them produced nearly two-thirds of the greenhouse gas emissions generated since the dawning of the industrial age, new research suggests.

The companies range from investor-owned firms - household names such as Chevron, Exxon and BP - to state-owned and government-run firms.

The analysis, which was welcomed by the former vice-president Al Gore as a "crucial step forward" found that the vast majority of the firms were in the business of producing oil, gas or coal, found the analysis, which has been accepted for publication in the journal *Climatic Change*.

"There are thousands of oil, gas and coal producers in the world," climate researcher and author Richard Heede at the Climate Accountability Institute in Colorado said. "But the decision makers, the CEOs, or the ministers of coal and oil if you narrow it down to just one person, they could all fit on a Greyhound bus or two."

Half of the estimated emissions were produced just in the past 25 years - well past the date when governments and corporations became aware that rising greenhouse gas emissions from the burning of coal and oil were causing dangerous climate change.

Many of the same companies are also sitting on substantial reserves of fossil fuel which - if they are burned - puts the world at even greater risk of dangerous climate change.

Climate change experts said the data set was the most ambitious effort so far to hold individual carbon producers, rather than governments, to account.

The United Nations climate change panel, the IPCC, warned in September that at current rates the world stood within 30 years of exhausting its "carbon budget" - the amount of carbon dioxide it could emit without going into the danger zone above 2C warming. The former US vice-president and environmental champion, Al Gore, said the new carbon accounting could re-set the debate about allocating blame for the climate crisis.

Leaders meeting in Warsaw for the UN climate talks this week clashed repeatedly over which countries bore the burden for solving the climate crisis - historic emitters such as America or Europe or the rising economies of India and China.

Gore in his comments said the analysis underlined that it should not fall to governments alone to

act on climate change.

"This study is a crucial step forward in our understanding of the evolution of the climate crisis. The public and private sectors alike must do what is necessary to stop global warming," Gore told the Guardian. "Those who are historically responsible for polluting our atmosphere have a clear obligation to be part of the solution."

Between them, the 90 companies on the list of top emitters produced 63% of the cumulative global emissions of industrial carbon dioxide and methane between 1751 to 2010, amounting to about 914 gigatonne CO2 emissions, according to the research. All but seven of the 90 were energy companies producing oil, gas and coal. The remaining seven were cement manufacturers.

The list of 90 companies included 50 investor-owned firms - mainly oil companies with widely recognised names such as Chevron, Exxon, BP, and Royal Dutch Shell and coal producers such as British Coal Corp, Peabody Energy and BHP Billiton.

Some 31 of the companies that made the list were state-owned companies such as Saudi Arabia's Saudi Aramco, Russia's Gazprom and Norway's Statoil.

Nine were government run industries, producing mainly coal in countries such as China, the former Soviet Union, North Korea and Poland, the host of this week's talks.

Experts familiar with Heede's research and the politics of climate change said they hoped the analysis could help break the deadlock in international climate talks.

"It seemed like maybe this could break the logjam," said Naomi Oreskes, professor of the history of science at Harvard. "There are all kinds of countries that have produced a tremendous amount of historical emissions that we do not normally talk about. We do not normally talk about Mexico or Poland or Venezuela. So then it's not just rich v poor, it is also producers v consumers, and resource rich v resource poor."

Michael Mann, the climate scientist, said he hoped the list would bring greater scrutiny to oil and coal companies' deployment of their remaining reserves. "What I think could be a game changer here is the potential for clearly fingerprinting the sources of those future emissions," he said. "It increases the accountability for fossil fuel burning. You can't burn fossil fuels without the rest of the world knowing about it."

Others were less optimistic that a more comprehensive accounting of the sources of greenhouse gas emissions would make it easier to achieve the emissions reductions needed to avoid catastrophic climate change.

John Ashton, who served as UK's chief climate

change negotiator for six years, suggested that the findings reaffirmed the central role of fossil fuel producing entities in the economy.

"The challenge we face is to move in the space of not much more than a generation from a carbon-intensive energy system to a carbonneutral energy system. If we don't do that we stand no chance of keeping climate change within the 2C threshold," Ashton said.

"By highlighting the way in which a relatively small number of large companies are at the heart of the current carbon-intensive growth model, this report highlights that fundamental challenge."

Meanwhile, Oreskes, who has written extensively about corporate-funded climate denial, noted that several of the top companies on the list had funded the climate denial movement.

"For me one of the most interesting things to think about was the overlap of large scale producers and the funding of disinformation campaigns, and how that has delayed action," she said.

The data represents eight years of exhaustive research into carbon emissions over time, as well as the ownership history of the major emitters.

The companies' operations spanned the globe, with company headquarters in 43 different countries. "These entities extract resources from every oil, natural gas and coal province in the world, and process the fuels into marketable products that are sold to consumers on every nation on Earth," Heede writes in the paper.

The largest of the investor-owned companies were responsible for an outsized share of emissions. Nearly 30% of emissions were produced just by the top 20 companies, the research found.

By Heede's calculation, government-run oil and coal companies in the former Soviet Union produced more greenhouse gas emissions than any other entity - just under 8.9% of the total produced over time. China came a close second with its government-run entities accounting for 8.6% of total global emissions.

ChevronTexaco was the leading emitter among investor-owned companies, causing 3.5% of greenhouse gas emissions to date, with Exxon not far behind at 3.2%. In third place, BP caused 2.5% of global emissions to date.

The historic emissions record was constructed using public records and data from the US department of energy's Carbon Dioxide Information and Analysis Centre, and took account of emissions all along the supply chain.

The centre put global industrial emissions since 1751 at 1,450 gigatonnes.

Steven Moffat: 'I was the original angry Doctor Who fan'

Doctor Who's 50th anniversary episode is BBC Drama's biggest event ever. Showrunner Steven Moffat's daunting mission: to come up with a special that will blow up everyone's space-time vortex. Can 'the Grand Moff' pull it off?

By Andrew Harrison

"The anxiety is unbearable," said Oscar Wilde, one of history's great should-have-been Doctors. "I can only hope it lasts for ever." Such is the case for lovers of Doctor Who. For months they've both avoided and vacuumed up any scrap of information about this Saturday's 50th anniversary special The Day of the Doctor, torn between curiosity and the self-denying desire to see the show play out as intended. You want to know, and you don't want to know.

The special could well be BBC Drama's biggest event ever, with a worldwide simulcast, 3D cinema screenings and a security blackout. It features current incumbent Matt Smith, his pin-up predecessor David Tennant, Billie Piper as someone who may or may not be Rose Tyler, and a hitherto unseen incarnation of the Doctor possessed by certain dark secrets and played, in testament to the reborn show's stature, by John Hurt.

Does Doctor Who's showrunner feel the weight of the occasion? Are we about to witness Steven Moffat and The Burden Of the 50th?

"It's such a hell of a thing to work on, and there is a sense of responsibility," admits Moffat, the 52-year-old from Paisley, Scotland, who took charge of the show with the end of Russell T Davies's tenure in 2009. We're talking in a multi-coloured circular thinkpod in the centre of New Broadcasting House that looks like a Fisher-Price Tardis control room. "In the end I thought, let's just try to make it a really, really *good* one. Do what James Bond did with their 50th - a story that's so good in its own right that it stands up as a 50th special."

Feeling the pull of tradition, some fans had wanted to see all 11 Doctors somehow reunited, or at least the post-revival trio of Christopher Eccleston, Tennant and Smith. Such poly-Doctoral plans were scuppered when Eccleston declined to appear. Moffat had met him for a "very amiable and gentlemanly" conversation and the actor considered it "quite seriously" before saying no. "It's just not the sort of thing he does," concludes Moffat. "The ninth Doctor turns up for the battle but not the party. But Chris was perfectly sweet and kind about it. And contrary to what was written at the time he *in no way* messed us around."

Instead the birthday story will concern a particularly important day in the Doctor's life. "It's a turn-

ing point," says Moffat, trying to explain without giving anything away. "We don't often do good character episodes for the Doctor. He's usually the one who catalyses other people's big emotional moments. We never see him when he's alone, he's always with his human friends.

"But if he meets another Doctor, what would he say to himself? What does he ask himself? This one is about him, for once. Am I making it sound too heavy? It does have its darker moments but it is a romp too. It's fun and it's funny. And the trailer doesn't exaggerate. It is big."

Then again, given that the BBC were able to keep entirely quiet the surprise reappearance of underappreciated eighth Doctor Paul McGann in last week's stirring online prequel The Night Of The Doctor, it's entirely possible that Moffat is lying through his teeth and we'll be knee-deep in Doctors on Saturday. I wouldn't mind if he was.

"Steven still has the qualities of a brilliant teacher," says Mark Gatiss, Who scriptwriter and co-creator with Moffat of Sherlock. "As he'd freely admit he's got a streak of Scots grump to him, but he's brilliant at generating enthusiasm for *your* ideas. He's got a fantastic story mind and he's always interested in pushing a script in a different way - not perversely, but he flips it. You think you knew where the story should go, but he'll get you to think about it totally differently."

The Doctor Who that Moffat took over from Davies in 2009 was the most successful revival in British television history. Its mix of escapism and family-friendly emotional warmth showed Britain certain sides of itself that had been hidden during the realist, mad-for-it 90s: imaginative, fantasist, psychedelic, a little bit daft but wedded to the notion of doing the right thing. Being a Doctor Who fan turned out to be like being in the French resistance - as soon as the show came back it turned out that everyone had been one. As the star writer who gave Davies' The Empty Child (boy with gasmask face terrorises Blitz-era London) and quantum-locked living statues the Weeping Angels (the show's first truly A-list recurring monsters since the Sontarans), Moffat was expected to take the series in a more explicitly terrifying direction as showrunner.

Instead his Who became more wildly free-ranging and more labyrinthine in its plotting. Many of the episodes were among the best of Who, especially in their understanding of childhood and the strange little girl Amy who meets the Doctor and then discovers in adulthood that her imaginary friend was real. Much of Moffat's own writing, from Matt

Smith's journey into a maze filled with Weeping Angels to last season's ludicrously intense finale The Name of the Doctor, was among the best the show has seen. Some viewers, however, saw in this new complexity Doctor Who disappearing up its own space-time vortex.

"It's funny, everyone thought it was too complicated for someone else, not them," says Moffat. "I don't want to be mean, but eight-year-olds seem to have no problem with it. Doctor Who is unashamedly a clever show. There have been calls for us to dumb it down but we just don't. We're dealing with children who can read long, complicated books while tweeting and playing computer games all at the same time. You've got to be ahead of them."

Sometimes it feels like Moffat is caught between the hardcore fans - vocal, possessive, perhaps too forensic in their love of what is only a TV programme - and a much larger corpus of general viewers who just want a good old thrill-ride laced with some unknowable cosmic terror of a Saturday night. Or maybe there's a fan in every mainstream viewer and vice versa. The fanboy and the fangirl are no longer marginal figures, but are driving the culture.

"I love Doctor Who fans," he says, "and I am a Doctor Who fan, but the show is not targeted at them. And to be fair most of them say: 'For God's sake *don't* make it for us.' They want it to be successful. They don't want it to be a niche thing, because then it would die."

Moffat's earliest Who memory is of watching Patrick Troughton and wondering where the real Doctor, William Hartnell, had gone. "That's Doctor Who now," his father told him. Young Moffat, then perhaps five years old, thought he was far too young for the role. "Oh, the irony," he says. "I was the original angry fan." The Doctor Who of the 1960s cemented Moffat's idea of perfect televisual fear. "It was *terrifying*," he says. "It wasn't the camp or sweet or nice thing it became for a while afterwards. It wasn't improving or good for you, it just wanted to scare the crap out of you. It was the bad boy of children's television."

During the dead years between cancellation and revival (1989-2005) Moffat moved in a circle of diehard fans based around the Fitzroy Tavern in London, which included working TV professionals like himself and Davies, writers of fan fiction and straightforward Who lovers. In those days the programme seemed destined to fall into the same category as The Prisoner - fondly remembered but never coming back.

"Were we keepers of the flame," Moffat wonders, "or just moths circling that flame, deluding our-

selves that we were influencing the fire?" They would fantasise about what they'd do if Who ever did return. As a TV writer with a few well-known shows to his name - Press Gang, Chalk and then Coupling - Moffat thought he might be in the running. He wrote a couple of short stories and an affectionate Comic Relief sketch The Curse Of The Fatal Death. "That form of fandom was much more active than it is now," he recalls, "because you only had what you could create yourself. There was no Who on TV. We had nothing."

But the show was relaunched, and he did begin writing for it. Creating vampiric statues and clockwork robots under the bed and darkness that ate human flesh, Moffat was rapidly tagged as Doctor Who's own Captain Frightening. "The king of terror thing was something that Russell said about me," he says, "but people forget that The Girl In the Fireplace is Mills & Boon Doctor Who. The monsters, outrageously, are offed 10 minutes before the end and there's no jeopardy at all."

Davies's Who had been brash and populist, with a common touch centred on Rose Tyler's working-class family and David Tennant's emotional availability. I ask Moffat how his own more circuitous version begin to gestate. "I don't really think of it as 'my version'," he says. "I just think of it as making Doctor Who. The great joy of the show is that it can be anything you want at any time. A fairytale one week, then a horror story the next and a romcom the week after that. You don't start with a big vision - you start with the most exciting thing you can think of to put on TV on a Saturday night."

Now that Doctor Who matters again, the job of executive producer is more high-profile than it was the 1970s. People know who he is; fans call him the Grand Moff. And in the social media era every single facet of Who is analysed in painstaking detail on an internet that breeds strongly held and not always generous opinions. One is that Moffat's female characters are empty vessels defined only by their relationship to the Doctor: Amy the childhood friend, River Song the brave-faced but pining on-off wife, Clara Oswin the mystery to be solved.

"The thing is," Moffat argues, "the show is about the Doctor, and the effect he has on people's lives. We don't tend to see the companions away from him because if we did that it wouldn't be Doctor Who. I've heard this criticism of lack of interior character about River Song - but she's the only one who's ever turned him down. I think I have written companions who've carried on with their own lives. The Doctor is central not because I think men are better than women but because he's the central



Steven Moffat (with the Daleks) in London. Photograph: David Levene

character. How is that not also true of Rory?"

Amy, he says, arose from the doubly complex challenge of introducing Matt Smith's new Doctor and a new companion at the same time. Usually there's a companion we trust, so that the new Doctor can prove himself to her - and by extension, to the audience. We need to know that he's still himself. Amy provided a different way in. "The question with Amy was, what would it do to you if you met your imaginary friend and then he didn't turn up for another 20 years? What if you had an imaginary friend who let you down? So you get feisty, difficult, trust-issues Amy. And that's how I start a lot of relationships."

The show is not just bigger on the inside now. It is bigger on the outside, the BBC's flagship property, seen by 77 million people in over 50 countries. Moffat has just spent his afternoon meeting the people from Brand Who. "The world of Doctor Who is now bigger than the TV show, obviously, but you can't ever stint in the show for the other stuff," he says. "My day consists of fighting to get enough writing time." He strongly dismisses the fear that as the show gets bigger it could lose touch with its British roots. "If you want to sell a show to the world," he says, "make it as British as you can. America likes Doctor Who because it's British. Do what it says on

the tin. It would be insane to make Doctor Who less British."

A few weeks ago Moffat gathered all of the show's writers together so that they could tell the fully plotted and complete story of the eighth season of Doctor Who - Peter Capaldi's first, and the debut of the 12th (or is he the 13th?) Doctor - between them, from start to end, to see if it works. To see how one episode answers another, to see if the twists and reveals feel right, to find out if it says what it needs to say.

"I'm a big believer in oral tradition," he says. "You've got to get it into your head. There's nothing worse when you're writing than having to look at a pile of documents. You should bloody well know." He doesn't want to tell me what Capaldi is going to be like, and I don't want him to. I want him to show me when it's time.

I wonder what five-year-old Steven Moffat would make of his successor's version of Doctor Who. "I think he'd love my take on Doctor Who," says Moffat with a grin, "because it's his take."

Nadezhda Tolokonnikova of Pussy Riot's prison letters to Slavoj Žižek

Pussy Riot's Nadezhda Tolokonnikova is currently in a prison hospital in Siberia; here she and Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek meet in an extraordinary exchange of letters
By Slavoj Žižek, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova

2 January 2013

Dear Nadezhda,

I hope you have been able to organise your life in prison around small rituals that make it tolerable, and that you have time to read. Here are my thoughts on your predicament.

John Jay Chapman, an American political essayist, wrote this about radicals in 1900: "They are really always saying the same thing. They don't change; everybody else changes. They are accused of the most incompatible crimes, of egoism and a mania for power, indifference to the fate of their cause, fanaticism, triviality, lack of humour, buffoonery and irreverence. But they sound a certain note. Hence the great practical power of persistent radicals. To all appearance, nobody follows them, yet everyone believes them. They hold a tuning-fork and sound A, and everybody knows it really is A, though the time-honoured pitch is G flat." Isn't this a good description of the effect of Pussy Riot performances? In spite of all accusations, you sound a certain note. It may appear that people do not follow you, but secretly, they believe you, they know you are telling the truth, or, even more, you are standing for truth.

But what is this truth? Why are the reactions to Pussy Riot performances so violent, not only in Russia? All hearts were beating for you as long as you were perceived as just another version of the liberal-democratic protest against the authoritarian state. The moment it became clear that you rejected global capitalism, reporting on Pussy Riot became much more ambiguous. What is so disturbing about Pussy Riot to the liberal gaze is that you make visible the hidden continuity between Stalinism and contemporary global capitalism.

[Žižek then explores what he sees as a global trend towards limiting democracy.] Since the 2008 crisis, this distrust of democracy, once limited to third-world or post-Communist developing economies, is gaining ground in western countries. But what if this distrust is justified? What if only experts can save us?

But the crisis provided proof that it is these experts who don't know what they are doing, rather than the people. In western Europe, we are seeing that the ruling elite know less and less how to rule. Look at how Europe is dealing with Greece.

No wonder, then, that Pussy Riot make us all uneasy - you know very well what you don't know, and you don't pretend to have any quick or easy answers, but you are telling us that those in power don't know either. Your message is that in Europe today the blind are leading the blind. This is why it is so important that you persist. In the same way that Hegel, after seeing Napoleon riding through Jena, wrote that it was as if he saw the World Spirit riding on a horse, you are nothing less than the critical awareness of us all, sitting in prison.

Comradely greetings, Slavoj

23 February 2013

Dear Slavoj,

Once, in the autumn of 2012, when I was still in the pre-trial prison in Moscow with other Pussy Riot activists, I visited you. In a dream, of course.

I see your argument about horses, the World Spirit, and about tomfoolery and disrespect, as well as why and how all these elements are so connected to each other.

Pussy Riot did turn out to be a part of this force, the purpose of which is criticism, creativity and co-creation, experimentation and constantly provocative events. Borrowing Nietzsche's definition, we are the children of Dionysus, sailing in a barrel and not recognising any authority.

We are a part of this force that has no final answers or absolute truths, for our mission is to question. There are architects of apollonian statics and there are (punk) singers of dynamics and transformation. One is not better than the other. But it is only together that we can ensure the world functions in the way Heraclitus defined it: "This world has been and will eternally be living on the rhythm of fire, inflaming according to the measure, and dying away according to the measure. This is the functioning of the eternal world breath."

We are the rebels asking for the storm, and believing that truth is only to be found in an endless search. If the "World Spirit" touches you, do not expect that it will be painless.

Laurie Anderson sang: "Only an expert can deal with the problem." It would have been nice if Laurie and I could cut these experts down to size and take care of our own problems. Because expert status by no means grants access to the kingdom of absolute truth.

Two years of prison for Pussy Riot is our tribute to a destiny that gave us sharp ears, allowing us to sound the note A when everyone else is used to hearing G flat.

At the right moment, there will always come a miracle in the lives of those who childishly believe in the triumph of truth over lies, of mutual assistance, of those who live according to the economics of the gift.

Nadia

4 April 2013

Dear Nadezhda,

I was so pleasantly surprised when your letter arrived - the delay made me fear that the authorities would prevent our communication. I was deeply honoured, flattered even, by my appearance in your dream.

You are right to question the idea that the "experts" close to power are competent to make decisions. Experts are, by definition, servants of those in power: they don't really think, they just apply their knowledge to the problems defined by those in power (how to bring back stability? how to squash protests?). So are today's capitalists, the so-called financial wizards, really experts? Are they not just stupid babies playing with our money and our fate? I remember a cruel joke from Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be Or Not to Be*. When asked about the German concentration camps in occupied Poland, the Nazi offi-

cer snaps back: "We do the concentrating, and the Poles do the camping." Does the same not hold for the Enron bankruptcy in 2002? The thousands of employees who lost their jobs were certainly exposed to risk, but with no true choice - for them the risk was like blind fate. But those who did have insight into the risks, and the ability to intervene (the top managers), minimised their risks by cashing in their stocks before the bankruptcy. So it is true that we live in a society of risky choices, but some people (the managers) do the choosing, while others (the common people) do the risking.

For me, the true task of radical emancipatory movements is not just to shake things out of their complacent inertia, but to change the very co-ordinates of social reality so that, when things return to normal, there will be a new, more satisfying, "apol-lonian statics". And, even more crucially, how does today's global capitalism enter this scheme?

The Deleuzian philosopher Brian Massumi tells how capitalism has already overcome the logic of totalising normality and adopted the logic of erratic excess: "The more varied, and even erratic, the better. Normality starts to lose its hold. The regularities start to loosen. This loosening is part of capitalism's dynamic."

But I feel guilty writing this: who am I to explode in such narcissistic theoretical outbursts when you are exposed to very real deprivations? So please, if you can and want, do let me know about your situation in prison: about your daily rhythm, about the little private rituals that make it easier to survive, about how much time you have to read and write, about how other prisoners and guards treat you, about your contact with your child ... true heroism resides in these seemingly small ways of organising one's life in order to survive in crazy times without losing dignity.

With love, respect and admiration, my thoughts are with you!

Slavoj

16 April 2013

Dear Slavoj,

Has modern capitalism really overtaken the logic of totalising norms? Or is it willing to make us believe that it has overpassed the logic of hierarchical structures and normalisation?

As a child I wanted to go into advertising. I had a love affair with the advertising industry. And this is why I am in a position to judge its merits. The anti-hierarchical structures and rhizomes of late capitalism are its successful ad campaign. Modern capitalism has to manifest itself as flexible and even eccentric. Everything is geared towards gripping the emotion of the consumer. Modern capitalism seeks to assure us that it operates according to the principles of free creativity, endless development and diversity. It glosses over its other side in order to hide the reality that millions of people are enslaved by an all-powerful and fantastically stable norm of production. We want to reveal this lie.

You should not worry that you are exposing theoretical fabrications while I am supposed to suffer the "real hardship". I value the strict limits, and the challenge. I am genuinely curious: how will I cope

with this? And how can I turn this into a productive experience for me and my comrades? I find sources of inspiration; it contributes to my own development. Not because of, but in spite of the system. And in my struggle, your thoughts, ideas and stories are helpful to me.

I am happy to correspond with you. I await your reply and I wish you good luck in our common cause.

Nadia

tional process: the protesters' misery and discontent were transformed into a great collective act of mobilisation - hundreds of thousands gathered in public squares, proclaiming that they had enough, that things could not go on like that. However, what these protests add up to is a purely negative gesture of angry rejection and an equally abstract demand for justice, lacking the ability to translate this demand into a concrete political programme.

What can be done in such a situation, where demonstrations and protests are of no use, where democratic elections are of no use? Can we convince the tired and manipulated crowds that we are not

one hand, and in Russia on the other. However, recent events in Russia - the trial of Alexei Navalny, the passing of unconstitutional, anti-freedom laws - have infuriated me. I feel compelled to speak about the specific political and economic practices of my country. The last time I felt this angry was in 2011 when Putin declared he was running for the presidency for a third time. My anger and resolve led to the birth of Pussy Riot. What will happen now? Time will tell.

Here in Russia I have a strong sense of the cynicism of so-called first-world countries towards poorer nations. In my humble opinion, "developed" countries display an exaggerated loyalty towards governments that oppress their citizens and violate their rights. The European and US governments freely collaborate with Russia as it imposes laws from the middle ages and throws opposition politicians in jail. They collaborate with China, where oppression is so bad that my hair stands on end just to think about it. What are the limits of tolerance? And when does tolerance become collaboration, conformism and complicity?

To think, cynically, "let them do what they want in their own country", doesn't work any longer, because Russia and China and countries like them are now part of the global capitalist system.

Russia under Putin, with its dependence on raw materials, would have been massively weakened if those nations that import Russian oil and gas had shown the courage of their convictions and stopped buying. Even if Europe were to take as modest a step as passing a "Magnitsky law" [the Magnitsky Act in the US allows it to place sanctions on Russian officials believed to have taken part in human-rights violations], morally it would speak volumes. A boycott of the Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014 would be another ethical gesture. But the continued trade in raw materials constitutes a tacit approval of the Russian regime - not through words, but through money. It betrays the desire to protect the political and economic status quo and the division of labour that lies at the heart of the world economic system.

You quote Marx: "A social system that seizes up and rusts ... cannot survive." But here I am, working out my prison sentence in a country where the 10 people who control the biggest sectors of the economy are Vladimir Putin's oldest friends. He studied or played sports with some, and served in the KGB with others. Isn't this a social system that has seized up? Isn't this a feudal system?

I thank you sincerely, Slavoj, for our correspondence and can hardly wait for your reply.

Yours, Nadia

● The correspondence was organised by Philosophie magazine in cooperation with New Times. Longer versions can be found in German at philomag.de or in French at philomag.com. Tolokonnikova's letters were translated from Russian by Galia Ackerman



'We are the children of Dionysus, sailing in a barrel and not recognising any authority ... Nadezhda Tolokonnikova of Pussy Riot writing to Slavoj Žižek. Photograph: David Levene/AFP/Getty/Guardian

10 June 2013

Dear Nadezhda,

I felt deeply ashamed after reading your reply. You wrote: "You should not worry about the fact that you are exposing theoretical fabrications while I am supposed to suffer the 'real hardship'." This simple sentence made me aware that the final sentiment in my last letter was false: my expression of sympathy with your plight basically meant, "I have the privilege of doing real theory and teaching you about it while you are good for reporting on your experience of hardship..." Your last letter demonstrates that you are much more than that, that you are an equal partner in a theoretical dialogue. So my sincere apologies for this proof of how deeply entrenched is male chauvinism, especially when it is masked as sympathy for the other's suffering, and let me go on with our dialogue.

It is the crazy dynamics of global capitalism that make effective resistance to it so difficult and frustrating. Recall the great wave of protests that spilled all over Europe in 2011, from Greece and Spain to London and Paris. Even if there was no consistent political platform mobilising the protesters, the protests functioned as part of a large-scale educa-

only ready to undermine the existing order, to engage in provocative acts of resistance, but also to offer the prospect of a new order?

The Pussy Riot performances cannot be reduced just to subversive provocations. Beneath the dynamics of their acts, there is the inner stability of a firm ethico-political attitude. In some deeper sense, it is today's society that is caught in a crazy capitalist dynamic with no inner sense and measure, and it is Pussy Riot that de facto provides a stable ethico-political point. The very existence of Pussy Riot tells thousands that opportunist cynicism is not the only option, that we are not totally disoriented, that there still is a common cause worth fighting for.

So I also wish you good luck in our common cause. To be faithful to our common cause means to be brave, especially now, and, as the old saying goes, luck is on the side of the brave!

Yours, Slavoj

13 July 2013

Dear Slavoj,

In my last letter, written in haste as I worked in the sewing shop, I was not as clear as I should have been about the distinction between how "global capitalism" functions in Europe and the US on the

Blurred Lines: the most controversial song of the decade

Another student union has banned Robin Thicke's party track. How did it become such a lightning rod for moral outrage and censorship?

By Dorian Lynskey

This week, University College London student union (UCLU) took the unusual step of banning a single song, Robin Thicke's *Blurred Lines*. It joins around 20 other UK student unions to do so. This is the latest development in the story of how the biggest song of the year became the most controversial of the decade: an unprecedented achievement, though not one that fills Thicke with pride.

It seems impossible that anyone with the faintest interest in popular culture could have missed either the song or the controversy, but here is a recap. At the end of March, mid-table R&B singer Thicke, along with producer Pharrell Williams and rapper TI, released *Blurred Lines*, a libidinous R&B party jam about a woman in a nightclub who may or not be interested in him. In April, one blogger branded it a "rape song", and two months later Tricia Romano of the *Daily Beast* described it as "rapey", a word that caught fire in other media outlets. The song might have escaped censure if the video, in which the three male performers goof around with scantily clad (and, in one version, topless) models, had not generated its own separate yet overlapping controversy.

Throughout the summer, as the song eclipsed even Daft Punk's *Get Lucky* as the biggest hit of 2013, debate about its sexual politics heated up. In September, contributors to Project Unbreakable, a photographic project dedicated to rape survivors, held up placards comparing words spoken by their attackers to lines from the song. Also in September, Edinburgh University Students' Association (EUSA) became the first student body to ban *Blurred Lines*.

"It promotes a very worrying attitude towards sex and consent," explained Kirsty Haigh, EUSA's vice-president of services. "This is about ensuring that everyone is fully aware that you need enthusiastic consent before sex. The song says: 'You know you want it.' Well, you can't know they want it unless they tell you they want it."

By that point, Thicke's hit was part of a bigger debate about the messages of pop lyrics and videos. Miley Cyrus's performance at the Video Music Awards in August, during which Thicke popped up like some kind of sex-pest Zelig, ignited another firestorm of indignation on several fronts. Recently, Netmums published a survey claiming that 80% of parents had found their children copying explicit lyrics or dance moves from music videos, while Annie Lennox called for videos to be regulated in the same way as movies. "I'm all for freedom of expression," she began ominously, "but this is clearly one step beyond, and it's clearly into the realm of porn. How do you stop your kids being exposed to it?"



Causing indignation: Miley Cyrus and Robin Thicke perform onstage at the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards. Photograph: Neilson Barnard/Getty Images for MTV

This week, a tipping point has been reached. Lily Allen launched the video to her comeback single, *Hard Out Here*, which takes aim at music industry sexism with specific reference to the *Blurred Lines* video. And three women's organisations launched the Rewind&Reframe campaign, with a four-pronged strategy: to enable young women to air their grievances about music videos, to campaign for age ratings on videos, to encourage compulsory sex and relationship education in schools, and to pressure the music industry to get its house in order.

"In music videos across the board there's widespread racism and sexism, specifically the sexualisation of black and ethnic minority women," says Lia Latchford of Rewind&Reframe. "Young women have told us that it has a real impact on their day-to-day lives. They're tired of messages that depict women as highly sexualised passive sex objects. Getting rid of one song won't solve the problem. It's a culture of racism and sexism that we need to change."

The last time pop music inspired such snowballing outrage was during the rise of the Parents' Music Resource Centre (PMRC). Established in 1985 by Tipper Gore, wife of Al, after she found her daughter listening to Prince's sexually graphic *Darling Nikki*, the PMRC successfully campaigned to slap stickers reading Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics on offending albums. The ensuing climate of censorship reached a peak in 1992, when rapper Ice-T's rock band Body Count buckled to huge political

pressure and deleted their song *Cop Killer*. They pointedly replaced it on the album with a new song called *Freedom of Speech*.

That moral panic was driven by older, more conservative campaigners, but much of the current opposition to pop's excesses stems from young feminists. If the MTV generation was the first to be exposed to the power of music videos, then the YouTube generation is the first to understand those videos in the context of social media and online discourse. Cultural consumers have never been more attuned to the messages, both explicit and implicit, embedded in popular artforms. Arguments about racism, misogyny and cultural appropriation that used to thrive primarily in academia are now mainstream. Sometimes these concerns about "problematic" art go to comical extremes - the Tumblr *Your Fave Is Problematic* leaves you wondering if there is anything out there that isn't problematic - but at least young consumers are asking the right questions, in the spirit of playwright August Wilson's axiom: "All art is political in the sense that it serves someone's politics."

Even the most prominent model in the *Blurred Lines* video, Emily Ratajkowski, has said: "I'm glad that people are criticising pop lyrics, because I think that's an important thing to do." It has tangible effects, too. When popular MC Rick Ross rapped, on Rocko's single *UOENO*, about spiking someone's drink in order to have sex with her, public outcry forced him to apologise.

Many people who follow pop music closely, how-

ever, are surprised that Blurred Lines has become such a lightning rod. "It really did boggle my mind when people started freaking out about it," says US music critic Maura Johnston. "This is just a cheesy pickup line song and everyone was like: 'No, it's about forcing a woman against her will.' There are so many songs out there that are worse about demeaning women. Maybe it's an easy target because Robin Thicke is kind of slimy. Right now there's a lot of tension between women and men online so this was a way of women taking a piece of pop culture and saying: 'No, we're against this.' But it's weird to me because I didn't see it and I still don't."

Blurred Lines is not about rape in the same way that Cop Killer is about the fantasy of killing cops, so it is a question of interpretation. If you don't think the song's narrator is willing to have sex without consent, then the song seems at worst sleazy, and the reaction overblown. If, however, you think that the concept of "blurred lines" sends a dangerous message to listeners, then it's explosive.

Thicke himself has been a woeful defender of the song in interviews, recalling Spinal Tap's response to being called sexist: "What's wrong with being sexy?" That could be because, unlike Body Count or Eminem, he didn't intend to be outrageous. In R&B, such lyrics are par for the course. But it is revealing that TI's verse, which features the inflammatory line: "I'll give you something big enough to tear your ass in two," has been replaced in televised performances with milder verses from rappers such as Iggy Azalea and the Roots' Black Thought.

The video is another matter. It was conceived and directed by Diane Martel, who told US website Grantland: "It forces the men to feel playful and not at all like predators. I directed the girls to look into the camera. This is very intentional and they do it most of the time; they are in the power position. I don't think the video is sexist. The lyrics are ridiculous, the guys are silly as fuck."

Martel's thoughts have received little attention, but then one flaw in the current debate is an unwillingness to credit female artists with ideas of their own. When Miley Cyrus appeared naked in the Wrecking Ball video, critics assumed director Terry Richardson was calling the shots, yet in the case of Blurred Lines the blame for the video falls on Thicke. "People have been discounting almost everything Martel says, even though she was in charge," says Johnston.

This is just one of the ways in which the battle lines are themselves blurred. Feminists were divided in their response to Sinéad O'Connor's open letters to Miley Cyrus. Was O'Connor making a valid feminist critique of misogyny in the music industry, or was she indulging in priggish "slut-shaming"?

Even more (here's that word again) problematic is the intersection of gender and race. While the mem-

bers of the PMRC were affronted by heavy metal as well as hip-hop - their original "Filthy Fifteen" blacklist featured only three black artists - the current focus is overwhelmingly on urban music. Lily Allen's new video exclusively parodies black music and reduces black women's bodies to lurid props, however satirical her intent might be. One critic, who asked to be quoted anonymously, says: "The lyrics talk about the absurdity of the industry and the media but the main visual reference is black music. What about Katy Perry or Gaga or Miley? What about rock music?"

"Lily Allen's using the sexualisation of black women to challenge the sexualisation of black women so it doesn't really work," says Latchford. "It's a good concept but poorly executed. For us it's not a problem with black music specifically, but the music industry as a whole."

The complexity inherent in debating pop, where lyrics and videos are often elliptical, ambiguous and even contradictory, isn't well served by the kind of direct condemnations that tend to generate attention. In the case of Blurred Lines, many listeners came to the song via the controversy and therefore had an opinion before they had a reaction. "Once you have an opinion that can be summed up by a single word - rapey, which I think is a terrible word - it's something that people can run with in an intense and far-reaching way, even if they haven't listened to the song," says Johnston. "You have this culture of commentary online where people are pressured to constantly come up with controversial angles to stick out. They don't have to do their homework to get the desired effect, which is traffic."

Some of the rhetoric may be blunt, but nothing is blunter than a ban. Haigh defends EUSA's decision on multiple grounds. "The executive made the decision that it wasn't a song we should be promoting and endorsing in our venues. It's also about protecting [rape] victims and making them feel safe so they don't have to listen to a song that reminds them of horrific experiences. And it starts a public discussion. Nothing changes overnight, but it's about slowly and surely changing the culture." But she says that Blurred Lines was banned because it was unusually well known and widely discussed rather than because it was exceptionally offensive, which makes for a shaky precedent.

"You're supposed to have as much freedom of expression in student unions as possible," says Eve Barlow, deputy editor of NME. "How is that precedent going to be set going forward, not just for music but other forms of media and speech? I think they're getting into muddy waters."

"In principle, I'm against bans," says Pádraig Reidy of Index on Censorship. "Blanket bans on certain songs are contrary to what universities and life as a

student should be about, which is becoming an adult and finding out about the world, and making your own decisions. It's worrying that young people seem to see censorship as a solution to complex societal issues."

He also has doubts about the efficacy of age-rating music videos. "First, ratings make these things more attractive: I remember the cred bestowed on any hip-hop record with an explicit-lyrics sticker back in the 90s. Second, I'm not sure that ratings really address the core issues of racism and sexism."

Yet however imperfect the debate triggered by Blurred Lines may be, many women are justifiably unsettled by pop's inability to outgrow its crassest tropes. New US chart rules, which count YouTube views as well as sales, provide an enhanced incentive to produce attention-grabbing videos, creating a kind of outrage arms race. "I'm a feminist, so certain things about pop music I find pretty frustrating," the New Zealand singer Lorde told Q recently. "I think pop is scarily powerful. What you do and say with it has a lot of weight. There are a lot of shock tactics these days: people trying to outdo each other, which will probably culminate in two people fucking on stage at the Grammys."

The question is whether or not the music industry has any reason to change when controversy has done nothing to blunt the sales of Thicke or Cyrus, and has probably been beneficial. "What [the campaigners] are trying to do is make some music executive alert to the fact that people are upset," says Barlow. "That's music to their ears. It seems like a domino effect: response after response after response, and that's helping the song do well and make even more people aware of it. I don't think it will change anything. If anything, it will make the actions more outrageous so more people talk about them."

Latchford is more optimistic. "Young women are tired of seeing this kind of video and they want to see a change. We hope that because it's coming from young women who are supposed to be consumers of this stuff, that will drive change."

It's more likely, and more desirable, that tangible change will be driven organically by formidable artists rather than chastened executives. Black women such as Angel Haze and Janelle Monáe don't so much resist hypersexualised imagery as behave as if it is not even a consideration. They have so much charisma and dynamism that they are riveting without having to strip down. Admittedly, they aren't yet household names, but it is only a matter of time before a truly unorthodox star emerges. If pop music has created a problem, then only pop music can solve it.



Proteus: adventure game is a meditation on place and nature

Proteus 1 Proteus' chunky, luxuriously coloured visuals are reminiscent of old Atari and Commodore 64 games, when digital landscapes were minimalist and subjective.

I first played Proteus two years ago - at GameCity of course. Its developer, Ed Key, had left traditional mainstream game development and was trying something entirely new. He had a small stand in the tent on Nottingham's main square - his business card was an acorn with his email address scrawled on it.

Something about the game's chunky, luxuriously coloured visuals caught my eye - they took me back to my childhood, to old Atari and Commodore 64 games, when digital landscapes were minimalist and subjective - like stark impressionist paintings.

I sat down and Key popped a headset on me. "You have to listen to the music," he said gently. And I did, because of course David Kanaga's score is an enormous part of this seemingly formless, graceful experience. You are on an island, procedurally generated just for you.

There are creatures here, and clusters of trees shedding pink leaves into the wind; there are remnants of civilisation; little stone circles and strange statues. It feels folkloric, like at any moment Christina Rossetti's goblin market could march by:

Backwards up the mossy glen
Turn'd and troop'd the goblin men,
With their shrill repeated cry,
"Come buy, come buy."
When they reach'd where Laura was
They stood stock still upon the moss,
Leering at each other,
Brother with queer brother;
Signalling each other,
Brother with sly brother.
One set his basket down,
One rear'd his plate;
One began to weave a crown
Of tendrils, leaves, and rough nuts brown
(Men sell not such in any town);
One heav'd the golden weight
Of dish and fruit to offer her:
"Come buy, come buy," was still their cry.

There are seasons, too, though you may never experience them if you don't learn the island's generative secrets. For the most part, you wander the land, learning how the soundtrack bends and wilts to each new area. For some, Proteus is a sound tool, an interactive musical odyssey; something The Orb may have made if the technology had existed in the nineties. It seemed something that we'd only ever see on PC or Mac.

But earlier this year, after Proteus was released on Steam, Key was approached by Curve Studios about the possibility of creating a PlayStation 3 and Vita

version. It wasn't something Key had considered, but Curve had spoken to Shahid Ahmad, Sony's indie guru, and he seemed interested. Sony is very interested in these experimental things nowadays, so the project was green lit.

Now here is Proteus - a thoughtful experiment, a meditation on place and nature available on a major console and a major handheld. Curve has cleverly added new features, such as interaction with the rear touchscreen and a Vita motion mode where you can look around the Proteus environment by moving the device itself.

"The new stuff is subtle but I'm really happy with it," says Key. "The motion-sensor camera mode, activated by tapping the L button on the Vita, is really neat - almost like VR without the mask or the nausea. I was so happy to see this crazy trick done with it.

"It's also possible to create location and date-based islands, both of which generate a random seed and then build an island from that, with a chance of about 10-15 different 'wild' things happening to it. Some of these are subtle and some aren't ... It's more about uniqueness and permanence and interesting dice-rolls than anything else. At one point the location-based islands were being discussed as if they would somehow take real-world elements and mix them in, but I'll leave it to someone else to make a Proteus/Geoguesser mash-up ..."

For Key, one of the hardest elements of the conversion process was including trophies - a potentially mood-breaking concession to console gaming conventions. "I actually designed the whole set of trophies about four times," says Key. "It was very weird to do and I still flinch when the trophy notification pops up - pling! - but the only solution to that is to play without notifications enabled.

"The other main headache is that it breaks a fundamental design rule of Proteus: no text after the title screen - except the options screen. I tried to make them fairly cryptic, and the text is all 'sampled' from various books and other media that were important to us whilst making Proteus so there's a kind of oblique 'director's commentary' aspect. For some of them, I took some cues from psychogeography and tried to force the player to take unusual paths on the island. Videogames need more psychogeography."

Brilliantly, the trailer for the game actually uses a slice of Key's own psychogeography - it follows him on a walk near his home in Broughton-in-Furness (although Key actually spent parts of his childhood in Kendal and Wiltshire, experiences that also shaped the look and feel of the game).

"The film-makers, Rich and Lauren of Stray Dog Video, are friends of Curve's PR and marketing guy, Rob, and I'd always wanted to make a crazy live-ac-

tion trailer, so we got talking about ideas," says Key. "They came up with a pitch and a storyboard after we knocked around a few initial concepts. The furthest outdoor location, Devoke Water, is only five miles from home, and the bus scene was shot driving around Kendal.

"It was a crazy battle against the weather, and perhaps even more against despair in the face of worsening forecasts, but in the end we shot almost the whole thing in one day. I'm incredibly happy with how well-received it has been. I enjoyed a certain person at the launch drinks with Curve saying, 'So did you build that stone circle?'"

Proteus is not a game, a few people insist. In some ways they're right, but in most they are wrong. Because as humans we gamify everything - it is how we interact with the world. When we explore a new place in real life, we set ourselves parameters and limits: I'll just get to that corner and head back; I have to make it to the brow of that hill. These are rudimentary game mechanics. When we fall in love, we are at the mercy of conflicting game systems - the natural desire is to show your hand, to go all in, express everything. But instead you need to quietly build XP, to learn and to work out in what ways your systems conflict or attune with your partner's. All of life is about finding a place or a person and learning their rules, however subtle, however arcane.

Proteus is not about love of course - or at least not obviously. It does, however, explore some of the same ideas as the traditional pastoral romance. In the Elizabethan era there was a fascination with the idea of the rural idyll as something magical and replenishing, and the Proteus environments are fecund with magic; it glistens at the edges of your vision, it sparkles above the trees and through the glades. It is there in the ambience, it drifts through the soundscape like pollen. Proteus renders into digital life, the isle of the Tempest, Shakespeare's pastoral vision of redemption, love and supernatural longing. From Caliban's famous speech:

Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.

Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open and show riches
Ready to drop upon me that, when I waked,
I cried to dream again.

You don't always get that in console games.

● Proteus is available now on PC and Mac via Steam, and on PS3 and PS Vita via the PlayStation store



Robert De Niro: 'I used to do take after take. Now I don't worry about it so much.' Photograph: Eric Ogden/Corbis Outline

Robert De Niro: 'I'd like to see where Travis Bickle is today'

If you thought that Robert De Niro had mellowed in his old age, think again. His new film with Luc Besson is feistily violent and he still hankers after making a sequel to *Taxi Driver*

By Xan Brooks

To misquote Bananarama, Robert De Niro is waiting inside the hotel room, talking on his phone, though probably not in Italian. I'm outside with the PR, who keeps easing open the door to check if he's done. The publicist is starstruck; he doesn't want to intrude. He explains that he grew up watching De Niro movies and that *Taxi Driver* is basically the reason he got into this business to begin with. We agree that it's wise to make no mention of this. He might shut the door and lock us out altogether.

De Niro is in town to discuss his new role as an ageing bull in a witness protection programme, and this seems fitting. Over the past four decades we have known him as sibilant Vito Corleone, volcanic Jake LaMotta, oily Rupert Pupkin, and any number

of others, which is another way of saying we don't know him at all. De Niro hurls his work at the screen and then hides out in the shadows, unwilling (or unable) to talk the world through the process or police his own image. "With every other actor, I kind of know what they'd be like in real life," Billy Bob Thornton once remarked. "But with Bob De Niro I have absolutely no idea." He's the Moby Dick of American acting, forceful on screen and gauzy in public; a creature of splashy arrivals and murky descents.

At this stage it would be nice to hail De Niro's latest film as a late masterpiece, a movie to stir memories of the ones that came before. But this would only be half true. Specifically, *The Family* reminds us of *Goodfellas* to the extent that it installs Martin Scorsese's gangster classic as a jokey accompaniment to its own climactic scene. Yet De Niro is largely coasting as Giovanni Manzoni, a mafia supergrass who finds himself marooned in small-town France.

The film is directed by Luc Besson, who leans heavily on the knockabout violence and accordion soundtrack. Guns are fired, baseball bats brandished and the rapacious Americans eat the locals alive. I stumbled out feeling as though I'd just been beaten about the head with a big string of onions.

His phone call complete, De Niro duly motions me in, like a world-weary dentist faced with one last appointment. He is wearing silver-frame specs and a chocolate shirt and his once lithe frame has turned soft at the edges. At the age of 70, he knows the clock is ticking and that there's no time to waste. He suggests that the best thing about Besson is that he shoots his films fast. Shout action, call cut and put the scene in the can.

Experience has taught him that this is usually for the best. There is a danger of over-thinking a role; of getting hung up on details. "I used to worry about doing take after take," he says. "Now I don't worry about it so much. You can get it in the first take,

more often than not. If there's some aspect of the character that you're really trying to get?" He shrugs. "Then maybe have two."

Three minutes in, I'm already wrong-footed. It's like hearing Pope Francis dispute the virgin birth, or learning that Vladimir Nabokov wrote with a set of kids' crayons. Wasn't it De Niro, more than anyone else, who took the art of immersive film acting to uncharted new depths? He learned phonetic Sicilian for his Oscar-winning role in *The Godfather Part 2* and piled on 70lb to secure the best actor award for *Raging Bull*. He is renowned for his obsessive research and attention to detail; for disappearing into the role like some brooding Cheshire Cat.

I worry that, on some level, fame must have been the worst thing to happen to him. All of a sudden his face is too visible and his cover is blown. Maybe his success is both blessing and curse.

"Yeah, well, it can be a problem," he concedes. "In the beginning it was hard to deal with all the attention. As an actor it's hard to do certain things because you're well known. Research and stuff like that. That's the downside. The upside is that people are actually more forthcoming. When you ask them about the work that they do, they see it as you immortalising them. That makes them more honest."

He compares what he does to being a painter, or writing a novel. "With painting or writing, you've got the finished product right there, with nothing in between. With movies it's different, because it's you in the movie. So there's a whole other social situation that you have to deal with."

De Niro, as it happens, is the son of writers and painters. His mother wrote erotica for Anais Nin and pulp fiction for *True Crimes* magazine. His father - Robert De Niro Sr - was a figurative expressionist and sometime poet, a member of a New York scene that included Mark Rothko, Willem and Elaine de Kooning and Larry Rivers, the reputed "godfather" of the pop-art movement. De Niro allows that he had a bohemian upbringing. I'm guessing that Jackson Pollock was constantly calling round, drunk out of his skull and merrily urinating into the De Niro family hearth.

"No, no, nothing like that," he says. "My father didn't hang out with Pollock. The only one that he was really friends with was Larry Rivers, although I did discover that he painted Elaine de Kooning, or maybe sketched her in charcoal. So yeah, he knew her too. But he was never a regular at the Cedar tavern. That was the big watering hole at the time."

Recently he has been working on a documentary

about his dad, who died in 1993 without ever quite achieving mainstream success for his work. The actor says that he made the film primarily for himself and for his own children, as a kind of family history. In the meantime he has kept his father's studio exactly as he left it.

In making the documentary, did he spot similarities between his style of acting and his father's way of painting? "Yeah, there might be," he says. "There might be certain things. I mean, I didn't see my father paint very much. But I'd watch him sometimes and he was very intense when he did it. So there might be a connection with my father there. A way of zero-ing in on a problem and examining every piece of the situation before I make a choice of how I'm going to tackle it. But I'm not sure, because I never really had a discussion about how he painted, I wasn't really interested at the time." He shrugs. "That's what happens, kids aren't interested. It's a shame."

How did his father feel about his own success? "Oh, he was happy for me," De Niro says. "He was proud. Maybe a part of him was a little envious, because he felt he was a great artist and ..." He trails off. "His name was out there in the world," he says. "But it was my name as well."

By the time he turned 30, De Niro was already a star. He made a galvanic entrance in Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets*, swaggering in slow-motion through the bar as Jumping Jack Flash wailed on the jukebox. It was the start of a fruitful collaboration. The director and actor would later re-team for *Taxi Driver*, a tour through the inferno of mid-70s Manhattan, brilliantly scripted by Paul Schrader. De Niro starred as lonely Travis Bickle, whip-thin, wild-eyed and thrumming with violence.

Today, I suspect, it remains the film that matters most, the one he'd most like to revisit. "Yeah, well, I had that idea," he explains. "I said, why don't we write something? And I talked to Marty and Paul did take a shot at something, whether it was an outline or a script, I forget. But somehow we didn't feel it was right and it didn't take off." He thinks it over. "But I'd like to see where Travis is today. There was something about the guy - all that rage and alienation, that's what the city can do to you. I mean Marty and I are from New York, and even we can feel alienated."

I'm fascinated to hear there could even be a sequel. It has been argued that Travis actually dies at the end of *Taxi Driver* and that the hazy closing sequence (the killer as hero, back behind the wheel) is

just his fantasy of the afterlife. De Niro blinks behind his glasses. "You mean the end of the movie? Well, that's an interesting theory. I know that was not the intention, but it's as valid as anything." He's like a kindly professor correcting a student.

On starting out as an performer, he trained with Stella Adler, the legendary New York acting coach, who described him as the best student she ever taught. For some reason, the mention of Adler puts De Niro at his ease. He talks about her teaching methods, how she felt that the Method school was "too indulgent, too much cult of personality" and how the written word was sacrosanct. "She was totally about plays," he says. "The play is the play, and the playwright has final say, and you don't change a word because it's written in stone. The great plays have a message and the message is political. She had a class called 'script analysis' where she would boil a play down to its bare essentials and work towards building a character from that. I'd never experienced anything like it before."

It's interesting to hear him talk about theatre. I've always had the sense that he wasn't a fan. "No, I like movies," he says with a chuckle. "I mean, I'd do a play if I could find a great play, a modern play, a new play. But you can do more with film. I like the illusion. I like that you can create something and do it over and then put it together like a big puzzle. With a play, the most you can do is videotape it once and then put it in the archive at the Lincoln Center. Films last. You put it on a screen and it's there for ever, a little piece of history."

The appointment is over; he has places to be. De Niro hauls himself up from the couch, shakes hands warmly and says that it was good to meet me, he enjoyed our talk. He sounds sincere, although he may well be acting. That's the thing about De Niro. We don't know when he's on and we don't know when he's off - and this, I suppose, is what makes him unique.

● The Family is released on 22 November.

Forget the headlines – schizophrenia is more common than you might think

Schizophrenia isn't a specific, rare or rigorously defined illness. Instead, it covers a wide range of often unrelated conditions, all of which are also seen in people who are not mentally ill

By Daniel Freeman and Jason Freeman

Which illness frightens you most? Cancer? Stroke? Dementia? To judge from tabloid coverage, the condition we should really fear isn't physical at all. "Scared of mum's schizophrenic attacks", "Knife-wielding schizophrenic woman in court", "Schizo stranger killed dad", "Rachel murder: schizo accused", and

"My schizophrenic son says he'll kill... but he's escaped from secure hospitals 7 times" are just a few of dozens of similar headlines we found in a cursory internet search. Mental illness, these stories imply, is dangerous. And schizophrenia is the most dangerous of all.

Such reporting is unhelpful, misleading and manipulative. But it may be even more inaccurate than it first appears. This is because scientists are increasingly doubtful whether schizophrenia – a term invented more than a century ago by the psychiatric pioneer Eugen Bleuler – is a distinct illness at all. This isn't to say that individuals diagnosed with the condition don't have genuine and serious mental health problems. But how well the label "schizophrenia" fits those problems is now a very real question.

What's wrong with the concept of schizophrenia? For one thing, research indicates the term may simply be functioning as a catch-all for a variety of separate problems. Six main conditions are typically caught under the umbrella of schizophrenia: paranoia; grandiosity (delusional beliefs that one has special powers or is famous); hallucinations (hearing voices, for example); thought disorder (being unable to think straight); anhedonia or the inability to experience pleasure; and diminished emotional expression (essentially an emotional "numbness"). But how many of these problems a person experiences, and how severely, varies enormously. Having one doesn't mean you'll necessarily develop any of the others.

Why hasn't this been noticed by clinicians? Mental health professionals, inevitably, tend only to see the most unwell individuals. These patients tend to suffer from lots of the problems we've mentioned – the more difficulties you're experiencing, the more likely it is that you'll end up being seen by a specialist – prompting psychiatrists like Bleuler to assume these problems are symptoms of a single underlying condition. But defining an illness by looking only at the minority who end up in hospital can be a big mistake.

The traditional view has been that schizophrenia occurs in approximately 1% of people. But it's now clear that the sort of experiences captured under the label are common in the general population – frequently far less distressing and disruptive, for

sure, but essentially the same thing. Take paranoia, for instance. Almost 20% of UK adults report feeling as though others were against them in the previous 12 months, with 1.8% fearing plots to cause them serious harm. We tested the level of paranoia among the general public by asking volunteers to take a virtual reality tube train ride, during which they shared a carriage with a number of computer-generated "avatars". These avatars were programmed to behave in a strictly neutral fashion, yet over 40% of participants reported that the avatars showed hostility towards them.

Moreover, triggering the odd sensations associated with schizophrenia is remarkably easy. Go without sleep for a night or two and you're likely to experience some very peculiar thoughts and feelings (as demonstrated by a recent study of sailors in solo races). Consume a lot of cannabis and the effects can be similar. Meanwhile, a classic study by the psychiatrist Stuart Grassian showed that prisoners placed in solitary confinement were soon prey to hallucinations and delusions.

What all this suggests is that schizophrenia isn't a specific, relatively rare, and rigorously defined illness. Instead, it covers a wide range of often unrelated conditions, all of which are also seen in people who are not mentally ill, and all of which exist on a continuum from the comparatively mild to the very severe. People with conditions like schizophrenia are simply those who happen to fall at the extreme end of a number of these continua.

What causes psychotic experiences? Research has pointed a decisive finger at living in cities, drug use, poverty, migration, traumatic experiences in child-

hood and later negative events such as being the victim of an assault. Experiences like paranoia are also linked with a number of psychological traits, such as a tendency to worry, feel depressed, sleep poorly, or jump to conclusions. These factors seem to work in what scientists call a "dose-response" manner: the more of them you experience, the more likely it is that your mental health will suffer.

Genetic factors also play a part, though there's no evidence for a single "schizophrenia" gene. Instead, a multitude of genes are likely to be involved – with their effect, crucially, conditioned by environmental factors. So the people who end up being treated for schizophrenia aren't the unlucky few who happen to have inherited a rogue gene. Genetic susceptibility exists on a spectrum too. The more of the relevant genes you possess, the further you are to the extreme end of the spectrum and the less of a push you'll need from life events to become ill. It's worth remembering, however, that genetic research into schizophrenia has focused on the people who present for treatment: the severest end of the continua. What it hasn't done is look at the various types of psychotic experiences across the general population.

Not everyone agrees with these new ways of thinking about schizophrenia. An editorial in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*, for example, lambasted the approach as "scientifically unproven and clinically impractical". But one thing is certain: deepening our understanding of psychotic problems must be a priority. Diagnostic criteria for mental illnesses change over time, and the same will happen with schizophrenia. Rather than getting sidetracked by day-to-day debates about the symptoms required for a diagnosis, it will be more productive to focus on the individual psychotic experiences, remembering that they don't only occur in those who come into contact with mental health services but exist on spectra in the general population. This isn't merely a theoretical issue: if we target specific problems, rather than a loosely defined illness, we're likely to improve treatment outcomes for the many people struggling with these debilitating experiences.

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Paranoia ... almost 20% of UK adults report feeling as though others were against them in the previous 12 months. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod for the Guardian

Alec Baldwin: 'I was staring off a cliff'

He had a hit with 30 Rock, then Tina Fey called time on it. His first box office smash was followed by 'eight bombs in a row'. He's fallen out with his family, his ex-wife, his colleagues, the press and Twitter (three times). Is it any wonder Alec Baldwin's new film is a dig at the movie business?

By Emma Brockes

Late one evening, Alec Baldwin enters a private dining room at a Japanese restaurant in downtown Manhattan. He is broad, with meaty forearms and a squarish head, his hair shooting up at the crest like a picket fence. Over the years, he has looked great and he has looked seedy, and at 55, he has settled into a well-rounded version of himself that comes with a new and much vaunted Zen attitude. That Baldwin is a good actor is indisputable; whether or not he's a good guy is subject to routine debate, depending on the nature of his most recent outburst. He shakes my hand, regards me unsmilingly, and settles into his seat for some sushi.

The actor has been much in the press this week, after appearing in court to testify against a 41-year-old woman on trial for stalking him. On Thursday, Genevieve Sabourin was found guilty of all charges, including counts of stalking, harassment and attempted aggravated harassment, and sentenced to six months in jail. All of which is unresolved and ongoing when we meet. The pretext for our meeting is a documentary called *Seduced & Abandoned* that Baldwin has made with James Toback, his friend and collaborator, who accompanies him this evening and who will - over the course of two hours - valiantly try to jam in his own anecdotes. It's one of those movies about making a movie, like *Looking For Richard* and *Lost In La Mancha*, which always feature a bunch of old lags talking about Marty Scorsese and Bob De Niro, and what they said to them in 1977. *Seduced & Abandoned* follows Baldwin and Toback as they hawk a film project around Cannes - a "political romantic adventure" set in Iraq, slated to co-star Neve Campbell - being repeatedly rejected for financing. "You, me and Neve," Baldwin says at one point, "they'll give us about \$4.50 to do this movie."

It is a perfect vehicle for the actor's self-deprecation, a main feature of his charm, and after a slow start (Baldwin has a taste for long and unsustainable metaphors, for example: "To Mike Nichols I was just the spatula he used to flip an omelette with. I wasn't the omelette. I wasn't the spinach or olives in the omelette. I was just some salt you might have sprinkled on") is a winning film.

It is also a bracing one. Despite his success in *30 Rock*, Baldwin is told by everyone they meet that he has no capital in movies. "When you lack a certain vitality in the film business," he says now, "there's no hiding it. It's like you've had your limb chopped off. How do you hide the fact that you're missing an arm?"

But people do; they put on their game-face.

"And they wind up looking like an ass. I spent enough time letting that destroy my confidence; letting that hurt me, letting that wound me, making me feel less than. And finally one day I said to myself, why do I give a fuck about any of these people and what they think? My stock is up, my stock is down. I have to live. Half of these people are self-indulgent morons."

It's classic late-stage Baldwin. In a world of PR bullshit, he's built an image as the guy who confronts things: photographers, antagonists on Twitter, his own shortcomings. It's not always convincing. People who make a lot of noise about their own honesty invite a certain scepticism and Baldwin's ebullience has a manic edge that sits awkwardly alongside his I'm-cool-with-that attitude. There is a great deal in life that Baldwin is clearly not cool with, starting with his ex-wife Kim Basinger, extending to ex-wives in general and rolling out to encompass the "vermin" of paparazzi, Daily Mail reporters, air stewards trying to stop him playing *Words With Friends* before takeoff, former agents and producers, and the California family court system.

He gives generously to good causes, supports Obama and does a podcast for lefty public radio, but like a lot of things about Baldwin, reports of his liberalism seem greatly exaggerated. In the new film, he ranges about speculating on which actress his character is "going to fuck", and during his most recent public meltdown, reached for the nearest insult to hand and found it to be: "You toxic little queen" and "You little bitch." (This to a male Daily Mail reporter who ran a story on Baldwin's wife tweeting at James Gandolfini's funeral, a story the paper later retracted.) That these upsets often backfire only endears Baldwin to his fans, but there's a petulance to it all that is not always cute.

Baldwin is largely unrepentant. His second wife, Hilaria, had a baby 10 weeks ago and he is furious at the thought of their privacy being invaded the way it was in his first marriage. "I can't look at what I have, this new chapter in my life, and just go about business as usual," he says. "I have to make some

significant changes. I'm so scarred from what happened the first time. I take my lessons and I'm not bitter about it, but if I didn't make a serious attempt at addressing it with my new family, I might as well just blow my brains out. I have no choice."

By "addressing it" he means cutting back on acting and not thumping photographers (as he did in August), although, he says, with a slightly laborious sarcasm, "I think there are people who deserve to be beaten with a chain to death, in the press." He's back on Twitter again, after the last walkout, but this time "just for promotional purposes. I don't try to communicate with my 'audience'. I don't bother with that any more. I used to try to have conversations with people but it's futile."

Baldwin probably won't leave acting as he's sometimes threatened. But he is emphatic about his healthy new attitude towards success and failure. In his imagination, he says, he sees the actor as a "cartoon-like figure, with giant bird-like wings manufactured out of papier-mache, and you stand out there in the breeze, and when you're Leo [DiCaprio] fortunes smile on you and you soar to these heights and never touch the ground. For other people, they land - sometimes crash-land - and they stand there on the runway, waiting for the wind to pick them up again. And they stand out there night after night, month after month, waiting for that breeze. Whereas I'm from the school that thinks: let's go inside and watch the ball game."

It's a tough contrast, spending seven years saying Tina Fey's lines and then having to revert to one's own. As Jack Donaghy, fictional boss of NBC on *30 Rock*, everything about Baldwin was forgiven: the mania, the divorce memoir, that overblown episode with his daughter and the phone message. Here he was, lovable sardonic Alec, in this fabulously knowing and well-written role. ("The only thing I will be discussing with the House Subcommittee on Baseball, Quiz Shows, Terrorism and Media is vertical integration." And: "I like you. You have the boldness of a much younger woman.") It didn't matter that no one in middle America watched it. As he says, "People in the industry liked the show. Big difference. There are shows that are monolithic successes on TV, that nobody in the business ever watches one episode of."

He needed a hit. Baldwin's heyday, in the early 1990s, was a long way gone, although he is the first to point out it was never that great in the first place. In fact, he analyses his career with relentless masochism. "Everything I did at the time," he says, "to varying degrees under-performed."

Hang on, not *The Hunt For Red October* (the 1990 submarine movie he made with Sean Connery, which earned \$200m worldwide). "Well, that was one thing. But after that I did *The Marrying Man*, that bombed. I did *Prelude To A Kiss*, that bombed. I did *Malice*, that might have made a couple of nickels. I made *The Shadow*, that bombed. I did *Heaven's Prisoners*, that bombed. It was a miracle I got that many trips to the plate." He casts around

for more failures with which to flagellate himself. "In 95, I did *The Juror*, that bombed. I did *Ghosts Of Mississippi* and *The Edge*, and both of them were very tepid. I had a hit movie and I had eight bombs in a row."

There are many reasons for this, Baldwin says, some of them in his control, others a matter of luck. One was bad advice. "I had agents who I trusted and admired and respected, and they had a very contemporary view of an acting career: that is, who the fuck knows what'll work now? No one can tell."

Another difficulty was his own nature; not that he was hard to work with, but that he didn't suck up to powerful producers and forfeited the advantage of having their "lips surgically attached to the buttocks". And then there was his personal life. Firstly, the Baldwins, a somewhat rascally clan from Long Island who, when Alec hit the big time, shot out a collective hand asking for money. "I had a business manager and he looked at the percentage of my income that was being siphoned off to help people in my family and he said to me, 'You remind me of you-know-who.' He was referring to Ryan O'Neal. Ryan was someone whose career was negatively impacted by having to go and get money because everyone in his family was sucking out of his canteen." As a result, he said yes to a lot of terrible projects. "People don't understand this; if you want to have a really good shot at succeeding, there are doors you have to slam in people's faces, and say, 'This is my priority and you can't depend on me to help you.' I was never good at that."

He makes a quick calculation: "And by the way, I know this sounds nauseatingly self-serving, like what a good guy I am, trying to imply that I tanked my film career so I could be of service to others." He quotes a line from *Lawrence Of Arabia*: "'The Turks pay me a golden treasure, yet I am poor, because I am a river to my people.' What I realise is, I am a river to my people." He starts to giggle. "And being a river to my people is not all that convenient to your career. The shit I did because I had to go get some short-end money."

Then there was Basinger, whom he married in 1993. After the birth of their daughter, Ireland, in 1995, Baldwin decided to take time out of his career and do the family thing. Basinger was shooting a film called *I Dreamed Of Africa* on location in Kenya: "And I went with her for three months. And I remember my agent said to me, 'Are you insane? You can't go to Africa with your wife and baby for three months!' He presented it to me like that was a turning point in my career."

Does he think it's true?

"I don't know. There's a chance. I don't know what's true or not. I did what I had to do."

Anyway, then in 2002 came the juggernaut of the Baldwin/Basinger divorce and the wheels really fell off. "That was very painful in so far as someone who I thought wasn't capable of a certain kind of behaviour wound up being the Marquis de Sade. That point of my life is a blur. I know exactly what



Photograph: Steve Schofield for the Guardian

projects I was doing from 1986 to 2000. And then from 2000-2006, during the Dien Bien Phu of my divorce litigation" - the "Tet offensive" as he has also called it, in another Vietnam analogy - "yes, I tried to give you a fresh reference; I can barely tell you what I did for those six years. It was a period that was so painful, I was staring off a cliff for six years."

Enough has been written about this period of Baldwin's life - the vicious divorce hearing and the battle for access to his daughter, Ireland, which punished and infuriated Baldwin so thoroughly he exploded in a series of angry voicemail messages on Ireland's phone - to satisfy the grimmest tabloid appetite. And few can fail to sympathise with the man; these things are messy and excruciating even when they're not played out in public. (They are also incredibly boring; Baldwin once said of Tina Fey that she's so smart, he worried he was boring her. Given how much it preoccupies him, I wouldn't be surprised.)

As part of the negotiations, he agreed to attend a course in anger management, a requirement that seemed only to make him more angry, and he's still feeling it. "It's not that I spent this ludicrous amount of money and didn't prevail. I went to court, and prevailed again and again, and we found out the hard way that the court's words aren't worth the paper they're written on." This is a condensed version.

All of which took its toll on his career. At some point in the mid-2000s, Baldwin realised something. "That rarefied place you want to get to as you get older - like Hanks - has eluded me. C'est la guerre. And you say I'm going to do other things; I'm going to do a television show."

Occasionally, Alec Baldwin wonders what would have happened if he had, in fact, achieved the success of a Leonardo DiCaprio - "a Kevin Costner or Mel or Hanks, who's had a bulletproof movie career?" (He's slightly obsessed with Hanks, whom he names as the one A-list star who "has had staggering success and is a happy guy".) Anyway, it wouldn't have worked out, he says, because "all the most wonderful things in my life happened after that. 30 Rock was fun; meeting my current wife was fun. Right now I could be living in a castle up in the Palisades, staring down from Xanadu like Charles Foster Kane." He does a good Orson Welles impression and says, "I wouldn't change a thing."

At this point, James Toback, who has been quietly working his way through a huge quantity of sushi, chips in with the reminder that the documentary they just made might also be considered a Baldwin career highlight. Baldwin agrees and they spend a jolly few moments bantering with each other like guests on a 50s talkshow. There's one niggle I have with the documentary: Neve Campbell, who appears briefly in the first half at a meeting with the two men in New York, is then trashed in the second half by various distributors and financiers. "I like Neve, but you cannot sell her," says one. Another says, "Neve Campbell is wonderful but doesn't have

marquee value." At one point, Jessica Chastain, Mila Kunis or Natalie Portman are suggested as alternatives. "We kill Neve," Baldwin says contemplatively. They suggest throwing her a bone in the form of a lesser role as the wife Baldwin divorces before going to Iraq. A bit harsh on Neve, I thought. It is never established to what extent the film project is real or a stunt, or whether Campbell is in on the joke.

"Well," Baldwin says, "Neve had the luxury, quite frankly, of being thousands of miles away, lying with her child in the bosom of her family while they were saying those things."

But nobody wants to hear themselves being bad-mouthed on screen.

"Well, we put up with it."

Toback says smoothly, "Maybe Neve's feelings were hurt with the way that played out. But that wasn't our intention. Everybody knows how the game is played."

Still, I would imagine she was slightly put out by all this.

"I wouldn't rule it out," Baldwin says, blandly.

So they haven't been in touch with her?

"I think she probably has mixed feelings," Toback says, and argues they didn't set her up in any way; just exposed the brutal realities of the industry. It doesn't seem to occur to either man that being honest and being thoughtless are not the same thing.

Baldwin clears his throat. "I want to finish this point," he says, "because it's potentially a sensitive subject about Neve. And that is, nothing was done with any malice." He looks triumphant.

Baldwin, of course, knows a lot about malice, to the extent that he gets quite cross if you presume even to understand what he's talking about. "I've made films that are overflowing with malice," he says, and when I murmur my assent, he snaps, "No. You don't know. You have no idea. Take your worst experience and multiply it by 10. There is no group of people who are more into fucking other people over unnecessarily and for sport than people in the movies."

Why?

"Because the non-creative people - there's a tremendous hatred of talent. They say, 'Why you and not me? My fortunes are dependent on whether I can get who I want to do my movie, and if I wind up with you instead, fuck you. I wanted Colin Farrell in this movie. You little shit.'"

To survive all of this, you have to have a good attitude, Baldwin says. "I think the greatest thing you can do in this business is have a great career, and have a good time along the way. And the only person I see doing that is Hanks."

An exception to the litany of Baldwin's bad experiences is 30 Rock, about which not even he has a bad word to say. "I was very grateful. I knew the show was funny. They were great lines and I think I found a way to play them. Very frantic, very fast. Don't give the audience time to think."

Which isn't, of course, to say he was happy while making the show. A few years in, it started to chafe

that it wasn't his show. "Meaning that I wasn't the producer; I wasn't the creator." He's not a writer, but never mind.

Baldwin had a certain licence; if a line mocking the father of someone his daughter was friends with came up, he could veto it. (He didn't abuse this freedom, "because it was so brilliantly written".) But "they never came to me and said, what storyline do you want? There was a period when I said to myself, what else could I be doing? It's Tina's show. I want to do my own show, which says what I want to say and about things I believe in."

Then he met Hilaria and changed his mind; suddenly the security of 30 Rock looked good. "I said to myself, I'm going to get married, I'm going to have a family, and this is the perfect job. I said let's bring it to nine seasons, like Friends. And Tina went the opposite direction; she had her second kid, and said I need a break. She's a very, very, very hard worker. To be head writer, the principal producer and the star of that show, and to have two kids? She said, I'm done; I'm burned out."

Baldwin is sanguine. He has other interests and even if the Iraq film doesn't go anywhere, he's in a good place, with appearances in two recent Woody Allen films and a part in a forthcoming Cameron Crowe film. They aren't leads; he's not Hanks. But as midnight approaches and he gets up to go home, he is, by his own standards, and for the time being, happy.

● Seduced & Abandoned is at selected cinemas, and screens on Sky Atlantic on 3 December.

Surveillance technology out of control, says Lord Ashdown

Former Lib Dem leader says it is time for high-level inquiry to address fundamental questions about privacy in 21st century

By Nick Hopkins and Matthew Taylor

The technology used by Britain's spy agencies to conduct mass surveillance is "out of control", raising fears about the erosion of civil liberties at a time of diminished trust in the intelligence services, according to the former Liberal Democrat leader Lord Ashdown.

The peer said it was time for a high-level inquiry to address fundamental questions about privacy in the 21st century, and railed against "lazy politicians" who frighten people into thinking "al-Qaeda is about to jump out from behind every bush and therefore it is legitimate to forget about civil liberties". "Well it isn't," he added.

Ashdown talks frequently to the deputy prime minister, Nick Clegg, and is chair of the the Liberal Democrats' general election team. Though he said he was speaking for himself, his views are understood to be shared by other senior members of the Liberal Democrats in government, who are also keen for some kind of broad inquiry into the subject.

This idea is also supported by Sir David Omand, a former director of GCHQ. He told the Guardian he was in favour of an inquiry and thought it would be wrong to "dismiss the idea of a royal commission out of hand". It was important to balance the need for the agencies to have powerful capabilities, and the necessity of ensuring they did not use them in a way parliament had not intended, Omand added.

Ashdown is the latest senior politician to demand a review of the powers of Britain's intelligence agencies - GCHQ, MI5 and MI6 - and the laws and oversight which underpin their activities.

In an interview with the Guardian, Ashdown said surveillance should only be conducted against specific targets when there was evidence against them. Dragnet surveillance was unacceptable, he added.

Ashdown made clear revelations in the Guardian about GCHQ and its American counterpart, the National Security Agency, had raised important issues that "could not be ignored or swept aside in a barrage of insults".

He also criticised the Labour party, which was in power when the agencies began testing and building many of their most powerful surveillance capabilities. Labour's former home secretary Jack Straw was responsible for introducing the Regulation of Investigatory Power Act 2000 (Ripa), which made the programmes legal.

"Ripa was a disgraceful piece of legislation," Ash-



Paddy Ashdown is the latest senior politician to demand a review of the powers of Britain's intelligence agencies and the laws and oversight which underpin their activities. Photograph: Adrian Dennis/AFP/Getty Images

down said. "Nobody put any thought into it. Labour just took the words they were given by the intelligence agencies. I don't blame the intelligence agencies.

"We charge them with the very serious business of keeping us secure and of course they want to have powers. But it's the duty of government to ensure those powers don't destroy our liberties and Labour utterly failed to do this."

One consequence of Labour's negligence was the development of surveillance techniques that could damage civil liberties and erode privacy, said Ashdown.

He said that he was "frightened by the erosion of our liberties" and while accepting that there was a need to keep the nation safe it was the "habit of politicians who are lazy about the preservation of our liberties or don't mind seeing them destroyed, to play an old game.

"They tell frightened citizens: 'If you give me some of your liberties, I will make you safer'".

Ashdown said that as a young man in 1960s he was taken to a vast Post Office shed in central London where spies were steaming open letters. Recalling being met by "a deep fog of steam" after entering the room, he said that the place was "filled with diligent men and women, each with a boiling kettle on their desk, steaming open letters". It was appro-

priate for the state to intervene in the private communications of its citizens, but the peer added "only in cases where there is good evidence to believe the nation's security is being threatened, or arguably, when a really serious crime has been committed".

The former party leader said that intercepting communications needed to be "targeted on an individual and not classes of individuals or, as at the moment, the whole nation" and argued that ought to be sanctioned by a third-party, preferably by a judge, or if not a member of the cabinet.

Ashdown said he did not believe Britain's intelligence agencies were out of control, but he said the same was not true of technology.

"We need a proper inquiry to decide what liberties and privacies ought to be accorded in the new interconnected world, and what powers of intrusion ought to be given to the state. The old laws that applied in the age of the steaming kettle will no longer do. The old protections are no longer good enough," he said.

Ashdown said the Guardian's reporting of the NSA files had been "helpful because it had raised this important issue to the point where sensible people understand this inquiry is now necessary".

An inquiry also needed to be set in the context of people's privacy expectations, he added, noting: "People today seem more casual about their privacy

A word from our developer team

than they used to be. They don't seem to mind when their privacy is breached when they use Google, Facebook and other social media."

He added that he hoped this had not "changed the public's attitude towards the state's power to intrude into their privacy" but argued this was the fundamental question that needed to be addressed.

Ashdown said he thought the agencies would welcome an inquiry too, saying that they "recognise the mechanisms are no longer sufficient" and he doubted whether such an exercise would be "inimical to the heads of the secret services".

The Lib Dem also dismissed the parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee, chaired by Sir Malcolm Rifkind, which is supposed to scrutinise the agencies.

He said that it was an institution "wholly incapable of coping" with the new circumstances.

Although he was careful to be respectful of its Conservative chair, Ashdown argued that "we are no longer in the age when a grandee's emollient words are enough to assure us that our liberties are safe" and concluded that the committee was "past its time".

Ashdown defended the Guardian's reporting of the issues over the last five months, and the paper's right to publish material that it deemed in the public interest.

He said: "I am not going to back every single thing the Guardian has done. But overall, in my view, the Guardian has done a very important job exposing a really important issue that must now be properly considered."

But he also criticised Edward Snowden, the former NSA contractor who leaked files to the Guardian, the Washington Post and Der Spiegel.

"When Snowden first broke cover, I had quite a lot of admiration for him. Here was a whistleblower breaking surface on an issue that is certainly important. But I have to say that the way he has behaved since has diminished that admiration enormously. It seems to me this is becoming more about vanity."

Meanwhile, Omand said the ISC had to be given a chance to review the work of the agencies in an inquiry that it announced last month.

"Much now depends first upon the ISC and whether their latest inquiry can rise above the current clamour to a calm and dispassionate examination of the capabilities needed to keep our people safe and secure, and at the same time, how public confidence can be maintained that under no circumstances could these powerful capabilities be used in ways that parliament did not intend."

Jonathan Hyde on product management and faith.

What is 'agile', and what does a product manager do? At its essence, agile is a mindset, an approach to building projects and products. The core belief is you will deliver better outcomes if you value your people over your process, communication over fixed plans and iteration over a big bang delivery.

Within this, the product manager, is the hinge, the pivotal point. They hold the tension, the balance and are the collective voice of the business, the user and the development team.

The Guardian builds its digital products using this approach. For the past year I have had the privilege of this role I have found some interesting parallels with my graduate studies - Applied Theology.

'Where there is no vision, the people perish' - Proverbs 29:19

Vision is, I believe, the most critical skill for both a Christian leader and also a product manager. The ability to be in amongst the trees but not blinded by them. The product manager must be able to see the destination clearly and inspire others to go with them on that adventure. The vision has to focus on how you will be making the lives of your users better through investing your time, energies and abilities building this product.

With upright heart he shepherded them and guided them with his skilful hand - Psalm 78:72

But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant - Matthew 20:26

The Bible uses the analogy of a shepherd when describing good leadership qualities. The shepherd is found not at the front, but rather at the back of the flock. They should know the terrain before they arrive and be ready to guide along the safest path. From that position they are perfectly positioned to spot when things go wrong. If your focus is only on the next goal you will miss when your team are struggling or need defending. The shepherd is prepared to shoulder a burden to keep the flock moving but also can run to defend when attack comes. The product manager carries the accountability and should deal directly with any criticism of the team but when success comes, should make sure the team are front and centre.

Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No' - Matthew 5:37

This one is simple - don't lie. Not to your team, users or stakeholders. Integrity is your bank account and delivery is your currency. When you need others to trust your decisions, you need to spend some of this currency. If you are discovered to be deliberately deceitful you will immediately bankrupt your authority.

A degree in Applied Theology usually leads to a role as a vicar or pastor of a church. Many of my friends from university are now leaders in Christian communities all around the world. My career didn't lead in that direction but I am now more grateful than ever of that training.

Jonathan Hyde

Product manager digital CMS

The Guardian

theguardian.com/profile/jonathan-hyde

Allegra McEvedy: Still cooking with Mum

Chef Allegra McEvedy's most treasured possession was her late mother's recipe book. Then it got irretrievably lost. As a mother herself now, she misses that potent symbol of a bond of love forged in the kitchen

By Amy Fleming

It is Monday afternoon and Allegra McEvedy – chef, writer, broadcaster, single mother – and I are holed up in a Clerkenwell pub in central London. "People accumulate a huge amount of stuff in their lives," she says, "but when they die, the things of value [to those left behind] are small and few. When one of those goes, for whatever reason, there is an element of that person being taken one step further away from you."

Allegra is telling me about her most prized possession: a tatty, orange plastic photograph album in which her late mother filed recipe cuttings. The book was divided into chapters, with titles that now sound amusingly retro, such as Hors D'oeuvres and Souffles, and it ended in, she says, "a big sea of hot puddings because that's what she really loved doing."

later transpired that her father, a doctor, had known his wife was unlikely to survive the surgery because of a blood condition, and even her older sister Flossy had greater awareness of the risks. But they wanted her mother to feel positive about her operation and so they wore brave faces. "I was completely sideswiped," says Allegra. Then followed what she refers to as her "wilderness years", during which she got kicked out of school and ended up "a mess" with a buzz cut and 16 holes pierced in one ear.



Home sweet home ... Allegra McEvedy in the kitchen with her daughter Delilah. Photograph: Sarah Lee for the Guardian

The recipes were cut out of newspapers and magazines; some were given to her mother by friends and, most important, some she had written out herself. For example, there were "quite a lot of very small recipes written on freezer labels in various colours that I used to enjoy," she recalls with a smile. "A bit like putting the Lord's Prayer on the back of a postage stamp."

Handwriting can take on magical, evocative powers after someone dies; a unique physical imprint they left on the world. "I still love finding little bits of her writing, and it's been 28 years now. The last shopping list she ever wrote is pinned next to my desk."

Allegra was 17 when her mother died unexpectedly during a liver transplant, so there had been no goodbyes or parting gifts. "It was not an outcome that was even on my radar at the time," she says. It

After she turned 21, and left home to start training as a chef, it was time to share out some of her mother's things. The family agreed that she should have the book. "Mum was a brilliant cook," she says. "And when I picture her, it is always in the kitchen, from breakfasts to lunches and tea – because I'd always bring friends back from school to supper."

It wasn't that her mother was chained to the kitchen, but she loved it there, as did the young Allegra, and that's where they spent time together.

Over the years, she communed with the book often, her fingers pressing into its familiar squishy, padded cover. She rarely cooked from it, apart from a few classic recipes, like the "never-fail" victoria sponge (a copy of which now hangs in a frame on her kitchen wall), but reading it would conjure up the taste of her mother's cooking. The book was more about their kitchen connection, "and the

memory of her using it. Knowing that she'd put those recipes in there, those were her handwritten notes in the margins. It reflected her attitude to food and triggered so many childhood memories of her referring back to this book when she was doing dinner parties. It was the 1970s, so everyone was doing dinner parties."

Allegra has few other things of her mother's. An old Ottoman wedding ring serves as a beloved wearable reminder. And she keeps her hand mirror in her bedroom, although she never uses it and it doesn't mean that much to her (she will give it to her daughter Delilah, now three). The only other thing is a Bible that was given to her mother at her confirmation by a great aunt, which contains inscriptions from three generations, documenting how it has been passed down through the family.

None of these other objects carries the emotional weight that the recipe book does. "The thing about the cooking is that it was just her and me," she says. "Flossy wasn't particularly interested in cooking. My mum loved cooking, I love cooking, and that's how I make my living now."

But six years ago, the book was lost. Allegra had reluctantly left it overnight with the editor of one of her cookbooks. She had looked the editor straight in the eye and said, "Do know that this is the biggest physical tie that I have left with my mum, and if my house was on fire it would be the first thing I'd pick up."

Understood, replied the editor, who tucked it under her desk overnight for safekeeping.

The next day, Allegra received a call to say that the office cleaners had mistaken the well-used, much loved book of cut-out recipes for rubbish and it was already floating down the Thames on a barge bound for landfill.

There was nothing they could do to save it. She screamed, shouted, swore and cried. "I felt sick, and had that prickly thing that happens when something truly shocking, awful and that you just weren't expecting happens," she shudders. "It was like going through all those stages of grief again," nearly 20 years after her mother's death.

Allegra's father had died a couple of years earlier and while she treasures a few of his things (his last notebook resides on her desk), no single object embodies his memory with such urgency. "When he died," she says, "I was 35 and it was a very completed relationship."

Her father spent the last five years of his life in the basement flat under her home. He died in his home office, which is now her office, so even though it has been redecorated she is surrounded by his memory. And he has a special link to Delilah, who was born just feet from where he died, five years later, rendering the prospect of ever moving house unthinkable.

Allegra, her mother and Delilah all look similar, a bittersweet reminder that her mother isn't around to be a grandmother. "It's a lonely thing, not having any parents," she says, "particularly when you have children." Her keepsakes from her parents soothe her when this gets her down. "Maybe it's because I'm a soppy cow," she says, "but they do help me."

She has worked hard not to allow the passing of time to erode her mother's memory, and still regularly dreams about her. "Some people lose their parents and seem to move on," she says, "but in some ways I've never really wanted to. I don't want my scars to heal. I've kept my mum close, I want to keep her alive in my mind, and I want to talk to Delilah about her." But the loss of the book made it feel like a little bit more of her has gone, only to be replaced by, she says, "an unquantifiable sadness that I can no longer go to it and have that moment".

Allegra McEvedy's new book 'Big Table, Busy Kitchen: 200 Recipes for Life' can be purchased through the guardian bookshop

Nigel Slater's Christmas side dish recipes

Classic accompaniments with a twist, including sausage, bacon and potato bake, salmon and beetroot rolls and sprouts in tempura batter
By Nigel Slater

As much as I love the Christmas roast, it's the accompaniments that really do it for me. Side dishes that complete the plate, such as brussels sprouts glistening with butter, roast potatoes, all crispness without and fluffy within, little sausages and the nutty stuffing. Good as the classics are, I don't want them for every festive meal, so here are a few suggestions for those who like their Christmas accompaniments as much as I do, but want to ring the changes with something a little different.



Brussels sprouts in wasabi tempura batter. Photograph: Jonathan Lovekin for Observer Food Monthly

Red cabbage with apple sauce

It wouldn't be Christmas without red cabbage. I usually add apple to mine, but this year I have made an apple sauce which I stir the cabbage into. A truly lovely accompaniment to beef, pork, ham or turkey.

Serves 6
cooking apples 2 large
star anise 3 whole
red cabbage a half
groundnut oil 2 tbsp
coriander seeds 10
juniper berries 8
cider vinegar 3 tbsp

Peel the apples, then core and cut them into large dice. Put them in a heavy-based saucepan with the star anise and 4 tablespoons of water and bring to the boil. Lower the heat and let the apple boil down to a slushy purée, taking great care it doesn't burn.

Finely shred the cabbage. In a separate pan, warm the oil, then add the sliced cabbage and let it cook, together with the coriander seeds and juniper berries, lightly crushed, stirring regularly till it is soft and bright in colour. Pour in the cider vinegar, let it sizzle then cover with a lid so the cabbage continues cooking in the steam.

Transfer the apple purée to the cabbage, stir gen-

tly together and serve.

Sausage, bacon and potato bake

Designed as a side dish, this also makes a fine main course in its own right.

Serves 6
floury potatoes such as King Edward 1kg
sausages 500g
smoked streaky bacon 16 rashers
butter 40g
sage leaves 4

Peel the potatoes, cut into roasting size pieces,

then boil in deep, salted water for 12-15 minutes or until almost tender.

Drain the potatoes, shake the pan gently, so the edges of the potatoes are softened - it will help them to crisp perfectly - then set aside.

Cut the sausages into short lengths, then fry them in a little oil in a non-stick pan so they are golden all over, then put them to one side. Set the oven at 180C/gas mark 4.

Butter a baking dish about 20x30cm. Place six of the rashers diagonally across the base, leaving small gaps between them.

Toss the potatoes and sausages together, then put them into the baking dish, flattening them into one layer where possible. Season them with salt and pepper, a little more butter, then tuck the sage leaves among them.

Place the remaining rashers of bacon, in a lattice pattern, over the top of the buttered potatoes.

Bake for 45 minutes to an hour, till the bacon is crisp and the potatoes are golden.

Salmon and beetroot rolls

Sausage rolls with a difference.

Makes 6 large rolls

salmon 400g
cooked beetroot 150g
creme fraiche 3 heaped tbsp
green peppercorns in brine 1 tbsp
puff pastry 325g
beaten egg 1, for brushing

Set the oven at 200C/gas mark 6. Remove and discard the skin from the salmon and cut the flesh into small dice. Finely dice the beetroot and mix with the salmon, creme fraiche, green peppercorns drained of their brine and a little black pepper and salt.

Put the pastry on a board with the long side facing you. Pile the filling along the bottom of the pastry, leaving a small border bare. Brush this and the rest of the edges of the pastry with beaten egg, then roll the pastry up from the bottom edge making a long, fat sausage.

Slice into 6 large rolls, brush the outside with beaten egg then cut a small hole or slit in the top of each. Bake for 20 minutes or so, till golden and sizzling.

Bloody Mary salad

The world-famous hangover cure becomes a crisp, refreshing salad. Great for cold turkey.

Serves 4-6
cucumber 300g
celery 300g
chestnuts cooked, 200g
chopped tomatoes 1 x 400g can
Tabasco sauce a half teaspoon
Oloroso sherry 2 tbsp
Worcestershire sauce 2 tbsp
fresh horseradish 3 tbsp, grated
celery salt 2 tsp
olive oil 3 tbsp
parsley 6 sprigs

Lightly peel the cucumber, remove the seeds and cut the flesh into small pieces. Trim the celery, saving a few of the leaves, then chop the ribs into small pieces. Warm the chestnuts in a shallow pan until they smell nutty, then crumble them and toss with the celery and cucumber.

In a blender, mix the tomatoes, Tabasco, sherry, Worcestershire sauce, horseradish, celery salt and olive oil to a thick dressing then toss with the nuts and vegetables. Pick the leaves from the parsley and add to the salad. Serve in bowls or glasses, with a sprig of celery in each.

Brussels sprouts in wasabi tempura batter

Crunchy batter, tender sprouts within.

Serves 6
plain flour 100g
sunflower oil 2 tbsp
sparkling mineral water 175ml
wasabi paste 2 tbsp or to taste
Brussels sprouts 500g
egg white 1
oil for deep frying

Sift the flour into a large bowl, add the oil, water and wasabi paste, then set aside. Trim the sprouts, then slice them in half. When the batter has rested, heat a deep pan of oil. Beat the egg white till almost stiff then fold into the batter mixture. Dip the sprouts into the batter, lift them out, then lower them, a few at a time, into the oil. Leave them to cook, turning them from time to time, for about 7 minutes until crisp and golden. Lift the fritters out with a draining spoon and put them briefly on to kitchen paper. Scatter over a little salt and serve them immediately, while they are still hot and crisp.

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Weighing up the virtues of long novels

Aristotelian poetics suggest that a big story is automatically better than a short one. Does his theory measure up?

by Richard Lea

I blame Proust, or at least last week's tributes to his massive achievement. But after waxing lyrical over the pleasures of a novel big enough to contain the world, I was brought up short by Aristotle's bold assertion in the Poetics that when it comes to writing, bigger is better.

He's talking about tragedy, which in SH Butcher's translation he defines as "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude". With the pioneering freshness that comes of exploring unmapped cultural territory, he's trying to establish from first principles how poets should construct what he calls "the soul of a tragedy" - the plot. Not only should a tragedy be complete, with an orderly arrangement of beginning, middle and end, he argues, but it must also "be of a certain magnitude", for beauty depends on both "magnitude and order" ...

"Hence a very small animal organism cannot be beautiful; for the view of it is confused, the object being seen in an almost imperceptible moment of time. Nor, again, can one of vast size be beautiful; for as the eye cannot take it all in at once, the unity and sense of the whole is lost for the spectator; as for instance if there were one a thousand miles long."

Of course each story takes its own time to tell, Aristotle continues, but providing that the length can "easily embraced by the memory ... the greater the length, the more beautiful will the piece be by reason of its size".

You might quibble with his reasoning - perhaps all he needs to appreciate a wider range of beauty are

the changes of perspective provided by, say, a microscope and a helicopter - or maybe you're unwilling to suppose a novel can be "embraced by the memory" as easily as a play, but let's suppose for a moment Aristotle's argument applies straightforwardly to a form which was invented two millennia after his death. Is he seriously suggesting, all things being equal, that Don Quixote's thousand-odd pages makes it simply better than Death in Venice's measly 72? Perhaps Cervantes's melons are a little too different from Mann's pears for any thing in such a comparison to ever be really equal, but do A Farewell to Arms's 300-plus pages see off The Old Man and the Sea, barely a third the length? Does Moby-Dick (600 or so) monster Billy Budd (less than 100), does Gravity's Rainbow (more than 900) destroy the comparatively minute The Crying of Lot 49? I'm the first to acknowledge the special pleasures of long-form fiction, but isn't this kind of aesthetic bean counting a little one-dimensional?

It's not hard to find writers who resist this kind of logic. For George Saunders "A novel is just a story that hasn't yet discovered a way to be brief," while Borges seems to suggest Aristotle's argument actually favours the short story, arguing that short fiction has the advantage because it "can be taken in at a single glance". For the novelist Ian McEwan - who made the 2007 Booker prize shortlist with his 166-page "full length novel", On Chesil Beach - the novella is "the perfect form of prose fiction ... the beautiful daughter of a rambling, bloated ill-shaven giant".

"The poem and the short story are theoretically perfectible, but I doubt there is such a thing as a perfect novel (even if we could begin to agree among ourselves on what comprises a good sentence). The novel is too capacious, inclusive, unruly,

and personal for perfection."

The novella, which according to McEwan has much in common with "watching a play or a longish movie", can at least be envisaged approaching perfection, "like an asymptotic line in co-ordinate geometry".

It's hard to imagine Aristotle settling for anything less than perfection, but perhaps he would suggest that if the short story, or the novella is capable of perfection then all the novelist requires is a little more elbow grease. After all, for Richard Ford the novel is "a lot harder to write ... Because they hold so much more stuff, and the stuff all has to be related and make one whole". He remembers debating the merits of short and long-form fiction with Raymond Carver:

"I used to say that a novel was a more important, a grander literary gesture than a story. And when Ray Carver would hear me say that he'd vigorously disagree, and then I'd always cave in. But he's gone now, and the fun's gone out of that argument."

Is a week in Paris more important than 24 hours in Chinook, Montana, if in Chinook "your life changes forever", he asks. "Forms of literature don't compete. They don't have to compete. We can have it all."

It's hard to see anything wrong with this 21st-century reasoning - maybe there's something suspect in trying to judge different works of art as objectively better or worse at all. But despite all that, despite the obvious absurdity of judging novels by their word count, I can't shake off the feeling that Aristotle's cultural exploration has unearthed some kind of valuable insight. Maybe the younger Richard Ford would agree.