Issue #6

Issue #6, now available!

2/11/2021  0 Comments
Hey everyone,

This week The Trail delivers to you four lovely articles for your reading pleasure.

Nicole Steinberg returns to contextualize Amanda Gorman's affecting spoken-word poetry at President Biden's inauguration with insights from student-body members. In case you missed it, Anny Schmidt gives you the scoop on Dr. Renee Simm's lecture on Arts and Afrofuturism. Regan Strauss reflects and retrospects on the significance of Obama's presidency in her youth. Finally, Logan Canada-Johnson leaves a scathing critique of Sam Levinson's new Netflix film, "Malcolm & Marie." In otherwords, it's something for everyone.

And that's The Trail: for everyone.

From the Heart,
Logan and the rest of backpackers on The Trail

Logan Canada-Johnson, Staff Writer, Film Analyst
Logan Canada-Johnson is a Communication Studies and Philosophy double-major from the East Bay, California. He primarily writes about film releases and film culture, but is also interested in philosophy. He performs a number of other roles on campus, including Campus Films Programmer, President of UPS Film Club, officer in Sigma Alpha Epsilon, and debater in Ethics Bowl. He plans on obtaining a Doctorate in Cinema Studies after his Bachelors.

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Malcolm and Marie burst through the door. Marie rushes off to the bathroom in a hurry as Malcolm sets the celebratory mood in the house with James Brown’s “Down and Out in New York City.” He generously pours himself a neat glass of whiskey and dances about the space with bravado and elation, sidestepping and twisting around the furniture like it were his dance partner. The shot cuts to a profile view of the massive wall-to-wall windows of the living room, where Marie enters and begins boiling some water. This sequence shot will last an impressive six minutes without the edit. But in the portent moment that Malcolm conspicuously announces, “I wrote and directed and premiered a movie that knocked the audience the fuck out tonight!” the joie de vivre fades and the vacuousness of this film is made apparent.
“Malcolm & Marie,” written and directed by Sam Levinson—the creator behind A24’s “Euphoria” on HBO and “Assassination Nation” (2018) and the son of esteemed director Barry Levinson—is an aggressively glib, vapid and tedious experience that enables the egocentricities of its director. It tracks a revealing night between a volatile couple, Malcolm (John David Washington) and Marie (Zendaya), as they quarrel following a film premiere for Malcolm’s new film. “Malcolm & Marie” itself has a unique backstory: it was filmed on a small budget of $2.5 million at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic and sold to Netflix after previewing at the virtual TIFF. Director Sam Levinson pulls from a personal story as the impetus of the film, that being him forgetting to thank his wife and co-producer Ashley Levinson when accepting an award. In “Malcolm & Marie,” Levinson catastrophizes the scenario into an epic argument à la Mike Nichols’ “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf” (1966) or John Cassavettes’ “Faces” (1968), but what those films have that “Malcolm & Marie” unquestionably lacks are interesting characters and expertly constructed melodrama.

The opening of the film is much of an allegory for the real tragedy of this film: Levinson’s awful script detracts from the beautiful cinematography, lighting and even his own direction. While the monochrome coloration of the film doesn’t serve any symbolic purpose, Marcell Rév’s cinematography utilizes the aesthetic effect to bathe the characters in shadows and capture the smoke. Levinson is no slouch
in the director's chair either. In a recent interview with "Deadline," Levinson said he took inspiration from the rivalry between boxers Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier for the way Malcolm and Marie argue. Similar to the way that many directors shoot boxing sequences, Levinson employs handheld close-ups of the actors during their torrid arguments. The young director often finds one or two angles that capture action optimally and sticks to them: clean and simple. Zendaya and John David Washington have outstanding chemistry and commit to their performances in earnest, nailing mannerisms that may feel forced when the camera is so focused on the face. However, no performance can deflect from the abysmal quality of the script.

To return to the first scene of the film. There are many creative ways that screenwriters use the visual medium or subtly employ dialogue to weave in narrative elements without telling us outright. This sustains or builds tension, keeps us questioning and maintains the immersion of the film-world. Spoon-feeding narrative information condescends to us what can possibly be inferred, demonstrating that the filmmaker doesn’t have trust in us doing any work. Much of “Malcolm & Marie” is written like this, straightforward as an interstate headed from West to East. Having watched the entire film, I can say that the first thirty minutes might as well be the entire film, repeating the following cycle: rising conflict, extended argument and intimate resolution, nearly all delivered in monologues by each character. The character of Malcolm appears to be a cypher for writer and director Sam Levinson to pontificate about the woes of being criticized, having his films analyzed and, most problematically, Black cinema being politicized. Within minutes of the film beginning, Malcolm is off to the races about why he’s not trying to “make a film for the three people in [his] media studies class that [he] respect[s].” He bemoans having “some white-ass writer making it about race ‘cause it’s fucking convenient.” Malcolm specifically calls out the “white girl at the L.A. Times” for giving him a “dumb-ass review” on his previous film; director and screenwriter Sam Levinson received a scathing review for his previous film from “L.A. Times” critic Katie Walsh. In itself a subtle jab at critics is harmless. Larry David wrote an episode in his series “Curb Your Enthusiasm” where a food critic who hates his restaurant ends up with broken thumbs (a nod to the bad reviews of his only feature film, “Sour Grapes”). However, Levinson mentions the white girl at the “L.A. Times” on no less than three separate occasions, including during a steamy conversation between the couple on Marie with the critic.
“This film tries to create a B-movie heightened dystopian reality where the gals get their violent comeuppance wearing matching chic vinyl trenchcoats, but the violence is all too nauseatingly real and unsettling. It’s an ugly exploitation of sexual violence in a hollow quest to indict the way our culture pathologizes female sexuality.”

- Katie Walsh’s review of “Assassination Nation,” 9/20/2018

By directly referencing reviews that Levinson received in real life and fixating on that critic throughout the film, Levinson effectively crosses the threshold into the diegesis of his own film and turns the subtextual critique of film criticism into a polemic against his dissenters. This is also what makes Levinson’s commentary on race so concerning. These are not Malcolm’s opinions on politicizing race in film, it’s Levinson’s. Who is Sam Levinson to know what the socio-political intentions of Black filmmakers in the films or to shout-down others who want to engage in the discourse on it? In one of Malcolm’s later self-aggrandizing monologues, he complains that a positive review that he has just received for his film is “fucking bullshit” because the critic makes assumptions about the meaning of it. According to Malcolm, the contradictions between who filmmakers are and the films that they make is mystical in nature, thus any criticism or analysis of that kind should be avoided. He then resorts to ad hominem attacks, yelling, “To box people in because you don’t have the love of film, because you don’t have the mind to critique the form, medium, technique. You don’t have the words to describe the fucking emotions,” and so on and so forth. Malcolm’s capriciousness and arrogance as a character is interesting and, ironically, ripe for analysis, but having established the precedent earlier that Levinson is going to insert his own opinions, it’s a thinly-veiled excuse for lame opinions.

“Malcolm & Marie” is a cultural touchstone as a film produced during the COVID-19 pandemic (and fortunately does not capitalize on its existence; e.g. “Songbird”), but as a film, it’s a flacid exercise in a filmmaker vicariously expatiating their personal woes. TLDR: first-world problems.
Logan Canada-Johnson, Staff Writer, Film Analyst

Logan Canada-Johnson is a Communication Studies and Philosophy double-major from the East Bay, California. He primarily writes about film releases and film culture, but is also interested in philosophy. He performs a number of other roles on campus, including Campus Films Programmer, President of UPS Film Club, officer in Sigma Alpha Epsilon, and debater in Ethics Bowl. He plans on obtaining a Doctorate in Cinema Studies after his Bachelors.

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Featured: Prof. Renee Simms on Arts and Afrofuturism

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Written by Anny Schmidt, Staff Writer.

In honor of Black History Month, Renee Simms kicked off the AFAM department’s weekly lectures by giving a talk on the arts and afrofuturism. She was joined by four other faculty members to share in their views on afrofuturism: professors Tulu Taiwo, Wind Woods, Regina Duthely and Gwynne Brown.

Professor Simms poses the question of what the word afrofuturism means. Afrofuturism was coined in 1993 by cultural critic Mark Dery. Simms highlighted speculative fiction that treats African-american concerns in the context
of twentieth-century technoculture … might, for a want of a better term, be called ‘Afrofuturism.’”

Simms then went on with the opening question: “Why do so few African Americans write science fiction, a genre whose close encounters with the Other—the stranger in a strange land—would seem uniquely suited to the concerns of African American novelists?” Simms went on to mention how in 1994 there were only four Black, English language speaking science fiction novelists, and that there were only a few mentions of afrofuturism before the 21st century. These mentions include a book published in 1952 called “Invisible Man” by Ralph Ellison, in 1974 the “Space is the Place” film and various album covers from the 1970s and 80s, including Afrika Bambaataa’s “Planet Rock.” More modern examples of afrofuturism in popular culture would include the 2018 film “Black Panther.”

Simms added that afrofuturism has a part to play in activism. An example of this was a billboard with the words: “There are black people in the future.” This quote became popular and was printed on t-shirts and other sources of media.

Following Professor Simms' main lecture, she turned the lecture over to the four speakers, the first being Taiwo who discussed Octavia Butler's book “Octavia's Brood.” Butler is a speculative fiction writer who has written over twenty novels and short stories and mentors Black speculative fiction writers. Taiwo calls her a “seer of patterns.” One quote from Taiwo's lecture was by Walidah Imarisha regarding Octavia Butler: “[Octavia] wanted to be one of thousands of folks writing themselves into the present and future. We believe in that right Butler claimed for each of us—the right to dream ourselves, individually and collectively. But we also think it is a responsibility that she handed down: are we brave enough to imagine beyond the boundaries of ‘the real’ and then do the hard work of sculpting reality from our dreams?”

Woods who showed the group some videos on Sammus spoke next. Following Woods was English professor Duthely who went back to discussing Octavia Butler. She mentioned two works of Butler's that she loves, the “Parable of the Sower” and the “Parable of the Talents.”

Following Duthely was the last speaker, Professor Gwynne Brown of music. She talked about Janelle Monae's song Q.U.E.E.N. which features singer...
Erykah Badu. Q.U.E.E.N. stands for Queer, Untouchables, Emigrants, Excommunicated, Negroid. Brown went on to play the six minute music video of this song, prompting many of the audience in the lecture to comment on how much they love Monae.

The lecture ended with a short Q&A with Professor Simms asking the audience the question “What is your one big takeaway from afrofuturism?” Some members of the audience answered that afrofuturism is not just a fantasy. Lots of work needs to be put into it and we as a collective can do this work. Another future is possible.

*Anny Schmidt, staff writer*

*Anny currently writes for the The Trail.*

On a crisp morning on January 20th, politicians gathered outside for the inauguration of President Biden. Just 14 days earlier, pro-Trump rioters took the capitol some fully armed, others clad from head to toe patriotic garb, to protest the results to the election. The pews on the white house steps, normally filled with watchers, were sparsely populated with members of Congress, past presidents and their families, all dressed in bold blue and royal purple to signify the so contested transfer of power.

Gorman's yellow coat was eye-catching as she took to the stage as the first youth laureate to perform at an inauguration. Her powerful performance of an original piece “The Hill We Climb” touched millions of Americans and all share to acknowledge and
reconcile with a country that was founded on violence, but to have the courage to work towards a more equitable future.

Gorman’s poem told a story about the challenges and hardships we have faced as a country, but ultimately the resilience and the hope for a better future that will push the country forward. She acknowledges the many lineages that make up America, the inescapable history of violence against Black and Brown Americans perpetuated by the state, but also the undying ability to change.

Poetry has its roots in activism. Spoken word in the U.S. had its beginnings in the Harlem Renaissance where great poets and activists such as Langstone Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston wrote their experiences as Black Americans in the beginning of the 20th century. During the Civil Rights Movement, spoken word reemerged as a tool for activism that was memorialized by speeches made by Dr. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X that became extremely influential in the fight for liberty of Black and Brown Americans around the world. In the 1990s, Spoken word poetry had gained a world following and an entire subculture emerged around open mics in coffee shops and on college campuses.

“Poetry has always been about making history. More than anything, poets and writers are historians. I get to write about these things right now, as they are happening. I tend to write when I can’t make sense of the world. It helps ground me and center me. And then I can put my writing out there, and hopefully help other people with that.”

–Asha Nahas 22’

The form [of spoken word poetry] itself is a departure from the sometimes rigid boundaries that are placed on other forms of writing. The accessibility of spoken word poetry and emphasis on community explains its popularity in the 1960s and then the 1990s when the country experienced social movements-- against systemic racism and the move towards global capitalism that stratified society-- that brought people together in a resistance of the individualistic and capitalist norm.
world. I am a mixed race bisexual woman, so I write a lot of identity based poetry. For people like us, just existing is activism, the only thing I would say is just write. It’s the hardest thing in the world, but just write. --Asha 22’

Nicole Steinberg, Staff Writer

Hi I’m Nicole! I’m a current senior writing from Tacoma! I am passionate about local and student art and events in the Tacoma and the South Sound, gender and sexuality, and history. I hope to write nonfiction and historical narratives. After school, I’m taking a break from the doom and gloom of WA and working at an outdoor camp in Colorado.

Happy Reading!

Op-Ed: Having A Black Man as My Childhood President

2/11/2021  0 Comments

Written by Regan Strauss, Staff Writer.

When Barack Obama went into his first office term, I was 11 years old. He left when I was 19. When our parents talk about who their president was, I was extremely proud to say Obama was mine. I was a white, middle class kid who lived on the westside of Los Angeles so having a black president was a huge deal. It was a huge deal for everyone, but I think especially for white people who were not used to having someone of color be the highest authority you are essentially taking orders from on a daily basis.

Even though I lived in a very progressive, diverse area, having a president of color shape me into the person I am
That all changed when the media blew up across the nation that Obama wasn’t an American and all his records would be investigated (when in fact he was clearly born in Hawaii in 1961, when Hawaii became a state in 1959). I lived a pretty sheltered life in terms of inequality. Racial injustice definitely happens in L.A. and we learned about it all the time in school, but this was the first time I saw racism and discrimination in realtime, not in a history book. Even as a child, I knew it was ridiculous. If he was born here, he’s American, but I was given the harsh reality that a majority of Americans to this day don’t believe that. There can be only two reasons why he was targeted: He’s black and he has a Middle Eastern middle name (Hussein, which means “good/handsome/beautiful” in Arabic).

It took me until 2013 to see that racism was nowhere near over and that makes Obama’s presidency that much more important. After him, Donald Trump was elected, the ultimate antithesis of Obama and everything he stood for. That cemented for me as an adult that even though we had eight years of many changes and forms of healing, it could all go away in a second because unrest still trembles beneath the surface.

Apart from being the first president of color, he was also the first president to take women and LGBTQ+ issues head on and not just mere PR and campaign trail promises. People from all different backgrounds with young, impressionable followers—like Tyler Oakley (a gay man), Ingrid Nilsen (a white/Asian American gay woman), Bethany Mota (a Mexican/Portuguese decent woman), etc.—interviewed him and he and Michelle always seemed to listen intently and soak it in (which our past president did none of, he just blah blah blahed his whole way through).

Obama was nowhere near perfect and I didn’t know all his policies so there were probably
only people in politics that, if I bumped into on the street, would talk to me and nod at or down to me and I would feel at home. Of course I would geek out, but I never saw him as anything more than a human like me who happened to go by the highest title for eight years. He, and other people of color who were authorities in my childhood, taught me to give respect to someone regardless of skin color. If someone has the best of intentions, does their job, and cares for others, you must show them respect. Obama must have taught that to a lot of people who grew up with a majority of white figureheads or in a white-centric city. To think of someone else other than myself (white people do that too much anyway), it had to have been glee-inducing for kids of color to see someone who looks like them be given the greatest honor and be in a place of power no Black person had been in (now it’s happened again with Kamala Harris). He must have been an inspiration for those who thought they couldn’t do something great because of how they look. I could only imagine what that would have felt like as someone of privilege.

Despite all the good I think Obama did for this country in breaking new ground and challenging preconceived expectations, many were not swayed in the slightest. Most of my extended family, for example, hated Obama and voted for Trump. They bashed his healthcare plan (which had plenty of flaws, but was the first genuine attempt to get universal health care FOR ALL), the fact that he went by the label “liberal”, and though they wouldn’t like to admit it, the fact that he didn’t look or sound like them. Many people say he didn’t do anything or that he made everything worse. Those who say that are basically saying: “He didn’t do everything, so he did nothing.” Most presidents had that pressure on their backs, but Obama, being unlike any
either by those who needed all those changes to prove a racist society wrong or to prove a point that being different isn’t the way to success. It probably isn’t all chucked up to race because humans are more complicated than that, but even if subconsciously, elements of it are there.

Obama showed in office that mass positive change is possible, but once out of office that electing one Black president wasn’t enough to undo centuries of oppression, misunderstanding, fear, and hatred. Even while he was in office in 2013 the Black Lives Matter movement stormed to life in response to decades of police brutality.

One Black man in office didn’t stop this tragedy, but it made sure it was on everyone’s minds and stayed there. It came to a head again in 2020, but if there hadn’t been a black president, would the first round have lasted as long as it did or made as much of an impact? Having a Black president meant we could no longer forget about racial issues and our disgusting, ugly past with it. Obama opened many doors for this country to face race, gender, and sexuality issues by having the guts and decency to allow the actual torch holders access to what’s usually the most exclusive house (the whitest house is no longer just white). In the end, it was and still is up to us to pry open those re blotted doors, storm through them, and keep them from closing again. Kamala Harris being the first female and person of color as Vice President is one way to make sure that happens. But what else will we do to keep that legacy going after the damage of the past four years?
Regan Strauss, staff writer for The Trail

I am an English Major with a Creative Writing Emphasis. I'm in LA, California this spring 2021 where I was born and grew up. I am interested in writing about a majority of social issues (Frankly too many to list), music, and movies through this publication. Might get a graduate degree in creative writing (undecided). I want to be a professional freelance writer who focuses on poetry, short stories, and opinion/research essays after I graduate.