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Hi, my name is Dr Tom Bamford-Blake, and I'm here to talk about the film *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night*, directed by Anna Lily Amirpour and released in 2014.

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I've provided some content notes for this lecture and for the film, which you can have a look at if you pause the screen here. And a general note about this lecture: I'm going to be showing some quite long quotations on the screen, which I won't go fully into because I want to cover as much as possible, but you can pause the screen and read through the quotations if you want to explore further, which I encourage you to do.

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So a bit of context first. Anna Lily Amirpour is a British-American director of Iranian descent and *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night* was her first film. The dialogue is in Farsi, the official language of Iran, and the cast is mostly of Iranian descent. But the film was filmed in California; it would not have been possible to film it in Iran owing to restrictions on filmmaking in that country. So *Bad City*, the film's setting, is implicitly in Iran but also a kind of non-place. And this sense of placelessness, something you can't quite place in either the US or Iran, is something I'll get into later.

It's a really rich and complex film, with a lot going on in terms of character, cinematography and use of music, but I'm going to focus today on these broad themes - transgression, orientalism and contemporary Iranian politics – and I'll explain why those are relevant as we go along.

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So what is transgression? According to Lane Neeper, transgression 'violates conventional moral boundaries and social proprieties which are culturally sanctioned'. So 'propriety' here means a broadly agreed on sense of what is right, correct or acceptable. So transgression is about going beyond these boundaries of what's considered acceptable in society.

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Transgression is often associated with the horror genre, with figures such as the vampire representing something that lies beyond the human, something that is dangerous. At the same time horror is often associated with something horrific which we also consider desirable. Thus the appeal of horror cinema: why do we enjoy these films?

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Georges Bataille, the mid-twentieth century French writer, argues in this quotation that we are drawn to things that horrify us and that fiction provides us with a space to explore things we would not be able to handle in real life: situations of violence, suffering and so on.

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And we can see this alignment of horror and desire, in, again, the figure of the vampire; Dracula often being seen as a figure who has a kind of charisma and desirability, and more recently the *Twilight* series has generated a lot of opinions about the idea of desiring the vampire.

So the film is transgressive simply by being a horror film and exploring these themes of violence and monstrosity.

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At the same time it also transgresses some of the conventions of the horror film by presenting us with a female vampire who is not a passive suffering victim but rather a predator in her own right.

Now, it's not by any means the first horror film to do this. It's an example of what Barbara Creed calls 'the monstrous feminine,' which refers to 'what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific[.]' And Creed here is talking about sexist and misogynist traditions that see any aspect of women that goes beyond stereotypes of women as passive, gentle and so on as monstrous and terrifying. And she wants to criticise this tendency to label women as monstrous when they transgress those boundaries. But she also perhaps wants to see some possibility for empowerment for women in there. The figure of The Girl is both transgressing some horror conventions around gender and also continuing this tradition in the horror film.

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Another aspect of transgression in the film I want to discuss is transgression of national and cultural boundaries. As I mentioned before, set in some version of Iran but filmed in California, the film breaks down the barriers between what might be seen as very different cultures of the US and Iran, by bringing in, for example classic Hollywood imagery such as the iconic figure of James Dean whose appearance is echoed in the figure of Arash.

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We also see the use of Western or cowboy imagery with the character of Rockabilly, who we see on the left. We should also note that Rockabilly is a queer-coded character, which means that not only are national boundaries being blurred but also some boundaries of gender or sexuality are potentially being transgressed. So, if we take all this together, we might say that the introduction of Americanised imagery as well as the playing with gender roles that we've seen, is representing a possibility for liberation beyond the restrictions placed on women in Muslim countries such as Iran. However, it might be a bit more complicated than that.

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And we can explore this further by looking at what Edward Said refers to as Orientalism, which for our purposes can be understood as a tendency for Western cultures to see Asian and Middle Eastern countries in a reductive, stereotypical way. The way in which the West engages with Muslim countries today is often seen through this lens of Orientalism, with Muslim countries being stereotyped as backward, primitive and repressive.

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Also relevant here is Gayatri Spivak's sarcastic deployment of the phrase 'White men are saving brown women from brown men, and what she's getting at here is the idea of a kind of Western white saviour complex whereby Middle Eastern and Asian women are always seen as being passive victims in need of being saved from patriarchal structures. And again this plays out in western perceptions of Muslim countries and ideas of Muslim women needing to be saved from oppression.

And so where we might have seen the film's presentation of gender as transgressing restrictions placed on Muslim women, the thoughts from Spivak and said might invite us to look at things in a more nuanced way.

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So let's look for example at the way the film presents skateboarding. The fact that the girl is also a skater adds yet another level of incongruity towards what we might expect from her character.

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However, a quick Google search shows us that there is actually a skateboarding culture in Iran, including young hijabi women who skate. And so the idea that skateboarding would be something inherently foreign, inherently transgressive to Iranian norms, can be challenged.

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Megan Goodwin gets into this further in her article 'When the Vampire Looks,' and she makes points about the ways in which the girl's monstrosity transgress some ideas of what she calls the 'good Muslim trope' and also talks about how the film enables us to look at the way that Western stereotypes have presented Muslims in general as monstrous. She concludes that 'This Girl who walks home alone at night is not vulnerable or weak. She is not in need of saving.'

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And for some further examples of Muslim women who are trying to save themselves, we might say: on the left, an example of a protest opposing the enforced hijab-wearing in Iran coming from the government, and these protests took place a few months ago. And on the right we also have a march against a proposed French law banning women under 18 from wearing the hijab in public. So in both cases we have, I think, women asserting their autonomy regarding whether or not to wear hijab without being forced either way. And so we see examples here of Muslim women who cannot be reduced to a stereotype of passive victims who need to be saved.

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And so if we apply these ideas around transgression, Orientalism and femininity back onto the film we can see how the figure of The Girl exceeds all restrictions placed on the idea of a Muslim woman from any side, refusing to be either a passive victim or a stereotype of a Muslim. And so I've enumerated here the different levels of transgression that I've argued are taking place in the film and how they interact with each other.

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If you pause the screen I've given a list of questions arising from my lecture to start your class discussion about the film.

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And on this slide and the next, a list of the works I've cited in the lecture so you can explore further in your own time.

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Thanks for watching and hope you have a good class discussion.