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Hidden persuaders on film: Exploring young people's lived experience through visual essays

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Abstract

The Hidden Persuaders research group examines 'brainwashing' in the Cold War for the roles, real and imagined, played by psychologists, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts. Our project engaged young people in an exploration of the history of fears about brainwashing, and enabled them to explore their thoughts and ideas about the forces that shape their lives in contemporary society, through film-making. Working with three schools in the Camden area of London, our partners at the Derek Jarman Lab media hub, Birkbeck, University of London, and an artist facilitator (Lizzie Burns), we invited Year 12 students to learn filming and editing to create their own short video essays. The use of this format resulted in a significant depth of engagement and generated a wealth of creative responses. The various stages of the film-making process enabled the students to work out the terms of an argument and to consider how best to express it concisely. In the resulting films, they came up with a variety of forms of visual storytelling, and used the medium to express their thoughts, feelings and ideas in diverse ways, giving us a range of new perspectives which we could consider in relation to our historical research.

Keywords: film, visual essay, lived experience, brainwashing, history

Key messages

- The use of 'visual essay' films as a method of engagement enabled young people to explore the research topic and respond with representations of their own lived experience.

- Using the history of ideas of brainwashing from the Cold War provided an opportunity for young people to explore their own social influences in an 'outside' space. This work in turn reoriented our own thinking, and provided interesting perspectives about young people's ideas about personal identity, conformism, education, the challenges of social media and other aspects of their own social worlds.

- Teachers valued the opportunity provided to school students to engage with university academics and film-makers, and the insights the teachers in turn also gained from their students about the challenges they face amid new modern forms of 'hidden persuasion'.

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Introduction

The term 'brainwash' was coined in 1950 amid intensifying Western concerns that communist states were indoctrinating their prisoners, as well as wider populations, during the Korean War. It soon expanded in scope, and the term came to be applied in many different domains of life, at home and abroad. It is still widely invoked in political discourse and culture. Cold War-era ideas about brainwashing, covert influence, indoctrination and mind control still shape in myriad ways contemporary perceptions, cultural responses, government policies, mental health initiatives and critiques of online advertising campaigns.

From 2014 to 2021, the Wellcome Trust-funded project Hidden Persuaders set out to explore a wide spectrum of ideas about brainwashing in science, politics, culture and commerce over the last seventy years, and to consider the role of the 'psy' professions in that history. Our research project explored legacies of this postwar history by mapping the key texts and archives analysing stories and reports about hidden persuasion in media narratives, scientific experiments, 'moral panics', therapeutic discussions, medical conferences and policy debates. We sought to identify the implicit beliefs and images that informed the language of politics and psychology in Cold War times, and today, in the idioms we use to describe, *inter alia*, the hidden dimensions of group interaction, technology, propaganda and power.

A wider goal of the research programme has been to enable public conversations and to engage a variety of different constituencies, outside the academy, in debate about these crucial issues. In 2017, the Wellcome Trust awarded us an enrichment grant to further public engagement with the research project. The engagement project was devised by the present authors, Daniel Pick and Sarah Marks, with guidance and advice from Mary-Clare Hallsworth, then Head of Public Engagement at Birkbeck, University of London, UK.

The engagement project was designed to facilitate exchange of ideas about the nature of influence and hidden persuasion in everyday life and experience. This was a single case study based on a small sample of young people in three schools in the Camden area of London. It was a new approach to public engagement for us; previously our public-facing activities had focused on collaboration with film-makers, museum curators and radio producers as a means to disseminate our findings, along with a website hosting interviews and blog posts featuring current research in the field. This school-based work, by comparison, sought to build relationships between researchers, teachers, schools, their students and our partners in film teaching at Birkbeck, combining our collective knowledge and experience. We aimed: to provide a learning experience for the students to which they would not otherwise have access; to enable young people to explore their own lived experiences of the project themes; and to enrich our own historical and cultural inquiries, and our understanding about how vocabularies from the past may be transmitted, translated or transformed over time. In short, we were interested in the legacies of that Cold War history and language now.

This article thus explains the particular public engagement project, situates it alongside previous work of comparable type, and describes our approach and some of the insights we gained from the young people's accounts. It also offers some practical details, the 'nuts and bolts' that may be of use to other researchers who pursue this approach in future. This account is complemented by a short film available online at www.bbk.ac.uk/hiddenpersuaders/outreach/.

Context and approach to public engagement

The design of this public engagement programme was based on a number of considerations. We sought to invite young people's reflection on how storytelling itself can operate as a form of persuasion and influence, benign or otherwise. We wanted to convey to the groups with which we worked something of the history of debate about brainwashing, the resources available to analyse such processes, and an awareness that these debates and social anxieties about hidden influence have always, in part, been mediated by film, television and, more recently, the internet – in short, by the screen. Thus, to invite our participants to use audiovisual means (rather than the traditional essay form) was also an invitation to reflect on the impact of sound and image, and, more widely, of contemporary technologies, in shaping perceptions.

We were keen to explore, for instance, how wary are they about the misuses of 'psy' expertise, or claims by 'experts' to possess authority? What kinds of networks of power and knowledge do they discern, and fear? To what degree do they feel themselves to be enmeshed in hidden webs of persuasion, conspiracy and influence, and how concerned are they about the exploitation of conspiracy theory in political discourse? What is their own understanding of the reach of advertising, and transformations in that industry, made possible by the digital age? What apprehensions might they have today about the future of liberal democracy?

We were also interested to engage young people in exploring a theme that, from the beginning, also made the malleable mind of the young its focus: brainwashing literature and film, in and after the 1950s, often revealed the anxieties of commentators about the suggestibility of infants, children and adolescents, and the deleterious consequences such vulnerability to brainwashing might pose for the future of society.

We had previously spoken to teachers at each of the three schools to see which areas of the curriculum might resonate best with the project. It was soon clear that a number of obvious and more subtle connections could be drawn with their work in history, politics, literature, psychology, philosophy, art, media and so on. Students and teachers related the material we shared, for example, to dystopian literature in English, such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World*. History syllabus content introduced students to cognate questions about propaganda and ideology in the totalitarian states of the twentieth century. There were also obvious links to be drawn with material in their politics classes, for example about the question of data harvesting (much publicized in the case of a notorious and now defunct company, Cambridge Analytica), electoral bias and the power of the vast companies such as Facebook that operate 'social media'.

In designing this work, we were inspired initially as well by other research endeavours we had encountered that had a public engagement component. For example, we had noted the work of the Wellcome-funded Sex & History project at the University of Exeter, which had previously used historical objects as a means of facilitating sex education classes. This group found that using objects, sources and stories from history, which were at a certain remove from young people's own personal experience, gave students material to draw upon which helped them to feel more comfortable discussing sensitive topics, especially in front of peers and teachers, as well as visitors that they did not know well (http://sexandhistory.exeter.ac.uk/about/). In participatory practice, these particular objects, around which conversation happens, can be referred to as 'social objects' (Simon, 2010). For example, it is often said that people in Britain like to use the weather as a social object, a third presence, to direct attention and make interpersonal engagement more comfortable, without any obvious intrusion.

The stories that films and newspapers tell can be personal or general, reassuring or provocative, but they have the benefit perhaps of being at one remove. They actively direct attention to a potentially shared third space, a means by which people then naturally talk about a film's content, perhaps also using debate about that story as a foil for exploring other attitudes, or learning more about each other's approach. On reflection, in this project too, we can see the degree to which we were using our research materials and the Derek Jarman Lab's own powerful film on advertising (Dziadosz, 2021) as 'social objects' to generate this kind of space, to stimulate conversation between the students, and with us, enabling them to explore shared beliefs, assumptions and fears, and to work together creatively to express those personal ideas and concerns, without feeling too intruded upon.

Our project sits among a considerable existing body of work on participatory film-making with young people. Most immediately, we were aware, for example, of Melissa Butcher and Luke Dickens's (2015) work. These geographers had facilitated young people's films on identity and urban space in the London Borough of Hackney, creating a project that reflected on their ideas of space, home and urban transformation. This was of obvious relevance, not least because of the similar age range of the participants (hackneyashome.co.uk).

As Alicia Blum-Ross (2017) has noted, participatory film projects are often oriented towards 'critical media literacy' through laying bare the film-making process (Goodman, 2003; Cannon et al., 2018; Connolly, 2008). For us, too, the visual essay was to prove a useful vehicle, both as a means of expression and as an object of study. By working with young people through each step in the creation of a film, from the conception of the idea, through scripting, filming and editing, we intended to open up a conversation with them about the medium of film, and its multiple uses – for example, for entertainment, engagement, diversion, influence and persuasion. The medium also facilitates in obvious ways a process where different voices can coexist and can appear in any number of combinations.

We were also mindful of previous reflections on the pitfalls of this method: projects with perhaps naive hopes to use film as a transparent 'window' onto the views of the film-makers, or as a vehicle that ensures a mode of expression, free from the constraints of, for example, the school-based A-level essay. Blum-Ross (2017: 15) has noted the limitations of projects which intend to empower young people to engage critically through film, citing examples where students, perhaps with insufficient critical reflection, recapitulated mainstream formats such as music videos. While a number of our participants did use this form – even featuring favoured songs, or composing and performing music of their own – these still functioned, we contend, as striking, and sometimes unexpected and personal, visual essays, which conveyed a clearly articulated argument about their chosen theme.

We will discuss two particular cases in more detail below. While many of the students fed back that they better understood the power of film after the project, we are cautious about the claim that these film-making workshops empowered the students towards a 'critical media literacy'. Instead, the project would be better framed as a supplement to the critical understandings they were gaining elsewhere, including in some of their studies, and as a two-way process of sharing reflections and knowledge about the medium, which included learning and making new connections on our part as well. The enterprise perhaps raised more questions than answers. Nonetheless, for a considerable number of the participants, it clearly resonated and offered a means of exploration, both in relation to other schoolwork, and the concerns of students in their social and personal lives.

Figure 1: The student journey through the project

Initial assembly workshop
History/ideas workshop
Film Workshop Day 1
Self-directed time for additional filming
Film Workshop Day 2
Self-directed time for additional filming
Film Workshop Day 3
Film screening event

Some students who were familiar with the A-level media studies syllabus, for instance, were able to relate this practical experience to concepts from Stuart Hall's (1973) audience reception theory, or the use of eye-tracking research to design 'Z-pattern' print layouts for drawing in the viewer's attention (Bradley, 2011). Others offered powerful and highly personal depictions of their own anguish, saturated by idealized cultural images of perfect bodies and models, and then of the feelings they might have, waking up each day and staring in the mirror – the sense that they somehow did not match up to some required, constraining and ultimately impossible version of themselves. That sense of vast pressure, bombarded with idealized images, featured very notably in some of the films.

Methodology

Our engagement programme took place over two years, with two cohorts of Year 12 students from each of the schools with which we worked (see Figure 1). Students attended an initial assembly on the project, followed by an 'ideas workshop' for a self-selected group at each school. They then went on to complete a course of three film-making workshops held at weekends over the course of their summer term. The project ended with a film screening of all the films completed that year, where students presented their films to peers from their own and other schools, as well as school staff, the research and film teams, parents and others.

We chose to work with Year 12 students following the guidance of their teachers because these students are:

- more likely than those in Year 11 (GCSE) or Year 13 (A level) to have the time adjacent to their studies for additional activity
- at an age where exploring ideas of self and identity, in relation to social pressure and influence, may well be of personal interest

- old enough (16 years and over) to have a certain level of autonomy and freedom to choose to participate, and to be able to travel independently around London for workshops
- well placed to make links between our themes and the subjects they have already selected to study (usually three or four A-level subjects, rather than the larger required number of GCSEs)
- at a stage of life when they may well be intent upon interrogating the world around them, and alert to the impact of images and sounds, in sophisticated ways
- at a point in their studies when they are starting to think seriously about what comes next (for example, university, jobs or further training), and so likely to gain especially from the outreach experience.

Ethics and inclusivity

We realized that the summer term of Year 12 would be the best time to host the workshops, as students do not have to sit A-level examinations until the following year. This was the least disruptive part of the academic timetable in which to hold intensive film training courses. We worked with the teachers to ensure that the project was open to young people from as diverse a range of backgrounds and abilities as possible, and that it was not presented as an opportunity primarily or exclusively for those deemed by the schools to be especially gifted and talented students.

We also consulted carefully with the schools about issues relating to informed consent. The teachers were quick to assert that the students, who were 16 years old and over, had the right to give consent themselves, as they had the capacity to decide whether they wished to have their films made available in public, alongside their names as creators, and to have photographs of themselves included in online material about the project. Therefore, instead of using the university's standard consent form template for research studies, we tailored the consent form for the purposes of the public engagement process, with the teachers' guidance. The students opted to have the films associated with their names from the point of view of claiming creative ownership. They are duly credited as the film-makers on our website. However, we have chosen not to identify particular students in this article, which seeks instead to give a summary of the process as a whole.

Role of the Derek Jarman Lab

The Derek Jarman Lab at Birkbeck, University of London took on the major role of training the students in key aspects of audiovisual production related to essayistic film-making. Students worked in small groups to learn how to use widely available DSLR cameras, phone cameras and popular editing software to create effective, and, as far as possible, professional-looking videos. Key elements of the course were: an introduction to film theory, tips on production management, hands-on skills in lighting set-ups, recording sound and using cameras, a supervised location shoot, editing theory and editing on Adobe Premiere Pro. Sessions explored films which combine an artistic form with an argumentative structure. As we argue below, this approach facilitated students' capacity to work out their arguments, and to consider concise and compelling means to present their case as a visual essay.

Role of teachers

The schoolteachers played a vital role, not only in authorizing the project in the first place, but also in facilitating it thereafter. Participation was voluntary and required some

commitment, with teachers brokering our relationship with the students. Heads of year or heads of sixth forms had to sign off on the project in the first place. Thereafter, they and other teachers helped coordinate the timing of our participation in assemblies and then at the workshops, offered encouragement at the first and subsequent stages, and, where necessary, supported the students' active participation. At each school we benefited from the teachers' advice and expertise; each school and cohort, we realized, is different. There was considerable negotiation required as to the logistics of how the project would run in each school in a way that complemented, rather than distracted from, the busy curriculum. Teachers' input was also crucial in considering how we could ensure that we reached the widest range of students possible, and in determining how the students were best approached, and supported, or sometimes encouraged, to sustain their interest when other pressures occurred. While one school was more comfortable with us inviting participation from students studying across all subjects via whole-year assemblies, with sign-up sheets distributed for them to 'opt in', another school preferred us to approach students in particular subjects of most obvious relevance, including media and film studies.

Role of the artist collaborator

Our artist collaborator was also indispensable. She was responsible for coordinating the meetings, communicating with the schools, and helping us maintain relationships with the teachers. She played a crucial role in holding the project together, facilitating and organizing the initial workshops, assisting us with choosing materials for the workshops, liaising with the schools' administrations, deciding how best to present our 'pitch', encouraging student participation, and later in gathering data and producing a report about the project.

Role of researchers

As researchers, we were responsible for providing the historical content of the workshops, offering introductions to the themes, providing advice where needed – for example, about key concepts and the history of ideas – suggesting possible resources, and furnishing additional materials that provided a basis for learning and inspiration. We sat in on workshops to answer questions and to hear from the students their thoughts about the materials, their own specific interests and broader themes. So for us, the process itself was as illuminating as the end products, a chance to glean what the students were interested in and concerned about in this field. We also liaised closely with the film unit team throughout, and, later on, played other roles, for instance organizing screenings and chairing, as needed, the post-screening discussions with the participants and with wider audiences.

Initial assembly workshop

We ran the first workshop as an assembly, with about two hundred students attending. We were keen to get an idea about what the students knew and about their associations with the word 'brainwashing', and to glean their attitudes, without them being unduly influenced in advance by our agenda, or by the set of cultural markers about this theme from Cold War history.

As such, when students entered the room, and after having heard their teacher's very brief introduction of our team as researchers from the university, and without prior notice of our project themes, they found cut-out paper silhouettes of heads on their

Figure 2: Graffiti heads (photograph: Lizzie Burns)

seats. They were then asked to use these to write or draw anything they liked on the theme of brainwashing. Hence, we announced simply that one key word, and then asked them to put pencil to paper for five minutes without conferring. We explained that these 'graffitied' heads should be left anonymous, and encouraged them to be as 'free associative' as they pleased. They could write, draw, doodle or scribble on the heads as they wished. This activity got the students to make their own marks and express their own associations right from the beginning. Sample graffiti heads can be seen in Figure 2.

We carried out this exercise in assemblies and workshops at all three schools across the two years, in total gathering more than four hundred responses. The miscellany of topics written down offered us some insights into the ways that notions of brainwashing have been shaped by films, books and the internet. It also provided an exercise in which the students could set out their most preliminary thoughts, a basis from which they could compare and contrast those first impressions with later views, as the project developed.

History/ideas workshop

Over the two years, members of the academic group shared various visual and written sources with the school students to spark discussion. Among these were clips from two short documentary films produced within the Hidden Persuaders project, including the tale of a US prisoner of war (POW) who chose to live in Mao's China (*David Hawkins: A battle of the mind* (Faruqi, 2017)). This film tells the personal story of David Hawkins, a soldier captured during the Korean War, who, aged 19, was caught up in the so-called brainwashing scare of the 1950s. His choice, together with a small group of other

POWs, to live in a communist society immediately after the war ended led many to believe that he and others had been 'turned' through psychological warfare techniques during captivity. Using original archive footage, including 1950s television interviews, and our own more recent interviews with Hawkins, the film traces a POW's evolving interpretations of his experiences as a prisoner, his life in China, and his return to the US a few years later, when he was grilled on prime-time television and challenged about his choices, or, as the interviewer suggested, his 'brainwashing'.

To introduce the history of how brainwashing fears permeated wider culture, the Jarman Lab themselves created *Nothing Exists Until You Sell It* (Dziadosz, 2021), focusing on Vance Packard's (1957) classic popular account, *The Hidden Persuaders*. Packard offered a widely influential exposé of the psychology of advertising and the 'dark arts' of consumer culture. His work has been cited in countless studies in more recent years, regarding legacies of the post-war advertising industry and the relevance of his analysis for twenty-first-century debates about 'surveillance capitalism' and the 'attention economy'.

We also shared archival images of 1950s advertisements, inviting participants to critically examine how they might persuade an audience, for instance, through messages of seduction, identification or aspiration; to analyse the use of colour, text and imagery; and to note any implicit or explicit assumptions, for example, regarding gender. In addition, we explored with the sixth formers materials from the Cold War era about so-called cinematic subliminal messaging. This, we found, prompted animated discussion about whether such techniques were effective, apocryphal, exaggerated or perhaps sometimes irresistible.

After this exercise, we provided further context about the history of the idea, sketched out themes from our own historical research work, and shared films, images and other sources with the students, asking them to reflect on what such ideas might mean in the contemporary world, and on the continuities and changes between the twentieth-century past and their own experiences today. We wanted to provide some material, not in order to insist that they covered it, but to suggest at least that some earlier historical contexts might be borne in mind for what could otherwise seem to some of these students (especially those not studying history at A level) merely a contemporary field of interest and anxiety. Students were then invited to form small groups to discuss how some of these themes might translate, in ways that resonated for them personally or collectively, into the material for film essays. In some of the workshops, later in the project, we also used 'inspiration sheets' with quotations from the classic 1950s literature to encourage students to start developing their own ideas about what has endured or changed over time. From here, the task for the students, supported by our team, was to select from the numerous things that they might cover, to pinpoint the actual story or theme on which they wanted to focus.

Ideas multiplied, and then particular more insistent themes began to emerge, while the students also considered the problem of how to represent those themes briefly and intelligibly, and how to pursue an argument, and not just about what themes they wanted to flag. Students readily grappled with questions about mental health, identity, gangs, music, media and appearance – topics which communicated something about their immediate lived experience, rather than necessarily about mainstream politics, history or the environment.

However, their concerns about current political antagonisms, populism, conspiracy theory, and the long shadows of fascism and 'totalitarianism', apparent at the outset, were also clear throughout. For example, from a single cohort, suggestions for films included: censorship of the media, conformity to ideas of masculinity, peer

pressure, eating disorders, military propaganda, persuasion in female friendships, the challenges faced by youth in other countries (the case of young people's daily lives in Mexico came up in one group, for example), body image, contradictory versions of truth on different news channels, gang culture and violence, conspiracy theory, persuasion in the past and now, fashion and identity.

Film workshops

The Jarman Lab created a new three-day training session, run over weekends in the summer term, especially for the students involved in this project, using our research as the context and inspiration for the students' films. Bartek Dziadosz, Director of the Jarman Lab, said: 'Our ambition was to help students develop critical faculty enabling them to question advertising messages they are immersed in. Judging from the films they produced, we did achieve that.'

Most outreach involves working with schools on location as part of a normal school day. However, in this case, the time needed to create films and the equipment required for these sessions meant that this was not possible. We endeavoured to run workshops at the schools where viable, but for the main interactions, students had to travel within Camden to the Jarman Lab at Birkbeck to participate, and, in fact, in the second year, make a longer journey to the Lab's relocated site at Stratford in East London. There were some instances where individual students were not able to attend all of the training days at the lab because of prior learning, extra-curricular or family commitments. Lizzie Burns worked with teachers to help these students join groups undertaking preparatory work between our scheduled sessions, so that they could still participate by contributing to scripting, data gathering, composition of music, conducting filming outside of the workshops and so on. These contributions could then be added into the mix by their colleagues on editing days, or the editing days could be split among members of the group. This was a way to enable the maximum number of students who wanted to be involved to do so, acknowledging that young people in this age group have multiple other pressures on their time.

The first session started with a screening of the Jarman Lab's own film materials linked to the Hidden Persuaders theme, focusing on advertising. Other thought-provoking material included clips from John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972) and Adam Curtis's films about influence and selfhood, such as *The Century of the Self* (2002), documentaries which often focus on the nature of soft power and how it works in society.

After considering the essential components needed to create a short film, students were able to get hands-on with cameras and microphones. They completed short exercises to learn the technical components of filming, and they were encouraged to consider the concepts behind each action. Groups then planned out ideas for their short film, with timelines, consideration of shots, sound and script, and how they could start recording that same afternoon. They also had to consider the etiquette of 'vox pop' interviews in the street. Studio spaces were set up inside for film and sound recording, and those working outside were supervised by one of the film team. Students were self-led and supported to develop their own ideas. At the end of the day, films were downloaded and saved, and clips were shared with the whole group, so that everyone could get a sense of what was beginning to emerge, support each other, and suggest improvements or elaborations.

Students were encouraged to film further material between sessions with equipment that they had to hand (such as their phones). Many took the opportunity to practise their filming and interview skills, and many filmed additional content.

This style of self-directed learning suited many, as they sought to improve their own skills, showing that they cared about the topics they were portraying. One student film-maker commented:

> With my interviews, I'm not that good at interviews, so then I gained interview skills through each and every interview. There was one group of people, they didn't really know anything about rap music, so then I had to learn how to phrase questions so that I could get the best possible answer from each person I interviewed.

In the second session, students learned about montage. Teachers explained the meaning and theory, and then designed practical exercises, with advice on copyright, intellectual property and sourcing material responsibly, such as finding material freely available online (via creative commons websites, image banks, music libraries and so on). Once introduced to software, and with basic training, the sixth formers were again encouraged to work in a self-led way, with film-makers available to help when needed. At the end of the final session, films were shown within the group.

It is worth emphasizing again that from the point of view of the research team, the process was as illuminating as the final products. It was a chance to interact informally with small groups, to see how their ideas were developing, and how their concerns with the theme of 'persuasion' were evolving.

Analysis

From the initial reactions on the 'graffitied' heads, we could see that many students, unprompted by us, did refer to key Cold War period motifs related to the history of brainwashing. Some recalled films from that era, such as *The Manchurian Candidate* (John Frankenheimer, 1962) and *The Ipcress File* (Sidney J. Furie, 1965). Several also made references to the CIA's brainwashing research programme in the 1950s, MKUltra, indicating that notorious projects such as this do have a long cultural legacy beyond the twentieth century, at least for some of this cohort. From this exercise, we could not be sure of the provenance of their knowledge of this history – from school, from their own reading, or from the screen. MKUltra has been the subject of various exposés and explorations in recent years, some to be found on commonly used and easily accessible streaming services such as Netflix.

Whatever our ambition may have been to have participants come at the topic 'blind' to our own research preoccupations, for some, the post-war history of brainwashing discourse was clearly powerfully alive in their minds. The history of psychological warfare and nefarious intelligence projects was notably present in many of their own references and allusions to iconic cultural and political moments in the history of 'hidden persuasion'.

In addition to popular culture, many students conceptualized brainwashing in relation to overseas or domestic politics, both past and present. They made reference to historical and contemporary propaganda, fake news, government spin and occasionally, more pointedly, to remarks by the then Secretary of State for Education in the UK, Michael Gove. He had often been in the news making contentious remarks about the appropriate content of the curriculum and the kind of education required to make appropriate contemporary British citizens. Indeed, we found several explicit references to the National Curriculum and school education, and, frequently, other allusions alongside, perhaps more predictably, to totalitarian ideologies and countries – to Nazism, Stalinism, communist China and North Korea.

There was also frequent mention of cults, and, in a few cases, reference to 'radicalization', although this did not appear as often as we expected, given that at the time there was high-profile media coverage of cases in the UK, including reports about three young women, most prominently Shamima Begum (who had been younger than our cohort of students), all from the East End of London, who made their way to join Islamic State in Syria. It is certainly true that in the years prior to and during this project, stories about 'radicalization' proliferated in the media. Begum's story was especially compelling, and it was widely publicized through the optic of brainwashing.

Workshops also led students to compare past and present, general and private, political, cultural and commercial processes, and not least to reflect on the nature of appropriate education and styles of expression. They compared and contrasted facilitating forms of teaching and learning with ideological 're-education', as seen through the prism of Cold War literature, and they engaged in debate about the curriculum and the justifications for examinations.

Thus, both in the workshops and in the films that were produced, we see evidence of debate, thinking aloud and forms of contestation. Some of the films offered the students' own adamant points of view; others offered an unsettled clash of views, leaving viewers to draw their own conclusions, for example, regarding the impact of social media. Images, sounds, stories and interviews were used by the film-makers to present such clashing perspectives, and to invite the audience's further inquiry. Some pieces featured brief interviews with members of the public approached on the street, while others included the opinions of fellow school students in such 'vox pops'. In a couple of cases, current public debates about the impact of 'drill music' became the focus for the students' own particular takes on the questions: Is such music dangerous, and responsible for inciting gang violence as a mode of brainwashing? Or is it a creative cultural development – a provocative mode of expression and searing social critique which is being used as a scapegoat by a racist government seeking to minimize and distract from the role of socio-economic drivers of violent crime?

One student film-maker commented:

> A lot of people in the media want to blame drill music. So instead of us saying whether we blame it or we don't blame it, we just wanted to explore it instead because it's better to have an open mind, and not just decide one viewpoint. So that's why we had all the interviews and the discussions, because we wanted to see how other people thought about it and not just have our own opinion.

One film offered a set of contrasting characterizations of drill music to ponder, such as 'absorbing', 'influential', 'corrupt' and 'insensitive', intercut with images of a young man rising from bed and going through his morning routine. He then plugs in headphones, and we hear an example of the music in which he is immersed as he walks through a modernist housing estate and calls to meet a friend. As the music plays, we are also shown clips of a young woman describing the track as 'objectifying' and 'attacking', and then hear another who declares it 'intense' and 'hard-hitting'. Another of the film-makers reflects on the more sinister content of the lyrics in response to his fellow students' reactions. While he is not convinced that there is a direct correlation with the rise in gun and knife crime, he opens up the question about whether the explicit and violent language and content might have a desensitizing influence as 'hidden persuaders around us'. Behind the genre, therefore, a wider issue is at stake, an argument that can be traced back to Book Three of Plato's *Republic*: the legitimacy of guardians of some kind in a society or state banning a putatively toxic form of art (Plato, 1997: 71–112).

In miniature, the films canvassed arguments about whether this particular mode of expression – drill music – encourages violence, glorifies gangs, promotes misogyny, highlights unpalatable truths, exposes social tensions, recognizes deprivation and injustice, foments hatred, defuses conflict or, in a small way, counters a sense of disempowerment among young people.

At the time that the students made these films, drill music was generating a certain amount of public concern, which was apparent in the media, a subset of wider and often polarized public debates about the cultural significance and political implications of various forms of rap. This particular form, which characteristically deals with the challenges of street life, crime, violence and gangs, was popularized in Chicago, and soon found a following in the UK. It caused considerable concern, and it was cited as a possible catalyst for violence in a London court case about a murder. It was reported that the music was a possible factor, a mode of communicating instructions, rather than just an artistic commentary upon street violence (see, for instance, Swan, 2020).

Here again we could see how the film-makers offered different takes on this kind of debate: music as 'brainwashing', or as a source of unwarranted, racially tinged, 'moral panic' about teenage life today, redolent too, perhaps, as one of the films fleetingly suggests, of older panics about mods and rockers, and other supposedly dangerous youth styles, conflicts and movements? As historians, we could not help noticing a continuity between these debates and long-running anxieties over centuries about the power of music as a potential force for encouraging unhealthy behaviours (Kennaway, 2012). A larger backdrop for these films was the much discussed, and at that time increasing, incidence of knife crime in London, which was regularly in the news. In one of the films, we hear sirens, see bereaved relatives, glimpse a funeral and are made aware of the anguish of those left behind in the face of senseless untimely death.

Other key themes that threaded through the films were the influence of personal relationships, and the nature of the emotions stirred up, by design or otherwise, by different media and media platforms, from women's magazines, to image-editing software, to social media platforms such as Twitter or Instagram. One film, which incorporated reference to both, focused on the daily experience of a young woman, using the style of a music video, including music composed and performed by the film-makers. It also opens with the moment of waking and rising in the morning, and as the young woman dreamily drifts out of sleep, we hear a striking, unaccompanied voice singing, 'maybe this fight was overdue/maybe it's late and I'm confused …'. Once she is fully awake, the tone changes, with a rhythmic beat starting as she picks up her phone from the floor and a message appears on the screen: 'Post every single day good morning Twitter'.

As she navigates through Instagram, email, news updates, chats, and more and more content, our view of the woman on screen becomes overlaid with scrolling images from her phone, in a manner which becomes increasingly overwhelming and difficult to keep track of. Interspersed among the content is targeted, aspirational advertising: for teeth whitening, fashion, student tickets for events and a host of other products. We could see this film as a twenty-first-century videographic 'reboot' of Vance Packard – both in terms of the critiques voiced in *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957) about the manufacture of 'compelling needs' by advertisers, and also in terms of fears about the future expressed in his 1964 book, *The Naked Society*. This was a foreboding warning about breaches of consumer privacy and surveillance capitalism – the increasing power of advertisers to gather personal information about individuals and tailor messaging to selected populations. Contemporary technologies – as this short film illuminates –

have enabled marketeers to zone in on individuals with unprecedented specificity (Packard, 1957, 1964).

As the film nears its conclusion, we hear the voice sing 'this is goodbye …', and as the music beat and the video pace decrease, we suddenly see the woman throw her phone away in slow motion – perhaps in exhaustion or anger, or as a means of escape. This motif of physically discarding or rejecting material objects recurred through a number of visual essays: magazines were thrown into waste baskets; make-up that had been carefully applied using a mirror was frenetically removed, followed by a smile. The combined effect of watching these films together conveyed a sense of entrapment or bombardment, triggering an action to set the individual free from the oppressive influence, which ultimately suggested a message about personal agency, resistance and hope.

The Jarman Lab subsequently assembled the films into a single compilation that could be screened at events, and watched on our website. The short films acquired a different and, we believe, perhaps greater purchase in this way: playing off one another, revealing a miscellany of views and inventive responses, exposing shared experiences, threads, common understanding – and areas of lively disagreement as well.

Project legacies and conclusions

Film screenings at Birkbeck marked the end of the project for most of the students, and a chance to showcase their work and reflect on the opportunity as a whole. As part of our evaluation process, the Derek Jarman Lab also invited the students to discuss their experiences of, and reflections about, their participation, and their reactions to seeing their colleagues' films, on camera after the screening. These interviews have since been developed into a short film about the project, which can be found, together with the films, on the outreach section of the Hidden Persuaders website (www.bbk.ac.uk/hiddenpersuaders/outreach/).

As one of the Year 12 participants fed back to us, it is significant that the films were actually made by young people: 'what we go through makes them more accessible and relatable' to others in that age group than content created by adults about their experiences would be. With this in mind, we continue to work with the schools to see whether the films can be shared more widely with teachers facilitating personal, social and health education (PSHE) classes.

Given the recurrent themes about societal pressures and mental health, we also invited psychotherapeutic practitioners from the Association of Child Psychotherapists and the International Psychoanalytical Association to view a selection of the films, and we are exploring how they may be curated as potential training resources for clinicians working in the field of adolescent mental health. As this article goes to press, we are negotiating potential viewings of these films at an event to be staged in partnership with the Camden Psychotherapy Unit, and potentially at a virtual conference at UCL for clinicians, exploring the implications of current paranoid political thinking, conspiracy theory, and arguments about our 'post-truth' discursive arena.

The Jarman Lab went on to use selected films as exemplars of the video essay genre in their international film summer schools with young people of a similar age group. Through the lab's work with Birkbeck's Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, four of the films were screened at the British Film Institute's (BFI) Southbank Cinema. Dr Lily Ford of the Derek Jarman Lab said:

> The highlight of this experience for me was the exhibition side of things, because several of the films were selected by film curating students at

Birkbeck to screen at the BFI Future Film Festival. Seeing these students watching their own films on the big screen at the BFI was really fantastic, and I could see how it was just giving them confidence minute by minute … and to understand that there was a broader audience and public that they could engage with their films.

Many of the school participants fed back to us that they would seek to use film as a way to express their ideas in future, with a number reporting that they had gone on to study film-making, or had continued making films in their own time since leaving school. One student also contacted the team after their first term at university to share their new work, and to seek advice about entering film festivals. Both students and teachers reported that the work had been enriching in a variety of ways. There was a recognition, in particular, that working independently but in a group was a valuable experience in terms of learning the need for collaboration and compromise in order to successfully complete their film projects. As Lizzie Burns commented, 'Teamwork was a really important part of the project, it presented a challenge, but one that the students got a lot from, and the teachers said they saw a rise in confidence in independent learning.'

Teachers noted that the opportunity for the sixth formers to leave their school environment to visit the university, the film lab and cinema, and for some to then take part in the BFI's film festival, widened their horizons in terms of higher education and the cultural sector as a workplace. This feedback reinforced for us the role that universities and academic research groups can and should play in terms of widening access and opportunities in partnership with schools and local communities. One teacher said: 'They have had an opportunity to work with other adults outside of their teachers/employers/family. This is also invaluable, as they need as much experience as possible in forging professional relationships before going to university and/or work.'

From our point of view, these encounters with the students and teachers over the course of those two years augmented our research, bringing to light contemporary concepts, new cultural references, and a sense of how terms such as brainwashing and hidden persuasion resonate with personal everyday experience in the twenty-first century. It also alerted us to the enduring legacies of some of the Cold War histories on which our research has centred, and their prominent place in the collective memory, mediated through the school curriculum, literature, film and television. The students' responses to our examples of historical texts, images and film material as springboards for discussion reinforced the idea that such 'social objects' can facilitate engagement, particularly with young people.

Moreover, these encounters gave us an insight into the potential of creative, participatory methods for enabling individuals to communicate and interrogate their own lived experience. By centring the participatory film project on the video essay, which forms the basis of much of the Jarman Lab's training, students brought their already well-honed critical thinking skills to the medium. We saw them draw upon a variety of genres, from classic documentaries featuring interviews and commentaries, to avant-garde montages of historical imagery and silent black-and-white films with acting, through to music videos with original voice scores. As we noted earlier, commentators on participatory film-making with young people have highlighted the limitations of youth film-making projects, in part due to the popularity of recapitulating particular formats in a way that precludes the aim of 'critical media literacy' (Blum-Ross, 2017). We argue that the video essay offered a middle way with our participant groups. It provided a highly flexible structure that could involve a variety of styles according to the young people's individual media preferences, which was inclusive in terms of its appeal to a wide range

of participants with different cultural tastes. At the same time, the focus on scripting the piece as a short visual essay ensured that, regardless of which genre they drew inspiration from, a clear message or argument was conveyed. This work demonstrated that they had mastered the potential to persuade an audience through film.

This article was being completed around the first anniversary of the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, and politics in Britain, the US and continental Europe still seemed characterized by drastic divisions, a shared mood of suspicion and mistrust, and great public doubt about the nature of 'progress' or of 'crisis' in years to come. Questions about hidden persuasion, expertise, science, trust, the appropriate sources of power and of knowledge, and the future of democracy have multiplied further. In the UK, much public discussion has also been taking place in 2020 and 2021 about the scale of mental health problems looming ahead, not least for young people, as we emerge from a year of lockdowns and massive disruptions to home life, social exchange, and school and university education.

Made pre-COVID, these conversations and resulting films, we hope, will continue to have some resonance for future research and public debate on cognate themes. These visual essays offer, we contend, telling snapshots, messages sent back to one another, and to us, in response to a particular question. Of course, they are responses derived from a very particular time and place, and a relatively small group of people. They are diverse in scope, but they also illuminate shared experiences and worries. They highlight problems and challenges, as envisaged by a sample of teenagers close to the end of their school years in London; a group acutely aware that their identities – anyone's identities – are not some assured possession, and that the world we live in today is precarious, divided, unequal and deeply uncertain.

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Notes on the contributors

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