

Gender & Sexuality in Cinema

Screening Diary - Elidijona Kurtolli up2068600



Ted Lasso (2020 -) - S3 Ep10: International Break



(Sam Richardson as Edwin Akufo & Hannah Waddingham as Rebecca Welton, Ted Lasso: Season 3 Episode 10)

While the episode involved multiple subplots, the key plotline that interested me portrayed Sam Obisanya's exclusion from the International break and the return of billionaire antagonist Edwin Akufo. Not only does Akufo return to make good on his promise from season two to ruin Sam's life, but he arrives with plans to establish the 'Akufo League,' containing only the richest clubs in Europe playing in a league with no competition. This is a reference to the proposal of the European Super League made back in 2021. Backed by 15 of the richest clubs in Europe, including the Premier League's 'Big 6', it was a breakaway described as "pure greed" (Neville. G, 2021) and was "unanimously and vigorously rejected" (Sky News, 2021). The main theme I noticed throughout the plotline is how patriarchal capitalist hegemony threatens to destroy the essence of a sport many marginalised communities are dedicated to. But it also showed me how Ted Lasso may have mishandled the topic.

When it came to the visual style of the episode and the plotline I was following, I felt its execution to be slightly uneven. Sam's tense encounter with Akufo at his restaurant uses straightforward mid-shots, typical of workplace comedies; his forced smiles and hunched shoulders convey vulnerability, while Akufo's relaxed confidence masks his disdain. One thing I did find interesting was the choice of colour in the costumes. Sam in a green coat and Akufo in a red shirt, added some subtle symbolism of good versus evil. Rebecca hesitated to attend the Super League meeting in the beginning, suspecting she was there as the token female club owner. Her fears are confirmed in a painfully obvious way, Akufo even admits he's glad not to be the only minority in the room. The owners are then served a mix of traditional Ghanaian food and Chicago hot dogs, this felt like the writers were trying to inject Akufo with a longing to be Westernised which did not sit well with me. The idea is that despite the vast wealth he has, he still feels like a marginalised or even subordinate male around the very rich, very white room. "What to make of Akufo's absence of intimacy in the hate and violence Akufo shows those white men and Rebecca, who have at least enough regard for him to heed his invitation and tolerate his eccentric palate?" (Harris. H, 2023)

While Rebecca's speech is visually impactful, with the camera reducing the male owners to little boys through her perspective. I can't help but feel like her impassioned plea reduces the plot to a ploy for virtuous capitalism, and her dynamic with Rupert, though touching, glosses over their complicated history. Akufo's arc, despite its potential, devolves into comedy with his tantrum and hot

dog-throwing exit, undermining the menace he previously displayed. Similarly, Sam's lack of response to Akufo's sabotage feels inconsistent with his earlier boldness, such as his stand against DubaiAir in the previous season. While the episode engages through strong performances and visual storytelling, it suffers from rushed resolutions and an oversimplification of complex themes. Its critical commentary on power and identity is compelling but could have been more thoughtfully developed to give its characters and conflicts the weight they deserve.

The third season of the show had some significant backing, including a £23.2 million sponsorship deal with Nike. While I was not able to find an exact budget, it's clear the production faced some challenges. "rewrites delayed much of the shooting until March, expensive with that cast already on location from January, and how some of it carried over into April. Some changes weren't necessarily the show's fault, with a scene at Chelsea's Stamford Bridge stadium paused thanks to the real-life Russian invasion of Ukraine that led to owner Roman Abramovich being forced to sell the team, but the sum total here has led to the season being an estimated 20 to 30 per cent over budget, with significant post-production still ahead." (Bucholtz. A, 2022)

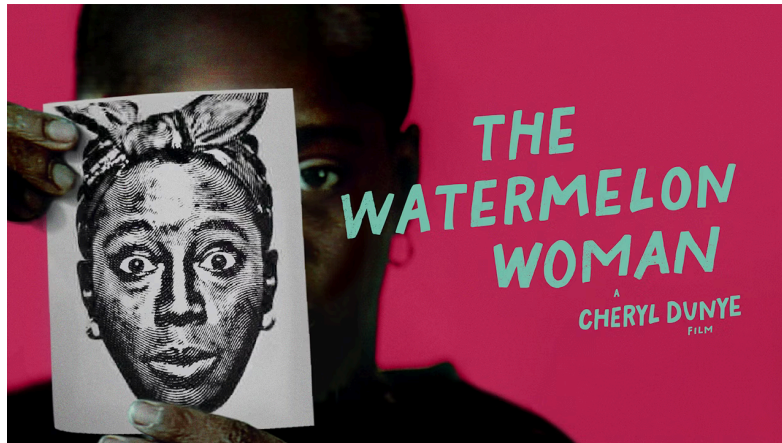
The series was produced by mainly US-based companies, including Ruby's Tuna Inc., NBCUniversal, Warner Bros., and Doozer Productions which was founded by Bill Lawrence, Jason Sudeikis' 'Ted Lasso' co-creator who also created *Scrubs*. The show's strong ties to football were reinforced by a £500,000 licensing deal with the Premier League allowing the show to use the names, locations and likeness of Premier League teams like West Ham and Manchester City. A partnership with EA Sports, which added AFC Richmond to the *FIFA 23* video game offered the opportunity for fans of the show to play as their favourite characters. As one of Apple TV's flagship shows, it had a global release on the streaming platform and became the most-streamed show of 2023, supported by an extensive marketing campaign. You can watch it exclusively on Apple TV.

The critical reception to this episode has received extremely contrasted views, with some moments getting praise but others feeling a bit off. It almost had you thinking "does it work for the episode? Rebecca's speech is well-played, as always, by Hannah Waddingham and nicely staged against the soundtrack of Nate's violin. But Ted Lasso has been leaning into sanctimoniousness all season, and this moment feels like another of oversimplifying what ought to be treated with more complexity. Of course she's right, just as Sam was right about immigration and the clubhouse was right about homophobia being bad. But why spoon-feed these sentiments?" (Phipps. K, 2023)

This critique mirrors the overall reception of season 3. While *Ted Lasso* received a metascore of 77 and a user score of 7.5. It does however hold a solid 90% on Rotten Tomatoes, but episode 10 only scored a critics rating of 56%. This showed me that both fans and critics felt this season didn't have the same careful attention to detail as its predecessors. Many reviewers pointed out that the season rushed to tie up loose ends and introduce too many subplots for supporting characters, almost like they're setting them up for spin-offs instead of focusing on the main story. I understand why critics felt the way they did, at the time, they thought the show had wrapped for good, however it has now been announced that *Ted Lasso* has been renewed for a fourth season so there's hope that the showrunners will take the opportunity to take their time with new story lines.

I have been a huge *Ted Lasso* fan from the start, so much so that I refused to see any flaws. But after further research and rewatching, I find myself agreeing with those who've critiqued both the episode and third season, especially when it comes to the character development and pacing.

Watermelon Woman (1996)



(The Watermelon Woman, Cheryl Dunye - 1996)

The 'Watermelon Woman' explores the erasure of black queer characters, especially black queer women, intersectionality in interracial relationships, Identity and the preservation of history. It highlights the importance of preserving marginalised stories and ensuring their place in cultural memory. Cheryl, an aspiring filmmaker, embarks on a journey to uncover the story of the "Watermelon Woman," a Black queer actress from the 1930s whose identity and contributions have been erased from film history. In tandem with her creative journey, Cheryl begins dating Diana, a white woman, which sparks tension between Cheryl and her best friend Tamara who is wary of Diana's motives when beginning a relationship with Cheryl. Not only does the film critique the silenced black queer voices and how many have been lost to history, but it also displays the complexities of interracial relationships and intersectionality between Cheryl and Diana while portraying sapphic sex and romance with the female gaze in mind. The film sends a powerful message about how traditional archives often fail to capture Black queer voices, emphasising the need for these stories to be reclaimed and amplified. It argues that Black queer creators deserve a prominent and lasting place in the cultural narrative, challenging systems that continue to silence them.

The 'Watermelon Woman' used a blend of narrative and mock documentary styles, the mixture of both grainy home video footage demonstrates Cheryl's passion project of searching for the forgotten Watermelon Woman, her use of vox pops with the public was an interesting touch as it showed just how easy women of colour can be erased from history when they are grossly misrepresented in the media, with one character even mistaking the Watermelon Woman for Brazilian singer Carmen Miranda. The costumes also stand out, reflecting both the urban Philadelphia culture and where the characters' feel their most authentic selves. Cheryl and Tamara dressed in baggy shirts, jeans shorts and vest tops, presenting them as potentially soft masc lesbians, juxtaposed to Diana and Stacy's more femme aesthetics.

The film's approach to lesbian intimacy also feels deeply personal to Dunye. A sex scene that captures not just the female gaze, but makes space for a uniquely interracial touch, it makes the connection between the characters feel more authentic and meaningful. As stated "When Dunye's scene ended I realised that I had never seen a sex scene directed by a gay Black woman before. If you want to direct a sex scene, take note: It's intimate and conveys a passion that resonates between the characters for the film's duration." (Fletcher. F, 2020)

In the end, when Cheryl reveals to the audience that the Watermelon Woman was not a real person, it felt like gut punch, just when we've gained an understanding of what's happening, Cheryl once again draws attention to the erasure of African American women in film history "and in a way thus making her a famous African American lesbian in the film industry. She herself then becomes the Watermelon Woman" (Turner. J, 2014)

The Watermelon Woman was made with a budget of just \$300,000. Funding was made through a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and various private donations. Even by the currency standards in the 90s the film's budget was extremely low considering that in 1996, the average budget for an indie film was around \$3 million and a Hollywood film around \$60 million. Produced by Dancing Girl Studio (US based), this independent approach made sense, the Watermelon Woman critically discussed the erasure of black queer women in old Hollywood and portrayed sapphic interracial relationships. Under the direction of Cheryl Dunye, who became the first black, openly lesbian filmmaker when The Watermelon Woman was released.

The film made its debut on the festival circuit, earning recognition at bigger festivals like the Toronto International Film Festival and the Berlin Film Festival, where it won Best Feature Film. Despite its critical acclaim, a severely limited budget and lack of marketing meant the film earned only \$774 on its opening weekend in the US and Canada. However, over time earning its critical success as the years have progressed. It's now available to rent on streaming platforms like Prime Video, Apple TV, and YouTube, allowing it to reach new audiences and solidifying the importance of conversations about erasure and intersectionality in the zeitgeist.

The critical reception of The Watermelon Woman received a majority of positive reviews with reviewers saying "the film employs both deconstructive and realistic techniques to examine the way that identity in contemporary U.S. culture is shaped by multiple forces, primarily race, gender, and sexual orientation." (Sullivan. L. L, 2000). As Dunye's debut film, Watermelon Woman uses a range of deconstructive and realistic techniques to explore themes of erasure, identity and the preservation of history.

With a 92% score on Rotten Tomatoes and a Metascore of 74, Reviewers were extremely impressed with Dunye's creation of a fictional Watermelon Woman, her research continuously led to gaps in black queer history, this only meant that Claire Dunye decided "if no history exists you have to create your own." (Dunye. C, 1996). While the reviews are largely positive, there were some light criticisms on the visual style of the film "The camera work in the narrative stretches is well composed but at times downright confusing...The script, while usually very funny, has entire scenes that swing for comedy and fall flat on their faces." (Fletcher. F, 2020)

I personally agree with the reviews that I've found. It took me a couple watches to fully gain a better understanding of the themes, but once I did, the film really deepened my understanding of Black queer history. It's a unique and thoughtful film that left a lasting impression on me.

Sex Education (2019-2023) S4 Ep8



(Neuti Gatwa as Eric Effiong, Sex Education: Season 4 Episode 8)

The main plotpoint I focussed on in the season four finale of Sex Education saw us reach the boiling point of Eric's journey. Themes of identity, faith, alienation and the intersection of sexuality and religion are prevalent as Eric prepares for baptism. At the climax of the plot, Eric bravely declares to the congregation, "My name is Eric Effiong. And I'm a Christian. And a proud gay man. And I love myself too much to not tell my truth." A moment that captures the struggle of being able to intertwine faith with sexuality while staying authentic. Eric's story deepens when he meets a character revealed to be the embodiment of God, who encourages him to embrace his calling. By the end of the season, Eric decides to become a pastor, determined to create a more inclusive and loving community. The show highlights the challenges LGBTQ+ people face within religious spaces but also shows how religion and sexuality can coexist. "It's a satisfying ending for Eric because his interpretation of Christianity will help serve the queer community and also give Eric a place to fully be himself." (Carey, A, 2023)

The baptism scene begins as Eric arrives, dressed in white, stands in a church that reflects African celestial congregations, before the ceremony begins, the pastor informs Eric that due his school ethos, the church can't accept any money from a planned fundraiser in earlier episode, Eric looks extremely troubled. The ceremony begins and everyone lines up on steps leading up to a pool where pastor Samuel is standing, Adedayo, a boy Eric had a romantic encounter with earlier in the season is first. He makes a speech about how he is ready to be rid of all his sins, referring to his sexuality and his relationship with Eric. Eric is next, When asked to renounce his sins, Eric instead declares "My name is Eric Effiong. And I'm a Christian. And a proud gay man," he said. "And I love myself too much to not tell my truth. So, if you love me as I am, I will be baptised, but if you don't, then I must leave." (Gatwa, N, 2023) His courage is met with silence, broken only by his mother's heartfelt support, as the pain of rejection becomes palpable. Close-ups capture Eric's vulnerability, while the uneasy expressions of the congregation highlight the emotional weight of the moment and the alienation LGBTQ+ individuals often face in religious spaces. Eric painfully accepts the rejection and leaves the church.

Later, Eric encounters God, a character he's met throughout the season. There's a surreal yet tender moment where Eric is reassured that walking away from the church was the right choice. God gives him a calling: to spread the message that everyone is loved exactly as they are. The lush, vibrant setting and soft lighting enhance the sense of divine connection and personal transformation. Eric's journey comes full circle when he finds Cal, a non-binary student facing their own struggles with alienation and body dysphoria. As they navigate their struggles together, it emboldens Eric's decision to become a pastor and preach inclusivity.

Sex Education, produced by UK-based company Eleven Film, which is best known for creating films and shows surrounding teenagers and young adults like Channel 4's 'Glue' or BBC Three's 'Red Rose', working well for Sex Education's coming-of-age themes. While there was no definitive budget released for Sex Education however, upon further research estimates suggest it may fall within the range of £1.6 -- 8.1 million per episode, comparable to similar Netflix originals like On My Block and Never Have I Ever. As I was not able to find a definitive number I cannot be sure, however Netflix's budget increase may imply Sex Education received substantial funding. The show was distributed globally via Netflix, quickly gaining popularity despite minimal marketing for its first season. Its organic rise to fame led to increased promotional efforts in later seasons, including cast interviews and trailers to build anticipation for Season 4. Currently, the series remains available for streaming exclusively on Netflix.

The reception to Sex Education's final season has been a bit of a mixed bag. Critics felt "In this farewell series, the glorious horny teenagers we knew and loved have become earnest bores who use therapy speak and exist mainly to tick boxes. What a mood killer" (Mangan. L, 2023). On the other hand, some critics, like Facey (2023), saw Eric's statement "to the congregation reinforces an idea that is often forgotten when it comes to faith, which is that religion should and can be able to accept all of you." (Facey. L, 2023). Season four received a critical rating of 88% on Rotten Tomatoes, but audiences weren't as impressed, giving it a much lower 36%. Similarly, Metacritics rating stood at 69, with a user score of 5.0. I personally disagreed with certain demographics that might have felt the show became too "woke," I think the diversity was a step in the right direction. What did feel off to me was that many of the characters came across as one-dimensional, which may have made the season feel less engaging for viewers. Personally, while season four was my least favorite, Eric's journey was the emotional heart of the show for me. Watching him embrace his true self after so much struggle was genuinely heartwarming, and it's the kind of character growth that really stuck with me.

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