

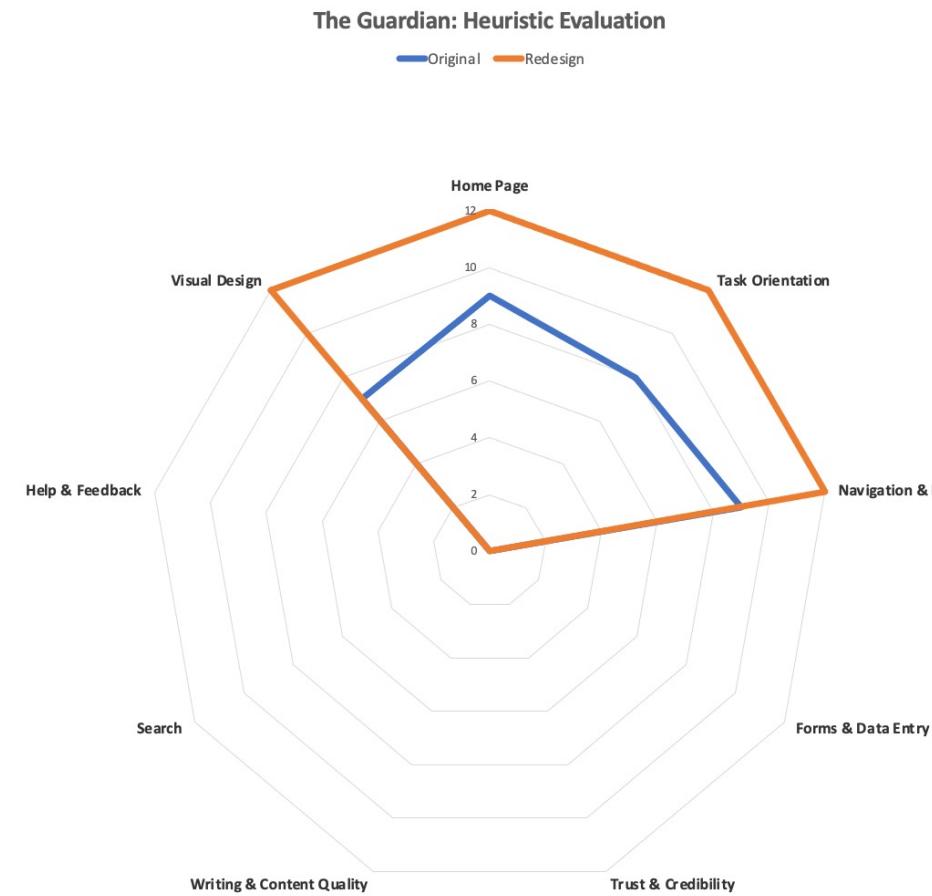
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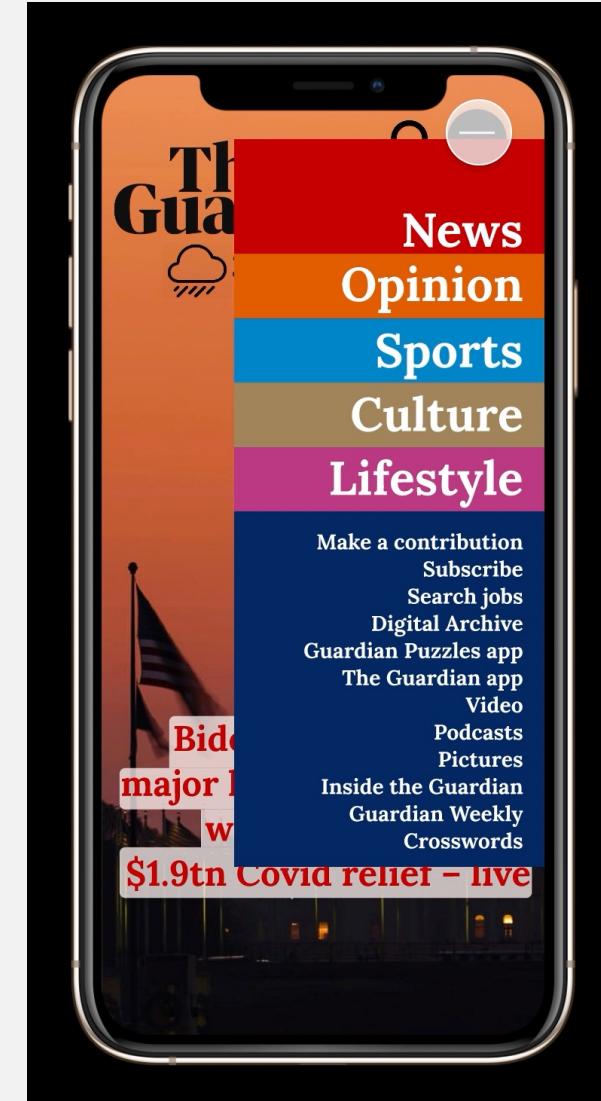


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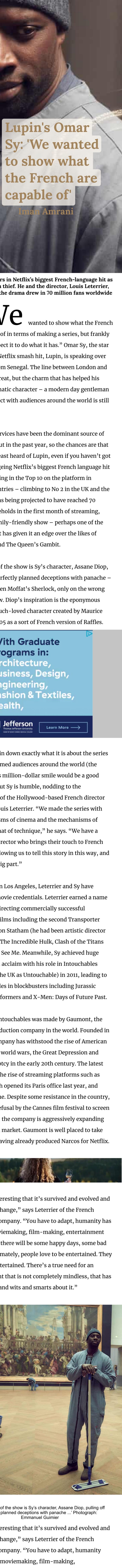
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Lupin's Omar Sy: 'We wanted to show what the French are capable of'

By Iman Amrani

The actor stars in Netflix's biggest French-language hit as a gentleman thief. He and the director, Louis Leterrier, explain how the drama drew in 70 million fans worldwide

“We wanted to show what the French were capable of in terms of making a series, but frankly we didn’t expect it to do what it has.” Omar Sy, the star of the latest Netflix smash hit, Lupin, is speaking over the phone from Senegal. The line between London and Dakar isn’t great, but the charm that has helped his slick, charismatic character – a modern day gentleman thief – connect with audiences around the world is still evident.

Streaming services have been the dominant source of cultural output in the past year, so the chances are that you have at least heard of Lupin, even if you haven’t got round to bingeing Netflix’s biggest French language hit to date. Ranking in the Top 10 on the platform in multiple countries – climbing to No 2 in the UK and the US – as well as being projected to have reached 70 million households in the first month of streaming, Lupin is a family-friendly show – perhaps one of the elements that has given it an edge over the likes of Bridgerton and The Queen’s Gambit.

At the heart of the show is Sy’s character, Assane Diop, pulling off perfectly planned deceptions with panache – a bit like Steven Moffat’s Sherlock, only on the wrong side of the law. Diop’s inspiration is the eponymous Lupin, the much-loved character created by Maurice Leblanc in 1905 as a sort of French version of Raffles.

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It’s hard to pin down exactly what it is about the series that has charmed audiences around the world (the protagonist’s million-dollar smile would be a good first guess) but Sy is humble, nodding to the contribution of the Hollywood-based French director and friend Louis Leterrier. “We made the series with the mechanisms of cinema and the mechanisms of cinema are that of technique,” he says. “We have a Hollywood director who brings their touch to French television, allowing us to tell this story in this way, and that plays a big part.”

Neighbours in Los Angeles, Leterrier and Sy have impressive movie credentials. Leterrier earned a name for himself directing commercially successful blockbuster films including the second Transporter film with Jason Statham (he had been artistic director on the first), The Incredible Hulk, Clash of the Titans and Now You See Me. Meanwhile, Sy achieved huge international acclaim with his role in Intouchables (released in the UK as Untouchable) in 2011, leading to a string of roles in blockbusters including Jurassic World, Transformers and X-Men: Days of Future Past.

Like Lupin, Intouchables was made by Gaumont, the first film production company in the world. Founded in 1895, the company has withstood the rise of American competition, world wars, the Great Depression and even bankruptcy in the early 20th century. The latest challenge is the rise of streaming platforms such as Netflix, which opened its Paris office last year, and Amazon Prime. Despite some resistance in the country, such as the refusal by the Cannes film festival to screen Netflix films, the company is aggressively expanding in the French market. Gaumont is well placed to take advantage, having already produced Narcos for Netflix.

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“It’s very interesting that it’s survived and evolved and understood change,” says Leterrier of the French production company. “You have to adapt, humanity has adapted, moviemaking, film-making, entertainment has to adapt, there will be some happy days, some bad days. But ultimately, people love to be entertained. They need to be entertained. There’s a true need for an entertainment that is not completely mindless, that has a little heart and wits and smarts about it.”

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Lupin certainly has that – and Leterrier’s commitment to adaptation and moving with the times is evident in the show. While using the original stories as a blueprint, by putting Sy’s Assane at the centre of the story, it makes the century old tales feel entirely modern. He is a con artist with a conscience, his target is the wealthy establishment, and he’s happy to use people’s prejudices against them in his scams, while rarely resorting to violence.

One particular scene really hammers this home. In a flashback, Assane poses as an undercover detective who persuades an elderly woman to hand over her most valuable items, including a rare Fabergé egg. She shamelessly admits that her husband “assisted with the extraction of diamonds in the Belgian Congo”.

“The good old days,” Assane says with a wry smile. “The locals were sitting on a fortune, and they didn’t even realise it,” the woman continues. Assane is just playing the white establishment at its own game, one rigged from the very beginning.

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Sy as Bishop in X-Men: Days of Future Past. Photograph: AF archive/Alamy

“I feel that Omar and myself started our careers not wanting to make any waves, wanting to entertain,” says Leterrier. “But ultimately, the world has gotten so hard and so unfair and the injustice is so obvious and so brutal that we couldn’t stay silent any more.”

If that could come across as heavy-handed, the show wears these themes lightly, while still allowing room for its messages on race and elitism to feel substantial.

Leterrier explains that the approach had to feel measured. “It has to be done in a subtle way because you don’t want to make it too preachy and too obvious. Otherwise, it just becomes too forced, but if you make it part of the story, and you make it part of the character, and you really experience this world through the eyes of that other character, then it’s not a lesson that you’re giving an audience. You’re just putting them in the shoes of this guy.”

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“What made me really sad is that last Saturday we were on the cover of Libération. Well, Omar was,” he says.

“That’s the newspaper that my father used to get every morning, and we would read together. It was like:

‘Lupin, the worldwide success’. And I was thinking, I wish he’d seen that.”

This article was amended on 27 January 2021 to clarify the original title of the film Intouchables.

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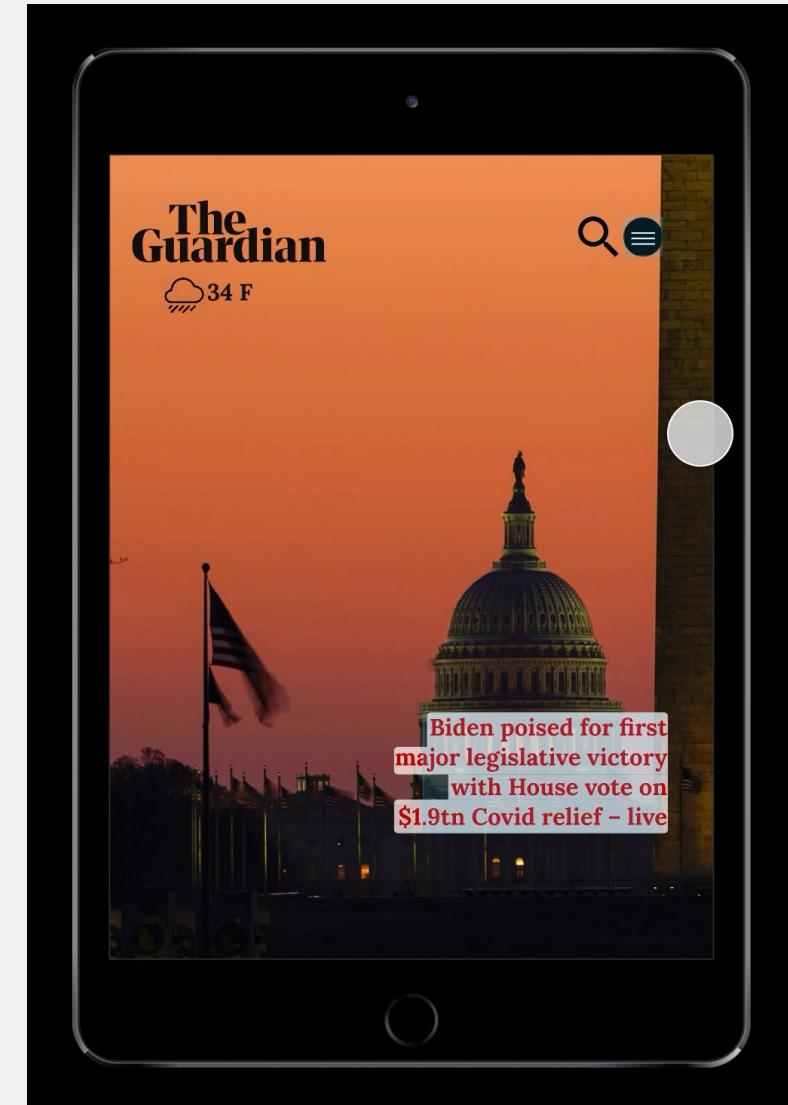
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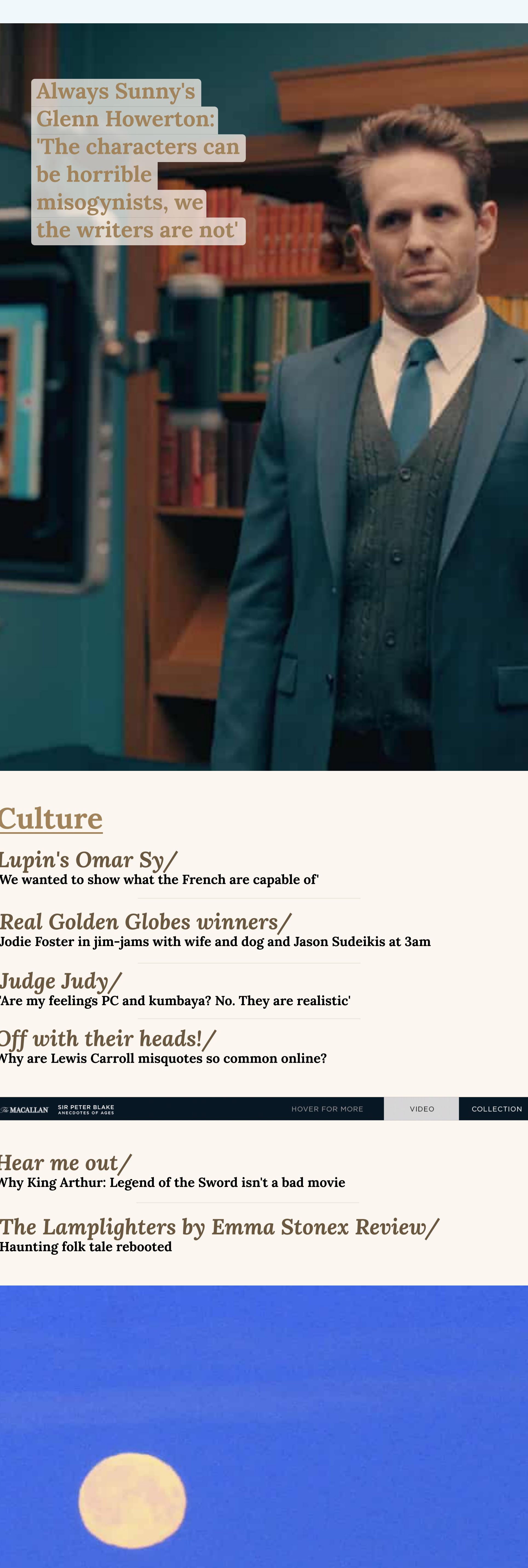
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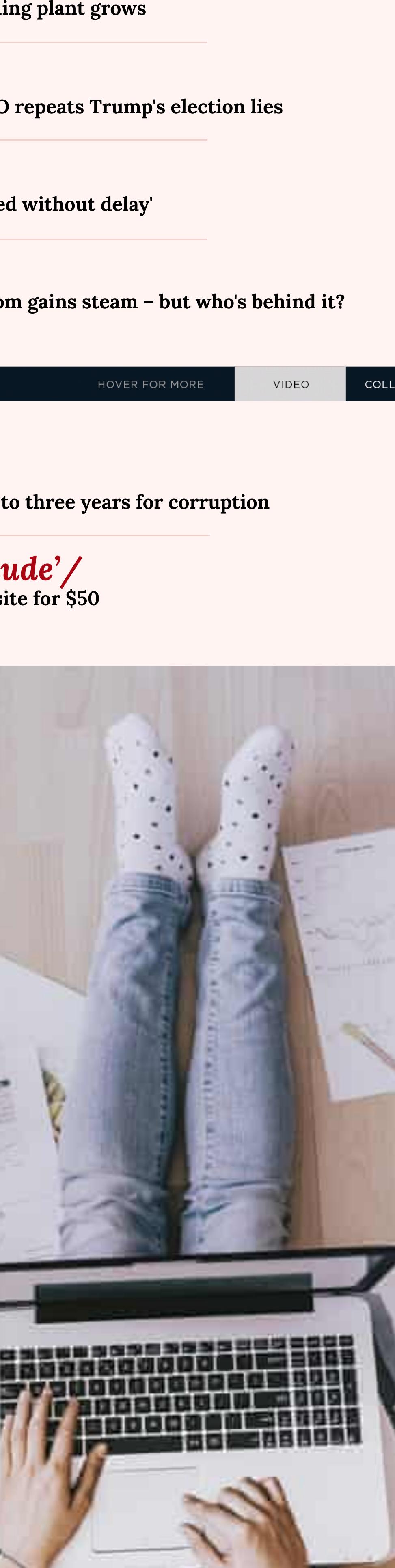
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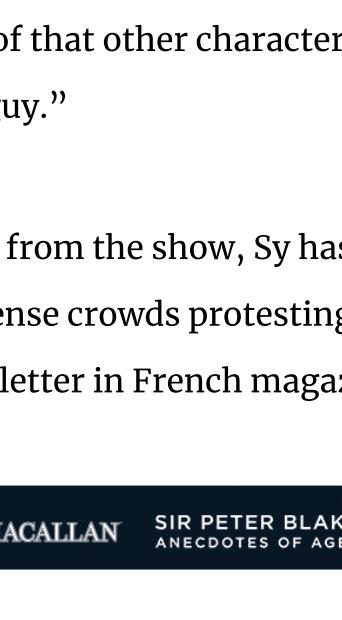
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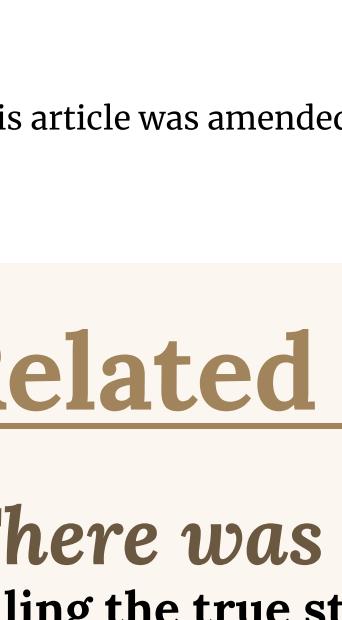

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'At the heart of the show is Sy's character, Assane Diop, pulling off perfectly planned deceptions with panache ...' Photograph: Emmanuel Guimier

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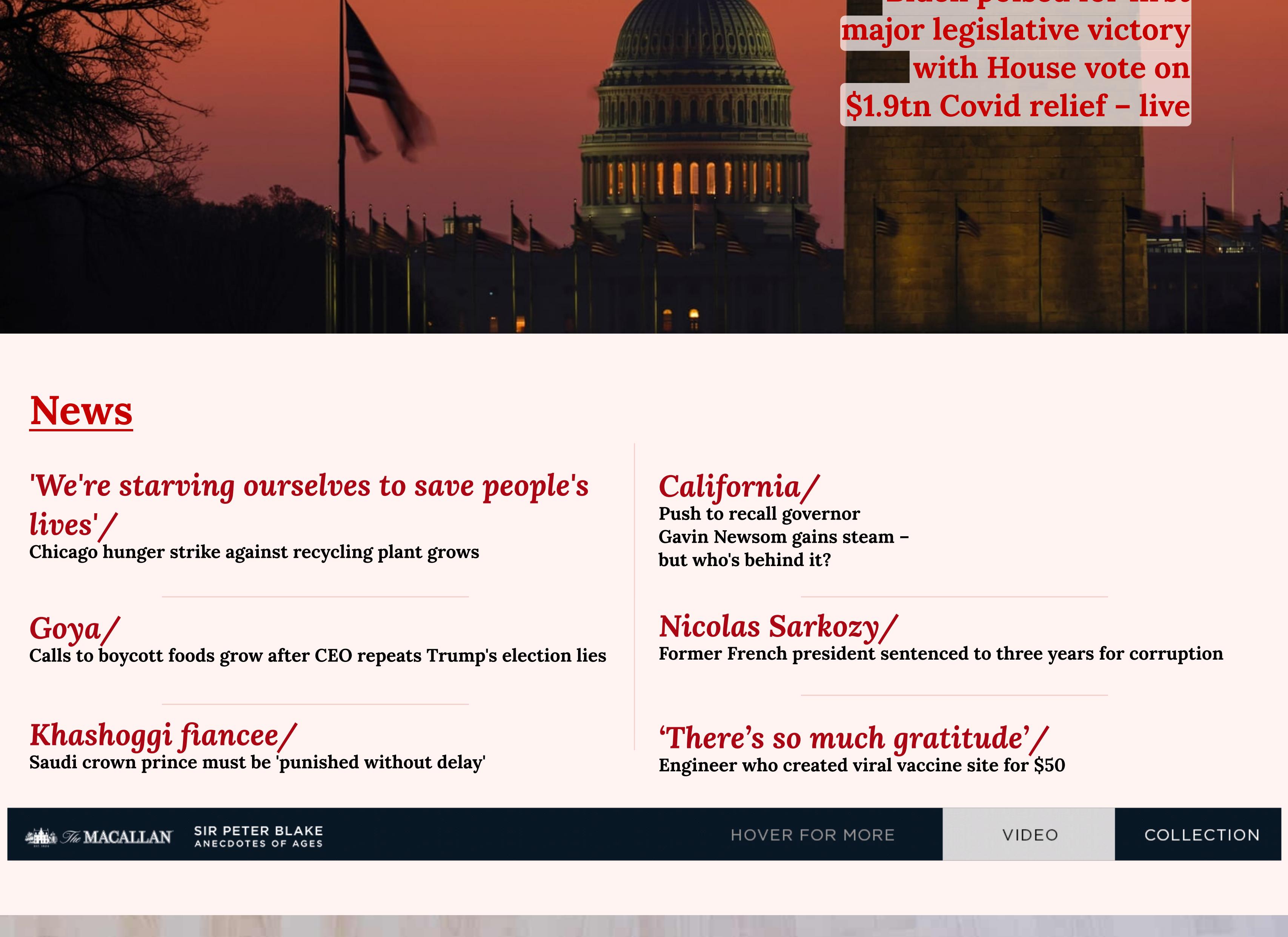
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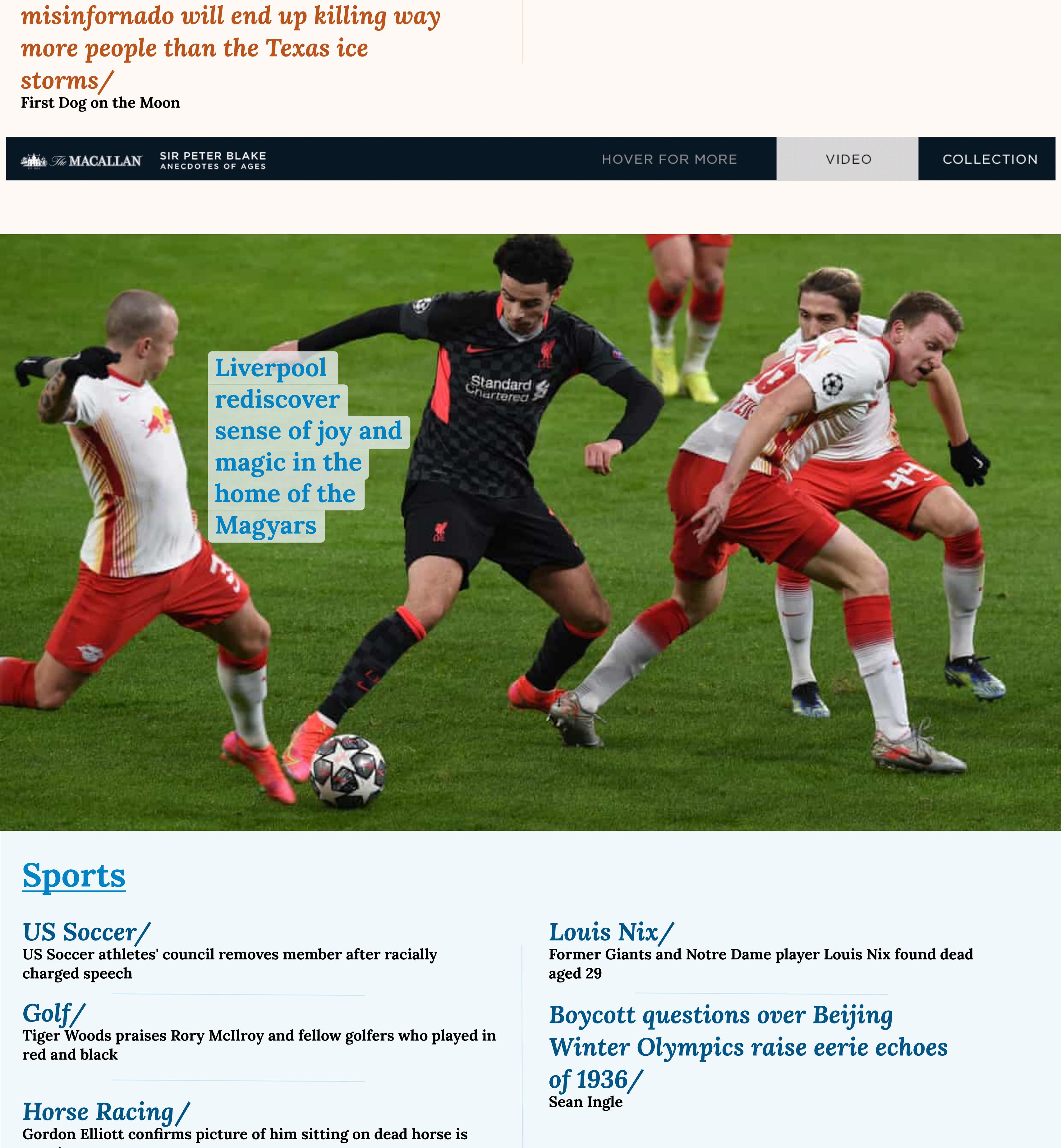
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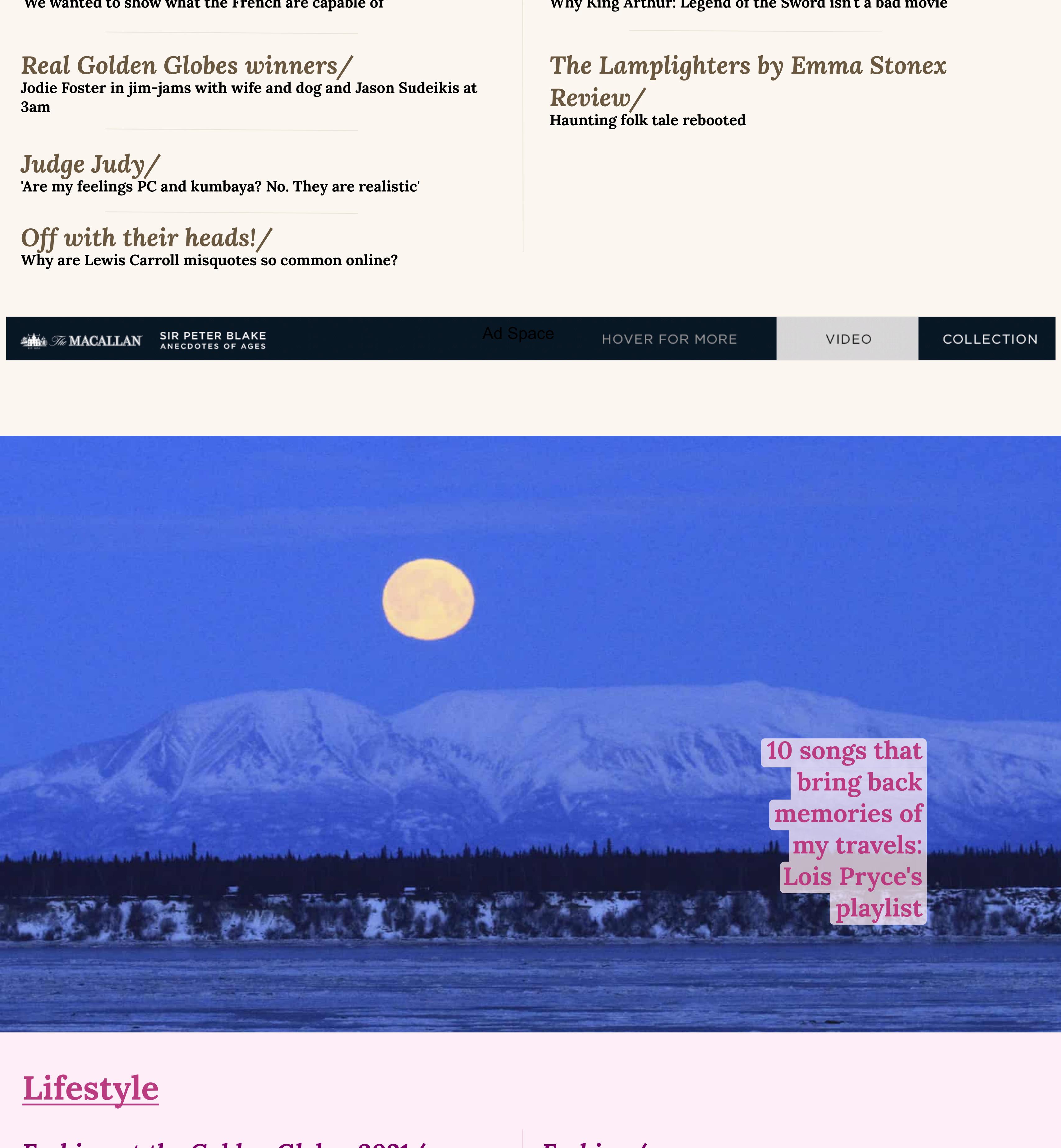
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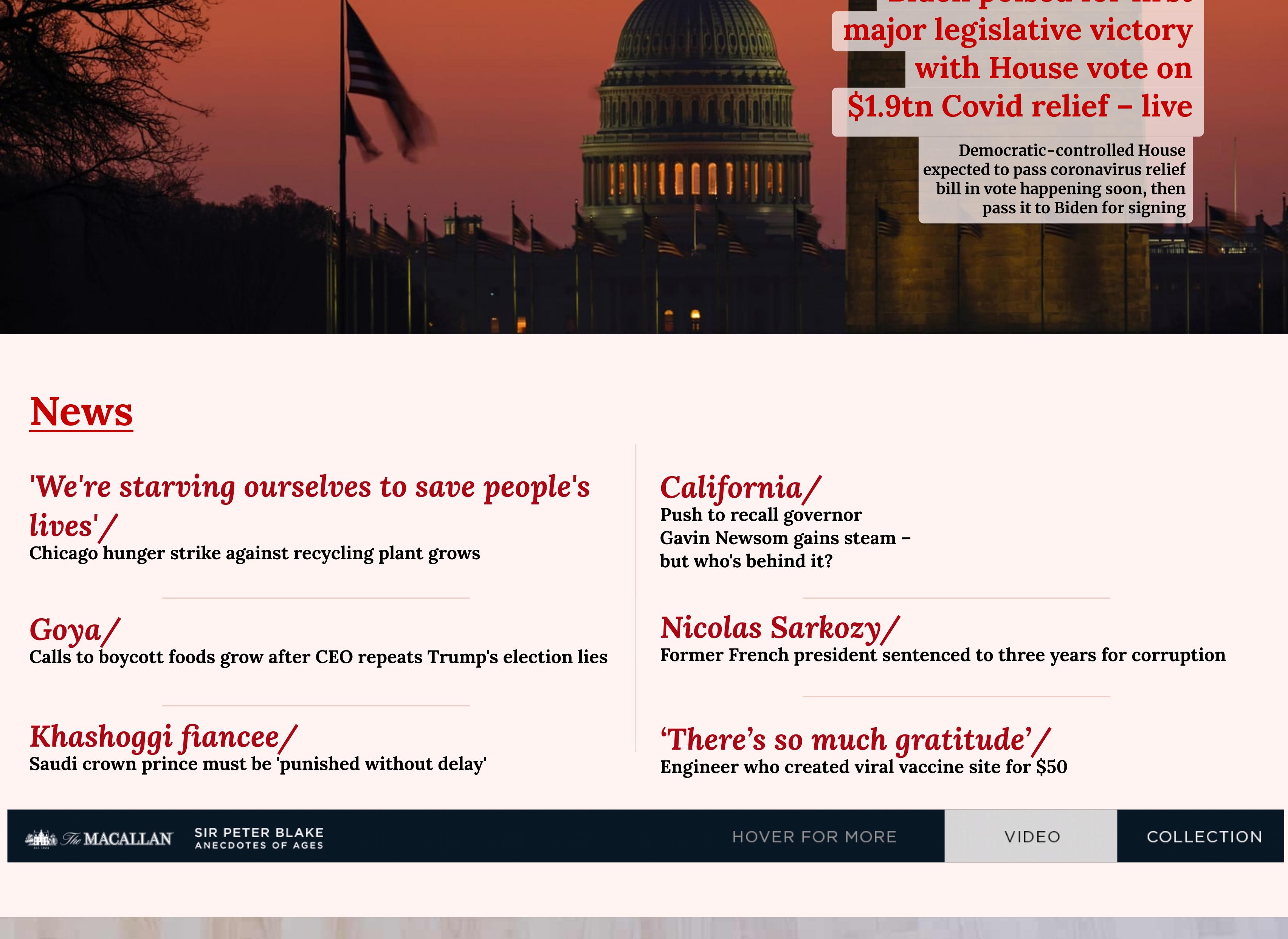
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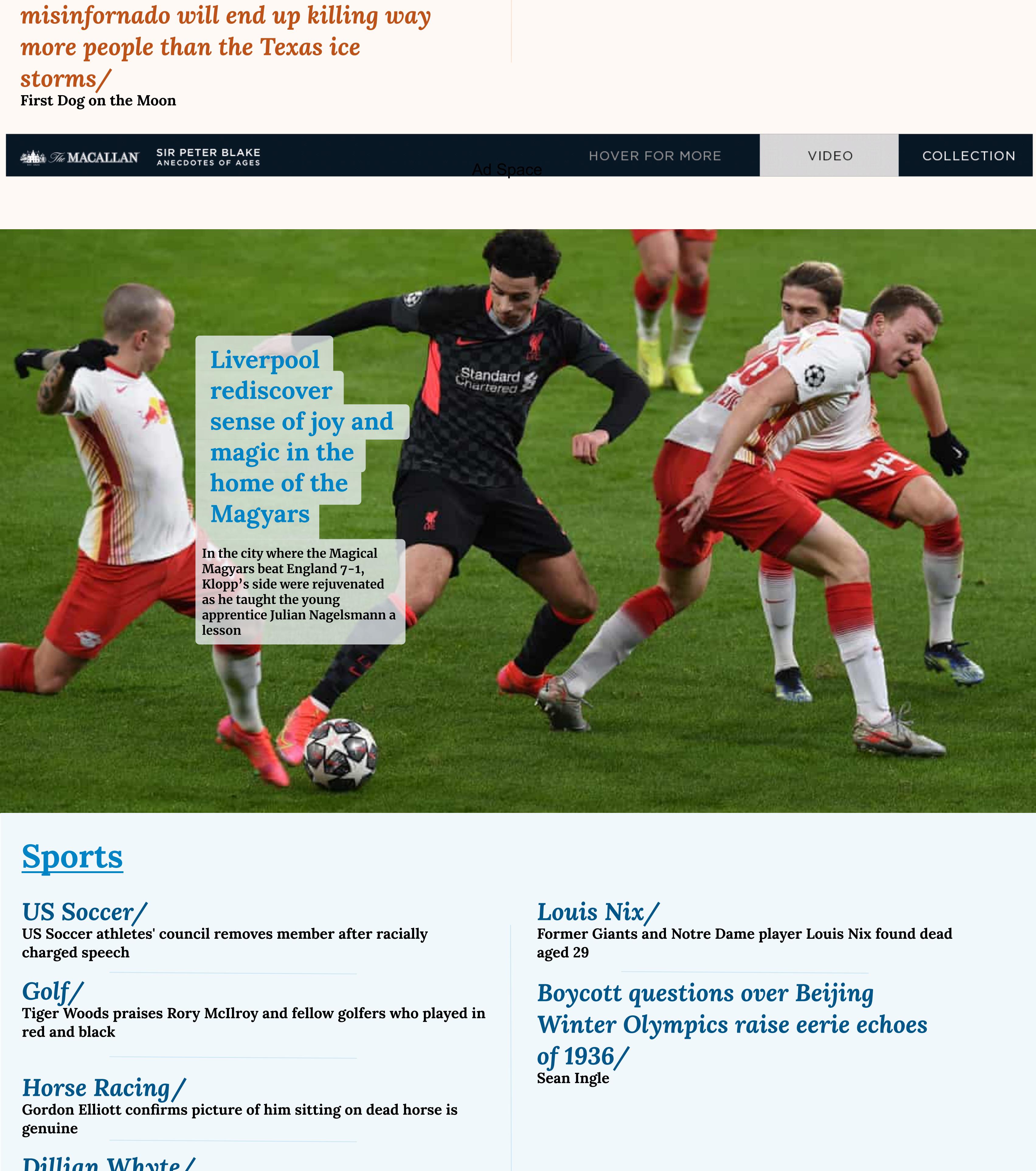
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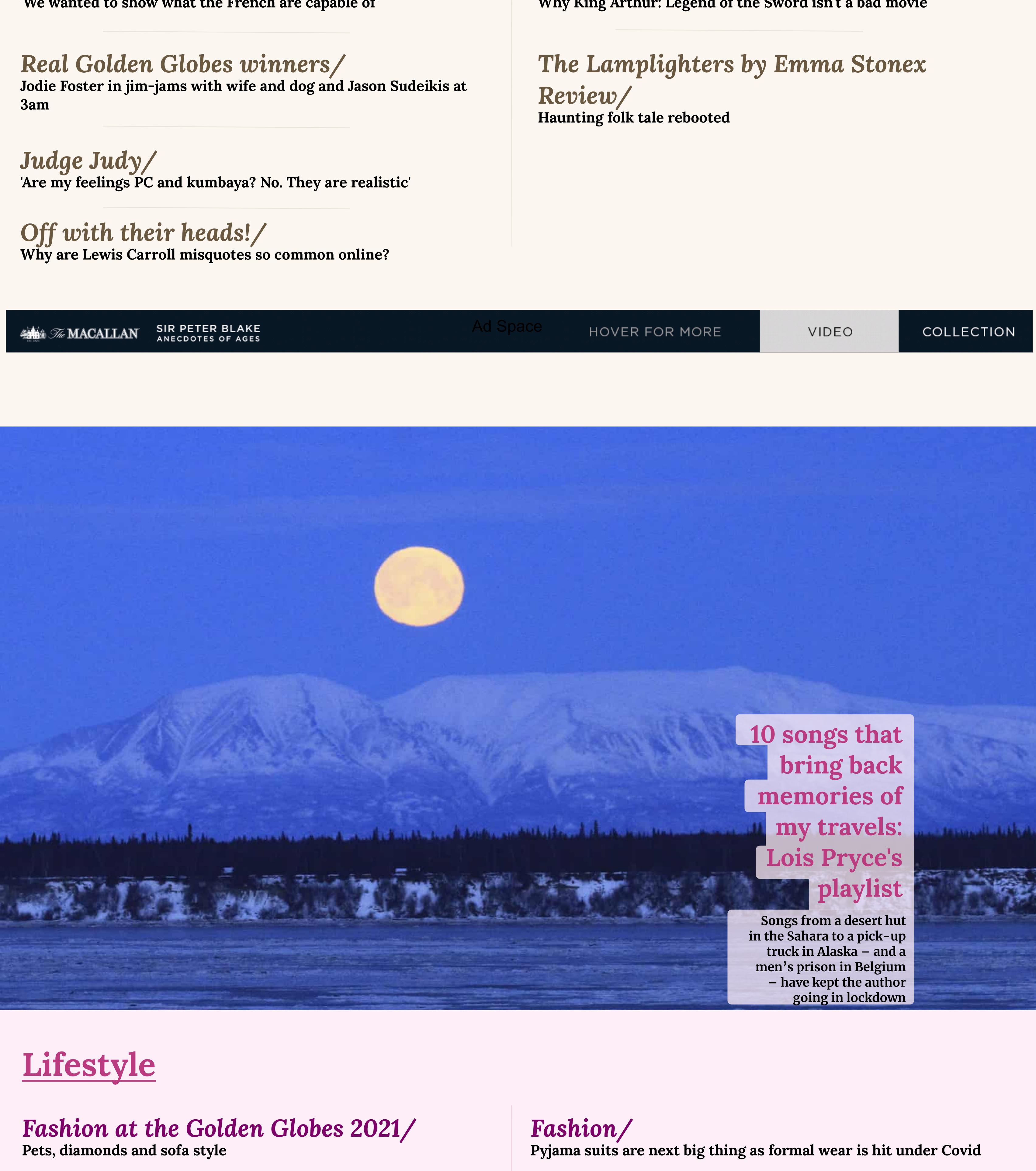
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Lupin's Omar Sy: 'We wanted to show what the French are capable of'

Iman Amrani

The actor stars in Netflix's biggest French-language hit as a gentleman thief. He and the director explain how the drama drew in 70 million fans worldwide.

"We wanted to show what the French were capable of in terms of making a series, but frankly we didn't expect it to do what it has." Omar Sy, the star of the latest Netflix smash hit, Lupin, is speaking over the phone from Senegal. The line between London and Dakar isn't great, but the charm that has helped his slick, charismatic character – a modern day gentleman thief – connect with audiences around the world is still evident.

Streaming services have been the dominant source of cultural output in the past year, so the chances are that you have at least heard of Lupin, even if you haven't got round to bingeing Netflix's biggest French language hit to date. Ranking in the Top 10 on the platform in multiple countries – climbing to No 2 in the UK and the US – as well as being projected to have reached 70 million households in the first month of streaming, Lupin is a family-friendly show – perhaps one of the elements that has given it an edge over the likes of Bridgerton and The Queen's Gambit.

At the heart of the show is Sy's character, Assane Diop, pulling off perfectly planned deceptions with panache – a bit like Steven Moffat's Sherlock, only on the wrong side of the law. Diop's inspiration is the eponymous Lupin, the much-loved character created by Maurice Leblanc in 1905 as a sort of French version of Raffles.

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It's hard to pin down exactly what it is about the series that has charmed audiences around the world (the protagonist's million-dollar smile would be a good first guess) but Sy is humble, nodding to the contribution of the Hollywood-based French director and friend Louis Leterrier. "We made the series with the mechanisms of cinema and the mechanisms of cinema are that of technique," he says. "We have a Hollywood director who brings their touch to French television, allowing us to tell this story in this way, and that plays a big part."

Neighbours in Los Angeles, Leterrier and Sy have impressive movie credentials. Leterrier earned a name for himself directing commercially successful blockbuster films including the second Transporter film with Jason Statham (he had been artistic director on the first), The Incredible Hulk, Clash of the Titans and Now You See Me. Meanwhile, Sy achieved huge international acclaim with his role in Intouchables (released in the UK as Untouchable) in 2011, leading to a string of roles in blockbusters including Jurassic World, Transformers and X-Men: Days of Future Past.

Like Lupin, Intouchables was made by Gaumont, the first film production company in the world. Founded in 1895, the company has withstood the rise of American competition, world wars, the Great Depression and even bankruptcy in the early 20th century. The latest challenge is the rise of streaming platforms such as Netflix, which opened its Paris office last year, and Amazon Prime. Despite some resistance in the country, such as the refusal by the Cannes film festival to screen Netflix films, the company is aggressively expanding in the French market. Gaumont is well placed to take advantage, having already produced Narcos for Netflix.

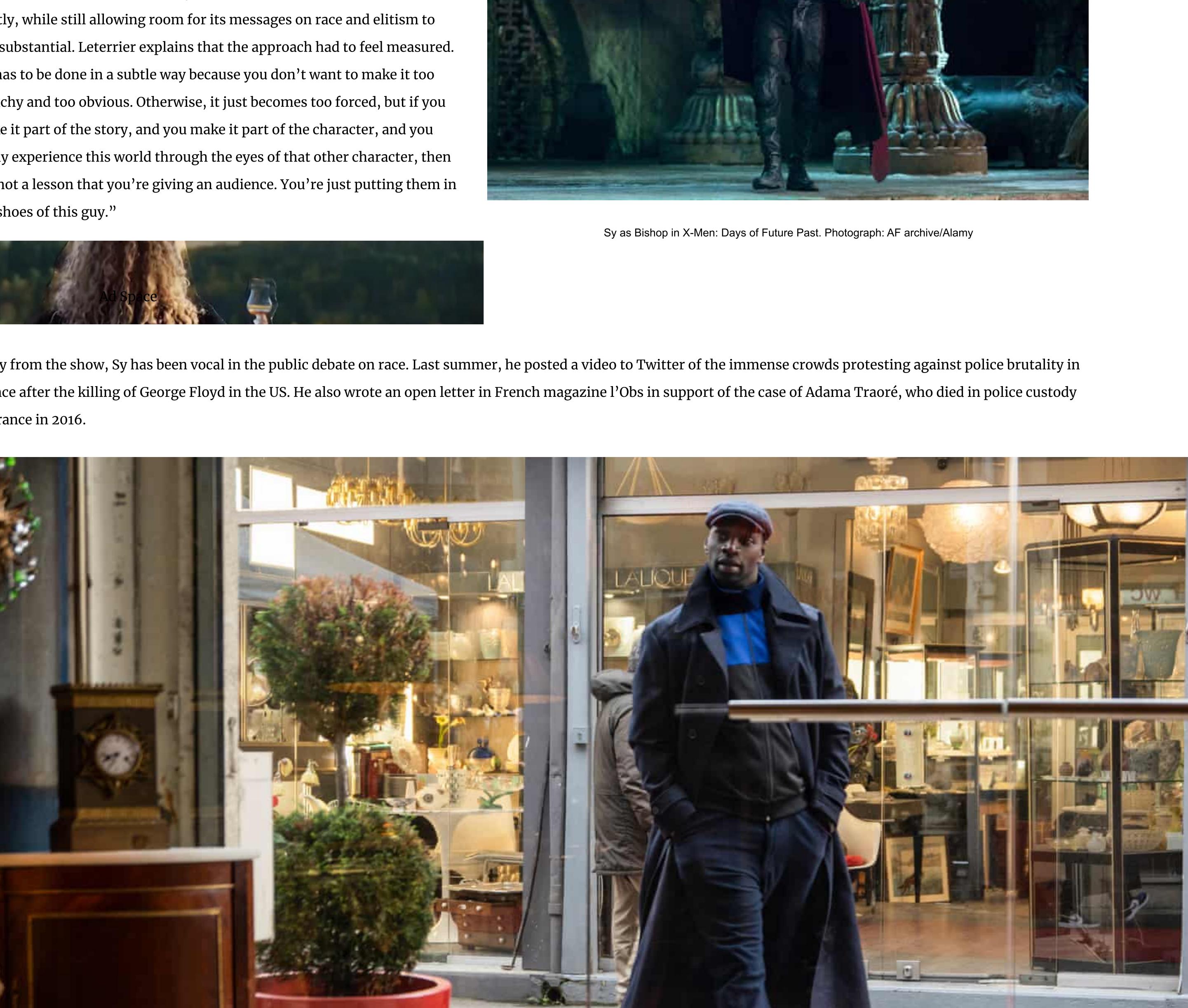
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'At the heart of the show is Sy's character, Assane Diop, pulling off perfectly planned deceptions with panache ...' Photograph: Emmanuel Guimier

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Lupin certainly has that – and Leterrier's commitment to adaptation and moving with the times is evident in the show. While using the original stories as a blueprint, by putting Sy's Assane at the centre of the story, it makes the century old tales feel entirely modern. He is a con artist with a conscience, his target is the wealthy establishment, and he's happy to use people's prejudices against them in his scams, while rarely resorting to violence.

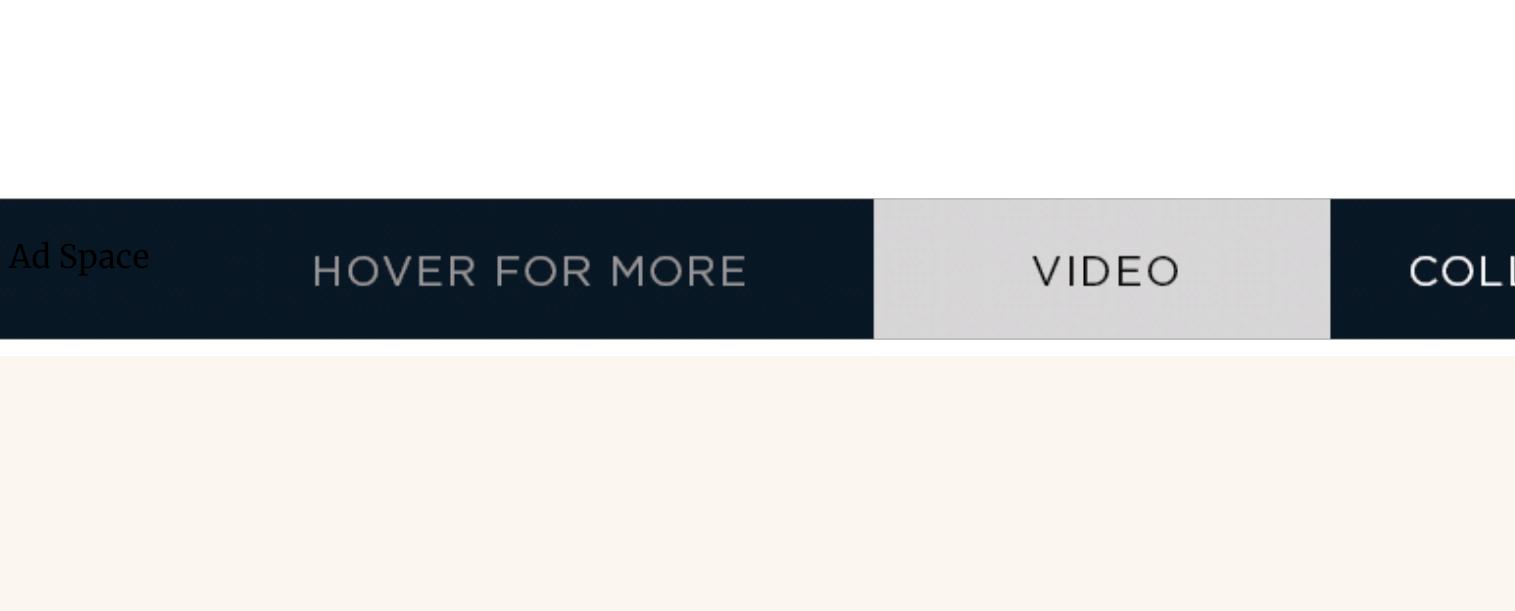
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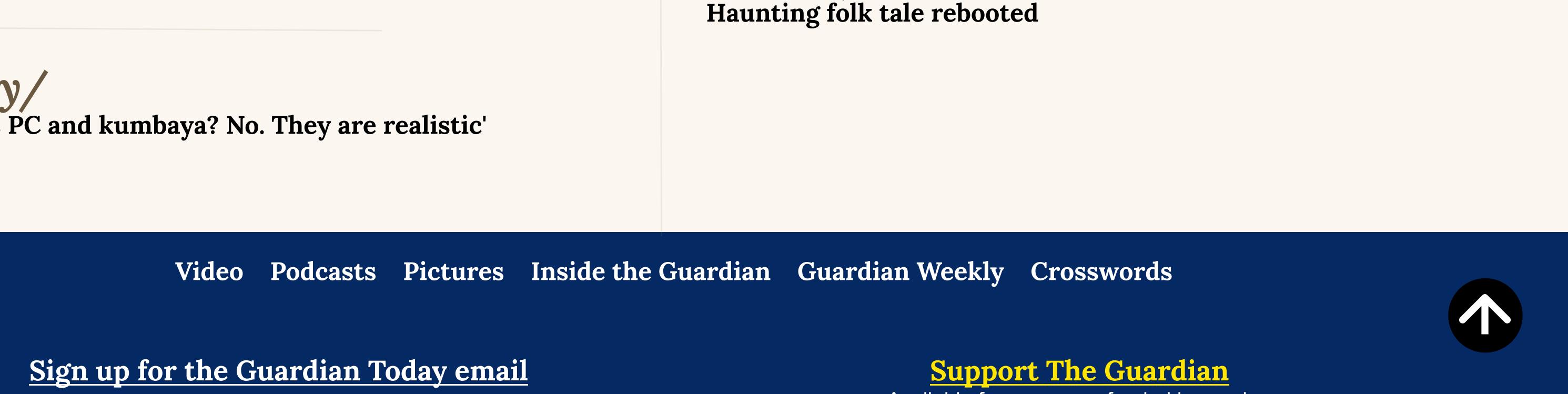
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Sy as Bishop in X-Men: Days of Future Past. Photograph: AF archive/Alamy

Away from the show, Sy has been vocal in the public debate on race. Last summer, he posted a video to Twitter of the immense crowds protesting against police brutality in France after the killing of George Floyd in the US. He also wrote an open letter in French magazine l'Obs in support of the case of Adama Traoré, who died in police custody in France in 2016.



However, Sy says he still feels most comfortable making himself heard through his work.

"We are at home as actors expressing ourselves through art," he says.

But does his visibility and fame make him feel a level of responsibility to speak out on these issues?

"Yes and no. I am just responsible for myself and sometimes people will try to pin responsibilities on me that are not really mine, so you just have to be conscious of that."

'I wish my father had seen it' – Louis Leterrier. Photograph: Axelle/Bauer-Griffin/FilmMagic

And along with those systemic themes, Lupin has touched people around the world with its focus on fatherhood – Assane's relationship with his dead father motivates much of the action, and there's his bond with his son, too. It's symbolised by the handing down of a book, the adventures of Arsène Lupin, of course. Leterrier's father, François Leterrier, was a well-known actor and director in France who died in December, just before the show was released. As our time draws to a close I ask him if there was anything that his father passed on to him about directing.

"You're the first one to ask me this question," Leterrier says with a soft smile. "My father cared for me like Assane's father cares for his son. He really gave me the love of cinema." One of his personal motivations for working on the series was so that he could be closer to his father in France who was unwell at the time.

"What made me really sad is that last Saturday we were on the cover of Libération. Well, Omar was," he says. "That's the newspaper that my father used to get every morning, and we would read together. It was like: 'Lupin, the worldwide success'. And I was thinking, I wish he'd seen that."

* This article was amended on 27 January 2021 to clarify the original title of the film Intouchables.

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