

The Problem With Hate-Watching the Rich

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One of the most original and engrossing shows I have watched in years is the Netflix series “Beef,” which was released last spring. It brilliantly conveys the indignities of modern alienation and quickly wins our investment in its central characters—characters who inhabit very different positions in the social hierarchy. It also contains perhaps the most authentic moment of Christian redemption that I have come across on screen. And in its concluding episode, it pulls the most surprising move possible: It ends in a place of radical, transformative hope.

One note from the show, however, seemed out of tune with the rest. Despite its generosity toward financially comfortable and struggling characters alike, “Beef” allowed its lone uber-wealthy figure—the only one who represented, roughly, the 0.01 percent—to exist as a caricature, and to die so gruesomely I had to turn away. This is striking. Here is a show suggesting, in brave defiance of our despairing age, that authentic spiritual rebirth is possible. And even in this world, where the last note struck is resonant goodness, the richest are a lost cause.

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Behold the zeitgeist. Some of the most buzzed-about shows of the past five years, including “Succession” and “The White Lotus,” invite us to wallow in the foibles and frustrations of high-net-worth characters. A spate of films has portrayed wealthy “beautiful people” meeting grim fates, among them “Triangle of Sadness,” “The Menu,” “Glass Onion” and “Parasite.” (This fall also saw the release of a novel bluntly titled *Kill the Rich*, blurbled by “Don’t Look Up” director Adam McKay and sure to be optioned sooner rather than later.)

These stories are often billed as “dark comedy” and have been described by many as cathartic. While we shouldn’t lump them together wholesale—they vary considerably in what they seem to be trying to show us, and in the coherence and complexity of their themes—they point to a strong appetite for mocking depictions of the wealthy, extending into the territory of sadism. “Catharsis,” from the Greek for “purge” or “cleanse,” is not what we get from this genre. Far from ridding us of resentment and disgust, these works encourage us to embrace, celebrate and cultivate the baser elements of our nature.

To Have and Have Not

The ancient world offers a better paradigm for what draws audiences to these shows and films: scapegoating.

The word comes from a Yom Kippur tradition among the Israelites. For the day of atonement, in addition to sacrificing a goat to God, the Hebrews would take a second goat and symbolically load it with their sins before banishing it to the wilderness. From this we have the familiar term, which typically refers to someone who has been unfairly blamed for the sins of many.

Construed in this way, no one can seriously defend “scapegoat” as an accurate term for the rich. In the 21st century, the “haves” bear significant, demonstrable culpability for a host of social ills. Whether we point to pharmaceutical giants and elite consulting companies fueling the opioid epidemic, oil and gas companies running roughshod over the health of workers and communities, or a billionaire’s greenhouse gas emissions dwarfing those of an average person, we find legitimate reasons to be furious. To some extent, proclaiming we should “eat the rich” is an expression of frustration at the sense that the rich are eating us.

It is hard not to see an element of sweeping self-loathing in much of today’s popular culture. In any given scenario, though, it is worth asking where the line between “have” and “have not” gets drawn. As Robert David Sullivan discussed in this magazine (“Television 1950-2000, R.I.P.,” **America**, 1/24), “elite” audiences—the most educated and well-off viewers—have largely retreated into a world of streaming choices made expressly for them. All the films and series named above are custom-designed for the tastes of a segment of the viewing public that we could call privileged. What does it mean that these viewers, specifically, are eager to spoon up damning portraits of jaded influencers and swaggering tycoons?

It is hard not to see an element of sweeping self-loathing in much of today’s popular culture. Google “humans ruin everything” and you’ll find it’s a popular slogan; and if you don’t mind the irony, there’s a T-shirt available on Amazon for \$19.99. The climate crisis has been shown, in numerous studies, to weigh on the mental health of young people in particular. In the United States, surveys suggest it has led to wide spread questioning around the morality of having children—widespread enough to prompt books examining the angst. But of course, not all swaths of humanity have contributed equally to damaging the planet, and the populations of poorer countries tend to be at once the most vulnerable and the least offending.

All Americans are more “responsible” for climate change than the average global citizen, something Pope Francis underscored in his most recent apostolic exhortation, “Laudate Deum.” We are all implicated in the sprawling global economic system in which exploitation facilitates our comfort and convenience. And it stands to reason that better-off and more educated Americans are especially aware of their complicity in a culture of ecological damage and grotesque economic disparity.

This awareness is a special kind of torment when the machine looks so vast and beyond our control. Lukas Moodysson’s 2009 film “Mammoth,” a memorable portrait of globalization told through intertwined individual lives, was well named. But whereas Moodysson (or Alejandro Iñárritu in his 2006 film “Babel”) sought to convey the predicament of humans swallowed up in a hopelessly complex world, the dominant note of more recent works like “Don’t Look Up” is bitterness. Overwhelmed by the size of the problem, viewers are

indulging in a mirthless laughter that points to deep frustration—with ourselves and with the larger reality.

These dramas focus on exaggerated versions of the average viewer's hedonism: the ultra-rich. Anger is easier to handle when pointed away from ourselves, so these more recent dramas focus on exaggerated versions of the average viewer's hedonism: the ultra-rich. While "Beef" does not exactly belong to the genre, then—because it's not primarily "about" the rich—it is an exemplar of the scapegoating dynamic. It honors the humanity of the flawed entrepreneur who is poised to benefit from capitalist conglomeration by selling her business to a big-box store. But because someone has to be held accountable, it buys her exoneration by meting out punishment to her ultra-wealthy investor.

Anger, Righteous and Not

It's a tempting way to process our discouragement, but not a constructive one. "Beef" saved its sadism for the 0.01 percent; other works may draw the line elsewhere. But circles of one circumference or another are being drawn around the privileged for the purposes of persuading audiences that theirs is a domain where the ethos of "love one another" does not apply.

TV shows and films of the 1980s offered up cheerful tableaux of affluence—think "Silver Spoons" or "Ferris Bueller's Day Off." It is difficult to imagine a movie or series being released today in which similar prosperity would go unremarked upon. Good. Wealth inequality is at the root of a litany of wrongs. It is also, compared with the 1980s, out of control. In 1985, the richest person in America was worth \$2.8 billion; in 1995, \$14.8 billion; today, the figure is upward of \$220 billion. The wealthiest have also exploded in number. On the cusp of the 2008 financial crisis, there were fewer than 1,000 billionaires globally; by 2022, Forbes counted nearly 2,700. The scale of these figures has entered the realm of the cartoonish. Small wonder that we have an impulse to depict the people associated with these riches as unreal—characters to be tortured like Itchy tortures Scratchy.

We should be concerned, though, with what the indulgence of this impulse does to us. A 2019 "Welfare, Work, and Wealth" survey by the Cato Institute found that more than a third of respondents under age 30 felt that violent action against the rich is sometimes justified; in Reddit threads, users muse on how advisable such action would be. Entertaining the fantasy of punitive or "righteous" violence, we run the risk of blunting our moral instincts and ceasing to see wanton violence as an abomination by its nature.

What we watch both reflects and shapes our real world.

Anger that begins righteously can become dangerous when unchecked. Consider the heinous acts committed in the name of fairness by the Bolsheviks or the Jacobins. What is notable is not simply the horrors of means justified by ends, but that "the need to inflict pain," as the historian Anna Geifman has written, became intrinsic to the project, "a formally verbalized obligation for all committed revolutionaries."

To borrow the wording of Adam Serwer, a staff writer for The Atlantic, the cruelty is the point. From the revolutionary perspective, an individual's claim to our charity and humanity is in direct proportion to their degree of oppression. By the time we get to oppressors, we're looking at negative integers. Scores need settling.

Movies and TV shows are a far cry from revolutionary politics, one might say. But what we watch both reflects and shapes our real world. According to neuroscientists, the brain makes little distinction between what it sees on screen and in reality. What does it do to us to watch a narrative where there is no redemption, only comeuppance? How does it influence us when we are encouraged to feed and wallow in our resentments rather than search for the good?

Christian Calculus

The calculus of Bolsheviks cannot be ours. There is a temptation to claim that Jesus, who identifies himself explicitly with the poor, would approve of any actions that advance their interests. And indeed, his tone in the "judgment of nations" passage of the Gospel of Matthew is so unmistakably seething, it's tempting to equate it with revolutionary zeal. On judgment day, the Son of Man "will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink.... What you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.'"

But Jesus is not proposing a program or endorsing a cause. He is saying something much more radical. Mark my words, he is telling us: Whatever human being you feel you can safely overlook, write off, rationalize away, I guarantee you, you're wrong. As the theologian PHEME PERKINS has written, "Neither Jesus nor Paul has a socioeconomic project for taking apart the structures of society.... The moral imperative for God's people is to treat the poor, the disadvantaged, the resident alien, and the enslaved in their midst with justice because the God of Israel is the patron of such persons." In a world that looks right through certain people, Jesus challenges us to think of the marginalized as himself—the Christ—in another form.

And how does the world, in general, regard the rich? One of many possible answers is summed up in a scene from "Triangle of Sadness," where the head of staff on a luxury yacht gives her team a pep talk before welcoming their wealthy patrons aboard. Be perfectly obsequious, she argues, and you're guaranteed to walk away with a huge tip. At this prospect, both staff and boss work themselves into a vibrational howl of giddy anticipation.

This pep talk and the animalistic response it receives are ugly—not because we necessarily feel sorry for the guests who are being shown a false face, but because this falsity is of a piece with the neglect of the poor that Jesus and his disciples decry. If you look at another human and see an equation calculating how much they can or can't do for you, you are in need of Christ's healing. That healing begins not by rejecting either the "losers" or "winners" in our zero-sum game of financial gain, but by rejecting the game's very framing. In our efforts to perceive the human dignity of every person, poor and rich alike, we participate in Christ's radical call.

Both “Triangle of Sadness” and “The White Lotus” are nuanced, illustrating how people of all socioeconomic strata are liable to be shaped by their needs and their power or lack thereof. But the schadenfreude-laden “The Menu” offers far less of value, depicting the scorched-earth wrath of a celebrity chef with axes to grind. He lures a group of elites to his restaurant in order to murder them. The only guest who escapes is a young woman with lower-class origins who suggests, to ingratiate herself with the chef, that she also has lower-class tastes. The only possible moral is that those with down-home palates and/or quick wits deserve to be last against the wall.

“The Menu” is especially disappointing, given that director Mark Mylod has been involved with HBO’s “Succession” in both directing and producing roles. When it comes to masterful depictions of high-end suffering, “Succession” has earned comparisons with Shakespeare. Like the Bard, the writers of “Succession” aren’t interested in gratuitous and gruesome scenes of punishment, meted out by self-appointed gods. Instead, they have engineered characters well equipped to heap all necessary misery on themselves.

Denied the benefits bestowed by loving parents, raised in the belief that competition and the quest for dominance represent the ultimate reality, the Roy siblings are predisposed to make choices that doom their chances of experiencing peace. They are not pure caricatures, because they show enough capacity for tenderness and self-awareness to win our fragile hope that they can finally change. When they don’t, we share in the tragedy that is the seduction of worldly things.

This makes “Succession” a great feat of storytelling. Yes, we laugh at the Roy family’s folly. But the show manages, in spite of our class-based prejudices and the siblings’ own glaring character flaws, to make us wish they would be better, suffer less and create less suffering in turn. We keep wishing this for them throughout, even in the absence of much evidence to give us hope.

Is there any better encapsulation of what it is to love those who persecute you?