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Purge: A Rogerian Argument

The frigid night air pierces your lungs like a dagger. You inhale one last breath and steady the rifle’s stock. Everything is perfect. You’ve got your nemesis square in your crosshairs; exacting revenge at this moment will bear no consequences, no judgment, nothing. You’ll have to contain your perverted excitement, this is not a real world scenario. The inspiration for this far-fetched sniper setup was drawn from a thrilling movie I recently watched. *The Purge: Anarchy* is a 2014 horror film directed by James DeMonaco. Set in Los Angeles in 2023, the film operates under the premise that one day a year, all crime, including murder, is legal for 12 hours. After starting the countdown, chaos ensues, with citizens taking up arms and transforming city blocks into warzones. *The Purge* is a fantastic story, the kind that reveals multiple layers of depth upon careful analysis. Delving deeper into the film’s framework exposes elements of racism, classism, and sexism at the core of American society.

From a casual viewing distance, *The Purge* presents itself as a superficial horror film centered on senseless killings. In this regard, the plot feels thin and hyper focused, skimping out on a global approach to the message it conveys. In the interest of profit, DeMonaco placed shock value above dense content, taking a cheap shot at the human tendency to vegetate in front of the screen. Since the film is not based on the current reality, it has no bearing or reflection on American lives. Certainly, a world where crime is legal seems highly unlikely, even in the distant
future. Furthermore, why would people kill to solve their problems? *The Purge* posits that the American people should have a chance to rid themselves of the negativity built up in a year through the act of murder; this sounds more like a ploy to gain viewers than it does real life.

These casual reads of the film make sense, and generally follow a logical pattern. They can’t necessarily be disputed as untrue or unrealistic, and I agree that they have a valid point. *The Purge* does rely heavily on violence, depicting a world that defies reason and logic. I agree with the interpretations to a certain extent, but once the viewers’ ability to derive personal meaning from the content is hindered, these views are halting potential growth. Viewing the film through any surface level lens absolves the viewer of critical thought, and perpetuates the issues in the film and society as a whole. I understand these commonly held viewpoints, and in fact, I respect their practicality. However, I encourage you as a viewer to disconnect from the herd mentality, dance with abstraction, and appropriate the issues of the movie to your personal life. If you engage with the material in such a non-cursory way I am confident that your understanding of the world will be stretched to new dimensions. The hyper escalation of society’s conditioned patterns of class and race entitlement, revenge eligibility, and the relegation of women to frail archetypes is highlighted by *The Purge*.

Classism and racism are pervasive themes throughout the film. There is a clear pecking order followed by purge participants that parallels modern day societal roles. For example, the wealthy “buy poor and sick people, and they take them into their homes, and they kill them where they are safe” (*The Purge: Anarchy*). The middle class are either purging for a specific reason, or locked inside their custom fitted, windowless fortresses. Not surprisingly, the poor are depicted as being systematically oppressed by soldiers who are secretly contracted by the government to corral and slaughter project residents. The goal of this genocidal assignment is to
thin the herd and subsequently stimulate the economy. This premise is an interesting reflection of current American economic affairs. An incredible insight into the economy and horror movies is offered by the article “Rich and Strange the Yuppie Horror Film”: “Instead of expressing the repression and contradictions of bourgeois society generally, as many critics agree is central to the ideology of the genre, it specifically addresses the anxieties of an affluent culture in an era of prolonged recession” (Grant 7). These anxieties of the rich, which are products of American society’s extreme consumerism and materialism, are just that, anxieties. Yet they continue to manifest themselves in the form of continued oppression against the poor. The Purge does an excellent job at capturing this essence, and playing out a fantasy solution to release the rage.

A description of the characters is necessary to further highlight the issues at hand. The protagonist of the film is Sergeant Leo Barnes, a white, middle class gunslinger seeking revenge for his lost son. Leo is idealized as a hero and a savior throughout the film. Shane and Liz are young, white, middle class suburbanites who are left stranded outside during the purge after their vehicle is sabotaged. Shane and Liz come off as naive and carefree, they even have the leisure of a car and an upcoming divorce. Eva, her daughter Cali, and her father Papa Rico are a Hispanic family of three generations living in the ghetto. The Rico family is pitiful; full of love, but struggling to make ends meet. The Rico family represent a Marxist construct that Lois Tyson calls the “colonization of consciousness” (Tyson 63). Tyson claims this colonization of the poor is “to convince them to see their situation the way the imperialist nation wants them to see it, to convince them, for example, that they are mentally, spiritually and culturally inferior to their conquerors and that their lot will be improved under their guidance” (Tyson 63). This theme is brought to life through the Rico family.
Before the purge commences, Eva’s father Papa Rico departs in a chauffeured vehicle; leaving behind a note saying:

Dearest Eva and Cali, my greatest heartache is seeing the two girls I love so much struggling in this world. I’m dying, you know this. I’ll be a martyr for a wealthy family tonight. They’ve paid me for this service, $100,000 will be transferred into your accounts. Take the money, survive the night, and live a safe life, I love you (*Purge*).

How horrifying, that self-sacrifice, in the interest of escaping poverty, is the most sensible rationale. DeMonaco did an incredible job at translating America’s current state of income and wealth disparity into an eye opening representation of class and purge status. According to “Marxist Criticism”: “Clearly, members of the underclass and the lower class are economically oppressed: they suffer the ills of economic privation, are hardest hit by economic recessions, and have limited means of improving their lot” (Tyson 55). To simplify the classist categories: the rich purge in safety and privacy, the middle class either carry out their purge goals or lockdown their homes and hide, and, rendered economically defenseless with their consciousness colonized, the poor are fed to the government machine like lambs to the slaughter. What’s in your wallet?

In addition to the issues of class, the racial overtones should now be screaming. Leo, Shane, Liz, rich families, and politicians are all white. Shane, Liz, Eva, and Cali are all rescued by Leo early in the purge, further establishing his role as a supreme patriarchal force, a white knight, quite literally. Literally all non-white characters are featured in a way that symbolizes their inferiority. From the status portrayal to the defeated expressions captured by the camera, the racist messages are disgusting clear. White people are monetarily well-off and safe. While the poor, mainly minorities, have been pushed so far back into a corner that it warped on itself and
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started a revolution. Firmly planted at the forefront of this revolution is Carmelo John; a renegade committed to overthrowing the highest level of government conducting the purge, the founding fathers. Carmelo leads a misfit group of black guerillas on their anarchist crusade, reminiscent of the Black Panthers with copious amounts of firepower. Carmelo and his accomplices are painted as dangerous gun toting animals. His soldiers are shown in torn clothing, brandishing outdated firearms and crude melee weapons. Carmelo represents a stereotypical black activist: loud, passionate, and unwaveringly faithful to his cause. Carmelo is hostile throughout the film, and his frustration towards his people’s oppression is expressed through violence and shouting his political opinions through various media outlets. Carmelo is featured on the internet, and on TV screens that have been hacked to display his messages, adding a criminal, counterculture vibe to his character. Carmelo’s efforts are impressive, and at the end of the movie he and his team infiltrate a high class purge theatre, killing off a slew of their enemies, the rich. This is a classic film scenario where blacks are exploited “blaxploitation films depicted a stronger, more militant image of African Americans who triumphed over (frequently racist) white antagonists” (Benshoff 36). The movie does not make it clear whether or not Carmelo is successful in his quest to disrupt the founding fathers. I infer that Carmelo ultimately fails his mission, in order to maintain a binary balance within the plot. The antithesis of Leo, Carmelo is the black knight of his people. Aside from the color interpretation, the implication of this status is twofold; that Carmelo is irreversibly destined to fail, and that his struggle pales in comparison to his more accepted counterpart, Leo.

Revenge is a universal aspect of mankind. When one feels slighted or wronged, thoughts of revenge are common. The issue lies in how the importance or eligibility of revenge is determined. The Rico family, with their desperate situation, deserve their revenge as much as
Leo, do they not? In an academic context, the answer to this question seems obvious; however, revenge eligibility, a function of class entitlement, complicates this scenario. Revenge is defined as the action of inflicting hurt or harm on someone for an injury or wrong suffered at their hands. Eligibility is defined as being entitled to be chosen. Revenge eligibility in *The Purge* is expressed through Leo seeking revenge for the loss of his son to a drunk driver named Warren Grass.

For the sake of extending a previous point, recall Leo’s societal position that I detailed earlier as we move forward. The rich aren’t followed throughout the film, and it can be inferred that they are safe and free of purge complications. Because the middle class are the majority, they are considered the norm. The poor are forced to sell themselves like Papa Rico, or turn to their faith and pray for survival. While the rich purge quietly, and the poor are routinely murdered, the middle class are left to face other members of the middle class. This gives them the unique ability to personalize their purge, and carry out specific goals. The loss of any life is tragic. But why would the loss of Leo’s son take precedence over the loss of Papa Rico, or any other resident of the projects? Furthermore, why would one life deserve action, retribution, or revenge over another? Class and societal status are the answers to these questions! Leo is a white, middle class police Sergeant, an extremely privileged social class. Because of this, the revenge of his son is weighted heavier than finding a solution for the oppression of poor people. It is weighted heavier than any other character’s deep personal reasons for purging, regardless of what they are. Leo alone is eligible for revenge. Yet, despite his eligibility, he chooses to pass on his opportunity for revenge, sparing Warren’s life. It appears that Leo is perfectly comfortable with his decision, as he walks away from Warren’s house with a demeanor of satisfaction.

As if the classist and racist issues weren’t enough, *The Purge* tosses another dimension of social inequality into the film -- sexism. The women in the film are discredited regularly, and are
not in pursuit of individual, noble causes. I can picture the actresses holding signs reading “I need feminism because of The Purge”. All jokes aside, the portrayal of women throughout the film leaves much to be desired. I say this not because of subpar performances from the cast, but because of the astounding lack of innovation with the characters. The female characters are mostly portrayed in archetypical roles. For example, Liz is depicted as a ditzy blonde, and if this were a more traditional horror film, she would take on the cheerleader archetype. There is a scene where Leo and his entourage are making an escape through the subway system. Liz is closely following her husband Shane, adding to her subordinate characterization. Shane stops to return fire, and Liz follows suit. As the bullets whizz by and ricochet off their cover, Shane is stone cold, while Liz is hysterical, blinded by tears and barely able to hold her weapon. Shane is hit with an enemy round, yet maintains a nearly catatonic composure. After Shane is hit, Liz rushes to his aid as if she were a nurse, and is shown beneath Shane, looking up at him. The lack of realism and bias towards male figures is startling. Furthermore, the act of the purge reinforces a psychological perspective: “Freud proposed that human society developed through stages from patriarchy to matriarchy and finally back to patriarchy” (Creed page). It should come as no surprise that patriarchy is deeply entrenched in modern American society. This societal ebb and flow, which appears to have halted, has sapped society of a degree of togetherness that results from equality. The concept of the purge reinforces patriarchal essentialism by depicting an assertion of masculine rage as the cultural norm.

One reviewer directly questions the recurring themes of sexism in American film, stating: “Clearly, female characters in film aren’t automatically unappealing to American audiences. But could it be that once these characters start to take on whatever system obstructs their goals, we’re no longer interested? (“Hollywood”). Female characters simply can’t be portrayed in diverse
roles if the studio’s goal is to turn a profit. Before equality becomes the norm, the industry requires reform through innovation to break the mold of subordinate female roles. Change is an uncomfortable feeling, and the customary nature of society rejects those who speak out against the standards. I believe this ideal to be the largest roadblock on the road to feminist equality.

A closer look at *The Purge* reveals themes of classism, racism, and sexism that the casual viewer might miss or write off as too abstract for their traditional mindset. As a viewer, and an upstanding member of society, one would be doing themselves and the greater good a disservice by not questioning the ideals held in movies and entertainment culture. Expand and extrapolate upon the points presented in this argument, and allow the content to resonate at the level reserved for your most personal thoughts. In the hopes of elevating culture, I envision a future where we critique our entertainment using the same intensity we consume it with.
Works Cited


