Pulp inequality: How popular culture exhibits the class divide

by Benjamin J. Dueholm in the August 19, 2015 issue

The Dr Pepper Tuition Giveaway contest, a competition in which students throw footballs into an oversized Dr Pepper to win money for education.

The breathless, prurient flutter that accompanied the release of *Fifty Shades of Grey* scarcely suggested the dark truth: this is one of the most brazen depictions of glassware in the history of cinema. Anastasia Steele's unlikely journey takes her from sad schoolgirl teacups of graduation champagne to the elegant stemware of the upper crust, all filmed with loving, almost leering attention.

The movie, an adaptation of E. L. James's publishing megahit, is about more than drinking glasses, of course. It is also about consumer aircraft. Sadomasochism figures as a plot element as well. Steele, filling in for a sick roommate, meets and interviews the titular Christian Grey, who has amassed billions running a telecom something-or-other. She is quickly swept up in his world of luxury accoutrements and marginal sex practices, protesting all the way. "What would I get out of this?" she asks, after learning of his exacting requirements for an intimate partner. "Me," he replies.

You get me. In a cynical world and a cynical film, it's a moment of seemingly genuine naïveté. Elizabeth Stoker Bruenig of the *New Republic* writes that *Fifty Shades* is at heart a film about negotiating our acceptance of dramatic economic inequality. That's an enduring, if submerged, theme in American film, from high-society romantic comedies like *Holiday* to hard-bitten noirs like *The Big Sleep*. But this story is different. Erotic flogging was never part of the deal for Katharine Hepburn or Humphrey Bogart. We have entered an age of pulp inequality.

Income inequality in the United States has reached its highest level since the Great Depression. Wealth inequality yawns wider still. The 14 richest Americans saw their net wealth increase by a combined $157 billion between 2013 and 2015, as presidential candidate Bernie Sanders has taken to pointing out. While inequality is growing worldwide, ours is the most unequal society in the developed world. We have been watching the consequences play out in areas such as political polarization and life expectancy. A recent Princeton study even indicated that the United States is no longer truly a democracy, so skewed is our policy making to the preferences of a tiny and increasingly distant elite.

Slowly but surely, extreme inequality is exerting a pull on our entertainment culture as well. People have long flocked to stories of rags to riches. But as the climb to the upper stratum of society becomes steeper—from the bottom, the middle, or even comparatively modest wealth—these stories have become more garish, random, and humiliating.

The leaden melodrama of Anastasia Steele, billionaire's moll, is repeated as upstairs-downstairs farce in the Netflix sitcom *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*. The title character, a survivor of a doomsday-cult imprisonment, falls into the employ of Jacqueline Voorhees, the second wife of a finance billionaire—they met when she was a flight attendant and he was drunkenly celebrating George W. Bush's reinauguration—who is struggling desperately to delay her inevitable replacement.

Jacqueline's regimen of physical and psychological upkeep is detailed at least once per episode, and it's played for laughs. But it brings more than a few cringes as well. In an early scene she delegates her stepmothering to Kimmy while she recovers from a disabling trip to the "gyno-dermatologist." The sexual humiliation she suffers is all the more poignant because it takes place in the constant absence of the husband she wants to please. He jets into town just long enough to accidentally reveal his sexual relationship with another woman. Good news, Jacqueline's lawyer tells her, you didn't violate your prenup's infidelity clause. But *he* did, she protests. The clause applies, the lawyer says, only to her: "Mr. Voorhees retained the right to 'stick it wherever.'"

In these stories, wealth is a necessary plot element, but it's more or less randomly distributed. A man who's made billions in telecom or finance may as well have found an enchanted toad. The point is not how he spends his days or where his money comes from, only that he has a limitless amount of it. He is not merely richer than

the people around him by some measurable increment; he is exponentially, qualitatively richer. He therefore has a limitless ability to make demands of the women in his life. If Christian Grey operated a city bus instead of his own helicopter, Anastasia's affair with him would be depicted as a symptom of mental illness, not a slightly transgressive erotic fantasy.

Fiction is not quite adequate to depict the gender relations of the ultra-elite. We learned this from Wednesday Martin, whose memoir/ethnography *Primates of Park Avenue* explains something called a "wife bonus":

> A wife bonus, I was told, might be hammered out in a pre-nup or post-nup, and distributed on the basis of not only how well her husband's fund had done but her own performance—how well she managed the home budget, whether the kids got into a "good" school—the same way their husbands were rewarded at investment banks. In turn these bonuses were a ticket to a modicum of financial independence and participation in a social sphere where you don't just go to lunch, you buy a $10,000 table at the benefit luncheon a friend is hosting.

The Upper East Side wives Martin studied were not plucked from obscurity like Anastasia or Jacqueline (though they share with the latter a fondness for cycling fads). They're graduates of prestigious universities who work as high-involvement, high-status, high-stakes mothers. "No ponytails or mom jeans here," Martin explains. "They exercised themselves to a razor's edge, wore expensive and exquisite outfits to school drop-off and looked a decade younger than they were." It's worth noting that Anastasia is explicitly directed to exercise regularly, eat healthfully, and wear the clothing provided for her. It's a glamorous existence and exquisitely appointed—but ultimately precarious. As Martin puts it, "under this arrangement women are still dependent on their men—a husband may simply ignore his commitment to an abstract idea [of partnership] at any time."

It is not only intimate life and family dramas that are twisting in the chasm between the elite and the rest of us. CBS recently aired an instantly notorious reality show called *The Briefcase*, in which a struggling family is given a briefcase full of money and told they can either keep it all or give some to another, similarly struggling family. The twist is that the second family has been given an identical briefcase and told the same thing. The scenario recalls the classic "prisoner's dilemma" of game theory—though in this case the tension comes not from rational decision making but from the anguish of the participants. The show's producers step into the Christian

Grey role, an entity with effectively limitless resources that finds a random family on which to lavish its attentions at an emotional cost it determines for them in advance.

Even philanthropy cannot seem to escape the sadistic thrill of playing Christian Grey—of dangling something people need on the far side of some ludicrous obstacle. Last year the Dr. Pepper Tuition Giveaway invited university students to make videos explaining why their tuition should be paid for. The top entrants were invited to compete in a contest at a college football halftime show. If they managed to throw enough footballs into an oversized Dr. Pepper can, they won up to $100,000 in tuition support. If not, at least they had an all-expenses-paid trip to the conference championship game. It's astonishing that this was called a giveaway, as if hustling up a viral video, earning the most votes, and then performing a circus trick in a stadium were not a rather taxing sort of labor.

There is a lurid odor about these entertainments. The sight of real people wriggling and dancing and chucking footballs to win a cruise makes a very slight claim on our sense of fairness and decency. The sight of them doing it for tuition or medical bills shreds it beyond any recognition.

The dystopian epic *The Hunger Games* is often invoked as a parallel to these works of pulp inequality. And indeed, when today's films imagine the future, they imagine inequality progressing to the edge of utter chaos. In this year's *Mad Max: Fury Road*, a warlord and his family dominate the water supply in a post-apocalyptic city full of beggars and seemingly enslaved workers. Since extreme inequality always suggests some kind of sexual excess, the warlord has a harem, too. In *Elysium* (2013), the wealthy have literally left a ruined Earth behind. Tellingly, these stories never end with reconciliation between high and low. The only way out of the horrors of Panem or the Citadel or Elysium is something like a revolution.

Nothing of the sort seems to strike our political elite, or even our filmmakers, as an immediate possibility. But pulp inequality stories—however imaginative, comic, or cynical—depict something that's really happening in America. They show us a class gap that can be crossed only by the most random, cruel, or absurd means. Economic mobility in the United States is stagnant at best, despite everything we have told ourselves about the power of hard work. The dividends of economic growth were once widely shared through union-negotiated compensation and publicly funded higher education. Now they are increasingly locked up by the top one or two percent of the population. This is in large measure the result of policy choices—from tax cuts

to financial deregulation to the way executive pay is treated as a business expense—that have both dramatically increased the income and wealth of the very highest class and closed it off from the rest of society.

Kimmy Schmidt, on the other hand, is part of what has come to be known as the precariat. These Americans work in part-time, short-term, or piecemeal jobs that offer little prospect for security or stability, much less advancement. They clean hotel rooms, care for children, or drive for Uber. They teach college or generate "content." They are not all poor, and they are certainly not all unskilled, but they share an isolating economic vulnerability. They are already living in the future of work that awaits most of the rest of us.

Our political system does not represent their interests. Our economic policies barely take them into account. (The Affordable Care Act, with its subsidies for individual health-insurance policies, represents a modest step toward acknowledging that traditional jobs aren't the only way people make a living.) But our stories—popular and highbrow, fictional and otherwise—are finding them.

Commentators, including many Christians, often blame the fragile status of the precariat on its members' disorganized family structures or chaotic intimate lives. But the narratives of pulp inequality reinforce research that points in the opposite direction: inequality breeds family instability. The relationship between the elite and the precariat can only be one of effectively random patronage and dependence. Morality, and the commitments that reinforce and are reinforced by moral norms, will duly follow.

Marx and Engels famously identified the industrial bourgeoisie's tendency to have "resolved personal worth into exchange value." Of course, even they could not have imagined a proposition as brazen as Christian Grey's offer of himself in exchange for contractual sexual access to his partners, or a beverage company doling out higher education for viral videos and football tricks. Augustine went farther into the vistas of degradation that are available to a culture organized around maintaining its own ludicrous imbalances. In *The City of God*, he imagines defenders of the dying Roman order stating their bottom-line interest in perpetuating pagan civilization:

> What concerns us is that we should get richer all the time, to have enough for extravagant spending every day, enough to keep our inferiors in their place. It is all right if the poor serve the rich, so as to get enough to eat and to enjoy a lazy

> life under their patronage; while the rich make use of the poor to enjoy a crowd of hangers-on to minister to their pride. . . . The laws should punish offenses against another's property, not offenses against a man's own personal character. No one should be brought to trial except for an offense, or threat of offense, against another's property, house, or person; but anyone should be free to do as he likes about his own, or with his own, or with others, if they consent.

There should be a plentiful supply of public prostitutes, he imagines his interlocutors saying, for the benefit of all men who prefer them or who can't afford to keep a private mistress. And "imposing houses luxuriously furnished" should be held as a chief good in life. The emotional and physical lacerations of pulp inequality would not surprise Augustine in the least.

They shouldn't surprise us, either. As inequality has increased and compounded, Americans have told themselves that we are still connected by ladders of opportunity, however long, and a shared moral idealism, however thinly stretched. Now the very stories that should be soothing our anxieties about our fragmenting society are showing us just how wrong we've been.