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5th Progression

Tiger King, The Grotesque, The Coronavirus, and The id

In 1862, amidst The American Civil War, Alexander Gardner went to Sharpsburg, Maryland, where he photographed the remains of The Battle of Antietam; the bloodiest battle in the military history of the United States. Gardner brought his camera and his photographs back with him to New York, where they were met with mouths agape. Civilians had never seen such gore displayed like this before, as at the time there was an intense “restriction over what was permissible or proper to be seen” (Ward). But instead of being met with disgust and rejection, the photographs were met with intrigue; “they were psychologically appealing to large sections of the public. People wanted—and still want—to be shocked” (Ward).

The audience for shock has not diminished over the one-hundred and fifty-eight years between the civil war and today. Recently, many have turned to a modern piece of shocking visual entertainment-- the Netflix true-crime documentary, *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem, and Madness*. The series reveals surprising secrets about the hidden subculture of private big-cat ownership in America, including the aberrant and shocking behavior of some big-cat owners. The series is so popular that it “reached a U.S. TV audience of 34.3 [million] unique viewers within the first 10 days of its release,” and has been streamed to twice as many households (Spangler). And “according to Netflix’s own rankings, *Tiger King* has held the crown as the No. 1 most popular title overall in the U.S. [for two weeks straight]” (Spangler). Because *Tiger King*

has reached so many people, one wonders what, in addition to its shock value, has made it go so viral. The answer may lie in a combination of factors: the way the documentary's characters fit into the grotesque artistic tradition, the subconscious motivations and desires of both the audience and those profiled in the documentary, and the context of today's coronavirus pandemic. In explaining the popularity of *Tiger King*, we can learn a lot about ourselves and our culture at this unique time in our history.

Part of what makes *Tiger King* unique are the eccentric people it features, who are “almost more interesting than the exotic animals they’re keeping” (Cox). The documentary’s main subjects-- Joe Exotic and Carole Baskin--each provide shock value, and also share many traits with the traditional grotesque character type that has been a successful form of entertainment through the years. In her essay, “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” Flannery O'Connor discusses the grotesque as a long standing artistic tradition. O'Connor describes grotesque art or writing as art or writing in which,

“we find that the writer has made alive some experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day, or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life. We find that connections which we would expect in the customary kind of realism have been ignored, that there are strange skips and gaps which anyone trying to describe manners and customs would certainly not have left” (O'Connor 3).

Exotic and Baskin live atypical lives which many American viewers are not used to and have never before experienced, and this surprises, shocks, and entertains the viewer. Exotic--the self proclaimed Tiger King, so named for running the largest big-cat breeding facility in the United States, is also a mulleted, third-party, gay, country-singing, gun-slinging, drug-addict,

polygamist, ex-presidential-candidate and present-convict. Exotic is a character in the extreme, and someone who does not try to fit in with conventional American society. Rick Kirkham, a producer who followed Exotic for many years, described the zookeeper and his park as “a place where all these misfits could come together and be with the King of Misfits, who reigned over them” (“Not Your Average Joe”). Baskin is Exotic’s “wealthy faux-hippie” animal-rights-activist nemesis-- “the Mother Teresa of cats” (Knibbs, “Not Your Average Joe”). Baskin runs a facility of her own, called Big Cat Rescue, which rescues abused cats from zoos like Exotic’s and gives them better homes. Baskin is so-cat obsessed that she typically dresses in cat-patterned clothing, and adorns the interior of her house with cat sculptures, cat-themed trinkets and cat-patterned furniture. She even rides a custom-painted cat-print bike. Exotic and Baskin both live lives in which “the customary kind of realism [has] been ignored”. It is the idiosyncratic, shocking, cartoonish, and almost unreal differentness of the show’s characters that contributes to its popularity.

O’Connor notes that while traditional grotesque characters seem wild, “they do have an inner coherence, if not always a coherence to their social framework. Their fictional qualities lean away from typical social patterns, toward mystery and the unexpected” (O’Connor 3). Baskin and Exotic are no exception. While both characters reject the social framework of more conventional culture, they do have an inner coherence reflective of their personal missions and motivations. It is their almost irrational sense of mission and motivation that makes for such a compelling story for viewers.

Everything Baskin does is in service of her cause: to end the abuse of big cats in captivity. The activist has built her whole life around advancing herself and her mission. For

example, Baskin proudly claims: “I don’t read the newspaper. I don’t watch news on television unless there’s a cat involved” (“Not Your Average Joe”). Her inner coherence is the reason why she has waged lawsuit after lawsuit against Exotic and his park. It is also the reason why Baskin so frequently wears clothes with cat patterns; if she goes to congress to lobby for her bill, The Big Cat Public Safety Act, “if [she goes] in there dressed head-to-toe in cat-prints, people remember ‘Oh, that’s the person that’s gonna be all over my case about why cats need to be protected’” (“Not Your Average Joe”). Baskin exhibits a single minded devotion and commitment to her cats and her cause, while she rejects norms in her daily life and her civil activities.

Exotic similarly has an inner coherence to his character, but his mission is to be wild, to be unusual, to draw attention to himself, and to build the “Joe Exotic” Brand. Exotic has said, “does it feel good to stand on my stage with 500-pound tigers and everybody envy you? Absolutely” (“Cult of Personality”). While he claims to run his zoo for animal conservation, his behavior is not that of a conservationist. For example, Exotic has shot and killed at least five of his own tigers and has bred unnatural hybrid cats such as ligers which are of questionable ethics and have no conservational value. Exotic uses conservation as a cover to keep his tigers, which enable him to further the attention he gets for himself. Exotic also has made multiple country music albums, run for President of the United States and Governor of Oklahoma, and has sold condoms with his face printed on them at the Tiger King gift shop because his life is built around this intense thirst for attention and self promotion. Baskin and Exotic’s dedication to their mission, irrespective of how their behavior shocks societal norms, further qualifies them as traditionally grotesque characters, and fascinates the audience.

O'Connor argues that what is new is often attractive. For her, "[great novels] are going to be the kinds of novels that interest the novelist. And the novels that interest the novelist are those that have not already been written" (O'Connor 7). For O'Connor, the innovative abnormality of a subject adds to their appeal. Viewers have not seen anything like *Exotic* and *Baskin* before, and so they are attracted to them the same way that people were attracted to Gardner's photographs after the Civil War. *Exotic*, *Baskin*, and the photographs all show audiences something new, uncomfortable, unique, and different from day to day life. Never before had anyone seen such a dramatic depiction of gore, as pictured in Gardner's Civil War photos. Never before had so many been exposed to the American big-cat-ownership subculture, as they have been through their exposure to *Exotic* and *Baskin*. When faced with the unique and unknown we are intrigued; "we cannot look away. Like drivers passing the scene of an accident, our heads turn" (Ward). The result is scores of people drawn to the wild nature of the series.

Because the grotesque has consistently drawn audiences for centuries, *Tiger King* would likely have been successful had it been released at any time. But there is another important aspect that has driven the documentary's popularity-- the context of its release during the coronavirus pandemic. *Tiger King* has a multi-layered appeal; by combining the traditional intrigue of the grotesque with the way it helps viewers cope with the stress of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the documentary is more popular now than it might have been had it been distributed at an ordinary time.

Today, in an effort to promote public health during the coronavirus pandemic, many governments have adopted stay at home orders, and encouraged social distancing. Millions are homebound and living lives of restriction and constraint. People are wearing masks and gloves

out, washing their hands regularly, and social distancing. They are not attending sporting events, religious services, or graduation ceremonies. They are responding to their superegos-- the part of the psyche that encourages one to act responsibly, suppress passions or urges, and do the morally right thing. But humans are a social species, and so many are struggling to maintain self-control and to cope with the social isolation. Many are stressed, impatient, and worried about their schools, their work, and their health. They miss the outside world, their friends, their families, and their communities.

COVID-19 presents particular challenges to American society and culture and others like it, which have historically emphasized the importance of freedom as a value across the political spectrum. From the emancipation movement to free the slaves, to the women suffragist movement to give women the right to vote, to the civil rights movement, gun rights movement, and gay rights movements, the desire for freedom and liberty has always been an enduring American value, struggle, and ideal. But today, Americans are posed with the significant challenge of sacrificing their freedom and staying in their homes for the greater good.

By contrast, *Tiger King*'s protagonists are unwilling to sacrifice their freedom for others. They are presented as individuals who live freely and listen principally to their id-- "the unorganized part of the psyche that contains a human's instinctual drives" (Siegfried). The id is the source of impulse, hunger, passion, instinct, aggression, and socially unacceptable behavior. It "seek[s] immediate gratification of all needs, wants, and desires" (Siegfried). It is because of the id that Exotic and Baskin live with few self-imposed restrictions. It is because of his id that Exotic hired a hitman to kill Baskin-- a crime for which he is now in prison. It is because of her id that Baskin may have killed her former millionaire husband, to get

his money and fund her mission and park. It is because of his id that Exotic has let his sexual desire drive him to manipulate heterosexual men into his polygamous marriage. It is because of her id that Baskin does not feel the need to follow the news or participate in the nuances of the outside world. It is because of their ids that these “characters have managed to construct whole worlds around themselves rather than curtail their worst impulses in any way” (Gilbert).

As living embodiments of freedom and the expression of the id taken to an extreme, Baskin and Exotic are compelling subjects for viewers given the challenging times we are currently living through in our history. There is something particularly satisfying and enjoyable at this time about being able to watch characters, who unlike the viewers, are free to live life without limits. Unlike most viewers, Baskin and Exotic act on their passions, determination, commitment to their ideals, and inner coherence of their lives. Watching these grotesque characters and unusual and unrestrained personalities appeals at some level to our inner sense and longing for freedom and desire for escapism from our current reality.

But while viewers may enjoy watching Baskin and Exotic and the escapism that they provide, we should be ultimately repulsed by the characters’ aberrant and unusual behavior and lifestyle. However, this repulsion can be meaningful to viewers because it may reinforce one’s own sense of self-worth and self importance. O’Connor writes, “the general reader has managed to connect the grotesque with the sentimental, for whenever he speaks of it favorably, he seems to associate it with the writer’s compassion” (O’Connor 4). For O’Connor, viewers are often inclined to compare themselves to the repulsive soul that the grotesque work is depicting. In doing so, viewers often pity or belittle the grotesque characters, who do not have what they have. Watching *Tiger King* is so attractive because it is healing; it is a chance for viewers to lift

themselves up by bringing Baskin and Exotic down; “through their supposed abnormality, we feel normal” (Wilkinson). By contrasting their own sober and placid pandemic lifestyles to the dysfunctional and chaotic lives of Baskin and Exotic, today’s viewers may feel better about themselves by comparison. For in this time of pandemic, when for many the whole world feels so unsettled, it can be healing to think that at least we are handling the throes of life better than the Tiger King.

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