# BAD VIBE CITY:

# ON SHOWTIME'S *THE CURSE*—PURIFICATION OR PERVERSION?

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1.

*The Curse* seems at first to fit our existing templates, but something is off.

In the opening scene, Asher and Whitney Siegel, a husband and wife real estate flipping team, prepare a cathartic moment for a reality show that, until the network greenlights it, still isn't real. When they announce their gift of full-time coffee shop employment to an overweight Pueblo ex-con to help him pay for his mother's cancer treatments, he knows to perform some gratitude, but the elder's affect remains flat. While the Siegels wring their hands over how much to push for the moment, their cameraman/producer Dougie is willing to be the bad guy, providing eye drops and exhaling menthol into the woman's eyes in a secular parody of an indigenous tobacco blowing ritual, the transformed purpose of which is not healing but the cosmetics thereof. The satire, like the tears, lays on thick.

The Siegels traffic in an image of virtue, but it's leveraged to the hilt, making it thinner than the veneer of a pop-up against a strip mall. Flipping and philanthropy, it turns out, make weird bedmates. And anything that further strains this tension—including a TV journalist recognizing it as such—is received as an existential threat.

And maybe rightly so. After this first piercing, Asher decides to get one of the reactions the show needs by trading a poor black girl a large bill for a miniature soda on-camera, before trying to renegotiate after the fact. It's only with this blatant split between image and reality that the eponymous curse is triggered, a brain bug that the Siegels, despite all the psychologizations and woo-woo white magic at their disposal, can't seem to shake.

By now the sophisticated viewer should recognize the terrain. This is like Michael Haneke's *Cache* (2005), where a simple VHS tape of the exterior of an upper class couple's home, traceable to an Algerian boy, incites their psychological implosion, or Ruben Östlund's development of the genre in *The Square* (2017), in which an accused thief, an Arabic boy, promises to "make mischief" for the cultured protagonist, sending his life into a tailspin. Where Haneke's treatment is characteristically solemn, Östlund's oscillates between high tragedy and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* to intensify the disorientation. In both cases, the more placid the

suggestion of guilt, the more uncanny its persistence. Lofty liberalism is critiqued as having an Achilles' heel: its being brought to see itself from the perspective of its victims.

But typically something is lost, or altered, in the Americanization. To choose a charitable example: in the BBC's *The Office*, the office is hell or at least purgatory; in the US version, no one wants to leave.

**Is *The Curse* a serious critique, or just in the aesthetic of one? The satire is sometimes too on the nose to get under our skin, and the characters are sometimes caricatures**. While the dark comedy of Todd Solondz uses the grotesque to reveal the hypocritical, the question here is rather if under the guise of sensitive cultural commentary we aren't watching a Todd Phillips comedy, or *Eastbound and Down*. And this isn't to diminish the value of the latter, only to consider whether the two forms aren't at cross-purposes. One points to a tear in the social fabric—a warning—the other tells us that all is essentially well—a sedative.

So which is it?

2.

To help us make sense of this question, the show supplies us with its own models of critique. Asher turns out to be a case study in ridicule. His genitals, flashed up close, are compared to various pygmy vegetables, a comparison, we are urged, is at least a little funny. Fielder captures the terror of insecurity. Someone who's been assaulted his entire life is also attacked for trying to reduce his exposure. Society pays the dignity of male bodies little notice. The contempt of loathsome figures, like Donald Trump and Ben Shapiro, freely expresses itself in the derision of their "small hands" or short stature. If Fielder's body was Asher's, we might say —given Fielder's cultural positioning—that the act was reflective of profound boldness. But it's a prosthetic.

Maybe Asher vibes with Whitney because of her talent for fielding criticism. While Asher's emotional range is highly compressed—his tenor barely changes whether he's reciting dialogue or simmering with rage—Whitney shifts registers at will, constantly reframing digs as positive reinforcement. It's only when she's with underlings that she allows the performance to fray. But the constant shapeshifting takes a toll. She advertises zen but radiates hyper-vigilance.

We are shown that Asher and Whitney's sex life involves cuckold play. Given that Asher and Whitney seem emblematic of a certain contemporary spiritual sickness, what are we to make of these associations? How do we feel deep down? Do we support all bodies, and non-traditional gender roles and sex practices? Or do we

find these things at least a little contemptible?

Instagram influencers preach body acceptance, while ignoring the problem of statistically low demand for those who don't conform, and mental wellness, while using it as a cudgel on their errant followers.




The behaviour being modelled for the next generation is to speak virtue while doing power, like the father who corrects violence with spankings. When it comes to bodies and fantasies, do we say one thing while feeling another? It's difficult to say whether *The Curse*'s mockery comes from a philosopher or a prankster. But maybe this ambivalence isn't accidental.

That the show contains a sort of self-critique is confirmed when Dougie plays Asher and Whitney the sizzle reel for his reality pilot *Third Degree*, a *Bachelor* clone in which the masked Romeo turns out to be a burn victim. Even Dougie seems a bit sheepish as it plays. When Whitney objects at its taste, Dougie counters that the burn victim was a willing and eager participant. This dialogue aestheticizes some of Fielder's own vulnerabilities.

In the pilot episode of *Nathan for You*, for example, Fielder holds a casting call entailing an impersonation of Sean Connery. He trucks in a crowd of real, non-union actors for the contest, but the audition turns out to be the performance: the more embarrassing, the better. In another segment he convinces an immigrant

with limited English to open her restaurant's washroom to the public so that she can brand her diner "the neighbourhood toilet." At times the show seems to treat ordinary people as a separate species.

The issue is not whether the participants signed a contract, or even whether they were well-paid and grateful for the experience. The issue concerns the artistic transmission: the message about how real people not in on the joke should be treated. The original test audiences for *Candid Camera* found the show mean-spirited until the edit was modified to include the laughing reactions of the apparent victims. And this testifies less to the obliviousness of the audience to the actual circumstances of the shoot, and more the primacy of the show's power to suggest those circumstances, as they were or as they weren't.

There's an interesting exchange between Howie Mandel and Tim Heidecker on the topic. Mandel asks if the real people featured on *The Tim and Eric Show*—who are euphemistically described as "characters" and "oddballs," but sometimes seem to include the mentally and socially precarious—"got the joke"? Heidecker and his cohort brace for what seems to be a familiar critique, but Mandel clarifies that he's on the same side of the fence, favouring showcasing weirdos on *America's Got Talent*, in disagreement with his cohost, Howard Stern (of all people, as Heidecker points out). Mandel says that he's not making fun of these people, he's celebrating and platforming the oddity of humanity.

Sometimes people are filmed under false pretences, like in *All Dolled Up*—the sketch Heidecker says is his favourite—in which two calloused industry actors are being made-up as clowns for what they believe is the sketch, unaware that their braggy chair banter is the sketch. Other times oddballs exist under their own false pretences and simply need to be platformed in order to be celebrated. Regardless, the participants seem to come away smiling.

Dougie has a point. *Third Degree* takes the problem to the extreme: if someone consents to the joke, does it matter if we don't see them as they see themselves? And isn't it more cruel to divert our gaze, to exile them from the comic dimensions of life, rather than finding a place for them on the stage? Does our pity, guilt, and indignation say more about us than it does about them?

What, then, makes a joke feel yucky or cruel? The difference seems to hinge on whether the viewer believes the subject to be being exploited, rather than how the participant feels about it themselves. Is it all then just a matter of controlling the optics?

3.

In *The Rehearsal*, Fielder brings these tensions into the story.

He presents himself as an evolved version of his Aspergersy *Nathan for You* persona, claiming a new awareness of the way he makes people uncomfortable, which he's learned to offset with jokes. But since "every joke is a gamble", they present an opportunity for obsessive, algorithmic mastery. What the persona announces as growth turns out to be the same dysfunctional approach to social interaction only better disguised.

His first subject, Kor, a fellow divorcee, has been offsetting a perceived intelligence deficit by lying about his credentials to his friends, and now finds himself in over his head. Nathan helps him prepare to come clean and find his way out of a maze of guilt. Gradually, it emerges that Kor's issue is not what he believed it to be. He's concerned with one member of his team in particular, Tricia, and his anxiety about confessing turns out to be anxiety about making himself vulnerable enough to foster a connection—possibly the consequence of divorce trauma. It takes considerable intervention on Nathan's part to enable this breakthrough. He has to temporarily inflate Kor's self-image so that Kor has the confidence he needs to admit to Tricia that his father sabotaged his confidence. But Nathan is caught between releasing his own guilt about having manipulated Kor, and leaving well enough alone.

By now we should be able to see the show's implicit design. The subtext of almost every segment of *Nathan for You* was about the persona's misguided attempts to make an intimate connection, like a pseudo Michael Scott. Here, instead of focusing on businesses, he focuses on people, but he's still displacing the work of self-reflection. In *The Rehearsal*, Nathan channels himself into his subjects as a way of dipping his toe into therapeutic waters. He's just as frustrated as they are, but unlike them doesn't have a Nathan to steer him to catharsis, rationalizing his continued resistance to giving in to the process. The paradox is that his pathology manifests as trying to control everything from a distance, but it's precisely this that leaves him feeling guilty and alienated. Who is powerful enough to cut through the defences of a master manipulator, controlling for every variable, crafting his sickness to look like superiority?

He meets his match in Angela, who's still hung up on a past partner named Adam, but unlike Nathan is capable of inhabiting projected realities without suffering cognitive dissonance. She does this in part by claiming faith in a higher power. Because she's using a strategy that competes with Nathan's own, he can't control her directly, and has to enter the simulation. He accuses her of thinking like a toddler; she accuses him of being like the devil. Although Angela is played for laughs, she has a point. Nathan isn't only his naive avatar, pleading for common sense, he's also Nathan Fielder, the invisible, neurotic overseer of the scenario, the casting, and the edit. *The Rehearsal* was filmed in Oregon, but forged in Silverlake.

But it's significant that this backgrounded factor has become an overt theme. Something is being raised to awareness. The show emphasizes the problem of contracts, whether concerning co-parenting, the participation of minors, or the use of condoms. A contract is between two equals, but leaves gaps capable of being finessed by the business savvy. As this sort of exploitation is perfectly legal, if not a fiduciary duty, it can only be punished by justice, which, in this world at least, manifests as guilt.

Eventually, Nathan gets something of the catharsis he was looking for, not from Angela, but from a sensitive imitator, who pummels him with reverse engineered anguish that he can't rationalize away. Fielder has said publicly that the circumstances of his own divorce are "shocking." Maybe what we thought was a rehearsal is actually a post-mortem.

Ironically, as manipulation is disclosed as manipulation, it's seen as more, not less, dishonest. Richard Brody of the *New Yorker* writes off the entire series as cruelty and arrogance, failing to notice that these charges would be truer of *Nathan for You*—which didn't seem to bother many critics—and are endemic to at least reality TV if not society in general, just better kept implicit. A *Wall Street Journal* interview with Kor makes sure to mention that, in the heat of summer, he showed up at their New York offices dressed in all black and asked for a glass of milk. Fielder did not invent the urge to celebrate and platform oddballs. But if Brody's onto something, it's that announcing one's own dishonesty may itself be a powerful manipulative tactic.

To be fair, this is an ambivalence that the show preserves. Whatever Fielder's journey, Nathan's decision by the end of the show isn't to loosen his grip, it's to lean in—addressing his pathology by accelerating it. He was already performing artificial intelligence, but finally synthesizes catharsis in a squeamish fusion of candour and deceit, revealing *The Rehearsal* to be something of a horror story.

What we'd been led to assume fit the episodic template of *Nathan for You* dissolves into a subversion, or apparent subversion, of the genre. The most surprising outcome of the shift of focus is the appearance of tensions we had no idea were relevant, such as between Judaism and Christianity. Fielder spends much of the series comedically torturing what appear to be internalized antisemites. Yet, given that Fielder represents himself as Patrick Bateman Mark Zuckerberg, the direction of his bias remains uncertain. The Summit Ice segment is one of the most beautiful bits in *Nathan for You*, and the rabbi there comes off as more ridiculous than the articulate but humourless gentile store owner (one of the few who later denounced the experience). Maybe because of Judaism's emphasis on making amends not only in mind but in deed, the Nathan character resents that to avoid an apology he has to adapt a psychological workaround

modelled after Christian spiritual technology. Or maybe he simply resists being pressured to engage in zero-sum cultural warfare.

These problems continue in *The Curse*, where the first symbol to haunt the movie isn't the utterance of a child, but a crucifix Asher spots from behind the camera.

4.

*The Curse* arrives at a cultural moment characterized by a lingering feeling of sickness.

A polarization that first erupted in 2016, stoked by social media, was intensified by the arrival of a threat that demanded a reckoning between individualist and collectivist values. The psychic burdens of the disease, namely alienation and worry, came to include the sadness of having to increase our dependency on already distrusted techno-capitalist powerhouses, and the disgust of needing to qualify the right to bodily autonomy even in the face of overwhelming pressure. At times the sickness felt so deep that an appropriate purge would need to be **explosive**. And then even when things started to get better, we couldn't tell whether we were out of the woods or only into the fire.

These circumstances have been conspicuously underrepresented in Film & TV. Instead, the aesthetic of the Covid era has been defined by luminous digital colours and airs of boldness, but bounded within hackneyed storytelling templates. Whether it's Eggers' *The Northman* (2022), representative of a new, glossy, Dark Mode mythology genre, that gestures towards Shakespeare and Christianity, but doesn't amount to more than hero's-journey violence porn, or Spielberg's *West Side Story* (2022) that exhumes the bones of *Romeo and Juliet* to make sure that they still have the power to move people (they don't), or the advancing legions of prestige parables bootlegging *The Social Network* (2010), or the continued colonization of the collective unconscious by Disney and its subsidiaries… Covid cinema delivers us familiar narratives in neglect of our transformed waking experiences, and is remarkable for the degree of its skew.

To some extent, the increased reliance on the template is explainable for its function as a handrail in frightening times. But it's also consistent with a growing awareness of the power of templates for psychological control. Templates, in their various forms, are conceptual associations that are prerequisites for seeing something as its designer wants us to see it. The transmission of these templates is typically implicit, manifesting as something we accept, when it's also or primarily something that's being asserted. **These insinuations can be optimized—pushed to the limits without ever triggering them—which is the essence and art of gaslighting.** The intensification of formula in Film & TV, then, is also suggestive of the medium's progressive dissolution into low grade hypnosis, the cinematic

equivalent of spa music playing in the background of a broader, gamified media experience. But somewhere, beneath the false landing of the template, other stories have been gestating, mutating the very frameworks that keep them blocked from sight.

Does *The Curse* approach us in a spirit of healing? It wouldn't be enough for it to reflect our experiences back at us, it has to also reenact them by degrading them to the point of an aesthetic used as a screen. *The Curse* doesn't just thematize, it performs, rehearsing fixations until they become prophecies, beaming foul images into our minds with dubious consent, like tiny penises and **scarred flesh**. We can hope that this way of expressing the problem ultimately helps us find our way back to health. For the moment, at least, it's the avenue that appears in front of us.