**BIG ICK ENERGY**
ON SHOWTIME'S *THE CURSE*

In the opening scene of *The Curse*, Asher and Whitney Siegel (Nathan Fielder and Emma Stone), a millennial couple and real estate flipping team, prepare a cathartic moment for a reality show that still isn't real. When they announce their generous gift of full-time coffee shop employment to an overweight Latino ex-con to help him pay for his mother's cancer treatments, he knows to perform some gratitude. But his mother's affect remains flat, denying the Siegels the emotional money shot they so badly want. While they wring their hands over how to proceed, their cameraman/producer Dougie (Benny Safdie) is willing to be the bad guy, exhaling menthol vapors into the elder's eyes. The scene plays like a secular mirror of an indigenous tobacco blowing ritual, transformed to produce only the appearance of healing. The satire, like the tears, is laid on thick.

*The Curse* arrives at an ambivalent cultural moment: we can't tell whether we're finally healing or the sickness has just gone underground. While Covid cinema was mostly bright colours and safe templates that felt stilted because of productions wracked with fear, *The Curse* is part of a movement going in the opposite direction (*Succession*, *White Lotus*) airing emotional dynamics so foul that it sometimes feels like it's opened Pandora's septic tank. It might even be the most committed to the bit. It's very funny, which also means that it's very sick.

The Siegels are leveraged to the hilt. Their show is called *Fliplanthropy*, but profit and charity turn out to make weird bedfellows. The strain is so intense that anyone who even brings it up—like a TV journalist putting together a story—is treated like an existential threat.

And maybe rightly so. Soon after the interview, Asher loses his way. On Dougie's urging, he trades a poor black girl a $100 bill for a small can of soda on-camera, and then afterwards hurries to renege. It's only with this overt break between self-image and material reality that the eponymous curse is triggered, a brain bug that the Siegels, despite all the Western psychology and woo-woo white magic at their disposal, can't seem to shake.

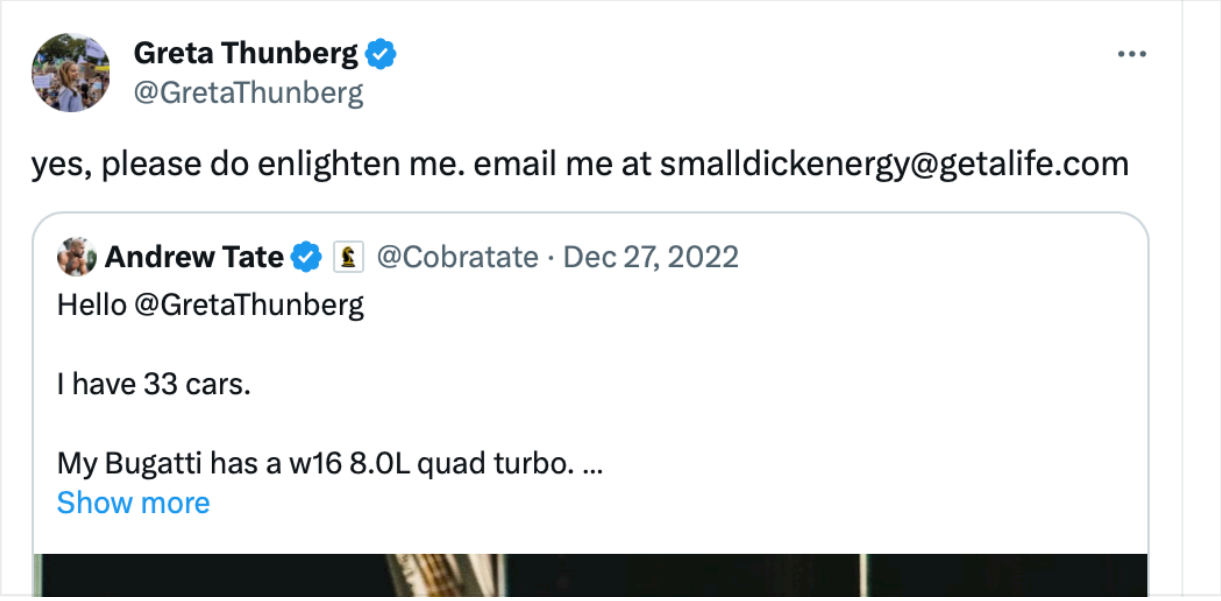
This premise is reminiscent of the recent European genre, represented by filmmakers like Michael Haneke (*Happy End*) and Ruben Östlund (*The Square*), in which a seemingly trivial accusation by a maligned minority sends the bourgeois protagonists into a tailspin. Where Haneke's treatments are characteristically stern, Östlund oscillates between high tragedy and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* to intensify the disorientation. In both cases, the more innocuous the suggestion of guilt, the more uncanny its hold. Proud liberalism is criticized as having an Achilles' heel: its being brought to see itself from the perspective of its downtrodden.

But typically something is altered in Americanization. In the UK *The Office*, for example, the office is hell or at least purgatory; in the US version, no one wants to leave.

What is the intention behind *The Curse*'s critique? It's sometimes hard to tell whether we're watching comedy in the vein of Todd Solondz (*Weiner Dog*), or Todd Phillips (*Bad Moms*). While both forms have their place, they seem to exist at cross-purposes—one points to hidden abuses, and the other tells us to loosen up.

In the most shocking moment of the episode, Asher's small penis is flashed to us up close. Whitney's father, who's also a "cherry tomato boy," urges us that the condition is at least a little funny. He pushes Asher to conceive of the phallus as a spiritual endowment, a mindset change he equates with "becoming the jester." But is dad really helping, or just reminding us who's the alpha?

Fielder captures the terror of insecurity. Someone who's learned to hide his genitals is also targeted for crossing his legs. Generally the denigration of male bodies travels beneath notice. The disparagement of hated men like Ben Shapiro, Donald Trump, or Andrew Tate often takes aim at their short stature, "small hands", or maybe just the energy of such inborn states.



**J.K. Rowling** @jk_rowling · 5h

Going to have to pass, @joshuaddsilva. Last time I sucked something that tiny it got stuck between my front teeth. #irritating

**josh** @joshuaddsilva · 11m




3 4 107




If this shot actually showed Fielder's body, we might say—given his high cultural standing, and the way that men with small penises are treated—that the reveal is a profound artistic gesture. But what if it's just a gag piece?

Later that night, we see that Asher has a cuckold fetish. The self-ridicule he uses to get off mirrors our experience as liberals watching such a vicious parody of liberalism. At some point, we have to wonder: is this sadomasochistic play, or the real thing?

*The Curse* is subtly reflexive. This is confirmed when Dougie plays Asher and Whitney the sizzle reel for his reality pilot *Love to the Third Degree*, a *Bachelor* clone in which the masked Romeo turns out to be a burn victim. Even Dougie seems sheepish as it plays. When Whitney objects at its bad taste, Dougie counters that the burn victim thinks it's hilarious. This exchange, which echoes those that circulate around the ethics of Reality TV—and especially Reality Comedy—digs at the root of the bad feelings.

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 labelled "characters" and "oddballs," but sometimes seem to include the mentally and socially precarious—"got the joke"? Heidecker and his friends brace for what seems to be a familiar critique. But Mandel clarifies that he's on their side, favouring showcasing weirdos on *America's Got Talent*. Mandel says that he's not making fun of these people, he's celebrating and platforming the oddity of humanity.

Sometimes the characters 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 own chair banter is the sketch. Other times, they exist in a fog of their own

and just need a spotlight. In any case, as Heidecker's pal says, they usually come back begging for more.

When we see someone being degraded, we feel disgust and indignation on their behalf—especially if they don't seem like they're in on it. But if they've consented to the treatment, who are we to pity them? Isn't pity just another form of contempt? Maybe we shouldn't think of them as burn victims, but as empowered agents.

*The Curse* picks up where *The Rehearsal* left off. That show was about manipulation by way of self-deception: "nice guy"-style contract finessing; power-differential gaslighting; and malicious moralizing. In the end, Fielder as Mark Zuckerberg turned Patrick Bateman finally learns how to synthesize an emotional breakthrough, revealing *The Rehearsal* to be both a reality comedy and a psychological horror.

*The Curse* turns all of this into a roast of our small dick spirituality, imagined in comparison to that of an older, more vital generation. This is why the first shadow cast over the story is by a crucifix Asher spots from behind the camera.

Western optimism is repeatedly disparaged as narcissistic hypnosis, but it's also the only way we know how to heal. This is the terrifying punchline of *The Curse*.