

Tiger King on Netflix: Approach with caution!

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For the last several weeks, the mini-series *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness* has been one of the most-watched programs on Netflix. Billed as a “true murder-for-hire story from the underworld of big cat breeding,” the documentary series follows several individuals who own and breed lions, tigers and other exotic cats and operate “cub petting” zoos across the US.

The series, however, suffers from a fundamental identity crisis. At times *Tiger King* rightly aspires to expose a nasty, semi-criminal racket, and the social backwardness surrounding it. More often, however, the show indulges in an unserious “human interest”-reality television approach, which half-wallows in or half-celebrates its subject matter.

Only 3,900 tigers live in the wild, according to the World Wildlife Fund. Their geographic range once extended from Turkey to Siberia and southeast Asia, but deforestation has reduced that area to just 5 percent of what it was a century ago. An estimated 25,000 tigers live in captivity, including 10,000 in the US alone. Legal restraints on owning exotic cats in the US are minimal and enforcement is lax at best.

Tiger King centers on the years-long feud between Joe Maldonado-Passage aka Joe Exotic—a flamboyant zoo owner in rural Oklahoma—and the animal rights activist who aims to shut down the cub-petting industry and end private ownership of exotic cats in the US, Carole Baskin.

Joe Exotic’s nickname comes from the title of a reality television show about his operation that never aired because an act of arson—possibly by Joe himself—destroyed all the footage. Only the introductory image of Joe grandly taking a seat on his throne has survived. The producer and creator of the ill-fated show, Rick Kirkman, sets the tone for the Netflix series with his confession that he tolerated Joe’s bizarre personality because “he makes great television.”

Joe more or less quickly reveals himself as an unsavory, criminal and narcissistic figure. Like a true reality television celebrity, Joe berates his subordinates. He pays them \$150 per week (supplemented by expired Walmart meats) and provides them rat-infested mobile homes. Joe loves shooting an array of firearms at effigies of his animal rights nemesis. He ritualistically detonates explosives and keeps his meth-addicted lovers doped up and on a very short leash.

We learn a bit about certain traumatic formative events in Joe’s life. “I knew I was gay when I was 11 years old,” he tells the camera. “My father made me shake his hand in front of my mother and promise that I would not come to his funeral.”

While rehabilitating his broken back after a suicide attempt, Joe fell in love with exotic cats. Soon he incorporated the animals into magic shows aimed at keeping school children from turning to drugs. His business model changed when he learned the high price that “petting” baby tigers could fetch.

Tiger cubs are the main attraction for Joe and his fellow zoo operators. They charge visitors \$300 and up per session to hold, play with and pose for pictures with the endangered animals. Cub petting requires removing very young tigers from their mother’s care—this is depicted graphically in the show, but not explained—a practice stunting their development, according to conservation biologist Imogene Cancellare.

In an interview with Huffpost sharply critical of *Tiger King*, Cancellare expressed dismay that the series didn’t refute a common claim by private zoo keepers, that they contribute to the conservation of an endangered species.

“The only breeding that contributes to conservation efforts are those under expert-managed Species Survival Plans, which are species-specific programs that safeguard captive populations in case free-ranging populations disappear,” she said. “These programs trace genetic health, pedigree, and ensure no hybridization, inbreeding, or crossing of subspecies.” Many other scientists have also strongly criticized, or openly condemned, the mini-series.

Tiger cubs remain suitable for “petting” for only a few short months; they rapidly grow up into massive financial liabilities. *Tiger King* strongly hints that Joe’s mentor, “Doc Antle” of Myrtle Beach Safari, euthanizes and cremates tiger cubs *en masse* as soon as they stop generating revenue.

A more sophisticated, pseudo-Eastern mystic version of Joe, Antle personifies petty-bourgeois self-absorption. His cub petting zoo preys on young women “interns” who live in horse stalls, earn \$100 a week and who may, if all goes well(?), join Antle’s harem. In one of the stronger sequences of the *Tiger King* series, the interviewers successfully let Antle hoist himself on his own egoistical petard. An interview with a former intern details the grooming and exploitation of the young female “employees.”

As the drama unfolds, Joe’s opponent, Carole Baskin, who operates Big Cat Rescue in Tampa, scores one victory after another against him, bolstered by Joe’s own penchant for showmanship and his shortsightedness, not to mention disregard for the law.

Tiger King co-producers and co-directors Eric Goode and Rebecca Chaiklin have dubiously chosen to draw an equal sign between the cub-petting profiteers like Joe Exotic and Doc Antle, on the one hand, and the animal rights activist Baskin, on the other. The comparison hangs on the latter’s perceived egomania and her own previous history as a cub-petting business owner.

Goode told the *New York Times*, “each one of them, whether it was Doc Antle or Joe Exotic or Carole Baskin, they all created their own little cultish worlds, which are oftentimes very creative and inspiring but also can become quite dark.”

Carole had a disturbing childhood. She tells the camera that three neighbors in her trailer park raped her at knife point when she was just 14. Her fundamentalist Christian family believed she must have been

“asking for it.” She fled her family home at 15 and was married by 17 to an abuser. Her second husband, Don Lewis, disappeared in 1997 and the series entertains claims, without providing a shred of evidence, that Baskin may have been involved. She was never charged with any crime and denies any wrongdoing.

In any event, Carole doesn’t engage in cub petting, doesn’t house scores of adult tigers in close quarters and she appears, despite eccentricities, to be a steadfast opponent of the big cat industry. Carole’s background story may be painful, intriguing; but the series’ attention to it is a “crowd-pleasing” diversion. She and her current husband have denounced *Tiger King*, claiming they were misled about its content, and disappointed by its emphasis on salacious details.

As *Tiger King* comes to a head, Carole has justifiably sued Joe Exotic for trademark infringement and other civil offenses, winning a massive judgment in federal court from which he never recovers. He turns to investors from the adult entertainment industry in an effort to save his failing business and keep his assets. These “investors” proceed to participate in a sting operation leading to Joe’s arrest and conviction for conspiring to murder Baskin.

Tiger King leaves the viewer shocked and unsettled. Numerous backward and unhealthy trends in American society find ample expression in the operations of Joe Exotic and his cohorts.

Bound up with this, right-wing “libertarian” political views emerge. For example, Joe asserts near the beginning of *Tiger King* that any effort to confiscate his tigers will result in a “Waco,” referring to the bloody shootout between federal agents and the Branch Davidian religious sect during the execution of a search warrant in 1993.

Joe’s brand of pseudo-populist personal “independence,” which has piqued the interest of Donald Trump himself, has nothing remotely oppositional about it. This sort of “anti-government” demagoguery has been around for decades in the US, often associated with the emergence of out-and-out fascist tendencies. Even when it does not reach that extreme, ultra-individualism has proven itself bankrupt in the face of American capitalism’s decline. While the US has more firearms per citizen than any other country in the world, the possession of weapons has afforded no “self-defense” when it comes to decades of social counterrevolution against the working class and large sections of the middle class. In the case of the pro-cub-petting zoo owners, the “Don’t Tread on Me” outlook is primarily a justification for their own semi-illegal activities.

At the time of this writing, the Trump administration and sections of the media are promoting the “liberation” of US states under coronavirus lockdown orders—using ultra-right elements as their more or less literal foot soldiers. “Freedom” here means the unfettered right to make profit despite the massive social consequences.

As troubling as the content of *Tiger King* proves to be, the directors’ approach to their material is also a serious and problematic issue. As noted above, the creators refuse to take a consistent and principled stand against the practices and operations they chronicle.

Tiger King director Eric Goode owns and operates several chic clubs, restaurants and hotels in New York City. In a 2016 interview, he told *Citizens of Humanity* magazine about his unpromising background in the New York art world: “My education happened in the nightclubs in New York City. I was infatuated with the sparkle and the glamour and the excitement, when people like Andy Warhol, Truman Capote and Mick Jagger were hanging out.”

Goode also described his work in the 1980s as “sort of reminiscent of what Damien Hirst [British artist-charlatan and millionaire “entrepreneur”] eventually did with dead animals. I made a lot of

things with insects, like big, giant patterns out of thousands of actual flies.”

The references to Warhol and Hirst, artists who dedicated themselves to achieving acceptance from the establishment and making fortunes along the way, help explain the non-committal and conformist essence of Goode’s work.

Goode’s previous film experience consists of music videos. He also runs a turtle conservancy. His interest in reptiles and their owners led him to film exotic cat owners, according to an interview with the *New York Times*: “Initially, I was doing a story on all these different subcultures, whether they were reptile people or primate people or bird people or tropical fish people. ... Ultimately I homed in on Joe and Carole because of that war that was ensuing between the two of them.”

That is to say, Goode wandered around half-aimlessly with his camera pointed at animals and “different subcultures.” One gets the sense of a man who has too much money, too much free time and too little sense.

Co-director Chaiklin worked at one of Goode’s restaurants in the 1990s before he recruited her to the project over a “crazy posh dinner,” as she told *New York Times* reporter Dave Itzkoff. Goode, Chaiklin told the *Times*, raised the prospect of “wild kingdoms they would end up traveling together. ... He said, ‘imagine *Breaking Bad*, but instead of dealing meth, they’re dealing exotic animals.’”

On the whole, *Tiger King* adopts an irresponsible and negligent attitude toward the exotic cat industry and ends up, intentionally or not, glorifying social backwardness at a time when such glorification can only play a damaging political and cultural role.

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