Utopia and the cartoonishness of "conspiracy theories"

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Utopia is a recently released television series from Amazon Prime, based on a 2013-2014 British series of the same title. This "Americanized" version was created and adapted by writer Gillian Flynn, known for the novel and film *Gone Girl*, among others. The story follows a group of conspiracy-minded comic book enthusiasts who uncover an apocalyptic plot.

The series opens with the accidental discovery of "Utopia," a comic book about a young girl named Jessica Hyde battling a nefarious organization bent on mass murder. Previous iterations of the comic had been thought by conspiracy theorists to have predicted the outbreaks of diseases such as SARS, MERS, Zika and others.

Five friends, Sam (Jessica Rothe), Wilson (Desmin Borges), Becky (Ashleigh LaThrop), Ian (Dan Byrd) and Grant (Javon Walton), make plans to pool their money to purchase "Utopia." However, in attempting to do so they make themselves the targets of a secret organization known as the Harvest, who are out to recover "Utopia" and dispose of anyone who has seen its pages.

Wilson is tortured by Harvest operatives only to be rescued by the real-life Jessica Hyde (Sasha Lane), a violent loner who is hunting for "Utopia" to find clues about the whereabouts of her father, whom she believes is being forced by Harvest and its mysterious leader "Mr. Rabbit" to engineer and unleash deadly pathogens on the population.

Meanwhile, a deadly flu has been infecting and killing children in cities across the US. Megalomaniacal billionaire Kevin Christie (John Cusack) enlists the help of infectious disease specialist Michael Stearns (Rainn Wilson) to produce a vaccine for the flu. Despite Stearns' insistence that the vaccine receive vigorous testing, Christie presses him to prematurely sign off on the vaccine, which Christie hopes to mass produce and administer to the entire world's population.

(At this point, the reader is warned that any serious discussion of the story requires that certain plot details be revealed.)

In fact, Christie is working with Harvest to infect the global population with a virus hidden in the vaccine, which will cause mass sterilization and depopulate the planet by several billion people. Christie uses his apparently limitless resources, including an army of acolytes he has raised in a cult-like compound, to manufacture mass panic about the flu and create demands that the vaccine be "freed" for immediate release without testing.

Hyde and the group of friends must race against time to prevent the shipment of the vaccines, all while being hunted by Christie's deadly assassins.

Utopia has attracted some attention in the press due to the plot's resemblance to right-wing conspiracy theories surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. These are, in a way, accidental. The series had been in development at Amazon since 2018, and filming had wrapped by October 2019, before the first cases of the novel coronavirus had been identified. Any parallels to events surrounding COVID are almost certainly unintended.

However, Flynn has told interviewers she intended to explore the realm of conspiracy theory culture and present such perspectives in a sympathetic light. While she described the various online conspiracy communities, which include many fascist and anti-Semitic elements among them, as "frightening," she also insisted that she "wanted to play it both ways" and "acknowledge both those sides of it," that is, lend a certain credence to the fantasies produced by groups

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like QAnon and others.

Insofar as *Utopia's* convoluted plot resembles the narratives pushed by real conspiracy theorists, it serves only to highlight both the absurdity of such outlooks as well as the weakness of Flynn's writing.

The plot is filled with contrivances and unconvincing developments. Flynn manipulates her characters largely to set up "twists," rather than develop socially or psychologically convincing drama. Christie's scheme, his cult-like followers, his ability to rather effortlessly manipulate mass consciousness, all add a cartoonish (or comic book-like) quality to the show.

Worse, Christie's ultimate aim of depopulating the planet comes dangerously close to being presented in a semi-sympathetic light. The final episode gives Christie ample time to make his case without any character seriously challenging him. He says things like, "Global warming, mass extinctions, food [and] water shortages. All these problems can be boiled down to one thing: overpopulation." In the end, Christie manages to convince one of the protagonists to switch sides and join him.

According to Flynn, the final episode was "designed specifically for people to argue about who the good guy is and who the bad guy is," and that "half of the audience is going to sort of lean in a little bit and be surprised who they're aligned with."

Flynn apparently sees no problem with "designing" a story in such a way so as to encourage half the audience to view mass sterilization as a legitimate response to social problems. The reactionary implications of such an outlook, ultimately rooted in elitist disdain for the "unwashed masses," are on display in the mass sterilizations that have been carried out by authorities in US prisons and immigrant detention centers.

The ruling elite finds much that is useful in anti-scientific and anti-historical outlooks. Trump has relied on QAnon and other fascist conspiracy groups to disseminate lies about the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 elections in order to support the back-to-work drive and his plot to overturn the election. For their part, the Democrats spent the entirety of Trump's term peddling tales about supposed "Russian interference" in American society, placing the blame for all social ills on the machinations of Vladimir Putin.

The capitalist class does, of course, engage in various murderous conspiracies. The US government is responsible for countless coups, assassinations and war crimes in every corner of the globe. Wall Street is rife with criminality and fraud. Governments and political parties around the world conspired to downplay the threat posed by COVID-19 in order to minimize the impact on financial markets.

These activities, however, are not rooted in the villainy of secret societies and hidden cabals, but in definite, identifiable social interests. What's more, they are not the activities of a class that is invincible, but rather a class that is increasingly unhinged and desperate. Far from being in firm control of all the levers of society, the ruling class produces the conditions for its own overthrow.

In any case, *Utopia*'s disoriented outlook and cartoonish plot don't add up to much. One hopes the artists will stick closer to reality next time.

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