

Rich Flu: What happens when wealth becomes a plague?

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Amid wars, wildfires, floods and epidemics, the ruling class sleeps soundly in the belief that its wealth will shield it from calamity. But what would happen if wealth itself exposed the world's financial titans and corporate chieftains to a mysterious and fatal illness? Where would the super-rich turn? What panic might ensue? The film *Rich Flu* (2024), which recently received its US theatrical release, imagines a disturbing answer to this hypothetical question.

Laura (Mary Elizabeth Winstead) is a cold-hearted striver on her way to the top, thanks to her bottomless cynicism and her willingness to stab anyone in the back if it's expedient. Just as she is poised to ascend to the upper echelons of society, a mysterious illness begins striking down the rich. As the epidemic reaches wider circles of the affluent, panic spreads, and the world's masses turn against the prosperous. Stricken with fear, Laura seeks desperately to save herself and her family, and her efforts take her on a chaotic journey around the world.

Rich Flu is the second feature film by Spanish director Galder Gaztelu-Urrutia. His first film, *The Platform* (2019), depicted prisoners in a large tower where sumptuous feasts are available to the lucky, while the unlucky languish. Inequality and the conflict between the individual and society appear to be recurring themes in his work. Interestingly, Gaztelu-Urrutia studied not film but business management, specializing in international trade.

In the opening scenes of *Rich Flu*, Laura, a senior media executive, brushes off her estranged husband Toni (Rafe Spall), who has come to pitch her a movie and to try to keep the family together. Eyes fixed on her career, Laura seeks to curry favor with her boss Sebastian Snail Sr. (Timothy Spall), an oligarch who controls a media empire. Laura even skips her daughter

Anna's (Dixie Egerickx) birthday to attend an exclusive gathering at Snail's snowbound compound. Meanwhile, reports about the deaths of various plutocrats (and, amusingly, the Pope) soon emerge.

Snail is a wonderfully repellent embodiment of obscene wealth, power and arrogance. He tells his well-heeled guests that they earned their fortunes through hard work. Perhaps understanding the imminent threat, Snail announces a huge redistribution of his wealth. Laura eagerly accepts this arrangement because it advances her career and social position. But more oligarchs die suddenly—including a bidder at an auction that Laura is attending—and Laura realizes that she is in mortal danger.

Billionaires die, then millionaires. The bourgeoisie's efforts to give away its fortunes lead to economic collapse, the breakdown of social order and the disintegration of personal relationships. Quarantines are imposed, and the wealthy find themselves visited by black-clad, helmeted policemen. Anti-rich demonstrations and violence spread, and wealth no longer buys peace. Laura manages to escape, but suspicion and violence erupt among her fellow passengers during the flight.

Having reunited with Toni, Laura finds temporary respite when she rejoins Anna and her mother Martha (Lorraine Bracco) in Barcelona. Martha is a middle-class leftist type who lives in a small, countercultural commune. But it isn't long before Martha's neighbors demand that Laura, the potential bearer of the plague, leave their settlement.

Martha insists on joining her daughter, son-in-law and granddaughter on their search for safety. They leave Europe, only to get caught up in the global migration crisis that the pandemic has caused. What follows are some of the hardest-hitting scenes of the

movie. The family finds itself on a dubious raft, with little more than the shirts on their backs, contending not only with stormy seas but also with menacing paramilitary gangs. They end up in a godforsaken refugee camp where dignity and the means of subsistence are in short supply.

The dark irony of these scenes is inescapable. Tycoons accustomed to penthouses and chauffeurs now wear tattered clothes and sleep on the ground under tarps. The dangerous sea journey and the scrubby camp (which evokes the Italian island of Lampedusa) reflect the torturous and dehumanizing conditions that vast numbers of migrants endure in their desperate attempts to flee war and devastation in their own countries. These scenes are not black comedy but rather an unblinking view of global reality.

For Laura, Toni, Anna and Martha, the story does not end here, however. The plans that they hatch change their situation and shed light on the character of each family member.

Gaztelu-Urrutia has cited director Luis Buñuel's *The Exterminating Angel* (1962) as an influence on his work. In that film, a group of the affluent attend a lavish dinner party, only to find that, for no apparent reason, they cannot leave the room. Cut off from the social relations that give them their power, these rich people with impeccable manners soon become desperate, irrational and violent. *Rich Flu* and Buñuel's film share an absurd premise and cutting commentary on the shallowness of bourgeois refinement.

But despite its global sweep and acknowledgment of the interplay of social forces, *Rich Flu* presents wealth not as the product of labor within the historically developed capitalist system but as a result of individual psychology and action. In his director's statement, Gaztelu-Urrutia calls the film "a complex and provocative emotional journey into the depths of human parsimony and the heights of our wondrous virtues." His focus is on ideas and attitudes, and not concrete reality.

Certain scenes suggest that the antidote to the opulent, cutthroat world of Laura and the oligarchs is a federation of small, self-sufficient, sustainable settlements founded by "enlightened" individuals. The inhabitants of these communities reject consumerism, have few possessions and seek simplicity and "authentic" human relationships. As admirable as some

of these ideals may be, establishing such a social order would be a step backward in social development.

Moreover, this approach emphasizes individual perspective rather than social being and the material and historical factors that shape it. In *Rich Flu*, the problem is not capitalism but greed, which implicitly is part of an ahistorical and unchanging human nature. In a movie that conveys such outrage at inequality in such a refreshingly direct and unsparing way, this emphasis on the subjective is disappointing.

Despite this weakness, *Rich Flu* is an absorbing, funny and disturbing film that deserves to be seen. It is a welcome sign that the mounting public opposition to injustice and inequality is finding artistic expression. Capitalism is coming to be recognized as a plague on humanity.



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