



Anya Taylor-Joy stars in *The Menu*.

**Warning: Spoilers below for *The Menu*, *The White Lotus*, and *Triangle of Sadness*.**

*"You'll never live like common people. You'll never do whatever common people do. You'll never fail like common people. You'll never watch your life slide out of view. And you dance and drink and screw. Because there's nothing else to do."*

—Pulp, "Common People"

Celebrities are working overtime to beat themselves up lately. Even Taylor Swift called herself "the monster on the hill" in her single "Antihero" and admitted "I'm the problem." But why? What has brought her to this lowly state? Certainly not concert ticket sales. Swift is but one example. As billionaires launch themselves into space and wealth disparity continues to widen, it seems as though skewering the uber-wealthy is in vogue, but to what end? Most of the people who create these entertainments fall into the same demographic they are satirizing. It could be argued that audiences enjoy seeing comeuppance aimed at the elite and they are just giving the people what they want. Perhaps these entertainments are meant to serve as an acknowledgement or a mea culpa from their creators. Unfortunately, these shows do not seem to be generating a discussion about wealth disparity, but rather who's in the body bag.

*The White Lotus* purports to skewer the cluelessness of the elite class by showing them behaving at their very worst, even getting away with murder, but bounces uneasily between trying to clown them and attempting to generate real sympathy for them. The couple played by Steve Zahn and Connie Britton attempt to preempt critiques of their lifestyle and bemoan the place of the white man in modern society, while their daughter and her friend spout woke-isms without acknowledging their own position as children of privilege. Jennifer Coolidge cluelessly toys with the hopes of a staff member before delivering a cruel rebuff, and Jake Lacey's character harasses and ultimately kills the hotel manager, played by Emmy winner Murray Bartlett.

*The White Lotus* is a resounding success with critics and audiences, earning an unplanned second season set in Italy that recently wrapped its run and renewal for a third season. Maybe the exotic locales in the midst of a time when few could travel allowed viewers to daydream. Most critics praised the series for its satire; however, there were a couple of critics who dissented. Kyle Turner wrote, "The show looks sheepishly at exploitation and imbalance, and then covers its face with a shit-eating grin, congratulating itself for glancing at everything in the first place." He notes that while Zahn and Britton's teenage daughter lectures them for their gauche take that there's no place left for white men, she benefits directly from her parents' wealth and is biting the hand that feeds. Nina Metz of *The Chicago Tribune* dismissively labeled the show "rich people talking," and noted that the class commentary is counterbalanced by the

# NIBBLE THE RICH

## Why is the 1 Percent in a Self-Loathing Phase?

By Brian Stout

## While *Triangle of Sadness* and *The White Lotus* aim to critique the way the 1 percent abuse their power over those who are paid to serve them, *The Menu* takes on the privilege from the perspective of the servers, and it skewers the wealthy's lack of appreciation.

show's love affair with being rich. The main characters' issues are mostly speed bumps, and they solve them by throwing money at them, particularly in season 2.

One of the strongest defenders of *The White Lotus* is *The Watch*, a podcast focused on prestige television. The hosts, Chris Ryan and Andy Greenwald, considered season 2 a resounding success, heaping praise upon creator/writer/director Mike White. Their take is that the show exposes wealthy people for their empty lives. Ryan noted that once the characters are outside of their routines that occupy their days, they are left with space to ponder their dissatisfaction. Your mileage may vary on whether or not this generates empathy.

Another issue with *The White Lotus* across both seasons is that the hotel staff (outside of Bartlett in season 1) are mostly interchangeable. Their lives are subject to the moods and actions of the resort guests, but they have no lives to speak of other than service. It is likely that White did this on purpose to emphasize

the point of view of his lead characters. This is rectified to a degree with season 2's assistant to Jennifer Coolidge's character played by Haley Lu Richardson, who gets into her own romantic entanglements and resort director Valentina coming out. On the other hand two women who are central to the plot in season 2 are prostitutes who are casually used and taken advantage of by multiple characters. They do end up getting what they want, but it is a drop in the bucket for the people who give them money. It could be argued that by soft-pedaling the class dynamics in season 2, the show is simply trying to avoid repeating itself. White's stated goal

for season 2 was to examine sex and power in relationships, and he does, but by avoiding any real critique of wealth, it seems to be veering closer to escapism and soap opera than its first season.

This year's Palme d'Or winner and possible Oscar contender *Triangle of Sadness* begins with our lead characters Carl and Yaya, a model and an influencer. The first act satirizes their respective professions mercilessly, including a hilarious sequence at one of Carl's gigs focused on aligning his facial expression to the prestige of the brand he's representing (sad face for fast fashion giant H&M, smile for Balenciaga).

Yaya's job provides an opportunity for them to take an exclusive cruise.

Once aboard the ship, the film introduces a hit parade of obnoxiousness, including a Russian capitalist who made his fortune from manure, an elderly couple whose family made their fortune in weapons manufacturing, and a lonely tech bachelor who sulks around the ship unable to enjoy his newfound wealth. The captain of the ship is a Marxist American alcoholic played by Woody Harrelson, who has a great scene with the Russian while the ship is in turmoil. Paula, the head of staff, insists that all



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whims and desires be fulfilled without question.

Unfortunately, the second act slides quickly into a fairly lazy parody of the 1 percent. Writer/director Ruben Östlund thinks we will be shocked by the obliviousness of the passengers, but sadly we are not. A sympathetic billionaire would have been more surprising than a boatful of entitled assholes acting oblivious to their cockeyed view of the world. The wealthy passengers make absurd demands, such as the staffer who has to get in a hot tub in full uniform in the spirit of making things “fair,” since the passenger gets to enjoy the opulence but the staff does not.

However, the film begins to get back on track with its signature sequence where all of the passengers begin to vomit and defecate violently due to food poisoning in the middle of a storm. This sets up the final third of the film, where the clueless wealthy survivors are stranded on an island and have the tables turned on them by the staff, who are used to doing whatever it takes to survive. The new de facto leader, crew member Abigail, keeps the survivors in line and takes sexual favors from Carl in exchange for preferential treatment. Eventually, Yaya hikes to the other side of the island and finds a resort. Obviously, she attempts to



put Abigail back into her place, offering a job as her assistant. No one learns anything that they didn't already know. Östlund has made a name for himself examining class, but his films are aimed squarely at the art house audience. His take on the ruling class appeals to them, allowing them to laugh at themselves without losing anything.

*The Menu*, released to theaters just in time for Thanksgiving, does deliver comeuppance to the elite. A group of wealthy foodies sign on for a culinary experience crafted by Chef Slowik (Ralph Fiennes). In another *Love Boat*-esque setup, the foodies are played by a slew of recognizable character actors, including John Leguizamo, Judith Light, Janet McTeer, Anya Taylor-Joy, and Nicholas Hoult, who is a Chef Slowik superfan.

Rather than showing obedience to the guests, the staff is in cult-like deference to Chef's vision, regardless of the harshness that occurs in service of the perfect dining experience. Most of the diners are largely unappreciative of their seats at Chef Slowik's tables. Some are repeat customers who barely remember the previous meals. Their indulgent indifference is precisely what has riled Slowik to the point of planning this final meal.

Hoult's character embodies the superfan mentality, the “I get this more than you do” show-off. He comes close to getting

ejected by taking photos of the food and spouting off all he knows about Chef, while Taylor-Joy gets an unexpected peek behind the curtain (she is the only guest who does not know what she's getting into, being a late addition since Hoult's original date dumped him before the film starts), and must make a decision about which side she is on—the servers or those who are being served.

As the meal progresses, it becomes clear that something sinister is afoot. The trailer suggested that the patrons might wind up on *the menu*, and they do, in a sense—the patrons and staff are to be the dessert in his final meal. He is burned out from years of serving ungrateful people. He mentions that he has devoted his life to something that barely registers with patrons who do not appreciate his craft, demonstrated by the repeat diners who don't recall the details of their last meal, which was planned meticulously by Chef. He has devoted his life to something that doesn't matter to those who pay handsomely for the experience.

Chef, however, is not content to go gently. In one course, he demonstrates that he is aware of the things about the diners that they'd rather not speak of, such as adultery, embezzlement, and more, which are printed out and presented to them as part of the meal. The night goes further off the rails as diners and staff lose fingers and even their lives. Despite the death and destruction, the remaining patrons dutifully douse themselves in graham cracker dust, don marshmallow hats, and become human s'mores for the meal's finale. Chef Slowik's work is done.

## The collective message across these entertainments appears to be, “Rich people suck, huh?”

While *Triangle of Sadness* and *The White Lotus* aim to critique the way the 1 percent abuse their power over those who are paid to serve them, *The Menu* takes on the privilege from the perspective of the servers, and it skewers the wealthy's lack of appreciation for their ability to access rarefied experiences, desire for one-upmanship, and superfandom. Being able to afford it is the point for them, not appreciating the craft. Chef Slowik knows he has a captive audience whose desire for an experience few others will have outstrips everything else. The film satirizes our obsession with “being there first” and projecting a remarkable life on social media. Only Taylor-Joy's character seems to see through the absurdity of the pomp and circumstance, unsurprising since she is the only one who didn't sign on for the experience. She manages to escape becoming charred performance art by re-engaging Chef's love for cooking when she asks him to make her a classic cheeseburger.

*The White Lotus* seems to want to be congratulated for simply acknowledging class differences, which it mostly handles with kid gloves. *Triangle of Sadness* dares to portray a scenario where the elites' easy living is upended, but even that ends cynically. *The Menu* critiques the behaviors and provides some comeuppance as penance for conspicuous consumption and mindless fandom.

The collective message across these entertainments appears to be, “Rich people suck, huh?” without offering much more than exotic locales and vicarious experiences to audiences far removed from these characters and their lives.