

## Film and Television Reviews

*The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*. Dir. Chiwetel Ejiofor. Screenplay by Chiwetel Ejiofor. Perf. Chiwetel Ejiofor, Maxwell Simba, and Lily Banda. BBC Films, 2019. Netflix.

*The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* (hereafter *The Wind*) is an inspiring true account of youthful resourcefulness and creative resilience. It follows the story of a Malawian youngster, William Kamkwamba (Maxwell Simba), who constructs a windmill to provide electricity for his community and save them from the scourge of drought and starvation.

A distinctive critical feature of the movie is its connection of popular culture and informal postcolonial economy. One of John Storey's definitions of popular culture is relevant to the understanding of *The Wind* as a text that generates fresh insights into the reading of popular culture:

Popular culture is the culture that originates from "the people." It takes issue with any approach that suggests that it is something imposed on "the people" from above. According to this definition, the term should only be used to indicate an "authentic" culture of "the people." (9)

One problem with this definition of popular culture is its opposition to commercial interference to the people's culture; the definition "evades the 'commercial' nature of much of the resources from which popular culture is made" since "people do not spontaneously produce culture from raw materials of their own making" (9).

In *The Wind*, water scarcity and its accompanying hunger are challenges facing the villagers. William's mother indicates that their ancestors "prayed for rain," a folk culture that was accepted and observed in the past. However, she also notes that as "modern people," she and her husband send their children to school for them to learn modern means of mitigating such ecological issues as the scarcity of water, thereby implying that the old approach is no longer generally acceptable given its non-sustainability. Therefore, there is need to replace the folk culture of praying for rain with a popular culture that involves material practice. The windmill invented by William emerges as the villagers' new material culture, a practice that is sustainable and effective. Yet this practice, even though it is a product of William's ingenuity and the villagers' collaborative efforts, does not entirely originate among

the people. In fact, William's aspiration is met with some obstacles. His neighbors and peers mock him, calling him *misala*, which means crazy, for his strange idea. This strange idea is one that William gets from reading a science textbook titled *Using Energy* in his school library. The failure of his parents to pay the \$80 one-year tuition for William due to the widespread famine that leaves his family in acute lack in 2002 forces William to drop out of school to help his family in the farms. Yet the greatest challenge to William's dream of building a windmill for his poverty-stricken community is his father's opposition to the idea, especially when William requests to use the old man's bicycle — which the latter considers as the remnant of all his prized material possession — to construct a windmill. The construction of a windmill that will provide electricity that could in turn enable the pumping of water is a venture which William's father, Trywell Kamkwamba (Chiwetel Ejiofor), deems a foreign education madness, a strange, total impossibility. When William says to him, "there are things I know that you don't know," William is referring to the foreign education he has acquired from school. When his father later yields, following his mother's emotional intervention and his persistent pleas and assurance that the project will be successful, William assembles metal scraps and bicycle halves to bring the dream of (an amateur but usable) windmill to fruition. The success of the local windmill, and thus the emergence of a new (popular) culture, is therefore facilitated by the fusion of commercial knowledge (gained through education) and communal persistence (which manifests in their pursuance of an informal economy).

In postcolonial economic spaces, "the precariousness of life" (Harris 12) structures the everyday existence of the subject. To survive this precarity and its contingent economy requires of the postcolonial subject to straddle the complex world of "informal, and sometimes illegal, economies" (12). One of the conditions of the postcolonial milieu is the existence of a corrupt neo-colonial government. With the villagers and such government in the city entangled in an economic face-off, the people are left to rely on chance, makeshift economy to survive. William's windmill is an example of a product of such postcolonial informal economy. While this informal economy enables the creation of a new but popular culture among the people, it is William's ability to appropriate postcolonial hybridity that plays a key role in the success of its creation.

The father-child relationship between Trywell and William Kamkwamba serves as a site of engagement bordering on the re-assessment and re-examination of the postcolonial concept of hybridity in this 2019 movie. Postcolonial hybridity refers

to how the clash between old and emerging epistemic orientations, as well as the tension between static rural formulations and urban dynamics, are mitigated in pursuance of economic growth in each postcolonial state. The postcolonial African society of the movie text is Malawi, and in it, we find this sort of clash and tension as mainly conditioned by the absence of the practical value of Western education in the social and economic lives of the postcolonial subjects. These subjects grapple with economic inequality provoked by their disconnection from the government. However, as an embodiment of postcolonial hybridity, William Kamkwamba exemplifies the possibility of refining local commitment and its residual ingenuity with foreign ways of knowing, for the birth of a modern popular practice.

William's story is one of a child prodigy and the youthful zest to triumph amidst a devastating and demoralizing situation. As such, he harbors that hybrid episteme necessary for a successful challenging of the status quo, for the establishment of a new and popularly acceptable way of knowing/living.

Daniel Chukwuemeka  
University of Bristol and Macquarie University

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*Insatiable*. Created by Lauren Gussis. Lady Magic Productions, Storied Media Group, Ryan Seacrest Productions, and CBS Television Studios, 2018.

Netflix's dark comedy series *Insatiable* debuted in the summer of 2018 and attracted immediate controversy based on its ostensible premise: high school senior Patty Bladell (Debby Ryan, best known for girl-next-door roles on Disney Channel sitcoms) is overweight until a homeless man breaks her jaw in a fight over a candy bar, causing Patty to go on a liquid diet and lose about seventy pounds in three months. Suddenly, Patty is skinny, and she assumes that her life will be, as her best friend Nonnie (played by Kimmy Shields) points out in the first season's trailer,

“like every great high school movie ever made.” Initially, this prediction proves true, as Patty attracts the romantic attention of wrestling star Brick Armstrong (Michael Provost) and mysterious rebel Christian Keene (James Lastovic) and becomes a beauty pageant queen at the request of her lawyer, pageant coach Bob Armstrong (Dallas Roberts). However, the longer she remains on the pageant circuit, the more aggressive she becomes, and the audience gradually realizes that *Insatiable* is not just a story about body shaming and makeovers. Over the course of two seasons (the second of which debuted in October 2019), Patty commits five murders; meanwhile, viewers unexpectedly discover that *Insatiable* is a campy commentary on a beauty-pageant-addled town and its deep-seated belief that feminine rage is oxymoronic. *Insatiable* exaggeratedly demonstrates what could happen when young women finally purge the anger they have swallowed to uphold the myths of beauty and propriety, and for that, the show deserves more praise than it has generally received.

As critical viewers, we begin to see the satirical cracks in the series’ superficial promotion of body shaming when we acknowledge its campy aesthetic. Though Susan Sontag famously argues “deliberate Camp [...] is usually less satisfying” than unintentional Camp, *Insatiable* is an example of how deliberate Camp can still work—in this case, how deliberate Camp can urge us to confront the discomfort of a raging woman (6). Visually, everything in the world of *Insatiable* drips of “artifice and exaggeration” (Sontag 1). Nearly everyone in this pageant-obsessed town dresses like a neon-frosted cupcake; District Attorney Bob Barnard (Christopher Gorham) is Hollywood-fit and regularly parades around without a shirt, and housewife Coralee Armstrong (Alyssa Milano) goes into business with fashionable tassels for tampons called “Tampazzles.” This absurdist world winks at the audience and reminds us that almost nothing in this series, including other characters’ bullying of Patty before her weight loss, is meant to be taken literally. Body-shaming and fat-phobic characters are not the implied authors of this series. They are part of the deliberate Camp that asks us to cringe at a cartoonish wickedness which, however exaggerated, resembles the body shaming we may experience away from the television screen. While most of the comedy in *Insatiable* is geared toward making the bully (not the victim) the butt of the joke, its finest moments focus on Patty’s self-loathing and uncontrollable rage, which is never comically framed. In these scenes, the deliberate Camp is starkly stripped away, forcing the audience to contemplate Patty’s pain, this time without their tongues in their cheeks.

With each episode, we watch Patty's story transform from a fantasy in the style of *Never Been Kissed* (1999, Raja Gosnell) to one of Patty's unbridled rage and the guilt she feels for being an angry pageant queen. In other words, Patty's rage is at clear odds with her expectations for womanhood. Her inability to reconcile fury and femininity in the same space reaches its apotheosis when, in her pageant gown and sparkling tiara, she pushes her rival, Dixie Sinclair (Irene Choi), off the top of a truck. Afterward, Patty questions whether she can ever be a good person, and the answer is fairly obvious, yet difficult for her to accept: Patty Bladell cannot be a good person until she relinquishes her belief that her body will determine the content of her character. By the second season finale, Patty (adorned again in a tiara) discovers "Nothing tastes as good as killing feels." For Patty, conventional feminine beauty is a prize worth killing for. She still does not admit to her rage, despite her loved ones begging her to seek therapy throughout the second season. Despite the series' overwhelming evidence toward the contrary, Patty still demonstrates a belief that rage is antithetical to (feminine) beauty, and that only the scale matters.

Of all the killings Patty commits, her murder of boyfriend Christian in the first season's finale is perhaps most significant. It is the first time anyone attacks Patty for the deleterious content of her character without addressing her body. No one mocks her dysmorphia or levies it as the reason for her violence. Christian asks Patty to see her anger as part of *herself*, not the shape of her body. "You said it yourself," he says. "There's no demon. That everything bad you've ever done...it's just you." Patty, however, is not prepared to accept this, so she bludgeons Christian with a crowbar, repeatedly shouting "I'M A GOOD PERSON!" at his dying body. As the camera zooms in on Patty's furious face, each splatter of blood on her cheeks a gory rendition of a beauty queen's blush, viewers are confronted with the excellence of *Insatiable*: a story unafraid to question what might happen when we fail to listen to raging women — a story unafraid to question how it feels when a raging woman cannot listen to herself.

Blue Aslan Philip Proffitt  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

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*Midsommar*. Dir. Ari Aster. Screenplay by Ari Aster. Perf. Florence Pugh, Jack Reynor, and Vilhelm Blomgren. A24, 2019.

*Midsommar* (2019) is a shroom-induced trip, not just because of the many psychedelic drugs used by the characters throughout the film, but also in the way it exemplifies the deeply rooted paradox in the horror genre between attraction and repulsion. This film, from director Ari Aster, combines an enchanting natural setting with disturbing scenes of death, all while the main character transforms into something monstrous, or perhaps beautiful. The narrative structure centers around the unsettling feeling of the unknown as American students explore the traditions of an isolated Swedish society. Just like the American students that arrive in this foreign Swedish community, the audience is situated in the dark, learning about the peculiar customs of the quaint but highly disturbing commune. The darkest moments in *Midsommar* are not illustrated in the dark, but in the light for everyone to see. None of the horrific mysteries in this society are hidden but revealed over time. The real mystery to unravel lies within the main character, Dani. She experiences intense trauma at the beginning of this film forcing her to cling to her only remaining support system, an emotionally distant boyfriend, Christian. Dani, Christian, and his friends are welcomed into this new society. By the end, Dani is the one who is truly changed by the experience. Her transformation occurs when she confronts the traumas of her past, recognizes the emotional abuse in her current relationship, and frees herself with the support of a twisted but deeply empathetic community.

Dani’s relationship with Christian becomes her lifeline after the sudden death of her immediate family. Dani suppresses her pain because of her constant worry of having too much emotional baggage for Christian to handle. She fears losing another person in her life, forcing her to stay in a relationship where she is not valued. Christian is no longer in love with Dani, yet he stays in the relationship out of guilt and pity. Over time, Dani senses his disconnect and it becomes clear that pity can never replace true feelings of love. Dani is repeatedly silenced while

grappling with the loss of her family on her own and she runs away to isolate herself whenever she is triggered. Dani suppresses her emotions around Christian, making her feel more alone and disconnected than ever. She tries to run away from her pain, but this new community finds ways to allow her to embrace and understand her trauma by refusing to let her be alone. The society reveals everything, willingly putting personal and private aspects of their life on display, including the processes of reproduction and death. All emotions, positive or negative, are expressed together. This community sits, eats, dances, sings, and even breathes together. There is a communal expression to emotions as they experience pain, pleasure, and worry as a united front. Living in unison and community transforms Dani. She is heard, she is seen, and, more importantly, she is held. There is no more hiding. These deep expressions of empathy reveal all that she was lacking in her current relationship. Christian's friend Pelle, a member of this community who invited them to Sweden, comforts Dani as she experiences this revelation. He says, "I have always felt held by a family, a real family. Do you feel held by [Christian]? Does he feel like home to you?" Dani never felt held by Christian. This society eventually becomes her chosen family. They have accepted her, all of her, even the trauma of her past, something Christian could never do.

Realizing her relationship is both emotionally abusive and lacking the support that she needs, coupled with witnessing Christian cheat on her, Dani decides to sacrifice him when given the opportunity. The last shot illustrates Dani's true transformation. Seeing the house that the community burned down with her boyfriend trapped inside, she begins to cry. She turns around and notices she is not the only one; the entire community is wailing in pain. She looks back into the flames and smiles. She is no longer alone, she is supported, and she has a family. Finally, Dani embraces this chosen world and family without fear of ever being too much. These empowering last moments change her forever. She is no longer the person needing to be consoled, constantly apologizing for being too much; she is embraced and held. She is terrifying at this moment as she detaches from any relationship that held her back. She is monstrous in the way she has fully explored the depths of her emotions and acted upon them. Choosing her boyfriend to be put to death for his infidelity while covered in a crown and robe of flowers provides a paradoxical vision of Dani as both monstrous and beautiful. As she embraces her emotions, she becomes frighteningly vulnerable and powerful. All this suggests that *Midsommar* is an exploration of trauma, of finding a new home, and of a woman embracing her power, ultimately leading to her liberation.

Riana Slyter  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

*Parasite*. Dir. Bong Joon-ho. Screenplay by Bong Joon-ho and Han Jin-won. Perf. Song Kang-ho, Lee Sun-kyun, and Jo Yeo-jeong. CJ Entertainment, 2019.

Director Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* portrays the polarization of a society where the poor and the rich both live in a strange symbiosis. The film represents this idea through the characters' homes, which serve to reinforce the unfair distribution of wealth and power that exists within in many modern societies. Therefore, *Parasite* appeals not only to Korean viewers but also to audiences around the world as Bong indicates (Chow).

The film opens with a scene showing the Kim family living in a half-underground apartment unit. This home demonstrates the Kim family's in-betweenness. In an interview with *Architectural Digest*, Bong explains,

[the house] really reflects the psyche of the Kim family. You're still half over ground, so there's this hope and this sense that you still have access to sunlight and you haven't completely fallen to the basement yet. It's this weird mixture of hope and this fear that you can fall even lower. I think that really corresponds to how the protagonists feel. (Wallace)

The design of the house not only represents the family's psyche but also their socio-economic status; the structure of the house makes them both visible to and invisible from society, which recalls a parasite's nature.

In the next scene, the Kim family finds their efforts to steal WiFi from their neighbor thwarted by a new password. In the twenty-first century WiFi has become an essential medium and commodity due to its ability to instantly connect people. The new password represents another barrier between the Kims and the outside world. The Kim family's desperation to connect to the outer world is illustrated by a scene in which siblings Ki-woo (Choi Woo-sik) and Ki-jung (Park So-dam) squat next to the toilet, which is situated too close to the flat's low ceiling, while trying to connect to a signal on their mobile phone. The strange structure of the house that forces Ki-woo and Ki-jung to huddle close to the toilet, an item regarded as necessary but filthy, suggests both the Kim family's parasitic nature and their

longing to connect to the outer world and rise above their station. There is no option for the Kim family to access the WiFi other than stealing it through abject means.

One day, Ki-woo's friend, Min (Park Seo-joon), pays a visit to the Kims' house and suggests that Ki-woo take a job as an English tutor for the daughter of the wealthy Park family. Ki-woo eagerly accepts the offer, and upon arrival he discovers that the Parks live in a grandiose and magnificent home, which likewise represents the family's socioeconomic status. Rachel Wallace of *Architectural Digest* observes that "Just like the semi-basement represents the Kims' place in society, [the Parks'] sleek, modern dwelling represents theirs." Ki-woo tries to penetrate this rich family by introducing all his family members as reliable people to the naïve young matriarch, Yeon-kyo. Ki-woo's attempt and desire to infiltrate the rich family, which is another of Bong's intended major themes, clearly shows the Kim family's parasitic nature. The Kims wish to survive in the harsh capitalist society and have no choice but to infest a rich family and suck their wealth.

Bong illustrates the theme of infiltration through blocking. In an interview with *IndieWire*, he states, "if someone is in a certain position, the other character[s] had to spy on them; if someone's coming in, another person had to hide behind a corner" (O'Falt). The Parks' magnificent house offers enough room for the Kim family to secretly breach the body of the host and live inside them without their knowledge.

The twist of the film lies beneath the basement of the Parks' house, and at this point I must issue a spoiler alert as I will discuss this twist in detail. Moon-gwang, the former housekeeper to the wealthy family, surreptitiously hides her husband in a secret bunker below the basement and lives there with him. However, once the Kim family invades the Yeon-kyo family they expel Moon-gwang (Lee Jeong-eun) and replace her with Chung-sook (Jang Hye-jin), matriarch of the Kim family. One day, when the Parks go camping, the Kim family celebrates their successful occupation of the host's house. However, Moon-gwang returns to check on her husband, at which point the Kims realize that they are not the only parasites in the house. A violent fight for survival ensues, during which the Kim family accidentally kill Moon-gwang. They then lock her husband in the sub-basement, thus burying the dark secret that could compromise their occupation of the Parks' home.

In addition to the differences between the two houses, the hierarchy of high and low in the film shows the division of class and wealth. Bong wanted to highlight the class division via cinematic techniques such as lighting: for instance, the Kims have less access to sunlight while the Parks' expansive home allows for more

natural sunlight to enter their lives (O’Falt). Along with the lighting, the different locations show the division of class and wealth. No matter how much the Kims strive to climb the ladder of success and thus rise out of their low socio-economic class, they nevertheless end up trapping themselves in the basement. The Kims try to leave their filthy half-ground basement apartment and move into the Parks’ magnificent house. However, as they discover Moon-gwang’s secret, they must return to the basement, an act that represents the ostracization of the parasites and reinforces the division of class and wealth represented by the hierarchy of high and low in the film, which is too rigid to break.

In the film’s chaotic ending, Ki-taek (Song Kang-ho), the head of the Kim family, kills Dong-ik (Lee Sun-kyun), head of the Park family, after his family’s true and secret nature as parasites is disclosed during an unexpected attack by Moon-gwang’s vengeful husband. Afterward, Ki-taek has no choice but to hide himself in the sub-basement of the house. The rest of the Kim family also end up back in their old half-underground apartment. The Kims, who are positioned as the parasites in the capitalist society, are once again banished to the low and dark house. The rule of the strange symbiosis of the capitalist society allows the parasites to sustain their lives only under the condition of living in their in-betweenness. The film’s ending yields an uncanny reflection of our contemporary society to the audience: Are we the parasites in this society? Or are there any parasites inside our houses?

Lim Hee-seong  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

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