

***The First Purge*, dir. by Gerard McMurray** (Universal Pictures, 2018)

*The First Purge* might initially appear to have nothing original about it – it seems to be little more than a B movie, where participants have twelve hours to commit whatever crimes they wish without repercussion. There are, however, a few interesting elements to the film, the fourth instalment of the *Purge* franchise (2013-present). Building upon the earlier chapters, *The First Purge*, the most financially successful film in the series to date, has a slightly more developed and insightful narrative, especially from a social-science and economic perspective, and provides some depth to the concept of ‘Purge Night’.<sup>1</sup> Directed by Gerard McMurray and starring Y’lan Noel, Lex Scott Davis, Joivan Wade, Mugga, Luna Lauren Velez, Kristen Solis, and Marisa Tomei, the film depicts the origins of the yearly activity as a ‘social experiment’.

Set in the mid-twenty-first century, the government has been overthrown by the New Founding Fathers of America (NFFA). The main action of *The First Purge* begins with NFFA members Arlo Sabian (Patch Darragh) and Dr May Updale (Marisa Tomei) announcing live on TV that the experimental purge will take place on Staten Island. Before this, we see various interviewees being asked questions to judge their suitability for the experiment. The NFFA offers five thousand dollars to the residents of the island to stay in their homes during the experiment, as well as financial compensation to those directly participating in the violence; Staten-Island inhabitants can choose to take part, though few of them do. The NFFA also give participants tracking devices and contact lenses with cameras so that they can monitor the night’s activity, ‘Big Brother’-style. Many choose to leave the island, others choose to stay but not participate, and others are trapped due to unforeseen circumstances. Activist Nya (Lex Scott Davis), her little brother Isaiah (Joivan Wade) and drug dealer Dimitri (Y’lan Noel), amongst others, remain – not as participants, but as potential victims.

As well as showcasing acts of violence, *The First Purge* also highlights the deplorable living conditions that the residents of Staten Island endure. Not only is the housing substandard, but, as we learn early on, through pre-purge interviews conducted with potential participants for Purge Night, the area has a considerable drug problem. It is important to note that this disadvantaged community is predominantly black and minority. Given the current political debates surrounding race in America, this is not only topical, but extremely relevant to contemporary US issues, particularly recent police shootings of unarmed black civilians.

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<sup>1</sup> See <<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=purge4.htm>> [accessed 15 October 2018].

The aim of the first *Purge Night* is to establish the impact of the night's violence on crime rates generally. For example, the authorities are interested to see whether the escalated violence that they anticipate occurring on the night will reduce overall subsequent crime rates, as the violence is supposed to function as a form of 'catharsis' for the community. *Purge Night* is therefore focused primarily on 'fixing' an impoverished 'problem' area by using violence as a tool to cull and calm the population, as opposed to addressing constructively the socio-economic factors and societal inequalities that cause these problems in the first place, such as poverty, lack of infrastructure, inadequate education, and healthcare. This is a system that works to sweep these issues under the carpet rather than deal with them head on.

The 'solutions' depicted here also mirror conservative views and the process of othering certain segments of the population along the lines of race and social status. In particular, the film evokes eugenics and 'black-on-black' violence; the authorities are essentially asking the population to sort itself out, but the recommended methods mark this population as fundamentally alien to 'respectable' society. What is more, although participation in *Purge Night* is voluntary, as there is a monetary incentive to take part, it gives many of financially disadvantaged population hope of a better life – they hardly have a 'choice' at all. For the community, the potential to earn money, and a sharp awareness of the immediate needs that it would feed, distract from the fact that this is essentially a population cull of the poorest sections of the population. The film therefore positions *Purge Night* and the experiment as exploitative, a point underlined when it evolves into a game that the powerful and rich, as in other *Purge* films, have a choice to participate in, unlike those to whom poverty has denied this choice.

While thematically the focus is on socio-economic issues, those who enjoy the violent element of the series will not be disappointed, as there is still enough excitement to hold an audience's attention. Most of the film's violence is perpetrated by a group of mercenaries hired by the NFFA, and one rogue member of the Staten-Island community, drug addict Skeletor (Rotimi Paul). Skeletor appears to be the epitome of the 'evil' and feral archetype that *Purge Night* would appeal to in the first place; the inclusion of such a character allows the filmmakers to go so far as to feature threats of rape among the usual acts of violence committed on the night. Sexual assault and rape have generally not featured in any of the previous instalments in the *Purge* series. In light of the deviant nature of *Purge Night*, it seems bizarre that violent sexual crimes were not really addressed to this extent prior to this

film. Indeed, this could be considered problematic, considering that the film deals with lower socio-economic groupings than the earlier films do. *The First Purge* could therefore be read as attributing this crime specifically to those on lower social tiers, as the focus in the previous films is more on wealthy characters.

As the narrative progresses, however, we see that the real enemy is external, as mercenaries are recruited by the NFFA to interfere with the way in which the situation would have naturally played out for participants; this is ‘necessary’ because, it emerges, the NFFA and scientists have over-estimated the level of violence that would occur. The mercenaries are masked, dressed as members the Ku Klux Klan and in Nazi uniforms, and are depicted as cold and calculating, opening fire on the unarmed crowd hiding in a church and hunting down those who roam the streets. This visual motif can be seen as referencing ‘white crimes’ such as the rise of fascism and Nazi groups, but perhaps more specifically also echoes the spate of shootings in the United States perpetrated by lone white men. Although not subtle, the inclusion of these spectres of white violence highlights the fact that the enemy is external, as it becomes clear that the original participants only rarely attack each other.

As with many depictions of covert governmental operations, ranging from *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) to the *Bourne Identity* series (2002-16), this interference in the system is ultimately cleaned up (just as rogue spies are conventionally killed off by hired contract killers and so on). In a clichéd fashion, Dr Updale realises too late that her experiment has been taken too far, when she discovers that the results are being tampered with by the introduction of the mercenaries. Her motivations, although idealistic, are also positioned by the film as rigorously scientific and of benefit to society at large, and once she finds out that the mercenaries have been drafted in to kill people because the naturally occurring violence was minimal, she understands that her experiment has turned into a genocide. This sets the scene perfectly for Purge Night to become an accepted part of life for the future, as the details of Updale’s original findings and the initial motivations for the purge are hidden from the ‘respectable’ public, making it appear more democratic and universally beneficial for all those involved.

*The First Purge* is by no means a ground-breaking film. It is, nonetheless, enjoyable in a ‘B-movie’ fashion, reminiscent of *Assault on Precinct 13* (1973), relying on clichés and somewhat tired tropes – such as a bubbling love story, a ‘bad guy’ becoming the ‘good guy’, and plenty of gunfire and action sequences. The script is also completely unmemorable, being more functional than anything (such as Dr Updale dramatically asking ‘what have I done?!’),

and merely serving to move the narrative along with the action. The film does, however, mostly feature a black cast that largely controls the narrative, and is framed from the perspective of African-American characters, which is refreshing. The sense of fear is also nicely evoked; the NFFA are terrifying, relatively faceless, with hidden motivations, and perfectly suited to what is essentially a dystopian thriller. It also raises some contemporary issues, albeit in a somewhat simplistic fashion, allowing for conversation about the socio-economic factors that minorities face in the US.

Overall, what makes this instalment unique to the series is how *The First Purge* focuses primarily – at least initially – on those of lower socio-economic status, as opposed to the wealthy, who are featured heavily throughout the remainder of the series. It also shows activism and resistance from this demographic in the form of small ineffectual protests depicted early in the film. McMurray does a highly commendable job in rejuvenating what potentially could be a dying franchise, adding a much more ‘relatable’ dynamic to this movie, as it shows how the Purge has its roots in the contempt that the rich have for the ‘ordinary’ people. It is not only less elitist and more democratic than previous instalments, but also shows that fundamentally, people of a lower economic status are less violent, more moral, and more resilient than those of the upper classes may have expected. The frightening thing, given the current cultural milieu, is that this vision of the future seems very plausible, and perhaps *The First Purge* is, more than anything, actually a cautionary tale, warning us of what politics may become.

*Caroline Egan*