

Science Fiction and the Angel of History

A review of, 'Sorry to Bother You'

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© ANNAPURNA PICTURES Lakeith Stanfield and Danny Glover in 'Sorry to Bother You.'

“It was 100 years ago... by which I mean last Monday” Brooke Gladstone of NPR’s *On the Media* sighed after Trump’s performance in Helsinki. Whatever one thinks about our current president, Gladstone’s sigh is the kind of thing one hears a lot these days, as the calamities and once-in-a-century happenings pile up so fast a frequent punchline on social media is that it’s only Tuesday.

This strange acceleration is not just an accretion of events but a shifting in our sense of time itself; the feel that we are witnessing a kind of rupture of the present. And certainly, given the resurgence of global fascism, the crisis of legitimacy in the Democratic Party, the explosive growth of the [Democratic Socialists of America](#), the unending horror of police violence and mass shootings, and seemingly inexorable environmental collapse on the not-so-distant, smog-layered horizon, it’s apparent that the status quo is broken. It seems we are now living in a world wherein the alignments, verities, and truths of the last 60 years are shifting, breaking open, splitting; falling out from under our feet.

Enter into this new terrifying millennium [Boots Riley](#)'s surprise hit, [Sorry to Bother You](#), a film that has received rave reviews from establishment media even as it's been described as "weird," "bonkers," "wild," and the "WTF film of the year." Riley himself describes it as "surreal" and a [recent review in Jacobin](#) suggests the film's more strange elements should be taken as an "honest attempt to reflect the crude madness we live in" – that capitalism has gone mad.

As much as I agree with critics that the film is strange, there is something about this strangeness that needs to be given more attention. *Sorry to Bother You*'s strangeness is more than just a reflection of the times we live in; it is a commentary on the way in which revolutionary moments are constituted by ruptures in time.

This idea – that revolution is not just a political event but rather a tear in the fabric of reality – has a long history. Marx famously said that revolution is the "locomotive of history." Lenin described the Bolshevik revolution as a "speedup of time." And Walter Benjamin describes the Messianic time of social transformation as "blasting a life out of...the course of history."

Set in Oakland, the film's basic plot outline is likely well known to most readers at this point. A working class African American telemarketer, Cassius "Cash" Green, is promoted upstairs to the position of "power caller" when he masters "the white voice." This promotion coincides with his comrades and co-workers walking out on strike. The Oakland that the film paints is like so many American cities of 2018, only more so: rapidly gentrifying, full of precarious employment and underpaid jobs, packed with foreclosed homes, and filled with a sadistic public culture of violent reality TV shows, celebrity worship, and casual racism.

At this point, even the film's more dystopian scenarios – such as the contractual neo-slavery represented by the "WorryFree" company – can be seen as merely the logical extension of our own world, in which workers kill themselves to escape the giant dormitories of FoxConn's Shenzhen complex, and local baristas are made to sign "non compete" clauses. So far it might seem like this is just another strike film, albeit funnier and with better grasp of the ironies of racial politics in contemporary America than most. The workers get organized, the boss cracks down, Cash gets his green and must make a moral choice: how much is he willing to sacrifice in order to become successful?

But it's just when the film seems familiar that takes a turn both stylistically and politically – a turn that violates not just our expectations, but even the most remote principles of realism. (And if you would like to be shocked by the film's violations of filmic realism as you watch for the first time, please stop reading here.) If you're still with me, there is little that can prepare you for the final plot twist of the film, so I will just say it: Cash is turned into a fucking horse. Or, rather, a horse-man. A satyr, of sorts. Or, in the language of the film, an equisapian.

Realism, of course, is the genre that is designed to reflect society in all its complexity. Realism shows us the multi-layered class structure of a society: think *Citizen Kane* or *The Wire*. Realist films or TV shows dissect society as cleanly as a doctor doing an autopsy. Yet as a genre, realism is rather allergic to speculation; it is as cautious as an historian, and by definition cannot make claims about what will be, or even what is now emergent. Science fiction, on the other

hand, and as Frederic Jameson notes, is a genre bent not toward reflecting society, but toward utopian dreams and discontinuous ruptures. Stalin liked realism: its stasis, its grim clutch on the reality principle. But the Bolshevik artists, giddy with visions of the revolution, they were science fiction writers and avant-garde artists.

Consider some of the Soviet titles before the rise of Stalinism: Alexy Tolstoy's *Aelita* featured a revolutionary colony on Mars in 1923; Alexander Belayev's 1929 *Air Seller* tells the story of an evil capitalist who builds a machine to horde the earth's atmosphere, only to sell it back at a profit. Vertov's avant-garde 1929 *Man with a Movie Camera* concludes with Leningrad accelerating into a whirl of sound and speed until the city folds into itself an orgasm of motion and sensory delight. All these pieces imagine the acceleration of capitalism, or socialism – and with Vertov, of subjective life itself.

As strange as it is to see on screen, as a portrait of the protagonist the transformation of Cash from man to horse actually has a kind of logic embedded within it. Alienating first his labor, then his racial identity, and finally his sense of justice, it makes sense that he is transformed from something human into something inhuman. But Riley will not allow us to view this transformation, as logical as it may be, as simply an extension of the film's historical materialism: half the scene is rendered in claymation; evil CEO Steve Lift grins like the Joker; one feels time bending and stretching like the beginning of a bad acid trip as the impossible figures speak into the camera. In other words *Sorry to Bother You* is to the strike film what *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* might be to a woodshop training video.

Here the post-modern performance of race the film first offered – with Cash's "white voice" only the most salient – breaks on the hard line of biology. The equisapiens are introduced as the new global workforce, both obedient and powerful, unable to strike, and not requiring pay. Not only will the equisapiens work harder, they return to capitalism the imaginary of biological difference, the animalized human worker on whom slavery was based, the genetically different "savage." To make that point clear, the Silicon Valley mogul dubs Cash's proposed role – as the fake revolutionary leader of the equisapiens – the "MLK of your people."

And yet this is not just a return to an earlier past. As [Marxist ecologist John Bellamy Foster reminds us](#), capitalism entered us into a new relationship with nature, a "metabolic rift," in which human industrial activity has changed the basic chemistry of life and of life-giving properties on the planet. Whatever new forms of exploitation – referred to as "progress" in polite circles – we will witness in the coming years, they will take new forms. They will be built out of the racial, gendered and class structures that already exist, and some will be recognizable – and some will shock, disorient, and bewilder.

Globalization has been one such "[futureshock](#)" and the left still lacks a coherent program to respond to its fast-moving, dizzying coordinates. Mass incarceration has been another, as has climate change. These transformations stand before us as strange and familiar as an army of horse-men, they are something we have seen before and yet are totally new – and we are still experimenting with strategies of resistance.

Science fiction, good science fiction, is never literal, and is only incidentally about the adoption of new technology. Rather, good science fiction is a cognitive map of what is to come; it is an aesthetic preparation for the sudden entrance of Messianic time, of rapid social transformation. One of the problems we face on the left continues to be that we fight new situations with old strategies – we are slow to see the new realities in front of us. This is the work that science fiction, or speculative fiction, can do for us. Not to give a prescription for what is to change, but to prepare us politically and culturally for changes when they come.

Of course, Boots Riley has been clear from the beginning that this film is not about Trump or Trumpism; he wrote it during the Obama years. As most on the left know, Trump is merely a morbid symptom of these changes, which is why the sense of acceleration NPR reporters feel is both real and also a mystification.

And yet it is not all bad. That a “self-described communist” should receive a glowing [portrait in the New York Times](#) is perhaps the strangest thing to happen in my lifetime, certainly no stranger than socialists running for Congress. It was not so long ago that Hollywood was giving awards to people who named names to the [House Un-American Activities Committee](#). It was not so long ago that references to socialism would be greeted with eyerolls or worse. These changes – like the transformations in the film – rock us back and forth with their negations upon negations. And yet the film propels us forward even in its last seconds: as the equisapiens become the vanguard of the new working class, we are forced to move past our horror or incredulity of the absurdist terror and ask: how do we understand each new crisis as an invitation to move forward, to organize in new ways? How do we ride this acceleration and not become airsick as it plunges us faster and faster into the ether?

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