Barbara Nitke/HBO/TNS

Donna Murphy, left, and Carrie Coon in Season 2 of "The Gilded Age."

Q&A

# Nina Metz: Money and status aren't everything. Try telling TV that

BY NINA METZ
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Status comes in many forms, but the quickest shorthand for status on TV is wealth. The clothes. The real estate. The private jets and other markers of affluence. Early in the Amazon series "We Were Liars," a family convenes at their sprawling beachfront estate on a private island near Martha's Vineyard and, like numerous wealthaganda shows of the moment - "The Perfect Couple," "Sirens" and "The Better Sister," among many - this version of luxury is East Coast old money. So much so, it might as well be an ad for Ralph Lauren come to life, a sensation that becomes even weirder when Ralph Lauren is indeed namechecked in the script.

Wealthy people - their absurdities and their pains, their endless wants and needs and human foibles - have dominated streaming's output over the last several years. Even so-called satirical depictions manage only the thinnest of critiques, while ensuring that characters who could mount a meaningful challenge to the status quo remain firmly off screen. The central players are miserable or odious, but even so, we're meant to want this life because look at the glorious trappings! Surely *we* wouldn't be unhappy if we had this lifestyle at our disposal. We're being seduced into a world largely stripped of color in terms of the interior design, but also the people who inhabit these spaces. It's a portrait disconnected from the lives of most Americans and where we are, existentially, as a country.

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Chef Anthony Iracane prepares a meal for guests chartering a yacht on the popular Bravo TV series "Below Deck."

It's a genre filled with status markers selling us on certain ideas, says Dominique J. Baker. A professor of education and public policy at the University of Delaware, she studies the real-world effects of status, and we talked about recent TV offerings that reflect - or shape - our notions of status.

**Q: You've dubbed these "Nicole Kidman gauzy wealth shows" - quiet luxury manifested as television - because Kidman has become the face of this trend, and it's such an apt description, capturing how they reinforce notions of what status is supposed to look like. There are all kinds of sources of wealth in this country, but the big, fast and blatantly destructive money at the moment is from Silicon Valley. That's not the version of status we're being shown on our screens.**

**A:** Right, we're being fed Cape Cod, the Vineyard. And that's because, for example, if you're lusting for the tradwife life, you're not lusting for Silicon Valley. I would argue that when we think about East Coast money, regardless of how the money was obtained, we think of it as Old Money - people who've had wealth for generations - and we imbue that with a goodness that we don't with Silicon Valley.

**Q: With a show like "Succession" or "The White Lotus," their money and status insulate them from consequences, which is probably true enough in real life. But the characters are insulated from *narrative* consequences in these fictional depictions. These stories aren't interested in anything that pushes back on how the wealthy operate and exist.**

**A:** We understand how the world works, right? Yes, having money means you can avoid certain consequences. But if you have a narrative aim with your fictional work, it doesn't make sense for there to be no consequences.

Conversely, one of my favorite TV shows is the Bravo reality series "Below Deck," which is about the staff manning these yachts. The stars of the show are the workers who haul out the jet skis and clean the bathrooms and unpack your suitcase. And frequently, the rich people do get comeuppance, even if it's only for five minutes. They often go on the show and think they can treat the workers like trash and no one will ever know, which is ridiculous because the camera is right there.

But because our point of view into the story is from the workers' perspective, the workers get the last word. They get to say, "Oh, that lady was a 'beep' and a 'beep' and left her garbage all over the place." And that woman has no idea, until six months later, that everybody sees her for who she is and it's on national TV.

**Q: These are contemporary portrayals, whereas "The Gilded Age" takes place in the late 19th century. The title is borrowed from an *actual* satirical novel from 1873 by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner that took aim at the era's greed, corruption and the emptiness of materialism.**

**Commentary around the show tends to frame it as fun and frothy, because it's clearly not aiming for meaningful critique. It's conspicuous but also surreal to see the original robber barons - the villains of history! - reimagined on TV as endearing or sympathetic at the exact moment we're living through a devastating revival of the robber baron era in real life.**

**A:** It irks me that we're meant to root for the characters played by Carrie Coon and Morgan Spector, who are stand-ins for the Vanderbilts and are positioned against the ridiculous snobbery of the Old Money families who want to keep them out of their society circles. We're meant to think they're scrappy upstarts and how unfair it is that these other rich people don't like them because they're New Money, so we should root for them. That's bananas. The people we should root for are the workers!

**Q: Do you think audiences are more likely to turn off the critical side of their brains when watching a historical version of this, rather than one set in the modern day?**

**A:** Well, I think some people turn their brains off for "The White Lotus," too! But I think it's the escapism of other spaces. "The White Lotus" allows people to escape because most aren't going to five-star resorts in real life. "The Gilded Age" is like a virtual vacation to the past, it's just a revisionist version of the past. But that ties in with other revisions of the past that have given us the tradwife phenomenon.

I would argue that there are a number of people who no longer hold the knowledge that robber barons were the bad guys. I think the century-long project of rehabilitating their names has worked, because we have bigger villains in Silicon Valley, so people look back at the Gilded Age with nostalgia. They don't realize that robber barons actually killed some of their workers who dared to strike.

It's interesting to compare "The Gilded Age" with something like "Sinners," because the perspective that takes us into "Sinners" is not the wealthy couple shopping in the segregated grocery store who are affronted by "those people" who are shopping across the street. We come into "Sinners" from the perspective of regular people.

And sure, the movie takes some creative license, but we get grounded in an experience of joy and pain and struggle and growth over a 24-hour period in a way that "The Gilded Age" could have done if our key entry points were not the fictional versions of the Vanderbilts fighting the Astors, but from the point of view of the Ida B. Wells-inspired character and maybe a domestic worker. You still could have the grand balls and all that nonsense, but seen through the eyes of someone who would say, "This is ridiculous - you spent all that money on lobsters and nobody came to your party?"

And on top of that, the people whose stories "Sinners" thinks have value is completely different. Watching "The Gilded Age," you would think New York is only filled with white and Black people, which is not true, even in the late 1800s. This is a show that could have told us a really lush and sumptuous story of that era that actually took up Twain and Warner's satirical ideas. This is what Edith Wharton did so well - actually uncovering why it is satire to call it the Gilded Age.

**Q: What do you make of the fact that there's a preponderance of these shows right now, when this is so at odds with our lived experiences and what we see unfolding on the news, not just in the last six months but the past several years. These stories of status exist to do *what* in our current moment?**

**A:** One, they offer an "easy" escape from the dreary parts of life. I think there are other ways to imagine entertainment that provides escape, but it requires hard work to create a "Sinners" or a show like "Watchmen."

Two, I think there's a real push that's reminiscent of the '80s where "greed is good" a la Mr. Gekko in the 1987 movie "Wall Street." But it's a flattened version of the '80s because "Wall Street" is not confused about whether Gordon Gekko is a villain.

In our present, we have TV shows that think they're "Wall Street," but unlike the end of that movie, they provide no actual consequences. I think that flattening curtails the available options for what entertainment can be.

That dovetails with the attention economy of "hate watching." You know all those studies that show social media platforms learned that hateful and angry speech gets more engagement and gets people to stay on the platform longer, so they tweaked their algorithms to show more stuff to make people angry? I think that's part of this entertainment push. And, as long as you're hooked on being angry about this one wealthy person snubbing this other wealthy person, you're not thinking about systems and what might be done to change our real world.

Three, building off that last point, if our entertainment showed the experiences of most regular people, I think it would radicalize them, especially if you talk about the systems that create our current reality. "Sinners" showing how real people experienced things like lynchings is a radicalizing act.

The powerful in Hollywood seem terrified of the potential for everyday Americans - in cities, in rural locales, and everywhere in between - to be radicalized by our world.