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America on screen, for richer and poorer

By [Ann Hornaday](#), Published: July 26

The American story has always been one of a classless society. But the stories we tell ourselves on screen have always been deeply, if tacitly, engaged in issues of wealth and poverty, whether as motivational fables, admonitory morality tales or — all too rarely — truly revealing glimpses of the society they reflect and portray.



Ever since Charlie Chaplin donned a shabby suit and bowler hat to play the Little Tramp — that winsome avatar of resistance to capitalism’s excesses — notions of rich and poor have been relatively fixed, at least within the fictional universe of the movie screen. But some recent movies are introducing a new fluidity in those once-firm images, echoing similar insecurities and anxieties abroad in an economically uncertain culture.

In **“The Watch,”** a comedy opening Friday starring Ben Stiller, Vince Vaughn and Jonah Hill, Stiller plays a character named Evan, who as the movie opens announces that he’s a proud citizen of Glenview, Ohio, a dutiful manager at the nearby Costco and a good neighbor devoted to civic duty and betterment.

Within a few swift opening scenes, “The Watch” establishes its premise: Evan’s Glenview, with its manicured lawns and well-tended cul-de-sac homes, epitomizes middle-class aspiration and security worth protecting — which Evan and his buddies do to clumsy and comic effect as they battle marauding, green-goo-spewing aliens.

Those same suburban values are also punch lines in “The Watch” — which features more than one well-timed Costco joke. Also played for laughs is Evan’s earnest multiculturalism, whereby he seeks out ethnically diverse friends to round out his otherwise white-bread existence.

But for the most part, “The Watch” hews to the age-old habit in Hollywood of representing what’s mainstream and “normal” in America as middle class — a notion of comfort, well-being and modest prosperity that, with median family income plummeting by the day as wealth inequality soars, looks more like a product of wishful thinking than 21st-century reality.

Oddly enough, a far more timely and candid snapshot of Americans’ current economic lives can be found in a depiction of extreme affluence — albeit caught in one hot mess of a downslide. **“The Queen of Versailles,”**

Lauren Greenfield's captivating documentary that also opens Friday, chronicles the life and times of Jackie and David Siegel, an astronomically rich couple who, as the film opens, are in the process of building the country's biggest single-family house (90,000 square feet, 13 bedrooms, 30 bathrooms, two tennis courts — you know, just a little place to call home).

Through an accident of timing, Greenfield filmed "The Queen of Versailles" just as the economic meltdown hit, so what might have been a deliciously voyeuristic exercise in schadenfreude transforms into a fascinating, if outsize, example of the financial decline that has gripped so many less-fortunate citizens since 2008.

At one point Jackie — a curvaceous 40-ish blonde who is devoted to her eight kids and 74-year-old husband — visits her modest home town of Binghamton, N.Y., where her onetime best friend describes their teenage years as "typical middle class." Jackie, who has just flown commercial for the first time in years, gives her friend a hug and compliments her on her home, a veritable shoebox in comparison with the Siegels' palatial mansion in one of Florida's gated communities.

A few moments later, it's revealed that that same friend is in foreclosure — a fact Jackie responds to by quietly sending \$5,000 to help save the house. It's an act of spontaneous generosity typical of Jackie but at odds with the straitened financial circumstances of her own family: David Siegel's time-share company has had to lay off thousands of workers and faces bankruptcy as he desperately seeks to save the business and personal wealth he has created out of easy credit and cheap money.

Great wealth in the movies has always been a fetish, either glamorized or demonized, but always imbued with some degree of contempt or desire. At the height of the Depression, American filmgoers flocked to escapist fantasies of ladies dragging ermine coats along polished floors or picking up a bum on skid row during a madcap party game. One of the few American filmmakers still willing to advance the tradition unapologetically is Woody Allen, who regularly populates his films with characters of off-handedly elegant, unexamined privilege.

"When I grew up, on a day like today, when it was 100 degrees out, you go into a dark movie theater and Fred Astaire is drinking champagne and calling some beautiful girl on a white telephone — you're transported instantly into a life," Allen told me earlier this summer. "You get a very refreshed feeling from that. It's like drinking lemonade. You can go on for another couple of hours or another day or two, having had a breather in a cool movie theater with something nice. Then reality slowly starts creeping in again, and you realize how grim things are."

As welcome as the occasional escapist fantasy of wealth is with audiences, (think of the vicarious haute couture of "Sex and the City," or the understated prosperity that forms the generic but well-heeled backdrop for so many romantic comedies, like Meryl Streep's Santa Barbara redoubt in "It's Complicated"), it's just as often a metaphor for greed, exploitation and evil — from the slick predations of Gordon Gekko in "[Wall Street](#)" to the villain in last year's "[The Muppets](#)" — a man of means, literally and figuratively.

Even the comic-book epic "The Dark Knight Rises," based on Batman story lines written years before the financial bailout and Occupy Wall Street, has seen fit to mine simmering class resentment for some of its most fascinating material. "There's a storm coming, Mr. Wayne," Selina Kyle (Anne Hathaway) tells the privileged scion Bruce Wayne early in the film, adding that "when it hits, you're all going to wonder how you ever thought you could live so large and leave so little for the rest of us."

“The Queen of Versailles” presents no such comforting us-and-them schematics. Sure, viewers are privy to the crass pressure tactics David’s salesmen use to sell expensive time shares to people who probably can’t afford them (called “mooches” in the lingua franca of the trade). And few will shed many tears over Jackie being forced to curtail compulsive spending that borders on an illness.

Nonetheless, Greenfield allows plenty of room for sympathy for her subjects: Just as surely as they are victims of their own hubris, vanity and fetishistic consumerism, in “The Queen of Versailles” they can also be seen as products of an economic structure predicated on the pursuit of wealth and material comforts. Perceived through one lens, Jackie and David Siegel are crass, nouveau riche fat cats who got what they deserved; through another, they’re the most grotesque extremes of the same American Dream Evan and his friends in “The Watch” seek so comically to protect.

If the upper class is given a frank but fair shake in “The Queen of Versailles,” the same can’t be said for lower- and working-class people on-screen these days. Like the very rich, the very poor in movies are often portrayed in simplistically binary terms: either as martyrs or monsters, paragons of striving and noble sacrifice, or undisciplined architects of their own suffering.

In “**Beasts of the Southern Wild,**” one of the most enthusiastically received movies on the art-house circuit this summer, young newcomer Quevenzhane Wallis portrays a fearless 6-year-old girl named Hushpuppy who embarks on a quest to save the shacks and shanties of her impoverished bayou community, called the Bathtub, from environmental and existential disaster.

While the film’s young heroine, strikingly imaginative visual design and themes of collective care and solidarity present an exhilarating image of the dispossessed and forgotten, an inescapable air of romanticism pervades the enterprise. Too often, the citizens of the Bathtub are presented as the picturesque, exotic creatures of the film’s title, rather than fully realized human beings. What’s more, the movie’s idea of a happy ending is for Hushpuppy and her friends to stay where they are — ferociously independent, yes, but still isolated and marginalized.

For pure, unvarnished contempt of the poor, though, no movie this year will be able to compete with “**Killer Joe,**” which is due to open here next week. The movie, based on Tracy Letts’s play, stars Matthew McConaughey as a corrupt Texas policeman who preys on a dysfunctional family living in moral turpitude amid the drug paraphernalia, beer cans and fast-food detritus of a squalid trailer. An unremittingly rancid portrait of slatternly sexuality, blighted intelligence and pathological depravity, “Killer Joe” traffics in every cliché conjured by the odious term “trailer trash.” Indeed, watching the film’s characters, it seems that Letts and director William Friedkin had finally found the winners of the Filthiest People Alive contest that John Waters staged to such outre effect in his 1972 comedy “Pink Flamingos.”

Of course, Waters treated the trailer-dwellers in “[Pink Flamingos](#)” the way he treats all his fictional characters — with affectionate, albeit bent, compassion. No such warmth imbues “Killer Joe,” which drips with superiority and lazy hyperbole. Rather, the drawlin’, brawlin’ souls who dwell in Letts’s vinyl-sided dead end seem just one meth lab away from the toothless, tweaked-out denizens of “[Winter’s Bone](#),” the art-house hit of 2010 that devolved into a gothic burlesque of rural poverty.

For a dignified, humanist portrayal of the American poor, the most recently memorable film is “Frozen River,” Courtney Hunt’s starkly realist but subtly nuanced 2008 drama about a woman pushed to extremes by a financial vise grip that was getting tighter as that year went on. “Frozen River,” which starred Melissa Leo in the lead role, achieved a rarity for fictional film, depicting poverty not in terms of myth or morality but as

an emotionally complex fact of life in late-capitalist America, as conditioned by systemic realities as by individual choice.

The caring, clear-eyed, unjudgmental perspective of “Frozen River” most closely resembles the point of view of “The Queen of Versailles,” which when it was shown at [Silverdocs](#) earlier this summer turned out to be one of many documentaries on view at the festival that provided articulate, vivid records of what it’s like to be alive in this world at this particular historical moment.

Of all the memorable films on offer at Silverdocs, the most haunting by far is [“The Waiting Room,”](#) Peter Nicks’s engrossing cinema verite film set in the emergency room of the Highland Hospital in Oakland, Calif. Taking a “day in the life” approach, Nicks trained his camera on the nurses, doctors and extraordinary staff members of the ER, where a steady stream of patients — most of them uninsured — come to receive care for everything from a strep throat and a malignant tumor to chronic diabetes or a gunshot.

As funny, smart and supremely professional as the medical practitioners are in “The Waiting Room” — which will most likely arrive in Washington [theaters](#) this fall — it’s their funny, smart, supremely dignified patients who provide the film’s most compelling narrative force. An estranged couple come together to support and advocate for their young daughter, giving the lie to toxic stereotypes about absent black fathers and “broken” families; a young, hipsterish couple face a life-threatening illness and a labyrinthine medical bureaucracy with gentle fortitude; the hundreds of faces in the film’s stirring final montage are full of pain, uncertainty, stoicism, grace.

Surely most of the people who populate the final sequence of “The Waiting Room” are of limited means. But just as assuredly, people who describe themselves as “typical middle class” found themselves in the ER, too. As “The Waiting Room” makes clear — along with “The Queen of Versailles” in its own funhouse-mirror way — the lines between wealth and poverty keep shifting, virtually before our eyes. Neither aspirational fantasies or pejorative cautionary tales, these films exemplify something much more potent: honest, deeply meaningful portraits of what America looks like, for richer and for poorer.

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