

## **The Criminology and Peacemaking Possibilities of The Purge Film and TV Series**

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As has been widely noted, film both reflects and shapes social reality. Films represent current social, political, economic and cultural trends and shape societal perceptions and ideas (Welsh, Fleming & Dowler, 2011). As hooks (1996) wrote, “Whether we like it or not, cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people” (p. 2). Yet media constructions of crime are often inaccurate or misleading, overrepresenting predatory violent crime perpetrated by the poor and underrepresenting crime by elites (Coyne & Archer, 2004; Surrette, 2011). Also overrepresented are retributive, punitive systems and underrepresented are restorative practices (Raney, 2005). Cultural criminologists recognize that media representations of crime are important sites to analyze contested ideas about crime, justice and punishment (Berets, 1996; Ferrell, 1999; Rafter, 2006). Gerbner and colleagues have conducted studies that lead to the development of cultivation theory, which argues that high levels of media exposure about crime creates a “mean world” effect whereby people overestimate the dangers of society (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002; Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, Morgan, & Jackson-Beeck, 1979). Some studies have found support for the mean world effect (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Gross & Aday, 2003), although others critique it for assuming media people are passive consumers (Hirsch, 1980; Hughes, 1980). Others posit that media is more influential in shaping ideas when people lack direct experience or alternate information sources are less accessible (Soulliere, 2003; Surrette, 2007). Given that the average viewer likely

has little direct experience with crime or the criminal justice system, this may be particularly true of media constructions of those topics (Surrette, 2007). Many of these studies were focused on news media, but there are some that show a mean world effect among viewers of fiction (Appel, 2008; Kappeler & Potter, 2005). Kappeler and Potter (2005) argue that crime fiction offers explanations for phenomena that are not easy to understand.

Several studies have found that fictional narratives depicting violent street crime lead viewers to support more conservative approaches to crime control (Altheide, 2002; Chiricos, Padgett & Gertz, 2000; Roberts & White, 1986; Surrette, 1998; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004) to oppose strong gun control measures (Dowler, 2003; Holbert, Shah & Kwak, 2004), and to have greater support for capital punishment (Holbert, Shah & Kwak, 2004). Common in crime films and television is a “good defeats bad” narrative structure which features a “psychotic super-male offender” (Welsh, Fleming & Dowler, 2011, p. 461). In fictional narratives, crimes are typically solved and the offender apprehended, showing law enforcement to be good, and the system to be overwhelmingly effective whereby offenders are unsympathetic and bad. Rogue police films, also very popular, reinforce these same viewpoints, as they show dedicated officers who have to bend the rules a bit to keep people safe and to enact justice. A common criminological theory presented in fictional crime film is rational choice (Rafter & Brown, 2011). Few films show crime as a structural issue, rather focusing on blameworthy individuals (Carlson, 1975; Cavendar & Deutch, 2007; Dominick, 1978; Rafter, 2006; Surrette, 2000; Zillman & Wakschlag, 1985). Further, most crime fiction depicts “ideal” victims who are sympathetic to viewers (Christie, 1986; Welsh, Fleming & Dowler, 2011). Racial, ethnic, and gender stereotypes are common in crime fiction as well (Finley, 2003; Rafter, 2006).

Yet there are some alternate narratives in crime fiction. It is important to analyze those film and television shows that offer different ideas about crime and criminal justice. Welsh, Fleming and Dowler (2011) noted a category of crime films that depict the flaws in the justice system, referring to them as “David and Goliath” films. Such films are often set in courtrooms or prisons. Yet even these often secure justice within these very systems, often by portraying a heroic lawyer who defies the odds to win on behalf of his or her client (Rafter, 2006). Still other films do frame crime as a social problem. These tend to show the long-term effects of crime for individuals and communities. Such films can move viewers to critically assess the effectiveness of criminal justice approaches and to critique stereotypes of simple good victims and bad offenders. Further, as Rafter and Brown (2011) noted,

crime films can offer different theoretical examinations, thereby challenging simplistic choice narratives.

Even more, some films have the possibility of promoting peacemaking and restorative themes. Previous research has used five analytical themes to identify restorative justice and peacemaking themes in feature films about crime: “embracing change,” “second chances,” “hope,” “connectedness,” and “becoming more human” (Thompson, 2007). These come from scholarship on peacemaking and its emphasis on mindfulness, care for others, possibilities, feeling tied to others, and understanding one’s deeper purpose in life. Further, there is a wealth of literature about using film to teach peace, even film that depicts violence. Some assert that viewing violence may provide a safe place for young people to explore emotions and reflect on critical issues (Jones, 2003). Finley (2015) asserts that “Instead of shying away from all violent media, educators should coordinate dialogue and activities with students so as to challenge why it is so pervasive in the United States, how violence is depicted, and the impact it may have” (p. x), as one of the primary goals of peace educators is to “make the seemingly invisible more visible” (p. x). Through analyzing films about violence and crime, peace educators and their students can consider the many barriers to social justice and identify creative methods of addressing them.

Others have identified that, because film and other popular culture often results in strong emotions, it is ripe for promoting caring, empathy and inclusivity, all components of positive peace or what Lin (2006) refers to as “peace intelligence.” Johnson (2015) notes that film can be a useful tool to teach theories of violence and nonviolence, as “One of the most difficult, and sometimes daunting, tasks for a teacher is to make theories real in the lives of students” (p. 1). Johnson discusses using film to teach about Walter Wink’s concept of the “myth of redemptive violence,” which according to Wink (1998), “enshrines the belief that violence saves, that war brings peace, that might makes right. It is one of the oldest continually repeated stories in the world” (p. 42). Similarly, Klein (2015) discusses how film can be used to demonstrate conscientization. Conscientization is the Freireian (1973) concept of developing critical consciousness so as to analyze social situations and eventually, develop agency to challenge structures of oppression and injustice. Film is also useful to teach Gramsci’s (1971) concept of hegemony, which emphasizes how people learn to embrace enthusiastically beliefs and practices that work against their own best interests, believing them to be the “right” or “normal” way. Freire and Gramsci’s work are key components of most peace and justice courses, while hegemony is a major emphasis in criminology.

This paper offers a critical analysis of the film and television series, *The Purge*. *The Purge* is a horror/science fiction series and, as Romano (2015) notes, “science fiction movies are pedagogical tools that not only influence our views about history and contemporary times, but present to us with clear ideas about how the future will be” (p. 219). This paper offers an examination of themes about crime and justice. It also describes common issues related to crime that are not featured or are only minimally depicted in the films and TV series, including domestic and sexual violence, child abuse, and financial crimes. Further, the paper discusses the lack of nonviolent resistance strategies depicted as well as the ways those restorative justice and peacemaking is included. Finally, the paper offers recommendations for using *The Purge* film and television series to understand assumptions about violence, crime, justice and conflict resolution.

### **Description of the films and tv series**

*The Purge* is a series of films that was also adapted into a television series that has run for two seasons to date. The films were created by James DeMonaco, are distributed by Universal Pictures, and produced by Blumhouse Productions and Platinum Dunes. The first film was released in 2013, followed by *The Purge: Anarchy* in 2014, *The Purge: Election Year* in 2016, and *The First Purge* in 2018. The TV series ran on USA Network, with season one opening September 4, 2018. Both seasons one and two ran ten episodes.

*The Purge* (2013) starred Ethan Hawke as James Sandin, an affluent man whose money comes from selling security systems to families to protect themselves from the purge. Lena Heady plays his wife, Mary, Adelaide Kain is his 16-year-old daughter, Zoey, and Max Burkholder plays on, Charlie. The film is set in 2022 and opens with James heading home for dinner with the family before the start of the purge. The purge was created in 2014 by the government, The New Founding Fathers of America (NFFA), who were voted into office after an economic collapse. Claiming that people need to take out their aggression or else it leads to crime, the NFFA declared a 12-hour time period once a year for the annual purge. During this time, from 7 pm until 7 am, all crime, including murder, rape, burglary and more, is legal except against government officials. No police or emergency services are allowed during the purge, either. Sandin’s family does not choose to purge so is determined that they will be safe hunkering into their home with his security systems. Things go awry, however, when Zoey’s boyfriend Henry (Tony O’Rourke), who the Sandins believe is too old for her, sneaks into her room and is still there when the purge commences. Upset at James and trying to convince him that he should be able to date their daughter, Henry pulls a gun on James who ends up

shooting and killing him in defense. Meanwhile, Charlie has seen on their security monitor a black man, referred to throughout the film as “the bloody stranger” (Edwin Hodge) walking around wounded and calling out for help. He disables the security system and lets the man in. James is upset that a stranger is in their home and holds him at gunpoint but he gets away and hides in their home. In a later confrontation, the family decides to help him. Soon after, a team of masked purgers, led by a character known as “the polite leader” (Rhys Wakefield), appear at the Sandins’s. They attempted to purge the “bloody stranger” but he got away and they declare it is their right to purge him. They demand that the Sandins release him or they will infiltrate their home and purge them. They do just that, and it looks as though the Sandins will be killed when their neighbors kill the purgers. Yet they did so only because they wanted to purge the Sandins themselves, as they are all jealous of their affluence. Rather than execute their neighbors, the Sandins hold them hostage until the purge ends, then release them since it is no longer lawful to commit crime.

*The Purge: Anarchy*, which takes place in 2023, is not set in one household like the first but rather an overview of purge night in Los Angeles. It follows several characters. Police Sergeant Leo Barnes (Frank Grillo) is committed to purging to avenge the death of his son, who was killed by a drunk driver. He ends up helping a waitress, Eva Sanchez (Carmen Ejogo) and her 17-year-old daughter, Cali (Zoe Soul). The mother-daughter duo, distraught that Eva’s father Rico, who lived with them, had slipped out and offered himself to be purged in exchange for \$100,000 to be paid to Eva and Cali post-purge, are attacked by their superintendent, Diego, who had felt insulted by Eva’s refusal to date him. A paramilitary group arrives at the right time and saves Eva and Cali, only to take them to their leader, Big Daddy, for his own personal purge. Leo finds them and the trio flee. Meanwhile, a married couple, Shane and Liz, are ambushed while grocery shopping and are in search of safe places and eventually end up hiding in Leo’s car. The car breaks down as Big Daddy fires at them and the entire group escape on foot with a wounded Shane. Eva promises that her co-worker, Tanya, has a car Leo can use to finish his purge if only he will help keep them safe. The group also learns that the stranger from the first film is working with a man named Carmelo Jones (Michael K. Williams) are leading an anti-purge resistance movement. At Tanya’s Eva tells Leo there is no car—she just said that to get his help. He is upset, but chaos takes over as Tanya’s sister, Lorraine, murders her for sleeping with her husband. They are all captured by the masked gang that ambushed Shane and Liz earlier, and that group intends to sell them to an auction where people bid on individuals they can purge. Leo manages to fight off some people but in the melee Shane is killed. The anti-purge

resistance group arrives and Liz, distraught over Shane's death, stays with them but the others leave in a car that Leo carjacks. Leo drives the trio to the home of Warren Grass, the man who killed his son. It is just five minutes before the end of the purge but he ends up deciding not to kill him. As he exits their home, Big Daddy shoots him, acknowledging that the NFFA had sent out death squads because the purge was not killing enough poor people, its original intent. Warren saves Leo, and the purge ends. Warren drives Leo, Cali and Eva to get medical attention.

*The Purge: Election Year* starts with a young girl, Charlie Roan (Elizabeth Mitchell), being forced to watch her mother, father and brother be executed during a purge. Eighteen years later, Roan is a U.S Senator campaigning for the presidency and is staunchly anti-purge. Leo Barnes (Frank Grillo) is her head of security. Because the NFFA and their candidate Minister Edwidge Owens (Kyle Secor) see Roan as a threat, they change the purge rules to remove the immunity on government officials. Meanwhile, deli owner Joe Dixon (Mykelti Williamson), his assistant Marcos (Joseph Julian Soria) and their friend Laney Rucker (Betty Gabriel), a former purger who now runs a clandestine EMT service, are watching the presidential debate. A group of teenage girls are enraged that Joe catches them attempting to shoplift and later, once the purge starts, they come back to try to kill him and destroy his deli. When the purge starts it is bigger than ever due to a boom in "murder tourism" from visitors outside the U.S. Roan is waiting out the purge in her home that Leo believes is secure but two of their security force members have betrayed them and allow a neo-nazi paramilitary force to invade the home. Leo and Roan escape but not before he is wounded. As they seek refuge they are attacked by a group of murder tourists but Joe and Marcos arrive and kill them. They all take shelter in the store, but after that is attacked the group flees. They continue to be ambushed until Leo realizes they are being tracked by the bullet in his shoulder so he removes it. They are helped by a group of Crips, as Joe used to be a member, who hide the bullet somewhere else to throw off the surveillance. They make their way to an anti-purge hideout run by Dante Bishop (Edwin Hodge), who they learn intends to kill top NFFA officials. Roan pleads with them not to do so. The seemingly secure location is not, and a paramilitary group in hunt for Roan and Bishop arrives. Leo and Roan escape and are reunited with Joe, Marcos and Laney. They are attacked and Roan is pulled from the van to a fancy cathedral where wealthy NFFA supporters intend to sacrifice her. The others arrive and Marcos kills the man about to kill Roan, resulting in a shootout. The other paramilitary and anti-purge groups arrive and Bishop and his team are killed. Joe is also killed. Two months later, Roan has been elected in a landslide and Barnes is director of the Secret Service. Laney and Marcos are taking care of Joe's store. News reports state

that NFFA supporters have staged riots around the country in response to Roan's election and the end of the purge.

*The First Purge* is a prequel, explaining how the purge came to be. It is set in 2017, when a sociologist, May Updale (Marisa Tomei), and her team announce to the NFFA the experiment that is the purge. During the experiment, residents of Staten Island are offered \$5,000 to stay home. Each participant in the purge is outfitted with contact lenses that allow the NFFA to monitor their activity. It features a drug lord, Dmitri (Y'lan Noel), who decides they should lay low. One of his dealers, Capital A (Christian Robinson), defies him and goes out to purge. Skeletor (Rotimi Paul) is another purger who the NFFA encourages to act and who commits the first documented purge. The NFFA videotaped it and it goes viral, promoting the purge. At the same time, the NFFA sees that more parties than killings are occurring, and that rather than murder, as is apparently the plan, it involves more looting and vandalism/ As many flee Staten Island, Nya (Lex Scott Davis), Dmitri's former girlfriend, tries to help her neighbors, Dolores (Mugga), Luisa (Luna Lauren Velez) and (Kristen Solis) . The latter two turn out to be sent by Capital A to overthrow Dmitri. Isiaah (Joivan Wade), Nya's brother, wants to purge Skeletor but can't, and ends up saving Nya when Skeletor tries to rape her. Updale begins to be suspicious of NFFA reports of surges in murder, especially involving masked perpetrators. She reviews videotapes and realizes that the killers are largely paid mercenaries. It becomes obvious that the NFFA's agenda is to dispose of the poor to reduce expenditures on social programs. NFFA Chief of Staff Arlo Sabian (Patch Darrag) has Updale killed. Dmitri and his crew kill Capital A's group, then escape until an unknown group attacks them. They discover that the group are mercenaries sent by the NFFA to flood the neighborhood with weapons to provoke confrontation, and Dmitri's crew is determined to fight back and to protect the neighborhood. They then save a local shopkeeper and go to Nya's, but NFFA drones shoot and kill most of his crew. Skeletor, still thriving in the purge, arrives to kill many of the mercenaries before he is killed. Dmitri then kills the remainder of the mercenaries and the purge ends. At the end credits, Sabian reads a public statement announcing the purge a success.

The TV series still focuses on the purge but, as does tv in general, develops the characters over several episodes. It follows siblings Miguel and Penelope, executive Jane Barbour, and a married couple, Jenna and Rick Betancourt. Penelope is a former addict who has joined a cult that pledges members to the purge. Miguel is a Marine because he had gotten into trouble so was forced to leave the area. Jane is intent on purging her boss as revenge for repeatedly being passed over

for promotions and accolades, and has hired someone to kill him during the purge. The Bettancourts are a middle class couple that want financing from some wealthy NFFA supporters, the Stantons. Both are seemingly anti-purge, but as they attend a gala event, Rick becomes more amenable to it. In addition, they have a past relationship with Lili Stanton, Albert and Ellie Stanton's daughter, both of which challenge their relationship. Joe Owens is an ordinary man who drives around town wearing a mask but instead of purging he intervenes to save people who are about to be purged.

Season two focuses on Marcus Moore, a successful surgeon who learns someone has put a bounty on him and he is nearly assassinated. He makes it his mission to find out who. In the process, he learns that his loving wife Michelle had an affair, and casually mentioned to her lover that they could be together if Marcus was gone, so it was he who put out the hit. Another story line follows Esme Carmona (Paola Nunez), an NFFA surveillance employee who becomes suspicious of the government's tactics when she learns about the strange death of professor Drew Adams, who had been conducting a study in which she interviewed purgers and found that, contrary to the NFFA's claims, it makes people more violent, not less. Marcus's son Darren was her student, and he ends up assisting Esme as they unravel the details of Adams' death and the corruption of the NFFA. Another primary character is Ryan Grant, who, with friends Tommy, Sarah and Doug, waits all year until purge night to carry off a large heist. He ends up helping Esme and the two begin a relationship at the end of the season. One other main character is Ben Gardner (Joel Allen), who after having been abandoned by his frat brother and attacked on purge night goes out for his first purge. He finds he likes it and goes on a killing spree, even off-purge.

### **Themes about crime and justice**

One of the primary themes of the films and tv series is that violence is natural and people must use it or else it will build and get worse. The purge is supposed to offer catharsis. People buy into it because the NFFA tells them that crime is way down and unemployment decreased to one percent, so the purge must be working. It is later revealed that the NFFA doctors the numbers and commit their own offenses that are, of course, not counted. In season one, the Stantons and their wealthy friends praise the founding fathers for understanding the "healing power" of violence. In episode nine of season one, an advertisement for the purge states "Take the horror build up inside of you and spill it on the streets." The ad admonishes listeners not to "squander this privilege." Only at the end of season two of the TV series is it made clear that the catharsis hypothesis is incorrect. This is revealed first



through the frat boy Ben, whose friend abandoned him on purge night and he nearly died. He becomes obsessed with violence, playing video games first then going to a place where people can kill animals to “get out their aggression.” He later escalates to killing people off-purge, starting with the owner of a strawberry stand. Eventually he goes on a rampage, killing anyone he can. Also in season two, Esme finds in Professor Adams’ home records of research trials she was conducting that show that the purge makes people more violent. The series ends with Ben having survived and training with new weapons. In terms of explaining crime and violence, then, the criminological theory depicted in the film is rational choice. This is common in crime films, as it frames crime as solidly an individual choice (Rafter, 2006). People are shown choosing to engage in crime because they are allowed to with impunity during the purge. Many specifically choose who they will purge, thus they are making the cost-benefit analysis that is In addition to applying this theory to the purgers, you can also apply it to explain the actions of the NFFA. The government chooses whom they see as threats, how they will orchestrate efforts against those individuals, and how to protect their own. Even more than rational choice, however, routine activities theory helps explain the crime depicted in the purge. There are plenty of motivated offenders—people who are upset with others, who’ve been rejected, or who’ve been wronged in some way. The NFFA is plenty motivated to maintain its power through whatever means necessary. There is ample opportunity, the second element of routine activities theory. Crime is entirely legal for twelve hours. And, there is a lack of guardians in that police, emergency services or any other “checks” on such behavior are not allowed. Even when people are able to purchase security systems, some purgers find it a challenge to attempt to circumvent them. Similarly, Seductions of Crime theory can be applied here in that, after some time, many purgers are simply doing it for a thrill.

Kids are generally taught that the purge is right, normal, and necessary, although some resist. Charlie Sandin in the first film tells his family that they study the purge in history class, and in episode nine of season two, a teacher is assuring kids that the purge is a holiday and that their parents who purge are simply exercising their right. . Even those who generally do not purge, like the Sandins in the original film, repeat the NFFA’s claims. Frat boy Ben’s new friend Andy and his girlfriend, neither of whom purge, both look the other way because “what happens on purge night stays on purge night.” Episode eight of the first season of the TV show is the first time a character vocally challenges the NFFA’s claims about the effectiveness of the purge. Pete the Cop, who has a bar where anti-purgers gather, says about the alleged cathartic effect of violence “I’m not sure that’s how people work,” and says of their crime statistics, “that’s just what they say.” The

NFFA has been hiding many murders by classifying them as something else. Ben hears about the man he murdered on the radio and the cause of death is stated as “heat stroke.” Season two, episode six ends after the college is in chaos due to Ben’s killing of Andy but a conservative commentator is arguing that there’s no real problem and that “everyone knows the purge works.” An anti-purge activist, Lena, is also on the show and the commentator and NFFA representative minimize and dismiss her, even calling for more frequent purges. The NFFA representative, Lena has used an app to call for purge on the student and brags that you can track “purge surges,” or the number of people who wish to see you purged.

At the beginning, the purge generally shows that violence is largely instrumental. The characters typically purge others who have or who are perceived to have wronged them. In the first film, the neighbors are jealous of and upset with the Sandins, who they say “You made money off us then stuck it in our faces.” They call it their “duty” as Americans. Ben’s new friend in season two, episode four tells him he should purge his buddy Turner, who abandoned him, saying “The best thing I ever did was purge the people who made my life miserable.” Even when people randomly purge because “it is their right,” they are not doing it from a sense of rage against injustice or oppression but rather because they can. People have come to feel entitled to purge, with characters often stating that specifically. The Purge: Anarchy, as does the second season of the TV series, shows characters talking about “releasing the beast” and the man, Diego, who tries to purge Eva and Cali says it’s his right and that he’s “tired of being ignored.” In Election Year, the group of teenage girls who try to shoplift from Joe return to get their revenge, all decked out in cute attire singing “Party in the USA.” The leader of that pack announces she “already took care of mom and dad tonight.” Eventually, purgers take advantage of the easiest prey. The purge is even marketed outside the U.S. and people buy packages to travel and purge.

The government uses the purge to control the poor, as they are themselves off limits until the end. This is actually stated at the end of The Purge: Anarchy. Furthermore, the NFFA is fully aware that the poor cannot afford security, and it is wealthy people like the Sandins that peddle such systems. The entire economy, as becomes clear in the later films, is built on the purge, which enriches many business owners. Even small businesses emerge, as is shown in episode two of season two of the TV series, which opens with cleaning services mopping up blood and disposing of bodies. There’s a TV interview with a criminologist in the first film who briefly mentions that perhaps the purge is used to eliminate the poor, needy, sick and “non-contributing,” but it ends with saying, “either way, crime is down

and the economy is flourishing.” The leader of the masked purgers who come to the Sandins refers to them as “the haves” and a “fine, young, very educated group of guys and gals ready to violate, annihilate and cleans our souls.” He refers to the bloody stranger as “a dirty homeless pig.” When Sandin says that he’s hiding, the leader responds “don’t force us to hurt you, we don’t want to kill our own.” In *The Purge: Anarchy*, Eva’s father sells himself to be purged so that she and her daughter can have some money. This is how the wealthy purge, while the less affluent must generally take to the streets in more of a free-for-all. In *The Purge: Anarchy*, when Leo rescues Eva and Cali, he says they all must flee because “they’re not the kind of people who will survive the night.” Some poor people do not purge but make money capturing others to sell to purgers, which happens to Leo, Cali and Eva. They are taken to a fancy dinner event with all white people adorned in their finest tuxedos and gowns and then are to be released onto a hunting ground where, after selecting the weapon of their choosing, the rich will hunt them down. When Leo is nearly shot at the end of the film after sparing the life of his son’s killer, the mercenary holding the gun tells him its an “unwritten rule—don’t save lives.” He also explains that citizens weren’t purging enough for the NFFA’s liking so they were called in to “supplement” the purge. In *Election Year*, the purge is referred to as “spring cleaning” by the NFFA candidate during a strategic meeting with his advisors, all white men. It is also revealed in that film the level to which insurance companies benefit from the purge. A restaurant owner complains that his rates have gone up so much for purge coverage but if he doesn’t pay he will have nothing and his business likely destroyed by purgers. Ewing (2018) noted that this would be a very real effect if the purge was reality. In *The First Purge*, the initial pilot program paid purgers \$5,000 to participate, thereby attracting the financially needy. The cult in Season One of the TV series, run by Tavis who is known as “The Good Leader,” claims that giving themselves to the purge will send them to heaven, or “the invisible.” The cult preys on young, troubled youth, and it is later revealed in season one, episode eight that Tavis works for the NFFA. The NFFA actually held auditions to find just the right person who could convince young people to give themselves up for the purge. The Bettancourts attend a party at the Stantons and they refer to the purge as “The Great Liquidator.” In season one, episode two, Miguel is captured and taken to participate in “The Gauntlet,” which is a contest coordinated by a car insurance company annually. Contestants fight to their death, like modern gladiators, and the wealthy vote on who should prevail. He and Penelope learn in episode three that their parents, who were purged, had been told they would be paid to stay home that night.

Government corruption is a primary theme outside of the first film. The NFFA violates their own laws as long as it suits them, and changes them when they want to. For instance, when they want purgers to go after Senator Roan, the NFFA changes the rules such that government officials are no longer exempt. She responds by refusing to go to a safe house, as the rest of the “99%” do not have that luxury. Also, the unwritten rule is to always leave the triage providers alone, yet that all changes after the NFFA goes after Senator Roan. Police corruption and abuse is featured prominently in season two of the TV series but not in the films. Pete the Cop tried to expose corrupt cops and now runs the bar as a safe zone. Season two emphasizes that “off purge” crimes are to be dealt with harshly, but only if they are committed by citizens, but the government. Esme’s boss refers to these efforts as “liquidation protocol.” In episode two of the series, Tommie, one of Ryan Grant’s friends in on their heist, surrenders to police and admits he moved money illegally when off-purge. They beat him horribly and Grant knows they will likely hold him until the next purge, when they can kill him legally. His attorney tells him to plead guilty so his minor offense will be treated leniently. He does, but using CCTV footage to show him on private property, he is convicted of a level R major felony and sentenced to die on the next purge. Police Chief Ziv is working with the local drug dealer and getting paid very well. In a flashback, Ryan, Sarah, Tommy and Doug all turn in their badges rather than work for her and she claims she will block them getting any kind of work in the city. Esme is able to use NFFA tools to identify who the people in Adams’ trials were and she finds that all have been killed by the NFFA except one, as they did not want her study to become public knowledge. When she goes to that woman’s home, she finds she too is dead. When she calls the police to ask about what happen, she is told it was a suicide but she does not believe that. When the group’s new heist goes awry, she demands a cut in their next plans. She says she will turn them in if they don’t cut her in. Esme’s boss demands that she stop investigating Adams’ death and when she refuses, the NFFA tries to kill her claiming she has committed treason. She escapes repeatedly, with the help of Ryan, over several episodes. She eventually airs video she finds of the NFFA murdering Professor Adams on television and even though the purge ends, they shoot both her and Ryan, not knowing it was still on air.

Interestingly, there is very little domestic violence and sexual assault depicted in either the films or the TV series. Given that these are some of the most frequently occurring crimes in the U.S., it is a strange decision to minimize them. In *The Purge: Anarchy*, it is a woman who commits an act of domestic violence when she kills her husband. Tanya, Eva’s friend, has been having an affair with her sister Lorraine’s husband and Lorraine uses the purge to try to kill both of them. In

season one, episode five, a flashback shows Penelope's drug dealing boyfriend Henry hitting her then Miguel beating him badly. In season two, Ben ends up killing his brother in an argument, as his brother had been taunting him. He later kills his own girlfriend after she finds the mask he saved when killing Andy. The most significant emphasis on gender-related crimes in in season one, episode four. When she goes out on purge night to stop the hit she placed on her boss, Jane is grabbed and a man tries to make her drink a roofie. She is saved by a group of women who call themselves the "Matron Saints." They note that every purge, year more than 10,000 women are sexually assaulted during the purge. Sexism is shown in a variety of ways, however. Jane's reason for paying someone to purge her boss is that she believes he is responsible for the glass ceiling she has hit at work. When she goes to tell him about the hit because she no longer wants him killed, he taunts her, even saying "You really hired a woman to do this?" He walks her through his home where he has a bunch of women tied up and refers to them as a "living, breathing art gallery. David states, "times were different before. Tonight, we can give in and become men." Jane is also upset at her mother for forcing her to participate in beauty pageants when she was young. At the end of episode seven, she shoots David after being rescued by Joe the vigilante. In episode five, the Matron Saints hold down a man who had been attaching women and brand him as a pig "so women will know." Jenna Bettancourt is repeatedly undermined by her husband despite being obviously intelligent and capable. Penelope ends up being a strong character but is mostly shown succumbing to her abusive boyfriend Henry's pushing of drugs and then to the cult.

Also surprisingly minimal, given its ubiquity in the U.S, is specific examples of crimes against children. Charlie Roan's flashbacks in *The Purge: Election Year* demonstrate that she watched her brother be executed by a purger but there is no sign of child abuse or child sexual abuse in any of the films or in the TV series. Similarly, while season two of the TV series shows Ryan Grant's group planning a heist, financial crimes are not a primary focus of the purge. Their heist has not resulted in as much as they had thought, so they begin to plot another one. It is revealed that the reason the amount was less than they thought is because the government is putting most of its money in airplanes so it cannot be purged. In that season, there are also jackals who steal from other purgers.

Race issues are visible in that most all the purgers are white. There are only a handful of black purgers, and many involved seem to be doing it for the payout, not for the thrill. Skeletor is the exception. Yet the films also play into some stereotypes. For instance, Joe is a former Crip and although they actually offer help,

it reinforces the idea that black men are largely gang-involved. In *The First Purge*, Dmitri is a drug dealer who is betrayed by his associates. In *The Purge: Election Year*, the NFFA supports white supremacist purgers attacking people of color. The NFFA has also dumped weapons into the urban neighborhood to stimulate trouble. In season two of the series, Marcus is disliked by his neighbors, all of whom are white, and it is implied that this is because he is a successful, “uppity” black man. They demand he and his wife Michelle leave the area or say they will purge them. Even as the second and third films featured people of color prominently, it is still Leo who is the hero, the white savior. *The First Purge* confronts race most directly. Men in KKK robes purging in the streets. It becomes clear that the government has stimulated black-on-black violence. Black and brown people save each other in churches and in community groups because they know no one else will. Although it did make allusions to Trump’s hateful rhetoric, even featuring a red hat like the Make America Great Again hats Trump supporters wear on a promotional poster, the film falls short of really tackling Trumpism.

Weapons are very easy to access, as they are in the U.S. today. In addition, military-grade weapons and materials like tanks and body armor are also shown repeatedly. In the second film, weapons dealing is happening openly on the streets and announcers note that spike in sales for Smith and Wesson before the purge. In *The Purge: Election Year*, mercenaries look like soldiers and have rocket-propelled grenades. Season one, episode one of the TV series opens with commentary on the news about stores selling out of weapons and ammunition and newscasters wear bulletproof vests. Season two, episode four shows Ben at the Purge USA store, which has every weapon available and is offering a discount on remembrance day. He meets another guy there to buy a crossbow.

The films also offer a critique of reality TV. Viewers hunker down in their secure homes watching live coverage of the brutality and many have “purge parties.” The Gauntlet that Miguel is forced to participate in during season one, episode two is televised for public consumption. Penelope is taken to the “Carnival of Flesh,” which is basically a McDonalds of the purge. People are auctioned so that others can torture and kill them. After the chaos of Ben’s killing of Andy, companies are marketing campus killer masks. Young people dress up and take “purge selfies.” The frat boys are watching TikTok purge videos and partying before the opening of that year’s purge in season two, episode eight.

The NFFA increasingly echoes the Trump administration’s attempt to blend Christianity with patriotism to support its corrupt practices. They even encourage celebrating the purge as if it’s a holiday. *The Purge: Election Year* opens with a

“purge playlist” on the radio. “Blessed be America, a nation reborn” is a common mantra. In the first film, the neighbors hold hands in a prayer circle before they are about to kill the Sandins, saying “Blessed be the NFFA.” The same type of prayer circle is formed by the rich people who are about to hunt down Eva, Cali and Leo in *The Purge: Anarchy*. In *Election Year*, a pastor leads a “purge mass” and says “America was built on sacrifice.” When Charlie Roan is captured in *Election Year*, she is taken to a church so they can “purge and purify.” The pastor calls on congregants to “eliminate evil” by killing her but she survives and is elected two months later. Season one, episode two of the TV series opens with a DJ asking “What could be more American than the purge?” and referring to it as the “ultimate night of freedom.” Episode four of season two opens on “Remembrance Day,” three months after a purge. Announcers “thank those who sacrificed,” almost like thanking veterans of war. The Star Spangled Banner is playing in the background and people are asked to wear a yellow flower if someone they loved was sacrificed.

The NFFA’s surveillance, in particular as it is demonstrated in season two of the TV series, is similar to that of the NSA after 9/11. All encompassing, all the time surveillance of citizens who are doing nothing suspicious. Esme becomes a whistleblower somewhat parallel to Edward Snowden, who reveals the total surveillance system. As such, she, like Snowden, becomes a target. In *The Purge: Anarchy*, Leo, Cali, and Eva are being tracked via the bullet he sustained. Even as early as the *First Purge*, which is set in 2017, the NFFA has given purgers content lens cameras. In *Election Year*, the NFFA uses drones to take out most of Dmitri’s group.

Most purgers wear masks, which has been shown to be a factor that allows people to engage in acts they otherwise would not. In season two of the TV series, Ben takes the mask from the person who attacked him and wears it. It has GOD written on it, emphasizing that purgers often feel as though they have the right to make choices like that of a divine power. In season one, the Stantons distribute masks of infamous serial killers to the party attendees who will be purging. The power of masks is well-documented. In October 2019, Hong Kong banned masks at demonstrations, noting that protestors wearing them are prone to violence. Twelve states and seven countries have banned protestors from wearing masks. Such bans in the U.S. were largely enacted in response to the KKK, while in Hong Kong, it was to suppress dissent (Pasley, 2019).

### **Nonviolent resistance and conflict resolution**

Like today, there are many resistance movements that form to oppose the NFFA and to try to end the purge. None use overtly nonviolent tactics. Conflict resolution is exclusively via violence or the threat of violence. This lack of nonviolence strategies among resisters is highlighted in *The Purge: Anarchy*, when Leo, Cali and Eva are saved by a group of black men, led by Carmelo Johns, who disagree with the purge. He says, “Fuck your money and the purge. There are more of us and we’re more pissed off. Change comes when their blood spills.” In *The Purge: Election Year*, Senator Charlie Roan, who watched her family get purged 18 years prior, is leading a more public resistance. Others resist in alternate ways, like Laney, who is an underground emergency worker in *Election Year*. Dante Bishop runs a triage center and a resistance movement, and when Leo, Joe, Charlie, and the others end up at the triage, they find a room full of photos of the NFFA and learn that Bishop’s movement intends to take them out. Roan tries to talk them out of it, arguing that it will merely make them martyrs. When Roan is elected, there are reports that the NFFA is retaliating by staging violent uprisings. There are also vigilante individuals and groups that kill purgers, as is introduced in episode three of season one. In season one, episode six, Joe is a vigilante who felt he had been rejected by a woman and lost his job. At the end of episode eight, he has taken the Bettancourts, Penelope, and Jane and in episode nine he puts them “on trial” because all previously slighted him somehow. In a clear nod to Trump era politics and a slight of President Obama, Joe says that he supports the purge because “hope and change didn’t get us anywhere.” The Stanton’s maid, Carolina, is part of a resistance movement that ultimately attacks the home during their purge party. She tells Jenna Bettancourt so that they can escape. Esme’s friend Vivian, who helped her evade the NFFA, survived being shot and is working with Marcus’ son Darren in a resistance campaign. Marcus and his first wife, Tonya, are assisting. They received money from Ryan’s friends. They announce, “the government created a virus for violence, it is spreading.”

The lack of nonviolent conflict resolution strategies is common in feature films. Media attention, both news and fiction, is essential to create successful nonviolent social movements that document and attempt to address social and structural injustices (Gorbenko, 2012; Nykon, 2011). Woodhouse (2011) contends that film narratives and images of nonviolent conflict resolution help to create a culture of peace, as they are “creative modes of knowing” (Boulding, 1990) that build people’s “moral imagination” (Lederach, 2005). “Film, an art form which has the power to depict human behaviour more lucidly than any other, has the potential to portray conflicting parties respecting one another and creatively finding peaceful win-win solutions to conflicts” (Nykon, 2011). While conflict is an essential part



of narrative storytelling, (McKee, 1999), often, conflict in film is portrayed in ways that destructive of dehumanizing (Nykon, 2011; Senihi, 2002). This true of *The Purge* series in large part, but not exclusively. Few characters are really redeemed, but there are a few important examples. Esme and Ryan elect to do good over what is easy sacrificing themselves at the end of season two of the TV series. Their actions help catalyze greater resistance to the NFFA. Laney is a reformed purger who puts herself in great danger to operate a rogue, mobile help service on purge night in *The Purge: Election Year*. These characters, then, embracing change. Leo offers a great example of second chances when he refuses to purge the man who killed his son. Connectedness is shown through several characters who help others they barely know. *The Purge* series reminds viewers of the destructive nature of violence, in the short and long-term. It can therefore be a powerful tool for seeing a more complex view of violence, crime and justice, and to shed a light on the way that powerful people are able to offend with impunity, often. Several characters show their humanity by saving others when they do not have to. In the first film, the Sandins save the bloody stranger and he later helps them. Joe, Laney and Marcos help Charlie and Leo escape imminent death in *The Purge: Election Year*, Esme and Ryan help the entire nation by revealing the NFFA's murders in season two of the TV series, and Nya helps as many neighbors as she can in *The First Purge*.

## **Conclusion**

While *The Purge* film and TV series seem to reinforce the notion that violence is natural, it also provides viewers with an important critique of common tropes about why violence occurs, who commits it, and justice systems. It firmly rejects the catharsis notion that is still widely held in the general public. The explanation for crime and violence depicted in *The Purge* series can help students understand theory, as was explained above. As Johnson (2015) notes, once students can apply theories of violence and nonviolence "to a low risk example, such as a film, then they start to make the leap to real political and social situations" (p. 16). Although the series does little to address some of the more frequently occurring types of violence and in some ways locates violence as an individual choice, it simultaneously offers an interesting view on the way violence is learned behavior, how elites are able to avoid sanctions for their own violent actions, and why justice is elusive in societies where the powerful control all the rules without accountability. It provides an important critique of government surveillance and control. After 9/11, many activists were concerned, and remain so today, about government monitoring of the sort that is clear in *The Purge*.

Yet, as Thompson (2007) explained, themes of hope and connectedness are quintessential to a peacemaking approach, and both are clear within this series. Even when things are the most dire, there are good people working together to help others, especially in the later films and TV series. This counters the typical narrative, which “continues to privilege and celebrate the individual actions at the expense of more collective responses to injustice, or even more nuanced understandings of how our economic, political, and cultural structures devalue and harm certain kinds of people” (Bateman, 2015, p. 83). Although it utilizes some racial stereotypes, the series rejects white saviorism by showing people of color doing good despite being the object of many purgers. As such, it helps to reject what hooks (1996) called “White supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (p. 3). It shows the realities of how people can get caught up in something they are told is not only right but essential. In this sense, the series highlights how hegemony works. In particular, *The Purge* shows how coupling violence with patriotism is problematic. While it is not an overt part of the narrative, the series also begs the question about easy access to weapons. Students can be asked about how nonviolence could have been used to a greater degree and to identify the many reasons why violence is a failure. This then reinforces the work of peace educators and scholars like Barbara Deming (1985), whose emphasis is on revolutionary nonviolence to move beyond the person and to address structural inequalities.

In sum, *The Purge* provides an interesting and important balance to many fictional crime films. As such, it can be a useful and engaging tool for broadening perspectives. As Bajaj and Chin (2009) wrote, “Education is not only an end to itself. It is a key instrument for bringing about the changes in knowledge, values, behaviors, and lifestyles required to achieve sustainability within and among countries and ensure democracy, human security, and peace” (p. 447).

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