

TIGER KINGDOM: CORONAVIRUS, CONSPIRACY, AND US POPULAR CULTURE

Kyle A. Hammonds, University of Oklahoma

Humans have invented all sorts of techniques for coping with uncertainty. As the United States becomes more postmodern, perspectival, and individualistic, the need for psychological structures to process uncertainty increases. One of the most prevalent coping mechanisms for uncertainty in the United States right now is conspiracy theory. Indulging conspiracy theories both enables ways of explaining otherwise mysterious events and maintains a sense of cynicism toward others that is typical of postmodern society. In other words, conspiracy theories grasp at certainty without letting go of the characteristic distrust of others that is so popular in the present time. Conspiratorial modes of thinking have become pervasive in US popular culture. It is no coincidence that spy movies, [neo]noir, and horror have seen a resurgence since the array of cultural shifts in the '60s and '70s. Characterizations of villains have been increasingly elusive in movies, television, and so forth since 9/11 exacerbated US cynicism and anomie. Most recently, cults and shadow governments have come to the forefront of cinematic villainy. While some popular texts cling to straightforward action plot structures, many movies and tv shows come equipped with some degree of conspiracy for the protagonist to unravel. Perhaps the most successful show in recent history to leverage such plot devices is Netflix' *Tiger King*:

Murder, Mayhem, and Madness. The series was released in March 2020, just as many institutions began closing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These closures were unprecedented to many people and came to represent a frightening source of uncertainty. *Tiger King* – conspiratorial without posing immediate danger and chalked full of characters that folks could love to hate – was just the escapism people wanted during the onset of coronavirus. This essay will note a few of themes from the show which may have contributed to its overall popularity, putting *Tiger King* in context of the present historical moment and its relationship to narrative strands in broader US popular culture.

Coronavirus and Popular Culture

The questions of how and why *Tiger King* has taken such a hold in the US have been at the forefront of recent popular consciousness. Google searches in preparation for this editorial revealed that the words “Why is...” produced a suggested result of “Tiger King so popular” before any other result, including more obvious outcomes such as “the sky blue.” Hosts of articles have been written to explain the show’s massive resonance. Some prevalent responses to the widespread consumption of the show will be addressed in this section. A personal favorite answer comes from an

interview in the show itself, in which reporter Sylvia Corkill likened the protagonist's, Joe Exotic, journey to a train wreck: something that is simultaneously horrible and difficult to ignore. This particular train wreck was clearly binge-worthy at a historical moment when many people had high uncertainty and additional unstructured time due to widespread shelter-in-place orders related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The show offered drama and excitement without being directly related to the daunting crisis of the coronavirus. Viewers could enjoy the bizarre tale of Joe Exotic from a safe distance. *Tiger King* therefore undoubtedly offered a convenient and exciting mode of escapism. It felt almost tailor-made for the coronavirus pandemic, providing an outlandish but true narrative – not unlike much of the news about COVID-19. Further, this odd story is absent of heroes, permitting the audience to channel any feelings of negativity into complaints about the unusual ensemble in the “Tiger Kingdom.” Perhaps watching people who do awful things grants some folks a sense of personal comfort. There's a strange feeling of security that comes with knowing that one can be imperfect and handle some situations badly without ever being the I-bought-a-private-tiger-zoo-and-hired-an-assassin brand of bad. The characters of the Tiger Kingdom might make us feel a bit better about ourselves. Bad behavior from the characters also directly ties into one of the most resonant features of the program: conspiracy.

Conspiracy and Popular Culture

Tiger King's major plot conflict is the feud between Oklahoma private zoo owner Joe Exotic and big cat rescue advocate Carole Baskin. Each party accused the other of exploiting big cats for personal profit and initiated a number of antagonistic behaviors against the other. Exotic is presently serving out a prison sentence for conspiring to murder Baskin. The internet seems to have greater interest in a more ambiguous conspiracy about Baskin than Exotic's plot to kill her, though. A number of popular texts, including memes and a *Tiger King* themed TikTok parody of Megan Thee Stallion's “Savage,” have honed in on the question of whether Baskin actually murdered her partner, Jack Lewis. The popular folk theory on the subject posits that Baskin conspired to kill Lewis, feed him to her tigers to remove evidence, and create a set of false evidence to mislead police into believing that Lewis had simply disappeared. *Tiger King* puts together “clues” about Lewis' mysterious disappearance like a game; but the game's conclusion was pre-set. Clues invariably lead to the conclusion that Baskin killed Lewis. This game positions the audience as amateur detectives and, as Scot Safon commented in an interview with CNN, the show concludes by leaving “lots of room for speculation.” Such space for speculation enables and indulges conspiratorial thinking. Part of the show's fun is supposedly unraveling the mystery of Jack Lewis and uncovering Baskin's conspiracy to cover up murder. Evidence outside of the show is

irrelevant: in the Tiger Kingdom, Baskin is a villain well suited for the audience's ire.

Conspiracy and Politics...and Tiger King

Conspiratorial thinking is not just enabled by the producers, but also commonly communicated among the characters of the Tiger Kingdom. Perhaps this gives figures like Joe Exotic a sort of relatability with some viewers. He is blunt and expresses his own ideas regardless of what other people tell him or his expectations of what other people will think. In this way, Exotic exudes qualities which have been commonly associated with Donald Trump (especially among his voter base). As such, Exotic's role as the protagonist of the program has created debate among viewers. Some critics have written about the show in terms similar to the morality tale genre, choosing to view *Tiger King* as a cautionary story about Right-Wing conspiratorial thinking. Doreen St. Félix (2020) from *The New Yorker* identified Exotic as a "cult leader" and described the most optimistic interpretation of his story as "a takedown of the libertarian ethos, a dispatch from the last frontier of white colonialism, a Trumpian fable." There is certainly evidence from the content of the show which may support this interpretation. Exotic was deeply embedded in gun culture, acutely paranoid, and far more concerned with the preservation of private business than of human (or animal) life. He explicitly discussed his beliefs about the Waco Branch Davidian siege as a warrant for buying up a massive number of firearms while regularly joking about killing other people. Exotic's

"jokes" might have, in fact, functioned as dog whistles given that viewers of his internet show harassed Baskin with antics such as leaving snakes in her mailbox. He labeled anyone who opposed him as a "terrorist," asserting the sort of all or nothing morality that is typical of cultic groups.

On the other hand, Joe Exotic has proven to be a fairly popular figure in the right corners of the internet and the very things which make him appear as a villain in a cautionary tale to some are the same things that make him laudable to others. St. Félix reflected on this phenomenon by saying:

The only observation that feels true is that *Tiger King* is what we watched two weeks into our isolation. Comfort television wasn't working; we needed something uglier. For the past four years, we have trained ourselves not to laugh at the antics of bad men; our collective embrace of *Tiger King* speaks of a renewed craving for the crass, the politically incorrect, the culturally insensitive—an outlet for the id now that the ego is under siege.

Indeed, the "craving for crass" can be easily satisfied for viewers of *Tiger King*, even if the reasons for indulging may vary from person to person.

Conclusion

In a rare time when many people seemed to have more time than ever, Netflix sprang an unusual documentary series that was just

too weird for us to look away. It seemed to have something for everyone. From the critics to the fans, just about everyone has something to say about *Tiger King*. A few themes of the show which may account for its popularity have been reviewed in this essay; however, there may be elements of the show that are even more mundane and speak to the “American experience” which have also influenced the show’s popularity. The conspiracy and crass of *Tiger King* may occasionally distract from another important ideological thread of the narrative: capitalist greed and good old American pride are consistent factors in the conflict[s] between Exotic and Baskin. In the first episode of the show, private zoo owner (and personal hero to Joe Exotic) Doc Antle commented that there is a war going on in America for an enormous amount of money in the big cat industry. Throughout the series, both Exotic and Baskin prove to be untrustworthy, albeit powerful leaders who wield their followings against one another for personal gain. At the end of the conflict, the animals lose while the humans continuously claw away at each other over their scrap of space in the neoliberal landscape. There are no heroes at the reigns in the Tiger Kingdom.¹

References

St. Félix, D. (2020, Apr. 6). The crass pleasures of *Tiger King*. *The New Yorker*.

¹ The journal solicited editorials, opinion pieces, autoethnographies, and similar items for the present edition in response to how people were engaging with media as a coping mechanism while quarantining during the COVID-19 Pandemic. This item is one of those pieces. – Ed.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/04/13/the-crass-pleasures-of-tiger-king>.

Willingham, A.J. (2020, Apr. 5). *Tiger King*: The not-so-secret formula behind its popularity. *CNN*.
<https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/05/us/tiger-king-documentary-why-popular-trnd/index.html>.

Address correspondence to Kyle A. Hammonds, 610 Elm Ave., Burton Hall, Dept. of Communications, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK 73019. Email: kyle.a.hammonds@ou.edu