How the Rich are Destroying Civilization

by Keith A. Spencer via gayle - Salon *Monday, Dec 3 2018, 7:46am*
international / prose / post

How the vapid trickle-down culture of the plutocracy could be the end of us all.

It is ironic that, as the gulf between rich and poor reaches record levels, the language of the underclass has become infected with the culture and mores of the rich. Twenty years ago, English began to absorb and normalize verbal markers of wealth, consumption and status, evidenced by the mainstreaming of luxury brands like Chanel, Gucci and Louis Vuitton and their appearance in pop culture and media. Reality TV went from nonexistent in the 1970s to one of the most popular television genres in the 2000s, much of it homed in on the lifestyles and lives of the rich — culminating in a billionaire, reality-TV star president. Social media in the late 2000s and 2010s seems to have exacerbated a cultural normalization of narcissism, an obsession with self-image, and a propensity for conspicuous consumption. Few of us are rich, but we all aspire to appear that way on Instagram.

In the past twenty-five years, documentarian and photograph Lauren Greenfield has been documenting this profound shift in culture, as the vapid materialism of the plutocracy has trickled down to the rest of us. Greenfield, who was once named “America's foremost visual chronicler of the plutocracy” by the New York Times, is an Emmy award-winning filmmaker and photographer. Greenfield has experience documenting the lifestyles of the rich and (in)famous: her much-lauded 2012 documentary, "The Queen of Versailles," followed the billionaire Siegel family during their quest to build the largest house in the United States. Her unflinchingly honest depiction of their bleak existence led to patriarch David Siegel filing a lawsuit against the filmmakers for defamation, which increased publicity to the film and which the Siegels lost handily.
Click for Sound

Greenfield's latest opus, "Generation Wealth," is an attempt to understand the intricacies of the trickle-down culture of the wealthy. Simultaneously an exhibition, monograph and film, Greenfield's camera follows not just the wealthy, but many folks who are middle- or working-class and yet who have absorbed the narrative and values of the elite in their quest to be thin, forever beautiful, and image- and luxury-obsessed. The film is unflinching in a way that is occasionally macabre: The on-screen depiction of plastic surgery is a grisly counterpoint to the pristine resorts, lifestyles and houses of the well-heeled. "This movie is neither trickle-down treat nor bacchanal guised as bromide, but rather an interrogation of an era defined by an obsession with wealth," wrote Eileen G'Sell in Salon's review.

I interviewed Lauren Greenfield at the Original Thinkers Festival in Telluride, Colorado. A video from this interview can be viewed here; the print version has been condensed and edited.

Keith Spencer: “Generation Wealth” is such a fascinating [book and film] project, and it's so rich. For those who may not know about it, how would you describe the overall project? I know it took 25 years of work?

Lauren Greenfield: I started looking back at my photography since the early nineties and seeing that, in a way, all of the stories that I had been doing — about consumerism and body image and

fame and celebrity and the economic crisis — that in a way they were connected. And I decided to do an archeological dig in my own work and look at the pictures as evidence of how we had changed as a culture.

And what I came to was that they revealed a kind of fundamental shift in the American dream, that we had gone from a dream that prized hard work and frugality and discipline, to a culture that elevated bling and celebrity and narcissism.

Interesting. And like you said, it's a global phenomenon, right? I mean, the pictures and the shots in the film were taken are all over the planet, right?

Yeah, I started in L[os Angeles] in the nineties, but even when I was doing the work in L.A., I felt like [I] was more looking at L.A. as the extreme manifestation of how you see the influence of the popular culture. In a way you are closest to the flame there.

But then I found that other people saw [that culture] as just L.A., so I kind of made it my mission to first go across the country and then go to different places in the world to show how we were exporting these values — exporting this culture with global media, with the Internet, with social media, with branding and international branding. In “Generation Wealth,” I really tried to show this global virus that is consumerism.

And that's something that I thought was so interesting about the film, was that the goods and the brands and the imagery look the same whether they were in Hong Kong or Moscow or Los Angeles or Orlando. It was like there's this culture that exists everywhere. It's so interesting how something like that is transmitted everywhere, the same idea, the same cultural values.

Yeah, I was really looking at how our culture, international culture in a way is being homogenized by these influences of corporations and globalism and media. In my work, I'm really looking for the similarities in values and influence and behavior in people who are really, really different.

And that really came together for me during the economic crisis. Because from L.A., from middle class to working class, to billionaires in Florida … to the crash in Dubai, to Iceland to Ireland, I was seeing similar consequences from similar behavior.

And the interconnected financial system was one more kind of homogenizing factor. And so that's what I was really interested in looking at. [Cultural critic] Chris Hedges speaks throughout the movie and at the end he says this comment, which I really love, about how authentic culture is being destroyed by the values of corporate capitalism. And that it's authentic culture that actually teaches us who we are and where we came from.

And so in a way we lose our identities when we lose that. And I think we see, especially with young people, how identity is so connected to brands and what you have and what you wear and what you buy.

Right. And that's one of the other interesting threads through the film, is just that in almost every subject's case — because you followed a lot of them for a long time through their lives or pick up at different points in their life — they all seem to sort of admit that either the money itself or the things that they bought with the money never made them happy. But yet at the same time, what I thought was so funny was some of them just seemed like they couldn't quit the lifestyle, like especially the German hedge fund manager.

Yeah. That's exactly right. For me, I realized it was really about addiction and it wasn't about the money — in the [film], you see that wealth is not just money, but all the things that give you value. And so you see people searching for beauty and youth and fame and image. But it's like addiction in the sense that you think it's going to bring you something that it doesn't.

[In] a way, all of the subjects are kind of looking to fill a void or an emptiness that can't be filled by that thing. [You] just stay on that gold plated hamster wheel… in the metaphor of addiction, the only way to stop is when you hit rock bottom. And so we see a lot of crashes, both collective and individual in the film.

Speaking of addiction — you ended up bringing in and talking about your own family too, both your mother and your children. Which I was not expecting, because before I saw "Generation Wealth" I'd seen "The Queen of Versailles," which you don't really bring yourself in that one much at all. Did you think while you were making it that you were going to end up turning the camera around on yourself and your family?

No, it kind of evolved. I started thinking I would be in it in some way as a kind of narrator, thinking mostly my voice, not physically in it, which was really scary to me in the beginning. But I felt like I was kind of the connective tissue and my journey was the connective tissue between these subjects.

I've always tried to go in really non-judgmentally, and show phenomena and people in situations that I think speak to the larger culture and are part of mainstream culture and influence. So I want people to see themselves in the characters, like in "Queen of Versailles."

And so I felt like it was also important to make the point that we're all complicit and that I'm not outside of it. And [to] look at how I'm also affected by these influences.

And it kind of emerged organically. I was talking to Florian — the German Hedge Fund banker — who is a very flamboyant character in the film. Makes $800,000,000, loses it all and becomes a truth-teller for how [money] doesn't bring you what you think it will.

And he challenged me at a certain point, and said, "How can a hundred-hour work week not affect your relationship with anything that matters?" And he kind of looks at me. And it forced me to kind of think about — you know, there I was in Germany on a three week trip on my way to Iceland, two kids at home that I'm trying to connect with on FaceTime. It made me think about my own addiction to my work.

There's this great scene in the movie where your son Gabriel talks about how his older brother got a perfect score on the ACT and how he's just afraid that he'll never be able to live up to that and he'll never be able to go to Harvard like his parents and brother. And it was amazing because it was like, before the camera was focused on all these rich kids — but they had similar anxieties to your son.

Yeah. And I think that this cycle of wanting more manifests in all different ways. I don't think that anybody can say they're outside of it. It's kind of like, I always think about modernism in a way, being kind of a justifiable luxury for [a] sophisticated or intellectual class.

And yeah… achievement was really important in my family. Gabriel also speaks to the weight and pressure of comparison, which is really a theme of the whole movie, that we're all kind of living in the state of collective FOMO where we can never be good enough because we're comparing ourselves to what we see not just on media but on social media. Not just real people but fictional, curated people.

I did a lot of work on gender, and so I made a short film called "Beauty Culture." And even in my book, "Girl Culture," looking at how girls are comparing themselves to pictures of models that are not just genetically specific, but also retouched and styled. And so it's literally impossible to measure up. And now I think we're all kind of in that state.

And so when Gabriel talked about comparing himself to his brother or not feeling like he could measure up, I wasn't initially planning to have my family be in there, but I did feel an obligation [to] be willing to ask of myself what I ask of the subjects — a hard, intimate look into the hard issues of living.

Last night at the Q&A after the film screening, you mentioned that this movie is a feminist film in the specific way that it looks at girls and women. Can you elaborate on that? I thought it was interesting how you noted that women are both a commodity, and also get power from commodifying themselves.

Yeah. I had done a lot of work on gender and I wasn't sure in the beginning how it would fit into "Generation Wealth." And then I realized that, in a way, girls were a really powerful and tragic case study for how human beings are commodified, and how in a way it's the ultimate cost and degradation of capitalism, the sale of the human being. And so for girls, I had been looking at both how girls were sold to — because their body image insecurities make them very vulnerable and avid consumers; "buy this and you can fix whatever's wrong with your skin, your body," or whatever — but also how they are physically sold.

And I think, for me, Kim Kardashian is a really powerful symbol of how that's changed. That the sex tape is a means to a lifestyle of money and affluence, and it's not the scarlet letter anymore. It's a badge of honor if that's what you bring.

And that manifests in different ways from an innocent game of dress-up, where there's also kind of precocious sexualization, to teenage girls putting sexy pictures of themselves on social media, to women who feel like they can't age and [get] plastic surgery — because if their beauty and bodies are their value, you can't lose that.

Speaking of that, that was another thing about the film I thought was interesting. From watching the trailer I had the sense that [the film] would be focused mostly on the 1%, but actually it's about how the values and the culture that the wealthy, the hypermaterialism and such, trickles down to the working class. I'm thinking specifically of Cathy, the bus driver... there's the very gruesome scenes of her getting plastic surgery in Brazil, multiple times I believe if I remember right.

Well, she gets multiple surgeries on one trip to Brazil, because if you go to Brazil you can get surgery much cheaper and the doctors will actually perform multiple operations on you in a way that they won't in the US. And yeah, I was really blown away by a statistic about plastic surgery that I heard, where 75% of women who get plastic surgery make $50,000 or less.

Like eating disorders — these things were thought to be kind of practices of the rich, but they have really trickled down. And I think part of that is the way we're bombarded with images of luxury and affluence. And also the kind of, in a way, new mythmaking of the American Dream, where the body is the new frontier of the rags to riches — where anybody with enough money, effort and willpower can transform themselves physically.

And so it's kind of like your fault if you don't have the drive and motivation to do that. And we see these shows, reality shows like "The Swan" and these transformation shows... I apologize for

showing such hard images, but I felt like it was really important to not see the before and after that we get in the media, but to see the middle, and the violence and risk that's really part of that transformation.

Towards the end, cultural critic Chris Hedges describes us as a civilization on the verge of collapse. But then the movie ends on a more hopeful note. I was wondering if you share Chris Hedges' apocalyptic view of the future, or if you felt hope at the end?

I do share his view, but I have, I guess, kind of a split or duality, in the sense that I feel like the reason I did this work and put it all together now, and went through a half a million pictures, is I do feel we're kind of barreling towards the apocalypse if we stay on this path. It's not a sustainable path. And from what I've seen over the last 25 years, it's blown-up exponentially.

Yet I think that there's a possibility of not staying on this path. A lot of the characters in the movie and in the book — when they do hit rock bottom, whether it's the economic crisis or their own personal crashes — they have insights that make them want to change.

And I feel like, in a way, this work is about kind of showing the Matrix that we live in, and having the option of the red pill. But I think that you kind of need a super-majority for that to happen on any significant scale.

Follow link below for additional embedded information:

https://tinyurl.com/yaefsrwt
