



## SNAPSHOT

### 'Taxi' (1984) by Joseph Rodriguez

Prior to picking up a camera for the first time at the age of 20, Joseph Rodriguez spent time in prison and was addicted to drugs. The native New Yorker would later say that taking up photography saved his life.

Becoming a taxi driver in 1977, Rodriguez spent the next decade exploring New York from the front seat of his cab, capturing the mood of the city in one of its most troubled

periods. From families en route to church to sex workers in the Meatpacking District, Rodriguez's camera doesn't discriminate. As the photographer says: "There are a million stories here in New York. Everybody's got a story."

**Cheyenne Darko**

*'TAXI' is at Galerie Bene Taschen, Cologne, to July 31*

## Meritocracy is no match for the alpha-couple

Janan Ganesh

Citizen of nowhere



In my favourite novel, *The Red and the Black*, the colours denote a low-born Frenchman's only means of ascent. In the end, it is neither the red tunic of the army nor the black robe of the church so much as the white linen of the boudoir that elevates our fool-hero. A mayor's wife and a marquis's daughter are among those who usher him to within grasping distance of his longed-for status. That titular "red", I still think, is a sly joke: the colour not of war but of sex, the age-old friend of the parvenu.

Or at least former friend. The last two centuries have opened more professional routes out of one's class than there are nameable colours. At the same time, they have closed off the older method of hypergamous romance. "Assortative mating" is the fittingly cold phrase for the intermarriage of educated people, who compound their material and cognitive advantages in the process.

In the middle of the last century, the following observations would have marked me out as a curiosity. I hardly know a straight person of my age with a degree who has a spouse without one. Of the couples where one partner earns vastly more, the other tends to bring cultural clout, grander relatives, a handy passport or some such equaliser. (Looks are of insufficient strategic value to close the gap.) As for the bachelors, of the hundred or so dates the most active ones sit through each year, around 90 are with graduates of research universities. A transgressive evening is one spent with an art or

drama school alumnus.

There is a notion that only female graduates are reluctant to marry beneath their credentials. I am sure this gets cause and effect all jumbled. When high-status men routinely ended up with less educated wives, it did not reflect preference, necessarily, so much as a want of alternatives. Once access to universities and the workplace spread to women, both sexes were freed up to be snobs. How lavishly we have used the licence since. My conscience is untroubled by almost every habit of the metro-liberal class that has been so tarred and feathered in recent years. Its romantic insularity

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is the exception. Not even private education does as much to forge an imporous caste.

This is why, along with its remorseless erudition, I have been carried along by *The Aristocracy of Talent*. In his new book, Adrian Wooldridge tries to salvage meritocracy from the ossified over-class that Aldous Huxley foresaw. Like all the best works of argumentative nonfiction, it falls down at the stage of policy fixes. Ideas of the "upgrading vocational education" sort can improve life chances, no doubt. The tax code can

cut into the racket of inherited wealth much more than it does. But soon enough, a serious meritocrat comes up against the untouchable borders of the personal realm. Parents rig life for their children with a zeal that is no less antisocial for being natural. And the most skilled of these self-dealers will be the graduate double-teams. It is not for society to "do" anything about so intimate a choice as marriage. It just falls to society to count the costs.

And these go well beyond the gumming up of social mobility. What stands out about the modern alpha-couple is not ladder-raising self-interest so much as grinding blandness. Hypergamy recurs in drama — Balzac, kitchen-sink films, *Cinderella* — because it has a fascination that is not quite there when someone at UBS weds someone at Freshfields.

The supposed subversiveness of inter-class sex is not the point (there is, after all, still plenty of that around). It is the contact and ultimately the synthesis of two distinct experiences of life. Any children that result from it, to the extent they absorb a bit of each, stand to be all the more rounded and imaginative in turn. The assortatively mated constitute perhaps the most disciplined, competitive and high-functioning ruling class the west has ever known, but also the least original. Wooldridge is never better than when he charts the distance between their bohemian self-image and the monoculture of their private lives.

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## On the couch with 'In Treatment'

Enuma Okoro

The Art of Life



For parts of 2020, I lived vicariously through a friend's therapy sessions. Every 10 days or so we would catch up on the phone, and she'd at some point share a few insights that she had with her therapist. I listened as a good friend but I confess, during the intensifying months of the pandemic and lockdown, I was hungry for any crumbs that could help me parse the way I was feeling.

I've always believed in the benefits of getting therapy, and I've used it at different points in my life, whether to process grief over something or to work through seemingly new issues unearthed from an unforeseen experience. For me, therapy is neither the endlessly embarrassing, self-exposing nightmare depicted in popular culture, nor a magic wand cure-all for our distress. Emotional and mental suffering is part of the human experience that visits all of us. And yet I think many of us still struggle to even entertain the thought that therapy might be something we'd like to explore.

So when I saw the strangely soothing trailer for the new series of *In Treatment* — the award-winning Nigerian-American actress Uzo Aduba sitting in a brown leather chair staring into the camera, like a waiting therapist — I was duly intrigued. The HBO drama series, recently revived for a fourth series after a 10-year hiatus, is about a psychotherapist who sees her own patients three days a week, then on the fourth day becomes the patient and sees her sponsor, the therapist figure in her life. It is a timely return for the show, given that the world is still reeling from the effects of the pandemic, with people trying to figure out how to make sense of the emotional and mental fallout. There's hardly a sense of "normal" to which to return. A December 2020 US Census Bureau survey revealed an 11 per cent year-on-year increase of people showing symptoms of anxiety or depression.

As I was unfamiliar with the original series, I went back to the first episodes starring Gabriel Byrne as Baltimore-based psychotherapist Dr Paul Weston. I was hooked within two episodes, and after watching the whole of season one, I skipped ahead to the new series, which picks up in present-day Los Angeles, during the pandemic. The patients here are — among other problems — trying to adjust to an opening world. Alongside the show, there's a complementary podcast, featuring an actual therapist, but which begins with a necessary disclaimer that the podcast "is not a substitute for therapy".

That's clearly true, but I found that the value of the show, including the earlier series, remains. The stories follow the lives of a cast of characters

**The show's return is timely, as we try to make sense of the emotional and mental fallout of the pandemic**

diverse in age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and socio-economic standing. They each present with their unique backgrounds and set of issues, and seem to offer a wide enough range for many viewers to likely catch threads that look similar to their own lives. There's a married couple questioning one another's love and support and dealing with differing views on finances and whether or not to have another child. There's the single professional woman who struggles to commit to a healthy relationship. Or the high-achieving man who's never acknowledged the pain of an emotionally absent but demanding father, or how his parents' marriage may have led to his own unhealthy professional and personal relationships.

Regardless of the patient or the problem, what seems to slip through

the screen are recognisable aspects of our common human dilemmas. Characters in one way or another reveal resistance to and fear of vulnerability. Their situations offer a reminder that many of us inherit family narratives, beliefs and traumas, and that there are often things we lack the courage to face in ourselves, barriers we put up to discourage intimacy, and lies we tell ourselves to remain in our comfort zones. And in the characters' impatience towards the therapist, we see reflected our tendency to want quick-fix answers to our singular concerns. We can't easily face the reality that healing often involves more pain, discomfort, inconvenience and courage than we bargained for. At one point early in the first season, in trying to help a frustrated patient understand the nature of the process, Byrne's character says, "All I can do is get you to confront your feelings . . . that's it".

Watching the series, I was reminded of how easy it seems for us all to become adept at layering our discomfort with all sorts of metaphorical coverings. It's as if we learn to live with our wounds until they become part of the identity that we are most secure in, and the thought of changing them bears the harder work and perhaps the seemingly greater pain.

I found myself nodding and "ah-ha"-ing as I watched, because the writing is clever enough to show how people can experience deep pain and yet carry their unhealed wounds without fully recognising the source or the impact. One thing *In Treatment* does is remind viewers how often it's in the slips of our conversations or the sharing of our stories that our complex selves are revealed. Perhaps one aspect of a helpful therapist is their ability to catch these slips, enabling us to see and understand the very things we need to find the courage to confront.

*Enuma Okoro writes weekly for Life & Arts*

## FT Globetrotter — when in Rome . . .



We don't know about you, but when restrictions finally ease, we will be immediately booking a trip to Rome. Thankfully How To Spend It travel editor Maria Shollenbarger has written the essential guide to hotels in the Italian capital for globetrotters of every stripe: the scenemaker, the aspiring local, the authenticist, the gentlewoman traveller and more.

Also this week, Relais & Chateaux chief Philippe Gombert offers a gastronomic guide to Paris. We are now dreaming of a poireaux vinaigrette at Chez Paul, followed by a Mont Blanc pâtisserie on the rue de Rivoli. On y va?

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