Review: Utopia is a very good series released at exactly the wrong time

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- Jessica Rothe plays Samantha, a fan of the *Dystopia* comic, keen to bid on the just-discovered copy of the unpublished sequel: *Utopia*.
- Fellow *Dystopia/Utopia* fans Becky (Ashleigh LaThrop) and Ian (Dan Byrd).
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Check out the cover of the only known copy of *Utopia*.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Wilson Wilson (Desmin Borges) lurks on the convention floor.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Some fans see complicated hidden connections in the comic.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- “You’re one of those, huh?” Not all fans buy into the conspiracy rumors.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Also lurking: Jessica Hyde (Sasha Lane), the comic’s famed central character.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Convention after-party in Wilson’s underground bunker.

Amazon Prime

- It’s rarely a good thing when Arby (Christopher Denham) shows up.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- “They’ve killed every single person who’s seen *Utopia*.” Including the wealthy collector who bought it.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Wilson loses an eye but escapes with his life.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Joining forces with Jessica Hyde.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Can’t a girl go get a coffee without coming back to a bloodbath?
  Amazon Prime
- Burning their cell phones to better elude their pursuers.
  Amazon Prime

It’s a rare TV series that gives me pause about even writing a review, but Amazon’s new sci-fi thriller *Utopia* turned out to be just that. Not because it isn’t good—on the contrary, I found it both entertaining and thought-provoking. But there are several key elements of the central plot that proved disquieting enough (even for someone like me who is not generally squeamish) that I had to ponder the pros and cons of giving space to a show whose release perhaps should have been postponed by a few months, given current world events. (I mean, read the room, Amazon! Geez!) In the end, the pro arguments won out.

(All major spoilers are below the second gallery. We’ll give you a heads-up when we get there.)

As we reported previously, the series is a reboot of the 2013 British version, about online fans of a graphic novel called *Dystopia* that seems to have the power to predict the real-world future. The fans are obsessed with tracking down the sequel, *Utopia*, and this makes them targets of a secret

organization. Amazon has kept the same basic premise (with a few tweaks) and swapped in an American cast. Per the official premise: “When the conspiracy in the elusive comic *Utopia* is real, a group of young fans come together to embark on a high-stakes twisted adventure to use what they uncover to save themselves, each other and ultimately humanity.”

Ian (Dan Byrd, *Easy A*), Becky (Ashleigh LaThrop, *The Handmaid’s Tale*), Samantha (Jessica Rothe, *Happy Death Day*), Wilson Wilson (Desmin Borges, *You’re the Worst*) and Grant (Javon “Wanna” Walton, *Euphoria*) are the conspiracy-minded *uber*-fans of *Dystopia*. They are intent on teasing out the meanings hidden within its pages that they believe will predict major calamitous events in the real world. They meet up in person for the first time at a comics convention where they plan to bid on the only known copy of *Utopia*.

Unfortunately, they are not the only ones interested in obtaining the comic. In fact, anyone who has seen it mysteriously ends up dead, courtesy of a sociopathic hitman named Arby (Christopher Denham, *Manhattan*), who has no qualms about executing random cosplayers, or even entire families (toddlers included), should his orders require it. Also seeking out *Utopia* is Jessica Hyde (Sasha Lane, *American Honey*, 2019’s *Hellboy*), the comic’s famed central character, who is actually real and thinks *Utopia* holds the secret to finding her long-lost father. Meanwhile, a mysterious deadly virus has begun infecting schoolchildren around the country, and the death count is rising rapidly.

Earn your place in this crowded world

The cast also includes John Cusack (*Grosse Pointe Blank*) as Dr. Kevin Christie, CEO of a powerful biotech company that manufactures vaccines, along with a few other ethically questionable research programs. He’s an idealist who espouses

an especially twisted form of utilitarianism: in lieu of grace at family dinners, every family member must recount what they did that particular day to "earn your place in this crowded world." Yes, Christie is up to something, most likely nefarious in nature. Rainn Wilson (*The Office*) plays Dr. Michael Stearns, a nebbishy virologist who suspects the virus currently killing children is the one he discovered in Peru years ago. The series also stars Farrah Mackenzie (*Logan Lucky*) as Alice, a young girl who falls in with Jessica and her ragtag crew of *uber*-fans, and Cory Michael Smith (*Gotham*) as Christie's son Thomas.

The British version received critical praise for its originality and visual style, offset by strong reservations about its extreme violence, which struck many as unnecessarily gratuitous. The most famous scene involved a torturer using a spoon to gouge out a victim's eye. That scene is still intact, albeit a bit less graphically depicted.

"I don't want it for a cartoon effect or for shock value," Gillian Flynn (author of *Gone Girl* and *Sharp Objects*), who adapted the series for Amazon, told Deadline Hollywood in August about whether this version would be as violent. "I think we as an audience are past most of that as pure shock value. I want to use violence when it's effective and appropriate." That tone is reflected in the series, despite a body count to rival *The Boys*. When young kids are the victims, for instance, the camera looks away, opting to imply their demise rather than show it on screen.

There's so much to like about this *Utopia*. The cast is terrific, the writing is sharp, and the story is compelling and expertly paced, and there are enough sparks of bleak humor to keep the series from being a slog. So what could possibly give me pause about reviewing it? Pretty much the entire central conspiracy, which might have played well in 2013 but hews way too close to the bone in late 2020.

(WARNING: Major spoilers below. Stop now if you haven't finished the series.)

- John Cusack plays Dr. Kevin Christie, CEO of ChristieBIO.
- Christie's son Thomas (Cory Michael Smith) is his right-hand man.
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- Beware corporate idealists who think the end justifies the means.
  Amazon Prime
- Rainn Wilson plays Michael Stearns, an expert on viruses.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- A top-secret quarantined camp.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Charlotte (Hadley Robinson) knows her purpose in Christie's grand scheme.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Seems like a vaccine might be in the works.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Jessica and her new allies try to decipher the clues.
  Amazon Prime
- Even aspiring corporate saboteurs need the occasional snack.
  Amazon Prime
- Christie's master plan hits a few snags
  Amazon Prime
- "We can fight it." Hope springs eternal for Stearns.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- "Practically begging to be slaughtered."
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Love blooms even when lives are in danger.
  Amazon Prime
- Arby has an epiphany.
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- Jessica comes home.
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We don’t discover the full extent of Christie’s nefarious plan until the final two episodes, but it amounts to this. He has deliberately manufactured the viral outbreak that has been killing hundreds of schoolchildren, all for the purpose of panicking the public and getting people to demand that the FDA fast-track approval of an experimental vaccine developed by Stearns, bypassing the usual safety trials.

Christie’s company will then ship out massive quantities of the vaccine worldwide—except it’s not really the vaccine against the virus. Rather, it will sterilize almost everybody who gets the vaccine, essentially curbing population growth for an entire generation to reduce the global population to a mere 500 million so that there will be more precious resources for everyone. Christie is like Marvel’s Thanos, only instead of an Infinity Glove, he’s using a manufactured health crisis to solve what he perceives to be an overpopulation crisis. And there’s a vast global conspiracy backing him.

There are plenty of people who fall into the “morbidly curious” camp—myself included—which is why the 2011 film *Contagion* experienced a sudden resurgence in popularity as the coronavirus pandemic began to escalate in the United States in March. In fact, some researchers believe that this is an evolved human response mechanism for dealing with threats by learning from imagined experiences, much like a love of horror may exploit our evolved fear system. We seek out being afraid in controlled settings as a means of confronting our fears in a safe environment, and we may seek out pandemic-themed entertainment for similar reasons. And until this year, I would have confidently asserted that people are far better at discerning fact from fiction than the tsk-tsking pearl-clutchers typically give them credit for.

Context matters

But we're now several months into the pandemic, with over 200,000 dead in the US alone and a shattered economy. Everyone's nerves are stretched thin. A good many panicked people are being fed misinformation via a highly coordinated campaign across multiple platforms, reaching to the highest levels of our government. Otherwise rational people are buying into outlandish conspiracy theories about a manufactured virus deliberately released to create demand for a vaccine—except that vaccine is a plot masterminded by Bill Gates so he can secretly microchip us and track our every movement.

There is political pressure to rush approval of a vaccine, skipping the usual safety trials against the advice of experts, and there is general distrust about whether any such vaccine can thus be trusted. QAnon adherents are running for Congress. Others are dismissing the pandemic as a hoax, refusing to take the simplest precautions and making it that much harder to get the outbreak under control. And on and on and on. Is this really the time for Amazon to pour gasoline on the fire, when so many people are in such deep denial that they will choose their preferred fictions over objective reality?

In other words, context matters. In the end, however, I came back to my conviction that good art is supposed to make us feel a little uncomfortable—*Utopia* just pushes that boundary further than most because of the poor timing of its release. Anyone inclined to take its fictions as fact is going to find abundant fodder to feed their fantasies regardless of whether Amazon had chosen to postpone the series or not. Some people will find *Utopia* a bit too on-the-nose right now; others won't understand what all the fuss is about. I trust Ars readers to know which category they fall into and decide accordingly.

Utopia is currently streaming on Amazon Prime.

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