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## Heated Rivalry Is Anti-Dystopia Art

Violence, cynicism and cruelty dominate prestige TV. *Heated Rivalry* became a global obsession by doing the opposite.

BY JENKA GURFINKEL



JANUARY 26, 2026

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**A**s I sat down to write this, the first episode of *Heated Rivalry* had been out in North America and Australia for less than two months, and the final one for only three weeks. In that time, the show had amassed over 600 million minutes of streaming on HBO and became a pirated hit worldwide, including in Russia and China, where it is not only unavailable but, due to its LGBTQ+ subject matter, banned.

The stunning, astronomical rise of *Heated Rivalry* has us all trying to answer the same question: why are we so obsessed? Why has this seemingly niche show with a modest budget and virtually no promotion, produced for Crave, which has just four million subscribers, led by a cast of unknowns, about an autistic half-Asian and a traumatized Russian involved in a secret love affair, based on a queer hockey romance book series, taken over the world? How did this happen? The leads are Olympic torchbearers now? WTF is going on?



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Sure, it's a faithful adaptation of a best-selling book series with a fanbase already built in. Yes, it dutifully adheres to the conventions of the romance genre, and romance will never let you down when it comes to a happy ending. It appeals to gay men and queer people for a myriad of reasons. It appeals to straight women—and women generally—for a myriad more. It even appeals to straight men. (To paraphrase an Instagram reel I saw floating by: "Hollander and Rozanov are your buddies. And you're always happy for your buddies to get laid. And, if they're getting laid with each other, great!") Obviously, the chemistry between the actors is unrivalled, and the standom they've inspired is at a boy-band fever pitch. The film craft is superb, sending the last two episodes to 13th and 14th places on IMDb's list of top TV episodes of all time. There are many reasons to be enamoured with this show. So I would like to add one more into the mix: it's because *Heated Rivalry* is anti-dystopia art.

In the 21st century, dystopian fantasies that inure people to violence, brutality and trauma pervade the entertainment landscape. These movies and TV shows have become cultural shorthand. We compare real-life events to *The Hunger Games*, *Squid Games*, *Mad Max* or *The Handmaid's Tale*. Reality has become *Black Mirror*. Dystopia's vernacular of dehumanization, desensitization and cruelty, especially toward women, seeps into everything. In comedy, there's the jarringly gratuitous gun violence ostensibly played for laughs in *The Out-Laws*. In fantasy, *Wheel of Time* features a pornographically lurid murder montage of one woman stabbing, choking and slicing the throat of another over and over. In action, it shows up as glorified dissociation in *Lioness* and, in drama, there's the grimy bleakness of *Euphoria*. Even superhero movies, designed to draw in younger audiences, expose viewers to hyper-real terrorism spectacles, like cityscape destructions that echo 9/11 or the snap of a finger destroying half of all life in the universe. Deeply disturbing, inhumane narratives and visuals are constantly streaming into our eyeballs in the guise of entertainment, like we're all living in *A Clockwork Orange*.

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*Heated Rivalry* might not be science fiction, but it, too, is a fantasy set in a speculative universe. In that universe, the captain of a major-league hockey team publicly comes out, setting off a cascade of events that diverge from our current reality in which, out of thousands of players, there are currently zero openly gay or bisexual men actively competing in any of the major North American sports leagues. As it ascends to the status of global phenomenon, creating an entire new cultural shorthand along the way, *Heated Rivalry* offers a cinematic universe that references our own, but casts an alternate vision of a world that's possible—a world of pleasure, mutuality, humanness, intimacy, creativity and joy.

That is deliberate. As Jacob Tierney—the show's screenwriter, director and showrunner—said in an interview on the *Spare Parts* podcast, "TV does not have a lot of sex right now, and the sex that we do see all the time is rape. We see endless nonconsensual sex as a storyline, like 'How does this crime begin?' There's so much sex you don't want to see. And *Heated Rivalry* is about two people who want to be fucking."

Dystopia, which presents a violent and degraded world, has likewise turned sex, a fundamental aspect of humanness and aliveness, into a plot device for violence and degradation. Pleasure has become torture. Unsurprisingly, according to a 2023 UCLA poll of 1,500 respondents aged 13 to 24, around half said that sex isn't needed in most shows and movies. The year after, market-research firm Talker Research surveyed 2,000 Americans and found that 43 per cent don't think that sex scenes add to a story. More than 40 per cent of Gen Z said they turn a movie off once a sex scene comes on.

The success of *Heated Rivalry* indicates that people do want to see sex scenes, as long as they show sex we actually want to see: people genuinely having a mutually pleasurable experience. This is especially true when it comes to taking women's pleasure seriously. The show is, of course, based on the *Game Changers* book series by Rachel Reid, a woman. The romance genre is a billion-dollar juggernaut keeping the publishing industry afloat thanks to its preponderance of female readers. Even more pointedly, the genre of gay romance stories and erotica written by and for women is currently receiving an extraordinary amount of attention on the heels of the show's wild success.

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In *Heated Rivalry*, we witness a relationship not only without gender hierarchy, but between two equals in almost every way. Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov are similar in physical size and strength, talent, social status and income brackets. They have the same job, captaining rival major league hockey teams and taking turns winning awards year over year. A show targeted toward women that depicts characters reveling in the pleasure of both competition and sex with their own equal is revolutionary. From *Cinderella* onwards, conventional narratives have romanticized power disparity. The feral attraction women feel toward what they see in *Heated Rivalry* reveals just how inspired and arousing a vision of sex, pleasure and intimacy beyond outdated clichés really is.

Dystopia, at its core, is about cynicism: the cynicism of resignation to a future that's inevitably worse. It doesn't have to be science fiction to be a dystopia. Often, shows set in a world indistinguishable from our own are populated with characters who are almost anaphylactically averse to experiencing or communicating genuine emotion. These stories use sincerity as a punchline. Even when characters perform intimacy—platonic or otherwise—they are choked in layers of irony, fear, self-loathing and dissociation.

It's easy to understand the appeal. Cynicism is prophylactic. It allows us to walk through a deeply scarred, imperfect world without being swallowed up and destroyed by its horrors. It allows us to compartmentalize the news we see on our screens, sigh and go back to finishing the email due by the end of the business day. It deadens and desensitizes us from feeling anything too much amid the tragedy and toxicity. *Heated Rivalry* is like a gust of fresh air that Canada blew into the rest of the world.

The narrative and emotional arc of the show's first season features Shane and Ilya navigating emotional intimacy and the deepening, if fraught, connection they feel. Sex becomes their primary mode for understanding each other before they grow the skills for deeper communication. On a technical level, there is nothing particularly more graphic about the show's sex scenes than the standard fare from HBO. Unlike, say, *Game of Thrones'* full-frontal nudity, *Heated Rivalry*'s only shows the actors' derrières. Instead, what makes *Heated Rivalry* truly subversive is how the intimacy of physical connection is crafted.

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In a culture where porn is ubiquitous, depictions of graphic, explicit sex are abundant and low-value. Its mere mechanistic frictions can only show us people doing something. *Heated Rivalry* transports us somewhere else. The show's intimacy is not just in arousal, but in being known, understood and part of a heightened, ecstatic experience beyond ourselves. Watching others start the series and go through the entire arc of emotions from the first couple of episodes until they, along with Shane and Ilya, arrive at *The Cottage* is like being on molly and watching it kick in for someone else. Seeing pleasure that is deeply to watch and intrinsically entwined in the dance of intimacy, makes people want to human, rewatch it, take the show to No. 1, launch its cast into superstardom, and tell others about it with the zeal of religious missionaries. In defiance of dystopian cynicism, it connects us.

"What I wanted to put out into the world was queer joy," explained Tierney on *What Chaos?*, a podcast that is otherwise about hockey. "The idea that we're allowed to exist, we're allowed to have sex, we're allowed to be in love, we're allowed to live. That's the whole appeal. That's why I made it."

It worked. This intent to put joy and love out into the world transcended the camera lens—not just into the hearts and minds of audiences, but into the production itself. François Arnaud, who plays Scott Hunter, captain of the New York team in *Heated Rivalry*'s fictional major league hockey universe, called it "the least toxic set I'd ever worked on." It's a sentiment echoed by many others on the cast and crew.

It's unsurprising that art explicitly intended to elicit joy was cultivated in a creative environment that could sustain it. That *Heated Rivalry* was created outside of the Hollywood system is perhaps critical to its success. According to Arnaud, it was originally supposed to be developed with a major American streamer where executives had such extensive notes that Tierney balked and took the show to Canada. Apparently, one of the notes was no kissing until episode five.

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Dystopia limits our imaginations, and also those of film and TV creators. It primes their perception and reflects back to us through the lens of their own visions. Right now, Hollywood simply does not know how to not make everything a casual-viewing dystopia.

"Those who control the fantasy control the future," says futurist Monika Bielskyte. All speculative fictions bleed into reality. Dystopia may conceive of itself as satire (which doesn't work because the targets of satirization don't get it) or cautionary tale (which merely provides a product roadmap to build the futuristic tormenting technologies it predicts). But it is, in fact, an intensely conservative, hypnotic tool. Every vision that has, for decades, depicted the future as a dissolute, perverted, joyless world fallen from grace has conditioned us to expect this inevitable, hopeless fate: more of the same, but worse.

*Heated Rivalry* shows us that the most transportive, visionary, *feels* different isn't one that looks different from our reality. It's one that *feels* different. It's a difference that we as the audience can feel as if we've already lived in that world too. Fantasy becomes a rehearsal for a different reality.

When confronted with the unknown that looms ahead of him and Ilya at the end of the first season, all Shane can muster is, "We just want a future." He speaks for all of us. *Heated Rivalry* has broken through the onslaught of pop culture visions that make dystopia's cynical, joyless futures seem inexorable precisely because it is a piece of art that not only shows us, but allows us to *feel* that another world is truly possible. That lets us somatically experience a future beyond what exists now, a future we all actually want. Joy in the present makes joy in the future seem plausible. And that, too, is hope. ■

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*Jenka Gurfinkel is a California-based user experience designer and culture essayist. This article was edited and republished from her Substack, where it originally appeared in longer form as "Heated Rivalry and the Art of Anti-Dystopia."*

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