

Lady Gaga brings down the 'House of Gucci'

By Justin Chang

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Monarchies may fall and empires may crumble, but for the moment, epic family dynasties still reign with a vengeance on the screen. Now along comes "House of Gucci," Ridley Scott's canny and engrossing movie about an Italian luxury brand and a family brought low by greed, fraud and vicious infighting, plus a notorious black widow played by a coldly electrifying Lady Gaga.

We get a taste of that bitter end at the beginning. The movie opens on March 27, 1995, mere minutes before Maurizio Gucci (Adam Driver), the fashion house's former head, is gunned down in Milan by an assassin hired by his vengeful ex-wife, Patrizia Reggiani (Lady Gaga). Scott cuts away before the killing occurs, in a way that can't help but echo the violence-anticipating prologue of "The Last Duel," his recent movie about the travails of a 14th-century Frenchwoman.



Courtesy of Metro Goldwyn Mayer Pictures Inc.
Lady Gaga in "House of Gucci."

Here, hundreds of years later, is another moment of calm before the storm and also another story of a woman caught up in an overbearingly male world of power and intrigue.

One crucial difference is that while the heroine of "The Last Duel" is sold into a bad marriage, Patrizia wills herself into one. She's at a party in Milan in 1970, giving off Elizabeth Taylor vibes in a head-turning red dress, when she first meets the diffident, bespectacled Maurizio, who's so awkward — but charmingly so — that it takes her a

beat to realize he's the heir to the famous Gucci fashion house. A reluctant heir, admittedly, who plans to practice law, shows little interest in the family business and is entirely naive about why Patrizia might have him locked in her sights. They soon marry, defying Maurizio's father, Rodolfo Gucci (an elegant, exacting Jeremy Irons), who takes one look at his future daughter-in-law and guesses what she's after.

It's hard to see how anyone couldn't guess, since Patrizia's darkly glittering eyes, which stop just short of burning holes in the

screen, so nakedly telegraph her every desire. As in her previous unhappily ever after Cinderella story, "A Star Is Born," Lady Gaga temporarily dons a working-class shell, downplaying her natural magnetism in order to maximize it. Before long, Patrizia stands revealed for what she is: an avatar of ambition and, like Gaga herself, born to wear the silver-sequined evening gowns and furry après-ski ensembles dreamed up for her by costume designer Janty Yates. More than anything, Patrizia is a woman of insatiable hunger: She looks ahead to the day that his millions — and his powerful place within the competitive Gucci family hierarchy — will be hers as well.

The bonds of family are extended first by Rodolfo's brother and business partner, Aldo Gucci (a boisterous, affectionate Al Pacino), who welcomes his new niece with open arms. He's the company's entrepreneurial genius, the one who continued his father Guccio's mission to transform a Florentine family-run business into a global brand. Maurizio and Patrizia soon relocate to New York (and have a young daughter, Alessandra) to work in Gucci's Manhattan

stores. And before long, Rodolfo is dead, leaving his half of the company (in a roundabout fashion) to Maurizio and setting a furious round of power plays in motion. There are stormy confrontations and hostile takeovers, forged signatures and prison sentences, grim financial assessments and odd psychic readings (the latter delivered by Patrizia's friend and future accomplice, Pina Auriemma, played by a very game Salma Hayek).

Patrizia takes a keen pride in the business — the market for cheap Gucci knockoffs infuriates her — and, like a chain-smoking, mud-bathing Lady Macbeth, spurs her husband toward increasing acts of ruthlessness against his own family.

Were any of these characters really this awful or this riveting? Did any of it actually happen this way? Possibly. More or less. Of course not. As in any slick bio-fiction, characters have been excised, timelines fudged, perspectives distorted. And yet, even amid the inevitable simplifications and exaggerations, it all coheres, with a kind of implacably grim logic, into an extended cautionary tale about how family and business shouldn't mix.

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