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'The Leader' Review: A Cult As American As Apple Pie



BY LIBERTY IMHOFF · JUNE 11, 2026

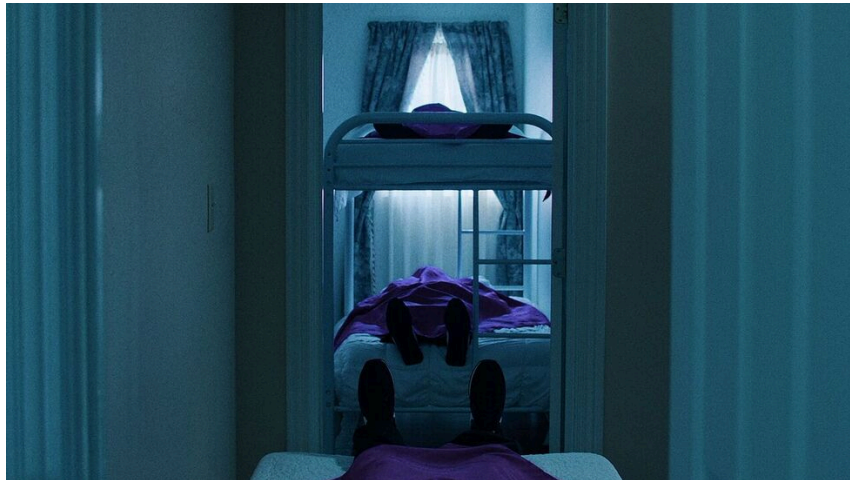


Photo courtesy of Tribeca Festival

What happens when two lost people, deeply unhappy with their current lives, find each other?

They start a cult. As one typically does in this scenario, of course.

Marshall Applewhite and Bonnie Nettles pair up to create a belief system called "Heaven's Gate" stating that its followers aim to elevate to "The Evolutionary Level Above Human" by leaving their vehicles behind. Many out there would tell

you that it would be evolved and humane to leave vehicles behind. It would certainly improve a lot of our environmental issues.

But we are talking about the human body. The body is the vehicle being referred to here, and it must be discarded to advance to the next level. And 39 people eventually decided to cast off their vehicle in order to ascend – the largest mass suicide ever carried out on United States soil.

“The Leader” does a chilling job at capturing the psychological desperation of what it means to exist in an America seemingly devoid of purpose. Many of the adherents of Heaven’s Gate – and there were many over the years – felt that something was missing in their lives. They felt that life was incomplete for various reasons, and Ti & Do (Bonnie and Marshall’s cult names, respectively) had the answers. “Heaven’s Gate” did as cults tend to do: it gave adherents a sense that there was something – or somewhere – better out there waiting for them. In this case, all they had to do was wait for a spaceship to pick them up to get there.

A key point of the Heaven’s Gate doctrine was that adherents must “rid ourselves of the burden of choice.” This was necessary because if you’re spending time making any of the 30,000 decisions over the course of your day that humans make, then there would be no time to ascend to that next level. Another key point was to remove all signs of gender. Adherents were made to appear as individuals with no distinction: same haircut, no signs of sexuality on display, and so on. Those two points are relevant to point out because when you remove the ability of people to make their own choices, and you take away their right to individuate and express themselves, then there is no longer a human there.

“The Leader” shows us what happens when life becomes so difficult that people are willing to make concessions in order to make their time on Earth bearable. Letting someone else decide how they style their hair. Regulate their bodies. Police their sexuality, and shame them if they have it. Groom in them a wariness and a fear of the outside world. Where does that lead us? It gives us a culture of people who do not value their lives or the lives of anyone else around them. They do not value the environment because life on Earth is doomed anyway, in their minds.

Leaders like Ti and Do are a dime a dozen, believe it or not. People who are so disaffected with the status of the world that they decide to build their own belief system and get others to worship them as makeshift gods. They have the answers to the universe, after all. They know exactly why the world is the way that it is, and people would be fools to not listen to them.

People like the followers of the Heaven’s Gate cult are a dime a dozen as well. Another thing that makes people vulnerable to cult belief systems is a need to belong. People are social animals, and they want to build relationships with other people. If buying into a questionable belief system will get them the companionship that they are searching for, then some will be willing to make that tradeoff. One wonders if the loneliness epidemic that has been a part of the public discourse in recent times could result in susceptibility to cults; let’s hope not.

Cultish behavior has always been popular in the United States. Cults themselves were common in the mid- to late-20th century in America. Who can forget groups like the Peoples Temple and the Manson Family? The concept of a cult

has become so ubiquitous that people joke about it and recommend building one as a legitimate business strategy.

Cults aren't a joke, though. "The Leader" shows that cults are, in fact, a very serious matter. Cult leaders are grossly manipulative, preying on people in search of meaning and belonging in their lives. The movie becomes physically nauseating to watch towards the end because it sinks in that this wasn't "just" a movie – this was a true story. When you realize that the events of Heaven's Gate have happened before, you realize that there's nothing stopping them from happening again. The drive to find meaning knows no bounds.

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