

As season 3 of *Succession* continues its latest run, the overwhelming consensus is that it is some of the best television around at the moment. There is no doubt that it is excellently written, beautifully produced and makes compelling viewing. Watching the internal wranglings of the tormented (and tormenting) Roy family, under the control of the patriarch Logan Roy, has a deliciously obscene quality to it. Critics like to revel in the description of the series as Shakespearean. Matt Zoller Sietz, for instance, writes in the *New York Magazine*, that: ‘The log line of *Succession* could be “*King Lear* meets *Arrested Development*”’ and there is no doubt that it plays up to those references as a key part of its charm. The title itself, *Succession*, draws attention to a key aspect of this story of aristocratic domination with its networks of inherited wealth at a level that simply transcend any national governance. Marriages, alliances, feuds and sibling rivalry all play to the tabloid fixation with royalty and the suggestion that, deep down, they all need love just like the rest of us. Rachel Connolly in the *Guardian*, praises its honesty in the portrayal of the selfish and narcissistic vanities of the billionaire heirs. But what does it tell us about the deeper workings of contemporary capitalism? Rupert Murdoch and family, described as an inspiration for the show, are according to Forbes, the 71st richest in the world. On the other hand, Steve Cohen, seen as the model for Bobby Axelrod in *Billions*, is listed at 119th. So, we may not be getting that close to the worlds of the true financial Titans.

In what ways, then, can television drama be seen to offer some kind of critique? It can’t be simply to portray this ruling class as caricatures of evil or pathologically selfish, doing things that makes us cringe in voyeuristic horror. What we can follow in a more insightful way, is the staging of a moral dilemma that shows us something of how the system itself works on those individuals and the choices they can make. If we consider a case from each of these shows we can see how this looks.

A key plot element in *Succession* is that there has been a cover up of systematic physical and sexual abuse within the cruise line division of the company Waystar RoyCo. Within the

Roy family there is a constant bargaining of position to determine who should be the scapegoat for the scandal. There are occasional references to some of the details but the most significant indicator of the morality at work is the revelation of the designation applied to multiple case files of: N.R.P.I (No Real Person Involved). To be real in *this* world is to matter in a way that mere mortals can never achieve. As James Poniewozik describes, to have a presence there is to be actually a different species of being. Son of the patriarch, Kendall Roy may voice his disgust at what was allowed to happen but this is a person who allowed the cover up of his own culpability in the death of a waiter whilst on a drug-buying run. So, it's fair to say his morals are flexible. Daughter Shiv is the only one who maintains the position that she had no prior knowledge of the abuse, to the cynical incredulity of the other siblings. On the recommendation of his grandfather, Ewan Roy, cousin Greg lawyers up with a veteran who, after a flippant reference to the ensuring of Greg's wellbeing, sees the prize to win here as being at last able to, quote, 'Expose the structural contradictions of capitalism as reified in the architecture of corporate America.' Greg's appalled expression suggests how much fun that might be to see.

*Billions*, on the other hand, sets up a different dynamic between its protagonists of hedge fund billionaire Bobby Axelrod and federal investigator Chuck Rhoades. A key dilemma within this drama serial is handled quite differently to the moral vacuum that is at the heart of *Succession*. In *Billions*, Axelrod has received inside information on the issue of a casino license to a town of Sandicot. In an attempt to get ahead of the game, Bobby Axelrod buys up a distressed bond option that carries the town's debt. This plan is foiled by the actions of an enemy and the question then remains, what to now do with this debt? What plays out in his war-room of traders, is the choice of whether to take a short-term loss and invest in the location to hopefully see a regeneration and a turn-around in its fortunes or, on the contrary, to call in the debt that will see austerity imposed leading to savage cuts in jobs and services. For the 'killer qaunt', and gender non-binary, Taylor Mason, to even be discussing this choice is, in their opinion,

offensive. If the town has lived beyond its means then it must suffer the Darwinian consequences, “Become antifragile, or die”, they coldly assert quoting Nassim Taleb. However, Axelrod with his blue-collar origins takes opinion from both sides, before he makes his decision. Ultimately, the town’s prized Remington sculpture becomes another trophy displayed in the atrium of his headquarters and gives a clue as to which path he chooses. Yet there is clear sense that he is struggling with a genuine dilemma.

Both of these television dramas are, of course, hugely entertaining and cleverly written that often opt to keep in the lingo and parlance of the trading and business world alongside the pop-culture references beloved by the writers. We watch as the protagonist’s execution of their devious plans are frustrated and loyalties stretched and morphed to suit the craven needs of the maniacal egos of these ‘exceptional’ minds. Although we have yet to see how the exposing of the corruption of corporate America might look in *Succession*, we know that in *Billions* the hedge fund king has lost his battle with the ‘liberal-communist’ billionaire, Mike Prince, with whom he had picked a fight. Finance capitalism sees the unhindered flow of money across the global system as one of many flows to control including ideas, words, or desire, and *Billions* goes some way to making manifest these abstract quantities. For *Succession*, the general mood is one of decay and a spreading malignancy as the old media world of newspapers and national TV continues to slowly die. The conglomerate needs to ‘go omni-national and reposition as a global media-hub’, as Kendall pitches to his siblings, all of whom are reluctant to join the attempted take-down of their father.

For the actor Damian Lewis, as Bobby Axelrod in *Billions* and graduate of the Royal Shakespeare Company, we can see the truth in the line from Julius Caesar, ‘the evil that men do lives after them’. Yet, for the powerful in today’s world, the damage they do is not simply the bullying, scheming and betrayals as we see here in *Succession* but rather, as the philosopher Alain Badiou writes in his book on the subject of evil, the undermining of the truth of the world

so that belief in the system of capitalism is continuously maintained by the positioning of this concept as always external, as elsewhere. In that sense articulated by Winston Churchill, liberal democracy is not by any means the best system of governing but it is the least bad of all those that have been tried.

Yet, art, including at times certain television dramas, can help us to see and hence think differently about the world, to not passively accept the neo-liberal assertion that we live in the best of possible worlds, or to reluctantly accept that its imperfections are preferable to the inevitable horrors of totalitarianism that must follow radical change. The question is whether we can discern any fragmentary moments of truth within these artworks that can allow for the emergence of a truly different kind of thought. It is here that Badiou describes politics precisely as the creation of new thought rather than simply the management of the status quo.

The serial format seems to map closely the contours of the contemporary world of cognitive capitalism and streaming is a key element of that process. Back in the nineties it became apparent that the expansion of creativity beyond the traditional parameters was essential to remaining competitive in modern workplaces. Evident in this new golden age of television serial drama was a significant level of freedom given to the creatives that had long been restricted by the demands of executives who were dependent upon audiences as the drivers of advertising revenue. There is an aesthetic war being waged over the very terms of what is possible to redeem from the digital onslaught that we are currently experiencing. It is a key question as to whether, whilst there has been a perceptible degrading of the public sphere, other potential virtual spaces of reflection have opened up. Shows such as these demand acute levels of concentration from viewers and are often supplemented by multiple systems of opinion and discussion. On the one hand they offer an immersive experience whilst, on the other, reflexive critique, all the while framed by challenging aesthetic techniques.

As the streaming platforms expand exponentially the volume of serial dramas available for us to consume, their aim is to lock us into the habitual affordances of these attention

machines. Aesthetics, technology and capitalism come together, here, to weave a complex social fabric that enfolds us and responds to this newly emerging cultural dynamic. Of course, there is the motivation so clearly described by Adorno and Horkheimer of a culture industry that seeks to subsume thinking into consumption, where streaming-media becomes indistinguishable from an algorithmically driven stream-of-consciousness. Yet, at times some of these dramas do, I would argue, contain moments of deep insights into the experience of being in this world, a world shaped by trauma, a desire for justice, and a search for systems of belief that can offer a way through the vicissitudes of contemporary life.