

Corporate: Offensive, pointed satire for a change

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A breath of fresh air, US cable and satellite television channel Comedy Central's new show, *Corporate*, directs its fire against the multinational corporation with considerable honesty and success.

Corporate centers on two junior executives who share an office and their misery at Hampton DeVille, a massive corporation that has just launched its flagship gadget, the *Obelisk* tablet, with a screen eight times larger than an iPad. The company's slogan is "We Make Everything." A motivation poster depicting an open-mouthed great white shark inspires workers to "Stay Hungry!" Another advises a softer approach: "Be the cog!"

Matt (Matt Ingebretson) taught underprivileged children after college because he wanted to help people, but was stabbed by a student and moved back in with his parents—a move which brought about their divorce. He then worked a series of jobs that landed him at Hampton DeVille, where he answers emails and follows orders.

Jake (Jake Weisman) is a suicidal ex-radical trying to reinvent himself as a cut-throat company man, but his past haunts him. Video footage of his college punk band surfaces, wherein Jake sings, bluntly if idiotically, "Don't get a job, fight the government, steal from the rich, punch the president—I will not be a slave to the corporate system," before he drops the microphone with gusto. Jake's cynicism serves as a comedic foil to Matt's lingering humanitarian instincts.

CEO Christian DeVille (Lance Reddick) is the consummate American business executive, for whom money and domination of the market determine every waking thought. A Samurai in his own mind, he berates inferiors, lies to the press and profits from war, terrorism, religion and natural disasters—he even wants to invent his own hurricane machine. He is summed up

by comments such as these: "Iraq was a missed opportunity," "We know there's no God, but there is a lot of money to be made in his name," and "It is my duty to monetize the [September 11] tragedy or the terrorists win."

Middle managers Kate (Anne Dudek) and John (Adam Lustick) cower before DeVille, but lord it over their own subordinates, shamelessly taking credit for their efforts and blaming them for their failures. John has a nightmare about Christian giving him a performance review, firing him ... and then crushing his skull in his hands. The dream leaves John conflicted: terrified by his death, but honored to be killed by someone he respects so much.

Kate agrees. Talking to Christian is like talking to a gun with an Ivy League education. Both falter outside of the office, unable to have a romantic relationship with each other or anyone else. The strength of these characterizations lies in part in the fact that neither individual was born a sociopath, they have become such through their horrible work environment.

At its best, *Corporate* even connects this business world with wider social phenomena.

For example, a motivational presentation at a company retreat teaches young executives how to be "A-WHOLES," an acronym that spells out the brutal ethos of a modern manager. The retreat ends with a waterboarding exercise whereby the initiate is "reborn" as a force to be reckoned within the business world.

In the series' second episode, *The PowerPoint of Death*, Matt has an ethical crisis about using his presentation software skills to pitch Hampton DeVille's weapons to CIA leaders at a "black site" where a plot to overthrow the Peruvian government is in the planning stages. When Matt asks the head of human resources about using drops of blood as bullet

points, she expresses admiration for Edward Snowden and hostility to violations of the Geneva Conventions, and calls his presentation a war crime.

Likewise, *Corporate* derides the street art and self-contented outlook of Shepard Fairey, the graphic designer of the “Obey Giant” and Barack Obama’s “Hope” poster. A Daft Punk helmet-wearing character known as TradeMarQ advises the company leadership on how to profit from protests against its Super Fracking operations. TradeMarQ turns the protest into a money-making music festival. Defending himself against allegations he is a “sell-out,” he explains to Matt that the best concerts “sell out,” as do the best albums and the best artists too.

Watching *Corporate*, one could be forgiven for thinking it was too good to be true, that there had to be lurking a cynical, misanthropic torpedo in at least one episode that would badly undermine the season.

The opposite proved to be the case. Each of the ten episodes in Season One demonstrates a genuine hostility to American business, violence and cultural bankruptcy. The series chooses not to blame the employees or consumers, i.e. the victims of Hampton DeVile, for the company’s wrongdoing. This swims refreshingly against the artistic current.

The approach of the series’ creators Pat Bishop, Matt Ingebretson and Jake Weisman has earned them some criticism from the middle class identity politics industry. Jane Hu at the *New Republic* begins an unfavorable review of *Corporate* by noting that “Americans are increasingly recognizing that when a top tier of usually white, usually male executives wield vast amounts of power, the potential for abuse is high. In #MeToo posts, women have written about the many varieties of workplace sexism.”

Hu goes on, “Perhaps it is with these changes in mind, then, that *Corporate* ... strikes such a sour note.” Why? Presumably because the show has “straight white male protagonists,” for whom she has no sympathy. She seems to take offense at the unfriendly treatment of DeVile, an African American, suggesting that the monstrous CEO “falls pretty close to the stereotype of the ‘angry black man,’ only, in this case, given an unexpected and, as the show seems to suggest, threatening amount of power.”

If the show steps on such well-heeled toes, good for its creators!

In *Vox*, an Jake interview Weisman with noted didn’t even blame “corporate America” for its crimes: “The laws are on their side. So why *would* they care about people? It would only cut their gains.” He went on, “Ideally, the person at the top would have nobody working for them. It would just be a bunch of robots handing them money. ... Corporations are the new nations. You can’t beat them. They’ve won the game. It’s impossible to beat them unless you blow them up.”

Not everything here is flawless. At times, the show can be *too* deadpan. Characters announce their intentions and the overall thrust of their persona here and there, which removes their edge. Occasionally, the dialogue feels forced or half-hearted.

But *Corporate* treads where few shows do, and leaves a pie in the face of many deserving targets. Here is not to be found a sweet, cute situation comedy, offensive to none. Here is genuine satire, artistic iconoclasm in rare, but badly needed form.

The author also recommends:

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