

Succession: A significant artistic and cultural development

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The conclusion of the HBO television series *Succession* speaks powerfully to our times and crisis-ridden society. The show, presented in four seasons over the course of 2018 to 2023, depicts the power struggles and moral decay bound up with the fate of a corporate-financial dynasty that wields enormous influence over politics, culture and society.

Part tragedy and part comedy, *Succession* has justifiably gained a large audience for its scathing satire of the capitalist ruling class. The show grapples with the obscene amounts of wealth controlled by the rich and their destructive social and political impulses, including the unleashing of fascistic and far-right forces.

Of course, the series is not without flaws and blind spots, but a widely viewed and discussed television show that deepens popular hostility to the ruling elite has an objective weight. It points to a radicalization of the population already underway.

Succession chronicles the rise and fall of the Roy family that controls the fictional Waystar RoyCo global media conglomeration—a vast empire spanning 50 countries that peddles lies, starts wars, conspires with fascists and covers up major crimes.

The series opens with the aging and ailing patriarch of the family, Logan Roy (Brian Cox), who suffers a stroke on his 80th birthday, triggering a crisis as to who will take over the firm. Logan, a tyrannical and manipulative figure, plays his children off one against the other, and refuses to relinquish the empire he has built.

The Roys are a dysfunctional and miserable bunch, driven by insatiable ambition, self-delusion and mutual resentment, while living in a bubble of luxury and privilege detached from everyday reality. Orbiting them is a host of sycophantic public relations advisers and self-serving corporate executives endlessly scheming to advance their careers. The Roys are also under constant threat from various external forces: hostile activist shareholders, rival corporations seeking mergers, government regulators, legal investigations and public scandals.

Logan's incompetent and unprincipled children include the second-eldest son Kendall (Jeremy Strong), an emotionally insecure and drug-addicted individual constantly trying to prove himself to his father, but failing miserably. In the first season, Kendall is responsible for the tragic death of a waiter while under the influence of drugs at his sister's wedding, but it is all covered up with his father's help.

Logan's younger son Roman (Kieran Culkin) is a degenerate who moves sharply to the right by helping to anoint a fascist presidential candidate. Logan's daughter Shiv (Sarah Snook) is a cynical political consultant who postures as a progressive but ultimately lines up behind her class interests, "flexible" enough to make alliances with fascist layers. The eldest son Connor (Alan Ruck) is a muddle-headed "New Age" buffoon who thinks he can waltz into the presidency with his far-right brand of libertarian politics.

Early on in the fourth and final season, which concluded recently, the patriarch dies, leading to a bitter conflict among Logan's children over "succession" to the empire's top spot. Ultimately, they prove as

incompetent at this as at everything else. Their father has reminded them they are "not serious people."

Of course, it is the brutish Logan, who communicates through grunts and expletives to all those socially beneath him, who has produced such intellectually and emotionally stunted, mutilated offspring.

In addition to the Roy clan, a number of intriguing and complex characters appear in the series, each of them shaped by the corrupt, dog-eat-dog corporate environment.

Shiv's husband Tom (Matthew Macfadyen) is an empty-headed social climber with his own ambitions to take over Waystar or important portions of it. His "sidekick" and punching bag, Greg (Nicholas Braun), is a less immediate family relation, comical and ridiculous in his desperate and generally treacherous attempts to navigate the family power struggles.

Succession portrays the various corporate executives and hangers-on, including Frank (Peter Friedman), Geri (J. Smith Cameron), Carolina (Dagmara Dominczyk) and Hugo (Fisher Stevens), as cunning, cut-throat and money-obsessed in their own right. They would act as ruthlessly and devastatingly as their superiors given the chance.

A central part in the unfolding drama is played by Lukas Matsson (Alexander Skarsgård), a megalomaniacal CEO of a Swedish tech company looking to acquire Waystar.

Logan himself perhaps possesses the least amount of dimension. Not because he isn't a complex figure, but rather that he personifies the unvarnished brutality of capitalism. Cox, an experienced and classically trained actor, with numerous Shakespeare productions under his belt, knows the great stage works and brings a broad range of artistic experience to bear.

"The Roys suffer a great deal from a different kind of want," Cox told the *New York Times*, "which is the want of having too much as opposed to not having." Logan Roy, the actor went on, "continues to define himself by that wealth, and he can't get out of it, and his children add to the confusion because they are entitled. But the other thing is, I'm not a capitalist. So I see the wealthy all finally getting hoisted by their own petard ... I feel the same way about Jeff Bezos. It's a kind of supervanity they share."

Succession's final episodes of the final season strongly elevated the show, as the Roy family's actions collided with forces in the wider world. The stakes are raised and viewers are reminded that these self-absorbed narcissists are social scum, wreaking havoc on society before they retreat once again into their vast wealth and power.

As we pointed out in our comment on the unnerving election episode, "America Decides," the Roy family conspire to elect a fascist presidential candidate, as Roman and Kendall agree that the far-right Jeryd Mencken (Justin Kirk) would be "good for business."

In the penultimate episode of the fourth season, "Church and State," centered on Logan's funeral, his brother Ewan (played brilliantly by James Cromwell, while suffering from Long Covid no less!) is the only voice of truth in a chorus of social parasites.

While anti-fascist protests spread in the streets of New York, Ewan, after providing a brief glimpse of Logan as a traumatized child, eviscerates his own brother and the social layer assembled at Logan's funeral.

"He was a man," Ewan says, "who has here and there drawn in the edges of the world; now and then darkened the skies a little; closed men's hearts, fed that dark flame in men, the hard, mean, hard-renting flame that keeps their hearths warm while another grow cold, their grain stashed, while another goes hungry ... He gave away a few million of his billions, but he was not a generous man. He was mean, and he made but a mean estimation of the world."

Ewan's damning speech stuns the audience into silence. But the next, semi-coherent remarks by Kendall, an Ayn Rand-like paean to capitalism and money, is received with rapturous applause. While acknowledging his father's cruelty, Kendall lionizes the dead man: "The lives ... and things that he made. And the money. Yeah, the money. The lifeblood, the oxygen of this wonderful civilization we have built from the mud."

One is reminded of the young Marx on "The Power of Money" in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*: "By possessing the *property* of buying everything, by possessing the property of appropriating all objects, *money* is thus the *object* of eminent possession. The universality of its *property* is the omnipotence of its being. It is therefore regarded as an omnipotent being. Money is the procurer between man's need and the object, between his life and his means of life. But that which mediates my life for me, also mediates the existence of other people for me. For me it is the other person."

Marx cites Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, whose central character famously grants "Yellow, glittering, precious gold" the ability to "make black white, foul fair, / Wrong right, base noble, old young, coward valiant."

Brilliantly, Marx goes on to explain that money, as we see in *Succession*, bestows immense power on its possessor:

Thus, what I *am* and *am capable of* is by no means determined by my individuality. I *am* ugly, but I can buy for myself the *most beautiful* of women. Therefore I am not *ugly*, for the effect of *ugliness*—its deterrent power—is nullified by money. I, according to my individual characteristics, *am lame*, but money furnishes me with twenty-four feet. Therefore I am not lame. I am bad, dishonest, unscrupulous, stupid; but money is honored, and hence its possessor. Money is the supreme good, therefore its possessor is good. Money, besides, saves me the trouble of being dishonest: I am therefore presumed honest. I am *brainless*, but money is the *real brain* of all things and how then should its possessor be brainless? Besides, he can buy clever people for himself, and is he who has power over the clever not more clever than the clever? Do not I, who thanks to money am capable of *all* that the human heart longs for, possess all human capacities? Does not my money, therefore, transform all my incapacities into their contrary?

It may well be that *Succession* creator Jesse Armstrong is familiar with this and other passages from Marx. In an interview with the *New Yorker* in 2021, Armstrong pointed to a comment by the great revolutionary thinker, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, "where he says men and women make their own history, but not the circumstances of their own making ... For me, a lot of the art and the work of the show is in that territory between what's history in the broadest sense, what's family history, what's tradition, and what's the room for one's own choices, and your own making of your life and your world. And there's a gap there, which that mysterious thing about human personality fills."

Everything comes to a head in the final episode ("With Open Eyes," a reference to the John Berryman poem, DreamSong 29). The relationship between Tom, Shiv and Matsson is disturbing. Matsson debases Tom repeatedly, telling him in a double entendre that he wants to screw his wife Shiv, which Tom accepts, willing to be his "pain sponge." Matsson goes on to say it will get "real nasty" in the corporate warfare that ensues.

Tom, the obsequious yes man whom Shiv calls a "highly interchangeable modular part," tells Matsson, "As a manager, I'm simple. You know I squeeze the costs and juice the revenue. Follow the boss. You know, I, uh, digest strategy and implement... You know, I'm cutting heads and harvesting eyeballs."

Fittingly, as everything falls apart, Roman sums up the Roy family and the ruling class with devastating truth: "You're fucking bullshit, I'm fucking bullshit, she's bullshit ... I'm telling you this because I know it. We're nothing."

Ultimately, *Succession* examines and measures the social layer that worships money and power at the expense of everything else, including their own humanity, with no thought for the consequences.

It is appropriate that the series' final season concluded as the writers' strike began. The rebelling writers are in a conflict with the Logan Roys of their world—the predatory media-entertainment tycoons at war with critical artistic and cultural expression, who seek to exercise a monopoly over what people get to see and hear on a daily basis.

In an interview with NPR, Armstrong expressed support for the writers' strike as something critical to the development of important television and film production. Other members of the cast have also expressed support for the strike, including Strong and Cromwell (the son of a blacklisted Hollywood film director).

In another interview last year, Armstrong referenced Leon Trotsky in regard to his writing of the series: "To go literary-political, I think it was Trotsky who said revolution is impossible until it's inevitable. I love that feeling in art."

Strong discussed the overall trajectory of the series: "The death of my character, this slow and moral and spiritual death... points at something in our culture at this moment in late-stage capitalism, this moment in our political life. Terminal decadence, collapsing empire, alongside this collapse of a man and his empire. It's a profound document of the times we live in, a chronicle of our times."

Cromwell told *Vulture* that "capitalism in its essence is about government officials finding ways to transfer the wealth of the nation into the pockets of the donors who helped put them in their positions. It doesn't work. Every institution I can think of is failing. The electoral system is failing. Congress is failing. Justice is failing. Every one of them, all failures. They cannot make it work because capitalism aggrandizes wealth unto itself. It impoverishes."

Succession proves itself to be a substantive, socially conscious work. Unlike a popular film such as *The Godfather* (1972), which, in the end, essentially glorified the criminal element, with only passing reference to big business, *Succession* goes deeper. It is no more merely inspired by Rupert Murdoch or Conrad Black than Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* based itself on the life and career of William Randolph Hearst. Welles' film was about American capitalism, the fraudulence of its dreams and "democratic" illusions about itself, as a one-time populist turns into a semi-fascist demagogue, liar and cheat.

Succession is also the product of immensely gifted artists—actors, writers, cinematographers, musicians, costume creators, editors and film crew—who worked together to create the show. These include the remarkable Armstrong, a gifted writers' room (including numerous playwrights), the directors (Mark Mylod, Adam McKay, Andrij Parekh and others) and the talented cast of performers (including Cox, Strong, Snook, Culkin, Ruck, Macfadyen and others).

The cinematography and editing are also striking throughout. The scenes

of the Roys constantly on the move in helicopters and private jets from skyscrapers to opulent mansions and penthouses adds an ominous element. Finally, the music by Nicholas Britnell is haunting and unmistakably brings a classical influence to bear.

The Trotskyist movement has long championed the need for artists to consciously engage more strongly and directly with reality and hold a mirror up to the world. *Succession* is an important contribution that speaks sharply and critically to our day. We welcome this work strongly as a manifestation of a cultural and political shift among wider layers of the population.



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