

Jesse Armstrong's *Mountainhead*: A satire about technology billionaires: "Planet Earth's like an all-you-can-eat buffet"

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British screenwriter and showrunner Jesse Armstrong, the moving force behind HBO's *Succession*, has written and directed *Mountainhead*, also for HBO. The 109-minute comedy-drama was released on May 31.

The film follows the frenetic antics over the course of a weekend—spent in a 21,000-square-foot Utah mountainside mansion—of three technology billionaires and a fourth, the host, worth as yet “only” \$500 million.

Venis “Ven” Parish (Cory Michael Smith), the world's richest person, controls the social media platform Traam, which, as we learn, is causing chaos across the globe with AI-generated disinformation. Jeff Abredazi (Ramy Youssef), owns Bilter, a company specializing in “good” AI, which Ven covets in order to get the UN and the US president off his back.

The “elder statesman” of the group, Randall Garrett (Steve Carell), spouts pseudo-“Hegelian” banalities. He has recently been given a death sentence due to incurable cancer. Hugo “Souper” or “Soups” Van Yalk (so nicknamed because he is the poorest of the four, i.e., as in “soup kitchen”) is the brains behind “Slowzo,” described as “not just a meditation tool. It's a lifestyle super-app.”

The characters are inspired by such figures as Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg, Sam Altman and rightwing “philosopher-financiers” like Peter Thiel and Marc Andreessen. Armstrong told *Time* that his characters were not one-to-one matches, but “Frankenstein monsters with limbs sewn together.”

The storyline, such as it is, involves rivalries and conflicts that inevitably surface at Mountainhead (a reference to arch-anticommunist Ayn Rand's 1943 novel *The Fountainhead*) among the four swollen economic interests and egos. As noted, Ven desires Jeff's firm, because he has recklessly introduced features on Traam that enable disinformation, and Bilter would help with fact-checking and fending off critics and government regulators. Randall fantasizes that Ven's unfettered operations will speed up the emergence of the “transhuman” (“He could get us post-human in five”), somehow ensuring immunity from cancer and immortality.

Jeff, who bears a grudge against Ven and suggests his board should “push him out,” becomes the focus of Randall's and Ven's resentment, with “Soups” along for the ride. The trio determine to murder Jeff, setting off a black comedy of errors.

Holding such individuals up to ridicule and debunking their claim to being the “the smartest men in America,” as one of the bunch suggests during the goings-on in *Mountainhead*, is a legitimate enterprise in and of itself. Armstrong paints the group as narcissistic, shallow, greedy, petulant, oblivious to the existence of others and generally repellant. Pretending not to care about riches (“Money is not a sort of thing I'm concerned about”), they think about little else.

Armstrong places the following lines in his characters' mouths to get

his points across:

I mean, planet Earth's like an all-you-can-eat buffet, and no one's gonna stop till we clear all the hot plates, right? ...

We're gonna show users as much shit as possible until everyone realizes nothing's that fucking serious. ... Nothing means anything and everything's funny and cool.

When confronted with one or another social atrocity or episode of mass murder:

You're always going to get some people dead. I mean, there will be eight to ten cardiac arrests during a Super Bowl.

Ven and Randall have this exchange:

-Do you believe in other people?

-I think one needs to.

-Yeah, but do you?

-Eight billion people as real as us? Well, obviously not.

Learning of an “undeclared war” between Turkey and Armenia, the tech giants muse:

- This could be cool.

- It could be cool.

- It could really be turning into a moment.

- In terms of?

- Where it all comes out. All of the fucking hatreds. All this resentment. Like, a slightly gnarly but eventually highly cathartic draining of all this poison, historical, ethnic, racial, religious...

They dream big, at one point briefly inserting “Soups” as president of Argentina:

Do we take over a couple of failing nations? Show people how

it's done? To one or more fragile or failed Western Hemisphere states, say, Argentina, Venezuela, or Cuba, we intellectually and financially back a rolling swap out to crypto-network states.

All in all, decides Ven, despite the developing calamity:

You know what I think, honestly? I think pedal to the fucking metal. ... I say we just push through. Let's fucking go! ... The worse the disease, the more valuable the cure.

And this pearl:

Yeah, it's so much better to do one big upgrade on the whole world than walking around with fucking patches, "Solving malaria." ... "Oh, I'm an old man and I solved malaria." "Here, loads more Africans." "Thanks for all the extra Africans, really loving those!"

The discussion around the decision to do Jeff in, after he refuses to sell Bilter to Ven, is amusing. It is Randall who first suggests that "I think we need to come up with a plan to kill Jeff." Challenged by "Soups," he backpedals, "'Killing Jeff' is just a placeholder. I'm obviously not talking about literally killing Jeff." Except that he is, because Jeff, according to Randall, "wants to stop the future."

Randall further explains to Ven,

He is planning to have your board push you out. ... He will never sell. He is a decelerationist [opponent of technological/AI progress] and a snake. ... He wants to stop a new world from being born.

Chaos ensues.

There are strong elements here. The Musks and Zuckerbergs, and their fascistic intellectual mentors, invite, no, demand satire. The "essentially Hegelian" lesson of history, we are told, "is everything is always cool, so long as you get there." And, "Bretton Woods crumbles. The fiat currencies wane. The block chain prevails. Thank you. Are we the Bolsheviks of a new techno world order that starts tonight?"

At a certain point, the four characters consider using their military and technological powers to overthrow the US government, which is not doubt actively considered among these fascistic layers in real life.

But there are real difficulties and weaknesses too.

Armstrong may have felt that he was making his life easier, in part for budgetary and logistical reasons, by restricting his film to a "four-hander," for all intents and purposes. On the contrary, he made things tougher for himself. It is far more difficult to paint a broad social picture, a panorama, with only a handful of characters and one setting, as opposed to larger, more diverse casting and interactions, and variety of locales. *Mountainhead* strains under the weight of having to make large statements with so little movement and such very limited human types.

The murder plot is comical ("I'll tell you one thing, I'd like to conduct all my negotiations with my opposite number covered in gasoline with me holding the match"), but, in the end, neither especially convincing nor

illuminating. The last portion of the film labors to justify its inclusion, without thorough-going success.

Armstrong has obviously undertaken a systematic and exhaustive course in the language and mannerisms of Musk, Zuckerberg, etc. The research pays off, in the sense that the writer-director captures the bound, constricted, yet "boyish" and "cheery" and ultimately tiring rhythm of the tech lingo:

Randall: Cancer was net-net a big positive. Wisdom, 50% increase. Purpose, meaning, both way up.

Ven and Jeff meeting each other, with some disparaging comments uttered on a podcast bubbling up:

-Can we hug it out?

-Yeah, buddy, of course.

-Good to see you.

-Bring it in.

-Oh, man, watch out. Don't crush me with all that "founder energy."

-I was misquoted.

-How can you be misquoted if you said it?

-Who cares? I don't even remember.

But this comes at a cost. To the non-initiated, the first thirty or forty minutes are extremely difficult to follow. The four understandably speak as though intensely "in the know," but there needed to be a dramatic-artistic, mediating means of translating that for the rest of us. A great many trees and not enough forest.

Armstrong's previous production, *Succession*, was a major work, which, as the WWSWS noted, "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." *Mountainhead* deals with similar themes, but less substantively. Armstrong at times appears "starstruck," overly impressed with these types and their power.

The rising to the top of the technology world in a given case, with its resulting fabulous financial rewards, of individuals such as Musk, Zuckerberg, Bezos, Gates et al is of course not entirely accidental or arbitrary. Each no doubt has certain qualities, for better or worse, that propelled him forward. But the notion that they have made their reputations and fortunes through great brilliance, foresight and "vision" is entirely absurd. Armstrong rejects the media adulation and reveals the rather wretched reality, but in the absence of a historical-social accounting, we are still left with the possibility that at least their aggression and personal "charisma" have paid off.

To a large extent, in fact, these "geniuses" are the entirely undeserving beneficiaries of various processes—scientific, economic, political—beyond their control and certainly outside their understanding.

As long ago as 1999, the WWSWS discussed the rise of Bill Gates and Microsoft in these terms:

Microsoft did not obtain a monopoly position in software because its operating system was superior technologically. Most software industry analysts would dispute the claim that Windows is an optimum system, and it is notoriously unstable in everyday office use. ...

Which system became the standard was determined, not by rational or dispassionate comparison of various alternatives, but through the struggle of rival capitalist concerns, in which sharp marketing practices and business connections—like Gates's early relationship with IBM—counted for much more than technical merit.

More fundamentally, monopoly is the inevitable outcome of the development of capitalist economy. Not only in software, but in every major industry, the process of capitalist accumulation leads to the consolidation of small capitals into large, with one or a handful ultimately becoming dominant.

Mountainhead deplores but accepts the existing economic framework. It resigns itself and the rest of the world to being at the mercy of these extremely limited, if not deplorable human beings, even as it warns, in one of the character's final comments, "I think there's a non-trivial chance it'll be a full fucking disaster."

Armstrong and *Mountainhead* might have asked, directly or indirectly, how it is that immense, objectively revolutionary technological advances like AI remain the private property and playthings of billionaires and their giant corporations, excluding and endangering the overwhelming majority of humanity. Couldn't these vast resources, productive capacities instead improve the living conditions of hundreds of millions of human beings virtually overnight?

Also, the film already seems dated. Trump and his allies, including his "tech" buddies, might have seemed invincible when they came to power in January. In only six months, the depth of popular opposition has shown itself. Millions have protested the Trump-Musk measures and proven they have no intention of being saddled with a fascistic dictatorship. The general movement of things today is toward mass outrage and resistance. Armstrong runs the risk of falling behind the times.



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