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NEOLIBERALISM IN PRESTIGE TELEVISION:
A STORY OF MASCULINITY, GENDER, AND FINANCE

BY

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Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between gender and neoliberalism in two prestige television shows, Showtime's *Billions* (2016-Present) and HBO's *Succession* (2018-Present). Both shows focus on gender to examine the metamorphosis of masculinity in a neoliberal age. In building from Amanda Lotz's book *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21st Century*, which examines changes in the representation of masculinity on television in the noughties, I analyze how masculinity has continued to shift in the twenty-tens, specifically in the realm of financial fiction. I will argue that the new television anti-hero hyper-identifies with the system instead of working against it. Additionally, I will argue that these characters idealize the same traits as Andrew Pendakis' concept of the "ontopreneur": a figure who equates financial success with existential fulfillment. The ontopreneur seeks to revolutionize the human experience, and as I will point out in the examination of these shows, this idea has become interlinked with our new versions of masculinity. Our anti-heroes are therefore driven by their commitment to the structures of the market and use it as metric for their own sense of masculinity. These changes, however, are not so simple as these men are nostalgic for earlier iterations of tough-guy masculinity which they must balance with the incursion of femininity into neoliberal finance. In these shows, femininity is represented as an advantage as well as a threat for our male protagonists. As a result, male characters must now tightrope walk between these perspectives in order to achieve fulfillment, independence and nirvana with the neoliberal market they exist in.

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Dedicated to those who are anxious.

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Introduction

The goal of this project is to examine how masculinity has shifted in a post global financial crisis, hyper-capitalist, neoliberal age. This shift, I argue, is symptomatized through the new figure of the male anti-hero, who once violated and rallied against the capitalist system but now hyper-identifies with it. His desires and transgressions are no longer set in the shady mis-en-scenes of the criminal underworld, but in the office spaces of corporate finance. In these institutional spaces, the new male anti-hero's financial success becomes synonymous with existential fulfillment. If he succeeds, he becomes a consciousness expanding revolutionary, or what I will define in what follows as the "ontoprenuer." The problem that the new anti-hero faces, however, is that these financial spaces are becoming increasingly feminine. In shows such as *Billions* and *Succession*, femininity is posed as both a tool to be absorbed and a threat to be contained. This threat, as I will show, manifests itself in a nostalgic longing for an earlier form of masculinity, rooted in paternal lineages and the accumulation of wealth and objects. These models of older capitalism are rendered invalid in the forms of neoliberalism that we will discuss, instead, cultural, and informational exchange is preferred, thereby forcing these old capitalists to confront a new world of online start-ups.

In an analysis of Showtime's *Billions* (2016-Present) and HBO's *Succession* (2018-Present), I will argue that the depiction of gender in these shows confront the contradictions of neoliberalism. Specifically, we will look at the relationship between our male protagonists and masculinity. These men, fearful of losing their masculinity, cling onto outdated forms of manhood. Simultaneously, they allow feminine insight and inspiration into their business acumen to succeed. The duality of fear over losing their masculinity and adopting feminine perspectives portrays femininity as radically ambivalent. My analysis will explore these

complex depictions of masculinity in the narratives of *Billions* and *Succession* and seek to unravel the aesthetics of neoliberalism.

This thesis will begin by establishing several key concepts necessary to conduct my analysis. In the first chapter, I will begin by defining neoliberalism and connecting it to gender, then use real and fictional examples to consider the effects of neoliberalism on masculinity. Before we begin an analysis *Billions* and *Succession*, we must establish how masculinity has represented former capitalist pressures, primarily before the global financial crisis. This exploration of early examples of masculinity will comprise the second chapter of the thesis and examine how these early male protagonists previously dealt with masculinity and finance by transgressing the system. In the third and fourth chapters, we will focus on how these anti-heroes have moved from working outside the financial system to working within it. Our protagonist in both *Billions* and *Succession* will illuminate the new struggle of finding their own sense of masculinity and independence through the market. In this examination of these men, I hope to unearth some of the ways neoliberalism influences gender performance and how it influences the narratives of prestige television today.

Methodology

This thesis begins with a brief examination of changing masculinities due to increasing pressure from neoliberalist ideologies. I will examine prior iterations of masculinity on television with the added context of the neoliberal theory that we covered in chapter one. The goal of this thesis will be to examine the conjuncture between masculinity and neo-liberalism to analyze two prestige television shows, Showtime's *Billions* and HBO's *Succession*. These shows were selected based on their status as premium cable entertainment and because they are both pieces of financial fiction. Other television shows were considered, but due to the length of this thesis, I prioritized these shows above the rest because of their radically different approaches to our subject of gender and neoliberalism. In my separate analyses of each show, I will examine how their narratives are symptomatic of neoliberal pressures on individual subjects. These pressures mold how men participate in a hegemony of masculinity as well as generate new anxieties for their patriarchal control of finance. I will discuss how the narratives involving several characters from each series is indicative of this phenomenon. These will stretch from covering season long character arcs to specific scenes of individual episodes in both analyses of each show. These analysis chapters will involve an overview of the series, followed by key examinations of the factors that shape the pressures of upholding gender norms under a new capitalist market. In completing an analysis of both shows, with the hindsight of previous analysis on prestige television shows from decades ago, I will illuminate the seismic shifts in portrayals of masculinity.

Chapter 1

The Masculinity Problem

There are few things as complex as trying to understand neoliberalism. Add in the complex relationship between this economic ideology and masculinity and you are left with an overwhelming pile of financial data and male privilege. In this chapter, I will unpack this relationship to establish how this thesis will read the mutation of masculinity under neoliberalism. In the first section of this chapter, I will break down a working definition of neoliberalism. This definition will provide a framework for understanding the historical significance of this shift in economic policy and its entanglements with the state. Following this framing concept, I will focus on the relationship between neoliberalism and the individual. Here, we will explore the significance of the so-called liberated individual within a neoliberalist economy. Finally, we will spend much of the chapter focused on the problem of masculinity. In this section, I will explore how a neoliberalist economy actively privileges men, as well as informs the perception of masculinity. Specifically, the ways the neoliberal male subject is rendered as a reflection of his economic environment and the struggle of maintaining the role as a provider.

A Brief Definition of Neoliberalism

The difficulty of framing neoliberalism as it pertains to the depictions of masculinity in prestige television is understanding the parameters of our working definition of neoliberalism as well as the context of masculinity in contemporary premium serial cable television. The purpose of this chapter is to focus on the concept of neoliberalism in its broadest contours as it pertains to the concept of gender identity. To start a dialogue between neoliberalism and gender, we must first establish a working definition of neoliberalism. Here, I will refer to David Harvey's key

text, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, which provides a compact yet dense description of the concept. For Harvey:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. The state has to guarantee, for example, the quality and integrity of money. It must also set up those military, defense, police and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets. Furthermore, if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary. But beyond these tasks the state should not venture. State interventions in markets (once created) must be kept to a bare minimum because, according to the theory, the state cannot possibly possess enough information to second guess market-signals (prices) and because powerful interest groups will inevitably distort and bias state interventions (particularly in democracies) for their own benefit.¹

This definition offers a concise way of dissecting the core of neoliberalism as an economic and political theory. The first thing to make note of is Harvey's calculated use of the word individual. Neoliberalism, as suggested by Harvey, hinges on the idea that well-being is formed by the complete liberation of the individual. In short, Harvey suggests that the idea of the liberated individual functions as a bipartisan method of diminishing the influence of the state. Harvey uses the example of the May 68 protests in France as a key example of the youth revolting against the state for their individual freedoms². Who could argue against this idea that individual freedom is essential to our well-being? Using this anti-establishment mindset, neoliberalist thought was able to harness the diminishment of the state to seize control of the economy. In essence, Neoliberalism was able to distort the Leftist critique of the state as a coercive apparatus in order

¹ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.

² Harvey, 42.

to place political power in the hands of multinational corporations and proliferate its power over future political finance reform.

Subsequently, the role of the state shifts under neoliberalism. As per this definition, the diminished state must guarantee the quality of money, the markets, private industry protections as well as generate new markets for private industry. Accordingly, the state treats private industry with the same level of concern as the individual citizen. This shift in the state's role in our economy is best represented in the documentary *The Corporation* (Abbott and Achbar, 2003), where the filmmakers make the case that private companies are legally considered an individual and share the same amount if not greater rights than actual citizens. Their case then evolves into the proposition that the characteristics of these companies embody the persona of a psychopathic individual, driven by the desire to benefit its growth by any means possible. This persona is expanded upon in Wendy Brown's book *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, especially in her analysis of Foucault's study of "Homo Politicus" and "Homo Oeconomicus".

The Demos, Gender, Masculinity, And the Influence of Neoliberalism

The heart of this concept derives from the idea that the economy and the state can be embodied by unique personas displaying specific characteristics that echo a society. In her analysis, Brown discusses Foucault's proposition that "Homo Oeconomicus" (the embodiment of the economy) has shifted its characteristics to envelope the embodiment of the state, or "Homo Politicus" attitudes³. Regarding gender in this same chapter, Brown mentions how great philosophers like Aristotle attribute masculine qualities to Homo Politicus and the struggle of

³ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 80.

gendering Homo oeconomicus⁴. Here, Brown asks how Homo Oeconomicus is both gendered and gendering? This question, as widely discussed in feminist theory, challenges us to look at the relationship between gender and how the economy functions and reacts to the structure of gender⁵.

The answer lies in the way neoliberalism both informs masculinity and privileges men. As I will argue, the desire for dominance displays the masculine nature of the economy and informs the perceived traits of masculinity. For example, Joan Acker's article "Gender, Capitalism and Globalization", does an excellent job of describing the dialogue between gender and the free market. Acker argues that, "although gender includes female and male, masculine and feminine, women and men, in scholarly and everyday practice, including discussions of globalization, gender often means women"⁶. Acker quickly follows this up by adding "the bulk of the research on men, work, and the economy is cast as gender-neutral, with the implicit assumption that to talk about men is to talk about the general situation"⁷. This proposition by Acker gives us a means of understanding the discussion and lack of discussion on gender. In short, gender is the backbone in the discussion in the ways the economy influences the individual.

This division between the genders is a fundamental process in women's subordination in capitalist societies according to Acker⁸. For Acker:

As European and then American capital established dominance through colonization, empire, and today's globalization, one of the cultural/structural forms embedded in that

⁴ Brown, 99.

⁵ Brown 106; Joan Acker, "Gender, Capitalism and Globalization," *Critical Sociology* 30, no. 1 (2004): 20; Leslie Salzinger, "Re-marking men: Masculinity as a terrain of the neoliberal economy," *Critical Historical Studies* 3, no. 1 (2016): 2.

⁶ Acker, 20.

⁷ Acker, 20.

⁸ Acker, 23.

dominance has been the identification of the male/masculine with production in the money economy and the identification of the female/feminine with reproduction and the domestic. The ideological construct starkly contrasts with the actual organization of production and reproduction, as women were often as much “producers” as “reproducers”.⁹

This argument covers not only the system of gender in the economy but also highlights the behaviour that the economy exhibits. The keyword here being dominance, which she attributes to the notion of the masculine and the money economy. Wendy Brown echoes this argument by noting:

Put another way, while neoliberal Homo Oeconomicus is both gendered and gendering in its ascendancy and dissemination, this is illegible within its own terms. The persistent responsibility of women provisioning care of every sort in and out the household, means that women both require the visible infrastructure that neoliberalism aims to dismantle through privatization and are the invisible infrastructure sustaining a world of putatively self-investing human capitals.¹⁰

I’m calling attention to this quote for two reasons, first, it emphasizes the point Acker made about women being in the dual role of “producer” and “reproducer and second it characterizes another behavior of the economy which is the goal of dismantling public infrastructure. As a result, we have a story of dominance and dismantling, in other words, the economy seeks to maintain control of women and the role of the “reproducers” through masculinity. From here, the question of the emasculation continues, and we are now tasked to trace how capitalist economies exemplify masculine qualities to subdue these changes, as well as how masculine qualities are shaped by the economy itself.

⁹ Acker, 24.

¹⁰ Brown, 106.

How is masculinity changing in a neoliberal society? The answer to this question is fundamental to our understanding of the aesthetics of neoliberalism in television, such as *Billions* and *Succession*. We have established so far that there is an undeniable privilege for men in a neoliberal and capitalist society, as men can be fully elevated to the role of producer and thrive in a society where capital is associated with individual labour. However, there is a natural complexity to this relationship between the masculine and neoliberalism and it is best introduced in Leslie Salzinger's article "Re-Marking Men: Masculinity as a Terrain of the Neoliberal Economy". This article offers data from a micro neoliberal society, that of a factory in Mexico, and the gender dynamics of this factory paint a picture of how masculinity informs and changes due to a neoliberal economic transition. Continuing off the ideas established in this chapter by Brown and Acker about discourse not specifically describing ungendered economic discourse as masculine, Salzinger writes:

This is particularly problematic because masculinity's tendency to function without being specifically articulated makes its role in the overall illegibility of the processes of domination pivotal, and the function is undoubtedly at work in the current neoliberal period. Focusing on masculinity also has the corollary benefit of helping us get some purchase on the rising chorus of anxiety about men and boys that has emerged over the course of the last quarter century in domestic popular discourse in the United States.¹¹

We understand both the way a Neoliberal economy is gendered and gendering, and we have established the motivation behind its displays of masculine qualities, but a question is provoked by the latter half of Salzinger's argument. How does the economy inform individual masculinity? This rise in anxiety surrounding masculinity is the area of aesthetics that we can see changes in television, especially after the financial crisis.

¹¹ Salzinger, 6.

Before moving into the realm of media, we should continue to examine real-world data markers for analysis. Salzinger's article posits that the male employees of the plant displayed radically different forms of masculinity as the plant hiring policy became unsegregated. While the presence of masculinity and sexualization did not disappear, the ways males displayed their masculinity did. As Salzinger states, "over time, the cat-calls diminished, softened, and personalized; however, the male voices never stopped"¹². What this suggests to her is that while the landscape changed visibly in terms of outright displays of masculinity, the male hegemony over the atmosphere never dissipated, instead, it mutated. Additionally, an invisible shift happened, rather than struggling against management they focused on their emasculation¹³. In a neoliberal economy, the reflection of masculinity actively fuels this male anxiety of emasculation.

Salzinger also offers the correlation of her analysis of factory workers to the trading floors of the stock exchange as another scene of masculine culture¹⁴. Salzinger describes these traits as "men behaving badly", she describes this as men making dirty jokes, teasing each other with statements like "I thought you had balls" and describing trades in sexual terms like "they fucked me" or "I fucked them"¹⁵. An iconic example of this is Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* (1987), which features the character of Gordon Gekko, a man who is the exaggeration of all these traits Salzinger describes. In his chapter, "*Wall Street and Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Film and Fiction*", Ulfried Reichardt describes these traits:

Gordon Gecko, fantastically played by Michael Douglas as an almost stereotypical prototype of a reckless, conscience-free, Wall Street broker, wearing shirt sleeves and suspenders, and forcing the young protagonist to sacrifice his father's business. The main

¹² Salzinger, 13.

¹³ Salzinger, 14.

¹⁴ Salzinger, 16.

¹⁵ Salzinger, 17.

point here is Gecko's performance. High risk, a short-term temporal horizon, aggressive, extremely self-confident, and reckless behavior are the decisive factors for the version of masculinity the film attributes to a successful stockbroker.¹⁶

Gekko is emblematic of this condition of an early neoliberalist society. His hyper-masculine behaviour, as embodied through acts of risk, is directly correlated with his success as a broker. Additionally, while his character is the undeniable villain of the film, he is frequently portrayed as the guy men want to be. In this respect, *Wall Street* functions as a kind of ur-text for later finance fiction, such as Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013). The film follows Jordan Belfort's career from a wet behind the ears stock trader to a white-collar criminal living a life of partying, drugs, and sex. Like Gekko, Belfort is no hero, but the film revels in his chaotic glamour, and in the final scene challenges the viewers' perception of Belfort by hanging on the image of an audience enamoured by his presence.

The characteristics of Gordon Gekko and Jordan Belfort represent a notable shift in the depiction of the salesman. In his chapter, "*Sovereigns of Risk: The Birth of the Ontopreneur*", Andrew Pendakis proposes "The salesman is no longer a figure of extreme powerlessness but a continuously tested (and risking) Homeric wanderer"¹⁷. This proposition is based on the idea that the entrepreneur is now closely linked to the adventurer and risk-taker. As Pendakis points out, the 1980s saw a spike in vanity projects like Trump Tower and an obsession with financial conquest. As Pendakis writes, "Not until the 1980s do we see Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* conspicuously displayed on the bedside table of every would-be entrepreneur"¹⁸. Again, this calls

¹⁶ Ulfried Reichardt "Wall Street and Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Film and Fiction," In *Contemporary Masculinities in the UK and the US: Between Bodies and Systems*, ed. Stefan Horlacher and Kevin Floyd (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 225.

¹⁷ Andrew Pendakis, "Sovereigns of Risk: The Birth of the Ontopreneur," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 114, no. 3 (2015): 597. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-3130767>.

¹⁸ Pendakis, 599.

attention to the idea of dominance and dismantling that Acker and Brown discussed. Capital has moved from being an exchange of labour to something won in battle. Pendakis summarizes this aptly, stating “Trump, Icahn, and a hundred other ambient Gordon Geckos: these are the self-avowed conquistadors of the nothing, the new heroes of the void. They aspired to change the world, not by imagining a different one, but by putting their hands all over it”¹⁹. The entrepreneur’s evolution has not stopped here and the new entrepreneurs of today pursue something larger than the vanity of capital²⁰. Pendakis continues this discussion with his theory of the ontopreneur.

The ontopreneur, as described by Pendakis searches for new worlds to conquer rather than capital. In Pendakis words:

Today’s ontopreneur no longer traces his or her destiny to a dream of money or to a luxury or convenience conceived from the margins of comfort but, instead, to the grace, violence, and strangeness of an event. At the origin of this entrepreneur exists an encounter, an experience, one that could not be foreseen in advance and that lays down in its wake the intensity of an extreme, even pathological, focus. This can be a trauma, a disruption, something that negatively interrupts life (failure is one of the key motifs here), or it can be framed as a moment of illumination, a kind of transfigurative encounter with the never-before considered. Page’s invocation of a dream in which he encounters the structure of the Internet laid bare, the montage sequence (LSD, India, calligraphy—all held together by the baroque algorithms of Bach) that precedes Jobs’s invention of the personal computer [referring to Joshua Sterns’ biographical film *Jobs* (2013)]—nothing could be further from the origin story of a Rockefeller or Carnegie than these narratives of violent perceptual rupture. The entrepreneur, or so it would appear, originates exogenously, ecstatically, on the edge of consciousness, intention, and existing knowledges.²¹

We see countless examples of ontopreneurs today, especially in the world of technological innovation. Silicon Valley is famous for an underground LSD culture of microdosing, which

¹⁹ Pendakis, 601.

²⁰ Pendakis, 601.

²¹ Pendakis, 602.

originated with Steve Jobs' incredible influence in that area of the market²². In Jobs' biography, written by Walter Isaacson, Jobs asserts that LSD "reinforced my sense of what was important – creating great things instead of making money, putting things back into the stream of history and human consciousness as much as I could"²³. This statement demonstrates exactly what Pendakis argues with the ontopreneur. This shift Pendakis emphasizes in his chapter also implies a shift in the *aesthetic* of masculinity. The question becomes, if the new class of billionaires have transcended the aspirations of the Gordon Gekko type, then how has masculinity continued to mutate under neoliberalism?

Pendakis briefly talks about this mutation when describing the motivation of the ontopreneur. The classic origin story of the ontopreneur is the rejection of the 9-to-5 job, and the pursuit of their passion projects and ultimately achieving freedom from the office and pensioned labour²⁴. This idea suggests that our concept of work has reorganized itself. As a result, Pendakis writes:

Risk is here feminized—removed from the masculinist trope of conquest—yet not delinked from the overriding ontopreneurial obsession with “changing the world,” with the foundation of a new order. A very precise equation is established here between risk, one's personal emotional comportment, and revolution itself, an equation perfectly captured by the cliché contemporary injunction to be the change one wants to see.²⁵

In her essay, “*Being the “Go-To Guy”*: *Fatherhood, Masculinity, and the Organization of Work in Silicon Valley*”, Marianne Cooper provides some real-world data in this labour reorganization. Here, Cooper extrapolates from a series of interviews with family men that the labour output

²² Jack Kelly, “Silicon Valley Is Micro-Dosing ‘Magic Mushrooms’ To Boost Their Careers,” *Forbes*, Jan 17, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackkelly/2020/01/17/silicon-valley-is-micro-dosing-magic-mushrooms-to-boost-their-careers/?sh=495ddd745822>.

²³ Walter Isaacson, *Steve Jobs* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 41.

²⁴ Pendakis, 606.

²⁵ Pendakis, 606.

correlates with their sense of masculinity. Specifically, Cooper mentions how their obsession over work, time spent at work and bending their entire lifestyles to conform with work is a predominant part of the Silicon Valley culture²⁶. Comparing this to what we mentioned around the figure that men subconsciously aspire to be, this new figure is that man who does not rest and is constantly part of, if not completely enveloped by the rule of the “producers”.

Cooper’s study offers a glimpse into the masculine aesthetic of the new economy. As we will investigate in the following chapter, this aesthetic presents itself in a variety of prestige television. The anxiety is best summarized by Cooper:

The masculinity created and constructed by the labor process borrows from, but is not identical to, traditional masculinity. It does not emphasize physical strength, but mental toughness. It does not require hazing women but does require a willingness to be absorbed in one’s work that, by effect if not design, excludes both women and family responsibilities.²⁷

This form of masculinity finds itself as a target of contemporary media, especially in the fallout of the world financial crisis. As we will explore in the following chapter, the ways characters face these anxieties and challenges will help us understand the implications of portraying gender. This will raise questions about how neoliberalism is symptomatized through gender identity as well as the mutation of masculinity in a neoliberal society.

²⁶ Marianne Cooper, “Being the “Go-To Guy”: Fatherhood, Masculinity and the Organization of Works in Silicon Valley.” *Qualitative Sociology* 23, (2000): 388.

²⁷ Cooper, 390.

Chapter 2

From the Meth Lab to Wall Street, The Transformation of Masculinity in 21st Century

Film and Television

If we want to understand how television represents masculine identity after the financial crisis, then we must first establish how masculine traits have been portrayed on TV in the periods before and after the crisis. To start this chapter, I will examine Amanda D Lotz's book *The Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21st Century* as a means of establishing how masculine identities have been rendered by a variety of premium network TV shows, specifically *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013). Additionally, I will follow Lotz's inquiry into television after the crisis to explore shifts in the representation of the anti-hero. By building on Lotz's argument, I will explore the environment of hegemonic masculinity in prestige television leading up to the shows to be explored in Chapters 3 and 4. As I will argue in the following chapters, contemporary representations of masculinity on prestige television tend to idolize the concept of the ontopreneur proposed by Andrew Pendakis. The ontopreneur, according to Pendakis, is the rebirth and redemption of the entrepreneur from a pathetic salesmen figure to someone heroic, like a character from one of Homer's poems²⁸. This chapter will review previous analytical parameters to establish my analysis of HBO's *Succession* and Showtime's *Billions*, particularly as concerns the ways those shows symptomatize the new masculinity.

²⁸ Pendakis, 597.

It is equally important that we establish the significance of a historical approach to the analysis of masculine culture this chapter will encounter. In his book *Transfigurations: Violence, Death and Masculinity in American Cinema*, Asbjørn Grønstad argues:

If masculinity, as among others, David Gilmore, Judith Butler (“Melancholy Gender”), and Giroux (“Private Satisfactions”) seem to imply, is ultimately a performance rather than an immanent psychic structure, it follows that any analysis of this performance as it manifests itself in popular texts must historicize rather than universalize the narration of men in crisis.²⁹

If we are to look at the significance of certain prestige television shows, we should establish the significance of the societal environments in which they were produced. This method helps us understand the fluidity of masculinity, as it is shaped in conjunction with both social and economic trends. Doing so will help us understand how television today focuses on the ontopreneurial performance of masculinity.

Whatever Happened to Gary Cooper?

A middle-aged gangster seeks psychological help after a series of panic attacks. These attacks are brought on by his struggle to perform traditional masculine archetypes and the anger he holds towards his mother’s generation for fostering this environment. Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini) struggles to balance his family life and the life of crime he was born into. *The Sopranos* is frequently referred to as a television show ahead of its time because it tackles these topics directly. *The Sopranos* ran from 1999 to 2007 and began the first wave of what is widely regarded as the golden age of television³⁰. In the pilot episode of the series, Tony asks his therapist, “Whatever happened to Gary Cooper? The strong silent type. That was an American.”

²⁹ Asbjørn Grønstad, *Transfigurations : violence, death and masculinity in American cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008): 117.

³⁰ J. Madison Davis, “Our “Golden Age” of TV Crime Drama: The Artistic Promise of Television Blooms,” *World Literature Today* 93, no. 1 (2019): 11.

Tony highlights a key element to his character's struggle surrounding masculinity, and his inability to live up to the masculine culture of his father's generation. Furthermore, the assertion of masculinity as performance is reinforced by Tony's statement in his reference to an actor that emphasized the most masculine qualities of his time.

The concept of men comparing themselves to a masculine ideal is not new and lines up with the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Raewyn Connell defines the term in her book *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*, noting, first, that “‘Hegemonic masculinity’ is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women” and second:

In the concept of hegemonic masculinity, ‘hegemony’ means (As in Gramsci’s analyses of class relations in Italy from which the term is borrowed) a social ascendancy achieved in a play of social forces that extends beyond contests of brute power into the organization of private life a cultural process. Ascendancy of one group of men over another achieved at the point of a gun, or by the threat of unemployment, is not hegemony. Ascendancy, which is embedded in religious doctrine and practice, mass media content, wage structures, the design of housing, welfare/taxation policies and so forth is.³¹

This concept helps us understand what Tony alludes to in his statement about Gary Cooper. His problem, as the definition establishes, is that ‘hegemony’ relies on a social ascendancy that is based on factors constantly in motion. In his chapter “Masters of Their Domain: Seinfeld and the Discipline of Mediated Men’s Sexual Economy”, Wesley Buerkle discusses how this constantly evolving ‘hegemonic masculinity is’ is symptomatized differently in *Seinfeld* (1989-1998) compared to *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-2007).

³¹ Raewyn Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 184.

Looking at *Seinfeld*, Buerkle argues that “*Seinfeld* has demonstrated the ever-changing discourses of gender and sexuality in the United States as we have shifted from a gender ideology grounded in modern/industrial ideals to one directed toward neoliberal/consumerist ends”³². His analysis focuses on the *Seinfeld* episode titled “The Contest”, where Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer challenge each other to see who can go the longest without masturbating. Kramer almost immediately caves in, while the other three manage to get along further and ultimately pay the price of their abstinence of pleasure. This is best embodied in the ending where Kramer is the only one going to bed with a partner. In his conclusion, he suggests “It does, however, demonstrate the tension within sexual discourses as dominant U.S. culture moves from modernism to neoliberalism, trying to find the balance between building resources and regulating social behaviour (modernism) and embracing the pleasures of life without slipping into complete narcissism”³³. The hegemonic masculinity *Seinfeld* deals with is like that of *The Sopranos*, in which Tony too struggles to balance building resources for his family and defining the social behaviour of his time.

In *The Sopranos*, these issues of equity and social behaviour are instead manifested through the lens of an anti-hero. A subject explored in Amanda Lotz’s chapter “Any Men and Outlaws: The Unbearable Burden of Straight White Man”, in which she writes:

The fact that so many of these men – uniformly white, straight and either physically or intellectually formidable – must transgress the bounds of law and order suggests that all is not well in the lives of men. This turn to illegality may be assumed to be a reaction against fading patriarchal power, but the intricately constructed characters and their

³² C. Wesley Buerkle, "Masters of Their Domain: Seinfeld and the Discipline of Mediated Men's Sexual Economy." In *Performing American Masculinities: The 21st-Century Man in Popular Culture*, ed. Elwood Watson and Marc E Shaw (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011): 9.

³³ Buerkle, 25.

stories reveal a far more complicated engagement with changing gender roles and social norms than might be presumed.³⁴

Her statement asks the reader to consider the significance of their criminal activity as a means of expressing their masculinity. When writing about *The Sopranos*, Lotz argues that the patriarchal Soprano crime family represents a significant change to hegemonic masculinity. For a protagonist like Tony Soprano, the challenge of his character is the “difficulty merging paternal involvement and nonpatriarchal marital relations with residual patriarchal masculinities that require great responsibility of men for familial provision”³⁵. The gap between this hegemonic masculinity and regulating his behaviour is Tony’s burden that he carries throughout the show.

It is also important to highlight the setting of *The Sopranos* as a source of these anxieties. Aaron A. Toscano suggests that Tony’s neighbourhood suggests several sources for his character's anxiety, the first being the nouveau riche status he has attained and the lifestyle he has entered and must maintain for his family³⁶. These anxieties are reinforced through his family's attempts to adhere to traditional gender roles and maintain the illusion of their upper-class surroundings³⁷. As Toscano points out, *The Sopranos* suburbanizes the mafia narrative genre³⁸. This shift from the nostalgic gangster story to one about a suburban nuclear family fighting with federal law enforcement offers us a sense of the new economy and gender roles. Tony wants to be a man behaving badly, as Salzinger puts it, but even this type of man has begun to fade from popularity³⁹. Masculinity by this point has become increasingly feminized and tied to capital, as

³⁴ Amanda D. Lotz, *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21st Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2014): 83.

³⁵ Lotz, 84.

³⁶ Aaron A. Toscano, “Tony Soprano as the American Everyman and Scoundrel: How *The Sopranos* (re)Presents Contemporary Middle-Class Anxieties” *Journal of Popular Culture* 47, no. 3 (2014): 452.

³⁷ Toscano, 452.

³⁸ Toscano, 455.

³⁹ Salzinger, 17.

Watson and Shaw argue in their chapter comparing *Seinfeld* to *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, “Unburdened by such tensions, the straight men of *Queer Eye* go through a public makeover of their intimate lives, shameless immersing themselves in capitalist pleasures”⁴⁰. Their conclusion highlights the significant growth of neoliberal influence on hegemonic masculinity and introduces us to a new crisis forming in the world of men.

What Does a Man Do, Walter?

This crisis of manliness, according to Lotz, emerged across a plethora of television shows in the early 20th century⁴¹. This crisis was indeed also a subject of David Fincher’s *Fight Club* (1999). Grønstad argues this point in his analysis arguing that the film dramatizes the repossession of masculinity as a rejection of the world⁴². In his argument, Grønstad highlights Suzanne Clark’s proposition that films like *Fight Club* “reassert a masculine identity threatened by the feminization of American culture”⁴³. Grønstad asserts that this concept of feminization is embodied in the themes of domestication and commodification present in the narrative and agrees that the film explicitly blames these concepts for the crisis of masculinity⁴⁴. The Narrator (Edward Norton) faces the weight of his consumerism and his emasculation when all his belongings are destroyed in an explosion. In discussing Henry A. Giroux’s analysis, Grønstad argues:

In his caustic but poignant evaluation, Giroux indicts Fincher’s narrative for conflating the processes of consumerism and emasculation: “If Jack represents the crisis of capitalism repackaged as the crisis of a domesticated masculinity, Durden represents the

⁴⁰ Elwood Watson, and Marc E. Shaw, *Performing American Masculinities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011): 29.

⁴¹ Lotz, 6.

⁴² Grønstad, 174.

⁴³ Suzanne Clark, “*Fight Club*: Historicizing the Rhetoric of Masculinity, Violence, and Sentimentality” *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory* 21, no. 2 (2001): 413.

⁴⁴ Grønstad, 178.

redemption of masculinity repackaged as the promise of violence in the interests of social and political anarchy” (“Private Satisfactions” 13).⁴⁵

Here we begin to see the new masculine hegemony emerging, one that seeks societal detachment. In a sense, the “Wall Street” Gordon Gekko archetype has shifted towards Durden, and commercialism, consumerism and finance are participating in a feminine culture. The masculine conflict here emerges because men are not able to escape the responsibility of family and feminization, as a result, they resort to violence as a means of maintaining hegemonic masculinities.

These traits are exemplified in AMC’s *Breaking Bad*. The show follows Walter White’s (Bryan Cranston), who has just celebrated his 50th birthday. At the party, his brother-in-law Hank (Dean Norris), a DEA agent offers to take him on a ride-along. For Walt, a high-school chemistry teacher, this offer proves to be at first too much excitement for him. After collapsing days later, and subsequently being diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer, Walt decides to take up his brother-in-law’s offer. After seeing one of his former students, Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul) escape from the drug bust, Walt decides to partner with Jesse in cooking meth to secure his family’s financial future. After some time, Walter becomes a larger presence in the meth underworld. In one of the most captivating exchanges between Walter White and his drug kingpin employer and eventual enemy Gustavo Fring (Giancarlo Esposito), *Breaking Bad* offers a summarization of the weight of being a man. Gus asks “What does a man do, Walter? He provides for his family.” To which, Walt replies “This cost me, my family.” Gus replies “When you have children you always have family, they will always be your priority, your responsibility. And a man, a man provides. And he does it even when he is not appreciated, or respected, or

⁴⁵ Grønstad, 178.

even loved. He simply bears up and he does it. Because he's a man". Gus becomes the antagonist of the show, and his rhetoric here reinforces the same societal structure Walter wants to avoid. As Lotz points out "it becomes increasingly apparent that providing for his family was largely a rationalization for a decision Walt made for far more egotistical reasons"⁴⁶. Walt's initiation into masculinity requires the castration of his nuclear family to fuel his sense of power as well as a means of escaping the humiliation of his life before he breaks bad.

Walt throughout the show is seen to desire that same masculine hegemony as "The Narrator" in *Fight Club*. They both wish to escape a late consumer society that has become increasingly feminized. Walt's economic position as a worker and provider for his family proves to be the crux of his motivation. As the show continues, the implication seems to be that Walt's drive to grow a meth empire is in part due to the regret surrounding a previous choice that led to his life of domesticity. In the series finale, he openly admits that his decision to cook Meth was for his gratification. The pursuit of capital is not everything for Walt; it is the pride and ability to embody the hegemonic male. As David P. Pierson writes, "For Walt, money is the route to masculine efficacy and allows him to rationalize all the violence he enacts as he continuously reminds himself that he has become involved in the drug trade to provide and protect his family"⁴⁷. The goal for Walt is to prove to society that he is a man. The series follows each decision he makes to regain control over something he thinks he has lost. This is not unlike the philosophy of *Fight Club*, which focuses on this same struggle to participate in masculinity.

⁴⁶ Lotz, 100.

⁴⁷ David P. Pierson, *Breaking Bad : critical essays on the contexts, politics, style, and reception of the television series* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011): 77.

These films and television shows depict hegemonic masculinity as violence and associate it with the role of the criminal anti-hero. This noticeably evolved sometime in the early 2010s, as Lotz attests:

The imagined masculinity crisis in fall 2011 and the noteworthy characters launched nevertheless create an opportunity to address some of the comedic portrayals of men that remain difficult to organize – as illustrated by the contradictory offerings of Barney Stinson, Charlie Harper, and Sheldon Cooper that open the book. The breadth of contemporary television comedy – in sheer quantity as well as the diversity of comedic sensibilities now addressed – allows for a vast range of masculinities and requires careful parsing of the complicated uses of parody, satire, and sincere representation.⁴⁸

The evolution of masculinity has evolved into a new complex network of representing hegemonic masculinity. The question remains, how have depictions of masculinity changed since the criminal protagonist era? As I argued in chapter 1, this new hegemonic masculinity idolizes the entrepreneur and continues to reflect the crisis of masculinity spurred on through neoliberal economics.

Sometimes It Is a Big Dick Competition

The 2008 financial crisis brought with it a new wave of entertainment-focused on financial capital. It has been the subject of many films and television shows that dramatize its precipitating events and the fallout of the market collapse. This focus on the market collapse has brought with it a fascination with the wealthy and powerful. Today, we have several popular television dramas that use this backdrop, notably *Billions* and *Succession*. These shows continue to focus on privileged white men battling for territory and power over each other. The crisis of hegemonic masculinity has evolved to represent traits that we have established as the entrepreneur. Money does not mean life or death for the characters but ties into their pride and

⁴⁸ Lotz, 183.

their ability to participate in the hegemonic masculinity. The rest of this paper will analyze these shows to map the coordinates of contemporary masculinity on television. This discussion is ongoing, and as Lotz summarizes at the end of her book, “Though incomplete, phenomenal changes in American gender roles have occurred in the post-second-wave era”⁴⁹. Although this analysis is part of a vast depiction of men on TV, I will seek to understand how finance builds platforms for masculinity and how these shows build upon the previous discourse on masculinity.

⁴⁹ Lotz, 193.

Masculinity in Crisis: The Process of Self-Actualization, The Male Fantasy of New Capitalism, And the Fear of the Corporate Cannibal in *Billions*

In her article “The Flashy Pleasures of ‘*Billions*’”, Emily Nussbaum proposes “If *Succession* is a show about Jared Kushner, *Billions* is the show that Kushner would write about himself”⁵⁰. The show's main characters carry themselves with extreme confidence and a superhuman capacity for life-threatening pressure. At its core, *Billions* is a show about the extreme ambitions of its rival characters Bobby Axelrod (Damian Lewis) and Chuck Rhoades (Paul Giamatti), and their relationship to the show's lead female character Wendy Rhoades (Maggie Siff). As Alyssa Rosenberg describes “The setup puts Bobby and Chuck in competition not just for professional power and preeminence, but for Wendy's loyalties. And Wendy has to reckon with her influence over both men's brains, her abilities to make them better -- or at least different -- versions of themselves”⁵¹. This premise is interrupted in the second season as the show introduces a non-binary character into the core cast, complicating the shows otherwise frat-boy mise-en-scene. Emily Nussbaum describes this noteworthy change, stating, “the show has begun to explore an alternative vision of heroism, one that is gentler, stranger, and, in its way, almost idealistic. And where better to tweak bro culture than from inside the locker room?”⁵². *Billions* has received wide critical praise for its willingness to challenge its generic conventions, especially in the finale of season three, where the culmination of seasons’ worth of hyper-masculine warfare comes to an apparent end when Axe is betrayed by the show’s only

⁵⁰ Emily Nussbaum. “The Flashy Pleasures of ‘*Billions*’”, *The New Yorker*, Published March 25, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/04/01/the-flashy-pleasures-of-billions>.

⁵¹ Alyssa Rosenberg. “On Showtime’s ‘*Billions*,’ Paul Giamatti and Damian Lewis fight a brutal class war”, *The Washington Post*, Published January 15, 2016, <https://go-gale-com.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=ucalgary&id=GALE%7CA440037015&v=2.1&it=r>.

⁵² Nussbaum, “The Flashy Pleasures of ‘*Billions*’”.

significant queer character. In his glowing and apropos review of the season three finale, Sean T. Collins writes “What a way to cap a season in which this ruthlessly entertaining and intelligent show, so gimlet-eyed about the corrupting influence of power and so deft at depicting its argot and appeal, finally brought in the buzz it has long deserved. To paraphrase the Hulkster, *Billions*-mania is running wild, brother. Long may it flex”⁵³. Based on these examples of popular discourse about *Billions*, we can see that it foregrounds the relationship between depictions of gender and financial fiction, which is what I will unpack in this chapter.

Observing a variety of television shows that have been released in the last five years and have had a significant focus on financial systems, we can see how the expression of the patriarchy continues to mutate. This mutation indicates the new ways men find themselves in crisis. Lotz summarizes this mutation when discussing male protagonists on television, stating “Aspects of patriarchal masculinities have not been eradicated from the men considered here, but some aspects have been made uninhabitable”⁵⁴. Lotz thus suggests that contemporary television highlights areas in which men are losing patriarchal control. This chapter will explore the male crisis of maintaining a habitable space in finance. Specifically, *Billions* uses the performance of masculinity to symptomatize the ontopreneural iteration of hegemonic masculinity in our increasingly neoliberal economy. As I argued in chapter one, Pendakis proposes that the ontopreneur is the salesman who evolved into the figure of adventurer and explorer, who treats the accumulation of capital as the core of human development⁵⁵. As I argued, men find themselves desiring a nirvana with economic success to satisfy their ideas of masculinity, as in the case of men working endless hours in Silicon Valley to become the next Steve Jobs. *Billions*

⁵³ Sean T Collins. “‘*Billions*’ Season 3 Finale: Crash of the Titans”, *The New York Times*, Published June 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/10/arts/television/billions-recap-season-3-finale.html>.

⁵⁴ Lotz, 188.

⁵⁵ Pendakis, 602.

is an excellent example of where this masculine crisis finds itself in the late 2010s, insofar as it stages, and subtly critiques, the figure of the ontopreneur. First, the character of Axe, the show's figure of the uber-capitalist, identifies as an integral part of the economic system. This is unlike the characters that we looked at in chapter two, all of whom actively worked *outside* the legitimate economy. Axe instead seeks to achieve self-actualization in working within the system rather than against it. In addition, Axe also participates in therapy and meditation in order to become a more aggressive capitalist rather than actually treat any underlying mental health issues. Second, in its depiction of this contradictory male anti-hero, *Billions* reflects these men's obsession with older iterations of capitalism and renegade behaviour. Axe and his goons nostalgically reference texts like *The Godfather* (1971) and *Goodfellas* (1990) as if they were carrying on that maverick spirit as opposed to inhabiting the austere, glassy, futurist world they have created. Ultimately, these systems that Axe uses are then seemingly interrupted by the show's non-binary character Taylor Mason. Taylor seemingly becomes the show's method of physically manifesting Axe's fears of inadequacy as a man. Furthermore, in a problematic thematic development, the show implies that Taylor's gender identification as non-binary allows them to be *more in sync* with the system of neoliberal capitalism than their mentor, Axe, and to quite literally consume his business. Overall, these points will help emphasize how *Billions* stages paradoxes of the male anti-hero in contemporary prestige television.

Premise of *Billions*

Chuck Rhoades, the U.S attorney for the southern district of New York is asked by the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission to investigate the charismatic hedge fund manager Bobby Axelrod for insider trading. These men share an odd connection through Wendy Rhoades, Chuck's wife, and the psychiatrist for Bobby's firm AXE capital. Axelrod, or Axe, is publicly

seen as a generous survivor of 9/11, while privately known as a ruthless and ethically compromised business genius. Chuck Rhoades on the other hand is seen as a tough and powerful public servant, while privately he is a sadomasochist who actively participates in BDSM with his wife and other dominatrix partners. Wendy plays the role of providing support for both men's professional and private lives. By and large, this role is a common and sexist trope as she serves as a medium of exchange between these two men, even if her role does occasionally grow out of this trope. The show begins with a premise of State Vs. Economy, as these men battle each other in a constant back and forth. Both Axe and Chuck use their positions in the state and the economy to outperform each other's demonstrations of power. This game of cat and mouse is upended as the character of Taylor Mason (Asia Kate Dillon) rises to prominence in the show. In season three, Taylor emerges as one of the lead characters and a threat to Axe, Chuck, and Wendy. The thesis of the show itself is the battle for these men to achieve self-actualization.

The Goal Isn't More Money. The Goal Is Living Life on Your Own Terms.

For Chuck and Wendy, this journey of actualization is achieved in terms of political influence and career success, as opposed to Axe, who finds it in the accumulation of capital. Both Chuck and Wendy are dominant forces in their respective fields, however, they privately practice BDSM at home and dominatrix clubs. For Chuck, in particular, this practice is the key differentiator between himself and Axe. Chuck is a domineering public servant as a district attorney but his ability to perform that role is supported by being sexually submissive. The show suggests that his ability to perform as a powerful state agent is paid for in his sexual submissiveness. Notably, at the end of season two, Chuck willingly sacrifices tens of millions of dollars to temporarily imprison Axe. Chuck taunts him saying "You'll make bail, but it won't feel like freedom for a long time, maybe ever again". Axe's response to this threat is "I didn't

realize how desperate you were to feel like a man”. Chuck ultimately believes his sacrifice is worth it, as for him there is always a price to pay for his success. Their interaction here highlights something else: Chuck is not so much a threat to Axe as he symbolic of the old laws that prevent him from achieving nirvana with the economy. Pendakis describes why this conflict exists in his description of the ontopreneur, saying “The entrepreneur today is a “deviant,” a rule breaker, but only because the entrepreneur is at the same time a giver of new law, a creator, a builder of whole new worlds”⁵⁶. Axe, blinded by this fallacy, threatens to spend a thousand times what Chuck spent on taking his opponent down. The two participate in a constant ‘big dick competition’ over who is the manliest. In this same finale, Axe makes amends with Wendy at the World Trade Memorial. The relationship between Wendy and Axe is integral to Axe’s business, she acts as the mediator between himself and his employees. Not only that, but Wendy is also Axe’s therapist, and advises him on his most important and brutal decisions. His therapy with Wendy, however, is not for a general anxiety disorder or other mental health problems but to clear his mind in order to execute trades more ferociously. Pendakis cites Drake Bennett when he discusses the ontopreneur and therapy, writing “Today’s juvenile delinquents, a team of psychologist argues, are tomorrow’s ontopreneurs”⁵⁷. The apology he offers Wendy at the memorial is a double win for him, as it helps emphasize his public perception as a heroic figure, and it is a means of maintaining his business acumen; with the added benefit of also pissing off Chuck. This action on his part highlights the sexist role Wendy is often relegated to as she is once again turned into a medium of exchange between two men, but also, we can extract that Axe needs her abilities as a therapist to continue his journey of self-actualization.

⁵⁶ Pendakis, 595.

⁵⁷ Pendakis, 603.

While Chuck and Wendy both have significant roles in the show, Axe is unique in his role because he hyper-identifies with the economic system. The character of Axe is perhaps the most ‘in crisis’ character in the show, particularly in the third season as he struggles with the rise of his protégé, Taylor. Axe embodies the figure of the capitalist in the show, it is his capital that is the focus of the entire narrative. His wealth allows him to generate an ontopreneural persona at his hedge fund. Axe works non-stop throughout the show and his employees are encouraged and at times bullied into working overtime to make more money for his firm. At the beginning of season three, after Axe is imprisoned temporarily by Chuck for manipulating the stock of “Ice Juice”, he is forced to forfeit his trading licences. No longer being able to trade, Taylor steps up and assumes control of Axe Capital. Powerless, Axe decides to continue trading using old contacts and essentially trading under their names, undermining Taylor’s new role at Axe Capital while pretending that he is hands-off. Instead of continuing a path outside the system, Axe actively tries to get back in. This action is directly opposed to his patriarchal legacy on prestige television, as a character like a Tony Soprano type would naturally disassociate with the system. The rational in this character shift is best described by the Lotz and Pendakis, as Lotz writes for our traditional anti-hero “their patrilineal legacy destined them to be leaders of men who exist in worlds outside the law and society”⁵⁸. Examining Pendakis’ article on the ontopreneur, we can map the evolution of men seeking new worlds to attempting to participate in the one that already exists, as he says “They aspire to change the world, not by imagining a different one, but by putting their hands all over it”⁵⁹. Regardless of his position in or out of the economic system, Axe's illegal activities must happen within its parameters. Axe’s attitude is not dissimilar to Gordon Gekko’s and even his desire to continually transgress against the law evokes the same

⁵⁸ Lotz, 83.

⁵⁹ Pendakis, 601.

philosophy of Walter White. As Helen Rosner puts it “Money types view Axe, in particular, as a role model, his ruthlessness and his Teflon resistance to ethics not bugs but features, a Gen-X Gordon Gekko in a blue cashmere hoodie”⁶⁰. For Axe, dis-identification with the system, like we saw in *Breaking Bad* and *The Sopranos* is no longer seen as the path towards self-actualization. For Axe to achieve this male perception of complete liberation, all his criminal actions must happen within the system itself. In an analogous way of putting it, the meth lab mafia has become wall street. In their stories, Walter White and Tony Soprano achieved nirvana or self-actualization through criminal actions, and they managed to live life on their own terms. In his unification with the system, Axe hopes to achieve the same kind of self-actualized independence previous criminal heroes of prestige television strived for.

Leigh Claire La Berge writes about this problem in her article “Fiction is Liquid: States of Money in *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*”. Her article focuses on the depiction of illegitimate money becoming legitimate. In summary, her article describes how *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* portray men blurring the definition and processes of illegitimate money and legitimate money. The key element of her analysis is how these men participate in the circulation of money, both illegitimate and illegitimately while maintaining the rigidity of their masculine identity. The area that I will discuss is how she discusses the characters' relationship with risk. Risk, as discussed in the first chapter is an essential trait of the ontopreneur. As La Berge writes “If Tony cannot regulate his anxiety, he will suffer panic attacks and be unable to work; if he cannot regulate the risk that adheres to his style of accumulation, he will be imprisoned and

⁶⁰ Helen Rosner. “How “*Billions*” Became One of TV’s Sharpest Critiques of Power”, *The New Yorker*, Published June 11, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/on-television/how-billions-became-one-of-tvs-sharpest-critiques-of-power>.

unable to work; indeed, he will forfeit his assets...”⁶¹. Conversely, she also writes “Their intimacy had, for the duration of the series, formed Walt’s risk, namely the risk of being apprehended by the state. That risk constitutes the price of illegitimate money...”⁶². Her point is that these men must absorb a significant level of risk to generate capital. That capital then evolves into a meaningful part of the economy. If Chuck seemingly pays for his political confidence in being sexually beaten, Axe gains his power in the accumulation of risk. After the financial crisis, the process of risking it all for complete freedom, or nirvana, is now inherently part of the system of capitalism itself.

It's Not Enough to Quote It, You Need to Live It.

In the episode titled “Hell of a Ride”, Axe watches Quentin Tarantino’s *Inglorious Bastards* (2009) and shows admiration for ‘The Bear Jew’ execution sequence. The scene begins with Sgt. Donny Donowitz aka ‘The Bear Jew’, played by Eli Roth, emerging from a dark underpass, as Ennio Morricone’s “The Surrender (La Resa)” swells in. The camera cuts back to Axe sitting on his couch grinning as his liaison, Sean Ayles (Jack Gilpin) enters the room behind him. When Sean approaches Axe, Axe gestures for silence and maintains focus on his television. Sean asks him “Who, in the name of goodness, is that?”, to which Axe replies “That’s the Bear Jew.” The camera cuts back to the film and we watch Donowitz swing a baseball bat to beat in a Nazi officer’s head. A reaction shot captures Sean and Axe’s shock and adoration respectively, as Sean replies to Axe saying “Savage”. Bobby replies “Yes, he is. For the cause. As are we.” Axe pauses the movie and begins to talk to Sean about his potential loss of control over the board of “World Aid”, an energy non-profit. Axe tells Sean that he should compel Taylor into buying

⁶¹ Leigh Claire La Berge. “Fiction is Liquid: States of Money in *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*”, *Journal of American Studies* 49, no. 4 (2015): 763.

⁶² La Berge, 773.

shares of a Solar Company that he will later offload onto “World Aid”. Knowing Taylor’s reluctance to engage in illegal trading, Axe suggests that Sean convey that “I’m stuck here watching skulls get crushed on tv, so I need Taylor crushing skulls on my behalf.” This scene offers a clue into Axe’s self-image; as warped as it may be, Axe perceives himself as the rebel hero of his story and romanticizes historical depictions of the male outlaw. These allusions to masculinity are found frequently in the show’s obsession with pop culture reference, particularly with Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather*. The employees of Axe Capital are seemingly trained to quote *The Godfather*, and frequently use lines from the film to convey the rationale for their actions. A key example comes from Taylor in the season three episode titled “Flaw in the Death Star”, in which they say, “Mr. Axelrod insists on hearing bad news at once”, which is an almost verbatim quote of Robert Duvall’s character, Tom Hagen. These kinds of references are not purely fictional either; John Oliver pointed this out in the 27th episode of his show *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, in a segment that highlights how frequently the programs on CNBC quote *The Godfather*, among whom include Andrew Ross Sorkin, one of the creators of *Billions*.

Mark Fisher writes about these mob films as an index of neoliberalism in his chapter “October 6, 1979: ‘Don’t let yourself get attached to anything’”, in which he compares Michael Mann’s film *Heat* (1995) and the films of Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese between 1971 and 1990. *Heat* is the story of bank robber Neil McCauley (Robert De Niro) and his crew escaping the pursuit of the LAPD and Lt. Vincent Hanna (Al Pacino). In his description of the film, Fisher writes “In *Heat*, the scores are undertaken not by Families with links to the Old Country, but by rootless crews, in a LA of polished chrome and interchangeable designer

kitchens, of featureless freeways and late-night diners”⁶³. Fisher suggests that *Heat* is emblematic of new capitalism, a post-Fordist look at the gangster. In his words:

As the organization of work is decentralized, with lateral networks replacing pyramidal hierarchies, a premium is put on ‘flexibility’. Echoing McCauley’s mockery of Hanna in *Heat* (‘How do you expect to keep a marriage?’), Sennett emphasizes the intolerable stresses that these conditions of permanent instability put on family life.”⁶⁴

The dismantling of traditional capitalism leaves these men in a vast network without direction.

As Fisher suggests, in a post-Fordist economy, traditional values of family life, such as obligation, trustworthiness, and commitment no longer serve any significant purpose and are rendered obsolete⁶⁵; a problem not dissimilar to that explored in *The Sopranos*. When Axe, or his employees, reference *The Godfather*, they are directly calling back to a form of tradition that has been obsolete for at least two decades. So, why are these characters, and financial media in general obsessed with a film of a bygone era?

It becomes clear in the finale that Axe generates an atmosphere of family and nostalgia as a means of shaping the environment of Axe capital to a fantastical mise en scene in an otherwise complex and austere network of finance. Axe sees himself, and his predominately male firm as a band of pirates destined for complete liberation. Unlike the concept of piracy of all for one, one for all, Axe likely only sees the first half of that statement. Emily Nussbaum highlights this in her article, where she writes,

At one point, Wendy tries to shame Taylor for their betrayal, insisting that a hedge fund was not about profits—it was about “lasting relationships, true loyalty, real trust.” “No,” Taylor replies, after a thoughtful pause, delivering what might be the slogan of the show.

⁶³ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Alresford: Zero Books, 2009), 31.

⁶⁴ Fisher, 32.

⁶⁵ Fisher, 33.

“I’m pretty sure there’s only money. And it can buy all those things—or, at least, the same result. That’s what you and Axe taught me.”⁶⁶

The values Wendy believes Axe perpetuates are the same as the values that Fisher suggests are obsolete. Taylor is correct in suggesting that the Axe’s motivations are entirely driven by money. Here we are confronted by the two faces of Axe’s character, the 9/11 survivor, philanthropist, the ideal family man and the hyper-aggressive self-centred businessman. The two sides of Axe represent, in part, the ontopreneurial influence of today. The ontopreneur is the product of their money, and it is through their capital that they can fund their projects of hubris. Throughout the show, Axe’s conflict is to bridge this gap between financial ambition and the perception of his generosity.

Here we have another contradiction in the character of Axe. Axe will make references to the previous Outlaws, but his actions foster an environment that is not habitable to those men who actively work outside the system. AXE capital is, in the world of the show, very much a part of the economic system and is on paper a legal entity. This is due by and large to the corporate entities adopting the worlds of the gangster. Consider the ending of *Casino* (1995), in which we watch a sequence of casinos being knocked down and replaced by corporations. The ending signals the end of the era of the gangster and the birth of neoliberal economics, which is best exemplified by Mark Fisher’s example with *Heat*. Axe, the meditating capitalist, can cope with this new environment unlike the traditional outlaw, as he accepts the new decentralized network of flexible capitalism. The component that emerges with Wendy and Chuck is equally fascinating and reflective of the power of Axe’s references. Wendy, who facilitates Axe’s therapy, undoubtedly sees him as the outlaw hero of his own story. Wendy fails to recognize just

⁶⁶ Nussbaum, “The Flashy Pleasures of ‘*Billions*’”.

how unrealistic that concept has become under neoliberalism. Chuck, himself, might see the difficulty in trapping someone so deep in the economic system, but the show depicts his struggle with Axe as an ultimately inconsequential speedbump towards Axe's Goals.

These concepts are discussed briefly in *Violence*, by Slavoj Žižek, where he discusses the influence of liberal communists over the economy. A liberal communist shares many traits with the ontopreneur, both having the goal of appearing to change the course of human development. The main figure of his argument is Bill Gates, who symbolizes the duality of his political philosophy, as Žižek writes,

The two faces of Bill Gates parallel the two faces of Soros. The cruel businessman destroys or buys out competitors, aims at virtual monopoly, employs all the tricks of the trade to achieve his goals. Meanwhile, the greatest philanthropist in the history of mankind quaintly asks: "What does it serve to have computers, if people do not have enough to eat and are dying of dysentery?"⁶⁷

Axe is no Bill Gates when it comes to 'ending dysentery', but his office portrays a 'microenvironment' of the influence of the liberal communist/ontopreneur. The employees of Axe capital truly believe they are part of Axe's family and that he has their best interests at heart when the reality has and always will be that Axe would let any of them fall to gain capital. Axe has the privilege of being ruthless in his business transactions while remaining maintaining his image as the world's best boss. This balance is interrupted by Taylor's betrayal at the end of season three, and Axe is given the opportunity to have Taylor killed by Russian Oil Billionaire Grigor Andolov (John Malkovich). He decides not to accept Grigor's offer but is conflicted with his decision to give in to his ruthless nature. When Axe asks Wendy about his hesitancy to turn against Taylor in that way, he asks, "Am I without mercy" and she replies, "he who makes

⁶⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008): 22.

money wins.” These lines offer reinforcement to Axe’s ontopreneurial attitudes, he has nothing to gain from Taylor’s murder, he chooses rather to focus on maintaining his monetary capital. Additionally, Axe cannot sully his reputation in such an extreme capacity as it would conflict with his ability to continue making money; as opposed to Grigor who’s financial income is secure in a more explicitly corrupt capitalist society. Taylor is the most interesting variable that emerges out of this storyline. As Axe is distracted with Chuck in their ‘big dick competition’, Taylor builds themselves into an incredibly threatening force towards Axe.

One Would Do Well to Go With Whoever Can Get the Best Kill

The character of Taylor Mason is an aspect of *Billions* that has been widely applauded. Asia Kate Dillon is perhaps one of the first breakout stars to identify as non-binary as Carolyn L. Todd emphasizes in her article “Meet *Billions*’ Asia Kate Dillon, TV’s First Non-Binary Star”, where she writes,

Just as Laverne Cox’s Sophia on *Orange Is the New Black* (2013-2019) — in which Dillon plays less-than-charming white supremacist Brandi, ironically enough — was the first trans woman to tread inside many Americans’ homes, Taylor has become the first non-binary-identifying individual many of *Billions*’ viewers have ever met.⁶⁸

While this assessment is fair, there is room for criticism against *Billions* in this respect, particularly in how the show often stereotypes Taylor as devoid of affect, a kind of human calculator. Taylor’s non-binary status is seemingly essential to the ending of season three, where they become the common enemy of the rest of the core cast. Taylor, because of their gender identity, becomes the show’s new representative of the demands of being the ontopreneur. The show implies, problematically, that Taylor’s disidentification as a woman allows them to

⁶⁸ Carolyn L Todd. “Meet *Billions*’ Asia Kate Dillon, TV’s First Non-Binary Star”, *Refinery29*, Published February 27, 2017, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2017/02/142575/kate-dillon-billions-taylor-nonbinary-gender-identity-pronouns>.

navigate and synchronize more naturally with the neoliberal economy. This is not unheard-of, since Steven Shaviro makes this case when discussing Grace Jones' music video *Corporate Cannibal*. The music video has a rather straightforward concept, with Jones standing in front of a white background in a variety of medium shots to close-ups. The film is filtered to black and white and distorted significantly to the point that at times Jones's figure becomes completely abstract. Shaviro argues that this abstraction loses all of Jones' identity, yet she consistently confronts us.⁶⁹ For Shaviro, this suggests "The only fixed requirement is precisely to maintain an underlying flexibility: an ability to take on any shape as needed, a capacity to adapt quickly and smoothly to the demands of any form, or any procedure, whatsoever"⁷⁰. The implication from *Billions* is that Taylor is the 'corporate cannibal' figure. In their clothing too, Taylor can move through space with an ability to take on any shape as needed. In this aesthetic choice, the show parallels Shaviro's statement: "Just as the groundless figures of digital video are no longer tied to any indexical referents, so too the endlessly modulating financial flows of globalized network capitalism are no longer tied to any concrete processes of production"⁷¹. *Billions* renders Taylor as a symptom of the neoliberal economy, and as someone who seemingly destroys the ethos of masculinity in their gender.

Taylor's personality reflects their environment. If we look at the spaces the show is set in, for instance, the headquarters of Axe Capital, both the original and new office demonstrate modernist coldness. Axe Capital has little to no colour, the walls are entirely glass, and the furnishings are all mid-century modernist designs. Mason Capital shares these modernist design tropes and even serves a more direct relationship to the narrative when we see Taylor sitting

⁶⁹ Steven Shaviro, *Post Cinematic Affect* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2010): 12.

⁷⁰ Shaviro, 14.

⁷¹ Shaviro, 30.

alone, victorious at the end of season three. These visual queues are significant, as Jonathan Beller writes:

The worker, once enveloped in the machine a la Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* or Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* is now the "social-worker" in Antonio Negri's special sense of the term – an actor whose body and consciousness are enveloped entirely by the deterritorialized factory of capitalist social organization, exactly as I the Wachowski brothers' contemporary social realist film, *The Matrix*"⁷².

This evolution in the setting is indicative of the shift from Fordist to Post-Fordist economics.

Fisher describes this cubical environment as a form of repetitive management in an analysis of Mike Judge's *Office Space* (1999) as "shirtsleeves informality and quiet authoritarianism"⁷³.

Billions follows this lineage by creating a new undefined space; there are no walls between upper management and those in the bullpen, the design is open concept, strikingly modern, and emphasizes a glassy transparency. We see this motif in a variety of shows that focus on finance today, perhaps most evidently in *Mr. Robot* (2015-2019), where the evil corporation meets in a minimalist glass room overlooking the New York Skyline. *Billions* uses these environments to underline the shape of those who will succeed in a neoliberal economy. The character of Taylor is pinned as the character who naturally embodies this neoliberal environment. Their ability to accommodate these new parameters is a point of crisis for Axe, so much so that he must unite with Wendy and Chuck to defeat this new threat.

Billions implies that Taylor's superpower is that they can blend seamlessly into this neoliberal environment. Additionally, Taylor can easily coopt both genders to navigate towards financial capital, best represented when they 'suit up' in the season four premiere, in which

⁷² Jonathan Beller, *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2006): 199.

⁷³ Beller, 39.

Taylor decides to look more feminine to convince a sheik to invest in their firm. Taylor also does this with Axe, participating in the culture of Axe capital to gain leverage from within the company, which is exemplified in how they communicate with the other employees at AXE capital. Notably, at Mason Capital in season 4, Taylor's assistant Sara Hammon (Samantha Mathis) responds to one of Taylor's male employee's reference to *The Godfather* with "It's not enough to quote it. You need to live it." For Taylor, all paths in the network are open and they can adopt more opportunity, more risk, and more capital than any of the cis gendered characters.

In the show, Taylor being non-binary is their power and makes them the person of the future, the best candidate for neoliberal nirvana. The original cast struggles to contain Taylor's implied destiny as the 'corporate cannibal'. Taylor quite literally consumes Axe's company at the end of the third season when they steal all of Axe's contacts at an investment event. Going back to the scene with Grigor, he warns Axe about losing control over Taylor, stating "look at this through my particular set of binoculars. I gave you my assets, at least in part, because Taylor was going to help manage them. So, when they fucked you over, they fucked me over too, but I ask your permission because she is your property. Not mine." Taylor is a greater threat to Axe than Chuck because they can perform at a higher level within the market than Axe, not to mention at an entirely legitimate level. Like *Corporate Cannibal*, Taylor becomes uncontained, flexible and a neoliberal entity. The final scene of Taylor alone in their office alone and surrounded in their new clinically designed offices suggests a synchronization with their environment. They have at the end of the season, seemingly achieved at least part of self-actualization.

Conclusion

Billions does an excellent job in calling attention to the significant change in the priorities of the anti-hero in prestige television currently. The idea of the anti-hero being intrinsic to the functions of the economy reflects a shift and signifies the increasing influence of neoliberalism on the depiction of masculinity in television. Equally in conversation is the history of the male criminal protagonist in film and television, and the evolution of these characters from being outlaws to stock traders. These concepts indicate a shift in the priorities of men, as the ideal version of manhood has moved from seeking independence outside the system to becoming an integral part of its function. In the case of *Billions*, the show also suggests that gender may as well be a hindrance to successfully achieving the goal that the anti-hero capitalist has set for themselves. The ethical nature of this depiction is certainly up for debate, but the fascination in *Billions* in trying to find a villain for men to blame their demise on is a provocative piece emerging from the show. In the following chapter, we will continue to explore how men struggle to cope with the pressure of neoliberal economics in the HBO series *Succession*.

Chapter 4

The Neoliberal Environment of *Succession*: Killers, Women and Culmination of Financial Fiction

Succession has quickly established itself as one of HBO's most brutal depictions of the upper class. Sophie Gilbert of *The Atlantic* describes her experience with the show, noting "To watch *Succession* is to see what happens when absolute power and unfettered id curdle into oppression in real-time."⁷⁴ *Succession* itself straddles a line between satirical commentary on current events and the high-stakes drama of *King Lear*. Similar to the films and television we have examined so far, *Succession* participates in the discussion of masculinity through its depiction of finance. Troy Patterson of *The New York Times* writes "In this realm, among these guys who often joke about emasculation and castration, nothing is more horrific, or more comedic, than a neutered tongue."⁷⁵ This realm is a departure from *Billions*, which unmistakably sees its characters as god-like figures in the world they inhabit. In *Succession*, creator Jesse Armstrong denies his characters that luxury, and is highly unsympathetic to their plights. Compared to the style and tone of *Billions* (2016-), *Succession* has a distaste for its world, as Megan Garber of *The Atlantic* describes:

Infestation. Insects. Ointment. This is not the stuff you might expect from a work of prestige TV that takes extreme wealth as both its subject and its setting. The typical exploration of wealth as a kind of ecology—in series such as *Billions*, or *Dirty Sexy Money*, or the *Real Housewives* franchise, or the many other shows that reimagine Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous for the post-Occupy era—takes the allure of aspiration for granted. *Billions* is a slick soap opera with how-to overtones... But *Succession* is a different beast, and that is in part because its stories involve, so often, actual beasts.

⁷⁴ Sophie Gilbert, "Succession Is Better Than Ever," *The Atlantic*, Published August 11, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/08/succession-review-hbo-season-two/595822/>

⁷⁵ Troy Patterson, "The Second Season of 'Succession' Digs Into the Characters' Self-Loathing," *The Atlantic*, Published August 14, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/on-television/the-second-season-of-succession-digs-into-the-characters-self-loathing>

Animals are everywhere in this show: Characters insult one another through invocations of weasels and snakes and extinction-ready dinosaurs.”⁷⁶

Instead of glamorizing the lifestyle of the rich and powerful, *Succession* portrays their lives as depraved and pathetic. Unlike *Billions*, the characters of *Succession* do not seek enlightenment because they are ‘geniuses’ or supposedly function better than most in a neoliberal environment, rather they’re attempting to make existential sense of the world they inhabit. Garber adds that while “*Succession* might have empathy for its characters; it has exactly zero sympathies, however, for the environment that contains them.”⁷⁷ She also concludes “The Roy family considers capitalism itself, for the most part, a struggle to be won. They hunt. They regard people as prey. They try their best to bag the elephants. But they also treat money the way only very wealthy people can: as a mere abstraction.”⁷⁸ The characters in *Succession* are not only condemned to a complex neoliberal environment but forced to compete in a game of power in which no one knows the rules. Sophie Gilbert encapsulates the show's tragic trajectory, writing “Armstrong’s family, unhappy in its own unique, Tolstoyan way, is also the stuff of classical tragedy, riddled with monsters and fated for hell. ‘Money wins,’ Logan says in one episode, raising his glass for a toast. But his face is empty of discernible emotion, a void so gaping that no amount of money or winning can fill it.”⁷⁹

In the last chapter, I examined the ontopreneural environment of *Billions*, and how the show emphasizes routes to achieving nirvana with the market though participating within the system. The environment in *Succession* is the same as *Billions*, but the representation of its

⁷⁶ Megan Garber, “The Bodily Horrors of *Succession*,” *The Atlantic*, Published October 13, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/10/why-succession-works-so-well-horror/599932>.

⁷⁷ Garber, “The Bodily Horrors of *Succession*”.

⁷⁸ Garber, “The Bodily Horrors of *Succession*”.

⁷⁹ Gilbert, “*Succession* Is Better Than Ever”.

neoliberal influence is radically different. As we just examined above, Garber mentions two points that emphasize this difference: the first, being the lack of how-to overtones in *Succession* and, the second, being the contempt the show has for its financial setting. If *Billions* portrayed the priorities of the white male anti-hero in prestige television, *Succession* portrays the death of that same anti-hero because of the neoliberal environment they themselves created. As we explored in *Billions*, these men now seek independence by infusing themselves with the system and essentially vilifies other genders that potentially hinder a cis white males' opportunity to accomplish his goals. *Succession* offers a different take. Here, the desire to appease hegemonic masculinity through becoming one with the company is still relevant but the process is satirized, and Machiavellianism goes unrewarded. Essentially, there is no game plan for the characters of *Succession* to achieve neoliberal nirvana like there is in *Billions*. As a result, the fear of fading patriarchal presence is a large component of *Succession*. The ontopreneur is thus categorically dissected and dismantled by the show's narrative.

Our protagonist, Logan Roy (Brian Cox), is the opposite of what the ontopreneur stands for; in fact, he is a direct rejection of his neoliberal environment. Instead of seeking power and influence through expanding the human experience into new market innovations, he wants to assume a larger strangle hold on local television networks through acquisitions. This business philosophy leads to Logan often being referred to as a dinosaur by his children and employees. It is not that Logan is opposed to neoliberalism, arguably he is part of the first wave of businessmen who helped foster its creation, but he rejects the lack of masculine dominance that is not prioritized in an increasingly flexible market. Logan's anxiety is not that he cannot achieve nirvana through the market, but that he can no longer possess control over his own company. This is hindered by the ambition of his son Kendall who, for all intents and purposes, wants to

become an ontopreneur figure. The issue is that Kendall is doing so without the guise of a masculine crusade. Logan alludes to Kendal's feminization when he tells Kendall that the reason he failed to become his successor is because he is not a 'killer'. The first part of this chapter will focus on what is intertwined with this concept of being a 'killer' and what form of masculinity Logan wants to see in his son.

Logan's distaste for the flexibility of the market is also reflected in the show's approach to gender. *Billions* touches on this through its depiction of its non-binary character Taylor and the flexibility that character possess that their male equivalents do not. *Succession* does this in a less problematic fashion and uses it to highlight male anxiety around the idea of women possessing more control in this bastion of patriarchal attitudes. This is primarily done through the show's female lead, Siobhan 'Shiv' Roy (Sarah Snook), who exercises flexibility professionally by ensuring that her career options are always left open. Her decision to keep her options open is looked down upon by her father and even costs her chance at becoming CEO. Additionally, she also practices an open marriage with her partner Tom Wambsgans (Matthew Macfadyen). For Logan, being a woman does not necessarily entail a disqualification from his job, as long as it holds the job's patriarchal orientation toward the world. Shiv is torn between these two realities in the same vein as her brother Kendall, as her flexible lifestyle that is arguably a bonus in a neoliberal environment is a hinderance for her chances to appease the patriarchal family heritage. In the second season, this plays out in several additional narrative threads, one being the introduction of Rhea Jarrell (Holly Hunter) who becomes a prime candidate for the role of CEO and second being the sexual frustration of Logan's youngest child Roman Roy (Kieran Culkin). Through these arcs, the show emphasizes Logan's anxiety around women possessing more

control over a system designed to assist men in achieving dominance and we will explore those ramifications in the second part of this chapter.

In the final part, we will explore the culmination of our dialogue with the genre of financial fiction. *Succession*, like most of the new media depicting financial fiction, owes debts to the early media in this genre. Zack Sharf of *Indiewire* calls attention to the blatant similarities of *Succession*'s opening credits and David Fincher's *The Game* (1997)⁸⁰. This lineage, in a genre that makes its bread and butter on white men in crisis, allows us to trace the evolution of patriarchal anxieties. The title of *Succession* implies as much, but also explores the concept of men 'dying' in a system they see as a means of independence. In this section, we will explore the ways several characters symptomatize this personal crisis and portray the implosion of men in contemporary neo-liberal environments. This makes *Succession* a useful exploration of the genre of financial fiction whose satirical nature allows the show to dismantle the genre's patriarchal structures. In *Succession*, our anti-heroes are not seeking to achieve nirvana, rather they are trying to survive the system they unwittingly created. The show illuminates the crisis of neoliberalism through lambasting the world that feeds it and as I will argue, builds the exploration of men in crisis through its narrative structure.

Premise and Plot of *Succession*

Succession follows the Roy family, the majority owners of Waystar Royco, as they feud over the future of their company. Waystar is the equivalent of the Disney Company and Fox News, owning both film studios, theme parks, cruises and a controversial right-wing tv network called ATN. The CEO of Waystar and patriarch of the Roy family, Logan Roy, intends on

⁸⁰ Zack Sharf, "The '*Succession*' Opening Credits You Love So Much Owe a Lot to David Fincher — Watch," *Indiewire*, Published March 30th, 2020, <https://www.indiewire.com/2020/03/succession-opening-credits-david-fincher-1202221411>.

passing down his mantle of CEO to his second-oldest son Kendall. After a midnight fugue that leads to Logan peeing on the carpet, he suddenly decides to renege his offer to Kendall, and he decides to stay on for a ‘few more years’. This opens the opportunity for several other characters to potentially assume control of Waystar and most of those candidates are his children. For the purposes of this analysis, we will focus on three of Logan’s children—Kendall, Shiv and Roman—as their character arcs each follow the same trajectory, in which they vie for CEO, while struggle with their gender identity.

The series has unfolded across two seasons so far, and a third season is in production at the time of writing. The first season establishes Logan’s decision to hold onto his power and lays out Kendall’s plot to betray his father through a board room coup, arguing that his father’s recent stroke and dangerous acquisition of debt has made him unfit to lead the company. After his plan inevitably fails, Kendall relapses and plots a hostile takeover of Waystar Royco with Logan’s rival Sandy Furness (Larry Pine) and his college friend Stewy Hosseini (Arian Moayed). Their takeover coincides with Shiv and Tom’s wedding, where Kendall clashes with his father and ends up looking for cocaine with a waiter at the reception. Kendall and the waiter drive to meet up with a coke dealer but end up driving the car into a nearby lake. Kendall manages to escape but the waiter dies in the wreck. The following morning, he is approached by his father who knows about the crash and covers it up for him. They embrace and his father calls him his ‘number one boy’.

The second season involves Kendall switching sides on the hostile takeover and assisting his father in fighting off Sandy and Stewy. Logan decides they must double down on acquisitions and pursues a buyout of PGM, a CNN equivalent in the show. During this season, Logan courts several candidates for CEO including his daughter Shiv and CEO of PGM Rhea. Neither one

ends up with the position and a sexual abuse scandal begins to grow in the cruise's division. The scandal becomes so large that one of the members of the family needs to take the fall for it. Logan decides that Kendall must take the fall and Kendall agrees. At the press conference setup for Kendall to accept fault for the scandal, Kendall surprisingly betrays his father by blaming him for the toxic culture at Waystar. Logan, watching on TV gives a Mona Lisa smile and the season ends.

You Have to Be a Killer. But, Nowadays, Maybe You Don't.

In this first part, I will explore the significance of the term 'killer' that Logan uses in describing the traits necessary to assume the role of CEO at Waystar. In the scene where this dialogue plays out, Kendall is asked by his father to take the fall for covering up the sexual abuse scandal in their cruise's division. After Kendall agrees, he asks Logan why he could be CEO to which Logan responds with "You're not a killer. You have to be a killer." The definition of what a 'killer' lies in our discussion of masculinity. The term 'killer' is used extensively in other finance narratives, Leigh Claire La Berge writes about the term in her chapter "The Men Who Make Killings", in which she explores Bret Ellis' novel *American Psycho*. *American Psycho* follows Patrick Bateman, a wall street trader who moonlights as a serial killer. In her analysis, La Berge discusses the masculine implications of the book's depiction of violence and finance. In her words:

I would argue instead that the violence is largely an effect of Ellis's dedication to generic compliance and to the language of finance. But I would also argue that *American Psycho* does not use a metaphor of violence. Rather it reveals how prevalent that metaphor is, and it then kills the metaphor. It is not that finance is narrated through violence in this novel, but that violence is narrated through finance. In other words, the text reconceives of finance as a metaphor for violence or perhaps even of a metaphorical relationship's

ability to cede into metonymy as finance and violence become more contiguous than vertical.⁸¹

The notion of male-driven finance as a metaphor for violence is not dissimilar to Salzinger's discussion of masculinity on trading floors. Recall in chapter one the idea of 'men behaving badly' and Oliver Stone's *Wall Street*. Lines like "I thought you had balls" and "I fucked them" are commonplace in the jargon of 'wall street' business. *American Psycho* incorporates a similar aesthetic but through the act of killing. Like Salzinger's examples of quips containing sexual innuendo, *American Psycho* does so with violence. As La Berge writes "From 'the killings' to the 'hostile' acts to the 'takeover defenses,' it is this descriptive, metaphorical language of finance that is collected and emplotted in *American Psycho*."⁸² The prevalence of this metaphor in this early 1990's text is integral in our understanding of Logan Roy. Like Bateman, one could imagine that Logan holds the same admiration for prominent businessmen of the 1980s. Logan's background would imply an admiration for men of that era, and the parallels between the character and actual businessmen of the 1980s are laid out prominently in the show. The idea of being a 'killer' to Logan is to think selfishly and to act on it. A key example from *Succession* that highlights Kendall's failure in this aspect is early in the pilot where Kendall works on closing a buyout of 'Vaulter'. When asked what he will do to complete the transaction, he jokingly says "I'll give them a blow job. I'll give them a reach around.", a remark Logan overhears. The lack of upholding heteronormativity and the thought of acting in service of others in order to succeed in business, is a point of crisis for Logan. In a way, the neoliberal environment that men of

⁸¹ Leigh Claire La Berge, *Scandals and Abstraction Financial Fiction of the Long 1980s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014): 132.

⁸² La Berge, 124.

Logan's generation created has gotten away out of hand and he seeks to remedy the situation before relinquishing his power.

For Logan, Kendall fails to live up to the masculine qualities necessary to run his company. Again, this is established early in the show when Kendall acquires an online news company called Vaulter, which is essentially a stand in for BuzzFeed. This move on Kendall's part is a means of becoming an ontopreneur figure who will grow his father's company out of old media like TV and into an online platform. Risk is also brought up here, as the risk Kendall makes in his acquisition is not for profitability but for expansion in the public's mindshare. TV is a 'dinosaur' game to an ontopreneur and does not reflect the expansion of human potential. In meetings with the board, Kendall does not focus on hostile actions or acquisitions, but, rather, buzz words, images, and fostering new ideas. Pendakis touches on this kind of shift when discussing a scene in Fincher's *The Social Network* (2010) which depicts an exchange between Mark Zuckerberg and Eduardo Saverin over the monetization of Facebook. As Pendakis writes:

It is not just that the ontopreneur is framed as emphatically resistant to the monetization of its invention... but that the invention itself must be seen to oscillate in the moment of pure uselessness, a form without limits or purpose, a kind of absolute hole in being. "We don't even know what it is yet!" says Zuckerberg in the film, a line that imbues Facebook with the same alien alterity and infinity of the plinth in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).⁸³

Kendall approaches his leadership with the same philosophy, and in season one is driven to ensure that his father's company would pivot into online media as a means consuming the markets of the future. This drive is reiterated in the second season when Logan makes Kendall gut Vaulter and strip out the profitable sectors of the company, essentially refuting that path

⁸³ Pendakis, 602.

forward for Kendall. In deepening the financial security of their investment, they deepen their financial ties to masculine control and essentially embody the anachronistic ‘killer’ persona.

Succession, like *American Psycho*, is a satire of its neoliberal environment and is critical of this entire dialogue of masculinity in financial fiction. As La Berge concludes:

American Psycho is a satire of a range of financial texts that Ellis himself is the first to collect as financial texts. But at the same time that *American Psycho* introduces the genre of the financial text, it threatens to collapse the unifying feature of that genre by destabilizing the supposedly determinant content, that is, the very representation of finance itself.⁸⁴

In portraying the conflict between Logan and Kendall, *Succession* subtly dissolves the luster of the financial fiction genre. The conflict in the direction of masculinity is the core of what makes *Succession* particularly scathing of not only toxic masculinity - which is so often tied to the genre - but the toxicity of the environment that contains these characters. Unlike its counterpart *Billions*, *Succession* uses interpersonal conflict to dissect the financial environment these shows take place in. In this context, the crux of the show being Logan’s fear of giving up his power is seen as a reaction to the death of patriarchal control over finance. With the fading presence of masculinity in financial fiction, *Succession* can attack the insecurities of men in finance through their relationship to women and the show’s relationship to the history of the financial fiction genre.

You’re Fungible as Fuck

In the penultimate episode of season two, Rhea discovers Logan’s culpability in the sexual assault scandal on Waystar Cruses. In a heated exchange with Logan, she decides not to accept the CEO position. She argues to Logan, “I don’t know if you care about anything, and that

⁸⁴ La Berge, 146.

scares me.” Logan replies “You know you’re fungible”. Rhea quips back “I am not fungible”, to which Logan yells back “Oh, yes you are. You’re as fungible as fuck.” Walking away, Rhea replies “Fine. Then fudge me. Go ahead. Try.” This scene represents Logan’s greatest anxiety, which is the fading patriarchal control he once lived in. The female characters in *Succession* do a fantastic job of illuminating this aspect of financial fiction, which typically avoids such confrontations with gender. La Berge discusses this tension in *Wall Street*, writing “Like so many morality tales, the film celebrates what it claims to criticize and makes normative what it aspires to isolate.”⁸⁵ *Succession*, by contrast, implements narrative devices that challenge hegemonic masculinity, including, Shiv’s openness in her career and personal life and Roman’s sexual frustrations.

In order to proceed with an examination of Shiv, we must first establish a working definition of post-feminism. Post-feminism is a frequently contested term in academia⁸⁶, but Laurie Ouellette offers a brief and apt description. In Ouellette’s summary of post-feminist discourse, she focuses on the terms implication that women have now achieved equality, she also adds in the discourse that this belief has generated a new crisis for women, in which they have lost their female identity⁸⁷. In essence, Ouellette’s summary suggests that white women in their twenties have gained the most from second wave feminism but shun the feminist label⁸⁸. This concept of post-feminism is useful for this examination of *Succession*, especially through Shiv’s character arc, which works as a synecdoche for how the show maps the relation between post-feminism and neoliberalism, and the crisis generated by these ideologies. For instance, Shiv

⁸⁵ La Berge, 99.

⁸⁶ Laurie Ouellette, “Victims No More: Postfeminism, Television, and Ally McBeal” *The Communication Review* 5, no. 4 (2002): 318.

⁸⁷ Ouellette, 319.

⁸⁸ Ouellette, 319.

works for a leftist democratic candidate despite her family owning a politically right news network, and despite this huge gap in political alignment, Shiv never lets her actual political beliefs be revealed. Additionally, Shiv values her independence above all else, as we see in her career path and relationship with Tom. When Logan offers her the role of CEO, she accepts but later also accepts the potential role of secretary of state from her boss. In the first season, she has an affair with her ex-boyfriend behind Tom's back, and later, at her wedding, she admits to Tom that she cannot have a monogamous relationship with him. Both choices end disastrously for her, as Logan finds out about her lack of commitment in accepting the role of CEO and Tom becomes resentful and depressed because of her inability to commit to him. Another scene that portrays Shiv as a character in crisis is when she is asked to confront the key witness for the sexual assault cover up scandal hitting her family's company. In this scene, Rhea offers her a chance to back away and maintain a moral high ground in a frankly disturbing situation, but Shiv decides to confront the victim anyways in order to protect her family's company. What follows is a haunting scene of Shiv manipulating a victim of sexual assault into choosing against testifying in order to protect their self-image in the press. It is with all these components in Shiv's narrative that we can suggest that Shiv is in crisis, through a post-feminist lens and a neoliberal one, suggesting that both concepts might share the same structural DNA. Furthermore, we can take Shiv's lack of commitment as broader connection between post-feminist and neoliberal aesthetics.

In her article, Rosalind Gill asks "Could it be that neoliberalism is always already gendered, and that women are constructed as its ideal subjects?"⁸⁹ *Succession* makes a case for

⁸⁹ Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (May 2007): 164.

Gill's argument as Shiv is subjugated as a character living between worlds. Our examples show this in a consistent desire in Shiv to always appear 'undefined' in what she wants. Gill argues, "what has not been examined is the relationship of neoliberalism to gender relations. But it appears from this attempt to map the elements of a postfeminist sensibility that there is a powerful resonance between post-feminism and neoliberalism."⁹⁰ This connection between post-feminism and neoliberalism is argued by Gill through the sense of individualism present in both ideologies and the similarity between the self-regulating neoliberal subject and the self-reinventing postfeminist subject.⁹¹ For Gill, the connection between the two reaffirms the pervasiveness of a neoliberal influence in popular culture and illuminates the greater extent to which women are called upon in this environment.⁹² As she writes "To a much greater extent than men, women are required to work on and transform the self, regulate every aspect of their conduct, and present their actions as freely chosen."⁹³ Going back to the dialogue between Shiv and Rhea when she goes to speak to the witness, Rhea states "Look, I'm not going in". Shiv responds "Seriously? You're leaving it to me?" Rhea replies "Siobhan, you don't have to do this." Shiv argues back "If she speaks and she's compelling, then that's it for my family's company. So yeah, I do have to." This exchange between Rhea and Shiv matches the conditions that Gill discusses in her article and demonstrates the more involved ways women are subjected to neoliberalism.

The gendered effects of neoliberalism also impact *Succession*'s male characters. As I mentioned, Logan sees neoliberalism's shifting gender politics as a threat to his patriarchal control over women. Shiv's lack of commitment to him suggests that she is displaying neoliberal

⁹⁰ Gill, 164.

⁹¹ Gill, 164.

⁹² Gill, 164.

⁹³ Gill, 164.

qualities and not directly participating in the paternalistic system he desires. This space between the old and new ideologies is best exemplified by Roman and his sexual frustrations with women. Roman's sexuality is troubled by the presence of women and he is unable to have 'normal' sex. In the first season this is only lightly alluded to but in season two Roman's girlfriend Tabitha challenges him on it. Tabitha often teases Roman, sometimes publicly, that they have never had sex. Roman's response publicly is that they have, but privately he seems somewhat disgusted by the prospect. It is also integral that we highlight Roman's use of gendered language that harks back to *Wall Street's* Gordon Gekko. La Berge discusses the power of language in her chapter "Capitalist Realism: The 1987 Stock Market Crash and the New Proprietary of Tom Wolfe and Oliver Stone", where she argues that *Wall Street* continues the trend of condemning finance as a masculinist and immoral economic form. As she argues:

In the 1980s, that same judgment derives from their hyperviolent, sexualized, masculine tendencies. More so than the film's financial terminology, sexual violence is its chief vernacular. Indeed, frequently, the two idioms occur simultaneously, as when Gekko threatens Bud over the latter's conveyance of financial information to a third party by telling him to "take it in the ass you scumbag cocksucker." This transposition of the gendered language and assumptions of finance from female to male, from ballerina-like to warrior-like, is surely one of the most dramatic reversals in the representation of value that the Modern period has witnessed.⁹⁴

What this quote suggests is that the use of gendered language is a mechanism of patriarchal control that secures the dominance of traditional heterosexual masculinity and maintains the submissiveness of femininity. When Roman exercises this practice, he is attempting to maintain that same control, however, unlike his predecessors, he is a failed heterosexual by these oppressive terms. The inability to perform in the bedroom suggests an anxiety around femininity. It is only with Gerri, his father's legal counsel, that he can participate in a form of sexual

⁹⁴ La Berge, 100.

exchange, although she maintains control over him. Roman's relationship with Gerri suggests his own lack of understanding of the traditional heterosexual masculinity he refers to in his language. Roman, therefore, represents a masculine crisis of being unable to live up to older heterosexual masculinity as well as an inability to participate in it. As a result, Roman is rendered in a space between old and new with no path forward. His frustration derives from the dissociation between what is said and what is real, and, like our other neoliberal subjects, is indictive of the pressures of his changing environment. These critical depictions of gender in a neoliberal environment sets *Succession* apart from the rest in its genre of financial storytelling and acts as a meditation on the processes that continue to feed this environment.

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So far, we have focused on two concepts prevalent in financial storytelling, and key to the plot of *Succession*. One being men trying to embody 'killer' attitudes and second being the pressure on women and by corollary the reaction of men to women from neoliberalism. The use of gender as a response to these problems is indicative of the larger fascination of gender in financial storytelling. Understanding *Succession*'s preoccupation with its predecessors in the genre helps us trace how the show functions as a critical examination of masculinity under neoliberalism. Doing so will illuminate how neoliberalism contributes to the feeling of anxiety in a genre focused on extremely privileged individuals.

The show's most prominent homage is found in the opening credits. Sharf's article on the similarities between the opening credits of *Succession* and the opening scene of *The Game* represents the alignment *Succession* takes with previous depictions of financial fiction. In brief, *The Game* follows a wealthy investment banker Nicholas Van Orton (Michael Douglas) whose brother gives him a voucher for a game from a company called Consumer Recreational Services

as a present for his 48th birthday - same age that their father committed suicide. When he meets with the company representatives, he is given several psychological tests and is rejected from participating. After the meeting, however, Nicholas notices that he is caught in a mysterious network of conspiracies that threatens himself, and the people around him. Additionally, he discovers that his immense wealth has been seized by these conspirators. Ultimately, having survived the torment of these mysterious forces and accidentally killing his brother, Nicholas jumps off a building in despair. He lands on an air cushion and his still alive brother greets him along with everyone else who participated in ‘the game’, revealing that it was a ploy to help Nicholas embrace life.

While the plot in *The Game* follows a thriller narrative, it thematically matches Kendal’s journey. Both narratives are concerned with paternal relationships, as well as the characters discovering a new sense of masculinity. Generally, financial fiction narratives are catalyzed when there is a rupture to or instability at the level of the patriarchal structure. In *The Game*, this rupture happens when Nicholas realizes that he is the same age as his father was when he took his own life. Nicholas is sent on a journey of masculine discovery, which in the film is manifested as physical treats to his life and his romantic interest. In addition, he cannot discern if the women he crushes over is working with him or against him. The journey he goes on disrupts his stable and safe lifestyle and leaves him virtually penniless. In combatting against these conditions, Nicholas regains his manhood and therefore his ability to bridge together his sense of patrilineal legacy and his own sense of masculinity. This premise of bridging two modes of masculinity is not far off from the central issue Bud (Charlie Sheen) faces in *Wall Street*. As La Berge describes for *Wall Street*:

The two fathers present structurally the choice between two corporations, two modes of accumulation, two styles of financial masculinity. The Old Conservatism and the New Conservatism, the old patriarchy and the new patriarchy, the industrial monopoly capital of airlines and the monopoly financial capital of a corporate raider.⁹⁵

This contradiction is prevalent in the film and television we have examined and mirrors the structure of neoliberalism. Kendall is *Succession*'s foremost figure caught in the divide between new and old ideologies. After he accidentally kills a waiter in a car crash, he loses even more autonomy as Logan assumes more control of his day-to-day life. In season 2, Kendall is undeniably depressed and continues to consume drugs along with the occasional theft of batteries when he buys cigarettes. It is noteworthy that the show goes out of its way to take the entirety of Kendall's autonomy away from him, stripping him of having a say in any decision making. When he is asked to gut Vaulter by his father, he does so without feeling or remorse, and essentially sheds his former naive entrepreneurial philosophy. Towards the end of the season, Kendall has essentially lost his entire ability to act of his own accord. This position leads to Kendall's final betrayal, and essentially his metamorphosis into a killer. When Kendall uses the press conference to blame his father for the cruise scandal, as well as creating a toxic environment, he 'kills' his father. Logan, watching from afar on a television smiles to himself, pleased with his son's ability to finally act and embody a 'killer' philosophy.

This powerful conclusion serves as a unique meditation on the entrepreneurial structure of neoliberalism today. Kendall regresses to an earlier version capitalism, becoming the man his father desires him to be, but at the same time essentially kills his father, making way for his own path. It is implied that Kendall has bridged the gap between his vain, fashionable persona and the

⁹⁵ La Berge, 111.

titan of industry persona of his father. By bridging the gap between his own sense of masculinity and his father's, Kendall manages to succeed, for the time being, in the toxic neoliberal environment of the show. Unlike *Billions* which emphasizes the pursuit of actualization through the economy, *Succession* rails against it. In the case of *Succession*, trying to make sense of or navigate that version of capitalism is portrayed as a traumatizing, humorous, and often fruitless endeavor. Actualization is therefore rendered possible because of a character's acute individualism and selfishness. Kendall's betrayal at the end of season two can be interpreted as a regression into old capitalism, but perhaps that is what is necessary. In betraying his father, Kendall works against his own former persona and becomes the ruthless capitalist his father wants him to be. The change Kendall goes through marks his own actualization into the perfect ontopreneural figure, as he can sell his actions as the new form of masculinity because he is supposedly removing the source Waystar's sexist work culture, while maintaining the brutal ruthlessness his father desires. Be that as it may, the satirical portrayal of bridging old and new masculinities suggests that this victory might be short lived. *The Game* ends with Nicholas asking his romantic interest on a date, only to be somewhat rejected, perhaps we can assume that *Succession* will follow suit and Kendall will realize that his actualization did not really matter in the grand scheme of things.

Conclusion

Succession is the latest in a long line of media depicting men in crisis because of their neoliberal environment. Although white men losing patriarchal control as well as their influence over their environment has been covered extensively, *Succession* manages to deepen this dialogue between media and our societal changes since our adoption of free market first policies. The two methods by which *Succession* portrays this crisis is by confronting gender through an

examination of ‘killer’ masculinity and the influence of neoliberalism on how we perceive femininity. These elements combine to place a critical lens on the genre of financial films and television—the effects of which feed into the sense of anxiety naturally created by neoliberal environments. While *Succession* offers no solutions, thus far, its satirical take on the state of modern corporations offers a clarity on the problems generated by neoliberalism. *Succession* draws inspiration from and is frequently compared to Shakespeare’s *King Lear*⁹⁶. If Logan is our avatar for a modern-day Lear, then he truly has every reason to fear for the future of his family. We might not be doomed to tragedy like these characters, but their spiral into insanity suggests the danger of trying to cope with neoliberalism.

⁹⁶ Cristina Wald, *Shakespeare’s Serial Returns in Complex TV* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020): 84.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This analysis has been, somewhat unintendedly, a continuation of the work Amanda Lotz started in her book *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21st Century*. Her analysis of male protagonists and anti-heroes ‘in crisis’ on television laid the groundwork for examining changing gender roles and fading patriarchal powers through these character’s narratives. *Billions* and *Succession* both offer an excellent representation of the continuation and evolution of men seeking independence from their imposed societal responsibilities. These men, over the course of twenty years, have seemingly moved from transgressing against the system through criminal activities to working within the system of Wall Street in order to achieve masculine independence. This evolution in popular prestige television genre dominance, from crime to financial fiction, represents the growing influence of neoliberalism on television narratives.

Television shows like *Breaking Bad* and *The Sopranos*, as well as popular films, like *Wall Street* and *Fight Club*, serve as foundational texts for financial fiction series today. A popular series in the genre of financial fiction, *Billions*, must act as an enforcement of the masculinization of finance as well as the pursuit of actualization within that system. The anti-hero of the show is emblematic of where traditional masculinity finds itself today and indicative of the unique metamorphosis of gender roles. Financial fiction finds itself, more and more, having to confront the increasing presence of non-masculine figures. This genre is a haven for cis white male protagonists and therefore has been quite fruitful for those attempting to write about the symptoms of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, perhaps unintentionally, created an environment in which it is impossible to succeed working against it and thus requires a sense of loyalty to the program. As a result, financial fiction, our haven for men, is now the genre in which our sense of

purpose and potentially their search for nirvana must be accomplished within the system by exuding entrepreneurial traits.

These concepts seem to grow over time, as more and more films and television inevitably portray finance. Recent examples like Lorene Scafaria's *Hustlers* (2019) and Todd Phillips' *Joker* (2019) have delved into explicit discussions of capitalism and gender. Not to mention as I wrote this thesis, HBO released a new series called *Industry* (2020-Present) which follows diverse group of twenty somethings working at an investment bank in London. These popular and critically praised works are indicative of a monumental re-evaluation how finance relates to gender and this movement towards demasculinizing finance. Additionally, these new works signify the death of the older model of hegemonic masculinity which favoured men who bought factories or broadcast media empires. These men are outdated in this new form of speculative finance and are seen as dinosaurs from a bygone era. The new male characters in television and film continue to idolize the idea of their dinosaur predecessors but they must also cope with the introduction of femininity. Under these circumstances, these men perceive women as both a tool and a threat to themselves. What we are seeing too is that these struggles have not come out of nowhere, they have been building for decades. Today, as our media has shifted into presenting legitimate structures for our male antiheroes, masculinity and gender must change too. *Succession* navigates these structures quite effectively through its characters and challenges the tropes that we would associate with financial fiction. These portrayals of people living in an environment where there are no more alternatives weighs heavily on their psyches and ultimately reflects the anxiety of their shifting gender roles.

To conclude my analysis, we should examine why this research into masculinity is necessary. This thesis does not seek to justify the actions of men or why they want to uphold

patriarchal dominance, rather, I sought to understand how neoliberalism has reshaped gender in television narratives. As Lotz concludes in her book:

A key part of better understanding the men and masculinities on display in these series and theorizing about what they might tell us about their real-world doppelgangers is letting go of some of the old explanatory narratives and considering the status of men and masculinity on their own trajectories, without the zero-sum assumption that men's gains are women's losses and the reverse. I am most certainly not calling for a celebration of the emergent feminist masculinities or disregard of the continued patriarchal currents, but rather for nuanced consideration of men and the stories told about their lives. Analysis must begin somewhere other than the assumption that crisis narratives are symptomatic of a mourning of entitlement thwarted, and instead, the type of holistic contextualized analysis that has characterized thirty years of feminist media scholarship examining female characters is needed to better understand changing norms among males.⁹⁷

Lotz's conclusion is apt in expressing the holistic approach needed in discussing the ever-evolving neoliberal environment. She also brings up the necessary work of further feminist media research to better understand how gender is reflected in narratives. The difficulty today is that shows depicting women in a similar environment are few and far between, and although shows like *Industry* are seemingly changing the landscape, more voices need to contribute to this subject. My own arguments could be enhanced with further research into feminist scholarship, particularly post-feminism. Overall, I am optimistic that this area will continue to grow and the interest in this topic of gender and neoliberalism through a film studies lens will follow.

⁹⁷ Lotz, 192.

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