

Chapter 8

The Apprentice: Realities and Fictions for the London Skyline

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A concrete metropolis of unparalleled strength and purpose.

Introduction, Donald Trump (2004) *The US Apprentice*, Season 1 episode 1¹

The human economy, then, is embedded and enmeshed in institutions, economic and non-economic. The inclusion of the non-economic is vital.

Karl Polanyi (1957), *The Economy as Instituted Process*, 146

Playing and Reality: *The Apprentice's* Fictitious Capital

In a book about 'fictitious capitals' this chapter explores London from perspectives afforded by looking at a highly popular² reality television-based presentation of the city. In its production, staging and narration, the BBC's *The Apprentice*,³ broadcast in the UK since 2005, incidentally but forcibly, serially foregrounds London-as-cityscape (Figure 8.1). In particular both signature imagery and the show's unfolding events stage and are staged by *London*; presented in its guise as a hyper-modern global metropolis, signalled especially by mock up Canary Wharf offices⁴ and framed and reframed throughout each episode by wide-angle panning shots of the city's iconic skyscrapers; the Swiss Re building (colloquially 'the Gherkin'), Tower42 (once the NatWest Tower) and with One Canada Square at

1 Trump is speaking against a backdrop of footage showing skyscrapers and the New York stock exchange – and in the relatively recent context of the September 11th terrorist attacks on New York's Twin Towers.

2 The *Apprentice* has been successful in growing a large prime time audience – topping 9 million in series 7, and with critical acclaim expressed in awards from the Royal television society and BAFTA. It has developed a range of subsidiary spin off shows including celebrity-based competitions and a *Junior Apprentice* programme aimed at young audiences.

3 The show is developed from a 2004 format launched in the USA with Donald Trump standing as the 'master'/employer'.

4 (Fictive) location of the show's famous boardroom – and vantage point from which Sir Alan is imagined to survey the competition – alongside his trusty aides – Nick Hower and Karen Brady (with former assistant judge Margaret less prominently involved in recent series.

Canary Wharf coded as the show's Head Quarters⁵ set against London's growing clusters of surrounding financial-industry edifices. As Jonathan Freedland puts it in a 2006 review of the second series: 'London never looked so good' (Freedland: 2006). This is Marion Boyer's (1995) 'figured city' for the small screen.

The Apprentice's London is also a site of everyday commerce and business culture, ersatz arenas springing up in shopping malls and commercial offices with major parts of each episode requiring contestants to pit their wits on location, to 'get their hands dirty' in the reality show's business simulation tasks. Each episode samples an industry-based 'task' staging problems themed to refer to an array of commercial and professional areas of work; from selling rag-and-bone 'junk', to used car sales, to restaurant management, to market trading, to food manufacture and retail, to advertising and branding. These simulations are certainly in the register of 'game', serious as competitors become in pursuit of their goals. In genre terms the show has been cast as reality TV⁶ (McGuigan 2008). Of course there appears to be little intention on the part of producers towards realism as such.⁷ Instead a general understanding prevails in accord with genre convention, so that, telling and high pressured as the representative 'work' situations performed by the candidates might well be, the show is largely unconcerned with verisimilitude in relation to depictions of its work-themed scenarios.⁸ In particular, while the show gives emphasis to 'city' locations there is no real engagement, no dramatisation of the major kinds of work undertaken in London's financial districts. Candidates might design a funny 'app' for an iPhone or seek to bake a better biscuit, but they are not tasked with derivatives trading or hedge fund management. This simple *trompe-l'œil* substitution – placing fictive concrete work in the spaces and places of actual abstract work – the real work undertaken beneath the city vistas on show can be examined as part of the show's appeal.

In the 'balloon debate' format typical of such shows, one by one and episode by episode the wannabe apprentices are removed from the game with Alan Sugar leading a panel and making a final evaluation before firing a candidate – that week's

5 One well known fiction in relation to the show's presentation is that the boardroom is in fact not located at Canary Wharf and that Lord Sugar's Amstrad offices are based in unglamorous Brentwood, an Essex-based suburb some distance from London's city-metropolis.

6 The show was invented by a producer who also made a US format called *Survivor*. The 'balloon debate' style pattern of competition and weekly ejection by some process of voting and/pr judgement is standard to the 'reality' format.

7 Other reality-style shows emphasise the fly-on-the-wall-exploration of working sites, notably airports and hotels. However, the surveillance aspect of *The Apprentice's* reality-TV commitments are fulfilled more fully in relation to emotional expose, framing the contestants 'seemingly real pain of failure and rejection for instance skilful editing juxtaposing hubris and incompetence, arrogance, tears, shame and shamelessness in contestants' self-presentations.

8 There is an extended debate about the accuracy and usefulness of the show's material as a resource in business education (Lair 2011; Wice 2006; Huber 2008).

‘victim’ is denied the winner’s opportunity to become the master’s apprentice and, formerly, to earn a ‘six figure salary’ or lately, to receive a £250,000 investment, a detailed format change reflecting a shift, post-crunch, as the show sought to endorse a more substantively entrepreneurial spirit for London and for Sir Alan – appointed entrepreneurship Czar in 2009. At the end of the series, one winner remains. He or she will be the apprentice.

Each episode is fronted by Sir Alan Sugar, presented partly as a quintessential London wheeler-dealer entrepreneur and partly as shrewd experienced business sage. Sugar is assertively *not* an establishment city figure, nor is there anything abstract about Sir Alan’s to-the-point argot. Sugar’s Hackney background, starting as a by-the-bootstraps electrical goods trader⁹ is frequently mentioned in the show. His past stands as illustration and resource to warrant assertions and judgements about the rights and wrongs of business practice. Partly connected to the fame accruing to Sir Alan Sugar via *The Apprentice* (he had already been knighted in 2000) Sugar was offered his role of ‘Enterprise Czar’ by the New Labour administration in 2009 with an accompanying place in the House of Lords (Murray 2010). Couldry and Littler (2011) rightly point out the show’s endorsement of neoliberal notions of ‘charismatic’ workplace leadership – embodied in Alan Sugar. This complementary reading of *The Apprentice* further asserts *place* as a key preoccupation – with London figured and refigured on screen accruing and evoking identifications and value in the process.

The Apprentice offers a particular and popular framing for London presented as a working capital. In terms made popular by Roland Barthes (1972), the show might be called ‘mythic’.¹⁰ Each episode offers up a fictive and poignant version of London-as-work-place – in the guise of light entertainment but with the underpinning structures of morality tale and moral trial. As such *The Apprentice* serves as an everyday media object, as a set of ritual (Couldry 2008; Couldry and Littler 2011) narrations and dramas which engage across media, and with the prime time TV show supplemented by subsidiary shows, a web site, a twitter feed and extensive cross media coverage.¹¹ The show, its coverage and its widely observed ‘water-cooler’ popularity together combine to produce a complex virtual-

9 Sugar’s fortune emerged between from success in consumer electrical culminating in highly profitable partnerships with digital broadcasters and in computing – his company Amstrad has been a prominent UK High St. Brand. As Couldry and Littler (2011) observe: ‘Sugar is indicative of the discourse of meritocracy which has become so central to New Labour government discourse, as the exhortations of Gordon Brown (ex-Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer) that schoolchildren should be more like Sir Alan in their entrepreneurialism, indicates’ (Wice 2006).

10 Barthes famously described the mythologies surrounding everyday representations and practices in essays collected under the heading Mythologies (Barthes 1972;1979)

11 The show’s official site can found at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/apprentice/>. See also <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b007qgcl> for information on the sister show *The Apprentice You’re Fired* in which ‘The newly-fired candidate from The Apprentice receives a grilling in front of a studio audience’

serial media event each year (2005–2012 in the UK). This constitutes a fragile but engaging and extended conversation to obliquely cut across and illuminate more serious and deep rooted anxieties and reflections on London, value and work and on ‘the city’.

In 2009 much anxiety about London and ‘the city’ was for instance elaborated through discussion of the social value of financial services, notably focussing on Financial Services authority head Lord Turner of Ecchinswell’s comment that activity within the sector had become bloated and was of questionable social utility.¹² The debate set in train in 2008 continues to define the evolving image and reflections upon London-as-city and as site for economic productivity and social value.

This chapter proposes that one part of *The Apprentice*’s popular appeal lies here – in the opening up of a casual reflective space through which anxieties and desires connected to the imagination of London-as-working-capital can emerge, alongside impromptu notions of value and judgements in these regards. All are fictionalised and dramatically played out on screen – and consumed largely in the Freudian mode of displacement.¹³ *The Apprentice* appeals further as a media-based counter to a widespread and disorganised sense, that London, and in particular ‘the City’ is in many regards an abstract and peculiarly distant place whose productivities and fortunes are perceived to be increasingly delinked from the ‘real’ economy,¹⁴ from consistently purposeful substantive activity and, even, from the political and moral economy of the capital city and the wider UK.

Critiques identifying London’s abstraction are recently amplified through extended considerations of the banking crisis and its aftermaths. Certainly at a remove from formal public debate on the topic, nevertheless in its popular blend of light entertainment and reality format *The Apprentice* seems to engage with this

12 Lord Turner of Ecchinswell, an influential figure in the reform of banking rules in London and beyond, said that the City had grown ‘beyond a socially reasonable size’, accounting for too much of national output and sucking in too many of Britain’s brightest graduates. ‘I think some of it is socially useless activity,’ he said, adding that the financial sector had ‘swollen beyond its socially useful size’ and seemed to make excessively large profits. Lord Turner named fixed-income securities, trading, derivatives and hedging as areas that have grown beyond socially optimal levels, adding that fund management and share trading might also have grown too big. *The Times*, 27 August 2009.

13 Classically Freud used the psychoanalytic term ‘displacement’ to describe a defensive organisation in the individual psyche whereby a patient might obsess, or otherwise direct attention away (via joking or parapraxis) from an object, person or idea that was troubling or traumatic and onto a focus that was psychically safe, less taxing, less disturbing – but perhaps still obliquely connected to the reality being avoided.

14 This delinking does not extend to the consequences of expanded debt in the aftermath of the governments numerous and substantial interventions to prop up banks’ financial deficits in the wake of the crunch. A direct line can be drawn between this public expenditure and coalition policies drastically reducing welfare and public sector expenditure – with a knock on effect for national employment rates and general levels of public service.

debate both directly and indirectly. Thus before the launch of the fifth series in 2009 BBC controller Jay Hunt claimed:

In the current economic climate, *The Apprentice* has never seemed more relevant. That emphasis on sheer hard graft seems more appropriate than ever before. (Holmwood 2009)

The 2009 series included a number of 'Buy British' tasks and a local regeneration project. As noted, subsequent series have replaced salary prizes with entrepreneurial investments.

Indirectly the show allows its audiences to symbolically offset 'the city's' abstract unintelligibility by offering up a peculiarly engaging mix of comedy, reality and fantasy in the form of a game: amounting to a drama of the city, for the city and staged and set up as a substitute for a London where work, meaning and value are sufficiently disturbed as to invite both reflection *and* disavowal.¹⁵ This presents viewers with a tabloidisation of business:

Business culture is increasingly drawing on tabloid discourse to construct an image of itself as 'democratic', contemporary and cool (Littler 2007; McGuigan 2006)

and the theatrics of *the Apprentice* are part of that shift. (Couldry and Littler 2011: 274)

This more dramatic business discourse functions especially in relation to the perceived 'abstraction' of the city, the show seeking to forge connections between the intelligible real-world commercialism figured in business tasks and in attendant reflections and evaluations, and the spaces and places of 'the city'. *The Apprentice* makes it easier to imagine continuities and connections between the algorithmic finance-industries inhabiting London's sky line offices, and the 'real' concrete commercialism of everyday trading, creativity and 'graft'. The abstract city-image is leant credibility in a screened association leveraging the affective 'reality' of the TV show and trading on its task-focused ethos.

Unreal City: Disembedded London

In referring to human activities the term economic is a compound of two meanings that have independent roots. We call them the substantive and the formal meaning...The two meanings could not be further apart; semantically they lie in opposite directions of the compass. (Polanyi 1957: 139-40)

15 See footnote 12 above.

The Apprentice is usefully considered in the context of a broader argument about processes of ongoing and contemporary change and with a focus on London as ‘fictitious capital’. The particular disturbance confronting and confronted in London here is *abstraction*.¹⁶ Contemporary urban processes intensively played out across London in recent decades can usefully be understood under this heading. James Carrier (1998: 2) provides a helpful description of what he terms ‘practical abstraction’ a process he links both to Miller’s (1998; Carrier and Miller 1998) conception of ‘virtualism’ and back to Polanyi’s analysis of ‘dis-embedding’, noting, correctly, that many of the mechanisms whereby social processes become ‘abstract’ are delivered thorough shifts in practice – a dynamic historically in evidence as part of the emergence of modern societies.

If abstraction can be taken as the removing of something from the social and practical contexts in which people previously existed, then one can talk about practical abstraction. That is, people can find that their practical activities have, for reasons beyond their control, changed in a way that make them more abstract: from the perspective of those who confront the changes, these practical activities have become removed from the contexts in which they existed. (Carrier 1998: 25)

Abstraction, as applied in this discussion, is both a matter of spatial as well socio-economic change, and, following Carrier (1998) can be said to have a practical aspect played out, for instance, in work cultures, as well as in the look and feel of London-as-place – in the built environment and practical managerial frameworks performing ‘the city’.

Finance, London’s dominant industry is, of course, susceptible to abstraction, dealing as it must with complex economic models and algorithms. But financial industries also and at the same time support real substantive needs and wants, for services related to the saving and investment of money, for housing, for structured borrowing, for inheritance and, lately for education, health and social care and so on. Indeed current debates about regulation and restructuring of London’s banks¹⁷ have revolved around a dichotomy seeking to protect High Street banking from

16 The identification of ‘abstraction’ here opens connections to a complex debate taking focus away from the main focus here. Certainly however there are key issues to flag up about the embodiment, location and performance of ‘abstraction’ in the social world. Carrier’s account of abstraction as a practical process is helpful (Carrier 1998, see also Frith 1998 and Fine 1998) but it is useful to also note Miller’s (1998; 2002; 2011) discussions of ‘virtualism’ which is linked to this concern with abstraction, and to a debate with Michael Callon (Miller 2002; Callon and Muniesa 2005) regarding the performance of markets and the conception of markets as practical-collective ‘devices’. Thus abstraction should not be seen here as airy and un-located, even while its attendant practices and rationalities produce in realities and institutional relations and spatial effects of the kinds identified as ‘dislocation’ and ‘disembedding’ in much social theory.

17 Most UK banks are based in London – with one further important other UK financial centres in Edinburgh.

contagious relationships with investment banking. Advocates for better regulation hope that the ‘lifeworlds’ (Habermas 1987: 355) of ordinary savers and investors can be more effectively shielded from the volatility of the abstract global markets and the risks taken by banks, prone to risky mistakes linked to serially asserting and applying the formal logic of theoretical finance-driven market economics in the abstract—treating economic models as real and robust rather than as hypothetical and abstracted.¹⁸

The character and extent of finance’s divorce from its former ‘real’ substantive referents; houses, capital investments and trading, savers’ domestic financial concerns, and in favour of formal logical processes taken-as-real, ‘treating the economic model of the market as though it were core to actual economies rather than a projection of economists’ (Miller 2002: 219) can be said to determine the extent to which the practice of finance has become overly abstracted. As Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) write, describing an emergent and changing ethos in contemporary capitalist accumulation.

The deregulation of credit markets, their de-compartmentalisation, and the creation of ‘new financial products’ have multiplied the possibilities of purely speculative profits, whereby capital expands without taking the form of investment in productive activity. (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: vii)

Such abstraction-process are linked to related terms discussed in a number of chapters in this volume; especially financialisation (in particular), globalisation, extended commoditisation, ‘time-space compression’ (Harvey 1990) and deregulation – with London as a key network centre where these dynamics intensify and radiate. These processes are by no means total, defining or unitary.¹⁹ Nevertheless they afford narratives framing a number of evident transformations experienced in London’s recent and ongoing evolutions and crises, with parallel and interlinked crises extensive across the UK and globally.

This is not to say that London is ‘abstract’ as such. It retains its immanence, its multiplicities; its streets and scenes, its material and cultural resonance; cosmopolitan, productive, energetic and creative. And yet, in different places,

18 In relation to the notion of ‘lifeworld’, Jürgen Habermas observes that there is an ever present risk, namely, ‘that the imperatives of autonomous subsystems make their way into the lifeworld from the outside—like colonial masters coming into a tribal society—and force a process of assimilation upon it. The diffused perspectives of the local culture cannot be sufficiently coordinated to permit the play of the metropolis and the world market to be grasped from the periphery (Habermas 1987: 355)

19 Frith makes an important criticism of over-arching narratives of change reminding that analysis must distinguish between confusing theoretical logics and narratives and the logic of practice. This applies in his notion of practical capitalism, a conception alert to the complex and multiple contradictions attenuating abstraction, globalisation, technological change and time-space compression (see Frith 1998: 162-3).

in differing registers London is marked by, sets out and displays a tendency to and deference towards this economic abstraction. The extension of such abstracting logic into our structuring and experience of further spheres stands as both present condition and future threat (Miller 1998; 2002; Fine 1998; Carrier 1998). It is the model of efficiency and modernity, as per Ritzer's (1993) account of McDonaldisation, but it is also the target for reflective redress as we think about places, spaces and the development of contemporary city. *The Apprentice* is relevant in this context.

Apprenticeship: Dreaming the Substantive Economy

Part of *The Apprentice*'s attraction lies in its title and in its explicit but underlying theme. The name of the show 'Apprentice' alludes to a tradition of hands-on skills acquisition, an intimate social-relational process depending upon extended engagement with a master and with the social world of his work and craft – the workshop (Sennet 2008; 2006; Rule 1987; Carrier 1998) as a social context for economic productivity and relations. As Bauman observes:

The very character of apprenticeship [is] an initiation into a totality of patterned existence of the closely-knit trade community. (Bauman 1982: 8)

Notionally, apprenticeship stands as counter to abstract market processes of selection and promotion structuring today's employment markets, predicated, as they are, on a modern discourse of 'careerism', 'personal branding', 'competition' and individuals' 'market value'.

Apprenticeship marks an era where some of the contemporary processes, linked to highly developed market societies, were far less extensive, and so did not so readily define individual 'value': a sociality where there was a demonstrable continuum between work, culture, family and community, place and the productivities in the application of skills and experience. In many ways redolent of the pre-modern, and finding its historical apogee in the proto-modern organisation of work, apprenticeship becomes rhetorically and nostalgically attractive as a traditional counterpoint to the hyper-modern realities of a risky, unsettling and marketised connection between work, self-identity, economy and society.

The Apprentice offers a notional and compressed version of apprenticeship as a prize, along with a large financial reward. While actual motivations in the show are multiple and complex, in the televisual poetics of *The Apprentice* and registered in the very title is the idea that the contestants seek not only to be contracted – to be paid the winner's salary. They want something more. The show also maps a journey from 'outside' Sir Alan's circle and inwards (project by project); it figures a promise of initiation and connection, to narrative and membership, to work and success framed not only by economic reward but by durable social engagement through work. The show valorises not just competitive and financial

success but, also, instituted success. The atavism underwriting the show's title can be considered as a mass-mediated instance of social dreaming – with audiences' displaced desire reaching for 'apprenticeship', a rhetorical and compensatory emblem for the employment-sociality formally ejected from London's abstracted marketised economy and its casualised and volatile employment markets.

Foregrounding the Background: London, Place and Work

According to Lao Tse, the reality of a hollow object is in the void and not in the walls that define it. He was speaking, of course, of spiritual realities. These are the realities also of the Canary Wharf Tower. The power of the void is increased and ... with its supporting structure creates a portal to the sky ... a door to the infinite. (Cesar Pelli, architect's speech at the opening of One Canada Square at Canary Wharf 1991)

The Apprentice is distinctive amongst reality shows in its studied consciousness of place. The place-based inflection stands as significant here in thinking about London. Put simply the aesthetic and presentational style of the show, redolent as it is with vistas traversing Canary Wharf, the financial districts of Docklands and, lately other numerous other iconic buildings,²⁰ works effectively to connect the show's discursive play and drama (around work, employee 'value' and values), with London underlined as space and place – as economic 'seat'.

It is commonplace to point out the ways in which cities 'star' in novels, film and lately television. 1990s drama *Sex and the City* is all about New York, as are Woody Allen's 1970s comedies (*Manhattan* and *Annie Hall* in particular). Inspector Morse is more or less a televisual hymn to Oxford. In each case the city-vision provides or implies an ethos – an urban style and a collection or collocation of subjectivities. It becomes both set and set *up*: an interruptive backdrop that sometimes supports and at other moments undermines characters' particular urbanity. So it is with *The Apprentice*. The show places its contestants 'on trial'; stuck in London traffic or in Sugar's putative Canary Wharf boardroom: do they fit in *this* city – are they at home *here* in and amongst these places? The city stands in the show as both obstacle to and destination for its competitive participants – as they negotiate the 'reality' contest.²¹ Such London-based urban-imagery cut into

20 Such as 'The Gherkin' and Tower 42 and soon The Shard.

21 Numerous episodes unfold in which knowledge and ignorance of London is deployed by contestants seeking to solve problems. Much on screen time is devoted to contestants in taxis and hire cars shuttling between distant destinations around the London compass – and as they seek to return to the notional 'hub' Sir Alan's boardroom in Canary Wharf. And, finally, the lucky winner will notionally be installed at Sir Alan's side. Not in fact in the Canary Wharf Tower where so much putatively goes on – but at Sir Alan Sugar's

The Apprentice, like its musical score, drives the sense, the sensibility and the culture of events as they unfold.

London's city skyline is both figure and ground for the show. The opening shots, backed by Prokofiev's imposing 'Dance of the Knights' from *Romeo and Juliet*, comprise perhaps the most recognisable credit sequences in UK television. Sound and vision lend context, drama and affective charge to the business activities depicted. The same vistas have been foregrounded in recent years the context of anxiety and confusion about the 'content' and 'function' of some of London's buildings.²² These have provided a spectacular stage and backdrop for narratives of economic success, but now (also) London's iconic skylines must signify and stand witness to news stories of grand-scale failures and to crises and decline. Spectacular architecture has become linked in the popular imaginary to over-speculation, abstracting de-control and market collapse.

Leslie Sklair (2005; 2006; 2010) has pointed up the iconicity of corporate buildings – part of a transnational vernacular for globalisation. As Sklair argues, global capitalism ... mobilises the commercial potential of generic globalisation in the sphere of architecture as it does more or less successfully in all other spheres (Sklair 2010). A consequence of the financial crisis has been some uncertainty about the referentiality and value of such pervasive architectural iconicity – with knock on anxieties about the city-as-a whole²³ and underscoring more imminent and specific concerns regarding the commercial and market value of commercial property in London. To specify: the extension of anxieties about disembedding and abstraction outlined above extend into sentiment regarding the iconic built environment. The city risks losing the 'moral' value built into its aesthetic skyline – a 'hyper modern' skyline framing London and the city and tacitly affirming the coherence, the purposeful development and function of the (financial/global) cityscape.

The show's drama, staged by the city in this way, ends up offering up fictive work content for the city – and a framing, scripted sociality structured as game. The show populates the abstract city – the hollow abstract towers spreading across London's skyline – light heartedly but arrestingly figuring rituals of work, productivity, creativity as well as failure and ineptitude. This produces

real headquarters – until recently in Brentwood. On occasion contestants are taken 'global' with notable trips in past series to Morocco and to Paris.

22 TV and press imagery have continually featured the towers at London's Canary Wharf, the Swiss Re Building, widely known as 'the Gherkin' and Tower42, just as are framed in *The Apprentice*'s vistas of London, along with a number of other banking head offices in London's financial districts. As finance-industry news spread to more frequently dominate front pages and news headlines in 2008-9 and subsequently, and with the credit crunch and its aftermaths demanding serial coverage and overview, the 'image' of the city – and attendant architectural imageries – has been very much in the frame for news audiences.

23 With *The Shard* soon to be added to the London skyline, a new tallest building for London, there is evidently a continuing confidence in the value of such structures in the reputation and the functional economic life of a global city like London.



Figure 8.1 The Apprentice dramatises individuals in competition, judgement, justification and business practice but it is also highly conscious of place – London’s city skyline is both figure and ground for the show

Source: Photo courtesy of author.

an imaginary dramatic narrative of value, virtue, punishment and reward. Again the show answers an appetite – to apprehend London’s *moral* economy. *The Apprentice* offers this up and framing punishment and reward in the imagined spaces of the city – and in a space where, as some have argued, judgement and justice have been suspended and deferred by abstracting market logics. Ethos is added to vista: affect to abstraction.

Moral Trial: *The Apprentice* as Modern Fairy Tale

It is ... no exaggeration to think that a society (or the state of a society) may be defined by the character of the tests it sets itself, through which the social selection of people is conducted, and by conflicts over the more or less just nature of those tests. (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 32)

The Apprentice is a moral fable tailored to a generation brought up on *Big Brother* and neoclassical economics. A further element to its imaginary encounter with the

abstraction of disembedded market relations is the show's assertion of emotional-narrative engagement. While *The Apprentice* primarily invites the emotional enjoyment of competitive play – for viewers and participants – the structure of the format invites further analysis. A deeper component of the show's appeal lies in its structure as modern fairy tale – dressed up to conform to reality-TV's demands for cringe-making exposure, rendered comedic via slap-stick pitches and narcissistic assertions of success.

Couldry rightly compares reality TV to theatres of cruelty (Couldry 2008). If we are at a safe distance and the pain is largely self-inflicted, people under pressure are often funny or otherwise compelling – sympathy gives over to something else, especially on reality TV. Like much loved 70s classic *Fawlty Towers*, *The Apprentice* stages a painful kind of neurotic chaos. It exploits its frantic protagonists' confused eagerness to serve either the projected ethos of the master, or the embodied abstractions of market-competitive orthodoxy. Candidates become mini cartoon capitalists on the living streets of London or spluttering justifications in the boardroom. On screens since 2005 and in a number of variants, this has provided one of the present generation's major workplace-comedy of manners. Like most comedy, *The Apprentice* is also, in the end, a morality tale.

The Apprentice's further appeal is to the affirmation of moral judgements – an attempt to link the abstract emotionally unintelligible world of city work, and to dramatise a process whereby 'good' is affirmed and embodied in one who triumphs, who *inherits*, in a narrative underpinned by the emotional register of a fairy story. Whoever devised *The Apprentice* format no doubt took inspiration from Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1973) – another cruel theatre of selection and judgement. *The Apprentice* re-plays Willy Wonka²⁴ for Reality TV. The 'children', having won golden tickets to the mythic factory are presented to the master (Wonka/Sugar) passing through in a series of inventive scenarios: An ongoing moral trial, or, as Sugar likes to call his equivalent, 'a process'. They are given instructions and clues and we see them fail, one by one. Each is then unceremoniously ejected, weeping into their Blackberry, if not turned actually into one – remember Violet Beauregarde.

The annual crop of contestants readily personify the moral failings of childhood favourites; the greed of Augustus Gloop, the know-it-all-entitlement of Violet Beauregard, and, of course, spoiled 'daddy's girl' Veruca Salt: 'I want an Oompa Lumpa, and I want it now!' Pick any series and there are candidates who readily reference Dahl's modern-consumerist archetypes.²⁵

24 If Alan Sugar makes an unlikely Willy Wonka, notwithstanding his sweet-toothed name, nevertheless Canary Wharf's towers suggest a credible great glass elevator (Dahl 1973b).

25 The most important Dahl character in all this has not yet been mentioned. Mike Teavee (TV) is a lesson to us all. He was the child for whom nothing mattered except that it was on screen. His fate was to be transmitted through a TV signal. Mike Teavee's efforts

The prize, as in Sugar's game, is a place at the master's side, the key to the factory. The master seeks an heir, an 'apprentice': the desperate heirs seek an inheritance – all the chocolate you can eat, or a £250,000 investment from Lord Sugar. A psychoanalyst might conjecture that the errant children in the chocolate factory are all also seeking more adequate father figures. It would be wrong to wildly extend that point to *The Apprentice* candidates. However, it is safe to conjecture that part of the show's appeal, if read psychoanalytically, stands in its offering some affirmation of and structure to contain a version of the 'good' in the city and in work, to construct from the process of elimination a further structure, also basic to the show's narrative – of *legitimation*: a way of reassuring ourselves and affirming that in 'the city' there remains an ethos supporting evaluations of good and bad – a moral economy as check and balance against an abstract marketplace logics.

The provision of such a framework is especially attractive in relation to and in the context of popular anxieties about London-as-unintelligible city, the 'city' out of control and seemingly deferring regulation and (communal) reparation. As such this accounts for *The Apprentice's* further attraction – an attraction which of course might readily be cast as dangerously seductive – for the show does not invite real practical judgement. Instead it produces a light hearted fictive scene where judgement is applied satisfactorily and ritually, and in the seeming absence of a position to pass or enact judgement on real failures in the Square Mile.

Clash of Cities: *The Apprentice* as Legitimation

It seems to us scarcely open to doubt that at an ideological level...capitalism will face increasing difficulties, if it does not restore some grounds for hope to those whose engagement is required for the functioning of the system as a whole. (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: xliii)

The differences between TV shows and fairy tales are as illuminating as the comparisons between them. Thus the moral ground of *The Apprentice* is not as raw, not as comprehensive as in Dahl's fable. The show, pantomimic as it is, feeds into a more articulated morality play than Dahl's child's morality fable. The show does not simply, just pull out the 'baddies' and reward the good character – the one who passes all the tests. Instead the show tests the contestants and seeks to affirm a 'good' candidate, selecting and scripting an individual to embody a suitable ethos – a suitable version of business practice and capitalism befitting and connecting to the projected ethos of Lord Sugar and his corporation and his vision of a regenerated practical capitalism in the city. The show attempts to perform, or, rather, attempts to address an appetite for 'an ideological reconstruction [of

to become bigger by broadcasting himself made him very much smaller. Perhaps there is a lesson in there somewhere too?

business ethos] to demonstrate that the world of work does indeed still possess a “meaning” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 29).²⁶ The Apprentice amounts not to a critique of capitalism as such; far from it: but an exploration of variants within the differing scripts laid out in the show.

The show’s format invites reflection: justification and the elaboration, in theory and practice, of competing ‘scripts’. Versions of ‘business’ are hinted at. Differing ethos becomes personified in candidates; in Sir Alan, too; and with understated gravitas, in his ‘eyes and ears’, the experienced mentor/auditors Nick and Margaret, and lately Karen Brady. From within the series values begin to crystallise, emerging across the boardroom table and during tasks; between

Table 8.1 Ideal Types of business ‘cities’: Criteria for status and justification

Ethos	‘city’	Justification of decisions and judgements made primarily in terms of...	Candidates/commentary
Here the ethos depends upon a performative valorising of creativity, authenticity, artistry and so on. Also some valuing of religious purity/integrity etc.	The inspirational city	Authenticity and creativity. The scripts of romantic individualism, non-conformity and ‘zaniness’. To what extent is there evidence of creative risk taking? It is carried credibly.	Candidates are often rejected for over-playing a creative approach and advertising creativity – as divorced from the hard sell approach favoured by sugar is mocked
Here status depends on respect for tradition, seniority and on enacting reciprocal dependencies allied to familial and generational structures. The ‘great man’ as elder, sage and protector	The domestic city	Respect for elders and continuity of concern with past values and approaches. To what extent does the candidate offer deference to the knowledge/experience of his elders?	Sugar asserts a discourse of respect, but uses his own biography to undermine candidates’ assertions of entitlement and scripts of success linked to inherited privilege

²⁶ Boltanski and Chiapello identify this ‘appetite’ not with TV programming but with the tracts of business books published in recent decades and which support their detailed analytic study of evolving business ethos. Their analysis is pre-empted by a helpful discussion of the ‘globalization of reflexive business knowledge’ by Nigel Thrift (Thrift 1998).

Table 8.1 (continued)

<p>Here Status depends on the opinion of others. This is the city of ‘celebrity culture’ or, more soberly, of reputation systems and good conduct dependent upon ‘the community view’.</p>	<p>The reputational city</p>	<p>The standing of the individual amongst members of important reference groups. What do peers, customers and other colleagues think of the candidate?</p>	<p>Sugar underplays aspects of his own celebrity, even as part of his cultivation of image. A notable failure in this regard was a 2010 candidate who announced himself as ‘Baggs the brand’ and who was ejected with an extra dose of scorn.</p>
<p>Here status is established via political power. How fully and how well does ‘the great man’ represent his constituency, his team, his firm and so on.</p>	<p>The civic city</p>	<p>The capacity to represent fairly, to subordinate their own views or aims within the task of representing and respecting the formal views of the group he or she might represent. Includes commitment to social justice as a guiding value</p>	<p>Few candidates emerge from political or public sector spheres and the show does little to support processes of democratic decision-making or social justice. One team failed a task, partly, for poor implementation of a charity-linked marketing scheme selling trainers (McGuigan 2008)</p>
<p>Here status is marked by wealth and acumen in the provision of commodities in the market</p>	<p>The commercial city</p>	<p>The profit motive. How much money has the candidate made. Was he or she successful in selling profitably?</p>	<p>This competent espousal of and performance conforming to version of capitalism seems to have a firmer success rate for candidates and ‘winning’ each week is often a matter of market competition – who made the most profit. Candidates who sell well and make good profits tend to thrive.</p>

Table 8.1 (concluded)

<p>Here status is primarily a matter of professional or other competence including efficiency and the capacity to ‘graft’.</p>	<p>The industrial city</p>	<p>Expertise and technical skill. Was the candidate exhibiting know-how and applying expertise in the delivery of this or that task</p>	<p>A common trope in the shows find Sir Alan exposing failures on the part of candidates whose experience and CVs suggest they have expertise in certain areas – and then nevertheless fail in tasks themed to their ‘home’ industries. This, while well applied expertise is valued, Sugar rejects much expertise, but serially rewards and endorse graft. In the most recent series (2011) Sugar appointed an inventor, suggesting endorsement of this aspect of the accumulation process</p>
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Source: Adapted from Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 24-6).

statements, judgements and justifications. Unstable and partial as these emerging scripts are, something engaging is transacted across the screen.

Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 24-6) offer a useful typology here (Table 8.1). They understand the relationship between the various regimes of accumulation in terms of different ‘cities’. Each ‘city’ (as they term it) identifies and is identified in the enactment of specific clusters of ideal typical values – underpinning a kind of regime validating ‘success’. They describe these ‘cities’ as sites for justification (in terms of an appeal to ethos) of particular values affirming status and worth. The moral ‘architecture’ corroborating value and justification in specific moments makes for the character of ‘the city’.

The show (and the reflective after show, where judgement and justification are picked over again and again in comedic mode), together comprise – and make a space for – a ritual enactment of an ethos for sense of ‘the city’. The ‘city’ referred to and presented become, variously and at once, a purely thematic concept (e.g. domestic, reputational, commercial etc.) denoting a cluster of values, a specific location-in transition, i.e. the span linking ‘The City of London’ between the square mile and Canary Wharf tower so avidly traced in the show’s imageries. For the audience, the city becomes also an approximation of an inner world of judgement, as the show affords moments demanding evaluative interventions on the part of viewers mobilising their adherence to this or that city, or, more likely,

this or that hybrid combination of ‘cities’: a city of the mind and of aspiration. The show invites the private formulation via public discussion of ‘the good city’ – a private-public connection affirmed in the social media traffic that has surrounded the more recent series.

Sir Alan, for his part, appears to judge primarily in terms of the ‘commercial city’ – with some deference to ‘the industrial city’. He is widely criticised for a narrow conception of what really counts in business and for an overly mercantile morality. Critique aside, Sir Alan is enacting an important ritual task in the cultural performance – presenting a version of the old to expose and test emergent and ‘new’ novice scripts. As Boltanski and Chiapello 2005 put it:

The spirit of capitalism is transformed to respond to the need to justification by people who are engaged in the capitalist accumulation process at a given moment, but whose values and representations, inherited as a cultural legacy, are still associated with earlier forms of accumulation. (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 21)

The moral drama of the show – beyond a broad affirmation of and embodiment of the good apprentice in a winner – comes from a clash of generations and a clash of ‘cities’. This clash is interesting in the context of the discussion of London as abstract city. To reiterate the world of work has become somewhat abstract, disembedded from framing scripts. It is lately at a remove from the sets of activities associated with previous regimes of accumulation; it is disconnected from established ‘cities’ i.e. the instituted regimes of accumulation and legitimating discourses that govern/have governed economic activity in the city-past. Ostensibly the show simply asserts a particular strand of capitalism. But what it also points to is an appetite for some framing, some social structure and moral-political governance of the market. Sugar, in person, cannot provide this. What *The Apprentice* points to, as media object, is a latent desire for a social-ethical frame for the city, for the market and for the people working day by day in those spaces and places.

Evident and widespread fascination with *The Apprentice* can be read as symptomatic of what I want to describe as a *virtual* movement – with the show affording not traditional critique, but a media space where anxieties and deficits in London’s culture of work can be explored. This is in no way to say that the show is in any manner critical in its approach to business – again, far from it. As Couldry and Littler suggest ‘neoliberal norms are both worked out and endorsed’ (Couldry and Littler 2011: 270) and McGuigan (2008) finds engagements with ‘cool’ cultures in the show to serve mainly marketing ends.

However, in part, and as a general function of its status as entertainment-oriented media product, with a brief to engage audiences and to afford drama, and in part, also as a function of its narrative and meta-narrative structures, the show nevertheless affords a resource – an object around which emotive, moral and evaluative thinking can emerge. In particular *The Apprentice* has a specific salience in London, and that the specific presentation and execution of the show’s

format in its UK editions has tuned into the show's location – in the city – as a key underpinning theme.

Fictive and playful as it certainly is, *The Apprentice* has contributed a powerful set of imagery to accompany ideas about London – as a centre for business know how and entrepreneurial success. It locates a part of its appeal in a popular media-based image of 'London', in the space of, but in register counterpointed against the 'the city' and its discursive abstraction. This is abstraction of long standing, but that became lately 'real', in the sense of dramatically impacting news agendas, lives and livelihoods via the multiple unravelling of unstable financial mechanisms and in the collapse of fictitious dependences within the fiscal system, as described by Gillian Tett (2009) and others (Turner 2008; Nesvetailova 2010) in the immediate wake of the wake of the 2008 crisis.

There is a hint in the show's popularity of a need for a resilient institutional frame for London's economic life. As Polanyi writes:

The instituting of the economic process vests that process with unity and stability; it produces a structure with a definite function in society; it shifts the place of the process in society, thus adding significance to its history; it centres interest on values, motives and policy. (Polanyi 1957)

Crucially this is a matter for governance and government, and not for 'leadership' and management styles as the show implies it might be. In the show's reality format, and as Couldry and Littler rightly identify, *The Apprentice* seems to assert commitments to the notion of individual corporate leadership. While such leadership has a place and a value, the city, London and the market require a process of social re-embedding to reconnect finance and the global-local flows of capital to the grounds of political, moral and community-linked governance – not least through a more stable connection between the jobs markets and education – and via real and not fictive apprenticeships. Then, again London might seem more real to more of its inhabitants and the excitement of energy of work will emerge, will be sought and found on the streets and in offices, institutions and work places – and not just on screen.

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