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### Neoliberalism in Television: The Winner Takes All

In recent years, audiences have enjoyed what seems to be a bolstered television industry comprised of an almost constant stream of increasingly innovative and intriguing stories.

However, behind the scenes of these rapidly produced dramas, is a much more sinister work environment that jeopardizes the creativity and professional livelihoods of those responsible for the television productions audiences enjoy. Through the contrastingly adorable character of Retsuko, *Aggretsuko*'s storyline centered around a female office worker's experiences in the workplace serves as a fitting metaphor for the television industry's exploitation of their own workers. As long as society is operated based on neoliberal principles, the exploitation of below-the-line workers and their labor in the television industry will remain inevitable; those who become "winners" of neoliberalism by assuming the role of singular authorship achieve attractive fame and status at the cost of an entire group's unacknowledged labor.

Under neoliberalism, individuals exist in a hypercompetitive environment that makes them susceptible to a resulting hyper-exploitation in the workplace. Neoliberalism centers competition in both professional spheres and personal spheres. According to Julie A. Wilson's book *Living in Competition*, "Neoliberalism incites us to live as self-enclosed individuals, as competition necessarily pits us against our peers and the rest of the world. [. . .] To ensure our success and survival, we must play to win" (Wilson 4). Individuals are encouraged to view themselves as an entity requiring constant maintenance to "compete" and "win." The

competition that neoliberalism fosters creates the notion that success is limited and only those who work for and are deserving of success will succeed. Those who fall short of success have only themselves to blame. However, this hierarchy of who does and does not deserve success allows those at the top of the hierarchy to exploit those that are below them. In *Aggretsuko*, Retsuko is repeatedly upset by her boss's antics as he spends his workdays playing golf and idling around the office. When Retsuko mutters her discontentment under her breath, her fellow coworker defends their boss by saying, "That's his job!" (*Aggretsuko*). Even though the boss is objectively incompetent and does not put in the work that his employees put in, his employees still cope with his antics because he is their higher-up. He has "won" in the hierarchy of success and therefore he deserves to be treated better and the coworkers deserve to be treated worse. This is a philosophy that many of the employees have internalized themselves, which is why they are so willing to put up with the exploitation they face in the office, and why Retsuko's coworker defends their boss to Retsuko rather than agree with her. After all, it is their own fault that they have not worked themselves up to the same level as their boss in the competitive work environment. Furthermore, the hypercompetitive environment turns employees against each other. Wilson goes on to argue, "We thus move through the world with an "oppositional consciousness," [. . .] More specifically, neoliberalism asks us to be constantly [. . .] thinking about how this or that decision might or might not give us a competitive edge over the rest of the field" (Wilson 4). When everyone believes that they have an equal shot at moving upward in the hierarchy, they also believe that their peers are their competition. In *Aggretsuko*, Retsuko faces malicious rumors about her intent to resign from her position. Ultimately, she finds out her fellow coworker Komiya is responsible for spreading the rumor. The only advantage Komiya stands to gain from spreading rumors about Retsuko is a chance to bond with their boss.

However, because Komiya has fallen victim to operating under “oppositional consciousness,” he turns on his fellow employee. Without a sense of commadery in the workforce, the employees are made even more vulnerable to the potential dangers of operating within the hierarchy of success that they are subscribed to. The resulting sense of competition that neoliberalism creates in the workforce teaches individuals dangerous concepts of hyperindividulism that make them the perfect victims for exploitation as they internalize a need to compete against their peers.

The dangers depicted in *Aggretsuko* are reflected in real life situations, and can be used to understand some of the dynamics within the television industry as well. Like any workforce, the television industry assigns certain individuals to the role of the “winner” while leaving others behind. In the book *Legitimizing Television*, Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine describe the role of the television industry’s winner: “A television auteur must be seen at once as an effective boss and an inspired genius, and in its ideal form he claims total authority, simplifying the collaborative nature of industrial media production” (Newman and Levine 40). Although creating television is a grueling process that requires the tireless collaboration of numerous people, only certain individuals who have been narrativized as the “auteur” or given the role of the winner are given the credit and benefit from the full successes of the work. Additionally, the labor that is required is spec. work, and as John T. Caldwell says in *Precarious Creativity*, “[The] spec world is a pathetic and ugly world indeed [. . .] the spec world off-loads [. . .] responsibility for actually producing and financing screen content onto the shoulders of the makers” (Caldwell 44). In the spec world, glossing over the labor of below-the-line workers is common such as in the case of one of Caldwell’s examples: “A personal assistant to an overbooked executive habitually employs a cultural caste system to prioritize which agents or producers get development meetings, thus acting as an unintended, low-paid narrative element gatekeeper for

the select stories eventually told in series episodes” (Caldwell 41). Certain workers are made invisible by placing a sort of “winner” of neoliberalism on a pedestal and regarding them as the sole source of authorship for a television series, ignoring the work that everyone within the lower levels of the “cultural caste system” have put in in order to make a successful show. By awarding authorship to a singular person, the work of everyone below that individual in the hierarchy is erased. In a more black-and-white depiction of workplace politics, *Aggretsuko* can illustrate this sort of unfair division between work and acknowledgement of work. At the bottom of the cultural caste system, Retusko is often asked to put in overtime and finish her higher-ups’ work. Although she spends the most time at the office, she is given little to no recognition for her work because she is simply one part of the machine that is meant to produce for a greater project. Because there is a belief that eventually anyone can arrive as the “winner” in a neoliberal world, Retsuko is willing to do continue playing into her own exploitation. In the spec. world, although writers understand they are being asked to overwork themselves, they are willing to play into this exploitation under the guise of possibly, eventually finding themselves as the “winner” and presented with narrative of being the sole author behind a successful series.

Workplaces efficiently operate through the perils of neoliberalism because neoliberalism convinces employees to play into their own exploitation in hopes of one day coming out on top. Clearly illustrated in Sanrio’s *Aggretsuko*, this exploitation can also be easily pinpointed in the world of television, as writers are asked to overwork themselves for the potential of becoming a “winner.”

Works Cited

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