

S1E2: Fifteen Million Merits

Name: Silvia S. Student

Student ID #: 123456789



Topics: Mass media, capitalism, eviscerating dissent, life as a performative activity

Characters: Bing Madsen + Abi Khan. Minor characters: Three judges, unpleasant bicyclist Dustin, unpleasant wannabe singer

Notable technologies: The media room senses if you're watching and demands that you watch if you aren't. Charging you for *not* receiving advertising (you can pay with your money *or* your attention). Micro-charges. Enforced isolation.

Summary: Fifteen Million Merits (15MM) depicts a dystopian world where people ride on exercise bikes to earn credits to let them live meaningless lives in TV-lined cubicles. Bing tries to help Abi escape this stupid existence and become a singer. The plan backfires because the judges would rather her be a porno-star instead. Bing is furious. He lashes out on the same talent-search show, threatening suicide live on TV. It is all interpreted as performance – which, ultimately, it becomes. By the end, he and Abi have escaped to better material conditions, but still an unhappy and meaningless existence.

Theme(s): A life of consumption, production, and mindless entertainment is idiotic. Fuck the bastards that make this happen, and that make it nigh near impossible to escape.

Vibe: Dark, quiet, angry. Even the cinematography is underexposed gray.

Questions:

1. Is the 15MM world just like present-day capitalism? Similar/different how?
2. Bing can't effectively resist. (Can we?)
3. Why did society acquiesce to the 15MM world? (Why did we acquiesce to our own?)
4. Why do you think people are bicycling as the assigned activity? Do you think the bikes power anything?
5. Why are people living in isolation in little rooms? Do you think people are allowed to partner? What purpose is served by keeping people apart?
6. Where did Bing get the 15M credits? Did you believe it was left by a deceased brother?
7. What kinds of TV shows are made available to people in the 15MM world?
8. Does technology like the don't-look-away-from-the-screen exist? Used where?

9. Work in order to live in order to work in order to live ... in an endless cycle. Bleak. Does the filmmaker lighten this dystopian image in any significant way?
10. Not only are people's lives limited to the consumption of commodities ... people *themselves* are commodified. Who is commodified how? [people are the commodities that cycle, that make porn videos, who buy stupid shit,]
11. Why does the film use *merits* rather than *dollars* as the unit of exchange value?
12. What is the meaning of Abi's folded penguins? [Not items that are being sold, they are *defined* as trash and recycled]
13. What do you make of Dustin, the obnoxious cyclist? The unpleasant silver-haired singer who waited for weeks to get on *Hot Shot*?
14. What is *Hot Shot* supposed to be evocative of? [*America's / Brition's Got Talent*]
15. What the purpose of the *Cuppliance* drink before performance?
16. Theodor Adorno: *Culture today has infected everything with sameness*. Discuss.

Cultural references: The song: "Anyone Who Knows What Love Is (Will Understand)", a 1964 song; Simon Cowell (Britain's Got Talent, American Idol).

Quotes:

1. *All we know is fake fodder [i.e., worthless consumer shit] and buying shit. That's how we speak to each other, how we express ourselves.* -Bing
2. *Authenticity is in woefully short supply.* - Judge Hope. Before he buys the alleged authenticity, which transforms it into something inauthentic.
3. Selma: *"I love gold. I feel like it really expresses who I really am.*

Personal reaction: One of my favorite episodes. Excellent acting and script. Very tight and efficient (barely an hour). Haunting song. Love can't really exist in the 15MM world; it persists, rather vaguely, as a nostalgic feeling captured by the song, and as an ember that won't quite die that motivates people to try to do kind things for others.

Acknowledgements: Before preparing these notes, I read the Wikipedia article for this episode and the chapter on this episode from the Brooker-Jones book.