

Hugh Greenway reveals why he can't stand *The Apprentice*

I can't stand *The Apprentice*. It's a visceral thing. I should admit up front that I have not seen any of the current series, so my comments may be unfounded. But it is almost impossible to escape the programme if you watch the news on TV or read the newspaper, so I think this is unlikely. I should also admit that I loathe nearly all forms of reality TV as they simply pander to the worst in all of us, the voyeuristic rubber-neckers and the narcissists alike.

At least the Romans, who understood that the provision of "bread and circuses"¹ was the way to keep the masses happy and docile, were open about the fact that gladiators and lions were a straight bribe to the baser instincts. And, before you challenge me on narcissism, have you honestly never looked at the freak show paraded in reality TV and thought: "Thank God, I'm not that bad!!"?

But all this is nothing to my disdain for *The Apprentice*. Laughing at unfortunates has existed throughout the centuries. The Fool King at the Roman Feast of Saturnalia was a slave given absolute power for the duration of the festival but who, at the end, was expected to slit his own throat and thus restore order. Compare and contrast, anyone??

The thing that winds me up most about this BBC offering is that it could be educational; and let us not forget that "to inform, educate and entertain" is the purpose of the Corporation.

Unfortunately, for the 'format' to work, ie irrational overconfidence, hubris, bitching and back-stabbing in pursuit of a 'six-figure' job with Sir Alan, the producers have to recruit dysfunctional people who are the polar opposite of learners.

Their almost complete absence of self-awareness, coupled with their overblown egos, a confined space and a relatively simple task to make them compete, guarantee dramatic tension. This, in turn, makes good television.

Anyone who looks like they might have a decent shot at being a human being is usually trampled underfoot in the first few episodes.

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I am sure I am not the first to ponder whether Marx, had he lived in the era of reality TV, might have written that television "is the opiate of the masses"².

I am clearly in the minority but I cannot be alone in knowing in advance what will happen if you stick a bunch of hornets in a jar and give it a shake, and not finding it particularly entertaining. I have grown past the period where using a magnifying glass to burn insects was fun (but please note that I am not denying that there was a time when it might have been).

In the earlier series, there was more real business content, which was educational. Teams failed because they got stuck with stock, or failed to price to the market, or failed to deliver on time, or misunderstood the client. As the series becomes more and more successful, the educational element disappears and is replaced by the entertainment.

I would be really interested to know if any of the previous winners still work for Sir Alan and even more interested in what they have learned since the media spotlight moved on from them. But I guess, with a potential audience of one, the commissioning editors are not going to rush this one into production.

I don't think it comes from Sir Alan Sugar, either. He is a genuine self-made man with heaps of experience and strong opinions that he is not afraid to share. I saw him once address a room half-full of teachers and tell them that most of what they taught was "useless nonsense"; they lapped it up and loved him for it. I also think he is genuinely committed to developing British enterprise; it is not his fault that *The Apprentice* has become such a huge entertainment success.

But I saw him in a fascinating documentary about Bill Gates and the rise of Microsoft, openly admitting how he had got it wrong in the early years of the PC. And without an editor cutting to make him look like a tyrannical bully, it was fascinating viewing.

Successful people talking about their failures and what they learned from them. Now that's a TV programme I would watch. ■

References

1. "Panem et circenses" Juvenal, Satire 10.77–81
2. "Religion... It is the opium of the people", Contribution to *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Karl Marx, 1843

