TikTok Tragedy?

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"This is so stupid," my girlfriend said. "Literally, why are we watching this?"

I had no answer. I, too, was thinking the same thing. We were watching the new Netflix documentary *Hype House*, a limited docu-series that focuses on a group of TikTok influencers living in a collaborative workspace/mansion called the Hype House. These influencers are kids from my generation—ranging from mid-teens to mid-twenties—that live lavish lifestyles in Los Angeles while making short-form content (and advertisements) on massive social media platforms like TikTok and YouTube. The occupants of these collaborative content houses live in constant fear, a fear that is palpable in the Netflix documentary. The stars are always aware that with a single bad post or loss of popularity, they could be "canceled" and lose their followings— or worse, their brand deals.

It is here that *Hype House* begins its story: After a public breakup with Charli D'Amelio (a former member), the ambitious Chase Hudson, one of the house's founders, has decided to move out and pursue a musical career beyond TikTok. A sizable amount of the plot revolves around this conflict; Hudson is living in a different mansion and not posting anything on his TikTok, and the other influencers are frustrated as the community and efficiency of the Hype House dissolves. It is a reality show about a reality unraveling, and Hudson is cast as half hero, half villain by the producers, seemingly on a quest for greater success in the music industry while turning aside from people that he describes as his family. *Hype House* sets up the viewer for an epic tale with tragic undertones, but in reality, the show has received negative reviews. "'Hype House': Netflix Series shows the depressing side of TikTok Fame," laments the headline of a *Guardian* review by Adrian Horton. In fact, "depressing" was the word most commonly tied to the show as I looked into its reviews, both in established print media and on the commentary sections of YouTube. The show has 2.2/10 stars on IMDb, and people shrivel up their faces when you mention it to them. But *why?*

I wanted to know why a show about celebrity influencers living large in Los Angeles ended up falling so flat, especially since 54% of young adults say they would take the same job if they had the chance (Swanson). Daniel D'Addario, who wrote a review in *Variety* similarly entitled, "'Hype House' Tells a Depressing Story of TikTok Fameseeking," claims that the show lacks "a pretense to build its characters' quest" and erases perspective in the eyes of the viewer. He says that Hudson's struggles seem removed from reality, citing the opulent pinball-machine- filled room in which he shot his testimonials. Hudson himself has since said he was unhappy with the way he was portrayed on the show, and says he was painted as a "villain" by the producers without his knowledge (qtd in Tenbarge). While I didn't necessarily perceive him as a villain, it was implied in the show that he was going against the established norms of the TikTok community at great personal risk. In a sense, the producers of the show are attempting to paint Hudson at a crossroads: a tragic hero of TikTok. This is an attempt that is ill-suited to the reality TV genre and

betrays a millennia-old function of entertainment, a function that we can see more clearly if we explore the ideas of the 20th-century philosopher Hannah Arendt.

Arendt was mainly concerned with *being*, much like her teacher (and lover) Martin Heidegger. Her book, *The Human Condition*, sums up her life's work fairly well in its title. She had three main ideas about what made up the experience of being human: namely, labor, work, and action. *Labor* is her term for humanity's survival-related activities, such as getting a job, grocery shopping, or using the bathroom. *Work* is a cultural aspect, focusing on society and institutions—a book, to her, is a human's way of *work*, as it leaves something behind for future generations to learn. Finally, there's *action*, which is our relations to each other, our being-in-the-world with other people, that give us our uniqueness and a life worth living (Arendt 7). These ideas, to her, layer innumerably inside each and every individual, and echoes of this human condition can be found throughout literature dating back to the beginning of modern history in the Ancient Greek *polis*.

At the dawn of modern politics, the *polis* meant a lot more to society than merely the word for a city-state. The *polis* was a new experiment in human life, one centered around an open space, the agora, and not a god-king or central leader—the word is the root of a little thing today called "politics." Arendt posited that the arena of the agora was the place where men could go to "multiply the chances for everybody to distinguish himself…in his unique distinctness" (197). In other words, the agora was the place where men could establish themselves in the world through discourse and speech and live on through works produced about them. Democracy, to Arendt, is maintained through the stories that are told about these men, in remembering their courage and failures to learn in a uniquely human way (26). These men, such as Achilles, are remembered in classical literature as heroes, and the more tragic their story, the more resounding their legacy. Arendt hopes that these stories will bring people together when outside forces try to drive them apart. She claims that we feel alive and remember our importance in the world and to others through stories such as the *Iliad*. These works, to Arendt, are a synthesis of *work* and *action* which bring the audience a sense of purpose, and ultimately, *being* (243).

If the function of these stories is to remind people of their place in democracy and their being in the world, as Arendt claims, then a story that sets itself up with a tragic hero should showcase the qualities of such a story and work towards that goal—something that *Hype House* seems to *want* to do, but cannot, due to the "reality" aspect of reality TV. Arendt describes that a "hero" to Homer was simply a name given to a free man that participated in the democratic enterprise: "The connotation of courage, which we now feel to be an indispensable quality of the hero," she writes, "Is in fact already present in a willingness to act and speak at all, to insert one's self into the world and begin a story of one's own" (186). In this sense, Achilles is not the only hero to be depicted in the epic *Iliad*, but also his counterpart, Hector of Troy, or any of the other characters who seek to enter the arena of the *polis* and win "immortal fame" (Arendt 193). The *Iliad* is the first Western work to depict such a hero, but since then, heroes have grasped the attention of inherently political audiences. The tragic hero is a key theme throughout the rich narrative history of modern democracy; Achilles, Antigone, Hamlet, and Darth Vader all classify as examples. These stories, however, are slightly different from the genre that *Hype House* is set in; specifically, they are fictionalized or entirely fictional, allowing the heroes to be built with the plot in mind. *Hype House* wants to tell a story like this, but fails because Hudson is an already

existing, real, human person and not a character written to embody the ideals of democracy and being.

Hudson comes off as a "tortured soul," according to Horton in his *Guardian* review. He's described by D'Addario as a "brooding would-be recording artist" with apparently one interest: fame. Hudson says in the documentary that he's done with TikTok, that he's signed a deal with a record label and is on his next great adventure, even noting that he's left his "family" behind. So far, he's supposedly checking off the boxes for a tragic hero (setting off alone, working towards a larger goal, etc.), except for one crucial trait: he fails to build a bridge to the audience through a tragic flaw and establish a narrative worth telling the rest of society. All of his testimonials filmed in a gargantuan game-room, complete with arcade machines, two foosball tables, and baroque ceiling decoration—he's exorbitantly rich beyond our comprehension already. The relatability of a tragic hero, baked into the narrative of a classical piece due to the narrative and (usually) fictionalized nature of a story, is lost within the reality TV show lens. This is not a deeply flawed Prince, or a "godlike" warrior—this is a kid from Stockton who got famous because he dances on the internet. Characters like his are common in the TikTok universe, according to Barrett Swanson, a journalist that spent a weekend in a related collab house. "Influencing has become fully democratized," writes Swanson, "Making a Jay Gatsby out of every intrepid Jimmy Gatz."

Jay Gatsby, is, of course, yet another tragic hero—a man whose story captivates because of his one great flaw: his inability to escape the past. Many tragic heroes possess such fatal flaws, or at least a trait that is perceived by the audience as detrimental to narrative victory. William G. McCollom, a mid-century scholar with several works about tragedies, defined society's need for a tragic hero in his piece "The Downfall of a Tragic Hero." McCollom says that the hero should be guilty of unavoidable wrongdoing, and in succeeding yet succumbing to his flaws, the audience "perceives that its own evil-doing is fundamentally connected with the human condition" (55). Arendt agrees, saying that tragic heroes die to evade the consequences of their actions and so live forever in the glory of a singular moment (194). While Hudson by no means has to die—I would equate the modern form of such narrative "dying" to "failure"—he still has a hard time living up to giants such as Achilles or Gatsby. After all, Horton describes him as "perhaps most famous for dating Charli D'Amelio," another TikTok star who is not even in the documentary. His downfall will not be caused by a fatal flaw like McCollom describes in his piece. His story does not necessarily relate to the human condition or some greater guilt in our subconscious, as McCollom describes (55), and it is not even his fault. He's a real person, not a literary figure sprung from the mind of a writer. I think he has no obligation to have any of those traits, nor a responsibility to uphold democracy or any of Arendt's ideas. However, the show portrays him as such, and in doing so, the producers doom themselves.

The realm of reality TV has no space for this historically narrative story structure. That Chase Hudson fails to connect the viewer to a deeper place in the ideological *polis* is not his fault; as he himself said, he had no knowledge of how he would be portrayed in the show. The producers attempted to tell a story that is traditionally fictional but used real people instead. I believe this is the emptiness that critics like D'Addario notice when they find the show lacking pretense for a quest. The story of the collapsing Hype House would make more sense under a different lens, if it was about the characters and their grandiose lives instead of fabricated drama between people still in the TikTok industry and Hudson, who is attempting to leave it.

Hype House on Netflix is not just a depressing look into the lives of TikTok influencers, as critics would have you think. It disconnects from ideas fundamental to modern democracy, namely Hannah Arendt's ideas of *work* and *action*, and a literary tool in existence since the oldest of stories was put in ink. The absence of a tragic hero in a show that is trying to tell a tragic hero-type story is what leaves the empty feeling and "lacking pretense" that D'Addario mentioned. It is not a dangerous story, or necessarily a bad one; I still had fun watching, but only because I was ogling at the extreme wealth and laughing at the petty drama. It is merely a story that set out to tell an epic tale and failed by forgetting a key ingredient. It leaves the audience in irony more than tragedy, with my girlfriend turning her attention away from the big screen and opening the very app that made Chase Hudson famous.

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