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B613?

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B613?

Hollywood will always be Hollywood. There will always be ridiculous chase scenes, impossible rescues and implausible conspiracies, each accompanied by the proverbial warning, “Don’t try this at home.” But sometimes, when art seems to imitate life and aspects of the fantasy world on the page or screen seem to mirror our reality, we end up asking ourselves, “Is it possible? Is that really true?”

The highly successful political drama series, *Scandal*, was a perfect case in point. The main character, Olivia Pope, a Washington crisis manager (a.k.a. “fixer”), was based on the real-world crisis manager and former Bush administration press aide, Judy Smith. Smith & Company has managed very real crises for clients such as Monica Lewinsky, Wesley Snipes, Michael Vick and Sony Pictures Entertainment as well as provided strategic communication consolation to various Fortune 500 companies. Olivia Pope & Associates managed the reputations of the Washington wealthy and powerful by whatever means necessary, escalating from manipulating media coverage to crime scene clean up and beyond, all while Olivia deftly (and sometimes not so deftly) managed an affair with POTUS.

But there’s more . . . because . . . Hollywood.

Just under a quarter of the way through Season 2 (of 7 seasons), in episode 13, we encountered the cryptic moniker B613. And just like that, the world of fixing was forever altered. Just like that, *Scandal*’s faithful audience wondered incredulously, “Does B613 really exist?” And despite its secrecy and lies, ruthless totalitarianism, brutal tactics and fearsome power, we (ahem . . . I mean, they, of course) almost want it to.

But why?

From *The Count of Monte Cristo* to Charles Bronson movies, to *Dexter*, *The Sopranos* and *Scandal*, the theme of vigilante justice meted out by an ethical-but-not-too-ethical hero persists in the stories we tell. It persists because somewhere, hidden deep in the shadowy crevices of most minds, there is a desire for a protector who is smart enough, and powerful enough and tough enough, to dispense real justice when the system breaks down.

We like the juxtaposition of tough (really tough) and tender. We feel for Tony Soprano when he struggles with the human condition as he sits across from his therapist, all the while knowing that in a previous episode we saw him carrying a severed head in a bowling ball bag after some serious “wet work.” Likewise, we (mostly) root for Olivia in love and war, even though we are well aware of her unscrupulous, illegal and immoral actions. We feel tenderness when those lips start to quiver.

[Several psychological principles seem at play here.](#)

Humans seem to be hard-wired, if you will, to evaluate for aspects of fairness. Fair treatment elicits positive emotions, while conversely, unfair treatment elicits negative emotions. The definition of fairness, of course, is mitigated by individual experience and cultural norms, but regardless of that definition, when principles of fairness are violated, humans tend to seek punishment and/or retribution. Of course, given the circumstances, exacting such justice in the face of injustice is not always possible, practical or beneficial. Yet the desire is there. And because this causes cognitive dissonance, individuals may seek other, less direct measures of righting the wrong - e.g., retribution by proxy. Enter the Dexters, the Tony Sopranos and the B613's of the world, real or fictional.

A close cousin of our need for fairness is the concept of revenge. Revenge is most often, or most purely, sought in the pursuit of fairness, or rather righting unfairness. However, that definition of fairness as a justification, can be twisted, and revenge can be pursued for less noble causes than fairness - e.g., pure spite or jealousy - think the Nancy Kerrigan/Tonya Harding drama. Again, much of what we might fantasize as appropriate revenge may well be immoral and/or illegal. Thus, we count on others - whether the sanctioned processes of our legal system, or some such entity that rises above the constraints of that system - to do our so-called "dirty work."

And then, the question becomes, "At what price, revenge?" What do we really gain in the quest to seek justice and retaliation? What do we lose? How much power do we relinquish to any entity to whom we give the task of executing our personal justice? How vulnerable do we become to them?

So back to B613. Does a secret agency exist that operates on a virtually unlimited budget beyond the oversight of government in order to protect "the Republic" in any way its Command sees fit? Some believe the answer, to some degree, is yes. Some believe it so for the sheer thrill and mystique of imagining a secret agency. Others, however, argue that the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), established in 2010 by the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, bears some resemblance to Scandal's fictional organization. The CFPB is hardly a secret. It has its own .gov site. But it does operate as an "independent agency" outside the authority of Congress. Much like B613, the CFPB is, some argue, under the control of one person - not referred to as Command, but rather a Director - though the agency does indicate a Deputy Director in its org chart.

Much like B613, CFPB has proven itself masterful in the extraction of information from American companies and consumers. The Bureau has been accused of amassing consumer data on 85-90% of American consumer credit cards with outstanding balances, a data collection program that dwarfs even the NSA's surveillance program. And though the CFPB has yet to engage in the strong-arm tactics and "enhanced interrogation techniques" of B613 (solitary confinement, waterboarding, torture), it does pack a punch, so to speak, along the order of fines and legal action.

While the CFPB's role is exclusively financial (again, unlike B613), it has been criticized for its overarching authority, lack of accountability, unchecked power and capacity for unilateral decisions, even, or perhaps especially among other government agencies.

United States House Financial Services Committee openly criticized CFPB for its "radical structure that is controlled by a single individual who cannot be fired for poor performance and who exercises sole control over the agency, its hiring and its budget" (Hensarling, 2013). The committee cited a lack of financial transparency and a lack of accountability to Congress or the President.

Thus far, legal action against the CFPB has been thwarted. However, in October 2019, the Supreme Court announced it would review the constitutionality of the Bureau's structure with proceedings set to begin in March 2020. But like B613, the CFPB has its staunch supporters as well, who argue that such unprecedented authority is necessary to fulfill its overarching mandate - consumer protection.

Beyond the CFPB, some argue that the real life role of B613 is played by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) clandestine units or a branch of the National Security Agency (NSA). Others insist that nothing remotely resembling the fictional agency does or could exist in the US, given the elaborate set of checks and balances in our government.

Still others argue that while there may not be one central organization, as depicted on *Scandal*, countless "off-the-books operations" function in an ad hoc manner - a.k.a. covert operations or "black ops." Now we're moving into some gray area. Depending on how one depicts these operations, they could be considered sinister conspiracies or the typical modus operandi of national security, which, by nature must hold its proverbial cards close to its chest, so to speak. Obviously, our government, or any government, for that matter, cannot make all things public. The question becomes, as it so often does with all things of a moral and ethical nature, where to draw the line. Where exactly is that murky gray area between for-your-own-good and harmful deception? And, of course, who gets to decide?

These are dilemmas humankind has struggled with since the ancient philosophers. Sometimes we get it right. Sometimes we get it very, very wrong. And sometimes we are left with more questions than answers.

Even B613.

Hensarling, J. (June 18, 2013). CFPB Lacks Oversight and Accountability. U.S. House of Representatives Financial Services Committee. Archived from the original Press release <https://web.archive.org/web/20170516101416/http://financialservices.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=339512> .