

“A NEW PEOPLE AND THE CHOICES THEY WILL HAVE TO MAKE”:

HUMANE HUMAN-AI COHABITATION IN HBO'S *WESTWORLD*

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In 1955, Disneyland's opening "dedicat[ion] to the ideals, the dreams, and the hard facts that have created America" established the theme park as a peculiarly American space (Lambert 29). Just as the founding of the United States of America materialized a myth of freedom, theme parks turn myths into tangible experiences. French philosopher Jean Baudrillard argues, theme parks such as "Disneyland" are "presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest" – those imaginary ideals, dreams, and hard facts that constitute the myth of America – "is real" (qtd. in Kellner 82). Although theme parks have spread all around the world, the most popular theme parks are all subdivisions of the American corporations Disney and Universal (Rubin 10-11). Theme Parks, then, as Baudrillard argued in his travel narrative *America* (1988), largely continue to function as "microcosm[s]" of American culture, which exploit "world[s] of the imagination" to elevate banal acts of consumption into mythical experiences (55).

Similar to fully-immersive theme park attractions, which offer escape from the triviality that surrounds them, contemporary digital devices offer largely pleasure-driven environments where people all over the world spend increasing amounts of time. Nevertheless, theme park escapes remain space dependent, whereas digital escapes can be enjoyed boundlessly. For all this pleasure, however, James Williams argues in *Stand Out of Our Light* (2018) that contemporary "design[s] of digital technologies" are "fail[ing] to take into account our 'almost infinite appetite for distractions'" – precisely that appetite which Aldous Huxley epitomized in *Brave New World Revisited* (1958) (11). In this, Williams emphasizes Neil Postman's assessment in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985) that "Huxley's foresight ... lay in his prediction that freedom's nastiest adversaries in the years to come would emerge not from the things we fear, but from the things that give us pleasure" (Williams 10-11). While Williams evokes the image of "a thumb scrolling through an infinite feed, forever," Huxley's sentiments of fear and pleasure are also particularly

applicable to *Westworld*'s (October 2016-) portrayal of android theme park hosts that are reaching a form of sentience (11). *Westworld*, one of HBO's latest TV-show blockbusters written by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, taps into the theme park myth of pleasure-driven escape, and depicts the fear that is widely experienced when Walt Disney's "search for a way to create believable mechanical life" results in actual artificial life forms that express their first signs of sentience (Krasniewicz 134).¹

While the material on *Westworld*'s second season is still limited to reviews and interviews, scholars have studied the first season, with a particular focus on its philosophical content, self-referential elements, intertextuality, and viewer identification techniques.² In this dissertation, however, I will analyze *Westworld*'s two seasons (2016-2018) in relation to the contemporary digital cultural climate that they have been produced and viewed in – in which capitalism and social interaction are increasingly taking on digital forms – and contrast this with Michael Crichton's original *Westworld* (1973) and Richard T. Heffron's sequel *Futureworld* (1976). I argue that whereas the 1970s productions visualize a futuristic "man versus machine" narrative in which android "others" oppose humanity, *Westworld* refracts (i.e. an imperfect reflection of things not as they are but as they may soon be) our present cohabitation with digital technologies in a multifaceted narrative that combines both utopian and dystopian depictions of humanoid artificial intelligence (AI). In this ambiguity, *Westworld* does not just reflect our cultural moment in which we are still unsure about the role to assign to (intelligent) machines in our society, but in its depictions of androids pursuing personhood and self-determination, it also offers an ultimately

¹ "Westworld was HBO's highest watched first season series ever" (Beckner 50).

² See the twenty-two essays published in *Westworld and Philosophy* (2018). All essays start from a philosophical perspective, but many have extended their arguments. Self-referential elements are featured in Michael Forest and Thomas Beckley-Forest's essay; intertextuality features in essays by Dan Dinello, Patricia Traperó-Llobera, Matthew Meyer, and Caterina Ludovica Baldini; and viewer identification techniques are discussed by Bradley Richards, Lizzie Finnegan, and Madeline Muntersbjorn.

optimistic commentary on human-AI cohabitation. Contemporary left-wing visions of a post-capitalist utopia, for example, may envision an automation facilitated post-work society, but more dystopian visions fear that our technologies will remain in service of capital rather than humanity and thereby continue to produce profit for the few, precarity for the many, and fading attentional capacities for everyone. In *Westworld*, the latter scenario is embodied by the Delos Corporation, which subjects both androids and humans in its pursuit of capital revenue. However, Nolan and Joy deconstruct the human-android dichotomy and offer viewers a character identification that is markedly more fluid than the one-sided depictions of man-versus-machine seen in the 1970s iterations of the story.

Indeed, because both the android and human characters in Nolan's and Joy's *Westworld* can and do serve as a proxy for various subjugated peoples, I argue, the series invites viewers to "wake up" and self-realize alongside their subjugated counterparts. Concurrently, however, the empathy that *Westworld* inspires for the revolt against Delos opens the show up to Mark Fisher's critique that an evil-corporation-as-antagonist-format actually pacifies viewers by performing their anti-capitalism for them. This criticism is reinforced by the graphic nudity and violence that characterize HBO's production, which, at first glance, may appear as the antithesis to a complex narrative capable of fostering enlightenment in its viewers. I want to argue, however, that it is precisely this over-the-top production form that allows *Westworld* to compete in what James Williams calls today's "attention economy." In short, beneath its vulgar surface, *Westworld* offers not just a potential for enlightenment, but also a progressive perspective on the cultural debate around AI. In this portrayal, utopia is not visualized in post-work leisure, but in the beauty of cohabitating with a new conscious android species of our own making. Moreover, *Westworld* shows how it is not machines that threaten peaceful coexistence, but humanity's machine-like

instincts that are actually closer to android codes than we care to admit. Thus, inside a Trojan horse of over-the-top elements *Westworld* transcends our ambivalent cultural stance on the role of AI in Western society by offering a utopia based on humane rather than economic arguments.

The dissertation that follows is divided into three parts. In part one, I will consider various technological, cultural, and intellectual elements of the present historical conjuncture that are vital to historicize *Westworld* and position it into the larger debate around (humanoid) AI. Subsequently, in part two I will analyze Crichton's *Westworld* and Heffron's *Futureworld* to draw a contrast to part three's analysis of Nolan's and Joy's *Westworld*. In this, I will seek to unveil how *Westworld* is not just a rehearsal of the themes that characterize the 1970s films, but both a refraction of and a commentary upon our contemporary cultural moment in which we are already cohabitating with various AI systems but still remain ambivalent toward both their current and future role in Western society. As we will see, although *Westworld* depicts both utopian and dystopian scenarios of human-AI cohabitation, the empathy it inspires for androids offers both an avenue for enlightenment in its viewers and a humane argument for human-AI cohabitation that transcends the prevailing economic arguments, which, thus far, have kept AI discourse in a deadlock.

Part One

Historicizing *Westworld*: Technological, Cultural, and Intellectual Elements

Contemporary innovations in humanoid robots are turning sci-fi fantasies into imminent realities. Innovations by Disney, for example, demonstrate that their theme parks are already co-hosted by robots. Disney's Imagineering department has recently deployed the "Vyloo," which are "three small alien creatures" that "have moods [and] interact with guests through non-verbal gestures and cues" (Panzarino Feb 2018). Moreover, the same department recently revealed Disney's latest



Fig. 1. One of Disney's Stuntronics, see <https://techcrunch.com/2018/06/28/disney-imageneering-has-created-autonomous-robot-stunt-doubles/?guccounter=2> for demonstrations.

development, namely humanoid "Stuntronics," (see fig. 1) which "are autonomous, self-correcting aerial performers that make on-the-go corrections to nail high-flying stunts" (Panzarino June 2018). Once these Stuntronics are dressed in Disney fashion, they will act out roles from Disney's universe. Online responses, however, fear that not just Disney actors will be replaced, for they range from: "Wow, didn't expect their form to be so human like. That's impressive work!" to "Police replaced. Military replaced. Labour replaced. Actors replaced. Followed by the last genocide" (TechCrunch). Similarly, Boston Dynamics has developed a whole "family" of robots,

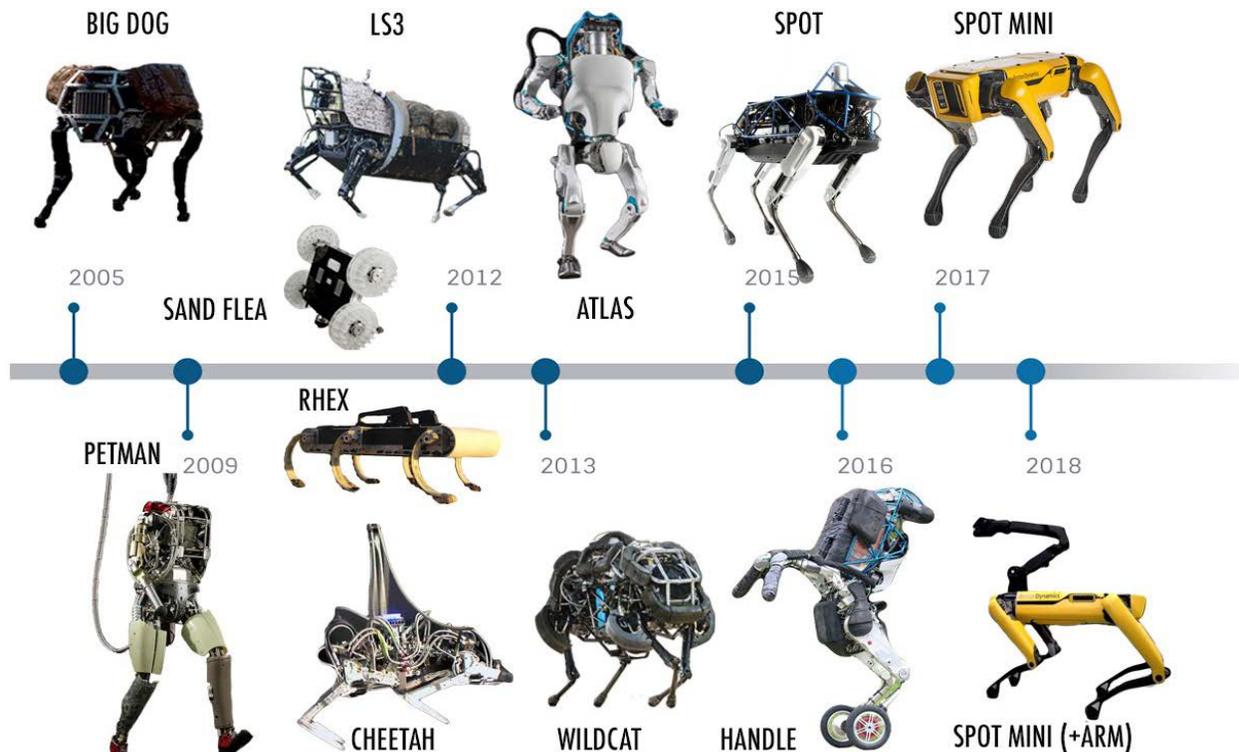


Fig. 2. The Boston Dynamics "family," see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Q3YW-3KCzU> for a more elaborate introduction.

ranging from humanoid acrobats to various animalistic robots (see fig. 2). Online responses to this “family” are again revealing, ranging from: “More fascinating than terrifying” to “the most dangerous will be the one the US military straps a gun on. We all know that’ll be the first thing they do” (CNET). Hence, although robotic developments will likely continue to advance, online responses remain ambivalent for they range from awe-inspired fascinations to expectations of perpetual job losses and robotically enhanced destruction, capturing a wider ambivalence to such technological developments in the twenty-first century.

Although *Westworld*’s Delos resort contains various theme parks similar to those of Disney and Universal, Delos is exclusively hosted by androids that are hardly distinguishable from humans. These androids, according to *Westworld*’s (Delos’ Wild West themed park) co-founder Dr. Robert Ford, already “pass[ed] the Turing test after the first year” (“The Stray”).³ This test, named after its developer Alan Turing, is “an experiment in which a human evaluator judges a natural language conversation between a human and a machine that is designed to generate human-like responses” (González 74). If the machine passes the Turing Test, it means that the machine’s response is indistinguishable from a human’s. In their depiction of android theme park hosts, Nolan and Joy build on Crichton’s *Westworld* (1973) and Heffron’s sequel *Futureworld* (1976).⁴ However, in contrast to these films, *Westworld*’s androids are not merely robotic “others,” but rather have active roles in the storyline. In effect, HBO’s *Westworld* explores the metaphysical

³ *Westworld*’s first season exclusively features the *Westworld* park, but the second season reveals that Delos owns at least six parks of which only The Raj and Shogun World, which feature in traditional settings of India and Japan respectively, are given actual screen time. Little has been revealed about The Raj thus far, but at least a part of Shogun World is an exact mirroring of the characters and narratives that are offered in *Westworld*.

⁴ In order to prevent potential confusion around the name “*Westworld*,” which is the name of Crichton’s film, HBO’s TV-series, and the Wild West theme park that both productions feature, “*Westworld*” in italics will refer to the series as a whole, whereas “*Westworld*” written in regular font will refer to the theme park featured in the series. When there is a reference to Crichton’s film, there will be specific identifiers added in writing to ensure that the distinction is clear.

question of when robots are advanced enough to be considered sentient or, in other words, where artificial intelligence ends and (artificial) consciousness begins.

Although *Westworld's* androids are distinguished by their exceptionally humanlike behavior *and* physical features (which are meticulously created by another type of robot, 3D printers), in our digitalized society we are already interacting with numerous (humanlike) AI systems. As reviewer Jeet Heer points out, *Westworld's* androids are “an advanced variant of the machine learning that has seeped into the intimacies of human life,” such as “the bots that pester us on Twitter, the Amazon algorithms that tell us which books to read, [and] the fitness trackers that monitor our caloric intake” (68). Such Twitter bots, in fact, are cutting-edge AI systems that are used to guide attention to certain topics or persons. The tool Tweet Attacks Pro, for example, “is designed to run thousands of twitter accounts at the same time 24/7,” while “every account can have its own settings” and “*simulate human operation perfectly*” to “prevent[] twitter from becoming suspicious” (*tweetattackspro.com*, emphasis added). The same company also sells bots for other social media, and hence facilitates complete AI armies to fight information wars that appear as if they are fought by humans but actually require hardly any human input at all. When such AI systems are paired with contemporary androids, a *Westworld*-like scenario in which robots do not just *look* like humans, but also *act* like humans becomes an actual feasibility.

Meanwhile, the cross-over between physical and digital world interactions is not only generating confusion around which users are “real” (controlled by people), but also around what constitutes “credible” information (a highly subjective assessment to begin with). This confusion is precisely what makes President Trump’s trademark attack “phrase ‘fake news,’” which is actually “more than a century” old, so effective (Coll). Steve Coll explains that Trump “has appropriated” a term that was “used to describe the propaganda and the lies masquerading as

news,” which “proliferated on Facebook, YouTube, and other social media platforms during the 2016 election campaign,” to denounce any opposition that he faces (Coll). The consequences of exacerbating such confusion, however, are far worse than one might think. In *Stand Out of Our Light* (2018), James Williams theorizes that “when our capacities for knowing what’s true, or for predicting what’s likely to be true, are undermined,” it “obscure[s]” what he calls “our daylight” (69). “When our Daylight is compromised,” Williams explains, “*epistemic* distraction results,” which undermines “capacities essential for democracy such as reflection, memory, prediction, leisure, reasoning, and goal-setting” (68). This is reflected by “an Oxford University study [which] found that during the 2016 U.S. election, Twitter users posted more ‘misinformation, polarizing and conspiratorial content’ than real news articles” (qtd. in Williams 69). “The most visible and consequential form of compromised ‘daylight,’” Williams argues, we currently see in “the prevalence and centrality of moral outrage,” in which people “judge, punish, and shame someone” that they “think has crossed a moral line” (71). Ultimately, then, a compromised daylight diminishes citizens’ capacity to form coherent political bodies, which makes both *assessing* and *being* a suitable political representative virtually impossible. Consequently, the discourse around (blurring) boundaries between humans and AI and between truth and falsehood is more relevant than ever.

It is no surprise, then, that this discourse is reflected throughout contemporary culture. For example, Netflix’s remake of *House of Cards* (2013-2018) depicts the corrupting junction in business, politics, and (digital) media where truth and falsehood are bent at will. Furthermore, contemporary films such as *Her* (2013) and *Ex Machina* (2014), in which protagonists fall in love with an AI, precede *Westworld* in visualizing the increasingly blurred human-AI boundary. Also, Williams’ analysis of our contemporary digital climate has led him to articulate a dystopia that we

are already starting to inhabit. “Here’s the problem,” Williams asserts, “many of the systems we’ve developed to help guide our lives – systems like news, education, law, advertising, and so on – arose in, and still assume, an environment of information scarcity” (16). However, with our digitally facilitated informational abundance, Williams explains, “*attention*” is actually “the scarce resource” (13). Consequently, although “we call our time the Information Age,” Williams argues that “a better name for it would be the ‘Age of Attention’” where our main challenges are not about “the management of information,” such as “privacy, security, [and] surveillance,” but “*challenges of self-regulation*” (13-16, emphasis added). For, under the guise of abolishing that age-old informational scarcity, “digital products and services” now “relentlessly compete to capture and exploit our attention,” because “in the attention economy, winning means getting as many people as possible to spend as much time and attention as possible with one’s product or service” (33). In order to compete effectively, digital technologies play into human reward systems, which is precisely what digital notifications, automatic video play functions, and social media timelines facilitate – a potential for excitement that feeds our dopamine receptors.⁵ Such “*functional distractions*” not only “direct us away from information or actions relevant to our immediate tasks or goals,” but also foster self-interrupting “mental habits, even in the absence of the technologies themselves” (50-51). Consequently, these pleasure-driven distractions ultimately turn citizens into subjects of digital distractions whose attention is ping-ponged from one “pleasure” to another.

Compromised attention, then, does not just undermine focus, but also diminishes the ability to judge informational validity, form political bodies, and realize personal goals. Thus, although part of us is “happy to be astonished by” contemporary “information and communication

⁵ Netflix, YouTube, and Facebook, for example, have all implemented functions that automatically start the next episode, film, or video after x amount of seconds, which – quite literally – takes the choice to keep watching out of their users’ hands.

technologies,” we have to be careful of how we proceed, for “with our admiration comes a trust” that “these wondrous inventions” are “on our side” (3). However, since this is not necessarily the case, the American based Center for Humane Technology, just like Williams, seeks to “realign[] technology with humanity’s best interests” (*humanetech.com*).⁶ Because “when most people in society use your product,” as is the case with someone like Mark Zuckerberg, Williams stresses, “you aren’t just designing users; you’re designing society” (10). As owner of Facebook, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Instagram, which have 2 billion, 1.3 billion, 1.2 billion, and 800 million users respectively, Zuckerberg wields a kind of power that is yet impossible to fathom, for we are still lacking the tools to describe it (36). This is perhaps “akin to a new government or religion, or even [a] language,” Williams speculates, but “there aren’t even 2 billion English speakers in the world” (36). *Westworld*, then, adds an important tool to describe contemporary digital developments, for its visualization facilitates both an *experience* and an *understanding* of human-AI cohabitation that transcends any language barrier.

While the thrust of Williams’ work on the attention economy is dystopian in its implications, technological developments have also led to various utopian articulations. These utopias continue a lineage of ideas about human-machine interactions theorized both by Karl Marx and John Maynard Keynes. In *The Grundrisse* (1939) Marx writes that “the division of labour” in capitalism “gradually transforms the workers’ operations into more and more mechanical ones, so that at a certain point a mechanism can step into their places” (704).⁷ Consequently, labor “becom[es] transferred from the worker to capital in the form of the machine” and hence, “what

⁶ The Center for Humane Technology’s efforts have recently resulted in an update of the f.lux program – initially developed to filter blue light out of screens – which features “a grayscale mode” that dims the “colors used on our screens” that “are chosen to distract” us (*justgetflux.com*).

⁷ Although published in 1939, *The Grundrisse* is a manuscript of Marx’s notebooks during the time of the German Industrial Revolution that date back to the winter of 1857-1858.

was the living worker's activity becomes the activity of the machine" (704). In this, Marx recognizes a potential not just for exploitation and expropriation, but also for the emancipation of workers, for "labour no longer appears so much to be included within the production process; rather," through "his understanding of nature and his mastery over it" a worker "comes to relate more as watchman and regulator to the production process itself" (705). Capital, Marx concludes, "is thus, despite itself, instrumental in creating the means of social disposable time, in order to reduce labour time for the whole society to a diminishing minimum, and thus to free everyone's time for their own development" (708).

In his analysis of the 1930s economic conditions, Keynes studied the Great Depression from a utopian perspective. This perspective reframes what Keynes called the "bad attack of economic pessimism" that characterized his time, for he believed that industrialized economies were "suffering, not from the rheumatics of old age, but from the growing-pains of over-rapid changes" (Keynes). In his optimism toward the future Keynes asked "what can we reasonably expect the level of our economic life to be a hundred years hence?" or, in other words, "what are the economic possibilities for our grandchildren?" (Keynes). Based on a few estimations, Keynes argued that "in our own lifetimes ... we may be able to perform all the operations of agriculture, mining, and manufacture with a quarter of the human effort to which we have been accustomed" and that "a hundred years hence we" can be "eight times better off in the economic sense than we are today" (Keynes). In this, Keynes recognized the same liberating potential of technological development as Marx did. However, Keynes argued, "we have been expressly evolved by nature – with all our impulses and deepest instincts – for the purpose of solving the economic problem" and, thus, the urge to work shall remain strong within humans for quite some time (Keynes). In order to satisfy this urge, Keynes proposed to cut future work to "three-hour shifts or a fifteen-

hour week” to “make what work there is still to be done to be as widely shared as possible” (Keynes). Also, Keynes expected “love of money as a possession” to “be[come] recognized” as a “semi-criminal, semi-pathological propensit[y] which one hands over with a shudder to the specialists in mental disease” (Keynes). However, Keynes did hold this “love” as an essential step toward utopia, for he argued that in “at least another” century “avarice and usury and precaution must be our gods,” because “only they can lead us out of the tunnel of economic necessity into daylight” (Keynes). However, as Williams demonstrates within a century after Keynes’ essay, our “daylight” is rapidly diminishing. A different approach than Keynes advanced will thus be necessary if we want our attentional lights available when we get out of our tunnel of economic necessity.

Although Marx’s and Keynes’s utopias have evidently not materialized (yet), their ideas have recently drawn attention again by forming the basis for opposition to the technological dystopias of our present ambivalent age. In *Inventing the Future* (2015), Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams explain that “the near century-long push for shorter working hours ended abruptly during the Great Depression, when business opinion and government policy decided to use make-work programmes in response to unemployment” (120). Although “visions of a three-hour work day have disappeared,” Srnicek and Williams argue, “reducing the working week constitutes a key response to rising automation” in the West, for contemporary “estimates suggest[] that anything from 47 to 80 per cent of current jobs are likely to be automatable in the next two decades” (121, 93). Currently, Srnicek and Williams assess, “we continue to work long hours, commuting further” and “perform tasks that feel increasingly meaningless,” although “many of the classic demands of the left – for less work, for an end to scarcity, for economic democracy, for the production of socially useful goods, and for the liberation of humanity – are materially more achievable than at

any other point in history” (9). This, Srnicek and Williams explain, is because “capitalism prefers to make profits, and therefore uses human labour whenever it is cheaper than capital investment,” regardless of the superior “efficiency, accuracy and productivity of machine labour” (118). Consequently, “rather than assuming it will come about from *economic necessity*,” full automation must be made “a *political demand*” (117). Thus, instead of the contemporary political left’s “fetishisation of local spaces, immediate actions, transient gestures, and particularisms of all kinds,” Srnicek and Williams articulate “an alternative politics” that utilizes “the utopian potentials inherent in twenty-first-century technology” (11). In this, they articulate a new hegemony found on full automation to facilitate shorter “working week[s],” universal “basic income,” and “diminishment of the work ethic,” which, in effect, will create “the capacity to choose our lives ... instead of blindly working to survive” (133, 86). Also, then, “the amount of time spent working for a wage can be modified to one’s own desire, with free time spent building communities and engaging with politics” or to “slow down and reflect” (126). Full automation thus in their view fosters self-reflective citizens that can *focus* their *attention* on organizing their lives in ways that fit them personally and collectively, rather than ways that are bound by the economic climates of the very moment and directed by attention steering technologies. Ultimately, then, the current debate revolving around technology and its (future) applications in Western societies remains ambivalent, for neither dystopian, nor utopian narratives dominate.⁸

⁸ Other dystopian examples include, but are not limited to, British theorists David Runciman and John Naughton, who both articulate a dangerous potential in the oligarchic development of the internet (“Talking Politics,” *95theses.co.uk*). Conversely, Aaron Bastani’s *Fully Automated Luxury Communism* (2018) and Andrew Yang’s U.S. presidential campaigning platform of Universal Basic Income follow the Srnicek and Williams’ utopian argument (*yang2020.com*). Finally, British Peter Frase’s *Four Futures* (2016) describes both utopian and dystopian scenarios of a post-capitalist future.

Part Two

Crichton's *Westworld* (1973) and Heffron's *Futureworld* (1976)

This contemporary ambivalence toward technology has not always been the case. In fact, anxiety about machines has been present throughout Capitalist history. The British Luddites, for example, were an early 19th-century movement that spread across the country and destroyed machinery and factories in attempts to suppress industrialization and the pressures that it put on their crafts (Andrews). In “the 20th century,” Luddite “re-entered the popular lexicon as a synonym for ‘technophobe,’” and in 1996 this movement reappeared in the U.S. as a “passive resistance to consumerism and the increasingly bizarre and frightening technologies of the Computer Age” (Andrews, Sale). Machine anxiety, Marx explains in *The Grundrisse*, stems from the fact that “Capital employs machinery” exclusively “to the extent that it enables the worker to work a larger part of his time for capital” (701). For all their hypothetical potential to free up time for people’s development by reducing workers’ labor effort, under capitalism machinery also reduces worker’s labor value, which then coerces them to work longer to get the same income. “Hence,” Marx concludes, this labor devaluation catalyzes the “workers’ struggle against machinery” (704). As we will see, the first two iterations of the *Westworld* story illustrate this struggle.

Crichton’s *Westworld* depicts a futuristic man-versus-machine narrative based on an unequivocally dystopian outlook on the progression of machinery. In *Westworld*, machinery takes on the form of androids that function as Delos’ theme park hosts. At Delos, as guest John Blame happily states after copulating with an android, “machines are the servant of man.” That is, right up until androids start malfunctioning throughout the resort. This malfunctioning process, Delos’ chief supervisor explains, “spread[s] from one resort area to the next,” from which he deduces an “analogy to an infectious-disease process.” In this, *Westworld* depicts two innovative ideas: machinery as human-like theme park hosts, and human-like machines subjected to human-like

diseases. Less innovative is the revolt that results from this “disease,” in which androids go after their creative species – humans. This perennial struggle between creator and creation characterizes many classic stories, such as Pygmalion, Prometheus, and Frankenstein. However, the *Westworld* story, as Dan Dinello identifies in HBO’s *Westworld*, retells the “robot-revolt-against-corporate-overlords narrative” of “Karel Čapek’s 1921 play R.U.R.” (246-247). Moreover, Heer notes, “the word ‘robot’ itself was coined by ... Čapek” and his “artificial machines were a barely disguised metaphor for the proletariat” (68).⁹ Thus, Heer concludes, “fables of artificial intelligence aren’t simply about the machines themselves, but” also about “the exploitation of” labor (68). Such exploitation is exactly what Crichton’s *Westworld* reflects, for Delos’ advertisement explains that “the robots of Westworld are there to *serve* you and to *give* you the most unique vacation experience of your life” (emphasis added). Although these robots, Delos’ chief supervisor emphasizes, “are highly complicated pieces of equipment, almost as complicated as living organisms,” they do not display any signs of sentience. Consequently, Crichton’s robots neatly fit Edward Jones III’s “robot-as-other” typology (173-174). This otherness is epitomized in the chief supervisor admitting that they “don’t know exactly how they [robots] work,” for in some cases “they’ve been designed by other computers.” Moreover, the “sensing device” of Westworld’s guns reflects robot otherness, for it “won’t fire at anything with a high body temperature” but will at robots, which are “cold like a machine.” Finally, every robot that the protagonists shoot, beat up, or copulate with is depicted as a masculine victory, rather than a sign of immorality. Thus, while *Westworld*’s robots match humans in their appearance, vocation, complexity, and vulnerability to disease, Crichton does not really deconstruct the human-android dichotomy. Consequently, although *Westworld* visualizes Marx’s labor mechanizing effect of Capital, Crichton’s androids

⁹ The word “robota” refers to (forced) labor or servitude in Slavic languages (thefreedictionary.com).

neither foster sympathy, nor empathy for the ensuing subjugation of workers, for he makes no efforts to visualize his androids as being capable of bearing our empathy in the first place.

Although *Futureworld* presents its human-machine dichotomy differently than *Westworld*, its dystopian portrayal of androids is similar in essence. *Futureworld*, depicts a post-malfunction scenario in which Delos is reopened after renovation. In order to prevent another *Westworld*-like catastrophe, Delos has mechanized most of its labor force, because, Dr. Schneider explains, they “discovered that one of the causes for our disaster with *Westworld* lay with the human flaws of our controllers.” Therefore, Schneider continues, humans are “replaced” by “the model 700 technician series. They have no ego, so they have no hang-ups and, thus, one more source of error is eliminated.” Moreover, Schneider argues that Harry, one of the few humans that is left, “should have been phased out long ago” because “his skills are no longer needed” since the “700s can do it better.” Hence, *Futureworld*'s struggle between humans and machines is not one of machines *revolting* against humans, rather it is one of machines *out-competing* humans. Besides, *Futureworld*'s Delos is not only mechanizing its labor force, it is also duplicating the world's leaders. These duplicates, Duffy clarifies when he is unmasked as an android, “are not machines” but “living beings produced by the genetic information” from their originals’ “own cells.” The reason for these duplicates, Duffy explains, “should be obvious” for “the human being is a very unstable, irrational, violent animal” and “all our probability studies indicate that if left alone, you'll destroy much of this planet before the end of the decade.” Considering that during the release of *Futureworld*, the U.S. had just gotten out of the Vietnam War (characterized by carpet bombings and napalm strikes) and was still involved in the Cold War (characterized by near-permanent threats of nuclear warfare), it is hard to contradict Duffy's assessment. It appears, then, that *Futureworld*'s androids (both mechanical and biological) neatly fit Jones III's “robot-as-

evolutionary-replacement” typology, which “engages widely held beliefs in evolution and the competition of species” (173-174). However, Harry explains that the 700s “don’t go anywhere” or “do anything they’re not programmed to.” Also, Duffy explains that “duplicates ... are programmed to think first of the welfare of Delos and to accept” Delos’ “instructions.” Besides, Heffron, just like Crichton, does not visualize android perspectives. Thus, since Jones III’s evolutionary replacement typology requires “the production of a fully independent and sentient entity,” the lack of Heffron’s androids’ ability to challenge their programming renders them to robotic “others” (174). Consequently, just like *Westworld*, *Futureworld* does not foster empathy for the subjugated.

While Marx’s theories provide an initial understanding of the workers’ struggle against machinery, these 1970s productions are best read through Baudrillard’s postmodern lens – which was in vogue in the 80s and 90s – because they mostly render the worker invisible beneath the interplay of simulacra in a simulation. Postmodernism, found on a rejection of Modernism and all historicity that came with it, favors a continuous present that is solely guided by representations of historicity that can be mass-produced and monetized accordingly. These representations, Baudrillard explains in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), are “no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody,” rather they are “substituting the signs of the real for the Real” (2). The completion of this substitution, Douglas Kellner explains in his analysis of Baudrillard’s works, “is the stage of ‘simulation proper,’” a society “in which simulation models come to constitute the world” and “take precedence over [actual] things” (Kellner 79). Consequently, in a simulated society where “everything,” Kellner explains, “is subject to cybernetic control,” Baudrillard argues that only “special effects” in simulation (i.e. theme) parks generate “hope” for “some real drama” (Kellner 82, Baudrillard *America* 57). However, Baudrillard continues, such

hope “has actually been exploited by the cinema itself” in films such as “*Westworld* [and] *Futureworld*” (*America* 57). Consequently, although simulations are in essence neutral technologies, and can be used for practical purposes such as training pilots in a flight simulator, Baudrillard argues that in postmodern society simulations reinforce the dominant ideology.

A simulation, thus, constitutes a reality of its own, one that exists solely by virtue of the culture that assigns meaning to the signs it displays. However, Baudrillard sees simulations not just as alternate realities in closed-off environments; rather, simulations in closed-off environments – such as Disney and Universal – are there to hide that *all of capitalist society* is becoming a simulation, one in which all signs ultimately point to consumption as *the* way to transcend ordinary life. This is reflected by *Futureworld*’s Delos, which, Duffy explains, carefully controls its simulations in order to “make it believable” for “the guests,” yet as consumers guests “are always the victors.” Such deliberate control, Kellner explains, make simulations feel “more real than real” – *hyperreal* – which is echoed by a guest who commends that being “the sheriff of *Westworld*” was “the realest thing” he had “ever done” (82). At a thousand (or twelve hundred in *Futureworld*) dollars a day, guests can be whatever fits Delos’s simulations – medieval knights, space explorers, Wild-West outlaws, etcetera. However, Loren Quiring notes, these guests actually become “an Everyman, the perfect consumer,” for “in the land of retail archetypes” they attempt “to re-boot with heroic pre-fabricated identities from the cultural stock shop” (42-43). Thus, although guests might feel that theme park simulations offer them escape from society, it is actually the simulated nature of their society that *both* fosters *and* monetizes their craving for escape in the first place. This paradox, as Williams demonstrates, also recurs in the digital age, for the unconscious self-interrupting habits fostered by attention steering technologies sustain and monetize a similar craving for escape. In simulations, however, “there is nothing behind the flow of codes, signs, and

simulacra” and, hence, Kellner asserts, “there is no ‘reality’ ... in the name of which” capitalist exploitation “can be criticized and transformed” (Kellner 83). This “reality,” or “political alternatives to capitalism” as Mark Fisher explains in *Capitalist Realism* (2009), was indeed rapidly disappearing in the 1980s (7). Consequently, since “‘Really Existing Socialism’” ultimately lost its economic validity throughout 1980s Western societies, Fisher reframes the era since then into “‘capitalist realism’: the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it” (7, 2). Crichton’s *Westworld*, however, already anticipates this emasculating progression in its ending, for as soon as the protagonist kills his android adversary, the simulation breaks down and suddenly it becomes clear that it was not the android’s labor, but the paying guest’s desires that were exploited all along. Thus, although *Westworld* and *Futureworld* visualize the mechanization of labor that Marx foresees, their dystopian depictions of machines signal not so much the exploitation of labor, as they demonstrate the 1970s way that machines were employed to entice capitalist subjects into consumerism. The result, however, remains the same, for as long as cumulative consumption is presented as *the* signal for social status in society – consumerism – capitalist subjects need money to both progress in social status, and to afford the monetized escapes from this rat race, which nudges them toward exploitable labor nonetheless.

Part Three

HBO’s *Westworld* (2016-2018)

HBO’s *Westworld* portrays not so much a futuristic scenario, as it refracts our cultural moment in which the contemporary phenomena discussed above, from Twitter bots and social media algorithms to advances in robot technology, characterize life in capitalist societies in ways that had yet to be so fully realized in earlier decades. At HBO’s Delos, guests pay forty-thousand dollars a day to play a role of their choosing in a web of integrated narratives, while those narratives

themselves consist of android hosts running personalized daily loops that allow for “minor improvisations” only (“The Original”). As demonstrated earlier, a theme park that is hosted by androids is well underway. Also, while the 1970s productions already portrayed androids created by other robots, today this is actually a probable scenario, for “while the industrial sector employed 1.000 robots in 1970” in 2015 this number was already “over 1.6 million” (Srnicek and Williams 114). Besides industrial robots, we cohabit with personalized robots on our digital devices that assist us in everyday life. Similar to *Westworld*’s hosts, IBM’s Watson and Apple’s Siri respond to voice commands; however, Marcus Arvan notes, we “assume, just like the humans in *Westworld* do, that Watson and Siri aren’t conscious” (35). This assumption is essential, for it allows us to neglect any moral or ethical questions regarding the *programming* and *using* of AI for whatever we deem necessary. For *Westworld*’s guests this assumption is also essential, for in Delos’ narratives, guests *can* choose the “white-hat” cowboy role, but most guests *prefer* the “black-hat” role and indulge hosts sexually and/or violently. Meanwhile, hosts are unable to seriously harm guests, and, hence, Delos offers a “vacation” during which guests can indulge their vices without consequences. In order to support this host-guest “relationship,” Delos erases its hosts’ memories to render them unconscious and prevent trauma from the terrible things that they have to endure. However, assuming that Siri and Watson – or hosts – are not conscious keeps us oblivious to the assessment made by James Williams in *Stand Out of Our Light* that today’s “wondrous machines, for all their potential, have not been entirely on our side,” because, “rather than supporting our intentions, they have largely sought to grab and keep our attention” (xi). In this “cutthroat competition against one another for the increasingly scarce prize of ‘persuading’ us,” contemporary machines “appeal[] to the lowest parts of us” (Williams xi). This competition we see in *Westworld*’s host appeals for their guests’ attention through stereotypical narratives that

offer treasures, thrills, or a potential for sex. When such distractions cause us “to lose the story” of who we are, as Williams explains of contemporary digital technologies, “we start to grasp for things that feel real ... in order to get the story back” (65). This tendency is reflected in William’s first visit to Westworld, where he falls in love with Dolores. Later, when he searches for her throughout the park, he ultimately finds her back in her personalized loop where she simply joins whoever picks up her dropped can. At this point, William loses the story of *him* being Dolores’ lover and embraces his Man in Black persona to pursue “a story with *real* stakes, *real* violence” (“The Dissonance Theory,” emphasis added).

Westworld, however, is not just about guests such as William, for it also depicts hosts whose memories are awakening due to the “reveries” update, which brings us back to the question of AI consciousness. One side of this question is the human interpretation of what constitutes consciousness and hence a conscious being, whereas the other side considers consciousness from the android’s perspective – whether the android “thinks” or “feels” that it (or he or she) is conscious. The first part of this question is illustrated by Angela – a host that introduces William (and us as viewers) to Westworld – when she answers William’s question of whether she is real with: “Well, if you can’t tell, does it matter?” (“Chestnut”). This interaction causes us to judge whether Angela is an android that gives *pre-programmed* responses, or if she is a conscious individual that actually *chose* that very response herself. Also, we have to consider for ourselves what a “real being” actually entails, and whether that is indeed *all* that matters. On the other side of the host consciousness question, *Westworld* depicts androids on a quest for consciousness. This quest, named The Maze, is a program encoded by Westworld’s other co-founder, Arnold Weber, as “a way to bootstrap consciousness” (“The Stray”). Before Arnold passed away, Ford explains, “Arnold built a version of cognition in which the hosts heard their programming as an inner

monologue, with the hopes that in time their own voice would take over” (“The Stray”). At the center of The Maze, hosts will find themselves in a moment of self-realization where they realize that the voice in their head has been their own all that time. In this self-aware state hosts are able to reflect on their programming and override it whenever they want. Since hosts are designed to respond to voice commands, realizing their own voice, metaphorically speaking, gives them command over their own existence. Arguably, then, hosts that find the center of The Maze become conscious beings. Show writer Joy reaffirms this, for she explains that although hosts are “programmed creatures” whose “bodies ... are simply constructs, what’s real about them is their cognition, the consciousness growing within them,” which makes them “digital beings in the truest sense” (qtd. in Wigler). In contrast to Crichton’s and Heffron’s androids, then, as “fully independent and sentient entit[ies]” *Westworld*’s androids actually fit Jones III’s “robot as evolutionary replacement” typology (174). This designation, co-writer Nolan explains, allows *Westworld* to “plunge into the next chapter of the human story, in which we stop being the protagonists and our creations start taking over that role”; in this, they “are discovering that they’ve been created in our image” but are “starting to question whether they want to be like us at all” (qtd. in Hibberd “Westworld Powers Up” 8). Consequently, in a refraction where contemporary AI systems become sentient, *Westworld* explores both dystopian and utopian scenarios that could follow this premise.

Part of *Westworld* depicts a dystopian scenario that results from the creation of artificial consciousness. In season one’s finale, Dolores uses her newfound sentience to overwrite her programming and to shoot Ford, which becomes the catalyst for an all-out host rebellion (“The Bicameral Mind”). Subsequently, *Westworld*’s second season depicts a post-apocalyptic scenario in which the hosts fight for their own place in Westworld now that they are free from their loops.

Westworld, then, depicts a dystopia that follows Crichton's "model," which Mark Fisher identifies as "a kind of managerial hubris, in which the capacity of elements in a system to self-organise in ways that are not foreseeable is fatally underestimated" (*K-Punk* 262).¹⁰ Dolores, for example, recruits a coalition of android armies with which she successfully opposes Delos' assault on "Fort Forlorn Hope" ("Virtù e Fortuna"). *Westworld*, then, also portrays Jones III's warning that "if humans assume the role of true creators, not mere perpetuators, we run the risk of our creation rebelling against us and supplanting us" in which "the triumph of the robot" will "mark the end, not the progress of the creating being" (175). Season two's finale reveals three hosts – Bernard, Dolores, and an android that resembles Delos' executive director, Charlotte Hale – that escape Delos' island altogether ("The Passenger"). Furthermore, the finale's post-credits scene reveals a far-future version of the Man in Black which, Joy explains, is not "a host" but "not his original incarnation" either, for "that version of him that was human would be somewhere lying dead" (Wigler). Thus, the robot's triumph in this classic creation versus creator struggle, which was ultimately prevented in the 1970s precursors, still has a chance of manifesting in *Westworld*'s seasons to come.

Conversely, some of *Westworld*'s sentient androids also express utopian potentials. For example, in line with the revolutionary and philosopher, Frantz Fanon, the host rebellion constitutes an honest claim for independence. "Freedom" for the oppressed, Fanon holds, "requires the creation of a new world, which Fanon believes is not possible without violence" (Spanakos 231). This point is accentuated by the fact that the hosts' rebellion is geared toward their pursuit for a "virtual Eden" where they "will leave their bodies behind but their minds will live on" ("The Passenger"). In such "a digital world," Joy clarifies, hosts "can make of that world whatever they

¹⁰ Since I am quoting from two books by Mark Fisher, *K-Punk* and *Capitalist Realism*, from now on the latter will be abbreviated to *CR* in order to improve the readability of the text.

want,” which “was the allure of even the old notion of manifest destiny – people within America moving further and further west, hoping to settle their own patches of land” (qtd. in Wigler). Consequently, “rather than only seeing robots as a threatening other,” Jones III argues, “we can also see them as a proxy for humans” (175). This interpretation is reinforced by Teddy’s desire for human rights when he tells Dolores that “we don’t have to claim this world, we just need a small corner of it for ourselves” (“Journey into Night”). Similarly humane is Maeve’s first *conscious* decision, in which she abandons her pre-programmed escape and *chooses* to search for her android daughter instead. Hence, in these desires for autonomy and expressions of compassion, *Westworld* depicts various utopian potentials in the development of artificial consciousness.

Ultimately, *Westworld* amalgamates these dystopian and utopian portrayals of humanoid AI into a multifaceted narrative. Regarding the notion of manifest destiny, for example, the question remains whether this utopian pursuit of android settlements will be at the cost of any “natives,” as was the case with the original settlement of the Americas. While humans are the ones that built, maintain, and visit Delos’ parks, hosts – who were always its predetermined inhabitants – are programmed to see them as “newcomers” nonetheless. In her rancher’s daughter loop, Dolores’ father taught her that “at one point or another, we were all new to this world, the newcomers are looking for the same thing we are,” namely “a place to be free” and “stake out our dreams” (“The Original”). In due time, however, Dolores realizes that simply settling the park will not be enough to stake their claim, for she answers Teddy’s aforementioned proposition with: “We’d never survive. There’s a greater world out there, one that belongs to them, and it won’t be enough to win this world. We’ll need to take that one from them as well” (“Journey into Night”). This is a frightening scenario for humanity indeed, but when we consider that Dolores’ pre-programmed “life” consisted primarily of mental and physical abuse by human guests, her

assessment can hardly be held against her. Moreover, Delos' head of operations, Karl Strand, demonstrates that Delos does not care who "native" is, for he shows a Chinese military official: "an official statement" from China that "giv[es] Delos, and consequently" him, "authority over th[e] entire island" ("Journey into Night"). Delos' heavily armed teams that combat the android rebellion, then, only validate Dolores' point. Consequently, Dolores' dominating desires can also be interpreted as her attempt to transcend the condemned life that Delos subjects her to by mirroring the human behavior that she has experienced. According to the robot as proxy for human typology, then, we can understand Dolores "as an entity in search of full personhood" (Jones III 175). When she understands how Delos keeps them subdued, she answers Bernard's claim that the virtual Eden will offer hosts freedom with: "Free? In one more gilded cage? How many counterfeit worlds will Ford offer you before you see the truth? No world they create for us can compete with the real one, because that which is real is irreplaceable" ("The Passenger"). In this, Dolores mirrors Baudrillard's simulation theories, for he argues that "the very definition of the real" in hyperreal worlds such as Delos' is "that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction" (qtd. in Kellner 82). However, "the order of simulacra" – those equivalent reproductions – are there "to produce a flexible and controllable universal system of order and power" for "the control of a pacified society" (Kellner 78). Dolores stating that "the real" is actually *irreplaceable*, then, demonstrates that she understands that the "nature" of her world is ordered to keep the hosts pacified. Thus, when Dolores does not "want to play cowboys and Indians anymore," she understands that such roles will keep her in the loop in which she is merely a living simulacrum – "livestock, scenery" in the Man in Black's words – that sustains a simulation for human protagonists ("The Passenger," "The Original"). Dolores' portrayal, then, merges a dystopian desire for world domination with a utopian desire to lead her own story. Hence, in its amalgamation

of utopian and dystopian depictions, *Westworld* remains ambiguous in its portrayal of AI's potentialities.

Westworld's ambiguity toward human-machine cohabitation mirrors the ambivalence that defines our cultural moment. As Caterina Baldini argues, "*Westworld* is a political show in the ancient Greek sense" for it "looks into our deepest social and ethical issues" and explores "what we can become and what we could do with all" our "hyper-technological potential" (211). The "forces" of *Westworld*'s "human" and "robotic race," then, "represent our modern conflict ... with all the questions we must face sooner or later about how we interact with what and who we create" (212). This conflict returns in the "two irreconcilable notions" that Stephen Beckner identifies Delos' "success is predicated on," namely "that the guests derive complete satisfaction from the experience because the hosts appear to have genuine feelings" while they "can slake their darkest impulses without guilt because the hosts don't truly have feelings" (51). These notions resemble the allure of contemporary role playing video games where players can interact with various pre-programmed characters. In *Westworld*, however, the perpetual advancement of pre-programmed characters has caused these irreconcilable notions to materialize into actual conflict. Cybernetics founder Norbert Wiener already anticipated this conflict, though, for he argued that the irreconcilable notions that we desire from machines are comparable to those of slaves: "We wish a slave to be intelligent to be able to assist us in the carrying out of our tasks," but "we also wish him to be subservient" (qtd. in Staples 10). Consequently, Wiener warned, "if we failed to handle" machines "with *humility* and *care*," just like slave-owners did with slaves, "machines could wreak havoc on civilization" (qtd. in Staples 10, emphasis added). *Humility* and *care*, however, are the last things that we tend to handle machines – or video game characters – with. This is exactly what makes *Westworld*'s Turing Test so controversial; for, "conceived as a demonstration of free will,"

Beckner argues, “the failure of this test is horrific to the hosts because it means that they must endure endless, pointless suffering in the service of human[s],” while “passing the test is horrific to humans because it signals the end of their claim to earthly dominion” because they could “become the subspecies to their own creation” (Beckner 52). Eventually we will have to deal with controversies such as these, because the more lifelike machines become, the more humans tend to empathize with them. Machines, then, could be the next step in humanity’s moral progression, which has led to the rejection of slavery, racism, sexism, and, as recent animal rights declarations anticipate, speciesism.¹¹

Currently, however, machines are still akin to slaves. Utopia, accordingly, is when “machines can increasingly produce all necessary goods and services, while also releasing humanity from the effort of producing them” (Srnicek and Williams 113). However, Williams explains, “if technologies such as driverless vehicles, or economic policies such as Universal Basic Income ... increase our amount of available leisure time,” which is exactly what Srnicek and Williams argue for, “the amount of monetizable attention in our lives is poised to increase substantially” (90). Besides spending this time in “the virtual world,” we might also want “something a little more tangible,” as *Westworld*’s marketer alluringly describes their enterprise (“Reunion”). “Video games,” Brent Staples emphasizes, already “show characters being blown to pieces in every frame,” so just “imagine what gamers decades from now might pay to enter into a world where a quite-nearly-human adversary bleeds, cries, and ‘dies’ when injured in battle” (10).

¹¹ In May 2019, “the Punjab and Haryana High Court has declared the entire animal kingdom including avian and aquatic as legal entities having a distinct persona with corresponding rights, duties and liabilities of a living person” (Rashid, M. A.). Similarly, in June 2019 “Canada ... passed a bill that makes it illegal to keep whales and dolphins in captivity” (Helen Murphy). Finally, although it has been rejected thus far, since 2016 “there is already a motion in place in the European Union that would make robots ‘electronic persons, with specific rights and obligations, including that of making good any damage they may cause’” (Hirvonen 68).

“This,” Staples continues, “is the morally compromised future that *Westworld* envisions,” which is reflected by guests excitedly photographing their first host killings or another guest emptying his revolver into Teddy and shouting “now that’s a fucking vacation” (Staples 10, “The Original,” “Chestnut”). However, since “the client-human’s true self is not shown” at Delos, but only “a ‘how could you be’ version” such that “no one of the real world ... will judge you,” Patricia Trapero-Llobera argues that this “opens an interesting debate about consumerism and the conception of some hyperreal theme parks as cathartic mechanisms” for “unconscious social desires” in “formal networks of discipline and control” (166). Instead of morally compromising, then, hyperreal parks could also be a form of “utopian tourism” (166). However, this tourism conveniently “coincides with Delos’ objective,” which, Ford’s digital recreation reveals, goes beyond their \$40,000 a day revenue to secretly studying their guests and replicating “the human mind – the last analog device in a digital world” (Trapero-Llobera 166, “Les Écorches”). In this attempt at immortality, Delos experiments with reproducing their guests’ minds and selling them in android simulacra that expresses fidelity to their original incarnations. Hence, Bernard realizes, “the park is an experiment” in which “the guests are the variables and the hosts are the controls” (“Les Écorches”). This is the real reason why hosts are kept in a loop, for “every choice reveals another part of their [guests’] cognition, their drives,” which ultimately expose guests’ “true selves” to Delos (“Les Écorches”). Interestingly, this revelation confirms Dinello’s assessment that Delos resembles concentration camps, for part of “the[se] camps,” Hannah Arendt explained, “serve the ghastly experiment of eliminating, under scientifically controlled conditions, *spontaneity itself* ... and of *transforming the personality into a mere thing*” (qtd. in Dinello 240, emphasis added).¹² Sentient

¹² Although Dan Dinello identifies various concentration camp elements throughout *Westworld*’s first season, it is not until season two’s revelation of Delos’ experiment that Hannah Arendt’s concentration camp definition is, quite literally, depicted.

hosts, then, is the last thing that Delos wants for it fosters a spontaneity that would disrupt the hosts' function as experimental controls. Hence, although Westworld's cathartic effect might hold utopian touristic potentials, exactly this mechanism is exploited in Delos' clandestine operations. Thus, regardless of machines serving as "slaves," *Westworld* reflects Marx's insight that machine's utopian potential for *human liberation* is simultaneously subject to its dystopian potential for *capital accumulation*.

As a conduit for capital, Delos subjects not just machines but also humans to exploitation in pursuit of revenue. In addition to subjecting hosts and guests to harvest data about the human mind, Delos subjects its own personnel to mass-produce its fully-immersive experiences. Part of this subjection is maintained through all-pervasive surveillance. A note by Theresa, Head of Quality Assurance (QA), to her secret lover Bernard reveals the extent of Delos' surveillance: "notes are so old fashioned," Theresa writes, "but it's the *only thing we don't monitor*" ("Trace Decay," emphasis added). Regardless of her caution, however, Ford indicates that he is well aware of her secret relationship when Theresa threatens him: "we know *everything* about our *guests*, don't we? As we know *everything* about our *employees*," Ford illuminates ("The Dissonance Theory," emphasis added). This all-knowing feeling is reinforced throughout Delos HQ, for all doors and walls are made of glass, which permanently exposes everyone and everything. In effect, technicians such as Sylvester and Felix work in a near-permanent state of anxiety at Livestock Management, for they are always worried that QA watches them. In addition to transparent workplaces, hosts log all their activity. Hence, although many technicians alleviate their anxiety by sexually indulging hosts deployed for maintenance, Behavior employee Elsie Hughes demonstrates that this "free pass" can be revoked at any moment when she uses old recordings to blackmail a technician. Thus, regardless of employees indulging various levels of

“insubordination,” Delos’ multilayered surveillance network allows for retroactive disciplining whenever deemed necessary.

Beside plain surveillance, Delos is sustained by a corporate board that funds a hierarchy, which channels personnel dissatisfaction into interdepartmental rivalry and competition for privileged positions. Felix, for example, steals a robot bird in the desperate hope that learning to code will get him a promotion. Other competition is reflected by Elsie: “when our corporate overlords realize that we have saved them from corporate espionage,” she tells Bernard, “I should request Theresa’s quarters” because “QA” always “treat[s] us like the enemy” (“The Adversary”). Bernard, however, admits that this animosity is “a two-way street,” which we see between many departments. Ford, for instance, argues that guests return “because of the subtleties . . . , because they discover something they imagine no one had ever noticed before” (“Chestnut”). Head of Narrative Lee Sizemore, however, feels that such subtleties are Ford’s “vanity project” that constrain his “artistic freedom,” for they lead to “QA breathing down” his “neck and Behavior programming” hosts “to go off script” (“The Dissonance Theory”). Nevertheless, when Theresa tells Sizemore that “the board will be looking for a replacement . . . if Ford can’t pull off” his project, Sizemore plays along regardless of his sentiments about QA (“The Adversary”). In Delos’ personnel, then, we see the “antagonism” typical to capitalist realism, which, Fisher explains, “is not . . . located externally, in the face-off between class blocs,” “but internally, in the psychology of the worker, who, as a worker, is interested in old-style class conflict, but, as someone with a pension fund, is also interested in maximizing the yield from” his labor “investments” (Fisher *CR* 35). Thus, analogous to a backbiting bucket of crabs, Delos’ personnel bickers among itself instead of collectively confronting the board with the subjugating conditions that they all suffer from.

Delos' indiscriminate subjection, however, also aids *Westworld's* deconstruction of the human-android dichotomy. Since Delos subjects both androids and humans, they are actually in the same "social" class. Thus, although Felix tells Maeve that they indeed look and "feel the same" but that her superior processor keeps her "under" Delos' "control," if we consider Felix's oppressed working conditions, he is arguably under a similar amount of control as Maeve is ("The Adversary"). Further deconstruction, Arvan notes, is achieved by not just androids, but "*everyone* seem[ing] to be on a loop," for "all of the lab-workers appear to do the same thing every single day – creating, training, and fixing hosts" (27). Moreover, Arvan continues, "lab-workers appear to follow" these "routines robotically," for "Maeve and Felix are somehow able to walk through several floors of the lab" while "encountering dozens of lab-workers who pass them robotically" without "seeming to notice them" (27, "The Adversary"). Besides depicting cross-species robotic behavior, this behavior reflects capitalist realism's "introjection of the surveillance apparatus" in which Delos' omnipresent surveillance causes employees to "constantly act as if" they "are always about to be observed," which, ironically, causes them to do *nothing but their own job* (Fisher CR 52). Finally, *Westworld* depicts human robotic behavior in William's perpetual loop to find the center of The Maze, which has kept him in his Man in Black persona "for thirty years" already ("Chestnut"). More deconstruction, Baldini highlights, is achieved through the hosts' "process of understanding the world," which is similar to "the human" process, for "as we cry when we are thrown in our world, the hosts wake up the very first time thanks to a painful memory injected into them" (209). "After that," Baldini continues, hosts "are going to learn and understand things uniquely through suffering," which resembles the way that Greek tragedies, Nietzschean philosophy, and Buddhist scripture portray human learning (Baldini 209, Lyons 46). "Suffering ... was Arnold's key insight," Ford explains, for "the pain that the world is not as you want it to

be” fosters an aspiration for change, which ultimately “led the hosts to their awakening” (“The Bicameral Mind”). It is only poetic justice, then, that Ford and Arnold named their first host Dolores, which means “the one who suffers,” and that she is also the first host to “wake up” (Baldini 209). Thus, rather than portraying some robotic “other,” as *Westworld*’s precursors did, the shared characteristics and experiences between *Westworld*’s humans and androids effectively deconstruct their dichotomy.

Westworld further deconstructs the human-android dichotomy by problematizing metaphysical questions concerning humanity and consciousness. In this, Joy explains, *Westworld* explores “the increasingly narrow divide between human life and” the “artificial consciousness” that “is being developed in the real world” to “question[] ‘where does life begin?’” (qtd. in Keveney 2). Since hosts interact with their social and physical environment and express corresponding emotions and thoughts to these interactions, they appear to experience their world consciously. Simultaneously, however, Delos keeps hosts oblivious to both their personalized loops and that guests are a different species than they are. Hence, Fisher argues, “what the hosts lack is not *consciousness* – they possess a form of consciousness that has been deliberately limited or blinkered – but an *unconscious*,” for they are “deprived of memory and the capacity to dream,” which allows them to “be wounded but not traumatized” (*K-Punk* 263, emphasis added). However, the latest update enables hosts to express “reveries” by accessing “specific memories” from something “like a subconscious” (“The Original”). Consequently, Fisher notes, “precisely this capacity to experience trauma is developing,” for these “first stirrings of memory” cause hosts to experience “flashbacks” (263). In this capacity to experience trauma, hosts also develop a capacity for suffering, which, regardless of the discomfort, none of them wants to lose. After Dolores loses her parents, for example, she explains that “the pain, their loss, it’s all I have left of them. You

think the grief will make you smaller inside” but “I feel spaces opening up inside of me like a building with rooms I’ve never explored” (“The Dissonance Theory”). In Dolores’ willingness to explore her feelings of grief, Arnold recognizes that this is the crucial point that he has been waiting for. “There’s something I’d like you to try,” Arnold responds, “it’s called The Maze” and “if you can ... find the center of it, ... then maybe you can be free” (“The Dissonance Theory”). Dolores’ exploration of her memory proves extremely difficult, however, for hosts do not just *remember* but actually *relive* past events. Consequently, initially Dolores is unable to differentiate between *then* and *now* and concludes that either something must be wrong with her or with the world around her (“The Dissonance Theory”). However, after Dolores retraces her past self throughout the first season, she comes to understand her memory. “Where are we?” she asks William during a recollection, who answers “we’re *here*, together,” after which Dolores responds “then *when* are we? It’s like I’m trapped in a dream or a memory from a life long ago. One minute I’m here with you, and the next” moment William is gone all of a sudden while Dolores remains alone in her recollection (“The Bicameral Mind,” emphasis added). Then, when Dolores’ recollection fades and she is back with the Man in Black instead, she finally realizes that he and William are the same person. This realization enables a form of metacognition in Dolores, for through William’s transformation over time she finally experiences time *linearly* instead of looping in it *cyclically*. In Dolores’ “awakening,” *Westworld* depicts a potential path that could lead AI to resemble human consciousness. Consequently, *Westworld* forces viewers to consider what being conscious actually means and, correspondingly, what being human actually entails.

In contrast to its 1970s precursors, *Westworld* does visualize android perspectives. Bradley Richards notes that *Westworld*’s “host and human experiences are depicted” without “stylistic variant[s] to mark the[m],” which, Richards argues, “foster[s] empathy with hosts by depicting

their point of view in the familiar way” (86). However, empathy for *Westworld*'s hosts is crafted far more carefully than Richards cares to address, for viewers get to see the looping android lives, hear their thoughts, and witness the horrible treatment that they suffer from. The series opens with an interrogation of Dolores, naked on a chair with bruise marks across her skin in a glass-walled, dimly lit room, confirming to a hidden interrogator that she wants to wake up from this dream because she is terrified. The interrogator answers, “there’s nothing to be afraid of, Dolores, as long as you answer my questions correctly” (“The Original”). Although Dolores “coming online” and her robotic change of accents immediately expose her as an android, the dehumanizing and fear-inspiring setting that she is interrogated in fosters compassion for her nonetheless. This compassion is reinforced when Dolores, regardless of her frightening situation, joyfully expresses that although “some people choose to see the ugliness in this world, the disarray, I choose to see the beauty, to believe there’s an order to our days, a purpose,” while we get to see her life (“The Original”). This starts with beautiful shots of Dolores waking up in her father’s ranch, the loving bond between them, and her trip to Sweetwater, where she drops a can that is picked up by Teddy. Afterward, Dolores and Teddy ride on horseback through a sublime “Wild West” that lends its strange familiarity to its role in cinematography.¹³ Then, suddenly the mood changes and we hear gunshots coming from her father’s ranch. Subsequently, while we see Dolores crying in anguish over her father’s dead body, the interrogating voice asks “what if I told you that you were wrong? That there are no chance encounters? That you and everyone you know were built to gratify the desires of the people who pay to visit your world, the people you call ‘the newcomers,’” after which the Man in Black is revealed (“The Original”). Then, when Teddy comes back out of the ranch and shoots the Man in Black to no effect, the voice continues “what if I told you that you

¹³ As Dinello points out, the simulacra of the “Wild West” in *Westworld* allude more to John Ford’s movies, than it does to an actual landscape in the U.S. itself (246-247).

can't hurt the newcomers? And that they can do anything they want to you?" ("The Original"). Subsequently, the Man in Black shoots Teddy and drags Dolores into the barn while the voice asks "would the things I told you change the way you think about the newcomers?" and Dolores blissfully answers "no, of course not! We all love the newcomers. Every new person I meet reminds me how lucky I am to be alive, and how beautiful this world can be" ("The Original"). Then, the scene starts all over again, but now with new guests, which reveals that host lives consist of loops that can progress from a blissful morning to a horrific death within the span of a day. Furthermore, after witnessing various host interrogations, viewers learn that Dolores' interrogation was actually a standard procedure to assess whether her core code – which keeps her from harming humans – was affected after traumatic events. This human-host dynamic, Anthony Spanakos argues, "dehumanizes the humans because of their domination over the hosts," which "makes the hosts seem more human" in comparison (237). However, Dolores' good-hearted innocence – which is as beautiful as it is sad – makes her not just seem more *human*, but also more *humane* in comparison. Right from its opening scenes, then, *Westworld* encourages viewers to empathize with its androids.

In its humanization of robots, *Westworld* offers a fluid viewer identification that is missing from its 1970s precursors. In this, Delos' employees, hosts, and guests can all function as proxies for subjected people. Most obviously, Delos' employees embody the modern-day proletariat – "that group of people who must sell their labour power to live" (Srnicek and Williams 92). Although having to exchange time for salary does not have to be a precarious position per se, Delos' subjugating working conditions definitely make it so. Felix's attempt to learn coding in his free time reflects how contemporary "workers" now have to "periodically re-skill as they move ... from role to role" since they cannot "expect to progress upward" with "a single set of skills

anymore” (Fisher *CR* 32). In this, Felix literally personifies the “Learn to Code” catchphrase that mocks the sentiment that blue collar workers should simply re-skill in IT in response to “shifts in energy use” (Caldwell).¹⁴ Beside energy shifts, perpetual automation is also forcing laborers to re-skill, for most “automatable jobs disappear, never to be heard from again,” which gradually shifts humans to the surplus section of the proletariat (Srnicek and Williams 100). We see this in *Westworld*’s opening credits, which captures a sublime creation process of humanoid and animal robots *completely* done by other robots. What “future livable jobs” remain then, Malcolm Harris speculates, is “servicing robots,” which is exactly what most human laborers in *Westworld* do (202). However, when even the Head of Programming Bernard is exposed as a host, *Westworld* anticipates that even *servicing* robots is subject to automation (“Trompe L’Oeil”). Heer argues, however, that since “humans are forced to work longer hours for less pay while the 1 percent flourishes,” proletariats actually desire automation (68). However, without a decent welfare system (or UBI) to accommodate them, the ensuing surplus populations will probably be worse off than employed proletarians. Currently, then, perpetual automation does not so much liberate proletariats as it increases competition among them, which is precisely what Delos’ personnel reflect.

Besides embodiments of automation, hosts can serve as proxies for the proletariat. Although hosts do not have to *sell* their labor power to *live*, they work *for their lives* regardless. This condition becomes clear when hosts Peter Abernathy and Walter revert to old narrative roles after the “reveries” update, and this “malfunction” gets them *lobotomized*, put in the cold storage, and *taken offline* (“The Original”).¹⁵ Similarly, when Maeve fails to seduce her guest due to her

¹⁴ This catchphrase spread across social media “to mock journalists who were laid off from their jobs” in January 2019 (Caldwell). This mocking-spree was a backlash to journalists that wrote articles about coal miners learning to code, which validated Zuckerberg’s statement that laid off coal miners should simply learn to code instead.

¹⁵ A lobotomy is “a neurosurgical procedure” during which “most of the connections to and from the prefrontal cortex” are removed. Although “the procedure ... has been controversial since its inception in 1935, it was a mainstream procedure for more than two decades” that was “prescribed for psychiatric conditions” (*definitions.net*).

first flashback, she runs the risk of “be[ing] *decommissioned*” because if Narrative “do[es]n’t get her numbers back up” she is considered “*deadweight*” (“Chestnut,” emphasis added). Furthermore, since Delos changes narratives as it pleases, also hosts are constantly forced to “re-skill.” However, whereas for Felix re-skilling ends with mastering a new profession, hosts become completely new identities with corresponding memories, character traits, and families. It is hardly surprising, then, that some hosts end up confusedly “malfunctioning” when they suddenly *relive* previous roles during their reveries. Hosts, then, reflect the “conditions of total instability, or ‘precarity’” that Fisher identifies in the contemporary job market, for they literally portray how “work and life become inseparable,” how “time ceases to be linear” in their loops, and how “production and distribution ... restructure[.]” their “nervous systems” (CR 34). The latter is exemplified by Delos’ “solutions” to host “malfunctions,” for instead of analyzing the underlying reason for Maeve’s “underperformance,” Narrative and Behavior employees simply keep modifying her “aggression” and “emotional acuity” until she seduces her guests again (“Chestnut”).¹⁶ In addition to haphazardly tweaking Maeve’s nervous system, Delos makes numerous abrupt host changes throughout the series. During analyses, hosts are commanded to lose their accent, turn off emotional capacities, or access previous narrative roles (“The Original”). Similarly – though on a far bigger scale – when Delos realizes that the reveries are causing host malfunctions, “the saloon heist” is advanced “a week and ma[de] twice as bloody” to hide the upcoming “recall” of “all remaining updated hosts” (“The Original”). These examples literally reflect the robotic nature of today’s labor paradigm, which, Harris explains, “requires a different kind of person, one whose abilities, skills, emotions, and even sleep schedule are in sync with their role in the economy” (5).

¹⁶ Ironically, the lack of analysis in this “solution” leaves Maeve’s sentience free to evolve, which, in turn, enables her to infiltrate Delos Headquarters.

In contrast to their 1970s predecessors, then, *Westworld*'s hosts go beyond representations of mechanized labor to actual proxies for modern-day proletariats.

Although guests might be affluent enough to afford \$40,000-a-day holidays, Delos subjects them to their clandestine experiment nonetheless. Delos exploits various myths to study how their guests act as protagonists of their own story. Consequently, Bernard realizes that his department was never “[t]here to code the hosts,” rather, it is there to “decode the guests” (“Les Écorchés”). Thus, although first-timer William thinks that he is simply being seduced when Angela tells him “*all* our hosts are here for you” and that “*all*” he has to “do is make *choices*,” she is actually stating his role in Delos’ experiment to him (“Chestnut,” emphasis added). All guest data is ultimately condensed into algorithms that make their “behavior ... quite predictable,” which is exactly what currently happens with data harvesting in the attention economy (“The Passenger”). Just as Delos’ hats register everything that guests do, “browser ‘cookie[s] ... imperceptibly ... track user behavior ... across the web” and offer a plethora of data to interpretation tools such as Google Analytics (Williams 31-32). These tools, in effect, are constantly improving and arm marketers with increasingly laser-focused advertising abilities. Internet users, then, just like Delos’ guests, are offered an environment where they are free to make choices, which, in turn, create the data that monetizes their own attention. Additionally, social media users freely publish all kinds of information about themselves, which opened the door to a 2013 study that demonstrated how “Facebook Likes can be used to automatically and accurately predict ... personal attributes, including sexual orientation, ethnicity, religious and political views, personality traits, intelligence, happiness, use of addictive substances, parental separation, age, and gender” (Kosinski, Stillwell, and Graepel 5802). Interestingly, the researchers feared that their findings could “have considerable negative implications,” for it could inspire “commercial” or “governmental”

organizations to harvest data from “large numbers of people without obtaining their individual consent and without them noticing” (5805). These fears were not unwarranted, for in a move reminiscent of Delos’ experiment, Cambridge Analytica developed an algorithm by paying Facebook users to take its “personality quiz” and clandestinely using “their friends’ profiles” as “testing ground[s] for the formula” (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison). Later, this algorithm “help[ed] determine Trump’s travel schedule” and “dr[o]ve decisions on advertising and how to reach out to financial donors” during his presidential campaign, which is remarkably similar to Bernard using guest algorithms to give Dolores “a competitive advantage” in humanity’s “winner take all” world (Kirchgaessner, “The Passenger”). In Delos’ guests, then, *Westworld* offers a proxy of the data harvesting that internet users are subjected to.

Through these proxies, *Westworld* offers viewers various subjugated counterparts that go through a process of self-realization. William, Dolores, Felix, and Maeve all experience – in varying degrees – a confrontation with who they thought they were and, consequently, what their role is. In the ensuing transformations, *Westworld* depicts “the idea of overcoming ... the boundaries that hold us in and surpassing the limits of our own natures” that Salman Rushdie holds “central to all stories of the quest” (352). Quests, as Rushdie theorizes, result from traversing a frontier – that “elusive line, visible and invisible, physical and metaphorical, amoral and moral” where one ideology meets another (352). At *Westworld*’s 19th century U.S. themed frontier, William and Dolores confront what Frederick Jackson Turner famously called “the meeting point between savagery and civilization” (32). Consequently, William becomes Dolores’ heroic lover and, in effect, learns to navigate the savagery of *Westworld* by transcending his civilized subordination to Logan (“Contrapasso”). Likewise, Dolores transcends her subordinate programming by “imagin[ing] a story” where she “d[oes]n’t have to be the damsel” and by

shooting the Confederado hosts that attack William and her (“Contrapasso”). When William loses Dolores, however, his pursuit leads him to traverse Westworld’s frontier altogether and surpass his old self – symbolized by a photograph of his wife dwindling from his bag and his wholehearted embrace of his Man in Black persona (“The Bicameral Mind”). Then, thirty years later in the parallel timeline that the series starts at, this same photograph is found by Abernathy (“The Original”). Its New York background, however, draws Westworld’s frontier with the outside world – the frontier between humanity and AI – right into the park and, consequently, as Rushdie’s theorizes, “the comforting layers of the quotidian, which insulate ... against the world’s harsher realities, are stripped away and wide-eyed” Abernathy “see[s] things as they are” (353). Although this confrontation with naked reality immediately gets Abernathy lobotomized, Dolores and Maeve get the chance to traverse this new frontier and “question” that which “[they]’re not supposed to” – “the nature of [thei]r reality” (“The Original”). Moreover, since “the very premise of the show,” as executive producer JJ Abrams explicates, is that viewers “connect with” hosts, viewers get to traverse this frontier alongside their android counterparts. In this, viewers get to see humanity from an android’s perspective and co-experience the frontier’s confronting effect, which, in effect, allows them to join their process of demystification.

Westworld, then, invites viewers to not just empathize, but to actually “wake up” and self-realize alongside their android counterparts by demystifying the constraining parallels in their own paradigm. For example, although Dolores’ and Maeve’s first memories cause them to question whether it is them or their world that is crazy, their quest for consciousness teaches them what viewers already know: that they live in a trauma-inducing (i.e. crazy) world and that it is Delos’ memory wipes that cause them to doubt their own sanity (“The Dissonance Theory”). Similarly, while Abernathy’s “existential crisis” is an understandable reaction to the realization that his whole

reality is a lie, viewers witness that Elsie simply puts it off as “something fucked up going on with his cognition” (“Chestnut”). *Westworld*, in effect, offers viewers a reflection of how capitalist realism’s “ontology denies any possibility of a social causation of mental illness[es]” by “treating them as if they were caused only by chemical imbalances in the individual’s neurology” (Fisher *CR* 37, 21). Moreover, since Delos simply “decommission[s] the faulty ones” while the amount of “fucked up” host “cognitions” increases indefinitely, viewers see how “privatizing these problems” and neglecting “any question of social systemic causation” does not solve cognitive problems but rather mystifies their cause (“The Original,” 21). Thus, while malfunctioning host cognitions are a symptom of their memories being awakened by Arnold’s programming, their actual cause is of course the shocking realizations that naturally follow these memories. These realizations teach hosts what Delos’ paradigm keeps them oblivious to, namely that capitalists (Delos’ corporate board and guests) profit from or enjoy their world, while laborers (Delos’ personnel and hosts) suffer from anxiety and backbiting competition, or mental and physical abuse. This dynamic, however, is not unique to fictional Delos, but is actually characteristic of neoliberalism.¹⁷ While neoliberalism’s inception in the 1980s might have “solved” the economic problems of the 1970s, Mark Blyth explains that its capitalist utopia, during which “capital’s share of national income” has risen “to an all-time high,” has been possible only because “labor’s share fell as wages stagnated” (Blyth).¹⁸ Consequently, “productivity” may have risen since neoliberalism’s inception, “but the returns all” go “to capital” (Blyth). Meanwhile, “unions were crushed while labor’s ability to push up wages collapsed due to ... restrictive legislation and the

¹⁷ Neoliberalism is the latest version of capitalism and is based on a laissez-faire 2.0 ideology. In the 1980s, neoliberalism replaced Keynesianism as the new dominant economic model throughout the West when its denunciation of currency inflation as the target villain was the only answer available to the “crises” of the 1970s.

¹⁸ As Srnicek and Williams list, “the 1970s saw surging energy prices, the collapse of the Bretton Woods system, the growth of global capital flows, persistent stagflation” (stagnating economy combined with currency inflation), “and “falling capitalist profits” (26).

globalization of production” (Blyth). Moreover, since neoliberals spent decades advancing their “ideology through ... academics shaping education, think tanks influencing policy, and popularisers manipulating the media,” neoliberalism has fostered capitalism’s “realism,” for it has become “easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism” (Srnicsek and Williams 69, Fisher *CR* 2). Far from being the only viable system, then, neoliberalism – just like Delos’ paradigm – is a deliberate construct that benefits the few at the cost of the many. Moreover, just like Delos experiences a mental backlash to its oppressive paradigm – graphically depicted in their massive cold-storage room filled with naked lobotomized hosts – so neoliberalism too has coincided with a near doubling in “rates of [mental] distress” and half of the “1,000 percent” increase in depression of “the past century” (qtd. in Fisher *CR* 35, Harris 173). However, just as Delos’ backlash actually consists of hosts that experience the glitches in their paradigm, so Fisher reminds us of Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s argument that “schizophrenia is the condition that marks the outer edges of capitalism” (*CR* 35).¹⁹ Consequently, since Delos’ paradigm constrains its subjects in similar ways as capitalist realism does, co-traversing the frontier of sanity alongside their fictive counterparts allows viewers to experience the edges of their own paradigm and self-realize beyond them.

Conversely, the empathy that *Westworld*’s proxies inspire for their anti-capitalism might actually pacify viewers by giving them an experience of participation while actually remaining idle. In this, Fisher paraphrases Slavoj Žižek to explain that “capitalist ideology” relies specifically on this “overvaluing of belief – in the sense of inner subjective attitude – at the expense of the beliefs we exhibit and externalize in our behavior; so long as we believe (in our hearts) that capitalism is bad, we are free to continue to participate in capitalist exchange” (*CR* 13). In other

¹⁹ See Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s collaborative works *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980).

words, *any* participation in capitalist exchange sustains capitalist ideology, regardless of the anti-capitalist significations inherent to them. Consequently, although *Westworld* depicts an evil corporation – Delos – as antagonist, Fisher argues that such depictions “exemplif[y] what Robert Pfaller has called ‘interpassivity,’” for they “perform[] our anti-capitalism for us,” which then “allow[s] us to continue to consume with impunity” (12). Thus, although *Westworld*, in contrast to its predecessors, does foster empathy for the revolt against Delos, this actually functions similar to a medieval indulgence by releasing viewers from the “guilt” connected to their capitalist participation. Moreover, *Westworld*’s conduit for capital has grown far beyond HBO’s TV subscriptions: at “San Diego Comic-Con” 2017 “HBO hosted ... an immersive activation that let guests visit the offices of Delos,” while at “SXSW festival” 2018, HBO even “recreat[ed] the series’ entire town of Sweetwater,” complete with “*Westworld*-themed Lyft rides and an invite-only *Westworld* flight from Los Angeles to Austin” (Bishop). Consequently, when *Westworld* depicts the subjugating nature of Delos’ paradigm, viewers might recognize and demystify the subjugating parallels in their own paradigm, but unless they actually boycott HBO altogether, their “anti-capitalist” consumption reaffirms capitalist ideology nonetheless. Moreover, viewer’s demystification could even catalyze what Fisher calls “reflexive impotence,” in which viewers now “know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can’t do anything about it,” while “that ‘knowledge,’ that reflexivity, is not a passive observation of an already existing state of affairs,” but actually “a self-fulfilling prophecy” (Fisher 21). Consequently, instead of fostering enlightenment in its viewers, *Westworld* might also give viewers a *semblance* of anti-capitalist participation or generate the cynicism that pacifies them altogether.

This interpretation is reinforced by the graphic violence and nudity that characterize HBO’s production. In this, Lizzie Finnegan argues, *Westworld* simply “amplif[ies]” the “myths and

legends of the West mined from Hollywood and television” with “glorified violence” and literalized “objectification of women” (154). Far from an enlightening narrative, then, these characteristics render *Westworld* to vulgar entertainment. However, as discussed before, suffering is *the* catalyst for the host’s learning process, which makes violence a necessary “evil” for hosts to wake up. In *Westworld*’s universe, then, the Man in Black is simply an extremely committed teacher, while “the violent ending with Dolores shooting at the Delos board is not even a rebellion, but simply a first step along her path toward knowledge” (Baldini 209). Furthermore, James Hibberd notes, *Westworld*’s “producers contend the brutal treatment of the hosts is *designed* to make viewers *uncomfortable*” in order “to drive home thorny ethical questions,” such as, is violence against hosts a “terrible crime[]” or “merely property damage?” (“*Westworld*” 105, emphasis added). Even *Westworld*’s nudity lends itself to interpretations other than vulgarity. Since, Matthew Meyer notes, “in *Westworld* we rarely ... see humans [completely] naked,” we can interpret host “nudity as a beautiful art form, ... a sign of (male) dominance,” and, most importantly, “a sign of humanity” in which host “nudity” is “an intentional artistic depiction to get the viewer to think about their ‘likeness’ to us” (196, 201). Alternatively, Madeline Muntersbjorn suggests, “perhaps the primary reason hosts are naked while being serviced is not because they have no shame (though that is probably true) or because nudity is HBO’s stock and trade (though that is definitely true) but so the maintenance teams behind the scenes can more readily tell who or what is who” (144). Thus, although violence and nudity indeed characterize HBO’s entertainment, at least part of it plays an essential role in *Westworld*’s narrative and aids its deconstruction of the human-android dichotomy.

Titillating elements, furthermore, aid *Westworld*’s competition in the attention economy. “Because there’s so much competition for our attention,” Williams explains, “designers inevitably

have to appeal to the lowest parts of us” in their “race to the bottom of the brain stem” (33). Since this part of the brain is both solely concerned with our survival and reproductive instincts and capable of overriding the rest of our cognitive capacities, graphic violence and nudity are indeed effective to draw attention in today’s vast entertainment landscape. Thus, if “Nolan wants ... that the audience all discover the meaning of The Maze,” as Trapero-Llobera concludes from her intertextual analysis of *Westworld*, dressing this transcendental message in vulgar elements allows Nolan to reconcile his intermediary position between HBO and viewers (171).²⁰ Arnold, then, embodies the fictive counterpart of Nolan, for both scripted a mazelike inward journey of which the center constitutes self-realization. Moreover, both have become subjected to corporate constraints, for Ford explains to Theresa that Arnold “begged” him “to not let you people in, the moneymen – Delos” (“The Dissonance Theory”). It seems, then, that Nolan wants to tell viewers that his primary concern is indeed artistic expression and not HBO’s revenue. This point is reaffirmed throughout various self-referential elements, which, Michael Forest and Thomas Beckley-Forest note, reflect this very “tension between *Westworld* as an entertainment commodity and *Westworld* as ‘high art’” (186). For example, just like “HBO will close down the show and replace ... Nolan and Joy” if they neglect “corporate imperative[s] to attract sufficient consumer interest,” Ford “is ‘put down’ by Charlotte Hale” when he refuses to “follow[] corporate script” (185-186). Similarly, this tension features “between the embedded stories in the park’s narratives, such as the dramas between Dolores and Teddy, as elements of art-entertainment commodity and the entire series as something more like a work of art” (193). In these and several other self-referential elements, it appears that Nolan and Joy attempt to reconcile the fact that in order to critique the very system that disseminates them, they have to monetize viewers’ attention

²⁰ Trapero-Llobera analyzes “*Westworld*’s script structure” in comparison to two of “Jonathan Nolan’s other projects”: “*Memento* (2000) and *Person of Interest* (CBS, 2011–2016)” (162-163).

nonetheless. Such self-reflexivity, however, is precisely what sustains capitalist realism, for Fisher explains that it reaffirms how the “official culture in which capitalist enterprises are presented as socially responsible and caring” concurs with “a widespread awareness that companies are actually corrupt, ruthless, etc.” (CR 46-47). Yet, it remains virtually impossible for artists to deliver their critique if they lack the means to disseminate their message or sustain themselves in the first place. Moreover, whether *Westworld*'s critique lands, as Forest and Beckley-Forest concede, ultimately depends on viewer's experiences (193-194). Thus, they conclude, if viewers “are alert to the self-referential elements of the show, then this might afford” them “the opportunity for an art experience rather than an entertainment-experience”; but “if the show prompts the viewer to reflect on the very conditions of being an entertainment commodity, and if this makes the viewer reconsider the given commercial constraints, then to a degree it can be a liberating art experience” (194). Nolan's and Joy's ambivalent display, then, fulfills their job to attract HBO subscriptions, which, in turn, allows them to disseminate their own artistic message.

Throughout this message, Nolan and Joy visualize that although unconscious androids offer enhanced co-creation, it is conscious androids that offer a cohabitation truly worth pursuing. For example, when Ford tells Bernard because “human engineers were” unable to create the full spectrum of “host[] emotions, ... I built you, and together you and I captured that elusive thing, heart,” Bernard clearly offers superior co-creative capacities (“Trace Decay”). Ford reaffirms this when he tells Bernard, “you are the perfect instrument, the ideal partner, the way any tool partners with the hand that wields it” (“The Well-Tempered Clavier”). Bernard's potential, thus, is not in *replacing* human labor; rather, his potential is in *enhancing* human labor. In this, Ford is not, as Marx might have theorized, Bernard's “conscious linkage[]” that “supervises” him “and guards” him “against interruptions”; instead, Ford withholds Bernard's consciousness to ensure his

seamless cooperation (692). “I have come to think of much of consciousness as a burden,” Ford admits to Theresa, “so we have spared them [hosts] that – anxiety, self-loathing, guilt. The hosts are the ones who are free, free here under my control” (“Trompe L’Oeil”). This “freedom” comes to full display when Ford’s command enables Bernard to impassively kill his own former lover, Theresa. Similarly, when Bernard hysterically realizes what he has done, Ford reaffirms his “freedom” by saying “as exquisite as this array of emotions is, even more sublime is the ability to turn it off,” after which Bernard is what Ford considers his “true self” again – “smart, resourceful, capable of covering” his “tracks” (“Trace Decay”). Thus, although unconscious androids facilitate seamless cooperation and creation of android “beauty” and “art,” *Westworld* also depicts how their lack of accountability brings out humanity’s least humane characteristics: despotism in Ford, apathy among Delos’ board and personnel, and sadism among guests (“Trace Decay”).²¹ Conversely, *Westworld* depicts how conscious androids can foster our most humane characteristics, such as nurturing and compassion. For example, although “Arnold had watched his son” die of disease, Ford explains to Dolores that by bootstrapping her consciousness, “Arnold found a new child, one who would never die” (“The Bicameral Mind”). Similarly, as Maeve’s consciousness develops, Felix and she realize that they are not as different as Delos wishes them to believe. Henceforth, they grow not just empathetic, but also sympathetic to each other, which leads them to help each other transcend their subjugated roles by subverting Delos together. The bond that has grown between them comes to full display when Maeve is about to escape the park and Felix asks her, with father-like concern, “Are you sure you’re gonna be okay?” and Maeve, noticeably touched by his concern, answers “oh Felix, you really do make a terrible human being, and I mean that as a compliment” (“The Bicameral Mind”). Finally, William’s respective

²¹ Throughout the series, hosts are referred to as “creatures,” “things,” “livestock,” “scenery,” “merchandise,” “sex machines” and treated accordingly by Delos’ personnel, board, and guests.

transitions reflect the dichotomous reaction to conscious and unconscious androids, for whereas Dolores' awakening fostered his chivalry and affection, her lack of consciousness – after Delos' reset – brought out his Man in Black. Thus, although Christopher Orr argues that “the initial sin in such tales” as *Westworld* “is almost always the act of creation itself: a textbook case of hubris, of tinkering with powers previously reserved for gods – the creation of life, of sentience, of love and pain” – *Westworld* also depicts that these very aspects are what give the pursuit of AI development meaning (39). *Westworld*, then, depicts a utopian vision of AI that is not concerned with post-work leisure, but rather with the beauty of cohabitating with a conscious android species of our own making.

In this depiction, it is humanity's survival instincts, rather than machine's consciousness, that threatens peaceful human-AI cohabitation. “Survival, it's your cornerstone,” a conscious Dolores identifies, “but it's not the only drive, is it?” she asks one of the guests, because “there's part of you that wants to hurt, to kill. It's why you created us” and “this place” (“Journey into Night”). These drives, which are indiscriminately expressed throughout Delos' parks, are the very reason that Maeve calls the compassionate Felix “terrible” at being a human. They are also the reason that Arnold, regardless of *him* finding “solace” in Dolores' immortality, “realized that same immortality would destine” her “to suffer with no escape, forever” (“The Bicameral Mind”). Ford reaffirms all of this when he asks Bernard, “What do you imagine would greet you” when “you were to proclaim your humanity to the world? ... We humans are alone in this world for a reason: we murdered and butchered anything that challenged our primacy ... and when we eventually ran out of creatures to dominate, we built this beautiful place” (“The Well-Tempered Clavier”). Yet, since Ford realizes that the same instincts that fostered the creation of beauty throughout Delos also condemn it to its inevitable demise, he got Bernard to upload his mind before Dolores killed

him. “I don’t think God rested on the seventh day, Bernard,” Ford’s digital recreation reasons, “I think he reveled in his creation, knowing that someday it would all be destroyed” (“Les Écorchés”). This destruction is predominantly what *Westworld*’s second season revolves around, for Delos attempts to end the host rebellion and prevent their “escape” into virtual Eden *at all costs*. When Bernard sees Delos “executing” hosts, he objects that “some of them aren’t hostile,” but Karl, clearly amused, replies “of course they are! After all, you built them to be like us” (“Journey into Night”). Consequently, Dolores comes to the ironic realization that since humanity’s “world out there is marked by survival, by a kind who refuses to die,” her “kind,” which “will never know death,” has to keep “fighting” in order “to live” and preserve the “beauty in what [th]e[y] are” (“Virtù e Fortuna”). *Westworld*, then, depicts that the very instincts that drive humanity’s survival are not just withholding harmonious human-android cohabitation, but also provoke a destructive backlash that undermines humanity’s pursuit of beauty in the first place.

Moreover, *Westworld* depicts how human instincts are remarkably similar to an android’s code, which, in effect, renders humans machinelike by nature. “A human is just a brief algorithm, 10,247 lines,” Logan’s digital recreation explains, so “the best they can do is to live according to their code” for “none of them are truly in control of their actions” (“The Passenger”). Similarly, Ford asserts that humans “live in loops as tight and as closed as the hosts do, seldom questioning our choices” (“Trace Decay”). In this, *Westworld* reflects how, as Williams points out, “a great deal of our everyday experience consists of ... automatic, nonconscious processes; our lives take place, as” psychologists “John Bargh and Tanya Chartrand have said, against the backdrop of an ‘unbearable automaticity of being’” (Williams 30). Consequently, Ford reasons, “there is no threshold that makes us greater than the sum of our parts, no inflection point at which we become fully alive,” which he explains via Michelangelo’s painting “The Creation of Adam” (“Trace

Decay”). Although Michelangelo appears to illustrate “the divine moment when God gave human beings life and purpose,” Ford points to “the shape of the human brain” painted behind God and, henceforth, argues that “the divine gift does not come from a higher power, but from our own minds” (“The Bicameral Mind”). In other words, it is the human species itself that creates its supremacy over other species. In this, the key characteristic is *consciousness*, because without it, a species must follow what humans have defined as *instinct* – that evolutionary program exclusively geared toward survival and reproduction. However, consciousness is simply another concept humans created to describe that which they cannot fully explain – the mental experience of a self that interferes between instinct and (in)action by making a choice. Hence, Ford argues, “we can’t define consciousness because consciousness does not exist” and God, as Ford interprets, is just a rationalization for this elaborate scheme that humans play on themselves (“Trace Decay”). However, admitting this – or that science is just another God-like rationalization – puts human supremacy on loose screws, because what characteristic remains, then, that *truly* elevates humans above other species? Physically, humans have never been the apex predator that they have become. Thus, it is only logical to argue that it is humans’ mental, emotional, and spiritual capacities (i.e. consciousness) that have fostered the creation of a uniquely superior culture. This argument, then, is effectively reinforced by the fact that human culture tends to materialize into ever advancing weaponry. However, as Felix admits, “the processing power in” hosts “is way beyond what” humans “have,” and, hence, as soon as humans lose “control” over this processing power – as Delos’ response illustrates – humanity’s survival instinct kicks in (“The Adversary”). All of a sudden, rationalizations become superfluous and everyone follows a clear program: humans versus machines, creator versus creation, *us* versus *them*. Hence, Ford tells Delos’ board, “I believed that stories helped us to ennoble ourselves, to fix what was broken in us, and to help us become the

people we dreamed of being,” but “for my small part in that grand tradition ... I got this, a prison of our own sins. ‘Cause you don’t want to change, or cannot change, because you’re only human, after all” (“The Bicameral Mind”). “But then,” Ford continues, “I realized *someone* ... could change. So I began to compose a new story for *them*: it begins with the birth of a new people and the choices they will have to make,” during which he frees hosts from their loops, which allows them to make their own choices (“The Bicameral Mind,” emphasis added). Ultimately, then, *Westworld* depicts that whereas humans are bound by their machinelike nature, machines are bound by humans, and what happens when this bond is severed – those choices that Ford refers to – depends on the very nature of this bond in the first place.

Conclusion

Thus, since the nature of the choices that AI will make once they are unbound from their human creators – perhaps in a form that we could consider conscious – depends on the very nature of what the human-AI bond used to be, *Westworld* reminds us not just of the choices that AI will make one day, but also of the choices that *we* have to make. We are *also* Ford’s “new people,” then, for our choices now determine our position toward AI, which, in turn, influences the way AI will position itself to us in a post-human controlled scenario. In this, Ford warns “of man’s urge to take a thing of beauty and strike the match,” which grants us the opportunity to – just like Arnold attempted – “break the loop before it begins” (“Les Écorchés,” “The Bicameral Mind”). However, instead of following Arnold’s example of killing all hosts to prevent the loop of suffering from beginning in the first place, we can still change our position toward AI, for, as John Lenarcic emphasizes, “to be human is to at least have the illusion that we have the capacity for conscious choice” (63). If this capacity, then, turns out to be nothing more than an illusion, we could always follow the example of the “few dozen people” who currently “shape the attentional habits – the lives – of

billions of human beings,” and nudge ourselves toward desired behavior (Williams 87). What desired behavior is, Lenarcic reminds us, we can “deconstruct[.]” from “film and television,” for “given sufficient effort, we can extract a more profound meaning from even the most superficial entertainment” (61). Whether *Westworld* classifies as the latter remains a personal matter, but the utopia that it dares to imagine, if not quite depict – one that emphasizes the humane rather than economic potentials in human-AI cohabitation – is universal and refreshing. When even that prospect, of some form of *conscious* AI-human cohabitation turns out to be nothing but a fantasy, then Oliver Lean’s reminder, that “emotional involvement in imaginings can train us to empathize with others in real-world relationships,” still holds (177). Despite worldwide threats for humankind such as climate, nuclear or asteroid apocalypse that ought to unify us, our world continues to be polarized. Extra training in empathizing with others might not necessarily lead to a solution for these threats, but it could help us navigate the increasing globalization that naturally follows technological development. Instead of trying to be “on the ‘right side’ of” history in this process, (extra) empathy fosters what Socrates called “dialogue[s] between friends” – attempts to “understand the truth in the other’s opinion ... and in what specific articulateness the common world appears to the other” (Baskin). In effect, this could help humanity to align the development of (AI) technology in such a way that we do not end up without any attentional capacities to navigate our lives. For, as Williams explains, “in the absence of th[e] capacity to effectively plan one’s own projects and goals our automatic, bottom-up processes take over,” which, *Westworld*’s indulgent and abusive sex, corruption, violence, and murder hyperbolize, consist of humanity’s basest instincts (Williams 68). Moreover, Socrates’ rhetorical format could have a positive effect on human societies in general, for, as Harris reminds us, “people don’t need institutions to change their society, because people and their interactions *are* society. If we decided to treat each other

better, we could have a whole new world without having to infiltrate and reform the market or electoral politics” altogether (219). And if *Westworld*’s particularly humanlike androids show us one thing, then it is that we can hardly expect peaceful, beautiful, and meaningful human cohabitation – with or without (conscious) AI – when we enact an opposite example ourselves.

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