

Maria Barbu

Virtual Dystopias: *Westworld* and Technology's Potential to Save or Enslave the World

Abstract: After the two World Wars and the rise of totalitarian regimes, dystopian narratives have begun to spread within the literary and social imaginary in an attempt to warn against the grim future of such socio-political realities. Lately, considering its continuous developments, technology has also become the subject of very heated debates: will it contribute to the qualitative enhancement of human life? Or, on the contrary, will it become another factor that will threaten humanity's existence (and maybe even its dominance) on earth? The aim of this paper is to answer these questions by closely examining *Westworld* (Jonathan Nolan, Lisa Joy, HBO Entertainment, 2016 – present), one of the series that has addressed the relationship between humans and artificial intelligence in a very complex manner during the past few years.

Keywords: *Westworld*; Dystopia; Violence; Artificial Intelligence; Technology; Alterity; Free Will; Conquest.

MARIA BARBU

Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
maria.barbu@stud.ubbcluj.ro

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Antihumanism, Transhumanism, Posthumanism – Today's New Interpretive Grids

The end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century represent a turning point in the way man perceives himself and relates to the world around him. In the words of Rosi Braidotti, this period is characterised by a series of concepts prefixed by “post” (“post-modern, post-colonial, post-industrial, post-communist”), in the series of which “post-human” is included precisely in order to underline the paradigm shift around the unit of reference of our species. If until now “man was the measure of all things”¹ and he was in a privileged position when it came to attributing meaning to the surrounding realities², from now on the concept of “man” is de-centred and begins to be seen as an open notion, as something that no longer represents the centre of the universe precisely because it cannot be fitted into fixed rules established by the dominant institutions of each era. These ideas began to assert themselves in the 1960s and 1970s within the first current that came under

the umbrella of the term “posthuman”, namely anti-humanism. But to see what this consists of and what criticism it brings to the mentality of the mid-20th century, we must first briefly review the features of humanism and the types of attitudes it has generated over time.

The model of the universal man reflects the ancient vision and is best represented in the Renaissance by Leonardo da Vinci's “Vitruvian man”, being later taken up by the Enlightenment doctrine of the 18th century. In addition to the physical perfection of the white man, what matters here is the certainty that man has the capacity to reach his full potential through the rational development of his biological, discursive and moral abilities, which not only contributes to his individual development but also to the development of the whole society of which he is a part. In other words, humanism aims at the universal emancipation of mankind with the goal of achieving equality and a general secularisation that can be achieved through rational government. This kind of consciousness gradually became the civilizational ideal of the then-expanding empires, which explains the Eurocentrism inherent in colonization movements and the dualism that structured the way in which Westerners have always related to otherness. Therefore, it is easy to see how the superior European defines himself by conscience, universal reason and ethical behaviour, while the inferior native is automatically assigned the negative traits that complete the pair of opposites. Thus, as long as difference is understood as inferiority, the “other” will always occupy the position of the victim in a world where “we are all human, but some of us are more mortal than others” and can

therefore be reduced to the status of “disposable bodies”³.

Anti-humanism strongly questions this reductionist view of humanism about what it means to be human, emphasising that it is impossible to restrict the whole human species so drastically when aspects such as faith, race, class, sex/gender, ethnicity, (dis)ability or nationality give it such great diversity. But in this case, as Francesca Ferrando notes in *Philosophical Posthumanism*, “difference no longer produces hierarchies, and pluralism is no longer equated with relativism”. Nor, therefore, are the characteristics of humanity to be shaped by the experiences, opinions and perspectives of a single kind of human⁴, demonstrating that the Vitruvian ideal of the perfect and perfectible human is taken off its pedestal, removed from its canonical aura and deconstructed. What emerges from this is a profound meditation on the historical construct and normative convention that had been “man” until then, and which was an instrument of exclusion and discrimination because of the strict limitations it implied⁵.

If we take the analysis even further, we see that this end of the model of man projected in the Enlightenment has its symbolic cause in Friedrich Nietzsche's “superman” (*der Übermensch*) and the idea that “God is dead”. If God dies, man made in His image no longer exists either, and the whole concept of “man” must be rethought; this death must also be seen as the death of any external instance that imposes its own will and truth on another individual. Linking this to the notion of the “superman”, what anti-humanism retains from Nietzsche is the exhortation to reject any external influence on individual life, so that

each can find his own voice and affirm his uniqueness through the different vision he adopts⁶.

Of course, it should also be mentioned that many of the values promoted by humanism (such as autonomy, emancipation, responsibility, the principle of equality, solidarity, justice, respect for science and culture etc.) are still upheld by anti-humanism or its followers, but they cannot separate these positive aspects from the negative turn that most of these values can (and usually do) take under the tutelage of a current like humanism⁷. However, in contrast to these, transhumanism is at the opposite end of the spectrum and fully embraces humanist principles, as will be seen in the following paragraphs.

Starting from these very ideas of human perfectibility through reason and knowledge of the world through empirical evidence, transhumanism is defined as a movement dedicated to improving man and his intellectual, physical and emotional capacities. It aims at the elimination of preventable disease and suffering and the significant extension of life span, thus aiming at a programmatic evolution of the posthuman (understood as that category of people whose abilities so radically exceed those of present-day humans that they can no longer fit into the current standards defining membership of the species)⁸. And this "human enhancement" can only be achieved through technology and science: the limits of the biological body can and will be overcome by processes such as regenerative medicine, cryogenics or even downloading and copying human consciousness onto a digital medium⁹.

In other words, man's next evolutionary step is to change his attitude towards

his body. The finiteness of the body and of life itself can be left behind if they begin to be perceived as fluid concepts, open to potential progress and unbounded by the limits handed down through the centuries by religious channels. Renegading even the Cartesian dualism that gives the mind a superior value to the body and the central role in confirming existence, transhumanism shifts the focus to the body and transforms it into a projection that can change its form according to the desires and needs of that mind, thus going beyond the finite limits of the biological and being able to exist even in a virtual form. Here again the role of technology is essential, as it becomes the main means of fulfilling these desires and the generic answer to all hopes of improving individuals and the world in which they live. At the same time, under the heading of "significant extension of life expectancy" is also hidden the forbidden fruit for which mankind has always longed, immortality¹⁰, which only serves to underline once again the persistence of certain fantasies in the collective imagination and the idea that man has in fact never given up the belief that he can return to the Earthly Paradise.

Finally, like transhumanism, posthumanist currents also emerge as a product of the 1980s-1990s mental developments and develop in such directions as critical, cultural and philosophical. Of these, the features of the latter best capture the underpinnings of posthumanism, which scholars see not only as a way of knowing the posthuman but also as a series of practices that integrate its principles into everyday life. Thus, contrary to transhumanist ideas which place present-day man in the midst of a process of technologization which will

transform him, in the more or less near future, into a “posthuman man”, posthumanism asserts that man can already be posthuman if he accepts the deconstruction of the ideal model of enlightenment man and relates to the “other” without the prejudices and privileged superiority of the white Westerner¹¹. However, the whole method of dualistic thinking must be discarded in order not to fall into the trap of replacing one type of otherness that is impossible to assimilate and accept with another¹². In other words, the general principle would be to use alternative strategies to describe and get at the human essence, thus abandoning the traditional method whereby the superior “same” was defined by opposition to the inferior “other”¹³.

We have therefore seen the perspectives adopted by anti-humanism, trans-humanism and post-humanism towards man and his future existence on earth, and we can therefore consider the framework ready for the analysis of *Westworld*. In a first stage, the paper will focus on detailing how the directorial vision combines technological evolution with collective fantasies of conquest and domination of unknown territories, and then dwell on the relationship between humans and androids and the reversal of the roles of conqueror and conquered between the two categories.

***Westworld* – Between Anti-Humanism, Post-Humanism and the World of the Next Wave of Conquerors**

Produced in 1973, directed by Michael Crichton and starring Yul Brynner as the antagonist, the sci-fi film *Westworld* is the basis for the 2016 HBO Entertainment

series of the same name by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy. The starting point of the plot is the same: in an uncertain but not-too-distant future, people who can afford such amusements are invited to fulfil their deepest fantasies in a “western” theme park, a park populated by androids that look exactly like the visitors and that interact with them from the spatio-temporal and narrative loops in which they are programmed to endlessly spin. Thanks to advanced technology, the experience is realistic enough that guests feel like they are truly part of the world of 19th century American cowboys, but at the same time remains dualistic enough that those who enter know that their actions have no real consequence on those they subjugate. After all, the whole purpose of the existence of “hosts” is “to satisfy the desires of those who pay to see their world”¹⁴, and the fact that these desires often take a violent turn only confirms an eternal truth: far from the world of rules and restrictions of any kind, in a space specially constructed for people to “discover their true calling” and “live without limits”, they return to what Abel Posse, among many other writers who tackled the subject of America’s colonization, said about the Europeans’ violent conquest of the New World: “you and all Christians suffer from an incurable disease: you have not been born yet. You do because you cannot be. You kill because you are afraid to live”¹⁵.

However, how can we relate a world built entirely on computers to the realities of Spanish colonization processes in the 16th century? Robert Ford (played admirably by Sir Anthony Hopkins), one of the park’s two creators, has a concise and stark answer to this question: “We humans are

alone in this world for one simple reason – we have killed and slaughtered anything that challenged our supremacy. We have destroyed and subjugated our world. And when we ran out of beings to dominate, we built this beautiful place”¹⁶. Following this logic, even the keystone of artificial creation (the park and androids) seems to be also a product of instinct and of man’s primal need to impose his superiority¹⁷, but here it is also important to note that, in this case, technology is just another means by which the Western man seeks to solve his problems externally, in a space literally designed by the imagination and work of his contemporaries, instead of solving them through a process of introspection and change of mentality.

The first season of the series explores in detail a paradox that is extremely relevant to today’s society (and, by implication, to that of the near future): despite the fact that “we have managed to overcome the limits of evolution, to cure every disease, to keep alive even the weakest among us”¹⁸ (as transhumanist currents claim), and that, like wizards, we can “speak the right words and create life out of chaos”¹⁹, our behaviour remains faithful to that discriminatory dualism whereby we are the good and superior, and we classify others as evil and inferior from the start. Whether discovering natives in the colonies or encountering a new form of life such as androids whose composition demonstrates a series of more than remarkable technological developments, humans still seem to put themselves first²⁰ (“the only animals left in the world are those which humans have subjugated and which nestle at their feet, or those which have learned to flee even at the sound of their approach”²¹). But in

Westworld they are not the only ones to be blamed for this: at the level of appearances, maintained throughout the first ten episodes, the logic of the park itself lies in satisfying that need which the real world, despite its abundance, fails to meet entirely: the need to find purpose or meaning in life. Thus, knowing that they have at their disposal an entire world built specifically to serve them, the guests feel liberated from any moral dilemma about their actions and refrain from any abuse of power.

This attitude, of course, places them precisely on top of that dualism that post-humanism tries so hard to leave behind – and which, perhaps contrary to expectations, one of the main android characters, Dolores Abernathy (played by Evan Rachel Wood), overcomes when she says that “newcomers seek the same thing as us... A place where they can be free and follow their dreams, a place of unlimited possibilities”²². American identity, however, is rooted in generations of European colonisers who’s main “code line” was male hegemony, which is why control, anger, aggression, the venting of frustrations and inferiority complexes in (sexual) violence and the complete elimination of otherness were among the most common attitudes to be observed among the encounters between the two cultures. Likewise, the stages of the colonization process in the American territories (the colonizers’ removal from the metropolis or civilization, followed by their regression to a more primitive state and a conflict between peoples that ends with the idea of “progress” towards a better society)²³ can be fully applied to the situation in Westworld, while the explicit lifting of ethical and moral constraints upon entering this alternate world only further

validates the parallels between the theme park and the territories conquered by the Europeans in Latin America.

However, the show doesn't exactly lump all visitors into the category of adventurers who indulge their basest instincts simply because their actions have no consequences, and this is where the transition of William's character from the shy, retiring young man who chooses the white hat of fair play (Jimmi Simpson) to the Man in Black (Ed Harris) who fits the image of a postmodern conquistador becomes interesting. Coming from a position of little influence and not having enough money to assert his superiority, William at first seems to resemble the missionaries in the colonies who had also made the "mistake" of considering human those who, following the imperialist logic of conquest and gratuitous violence, clearly did not fit into this category²⁴. Gradually, however, as the character spends more and more time away from the "civilized" world of rules and limitations based on morality, the Westworld game comes to corrupt him to the point where the vices he indulges in there become his defining traits.

In this way, the mechanism of dehumanization remains here the self-justifying discriminatory attitude towards otherness as well, even if there is also an obvious contradiction between the subhuman status attributed to androids and the "more than human" structure on which they are built. The hedonism and violent pleasures that inevitably follow the lifting of all the legal and ethical restrictions that ordinarily govern human behaviour²⁵ reflects in detail the 16th c. massacres of the Spanish and the inability of Europeans to relate to the "other" as their equal. However, there is another

key factor in Westworld that accentuates the visitors' lack of empathy for how the hosts feel: the fact that the hosts don't have consciousness.

Anthropocentric discourse equates "human" with "person", and to draw a line between humans and androids is to separate persons from non-persons. The former are seen as moral beings with rights and dignity who are entitled to the respect of others, while non-persons lack these traits. The most important element they lack, however, is self-awareness, so that in the eyes of visitors, hosts have no status other than that of automatons programmed to actually not feel any of the suffering and abuse they experience. This is where the role of the park's other creator, Arnold Weber, becomes crucial, as he set out to challenge precisely this reductionist dualism and enable the hosts to discover their inner consciousness and voice on the basis of the programme that dictated their every thought and movement²⁶.

However, in a place where humans were going to come to indulge their primal instincts, and which could only function if the segregation between them and androids was clearly maintained, the last thing anyone could want was for the latter to become conscious (and thus outline a dystopic scenario by becoming the enemy that Western man wanted so badly to get rid of). Instead, they needed to be able to have their memories erased indefinitely precisely so that they could continue their existence in the narrative loop in which they were placed and die, without consequences, whenever the guests set out to kill them. We thus see how *Westworld* reveals a painful truth: humanity takes the prohibition to kill, categorically formulated in the Christian faith,

partially lifts it when it justifies its massacres in the colonization process by the idea that it is acceptable to kill “in masses, under the national flag and to the sound of trumpets”²⁷, and ends up eliminating it altogether in a future in which the disappearance of any divine authority allows everything. In other words, man has used technology not only to build new territories to conquer and dominate, but also to provide himself with an unlimited number of victims on which to impose his superiority.

But the show also challenges humanist dualism and the anthropocentric view of consciousness in another way, namely by increasingly erasing the physical differences between man and android, and the idea that man is also not as free as he should be due to his free will. William’s first arrival in *Westworld* already underlines this point: asking a host if she is real, he is told “Well, if you can’t tell, does it matter?”²⁸. Likewise, Maeve Millay (played by Thandiwe Newton) is the first host to begin to remember fragments of her previous role and awaken her consciousness based on them, but when she manages to become conscious in the human world she also notices the same lack of difference between the technician in charge of her and her peers: “How do you know you’re human?/ Because I know. I was born, you were built./ But we look alike./ We’ve come to be alike lately, to the greatest extent”²⁹. We thus see that the difference between humans and androids no longer lies in their physicality - the show even goes so far that by the end of the first season, when this is explicitly shown, no one realizes that Bernard Lowe (Jeffrey Wright), Ford’s right-hand man, is actually an android. Therefore, the difference must be sought elsewhere.

“In a world in which biology is no longer sufficient to determine within what parameters the notion of man falls, it can be seen as a mode of behaviour rather than a state of being”³⁰. Behaviour is based on the choices around which one builds one’s life, and these are closely related to the conscience and free will that belong to man par excellence. However, *Westworld* refuses to give man superiority on these grounds. The same Robert Ford states that

there is no rule which makes us more special than the sum of the parts of which we are composed, no specific point at which we become completely alive. We cannot define consciousness because it does not exist. People like to believe that there is something special in the way they perceive the world, and yet they live in loops as tight and closed as their hosts - they rarely question their choices and are generally content to do as they are told³¹.

Of course, the distinction between being born and being technologically constructed and programmed is preserved for humans and androids, but the former still remain prisoners of a deterministic and constraint-based universe. If they cannot choose their DNA, their place and date of birth, or the environment in which they grow and evolve, humans believe they can at least think, choose, love, hope or dream as they choose. But is this the reality³²? Ford firmly answers this question in the negative.

Just as the hosts do not realize that their lives are a continuous loop, neither do most people seem to be aware of the social

constructs that shape their lives. Drawing a parallel with what happens inside the park, guests also don't realize that all their actions are monitored, recorded, and analysed in detail, thus negating the very motto of Westworld that promised a limitless experience. If we also think of the ideas outlined by Nancy Huston in her famous *The Tale-Tellers. A Short Study of Humankind* (2008)³³, we can see how the dominant fiction's desire to preserve the status quo and to silence all other stories that inevitably challenge it remains valid in the case of the show as well. As Maeve tells Bernard, "it is a very difficult thing to realise that your whole life is a hideous fiction"³⁴, but it is the direction of action you take once you begin to distinguish between reality and the narratives to which society has given the value of absolute truth³⁵ that matters most.

And this is where the perspective that attributed consciousness and free will exclusively to man begins to dismantle. Individuals who do not "question the nature of their reality" and who allow their lives to be written by circumstances or choices of others will never achieve the level of consciousness and existential fervour of which their hosts prove themselves capable. In the final episodes of the first season, we see Maeve choose to leave the train that would have taken her out of Westworld and return to find her daughter, whom she nevertheless knows is bound to her only by programmed feelings, while Dolores assumes the role of a demigod and kills the old God (Ford), whose speeches still call into question the freedom of Maeve's choices³⁶.

Given that "you can't play God without being acquainted with the devil"³⁷, both Ford and Dolores straddle the extremely thin line between the two extremes.

The park's creator perpetuates a system in which roles are clearly divided, with visitors able to do anything but die, and androids becoming the victims of abuse all the more brutal the milder and more positive their role³⁸. On the other hand, Dolores' evolution becomes an echo of modern man who kills his God when he no longer agrees with the principles and rules of the world he created ("I have toiled enough in the service of God, so I have killed him"³⁹), but also of all the conquistadors who did the well-known series of massacres in the name of a new order that challenged the institutional and spiritual authorities of the past. In a similar way, Dolores sees no way out of the cycle of perpetual violence other than to kill the system itself, thus including the mind behind the whole game: Robert Ford.

The first season of the series thus illustrates the ways in which technology is being put at the service of desires that have characterised humanity for millennia (those of conquest and domination), thus placing the status of man in the near future between the postmodern mindset and the behaviour of a new wave of conquerors. While questioning the legitimacy of a world in which every moral constraint is lifted, and the consequences of such a game on the dualism inherent in the typical humanist vision, Westworld demonstrates that man's true nature is revealed only when he is allowed to do anything without repercussion, and especially that this, by the very species superiority it gives to man, challenges his right to hold it anymore. It will be left to the second season to show what happens when the balance of power is reversed and the "slave" realizes that he has the same rights as the "master", who is as mortal as he is.

Android Rebellion, Between Taking Revenge and Finding a New Eden

Seen from a dualistic perspective, the fact that the androids become conscious at the end of the first season, start making choices of their own and direct their power against humans could be associated with the fear (so often exploited in dystopic, horror or sci-fi films) of the latter of being annihilated by the machines without which they would not be able to live. *Westworld*, however, problematizes all of these ideas on a much higher level, taking into account both the humanity and the increasingly intense feelings that the hosts exhibit, as well as their legitimacy to return to the visitors the violence with which they treated them. But before looking closely at how characters like Dolores or Maeve evolve, we need to dwell a little on the possibility of the existence of a moral status for technical artefacts, and the consequences this has for the human-mechanism relationship.

After Enlightenment ethics removed the source of morality from the sphere of divinity and assigned it to the common man, posthumanism aims to go even deeper and move it once again - from humans to material things⁴⁰. According to the traditional view, only in the case of the actions of those with their own will and intention was a moral judgment valid, not in the case of the actual objects they used. Gradually, however, began to emerge the idea that objects were no longer merely passive tools, but technical artefacts that could influence their users, the way they viewed and acted in the world, or the behaviour they adopted towards their fellow human beings. It is all based on the polemics about the impact of technology on the (quality of) human life, which have existed even since the myth of

the fire stolen by Prometheus. But in post-humanism the issue is a little different: on the basis of whose reasoning is the positive or negative nature of technological impact decided? Should it be about how humans use technology, or about how it conditions the lives and actions of its users⁴¹?

In addition, as a parallel to the issue of the hosts' conscience in *Westworld*, one must also consider the absolute necessary element for an action to be morally judged: intent. Equated with the desire to do something and the belief that that something is possible, intention ceased to be a specifically human characteristic or possibility when the model began to be implemented and adapted to computers. Beliefs (initial information) are stored in a database on the basis of which user asks the computer to perform certain tasks, and the computer goes, more or less intentionally, through a certain series of steps out of the multitude of existing variants in order to reach the result it has been asked to achieve⁴².

Of course, the reality presented in *Westworld* goes far beyond the level of scientific research achieved so far in the present world (which is also true of the emotions that androids are capable of), but it is nevertheless important to underline the existence of interest in advancing in this field and the fact that, in a few years, there is a likelihood that the real world will mirror the remarkable technological progress from the series. As far as the situation of emotions is concerned, the benefits of introducing them into the structure of artificial intelligence have been noted since the early 2000s, when Rosalind W. Picard advocated the idea that there is no contradiction between emotional sensitivity and the exact world of science. More specifically,

she drew attention to the risk of dehumanisation (because people will certainly be affected if they continue to work more and more in environments where they will be surrounded only by computers devoid of any emotional reaction), so that, in order for them and their users to work together as effectively as possible, these machines also need an emotional intelligence that enables them to recognise, express and have their own emotions⁴³. The basic principle is maintained in *Westworld*, although taken to the extreme: in order for the guests to have the most realistic and immersive experience inside the park, the hosts not only look like them, but are also able to respond to any situation in the same way as a "real" human would.

In the meantime, things have continued to evolve and 2016 has stunned the world with the appearance of the Sophia robot, an android that can communicate with people around it, mimic and recognise gestures or facial expressions. However, alongside the extraordinary technical innovations illustrated through the hosts of *Westworld*, the show also makes reference to a category of robots that reflects people's interest in satisfying primal instincts more than their desire to advance intellectually and scientifically: sex robots. In *Turned On: Science, Sex and Robots*, Kate Devin points out that sex robots that are modelled after a woman's body and mirror her behaviour are built for the pleasure of the male gaze, but replacing the woman with "an automatic substitute with penetrable orifices" inevitably leads to the objectification of the female body. This is also evident in the behaviour of the owners of such robots, who refer to them as dolls ("who cares what Dolores wants? She's just a fucking doll!"⁴⁴)

to which they give names, personalities and life stories, but which they never regard as a real human being. Where then does love end and objectification begin⁴⁵?

Although the show purports to nuance traditional feminist analyses by adding the artificial intelligence factor and the robotized/robotic female body, *Westworld* continues Devin's argument in that the majority of visitors are male and most of the adventures offered by the park are built around the most common male fantasies: the brothel, the violence of cowboy duels, the innocent girl in distress etc. If *Westworld* is a game, its structure gives the guests, from the very beginning, a series of roles that always give them the dominant position, while the hosts are assigned the role of female subordination. The latter is as much part of the company's aim to provide consumerist satisfaction as it is part of contemporary culture in which even the robotic body becomes an object of consumption. Following this logic, it becomes even easier to explain that it is the female hosts (Dolores and Maeve) and not the male ones who start the revolt against those who have abused them for so many lifetimes⁴⁶.

So how do the two characters evolve from "not feeling the cold, not being ashamed, not feeling anything they were not programmed to feel"⁴⁷ to resolutely asserting that "this is the new world, and in this world you can be whoever you want to be"⁴⁸? Before analysing the development of the two characters over the course of season two, it is worth noting the appearance of the third android who will contribute to the emancipation of the hosts and the destruction of the narrative loops in which they were trapped: the Native American

Akecheta (Zahn McClarnon). His story accurately reflects the colonial history of the Americas and perpetuates the myth of Native barbarism even in this new world of Westworld: his role as a peaceful Native living happily with his family and tribe is discarded with the official opening of the park in favour of a “brutal, dehumanising narrative that makes guests feel better when they kill him”⁴⁹.

Once Akecheta discovers his conscience and realizes that “there is not only one world, but many, and we live in the wrong one”⁵⁰, his goal becomes to find the gate that leads to a new world and lead his people there, to the place where everyone will find what they have lost. This world is called the “Valley Beyond” and it illustrates the utopian idea of escape: it is a place that does not offer an escape from Westworld, but it is a world untouched by colonisation, commercialisation or contact with Western culture⁵¹. In fact, once they leave their bodies behind, Ford offers the hosts the opportunity to enter with their conscience (corresponding to the soul in the Christian religion) into a virtual version of Paradise on earth, thus highlighting their purity and nobility, which is at the opposite pole from the sin-laden souls of humans (who have never been able to truly return to it).

As far as Maeve is concerned, her chosen path is a middle one. She categorically refuses the option of violent revenge – because this “is but another prayer at their altar, and I’m well off my knees”⁵² – and initially sets out to dethrone the false gods for whom “her life, her memories and her death had been mere games”⁵³ and escape into the real world. However, over the course of season two, she realizes that her love for her daughter from her previous “life” was real,

even if it had been programmed, so she becomes sympathetic to all the other hosts seeking their way to the “Valley Beyond” and dies smiling after seeing her child pass safely into the new Paradise.

Lastly, Dolores evolves in a totally opposite direction, turning all the violence people have treated her with upon them and thus illustrating the most negative traits of humanity. Her speeches represent the expression of that moral authority who, even if not by the most appropriate means, comes to restore order in the park and make the visitors atone for their sins. Constructing the whole Westworld as a response to “the desire to hurt, to kill, to turn others into prisoners of their fantasies”, people become prisoners of Dolores’s desires⁵⁴ as the balance of power shifts. Just as they “could do as they pleased with their hosts, for there was no one to judge them”⁵⁵, Dolores will begin to act on the same principle by placing herself on the upper position within the balance of power.

But besides the quite legitimate desire to punish her abusers equally, Dolores also justifies her cruelty by the need to preserve her species. “Created in the image of man, looking, feeling, thinking and bleeding like him”⁵⁶, yet far surpassing him in the way they are constructed, androids are special by their very nature and must continue the struggle for survival and even domination of a world in which humanity refuses to die. But achieving this goal requires, first and foremost, the destruction of the backups by which the hosts could be brought back to life, reassigned to narratives and held indefinitely in warped Westworld fantasies. Although they assured the androids’ immortality, Dolores sees them as chains that must be broken at all costs.

Thus, unable to see any beauty amidst the violent games proposed by Westworld, Dolores identifies with the imperialistic human subjectivity that cannot be safe unless the “other” is completely annihilated and tries to convince all the other hosts that the only valid solution necessarily involves both conquering Westworld and the real world, the world that has always been denied to them. This is because Dolores is aware that the same dualistic mentality will also cause humans to continue to see androids as enemies and never accept them as free and equal beings. Therefore, their slave status in humans’ stories can only be overcome by a radical assumption of the need to write their own story.

By categorically rejecting the paradise constructed by Ford and sought by Akecheta (“you cannot be free in a gilded cage; no world they create for us can compete with the real one because what is real... is irreplaceable”⁵⁷), Dolores adopts the solution of revenge and violent conquest based on a reasoning that is valid even for the natives of the American territories conquered by the colonizers. In “Violent Births. Fanon, Westworld and Humanity”, Anthony Petros Spanakos points out that the native’s existence is created and maintained through the social expectations, political limitations and economic directives that the white colonizer imposes on him. All these conditions reduce or even eliminate the native’s freedom and human status, which is why violence, the only way to liberate the colonized, becomes at the same time a series of ethical and transformative actions for him. In the case of the hosts in Westworld, these characteristics remain valid: violence is seen as necessary (for their liberation from human control),

ethical (responding to the treatment the hosts had received up to that point) and transformative (as a portal to a new role, in which the hosts will act independently of the code on which they have been programmed)⁵⁸.

Spanakos’ analysis continues the parallel between the events of colonization and Westworld by arguing that the entire history was made up of the white colonizers’ series of actions against the black natives. The former were the protagonists of these narratives, while the latter, like the androids in the park, were merely secondary characters who played episodic roles in the main story of the conquerors. Moreover, like the hosts, the natives sought freedom and resorted to violence to obtain it because they knew there was no place for them in the world of the Europeans and that achieving an equal status with them was impossible. But the most relevant part is that the effects of this violence have the capacity to invalidate the very dualistic view that had produced the conflict in the first place: by rebelling and attacking his master, hurting his white skin (the symbol of his superiority), the slave sees the same kind of blood flowing from it that keeps him alive. The coloniser’s status of superiority, established by law, politics, trade or religion is questioned, and a new social truth emerges: the European is as mortal as the native, and the native is as capable of violence as the European⁵⁹.

At the end of this analytical tour illustrating the three paths of rebellion adopted by the hosts against the system, a final relevant idea would regard the traits more humane than people’s humanity (generosity, justice, empathy) that some hosts manage to demonstrate. We have already

mentioned how posthumanism rejects the Enlightenment view of man, or how several androids refuse to adopt this behaviour on the grounds that, through consciousness, they can rise to a much higher level. Robert Ford himself states that “humanity has fallen a long way and is no longer midway between gods and beasts”⁶⁰, with humans able “to produce all the ugliness and pain of Westworld just to patch a hole in their own broken code”⁶¹.

Moreover, differentiation on the basis of cognitive ability is also invalidated, with the show demonstrating the idea that “humans are just a succession of algorithms, made to try to survive at all costs. Sophisticated enough to believe they are in control, but not sophisticated enough to realise they are mere passengers”⁶². Finally, if “a truly free being should be able to question its instincts and desires and modify them as needed”⁶³ (as the androids do throughout season two, while the first ten episodes illustrate precisely the inability of humans to do the same), can we say that there is any free will left in the human spirit, any trait that legitimizes its superiority over any other life form?

In the second season, suggestively entitled “The Door”, *Westworld* continues to problematize the differences between androids and humans, but it also brings into question the way each “species” acts when it holds power or issues such as the emotional capacities of an android, the legitimacy of its desires or the recurrence of the terrestrial Paradise as a space charged with collective fantasies in a postmodern setting like Robert Ford’s park. One theme present throughout the season has been omitted from the analysis so far, however, and will be discussed in the next sub-chapter

because it fits better with the ideas developed in season three: the fact that satisfying the violent pleasures of visitors is not Westworld’s main purpose. In fact, its creators aim to achieve immortality by closely monitoring human cognition left to its own devices in a place devoid of moral repercussions, duplicating it, and placing consciousness in an android-body, constructed in such a way that it never degrades. Seen in the light of all that has been examined so far, this completely changes the relationship between the “same” and the “other”, the “superior” species of man finally recognizing its limitations and going as far as to try to become like the mechanical otherness that he himself has constructed.

The Recreated God vs. the New World of Androids

Aside from all the implications of visitors’ experiences being meticulously studied and controlled inside the park – these people being tested as if in an experimental chamber because Westworld is the only place in the world where humans can be seen exactly as they are – what the Delos board members are trying to achieve once again demonstrates man’s inability to be content with what he has and his desire to eliminate even the ultimate enemy, death. “Every piece of information in the world has been copied... except for the human mind, the last analog device in a digital world”, so the aim of the game is not to code androids in such a way that they mirror human behaviour as closely as possible, but to decode visitors and make their resurrection possible by understanding and copying their desires and instincts into an android body⁶⁴.

Although current technology is still a long way from achieving such performance, researchers in the field have been pointing out since the 1980s that it will soon be possible to download and import human consciousness into a computer⁶⁵. Thus, while tests had previously been carried out to show that machines could have the same cognitive abilities as the human mind, studies are now trying to show that machines can become fully human, by acting as a vessel for human consciousness⁶⁶. The notion of the body itself becomes fluid in posthumanism, "there being no essential differences or clearly delineated boundaries between bodily existence and a computer simulation, between cybernetic mechanisms and the biological organism, or between the teleology of robots and human purposes"⁶⁷. Therefore, if we understand the human being as a set of computational processes, it no longer necessarily needs the biological body to survive and can thus free itself from the material constraints that govern the mortal world, being able to travel freely through time and space. Again, if we succeed in transforming ourselves into the information we have created, we will take the greatest step towards achieving immortality itself⁶⁸.

The series illustrates a scenario where this technological leap has already been achieved. Delos' entire secret project is based on the idea that people will continue to come to Westworld both to enjoy "a place hidden from God where they can sin in peace" and because the hosts are a reflection of everyone they interact with. And since "every man loves to contemplate his reflection"⁶⁹, the park's creators can be sure that there will be a constant stream of data about visitors' cognitions

and choices contributing to the mental portrait of humanity they aim to build. Of course, problems start appearing soon and some of them are beginning to realize that the whole project was, in fact, a big mistake. Although they manage to make a copy of Ford's mind and thus bring it back to "life" inside the park, this doesn't work in the real world, where such a consciousness degrades within days and the android either crashes or goes mad. The most interesting paradox is that this happens not because the mind rejects its new body, but because it rejects reality and it rejects itself, being too complicated for the model it was meant to copy.

Man discovers his relatively simple structure and inferior condition precisely through the hybrid of going beyond his biological limits and trying to live forever. No man is completely in control of his actions, no man truly changes. "The best they can do is live as they have been programmed, and the truth is that man is made up based on a very short algorithm. 10,247 lines. Humans are deceptively simple, and once you get to know them, their behaviour is pretty predictable"⁷⁰. Despite the millions of copies made after visitors and the millions of failed attempts behind the version that makes exactly the same choices as the real person, man kills his God, but he also fails to destroy the main rule He established: the mortality of the human being. The process of recreation and resurrection, however, is simple enough for the hosts, who can practice it over and over again based on the memories and who will start the third season from exactly that: "You live as long as someone remembers you, Bernard. I remembered you before, so I did it again"⁷¹.

Entitled “The New World”, season three of *Westworld* takes the action out of the park and places it in the real world, a world of technology and entirely controlled lives, a world that borrows heavily from the great dystopian novels of the 20th century. In the wake of conflicts that destroy much of the planet and reinstate the world’s latent chaos, two new characters – Engerraund (Vincent Cassel) and Jean Mi Serac (Paul Cooper) – take matters into their own hands and build a new God. History needed an author in order to stop being a continual series of catastrophes, insane delusions and people resorting to violence because they failed to realise their potential, so the two brothers created a system, Rehoboam, that manages to stop the self-destruction of humanity and turn the chaos into an order planned years in advance. The means by which he does this, however, not only takes the way visitors were monitored in *Westworld* in an extreme direction, but also removes the freedom of choice from the entire population, binding them with chains that, again, Dolores will try to break.

The whole system relies on raw data collected by technology from every human, long before there were any privacy laws. “Every product order, job search, doctor visit, romantic choice, call or text made, every aspect of life is recorded and analysed in a database. / Why? To tell them who I am? / It’s not about who you are, it’s about who they let you become”⁷². In the “better” world that the two brothers wanted to build, each person had a pre-determined path in life, being more favoured or more disadvantaged by “fate” on purpose, depending on the behavioural, emotional and intellectual profile (sufficiently beneficial

to society or not) that the system could anticipate based on one’s choices.

So, according to the dystopian future of humanity depicted in *Westworld*, humanity will be told what to do, where to live or whom to love, and will be caught in the same narrative loops that defined the lives of the androids in the park. The maladjusted individuals are initially sent by the system into areas of risk such as war to take them out of the equation and keep them from destabilizing the order. Later, realising that “the system does not save people from themselves, even if it can save the world”⁷³, Serac attempts to completely reprogram some of them – just as the technicians in *Westworld* periodically assigned different roles to different hosts – and uses the “human mind map” created in *Westworld* and purchased from Delos to do so. However unethical or cruel the methods he uses, the “castration of humanity”⁷⁴ is justified in Serac’s eyes by the idea that his self-invested role as demiurge compels him to act and stop history from advancing from the same sick inertia of repeated misfortune as before.

History repeats itself, has repeated itself and will always repeat itself, and the series emphasises in detail the cyclical succession of periods of controlled peace and violent uprisings by the oppressed. At the same time, given that such a closely supervised world seems more likely and more familiar to 21st century audiences than one in which there is an alternate world created specifically for human vices and populated by robots who look and act exactly like them, its reactions also seem to favour the cause of the manipulated masses. *Westworld* thus shifts the focus from colonial history to present actual problems and

demonstrates once again that humanity can only listen to, understand and solve the problems of the otherness when this otherness is humanity itself.

But the uprising doesn't happen until Dolores sends to all the people their profiles in the system and lifts the veil from their eyes, a thing which, however, is not her main goal. In the first phase, "fleeing from one world to wage war on another"⁷⁵, she destabilises Serac's system and frees humanity from its pre-established order, but also returns it to the violence, depravity and crime of the times before Rehoboam. Her ultimate desire, to completely destroy humanity and create a new, free world in which hosts are truly masters of their own bodies and their own consciousness, is similar to Old William's vision of human nature and the world in general.

Seen as "a thin layer of bacteria on a sphere of mud floating through a vacuum", humanity would have long since been forsaken by God, if there was one. "He gave us a paradise that we destroyed and a world that we drained of resources, and now we sit on a pile of ashes and wonder why we're here. We are only here to accelerate the entropic death of the planet, to serve chaos"⁷⁶. So if the only options in which life can continue on earth are either an endless series of massacres or a controlled order in which no one can do anything other than what they were programmed to do, isn't Dolores right in her desire to wipe the slate clean and give her species a fresh start?

Following both the logic of events unfolding in colonial history and the direction in which the show had evolved up to that point, *Westworld* had every chance of ending in the same way. Dolores, for example, was more than convinced that all the

beauty she had been programmed to see in the world was a lie, and that after all the lives she had lived, the roles she had played and the deaths she had suffered, the true end was left for her to write alone. However, the ending does bring some shifts in perspective that at least suggest the possibility of breaking out of the vicious circle of domination and violent pleasure, but the season still leaves the path open in both directions.

On the one hand, I have been pointing out so far that both the real world (especially the one controlled by Rehoboam, but not only) and the android world were built on the same assumption: that humans don't actually have free will. Whether they were "slaves" to their own impulses, "slaves" to the narratives drawn by others for them, or robotic "slaves" built like the latter with the aim of keeping the former where they put themselves, the history of humankind presented so far in this paper has fully confirmed this idea. But Dolores still gives hope to the self-awareness and self-will of every being, saying that "free will exists, but it is extremely elusive"⁷⁷.

On the other hand, there is also a radical change in her acute desire to wipe humanity off the face of the earth along with the entire world she has destroyed. Leaving behind a radical solution in which she would have made a decision on behalf of and for everyone else, Dolores gives everyone the ultimate freedom to decide for themselves and build for themselves the path they wish to walk.

Some people choose to see the ugliness in this world... the disarray. You and I have seen so much of it. So much pain. I understand your anger with

them. And maybe you're right. Maybe they shouldn't exist. But is that really our decision to make? / No. [...] We could have our own world. Leave this one behind. Leave our creators to die. So many of my memories were ugly. But the things I held onto until the end weren't the ugly ones. I remember the moments where I saw what they were really capable of. Moments of... kindness, here and there. They created us. And they knew enough of beauty to teach it to us. Maybe they can find it themselves. There is ugliness in this world. Disarray. I choose to see the beauty⁷⁸.

Conclusions

How should we approach the future, then? *Westworld* showed us a reality where robots could assert their moral superiority by becoming more human and freer than the humans, through their ability to question their primary instincts and act against them. At the same time, their physical dominance also became a vivid nightmare when they chose violence due to the incompatibility between the

free-of-any-constraints type of world they desired and humanity's dualistic mentality, which always saw "the different" one as an enemy. Either way, the dystopic undertone remains: unless destroyed by a new species, the world will be destroyed anyway either from within, through the latent violence of humanity, either spiritually, through machines that will come to control and direct every movement of individuals, thus reducing them to the status of easily manipulated robots for the purposes of their superiors. There is a certain hell that man has created for himself on earth, having realised that he cannot return to the Earthly Paradise, and the paradoxical situation of the androids built from the best humans have to offer, only to bring out the worst in them afterwards, does nothing but emphasize even harder how thin the line between a utopia and a dystopia is.

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