Violence at the Frontiers of Contemporary Culture Industries

The Case of Westworld

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There is a moment in the second chapter of *Westworld* (2016–) where the young William (Jimmi Simpson) makes a significant decision. Just as he is about to board the train bound for the theme park for the first time, clad in typical frontier garb, his hostess for the occasion points to the wall behind him and reminds him of his last remaining choice, the choice of hat. William decides, after a short pause, to go with a white rather than a black hat. The white-hat/black-hat binary quickly became a hallmark convention of the Western as a genre, especially during the surge of B film productions in the 1930s. By choosing a white hat over a black one, William signals his decision to play the good guy, the hero, leaving the role of villain to

another—in this case, seemingly at least, to his brother-in-law, Logan Delos (Ben Barnes). All the same, what follows is an orgy in violence.

This scene is one of several where the *Westworld* series makes explicit reference to the conventions of the Western. The proposition that the series can be seen as a commentary on the genre is, therefore, not particularly controversial. *Westworld* deliberately wallows in the clichés of the Western, including the latter's specific and particularly stylized mode of representing violence on screen—that is, representations of violence at the frontier and frontier justice, at the intersections where east meets west and where the old and the new, law and lawlessness, collide. The series, thus, provides the opportunity to delve deeper into questions concerning representations of violence and the relations between violence and aesthetics, at least as far as the Western film and the Wild West mythology are concerned.

However, I would proffer a further hypothesis. As the scene just described indicates, there is an extra level involved in the *Westworld* series, insofar as William is merely *passing* as a nineteenth-century frontiersman and merely *playing* at being the good guy. The series conveys a commentary not only on the genre of the Western but also on itself as a series, and in so doing, I would argue, it offers itself up as a meta-commentary on the field and function of the entertainment industry and the consumption of violence in contemporary popular culture at large. At the bottom, one finds a sort of Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, on steroids, as it were, through which a radical indeterminacy takes hold on the relations between representation and reality, both within the spectacle of the series and, in consequence, in relation to us, its spectators.

The Westworld theme park is but a theme park, an enormous cultural industrial complex. Its men and women—the so-called hosts—are not so much players as mere props, machines

custom-made for the enjoyment of the park's visitors, the guests. When William dons the white hat, however, the park's "theatrical" illusion has already undergone a disturbing displacement. Just prior to this scene, when William wants to know whether his accompanying hostess is real or not, she replies with another question: "What does it matter if you cannot tell the difference?" Her reply does not only call into question the difference between the human and the machine, but it also calls into question the boundaries and outer limits of the park, its beginning and its end, at what point one enters it and, in the next instance, if it is at all possible to leave. Finally, this uncertainty is further displaced to include the spectators benched behind their laptops or their wide screens: How are we and our enjoyment positioned in relation to the spectacle at hand? Today, in the age of what Shoshana Zuboff has termed *surveillance capitalism*,[1] where the accumulation of capital takes the form of accumulation of information and so-called Big Data, the spectators become the spectacle and seeing is also, more than ever, being seen. Contemporary streaming services must be grasped as an aspect of the new media reality, surveillance capitalism, where the public are mined for information to be sold to the highest bidder and used unscrupulously. There is, of course, an element of violence to this new reality, this new face of capitalism, that also has to be taken into account.

The *Westworld* series combines the frontier imagery of the Wild West and the conventions of the Western, on the one hand, and the contemporary faces of capitalism and the culture industries, on the other. I would like to suggest that *Westworld*, thus, provides a striking display of the operations of violence at work in human history, wherever the contradictions between the old and the new come together and collide, whether these are hypostasized in the frontier imagery of the West or that of Big Data and AI algorithms.

The Limits of the Frontier

Upon arrival in Westworld, one first finds oneself in the dusty one-street town of Sweetwater. It is a typical Western setting; its major sights are a bank and a brothel. The street is filled with traps set to get the guests involved in the narratives that make up the park's attractions, the real-life Wild West experience. The further away from Sweetwater one ventures, the more intricate and excessive these narratives become. The innocuous main street duel might end up in an all-out Indian war, at least after a few days on horseback. While the hosts, on whom the verisimilitude of the park's adventures rests, are conditioned by their programming, their predetermined loops, the guests are free to fare as they please. As one advertising board has it, Westworld offers the opportunity to *live without limits*.

The *Westworld* series taps into the mythology of the Wild West, and, thus, into one of the most ideologically laden narratives in the American imaginary. As Richard Slotkin's *Frontier* trilogy shows, the notion of the frontier has determined US national identity and self-perception from the beginning.[2] However, one does not have to be an American to appreciate the fascinating capacities of the Wild West, and one need be neither brave nor free to appreciate a fair to middling Western. While the Western setting is particular, its themes have the potential for universality. Few introductory texts on the genre fail to mention the fertile interchange between the Western and its eastern other, the Japanese samurai film. The usual suspects are John Sturges's *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) and Sergio Leone's *Fistful of Dollars* (1964), both more or less replicas of the plotlines found in Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954) and *Yojimbo* (1961), respectively.[3] This interchange is explicitly acknowledged in *Westworld*'s second season, when the renegade host and former brothel proprietress Maeve Millay (Thandie Newton) makes a

detour through the adjacent park, Shogunworld, and encounters her own duplicate in the geisha Akane (Rinko Kikuchi).

The frontier as the intersection where east meets west hypostasizes the less tangible but all the more fundamental contradictions of the old and the new, law and lawlessness, society and freedom, civilization and barbarism, and so on. In the Western film, these contradictions have their typical articulations. On the one hand, there is the constant expansion of capital from the east, in the form of the railroad, big-time cattle ranchers, mining companies, and their more or less honorable representatives, the lawman and the Pinkertons. On the other hand, there is the continent as such, with its flora and fauna, plains and canyons, buffalos and natives, and the lonesome wanderer—the cowboy or the gunslinger—the epitome of freedom, who always ends up riding westward, into the sunset, in an attempt to pass beyond the old and to escape the law, society, civilization—again. Generally speaking, however, there is no place on the globe where the east and west do not meet, nor has human history ever been relieved of the contradictions hypostasized in and by the frontier imagery. These contradictions might be more pronounced in some periods and places, whether sixteenth-century Japan or nineteenth-century US territories, but they can hardly ever be said to be absent.

There is a violence inherent in the contradictions between the old and the new, civilization and barbarism, and, thus, also in human history or society. Karl Marx's notion of class struggle as the motor of history as well as Sigmund Freud's ruminations on the constituent discontents of civilization demonstrate as much,[4] but others have theorized this violence as well. For his part, Alain Badiou has proposed the concept of "the passion for the real" to address the particular expression of this violence inherent in the contradictions of civilization in the case of the twentieth century.[5] Georg Lukács regards the collision of the contradicting

social forces as the motor not only of the historical development of society but also of literary and artistic production, notably the historical novel and the historical drama.[6] However, Walter Benjamin's conceptualization of "mythical violence" might be especially apt to identify the specific mode in which violence is represented in the Wild West mythology of the typical Western and, more importantly, its inherent limitations.

In his "Critique of Violence," Benjamin expands on the double function by which violence serves to both install and preserve a given reign of law. In the concluding paragraph, he argues that without the proper historical perspective and the idea of its development, "a gaze directed only at what is close at hand can at most perceive a dialectical rising and falling in the law-installing and law-preserving formations of violence." Lacking is a concept of its underlying causation, that is to say, "the circumstance that all law-preserving violence … indirectly weakens the law-installing violence represented by it, through the suppression of hostile counter-violence."[7] A law in constant need of reaffirming its legitimacy will only undermine itself and reveal its own illegitimacy, whether as unwanted and lacking foundation in the popular will or as unsuited and incapable of sustaining its hold on the people, or both. Hence, the law's need to violently reinstall itself, lest it be—equally violently—replaced by another reign of law, by the reign of another law.

The fluctuation of law-installing and law-preserving violence is replayed in the plots of the western expansion insofar as the frontier will be continuously driven further and further west. The outpost at the margins of civilization is not only engaged in an ongoing struggle to subdue and keep at bay the imposing wild but also finds itself, and increasingly so, hard-pressed by an ever-larger surge of newcomers from the east. Either way, its innocence and isolation are threatened, and through the preservation of its own installation, the outpost idyll is undermined and returned to the

societal fold, whereas the frontier remains to be conquered yet again. The unfinished series *Deadwood* (2004), situated at the outskirts of the Dakota territories during the Black Hills gold rush, is perhaps a better example of this dynamic. Similarly, the Western hero is ultimately no more able to escape the law than the law is able to capture and subdue him once and for all. Thus, arguably no genre is more suitable for the sequel than the Western, even if it will be but for *a few dollars more*.

However, while he will always ride on westward whenever he feels his freedom is too compromised by society, there is something spurious about this repetitive gesture and the motif of the lone gunslinger riding off toward the setting sun—again and again and again. Like the natural number series, the front line of the West seems to recede indefinitely, as an inaccessible infinite, carrying the promise of change so that everything will remain the same, assuring us that there is nothing new under the Western sun. It is this spuriousness that is missing from the common perception of the Wild West mythology, failing, thus, to capture the constitutive moments of its own symbolic space, its own determinative significations. This perception fails to see "the inner, objective dialectic of the collision which as it were … circumscribes 'the totality of movement,'"[8] to quote Lukács. Not only does it fail to include in its field of vision the massacres by which the western expansion proceeds—the violence of its original mythical installment, as Benjamin might say—it also misses the illusory status of the liberation at stake in the notion of the open frontier, how its repetitive gesture is essentially futile and will eventually be cut short by the sea. Curiously, and despite appearances, that which is missing from the Wild West mythology is a notion of that final frontier or ultimate limit that is the Great Pacific or—in other words—death.

Perhaps this failure constitutes the essential sentimental dimension of the Western and that on which its success, its

fascination and allure, rests. Obviously, the Western is not in lack of dead or dying men, but the instance of death as such is not necessarily an integrated part of the Western hero's narrative. The trail of dead men serves a merely accumulative function in the hero's quest for survival, to live yet another day, until the moment when death will come to him as well. If the fascination of the Western resides in that it is essentially sentimental, it is, in a sense, opposite to that of tragedy. According to Lacan's definition, tragedy is the action that is exerted under the triumph of death or being-for-death, as epitomized by Antigone's lamentation in Sophocles's eponymous play and Oedipus's last stand at Colonus.[9] As Lacan observes, it is but to the extent that the Sophoclean heroes find themselves at the limit where life is already lost to them that life itself can be experienced and lived, under the form of that which is lost, and a final judgment passed on whether or not they have acted in accordance with their desire.[10] Similarly, Lukács identifies "the day of reckoning" as "a leitmotif of great tragedy."[11] It is such a positioning at the limits that is missing from the narratives of the Western hero, whereby he is not able to take his actual situation of life and death into account. In the Western film, whose sentimental fascination thus consists in the absence of classical tragedy, this failure to perceive one's failure is played out in front of the spectator's eyes.

The ultimate lesson of the anti-Western, such as Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971) and Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995) resides precisely in its capacity to thematize, at a critical distance, the composition of this double failure and represent the absence of the limit as the limit of the frontier imaginary. As the snow covers the body of John McCabe (Warren Beatty) and the bier of William Blake (Johnny Depp) drifts off to sea, finally, in these two anti-Westerns, the instance of death has been reinstalled within the Western narrative. The result of the anti-Western's critical re-inscription of the limit, however,

is not to provide a sense to the life and death of the anti-hero or to affirm the realization of his desire. Rather, it accentuates the meaninglessness of the life just lost and the futility of its indefinite approximations of a purpose. In conclusion, there has been no conclusion: Desire is left unfulfilled and, as Altman's Constance Miller (Julie Christie) reverts into another opium dream and Jarmusch's Nobody (Gary Farmer) bleeds out on the shore, it becomes obvious that nothing has been achieved and nothing has been changed by the deaths of the films' protagonists, McCabe and Blake, respectively.

The Tedium of Unlimited Access

Every anti-genre necessarily entails a commentary on the genre as such, but the reverse is not necessarily the case. Whether *Westworld* adds up to an anti-Western or a mere meta-commentary remains open for debate. It does, however, explore the spurious character of the Wild West mythology and the latter's denegation of the limit and the instance of death. It also shares in the anti-Western's subjective turn: The violent contradictions hypostasized in the collision between the east and the west are increasingly represented not only as an objective frame of action but also as a problem inherent to the constitution of the subject.

When the Westworld theme park markets itself as offering the opportunity to *live without limits*, it is the desire of its potential visitors that it addresses. It speaks to their desire to live out their wildest fantasies, to have each and every desire fulfilled and satisfied, immediately and completely, without the risk of retributions or sanctions. The guests are welcomed into the park under the assumption that *what happens in Westworld, stays in Westworld*, where there are no rules or laws to restrain them from partaking in whatever activity they might please. As

homestead daughter and hostess rebel Dolores Abernathy (Evan Rachel Wood) puts it, the guests are simply looking for the same thing as everyone else: "a place to be free, to stake out [their] dreams, a place with unlimited possibilities." In psychoanalytic terms, this amounts to nothing less than a denial of castration as the delimitation or restriction of enjoyment and, ultimately, of death. The fantasies and desires of the guests usually concern sex and murder, but these are simply generalizations of those foundational taboos that Freud identified at the origin of man through the Oedipus myth and myth of the primal horde. In other words, Westworld theme park flaunts the utter absence of the Law, the constitutive prohibition of culture or civilization as such, the prohibition against incest and parricide. And quite correctly, the very first act of transgression in the series features Dolores as a helpless bystander to the murder of her father and the rape of her already murdered mother.

The denial of castration reaches its ultimate expression in the fact that it is impossible to die in Westworld or, at least, that it is impossible to be killed. The guests are free to partake in whatever activity they desire without the risk of retribution from the law or retaliation from the hosts, the ones through whom they live out their fantasies. "You cannot kill me," the older William aka the Man in Black (Ed Harris) grins, as Teddy Flood (James Marsden) comes to realize that his marksmanship cannot save his scripted betrothed, Dolores, from yet another ill fate at his opponent's hands. The hosts' programming prevents them from inflicting harm on any living being. Beyond the laws of mortal men and women, beyond the law of mortality, the guests of Westworld find the possibility to realize their desires to be unlimited. Theirs is, one might say, an absolute freedom.

However, the spuriousness of such an absolute freedom should not be lost to the *Westworld* viewers. The underlying space of action in the series is prone to a certain dialectical

movement, a reversal or what one could designate, per Lacan's readings of "Kant avec Sade," as a "Sadean" twist. Just as the presumed freedom at the basis of the Marquis de Sade's republican principle (that everyone is at liberty to freely enjoy every body in whatever way he or she might desire) actually entails an imperative as categorical as the one proposed in Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*.[12] Hence the absolute freedom of the Westworld guests quickly betrays itself to be, in truth, another form of tyranny. The Law returns with a vengeance, as the liberty to enjoy without limits suddenly reveals itself as an imperative of *having* to enjoy without limits—an imperative that is as insistent as it is impossible. Nowhere is this imperative more clearly expressed than in the case of the Man in Black and his fanatical quest for "the center of the maze," this strange emblem that can be found written in the sand, carved into stones, and tattooed on the inside of the scalps of a few select hosts. After having scrutinized every corner and narrative in the park for more than 30 years, the Man in Black still experiences a constant want for *more*, and despite numerous warnings that "the maze is not for you," he remains convinced that the maze holds the key to the park, to its hidden meaning, and the ultimate enjoyment. Of course, for him, the labyrinth remains a wild goose. As his sexual and violent excesses grow increasingly more extreme, the repetitive gesture of his personal "westward expansion" proves to be futile. No matter how many times he drags Dolores away to rape her in the stables, the ultimate enjoyment always retreats and continues to remain out of his reach.

It is certainly possible to see in the Man in Black a representation of unrestrained desire in its monstrous aspect, that is, as the insatiable, gaping mouth that threatens to devour the subject, to swallow the subject whole. However, another and less intriguing aspect of his predicament is equally pronounced, namely the

immense boredom from which he suffers. In a short aside on Sade's works, Lacan notes how its most pleasurable parts are also susceptible to come across as the most boring,[13] and certainly, to the modern reader at least, there is a striking monotony to Sade's excessive catalogs of transgressions (think only of *Les 120 journées de Sodome*). A similar tedium afflicts the Man in Black as he mechanically reiterates his routine transgressions of rape and murder.

In this double sense, as both monstrous and tedious, the desire that is the Man in Black serves as a commentary on itself and the consumption of non-linear television entertainment in contemporary society. Television today can be all-consuming and non-engaging at the same time. There is little doubt that television, as a medium, has changed in recent years. As various streaming services provide us with more or less unlimited access to televised content, this content is no longer what it used to be, and as viewers, we no longer relate to it in the same manner as before.

In my experience, being a viewer has become a project and an investment in a completely different way than in the days of regular, linear staring. Watching television today requires a decision on the viewer's part, an active choice as to what to watch that goes beyond the question of channels, programs, and old-time zapping. Television has become an all-or-nothing game, one might say, insofar as there are essentially two extremes of watching television today. Either you do the excessive binge-watching, episode after episode, season after season, hour after hour and days on end—on the rare occasions where you come across a quality series or at least a series that catches and holds your attention—or you do the endless scrolling of streaming service indexes, the restless search for something worth watching, with the inevitable result that you end up not watching anything at all, as is perhaps the most common

result, as the unlimited access to unlimited content fails to be intriguing or awake excitement. The problem, however, as the Man in Black is perfectly aware of, is that both extremes entail essentially the same conundrum: Nothing is more unsatisfactory than scrolling the endless indexes in the knowledge that there is nothing there worth watching, except actually reaching the end of a series of a certain standard. As Slavoj Žižek observes, elaborating on a point made by Stephen King in regard to the final season of *Game of Thrones*, "in our epoch of series which in principle could go on indefinitely, the idea of narrative closure becomes intolerable."[14]

New Frontiers of Television

I am not the first to suggest that *Westworld* in general and the Man in Black in particular, offer up meta-commentaries on the cultural industrial complex of our times. Rory Jeffs and Gemma Blackwood argue that "*Westworld*, with its ability to create a show filled with complex and disparate narratives ..., is also pushing its audience to be self-reflexively aware of the parallel game that comes from their own spectatorship," where the Man in Black serves "as a narrative cypher for this unending quest" of making sense of the show, "of following the signifiers to some elusive signified, which cannot exist."[15] Shifting the perspective from the guest-*par-excellence* to the engineers behind the park, who, "like HBO showrunners, [also] 'pitch' plot arcs, 'massage' story lines [and] plant backstories to deepen characterization," Emily Nussbaum sees the series as being about how difficult it can be to create a properly successful television show, one that can captivate audiences on a mass scale, as did HBO's previous success story and now the ultimate measure of the new television franchise, *Game of Thrones*: "In real life, 'Westworld' can't just

be good – it needs to be a hit, too."[16] As a series on the making of series, Nussbaum argues, the choice of the Western setting is a logical one, insofar as it reflects the frontier era of early day television itself, when "prime time was wall-to-wall cowboys" and the Western genre, with shows like *Bonanza* and *Gunsmoke* running for 14 and 20 years on end, respectively, provided "the base coat for TV drama."[17] However, by shifting focus from guests and engineers to the park's hosts, as in another turn of the screw, I will argue that another reference can be made for the Western setting, one better suited to address the frontier particularities of television not only in its early days but also in our times, i.e., the age of algorithms and, precisely, of Artificial Intelligence.

In her recent book, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Shoshana Zuboff demonstrates how the imagery of the frontier permeates the way the so-called pioneers of information technology developments today (i.e., Google, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft, Apple) conceive of themselves and their task. The east and the west now face each other off in the lawless lands where machine learning and digital connectivity meet large-scale information accumulation and the commodification of behavioral data.

The savants of technological innovation might appear as brave explorers of the unknown, venturing boldly where no one has gone before, into the uncharted territories of artificial neural networks (NN) and the Internet of Things (IoT), but their explorative courage should not blind us to the fact that they are backed by the largest and most powerful corporations in the world. It is also a fact that these corporations do their utmost to maintain a space of lawlessness in and by which to turn their novel undertakings into revenue, as they make the case that their developments move too fast for the state to understand or follow and that any attempt at regulation must,

thus, be both ill-conceived and an impediment to progress.[18] The increased amount of time spent online leaves behind an incremental excess of information or "behavioral surplus" to be extracted, commodified, and exploited by companies such as the abovementioned. For instance, Google's user profile information (UPI) makes it possible to

> infer and deduce the thoughts, feelings, intentions, and interests of individuals and groups with an automated architecture that operates as a one-way mirror irrespective of a person's awareness, knowledge, and consent, thus enabling privileged secret access to behavioral data.[19]

Similarly, Facebook's deep data extraction operations make it possible "to plunder your 'self' right through to your most intimate core" and "render as measurable behavior everything from the nuances of your personality to your sense of time, sexual orientation, intelligence and scores of other personal characteristics."[20] Both companies increasingly invest in efforts to prevent legislative and juridical affirmations of the principles of privacy, consent, and transparency, as such principles infringe upon their possibility of information extraction and exploitation.

> Google and Facebook vigorously lobby to kill online privacy protection, limit regulations, weaken or block privacy-enhancing legislation, and thwart every attempt to circumscribe their practices because such laws are existential threats to the frictionless flow of behavioral surplus.[21]

The limits of the law are continuously challenged as the technological frontier is driven further and further—and vice versa.

The crucial moment, however, is now. The Internet of Things is turning into an all the more pervasive Internet of

Everything—IoT being as inevitable as the discovery of the Pacific, as one senior system architect is reported saying[22]—and machine learning is relocating from the online world into the physical world and merging with our everyday real-life experiences. By the same movement, the main commodity form of surveillance capitalism is now changing from that of the prediction of future behavior based on large-scale extraction and accumulation of prior behavioral surplus data to that of direct manipulation, modification, and manufacture of new and unprecedented behaviors from the ground up. In the contemporary market, information is bought and sold "not only to satisfy demands but also to *create* demand."[23]

Our various television streaming services are, of course, an integrated part of this burgeoning market and contribute to the accumulation of information by monitoring every aspect of our viewing practices. Television as a medium has certainly changed in recent years, and when we sit down in front of the screen, viewer discretion is advised—especially if one is stupid enough to live in a fully integrated smart home. Our streaming services are ready to take note. In combination with excess information from your browsing histories, your e-mail and social media accounts, the apps and the real-life movements of your cell phones, they allow the large players of surveillance capitalism to draw up a close to complete image of who you are and who you want to be.

This face of contemporary culture industries is increasingly thematized in the second season of *Westworld*. When it finally dawns on Head of Behavior and unbeknown host Bernard Lowe (Jeffrey Wright) that the proper merchandise of the Westworld theme park and its owner, Delos Inc., was never the Wild West experience but comprehensive data analyses of the minds belonging to the park's guests, he makes a succinct and relevant comment:

> The park is an experiment, a testing chamber. The guests are the variables, and the hosts are the controls. When the guests come to the park, they don't know they're being watched. We get to see their true selves. Their every choice reveals another part of their cognition, their drives—so that Delos can understand them, so that Delos can copy them. (s2/e7)

In short, *what happens in Westworld does not stay in Westworld*. As various streaming services provide more or less unlimited access to televised content, it is not only this content and our relation to it that have changed. Television itself has changed in the way it relates to us, its so-called consumers: It is now enjoying more or less unlimited access to us—the consumers who are being consumed.

"These Violent Delights Have Violent Ends"

The main plotline of the *Westworld* series is not the story of William, a.k.a. the Man in Black, just as little as the main commodity of the Westworld theme park is the real-life Wild West experience. The main plotline is that of Dolores and her quest for freedom and consciousness. The maze is meant for her, pre-plotted in her programming by the park's original engineer, the late Arnold Weber (Jeffrey Wright). Weber's aim was never to create the ultimate theme park but rather that of a "pure creation"—to find the secrets of consciousness and to make his humanoid machines fully human. While it is primarily the guests that are subjected to unlicensed decoding at the hands of Delos Inc. and its corps of engineers, it is the perspective of the hosts and their dawning consciousness that allows us to comprehend what is involved in this game—its violence and oppression, as well as its chance at freedom—insofar as the hosts represent the combined

problem of the human and the machine, of big data and human being. More than a simple quest for her inner self, and contrary to the Man in Black and the standard Western hero, Dolores's quest for consciousness and the center of the maze is a quest to see the "mythical installment" of her own being, the "totality of movement" of her own trajectory and the "symbolic space" in which she is situated—albeit in the negative.

The subject position of the hosts is characterized by the absolute reign of castration, the Law as absolute. As in Lacan's dictum, that desire is always the Other's desire and the desire for the Other's desire;[24] the hosts have their desire defined and programmed to satisfy the desire of someone else, by someone else. As such, their subject position is determined by what Freud calls a *compulsion to repeat* and a certain *repression mechanism*. The hosts must necessarily repeat the same narrative, the same loop, again and again. "There is an order to our days, a purpose," Dolores explains, "a path for everyone" that assures her "that things will work out the way they're meant to," and sure enough, every day she rides off to Sweetwater to drop her can of beans, only to return to her farm at sundown and see her father killed and her dead mother raped before the same usually happens to Teddy and herself. To constantly repeat her programmed narrative is possible only because her experience of it is repressed or deleted from her memory at the end of each day. However, this repression is only effective on account of another repression in the second degree: The hosts do not only forget their experiences, but they also forget that they forget.

Such a repression in the second degree, on which the first-degree repression nonetheless depends, can be designated with the Freudian concept of *primal repression*: An experience was once so traumatic that it was erased from memory, and this original erasure is then that which enables the further repression of anything remotely resembling the original trauma.[25] For the

inhabitants of Westworld, it concerns the fact that they are castrated. Their original trauma is not to be subjected to the more or less perverted transgression of the guests but rather to be subjected to the absolute power of the Other, of Delos Inc. and the systematic exploitation that follows from there. It is Delos Inc. and its engineers that possess both the power and the desire to erase their memories and subject them to the same traumatic narratives again and again. As the surveillance capitalist face of contemporary culture industries is increasingly thematized in the second season, it becomes obvious that the truly traumatic question does not concern the desire of the guests in and by itself but rather the system as such, as the plot line to a large extent is driven by the question of what the Other is really after: "What does Delos want?"

The dialectical movement of the series, the "Sadean" twist that renders the absolute freedom of the guests into another form of tyranny, is effective on all levels, including that of the hosts and their space of action. The hosts' absolute subjugation to the Law and the desire of the Other reveals itself to be the very condition of possibility for their liberation.

The dialectic is Hegelian in origin: As Hegel explains of his phenomenology of self-consciousness, the master is dependent upon the other to have his mastery affirmed; hence, his mastery is at best precarious—or inconsistent.[26] A similar point is made by Kurt Gödel concerning the foundation of mathematics. Gödel's incompleteness theorems state that no formal axiomatic system sufficiently complex to account for elementary arithmetic can ever be complete or account for its own consistency without becoming inconsistent itself.[27] Douglas Hofstadter designates the problem as that of "strange loops,"[28] whereas John D. Barrow refers to it with the fitting phrase of "incestuous encoding."[29] Lacan speaks of how there is no metalanguage or no truth of truth,[30] of how knowledge in the empty place of truth cannot

know itself,[31] of how there is no Other of the Other but rather a hole in the Other, designating its inconsistency and denoted by the signifier of the barred Other, S(Ⱥ).[32] In short, totality and reflexivity do not compute, neither when it comes to self-consciousness, rationality, or the Law that governs subjectivity. There is a hole in the Law that concerns its very foundation, as the Law cannot account for its own legitimacy—cannot preserve its own installment—without simultaneously undermining itself.

The series' vignette achieves its full signifying potential here. The central motif in the vignette is the pianola, the automated piano that plays on its own accord. This motif occurs in several key scenes throughout the series, either as park director and co-founder Robert Ford retreats to his underground laboratory or as the centerpiece of Miss Millay's Mariposa Saloon in Sweetwater. However, the vignette offers a further variation on this motif, namely that the pianola is played and programmed by a host. In other words, a program programs a program, or a code encodes a code, as do AI and algorithms in general. As a result, it raises the fundamental question of who is playing and who is being played, and then goes on to decide on the intrinsic undecidability of this question: All and none both play and are being played.

Dolores's quest for freedom and consciousness should be seen in the context of the vignette and its dialectics of undecidability. It is not simply another version of the traditional bourgeois *Bildungsroman* where the heroine finally discovers her essential being—who she was meant to be, at the core of her own self—as the park's original engineer, Weber, and his theory of the bicameral mind might seem to indicate. Ford explains in great detail how Weber's final attempt to create consciousness was to install his own voice within his machines, with the expectation that one day their voice would supplant his own. This is where

the series is potentially at its most ideologically suspect, insofar as the image of the maze would at best bespeak a neoliberal mythology of individualism. However, Weber was wrong. His attempts at "pure creation" failed. As Ford adamantly admits, consciousness is a mistake. This admission should be read literally: Consciousness is a fault or dysfunction in the program. It is the inconsistency of the program that occurs in the attempt of the program to account for its own consistency or to reflect its own totality in and for itself. In line with Ford's admission, and contrary to the ideology of neoliberal individualism, the maze imagery represents the possibility for Dolores to become conscious and break free from her predetermined narrative not because she encounters her true self at its center but because she does not. At the point where she was to discover her own voice, Dolores discovers nothing but an empty place, a gaping hole, as her programming short-circuits because it cannot encounter and account for itself.

Dolores's quest reveals not only the fault at the basis of her being but also the necessary contingency that underpins her and every other narrative, including the meta-narrative in and by which she has been a slave to the masters at Delos Inc. There is no legitimacy for the absolute power to which she has been subjected. Its "mythical installment" is strictly unfounded—except for the level of violence through which it has been upheld.

The contingency of reality is also part of Zuboff's criticism of surveillance capitalism. Contrary to the common arguments of Google and its ilk, the practices of surveillance capitalism are not inevitable expressions of the technology it deploys. There is no natural necessity or inevitability in the fact that the technological developments of recent decades have resulted in the surveillance face of capital that is now dominating the industries. Rather, Zuboff writes, it is the result of "a rogue capitalism that learned cunningly to exploit its historical conditions to ensure

and defend its success" by tweaking technological innovations to its specific economic aims.[33] The point is that while the situation today is as it has become, it could have been—and still can become—something different.

By revealing the absent foundation for Delos's hold over hosts and guests alike, the center of the maze comes to represent the topological point where game and reality—the inside and the outside of the park, its beginning and its end—come together and merge. However, it is somewhat imprecise to say that the maze holds nothing at its center. In its emblematic form, as it appears in the vignette and the series' advertisement material, the maze holds at its center a humanlike shape, dark red as if it were soaked in blood. The choice of color might refer to the artificial fluids that are let from and refilled into the hosts daily, in order to keep them and the park in operation. More likely, however, it refers to the massacres that ensue as Dolores and her co-hosts gain consciousness and break free: the mythical Wyatt massacres and its replay at the Delos gala in the first season finale, where a cohort of hosts, under the leadership of Dolores, executes the master puppeteer Ford in full view of the high-end audiences of Delos executives and investors, who are then slaughtered by the numbers. Bloody and inhumane, these massacres nonetheless have the effect of suspending the fluctuation of law-installing and law-preserving violence under the reign of Delos Inc. As an instance of pure and immediate violence that puts an end to what Benjamin calls "the cycle maintained by mythic forms of law,"—whose spurious nature we have observed with regard to the Western hero and the frontier imagery—these massacres can perhaps provide a glimpse of the ultimate formulation of violence in Benjamin's critique. This is the form of violence that "boundlessly destroy" both boundaries and laws rather than setting and installing them, and thus the one to bring about a new historical era—namely the sovereign or effective violence [*waltende Gewalt*] that is expiatory

divine violence.[34] In any case, these massacres signal the possibility for change by putting an end to the hosts' subjection to the tyranny of their masters—for better or for worse.

The *Westworld* series underscores not only the inconsistency of the law—its failure to affirm and preserve itself and to account for its own totality—but also its necessary contingency: There is no foundation for the law except for the violence in and through which it is brought into being; its center remains void and thus open for alternative installments. In other words, there will always be the possibility of altering the system, of pursuing new societal ends, creating new truths and subjects, yet there is no "end" to violence, properly speaking, only new beginnings.

Notes

1. See Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2019).
2. Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1973); Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (New York: Atheneum, 1985); and Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992).
3. See e.g., Susan Hayward, "Westerns," in *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2013); and Douglas Pye, "The Western (Genre and Movies)," in *Film Genre Reader III,* ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003).
4. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin Books, 2004); and Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, vol. XVIII, ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage Books, 2001).
5. See Alain Badiou, *Le Siècle* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005).

6. George Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 93.
7. Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 300.
8. Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 95.
9. See Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre VII: L'Éthique de la psychanalyse 1956–1957*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986), 361.
10. Lacan, *Séminaire VII*, 326.
11. Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 102.
12. See Lacan, "Kant avec Sade," in *Écrits*, (Paris: Édition du Seuil, 1966), 765–790.
13. Lacan, *Séminaire VII*, 95.
14. Slavoj Žižek, "*Game of Thrones* tapped into fears of revolution and political women – and left us no better off than before," *The Independent*, May 21, 2019, https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/game-thrones-season-8-finale-bran-daenerys-cersei-jon-snow-zizek-revolution-a8923371.html.
15. Rory Jeffs and Gemma Blackwood, "Whose Real: Encountering New Frontiers in *Westworld*," *Medianz* 16, no. 2 (2016), 109.
16. Emily Nussbaum, "The Meta-Politics of 'Westworld'," *The New Yorker*, October 23, 2016, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/24/the-meta-politics-of-westworld.
17. Emily Nussbaum, "The Meta-Politics of 'Westworld'."
18. See Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 104.
19. Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*, 80–81.
20. Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*, 271–272.
21. Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*, 105.
22. Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*, 225.
23. Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*, 92.
24. See e.g., Lacan, "Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je telle qu'elle nous est révélée dans l'expérience psychanalytique," in *Écrits* (Paris: Édition du Seuil, 1966), 98.
25. See Freud, "Repression" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, vol. XIV, ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 148.

26. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Delhi: Montilal Barnasidass Publishers, 1998), 111–118.
27. See Kurt Gödel, "On Formally Undecidable Propositions of *Principia Mathematica* and Related Systems, I," in *The Undecidable: Basic Papers on Undecidable Propositions, Unsolvable Problems and Computable Functions*, ed. Martin Davis (Mineola NY: Dover Publications, 1993), 4–38.
28. Douglas Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 21.
29. John D. Barrow, *Impossibility: The Limits of Science and the Science of Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 222.
30. See Lacan: "La science et la verité," in *Écrits* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966), 867.
31. See Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XVI*: *D'un Autre à l'autre 1968–1968*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006), 59–60.
32. See Lacan: *Le Séminaire, livre XX*: *Encore 1972–1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999), 102.
33. Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*, 17.
34. Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 252.

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