

## Book Reviews

### *Westworld and Philosophy:*

#### *If You Go Looking for the Truth Get the Whole Thing*

JAMES B. SOUTH and KIMBERLY S. ENGELS, editors. A volume in the *Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture* series, edited by William Irwin. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018.

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The 2016 and 2018 HBO series *Westworld* by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy may seem the epitome of modern, sci-fi entertainment, yet it comes from afar in time. It is based on Michael Crichton's 1973 movie with the same title, which was followed by a somewhat weak sequel (*Futureworld* by Richard T. Heffron, 1976) as well as by a short-lived CBS series, *Beyond Westworld*, in 1980. It narrates the complex vicissitudes of a hyper-technological theme park – the titular Westworld<sup>1</sup> – that recreates a cliché “Wild West,” populated by extremely realistic androids (the *hosts*) who are at the complete service and disposal of human visitors (the *guests*). Some tourists are simply looking for a Hollywood-like adventure (e.g., a treasure hunt), whereas others seek to play out their most extreme fantasies, including rape and gratuitous murder, against an artificial, cinematic background. A diverse and hierarchical cohort of technicians steers the resort, often entertaining quite different (when not clashing) views on humans, androids, and their relationship. Everything is supposed to follow a routine and be under the control of experts; however, some hosts begin developing self-awareness and devising their own plans, setting the story in motion. HBO's reimagined *Westworld* is undoubtedly a feast for the eyes, the ears, and the imagination, with its visual inventions, its spectacular setting, its haunting musical score, its multifaceted characters, and its plot twists. In addition, *Westworld* is a feast for the mind, thanks to its intertwined and multi-layered symbols (narrative as well as visual), to its sophisticated dialogues, and to its highly intellectual quotes, frequently contained in the very titles of the episodes, one of which for instance refers to Dante Alighieri's (1265-1321) *Inferno*, while another calls to mind Johann Sebastian Bach's (1685-1750) music, and a third one alludes to Julian Jaynes's (1920-1997) fascinating if controversial psychological theory; respectively, “Contrapasso” (S.1, E.5), “The Well-Tempered Clavier” (S.1, E.9), and “The Bicameral Mind” (S.1, E.10). In and through *Westworld* one discovers a fabulous, perhaps even staggering, wealth of philosophical problems concerning competing definitions of humanity, creativity, technology, knowledge, ethics (individual and corporate), all interwoven and conveyed through a breath-taking, sometimes moving,

kaleidoscopic and choral adventure with some extremely gruesome moments. This collection of essays, edited by South, Engels and Susanne E. Foster (who unexpectedly passed away before publication), which focuses only on the first, 2016 season, is extremely worthwhile both for *Westworld* fans with philosophical inclinations, and for philosophers, scientists, and other scholars. The volume coordinates the efforts of twenty-six authors with varied disciplinary backgrounds, whose contributions are distributed over seven parts. Relevant features of the series, such as the characters' actions and statements, plot elements, or visual devices, are either scrutinized to illustrate classical philosophical problems, or used to challenge established philosophical definitions. Some essays support a specific thesis; other ones are rather open-ended. All of them are highly readable and contain enough clarifications and references to guide even newcomers into things philosophical and build up their own knowledge-base on the subject.

### *The Essays*

Part One, "You Said This Place Was a Game," explores conceptual issues raised by the fact that *Westworld* is presented and perceived as a *game* in which the participants take up fictional roles. Don Fallis examines notions of pretense, deception, and false belief, using the series' characters and occurrences as counter-examples to household philosophical definitions of such concepts, in particular by John Langshaw Austin (1911–1960) and René Descartes (1596-1650). Nicholas Moll analyzes the differences between role-games proper and *Westworld*, in which a Game Master is invisible and the games are marked by "violent escapism, sexual fantasy, and nostalgic indulgence" (24). Marcus Arvan, by pointing out a set of otherwise unexplainable occurrences and patterns (in particular physically impossible ones, like lab-workers appearing in the park literally *from nowhere*), argues that all of *Westworld* is a videogame and, conjuring up (and criticizing) classical ideas put forth by Descartes and Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) he blurs the very distinction between humans and hosts, as well as between "us" and videogame characters.

Part Two, "You're Only Human, After All," discusses the concept of *humanity*. Siobhan Lyons reflects upon *Westworld* androids in light of Masahiro Mori's (1927) famous notion of "uncanny valley": a robot elicits feelings of empathy on our behalf insofar as it resembles a human being only up to a point, after which we sense unease because of the extreme similarity. Lyons' essay also touches upon notions put forth by Aristotle (384-322 BCE), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), and Jacques Derrida (1930-2004); the conclusion is that by virtue of their suffering and of their strife to self-improvement, the robots ultimately "better exemplify the ideals of humanity than humans do" (48). Jason T. Eberl, relying on ideas by, among others, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), and Harry Frankfurt (1929), discusses how the artificial reality of *Westworld* is an environment that warrants the discovery and cultivation of one's "true self," the main difference between guests and hosts being that the former, more often than not, live without limits and hence bring out their vicious traits, whereas the latter mostly flourish and cultivate virtues. Onni Hirvonen uses *Westworld* to challenge *anthropocentrism*: the "unnecessary and unjustifiable focus on humans while disregarding other beings that may be equally relevant and equally capable" (61). He relies in particular on notions of

personhood and interpersonal relationships discussed by John Locke (1632-1704), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), and Daniel Dennett (1942). According to him, the androids in *Westworld* engage in shared social practices and in interpersonal struggles for recognition that define them as human above and beyond the (unverifiable) presence in them of self-awareness.

Part Three, "We Can't Define Consciousness Because Consciousness Does Not Exist," focuses on *consciousness*. Lucía Carrillo González draws upon the ideas of Alan Turing (1912-1954) and John Searle (1932) to raise, without solving it, the question whether *Westworld* androids think and suffer. Bradley Richards takes up the topic where González leaves off and, inspired by discussions offered by Thomas Nagel (1937) and David John Chalmers (1966), concludes that despite the hosts' biological similarity to us, we can't conceive of their experience any more than we can conceive of a bat's, although they may become more comprehensible when they gain more awareness of themselves and their pasts. Michael Versteeg and Adam Barkman draw upon ideas put forth by Paul Churchland (1942), as well as by the aforementioned Dennett and Descartes, to challenge a theory of consciousness explicitly voiced in the series by the park's creator Robert Ford, who states, "There is no threshold that makes us greater than the sum of our parts, no inflection point at which we become fully alive. We can't define consciousness because consciousness does not exist" (S.1, E.8). In what I believe to be one of the most insightful and clear essays in the collection, the authors not only point out the flaws in Ford's "eliminativism," but they also emphasize the multiple, strident contradictions of such a character who, while denying the reality of consciousness (and hence the host/human and guests/creators divide), is in fact obsessed with power and control *and* sacrifices himself so that some hosts get a chance to develop self-awareness and autonomy.

Part Four, "Choices Hanging in the Air Like Ghosts," deals with matters of *free will* (and *choice*). Marco Antonio Azevedo and Ana Azevedo draw upon Harry Frankfurt's discussion of freedom and determinism to scrutinize the story of Maeve, a host who engages in a journey of self-discovery, as well as of self-determination and liberation. The authors point out how her final decision (choosing, while she is already on the train that can bring her to the outside world, to go back to the park to look for her "daughter," although aware that their relationship is just an implanted memory) seems to suggest that she has shifted from being an agent who only has "first-order desires" (a *wanton*, in Frankfurt's parlance) to one that has "second-order desires" (a *person*). Joshua D. Crabill follows the vicissitudes of hosts Dolores, Bernard, and Maeve, in the light of ideas put forth by Kant and Nietzsche, but also by Plato (428-348 BCE), and Christine M. Korsgaard (1952). Maeve's story seems to illustrate the notion of "reflective distance" between instincts/desires and decision-making, that, according to Korsgaard, characterizes beings endowed with a "thinking self" (120). Kimberly S. Engels reads the stories of, respectively, Maeve and the guest known as the Man in Black, by resorting to the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980); according to such interpretation, both characters qualify as "free" *not* because they are able to act outside a causal chain, but rather because they gradually "build themselves" in a world of possibilities that they decide to affirm or deny. This,

regardless of the question whether they are “good” or “evil,” or human or machine, qualifies them as free agents.

Part Five, “I’ve Always Loved a Great Story... Lies That Told a Deeper Truth,” employs the concept of *narrative* as an analytical lens. Madeline Muntersbjorn discusses the series in the light of Annette C. Baier’s (1929-2012) conjectures that self-awareness, freedom, and integrity, are linked to personal interaction in which we experience challenges on behalf of our fellows that push us to deconstruct the lies we tell ourselves, as well as to engage in self-scrutiny. Other authors referenced by Muntersbjorn include Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) and Austin, but also Plato and Descartes. I am also inclined to describe this chapter as one of the most enlightening. Muntersbjorn is convinced that “humans have less freedom than they realize but more freedom than they exercise” (140). She points out that androids are “less free than guests” *not* because they are machines “but because most of their interpersonal encounters are deliberately scripted to prevent them from questioning the nature of their reality” (143). Another inspiring contribution is that of Lizzie Finnegan, who draws upon Ludwig Wittgenstein’s (1889-1951) notion of *language games* to explore how *Westworld* narratives (i.e., the ones imposed on the hosts) are employed to objectify, marginalize, and restrict female robots that, according to her interpretation, “present a scenario much closer to the reality of most women than the lives represented by any of the human characters” (152). Finnegan observes that the same female hosts can in fact use the very features of language to resist and finally dismantle the “Master’s game,” although the 2016 series still doesn’t narrate the final outcome of such “guerrilla” (159-160). Patricia Trapero-Llobera concentrates on memory and imagination and examines *Westworld* in light of Nolan’s previous work, focusing on how characters observe and relate to reality. All characters, human or robot are constantly induced by Ford, their creator, to recollect and interpret anew their memories, over and over again, in order to shape their selves and their actions; this, according to her, has a parallel in the relationship that Nolan constructs between himself and his audience. Oliver Lean reflects upon the trials and tribulations of the character Bernard in light of concepts respectively elaborated by Franz Brentano (1838-1917) and Gottlob Frege (1848-1925), who in different but intertwined ways reflected upon the mind’s *intentionality*: what are thoughts “about” or directed towards? Additionally drawing upon an essay by Peter Lamarque (1948), Lean ponders over the hypothesis that, even upon discovering that a grievous memory of a person’s death is actually artificial and implanted it might still make sense to have an emotional reaction to it (analogous to someone feeling sympathy for a movie or novel character).

Part Six, “I Choose to See Beauty,” explores issues of *aesthetics*. Michael Forest and Thomas Beckley-Forest mobilize reflections by Clement Greenberg (1909-1994) as well as by Theodor Adorno (1903-1969), in the attempt at answering the question whether *Westworld* qualifies as simple “entertainment commodity” or rather as “high art.” Their answer is that, with its depiction of the hosts/Dr. Ford relationship (influenced by the Creature/Frankenstein archetype and reflecting the relationship of *Westworld* as a whole with creators Nolan and Joy), and with its constant references to the respective roles of artist and audience, *Westworld* fully counts as modernist art besides making for good entertainment. Matthew Meyer draws upon Kenneth Clark’s (1903-1983) distinction

between *nakedness* (the mere fact of not having any clothes on) and artistic *nudity* and explores the usage of the latter in the series, classifying it in a threefold typology: “art form,” “sign of (male) dominance,” and “sign of becoming human” (196). Caterina Ludovica Baldini draws a fascinating comparison between topics and teachings conveyed by Greek tragedy and mythology and by *Westworld*, as well as their respective narrative devices: she astutely points out that, like Greek literary forms, *Westworld* makes use of repetitions and kennings, it links the concepts of understanding and pain (it is not a coincidence that one of the characters engaged in a voyage of self-discovery and growth is called *Dolores*, that is, “sorrows”), it contains reflections on the fluidity of time, it displays a modern “assault to the Olympus” similar to the one narrated in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, and it offers a *catharsis*, that is a purging from negative feelings.

The seventh and last part, “You Can’t Play God Without Being Acquainted With the Devil,” deals with the *human-machine relationship* and its *ethics*. François Jaquet and Florian Cova address the question whether it is right to treat *Westworld*’s hosts the way park managers and guests do. The authors resort to various philosophical views to explain the diverse ways in which different characters relate to the androids, especially challenging *speciesism*: “the view that human well-being matters more than that of other creatures” (222). Such view must of course rely on a clear human/non-human distinction, yet the authors point out how all (implicit) characterizations of such distinction embraced by *Westworld* characters who exploit and abuse the machines are in fact problematic. Their pessimistic conclusion is that the series ultimately shows how “faced with the miracle of a new life form, most humans still care only about their kind” (227). Anthony Petros Spanakos interprets the hosts’ acts of violence in the light of Frantz Fanon’s (1925-1961) philosophical criticism of colonialism. Similarly to abused, exploited, “otherized” and marginalized native inhabitants of colonized territories revolting against the “white man,” the violence that the androids inflict on their human creators is not only practically essential to achieve freedom, but also *transformative* in character: the very fact of spilling the masters’ blood and making them suffer is an act of desacralization, a radical disturbance of the present order, a first step in a process of mutual recognition, that ushers in a new world in which, in fact, both the colonizer and the colonized can be free. Dan Dinello, perhaps the most prestigious contributor, author of a pivotal monograph about the fear of technology conveyed by sci-fi narratives (*Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology*; Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005) draws upon Hannah Arendt’s (1906-1975) discussion of totalitarianism, as well as on the aforementioned Fanon, to describe the situation displayed in the park as nothing but a disguised version of a concentration and extermination camp. According to Arendt’s famous analysis, totalitarian regimes are not defined by a specific political ideology (which could indifferently be Nazi or Communist) but rather by the attempt, as the very term indicates, at totally controlling the lives of their citizens down to their most personal and intimate moments while at the same time depersonalizing them. Furthermore, tyranny is expressed by, and played out through, (“mad”) science and technology, like in the case of Auschwitz doctor Josef Mengele (1911-1979). According to Dinello’s analysis, the analogy to *Westworld* is manifest: the hosts are thus a symbol of “another species of humanity,” marginalized, abused, and exterminated like the Jews in the Nazi camps or the peoples who

were colonized by the West. The only way out is thus a violent rebellion and retaliation, although, as Dinello acknowledges, the first season does not make it clear whether the upheaval will be followed by a spiritual rebirth.

### *Evaluation*

I first watched Crichton's *Westworld* on TV some twenty-five years ago and it still is one of my favorite movies. It deeply impressed (perhaps even *obsessed*) me as a child, and my thirst for more *Westworld* was definitely not quenched by its low-quality sequels. Nolan's and Joy's series was a great and welcome surprise: only through the series-format, collective creative work, and 21<sup>st</sup> century visual technology could the potential of Crichton's original intuitions be fully expressed, explored, and expanded. But in the meanwhile, having taken up the calling of philosophy professor and scholar, I discovered that HBO *Westworld*, as I pointed out at the beginning, *overflows* with philosophical inspiration. And, as a *Westworld* employee says while welcoming a guest, "Figuring out how it works is half the fun" (S.1, E.2). A statement complemented by Maeve's, "If you go looking for the truth, get the whole thing" (S.1, E.9). However, if you set out to interpret *Westworld* through one and only one theoretical framework, or to make sense of it as whole, you can only end up feeling like Wittgenstein's "old lady," finding yourself "always mislaying something and having to look for it again: now her spectacles, now her keys."<sup>2</sup> South and Engels, who have chosen Maeve's quote as the subtitle of their collection, have put together a volume that is an excellent attempt at "getting the whole truth" in the only way such an enterprise can (perhaps not fully, but meaningfully) be undertaken: by appointing a cohort of different scholars provided with different "spectacles" and "keys."

If I were hard-pressed to identify one single *glitch* (to use a typical *Westworld* term) in the collection, I could point only at one that is, perhaps, unavoidable. The essays in the collection display some repetitiveness (since inspiring series elements and citations are often the same for different contributors). I was also slightly disturbed by some systematic misspellings of non-English words: *Westworld* creators, with the very titles of their episodes (for instance *Virtù e fortuna*, Episode 3, Season 2, as a reference to Niccolò Machiavelli, 1469-1527) remind us that English is not the only language and culture. Finally, the collection could have benefited from more engagement with the original movie (not to mention the sequel and the CBS series, their lower quality notwithstanding), as well as with the problems and topics raised by techno-science (and perhaps Heidegger's famous 1954 essay on technology may have been taken as an important reference).

More substantially, but also as a digression, I must additionally point out that I feel that *Westworld* raises an important methodological issue (or, if you will, a meta-philosophical one) which is particularly relevant for a journal of science fiction and philosophy and one which could have been better explored in the collection at hand. Consider the scientific/logical incongruences pointed out by the collection's contributor Marcus Arvan in order to argue that *Westworld*, not conforming to known physical laws, is in fact a videogame. This seems to me, in fact, just the tip of a philosophical iceberg. No science fiction movie can be said to be completely devoid of elements that are located in a

“gray zone”: the original movie left completely unexplained how guests were protected from ricochets and blade-inflicted wounds. To be sure, I am not referring here to plot-holes that may be explained with further narratives (i.e., through leaps of imagination on behalf of the inspired audience), nor to crude technical bloopers. I am here referring to somewhat subtler and more insidious questions: in HBO *Westworld*, for instance, how can orders be transmitted and implemented *instantaneously* from the managers to the androids? How can androids be repaired so rapidly keeping up with the guests’ destructive sprees? To be sure, any science fiction narrative can be *philosophically* discussed and dissected by pointing out the problems and topics it *conjures up* (such is the case of the collection’s essays focusing on oppression and the use of violence), or it can be the object of thematic/cultural comparisons (as it happens in the essays discussing *Westworld* and ancient Greek drama, or 20<sup>th</sup> century totalitarianism), or it can be examined *aesthetically* (such is the case of the study of nudity and nakedness). However, the question also arises: is it philosophically legitimate and fruitful to treat some of the situations displayed in such a filmic narrative like mental experiments or hypothetical scenarios, and use them to discuss, for instance, issues of humanity, voluntary choice, and the like *when those very situations violate, unintentionally or for narrative purposes, the known laws of reality* – physical, logical, etc.? What is, in other words, the philosophical value of a discussion based on a narrative that, on close inspection, makes reference to ultimately *impossible* occurrences and scenarios? This challenge seems to me especially urgent when it comes to cyborg-stories displaying physically unwarranted situations that surely make for great, imagination-sparking stories but not for consistent thinking, since they violate limits that in reality will never be transcended. As Despina Kakoudaki points out, movie depictions of cyborgs and computers more often than not display *extreme disembodiment*: “Fictional depictions of present and future technology often presume that all aspects of life have been translated into packets of information [...] without gaps in coverage” and “depictions of a particular technology in fiction and film tend to ignore the material conditions required for its operation.”<sup>3</sup> Could not such speculations even be deemed *misleading*, since they induce us to reflect upon the impossible, while losing sight of the actual ways in which technology may impact our lives (and even in the near future)? In sum, I feel that this problem should be given more attention in general, and that it should have been preliminarily considered by some contributors in particular.

Perhaps a new volume, focusing on the second series with all its thematic and narrative expansions, but also on some issues from the first series that were left suspended or uninvestigated, will address some of these questions. Or shall we rather claim, with Robert Ford, that “we are done, that this is as good as we’re going to get”? Philosophically speaking, it is hard to believe.

On a final note, a piece of advice for *Westworld aficionados* with a scholarly background and interests: besides this precious compilation, definitely a must-read, there is a wealth of other greatly inspiring academic essays. I can briefly mention here at least three, all published in 2017. Agnieszka Kiejziewicz drew an interesting comparison between *Westworld* and the British series *Black Mirror* (created by Charlie Brooke), taking as a reference point the concept of technophobia; that is, fear of technology<sup>4</sup> which,

according to such analysis, seems rather *absent* from the HBO series, thus opening interesting vistas for a comparison with the 1973 movie. Reto Winckler explored the analogies between *Westworld* and Shakespearean theatre, in particular in reference to the world-as-stage metaphor; his essay may be fruitfully read together with Caterina Ludovica Baldini's analysis.<sup>5</sup> Deborah M. Netolicky used *Westworld* to explore and criticize scholarly identity and academic writing (in fact, upon attentive reflection, also a field where one may experience issues of coercion, oppression, and exploitation, although perhaps less manifestly and physically than in a colonized country).<sup>6</sup> Just a few gems, that may have very well featured in South's and Engels's collection.

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#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> In what follows, the term in italics will refer to the series (or the original movie), while the term in plain characters will refer to the park area.

<sup>2</sup> Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (1969), 532.

<sup>3</sup> Kakoudaki, Despina. 2000. "Affect and Machines in the Media." In *The Oxford Handbook of Affective Computing*, 110–128. Edited by Rafael A. Calvo, Sidney K. D'Mello, Jonathan Gratch and Arvid Kappas. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Kiejziewicz, Agnieszka. 2017. "Between Technophobia and Futuristic Dreams. Visions of the Possible Technological Development in Black Mirror and Westworld Series." *Maska: The Performing Arts Journal* 34 (2017): 297–304.

<sup>5</sup> Winckler, Reto. 2017. "This Great Stage of Androids: *Westworld*, Shakespeare and the World as Stage." *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance* 10, no. 2 (2017): 169–188.

<sup>6</sup> Netolicky, Deborah M. 2017. "Cyborgs, Desiring-machines, Bodies Without Organs, and Westworld: Interrogating Academic Writing and Scholarly Identity." *KOME: An International Journal of Pure Communication Inquiry* 5, no. 1 (2017): 91–103.

