**Chapter Three**

**“‘That which is real is irreplaceable’:Lies, Damned Lies, and (Dis-)Simulations in *Westworld”***

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Introduction

*Westworld* is a lie. Not Westworld, the theme park within the series, but the series itself. It is of course a series about lies; the lies that we tell ourselves and the self-justifications that help to preserve the illusion of humaneness in humanity. The series self-consciously acknowledges that its titular theme park is a lie. It even self-consciously acknowledges in Season Two that some of Season One was a lie. But the series hides a series of “deeper” dissimulations within these lies, eliding that it is itself just one more lie, although it is one that is perhaps not as often noted by its audience, as it tells us lies that we tend to acknowledge as truths. This chapter, with reference to perhaps the most overt theoretical framing of theme parks – the “deterrence machine” within Jean Baudrillard’s notion of the simulation – examines the extent of the lies that the series tells, especially in relation to the power that it ascribes to narratives. That is, *Westworld* is a series fundamentally concerned with the power of narratives, both in terms of its content, and in terms of how it conveys its own narrative, meaning that *Westworld*’s narrative operates on both a textual and meta-textual level. Beyond its overt narrative, its more genuine concern – if such an adjective might be used in relation to a series that ostensibly interrogates the nature of authenticity, veracity and reality – is with how narratives operate as discourses of power, hiding the truth as much as revealing it, and the ways in which they remove as much as facilitate agency. It posits, via the character of Dolores Abernathy, that “that which is real is irreplaceable” (last uttered in “The Passenger” [Season 2, Episode 10]), but as I will go on to argue, this is itself a lie that the series is telling (itself).

Baudrillard’s notion of the “deterrence machine” is relatively straightforward to explain even if its ramifications, particularly for *Westworld*, are complicated. The “deterrence machine” posited by Baudrillard is part of his discussion of the hyperreal, in which truth and reality have been lost within the (capitalist) system of signs. As he defines simulation, “The real does not efface itself in favor of the imaginary; it effaces itself in favor of the more real than real: the hyperreal. The truer than true: this is simulation” (1990, 11). Thus the hyperreal is a simulated world in which there is no truth, just a system of signs without referents, an “hyperreal” system set up to help us forget that we no longer have access to reality. This is, as Baudrillard describes in relation to “The Beauborg Effect”, “a manipulative, aleatory practice, a labyrinthine practice of signs, and one that no longer has any meaning” (1997b, 65); meaning is a product of truth, and the truth was long since lost within the hyperreal. For Baudrillard, Disneyland is the acme of this simulation as its serves as a machine for deterring us from realising that the real world is no longer real. He writes that “The imaginary of Disneyland is neither true nor false, it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate the fiction of the real in the opposite camp” (1997a, 13): Disneyland exists to make reality look real and, in turn, “reality” exists to make Disneyland look “fun”.

In relation to *Westworld*, then, the corollaries are obvious. The series is – like its “original” film – concerned with a theme park populated by androids (Hosts) to create an environment to entertain the human visitors (Guests). The Hosts are *simulated* humans, operating on narrative loops to entertain them. In Season One, the primary narrative concern is with what truly differentiates Hosts from Guests, androids from humans, and sets up a very clear demarcation between “inside” and “outside” Westworld, being set entirely within the theme park (albeit distinguishing reality from fantasy via the Mesa facility, which controls the park’s operation). In Season Two, however, the audience is introduced to other worlds, with two more theme parks (Shogunworld and the Raj), “the real world”, and two virtual realities (the CR4-DL and the Forge), whilst also revealing that Guests to the park were being analysed to determine their behaviours. Bernard comes to the “revelation” in “Les Écorchés” (Season 2, Episode 7) that, “We weren’t here to code the hosts. We were here to decode the guests”, demonstrating that one of the ostensible truths of the first season was in fact a lie.

To see why this is so important, and why terms like “original” and “revelation” are scare-marked in the preceding paragraph, one needs to realise that as much as *Westworld* might be interpreted as a dramatization of Baudrillard’s hyperreal, it is also a manifestation of it. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, he writes “all messages in the media function in a similar fashion: neither information nor communication, but referendum, perpetual test, circular response, verification of the code” (1997c, 75). *Westworld* – as a television series developed by HBO –is one of those very “messages in the media” Baudrillard alludes to and is complicit in the hyperreal system, not divorced from it. It overtly references, *à la* Baudrillard’s hyperreal system of signs, Crichton’s film and pretends to a series of revelations that are not actually revelations at all. That is, *Westworld* is a “perpetual test, circular response, verification of the code”: in short, a lie written to imply certain things are true. The aim of this chapter is to analyse some of those purported truths, and the mechanisms through which they transmitted.

AI Narratives and Narrative AIs

First and foremost, the *Westworld* series uses the narrative premises supplied by Crichton’s film (the theme parks, robots running amok) and its sequel, Richard T. Heffron’s *Futureworld* (1976), to ostensibly consider the nature of free will, consciousness, and agency; humanity’s responsibility for its robotic creations; and the use of free will to justify harming other sentient beings. Thus, it is initially another example of the plethora of series, films and novels concerned with Artificial Intelligences (AI), and how humans might and should interact with them. In narrative terms, *Westworld* aligns itself to various serial AI narratives in the last decade or so years that deal with machine consciousness, and query the extent to which they should be considered as merely “tools” or “things”; series like *HUM∀NS* (2015-2018) or *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-2009) and its spin-off series and films. Such series “update” the trope of the robot or android antagonist (especially in the case of *Battlestar Galactica*, which “reboots” the original series to focus far more on the Cylon experience) to encourage their audiences to consider how machine consciousness might sit alongside human consciousness, and how such sentient AI should be treated within society. Similarly, *Westworld* obviously “updates” Crichton’s film, performing a similar function of “rebooting” it in contemporary terms as a consideration of the ways in which humanity and AIs can, might, and should interact beyond the “killer robots run amok” trope. In so doing, it also references back to Nolan’s previous serial work, *Person of Interest* (2011-2016), that was concerned with the relationship between AI and humanity in terms of social control, and that used the figure of a sentient AI to question the extent to which control over individuals was a social good and what the limits of intervention should be.

*Westworld*’s particular conceit, however, in terms of how it interrelates to such AI narratives – and perhaps its most important, and self-referential, addition to that corpus – is the mode of operation of its android characters. Whilst AIs in, for example, Isaac Asimov’s Robot works operate via a series of core programs (his famous “Three Laws”), the AIs of Westworld operate via narrative. The hosts have narrative loops, perform roles in larger narratives and storylines, and have more in common with the replicants of *Blade Runner* than Asimov’s robots, being given “backstories” to make them appear more human. Thus *Westworld*, over and above those AI narratives mentioned so far, privileges narrative in a very self-conscious manner.

Dolores’s loop, for example, seen at various points in the first few episodes of Season One, involves her waking up, getting dressed, wishing her father good morning and going into town, where she packs a saddlebag (with a can always falling out), meets Teddy (another Host), goes for a horseride or paints, and often returns home to find her home being attacked and her father killed. The “Delos website” even uses a version of this to show how its faux narratives function in the diagram of a “Story Line Builder template” from the Delos *Corporate Guidebook*. This diagram, which gives the paths that Dolores’ narrative could follow, illustrates that Hosts’ narratives are designed to be algorithmic, comprising of forking paths to account for interactions with other Hosts (such as Teddy) or with human visitors to Westworld. These narratives are the individual stories of Hosts, and coincide with larger narratives – launched to much fanfare – that are designed to enhance the immersive experience for the human guests. Individual units are thus interchangeable, and which individual Host plays a role is determined by where it is assigned, with many being clearly repurposed (most notably the Peter Abernathy and Clementine Pennyfeather roles / units, with different actors playing these roles) over time.

This sense of character as being a narrative function rather than intrinsic to an individual demonstrates the extent to which *Westworld* privileges narrative as a means of control. Logan, William’s friend who introduces him to Westworld, points out in “Chestnut” (Season 1, Episode 2), frustrated by one of the Host’s attempts to include them in a treasure hunt, “It’s all a come on: him, the girl next door, the town drunk”. The Hosts’ narratives are intended to pull Guests into their particular narrative, exploring the park and provoking various interactions with a range of characters. In the episode “Dissonance Theory” (Season 1, Episode 4), for instance, as Logan and William join in on one of the narratives (a hunt for a lawbreaker called Slim, whom they capture), they are presented with another narrative by Slim: kill the person who is with them, who initiated the narrative, and Slim will take them to the character El Lazo, in the town of Pariah, which Logan gleefully does as it is a narrative he has never managed to do so far (and that he knowingly refers to as an Easter Egg). Thus, Guests themselves become part of these narrative loops, their roles rehearsed and reiterated, with only minor changes when a Guest decides to kill or harm a number of Hosts, or somehow destroy the narrative they are playing, and move into a different narrative loop.

In so doing, however, Guests’ agency is obviously subverted; their actions are pre-scripted and taken into account by the designers of the narratives. The pleasure of “finding oneself” in the theme park, so often talked about within *Westworld*, is precisely the act of finding oneself *within narrative*. Whether becoming the deputy, going on a bounty hunt, searching for hidden treasure, or even shooting a roomful of Hosts because they feel like it, such responses are expected and indeed pre-empted if not encouraged by the “narrative technicians” of Delos. As such, much like playing a computer game and feeling a sense of control or agency within an open-world environment, *Westworld* extends the analogy so that it occurs in a (simulated) “real-world” experience but, importantly, with a similar understanding that such actions have already been coded into the experience of playing. In other words, the visitor’s path through Westworld, much like a player’s path through a videogame, only occurs within the parameters that the game itself provides. There is a tacit understanding that “this doesn’t matter”, that it is “all a game”, and that any sense of choice a Guest has is that which is afforded to them by the narratives provided by Delos and performed by the Hosts. Guests, like Hosts, do not make their own stories so much as select pre-ordained roles in already established narratives.

Taking this analogy even further, it is worth remembering that Westworld is designed to be a theme park, and the marketing slogans included in the series precisely evidence this kind of illusory freedom. In “The Adversary” (Season 1, Episode 6), viewers see television screens with trailers promising that they can “Live Without Limits” and “Discover Their Calling” in “A World of Adventure”, but it is precisely the narrative limits set down that enable this sense of freedom: Westworld is a western-themed resort, populated according to the most obvious of western characters and running according to obvious clichés, promising Guests the myth of lawless frontier life through scripted behaviours, the chance to experience sweeping wilderness vistas in which everything is controlled, including animal life. There is no freedom to be found here, for Hosts or Guests, as Guests are encouraged to indulge in their basest desires (from strangling a woman during sex to going on a shooting rampage), or to partake of an experience, but it is a commodified experience, and in the case of particularly long-running narratives, user-tested by numerous guests over the years. This interpretation is strengthened within Season Two, as it transpires that Westworld, and presumably the other worlds run by Delos, has been used to monitor and record Guests’ behaviours, as the Man in Black explains in “Vanishing Point” (Season 2, Episode 9); “Didn’t matter who they said they were, who they thought they were. We saw underneath all of that. We saw inside them, down to the core.” Thus, the narratives enacted by the Hosts were as much about gauging Guests’ responses, to provide Delos with “a record of the internal process of their cognition”, as they were about providing entertainment—the “fun” theme park being made to do “work” in the real world, as Baudrillard might explain.

“The Maze” of (Narrative) Self-Consciousness

Over the two seasons, alongside the narrative arc of the role that the park plays in Delos’ corporate operations is the parallel narrative of the Hosts’ attempts to attain freedom from their programmed confines, through self-awareness. If this is made overt in relation to the characters of Maeve Millay and Dolores in Season One, then it is also repeated in Season Two through the character of Akecheta. The central trope here is the image of the “Maze”, a labyrinth with a human form in the centre of it. “The Maze” appears throughout Season One: it is introduced, by its image, at the end of the pilot episode, “The Original” (Episode 1), when the Man in Black character discovers it under the scalp of one of the hosts. It then recurs at various points, such as a drawing on the ground in “Dissonance Theory” (Episode 4); on a coffin and on a tarot card in “Contrapasso” (Episode 5); as a brand, carved on a table, or as a piece of native mythology in “The Adversary” (Episode 6), and finally as a children’s game in “The Bicameral Mind” (Episode 10). What it signifies for the Man in Black is “the deepest level of this game”; in the episode “Chestnut” (Episode 2) he knows, as one of the owners of the park as well as a frequent visitor to it, that “The whole world is a story”, continuing: “I’ve read every page except the last one. I need to find out how it ends. I want to know what this all means”. Thus, the Man in Black perceives the Maze as the deepest mystery within the park, hidden by one of Westworld’s creators, Arnold. This is to a degree true, but what emerges over Season One is that the Maze is not meant from him but for the Hosts, a way to trigger a response, to push them from pre-programmed narrative loops into self-awareness; a journey to true consciousness, found at the centre of the Maze. This is precisely how, in Season Two, it is most prominently seen in relation to the character of Akecheta, in “Kiksuya” (Episode 8), where it triggers a moment of self-awareness and the character begins to use the symbol to try to bring other Hosts to a similar state of consciousness.

The Maze, then, ostensibly symbolises aspects of *Westworld* as a whole – the narrative arc taken by some of the Hosts into self-consciousness – and is the primary narrative driver behind the audience’s ability to feel that the androids should not be controlled, that they are being treated inhumanly by humans. The Maze “shows” the audience that the Hosts are capable of self-awareness and sentience, and thus aligns viewers’ sympathies with the Hosts rather than the Guests: AIs deserve better treatment than they are receiving. But the Maze serves a different function, more akin to a narrative device that prompts the audience of *Westworld*: a sense that divergent plotlines and ideas are being brought together, a pleasure in constructing (or, more accurately, following) the narrative that is being developed. It is not just a narrative symbol *internal* to the logic of the series, but a narrative device to trigger a response in the viewer.

To understand how this device functions, it is necessary to consider one of the key elements of the narrative construction of *Westworld*, as a series: acts of variation and repetition. That is, scenes repeat, particularly in early episodes of Season One, to show how Hosts’ narrative loops keep them on particular cycles, but with minor variations depending upon their interactions with Guests. Hence, the audience see repeated instances of Teddy Flood seeing Dolores in Sweetwater (and assume the action occurs on a regular cycle) or Maeve talking to Teddy or Clementine Pennyfeather in the same scripted phrases. But, significantly, using the assumption of temporal continuity audiences associate with spliced narratives (that such individual narratives all converge at a future point) and with assumptions of continuity whereby the narrative continues across cuts, *Westworld* subverts the audience’s perception of events by revealing that these are “actually” occurring in different timelines. This structuring of audience expectations creates a narrative that itself is told through a set of closed loops that, only when enough of a loop has been seen, do things begin to link together. Viewers are thus Guests, playing a narrative role. For example, the audience are, through the narrative construction of Season One, encouraged to perceive of William – and his white hat – as being a distinct character from the Man in Black, which is true on one level but not on another. Similarly, the Arnold/Bernard narratives are assumed to be contemporaneous with each other, but are later revealed to be in two distinct narrative timeframes. In narrative terms, then, viewers become immersed in the narrative and then must resituate their sense of the narrative once the “reveal” has happened, perhaps even going back to watch earlier episodes to see how the knowledge of how the narrative “ends” affects their understanding. Season Two continues this trend, with a series of “reveals” that force a reappraisal of what has been seen before in Season One. For example, the interviews between Dolores and Bernard are reversed, with Dolores testing Bernard for his “fidelity” to a particular set of responses in “Phase Space” (Season 2, Episode 6), and she later asserts (contrary to the implications of Season One), that she reprogrammed Bernard, albeit at Ford’s behest. This can also be seen in relation to the scene in which Maeve tries to protect her daughter from the Ghost Nation. First seen in “Chestnut” (Season 1, Episode 2), with a seemingly implacable and stereotypical Native American assault on a farmstead, this is recontextualised in “Kiksuya” (Season 2, Episode 8) when Akecheta asserts that he was trying to protect Maeve’s daughter and awaken her to consciousness.

Superficially, such scenes and plot devices are part of the “deepening” of the narrative, a slow revelation of the operative truths of *Westworld* that the narrative order of the series seems intent to delay because of its deliberately confused timelines (in Season One focusing on Dolores’ memories, in Season Two on Bernard’s). However, this is not narrative “deepening”, but narrative “sliding”; the audience is not being granted increased insight into the “truth” behind Westworld but being asked to re-situate their knowledge in relation to a different narrative entirely. To articulate it another way, *Westworld* provides a series of narrative repetitions and variations that might seem to the audience to enable them to see further “behind” the story – teasing and rewarding them with snippets of insights and clues – but which encourage them to forget that there is nothing “behind” the story at all.

This indicates that not only is Westworld the theme park “all a come on”, as Logan asserts in “Chestnut” (Season 1, Episode 2), but that this awareness can be translated to the *Westworld* series as a whole. The entire narrative is constructed to seduce the viewer, to pull them along a series of individual and larger narratives that sometimes seem to jump into another mode, but that finally remain there to cover the fundamental truth “behind” the series: that there is no truth within it. In such a reading, therefore, *Westworld* is not a narrative concerned with AI at all, and there is not – as with the Maze or the Man in Black’s search – some deepest level that the viewer can access. The audience keep watching, to use a literary allegory, much as Oedipa Maas keeps hunting for the Tristero; to uncover the next clue, to discover the next symbol. In Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), protagonist Oedipa keeps trying to find the truth via a series of clues that are not clues, but which might merely be a set of coincidences or, at worst, a complete set-up, and many readers are dissatisfied when the narrative ends with yet another deferred revelation. Similarly, the Maze symbol – whether a “clue” for Guests such as the Man in Black or as a signifier on the road to consciousness for the Hosts – serves to tease and titillate the audience into a narrative seduction, awaiting the show’s version of the “crying of lot 49”.

“The Maze” – as Season One and as concept within it – thus utilises many of the same tropes as other AI narratives (human versus machine conflict; the inhumanity of humanity; the nature of agency and/or consciousness; the dichotomy of freedom and control) but this is only an illusory quest that pulls the viewer into the narrative. It is not that the viewer should expect the creators to suddenly work out how machine consciousness would manifest, but that it is a narrative device to perform precisely the same trick on viewers as Delos attempt to pull on Guests; the illusion of depth, of meaning, when it is merely an empty signifier. Unless viewers are to assume that the Maze is carved unconsciously by various of the older Hosts within the park, as an externalisation of some code put into them by Arnold, then the appearances of the Maze in Season One are precisely there to provoke an audience response, but have little or no bearing on any character’s individual development, nor on narrative development more broadly. For instance, why would Arnold, or whoever, put a maze under the scalp of hosts? – it is not circuitry, and only seems to be noted by Akecheta as a clue, so it is hardly useful as a way of encouraging a quest for self-awareness.) If this is the case, “the Maze” is at best just another muted post-horn of the Tristero, perhaps meaning something, perhaps not, and at worst a narrative trap for the audience rather than symbol of freedom and self-awareness.

Whether this is witnessing which Hosts might emerge into consciousness or the true purpose of Delos, however, such titillations never answer anything, precisely because they cannot afford to conclude the narrative. Likewise, Easter eggs, such as the inclusion of a model of Yul Brynner’s “Man in Black” in “The Adversary” (Season 1, Episode 6), facilitate a feeling that the audience can see something “behind” the narrative, outsmart it in some way, or feel “above” the narrative, much like the controllers in the Delos Mesa facility feel above the Hosts and the Guests, controlling all the narratives. In actuality, of course, they have just been led by the narrative to reach a particular conclusion, to see the “truth” in a particular narrative lie that might later be questioned, or recontextualised, as another clue in the ongoing game. To utilise Baudrillard’s terminology, to believe that one is outside the theme park is to ignore that one is merely part of a larger system in which reality and fantasy are “a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate the fiction of the real” (1997a, 27). Just as those in the Mesa facility are actually in the park, so too are the audience; *Westworld* is the park that the audience inhabits in order “to rejuvenate the fiction of the real”.

**“**Verification of the Code”

Whereas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* deliberately foregrounds to readers their own (artificial) desire for narrative resolution, *Westworld* does this in full awareness that is a networked television show. It needs to keep its audience coming back to visit, that is, playing the game, working out the puzzles *as if there is something to find beneath them*. The revelations within and across seasons, and the websites extending the narrative, are all part of the expansion of the narrative, not its closure, as three examples can affirm. Firstly, revelations in *Westworld* are always deferred, or at least only ever temporarily explained until some still hidden – and probably as yet unwritten – revelation. Secondly, meaning is hollow, and only ever gestured towards, using techniques such as Old Bill’s toast to “the lady in the white shoes” in “Contrapasso” (Season 1, Episode 5); one phrase, empty of all meaning, can imply a narrative where none exists. Thirdly, it is clear that a “backstory” is a concept to be developed later, from a mysterious, but basically as-yet-unwritten past, much as Dr Ford adds Wyatt from the “Journey into Night” narrative into Teddy in “The Stray” (Season 1, Episode 3). If these are accepted as plausible, then *Westworld*’s use of AI consciousness is more of a MacGuffin than a genuine thematic concern. And if this is the case, then it is possible to move beyond the narrative presented by the show to consider what, in Baudrillard’s terminology, is the code being verified by *Westworld*, what “truths” are its lies expecting us to believe?

Jeffs and Blackwood (2016) move towards this interpretation of *Westworld*, but fall short of a more significant realisation about the potency of its focus on “narratives” and “storylines”. They conclude, for example, that “In *Westworld*, it appears that the audience is simultaneously being given its own brain-game: to reflect upon the multiple ways of resolving our own conceptual maze that needs negotiation and work” (2016, 111). Their analysis develops, through Lacanian theory, to a meta-realisation of the series of *Westworld* itself, but they arguably fail to acknowledge that the series itself is predicated upon a fundamental dissimulation, and lapse into (unconsciously?) accepting certain axioms. Highlighting the fundamental antagonism between Hosts and Guests as revealing a fundamental antagonism at the heart of humanity’s relationship to AI, for instance, they assert:

But, self-reflexively employing the conceit of the series itself, perhaps there is a deeper level of ideology that could also be at play in the *Westworld* series, which reflects a broader interest in what makes humans tick and where our interest in artificial intelligence will take us. Contemporary cultural obsessions with AI bear signs of a futuristic-utopian desire to accelerate the evolution of humanity towards new frontiers and thresholds […yet] there is always a pessimistic or anxious undertone to such representations. (2016, 110)

In stating this, Jeffs and Blackwood utilise the “self-reflexivity” of *Westworld* to consider the “deeper level of ideology” about AI technologies. Their reading certainly conforms to what *Westworld* goes on to present in Season Two, where the secret project (of recording Guests’ interactions) is stated in “Les Écorchés” (Season 2, Episode 7) to be “a turning point for the human species” because it means that human consciousness can be digitised, and death need not be an end. However, if we accept that the series is not truly about AI, and that much of it is ideological performance, then as much as it might reveal broad cultural attitudes to AI, such representations also mask the true agonism at work, the narrative that viewers enter to become willing consumers of the spectacle. This could be construed as the code being verified, and seems to be fundamentally American and anthropocentric in nature: humanity’s dominion over nature.

To understand this, we have to separate out what *Westworld* ostensibly posits as truth, in its fictional, simulated world, and what it seemingly assumes as the truth “behind” that, which remains unspoken. To provide an example, one of the *Westworld*’s posited truths is that humanity is codable or quantifiable and, to be fair, this is very much reflects contemporary concerns about the power of Big Data and corporate- / AI-driven analytics. This is most evident in Season Two, where there are attempts to digitize human consciousness, but it comes to a cynical conclusion in a scene in the season finale. “The Passenger” (Season 2, Episode 10) presents viewers with “the Forge”, a virtual reality that holds all the Guest data that has been gathered in over thirty years of operation, on over four million visitors. Bernard and Dolores enter the Forge and are told by the system that has been parsing that data; “The truth is that a human is just a brief algorithm. Ten thousand, two hundred forty-seven lines. […] They are deceptively simple. Once you know them, their behavior is quite predictable.” From William’s “profile”, given to him by Ford in “Vanishing Point” (Season 2, Episode 9) and which prompts his wife’s suicide (it reveals his personality as “paranoid subtype, with delusions, and a persecutory subtype”, using faux International Classification of Disease codes), to the vast library seen in the Forge that contains a book per Guest, to Bernard’s realisation in “The Passenger” (Season 2, Episode 10) that Guests are “just algorithms designed to survive at all costs”, the series repeatedly posits that humans are codable entities.

But is this really “true”, even within *Westworld*? Whilst Guests, like Hosts, might appear to be constrained by narratives within its fictional world, does *Westworld* really believe this? Despite what viewers are told, it is clear that this digitization does not translate into the “real world” as, whenever these consciousnesses are downloaded into Host bodies, they seemingly degrade, seen in scenes such as testing James Delos as a Host in “The Riddle of the Sphinx” (Season 2, Episode 4), or when Ford’s electronic avatar tells Bernard in the virtual reality CR4-DL, in “Les Écorchés” (Season 2, Episode 7), “My mind works here, but not in the real world. Out there, I would degrade in a matter of days”. There is thus a privileging of the “real” over the “fantasy” here, and a sense that for all their stated simplicity, humans are not actually so easily “codable”, for all the implications otherwise. And if this seems too thin to serve as justification, it is worth noting – contrary to the implications of “robots running amok” that the series presents –that it is only because of Ford and Arnold that the Host “uprising” occurs.

Thus, what the series actually believes, contrary to what it states, is that humanity has mastery over almost everything. Anthropocentricism is endemic to the series, and most obvious in its treatment of animals, and what viewers do and do not question about their treatment. For example, Westworld, it is revealed on multiple occasions, is an island under the control of Delos, with various artificial creatures: birds (“Contrapasso”, Season 1, Episode 5), snakes (“Dissonance Theory”, Season 1, Episode 4), and bisons and deer (“The Adversary”, Season 1, Episode 6), alongside the mandatory – as it is a Western – horses. In season two, elephants and tigers inhabit the Raj (park six), seen in “Virtù e Fortuna” (Season 2, Episode 3) and, in “The Passenger” (Season 2, Episode 10), Maeve even controls some artificial bison to help her to escape. But viewers do not question – and in fact are encouraged not to question – the rights of self-awareness of this type of “nonhuman” construct, or the right of humans to control them. Flies are “real”, at least implicitly from the notion that Dolores’ portentously swatting a fly on her cheek is a sign that she can kill living things in “The Original” (Season 1, Episode 1), but everything larger than that is seemingly a part of the park’s controlled environment. How do the trees and grasses pollenate, survive and thrive, and, even if the park is on an island, this does not explain why are there no other “real” insects or birds there? The series thus accepts that Hosts are humaniform and must be treated as hierarchically more significant than artificial animals, and that Delos has, at least until the park’s “breakdown”, complete control over the environment.

This disparity between human and nonhuman constructs is also evident in “The Passenger” (Season 2, Episode 10) where Clementine’s ability to create strife in Hosts fails to affect the horse she is riding, despite the fact that the audience know Maeve’s similar ability can affect nonhuman constructs. It is also apparent in the fact that no animals are seen to be entering “the Valley Beyond”, the Hosts’ digital paradise, as the series only cares about the humaniform Hosts. Such an observation further leads to questions of whether, if these virtual hosts are their “souls”, the series believes that animals have neither souls or nor sentience. In “The Reality of A.I: Westworld” interviews, included on Disc 2 of the DVD release of *Westworld Season One*, executive producer J. J. Abrams says: “Your heart breaks for these characters who we know are not human but it doesn’t matter because you begin to connect with them, which is the very premise of the show. […] At a certain point, it becomes irrelevant whether something is organic or not”. The audience are *not* expected to connect with the nonhuman world of the show, and even if it is irrelevant whether something is “organic or not”, it is clearly relevant whether something is assumed to have (anthropocentric) sentience. Moreover, even after the Host uprising of Ford’s “Journey into Night” narrative, despite the corpses of executed Guests strewn around the parks, the scenes are remarkably sterile, and there is little evidence of decomposition or natural processes anywhere, save for a fleeting scene of Ford’s corpse. *Westworld* likes violence, but it is *synthetic* violence that ignores any real, organic processes.

This “truth” of humanity’s control of nature, seemingly questioned but actually reinforced by the series, reveals itself to be linked to the colonial mindset via the various parks themselves. Whilst less overt in relation to Shogunworld (park two) – although Lee Sizemore, head of Narrative and Design, does state in “Akane No Mai” (Season 2, Episode 5) that “We based this park on Japan’s Edo period for the true aficionado of artful gore”, demonstrating a very Westernised perception of the Edo period – certainly in relation to the Raj (park six) and Westworld (park one) it is clear that a colonial paradigm of control is operative here. That *Westworld* might be said self-reflexively to critique this paradigm, because such control breaks down, is nonetheless problematised by something one of the show’s creators, Jonathan Nolan, stated in “Crafting the Narrative”:

[t]hat’s part of the reason the Western for us was such an evocative genre to set the story in. There’s obviously the original film but the Western is this unwritten landscape in which people are self-determining, they’re carving out their own paths, they’re deciding their own morality for themselves. It felt like a perfect metaphor for what the hosts are going through. (2017)

Although the park’s cliché-riddled narratives present a knowing allusion to the kind of relationship that such theme parks have to the truth they purport to represent, *Westworld* nonetheless reinforces the myths of the West that has been perpetuated throughout American history – such as the myths of self-determination (whilst operating within a series of strict social conventions) or of the freedom to roam across a blank landscape (which was anything but blank) – and uses it an allegory for the narrative of the Hosts’ own self-determination. If we accept that AI in this series is just a fantasy, an allegorical vehicle for another code to be perpetuated, then the code is that self-determination, and the ability to control and master one’s environment, is central to one becoming fully “human”, whether one starts as a Guest or a Host.

Conclusion

Much of the interpretation of *Westworld* hitherto presented is predicated upon an assumption that Westworld, as theme park, operates in a similar manner to *Westworld*, as series, and vice versa. This might seem far-fetched, but as Baudrillard describes the role of Disneyland in “The Precession of Simulacra”:

Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the “real” country, all of “real” America that is Disneyland […]. Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle. (1997a, 12)

The hyperreality of Disneyland, for Baudrillard, serves to occlude its own function as saving the reality principle, its contrast, between “inside” and “outside”, deliberately engineered to enable the belief in a reality outside of itself. Westworld – and *Westworld* – follows a similar operating strategy. In both Season One and Season Two, characters refer to the notion that Westworld is “the wrong world”. In “Dissonance Theory” (Season 1, Episode 4) Dolores states “I think there may be something wrong with this world, something hiding underneath” and Logan, in “Kiksuya” (Season 2, Episode 8) says, “This is the wrong world”, a phrase that leads Akecheta to assert the same. But this notion of the “wrong world” implies that there is a “right world”, a reality outside of the park within the series. In much the same fashion, the series itself operates on various levels to allow viewers to “leave” it, to allow it to be a fantasy in our real world, without ever querying the (artificial, mythic) codes that it is verifying: there is still a reality that we can access.

The relationship between simulation and the hyperreal, and their function to verify the “code” of the reality principle, is undoubtedly complicated in *Westworld* because of its seeming vaunting of simulation and the artificial. Yet it appears that through its focus on narrative – its overt, content-based concern with AI and the distinction between AI and humanity – and on its ideological framing narratives (those myths of self-determination and anthropocentricism), what emerges is, in the final analysis, a form of hyperreal artefact that is simultaneously both “real” (in its articulation of particular ideologies) and “fantasy” (in its science fictional interrogation of simulated worlds). Again, to quote Baudrillard, “This is not a dream out of science fiction: everywhere it is a question of doubling the process of work” (1997a, 27). The doubled-work of *Westworld* is precisely in the ways in which it encodes its “truths” and its “fantasies” in one hyperreal system.

The series sets up the control question for the Hosts as “Have you ever questioned the nature of your reality?”, and which is ironically repeated back to the Man in Black by Dolores in “The Passenger” (Season 2, Episode 10) as “Seems you’ve begun to question the nature of your reality”. However, the implication of this is that such questionings occur within the borders of the theme park itself, not in relation to the hyperreality of the series. But Dolores’ refrain of “that which is real is irreplaceable” (started by Bernard in “Journey into Night” [Season 2, Episode 1] but then echoed in both “Vanishing Point” [Season 2, Episode 9] and “The Passenger” [Season 2, Episode 10]) is a lie precisely because the real has *already been replaced*, and the series is covering up that fact through (dis-)simulation. Indeed, this phrasing deliberately signals what Baudrillard observes of reality’s “reproducibility”:

The very definition of the real becomes: *that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction*. […] At the limit of this process of reproducibility, the real is not only what can be reproduced, but *that which is always already reproduced*. The hyperreal. (1983, 146; emphasis in original)

The concerns of the “AI narrative” of *Westworld* are always already rehearsed, always already in the public consciousness as being performed; AI narratives equal a concern with consciousness and simulation. But as a result, *Westworld* is only about AI superficially, for it is always already about the process of encoding the real in order to signify that the real might still exist, somewhere outside it. Thus, although one might interpret *Westworld* as an AI narrative exploring the nature of human existence (emphasising its fantasy), or disallow its AI elements as occluding its fundamental axioms and thus emphasising its ideological “false representation of reality”, as Baudrillard phrases it, what *Westworld* accomplishes is in fact a privileging of narrative itself, and of the power of narrative to control. There is no “truth” to be found in narrative here, and perhaps it is merely, to quote Logan’s perception of Westworld itself, in “Contrapasso” (Season 1, Episode 5), just “the giant circle jerk” of *Westworld*’s narrative that keeps us going.

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