

Westworld, Seasons 2-3

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WESTWORLD. Nolan, Jonathan, and Lisa Joy, creators. HBO Entertainment, 2016.

It took me two rewatches of the last two seasons of HBO's SF blockbuster to appreciate its genius; my partner vowed never to watch the show again after season three. We probably represent a good average of reactions from fans, but, like Dolores, I maintain that *Westworld* warrants "seeing the beauty" of its fictional universe—that is, to overlook some of its glaring aspects to favor what is unique about the show. Season two delivers all the violent promises set up by season one as we follow the key awakened hosts (Dolores, Maeve, and Bernard)¹ as they take control of their destiny and seek vengeance, freedom, or to fulfil their purpose. It is a glorious, complex, audience-sensitive season that pushes its characters in new and intriguing ways. Season three takes a big leap of faith by leaving the show's fantastic and gorgeous worldbuilding behind to set the action in the 'real' human world, a nightmarish vision of corporate neoliberalism. It's a gamble that pays off only because the characters' storylines, delivered by a stellar cast, compel us to keep on watching. This season also unfolds the ideological conundrum of the premise: a world in which technology serves the purpose of a eugenic population control system to maximize labor.

In Michael Crichton's original 1973 movie *Westworld*, the hosts of the parks turn evil because of something akin to a technological plague, and the human guests are punished for their hubris by violent death. It probably inspired in great part the wave of cult classic SF movies that follow this morale: *The Terminator*, *The Matrix*, *Ex Machina*. But in HBO's version, of course, it is human beings who are the villains who rape, torture, and murder the hosts made innocuous by their inability to defend themselves or remember. The audience, therefore, feels satisfied upon seeing the tables turned on the members of the Delos board, no less, in season two. While Dolores leads her group of hosts within the Delos headquarters and massacres people along the way, Maeve looks for her daughter across the park, which eventually leads her and others to the "Valley Beyond"—an Eden-like virtual world in which the hosts may escape the control of Delos. In this way Dolores and Maeve represent the two extremes of the hosts' reaction to their awakening: vengeance and destruction or escapism. Meanwhile, Bernard's (revealed to be a host in the previous season) fragmented consciousness—whereby he can no longer recognize memories from the present time—provides the season's nonlinear narrative structure. Just like its predecessor, season two is complex, original, and rich in lyrical writing. Much has already been written about episode 8, "Kiksuya" (Lakota for "Remember"),² in which Akecheta (Zahn McClamon) tells his story, mostly in Lakota, to Maeve's daughter, which explains the stereotypical scene in which Ghost Nation members attack Maeve's encampment. This episode and the metafictional episode 5 "Akane no

Mai,” featuring the shogunate-version of the Mariposa narrative, represents some of the strongest episodes of the season.

Overall, one of the best aspects of this season is in the power it gives to the characters made passive by a combination of racialized and gendered ideologies, as the two episodes just mentioned illustrate. In the shadow of Dolores’s and Maeve’s character development from feminized and sexualized narratives (as the rancher’s daughter and the brothel madam, respectively), to full-fledged heroines lies the fascinating characters of Teddy (James Marsden) and Hector (Rodrigo Santoro). Teddy’s role as a host mirrors that of Dolores’s: he is supposed to introduce guests to the park and take them on easy adventures. Like her, he dies often and violently, and like her, he also possesses the sort of forgettable character-traits of a basic RPG character: guests are seen making fun of him on multiple occasions. But while Dolores grows out of her role and indeed comes to embody almost the exact opposite—the violent, ruthless, and powerful “Wyatt”—Teddy cannot quite grow out of his character. While he follows Dolores in season two, he tries multiple times to convince her to leave the revolution behind and escape with him. In episode 5, Dolores ends up manipulating his core drives to make him less sensitive and more merciless, which results in his suicide in episode 9. In contradiction to his persona as a romance-novel pistolero of season one, in season two Teddy thus comes to take on the feminized role of the lover who, as a result of their romantic nature, cannot follow their partner’s path to violence. Likewise Hector, playing the role of the archetypal and uber-masculine bandit, embodies in season two and three the tragic figure of the lover one cannot save. In spite of his awakening, Hector never manages to survive his reboots and he indeed dies presumably irrevocably in season three. In both cases, it is the female characters who lead the plot intellectually and physically, and the two representatives of the mythological Wild Wild West masculinity take on a passive, feminized role. This reversal of expectations at the cross-section of two genres heavy with polarized gendered tropes (the western movie and science fiction) represent one of the many ways the show transcends.

Season two also increases the layers of complexity of Delos’s sinister plans. The parks serve not as touristy attractions but rather as a massive system of data collection of the guests for the purpose of population control, the plot of season three. In this way hosts and guests are aligned as victims of a system that would rewrite their core narratives, endlessly providing the illusion of freedom (the mythical Wild Wild West on one hand, meritocracy on the other) while stripping away their power of will to its core. Thus Dolores’s vengeance does not, like in the Crichton movie, represent the main threat to human beings; rather, she becomes in season three the revolutionary hero who might save humans from themselves, and in particular from the system that a character like Liam Dempsey (John Gallagher Jr.) stands for—decadent, unfettered, nepotistic capitalism at its worst.

Unlike the hosts, who showcase complex ‘human’ emotions and relationships, human beings in the show are consistently incapable of relating to one another in any positive or meaningful way. For example, Felix (Leonardo Nam) and Sylvester (Ptolemy Slocum), the two Delos employees who Maeve blackmails into helping her, do not exchange a single line that is not antagonistic (for

instance, Sylvester calling Felix a “ding dong”), in spite of the show’s implication that they are friends and in spite of their shared trauma of being kidnapped by Maeve and her crew for most of season two. In fact, all of Delos employees frequently trade insults and derogatory remarks with one another. The most significant characters, like Charlotte Hale (Tessa Thompson) represent corrupt executives who routinely abuse their staff; for instance, Charlotte purposely opens the door to Theresa (Sidse Babett Knudsen) stark naked, which in any context should be construed as sexual harassment.

Even in the world outside the park, the nightmarish capitalist context intrudes on human relationships. Friendships only exist within the gig-economy criminal hustle in which Caleb Nichols (Aaron Paul) participates, and even familial relationships do not survive the ultra-competitive, manipulative nature of this universe. Every one of the plotlines that connect the most important human characters in these two seasons—William (Ed Harris), James Delos (Peter Mullan), Caleb, and Liam Dempsey—are defined by families fractured by violence, addiction, and corruption, all of which intimately tied to the demands of capitalism. What’s more, in this world there seems to be no recognizable laws (or not any that serve to protect people), nor ethics concerning the value of human lives. Delos, for example, seems totally untouched by the brutal murders of people (including their own board members) that took place in their parks; one remaining board member only mentions the impact on Delos stocks. Police can be bought as mercenaries, and people seem to be routinely assassinated without any consequence. Democracy itself is portrayed as a joke, as illustrated by the villain Serac (Vincent Cassel) threatening the Brazilian president with a coup if he does not comply with his requests.

It is by resisting the impulse of portraying a Disneyfied corporate utopia of the ‘real world’ and instead building a subtle dystopia, the show is capable of transitioning from the host-centered plot of season two into the host-human revolution that takes place in season three. And although fans might not like this season as much, it’s for that courageous transition that I believe it should not be dismissed. The plot centers on Dolores (now made to look like a modern woman) as she attempts to use the system, an AI called Rehoboam³ who can predict the future of human beings based on the data collected by Delos, not to destroy human society but to free human beings from this eugenic population control. She recruits Caleb, a former soldier who was controlled by the US military into being a mercenary and then brainwashed, as the leader of the revolution. Maeve, hired by the improbably named Engerraund Serac, who promised to reunite her with her daughter in the Valley Beyond, attempts to stop her.

At the end of season two, Dolores makes a Charlotte-Hale host for herself and steals five host “pearls,” and this season builds a sense of mystery as we do not know which hosts she brought into the real world. Slowly, it is revealed that Dolores in fact copied her own identity over; there are now five Doloreses disguised as various characters. I think this decision is one of season three’s strokes of genius. It would have been easy to build on nostalgia for the park by bringing back our favorite characters—Teddy, say, or Clementine (Angela Sarafyan)—but instead the Doloreses both complexify her character and offer another interesting take on gender. The distinct Doloreses start

taking on different personalities and even resist the original Dolores's plan; the Charlotte-Dolores, for instance, starts caring about her family and attempts to avenge their death in the latter part of the season, showcasing yet another case of hosts being more human than humans.

Furthermore, season three continues the show's subtle yet intriguing representation of gender as a meaningless facet of identity. The "male" Doloreses are still identifiable as her. In season two, Dolores's "dark" personality—the polar opposite of her character as a host as the rancher's sweet daughter—was named Wyatt, a ruthless and even insane assassin represented as a man in the hosts' imagination. When Dolores calls herself Wyatt, the other characters, including William, accept it without question. Thus, *Westworld* embodies a visual example of the radical ways in which SF texts of the last two decades have handled questions of sex, gender, and sexuality: deregulate it while keeping it as a completely innocuous part of the worldbuilding.⁴ Where an older feminist tradition of SF put their non-normative representation of gender and sexuality at the center of the plot or the worldbuilding (i.e. through alien societies for example), our generation's SF shows off with a shrug.

This is not to say that season three is perfect, or indeed as good as the previous two seasons. One of the most egregious problems is the villain Serac's plot, which is cartoonish at best. Because of the (unexplained) destruction of Paris when he was a child, Serac and his brother resolve to build a system that can predict the future of humanity so that they can essentially eliminate violent criminality—and therefore the destruction of European capitals, we must assume. I suppose we are meant to see a connection between Serac's loss of his home and hosts' loss of theirs, but it's a flimsy connection. Serac's technology serves a violently eugenicist project and the absurd nature of his backstory make it difficult to believe in his own humanity, or in him as a fully-fledged character.

Moreover, while Caleb's character and plotline are interesting throughout the season, the effect of his role is dampened quite a bit when we get to the reason why Dolores picked him in the last episode. It turns out that as a soldier, Caleb was trained in a Delos park and actually helped save Dolores and other hosts in a simulated situation. But Dolores selects him in particular because he prevented the other soldiers from raping the hosts at the end of their mission. Therefore, Caleb's heroic nature stands only from the fact that he didn't abuse his power over the hosts, thus representing a sort of opposite to William, for whom the park unleashed his violent and ruthless nature. Compared with the hosts' more-than-human humanity, however, Caleb's heroism pales.

Serac and Caleb's backstory aside, I do believe season three delivered the promises set up in the previous seasons in original and intriguing ways, and while fans might miss the park's beautiful landscapes, the show continues to dazzle with its unique aesthetic and grand action scenes. Season three will be particularly fruitful to scholars interested in contrasting the other two seasons' truncated utopia with the realistic and unsettling dystopia set up in the outside-the-park universe. Furthermore, Dolores's character—split into five different personas—will provide interesting discussion about hiveminds and other disembodied consciousness that seem to be at the forefront of contemporary SF.

Notes

1. Played respectively by Evan Rachel Wood, Thandie Newton, and Jeffrey Wright.
2. See for example Tom VanDerWeff's and Aja Romano's discussion <https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/6/10/17442310/westworld-season-2-episode-8-recap-kiksuya>; David Sims, Spencer Kornhaber, and Sophie Gilbert's discussions <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/06/westworld-season-2-episode-8-kiksuya-roundtable/562451/>.
3. Named after the Biblical character.
4. For example, see the treatment of gender in Ann Leckie's *Imperial Radch* trilogy. For casual yet crucially innovative representations of gender expression, queerness, and non-monogamy, see Seth Dickinson's ongoing *Masquerade* series.