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WESTWORLD TURNS, OMNI 2016

Every Generation Brings A New Vision Of Westworld, The Robot-Themed Amusement Park Of Our Deepest Desires And Dreams. The Latest Version Reflects Our Modern Darkness, Our Violent Urges, And A Deep-Seated Doubt That The Future Will Turn Out Well.

“Bring her back online,” a deep, male baritone commands.

A dim glow rises in a darkened room, revealing a young woman, blonde and silhouetted in shadow. She’s vulnerable and alone, surrounded by mirrors on all sides, creating a chilling effect that’s somehow cavernous and claustrophobic at once. She sits in a chair, nude, her feet shoulder-width apart, her knees demurely pressed together in child-like fashion. Her shaky, Southern lilt breaks the silence, but her lips don’t move — she remains as still as a mannequin. It’s eerie. The baritone commands the young belle, Dolores, to lose her accent. Her voice is as soft and helpless as her bare, motionless body — it’s clear the sound and image on-screen are disjointed, maybe disconnected in time. Perhaps this talk between the belle and the baritone takes place in the future — or the past. As our eyes adjust to the dark the glow intensifies and the images and sounds become more disturbing. Dolores isn’t just nude, but caked in blood. And she isn’t merely still, but paralyzed and frozen in place. A fly lands right on her vacant, open eyeball, but she does nothing. Her basic human reflexes have been suppressed. She is, for all intents and purposes, dead.

Yet the conversation continues. “I am in a dream,” Dolores’s voice intones, prompting the baritone to ask, “Would you like to wake up from this dream?” The baritone probes further: “Have you ever questioned the nature of your reality?” If you hear notes of *The Matrix*’s Morpheus in these questions, you’re not alone. Only, Dolores isn’t offered a red pill or a blue pill, because unlike Neo, she’s designed not to question the nature of her existence. “No,” she answers simply. But Dolores *is* trapped in a false reality, and in this matrix, it’s the humans who have created a dystopian prison to keep machines docile and enslaved, not the other way around.

During the breathtaking pilot of HBO’s slick and disturbing new series, *Westworld* (based on the 1973 Michael Crichton film of the same name), we learn that Dolores (Evan Rachel Wood) is a machine:

highly complex, but not sentient — or so runs the official line.

Dolores lives (if that's the right word) on a ranch with her protective, gun-toting father, Peter Abernathy (Louis Herthum), on the outskirts of a small town. Dolores's town is at the heart of "Westworld," a western theme park populated by hundreds of lifelike robots, called "hosts." Even the horses are animatronic. The hosts, ranging from hookers to gunslingers to sheriffs, exist to serve the guests' pleasure and to create a fully authentic and immersive experience. But guests don't come to Westworld just to play dress-up; they come to indulge their basest desires, treating the hosts in ways they could never treat real people. Murder, rape, and pillage are not only allowed but encouraged in Westworld. The humans don't need to worry: the futuristic theme park has measures in place to protect the guests and ensure that only the hosts get sadistically murdered.

Dolores initially seems to have an idyllic existence: A doting father, a beautiful home, an interest in painting and animals, and even an endearing romance with a gunslinger host, Teddy Flood (James Marsden). But Dolores has a particularly grisly assignment in this world. Her job is to be a ready victim for guests and their outlaw hosts, who murder her family in front of her and then rape and kill her in the barn. Night after night, Dolores's body is repaired and her memory reset, so she can go back out to be raped and killed again. And that's where *Westworld's* disquieting philosophical questions kick in. The attacks on Dolores are hard to watch and raise legitimate concerns about the ubiquity and treatment of sexual violence on TV, but are the guests' actions actually immoral? From a guest's perspective, Westworld is a big, expensive, live-action video game, and nothing that happens to the hosts has any more meaning than the piles of dead in a *Call of Duty* session. The guests might as well be attacking puppets or holograms — if, of course, Dolores and the other hosts are truly just intricate machines, mere mechanisms coded to simulate human emotion but without any genuine internal experience of their own, rather than sentient beings with awareness of what happens to them.

Therein lies the rub.

The original *Westworld* hit theaters in November 1973, four years after the moon landing, at a time of roaring optimism about our technological capabilities and even stronger pessimism about our institutions. The film reflects the technological awe of a country in the midst of the space race, as well as the cynicism and paranoia of a nation in the grips of Watergate and Cold War tensions. HBO's update plunges viewers even deeper into the wonder and cynicism that made the original *Westworld* a hit and a cult classic. Crichton's version provided a blend of societal critique and technological horror: The park scientists, particularly the Chief Supervisor played fittingly by a man named (Alan) Oppenheimer, are brilliant and well-meaning, but their reach exceeds their grasp as they lose control of their creations; the park guests are hedonistic Neanderthals, interested only in hookers and gunfights; and the park's corporate management ruthlessly disregards human life in pursuit of the bottom line. Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy's reimagining of this material offers similar takes on corporate amorality, reckless science, and the hedonism of consumer culture. But they've also taken their critique further than Crichton did, into a darker, more thoroughly misanthropic realm, by suggesting that the moral failings of our species lie not within our institutions, but within each of us. The guests of the new *Westworld* don't just want sex and shootouts; they want rape, torture, and murder.

It doesn't feel coincidental that our self-critiques have gotten more personal and severe in the most polarized political climate of modern times, when the U.S. appears to be divided into two camps that view each other in hostile and uncompromising terms, and regard the other side's presidential candidate as a figure of operatic villainy. *Westworld*, which shot its pilot in August 2014, is caught up in the same deeply judgmental zeitgeist. The guests at this park are all part of the 1% (given the forty-thousand-dollar-per-day fee), and have chosen to use their time, privilege, and affluence to kill, screw, and rape robots. Abusing non-sentient machines may be a lot more ethical than doing the same to people, but it's still gross, disturbing, and indicative of a dark id that longs to commit acts of horrific cruelty. In the second episode, Logan (Ben Barnes), a longtime veteran of the park, shows off to rookie William (Jimmi Simpson) by viciously stabbing a host at the dinner table, then announcing that he has an appetite for something else — if you catch his drift, wink-wink — while his victim wails in agony and oozes authentic-looking blood all over the table and floor. William is horrified, but the other guests get on with their meal, used to this sort of thing. Dramatic music swells, cuing us (in case we needed it) on how to feel about what we've seen. Then we smash cut to Logan in bed with a trio of android hookers, directly connecting his violence to his pleasure.

William is the exception, not the rule, allowing him to function as our eyes and ears as he experiences the wonders and horrors of the park for himself. But the other guests display a catalogue of the worst human impulses. One couple gleefully poses for photos in front of two dead hosts they've killed. Another guest shoots gunslinger Teddy half a dozen times without warning at point-blank range, and crows, "That's what I call a vacation!" One particularly disturbing guest, the Man in Black, portrayed chillingly by Ed Harris, is a driven and terrifying monster, who serially rapes and kills Dolores, tortures other hosts, and, when he's feeling particularly jaunty, collects their scalps, which he examines for clues (no, seriously). The 1973 film was less inclined to depict the guests as sadistic fiends. The film's lead, Peter Martin (Richard Benjamin), is actually a fairly sympathetic character who even cares about the feelings of the robots, on occasion. Sure, he kills hosts in gunfights, but he doesn't revel in torture or rape.

A crucial difference between the film and the series is the verisimilitude of the hosts. In the film, Yul Brynner's gunslinger and the other hosts never come off as human or sentient for a second, clearly functioning as automatons in human skin. They move a bit mechanically and even look different, with glowing eyes and ridged hands. The androids of the HBO series, on the other hand, are so life-like it's chilling, and the guests get off on the illusion that they're doing what they're doing to real people — that's clearly part of the appeal. The problem is, it might be more than an illusion. If all guests but William are awful, then in whom else can we invest? The answer to that question brings us back to Dolores and, eventually, to that fly.

Yul Brynner plays a killer robot cowboy in the 1973 film version of *Westworld*.

Crichton's *Westworld* was ahead of its time — it's a progenitor of killer-robot classics like *The Terminator* (which borrows a ton from *Westworld*'s climax, particularly the Gunslinger's relentless stalking and piecemeal loss of his human facade) — but it doesn't explore artificial intelligence in any depth or ask the hard questions: What constitutes life? What makes us human? Are we, as a species,

worthy of our place in the solar system — worthy of our intellect and technology — or have we abused our privilege? And that’s where the Nolan-and-Joy reimagining separates itself as a more mature, thoughtful work than the original and offers us a protagonist more sympathetic than Peter Martin ever was: Dolores.

The show explores some of the same fascinating territory as films like *Her*, *The Machine*, *The Matrix*, *Ex Machina*, and many others. Will the next stage of our evolution be silicon-based, rather than carbon-based? When A.I. becomes a reality, will machines, capable of building ever-greater machines themselves, bring about the long-feared singularity and become the dominant intellect on Earth? The park’s chief scientist, Dr. Robert Ford (played by Anthony Hopkins with a familiar air of intelligence, gravitas, and tightly coiled menace), doesn’t have the physicality of Hannibal Lecter, but exudes the sense that if you get in his way, he will hurt you (using his intellect, not his incisors). Ford’s pessimism about the future of humanity isn’t subtle, as he laments that we’ve “slipped evolution’s leash” with our technology, which means “We’re done. This is as good as we’re gonna get.” Ford’s number two, Bernard Lowe (Jeffrey Wright), is initially the most sympathetic human on-screen, as a father grieving for his dead son and finding connection with his creations — until, of course, we learn Bernard isn’t human either.

Like William, Bernard is more exception than rule behind the scenes of Delos, the shady company that owns the park. The show offers familiar corporate intrigue and the requisite indictment of capitalist culture in the form of hardened, cut-throat executive Theresa Cullin (Sidse Babett Knudsen) and smarmy, scheming creative director Lee (Simon Quarterman), who crafts the hosts’ cliched and depraved storylines. But the focus behind the scenes of the resort is on Ford and Bernard, whose job is to design software updates to make the hosts more efficient and authentic, and make the park ever more addictive to its wealthy patrons.

Ford, who has no real boss and keeps his own counsel, has included a wrinkle in the latest update without consulting Bernard, or anyone else: a “reverie.” Hosts will now subconsciously tap into past experiences — past lives, if you will — and make subtle gestures and facial expressions in response to these memories. But the update brings side effects: a string of malfunctioning hosts across the park that need to be recalled; the existential meltdown of Dolores’s father when he finds a photo from the outside world and seems to realize the falseness of his own reality; and maybe, just maybe, in a few cases, genuine consciousness. Bernard notices changes in Dolores, like her heightened improvisation and awareness, but keeps it to himself, enjoying their talks and needing an outlet for his grief. The full implications of these changes become clear in one expertly crafted scene. In each host’s core code is a command that forbids them from harming any living thing, so when Dolores swats a fly on her neck at the pilot’s end, it’s a powerful and triumphant moment in her evolution and a terrifying warning of what we all know is coming.

Unlike Crichton’s original, the HBO series asks us to empathize with the hosts more than the guests — not just Dolores and her dad, but also madam Maeve Millay (Thandie Newton) and top prostitute Clementine Pennyfeather (Angela Sarafyan), who after the update suffer recurring nightmares and start to knock on the door of awareness themselves.

The show’s decision to humanize the hosts and demonize the majority of actual humans is indicative

of the cynicism and suspicion of our time, when most Americans see the other half of the country as not just wrong or misguided, but sinister and evil. By breathing humanity and sentience into the hosts, the writers have held the guests and the scientists accountable for their actions in a way that Crichton's film never did. An optimist might say that's indicative of an era of enhanced awareness and responsibility. But Dr. Ford would likely call it like it is: a grand indictment of the human condition in a culture of upheaval and name-calling, where we are all at each other's throats. *Westworld's* cynicism and revelry in the depraved may be hard for some viewers to take, but the show stays true to its vision of a harsh, cold future where our brains have outrun our hearts, and the worst instincts of humanity have won out. Contrary to Dr. King's hopeful view, the moral arc of the universe does not, in *Westworld*, bend towards justice.

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