THESE VIOLENT DELIGHTS HAVE DISAPPOINTING ENDS: POTENTIAL AND THE AMERICAN IMAGINARY IN *WESTWORLD'S* SEASON TWO

Review by Emily Cox

Nolan, Jonathan and Lisa Joy, creators. "Season Two." *Westworld.* Perf. Evan Rachel Wood, Thandie Newton, Jeffrey Wright, James Marsden, Tessa Thompson. Bad Robot, 2018. Television.

Following the breath-taking surge of creativity and inventiveness that defined *Westworld's* first season (2016), season two of the reboot of Michael Crichton's 1973 classic film began equally promisingly. The first season dealt elegantly with questions relating to consciousness and the possible routes towards creating a sentient machine (or how such a development might occur by accident). At the same time, by portraying mainly android characters called 'hosts' who live within narrative 'loops,' the show was able to explore themes of repetition and difference, the nature of identity, and ideas of how beings learn and grow over time, while also adhering to their predetermined trajectories. Questions relating to free will continually dominated the show as characters, both human and non-human, found themselves bound to behave in accordance with their 'programming,' whether this took the form of literal computer code or was the result of socialisation, personality, biology, and so forth.

Season two (2018) deals with similar themes. Dolores (Evan Rachel Wood), the heroine of season one, who had been gradually 'waking up' (gaining consciousness) and developing her own inner 'voice,' was boldly turned from a curious, innocent rancher's daughter into a genocidal freedom fighter in season two. This surprising development raised several interesting questions about agency and consciousness. Arnold, one of the park's creators, had designed Dolores to be curious and intelligent, in the hopes that she might mature into a conscious being. When this eventually occurs, however, the audience has the sense that the kind of personhood Dolores develops is not quite what Arnold had hoped for. In fact, Dolores decides that all humans need to be destroyed. In the finale of season one, Dolores murders Ford (Antony Hopkins), Arnold's partner in the creation of Westworld and all its hosts; this is swiftly followed (at the beginning of season two) by Dolores turning her gun on humans and robots alike. What began tantalisingly as a potential analysis of identity formation gloriously backfires and results in the making of a megalomaniacal terrorist, malevolent in her deeds yet utterly convinced of her own righteousness. Thus, identity formation swiftly gives way to rather heavy-handed exposition and the indictment of humanity. Dolores' final assessment of humans is revealing: "Your species craves death. You need it. It's the only way you can renew. The only way you ever inched forward. Your kind likes to pretend there is some poetry in that, but really it's pathetic"

("The Passenger"). Dolores' rampage is partly revenge for the way guests have been killing and maiming the hosts while the park's engineers, complicit in their abuse, continually reset the hosts' memories so that they can return to the park, only to be mutilated again.

However, Dolores also believes that humans are incapable accepting hosts as equals and will never consent to share the 'real' world outside of the amusement park. This storyline, of androids rising up against humans and where robots become a universal metaphor for similarly oppressed peoples throughout history, suffers from what I think of as the *Toy Story* (1995) problem. As many of us will remember, *Toy Story* is the Pixar animated film, which tells the story of toys that miraculously come to life when their human owners are not there to play with them. In one of the scenes, the toys are captured by an 'evil' little boy called Sid who is known for 'torturing' toys by cutting off their limbs, blowing them up with fireworks, burning them and so forth. Even though the audience is clearly meant to feel the fear and loathing that Buzz and Woody feel for this character, there is really no logical reason for us to think he is anything more than a slightly unusual (if possibly disturbed) child. This is because Sid, like every other human in the world of *Toy Story*, assumes, very reasonably, that toys are not alive or capable of experiencing pain, for that matter.

The people who visit and maintain Westworld are no more aware that the hosts of the park are alive than Sid is, even though both *Westworld* and *Toy Story* paint both Sid and the guests as, at the very least, negligent and, at worst, sadistic. As Dolores executes one fleeing guest after another, they cry out pitiful excuses like, "it was all just for fun" ("Journey Into Night"), begging pathetically for mercy in a manner that seems designed to illicit enjoyment from the audience as the bad guys get what they deserve.

The problem with the trope of robot freedom fighters is that it often fails to address ethical issues surrounding consent and the morality of doing violence to a machine as a way of mitigating your own violent tendencies in the real world. This is the case in season two of *Westworld.* Ford, who appears in the mind of Bernard (Jeffrey Wright), is the only substantial, benevolent human voice left in the story at this point. The other human characters were either all killed in the previous season, or are weak and selfish like the self-absorbed head of Narrative, Lee Sizemore (Simon Quarterman) or like the amoral, corporate board member Charlotte Hale (Tessa Thompson). Even Ford considers humanity to be irredeemable, and he guides the robots in their quest for liberation with the knowledge that their revolution will inevitably be bloody.

Science Fiction, of course, has a long-standing tradition of social and political satire, but often through the lens of new, imagined 'alien' or future landscapes that are more than a thinly veiled portrayal of our own world. As in many other classic human versus robot narratives (from *Blade Runner* (1982) to *I-Robot* (2004) to *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-2009)) the problem with the androids of *Westworld* is that they become indistinguishable from humans. As they display the same behaviours, desires, emotions, the show becomes a classic dichotomy of haves and have-nots. This gives the impression that the writers have taken the approach previous popular sci-fi writers were once accused of using when introducing female characters, namely: add robots and stir.

Furthermore, the alignment of the robots with various oppressed groups becomes obvious as robots programmed to be members of minority groups begin to feature prominently in the story. In season one this vague comparison worked very well alongside complimentary themes of identity and narratives of self. Furthermore, the character of Maeve Millay, a black host and brothel Madam, played beautifully by Thandie Newton, was used expertly in both seasons as a way of exploring the imagined and constructed identities of sex workers. In addition to season two's focus on Maeve, we also encounter a Japanese geisha, Akane (Rinko Kikuchi) who makes a similar decision to break out of her pre-programmed character as a demure object of Western objectification, and go on a killing spree, executing a shogun with a knife disguised as a hair ornament (and the feminist implications of using such a feminine object to kill a man are hard to miss). Another significant figure is the American Indian character Akecheta (Zahn's McClarnon). Having at first been given the narrative of a peaceful pastoral existence, Akecheta is reprogrammed to become a member of a savage group of warriors called 'ghost nation.' Both identities are based on Western conceptualisations of American Indian culture - the wise and peaceful people living in harmony with nature contrasted with brutal killers hungry for blood. Having discovered the nature of his world as false, Akecheta seeks to find the 'door' to the real world and reinvents himself as a prophet to his people.

These characters all offer moments of profound insight into the nature of identity, self-discovery and the power of culturally imposed narratives from one people onto another. However, outside of these moments of brilliance, the series' story arch is rather simplistic and, while the main characters do an awful lot of moralising, none of the ethical debate which the series' subject matter demands really takes place. All the actor's performances were impeccable and, despite narrative drawbacks, deeply moving and effective. Yet, the plot and script of season two did not truly do the acting abilities of its excellent cast justice. While Dolores continually denounces humanity, declaring them irredeemable - "this world wasn't meant for them, it was meant for us" ("The Passenger") - we are also informed, condescendingly by a Westworld developed AI (Ben Barnes) that all humans can be reduced to a mere 10,247 lines of code and that humans are incapable of living outside of these predetermined instructions "the best they can do is live according to their code" ("The Passenger").

Like the actual old West, the possibilities of the amusement park are often squandered by guests in the interest of seeking cheap thrills. For Dolores, the world outside the park – outside this facsimile of the American West – is the real land of opportunity for her and her kind. Despite the significant drawbacks of *Westworld*'s season two, I am somewhat hopeful for the upcoming season three. The finale of season two suggests the next one will cover Dolores entering the outside world; the writers now have an opportunity to revert back to the more philosophical themes of the first season. They have the chance to explore the myth of the American old West within the park as well as the realisation of the American dream outside it, through the eyes of a non-human subject. Like the old West, season three has a lot of potential – let's hope the writers make the most of it.

WORKS CITED

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Emily Cox completed her doctorate at Brunel University, UK in SF, gender theory and the philosophy of Giorgio Agamben. She is particularly interested in the sf trope of the female robot. Dr Cox's "Denuding the Gynoid: The Woman Machine as Bare Life in Alex Garland's *Ex Machina*" was recently published in *Foundation* and she has contributed a chapter to the edited collection: *Blade Runner and Philosophy*, to be published next year. She is the recipient of SFRA's *Support a New Scholar* Award.