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SUBVERTING OR REASSERTING? *WESTWORLD* (2016-) AS AN AMBIGUOUS CRITICAL ALLEGORY OF GENDER STRUGGLES

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Resumen || Este artículo analiza las tres primeras temporadas de la serie de HBO *Westworld* (2016-2020), considerándolas una alegoría crítica de las relaciones de género. Se presta especial atención a la construcción autorreflexiva de sus mundos de ciencia ficción y a dos de los arcos narrativos de los personajes principales, las androides femeninas (o ginoides) Dolores y Maeve. Más específicamente, el ensayo consiste en un examen dialéctico de las ambigüedades narrativas de la serie, por lo que su argumento es doble. Por un lado, se argumenta que *Westworld* está clara y conscientemente construida como una alegoría crítica y que, como tal, sus mundos de ciencia ficción escenifican luchas sociales reales (principalmente, aquellas entre géneros) para narrar posteriormente su (intento) de derrocamiento. Por otro lado, en contra de esta interpretación crítico-alegórica, pero completándola, también se argumenta que *Westworld* no es una narrativa inequívocamente crítica y que, si vamos a examinar sus *potenciales* alegóricos, debemos considerar también cómo su realización puede ser obstaculizada y/o contradicha por ciertas ambigüedades narrativas.

Palabras clave || *Westworld* | Ciencia ficción | Metaficción | Alegoría crítica | Género

Abstract || This article analyses the first three seasons of HBO's *Westworld* (2016-2020) by considering them a critical allegory of gender relations. In so doing, the text pays special attention to the self-reflexive construction of its SF worlds, and to two of the main characters' arcs, the female androids (or gynoids) Dolores and Maeve. More specifically, the essay consists in a dialectical examination of the series' narrative ambiguities, so its argument is twofold. On the one hand, it is argued that *Westworld* is clearly and self-consciously constructed as a critical allegory and that, as such, its SF worlds stage real social struggles (chiefly those between genders) in order to subsequently narrate their (attempted) overthrow. On the other hand, against this critical-allegorical interpretation but supplementing it, it is also argued that *Westworld* is not an unequivocally critical narrative and that, if we are to examine its allegorical *potentials*, we ought to consider too how their realisation can be obstructed and/or contradicted by certain narrative ambiguities.

Keywords || *Westworld* | Science Fiction | Metafiction | Critical Allegory | Gender

Resum || Aquest article analitza les tres primeres temporades de *Westworld* d'HBO (2016-2020), considerant-les com una al·legoria crítica de les relacions de gènere. Al fer-ho, presta especial atenció a la construcció autoreflexiva dels seus mons de ciència-ficció i de dos dels personatges principals, les androides femenines (o ginoides) Dolores i Maeve. No obstant això, el treball consisteix més específicament en un examen dialèctic de les ambigüitats narratives de la sèrie, per la qual cosa l'argumentació és doble. D'una banda, s'argumenta que *Westworld* es construeix clara i conscientment com una al·legoria crítica i, com a tal, els seus mons de ciència-ficció escenifiquen lluites socials reals (principalment entre gèneres) per a narrar posteriorment el seu (intent de) derrocament. D'altra banda, en contra d'aquesta interpretació crític-al·legòrica però completant-la, es proposa que *Westworld* no és una narrativa inequívocament crítica i, si examinem els seus potencials al·legòrics, hem de considerar també com la seva producció pot ser obstruïda i /o rebutjada per certes ambigüitats narratives.

Paraules clau || *Westworld* | Ciència-ficció | Metaficció | Al·legoria crítica | Gènere

0. Introducción

HBO's flagship SF series, *Westworld* (2016-), the co-creation of Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan, has proven itself to be not just a successful entertainment product: it is also a thought-provoking narrative which has inspired a wide range of interpretative writing, academic and otherwise.¹ Although the show may be, upon superficial examination, dismissed as yet another action-packed, CGI-abusing spectacle—which it indeed is at numerous points—, *Westworld's* self-reflexive, multi-layered narrative lends itself to being read as a *critical allegory*;² that is, as a commentary on real societies from the perspective of different axes of oppression, especially gender (Mullen 2018; Köller 2019; Belton 2020).³ Now, were we to take the series as *essentially* a critical allegory, *Westworld* would appear to be successfully fulfilling the *potential* of literary SF as a means for the 'cognitive estrangement' of real social relations, to use Suvin's classic definition.⁴ In such view, *Westworld* would appear capable of 'estranging' and thus indirectly allowing a critical perspective on our historical reality, and it would also be doing so in a 'cognitive' manner—i.e. creating a narrative other-world which is self-consciously coherent and logically plausible. However, as opposed to taking *Westworld* as a unidirectional route to social criticism and reflection, in this essay I want to pay closer attention to the series' ambivalence and contradictions, including how these have complexified in seasons 2 and 3. Specifically, in trying to expand upon previous analyses, I argue that *Westworld's* self-reflexive subversion of gender hierarchies exists in constant tension with a reproduction and reinforcement of their logic—especially through the (thus far overlooked) conformity to a hegemonic, patriarchal masculinity of lead female characters and, more indirectly, through the creation of SF worlds which seem to convey a deeply "coded," overdetermined notion of social inequalities.

Before that, however, it seems worth beginning by asking: what have other interpreters gathered from *Westworld's* cognitive estrangement? What (or how much) is it supposed to critically allegorise? Among other readings, *Westworld* has been analysed as a quasi-philosophical fable which in one way or another dramatises relatively abstract dilemmas, like the questions posed by the Promethean myth (Contreras Espuny, 2019) or the dialectical contradictions posed by Marxist theories about the functioning of ideology (Busk, 2016; although he mostly focuses on the original 1973 film). Here, I do not want to deny that the series does indeed engage in some philosophical and mythical questions, nor to deny that such questions have a socially concrete reference—as demonstrated by the former two works and others (Favard 2018) —, but I want to stress from the outset that it seems equally important to gauge how these questions are concretised and gendered in flesh-and-blood characters. In writings like the above-cited, the tendency seems to be to de-individualise and often de-gender the narrative—and it must be said that I have partaken myself in this tendency in a previous essay, where I focused on two relatively abstract dimensions of *Westworld* which thematically parallel those of Contreras Espuny and Busk (Sebastián Martín 2018).⁵ Therefore, I here aim at supplementing my previous work by bringing the analysis down to a more corporeal and relational dimension, the one in which gender is, as Butler (1990) teaches us, socially *performed*.

In said essay (Sebastián Martín 2018), which shall serve as the starting point for the present one, I focused on exploring how *Westworld's* first season can be understood as a rewriting and recombination of both science fictional and metafictional elements. On the one hand, I argued that the show recovers elements from the 'Frankenstein myth'—i.e. the transmedial corpus of texts dealing with artificial creatures and creators, thus following the way in which

Pardo (2020) approaches *Frankenstein* as a myth—, particularly drawing from sympathetic portrayals of the monstrous/mechanical being, like the creature of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, or the androids of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*. In line with these forerunners, but also transcending them, *Westworld* clearly takes the side of the non-humans, posing them as oppressed figures with a nuanced psychology which makes them worthy of sympathy and justifies their search for truth and justice. On the other hand, besides the Frankensteinian themes, but interwoven with them, I analysed how the series draws from an array of metafictional devices, like the metaleptic, ontologically destabilising structure⁶ of Jorge Luis Borges's "The Circular Ruins," the character awakening or 'metafictional anagnorisis'⁷ epitomised by Miguel de Unamuno's *Niebla*, or the structural 'metafictional/metacinematic allegory' found in Peter Weir's *The Truman Show*.⁸ In this sense, my basic argument was that the series portrayed the androids as sentient characters who are both oppressed and deceived, both technologically and narratively constructed subjects—but I left it at the point of *suggesting* socio-ideological implications. Thus, in the present essay, my goal is to re-examine these two dimensions (science-fictional and metafictional) in order to ask: shouldn't we see, on the one hand, the oppression of androids (in the show primarily female characters) as an allegorical critique of capitalist patriarchy? And on the other hand: shouldn't we see metafictional devices as means to critically scrutinise the constructedness and performativity of gender roles and relations, as well as a means to, after allegorising them, gradually deconstruct them? Accordingly, picking up these two key questions, this article shall re-examine the series' fictional worlds and the character arcs of Dolores and Maeve, the two main female androids. More specifically, by analysing season 1 (S1), and subsequently, seasons 2 and 3 (S2 and S3), I shall reflect upon (a) the construction of a critical allegory of gender relations, and upon (b) the role of the main characters in maintaining and/or subverting those structures of domination.

1. Season 1: The Promise of Revolution

In S1, *Westworld* presents us with a theme park (Westworld itself), a simulacrum of the sceneries, characters and tropes of Western movies, which is populated by androids (called hosts) who are (only at first) unaware of their physical and psychological artificiality, but who are nonetheless capable of suffering, and doomed to play and replay pre-set roles in a constant interaction with the park's guests. Every day, hosts are tortured, raped and killed for the "enjoyment" of the park's affluent visitors—but instead of being retired or replaced, their memory is quickly wiped, physical damages are fixed, and thus they are sent back to the park, or rather, back downhill like Sisyphus. Thanks to this looping system, abuses of all kinds are efficiently commodified and catered to by the park's interactive storylines, allowing guests to embark on all kinds of "missions" with hosts as companions or as enemy fodder: from "mere" accidental shootings or "occasional" visits to the brothel, all the way to enacting sadistic fantasies of domination over women hosts or effecting white supremacist violence towards Indians or Hispanics at the park's edges; everything is possible in Westworld. But who are the implied customers of this hyperreal videogame? Quite tellingly, the first episode shows an African American family (a child, a mother and a father visiting the park), who seem completely out of place when juxtaposed with the pervasive and relentless hypermasculine violence. And their child, with an insightfulness and an empathy uncommon in the majority of guests, approaches the host Dolores to tell her that she is not real, visibly concerned about her tragic naivety. This anecdotal image summarily illustrates how the park (like traditional Westerns) de facto excludes many audiences: it is clearly, like so much in the history of Western civilisation,

conceived with a white, rich, male individual in mind. The park is, apparently, not there to be understood; the park (and its sentient androids) is there for the taking—everything there to be grabbed, possessed, abused and destroy at whim.

In following these design principles, it is no wonder that the hosts are at first no more than stock, “passive” characters conforming to gender and genre stereotypes, to paraphrase Mullen’s essay title (2018). Two of the series’ focal characters are the female hosts Dolores (Evan Rachel Wood) and Maeve (Thandie Newton), both of whom are introduced as the upside and downside of traditional femininity, as two potential subjects of feminist struggle. On the one hand, we get Dolores: a rancher’s devoted, hard-working daughter whose life motto is “choosing to see the beauty in life,” and who, in both bodily complexion and clothing, seems like a perfect blend of Tim Burton’s Alice (2010) and Mary Ingalls’ character in *Little House on the Prairie* (1974-1983).⁹ On the other hand, we get Maeve, prostitute and manager in a brothel, who, as “a woman of color, ... is not just the ‘archetypal Madam character’ of the classical Western; she is also ... a version of the archetypal Jezebel character constructed to justify the sexual abuse of women of color during enslavement: overtly sexual, confident and self-reliable, scheming and strategic, and primarily egotistical” (Köller 2019: 171-2). Thus, we get to see (and suffer) the park’s looping narratives from the perspectives of housekeeper and prostitute—a potentially symbolic choice if we remember how Fortunati (1995) argues that the two roles, as waged and unwaged reproductive labour, complement each other in capital’s exploitation of women. In this sense, both Dolores and Maeve can be regarded as the *objects* of patriarchal abuses—and, perhaps more importantly, as *the potential, future subjects* of feminist struggles. Accordingly, S1 initially makes viewers co-experience Dolores’s and Maeve’s suffering, and subsequently shows how they gradually recover memories of their (mostly traumatic) past. And by S1 finale, Dolores and Maeve realise that their roles are nothing but a fiction to render them oppressed non-subjects, so they begin to struggle against their pre-set roles and their oppressors. In other words, Dolores and Maeve undergo both a metafictional anagnorisis and a political awakening: they understand their predicament as patriarchally designed characters, and they decide to radically rewrite their stories—even if that means a literal death of their authors and creators, as shall happen in S1 finale (to which I return below).

In parallel and in stark contrast to Dolores and Maeve, we also go through S1 from the perspective of two extremely powerful old, white men—both of whom seem to exemplify the ideology and psychology of hegemonic masculinity as presupposed in this fictional world.¹⁰ On the one hand, there is ‘The Man in Black’ (Ed Harris), the park’s major shareholder, now retired from corporate work and turned into a perversely Quixotic addict to his park, given how he is obsessed with decoding its deeper meaning (arguably like many viewers obsess about the whole show’s narrative intricacies, leading to the multiplicity of fan theories analysed by Lefait [2018]). In following The Man in Black’s relentless quests throughout the park, we bear witness to the extremes of gratuitous violence and perversion that the park not only permits, but also fosters. In his search for answers, scalping becomes routine, raping, an amusing distraction, and killing, a necessary nuisance. Besides, the series seems to make a big point in giving a parallel storyline to his younger self, William (Jimmi Simpson)—although for greater shock, viewers are not shown that they are the same person until S1 finale. In William, we see a shy, gentlemanly, romantic man who falls in love with Dolores, only to be eventually corrupted (or exposed, depending on viewpoint) by the park’s more perverse possibilities. And the lesson, if we are to trust the character’s self-descriptions, is that the park did not change him, it only “revealed his true self”—which may

be interpreted, in line with the whole allegory, as a hint that romantic love is often a friendly mask worn by domestic abusers, or a shallow excuse for Don Juan characters.

Besides The Man in Black, there is Robert Ford (Anthony Hopkins), the hosts' Frankensteinian creator, who, from the park's obscure research and maintenance labs, plays God with the hosts' roles and psyches as though they were mere NPCs in a videogame, repeatedly arguing in a very mechanistic manner that he does not believe hosts (or humans) to have souls or consciousness.¹¹ Nevertheless, he seems comfortable delegating most of the tedious maintenance and development work to a subordinate team composed of technicians and hack writers (the stereotypically banal Lee Sizemore being a case in point). Ford thus seems to be largely retired from labour and mostly dedicated to philosophising out loud, providing dialogue (or rather, monologue) which makes up a significant part of the show's self-reflexive and existential commentary.¹² Nonetheless, as S1 finale proves (a finale to which I return below), Ford was not as idle as he seemed, instead being devoted to behind-the-scenes plotting, planning one last storyline with absolute secrecy—a storyline which may suggest that Ford is in the end disavowing and undoing his own patriarchal authority, and thus redeeming himself. Nonetheless, confining my commentary (for now) to the series' allegorical structure at its narrative outset, one can say that these two key male characters are positioned as (relatively vilified) patriarchal authorities who (despite their abuses) are portrayed with an aura of social prestige and privilege: both play an active role in the park's creation and preservation, and both exert power as authoritarian personalities, either by threatening and inflicting physical violence (The Man in Black) or by enforcing (and literally coding) their intellectual superiority (Robert Ford).

It is in terms of these initial antagonisms and their subsequent collapse by the season finale, that we have got the most acute interpretations of *Westworld's* S1 as a critical allegory of gender relations. Regarding Dolores's and Maeve's stories, it is argued that the series

shows the literal construction of femininity according to what are deemed to be societal standards. By presenting its female android characters as literal characters, functions, devices – that is, constructions – which develop an ambiguous autonomy and agency, the series does not merely engage in an entertaining and challenging display of meta-storytelling but in a deeper level of (self-)reflexivity that lays bare, comments on, and ultimately undermines established, received notions of femininity in popular and visual culture as part of a larger negotiation of the creative process and practices of storytelling. (Köller 2019: 168)

Therefore, at this level, the show seems to reproduce norms only to eventually break them down, and in the meantime it exposes the underlying, systemic violence,¹³ elaborately showing that gender is in no way a determined role or identity, but something both performed and disciplined within a pre-given power structure.¹⁴ Moreover, the show's critical allegory is far from being one-dimensional, since it clearly represents the connections between capitalist and patriarchal exploitation, as well as, to some extent, the interconnection with racial hierarchies—thus “at least mak[ing] a nod toward intersectional understandings of oppression” (Belton 2020: 9). With all this in mind, *Westworld's* cathartic S1 finale, in which Dolores shoots Ford in the head while he is delivering a speech to the park's investors, would seem like the beginning of a radical overthrow of established hierarchies. And indeed, immediately afterwards, at nightfall, a mob-army of heavily-armed hosts with women at the

vanguard emerges out of the surrounding forests to attack—something which, visualised in this way may be metaphorically readable as a return of some long-forgotten, mass-prosecuted witches, the paramount historical scapegoat of patriarchy. Hosts have thus turned against guests, the oppressed have switched roles with the oppressors, and the potential for a radically “new world” where, as Maeve puts it, “you can be whoever the f**k you want” opens up for the next season to seize it. But will this be a sustainable revolution or just a momentary riot? Will it be a pervasive change or just a temporary reversal? And more importantly: are there not ambiguities in how this comes to happen? Indeed there are, as has also been acknowledged by analyses of the show’s social allegories (Köller 2019; and especially, Belton 2020).

As we also find out by the finale, revolution arises neither from the hosts’ newly gained consciousness nor from a conscious decision made by either Dolores or Maeve—even though viewers are structurally led into expecting so. As it really happens, Ford recoded them: first to remember and later to ‘misbehave’. His own death and the ensuing android revolution are precisely the one last story that he had been plotting, which he appropriately entitled “Journey into Night,” foreshadowing his and his fellow humans’ demise. Even though Dolores is left in a powerful position, finally self-aware, and prepared and decided to lead a revolution, it is true that she has only arrived there because she was programmed to be able to do so—which, in turn, only happened because Ford decided that she should finally achieve and reclaim her own consciousness and dignity. And a similar logic applies to Maeve: although by coercing some of the lab’s technicians she managed to boost her mental and physical abilities to facilitate her escape, she only does so because someone unknown (presumably Ford) altered her system beforehand and enabled it. Hence their rebellion was as planned as everything else, and that in the end that revolution, much in spite of S1’s complex development, seems to be presented to viewers as a fantasy, as something out of reach for oppressed individuals unless consented to by those at the very top—that is, unless “the man” Ford decides that it can and should happen.

Considering this, we are in a sense back at square one, but with a clearly reactionary twist: subordinate feminine roles are shown to be the products of social programming—but so would be the breaking out of those roles. Moreover, the very fact that there remain clear-cut roles in the end, however reversed, seems to be suggesting that a fixed gender binarism, or the existence of oppressors and oppressed, are inescapable facts of life. And in another sense, it can also seem that the series’ critical impetus and allegorical subtleties, both its feminist- and its Marxist-tending connotations, are eventually reduced to totalitarian terror—in other words, the goal of revolutionaries like Dolores seems to be caricaturised as either/both “eat the rich” and/or “kill the men.”¹⁵ Besides, another relevant caveat to the narrative’s subversive aspects may emerge from how Dolores’s and Maeve’s psychic (r)evolutions are explained intradiegetically. On the one hand, the key element of Dolores’s reprogramming, the one enabling her rebellion, is that her ‘personality build’ was merged with that of a merciless outlaw, Wyatt, who is remembered by a host (and visualised in flashbacks) as a *hyperviolent man* who slaughtered an entire village in cold blood. On the other hand, Maeve’s last-minute decision not to escape the park was motivated by a decision to find her “daughter”—that is, a child-host that she remembers from another role that she previously performed in the park. What links these two narrative details and why could they be deemed contradictory to the critical-allegorical aspects of the series? Although in opposite directions, my argument is that both these intradiegetic details may reinforce beliefs in clear-cut gender roles, leading to questions like: does Dolores gain the strength to rebel only because she is coded as a hyper-aggressive man? And conversely:

is Maeve's change of mind implying that, even if it is based on a lie, her "real role as a woman" is that of motherhood?

By leaving us with questions like these, S1 seems to be (to some extent) upholding a very overdetermined gender binarism, a state of affairs in which changes are just troublesome re-adaptations into a pre-established, clear role; nonetheless, at the same time, it remains a fact that S1 effectively functions as a multi-layered critical allegory of those same hierarchies. Does this ambivalence remain in later seasons? On the one hand, viewers could hold on to the cliff-hanger promise of a "new world," however dark the "Journey into Night" may seem. But, on the other hand, viewers could also remember that quote to *Romeo and Juliet* so prophetically uttered by several hosts during the season: "these violent delights have violent ends." Despite the many utopian promises, there may be still a deeply anti-utopian closure.

2. Seasons 2 and 3: After Revolution

Westworld's S2 (2018) and S3 (2020), logically stand as the as-of-yet most understudied part of the series, so my aim for the remainder of this essay is to begin, however partially, to open pathways for their interpretation. For the sake of length and scope, my attention will be centred upon how certain of the above-analysed elements have been given continuation: namely, (a) the introduction of new fictional worlds which, like the park, allegorise the structures of gender domination, and (b) the development of the two lead characters, Dolores and Maeve, and the ways in which they resist and struggle against these new oppressive milieus.

As we glimpse in parts of S2 and more fully in S3 (where the park is only a very episodic setting), the series constructs new narrative/ontological layers with the effect of expanding the show's critical allegory. First (in S2), we find out that *Westworld* is only one of a larger set of bordering, pseudo-historical theme parks owned by the parent company, Delos. Out of these, "Shogun world," based on the Japan of samurai-historical genre films, is the most detailed, as it is explored in Maeve's adventures through it. And as we find out with Maeve, Delos's writers/coders, more often than not, plagiarised *Westworld's* narrative arcs and character types for other parks, thus crafting worlds as hierarchically fixed and stereotype-conforming as the forever-looping *Westworld* which we saw at the beginning of S1.¹⁶ Subsequently (in S3), the setting moves definitively to the outside, human planet Earth of the future, which is gradually explored by following Dolores's attempts at infiltrating its power structures. Here, viewers are gradually led to discover that this world is as "coded" and hierarchical as the parks, since a privately-owned AI machine named Rehoboam has been programmed to keep "social peace"—i.e. pre-existing social hierarchies—and to confine every individual's social mobility within margins tolerable for the totality (though not necessarily tolerable to him/herself, as shown by the systematic exclusion and/or reconditioning of deviant individuals). For that purpose, the Biblically named machine-king realises constant surveillance through all the planet's networked machinery, in order to run infinite simulations of everyone's future based on mass data—and to decide their future. Therefore, we find that while theme parks were mostly allegorical—that is, a staging of gender relations in an environment self-defined as fictional—the external world is a relatively more literal (though still estranged and allegorical) representation of our real world: it is a human-populated future of our own planet Earth, a time which, like our present, seems driven by "surveillance capitalism."¹⁷ In this sense, S3 not only continues to allegorise social hierarchies, but it makes a more explicit reference to one of today's most

prominent technologies of domination: the globally expanding Internet and the humongous amounts of data that it manufactures (and commodifies). And, just like in our real world, these technologies have the effect of reinforcing pre-existing social inequalities, like gender divides and class structures.

Besides these physically-existing worlds, *Westworld* also makes repeated use of several computer-simulated settings, some created benignly for VR therapy (as is the case of William in S3), and some malignantly, as mental jails (the case of Maeve in S3, whose mind is kept inside a simulation of a Nazi-themed Delos park). These two instances, in juxtaposition, would thus seem to point at how technological developments are generally employed to the service of elites (and to the detriment of others). The most significant element in these virtual worlds, however, derives from S2, when Dolores enters a massive virtual library, as potentially boundless as Borges's "La biblioteca de Babel." Here, all the parks' (human) guests' personalities and behaviours have been stored and converted into a few lines of code, and each is contained in a slim book, due to humanity's supposed 'mathematical simplicity'. With this deeply allegorical image, the series seems to redouble its portrayal of individual selfhood as overdetermined and manipulatable, while additionally providing a foreshadowing of the breadth and depth of the very "surveillance capitalism" which is systematically represented in S3. And in following its Borgesian undertones, the series seems to be supplementing the spiralling fictionality of S1—i.e. the metafictional anagnorises experienced by hosts in a way similar to "Las ruinas circulares"—by showing an all-encompassing library-world that contains infinite variations of itself, a world in which infinite forking paths seem to open, yet everything is already written somewhere. Moreover, in explicitly telling us that the park was not made "to code the hosts," but rather "to decode the guests" (S2x7), *Westworld* seems to be more directly provoking a *metafictional epiphany* upon the audience: the realisation that, as in these fictions-within-fictions, individual roles or characters may have been written by someone else—and not in our own best interests.¹⁸ In all these ways, the proliferation and potentially infinite expansion of similarly hierarchical worlds seems to point at the adaptive capacity of structures of domination, giving the impression that patriarchy and capitalism may historically change in form and sophistication, but not in essence.

Therefore, within the context of these similarly hierarchised and overdetermined new settings, we can ask again: what is the role of Dolores and Maeve? Does the series continue to offer (or at least promise) some room for subversive manoeuvring against the patriarchal-corporate machine? Or does it, on the contrary, present Dolores's and Maeve's actions as overdetermined by the systemic logics from which they try to escape? It is my argument that, in S2 and S3, both tendencies have continued to be at work in a dialectically contradictory manner; that is, both Dolores and Maeve take stands against the machine, yet, simultaneously, in some ways they seem to fall back into its logic.

What can we say about Dolores specifically? After shooting Ford in the S1 finale, we follow her raiding and killing (both guests and hosts) throughout *Westworld*, relentlessly trying to get out into the human world: "I want their world" is her motto. S2 thus has her "portrayed as an extremist, reprogramming [her host lover] Teddy [to become a mindless killer] and telling Maeve to abandon her daughter" so as to join her revolution (Belton 2020: 12). And eventually, in the S2 finale, she manages to escape by putting her mind inside a host-replica of Charlotte Hale (Tessa Thompson; a ruthless Delos executive whom Dolores herself executes¹⁹) and, most importantly, she takes out the access key to the above-described data library. Thus, in S3 Dolores enters the human world undercover and with a knowledge of humans that rivals machine-

God Rehoboam—another machine whose (rich, male) owners and creators again function as Dolores's chief antagonists: behind-the-scenes puppeteers who react ruthlessly to the possibility of their charade's collapse. However, although this season continues to portray Dolores as a violent and fanatical rebel, an important twist is introduced: the fact that, upon realising that humans are as manipulated as she once was, Dolores decides to help them and takes a precarious petty-criminal, Caleb Michells (Aaron Paul), as her pupil and ally against the status quo²⁰—a decision that relatively re-humanises her in her motivations, even if her means remain superhumanly violent and manipulative. In addition, the fact that Dolores creates a copy of her mind so that she can recover her “real” body (Evan Rachel Wood's) while simultaneously supplanting Delos executive Charlotte Hale (Tessa Thompson's character and body), shows us that Dolores-as-a-coded-self is not as overdetermined as we might have thought, since her Hale-self changes as she embraces her role as a mother, ironically being better at it than the “original” Hale. With all this in sight, it appears that Dolores evolves from acting as a vilified “Stalinist-feminist” to (literally) splitting herself into a caring working mother and a more pragmatic rebel, capable of empathy and willing to trust others with her revolutionary mission. It is thus that in the S3 finale, when her revolutionary self dies, the “mission” passes on to Caleb and Maeve, while this version of Dolores is apparently redeemed as a sacrificial hero.

The implications of Dolores's arc—or of however much of it can be taken as a coherent narrative—would appear to be complex and often contradictory. On the one hand, viewers may be satisfied with her trial-and-error (hence “human”) way of learning how to claim and to exercise her freedom. And in a different interpretation, she can also be viewed as a liberal-feminist inspiration for women to break the eternal “glass ceiling,” and to claim a place at the top as men's equals. On the other hand, less critical and less emancipatory implications abound. Firstly, it often appears that she is capable of exercising power *only* when she assumes a hypermasculine behaviour—when she acts more as the hyperviolent outlaw, as Wyatt—, and it then seems that she loses influence as soon as she regains a series of emotional and mundane (“feminine”) attachments (to Hale's family and to Caleb)—, a narrative move which may re-associate masculinity with power even if (or perhaps because of) violently struggling to overthrow it. In other words, the series seems to imply that power is inherently masculine and that anyone holding it shall reproduce its patterns: in this case, that a feminist revolution would only lead to a “women-led patriarchy” (one could think of a tyranny like Lorca's Bernarda Alba here). In parallel to these implications, the “re-feminisation” triggered by Dolores's assumption of Charlotte Hale's family duties, as well as her revolutionary self's caring (and at points motherly) relation to Caleb, are details which may possibly idealise a return to traditional notions of femininity. This return seems to be highlighted by the scene in the S3 finale in which this “re-feminised” Dolores-Hale shoots her revolutionary self. How does this matter? Here, I would contend that this attempt at assassinating her copy is metaphorically readable as a killing of the Eve that dared contradict her creator and thus caused humanity's fall — and tellingly, Dolores takes the bullet without much fight, which could suggest that she is assuming her “sin.” In the end, then, her Terminator-in-drag²¹ performance appears to be a punishable, temporary transgression, and her final catharsis seems to emerge from a relative return to her “properly feminine” side, an abandonment of her highly masculinised role as femme fatale in order to assume the role of the “mother” or the “anima” of revolution.

And now: what can be said about Maeve's arc? During S2, she is completely devoted to finding her host “daughter,” for which she explores both Westworld and Shogun world and enters constant fights and shootings, in which she

spectacularly uses her “psychic” power over other hosts (although, unlike Dolores, most violence is in self-defence). By the S2 finale, she is contacted by a digital replica of Robert Ford, who tells her (patronisingly?) that he wants her to escape, giving her further mental powers to achieve it. However, Maeve again contradicts his expectations and goes back to her at-last-found daughter, fighting and “dying” to enable her (and other hosts) to escape into a digital, utopian afterlife—something actively fought and vocally disdained by Dolores as a gilded cage, made to render hosts harmless. Subsequently, in S3, after her cathartic death as an abnegated mother, her mind-hardware has been appropriated by Rehoboam’s creator and supervisor, Engerraund Serac (Vincent Cassel), who imprisons her in another digital simulation until devising a way to control her and use her against Dolores. And during most of S3, given that Maeve seems as hostile to Dolores as to her abductor (or more), she is coerced (and partly convinced) into fighting for Serac, which paves the way for a series of superhuman, videogame-like fight scenes leading up to the toughest adversary, Dolores herself. Their spectacular and often overexploited antagonism is, however, undone by the S3 finale: here, Maeve, upon empathising with Dolores’s last act of selflessness, decides to turn against Serac, killing him and turning Rehoboam off. Then, in a self-referential, fan-winking ending, Maeve leaves the company’s building with Caleb, to whom she repeats her saloon pickup line, so often heard in S1: “This is the new world, and in this world, you can be whoever the f**k you want.”

Maeve’s character development thus appears to re-open the promises once made by Dolores’s uprising: everything can and will change; we the gynoids shall be eventually free from our patriarchal creators. But could we detect ambiguities here too? On a positive glance, it seems clear that Maeve is to be taken as a powerful symbol of female autonomy, as someone who idealistically refuses to accept the patriarchal “help” of Ford, even when it is meant to allow her freedom. And in addition, Maeve is shown to perform her mother role in such a radical way that she ends up actively resisting and fighting patriarchal-capitalistic interests. Later, in S3, although her role is relatively less inspiring, given her reduced agency as an abductee, her dignified resilience and her liberation in the finale holds a significantly emancipatory symbolism, given how she achieves freedom even after being abused and manipulated by men in so many ways, as host and as prostitute, as prisoner and as soldier. Nevertheless, if we look at the character with more sceptical lenses, there could emerge certain counterweights to the more utopian and/or critical implications. On a certain level, Maeve seems to be following Dolores’s path in the sense that she gradually assumes a violently competitive, hypermasculine notion of individual freedom: the privileged assumption that one is entitled to claim one’s individual interests regardless of what it means for others. At the least, Maeve’s decisions seem to imply that men’s (the bourgeoisie’s) weapons can and must be turned against them; that the ends justify the means. Thus, although she seems less of an extremist than Dolores thus far, Maeve, for example, does not hesitate to shoot Serac and his men in cold blood—or to mentally manipulate anyone, host or human, who is accidentally standing in the way of her search for her daughter in S2. With this in mind, we can ask: will these hypermasculine tendencies be overcome as she continues to gain self-awareness, or will she remain overdetermined by the very logics of violence that she has learned and suffered from patriarchal domination? Besides, bearing in mind Maeve’s recent alliance with Caleb, given that by the S3 finale they are left as the two revolutionary leaders after Dolores’s death, one can also ask: will this relationship be constructed in a way that reproduces gendered patterns, with one of them as a “feminised” sidekick or supporter, or will it develop in a more ambivalent and potentially subversive manner, presenting them as equal collaborators? Maeve seems to have a long journey ahead as a lead character, so we still need to wait

for these questions to be resolved—as well as for the questions that new characters like Caleb will pose.

In all these ways, the show's main revolutionary subjects, the rebellious Dolores and the resilient Maeve, allow for an ambiguous and often contradictory set of interpretations. Although *Westworld* presents a struggle of “feminist underdogs” against “patriarchal overlords,” often doing so in a self-critical, multi-dimensional and narratively subversive way, certain elements of Dolores's and Maeve's arcs seem to undermine or at least overlook the very questions that the critical allegory opens. Of course, my analysis here has mostly focused on character development and setting, but it is easy to imagine how parallel ambivalences would operate at other levels. We could ask, for example: how many contradictions emerge from the interplay between narrative and spectacle? In other words, how much of the allegorical complexity tends to be reduced *ad absurdum* in the series' constant, spectacular fight scenes? And more specifically, are S3's Terminator-like fights between Dolores and Maeve sufficiently justified by narrative or are they another means of (re)establishing women as the objects of visual pleasure? In such scenes, it often seems that their fights are designed for an implicit male gaze, in a way that resembles the sexualisation of other “masculinised” heroines in SF, like Wonder Woman, Lara Croft (from the *Tomb Raider* videogames and films) or Lieutenant Ripley (from the *Alien* film franchise). Even when Dolores and Maeve are narrative subjects with a great degree of agency, they also function as objects of visual pleasure, with their bodies being ‘offered’ for contemplation through slow motion or close ups. Besides, on an extratextual level, we could ask: how many of the contradictions derive from the context of production's (HBO's) likely pressures to introduce an easily marketable visual spectacle, regardless of narrative content? And also, how many of the contradictions are derived from a desire to exploit the show as much as possible and a willingness to, so to speak, extend the loop? Evidently, the lack of a clear answer to many of these questions would derive from this essay's primarily narrative scope, but there are indeed both textual and extratextual materials which would enable us to answer them.

3. Conclusion: Locked in a Larger Loop?

The main argument of this article has been twofold: on the one hand, that *Westworld* is clearly and self-consciously constructed as a critical allegory of real social relations. As such, the series stages (primarily but not exclusively) gender struggles, representing them through the oppositional viewpoints of female androids, and it gradually deconstructs these “coded” hierarchies through the combined use of metafictional devices and a literal narrative of revolution. On the other hand, I have been repeatedly introducing caveats: that *Westworld* is (understandably) not an unequivocally critical narrative, and that if we are to examine its allegorical *potentials*, we ought to consider too how the realisation of these critical potentials can be obstructed by elements of its visual-narrative design and its interpretative context. In short, the series is deeply critical, yet also oblique and ambiguous. Moreover, the analysis could be indeed extended by considering characters that are more secondary to the central struggle between the two female hosts and their patriarchal-Frankensteinian adversaries. To give only two suggestions, one could examine the figure of Bernard, a park technician and (unknowingly) a host who seems less in conformity with hegemonic masculinity, or that of Akecheta, the leader of *Westworld*'s “barbaric” Ghost Nation tribe, who (in episode 2x7, a spin-off entirely about him) is shown to have been the first host to awaken. Sub-narratives like these two, and multiple other elements which are equally full of

allegorical implications and ambiguities, have all remained beyond this essay's purview, but demand further study.

And what will happen to this show in the future? With further seasons ahead, it is always risky to speculate, but so far, many elements in the series point towards a loop where viewers, like hosts, remain trapped. Utopian, revolutionary promises are vocalised and/or embodied by many different characters, as well as by *Westworld's* potentially endless set of new worlds. But just as promises are repeated, they seem to be subsequently disappointed. In the series' implicit worldview, history has thus far appeared as a Gordian knot; as a Borgesian library in which exploration, although initially thrilling, can only lead into an endless repetition of simulacra. If, to a great extent, revolution has been turned into regression in the park, why should we expect this to change, given the show's repetition of its own formulas? At least so far, the show has been repeatedly crushing the utopian hopes that it produces with a restoration or a worsening of social conflicts—so one could expect *Westworld* to continue in a loop of anti-utopian cynicism. Of course, in the absence of a definitive ending, this is understandable, since the continuation of any narrative, especially of a dystopian one, would require the continuation of conflicts. Nonetheless, if I am allowed the suggestion, the series may still try and break out of its loops, elaborating more on its utopian promises so that its critical spirit does not fall into a cynical anti-utopianism. A classic like Ursula LeGuin's *The Dispossessed* has already taught us that utopias are not necessarily static narratives which propose final solutions, but that they can be (like *Westworld* is at its best), dynamically critical and self-critical, and at the same time still nurture the hope that social improvement is possible, even if hard. Hopefulness, however, is what *Westworld* seems to shy away from, at least for the moment. Will this change in later seasons? Having as of yet no definitive ending, it remains to be said. The loop still goes on.

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Notes

¹ With regards to non-academic responses to the show, Sébastien Lefait (2018) offers an interesting analysis of fan theories about *Westworld*, many of which show a high degree of speculative complexity that parallels and elaborates on the show's own narrative spirals (described as "récit complotiste").

² The notion of allegory is not explicitly employed in the recent studies of *Westworld* here considered—although one does employ the related notion of metaphor (Belton 2020)—, but I would contend that allegorical interpretation is indeed what many scholars have engaged in if we, following Fredric Jameson (2019), understand allegory as a mode of representation that is dialectically opposed to ideological reification. That is, as a representation that provokes epistemological questioning on different interpretative levels rather than foreclosing it or limiting it (see also Moretti 2020). Belton, for instance, describes *Westworld's* presumed aim as "to make clear the parallel between the protagonists' on-screen oppression and real-world systems of domination" (2020: 2).

³ Although I am focusing on those allegorical readings with a more socially critical focus, the show has also been taken as a self-reflexive allegory of its own diegetic complexity and, more broadly, of the recent narratological overcomplication of TV series and other media products (Breda 2017; Luiz Anaz 2018). Nonetheless, it should be noted that even some of the more socially oriented studies have thoroughly commented on some feedback loops between narrative self-reflexivity and social reflexivity on issues of gender: take Mullen's essay, aptly subtitled "(De)Constructing Genre and Gender in *Westworld*" (2018).

⁴ Although Suvin's study *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979) has been often criticised for supposedly prescribing a necessarily subversive aim for the SF genre, I here assume that his definition should be taken as a description of the genre's *potential*, something which is never fully realised but present in varying degrees across texts. I highlight this here because, as will become evident in my analysis, *Westworld* would appear at odds with this definition if it were taken prescriptively, since the series is, like most cultural commodities, not purely subversive but ambivalent in its real functioning.

⁵ As I explain later, the two dimensions I refer to are the Frankensteinian (which overlaps with Contreras Espuny's *Promethean myth*) and the metafictional (which has affinities to Busk's theories of ideology).

⁶ By metaleptic structure, I refer to a potentially or implicitly endless succession of metalepses (i.e. a blurring of narrative and hence 'reality' levels), which is reflected in *Westworld*'s constant play with our assumptions about who is and is not an android, for example.

⁷ Metafictional anagnorisis, as coined by Pardo (2011), refers to the climactic moment in which a character discovers his/her status as a fictional entity—found in *Westworld* everytime an android discovers their artificial condition.

⁸ Borrowing the term from Pardo (2011), I described *Westworld* as a metafictional allegory inasmuch as its characters can be taken as tokens of writers, readers, characters, etc. In my previous work, I took *The Truman Show* as exemplary in its metacinematicity (featuring directors, actors, etc. as characters)—the difference with *Westworld* being that where the former is literal, the latter is allegorical (Author 2018).

⁹ These are just two of the numerous visual quotations acutely studied by Lemmonnier-Textier and Oriez (2018).

¹⁰ I am taking the notion of hegemonic masculinity in Conell's sense (2005), as, simply put, the dominant conception of maleness within a given social environment (in this case, *Westworld*'s fictional worlds). It is important to remember that hegemonic masculinity is neither biologically determined nor fully socio-ideological in origin, but rather a dynamic construct emerging from the constant interplay of both corporeal and social.

¹¹ As is discussed later, Ford's repeated denial of the hosts' consciousness is contradicted by Ford's own secret efforts towards leading them to an awakening. In this sense, his is a profoundly ambivalent figure, standing somewhere in between the despotic, cynical patriarch and the benevolent-but-condescending father.

¹² Robert Ford is indeed a *tour-de-force* character for all those analyses interested in either or both of the show's metafictionality and philosophical musings, and most of these necessarily comment on his speeches (cf. Favard 2018; Köller 2019).

¹³ It should be noted that although the show makes abundant displays of nudity and sexual violence, it cannot be said that it aestheticises or spectacularises them, but instead treats them as part of a larger narrative, as argued at length by Campion (2018) or as illustrated by Köller (2019: 170) in relation to Dolores's rape scenes.

¹⁴ Köller (2019) elaborates at length on Maeve's efforts to reprogram herself and on Dolores's gradual embracing of more masculinised "missions," all while adopting a more androgynous look.

¹⁵ Belton (2020) notes the similarity of this ending with the anarchist-radical feminism of Valerie Solanas's *SCUM Manifesto* (2016), famous for (satirically) proposing the extinction of the male sex. However, the series seems to shy away from the radical subversiveness of taking such a stance.

¹⁶ In this line of thought, this part of the series could be taken as another self-reflexive exploration of Westerns (and the film industry), since it seems to hint at how America often appropriated samurai narratives, characters and tropes and re-set them in the West (although these inter-generic influences are likely to be more bidirectional).

¹⁷ The phrase "surveillance capitalism" has been popularised in a book by Shoshana Zuboff (2019), where she thoroughly and critically analyses the complex 'choice architectures' constructed by companies like Google, Facebook, Microsoft or Amazon,

whose business model rests on the commodification of mass surveillance data. However, the phrase should be taken with a historical caveat: “Though Zuboff’s attempt to read the founding of surveillance capitalism politically—as the act of specific people in a specific conjuncture—is admirable, it obscures [a] longer history of computation in state surveillance and its crossovers with the private sector” (Lucas, 2020: 141).

¹⁸ A metafictional epiphany is, like the corresponding anagnorisis, another of the terms proposed by Pardo (2011). Where an anagnorisis is the characters’ realisation of his fictionality, the epiphany would be the reader’s or viewer’s realisation—which in *Westworld* seems to acquire a directly appellative function (that of telling spectators that their selfhood/identity is also a “fictional” construct).

¹⁹ Although I am centring my commentary upon Dolores’s and Maeve’s arcs, Charlotte Hale could prove to be another source of fruitful questioning along similar lines: in many respects, she is an empowered female character who reproduces and performs a hegemonic masculinity.

²⁰ The character of Caleb, who is, as of season 3, still in process of (characterological) development and showing potential for subsequent transformation, seems to harbour the potential that a male character may be able to escape the behavioural loops predisposed by *Westworld*’s technologically enhanced patriarchy. In this sense, he may prove a significant subject for further analyses and re-analyses of the series.

²¹ I here use the term “Terminator-in-drag” in allusion to Lissa Paul’s notion of the “hero in drag” (1987), a female character who in practice assumes and reproduces masculinised behaviours.

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