

HBO's *Westworld*: Blood, guts and pseudo-philosophy

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HBO's critically-acclaimed science fiction drama *Westworld*, based on a 1973 film written and directed by Michael Crichton, imagines a futuristic "Old West"-themed amusement park populated by ultra-lifelike robots.

The series was created and written by husband-and-wife team Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy. Nolan, working with his brother Christopher Nolan, has written a number of long-winded and violent films in the past. His work has ranged from the truly retrograde and misanthropic (*Memento*, the *Dark Knight* films) to the merely pretentious (*Interstellar*).

Westworld is set at an unspecified point in the future when, having supposedly conquered all forms of disease and suffering—with capitalism apparently still intact—science has turned its attention to the problem of artificial intelligence. A team headed by the enigmatic Robert Ford (Anthony Hopkins) has created a hyper-realistic amusement park where guests interact with robotic "hosts." Advanced technology has given the hosts the appearance of life; they look, talk, emote and behave like real people, though they are still programmed to obey commands from their human overseers.

Wealthy patrons arrive via train to the artificial town of Sweetwater, where the hosts are designed to resemble a number of "Western" archetypes: the kindhearted farmer's daughter Dolores (Evan Rachel Wood), the brave gunfighter Teddy (James Marsden), the canny madam of the local brothel Maeve (Thandie Newton), the wanted bandit Hector (Rodrigo Santoro), etc. The guests are free to interact with the hosts as they please, while the hosts are forbidden to cause the guests any harm. Virtually without exception, the guests all choose to partake in various acts of murder, debauchery and general mayhem. Particularly sadistic

is a longtime guest identified only as the Man in Black (Ed Harris), who terrorizes virtually every character in the park.

The hosts are routinely killed, maimed, and sexually violated, only to be repaired by technicians and sent back into the park with no memory of their trauma. A software upgrade introduced by Ford causes some of the hosts to behave erratically, and a subsequent investigation by head programmer Bernard (Jeffrey Wright) reveals that the update has allowed some of the hosts to access prior memories in their databanks. Bernard begins to believe that, with the aid of memory, some of the hosts are beginning to exhibit signs of genuine consciousness.

The hosts, now able to remember their horrific treatment at the hands of the guests, plot retribution. Various plot convolutions culminate in a gala dinner, where Ford plans to unveil his new park "narrative" to his scheming board of directors. A great deal of violence erupts.

The original 1973 *Westworld* film is a fairly straightforward science fiction thriller about killer robots running amok. It's a premise well-suited to a 90-minute film. One might wonder how such a premise could be stretched out to fill an entire 10-episode television season, much less multiple seasons. The answer, for Nolan and Joy at least, is to turn the story into a plodding exercise in pseudo-philosophy where interminable monologues about the nature of reality and consciousness are punctuated with gratuitous outbursts of sex, violence and sexual violence.

To be sure, the series has drawn a great deal of critical acclaim and a large audience, becoming the most-watched first season of any HBO original series. Justifiable praise has been given to its visuals and the skilled performances of the actors. Hopkins, alternating

between tenderness and soft-spoken menace, is a pleasure to watch. Wood, seamlessly shifting back and forth between flashes of powerful emotion and flat, robotic cadence, has created a moving performance in circumstances that must be difficult for any actor. The series is visually rich, drawing the viewer in with elegant compositions and artful lighting. The music, at times sweet, at times eerie and dissonant, helps to build an atmosphere of anxiety and dread.

But to what end? Richness in form is meaningless without richness in content, and the ideas at work here are mostly conventional, misanthropic and trite. By shifting the perspective to a more sympathetic portrayal of the robots, Nolan and Joy end up condemning all of humanity.

Over and over again we see acts of torture and rape that we are told reflect the guests' "true selves"—and, by extension, our own. The one guest who shows empathy toward a host is eventually revealed to be violent and corrupt as well.

There could perhaps be something worth exploring here if Nolan and Joy made any attempt to connect the guests' apparent wealth and privilege to their cruelty inside the park. The sadistic Man in Black, for example, is apparently some sort of ultra-rich industrialist. However, the world outside the park is only referred to in the vaguest and most oblique terms. Ignoring concrete social circumstances, Nolan and Joy instead fashion an "allegorical" story in which a kind of trendy pessimism and nihilism pervades.

The story itself is convoluted but at the same time predictable. One can see the various twists coming if one assumes, as Nolan and Joy apparently do, that every character will either be the perpetrator or the victim of an act of great cruelty and betrayal. The shifting and ambiguous timeline, a result of the hosts' inability to distinguish between memory and present experience, is mostly just an irritating narrative gimmick.

On the subject of consciousness, Ford remarks at one point that, "Consciousness does not exist...Humans fancy that there's something special about the way we perceive the world. And yet we live in loops as tight and as closed as the hosts do, seldom questioning our choices, content, for the most part, to be told what to do next." The show creators should speak for themselves here.

For the hosts, their development of consciousness is entirely a journey "inward," to find their true, uncorrupted "inner voice," to mine "meaning" from their individual traumas, etc. The show attempts to use references to Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Chopin and others to give itself an air of profundity, but these are completely unsuccessful.

The connection between memory and consciousness, the way that consciousness develops through history and experience, and the relationship of consciousness to collective action are all intriguing questions that a serious artist could pursue to great effect. For Nolan and Joy, however, these are merely idle musings that serve as window dressing for the violent spectacle. One senses the limitations of the social-cultural milieu from which these artists hail. They have fashioned a work that, however well-crafted and outwardly striking, is totally hollow. Whatever temporary sensational thrill the viewer gets from watching the show inevitably fades away, unanchored, as it is, in any truthful conceptions about life or humanity.

Season 2 of *Westworld* is scheduled to air in 2018. The trailer for the second season shows, among other things, corridors filled with bloody corpses, hosts gunning down fleeing guests, and a smiling, blood-spattered Man in Black. One doubts the show creators will give up their unhealthy fixations any time soon.

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