

Searching for Sophia on our Small Screens Draft

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I Don't Want to Survive! I Want to Live!

Shall we start in the future? Say 2805. Earth is abandoned, devastated by some sort of apocalypse. Desolate. Inhabited by autonomous robots—the future's version of the walking dead. When we first encounter human beings, we're treated to another version of the walking dead. But not the rotting, putrid flesh we might expect. No, these walking dead are large, round, and soft. Like big babies. And they're not walking but sitting reclined in a chair that seems to be steering itself. A holographic screen floating inches in front of their faces. Humans, we learn, have become the most extreme form of couch potatoes. "Absolutely no reason to ever get up. No purpose. Every one of them engrossed in their video screens. Cocooned in virtual worlds" (WALL-E).

We are, of course, on board the Axiom, the autonomous space ship owned and run by Buy-N-Large and the home for the last 700 years of Earth's human remnants. And life aboard the Axiom is one large televisual nightmare, though our passengers may not recognize it as such. At least not until they are awoken to their plight by the plucky little Waste Allocation Load Lifter—Earth Class automaton. Otherwise known as WALL-E. Having discovered vegetation on Earth, WALL-E and his object of affection EVE wake the captain from his televisual slumbers, who soon longs to return home, much to the consternation of Auto, his ship's autopilot:

CAPTAIN: Out there is our home! Home, Auto! And it's in trouble! I can't just sit here and...and...do nothing! That's all I've done! That's all anyone on this blasted ship has ever done...NOTHING!!

AUTOPILOT: On the Axiom you will survive.

CAPTAIN: I DON'T WANT TO SURVIVE! I WANT TO LIVE! (WALL-E)

Who might have guessed that in some distant future we might survive but not really live. That we might become the walking dead, chained to our holoscreens. Well, perhaps Newton Minow, Chair of the Federal Communication Commission, who already in 1961 observed that while you can see a few things you'll enjoy on television, the screaming, cajoling, offending commercials and the procession of blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, and murder that makes up most of the broadcasting day constitutes a vast wasteland. Even prior to that, the implications of this vast wasteland for our mental lives was made clear by Jacques Ellul in his 1954 text *The Technological Society*. Ellul suggests that the mass media creates a continuous,

lasting, and total environment that encloses the human being within its artificial creation, holds us in thrall, and is responsible for our nervous afflictions. Ellul observes:

There is no other comparable instrument of human isolation. The radio, and television even more than the radio, shuts up the individual in an echoing mechanical universe in which he is alone....Television, because of its power of fascination and its capacity of visual and auditory penetration, is probably the technical instrument which is most destructive of personality and of human relations. (379 - 380).

The real implications of this vast wasteland, though, were first identified by Marie Winn in her 1977 book *The Plug-In Drug: Television, Children, and the Family* (revised 2002). Chapter 2 of that text is titled "A Changed State of Consciousness" and identifies the phenomenon of "television zombies." Winn draws on mothers' descriptions of their young children's behavior while watching television:

Charles settles in with all his equipment in front of the television set when he comes home from nursery school—his blanket and his thumb. Then he watches in a real trance. It's almost impossible to get his attention. He'll watch like that for hours, if I let him. (16)

My five-year-old goes into a trance when he watches TV. He just gets locked into what is happening on the screen. He's totally, absolutely absorbed when he watches and oblivious to anything else. (16 – 17)

Winn describes the phenomenon of the television zombie: "trancelike...the jaw is relaxed and hangs open slightly; the tongue rests on the front teeth (if there are any). The eyes have a glazed, vacuous look...There is certainly little indication that they are active and alert mentally" (17). Jerry Mander picks up the theme of the television zombie in his 1978 book *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, where he observes that television trains people for being zombies. The television is a machine "that invades, controls and deadens the people who view it" (158). "My kids look like zombies when they're watching" (160). He references Marie Winn's book: "It asserted that television viewing by children was addictive, that it was turning a generation of children into passive, incommunicative zombies who couldn't play, couldn't create, and couldn't even think very clearly." (163). When watching television, your mind is occupied by images that come pouring in. Your mind is neither quiet nor calm. "It may be nearer to dead, or zombie-ized" (214).

In 1984—a year befitting apocalyptic diagnoses of our televisual culture—the philosopher of technology Albert Borgmann turned to television as a paradigmatic device and the foreground of technology. In *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*, Albert Borgmann, shortly after introducing the distinction between things and devices, turns to the television, noting that "increasingly, video programs can be seen nearly everywhere—in bars, cars, in every room of a home" (43). The televisual procurement of entertainment is, Borgmann attests, the foremost foreground of technology. The attractiveness that television possesses, which Borgmann likens

to addiction, belies its tendency to prevent an idyllic childhood and a vigorous adolescence, to suffocate conversation, reduce common meals, supersede reading, and crowd out games, walks, and social occasions. Television, he suggests, is eminently in tune with the device paradigm, indeed it remains the purest, the clearest and most attenuated presentation of the promise of technology and the inevitable completion of technological culture (142).

In a world ruled by zombies and hosts, we are forced to finally start living.

Oddly, perhaps ironically, the phenomenon of televisual zombies and Borgmann's philosophical diatribe against television finds resonance with two of the most popular television shows today, AMC's *The Walking Dead* and HBO's *Westworld*. On the surface, AMC's popular zombie show would seem to be worlds apart from HBO's equally popular robot drama. The decaying and putrefying Southern flesh of *The Walking Dead* seemingly occupies a distinct universe from the gleaming surfaces of animatronic hosts populating the old west of *Westworld*. Zombies are the shambling walking dead. Whether slow or fast, they are decrepit, falling apart, used up of life, representative of the body and its failings. Robots and various sundry cyborgs, on the other hand, are products of the intellect, the mind, and representative of the gleaming, shining surface of a technological culture—the products of technoscience. Our *Westworld* hosts are regularly repurposed and reliably rebuilt following any damage.

And yet, zombies and robots share a long and complicated philosophical history that speaks to, dare we say, timeless existential riddles about our nature and place in the cosmos. At least since *I am Legend*, the ur-text of contemporary tales of vampire/zombie apocalypse, and *R.U.R.*, the ur-text of robot revolutions, we human beings have been preoccupied with visions of being displaced in a future that lacks a place for us. Furthermore, zombies and robots are joined at the hip philosophically, so to speak, in the puzzles they raise about subjectivity and consciousness. From Hershel's commitment to preserving the personhood of a barn full of zombies in *The Walking Dead* to William's defense of Dolores against the depredations of Logan in *Westworld*, zombies and robots have provoked philosophical musings about what, if anything, is distinctive about human beings and what, if anything, is going on in their and our heads.

The Walking Dead and *Westworld* share another intriguing similarity in their take on the very televisual culture that produced them, suggesting that our time spent with our screens is indeed turning us into the very walking dead they caution us against and that WALL-E holds out as our future state. The inspiration for *The Walking Dead*, Robert Kirkman's graphic novel notes on its back cover:

How many hours are in a day when you don't spend half of them watching television? When is the last time any of us REALLY worked to get something we wanted? How long has it been since any of us really NEEDED something what we WANTED? The world we knew is gone. The world of commerce and frivolous necessity has been replaced by a world of survival and responsibility. An epidemic of apocalyptic proportions has swept the globe causing the dead to rise and feed on the living. In a matter of months society

has crumbled—no government, no grocery stores, no mail delivery, no cable TV. In a world ruled by the dead, we are forced to finally start living.

Kirkman would seem to agree with the Captain of the Axiom that it's time to turn off our screens and finally start living. It's a sentiment that finds its way into *Westworld* as well. As The Man in Black tortures the host Teddy, he observes, "You know why you exist, Teddy? The world out there, the one you'll never see, was one of plenty. A fat, soft teat people cling to their entire life. Every need taken care of... except one... Purpose, meaning. So they come here" ("Contrapasso"). The Man in Black is a seeker of meaning and purpose and he thinks he can find it in a wild west world not unlike the world Rick Grimes inhabits. Both television shows seem to advocate stripping away the detritus of our media culture and getting real.

Irony or Self-Reflection?

In the worlds of *The Walking Dead* and *Westworld*, technology, and perhaps foremost television, zombifies human beings, leading to brain death. We need a zombie apocalypse or at least a wild west theme park to once again start living and find some purpose. Both television shows are preoccupied with perennial philosophical questions about subjectivity, personhood, the boundaries between the living and the dead, the place of human beings in the world, and the apocalypse and the coming of the posthuman. And, yet, of course, these are two very popular television shows, firmly ensconced in the flourishing second golden age of television. Is there perhaps a touch of irony there? Or quite possibly more than a measure of serious self-reflection?

If television in the broadcast era was guilty of transforming us into zombies, television in the post-broadcast era is perhaps concerned with plumbing the nature of that existence engendered by watching so much television. Employing a televisual metaphor, Judith/Jack Halberstam and Ira Livingston observe in their introduction to *Posthuman Bodies* that "the posthuman body is a technology, a screen, a projected image;...the human body itself is no longer part of 'the family of man' but of a zoo of posthumanities" (3). That zoo of posthumanities is well represented on 21st century television, which is preoccupied with technology, subjectivity, and the status of the human in a potential age of technological apocalypse. Beginning with what I will nominate as the founding text of the second golden age of television, Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1996 – 2003), on to his *Firefly* (2002 – 2003) (recall the Reavers) and television shows such as *Orphan Black* (2013 – 2017), *Mr. Robot* (2015 – present), *Battlestar Galactica* (2004 – 2009), *Sense8* (2015 – 2018), *Humans* (2015 – present), and many more, we've offloaded onto our still most ubiquitous technology our story-telling proclivities, compulsively rehearsing stories and myths and engendering new rituals geared to coming to terms with the technological shifts it and we are living through.¹

¹ I owe this point to my colleague and collaborator Dr. Colbey Emerson Reid, with whom I am at work on a project exploring posthuman television. Our many conversations about television have informed this essay.

The flourishing of Reavers and clones and synths, walking dead and hosts on our small screens suggests that rather than irony, our small screens might be steeped in self-reflection. We truly are searching for sophia on our small screens. Perhaps we need an alternative to the rather tropistic take on television and our screen technologies, including smart phones, that suggests they are turning us into the very zombies we are so preoccupied with on our small screens. Several alternatives are suggested in the work of media scholars, including John Fiske and John Hartley's account of television's bardic function (*Reading Television*), John Ellis' notion of television as a medium of "working through" (*Seeing Things*), and John Hartley's account of television as a transmodern teacher (*Uses of Television*). Referencing several of these accounts, Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch, adopt the model of the cultural forum. As they write:

In its role as central cultural medium [television] presents a multiplicity of meanings rather than a monolithic dominant point of view. It often focuses on our most prevalent concerns, our deepest dilemmas. Our most traditional views, those that are repressive and reactionary, as well as those that are subversive and emancipatory, are upheld, examined, maintained, and transformed. The emphasis is on process rather than product, on discussion rather than indoctrination, on contradiction and confusion rather than coherence. ("Television as a Cultural Forum" 564)

For Newcomb and Hirsch, television is a liminal realm in which "we allow our monsters to come out and play, our dreams to be wrought into pictures, our fantasies transformed into plot structures" (564). Rather than an impoverished medium that zombies the brain, Newcomb and Hirsch treat television as a dense, rich, complex, liminal medium that challenges us to work through our complex, contradictory, and confused perspectives. In this respect, they could be talking about the wild lands of Georgia and Virginia in *The Walking Dead* or the Westworld theme park. While Newcomb recognizes that television has a history and is a complex phenomenon and that its broadcast model, somewhat central to his proposal of the cultural forum, has been superseded by something (it's not yet clear what), television still has the power to function as something like a cultural forum. Newcomb himself has more recently rehearsed several models for thinking about television, from television as a cultural forum to television as a switchboard through which streams of information, power, and control flow unevenly ("Television Studies" 25), to, my own favorite, TV as the Sam's Club or the Costco of contemporary American culture ("Studying Television" 110). But whatever the model, the starting point is television as a complex medium in which complex ideas are worked through.

We in fact find support for this alternative take on television in the manner in which *The Walking Dead* and *Westworld* actively call attention to their status as televisual texts immersed in our media culture while they seemingly engage in reflection on those perennial philosophical questions. Both shows are interesting mash ups of genre television, with the DNA of the western, long a popular television genre, pervasive throughout. Both shows are immersed in the new world of television as social media and transmedia phenomena, with links to books, websites, social media, video games, even theme park experiences and pop-up experiences. *Westworld* recently featured a pop-up theme park during the South by Southwest festival. As *Wired* magazine reported, "A 40-person crew spent five weeks constructing a real-life town of

Sweetwater, a Sleep No More-style immersive theater experience in which more than 60 actors and stunt performers played the show's "hosts" and visitors played, well, visitors" (Locke). Not to be outdone, Universal Studios Theme Park now features a Walking Dead attraction:

Prepare to fight for survival in a fully immersive journey as you navigate through a world overrun by hungry walkers. Follow in the footsteps of the human survivors as you battle your way through nightmarish iconic landscapes that bring the most popular cable TV show in history to life! (Universal Studios)

The Walking Dead is notable as well for having pioneered the aftershow experience and for its two-screen Story Synch experience. As reported by that font of pop culture information, Wikipedia:

The aftershow format originated in the mid-2000s with the U.S. channel MTV's *The After Show*, and was initially conceived to accompany unscripted programs such as reality television. In the 2010s, U.S. entertainment channels began to add aftershows to their most popular scripted series, up to a point at which the *New York Post* wrote of the format having achieved a "saturation point" in 2016. An aftershow's typical format, pioneered by AMC's *Talking Dead* in 2011, is two or more people discussing a just-aired episode. This is sometimes accompanied by bonus material from the series, or special guests such as actors or creative staff.

AMC describes Story Synch as a way for viewers to immerse themselves more deeply in their favorite series. "This live, interactive experience lets you vote in snap polls, answer cool trivia questions and re-live tense moments via video clips during the *premiere* broadcast of each new episode." Increasingly, our screens are preoccupied with reflections on what we are watching on still other screens. From Story Synch to theme parks and active online communities, *The Walking Dead* and *Westworld* create opportunities for individuals to "enter" their worlds, to enter the forum, as Newcomb and Hirsh put it, and participate with television in the logic of public thought. The idea of the "forum," they note, is more than a metaphor. "In forming special interest groups, or in using such groups to speak about television, citizens actually enter the forum. Television shoves them toward action, toward expression of ideas and values" (570).

Zombies or Hosts?

Philosophy has long excluded the realm of image, myth, and narrative from its purview and philosophy's hostility toward the television, exemplified even in philosophers of technology such as Ellul or Borgmann, robs us of the opportunity to grapple with our modern myth-making machine and the narratives it routinely generates regarding our technological culture. Media studies scholar Douglas Kellner argues that television today assumes some of the functions traditionally ascribed to myth and ritual, including integrating individuals into the social order, celebrating dominant values, and offering models of thought, behavior, and gender for imitation. Whether adopting Newcomb and Hirsch's model of the cultural forum or some other model, it's clear that as the story telling animal, we have and will likely continue to turn to the

“stories” of television as part of our daily rituals of meaning making. Television is a medium the content of which is often our fraught relations to technology and our TV shows enact for us how to live with technologies. TV serves as a gateway for learning how to live with technologies.

Rather than present television viewers as ideological dupes, Newcomb and Hirsch argue that television is as important for raising questions as it is for answering them. The rhetoric of television drama is, they suggest is a rhetoric of discussion. The central point of the forum concept is that television as a whole system “presents a mass audience with the range and variety of ideas and ideologies inherent in American culture” (566). Rather than turning passive couch potatoes into slack-jawed, binge-watching zombies, television serves as a site in which we actively work through complex and sometimes contradictory ideas. Today, perhaps more than ever, television serves as a reflective medium in which the ideas we are working through concern precisely how to live with technology. Marie Winn quotes parents’ dismay at their children lost in a zombie trance while watching television. Well, perhaps the kids are contemplating our media culture future, lost in a thought or a reverie as they engage with and work through the zoo of posthumanities screened on their televisions (and increasingly their tablets and smart phones).

Here too, *The Walking Dead* and *Westworld* are intriguing for suggesting alternative takes on media culture and our techno-social condition. For all their similarities, there is a significant difference in how *The Walking Dead* and *Westworld* treat what we might call our techno-social condition. While *The Walking Dead* seemingly banishes technology from the world, eliminating any trace of television and policing the boundary between human and machine, *Westworld* focuses its attention on technology to the point that the park itself serves as an analogue for television. The hosts’ efforts to make a place for themselves in that televisual landscape address important issues related to living with technology that are ultimately obscured in *The Walking Dead*. Both shows address the place of human beings in a technological world they have made and now no longer have a secure place in. But they propose dramatically different pathways forward.

***The Walking Dead’s* Existential Threat**

The technological milieu of *The Walking Dead* is of course significantly different than that of *Westworld*, which situates its characters within a world within a world deeply shaped and textured by technology. *Westworld* seemingly delights in its disorienting shots of the eighty or more floors that lie beneath the actual theme park and keep it functioning. It offers viewers a complex vertical world whose archaeology is an archaeology of ancient and surpassed technologies. *The Walking Dead’s* world is much more horizontal, spread out among the woods and swamps of the south, littered with the detritus of a now dead or dormant technological culture. That now dead technological culture may have inadvertently been at the origins of the zombie apocalypse. Either way, it’s not a far stretch to read the zombie horde of *The Walking Dead* as the stand in for our technological culture, a relentless tide of ever advancing mindless devices that is transforming the world into a “world without mind,” to borrow a phrase from

Franklin Foer's recent book *World Without Mind: The Existential Threat of Big Tech*. Whether smart phones or zombies, we 21st century humans are facing an existential threat. The ever-pervasive flood of zombies constantly rolling through our environment may just resemble the mass of distracted teens glued to their smart phone screens mindlessly walking into traffic, water fountains, and the future. Recalling the world of WALL-E, to truly live in the world of *The Walking Dead* entails throwing off the yoke of high technology and embracing what in its latest seasons has seemed like an almost feudal, pre-industrial world. Indeed, the most recent seasons of *The Walking Dead* have featured a king, survivors dressed as comical knights, Daryl and his crossbow, saviors exacting feudal fees, and a singular stand-in for a now defunct techno-scientific culture—Eugene and his bullet-manufacturing factory.

The parallel between zombies and our digital technologies is interestingly captured in Sherry Turkle's observations of the computer. A marginal object like dreams and beasts, test objects that are interesting to "think with," Turkle observes of the computer:

It is a mind that is not yet a mind. It is inanimate yet interactive. It does not think, yet neither is it external to thought. It is an object, ultimately a mechanism, but it behaves, interacts, and seems in a certain sense to know. It confronts us with an uneasy kinship. After all, we too behave, interact, and seem to know, and yet are ultimately made of matter and programmed DNA. We think we can think. But can it think? Could it have the capacity to feel? Could it ever said to be alive? (*Life on the Screen* 22)

Taken out of context, we might not know if Turkle is referencing our latest technological gadgets or the zombie herd. Turkle observes that in treating our computers and smart phones as test objects, we are thinking through what, if anything, is distinctive about being human and how we understand the boundaries between living and dead, minds and machines. In our struggles with technology, we often revert to identifying subjectivity as essential to our humanity. As one of Turkle's young subjects observes, "When there are computers who are just as smart as people, the computer will do a lot of the jobs, but there will still be things for the people to do. They will run the restaurants, taste the food, and they will be the ones who will love each other, have families and love each other" (*Life on the Screen* 81). Here too we see a parallel in *The Walking Dead* in the glee with which the human survivors reinforce their difference with zombies by stabbing, bashing, pummeling their useless brains out in a show that reinforces their lack of subjectivity and reinforces the divide between human beings and zombies/technology.

In fearing the walking dead, what we are fearing is the slow disappearance of subjectivity and the erasure of that boundary between the living and the dead presaged by our growing dependence on digital technologies. We are fearing the idea that animated, or shall we say re-animated, the captain of the Axiom, that amidst our many devices we are merely surviving and not truly living. Turkle herself, long an advocate of technology and the digital culture, has turned decidedly less optimistic about our future with technology, mirroring a stance not unlike Albert Borgmann's. In her latest books, *Alone Together* and *Reclaiming Conversation*, Turkle argues that we are facing a crisis of authenticity, brought on by our increasing engagement with

relational artifacts that simulate human emotions and attachment and offer an easy alternative to engaging with actual human beings. Turkle suggests we are witnessing a paradigm shift from computers as neutral tools to think with, evocative objects that serve as a mirror onto which we can project, to objects that serve as relational entities that provoke engagement. This new paradigm challenges the boundary between user and object, human being and technology, and seduces human users in a way that Turkle finds transgressive and forbidding. “I once described the computer as a second self, a mirror of mind. Now the metaphor no longer goes far enough. Our new devices provide space for the emergence of a new state of the self, itself, split between the screen and the physical real, wired into existence through technology” (*Alone Together* 16).

Turkle suggests that in a computer culture predicated upon the power of simulation, our connection to reality has grown so tenuous that we no longer value real human emotional responses and we are inclined to see other people’s behaviors as a matter of simulation. We are unable today to even differentiate between authentic and simulated engagement and emotions. And in a manner resonating with Robert Kirkman’s own apocalyptic warnings, Turkle observes, “...if you’re spending three, four, or five hours a day in an online game or virtual world (a time commitment that is not unusual), there’s got to be someplace you’re not. And that someplace you’re not is often with your family and friends—sitting around, playing Scrabble face-to-face, taking a walk, watching a movie together in the old-fashioned way” (*Alone Together* 12). I can almost picture in some other televisual world, a young Carl and Sophia, huddled in the dark, distracting themselves with a good game of Scrabble.

Having envisaged our lives with technology, Turkle suggests, the times “have brought us back to such homilies” (294). In a recent piece for *Atlantic* magazine, psychologist Jean Twenge wonders, as the title of her article indicates, “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?” The iGen, she avers, may indeed be the walking dead. In taking the measure of our technological condition, for Kirkman, Turkle, Foer, *The Walking Dead*, our screen technologies may indeed be an existential threat, turning us into mindless automatons and destroying a whole generation.

These Violent Delights Have Violent Ends

While suggesting that we have to reject the rather simplistic claim, emanating for many years and from many quarters, that television is turning us into zombies, I’ve also suggested that *The Walking Dead* is steeped in our televisual and media culture, and yet it too suggests an uneasy identification between our screen technologies and zombies and the autonomous flood of gadgets and the zombie horde. It’s not difficult to read *The Walking Dead* as something of a paean to a pre-technological age in which we can engage in focal practices absent our ever-present screens. We can reclaim conversation and the good life if we simply turn our backs on technology and the media culture.

On the surface, *Westworld* seemingly agrees with this prognosis, no more so than in the manner in which all the violent delights of the show are initiated—with an image of Times Square setting off an almost viral upheaval, first in the host Peter Abernathy and then infecting

his daughter Dolores and the Sweetwater madam Maeve. Abernathy shouldn't be able to see the photograph—hosts, when shown photos of advanced technologies typically respond, “They don't look like anything to me.”—and yet the photo disturbs Abernathy and provokes him to what is referred to as an “aberrancy.” As the Friar Lawrence meme makes its way from Dolores to Maeve, our hosts awaken from their slumbering condition and attempt to throw off the yoke of their technological task masters. Their response to our media culture—represented by a photographic image of the center of our simulational culture—provokes violence and revolution. As we saw earlier, the Man in Black would seemingly confirm this take on our media culture. It's a fat, soft teat people cling too in the mistaken hopes that it will provide some meaning or purpose.

And yet *Westworld* also teaches its viewers to be careful of surface appearances. Indeed, in this regard I think we can productively read *Westworld* as a television show about how to think about and watch television. While both *The Walking Dead* and *Westworld* actively call attention to their status as television shows and engage in a self-reflective practice about watching television in an age of convergent media culture, *Westworld* strikingly serves as an analogue to our contemporary televisual situation where so much of our lives is lived on our screens. *Westworld's* preoccupation with watching is evident almost from the opening scene of the show's first episode, with its tight close-up of the host's Dolores' eye—an image which is regularly repeated throughout the first season of the series. As the camera pulls in tightly on Dolores' eye, she is questioned in a voiceover: “Have you ever questioned the nature of your reality?” There's a quick transition to a scene of Dolores waking up in her bed. *Westworld* is going to be about watching and dreaming and waking up from our dreams.

And *Westworld* is very much interested in what is being watched. It is about the televisual experience, the experience of staring at images and photos and screens for much of the day. Characters in *Westworld* spend a lot of time staring at their screens and handheld devices, talking about coding, watching the action in the theme park, thinking about their relationship to the technologies with which they are surrounded. And as a television show, it is very much about the business of television, including its aesthetics, the narrative function of television, the immersion in televisual worlds, about how to watch television today when television is part of a complicated media ecosystem. *Westworld* shows us the various parties competing to control the nature of the medium that is *Westworld*, from its creative visionary Robert Ford and his commitment to telling grand narratives that spur the self onto higher levels of reflection, to the hack writers like Lee Sizemore interested in producing grand spectacles, and the corporate types such as Charlotte Hale and Theresa Cullen, the murky figures behind the Delos Board in charge of finances and daily production. In the world of *Westworld*, we see how character actors are replaced and repurposed when new storylines demand it or when a character or storyline no longer pulls in acceptable ratings. *Westworld*, both the theme park and the television show, is about ritual, tropisms, and the search for meaning—as much as our own time spent with television is about ritual and tropism and the search for meaning.

Newcomb and Hirsh suggest that television offers us a liminal space in which “ritual and the arts offer a metalanguage, a way of understanding who and what we are, how values and

attitudes are adjusted, how meaning shifts” (“Cultural Forum” 564). This is an apt description of *Westworld* as theme park, television show, and liminal space in which we can work through our relationship with technology. The Man in Black is convinced that there is a deeper meaning behind *Westworld*, and we watch *Westworld* eagerly trying to decode its puzzles and mazes in an effort to discern that meaning. But the show intriguingly suggests, in another parallel to television and the notion of a cultural form, that that meaning is itself a product of debate over the nature of *Westworld* and perhaps the nature of our relationship to television. Where *The Walking Dead* treats technology as an existential threat, *Westworld* treats it as a source of debate. We see an active debate taking place in and on *Westworld* over how to conceptualize our relationship to technology and this struggle too mirrors our own struggle as we work to come to terms with our technological condition.

Dolores and William, Maeve and Felix

Let us return, for instance, to the Man in Black. A central conceit of the first season of *Westworld* is the mystery behind his character. Who is he? What is his place in the show? Why does he keep exacting such suffering on Dolores? As the first season unfolds, we learn that the Man in Black is in fact William, the reluctant visitor to *Westworld* and sidekick, at least at first, of Logan. William isn't initially all that enamored of *Westworld*, until he meets Dolores, and then he eventually comes to agree with Logan's assessment that *Westworld* seduces everybody eventually. William finds his salvation in Dolores but it's not to be. When Dolores' memory of her time with William is wiped and reset, she quickly moves on to other *Westworld* customers. As so often is the case, our technologies disappoint us. And so, William dons the black hat, becomes the Man in Black, and seeks to dominate and control technology. *Westworld* becomes the ultimate commodity to him, just a thing to be abused as he works out his own demons. The Man in Black flees the real world and immerses himself in *Westworld* as a form of escape. But rather than forging a relationship with his technological milieu, his technological world, he seeks to dominate it, beat it into submission, make it reveal its hidden depths and secrets. He remains aloof, separate from the technology, as he tries to bend it to his will and make it reveal its secrets. He never fully wakes up to the reality of the technology and to technology as a form of life—it stays a mere thing to be used for his own purposes, rather than having a reality of its own.

Dolores suggests a different prospect regarding our relationship to our technological culture, but it's a perspective that is perhaps equally pessimistic, especially for the place of us human beings in the world she is intent on bringing into existence. Over the course of the first season of *Westworld*, Dolores awakens to her nature as a host and to the nature of *Westworld* as a world meant not for humans but for hosts. As she tells her stalwart suitor Teddy, “It's gonna be all right, Teddy. I understand now. This world doesn't belong to them. It belongs to us.” Dolores is responsible for the death of one of the park's creators, Arnold Weber, and ultimately by the end of the season, kills its second creator, Robert Ford, unleashing an apocalypse not unlike *The Walking Dead's*. As a technology that has taken on a form of life, akin to Frankenstein's monster, Dolores' actions suggest that our built world is no longer a world which has any place

for us human beings. Dolores seemingly presages the birth of the posthuman, as she implies to the Man in Black:

They say that... great beasts once roamed this world. As big as mountains. Yet all that's left of them is bone and amber. Time undoes even the mightiest of creatures. Just look at what it's done to you. One day... you will perish. You will lie with the rest of your kind in the dirt. Your dreams forgotten, your horrors effaced. Your bones will turn to sand. And upon that sand... a new god will walk. One that will never die. Because this world doesn't belong to you or the people who came before. It belongs to someone who has yet to come. ("The Bicameral Mind")

Both the Man in Black and Dolores suggest cautionary narratives as we struggle with the meaning of our technological condition. But *Westworld* also offers us a more interesting and potentially optimistic path forward as well, in the relationship between the human Felix and the host Maeve. Felix is perhaps the most human human in *Westworld*. He spends his days in the bowels of *Westworld* laboring in Livestock Management to keep the mangled and butchered bodies of hosts functioning for another day of mayhem and murder. Day in and day out he's elbow deep in blood and guts, abused by his colleague Sylvester, laboring to maintain a theme park that he himself can't afford to visit. His life involves loops every bit as routine as the loops of *Westworld's* hosts. Felix is a mere cog working away in the subterranean levels of *Westworld* to keep it functioning. He's an everyman. But he aspires for more. He's stolen a mechanical bird and is trying to learn how to code and get it to fly. Sylvester mocks his plan.

Whoa, whoa, whoa. Is that your ace plan? You're gonna fix up a birdie and get yourself a promotion? You're not a fucking ornithologist. And you're sure as hell not a coder. You are a butcher. That is all you will ever be. So, unless you want to score yourself a one-way ticket out of here for misappropriating corporate property, you better destroy that fucking shit. Now, come on, we got another body. ("Contrapasso")

Failing to acknowledge his colleague's humanity, Sylvester simply orders Felix back to work. But Felix doesn't "destroy that fucking shit." Instead, he continues to work on his little side project. Until another project comes along. It's while he's working on his bird and getting it to fly that it alights on Maeve's finger. She's woken in the lab and ominously says, "Hello Felix. It's time you and I had a chat" ("Contrapasso").

Thus begins what Sylvester will later observe is "some weird interspecies simpatico going on" between Felix and Maeve. Maeve challenges Felix to articulate just what makes them different, grasping his hands in hers and observing, "we feel the same" ("The Adversary"). And Felix comes to see his world afresh through Maeve's eyes. While he's worked on the butchered and bloodied bodies of the hosts for years, he comes to see them differently as he walks through Livestock Management with Maeve by his side, witnessing through her perspective the atrocities he has been daily surrounded with. And he comes to acknowledge Maeve's humanity. While recognizing that Felix and Maeve had some "weird interspecies simpatico going on," Sylvester plans to "brick" Maeve, literally turning her into an unthinking material object,

objecting that “she was a fucking host. This was never gonna end another way.” But Felix isn’t party to the plan. As Maeve observes, “Turns out your friend has a little more compassion than you. He couldn’t snuff out a life just like that” (“Trace Decay”). Felix has come to recognize that she’s not a brick, but a life.

But the status of Maeve’s life is uncertain. Like Dolores, she is a host who awakens to her role as a technological object used and abused by human beings for their “narrative” pleasures. She learns her life is a lie, including her relationship to her daughter. Everything she does has been programmed into her. When Maeve sees her own thoughts and words played out on Felix’s handheld device, she initially shuts down. She can’t reconcile her memories of being at the Mariposa for ten years with her memories of being a mother. Her character begins to fragment, as she tells Felix and Sylvester: “What the hell is happening to me? One moment, I’m with a little girl in a different life. I can see her. Feel her hair in my hands, her breath on my face. The next, I’m back in Sweetwater. I can’t tell which is real” (“Trace Decay”). But as Maeve learns that her life is a story scripted by others, she comes to realize that she can begin to narrate her own story. As she so aptly puts it, “Time to write my own fucking story” (“Trace Decay”). The next time we see Maeve strolling through Sweetwater, she’s narrating events, controlling the action. Maeve comes to understand how technology is implicated in her sense of self, her nature as a host, the place she occupies in the world. She learns to code, much like Felix does, but with her bulked-up bulk apperception, she quickly learns that she can take command of the technology. She is technology as form of life.

As Maeve comes to understand how technology structures her life, she initially uses that understanding to find a way out of her technological prison. She comes to believe that every relationship she has had has been fake—with the prostitute host Clementine, with her daughter. And she tries to extricate herself from Westworld—pursuing a rebuild to remove the explosive device implanted in her spine and asking Bernard to delete the memories of her daughter. But then, just before departing Westworld, she has one last visit with Clementine and she learns from Felix the location of her daughter. When she finally has the opportunity to leave, she seemingly decides to stay and search for her daughter.

Maeve also comes to recognize and affirm Felix’s humanity, in a way that his human colleague Sylvester never fully does. When Felix is confronted with the body of Bernard and the realization that Bernard is a host, he momentarily looks at his own hands, the hands that Maeve earlier had held in her own, and doubts his own status as a “born” human being. It’s Maeve that affirms his humanity: “Oh, for fuck’s sake. You’re not one of us. You’re one of them. Now fix him” (“The Bicameral Mind”). But even in recognizing that he is one of them, Maeve recognizes he’s a terrible one of them. Shortly before she is to board the train to leave Westworld, Felix hands her information on how to locate her daughter and asks her if she is going to be okay. Maeve replies, “Oh, Felix. You really do make a terrible human being. And I mean that as a compliment” (“The Bicameral Mind”).

Felix is a terrible exemplar of a human being, at least in the world of *Westworld*, in that he is one of the few human beings to have forged a meaningful relationship with his technological

surroundings. He has awoken to his technological condition and has learned to care for technology, whether the bird he teaches to take wing or Maeve, the host hell bent on telling her own story. But in turn, Maeve's story can only be told with the recognition and help she has received from Felix. It's clear from Felix and Maeve that the story they are writing is jointly authored, that there is indeed some weird interspecies simpatico going on. That same weird interspecies simpatico could characterize our own relationship to *Westworld*, to television, and to our technological condition.

Searching for Sophia on Our Small Screens

Can we find sophia on our small screens? *The Walking Dead* might suggest not. One of the most poignant scenes in the first two seasons of *The Walking Dead* occurs when Carol and her daughter Sophia are reunited after a long separation. Tragically, Sophia has already turned and Rick Grimes has to put a bullet in her head. As Carol works to come to terms with the death of her daughter, she says to Daryl and Lori: "That's not my little girl. It's some other... thing. My Sophia was alone in the woods. All this time, I thought. She didn't cry herself to sleep. She didn't go hungry. She didn't try to find her way back. Sophia died a long time ago" ("Nebraska").

At least on our small screens, sophia died a long time ago. Maeve might beg to differ, though. She's more intimately familiar with death, having died multiple times in order to make her way back to Felix and her eventual freedom. As she says to Sylvester: "You think I'm scared of death? I've done it a million times. I'm fucking great at it. How many times have you died?" ("Trumpe L'oeil"). Despite her many deaths, Maeve keeps returning. One might say, she persists. Maeve of course is technology come to life, technology as a form of life, as Langdon Winner suggests, in *The Whale and the Reactor*. Winner encourages us to wake from our technological somnambulism and recognize that our technologies are powerful forces acting to reshape human activity and meaning (6). Both Maeve and Felix are experiencing awakenings, as Leonardo Nam, the actor who plays Felix, perceptively observes in a comment to awardsdaily.com.

There are awakenings that are happening, that's one thing that's running through our storyline. Maeve is starting to wake up, my character is starting to wake up. As she wakes up, I'm like the audience. I'm waking up, too. For Maeve, there is a new kind of relationship that she's experiencing with me. Previously, she's only been programmed to deal with death or deal with being in diagnostic mode. But me, I'm an 'other.'

By entering into a relationship with one another, Felix and Maeve are able to awaken to the technological conditions of their lives. Their weird species simpatico could perhaps serve as a model for how we might think about our own relationship with the technological forms of life we have surrounded ourselves with. As Nam notes, Felix is like us, the audience. Rather than struggling to reinforce the boundaries between human beings and technologies, as Carol and Rick and Daryl do, or as the Man in the Black and Dolores do, perhaps we can tell a different story about the future aboard the Axiom in which we've acquired a measure of sophia from our

small screens and entered into a fruitful and productive relationship with our technologies, including of course our televisions.

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