

## **Westworld: Ideology, Simulation, Spectacle**

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It is not only that Hollywood stages a semblance of real life deprived of the weight and inertia of materiality — in late capitalist consumerist society, “real social life” itself somehow acquires the features of a staged fake, with our neighbours behaving in “real” life like stage actors and extras ... Again, the ultimate truth of the capitalist utilitarian despiritualized universe is the dematerialization of “real life” itself, its reversal into a spectral show.”<sup>1</sup>

A smiling face with a microphone is looking into the camera, addressing the audience. We are watching an advertisement; the product being pitched is a vacation, “the vacation of the future — today.”<sup>2</sup> The spokesman tells us about Delos, a high-tech amusement park and resort that offers the guest an immersion into a meticulously recreated “world” of the past, with the options of Roman World, Medieval World, and — “of course” — Westworld. Our pitchman solicits testimonials of guests who have just come from a stay at the park. The first is fresh from Westworld: “When you play cowboys and Indians as a kid, you’d point your fingers and go ‘bang bang’ and the other kid would lie down and pretend dead. Well, Westworld is the same thing — only it’s for real!” The man then tells us, with alarming glee: “I shot six people!” The pitchman calmly explains that the guest has actually shot six highly sophisticated androids, amenities of the park designed to look, sound, and bleed just like human beings. “They may have been robots,” the guest confirms, “I think they were robots...I mean, I *know* they were robots.” For the second testimonial, the best thing about Roman World is “the men”; she describes it as “a warm, glowing place to be.” The third endorsement has come from a stint as the “sheriff” of Westworld. When asked if the experience seemed “real,” he responds: “It’s the realest thing I’ve ever done.”

That Michael Crichton’s 1973 film *Westworld* begins with an advertisement is oddly appropriate, not only because it evokes Adorno’s claim that every product of the

culture industry “becomes its own advertisement,” but also because it immediately establishes the film’s central motif: the dialectic of reality and simulation.<sup>3</sup> It is likely that the ostensibly authentic testimonials are actually paid actors reciting prepared lines, but we are led to believe (by the advertisement) that these volunteers chosen at random have spontaneously offered their reviews immediately after a spell at the resort. The promotion is certainly compelling, but upon scrutiny it cannot possibly sit right. Did the production crew show up at an airport and wait around for perfectly articulate, satisfied customers to come along at just the right time in the pitch? The game is up, if we are not already hoodwinked, when the spokesman turns, raises his voice, and asks: “What do you think, folks, was it worth a thousand dollars a day?” and we suddenly see a crowd of enthusiastic people answering in the affirmative. The advertisement for an amusement park that insists so forcefully on its “reality” and authenticity is itself hopelessly contrived and phony, as all advertisements are, and the only possible way not to notice this is to mistake an obvious façade for reality. The advertisement is therefore the perfect introduction to the resort: one counterfeit production trying to sell us another. It is also remarkable that the film begins with what is unambiguously a *commercial* for the amusement park; no character in the film is watching the advertisement — it is addressed *to the audience of the film itself*. Pointing at the camera, the spokesman tells us that, at Delos, “you get the choice of the vacation you want.” It is as though the audience of the film is being sold, not the film, but the vacation. We can even imagine that, if only for a brief time, one might fail to realize that the film has actually started — perhaps this is only another ad one has to sit through before the movie. The opening credits begin only after this initial sequence.

This year (2016), HBO is returning to *Westworld* and producing a series based on its central concept. It is thus an opportune time for critical theory to rediscover this film as well. Though over forty years old, it illuminates (however inadvertently) many of the problems that confront a critical analysis of capitalist society in the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first: the ontological and normative status of “reality” as opposed to illusion under the ubiquity of the virtual, the limits of ideology critique in the era of simulation, and the implications of increasingly “spectacular” social relations. Even more interestingly, more contemporary films which more obviously and self-consciously concern these issues (*The Matrix*, *The Truman Show*) do not capture the cultural logic in question as forcefully as *Westworld*. In a sense, Crichton’s film is a prophetic cultural document evocative of tendencies that were only nascent at the time of its production, something of an omen for political-cultural phenomena that would only later be fully articulated in theory. In what follows, I attempt to trace these phenomena as expressed in

*Westworld* and correlate them to three related but distinct moments in critical theory: the early notion of “false consciousness,” Baudrillard’s theory of the “hyperreal,” and Slavoj Žižek’s insight into “spectacular reality.”

The three “worlds” that make up the Delos amusement park have been “re-created” with precision “down to the smallest detail.”<sup>4</sup> The purpose of the resort is not the vicarious nostalgia that comes with visiting medieval castles or western “ghost towns,” but the opportunity to exist, temporarily, in a refurbished world. It promises the ability to “relive” the height of decadent imperial Rome, courtly twelfth century Europe, or the lawless American frontier of the 1880’s. As the guest, you leave your clothes and belongings in a locker to be retrieved upon exiting the resort. You leave your old life behind for a limited period of time and immerse yourself in a synthetic “old west” or “imperial palace” (notwithstanding one guest’s anachronistic eyeglasses). In *Westworld*, the primary setting of the film, one gets a real gun and holster, a cowboy hat, and spurs. The food, whiskey, and rustic accommodations are all realistic. There are barroom fights, bank robberies, and jailbreaks. There is a colorful cast of predictable old west characters to interact with — all uncannily lifelike androids: a crusty hotel bellhop, a maternal hotel proprietress, a terse bartender, a sheriff, and a madam. One can even have sex with a robotic prostitute.<sup>5</sup>

The inability of the guests — and, by extension, the audience — to distinguish reality from spurious reproduction is introduced immediately (the first “testimonial” and the opening sequence in general) and is revisited almost ad nauseam. Early on, what we initially perceive as the camera flowing by stretches of terrain is revealed, through a zoom, to be a reflected image in a character’s sunglasses. When we meet the film’s two protagonists, Peter and John (Richard Benjamin and James Brolin), they are discussing *Westworld*’s authenticity, the skeptical and curious Peter directing questions to John, a repeat visitor. When the two men are greeted by attendants transporting them to the park, Peter is unsure if they are robots or not; “probably,” says John. A similar exchange occurs when they encounter the android prostitutes: “Are those two girls *machines*?” “Now how can you say a thing like that?”<sup>6</sup>

*Westworld*, as well as the other attractions of Delos, represent the most successful kind of imitation: one that has become, for all intents and purposes, indistinguishable from the real. It is not that the resort is literally mistaken for the actual bygone worlds to which it corresponds, but that it cannot be called “fake” insofar as the quality and experience of the copy are identical to the original; Peter cannot tell if he is having sex with a person or with a machine — is he having “fake” sex? It is this essential factor that makes the resort a simulation in Baudrillard’s sense and not simply a replica: “[P]retending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact; the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary.’”<sup>7</sup> The occasional reminder that the entire thing is a charade (John: “It may look rough, but it’s still just a resort”) is offset by more frequent remarks about its “reality” or authenticity. Peter

confesses at one point: “I almost believe all of this.” John’s reply cuts right to the heart of the film: “Why not? It’s as real as anything else.” That Westworld is not “really” the old west does not seem to matter, or else it is forgotten. The park is selling much more than amusement; it is selling an immersive escape into a false world that blurs into a true world, into a “virtual reality.” For a price, one can bracket the real world and live the simulation. It is not difficult to understand the appeal of Delos. As the daily life of contemporary capitalist society becomes increasingly bland and monotonous, administered and uniform, the excitement and escape offered by the exotic simulated worlds is irresistible, and for this reason almost “believable.” We know that Peter is a lawyer from Chicago; we are unsure of John’s profession or of the nature of their relationship. But we can assume that they live typically mundane professional lives, with enough disposable income for Delos but not enough imagination for anything but flat conversation. It is no wonder that for the third testimonial, “a stockbroker from St. Louis,” his stay in Westworld felt like the “realest” time in his life, even while it was actually, to be sure, the most systematically contrived and fabricated.

The imitation-cum-reality aspect of the ersatz worlds also feeds on fantasies and childish fixations. Westworld in particular aims to bring childhood play to life — recall the first testimonial who likens the park to a “real” version of his boyhood “cowboys and Indians” game. We can also see John reading a copy of a dime-store western novelette, “The Brimstone Kid.” This juvenile regression is juxtaposed with the more sinister, adult themes of the park. Recall here the second testimonial’s not-so-subtle allusion to her sexual gratification. In all three worlds, there seems to be a delight not only in unhindered sexual abandon but also in violence. The resort is something of a playground of aggression. It is part of the “amusement” of Westworld to murder others in arbitrary, pointless saloon disputes. In a key scene, our heroes encounter The Gunslinger (Yul Brynner), an android seemingly designed for no other purpose than to provoke classic “old west” shootouts. When the robot taunts Peter, John is overly anxious to see his friend in a duel. “Go on,” he says, “*kill him.*” Peter fires at the Gunslinger several times and produces large amounts of blood. “Pretty realistic, huh?” says John. Of course, both men know that the confrontation was only imaginary and that the violence is without any real consequence. Peter has killed an android, not a person.<sup>8</sup>

This brings us to a key aspect of the resort (and the film): it offers a safe and controlled version of dangerous and unforgiving situations. The brutality of the real worlds to which the resort corresponds is neutralized, whitewashed, made harmless, sterilized. You are a cowboy and not a penniless prospector, a king and not a serf, a noble and not a slave. No one would visit Westworld if it meant being a malnourished prostitute; Medieval World would be deserted if one had to actually till the fields. Insofar as the amusement park is designed for amusement, the advertised “immersion” into another world is not so much an immersion into the world alleged as an immersion into the glossy caricature of these worlds as seen in Hollywood films

and Arthurian legend (only with more explicit sex and violence). The very word “gunslinger” is in fact a creation of western movies and was not used in the nineteenth century. The “recreation” promised by Delos is therefore disingenuous in at least two respects: what is “recreated” is not the old west or imperial Rome “as it really was,” but 1) as it appears in mollifying fantasies fed by folklore and sugarcoated media, and 2) in a completely controlled environment in which one cannot be harmed. This must necessarily collapse the “real” or “almost believable” dimension at play, but no effort is made to conceal this particular infidelity to the authenticity of the park. On the contrary, upon arrival an overbearing voice on an intercom tells us that “nothing can go wrong.” “There’s no way to get hurt,” John assures Peter, “Just enjoy yourself.” Beyond the dramatic irony given the ending of the film, this constant reassurance of safety — of the true lack of a threat in the officially threatening worlds they have chosen to visit — underlines the guests’ expectation of comfort and security, the standard of convenience and well-being that goes without saying for anyone able to afford a vacation at Delos.

The interplay of reality and deceptive appearance, so visible in *Westworld*, is a familiar trope of the strain of critical theory that focuses on the critique of “ideology.” There is no one way of understanding this concept or the terms of its examination and evaluation.<sup>9</sup> In one interpretation, ideology names the systematic organization of cultural, social, and political symbols that serves to legitimate and/or sustain the present relations of production and exchange; for Althusser it is “an imaginary ‘representation’ of individuals’ imaginary relation to their real conditions of existence,”<sup>10</sup> and needs “state apparatuses” in order to function. In other conceptions, ideology is a nexus of false appearances that conceals some more fundamental reality or truth. It is a kind of smokescreen that masks the violence, exploitation, oppression, and ecological devastation upon which the system is based. This system can perpetuate itself, according to this model, because it keeps our gaze focused on the ideology and away from the real. W.F. Haug captures this moment: “[D]omination over people is effected through their fascination with technically produced artificial appearances.”<sup>11</sup> The world of capital can maintain its contradictory mode of operation only insofar as it maintains what Guy Debord calls its “monopoly of appearance.”<sup>12</sup> It is in this framework that a notion like “false consciousness” gains currency and meaning. Marx’s discussion of “commodity fetishism” in *Capital*, arguably the *locus classicus* of ideology critique, is a bit different. When a commodity appears in circulation, the labor embodied in it disappears, recedes, is forgotten; what is essentially a product of labor and of the relationship between persons “takes on the fantastic appearance of a relation between things.” In other words, the encounter of the commodity divorced from any reference to its production *obscures the reality* of this production; this mystification is not the result of an intentional or accidental obfuscation of the truth, but a “spontaneous” and necessary result of the logic of the commodity form under capitalism.<sup>13</sup> As later commentators like Rahel Jaeggi have pointed out, fetishism is not

simply false, but “necessarily false” — or, in Adorno’s oft-quoted phrase, “both true and false.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, capital has produced a system in which the mystification of fetishism takes on a peculiar kind of “truth.”

No matter what the schema, ideology critique thematizes the relationship between appearance and reality insofar as it pertains to the conditions for the possibility of the reproduction of capitalism.<sup>15</sup> Its key phrase is “as if.” To quote Haug again: in ideology, “[people] experience their existence in [capitalist] society *as if* it were an apolitical natural state.”<sup>16</sup> This description would hold to varying degrees for Gramsci’s discussion of “hegemony,” Lukács’s “reification,” and Horkheimer and Adorno’s “culture industry.”<sup>17</sup> Essential to all of these conceptions is the idea that insofar as ideology has a causally efficacious role in the reproduction of a society (and is therefore materially embodied), ideology is “real” in a decisive sense. Existence is not actually apolitical, but it is actually experienced “as if.” As Althusser says, ideology is both an illusion that conceals reality and an *allusion* to its character.<sup>18</sup>

We have discussed the appeal of Delos as an escape for the clientele, a temporary (and privileged) release from their dreary realities into a fantastic dreamlike world, supplemented by the acting out of childish fantasies and violent, sexual urges (the relationship between political repression and the insights of psychoanalysis has been explored at great length — Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization* is among the best). We have also analyzed the duplicitous nature of the resort, which goes to great lengths to appear authentic and to camouflage its obvious forgery. The “reality” of the park, from a certain perspective, amounts to a systematically manufactured illusion, an organization of symbols designed to produce a dissembling appearance. This is made evident when we visit the cold and sterile underbelly of Delos, the “control room,” the computerized apparatus that supports its daily functioning. Out of sight of the guests, every action of the androids is puppeteered and all aspects of the park are supervised (the resort is something of a panopticon — they are always watching). The dead refuse is swept away underground clandestinely at the end of the day. The world is controlled from beneath by unseen forces behind the scenes, but we see only the appearance. (Strangely enough, Peter himself is “activated” (he wakes up) at the same time as the rest of the resort.) As critical theory says of the ideological relations of capitalist society, the guests of Westworld are kept at a comfortable distance from the reality of what is happening: the waste produced by the park is made invisible, all actions are without real consequence, security and stability are assured. Forces that are not immediately observable sustain both the illusion and its pretense to reality, “as if” the park ran on its own as a “natural state.” The *telos* of this apparatus is reproduction — the reproduction of the park from the point of view of the realization of profit. Yet the “illusions” of the park, like ideology, are not simply and strictly “false” or “fake.” We have asked questions like this: is Peter’s sex with the mechanical prostitute “unreal”? Is the liquor served in the saloons “false liquor”? Are the bar brawls mere imaginings? Ideology has a certain material reality even if it is, to a greater or lesser

extent, a mystification. Delos is “still just a resort,” but it is “as real as anything else.”

The matter is even more complicated than this, however, and the deceptive appearance/troubling reality distinction has its limits as a critical tool in examining the cultural logic of capitalism — and in analyzing *Westworld*. Earlier we evoked this distinction made by Baudrillard: a simulation is not merely something false masquerading as real, but that which dissolves the line between real and false. For Baudrillard, the semiotic phenomenon most characteristic of contemporary capitalist society is not a false representation of the real (even one which is nevertheless “real in a sense”), but a representation without a corresponding referent, “the generation of models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.”<sup>19</sup> Although Delos is at least some kind of mystification, it is not exactly an “appearance” of something real. It is Baudrillard’s “pure simulacrum”: a simulation without a simulated, a mask without a face behind it. What is being recreated is itself an imaginary world (the west of old movies and the medieval castles of folklore) and not reality. In other words, what is being recreated was never really a creature. And, as mentioned above, its virtue as a simulation is that it challenges the very distinction between real and unreal, between ideology and reality. The guests of *Westworld* know that they are only taking a vacation in a high-tech amusement park, but to a certain extent they are unable to tell what is flesh and what is synthetic — “that’s the beauty of this place,” says John, “It doesn’t matter.” He is right, but traditional critical theory would interpret his comment in this way: it does not matter if the bartender is a human or an android — he still serves drinks. This happens to such an extent that the guests’ discriminating sense of “reality” falters and the playacting becomes real for them (“I almost believe all this,” “it’s the realest thing I’ve ever done”). But Baudrillard would read John’s remark differently: the inability to distinguish between factitious representation and genuine article is a non-issue because *the representation refers to no genuine article*. Delos should advertise itself, then, not as a model of a past world, but as pure fantasy, a hyperreal, simulation.

In a well-known analysis, Baudrillard calls on Borges’s image of the cartographers of an empire who make a map so meticulously detailed that it covers its territory completely, eventually wearing and decomposing such that vestiges of the real landscape appear beneath the tatters of the copy. Baudrillard first inverts the story: today, it is the real that copies the copy, and it is the former that is in a state of disintegration. He then suggests that even this inversion is misleading, as it supposes a clearly enough defined division between the original and the imitation.<sup>20</sup> On first inspection, Delos is an illusion draped over reality — the map covering the territory, though not without cracks and fissures. On another level, *Westworld* is the world, and that which is outside of it (“it’s just a resort” — real life is elsewhere) is rendered irrelevant or is rapidly dissolving. Finally, any declaration about the inauthenticity or quasi-reality of the park becomes a non-sequitur — “it’s as real as anything else.”

About halfway through the film, something unsettling begins happening at Delos.

The “failure and breakdown rate” of the androids begins to rise above expected and anticipated levels. In an interesting scene, the technicians of the park discuss this development. They are unable to pinpoint the cause of the rise in malfunctions, which are becoming increasingly “central” rather than “peripheral,” and liken the new wave of breakdowns to “an infectious disease process” — a “disease of machinery.” The chief technician worries about the resort’s ability to stabilize and maintain “homeostasis.” Then something even more peculiar begins happening. Rather than simply malfunctioning, the androids begin to stop following programming. A robotic rattlesnake strikes and bites John (he is furious — “that’s not supposed to happen!”), and a buxom maidservant in Medieval World (“a sex model”) refuses the advances of a guest. Despite these troubling incidents, the management of Delos decides against closing the resort, citing the compelling argument: “Everything’s fine.”

Then, suddenly, the simulated world breaks down completely. The artificial characters of the amusement park go berserk — or, rather, they begin acting as *they would in real life*. The violent reality of the worlds supposedly depicted creeps in. A guest in Medieval World is stabbed to death in a swordfight with “the black knight.” John is shot and killed, and Peter is chased by The Gunslinger. The all too cruel truth behind the illusion — or, rather, the ostensible “real” short-circuited by the simulation — comes to life and hunts him down. It is at this point that he discovers the “underworld” of the park as he is chased from one world to another, finally managing to subdue his attacker in a medieval dining hall.

The constitutive instability of the capitalist system is another familiar theme in the critical literature, as is its tendency to withstand this instability by virtue of ideological integration. In the twentieth century, critical attention shifted from the production of capitalism to its reproduction, its ability to maintain equilibrium despite internal antagonisms and contradictions (the chief technician at Delos is worried about “homeostasis”), which we have touched upon already. Theories of ideology are attempts at understanding how a system based on exploitation and domination manages to sustain and reproduce itself.<sup>21</sup> The collapse of the capitalist mode of production — the breakdown of its ability to reproduce itself — must then be concomitant with an ideological collapse, and with the disintegration of the “monopoly of appearance” discussed above (or, in the case of Baudrillard’s analysis, with the revelation that the simulation refers to nothing). This is what happens, in a certain sense and to a certain extent, to Peter and the other guests in *Westworld*. The insulated, protected, and predictable world they have invested in ceases to function in the desired and expected way. They are unable to account for unforeseen deviations in the system (“That’s not supposed to happen!”). The actual violence of the worlds supposedly represented by Delos is revealed, along with the automated system that clandestinely controls it.

There is something unique about the situation presented in this film, however, something that distinguishes it from other (superficially) thematically similar pieces

like *The Truman Show* and *The Matrix*. Here, the intrusion of reality which destroys the ideology is *the very realization of the ideology itself*. It is not some truth hidden behind the fantasy that bursts through and destroys it, but rather the dreamlike fantasy itself that becomes a living nightmare. The medieval knight *really* wields his sword; the Gunslinger no longer loses every duel. We could even say that the androids do not “malfunction”; the problem is that they begin functioning too well. The guests are not exactly “disillusioned”; the frightening, terrible thing is precisely that their illusion is consummated. What we have described as the dialectic of reality and simulation in *Westworld* comes to an end here, and it is at the same time this moment of analysis which represents the most innovative form of the critique of ideology.

The best representative of this form is Žižek, and it is succinctly expressed in his *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. In taking up Badiou’s concept of “the passion for the real,” he argues that, in late capitalist culture, this passion manifests itself in a peculiar and contradictory way:

[T]he fundamental paradox of the “passion for the Real” [is that] it culminates in its apparent opposite, in a *theatrical spectacle* [...] If, then, the passion for the Real ends up in the pure semblance of the spectacular *effect of the Real*, then, in an exact inversion, the “postmodern” passion for the semblance ends up in a violent return to the passion for the Real.<sup>22</sup>

His focal point of discussion here is the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001, and the interpretation according to which this event represents a calamitous intrusion of “the real” into a culture of appearance and illusion. In Žižek’s view, this interpretation misses something crucial. He points out that the hideous violence of the attacks is intimately familiar to us *qua spectacle* from both Hollywood disaster movies and from documentary footage of “third world” atrocities. This ubiquitous violence, our voyeuristic consumption of which is a manifestation of our “passion for the real,” only shows itself to us as an image on film and television screens; the “real” is thus made spectacular and it is this spectral image of the real for which we are “passionate.” In other words, the “theatrical spectacle” meant to embody the real is actually designed to keep the real at a safe distance. The World Trade Center attacks, then, represent the calamitous intrusion of appearance into reality and not vice-versa:

We should invert the standard reading according to which the [World Trade Center] explosions were the intrusion of the Real which shattered our illusory sphere: quite the reverse — it was before the WTC collapse that we lived in our reality, perceiving Third World horrors as something which was not actually part of our social reality, as something which existed (for us) as a spectral apparition on the (TV) screen — and what happened on September 11 was that this fantasmatic screen apparition

entered our reality. It was not that reality entered our image: the image entered and shattered our reality.<sup>23</sup>

Žižek's analysis of September 11 and "the passion for the real" captures the cultural-political phenomenon that, in my reading, is thematized and made explicit in *Westworld*. The key feature of the prevailing ideological system is not a false representation of a concealed reality, or a simulated appearance with no underlying referent (although these are still important facets — just as they are at Delos), but rather a reality *made into a spectacle and thus deflated as a reality*. Just as in *Westworld* or *Roman World*, our affluence and comfortable distance enables us to vicariously experience devastating situations without really being involved in them and with none of the consequences, be it in violent films and television, documentary evidence of atrocities "elsewhere," or video games designed to simulate real-life wars. Put differently: we get to be in the world without really being in the world. This powerful ideological haze breaks down when what we are only able to understand as a spectacular simulation boomerangs and asserts itself in our reality, as when terrorists crash a plane into the World Trade Center or when someone opens fire at a movie theater during a screening of the latest superhero film. In yet other words: the moment of greatest trauma is not when the simulation breaks down, but when the simulation becomes real. The Delos amusement park poses a threat and becomes a catastrophe only when its promise of authenticity is fulfilled. As the guests, we wanted to experience an authentic reality — but in a controlled and disinfected way, as a playground for our childish fantasies and obsessions, the potential danger involved in the situation carefully neutralized. As Žižek says: "The problem with the twentieth-century 'passion for the Real' was not that it was a passion for the Real, but that it was a fake passion whose ruthless pursuit of the Real behind appearances was *the ultimate stratagem to avoid confronting the Real*."<sup>24</sup> This is precisely an ideological moment because the spectacular dissociation and deflation of this reality serves to reproduce the very system that generates it.

It is impossible to assign a date to the ideological developments under discussion here; we cannot say that the form analyzed by Baudrillard became dominant in such-and-such year or that Žižek's "deflation" hypothesis is only relevant after the advent of video games or the internet. It is nevertheless remarkable that *Westworld* illustrates what I have called the most innovative moment of this theme as early as 1973, decades before other less complex and more popular reality/appearance fables (*The Truman Show*, *The Matrix*). It does so better than any film to my knowledge. We have gone from a "monopoly of appearances" that conceals the real, to a "hyperreal" of representations with no corresponding reality, to a "spectacular real" the actualization of which represents the most dangerous calamity, and *Westworld* has followed us every step of the way — or, rather, we have followed it. My claim about these aspects of the film is not about authorial intent or some epistemic privilege of the 1970's. If Crichton's movie represents the ideological complexity of the political-cultural present, it does so "spontaneously."

At the very end of the film, after Peter has defeated The Gunslinger, he hears the soft whimpers of a young woman pleading for help from the Medieval World dungeon. Like a true chivalric hero, he unties her and carries her to safety. When he tries to give her water, however, the circuitry inside of her mouth cracks and fizzes. She is an android. Peter backs away and looks on with silent horror. We have said more than once that one of the constitutive factors of Delos is that it confuses the distinction between reality and counterfeit, between true and false. Its threat may be more than this: it may destroy the ability to experience any reality whatsoever. After slaying The Gunslinger, Peter thinks that his ordeal is over and that he has survived relatively unscathed; everyone else is either dead or a robot run out of power. But the encounter with the mechanical damsel in distress is the most traumatic of all. She represents not only the completed dissolution of his ability to distinguish between what is imposture and what is real, even after the amusement park is completely broken down and the live threat overcome, but the recognition that the pervasiveness of dissimulation may have permanently disintegrated his sense of reality. This encounter, I fear, illustrates the crisis that a critique of ideology faces today: that as the spectacle, or the “monopoly of appearance,” or the “hyperreal” becomes more ubiquitous and overwhelming, our ability to interpret and incorporate real events (like the Trade Center attacks or the Aurora theater shootings) in all of their trauma and tragedy will gradually wither and diminish. They become just another spectacular series of images, like our slasher films or gangster video games. Our sense of the real may be irrevocably damaged, and it is possible that no event is capable of returning it. As this process of deflation continues, it is not only catastrophic events like September 11 that lose their urgent sense of reality, but even the mundane experiences of everyday life. Žižek again offers a helpful formulation: “What happens at the end of this process of virtualization... is that we begin to experience ‘real reality’ itself as a virtual entity.”<sup>25</sup> We no longer experience the simulation as real; we experience the real as a simulation. Peter’s final, chilling experience confirms what John said about Delos earlier in the film: “It’s as real as anything else” — that is, not at all.

One of the bittersweet pleasures of *Westworld* is to observe that what goes on *before* the robots malfunction and start killing is actually more disturbing than what goes on after. No one seems to notice the despicable nature of the park: the sheer delight in random violence and coercive sex, the disingenuous hypocrisy of a “meticulous recreation” that suspends its authenticity wherever it counts, and the prospect of forming a relationship with a person who just might not be a person. There is something altogether sinister, and yet not at all unfamiliar, about this simulated world where childish fantasy is allowed free reign, where one can experience violence without being in real danger, and where the entire spectacle assumes the air of reality — or, even more, when it effects the erasure of a meaningful divide between the real and the spectacular. The first half of the film is more disturbing not only because of the dramatic irony in knowing the second half, but because it cannot help but remind

us of ourselves. This film is much more than another “cautionary tale” about the dangers of technology, and, whatever his intentions, more than a vehicle for Crichton to explore “chaos theory.” It is rather an apologue for the multi-faceted ideology that sustains our present way of life. *We are living in Westworld*. We must be dimly aware, just as the guests at Delos are, that our stay is temporary, and, perhaps, not as safe as proclaimed. Yet we are seduced by the siren song of the commercial spokesman who speaks to us at the beginning of the film; it is a “warm, glowing place to be” and we “almost believe it.” We know that the advertisement is itself phony, and that the smiling face with a microphone looking into the camera is only an actor. But if this knowledge is too burdensome — “Boy, have we got a vacation for you!”

## Notes

1. Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002) 13-14.
2. All film quotes are from *Westworld*, directed by Michael Crichton (MGM, 1973).
3. Theodor Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered," trans. Anson G. Rabinbach, in *The Culture Industry*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991) 100.
4. Although contemporary English is still spoken in both Medieval World and Roman World.
5. It is unclear, and never alluded to in the film, what would attract women guests to Westworld.
6. The mechanics of this sexual encounter are left to the viewer's imagination. In any case, the impersonal, transaction-like quality of prostitution is compounded, exemplified by the terrifying moment when the cybernetic courtesan mechanically opens her eyes during the act.
7. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, Michigan: U of Michigan, 1994.) 3.
8. The "plot holes" of this film are many. We are told that the firearms have "sensing devices" that prevent them from firing on anything "with a high body temperature." This is to prevent the guests turning their guns on one another. But why is this device not also installed on the guns of the androids? Even more, why give the androids live ammunition in the first place?
9. For an anthology of perspectives, see *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Žižek (New York: Verso, 1994).
10. Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (New York: Verso, 2014) 181.
11. W.F. Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*, trans. Robert Bock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) 45.
12. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. anonymous (Detroit: Black & Red Press, 1983) 12.
13. See Karl Marx, *Capital Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1976) 163-177. See also in Marx: "All the notions of justice held by both the worker and the capitalist, all the mystifications of the capitalist mode of production, all capitalism's illusions about freedom, all the apologetic tricks of vulgar economics, have as their basis the form of appearance...which makes the actual relation invisible, and indeed presents to the eye the precise opposite of that relation." *Capital Volume One*.
14. Rahel Jaeggi, "Rethinking Ideology," trans. Eva Engels, in *New Waves in Political Philosophy*, ed. Boudewijn de Bruin and Christopher F. Zurn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 68, 66.
15. This theme shows up as recently as David Harvey's *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*, where "perhaps the most important contradiction of all" is "that between reality and appearance in the world in which we live" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 4.
16. W.F. Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics* 98.
17. See: Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971) 83-222. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 5-14. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983) 94-136.
18. Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 181.
19. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 1.
20. *Simulacra and Simulation* 1-2.
21. This kind of analysis is already present in a nascent form in Marx. See *Capital*, 711-724.

22. Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 9-10.
23. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 16.
24. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 24.
25. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 11. See also: “[T]he dialectic of semblance and Real cannot be reduced to the rather elementary fact that the virtualization of our daily lives, the experience that we are living more and more in an artificially constructed universe, gives rise to an irresistible urge to ‘return to the Real’, to regain firm ground in some ‘real reality’. The Real which returns has the status of a(nother) semblance: *precisely because it is real, that is, on account of its traumatic/excessive character, we are unable to integrate it into (what we experience as) our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition.*” (*Welcome to the Desert of the Real* 19).