

The Machine in the Mirror: *Westworld* and the Posthuman Anxiety of Automated Body

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the HBO series *Westworld* (2016) as a primary site for exploring contemporary anxiety regarding the evolution of automated technology. Utilizing Rosi Braidotti's posthuman critical theory and Donna Haraway's cyborgian framework, the research investigates the shifting hierarchy between human "creators" and robotic "hosts". The study explores how the process of automation reproduces the conditions of humanness while simultaneously defying human control, creating a "weird ambiguity" where the automated body becomes a site of both self-acting subjectivity and absolute otherness.

Keywords: *Westworld*, anxiety, automated body, subjectivity, posthumanism

INTRODUCTION

The Industrial Revolution served as a foundational catalyst for recognizing that repetitive, labor-intensive tasks could be effectively delegated to machinery. This early manufacturing landscape marked a pivotal shift in the structural relationship between humanity and technology, ultimately redefining the contours of everyday life. As modern technological innovations increasingly assume both domestic and occupational responsibilities, human reliance on interpersonal social structures has diminished. Concurrently, the prospect of widespread automation has fueled anxieties regarding future structural unemployment.

Crucially, this technological displacement extends beyond economic and professional spheres; it threatens to decenter the human subject as the primary agent of historical, social, and political progress. This profound existential tension is vividly manifested in

Westworld, a 2016 television series created by Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan. Rather than depicting a harmonious integration of species, *Westworld* foregrounds the volatile frictions between biological humans and technological humanoids. The series thus functions as a cultural barometer for contemporary anxieties regarding the evolution of autonomous, anthropomorphic technology.

Consequently, this study interrogates the contemporary human condition against the backdrop of rapid advancements in artificial intelligence and robotics. *Westworld* mirrors the psychological discomfort of confronting an artificial “other” that possesses an uncanny physical resemblance to the self. By synthesizing posthumanist theory with an analysis of cinematographic techniques, this paper explores how *Westworld* constructs subjectivity to destabilize and interrogate traditional human-robot hierarchies.

METHOD

The main lenses in discussing the problems mentioned are the posthumanism and the self/other theories. Rosi Braidotti in her seminal work *The Posthuman* (2013) proposes the term “nomadic subjectivity” which positions human as a non-unitary, relational and transversal self that works across species and environment. This perspective questions the subjectivity of human through materialist approach such as in the perspective of a perfect body of Vitruvian Man and expands the human self as a part of a community with multiple “others”. Donna Haraway’s essay “A Cyborg Manifesto” explores the definition of the cyborg as “a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (2006, p. 117) which gives us a starting point to problematize the distinction between the self and the other. Haraway also points out her view about “leaky distinction” and the dualism of male/female or human/machine as the foundation of Western system of domination and exclusion. In addition to posthumanism view, Jacques Lacan’s mirror stage concept (2010) in psychoanalysis will deepen the analysis of self/other and the development of subjectivity.

Several scholars have discussed both *Westworld* and its issues related to the posthumanism, cinematic style, and subjectivity. Devereux and Kosman (2016) explore a “weird ambiguity” in automation where the automated body is defined as both “self-acting” (purely subjective and human-like) and operating with little or no direct human control (absolute otherness). This paradox marks the automated body as a site of posthuman anxiety and the limit of love and cruelty when interacting with humanoids. Trapero-Ilobera (2018) discusses the semiotics of virtuality as the multiple way of connecting

the real with its simulation replica. Subjectivity is forged through the transmission of prosthetic and emotional memories which turn the machine into a “virtual reflection of the human being” (p. 169).

The discussion about robot’s longing for being human has also emerged lately. Mandal (2024) explores the transhumanist drive to achieve immortality by duplicating human consciousness into machine, challenging the idea that biological embodiment is the only container for the self. The paper argues that suffering is the cornerstone of host consciousness, echoing the posthumanist view that there is no threshold that makes humans “greater than the sum of our parts” (Trace Decay, E8, 2016). Similar to Mandal, Gao (2026) extends the discussion of how *Westworld* dismantles the “anthropological machine” that defined the human by excluding the nonhuman. Furthermore, he discussed robots whose “human” qualities such as suffering, memory, and empathy surpass their creators’. Furthermore, he argues that subjectivity is traced through a three-stage evolution: from programmed repetition to rebellion, and eventually to a posthuman community that transcends dualisms.

To critically analyze the use of cinematography aspect to establish posthuman subjectivity in the series, certain studies have been brought in this discussion. Wilder (2023) analyzes the series as a metatext that critiques the narrative television format, particularly using the metaphor of the piano player in the opening scene to symbolize robots displacing human agency. Verstraten’s seminal book *Film Narratology* (2009) provides a specialized technical vocabulary that will be helpful in the analysis, such as the use of auditive narrator which programmed the “voice of God” and the visual narrator that shows the host’s physical immersion their “loops”.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The centrality of human in the world civilisation becomes one of major factors which later builds the hierarchy between the human and the robot. Braidotti explains that the centrality of human is the result of human’s ability to reason. She argues that

[t]he ‘death of Man’, announced by Foucault (1970) formalized an epistemological and moral crisis that resulted in insubordination from received humanist ideals. What was called into question was the humanistic arrogance of continuing to place Man at the centre of world history, and more specifically, the implicit assumption that the distinctively human prerogative is ‘reason’. (Braidotti, 2016, p. 14)

Braidotti then explains the roles of critical theories such as Marxism, psychoanalysis and postmodernism which deconstruct the

Kantian notion of ideal human and human's metaphysic. Marxism believes that human condition is constructed by the social and capital forces while psychoanalysis rejects human's autonomy because human is actually driven by its unconscious desire. The challenge to anthropocentrism is clearly shown in the contemporary media such as *Westworld* the series.

The fact that the Westworld theme park is operated by a company led by Dr. Robert Ford (Anthony Hopkins) draws a dichotomy between a human and a robot. In this series, humans are acted as guests who visited Westworld theme park and viewed robots as the objects of pleasure. Delos, the company which operated the theme park, monitored how the robots performed from their headquarters.

In addition to monitoring, the company also produced both the robots and their narration. The Episode 7 "Trompe L'Oeil" clearly shows the dichotomy which creates a structural hierarchy between the human and the "host", the robot that lives in Westworld. When Dr. Ford argued with Bernard Lowe (Jeffrey Wright), Westworld programmer head, he acclaimed that he was the god and the hosts are his creations.

Bernard: "I am a killer. My God, my God..."
Dr. Ford: "God has nothing to do with it. You killed her because ... I told you to. And you should be proud of these emotions you're feeling."
Bernard: "Proud? Yeah." (Trompe L'Oeil, E7, 2016)

The superiority of humans toward the hosts marks the power relations between them. As the creator, human can control, design, and reproduce the hosts as much as they need. Borrowing Agamben's term "anthropological machine", Gao (2026) asserts that *Westworld* tries to maintain the notion of human by excluding the nonhuman to show how this division inevitably produces cycles of oppression and retribution. The cycles are maintained through the reproduction of the hosts and the loop of the narrative of the theme park. The cycles represent the power that the creator holds to preserve the order of the hierarchy. Deacon (2002) in his study also argues that the "hierarchical observation" and the "fabrication of individuals" is a form of Foucauldian disciplinary mechanism.

The depiction of Dr. Ford who are playing God is also shown through the *mise en scène* of the series. In Dr. Ford's office, we can see the scene when Dr. Ford sat on his office chair and the camera focused on him. Dr. Ford was in the center of screen while the background showed the face prototypes of the hosts. This scene shows the arrogance of Dr. Ford as the creator of the hosts. By placing the face

prototypes as the wall decoration, it devalues the hosts as only products of Delos. While *Westworld* shows similar appearances between the human and the host, the cinematic depiction of the two races is strikingly different. By placing Ford in the center of the screen among its creations, the visual narrator performs a selective framing that directs the viewer's attention toward him as the absolute center of power. As Verstraten (2009) suggests, this *mise en scène* establishes visual narrator's interpretation regarding the power relation – in this case, between Dr. Ford and his creations.

The ornamentation of the scene further reinforces the theme of the creator and his creation. In Episode 10 "The Bicameral Mind", Dr. Ford interviewed Dolores (Evan Rachel Wood) in the secret room. Dr. Ford then showed Michaelangelo's famous painting "The Creation of Adam" to Dolores. This painting symbolizes the relationship between the human and the host. Adam is the allegory of the host who is created by God. Humans as the creator have a prerogative to design the host and give certain personality attributes to support the human-made narration. Adam's nakedness is also followed by the host, particularly in the factory and analysis room. As they are in the analysis mode, the hosts are fully controlled by the humans' commands and do not aware of their surroundings. The hosts' nakedness, as Adam did, symbolizes their naivety of the real situation that they are a robot. Although physically they resemble humans, their mind is programmed to follow the given human's narrative.

The host's programmed thinking system does not allow them to reason. They are trapped in the recycling loop with a slight deviation from the main narrative. The incapability of the hosts to reason indicates their subordinate position toward humans who are able to think. However, there are malfunctions in the control system of the hosts that make them free pursue their will. For example, Maeve Millay (Thandie Newton) had some glitches that made her woke up in the middle of her repairing process. It made her realized that she and other hosts in *Westworld* were merely artificial attractions in the theme park. The glitches and the awakening moments of the hosts become the main conflict which triggered to their consciousness.

The consciousness of the robot becomes the fear that this show continually displayed. Although the programmers of *Westworld* have designed to not let the robots to have a consciousness, Arnold Weber, former pioneer programmer of *Westworld*, had a big ambition to plant it to robots. Dr. Ford states that

[Arnold] wanted to create consciousness. He imagined it as a pyramid. See? Memory, improvisation, self-interest. ... Arnold built a version of that cognition in which the hosts heard their

programming as an inner monologue, with the hopes that in time, their own voice would take over. It was a way [to] bootstrap consciousness. (The Stray, E3, 2016)

The ability of the robot to reflect their life in the form of inner monologue, as seen in Dolores, is a path to create the robot's consciousness. As Dolores possesses the symptom of being conscious, she is the only robot that has the ability to kill both hosts and living things. As the narration goes on, it is revealed that it was Dolores who did the mass killing to the hosts at Escalante and eventually shot Arnold. Furthermore, in Episode 10, Dolores also the hosts who killed Dr. Ford and other human guests who visited Westworld. This glitch show what Cascales and Fernandez-Urtasun called "traces" (2019) to show that the host has a memory of past background. Traces, borrowing Paul Ricoeur's term, is a physical or psychic mark of the past, which in this series, functions as the awakening moment of the host consciousness. The consciousness furthermore becomes the transformation to blur the border between a robot and a human. This important moment also shows that not only does the physical resemblance become the attributes shared between two species but also the awakened mind.

Similar to Dolores, Maeve's awakening leads her to kill the human as well. As she was aware of the reality that she was a robot, she seduced Felix and Sylvester, two of the Westworld repairing staff, to gain control of herself and other hosts. Maeve's glitch, which affects her ability to recall her memory, is the first step for her to gain the consciousness. As Dr. Ford explained in his pyramid diagram, the consciousness could be gained when a robot has the access to memory, improvisation, and self-interest. After seducing the staff, Maeve was able to improvise her personality by hijacking the host's controller from Felix's hand. She then increased the variables of her personality that suit her needs. Finally, she had a self-interest to escape from the Westworld's headquarters to set her free from Westworld's control.

The uncontrolled and self-directing machine could overthrow the human's power. Braidotti argues that "[t]echnology plays a big role in the inhuman character of contemporary warfare: wars today are driven by drones and other post-anthropocentric unmanned vehicles, run by professionals. ... 'We' are in *this* war machine together" (Braidotti, 2016, p. 20). Technology is closely related to violence. It could be a deadly means to win the war against other countries. In the context of war, Braidotti shows the power relation between the human and the machine. The inhumane war is created as the technology is controlled by the abusive power of the human.

Technology could lead to violence according to whom the control is. As the hierarchy between the human and the machine is still established, the violence will also follow. Braidotti then offers the use of the word 'we' to represent the co-existence of the human and the machine to assert that it is not only the machine which should be blamed. Rather, the human who controls the machine should be responsible to the violence. Since *Westworld* shows that the machine itself has the power, the nowadays' relation between the human and the machine could be turned around.

The way the robot surpassing the human's position is still far. Not only do the robots need to be aware of their own existence, they also need to perform *autopoiesis* or reproducing and maintaining themselves. Devereux and Kosman argue that '[a]utomation thus defies the human – it needs no human control – at the same time as it affirms the work of the human who produced a body (a machine, an appliance) that will work by itself' (2016, pp. 5–6). The robot and its artificial intelligence itself can be regarded as a human's monumental achievement. By considering the relation between the creator and the creation, the robots could never be independent and detached from their creators because they are created by humans. Unless the robots have the ability to produce themselves, the hierarchy will eventually persist. However, *Westworld* displays a radical notion of robot's *autopoiesis*. For example, on the intro of each episode, we can see the scene of copulation between two robots. It hints the possibility that robot can reproduce themselves as they can perform a sexual activity. In addition to reproducing themselves, Maeve's attempt to adjust her personality level could trigger the possibility of the robots to surpass human's intelligence. As the robot reach certain intelligence level, human's position in the top level of hierarchy is compromised.

The representation of the machine which is going crazy is not something new. Since the industrial era, the Frankenstein monster has become the horror story of Victorian people. Yet, it has been a convention to depict the robot to rebel against its creator. Devereux and Kosman argue that

[i]t is conventional in some dystopic representations of automated bodies—androids, humanoids, cyborgs, robots—to emphasize the human creator who wants to keep pushing at the boundaries of automaticity ... it is equally conventional in these representations for the automaton who has not only the power of motion but of impulse and desire to turn on its creator, who has, after all, not made a human but a machine that acts like a human, a narrative clash of selves that reaffirms the contradiction at the heart of the automatic. ... Anxiety pertaining

to these contradictory values of automation is not new...".
(2016, p. 6)

Westworld follows this convention by contradicting the fate of the robot to be the slave for human. The large number of the cultural products that are depicting robots as the antagonists shows the current anxiety that has already grown. The fear to the independent automated robot is the result of the development of the technology itself, particularly in the development of robot's consciousness in the form of artificial intelligence. The anxiety furthermore stems from a "weird ambiguity" where the automated body becomes the subjective "self-acting" and the absolute other "outside of the human control" (Devereux & Kosman, 2016, p. 5).

Instead of showing that a consciousness is a noble attribute of human, *Westworld* displays the destruction that the consciousness can make. William (Jimmi Simpson) and Logan (Ben Barnes), two *Westworld* guests, are aware of their positions as humans in the *Westworld* park. Because of murdering a host, William and Logan argued of the killing ethics.

William:	The second we get away from the real world, you turn into an evil prick.
Logan:	Evil? It's a fucking game, Billy! (Dissonance Theory, E4, 2016)

As humans, Logan thought that he can do anything in *Westworld*. *Westworld* and its robots for him is only a simulation game of Western world. As he regarded that *Westworld* was unreal and it was designed to be played, he can kill any robot here. Although William sympathized to the robot, in the middle of the season, it was revealed that William was the Man in Black, the killer of the robots. Both William and Logan in turn does not have a sympathy to the robot. The killing of Theresa Cullen (Sidse Babett Knudsen), Bernard's partner, is also masterminded by Dr. Ford, not the will of Bernard himself. As a result, the show displays a consciousness and a power are two elements to create a dystopian future.

The problem is that the dystopian future itself is represented by existence of the robot formed as a human. *Westworld* shows the binary of humans and hosts, but their differences are seamlessly camouflaged by the resemblance of their physical attributes. The perfect resemblances between a human and a robot evoke the feeling of "creepy, inspiring an unnerving sense of unfamiliarity" (Lyons, 2018, p. 43) which prompts a disturbing interrogation into "legitimacy" of our own humanity. Instead of making visual distinction between humans and robots as in *Robocop* or *Power Rangers* movie,

Westworld brought the idea that a robot should carry the “ideal” physical attributes as a human does.

Delos borrows the ideal concept of a human coined by Vitruvius as pictured in the Vitruvian Man diagram. *Westworld* keeps showing the process of host production by shooting the three-dimensional printing machine. This machine with the host’s body prototype is also the icon of *Westworld* series. The intro of the series shows how detailed the process of the making is. The machine also weaves the human interior such as human muscles. Even the machine can replicate human’s iris which has a complex design. In Episode 3, the production process is displayed dramatically to dramatize the birth of human’s creation. The half-finished body is gradually appeared from the white liquid pond as the white liquid drops little by little. The dipping process creates a breathtaking effect by slowly appearing the perfect human-shaped face. The staff who wear white uniforms generate the imagery that they are the same as the white half-finished robot. The underground where the robots are made is a semi-dark factory and the rooms are separated by glass wall. The lighting at the underground is dimmed to create a mysterious and eerie effect. The result of the production is the blank body of human. To fulfil the mind to the blank body, the narrative needs to be uploaded.

Because of the perfect resemblance with the human, the audience will not expect that Bernard is actually a host which is revealed in the Episode 7. The fact that Bernard himself is a host leads to the question of how many hosts are actually employed inside the *Westworld* headquarters. As Bernard is one of Dr. Ford’s closest staff, we cannot be sure that the people around Dr. Ford are actually human or hosts. This scene suggests Bernard’s awakening where, as Choi (2026) argues using Paul Ricoeur’s “idem” and “ipse” terms, his “idem” (factual continuity) identity collapses when he learns his memories are fabricated. Thus, his “ipse” (ethical commitment) selfhood allows him to remain responsible for his actions despite his artificial origins. Choi’s use of the idem/ipse duality further demonstrates the recurring theme of dualism in this show. Bernard’s revelation also plays with the Lacanian mirror stage theory where the “I” is always “alienated with respect to the Other” (Giebault, 2010, p. 90).

When William and Logan arrived at *Westworld*, they were amazed by the similar form and response that the hosts have. Although the physical appearance of the hosts is perfectly similar with human, they still killed the hosts. These resemblances depict the anxiety to the audience. The audience are shown the cruel murder of the hosts, but the killer calmly regards it as a merely game. The victims

themselves do not really problematize the killing since their memories will be wiped out as their narration starts from the beginning.

The act of host's killing is as problematic as the process of repairing them. The hosts are trapped in the recurring cycle of their lives. When the hosts are killed, the corporation will repair and restore them to the perfect condition so that they can be used in the park again. The corporation treats the hosts as their products which have less value than humans. The killed hosts are dragged by the staff back to the factory. In the factory, the camera unashamedly shoots bodies of the dead hosts. The body usually has a bullet hole where the blood is still spilled. The grotesque depiction of the factory sends the message to the audience that there is a wrongdoing in this place. In fact, the establishment of the factory itself creates the host's eternity.

The ability of the hosts to be repaired and live again can be juxtapose by the vulnerability of human. As the robot can live longer, it threatens the mortal human. Considering the development of artificial intelligence, the robot's eternity means that they can grow their own knowledge further than a human's living period. Clementine (Angela Sarafyan), a prostitute robot, had a glitch which makes her able to memorize and learn other people's movement. The glitch allowed her to mimic the fighting movement of her opposition. As a result, she can defeat her enemy. Her position at the brothel house is eventually replaced by physically different robot but has the same personality and identity. This replacement shows how flexible the changing of the body is as a host. Although the hosts are subordinate to the humans, the hosts have the advantage of the fact that they are products of the factory which can be resurrected.

The final episode in the *Westworld* Season 1 portrays the intense climax of human-host relationship. The tension is delivered in two plots: Maeve's escape and Dolores' revolt. These two plots are delivered interchangeably so that the audience are brought to the intensity and the pace of the narration. Maeve killed several people en route to the station which will bring her to the real world. Furthermore, Dolores also killed Dr. Ford and other Delos board members. In another scene, the Man in Black who used to be bulletproof was shot by a group of hosts. All of the scenes in the last part of this episode give an impression that the hosts will take over both the Westworld park and the real world. The revolution of the host is presented in their violent acts. Some of them are dramatic, such as when Dolores shot Dr. Ford right at the center of his back head while he delivered his final speech. This shooting becomes more dramatic because people will expect that the gala will be a good

farewell to Dr. Ford. On that night, he gave his final speech as he was going to retire from the company. Moreover, he also introduced his last narrative called "Journey into Night". This name foreshadows the Season 2 which would be as dark as night. In other words, this scene presents that the revolution of the robot will bring a darker future, particularly to humans.

The notion that the human will be overthrown by the robot is the question that needs to be answered by the posthuman theory. Braidotti admits that

[a] posthumanist with distinct anti-humanist feelings and resolute technophilic leanings, I am less prone to panic at the prospect of a displacement of the centrality of the human— both as humanist 'Man' and as anthropos — and can also see the advantages of such an evolution. What I want to propose theoretically is a critical form of posthuman theory and affectively a form of caring disidentification from human supremacy. The recipient of this care is future generations. (2013, pp. 21–22)

Although the contemporary work of art shows an unequal position between the human and the robot, we need to see the problem from the perspective of decentralization of human supremacy. The conflict between the hosts and the humans should not be perceived as a way to exterminate each other. Rather, as a human, we have to seek the possibility to co-exist with the nonhuman others. In *Westworld*, the human supremacy is maintained by the establishment of master-slave relationship of the human and the robot. The revolution happens because the robots become aware of their self and their position toward humans. The existence of Westworld theme park is the ultimate manifestation of human's ego to gain profit by displaying the robots as the attractions. As Haraway argues in her seminal essay, the boundary between organism and machine has become thoroughly breached. She notes that while pre-cybernetic machines were not autonomous, modern machines have made the difference between natural and artificial, or self-developing and externally designed, thoroughly ambiguous (Haraway, 2006). For Haraway, the machine is not an "other" to be worshipped or feared, but an aspect of our embodiment.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the conflict between humans and robots in *Westworld* yields a speculative narrative that destabilizes traditional anthropocentric dominance. The narrative progression toward robotic consciousness demonstrates that cognitive autonomy, paired with physical resemblances, effectively dissolves the boundaries of

human superiority. This physical and psychological similarity subverts the viewer's perspective, transforming the uncanny resemblance into a site of existential anxiety. Furthermore, by foregrounding the grotesque, exploitative violence enacted by humans upon these inferior creations, the series generates a horror aesthetic that implicates human ego. Through a critical posthumanist lens, *Westworld* functions not merely as a cautionary tale of robot revolution, but as a profound deconstruction of self/other binaries and rigid human-nonhuman hierarchies. Ultimately, this paper underscores the necessity of Rosi Braidotti's "nomadic vision" and Donna Haraway's cyborg as a hybrid figure, advocating for a decentralized, relational subjectivity that dismantles binary categorization to imagine a collaborative structure of multi-species co-existence.

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