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We Ate Them: A Tale of Rampant Consumerism

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Abstract
HBO’s recent breakout success TV series Westworld stars Anthony Hopkins and Evan Rachel Wood. It is set in a futuristic theme park that has commodified humanities violent impulses including rape and murder. The park allows its wealthy residents to act out their fantasies free of consequence. Westworld depicts the consequences of greed and consumerism that humanity has fallen into. Westworld turns human history and nostalgia, sadism, and women into objects to be sold to the highest bidder. The series proves that no human is impervious to this horrific violence and we all fall victim to our own consumerist desires. The classist and misogynistic overtones of the show create an atmosphere that feeds into the wealthy, elitist, male park goers. As humans continue to demand more and more soon the commodities will be humans, and we will have nothing left.

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“These violent delights have violent ends.” This quote appears multiple times in the series *Westworld*; it is an overarching motif which depicts the consequences of consumerism. *Westworld* is a reflection of the violent culture of hegemony in America. The show depicts how the domination of humanity is achieved through physical and emotional violence—the humans abuse the humanoids, and the creators root through the humanoids’ brains without concern for their welfare. These occurrences parallel the physical abuse humans inflict on each other every day. In our own reality, 600,000-800,000 people are trafficked over international borders each year (“The Scale of Human Trafficking”). In short, the physical and emotional abuse that is inflicted on humans by humans is represented by the brutality that the humans inflict on the humanoids in *Westworld*. The humanoids become a cultural commodity that can be bought, and are kept submissive by way of physical memory and personality change. The audience witnesses the resurrection of the Western frontier and colonialism and its brutal culture, which leads to the complete subjugation of an inferior group of people. The impulse to violently dominate and colonize has always been prevalent in society—this impulse will eventually become commodified and to meet the demands of consumers.

Historically, many minority groups in America have been subjected to second-class citizenship under the continual threat of violence imposed on them by the dominant class. Similarly, the humanoids are abused and enslaved. The suppression of the humanoid race who are the ‘native’ inhabitants of *Westworld* is extremely grotesque; it reflects how the violent implications and effects of consumerism will continue to control society in the future. The dominance of the humans over the humanoids calls to mind the many instances of capitulation of minorities throughout history. The series illustrates social minorities being crushed under the
foot of hegemony. The tyrannical need to repress a weaker group is completely ingrained in our culture and will continue to operate because humanity has been unable to break this perpetual cycle of violence. In American history, there has been a pattern of hegemony that is perpetrated and is repeated, but as society becomes more equal there is a demand for violence and domination. As we move into a more egalitarian age, the desire to dominate will become a commodity to be produced and consumed. The nostalgic frontier, violent subjection, and women will all become commodities of production and humanity will experience rampant, violent, gluttonous consumerism.

Westworld shows how capitalism can use frontier nostalgia to gain profit through consumerism. In Westworld, the Western frontier has been rebuilt to accommodate the elite’s fetishes. The frontier encapsulates the American and Western ideology of pushing the boundary further and further — the place where civilization meets savagery. However, the frontier has since disappeared from the American landscape. In Westworld, Robert Ford has created a simulated frontier, where humanity can relive the romanticized memory of the Western frontier. The fantasy of the frontier ideology begins during an exterior narrative at the beginning of the pilot. The humanoid Dolores narrates: “The newcomers [humans] are just looking for the same thing we are, a place to stake out our dreams, a place with unlimited possibilities” (WW 1). This is a comment on America’s penchant for idolizing the past so much so that it becomes lucrative to create a park where anyone can relive it.

Future populations of America yearn for a place of endless possibilities where they can relive domination of native inhabitants, where they can be gods amongst robots. Similar to Europeans’ interactions with Native Americans, the humans see the humanoids as noble savages.
While they are seen as purer than humans due to their innocence and ignorance, they are still feeble-minded and trapped by their human creators. However, humans are tainted by their desires and darkness. The creator Ford says, “never place your trust in us. We’re only human. Inevitably, we’ll only disappoint you” (WW 9). Humans are sneaky and leave endless disappointments, while the humanoids are also simple minded, etiolated, and under the control of the humans. The slave-like robots in Westworld repeat and echo the actions of historical Western figures in a manner that is startling. Westworld is recreating the past to feed the unquenchable consumerism of modern society.

Hegemonic consumption is feeding the violent demand of cultural domination. Hegemony was an integral part of the frontier and is defined as “A predominant social group or regime which exerts undue influence within a society, esp. through conditioned consent or the repression of dissent” (OED). Hegemonic ideology is prevalent in the cultural identity of America and is reflected in Westworld. The creator of the humanoid robots, Robert Ford, says, “We humans are alone in this world for a reason, we murdered and butchered anything that challenged our primacy…. Do you know what happened to the Neanderthals? We ate them” (WW 9). This unwavering desire for supremacy leads to the commodifying of a pliable species for consumption. Comparing Neanderthals to the humanoids is a metaphor for the blatant and reckless consumerism in Westworld, compared the literal consumption of the Neanderthals by the Homo sapiens.

This pathological desire to control is deeply ingrained in our capitalist society Billy embodies the persona of the white knight, by sympathizing with the humanoids and trying to help them—until the penultimate episode. In the climactic episode, Billy massacres and
eviscerates dozens of humanoids and the last frame is his bloody smile standing over their bodies. The displaced body parts strewn across the street and Billy’s bloody smile, call to mind the Homo sapiens eating the Neanderthals. This is Ford’s blatant metaphor for consumerism. Even the white knight succumbs to consumerism. Consumerism is not passive--it is violent: “to destroy, wear away, to kill… to eat, devour” (OED). Humans consume the robotic humanoids, and devour them like the Neanderthals. Consumerism is the inevitable outcome of production; even the purest of characters like Billy, eventually surrender to its seduction.

The dynamic between the humans and the robots is the dynamic of power. While the humans are white men, like Billy, Logan and the Man in Black, the protagonist humanoids, Clementine, Dolores, and Maeve are all women. Throughout the show, horrific acts of violence are inflicted upon the humanoids. Dolores is brutalized and dragged off within the first ten minutes of the pilot; Clementine is kidnapped and later viciously beaten by a man; and Maeve is shot, strangled, and gutted twice. This is an overt representation of the objectification and diminishment of women. Mrs. Abernathy, Dolores’s mother, first appears in the pilot and is inconsequential, as the camera effectively passes over her corpse. She is murdered by a group of men, and left face down in the hallway of her house while they callously discuss her death. The first man says “Shame you killed the old woman before any of us could have a turn” (WW 1). She is completely insignificant and is essentially scenery within the frame.

The overt hierarchy of human men over humanoid women echoes the relationship between consumer and product. The women hosts are mindless and slave-like, and are beaten and violated for the pleasures of white men. They are consumed without conscience or consequence. Ford alludes to the inferior role of women in Westworld: “you and everyone you
know were built to gratify the desires of the people who pay to visit your world... they can do whatever they want to you” (WW 1). Their entire purpose is to satisfy the whims of human men who pay to visit the park where they live. As the ultimate subjects of production, the women humanoids were created to be objectified and consumed by the paying customer--human men.

The series *Westworld* depicts an ideology that originated in the Old West, but is certainly still prevalent in today’s society. The nostalgia for the past in America creates a demand that is filled by *Westworld*. The entire series is used to reflect the true insidious nature of consumerism, and the underlying violence associated with it. The customers of *Westworld* consume the atmosphere of the frontier, through the submission of the humanoids and objectified women. As a society, we are devouring the objects of production with increasing ferocity. As consumerism grows so does its violence. *Westworld* shows that consumption will continue to grow until we are savagely feasting on anthropomorphic commodities. We will eat until there is nothing left.
Works Cited

