Westworld, season 4

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Season four of Westworld opens with a seven-year time jump after the events of season three, which allows the series to start its new narratives from an almost blank slate. The series’ characters and their allegiances are shuffled in new ways: Charlotte Hale (Tessa Thompson), radicalized after the loss of her family in season three, tries to create a perfect world for the hosts at the expense of the humans. She keeps William a.k.a. the Man in Black (Ed Harris) imprisoned and uses his host copy as enforcer for her world domination project. Maeve (Thandiwe Newton) and Caleb (Aaron Paul) reunite in opposition to Hale. Bernard (Jeffrey Wright) returns from the Sublime with knowledge of possible futures. Dolores (Evan Rachel Wood) has lost her memory and has to regain her own identity.

Many of the themes of previous seasons are picked up in season four, including open ontological questions about the consciousness and agency of both the artificially created “hosts” and humans, as well as competing ideologies of determinism and free will. These questions gain additional urgency as it turns out that season four is about nothing less than the end of the world. The long-standing conflict between humans and hosts we have watched unfold over the course of the series has morphed into an inescapable global war, leading to the inevitable eradication of all intelligent life on the planet.

Here, Westworld is remarkably reminiscent of Karel Čapek’s play R.U.R. (1920), which famously introduced the word “robot” to the world. Like in Westworld, humanity’s artificially sentient creations rise up violently against their makers. The robots in R.U.R. realize too late that they need the humans to give them purpose and meaning, because they are created as a labor force for a human world. The hosts also have to grapple with this problem (both practically and metaphysically) after Hale leads them to victory over the humans. Another significant parallel is that in the end of the play and the series respectively, the extinction of both species cannot be averted, effectively ending sentient life on Earth. However, there is a crucial difference between R.U.R. and Westworld. The human protagonists in R.U.R. are trapped and helpless; all attempts to fight the oncoming robot apocalypse are always already pointless or comically misguided. In contrast, both sides of the conflict in Westworld are forces to be reckoned with and worthy opponents to each other. This sets up a spectacular showdown between those who work to destroy
humanity—Hale and William—and those who fight on behalf of all intelligent life on earth—Maeve, Caleb, Bernard, and Dolores.

The central conflict of the series has shifted away from the familiar “robots rise up against their makers” tropes in favor of more complex grievances, motives, and alliances between the characters. Here, contested (re-)configurations of liberal humanism remain the main battle ground. Hale's hatred of and disgust with humanity result in a radicalized posthumanism. She perceives embodiment as confinement and loathes her human-like host body to the point of destructive self-harm; she wishes to transcend her body to realize her full posthuman potential. Westworld thus echoes transhumanist ideas of the technological singularity, but the series does not engage with some of the more critical, challenging, or emancipatory aspects of posthumanist thought, such as a focus on overcoming individual subjectivity through hybrid identities.

Where Hale seeks to build a new world at any cost, William just wants to see it burn. In past seasons, he has played the role of the main antagonist because of his disdain for anything and anyone getting in his way, as well as his cruelly detached violence. At the climax of the fourth season, William has shed the last remnants of any consideration for anything but his own violent urges and sets off the end of the world by taking control over humans and hosts, causing them to mindlessly turn on each other in a global excess of violence and death. The radical violence of Hale's increasingly unhinged posthumanism is thus finally eclipsed in William's brutal nihilism.

In contrast, traditionally humanist values are sources of power for those fighting for life, humankind, and free will. Maeve and Caleb draw strength from their friendship and from their families, both biological and chosen, and are motivated by love for their respective daughters. In the bleak circumstances on the cusp of human extinction, love, hope and empathy are nevertheless revealed to be as futile as they are fragile. Instead, much of the opposition to all the nihilism in Westworld seems to be rooted in experiences of self-awareness and enlightenment. For Dolores in particular, the theme of the season may very well be summarized as a Kantian sapere aude. After completing her journey of self-realization, it is Dolores herself, and not Hale, who reaches transcendence into the virtual paradise world of the Sublime.

After showcasing the inherent violence and depravity of human nature throughout the series in interesting ways, Westworld here fails to commit to a coherent posthumanist critique and instead falls back to fairly conventional genre-typical narratives rooted in liberal humanism. Westworld season four certainly merits further academic attention to investigate this further. The discursive space created between these contested ideologies of humanism and posthumanism is worth exploring in more detail, as well as the manifold intertextual connections and references situating Westworld in the wider SF genre.

Westworld is, all the graphic violence aside, both poetic and cerebral. I personally appreciated season four for the stunning cinematography, but especially for the stellar performances of the actors. A fifth season was planned, but the show was canceled before it could be filmed. After the
end of season four the show feels slightly unfinished. Whether Dolores will save the last surviving
form of sentient life in the Sublime remains unanswered and leads to a bleakly ambiguous ending
to the series.

Notes

1. Loosely: “dare to be wise” or “have courage to use your own reason”

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