Westworld: complex TV, puzzle narratives, and paratexts

Ana Cabral Martins[1]

Westworld is an American science fiction television series set in the Western genre. Created by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy and produced by HBO, it is based on the 1973 film of the same name (written and directed by Michael Crichton). The story takes place in Westworld, a fictional and technologically advanced theme park (one of six), modeled after the American Old West,[2] but populated by contemporary android "hosts". The "guests" are high-paying humans, who can humor their wildest and most violent fantasies. The hosts follow a predefined set of intertwining narratives, but have the ability to deviate from these narratives based on interactions they have with guests. In the first season, which depicted different and difficult to distinguish timelines, select hosts began to experience an awakening of their own consciousness. At the end of season one, a number of hosts instigated an uprising. The second season dealt with the aftermath of that uprising. The season also presented overlapping and hard to parse timelines. This time, instead of depicting a 30 year-old gap, the second season is set within a few weeks.

In the first season of *Westworld*, there are, ideally unbeknownst to the viewer, three main timelines being depicted: one depicting events before the park has opened, one following the events shortly after the Westworld park is launched, and another 30 years later, as the hosts who populate the park seem to be achieving consciousness for the very first time. Only, throughout the show (a cheeky production design element obscured in the background notwithstanding), events are presented as occurring at the same time trough clever editing and composition, which provides occasional clues to their separation. In the final episode, the events are recast in a new light, as two seemingly different protagonists are revealed to be one and the same person, only 30 years apart. In season two, the show deals with the aftermath of the hosts' uprising. This meant that certain hosts played dangerous games in order to escape the park, while others died (with no possibility of being uploaded into different bodies), and others still were eventually uploaded into a digital paradise free of human existence. The company that controls the parks is revealed to want to create hosts

---

[1] Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade de Lisboa, 1600-189 Lisboa, Portugal.
[2] When it comes to both *Westworld* the show and Westworld the park, there are a number of tropes being played with, from American history, the Old West, the Civil War, etc.

that can carry human consciousness – although the experiments have been unsuccessful.

Westworld is a J.J. Abrams' production through his company Bad Robot. Abrams himself pitched the idea of adapting Michael Crichton's 1973 film to Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy's vision. This is an interesting, potentially revealing detail given that, comparably to *Lost*, *Westworld* has also become a popular television drama that notoriously teasing its viewers through its puzzle narrative. As a member of a type of prestigious HBO drama, *Westworld* sets itself apart through its hefty budget and production design, its narrative complexity, and its star-studded cast, populated by actors such as Anthony Hopkins, Evan Rachel Wood, Jeffrey Wright, Ed Harris, Thandie Newton, Tessa Thompson, and James Marsden, among others.

Embodying the "showrunner-auteur" discursive construct,[3] *Westworld*'s creators and showrunners Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy have been portrayed (as well as portrayed themselves) as the caretakers of the narrative[4] and, therefore, as responsible for its development and ultimate satisfactory conclusion. This is illustrated by comments made by HBO's president of programming Casey Boys, quoted in "Why *Westworld* Is Such an Unlikely Success Story for HBO" (2016). There, Boys addressed two factors in connection with the series renewal, which I consider to be of paramount importance when discussing and analyzing *Westworld*. First was "concerns over whether Nolan and Joy had a firm grasp on the show's creative direction". Second was the fact that it was an audience hit that garnered good critical reception and, especially, good fan interaction (Adalian 2016). In this way, the show *Westworld* has positioned itself as a narrative overseen by a couple of authors who present not only a unified front, but who have a cohesive vision of the story they are telling. As season one's narrative played out, the audience realized it was being depicted through different timelines and fan interaction was sparked in a similar fashion to what had previously happened with *Lost*: as the audience begins to understand that there is a larger plan being played out in front of them, its members start looking for clues of what's to come and theorizing about what it might all mean.

The fan interaction that Casey Boys speaks of is created because of the show's narrative complexity, and it leads to the creation, pursuit, or reliance on paratexts whose objective is to orient the viewer to be able process the narrative. At the same time, and precisely because of this narrative structure, *Westworld* has become increasingly dependent on paratexts.

---

[3] As discussed in Tobias Steiner's "Steering the Author Discourse: The Construction of Authorship in Quality TV, and the Case of 'Game of Thrones'" (2015).

[4] This has, is no small part, been the product of the PR surrounding the show's production.

My objective in this paper is to explore the complexity of the *Westworld's* narrative structure, but also explain why it is so defined by the necessity of orienting paratexts, including television criticism, to its dedicated and "forensic" audience.

Westworld and narrative complexity

To explore *Westworld* as a complex narrative, it is essential to further detail what narrative complexity is, how it has evolved, and in which ways *Westworld* embodies it, while engaging with the work of Jason Mittell, who has written extensively on the subject of complexity in contemporary television.

Due to its narrative structure, which is heavily serialized and composed of different timelines, in many ways *Westworld* is exemplary of what Jason Mittell called "narrative complexity". Still, the notion of complexity when in relation to contemporary television starts by comprehending "a redefinition of episodic forms under the influence of serial narration—not necessarily a complete merger of episodic and serial forms but a shifting balance" (Mittell 2006, 32). As television shows in particular, move away from stories contained in episodic arcs that expand towards stories along season long arcs, narratives become more complex. If an episodic narrative would have to be somewhat simple in order to have a discernible beginning, middle, and end within the space of a self-contained episode, a narrative that is allowed to extend for longer has both the luxury and need to develop in deeper ways, whether they are deepening a character's portrait or developing a narrative that hinges on constant plot twists. Consequently, Paul Booth adds that a show observes narrative complexity if it "creates an elaborate, interconnected network of characters, actions, locations, props, and plots" (Booth 2011, 371) – an interconnectedness fostered by the heavier serialization of televisual narratives. It's also interesting to contemplate – as Felix Brinker does, in "Conspiracy, Procedure, Continuity: Reopening *The X-Files*" (2017) – how demanding shows like *Westworld* can be: it offers little to no episodically contained arcs or plot, it tells ever sprawling stories that encompass shifting alliances and lines of conflict that encompasses a large roster of central and recurring characters. *Westworld* exhibits these symptoms. Although the second season finale worked as a sort of corrective to the expansion of the show's roster of characters, it boasted from the start a complex narrative network: from the hosts populating the park unconsciously and reapeatedly living their humanly prescribed narratives in loops; to the humans working in the mysterious Delos corporation. By the second season, the objectives of Delos are revealed and the narratives become more complicated. Hosts and human interactions grow more nuanced and the show expands to encompass the world outside of the park.

In an editorial for the journal *Series*, "Introduction: *Twin Peaks*' persistent cultural resonance" (2016), Anthony N. Smith, Michael Goddard, and Kirsty Fairclough examine how the television

show *Twin Peaks* and its "vibrant participatory culture" can be see as an early example of a complex narrative that developed a forensic fandom (Smith et al. 2016, 5). The authors consider *Twin Peaks*' "cryptic storytelling" (its "mysteriousness" continuously led to questions, while withholding answers) as a significant influence when it comes to the emergence of more serialized, even intertextual, dramas that followed. *Westworld*, while a very different property, does belong to the *Twin Peaks* tradition of displaying cryptic and symbolic storytelling that cultivates mystery by withholding answers. For example, although *Westworld*'s second season told a fairly straightforward story,[5] the style in which it was told – flashing back and forward in time – contributed to its mysteriousness and to its complexity.

Inevitably, these kinds of narratives, exemplified by *Westworld*, *Twin Peaks,* or *Lost* (among other possible examples), have encouraged a strong commitment in their audiences precisely because of the opaqueness of their narratives. At the time, *Twin Peaks* cultivated "message board speculation and the close scrutiny of VHS recordings" (Smith et al. 2016, 6). Similarly, *Westworld* has been intensely scrutinized and the visuals of the show are examined and inspected thoroughly during the weeks the show airs, not only on online forums (specially Reddit), but also on multiple media outlets eager to provide readers (or listeners, when it comes to podcasts) with a space to discuss each episode.

Ultimately, Smith et al. argue that series like the three mentioned above are cherished because of their brands of puzzling storytelling, which lead to high levels of engagement from the audience – something that comes across in Casey Boys' statement regarding fan interaction being one of the factors that propelled more seasons of *Westworld*. While I can argue that *Twin Peaks* unwittingly fostered this and *Lost* certainly encouraged it, *Westworld* has, in many ways, tailored its narrative to "practices of intense 'forensic fandom'" (Smith et al. 2016, 6) – something I'll detail further ahead.

In "The qualities of complexity: vast versus dense seriality in contemporary television" (2013), Jason Mittell details his perspective on complexity in contemporary television by describes two modes, "centrifugal complexity" and "centripetal complexity". First, Mittell offers a definition that certainly applies to *Westworld*'s brand of complexity: "formal structures that blend serial and episode forms, foreground reflexive storytelling techniques and encourage participatory viewing practices" – he deems these encouraged practices as "forensic fandom", because they invite viewers to dig deeper, searching beyond the surface in order to appreciate and comprehend the complexity of a story and its telling (Mittell 2013, 46). According to Mittell, complexity is its own goal, a conscious effort by television showrunners. Ideally, a television show's

---

[5] Rendered more complex due to its significant roster of characters, both main and recurring.

complexity would render it, through sustained viewing and engagement, richer and foster a more attentive and less casual viewing experience.

Mittell goes on to use a pair of excellent TV shows, *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad,* to exemplify two modes of complex televisual storytelling. I find the poetics of complexity that Mittell identifies helpful when analyzing *Westworld*, as it encompasses qualities from both modes. Mittell presents *The Wire* as exemplifying the "centrifugal complexity" mode and *Breaking Bad*'s the "centripetal complexity" mode (Mittell 2013, 52). The latter mode focuses on an inward movement towards a "cohesive centre" regarding the characters. Conversely, "centrifugal complexity" follows an outward movement, a narrative that expands its storyworld and has no definitive narrative center. This mode is defined by the wealth of its "complex web of interconnectivity", instead of through the "depth of any one individual's role" (Mittell 2013, 52). *Westworld's* mode of narrative complexity is somewhere in between these two modes of operation, as it both expands its scope, while at the same time, focuses on the depth and psychological development of a character or group of characters. In fact, the complexity of *Westworld*'s narrative is immediately indicated by the fact that it combines both of these modes. The show's main characters are hosts Dolores Abernathy and Bernard Lowe, as well as human William/Man in Black, and throughout both seasons, the show focuses on exploring the depth of their roles in the narrative – they form the cohesive center around which the show continues to, at the same time, expand. Coupled with this inward movement regarding these characters and their function as narrative center, *Westworld* also moves outward. This is exemplified by the fact that while the first season took place in one of the themes parks alone, the second season expanded to other parks (Shogun World and The Raj) and to the actual "real" world, outside of the apparent island where all these parks are assembled.

Westworld's as tentpole TV with a puzzle narrative

In M. J. Clarke's "*Lost* and Mastermind Narration" (2010), the author begins by describing how *Lost* belongs to a category of shows that he defines as "tentpole TV". I contend *Westworld* also fits neatly into this description because apart from a heavy serialization, "tentpole TV" refers to programming that is narratively connected to "off-broadcast iterations" (Clarke 2010, 123). These iterations can be anything from video games, to comic books, to any online permutations such as dedicated websites. It's also important to note that the type of seriality that Clarke defines as characteristic of tentpole TV is not the same as the kind of seriality that has existed in comic book movies or other kinds of television shows that deprioritize change or closure. Instead, the kind of seriality associated with tentpole TV would be correlated to a "narrative structure executed over a number of episodes that promises a

conclusion", a tradition of seriality closely related to Dickens (Clarke 2010, 124). This was confirmed at the end of the second season of *Westworld*, as creators Joy and Nolan emphasized that "the show does have an ending in mind, and it has been there since the pilot" (Roberts 2018). It's important to stress that, while having a defined and definitive end point, in the kind of narrative prized both by tentpole TV in general, and by *Westworld* in particular, there's a thought out and purposeful use of "unanswered enigmas, both short (...) and long term", as well as encompassing information and connections that "only slowly become clear over the work's" duration (Clarke 2010, 125). Furthermore, Clarke also equates tentpole TV to forensic fandom, as the author has established a dependency on "off-broadcast iterations" that, essentially, allow the managing of an abundance of visual details and character backstories.

Embedded as a characteristic of tentpole TV, the concept of "mastermind narration" is a strategy deployed to hold narrative components together when it comes to the "vastness and complexity of tentpole TV", and it is defined by a "retrospective shifting in valence of narrative information". M. J. Clarke clarifies how this technique is used to provide order, especially when a narrative offers a multiplicity of timelines, adding that it implies a yet to be revealed guiding hand. Order is provided when "sequences that were assumed to be either objective or neutral are recast as subjective or motivated", and, therefore, signifying that "even the most obscure and smallest of details will eventually be reconciled with the larger narrative whole" (Clarke 2010, 127). The fact that the narrative does unfold slowly and in a mysterious and not straightforward fashion is, as Lindelof said of "The Lost Survival Guide", precisely the point: "The reality is, you're supposed to be a little confused. The show sort of reveals itself one layer at a time" (Clarke 2010, 140). In a similar fashion, in an interview after the season two finale, creator and showrunner Jonathan Nolan argued that he has "great faith in the capacity of an audience to not only be able to track complicated non-linear storytelling but often to embrace it and enjoy it" (Hibberd 2018), emphasizing that the show's inevitably provides answers and that its appeal is precisely the hunt or wait for them. With this in mind, and while *Westworld* does possess a mastermind figure in Dr. Robert Ford, who is revealed to have been conducting hosts and humans along in a particularly obscure symphony, I also argue that the showrunners of *Westworld* are the extra-diegetic masterminds of the narrative. The "retrospective shifting in valence of narrative information" sought by the mastermind narrative is achieved through the use of devices like flashforwards or flashbacks, something that was not only very much a part of *Lost*'s structure, but also of *Westworld*'s, where the connections between a multiplicity of timelines is only slowly uncovered, usually with the objective of re-presenting sequences and their meaning.

Another example of "mastermind narration" is when a particular character is recast in a new light, recasting motivations and revealing a mastermind. In *Westworld*'s second season, due to time jumps between two weeks worth of events, Charlotte Hale was revealed to have been, in the lapsed time, killed and replaced by a host copy, with Dolores' consciousness inside, effectively shifting the valence of every event and exchange that had shown Charlotte's actions. At the same juncture, it was revealed that Bernard had masterminded this body-mind swap, as is consequently presented as "retrospectively having controlled events first coded as objective" (Clarke 2010, 130). Lastly, there's the example of Akecheta, a host that belongs to a seldom seen group called Ghost Nation, composed of Native American hosts. In the first season, Akecheta is depicted as an evil figure in the narrative of Maeve. The second season breaks from the serialized structure to provide an episode devoted to recasting Akecheta's role as a benevolent figure.

The examples of *Westworld*'s "mastermind narration" become apparent especially and specifically when keeping in mind the notion of the showrunners as the ultimate and actual masterminds, whose extradiegetic weight is structurally felt by the viewer because of the heavy use of multiple timelines and its promotion of an unmasking of an evident authorial manipulation. I'd also like to point to "seemingly purposeful 'traces' of the creator in the text more akin to (...) an Easter egg", such as coordinates or binary code, which, then, are meant to "filter viewers through a system of related, ancillary texts" (Clarke 2010, 129). Bryan Bishop wrote in *The Verge* about Westworld's marketing working as a paratext that provides clues. In that piece, associate producer Halle Phillips acknowledged that the marketing and ancillary websites were seeding information that would play in episodes of season two, and it all depended on the viewers willingness to engage with it: "There are definitely Easter eggs there that hint at things to come if you can read between the lines" (Bishop 2018).

In "Flashforwards in *Breaking Bad*: Openness, closure and possibility", Elliott Logan examines the "vocabulary appropriate to appreciating the achievements of a puzzle" (Logan 2013, 220). He specifically highlights the penultimate episode in the first season of *Breaking Bad*. In this episode, as happens throughout *Westworld*'s second season, there are interrelated flashforwards that foreshadow a tragedy. In essence, Logan's argument focuses on the inappropriateness of the vocabulary used to appreciate the achievements of a narrative that's presented as a puzzle, especially when it comes to understanding the emotional scope of those achievements. The author readily admits that spreading "strands of stories" invites "anticipation of how they will be reconnected", although he chafes at the negative employment of the expression "mind game". For *Flow*, Lisa Coulthard claims, in "The Hotness of Cold Opens: Breaking Bad and the Serial Narrative as Puzzle" (2010), that when it comes to television series that present themselves as puzzles or "mind games", flashforwards function as

"retroactive clues" that can be used to disentangle the season's narrative. According to Logan, Coulthard suggests that the foreshadowed tragedy or final outcome of the seasonal arc can be "solved by properly understanding the clues" (Logan 2013, 221). This seems like a difficult proposition to apply to *Westworld*, since the second season (unlike its first) endeavored extremely hard to hide the clues in plain sight, and only once the story unfold could viewers reorganize the previously seen information. To Logan, it's "undeniable the initial puzzlement evoked by these designs is one of their intended effects" (Logan 2013, 222), but the author does argue in favor of the dramatic payoff afforded by puzzle narratives when the puzzle structure is properly employed.

What can work against puzzle structured narratives is how inevitably cerebral or intellectualy minded they can be. Viewers are required to "think about the show's narrative mechanics, embracing the operational aesthetic to enjoy the storytelling spectacle provided" (Mittell 2009, 131). In "The Hotness of Cold Opens", Coulthard expounds that developing a "narrative premise into a long form serial narrative that builds upon events in a cumulative rather than episodic fashion" is a feature of many of the most highly praised series" in contemporary television (Coulthard 2010). The author – who relies on Thomas Elsaesser's chapter "The Mind-Game Film" (2009) – argues that what creates "a puzzle or mind-game" television series is that details are, "rather than mere foreshadowing", clues that can only be made visible once a season has ended, meaning, they function as "retroactive clues, rather than hints to help us in a gradual unfolding of a mystery" (Coulthard 2010). According to Coulthard, it's the structuring of the clues, and composition of the narrative, and "the fan and marketing discourses created around the show" that create this "variation on an old formal device", which "works to further the innovations associated with the puzzle tendencies of complex narratives in televisual seriality" (Coulthard 2010).

In "Am I watching Westworld wrong?", television critic Todd VanDerWerff posits that *Westworld* functions more like a video game that requires viewers to "play it", or rather, to actively pick it apart, digging into the visuals displayed onscreen and trying to figure out a unifying theory of what is going on. Ultimately, the show has fewer rewards for those who watch passively and only engage on the simple basis of characters and plot. Should one not pay exceptionally close attention, important components of the show will constantly be missed.

Westworld and Paratexts

The criticism that surrounds *Westworld* is incredibly focused on the ways in which the show is "interpretable". In *The Language and Style of Film Criticism* (2001), Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan cite Stanley Cavell's useful insights into criticism, specifically his viewpoint regarding something being worth criticizing – and,

therefore, imbued with value – if it was both "shareable" and "interpretable", capable of holding various possible interpretations (Clayton & Klevan 2011, 3).

Television, like film, possesses a "special capacity to embody the 'allegorical' and the metaphorical in concrete sounds and images of the physical and real" and, consequently, "symbolism takes a peculiarly 'literal' guise" (Clayton & Klevan 2011, 21). It's also interesting to cite Clayton and Klevan's description of Raymond Durgnat's critic of Godard's *Pierrot*, which he calls a "ciné-salad". Although, as Clayton and Klevan's eloquently put it, Durgnat's review is then a "crit-salad", meaning: a "multitude of references to ideas, art and culture [that] are slice and diced (...) and tossed together" (Clayton & Klevan 2011, 12). Such are the critical approaches to *Westworld* given its continuous dialogue with literary, poetic, and mythological references, evidenced by Nolan and Joy's use of quotations or set design (i.e., a strewn of books) that specifically relate to the themes they are evoking. Again, and though they are concerned with writing about film, Clayton and Klevan warn of the oeuvres that, like *Westworld*, "refuse to define our feelings for us straightforwardly, and resist crystalizing meaning", while criticism will continuously respond to a "desire for interpretation" (Clayton & Klevan 2011, 20).

Any consideration of *Westworld* is always marred by the necessity to interpret it and devise its meaning from a constant barrage of references and symbology. Criticism surrounding *Westworld* inevitably becomes an "orienting paratext" because of the show's puzzling nature. There is a constant need to analyze and recapitulate it, while parsing out the clues it seemingly offers to an overarching solution.

Adrian Martin's chapter, in *The Language of Style and Film Criticism*, titled "Incursions", addresses a specific concern when it comes to (in this case film) criticism that I believe is particularly interesting when discussing the criticism that originates out of *Westworld*. Martin distinguishes how movies exist in an "'eternal present' tense", whereas an ordinary viewer might stick with the notion that his experience of the film is "always something in the past" (Martin 2011, 54). I find it interesting to consider the ways in which present and past – as one deals with the experience of *Westworld* – can be perceived: the show is viewed in weekly, sequential episodes, and thus, until it is finished, it lives in the present tense. At the same time, because of its relationship with time, describing or discussing *Westworld* forces the spectator, the critic, or the fan to constantly place actions within the show in a certain "tense", whether past, present, or future – events are incessantly *happening*, have *happened,* or *will* happen.

Another relevant notion (that Martin raises in this chapter) to explore regarding *Westworld* is the "possibilities – or impossibilities – for a *discourse* to *intervene* in what unfolds on screen" (Martin 2011, 56). Of course, here Martin is writing about self-contained

films that are closed, finite texts. In the case of *Westworld*, the showrunners actually changed the narrative structure because of fan discourse. However, beyond that, the Internet discourse (both critical and fannish) surrounding *Westworld* is, as TV critic Alison Herman defined it on social media, "homework". The extensive use of flashforwards and flashbacks in *Westworld* creates what Paul Booth calls a "temporally complex narrative", which (especially in the case of *Westworld*) actively endeavors to "confuse the temporal location of the narrative". At the same time, herein lies the pleasure associated with the viewing experience, which unlike Barthes' "readerly" text, rests upon the "'writerly' aspects of the text", as the audience (re)constructs the temporal situation (Booth 2011, 378).]

Due to the complex (and complicated) nature of *Westworld* and its status as "complex TV", most criticism results in an exercise in "*redescribing* what has already been etched into the screen" (Martin 2011, 56). Usually, Martin would be right: "why laboriously put into writing what is plainly evident for anyone to see on the screen in the first place" (Martin 2011, 57)? However, in *Westworld*, this act of *re*description is not one of recapitulation, but an act of *clarification* of what was seen on screen, given how plainly unclear it is.

Westworld is "interpretable", but mostly, it's a television show that opens itself up to much interpretation and speculation, having created a small cottage industry of "decipherers" out of television critics who endeavor to analyze the achievements of the show as a puzzle and as a complex narrative, but also as a television show with its cohesion (see Surrey 2018; Bishop 2018; Bunbury 2018; Paskin 2017).

As a television show supremely concerned with managing different timelines (as well as concepts such as the passage of time, immortality, and memory), *Westworld* is meaningful when it comes to the dichotomy between the momentary and the (creation of the) whole. On the one hand, its "expansive structure" and serialized season arcs mean each season functions as a whole, doled out in installments throughout ten weeks (Jacobs & Peacock 2013, 6). This underlines the notion of "fluid consistency" and coherence: "How do we judge a television work's unity if it is open-ended, changing and building across episodes, still in flux?" (Jacobs & Peacock 2013, 7). *Westworld* has two complete seasons, which have been broadcast in their entirety with least one more season still planned. On the other hand, *Westworld* also thrives due to of an appraisal of its fragments, of its moments. This is encouraged not only due to its traditional broadcasting form (a "fixed schedule of air-dates and times"), but also because of its aspect as a TV show that is experienced as a "collective community". The focus is not necessarily its "live-ness" (exemplified through live-tweeting). Rather, it's largely connected to the way the show is methodically parsed for clues, as fans of the show employ their "collective intelligence" – a term by Pierre Lévy coined to refer to "the ability of virtual communities to leverage the knowledge and expertise of

their members" (Jenkins 2006, 321) – in order to sift through images, scenes, design and costume elements, etc., as a community, alongside the coverage of the show by television critics and writers. The reception of *Westworld* is through the series' weekly episodes, and both fans and critics utilize their sources and communities in order to parse through each episode's visuals. Each episode is seen as a new fragment of a puzzle. *Westworld*'s serial structure means that overall meaning only presents itself once the season is over and the narrative completes. However, amongst its various timelines and simulated dimensions, there are clues and design elements that denote significance.

In fact, discussing the reception and consumption of the series requires the grasp of various aids to reach an understanding. As Jason Mittell argues, in *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (2015), "orienting paratexts" are needed to follow (week-to-week or seasonally) a television show that is able to be categorized as being "complex television". These series often challenge the facility with which casual viewers can make sense of a show, especially if they invite (provisional) disorientation and confusion. Thus, viewers tend to "build up their comprehension skills through long-term viewing and active engagement", as well as through "practices of orientation and mapping, primarily through the creation of orienting paratexts" (Mittell 2015, 261). It's important to add a clarification when it comes to what is considered to be an orienting paratext. The operative word is "orienting" and, as Mittell argues, "most orientation practices involve paratexts, whether in the tangible form of maps and lists or in more ephemeral conversations" where the viewer is actively tackling the narrative world (Mittell 2015, 262). It is important to distinguish orienting paratexts from transmedia extensions and Jason Mittell offers a concise elucidation: "orienting practices reside outside the diegetic storyworld" (Mittell 2015, 262). The goal is, whether these are authorized or unofficial practices, to help figure out how the pieces of information the viewers are privy to can eventually fit together, as well as to propose different ways of interpreting the story or of making sense of the original text. As Mittell details the range of orientation practices embraced by contemporary television viewers, the author describes "recapitulation", which includes summarizing the narrative material, and "analysis", which explores narrative material in analytical ways that go beyond recapitulation (Mittell 2015, 267). In this section of the book, Mittell includes examples of fans that utilize YouTube to offer their interpretation of narrative events, but also of bloggers and journalists that catalogue and analyze references and events in order to orient viewers.

Allow me to provide a few examples of the cottage industry of orienting practices that have arisen out of *Westworld*. *Vanity Fair* employs senior writer Joanna Robinson as the resident *Westworld* expert, as she writes through recaps that methodically analyze each episode, looking for references, callbacks and potential clues regarding the endgame of the show. Apart from that, Robinson has

two podcasts dedicated to dissecting the show: *Vanity Fair*'s *Still Watching Westworld* is helped by interviews and access, while the other, *Decoding Westworld*, is more of a fannish pursuit with co-host David Chen that endeavors to do the same thing, but in a less "spoilery" fashion. *The Ringer*, a website dedicated to sports and culture, has many staff members dedicated to writing about the series, either as a whole or episode-by-episode, as well as two weekly episodes of a podcast called *Rewatchables: Westworld* - one that recaps the episode and one that explains theories that arise from each episode and are found through social media like Reddit.

In the case of *Westworld*, its "orienting paratexts" can be either "officially sanctioned", such as those found on the website that performs as an entry point into the Westworld theme park, or "viewer created",[6] which includes Reddit threads, Wikipedia entries, unofficial podcasts and, as well as recaps, timelines, and reviews of weekly episodes by journalists and television critics. According to Jonathan Gray, in *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (2010), as well as Bryan Bishop from *The Verge*, accompanying the marketing campaign, to many viewers, will not only be part of the entire (textual) package, but also amplify aspects and meanings of the text unbeknownst to those who don't partake in this particular kind of forensic viewing practice. *Westworld* uses its marketing as a paratext that blurs storytelling lines. Bishop provides the Cradle as an example, which is mentioned in the show for the first time in the third episode of season two as a throwaway reference. However, viewers or fans how interacted with in-world websites, chatbots, and emails that were part of the show's marketing campaign were already aware of the Cradle as a simulation technology used by the company operating *Westworld*'s theme parks. This is an example of a paratext – both peripheral promotion and transmedia extension – that encourages puzzle-solving practices from *Westworld*'s viewers (Bishop 2018).

These orienting paratexts have become abundant and essential for not only enjoying the series, but also for comprehending it. *Vanity Fair*'s Joanna Robinson frequently posits (whether in her pieces or on her various podcast hosting duties) that the show's creators and showrunners actually depend on journalistic and fan sleuthing given the intricate nature of *Westworld*'s overlapping timelines.[7] *Vanity Fair* colleague and television critic Sonia Saraiya argues that the puzzle narrative structure of *Westworld* is precisely what makes the show so enthralling. In "The Blissful Confusion of *Westworld*", the critic expands on the show's opaqueness and how this leads many viewers to "rely on the hard

---

[6] Jonathan Gray's use of the term "paratext", for instance, comes from considering fan and viewer creations as part of the "surrounding textuality" that contributes to meaning creation regarding film or television, which wouldn't be included were one to use terms such as "hype, promotion, promos, synergy, and peripherals" (Gray 2010, 6).

[7] Todd VanDerWerff writes that "subscribing to the show's subreddit feels not like a fun value-add but like something that's compulsory" (VanDerWerff 2018).

work of people like my colleagues to understand its twists and turns and overlapping temporalities", a need that arose with special force in the second season of *Westworld* with its continuous jumps across time. Saraiya singles out an article by journalists and *Westworld* fans Kim Renfro and Jenny Cheng for *Insider*, which contained a chart of every event on *Westworld* so as to establish a coherent timeline (Renfro & Cheng 2018). This timeline was comprised of upwards of 100 events over the show's two seasons. Saraiya's point, in essence, is that if a show encourages this type of orienting practice, it is not creating a mystery, but deliberate confusion. The critic goes on to describe the HBO show as presenting its "universe as a puzzle", often being "comically clue-oriented" and "less a narrative than a matrix of interlocking ciphers", which would potentially place *Westworld* not as a complex narrative but as a intentionally *complicated* one. Jason Mittell separates this category as it suggests "less coherence and more artifice", usually coupled with an attempt at appearing more nuanced than it really is. Consequently, mere complexity isn't an inherent marker of value, given that if a complex narrative "sacrifices coherence or emotional engagement" it is liable to disappoint (Mittell 2013, 47). Season two's long dynamic between timelines is a defiant stance of conventional narrative logic. There are, nonetheless, other times when Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy's boldness in terms of narrative logic can also be disconcerting. However, the show bets on hope felt by viewers, critics, and fans and on their capacity for finding a pattern that allows for the multiple clues to eventually fit into a clear picture. The "orienting paratexts", then, have an essential role to play by guiding us through the structure of the show and filling it with meaning. They do so by providing other spectators or fans an opportunity to interpret and discuss the events and plot twists and reveals that occur throughout the seasons. They also result from a need to consume and create paratexts that provide meaning to a show that constantly hints at its aptitude to hold clues in the most minute of details.

Conclusion

Examining *Westworld* is relevant for analyzing complexity in contemporary television, as well as for understanding its place as a show that necessitates its paratexts for its full intended experience.

Ultimately, *Westworld* is a show that perfectly encapsulates a number of characteristics of contemporary television, from its pursuit of seriality and narrative complexity, to its reliance on orienting paratexts as a way of positioning, defining, and creating meaning. Its creators and showrunners have intentionally devised a television show that, while having a fairly straightforward narrative, is presented as a puzzle that needs its every piece to be presented for the narrative to be solved. In each season, the final episode features a "retrospective shifting in valence of narrative information" that places every episode, clue, and event in a new light. In season one, it was Dr. Robert's Ford plan all along that hosts

gain consciousness. In season two, there were many more shifts in perspective as there were many more clues to be parsed out regarding character reveals and motivations. As the seasons unfold, *Westworld* continues to walk on a tightrope, continually moving inward and outward, expanding its universe and trying to focus on its core characters. At the same time, these modes of structuring the show are thrown into further confusion by presenting the narrative as a puzzle, jumping across a timeline and offering different events without a stable chronology – until all the pieces are revealed.

   Westworld is an example of how complex, and perhaps complicated, a television show can be, while also highlighting how analyzing its complexity is exactly its point and the *modus operandi* surrounding the reception and consumption of its episodes. The thrill of engaging with the show on an active level – by making connections and investing emotionally through the help of extradiegetic forces – is the reward.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adalian, Josef. 2016. "Why Westworld Is Such an Unlikely Success Story for HBO." *Vulture* (blog), December 4. http://www.vulture.com/2016/12/westworld-unlikely-success-story-for-hbo.html.

Barker, Cory. 2016. "'Great Shows, Thanks to You': From Participatory Culture to Quality TV' in Amazon's Pilot Season." *Television & New Media* 18, no. 5 (September 15): 441-458. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476416667817.

Bishop, Bryan. 2018. "Westworld's Digital Marketing Is Giving Fans Sneak Peeks at the Show's Biggest Secrets." *The Verge* (blog), May 24. https://www.theverge.com/2018/5/24/17386488/westworld-secrets-decoding-digital-marketing-campaign-hbo-kilter-films.

Booth, Paul. 2011- "Memories, Temporalities, Fictions: Temporal Displacement in Contemporary Television." *Television & New Media* 12, no. 4 (July 1): 370-388. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476410392806.

Brinker, Felix. 2017. "Conspiracy, Procedure, Continuity: Reopening 'The X-Files.'" *Television & New Media* 19, no. 4 (November 29): 328-344. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476417742974.

Bunbury, Stephanie. 2018. "'Puzzle Television' at Its Best as Westworld Lurches towards Its Finale." *The Sydney Morning Herald* (blog), June 25. https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/tv-and-radio/puzzle-television-at-its-best-as-westworld-lurches-towards-its-finale-20180625-p4znjr.html.

Cardwell, Sarah. 2013. "Television Aesthetics: Stylistic Analysis and Beyond." In *Television Aesthetics and Style*, edited by Steven Peacock and Jason Jacobs, 23-44. New York, New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Clarke, M.J. 2010. "Lost and Mastermind Narration." *Television & New Media* 11, no. 2 (March 1): 123-142. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476409344435.

Clayton, Alex & Andrew Klevan (eds). 2011. *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*. 1 edition. New York: Routledge.

Coulthard, Lisa. 2010. "The Hotness of Cold Opens: Breaking Bad and the Serial Narrative as Puzzle." Critical forum on media and culture. *Flow* (blog), November 12. http://www.flowjournal.org/2010/11/the-hotness-of-cold-opens/.

Elsaesser, Thomas. 2009. "The Mind-Game Film." In *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, edited by Warren Buckland, 1 edition, 13-41. Chichester, West Sussex/Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.

Gray, Jonathan. 2010. *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*. New York: NYU Press.

Hibberd, James. 2018. "'Westworld' Showrunner Explains Those Finale Twists, Hints at Season 3 Plan." *Entertainment Weekly* (blog), June 24. https://ew.com/tv/2018/06/24/westworld-season-2-finale-interview/.

Hills, Matt. 2014. "When Doctor Who Enters Its Own Timeline: The Database Aesthetics and Hyperdiegesis of Multi-Doctor Stories." *Critical Studies in Television* 9, no. 1 (March 1): 95-113. https://doi.org/10.7227/CST.9.1.7.

Jenkins, Henry. 2008. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. Revised. New York: NYU Press.

Kinder, Marsha. 2002. "Hot Spots, Avatars, and Narrative Fields Forever: Buñuel's Legacy for New Digital Media and Interactive Database Narrative." *Film Quarterly* 55, no. 4: 2-15. https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2002.55.4.2.

Logan, Elliott. 2013. "Flashforwards in 'Breaking Bad': Openness, Closure and Possibility." In *Television Aesthetics and Style*, edited by Steven Peacock and Jason Jacobs, 219-226. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Martin, Adrian. 2011. "Incursions." In *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, edited by Andrew Klevan and Alex Clayton, 1 edition, 54-69. Abingdon/New York: Routledge.

McCabe, Janet. 2013. "HBO Aesthetics, Quality Television and 'Boardwalk Empire.'" In *Television Aesthetics and Style*, edited by Steven Peacock and Jason Jacobs, 185-198. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Mittell, Jason. 2015. *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*. New York: NYU Press.

———. 2009. "'Lost' in a Great Story: Evaluation in Narrative Television (and Television Studies)." In *Reading Lost: Perspectives on a Hit Television Show*, edited by Roberta Pearson, 119-138. London: I.B.Tauris.

———. 2006. "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television." *The Velvet Light Trap* 58 (January 1): 29-40. https://doi.org/10.1353/vlt.2006.0032.

———. 2013. "The Qualities of Complexity: Vast versus Dense Seriality in Contemporary Television." In *Television Aesthetics and Style*, edited by Steven Peacock and Jason Jacobs, 45-56. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

———. 2011. "The Quality of Complexity." *Just TV* (blog), May 25. https://justtv.wordpress.com/2011/05/24/the-quality-of-complexity/.

O'Sullivan, Sean. 2013. "'The Sopranos': Episodic Storytelling." In *How To Watch Television*, edited by Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell. New York: NYU Press.

Paskin, Willa. 2017. "Before Twin Peaks, You Could Just Watch a Show. Now You Have to Solve It." *Slate Magazine* (blog), June 7. https://slate.com/arts/2017/06/how-twin-peaks-spawned-a-whole-tv-genre-from-lost-to-mr-robot-to-westworld-that-wants-to-be-a-riddle-for-viewers-to-solve.html.

Peacock, Steven, & Jason Jacobs (eds). 2013. *Television Aesthetics and Style*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Renfro, Kim, & Jenny Cheng. 2018. "An Essential Timeline of Every Important Event on 'Westworld.'" *Insider* (blog). Accessed November 29. https://www.thisisinsider.com/westworld-timeline-spoilers-2018-4.

Roberts, Andrew. 2018. "'Westworld' Creators Want You To Know They Have An Ending In Mind." *UPROXX* (blog), July 3. https://uproxx.com/tv/westworld-creators-have-ending-in-mind/.

Saraiya, Sonia. 2018. "The Blissful Confusion of Westworld." *Vanity Fair* (blog), June 24. https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/06/westworld-hbo-blissful-confusion.

Scott, Suzanne. 2013. "'Battlestar Galactica': Fans and Ancillary Content." In *How To Watch Television*, edited by Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell. New York: NYU Press.

Skoptsov, Mikhail L. 2015. "Prophetic Visions, Quality Serials: Twin Peaks' New Mode of Storytelling." *Series - International Journal of TV Serial Narratives* 1, no. 1 (May 14): 39. https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/5113.

Smith, Anthony N.; Michael Goddard, & Kirsty Fairclough. 2016. "Introduction: Twin Peaks' Persistent Cultural Resonance." *Series -*

International Journal of TV Serial Narratives 2, no. 2 (December 31): 5-8.

Steiner, Tobias. 2015. "Steering the Author Discourse: The Construction of Authorship in Quality TV, and the Case of 'Game of Thrones.'" *Series - International Journal of TV Serial Narratives* 1, no. 2 (December 30): 181. https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/5903.

Surrey, Miles. 2018. "The Haphazard Storytelling of 'Westworld' Season 2." *The Ringer* (blog), June 25. https://www.theringer.com/tv/2018/6/25/17501714/westworld-finale-haphazard-storytelling.

VanDerWerff, Todd. 2018. "Am I Watching Westworld Wrong?" *Vox* (blog), June 22. https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/6/22/17489862/westworld-season-2-review-finale-recap-the-passenger.