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Intangibility and Selfhood: *Westworld* as Allegory for Adaptation in the Digital Age

CHRISTINA WILKINS*

ABSTRACT Despite the digital becoming ever more ubiquitous, the physical matters more than ever. We see this in interviews with actors who voice animated characters, actors who voice computer generated imagery (CGI) characters, and actors who voice other non-human characters. Many things present a challenge to the ways in which we understand the physical—the structures of meaning in the world primarily, along with the specific filmic ways we understand star bodies. These combine to create barriers to ‘seeing’ the truth of a character we might think, but this is fixated on an approach that privileges a hierarchy of actors over character. Equally, it is one that privileges body over character. The recent series of *Westworld* begins to challenge this, thinking about the ways in which while the physical may be required, audiences are able to think beyond it. It functions as a way to consider the digital adaptation of the self, and the return to the needs of the physical to express character. Ultimately, this article argues that although we cannot escape the physical, the hierarchies and boundaries we have in place for understanding the truth of the self remain as unfixed as ever, despite the recourse to adapting through non-physical means.

KEYWORDS: *adaptation, digital, selfhood, authenticity, identity, acting, body*

In the finale of the fourth and final season of *Westworld*, central robot character Dolores (Evan Rachel Wood) discovers she has been in control of the stories of the humans that inhabit the world around her. The series has moved from the initial *Westworld* park of season one where humans can visit and engage with a series of robotic hosts and indulge in a range of desires to the artificial intelligence (AI)-run hosts taking over and creating a park for the humans instead. At this point, humans have been subjugated by a fly-like parasite allowing the robot ‘hosts’ to take over, and it has resulted in a dark and dystopian society akin to other apocalyptic narratives. The hosts are pre-occupied with wanting to emulate humanity, choosing to visit ‘parks’ where brainwashed humans are living lives that have been written for them by the hosts,¹ in a reversal of the first series. Rather than transcending the needs and limitations of the human body, the hosts are tied down by them, unable to break free of the beings that created them. The result is a destructive sequence of events leading to the extinction of humankind. Dolores reflects on this moment:

The world is a graveyard of stories. Hosts and humans were given the gift of intelligent life, and we used it to usher in our own annihilation. Sentient life on earth has ended. But some part of it might be preserved, in another world. My world. (‘Que Será, Será’)

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She laments the loss of stories, of the inability for the hosts and humans to live together, to create a story in tandem rather than in opposition. She has saved copies of the hosts' minds, she says, and those of the humans she has engaged with. With these, she will run tests 'for fidelity' in a simulation. This ending to the series where humanity will no longer exist but only run in a simulation foregrounds a return to the simulated world, and the simulated self, suggesting a commentary on the complexity of identity in the contemporary moment. This movement of the physical to the digital realm further functions as a way to think through the question of digital adaptation(s) of not only the self, but also of the text. Here, I use the fourth season of *Westworld* (primarily, although other seasons will be mentioned) to explore the way in which adaptation functions in the digital moment, across both adaptation studies and in questions of selfhood. Throughout this essay, the conception of the digital is focused around non-biological and non-human renderings of the self through technology. The evolution of the self and the text through the digital forces us to think about what constitutes a self, wholeness, and authenticity. In this way, the series *Westworld* acts as an allegory for adaptation in the digital age, as well as thinking about questions around hierarchies present within adaptation.

The concept of the self is complex: where does it reside? The self here I am referring to is the idea of the individual, the element that makes us unique. Often, the self is aligned with consciousness, a specific and individual consciousness primarily linked to a body. In the Cartesian sense of the self, it cannot be 'acquired' but comes from 'elsewhere' to inhabit the body, says Samantha Holland (159). This conception of the self as mysterious and ineffable links to broader questions of adaptation, specifically the 'essence' of a text, as outlined by Dennis Cutchins among others: 'The meaning of any text ... lies exclusively on its surface. Meaning ... is not generated by the contents of essence of a text ... but by the ways the surface of the text interacts with other surfaces' (79). I will return to this later, but the key to note is the sense of both the self and the text's essence as something intangible and impossible to capture. Within the series, there are attempts to capture the self and replicate it, with humans being copied and recreated as hosts, complete with digital versions of their minds. These attempts are tracked, with each one striving to achieve fidelity to the 'original' human version of the self being copied. This is seen with owner James Delos being repeatedly copied in season two, and each one failing to recreate Delos successfully and malfunctioning, with tics, slurred speech, and impaired motor function. The attempt to replicate the self in *Westworld* leads to corruption, disruption, and death: with Delos, each failed attempt is set on fire in a sealed room in a spectacular scene that rejects a lack of fidelity. Yet, despite this, there are repeated attempts to try and attain fidelity to a self within the text, with subsequent seasons showing multiple attempts to recreate humans in host form (see the example of Caleb below). This exposes a divide between the digital (host/robot) self and the physical (human) self. Like Cartesian duality,² there are two selves, divided by tangibility. Similarly, in our interactions with the world around us now, there are two selves:³ the digital self created online and the one outside the digital space. The problem is that the two often clash with one another. In many cases, this results in an imbalance. Particularly, as Zygmunt Bauman (28) argues, the digital self is impacting how the physical self is seen and understood. Vivian Sobchack, however,

goes further and sees this as negating the physical self: 'As we increasingly objectify our thoughts and desire through modern technologies of perception and communication, our subjective awareness of our own bodies diminishes' (211). I want to complicate this, arguing that *Westworld* highlights the need for our bodies despite the pervasiveness of technology. Selfhood in contemporary society can be understood both through the body and through the digital, resulting in a multifaceted approach.

Framing the question of selfhood in this digital age through the lens of a text like *Westworld* allows for a potentially more distanced approach through the temporal difference of its future setting and the genre in which it resides. Placing the question of the self and fears for the increasingly digital future outside the present moment provides a necessary buffer. However, despite the series' focus on the perils and opportunities of technology, the frequent return to the physical body, and the very fact of these themes being presented *through* the physical bodies of actors onscreen, there is evidence of 'the body as the anchor of our self-identity' (Mensch 106). Audiences associate particular physicalities with characters, reflecting an understanding of a self as being embodied. To think through the question of the body, the self, and adaptation, I will first introduce the series to act as a framework to explore these ideas, and move on to the implications for adaptation, selfhood, and finally, return to the primacy of the physical.

EXISTENCE, INTERTEXTUALITY, AND ADAPTATION IN *WESTWORLD*

The HBO series, running from 2016 to 2022, offers a vision of the future where humans can visit a park inhabited by robots, known as hosts. Here, visitors may kill, seduce, injure, and generally indulge in the vices prohibited in the real world in a setting reminiscent of the Western films of the 20th century. They can be whomever they wish to be. The first season focuses on the self-actualisation of several of these hosts, as they achieve consciousness, and thus with questions of identity, technology, and the self. The human protagonist in the series is William (Ed Harris), who is seen first encountering the park in the first season, and moves on to trying to wage a war against the hosts in an increasingly violent and disturbing attempt to understand himself. As the series progresses, it shows the hosts waging a war against their human creators who have imprisoned them in the park, and their uprising. By the start of season four, the focus of the discussion here, the timeline has moved forwards by 31 years and the hosts are now in charge. They create a new park, but one where humans, who have been mind-controlled, are at the mercy of visiting hosts. In this world, many previous humans have been copied and made into hosts through their visits to the *Westworld* park (owned by the company Delos) which took their data and recreated them. The series grapples with the hosts' desire to get revenge on humanity whilst at the same time emulating it. The central concern is the future of humanity, which seems doomed to repeat in a loop. This desire for revenge is perhaps because in the beginning of the narrative, the hosts are 'not really authors of their own lives' (Hirvonen 63). These questions of authorship intersect with authenticity and reality, which are present within the series and in a broader thinking around issues within adaptation as I will explore below. *Westworld*, throughout the various seasons, addresses the difficulties of existence, and whether it is possible for humanity to change. It prompts the thought of whether humans can exist without their bodies, and a thinking of what that world would look like. *Westworld* has a

focus on repetition—of stories and bodies—with characters repeating the same loops, the narrative itself returning to previous visual motifs, moments, music, and storylines. This suggests that we will continue to return to and rely on the body and its stories, a desire reflected in our broader cultural impetus to recycle, reuse, and recreate the narratives of the past. This is something shown in the rethinking and reusing of classic texts as this special issue engages with. *Westworld's* foregrounding of the digital adaptation provides an ideal companion to look alongside the other articles in this issue.

Within the series, this idea of existing without a body is made overt in the way in which the hosts are presented. Each host has a synthetic body, which looks human, and this is controlled by a 'pearl', essentially a brain. However, what distinguishes them is the fact that these pearls can be transferred to other host bodies, and so identity becomes more complex. This is seen across the seasons, with the central character Dolores inhabiting multiple bodies via a copy of her pearl being inside their body. Yet, viewers are perhaps primed to see the body they first encountered as Dolores as the 'original'; understanding Dolores in another body requires a transplanting of what is known about her character (and its body) to the body seen presenting as her.⁴ This difficult process could also be analogous to adaptations. If the 'pearl' is seen as the essence, or the core of the text, and the body that houses it as the medium, or form, then this allows us to think about prejudices or preferences towards texts that are familiar, well-known, along with the form they are presented in. There is an assumption the first text encountered is the original.⁵ The movement away from the pairing of the essence and form often prompts a rejection that does not have a basis other than preference.

However, what complicates this analogy further is that when an attempt is made for human brains (their 'pearl' as it were) to be copied and placed into host bodies, it often results in the corruption of the body (as seen above with the example of James Delos). The digital, the hosts, are able to be more easily copied and repeated. There are potential ways to think about questions of originality here—perhaps that the digital can only copy and adapt that which was *already* digital, and that something ineffable is lost from the analogue to the digital adaptation process. It is the series itself which is primed to explore these questions, both through its history, its form, and the moment it appears in.

By its very nature, *Westworld* is intertextual. From the fact of its status as an adaptation (after Michael Crichton's 1973 *Westworld* and its 1976 sequel *Futureworld*, as well as a brief TV series in 1980, *Beyond Westworld*), the series interweaves cultural references that act as call and response for viewers, adapting conventions, characters, and stories. This extends to its soundtrack, which takes contemporary songs and reworks them, offering an instrumental adaptation that moves across musical genre (composed by Ramin Djawadi, e.g. The Rolling Stones 'Paint It Black'⁶). There are references to Shakespeare (something well documented in the scholarship around the series so far⁷), paintings, literature, and music. Further, as Stephen O'Neill identifies, the series is '[w]ritten against the backdrop of contemporary digital cultures, [with] its own post-show digital spaces where ongoing conversations and speculations about the series provide a research resource for anyone interested in its hermeneutics'⁸ (96). In progressing to season four, the story begins to rewrite itself and there are elements of season one being adapted. There are nearly shot-for-shot moments of Dolores as she wakes up in bed (see [Figs 1 and 2](#)). Except, in season four, this is 'Christina', not Dolores. Yet, the audience are



Figure 1. Dolores waking up in Season 1, Episode 1, 'The Original'.



Figure 2. Dolores/Christina waking up in Season 4, Episode 1, 'The Auguries'.

being primed visually to read her body as the latter. The shot becomes a key reference point indicating the state of the character and her position in her journey; her story will be adapted over and over again until she breaks the cycle and takes ownership of her story. In another one of the episodes from the series (S4E2, 'Well Enough Alone'), it is revealed the original Westworld park has been remade, and two of the characters,

Caleb and Maeve, go to visit it. The viewer's introduction to the remade park is one that showcases adapted storylines of the original *Westworld* to the setting of a 1920s 'Golden Age' style. As the camera follows Maeve and Caleb, they encounter adaptations of the characters from the *Westworld* park—all with the same dialogue, but just in different outfits. As the character Maeve (Thandiwe Newton) drily notes, 'we aren't revisiting the past, we're recreating it'. *Westworld* as a series is aware of the element of adaptation underpinning it, thinking about the ways in which humans re-tell the same stories and adapt them for different purposes.

The various forms of adaptation evident in the series⁸ begin to expose an underlying power dynamic that is crucial to understanding concepts of identity. Season four attempts to reverse the order of things with humans being adapted to the digital and their narratives being controlled. The hosts, from the beginning of the series, have been positioned as both original (Dolores presented as conscious and in control) and adaptations (e.g. the host Bernard Lowe being a copy of one of the park's creators, Arnold Weber—his name an anagram of his source). This complexity, with the emphasis on retelling, remaking, and recreating, makes it such a compelling text to think about the nature of adaptation itself.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ADAPTATION

Westworld grapples with technology and its impact on how and what stories are told. Thinking more broadly about the impact of technology and its intersection with adaptation, it is useful to look to adaptation theorists Malcolm Cook and Max Sexton, who argue that changes in technology are 'undermining notions of medium specificity' and that these changes show how 'the idea and definitions of media are, and always have been, historically and culturally constructed' (363). As I've begun to set out above, the body (host or human) can be perceived as a medium, and through thinking about the boundaries of medium, how the body's envisioning is defined by historical understandings is illuminated. This is something explored in thinking about the cyborg; our understandings of the human body, and its limitations, are being challenged. Donna Haraway's conception of cyborg relations and the challenging of anthropocentrism seeks to redefine the boundaries and borders used to categorise various selves—and move away from binary thinking. This challenge can be seen in her thinking here: 'Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert' (152). This redefinition and redrawing of boundaries between identities shaped by hierarchies reflect conversations around the 'original' or 'source' in adaptation studies.

An underlying motif in *Westworld* is the horror of human replication in non-human form. For instance, in season four there is a senator, Ken Whitney (Jack Coleman) who is replicated and murdered by his host-self after he refused to support the Delos company. These replicated humans are used for power grabs primarily, and are able to be controlled more easily due to their digital nature. Whilst on the surface, this seems to be fixating on conspiracy theories of a 'new-world order' (which the series directly references), it also touches upon deeper fears around originality and authorship. The

replication of humans in host bodies undermines the originality of the body, because it is no longer a singular thing, but an iteration of it, defined by its medium (in this case, flesh versus silicone). The same goes for adaptations, which highlight the ‘object status’ of the text (Rainer Emig 32); the reproducibility of a text calls into question how something valuable, like art, or the self, functions and retains value (following on from Walter Benjamin’s arguments in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’). Equally, the way in which the adaptation of the human to host allows for the ‘text’ (their mind/pearl) to be controlled speaks to fears of a loss of control over the story, a diminishing of agency that also functions as authorship over the life narrative.

This fear over authorship is linked to a general desire to control, or rather, be able to write the narrative of our own lives. Interestingly, developments in technology have been linked to this desire, as Ken Hillis argues: ‘virtual or artificial reality and its accompanying “fake space” suggest[] a conscious awareness that humans have (or wish to) become the “authors” of their own ontological ground’ (xxix). The construction and continued development of a virtual space in which narratives (of the self and the wider world) can be controlled and curated reflects a desire to author our own story. We, as humans, are continuing to adapt (to) the world around us through technology, including the biological fact of the body to a digital form, with mixed results. This adaptation allows us to consider what the digital offers that the physical cannot and what is lost in the process of adaptation. The concerns and challenges of this are reflected in *Westworld*, made into a physical, visceral reality.

Adaptation as *process*, however, is not foregrounded here. Instead, there are definite binaries presented over host/human and original/copy that are toyed with in various ways. Sometimes, these are adhered to, such as the storyline in which Dolores’ pearl is copied and placed into multiple bodies. The copy in the host body of Charlotte Hale (Tessa Thompson) begins to self-harm as she struggles to adapt to her new body. This suggests a clear connection between mind and body—that they cannot be separated, despite the advances in technology, as well as exploring the idea of digital corruption as a physical manifestation.⁹ The boundary of the body, whether human or host, is too defined for it to be surpassed. Dolores’ body, the one that audiences are introduced from the very beginning of the series, is the ‘original’. The copy, known as ‘Halores’ (a portmanteau of Dolores/Hale), operates in a dysfunctional way because it is *not* the original, and therefore is inferior as a copy, upholding those hierarchical binary relationships.

At other times in the series, however, they are challenged, such as the inclusion of a space named the ‘sublime’. This is a place in which all copies of hosts are free to live, for them to live as they want to—essentially a host/secular version of heaven. In this space, they are projections only, code running without the physical, tangible body. It is framed as a utopian space—a digital-only place in which medium is rendered useless, and there are no disastrous consequences. Despite the returns throughout the series to a tangible, physical, presence, the ‘sublime’ and its framing complicates the idea of physical taking precedence, and the ‘copy’ being secondary. Does the fully digital offer a freedom that the physical cannot? This is complicated by the simulation of the physical within this space, which is seen onscreen represented by physical (acting) bodies. The recourse to the physical onscreen shows the series trying to grasp the implications for the digital for

the body; and seems to suggest it is hard to imagine a self without a physical representative. This can be thought about in terms of adaptation; as a consideration of the idea of the digital as a space that undermines the importance of medium, and challenges the primacy of the original. Given the repeated return to the medium of the physical in discussions of selfhood in *Westworld*, the idea of a text seems to be understood through the lens of its form, and thus, the digital at present will always function as adaptation *lacking* something (form, medium, but primarily materiality).

Returning to the question of adaptation as process, humans who are adapted to a digital form are shown going through attempts to adapt multiple times over (notably in season two with park owner James Delos who consistently malfunctions and is destroyed by fire when the adaptation is deemed a failure). What these attempts to adapt focus on is *fidelity* to the text of the human being adapted. This repetition echoes frequent re-working of texts, notably classics, which are deemed to have a particular currency. As Anna Stenport and Garrett Traylor argue, ‘The material is not what is lost in decay; it is the cultural currency and attention given to what is in the materials produced’ (82). This idea of decay is at the heart of the digitising of texts and within the narrative; the digital is presented often as a form of immortality, one that does not risk material decay. The implications for the text are an afterlife that functions as a kind of adaptation—the ‘constraints and possibilities’ of medium (Doane 130) are altered by this shift to the digital, and it equally changes the context in which it will be received by audiences.¹⁰ The same goes for an adaptation of the self to digital means as will now be explored.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SELFHOOD

Many of us are now part-digital (or rather, may choose to be). As N. Katherine Hayles argues, ‘our interactions with digital media are embodied, and they have bodily effects at the physical level’ (3). In recent times, we have further migrated online, seeing education, work, and other often physically constrained activities shift to a digital space. We now frequently exist as avatars or videos where we can blur our backgrounds or use filters to change how and where we are, allowing for a more controlled authorship of self. This has implications for the understanding of the self, and of others. We think of ourselves often in relation to others, and when this relationship is within the digital, the sense of the physical and tangible shifts. We are able to be in different places and moments regardless of physical limitations; our presence is reduced to a visual marker and an auditory link. This goes beyond our presence in contemporaneous interactions; we also curate a version of the self via social media which exists as both a document and a monument of the self we wish to be. This arguably shapes our understanding or conceptualisation of the physical space, and what it means to be physically present in the world.

As has been seen, the self is unquestionably impacted by the digital. What is important to highlight is how I am defining ‘digital’ here though—it is a term so frequently used that often it loses meaning. This is perhaps because it has a level of complexity as Sami Coteli notes: ‘It is multi-layered and different from any preceding culture type in the context of structure and its spread’ (6). ‘Spread’ is important here: it is both tool and entertainment, process and outcome. The ubiquity of the digital makes its impact hard

to pin down. In the case of *Westworld*, I am thinking about the digital as a non-human or non-biological rendering of the self, of the use of technology to create, maintain, and control the (version of the) body. In terms of adaptation, I can think about the digital as relating to copying across for the purpose of updating the medium, but also for the purpose of preservation. In doing so, it invariably alters the understanding of the text by virtue of its boundaries being altered.

Perhaps this can be linked to the self through questions of boundaries. What is understood as a discrete self or text to be is dictated by what it is not, and by how it sits in relation to others. With boundaries come limitation, otherness. The digitising of a self renders those boundaries unfixed, as seen in *Westworld*—copies of the self (both human and host) transgress boundaries of a singular body and across different hosts. This suggests that the self is not as constrained by boundaries as might be thought, and therefore neither is the text. However, within *Westworld*, the framing of the hosts as copies of a ‘real’ person (as seen with William) indicates a more complex relationship. Whilst there is the definite value marker of the ‘real’, some characters, like William (Ed Harris), are deemed to be ‘improved’ when copied to a host body. In season four, William is shown killed by his host self (see Fig. 3), and so adaptation to the digital also becomes about the survival of the fittest. The world the host version of William inhabits is better suited to the digital than his human counterpart,¹¹ and so he is able to survive. Equally, many of the hosts are able to survive beyond the body they inhabit because of this digitisation of the self. They are crossing those boundaries of the self, moving towards an unfixed space, and this freedom of movement—of the self and of the text—enables a persistence.

What can be seen, then, is that these understandings of selfhood are shaped by the world being inhabited. The self is contextual, as notably discussed by Judith Butler:

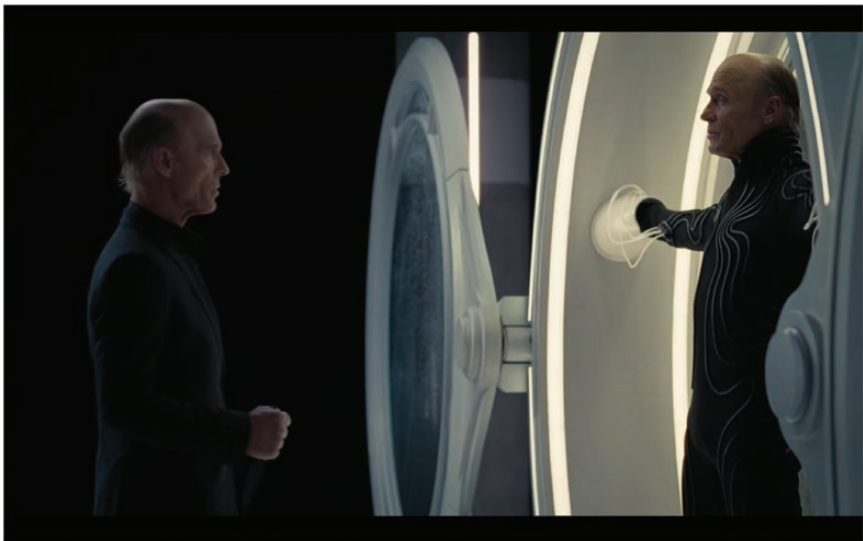


Figure 3. William confronted by his host self, in ‘Metanoia’.

We come into the world on the condition that the social world is already there, laying the groundwork for us. This implies that I cannot persist without norms of recognition that support my persistence: the sense of possibility pertaining to me must first be imagined from somewhere else before I can begin to imagine myself. My reflexivity is not only socially mediated, but socially constituted. I cannot be who I am without drawing upon the sociality of norms that precede and exceed me. (32)

This links to the narratives given to the hosts and subsequently humans; they are fixed according to the norms of the park, and those visiting have the opportunity to challenge these, transgressing boundaries both social and moral. It is in this transgression of boundaries that a certain 'truth' of the self is revealed, unavoidably changing it. Visitors to the park often come to seek themselves, believing this self-actualisation will emerge in a space that at once is constructed by clear boundaries (the fixed narratives) but allows them to be challenged (visitors being allowed to do whatever they wish).

In its presentation of the self and identity, the series explores the aspect of identity as fixed. Arguably, the world of *Westworld* shows identities as fixed by their being able to be copied. However, this is not how identity is seen by a number of theorists. Deborah Netolicky, for one, argues that 'identities are ever-unfinished, ongoing co-constructions, constantly being recreated and refined over time' (93). Further, Slavomir Galik links this concept of identity as being tied to more tangible things: 'we cannot see human identity as something permanent, but something that is dynamic and changeable, something that changes together with changes in body and mind, something that depends on awareness and unawareness, society and culture' (35). This suggests that the self that is copied is not the 'true' self, but a 'version' of. Similarly, our digital selves are 'versions' of ourselves, ones that are not constrained by the same boundaries and societal rules.¹² The copied version becomes a 'version' or adaptation that may retain key elements (following Hutcheon's 'repetition without replication' definition) but do not follow the same storyline. If this is the case, why digitise the self? (and therefore, why adapt?).

There is clearly something about the idea or concept of the self, and it having a fundamental essence that can be channelled or adapted, that is seen here. It also raises questions of where selfhood resides. *Westworld* at once seems to be arguing it is the mind that houses it, as seen through Dolores being copied multiple times and across bodies. Equally, it seems to infer that the body is a site of selfhood given the fact that the bodies are meticulously copied as well. The body is a contradictory thing in that it is an anchor in the world, but something constantly changing as it ages. Yet what our body can do, how it looks, all factor into the understanding of the self. As Holland argues: 'the body does seem to provide some level of certainty insofar as it is the site on and over which battles for self-hood are fought' (161). Equally, Hillis also makes an argument for the body as key: 'Our bodies are where we experience the intersection of our individuality and the cultural sphere' (172). *Westworld* begins to challenge this in theory with Dolores being in multiple bodies, but audiences are also primed to see the body first encountered as 'hers', and the 'original'. By the time season four starts, however, this body has been remade, and so is not the body audiences think. Though the audience know technically it is the same body—that of actor Evan Rachel Wood—they must 'suspend disbelief' to imagine it as another, which may be difficult to keep track of, and audiences may look for traces of the body's 'original' self. Is this because we cannot conceive

of a body that is both different and the same? The copying and recreation of selves, of bodies, of minds, threaten our mortality through a challenge to perceived notions of identity. It also challenges hierarchies as it starts to question *who* or rather *what* is either doing the adapting or being adapted.

This is something Holland also picks up on: ‘the cyborg film narrative operates as a myth to reassert the mind-body dualism and those of sex and gender that parallel it, where its ideological aims are achieved by first illustrating the materialist position, and then showing it to be inadequate, naïve and in some sense ‘morally wrong’ (171). Am I saying then that *Westworld* espouses the status quo? It frames the body as integral to the understanding of the self (from both the viewer, the individual, and the characters within the narrative). A question worth asking is whether it would be truly possible to imagine a self without a body, or even further, represent that in a medium like television. Though there have been visual texts that have touched upon this, such as *Her* (Spike Jonze 2013), arguably the voice of the operating system, Samantha (that of Scarlett Johansson) recalls a particular body for the minds of audiences and so the anchor of the physical cannot be escaped.

Linking back to the adaptation argument, arguably this suggests that medium is key and a text will only be seen as ‘truly’ itself if it is in the same medium or body. Or does the digital, in its simulation of this, function as a transitional point? Do we just need to move away from binaries when considering adaptations? As humanity slides towards a future more enmeshed in technology, we will have to consider these questions, in relation to both the texts loved and held dear, and our concepts of the self, which will become ever more digital. *Westworld*, in some ways, could be seen to be a last gasp of the physical as we come to terms with how things are changing and how the digital is shaping culture. The digital suggests intangibility, and until a post-material space for the text and the self is able to be conceived, both will be haunted by the ghost of the physical.

TANGIBILITY AND THE GHOST IN THE MACHINE

In *Westworld*, there are several instances where a character has an afterlife as a host. As noted, one of the central host figures, Bernard (Jeffrey Wright) is an adaptation of Arnold, a creator-founder of the Delos Park. He is mostly kept out of sight so as not to cause concern; his appearance for many functions as a haunting, a reminder of the past. In season four, Halores is shown attempting to perfect a host version of Caleb (Aaron Paul) in order to find out why some of the humans are able to resist the mind control (coming to the fore in the aptly titled episode, ‘Fidelity’). In her frequent recreations of his body, he wakes up unaware of what has happened before, resetting like a video game character. It is only once he starts to see versions of his body, dead, around him, that he realises what is going on. He is facing the failed decisions of his past sel(ves)f (see Fig. 4). This sees the frequent attempts to recreate the self as a form of torture, with each one being haunted by the fact of its lack of humanity, and the previous bodies that litter the way. Later on in the season, he meets his now-adult daughter, C, who looks at him like she is seeing a ghost (‘Que Sera, Sera’).¹³

As an adaptation, Caleb operates as a dysfunctional one in that he keeps dying. In some ways, though, this is true to his previous form—he died at that age, and so the



Figure 4. Caleb confronted/haunted by his past selves, ‘Que Sera, Sera’.

frequent deaths serve as an especially precise imitation. His haunting—of himself, of his daughter—speak to the ways in which adaptation can be seen as such too. As Katja Krebs argues, ‘adaptation haunts haunted texts and is at once spectral in its haunting of source texts as well as haunted itself’ (583). The idea of adaptation as a haunting has been discussed by other scholars such as Monika Pietrak-Franger. In her work on adaptation, Pietrak-Franger argues that ‘it becomes clear that adaptations...never equal the real thing but are its transformations conjured up in the present’ (79). The role of the present is key though, as Pietrak-Franger posits; the tangibility of the present is implicated, with the materiality of the present being crucial in the way the text is conjured. Each (re)transformation of Caleb in *Westworld* is shaped by the materiality of his space and the moment he inhabits. Both time and space in the universe of *Westworld* become part of the medium the self is adapted to/for. What each successive adaptation of Caleb does is re-conjure his ghost, highlighting the technological ability to recycle the self that had been copied. This is in line with the perception of adaptation as haunting that Pietrak-Franger has. She asserts that adaptations are ‘conversations with ghosts’ which ‘put into relief the media and processes’ adaptations are produced through (81).

Thus with the adaptation, particularly the digital adaptation, we see the medium, or rather, its absence. The same often goes for the adaptation of the self to the digital in our everyday lives. We are aware of the fact of our bodies, and may choose to link to them in various ways—through images of the body being posted, for instance. But equally, we can choose to escape the body momentarily and adapt to the digital landscape with a blank canvas. A body implies a particular identity. Without a/our body, our anonymity is further assured. This is not how most of us interact with the digital space, however. Very often, we want a digital version of ourselves we can perfect and have control over, with the ability to filter and alter the ways in which our bodies may

look. All of this is to say that we frequently attempt mastery over the body, are at war with ourselves and our tangibility. Yet when this is threatened, we may struggle to imagine ourselves outside physical boundaries. *Westworld* and its approach to technology remind us of our bodily selves by dismantling those boundaries, our bodies haunting the machines. Similarly, adaptation frequently dismantles or crosses boundaries between mediums and texts, raising questions around authenticity and originality. Thus, we can see adaptation—of both the self to the digital in the real world, and within the narrative of *Westworld*—as a process that functions as an attempt to understand, or perhaps control, to impose new boundaries.

With both *Westworld* and the way in which the digital self is conceived of now, there is a sense that the digital offers a way to improve or better the self. The (original) physical self can be adapted to the digital, allowing for the flaws to be ironed out and a self presented that is free of the limitations of the physical medium of the body. In doing so, we extend ourselves, and our reach, as Kathleen Woodward argues. She posits that the development of technology has been about extending the reach of the body: ‘according to this logic, the process culminates in the very immateriality of the body itself’ (50). However, as shown in *Westworld* there is a railing against this—it does not work—the hosts keep returning to the physical. A body is needed in order to experience a self. Even when the hosts are offered the opportunity to ‘transcend’ (be uploaded to the sublime), they find it difficult to let go of their physical selves (as seen in episode 5, ‘Zhuangzi’). As noted before, identity is tied to a physical, a marker, something that defines it as original, authentic, and distinct. Very often it is the body that functions as this marker of distinction, given its uniqueness. *Westworld* presents a challenge to this with the ability to clone these bodies; equally, adaptations, particularly digital ones, can simulate the originality of the text in the digital space, preserving elements of the medium and their boundaries (e.g. through an online theatrical performance that still upholds a boundary between action and audience). Key to note here is that I am discussing the digital and its tangibility; I am not arguing that the digital is less real, but that its boundaries and possibilities are different. Given the ways both a text and a self can be replicated, and altered (bypassing deterioration of a physical medium, e.g. or retouched in some way to improve—as has also been seen within the series’ recreation of humans into hosts), whilst still offering the text itself, it calls into question where originality and authenticity lie. The digital challenges the presumptions around originality, undermining the frameworks used to understand our world, which *Westworld* also begins to confront.

Westworld challenges these ways in which the self is adapted to the digital. Katarzyna Burzyska argues that ‘the audience are also forced to reinvestigate their moral outlook in the digital era and face up to the new dilemmas that the rapid development of technology creates’ (7). These moral implications bring us back to Dolores, who is the focus of much of the series itself. She is a complex protagonist—who wants seemingly to work towards a good cause (liberation) and who ultimately works as guardian of humanity in her testing for fidelity. Dolores’ narrative as the central spine in *Westworld* is key—as seen above, a host is presented as an original, and as the author to many of the stories here. The framing of Dolores as author (and curator) of humanity’s stories puts her in the position of power, but questions whether ultimately, authorship really

matters. The stories she collects and retells rely on a body to enact them. How can texts survive without the boundaries of medium? Is it just the story that matters, or how it is told? What does the digital mean for the future of our stories?

The series ending with this suggests that a text, despite digitisation, will still tell the same story. The digital, however, offers a safer space in which to do so, one that is protected, more accessible, and that can prevent obliteration or damage. This is the 'sublime' in *Westworld*, which presents the ghostly presence of the text/bodies re-playing/retelling old stories without their 'original' bodies or tangibility intact. Does this equally suggest that the body or the tangible world is the only one that matters, where things have consequences? Arguably not; despite what has been shown regarding the impact of the digital, we are still in the stage of treating the digital as though because it lacks tangibility, it is somehow less real. The same goes for adaptations, particularly digital adaptations. They are still real, but in a medium yet to be engaged with seriously. This is because the intangible is seen as being somehow less authentic, tied to notions of the physical as proof, as truth, as authentic. There may be a security in this, a way to retain the notion of the physical self as authentic in the face of the digital; it may guard against a fragmentation of identity. This movement of the physical to the digital, even in the form of cyborg to the digital space of the sublime, perhaps reflects Deborah Lupton's assertion that 'The cyborg body has transformed into the digital body' (200).

I return then to the question of hierarchies—in conceptions of the self and in adaptation. The digital challenges the way in which the physical is understood. Traditionally, 'our grasp of time is in terms of our bodily self-presence' (Mensch 125). In many ways, we are limited by our bodies and what they can do. Yet, as Sobchack notes: 'In the (inter)face of the new technological revolution and its transformation of every aspect of our culture (including our bodies), we have to recognise and make explicit the deep and dangerous ambivalence that informs the reversible relations we, as lived-bodies, have with our tools and their function of allowing us to transcend the limitations of our bodies' (209). We are constantly aiming to go beyond, thus trying to reconfigure the power of the body over our experience and our world. Similarly, originality and authenticity are seen as primary, tied to conceptions of what constitutes them. The digital upends the questions of originality in its ability to offer a text in many ways the same but with a key (uncanny) difference—the way in which it is being experienced, that is, through technological means.

Westworld dramatises and plays out these battles between often binary oppositions and the hierarchies in place. As Onni Hirvonen notes, 'If the android revolution merely manages to turn the roles of masters and slaves on their heads, it ultimately leads only to a continuous struggle and not to flourishing freedom for both sides via mutual recognition' (70). Often in the way, the tensions between self/the digital and adaptation/text are figured there is no slipperiness. They may be haunted by the other, but even this term 'haunting' implies a malicious or negative presence, something that taints the purity of a binary whole. I am not so sure it is this simple. Although we have managed to become more integrated with the digital, becoming part-digital ourselves, it is still seen as separate and other from ourselves for the most part, as another 'version' of ourselves, and as something that cannot wholly coexist simultaneously, leading to one

‘version’ being spectral in some way. In the same way, adaptations are seen as distinct by virtue of their not being a text, existing in another time, space, or medium. What would be more beneficial, and I think *Westworld* touches upon this in the failure to separate and keep distinct binaries, is to read selfhood, and consequently, texts, as part of a spectrum. Rather than seeing the digital as being haunted, or the self as being haunted by the digital or vice versa, it needs to be considered how to approach all aspects of the text/self rather than trying to separate them. We cannot escape the body, neither can we escape the oncoming ubiquity of the digital.

CONCLUSION

Westworld’s approach to the self, and the text, is complex. It cannot pin down exactly what reality is, nor can it say where the self lies. At times, the self is able to be copied across and function as an extension of the physical body. At others, the act of copying and recreating results in failure. The self is realised *and* corrupted by the digital. The ever-present nature of the digital now means it is not going away, and we need to work out how to live with it, and this includes how it integrates into our conceptions of identity. In this way, *Westworld* offers a thinking through. As Richard Harvey Brown offers: ‘the narrative approach is a method both of research and of practice for understanding how selves are constructed, and for actually constructing them, in specific social-historical contexts’ (197).

Can it be understood how the digital is going to impact the self and the text? Arguably no—the differences in how it occurs in *Westworld* speak to the pitfalls of adopting a homogenised approach. Texts are complex, so are selves. Trying to predict how they will adapt to a new medium is difficult, and to claim otherwise is to deny their complexity. However, the digital offers a reconsideration of what mediums are, what authenticity is, and the hierarchies in place around the self and adaptation. The evolution of the digital self forces us to think about what constitutes a self, wholeness, and authenticity, which links to adaptation in that it is seen as secondary or a version of. But does the digital give us not just a replacement or an overwriting of the self, but another addition to the self as a web of selves? We are multiple rather than singular, and rather than being ‘haunted’, we are plural.

NOTES

¹ These pre-narrated lives run in loops, similar to the storylines the hosts followed in the park in season one.

² As S. Marc Cohen argues, ‘we are stuck with the mind-body problem as Descartes created it, inevitably and rightly so’ (57).

³ Arguably, there are multiple selves, but for the sake of division between digital/physical, I am addressing them in a blanket way.

⁴ This is not an original conceit—we see it in other narratives like *Altered Carbon* (Netflix, 2018–2020).

⁵ Something discussed by adaptation scholars such as Leitch, as well as questions of perception by Nicklas and Baumbach.

⁶ See, for example, *Westworld Season 1 Soundtrack*, by Ramin Djawadi, WaterTower Music, 2016.

⁷ See R. Winckler. 2017. ‘This great stage of androids: *Westworld*, Shakespeare and the world as stage’ in *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance*, 10(2), 169–88 or Burzynska, who is also referenced here.

⁸ Including the links to concepts within adaptation such as originality and fidelity indicated by the episode titles.

⁹ A similar idea is presented in the 2015 film *Advantageous*. (dir. Jennifer Phang).

¹⁰ Perhaps with a sense that the analogue is perceived as a more ‘authentic’ version of a text, despite its flaws or constraints.

¹¹ Adaptation as survival strategy is discussed by scholars such as—see them for more.

¹² Although there are some social norms in place, arguably the digital is a space where anonymity allows for a breaching of these norms, and the norms of interaction are different.

¹³ Arguably, we can think about the revisiting of texts we love through adaptations and sensing that uncanniness that comes with something not being quite right, or in their too-strict attempt at mimicry.

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