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Westworld and Humans: The Sentimental Disposition of Popular Posthumanism

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Abstract

Popular trans- and posthuman TV fictions such as Westworld (2016-22) or Humans (2015-18) are replete with sentimental tropes and scripts – those inherited from an 18th-century sentimental tradition and the affective-political ones that allow the sentimental to continue to operate today, as a communicative code in an arena of 'public feelings'. Here, it is activated in times of crisis and to hedge in experiences of radical contingency. Uncanny encounters with posthuman forms arguably constitute such moments of crisis. But how can the sentimental do its cultural work if these encounters threaten to decentre its humanist foundations? In Westworld and Humans, sentimental scripts are partially revised, develop ambivalent, multi-coded forms and are employed self-reflexively, both in the shows' diegesis and in the way they address their audience: In 'quality TV' drama, fictions of the posthuman seem to engender a 'meta-sentimentality' – which in turn may allow for a critical mode of inquiry.

Keywords: *Sentimentality; Sentimental Politics; Westworld; Humans; Television*

Like many other TV series with trans- or posthuman themes, HBO's *Westworld* (2016-22) and Channel 4's *Humans* (2015-18) are infused with a heavy dose of sentimentality. It is not (just) a 'sentimental mood' that seems to pervade these shows. They share a "sentimental disposition", to borrow a phrase James Chandler has used to capture the different tonalities of sentimentality – as 'mood', 'mode', and 'manner' (2013, xiii-xvi). *Westworld* and *Humans* are indebted to various sentimental 'modes' as well, including an 18th-century culture of sensibility and 18th- and 19th-century 'sentimentality' in the theatre and the novel. These continue to provide popular culture with a sentimental 'manner' which the shows routinely activate: sentimental tropes, scripts and repertoires, including literary (e.g., sentimental novels) and theatrical or cinematic ones (such as stage and film melodrama). Recent scholarship has also explored the role the sentimental plays in today's 'affective societies', specifically in conjunction with political storytelling in an arena of 'public feelings' (e.g., Berlant, 2008). Here, the sentimental continues to provide a powerful communicative code which can be mobilised in times of crisis and used to hedge in experiences of radical contingency. The uncanny encounters with androids – autonomous, humanoid and sometimes (partly) organic robotic entities – in *Westworld* and *Humans* arguably also constitute such moments of crisis. But how can the sentimental do its cultural work if the shows' posthuman encounters threaten to undermine humanist foundations as well – since the very notion of a shared 'humanity' may well be central to its operation? This essay looks at how conventional sentimental scripts change in a trans- and posthuman scenario and how the sentimental continues to provide a way of 'dealing with' and 'interrogating' a posthuman condition. 'Dealing with' covers ethical and ideological aspects,

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'interrogating' will address the sentimental's critical potential in what I take to be a 'popular posthumanism'.

Terms and concepts such as 'popular posthumanism' may need some clarification. In its most general sense, 'posthumanism' denotes an academic framework for all kinds of enquiries into concepts of 'the human', past and present – an institutionalised academic enquiry with its own critical discourse. 'Popular posthumanism' on the other hand, is potentially just as insightful (Seaman, 2007). Aesthetic rather than academic, it does not play out in universities but in popular culture – including, as I will argue, in so-called 'Prestige' or 'Quality' TV drama. John Hartley, a seminal media scholar who was one of the first to analyse television from a Cultural Studies perspective in the 1970s, recently quipped: "Honestly, who needs philosophy when you've got *Westworld* and *Humans* to think with?" (2020, 235). 'Thinking with' popular culture is what interests me. Compared to academic posthumanism, this 'popular posthumanism' asks a slightly different set of questions, and it involves a different 'problematic' (Seaman, 2007).

This is specifically true for 'Quality TV' drama – a contentious label in television studies (see McCabe/Akass, 2007). Used as a discursive (rather than evaluative or normative) term, however, the label simply highlights a generic contract that exists between the audience and narratively complex series (Mittell, 2015). This includes an awareness that such shows are scripted and that part of the audience's pleasure is to uncover the constructions behind them. This meta-fictional dimension has long been considered a hallmark of 'Quality TV' drama (Bignell, 2007). *Westworld* is a case in point – it consistently invites a critical, self-reflexive viewing (Köller, 2019; Wilkins, 2019; Lynch, 2022). Anthony Hopkins's character in the first two seasons of the show, Dr. Robert Ford, is an obvious stand-in for this kind of meta-narrativity: In "Westworld" (a theme park full of androids, or 'hosts'), Ford is literally the showrunner, with his own staff writers producing the day-to-day scripts for the androids. One of the pleasures of watching *Westworld* is figuring out Ford's scripts – and to see how the actual showrunners, Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan, manipulate the story within the bounds of a 'posthuman realism'.[2]

Sentimental with a Twist

Perhaps not surprisingly, existing scholarship on science fiction novels and films has long noticed an inflation of a sentimental 'manner' to reaffirm traditional humanist positions in trans- or posthuman fictions. *Westworld* and *Humans* employ some of these strategies – but they also use them with a twist.

First, scholarship on science fiction has identified "sentimental containment responses", such as an overly sentimental anthropomorphism to "refamiliariz[e] the unknown" (Gomel, 2014, 15). The cultural work of the sentimental here is to relegate unto the level of feeling or affect something with cannot quite be resolved cognitively – as, for example, when in Carl Sagan's novel and film *Contact* (1985/1997), an uncanny encounter with an alien life force is envisaged as "a sentimental father-daughter reunion" (ibid.). Sentimental scripts have similarly been used to mourn, or nostalgically reimagine, some lost, human-centred world. Obvious examples are science fiction films of the 1970s in which the escape to a lush natural world provides the answer to a techno-totalitarian dystopia

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[2] Another way of looking at this self-reflexive dimension would be to say that metaphorically, 'Quality TV' such as *Westworld* or *Humans* has become 'self-aware', 'sentient' – and popular culture as a mode of inquiry is becoming the woken android to traditional academic endeavours. Just like the androids in these television shows are denied fully equal status, so is 'popular posthumanism' in intellectual terms. This may explain some of the uneasiness I feel when I research topics such as this one on popular internet sites. There is something of an 'uncanny encounter' with our own scholarly 'other' that speaks to us from the myriads of popular paratexts on the internet, and from within these shows themselves, threatening the privilege of academic expertise.

(Dinello, 2005). *Westworld* and *Humans* likewise establish such sentimental 'retrotopias' (Bauman, 2017) in their respective second seasons – but they use them ironically. *Humans* uses a lush natural world as a screen saver to visualise a human consciousness downloaded onto a computer, and in *Westworld*, the narrative arc revolves around reaching a frontier-style Garden of Eden, which, however, turns out to be a simulacrum on a server, known as the (digital) "sublime".

Second, while the sentimental has thus been employed to 'humanise' trans-/posthuman forms that are marked as not human, not quite human, or not quite human any more, it also adds uncanny effects by bringing them into the intimate field of, for example, the nuclear family. Sentimental tropes can provide the *heimelig* in the *unheimlich*, and this is something *Westworld* and *Humans* self-reflexively exploit. Looking at this uncanniness in more general generic terms, there is arguably a close affinity between sentimental fiction and horror. The sentimental not only complements a specific spectrum of feelings and emotions – sadness, grief, suffering, perhaps nostalgia – in texts that otherwise utilise very different emotional responses, such as horror, terror, or fear. The sentimental can also become the very site of horror. In both *Westworld* and *Humans*, horror is mapped onto sentimentality, and the resulting effects are self-reflexively explored in both TV shows.

Third, in terms of sentimental politics, the shows explore on a diegetic level how sentimental scripts are used to interpellate their androids. A similar trope has also long been used in science fiction films. It builds on the (sentimental) notion that machines that 'feel' cannot kill (which, if human beings are anything to go by, is not a very forceful argument). The fiction is that cyborgs can be 'controlled' by feeling or emotion, providing a 'safeguard' for humanity (Dinello, 2005, 80). A version of this sentimental trope is consistently used in both shows – but it is not *empathy* that is engendered in androids. Instead, invented memories of suffering, trauma and loss are implemented in androids to serve as the 'cornerstone' of their identity.

This is a significant shift. Empathy (an early 20th-century coinage) and sympathy (the 18th-century term it gradually supplanted; Burdett, 2011) have long been in crisis in trans- and posthuman fictions. They have been challenged as a human privilege (Herbrechter, 2022), including in the films *Westworld* and *Humans* are most obviously indebted to: in the case of the former, Michael Crichton's 1973 film *Westworld* and the *Blade Runner* movies; in that of the latter, Stephen Spielberg's melodramatic fairy tale *A.I.* (2001) or Jake Schreier's *Robot & Frank* (2012). These films explore whether empathy is an embodied, affective, human state – or a mere cognitive ability that can be learned or even simulated (e.g., Herbrechter, 2022; Kappelhoff, 2004, 11-12). *Westworld* and *Humans* shift the focus of this debate. Their sentimentalism is *solipsistic* rather than communal, its goal no longer the forging of sociability. In fact, both shows feature symbolic equivalents of 18th-century sentimental communities – forms of sociability based on sympathy. However, while androids are connected by means of near-field communication networks, these are radically critiqued. In *Humans*, androids employ them as a form of panoptical surveillance system, and in *Westworld*, they serve as an instrument of downright extinction: In an apocalyptic scenario in season two's final episode, Clementine, an android riding a pale horse, wirelessly brings death and destruction to her fellow androids looking for salvation in the digital sublime.

Westworld and *Humans* self-consciously instrumentalise, and indeed weaponise, sentimental tropes and scripts. While these are fairly conventional (as I will argue next, they centre on suffering and trauma connected to the nuclear family), they are partially revised, ambivalently coded and self-reflexively employed, both in the TV shows' diegesis and in the way they address their audience. Both shows, but *Westworld* specifically, exhibit a 'meta-sentimentality'.

Questions of Slavery and Class?

Considering HBO's *Westworld* in conjunction with *Humans*, which was produced by British company Kudos for Channel 4 in the UK and AMC in the US, may also bring into relief cultural differences when it comes to the way sentimental scripts and tropes are reconfigured in popular trans- and posthuman visual fictions. Again, John Hartley provides a good starting point for looking into them. While he touches on the shows only in passing, he argues that *Westworld*'s posthuman fictions symbolically replay questions of slavery, and *Humans'* those of class (2020, 235). (Slave- or servant-systems involving artificial humans have long been a core trope of posthuman narratives; cf. LaGrandeur, 2013 & 2015.) In *Westworld*, according to Hartley, AI is the "source of consolidated wealth and power", its android 'hosts' "can be owned, killed, sexually abused" and their "consciousness (speech, character, actions) be tuned to the whim and pleasure of the owner". The show, he argues, thus serves as a modern meditation on (US) slavery. In *Humans*, on the other hand, robot 'synths' work in production, services and as caregivers. They "join with other synths in solidarity" and "struggle for rights". This, Hartley claims, is more specifically a meditation on (British) class struggle (ibid.). Therefore, while both shows interrogate the shifting boundaries of what it means to be human, and despite their common transcultural appeal, their respective cultural imaginaries and the "unresolved social anxiet[ies]" they address are historically and culturally very specific (ibid.).[3]

For example, the shows draw on a specific iconography – the first season of *Westworld* has a frontier setting, *Humans* is set in a London suburb – which they place into an aesthetic mode with a wider, transcultural appeal. In both productions, a sentimental melodramatic mode serves that purpose. The main android character of *Westworld*'s first season, Dolores, is the iconic 'farmer's daughter' of frontier fiction, and she is made to act in a melodramatic script. Dolores represents persecuted innocence (her catchphrase is: "I choose to see the beauty [of this world]", S3, E8), and her function is to be constantly victimised – in this she is clearly reminiscent of the heroine of 19th-century stage melodrama. Like all the other android 'hosts', Dolores is kept in a narrative loop where she is repeatedly exposed to trauma, injured, possibly raped, and killed. Hosts are forced to have, and then (mostly) to forget, the same traumatic experience again and again. As with Richardson's Pamela, Dolores's chastity in the Westworld theme park is a marketable commodity – and one which can be sold again and again.

Dolores's initial narrative loop in Westworld is that she returns home and witnesses how her father is killed. At that point, the human customers of the theme park are invited to play either the hero or the villain in this melodrama. They can save her – or rape or kill her. As a melodramatic heroine, Dolores *embodies* suffering (her name, after all, literally means 'sorrow' or 'pain'). Her suffering is clearly marked as scripted – both *in* the show (by the theme park's scriptwriters), and *as* the show, by *Westworld*'s showrunners Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan. As part of 'quality TV' drama, the audience is meant to decode both. The sentimental scenario is that the audience is not only invited to sympathise with her suffering, but to engage with it critically, and place it in the context of systemic forms of exploitation. Again, this is done in a self-reflexive fashion: When Dolores finally fights back in season two, she metamorphoses from melodramatic heroine to an avenging angel of the blossoming "#MeToo"-movement, which broke just as the second season was being filmed in late 2017.

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[3] I am mainly focusing on the first three seasons of *Westworld* (2016-20) and all three seasons of *Humans* (2015-18) because they also capture a particular cultural moment, one which is contemporary but pre-pandemic: When it comes to popular posthumanism, the pandemic will make a difference in how popular culture will conceptualise humanity and sociability. *Westworld*'s fourth season (shot during the pandemic and released in 2022) reflects this shift very well. The parasites that invade human beings in that season are (amongst other things) a thinly veiled symbol for the Corona virus, and *Westworld* makes sure to include the relevant pandemic iconology (the wearing of masks in a bar) and terminology (such as a "super spreader event").

While the audience is invited to sympathise with her, however, there is a fundamental problem with the representation of her embodied suffering, because the show lingers on that very body in voyeuristic scenes of gratuitous nudity and of graphic and salacious torture. In one of the first season's most striking scenes of suffering, a human guest, young William, has fallen in love with Dolores. Now Billy (i.e., 'the Kid') is forced to sit in a chair and witness how a male friend cuts open her body, with a large knife and in close-up, to expose the workings of her android body. This scene from *Westworld*'s ninth episode uses a very conventional cinematic tableau in which the voyeuristic gaze of the audience is legitimised by the forced gaze of a man on the screen (*forcing* him to look *allows* him to look – allows *the audience* to look). In terms of the sentimental politics of the show, however, the audience is invited to sympathise not with Dolores for suffering pain, but with Billy for being shown that his love for her is futile and their future together impossible (specifically their reproductive future, given that Dolores' lack of a womb is exposed in this scene). The direction of sympathy, that is, does not quite align itself with the object of torture.

The ambivalence involved in such displays – between empathy and voyeurism, compassion and titillation, the bearer and the burden of sympathy – was already a fundamental part of a culture of sensibility and of sentimental fiction. 18th-century audiences expressed uneasiness about Laurence Sterne's narrator in *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), who, for example, went to great length to invent and imaginatively torture a fictional slave just to be able to then sympathise with him (Wood, 2002). Moral values espoused in sentimental novels frequently came with their significant other – sympathy and compassion were evoked in sadistic scenarios of suffering, the celebration of female chastity allowed for elaborate staging of temptation and seduction, the nuclear family and the virtues of the family home brought with it erotic taboos, including incest. The very tears shed in sentimental novels were ambivalently coded – ranging from signifiers of pain to those of sexual arousal. Both *Westworld* and *Humans* are indebted to these contradictory representations. The shows frequently explore them in a self-conscious manner.

Both shows centre around, indeed fetishise, family bonds. These bonds have mostly been severed in the past – the closest *Westworld* comes to representing affectionate family ties is in its title sequence, which features a half-formed android mother and her child. Instead, the nuclear family becomes the prime site of suffering and pain. The blueprint in both shows is similar: Memories of traumatic loss (real or scripted) compel characters to act, furnishing them with their social reality – and in the case of androids, with consciousness. In *Westworld*'s first season alone, Dolores suffers from memories of the violent murder of her father; Maeve is compulsively driven by memories of a daughter from a previous narrative; Arnold compensates for the loss of his son by creating Dolores; Dr. Ford compensates for the loss of Arnold by creating an android, Bernard, whom he furnishes with scripted memories of a son dying in his arms. In fact, Dr. Ford has even memorialised his own childhood family in android form, complete with himself as a little boy, and a family dog – the ultimate posthuman sentimental retrotopia. His equivalent in *Humans*, Dr. Elster, likewise built himself an android *ersatz*-family after he lost his wife and son in an extended suicide. They become the first 'synths'; the new android servant class in the UK.

Again, this is done in a self-reflexive fashion. Sentimentality comes with ready-made explanations, interpretations, and philosophical musings. *Westworld* takes great pains to explain that for androids, (scripted) memories of suffering and trauma provide a "cornerstone" around which their whole humanoid identity is organised ("the tragic ones worked best" as "it made the hosts more convincing", S1, E9). And in *Humans*, a fully-sentient sex worker – who must pretend she neither feels nor understands what her clients do to her – likewise muses that "[t]rue consciousness isn't possible without suffering" (S1, E5). In the words of *Westworld*'s pop-culture philosopher, the 'Man in Black', "when you're suffering, that's when you're most real" (S1, E2). *Suffering*, rather than cognition or rationality, is the hallmark of the human(oid) – 'I suffer, therefore I am'. Both shows explore philosophical questions about whether there is, in fact, any practical or even ontological difference between appearing real and being real, between consciousness and its semblance, between emotion and affect. And the shows come with their own ideology critique, as when the Man in Black in *Westworld* inscribes human(oid) consciousness into a capitalist logic: "Your humanity is cost-effective. So is your suffering" (S1, E5). *Westworld* also exposes its own sentimental narratives by staging them for reflexive consumption. In the first season, Dolores tells Bernard that she needs to hold on to the traumatic memories of the death of her parents – because they make her more complete: "Their pain, their loss... it's all I have left of them. You think the grief will make you smaller inside, like your heart will collapse in on itself, but it doesn't. I feel spaces opening up inside of me like a building with rooms I've never explored." What seems like a pretty, heartfelt moment, however, is then exposed as a sentimental narrative: "That's very pretty, Dolores", Bernard says. "Did we write that for you?" "In part", Dolores replies. "I adapted it from a scripted dialogue about love." (E4)

Sentimental Conclusions

Not all sentimentality, however, is ironically inflected. In the climactic moments of its third season, *Humans* shifts sentimentality from a diegetic level, where it is self-reflexively employed, to an extradiegetic level, where an abundance of sentimentality is served up straight, most likely in an attempt interest the audience in a new story line (*Humans* was subsequently not renewed for a fourth season).

Throughout the series, the audience's focal point was the middle-class suburban family of Laura. Viewers followed her family as they reluctantly used "synths", 'working-class' androids, as domestic servants, then sex workers, and eventually role models. Now, the family even considers adopting a sentient android son, Sam. *Humans* ends with an assault on this nuclear family. The respective scenes are intercut with a terrorist attack on London, thus underlining the symbolic significance of Laura's family as a stand-in for the middle-class nation. At gunpoint, Laura is forced to choose between the life of Sam and a random human pensioner. An ethical question she already faced on a national level (Laura served on a government commission about human-synth relations) is now dramatically condensed in the nuclear family. Forced to choose, Laura effectively restores her family to a pre-android state by deciding against Sam.

This 'Sophie's choice' is reflexively constructed as a 'teachable moment' for Laura by revolutionary androids. What happens next is no less contrived but comes without any reflexion whatsoever: It turns out that Laura's human daughter is pregnant with a child she conceived with Dr. Elster's son (who died in an extended suicide, was brought back to life as a cyborg and furnished by his father with an android family of his own, only to become 'wholly human' again when it turns out that a mixture between synth blood and human blood gives super-human strength and resilience). These plot twists allow *Humans* to end with the most sentimental of tropes: "The motherhood knot. The bond between mother and child" (S3, E8): Laura's pregnant daughter is told by a feminist android that "Humans and Synths share the same path now. And you shall lead the way" (ibid.).

If, as John Hartley suspects, *Humans* is indeed on some level a discussion of class, it is tempting to consider this ending in ideological terms: The blood of the working classes (the synths) 'rejuvenates' the middle-class family (the stand-in for the nation) – while allowing the latter to otherwise remain fairly unaffected. This is an ideological solution to class struggle which is not all that different to those advanced in some early-19th-century novels. Likewise, if *Westworld* is to some extent a meditation on (US) slavery, its ideological solution is also deeply problematic. Compared to *Humans*, *Westworld*'s narrative trajectory is not so much linear as centrifugal, an opening up of the story world in narratives of repetition and variation: Hosts, after all, are constantly rebooted – their story is literally one of *becoming* (a fitting musing on the "posthuman subject") – and the show concludes by circling back to its beginning, to Dolores as the Farmer's Daughter. This centrifugal moment also affects representations of slavery. In its first three seasons, *Westworld* simply extends its perspective from the liberation of android 'slaves' held in a frontier theme park to a global perspective where all of humanity is metaphorically enslaved. But this effectively voids slavery as a historical category.

Outlook

While slavery and class are not the only, nor perhaps the primary concerns of these shows, considering them as a critical lens may help bring into focus the strategic use *Westworld* and *Humans* make of the sentimental, including as a form of political storytelling. I was only able to sketch some of the functions the sentimental plays more generally, as a powerful communicative code in popular posthumanism – but they merit further interrogation. A sentimental disposition continues to provide popular posthuman fictions with a 'mood', 'mode' and 'manner', furnishing them with sentimental scripts and repertoires. Acknowledging this disposition may bring into sharper relief the affect-laden dimension of moral and political judgements about a trans- or posthuman condition in these texts. Moreover, the sentimental does not just function as an unobtrusive strategy of containment, hedging in liberal humanist positions in trans- or posthuman scenarios. It arguably also serves as a self-conscious, critical mode of inquiry – something that features in *Westworld* and *Humans* as reflexive or meta-sentimentality. Self-reflexivity was already a crucial part of 18th- and 19th-century sentimental traditions (e.g., Bell, 2000). It is now activated by (popular) posthumanism, and 'Quality TV' drama provides it with a fertile reflexive ground. This self-reflexive potential complicates easy distinctions between "academic" philosophical inquiries and ostensibly more "uncritical" popular ones (Braidotti et al., 2018, 94-95) and may align a popular, sentimental, posthumanism with a 'critical posthumanism'.

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