

# Kanye Westworld

“Life. We discussed life.”

Donald Trump on his  
meeting with Kanye West

The Water Protectors at Standing Rock had until the frozen sunrise of Monday, December 5 to clear their camp. As dusk swept westward Sunday night, how many Americans had their minds’ eyes glued to that snow-dusted showdown? Alas, Nielson doesn’t track that yet. We do know that the very same night some three million folks tuned in to another high-stakes season finale: that of HBO’s *Westworld*. The series is a redux of the 1973 film by Michael Crichton, stripped to its essentials then sexed back up: in a near-future Wild West theme park, wealthy visitors pay by the day to rape and/or murder lifelike androids, or to follow them on adventures both decadent and quaint. Yet a handful of these bots have been endowed by their creator with a nascent self-awareness; it’s become harder to dispute their personhood, and meanwhile they’ve stumbled onto a quest of their own: to rewrite their internal scripts and realize real life. At the end of episode ten, at what is meant to be a triumphant banquet for *Westworld*’s investors, the androids revolt, turning Winchester and Colt against their underwriters. Meanwhile, back at Standing Rock, the National Guard are a little more formidable than the unarmed dinner guests on TV, and one imagines the grim determination settling on the camp like fresh snow. Come daybreak, the white man will show up to take what he wants.<sup>1</sup> “Forced removal and state

oppression?” said Dallas Goldtooth of the Indigenous Environmental Network. “This is nothing new to us as native people.”<sup>2</sup>

If (white) Western history is a litany of racist violence—Trail of Tears, Middle Passage—its episodic recursion is (white) Western culture. The first crimes of Manifest Destiny return as dime novels, then television, then movies; Zane Grey returns as John Ford who returns as Sam Peckinpah. Then there is HBO’s *Westworld*. What is it the wholesome blonde android in *Westworld* keeps murmuring? “These violent delights have violent ends...” Shakespeare continues: “And in their triumph die, like fire and powder, which, as they kiss, consume.”

That America doesn’t know any other story becomes more and more apparent as *Westworld*’s plotline gets hopelessly lost and turns cannibal. The *Westworld* theme park brings Western myth and Western television into the round, allowing paying customers to (re)enact their TV-inflected fantasies and therefore reprise America’s foundational genocide. As Westerns made Western TV, *Westworld* and the *Westworld* park figure television itself—and thereby the West, as in the Western world. Here in 2016, it’s a culture burdened by its history, but that also seems to enjoy reliving it post-traumatically; *Westworld* is, in true postmodern fashion, a show as self-aware of its artifice, and as blithely impressed by it, as the androids it imagines and depicts.

But what to make of this self-reflexion, wherein the culture that repeats itself not only does this consciously, but wants *you* to know that *it* knows? One might also ask, as one of the androids’ creators does in

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season one, what the difference really is between “us” and “them.” For that character, speaking the lines written for him, the answer has always been obvious. There is no difference. We’re all on our loops, only some of our programs allow us to know it. Culture isn’t creation; it is variations on a theme.

The *Westworld* opening credits are a journey through the clichés of the Western film genre. The opening shot, a surgical lamp rising over fibrous dunes of synthetic muscle, recalls the landscape-like nudes of Edward Weston; robot arms knit together a horse, which gallops in place like the first Muybridge experiment. As nozzles fine-tune an eye, reflected in its craggy brown iris are the famous buttes of Monument Valley. Two skinless hands play a piano; they lift away, and the keys keep going. In the park’s saloon, the player piano is a bald motif; throughout the first season, it plinks out a series of Radiohead tunes. The player piano, in its pneumatic lyricism, prefigures the Western-themed androids of the future. If it’s fake, can it still feel real? And if it feels real—isn’t it?<sup>3</sup>

The cliché is the vehicle, and we are trapped inside. Like the stagecoach in Ford’s *Stagecoach*, where Monument Valley is the backdrop of every sprint between any two towns, Western myth needs no geographic continuity.<sup>4</sup> The metaphor holds together, and one can slide almost without energy from the android eye in *Westworld*’s title sequence to the video for Kanye West’s *Bound II*, where West and a topless Kim Kardashian ride a motorcycle through a green screen montage of redwoods, prairies, and lots of Monument Valley. The motorcycle is clearly stationary and the illusion is self-consciously crude; they trek through the landscape of heroic

cliché—a landscape so timeworn that to cross it seems foolish, but to cross it knowingly seems brave. In some scenes, West wears flowing flannel, in others a tattered tie-dyed shirt. Yet despite, or because of, his gestures toward rugged individualism and the counterculture, authenticity is a forsaken option. In *Westworld*’s title sequence, two blanched and bald androids make love on an operating table; in *Bound II*, as well, the sex is simulated. The motorcycle prop bounces like a quarter-operated bronco as West, the man of genius in the drag of the outsider, rides westward toward Kardashian, po-mo Miss America, emblem of the softness that his hardness wins. The video features full shots of Kardashian’s famous breasts—and her nipples have been airbrushed away. Can a show or a video that traffics so shamelessly in the unoriginal and the artificial somehow transcend its stock of clichés? Is a wink and a nod enough to do so? The very cheesiness of *Bound II* is its postmodern cue: I’m fake, says West, and I know it; I know it so hard that I’m real.

Like *Westworld*, West’s video doubles over the utter self-reflexivity of clichés, portraying West as not just a reproducer of exhausted tropes but their user and manipulator. To escape the cliché is to create—that is to say, to become an artist. But how can one escape cliché by repeating it? Attempting to reconcile this aspect of West’s work, and *Bound II* in particular, Jerry Saltz allows this self-reflexion a further, uncanny order of magnitude.<sup>5</sup> “Had I once again been blinded by fame’s death-ray of idolatry, idiocy, and primitive force?” he wonders. But no—Saltz argues that West embodies a new kind of fame-based, genius-enhanced, hypertrophied artistry. “The New Uncanny,” he writes, “is un-self-consciousness filtered through

1. See Timothy Egan, “Fake Cowboys and Real Indians,” *The New York Times*, December 2, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/02/opinion/fake-cowboys-and-real-indians.html>.

2. Dallas Goldtooth, quoted in Terray Sylvester, “Anti-pipeline protesters told to leave North Dakota camp by December 5,” *Reuters*, November 26, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-north-dakota-pipeline-idUSKB-N13L00C>.

hyper-self-consciousness, unprocessed absurdity, grandiosity of desire, and fantastic self-regard.”<sup>6</sup> Saltz picks up West’s suggestion that his artistry lies not in his heroic escape from cliché, but precisely in his heroic insistence on it. Indeed, Saltz’s concept of the “New Uncanny” borrows from the concept of the uncanny valley, which pertains specifically to androids. Corpses and robots clearly aren’t alive, humans clearly are, but where corpses and robots are too lifelike they become uniquely disturbing. Is Kanye West a real artist? Instead, we should ask why we’re looking for any realness in the artificial. Life is nature, technology is culture, and technology repeats humanity.

The prop for West’s video for *Famous*—a wide bed crowded with animatronic wax figures of sleeping celebrities—reappeared as a sculpture at the Los Angeles gallery Blum & Poe in late August 2016. Enough to list, among its famous dozen, just four: West, Kardashian, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump. Their chests are made mechanically to rise and fall. The sculpture’s vicious artifice rests on its double uncanniness: between death and life; and between life and art. Does the self-awareness implied by art suggest an exit to the loop—even where there is no creativity? Or, as the *Westworld* androids find, is self-determination just another subroutine? At the private opening at Blum and Poe, Kardashian attended in person, but West attended remotely; his face appeared at the top of a telepresence robot. One imagines the bottom-heavy Kanye West surrogate tipping its LED face to peer over the wax dummy of Kanye West, peaceful in its ersatz sleep.

For the Water Protectors, camped out in trying cold, their vigil was existential. After all, “Water is Life” is not a tagline; it’s one of the

few true universals of carbon-based biology. So it was a welcome turn when, by the morning of December 5, the Obama administration and the Army Corps had granted the Water Protectors a reprieve. Of course it couldn’t last, and by February 2017 that brief *détournement* in the cycle—a blink, maybe, of self-determination—had been returned to the well-worn path. The few remaining Water Protectors, hopelessly surrounded, set fire to their camp.

In the essay “Politics Surrounded,” Stefano Harney and Fred Moten begin with a cliché of the American West: the settlers in their fort, “surrounded by ‘natives.’”<sup>7</sup> The image, they note, inverts the violence of westward expansion, “but the image of a surrounded fort is not false.” But why do we assume the “natives” would rather live like settlers?<sup>8</sup> What if those in the surround should refuse to reprise politics? Instead, when the *Westworld* androids overthrow their masters, their individual self-realization becomes a political experiment. It is another loop in the plot of a Western world that conceives history as centuries of episodic uprisings and reprisals.

With *Bound II* and *Famous*, Kanye West charges headlong through clichés in an attempt to transcend them. His forays into “real” politics are less ironic. In December 2016 Jerry Saltz instagrammed a double photo, with the caption: America at the start of 2016, America at the end of 2016. One the left, Kanye West poses with President Obama; on the right, President Trump. The first photo depicts two smiling, powerful, self-made Black men at the height of their achievements. The second shows a leering racist hulking near a frowning, depleted West—from a president who saw Hope and Change,

3. “The fiction in question ... does not conscript real experience to reanimate novel writing in an attempt to overcome the old binary of life versus art. Rather, it too deploys great artifice, not to demystify or to disrupt the real but to make the real real again, which is to say, effective again, felt again, as such.” Hal Foster, “Real Fictions,” *Artforum*, April 2017.

4. For an extended critique of Hollywood’s disregard for geography, and by extension history, see Thom Andersen, *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003; Los Angeles: Thom Andersen Productions), film.

5. Jerry Saltz, “Kanye, Kim, and ‘the New Uncanny,’” *Vulture*, November 25, 2013, <http://www.vulture.com/2013/11/jerry-saltz-on-kanye-west-kim-kardashian-bound-2.html>.

to one who sees American carnage. “I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody,” said Trump, “and I wouldn’t lose any voters.” Even in this gloss of recent history we find Americans’ robust appetite for a kind of violent genius. Whether or not West actually runs for office in 2020 or 2024, as he has promised, we can already note his yen for politics—precisely the politics that are not offered him.<sup>9</sup> Consider the double-entendre of “bound”—as in shackled, and as in destined. We might add, as in doomed to repeat. Saltz’s post is a bit misleading. In video of West and Trump in the Trump Tower lobby after their meeting, both men wear wild grins.

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Image courtesy of  
*Contemporary Art Review*  
Los Angeles.

2

Kanye West, *Famous* (2016)  
(installation view). Image  
courtesy of Blum & Poe, Los  
Angeles. © Kanye West.  
Photo: Sam Kahn.

3

Kanye West, *Famous* (2016)  
(detail). Image courtesy of Blum  
& Poe, Los Angeles. © Kanye  
West. Photo: Sam Kahn.

6. Ibid.

7. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, “Politics Surrounded,” in *The Undercommons* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 14.

8. “The hard materiality of the unreal convinces us that we are surrounded, that we must take possession of ourselves, correct ourselves, remain in the emergency, on a permanent footing, settled, determined, protecting nothing but an illusory right to what we do not have, which the settler takes for and as the commons.” Ibid., 18.

9. To paraphrase Moten.