

The Author is Dead, Long Live the Author: Negotiating textual authority in *Westworld*, *The OA* and *13 Reasons Why*

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Abstract:

This paper examines the ways in which television imagines the relationship between creators and audiences in the contemporary media landscape. This is developed through an examination of the inaugural seasons of three American television dramas that debuted between October 2016 and March 2017: Netflix's *The OA* and *13 Reasons Why* and HBO's *Westworld*; all three series featured the character of a storyteller who was killed within the narrative, in what was presented as an act of collaboration between the storyteller and their audience. We will question whether new participatory modes of media engagement truly engender 'the birth of the viewer' through a symbolic 'killing' of the creator, or merely serve to reaffirm the authority of the creator, reimagining the author-function as a powerful marketing brand.

Keywords: television, audience, fan audience, new media, textual analysis, critical media studies

Introduction

Over a period of six months in 2016-2017, three American television dramas debuted that featured the character of a storyteller who was killed within the narrative, in what was presented as an act of collaboration between the storyteller and their audience. In the case of *The OA* (2016-2019), this was the titular protagonist (a character portrayed by series co-creator, Brit Marling), who narrated her life story for a group of characters; on *13 Reasons*

Why (2017-2020), it was Hannah Baker (Katherine Langford), who narrated thirteen confessional cassette tape recordings made prior to her suicide; on *Westworld* (2017-), it was Robert Ford (Anthony Hopkins), founder and creative director of the 'Westworld' theme park, who orchestrated the park's principal narrative.

This paper offers a reading of these textual deaths as allegorical ruminations on Barthes's intertwined notions of 'the death of the author' and the 'birth of the reader' (Barthes, 1967: 148). Through textual readings of the series, focusing on parallel plotlines, characters and relationships, we will examine the ways in which the series reflect, imagine and perhaps attempt to construct an image of television creators, television audiences, and the shifting power dynamics between them within the contemporary television landscape. In addition to our textual reading, we will also address the discourse surrounding the series, incorporating various paratexts relevant to conceptions of television creation, television viewing, and creator-audience relationship; paratexts addressed in the paper include interviews with creators in magazine articles and podcasts, fan videos, reviews of the series, viewer comments, and various forms of online interaction between creators and viewers on social media.

While the characteristics of the relationship between creators and audiences this paper will outline are neither unique to recent years nor a-historical in nature, their particular manifestation in our chosen case studies is reflective of common perceptions and concerns regarding contemporary audiences and creators, as shared by viewers, industry members, critics and academics alike.

Television scholars have suggested many names and definitions to describe the various technological, aesthetic, industrial and cultural transformations undergone by television in recent decades; this period has been alternately referred to as 'Television After TV' (Spigel and Olsson, 2004), 'Post-Television' (Leverette, Ott and Buckley, 2008) or 'Post-Network Television' (Lotz, 2010), and situated within the broader contexts of online digital platforms and media convergence. One of the more significant and widely discussed aspects of this era is the heightened awareness, among audiences and industry members, of active audience engagement with television texts, an engagement encouraged by narrative complexity and available digital platforms and tools (Mittell, 2015). This is evident in increasingly widespread practices such as the active, 'forensic' investigation of texts (261-291); the creation of online fan communities that function as collective intelligence networks, enabling communal textual exploration and comprehension (Jenkins, 2012); and the production of user-generated content, such as fanfiction, by active 'prosumers,' replacing traditional, supposedly passive consumption practices.

While practices of active audience engagement have gained increasing prevalence and mainstream recognition, the contemporary media landscape has also encouraged more widespread reliance on the authority of television creators, perhaps refuting Barthes's oft-quoted declaration that 'the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author' (1969: 148). While viewers consult online fan communities in order to make sense of complex serial narratives, they also routinely turn to creators for interpretive guidance

and a sense of narrative coherence, either by consuming creator interviews and other producer-created paratexts, or by more directly conversing with creators through social media (Scott, 2013). As these practices illustrate, many creators are perceived by their audiences – and often actively marketed – as custodians of the ‘truth’ of their own creation, the ultimate authority and the final word on its ‘proper’ meaning (Mittell, 2015: 86-117).

Thus, another significant aspect of television culture within the contemporary media landscape is the increased prominence – and mainstream media attention – afforded to the television creator, and in particular, to the showrunner. Though the term ‘showrunner’ has been in common use in the television industry for decades, demarcating a position of both creative and managerial authority, it has only gained widespread recognition in recent decades, in both popular and critical discourse.¹ We can gain a better understanding of this transformation by turning to Michel Foucault’s notion of authorship, as elaborated in his seminal text, ‘What Is an Author?’

According to Foucault, the figure of the author, as perceived in culture, ‘is not formed spontaneously through the simple attribution of a discourse to an individual,’ but is rather the product of cultural, discursive practices, that construct the ‘author’-figure as a perceived ‘individual’s ‘profundity’ or ‘creative’ power, his intentions or the original inspiration manifested in writing’ (Foucault, 1979: 21). Foucault suggests a paradigm shift: the meaning of the literary text is no longer anchored in a living, breathing creator, but is instead the product of the properties we – the readers, the critics – discursively ascribe to the author-figure. As Jonathan Gray has noted, as long as viewers keep the author alive, giving him ‘special authority to dictate meaning, it would be cavalier to pretend that he is dead’ (Gray, 2013: 104-105). The author is thus ‘resurrected,’ but only as a projection of our own way of handling texts (Foucault, 1979: 21), as ‘a function of discourse that works to attribute, classify, delimit, contextualize, hierarchize, and authenticate creative works’ (Mittell, 2015: 96).²

Television in particular has become a fascinating case-study for Foucault’s discussion of the function of the author, as it enabled scholars a ‘real-time’ observation of the transformation of individuals and roles that had hitherto been considered ‘craftsmen’ or ‘skilled technicians’ into ‘artists,’ with the labour of television creators, which had ‘been mostly hidden from the public eye for much of its history’ (Mittell, 2015: 96) becoming positioned at the heart of popular and critical discourse. Seen as the locus of creative control and authority, the contemporary television showrunner serves a similar function to that served by the ‘auteur’ director for the medium of cinema since the 1950s, constructing the television creator as an artist, as opposed to a craftsman, and legitimating the medium as an art-form (Bourdieu, 1993; Newman and Levine, 2012: 38-58; Hartley, 2002: 21).

Cinematic auteur theory, however, did not ‘invent’ the image of the director-as-artist, which had existed long before the 1950s, ascribed on rare occasion to the likes of D. W. Griffith, Cecil B. DeMille, Orson Welles and others who were perceived as ‘exceptional’ individuals, ‘transcending’ the prosaic limitations of the film industry and of ‘popular culture’ more broadly.³ What auteur theory consciously and deliberately attempted to

achieve was the expansion of the 'artist' designation to include further creators, from mainstream cinema, so that the 'film artist' would no longer be seen as the exception that proves the rule but as an integral part of the art of cinema.

Similarly, while in the past television creators hailed as 'artists' had been considered outliers within the medium—as was the case with the creators at MTM Enterprises in the 1970s, with Steven Bochco and David E. Kelley in the 1980s and 1990s, or with HBO's 'It's Not TV' branding strategy in the late-1990s⁴ – the showrunners of the 21st century have gradually come to be perceived by popular and academic discourse as emblematic of the medium. Accordingly, the showrunner, as a signifier of authorship, seems to function more as 'a way of organizing marketing strategies, and conferring value on intellectual property, than a way of accounting for meaning' (Hartley, 2002: 23), serving as a particularly useful marketing brand in the overwhelming and content-rich era of 'Peak TV' (Pearson, 2005). This transformation thus illustrates a point crucial for our analysis: the discussion of showrunners as creators and artists is not merely a description of the existing phenomenon of 'television artists' – it actively contributes to the production of that phenomenon. In this sense, texts that focus on the figure of a creator, whether explicitly or metaphorically, do not merely reflect an existing discourse of creation and creators but are actively participating in it.

Against this rise of the television creator as a source of authority and reverence, we find it intriguing that several recent television texts, including the three series presented in the opening paragraph, would all elect to symbolically 'kill' the television creator, by killing off their textual stand-ins.⁵ Of note as well is the fact that they are all either killed, or assisted in killing themselves, by characters who serve as surrogates for the active television audience. Thus, in contrast to our description of the contemporary creator-audience relationship, the series would seem to suggest that the birth of the active audience is indeed ransomed by the death of the author. However, as our reading of these three inaugural seasons will illustrate, rumors of the 'death' of the television creator may have been greatly exaggerated – and proclamations of the 'birth' of the active audience may likewise be premature. We will first discuss *The OA* and, more briefly, *13 Reasons Why*; pointing out the similarities between these two series, we will establish the premise of our reading and outline our discussion of the creator-audience relationship. We will then turn to *Westworld*, a case study we find to be more complex and nuanced in this context, to further develop this discussion and suggest a more ambivalent reading. Before concluding, we will highlight the gendered aspects of the creator-audience relationship, as suggested by all three case studies. Understanding the gendered power dynamics at play within the narratives of the series—narratives that all heavily feature violent male aggression directed at female victims—can also help us to better understand the gendered dynamics that characterize discourses of television production and fandom.

***13 Reasons Why, The OA* and the Afterlife of the Author.**

The inaugural seasons of *The OA* and *13 Reasons Why* share many similarities: both are Netflix series that feature a female character who narrates her own story, for other characters within the narrative and for the viewers at home; in both cases, the narrator character's story leads her audience – diegetic and non-diegetic – towards unlocking the mystery of her life, and more specifically, of her death, as both stories are narrated, in a sense, posthumously. On *13 Reasons Why*, the character of Hannah, before taking her own life, leaves behind thirteen audio cassette recordings in which she narrates the events that led to her suicide, and has them delivered to all those she holds responsible for it. On *The OA*, the character of Prairie (or 'The OA'), narrates for her audience the story of her death, or numerous repeated deaths, and of her aspirations to die once more.

Structurally, both series offer a complex narrative premised on non-linear storytelling, multiple characters and conflicting points of view; thematically, both focus on repeated instances of male aggression directed at female victims, who attempt, in some form or another, to fight back and regain agency. Furthermore, both series generated considerable online discussion, spurring heated debates among vehement critics and staunch defenders (Rosman, 2017; Rosenberg, 2017). Both series were critically acclaimed, and both were listed among Netflix's 'most binged' shows of 2017, with *13 Reasons Why* and *The OA* making the third and ninth spots on the list, respectively (Dwyer, 2017).

We suggest reading these two series as metaphors for the complex relationships between television texts, creators and audiences. On *13 Reasons Why*, Hannah, functioning as a creator stand-in, narrates her story, which represents the television narrative, while the characters listening to her tapes, and particularly the character of Clay Jensen (Dylan Minnette), function as audience surrogates. Hannah's story is revealed to the viewers through the eyes – and ears – of Clay, who listens to the tapes and while doing so imagines seeing the events recounted in Hannah's narration.

Clay listens to one recording each episode, the episodes thus constructed in a way that matches the narrative design of the tapes: just as Hannah's story is comprised of thirteen tape recordings, the series itself is comprised of thirteen episodes, each episode titled after the recording featured in it ('Tape 1, Side A,' etc.). And just as all thirteen episodes were made available for viewing on the same day, Hannah's tapes are all delivered to the listeners in one package; just like the viewers, the characters can choose when to watch each episode, some electing to 'binge listen' to them, just as many television viewers, and Netflix viewers in particular, are prone to binge-watching: 'I listened to 'em all in one night,' says Alex, one of the tapes' recipients.⁶ The characters who listen to the tapes also discuss them amongst themselves, responding to them and criticizing Hannah in ways that at times mirror viewers' response to – and outrage at – the series and its creators (Cox, 2017).

Crucially for our argument, the tapes – and the series as a whole – revolve around determining the events that led to Hannah's suicide, for which she holds each of the

recipients of the tapes responsible in some way. Though she took her own life, it is clear from her narration that this act was motivated by various incidents that her listeners had a role in; in her own words, directed at the listeners: 'if you're listening to this tape you're one of the reasons why.' In other words, the author recounts the story of her demise, which was brought about by the actions of her audience.

The death of the author in *The OA* is likewise precipitated by the actions of her audience, though in a different manner. Like Hannah, the narrator-protagonist of *The OA* serves as a creator stand-in – a reading reinforced by the casting of Brit Marling, series co-creator and showrunner, as the titular protagonist, who returns to her hometown after having been considered missing for years. Her arrival raises much public interest, as both her disappearance and her reappearance occurred under mysterious circumstances. For reasons unclear to the viewers and the other characters, *The OA* insists on gathering an audience comprised of five people from the town. They convene each evening, in a regular, hour-long timeslot, in the attic of an abandoned house, and sitting together in a circle they listen to *The OA* as she recounts the story of her life.

Once again, we suggest reading the series as a metaphor for the television creator-audience relationship, with *The OA*'s story delivered in regular daily segments reminiscent of the traditional broadcast programming schedule, and her group of listeners serving as audience surrogates. This analogy is further validated by the manner in which *The OA*'s story is first introduced; she begins narrating her story an hour into the first episode of the series, with the following words: 'I'm going to tell you my story from the beginning [...] I want you to close your eyes. I want you to imagine everything I tell you as if you're there yourself. As if you're with me. As if you are me.' As her listeners close their eyes, they imagine seeing her words come to life—much like Clay does when listening to Hannah's tapes, the images shown to the audience as well.

Furthermore, when the story they are listening to is first introduced, it is stylized like the introduction of a television series, rather than a simple recounting of past events. Instead of immediately cutting to a scene involving the young version of *The OA*, her story begins with an opening credits sequence: a traveling bird's-eye view of Moscow, where she grew up, accompanied by the main theme music of the series and the title 'Netflix presents,' followed by the title of the series and the names of the actors and creators. Significantly, these opening titles are not shown at the beginning of the episode, when the viewers begin watching, but only an hour into the episode, when the surrogate characters begin listening to *The OA*'s narration. The titles thus seemingly address the characters just as much as the viewers.

The conflation of audience and surrogate characters is also evident in the trailer for the first season, which uses an excerpt from *The OA*'s opening narration, quoted above ('I'm going to tell you my story from the beginning [...]') (Netflix, 2016). What is framed in the trailer as a direct address to viewers, inviting them to watch the series, is in fact, as detailed above, a part of the narrator character's address to her listeners. And just as the series was promoted on YouTube, the character of *The OA* herself similarly reaches out to the

characters who would eventually become her followers by uploading a video to YouTube, utilizing the direct address made possible by this platform.

Moreover, it is not only The OA who makes use of YouTube within the series, but also her followers, who function as an active and engaged audience, not content in merely listening to her story but electing to explore it further on their own; employing YouTube and other online tools to try and find answers for themselves, they verify and corroborate details of her story against other online sources. These activities are illustrative of common viewing practices exercised by many contemporary audiences, a form of media engagement that Jason Mittell has named ‘forensic fandom,’ wherein viewers ‘embrace a detective mentality, seeking out clues, charting patterns, and assembling evidence into narrative hypotheses and theories’ (Mittell, 2009: 182), acting as what Henry Jenkins describes as ‘informational hunters and gatherers’ (Jenkins, 2006: 218). The surrogate characters’ forensic investigation of The OA’s story mirrors the activities practiced by viewers of *The OA* in particular, many of whom were driven by its complex and confusing narrative to go online searching for answers.

While most of The OA’s listeners initially doubt her, their forensic investigation ultimately leads them to a renewed faith in her story, and in her authority as storyteller. While some forensic viewers of *The OA* have similarly come to reaffirm their faith in the ongoing narrative and in the authority of its creator, others have elected to reject both, arguing that the narrative is too confusing, too ambiguous, or downright pointless. As one Reddit thread colorfully put it, ‘Netflix’ [*sic*] ‘The OA’ feels like the incoherent ramblings of a ‘60s hippie on acid’ ([u/crookedsmoker](https://www.reddit.com/user/crookedsmoker), 2016). Though complex television has in recent decades embraced a certain degree of ‘planned confusion’ as an integral – and often enjoyable – narrative characteristic (Mittell, 2015: 164-168), many of *The OA*’s viewers found this aspect of the show detrimental to both narrative comprehension and enjoyment. As plainly put by one critic, ‘Netflix’s ‘The OA’ suffers from confusion’ (Dickinson, 2017, our emphasis).

Similar sentiments are expressed in various online memes addressing the confusing nature of the series, some particularly emphasizing its demand for forensic viewing practices, in a typically critical, reflexive and bemused manner. Thus, while one meme (**Figure 1**) illustrates forensic viewing – and reviewing – of *The OA* as a necessary strategy of narrative comprehension (@beauwhincop, 2019), another (**Figure 2**) utilizes the ‘Pepe Silvia’ meme to depict forensic fans of the series as crazed conspiracy theorists, who become increasingly detached from reality and delude themselves into believing in some ‘deeper meaning’ hiding behind ‘incoherent ramblings’⁷ (@WilliamFiliault, 2019).



When you watch *The OA* for the first time vs the second time...

Figure 1

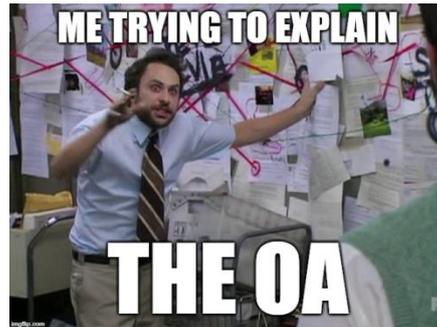


Figure 2

While confusing – and for some viewers, frustrating – from its first episode, a watershed moment for many fans came at the end of the first season, following a particular scene that angered many viewers and raised heated debates on the merits of the season as a whole. Understanding this scene, a scene crucial for our argument, requires some elucidation of what came before it.

A key element throughout the series involves a sequence of dance movements that play an integral role within *The OA*'s story, as they ostensibly have the power, among other things, to transform *The OA* to a higher plane of existence. As part of her story, *The OA* and her friends are seen learning and performing this sequence, which she subsequently shares with her listeners, teaching them how to perform it along with her. In the final scene in question, at a point in the series when *The OA* has already finished narrating her story, the characters perform the dance on their own, during a school shooting incident, in a context which initially seems unrelated to *The OA*'s original intentions for it. What at first seems to be an act sublimely irrelevant to both *The OA*'s story and the shooting incident ends up resolving both. The shooter is distracted and confused, which enables his apprehension—but not before he accidentally shoots *The OA*, who has just arrived at the scene, fatally injuring her (and simultaneously fulfilling her desire to be transported to another plane of existence, as will be confirmed in the second season).

Seen by some fans as completely divorced from the narrative that preceded it, this surprising and highly divisive conclusion to the season was derided by many for not offering adequate payoff to the season's narrative enigmas, and for retroactively invalidating their appreciation of preceding episodes (Renfro, 2016). While moments of temporary disorientation are something audiences of contemporary complex television are asked to endure, this confusion is motivated by the implied promise of eventual narrative payoff. The unspoken contract implies a rhyme and a reason for everything, to be inferred by the fans through commitment and hard work, and ultimately promised to be revealed in a satisfying narrative denouement which will—retroactively—make it all worthwhile (Mittell, 2015: 50). When viewers feel this promise was not adequately fulfilled, it can lead to vocal expressions of frustration, disappointment and betrayal. This is evident, for example, in a Reddit thread titled: 'Anybody else felt betrayed by *The OA*?' expressing a sentiment that many repliers agreed with: 'Thank you! I am not alone,' 'Can't agree with you more,' and 'It was like this

huge build up and then ... nothing' (u/s1me007, 2016). Significantly, many commenters link these feelings of frustration to their perception of authorial influence, attributing their sense of betrayal to the perceived shortcomings of the creators. Thus, one commenter writes: 'the problem is that these particular writers, Brit Marling and Zal Batmanglij NEVER [sic] give answers in any of the shit [sic] they write,' pointing out interviews with the two as proof that they 'they don't seem to think answers are important' (Ibid.). Another commenter expresses disdain at the season's nonsensical ending, as they see it, postulating that '[t]his is the natural consequence of giving Indy Darling Brit Marling free control over a show' (Ibid.).

At the same time, many fans saw the ending as meaningful, profound and integral to the inferred vision of the creators of the series, and defended its narrative and thematic merits online, in various posts, comments and Youtube videos.⁸ Fans thus theorized on possible deeper meanings and advocated for the final scene as a coherent and necessary conclusion for the season. This fan devotion is mirrored by that of the surrogate characters, who put their own lives at risk out of a strong faith in *The OA*, performing the dance movements during the school shooting. And just as the surrogate characters initiated the dance on their own, certain fans chose to do likewise, recreating these same dance movements, filming themselves and sharing the videos online, as a heartfelt tribute to *The OA*.⁹

Returning to the final episode, it is the very moment in which *The OA*'s listeners appropriate and repurpose the creative act, performing the dance, which directly leads to *The OA*'s death; the season thus concludes, as in Barthes' essay, with the birth of the audience ransomed by the death of the author. The audience surrogates, through this usurping of the creative act, take *The OA*'s place in the season finale, in a sense acting 'as if they were her,' as her opening narration had initially instructed them. And in a sense, the same can be said of the viewers at home, who emulated and repurposed elements from the television series, creating, in typical prosumer fashion, their own media texts in which they themselves star (Burgess, 2001).

While the creative activity of the diegetic audience directly leads to the literal death of the storyteller, the equivalent reproduction of the creative act by the viewers of the series only serves to enhance the aura of the source text, and with it the authority of its original creator. But can active audiences adopt an alternative viewing position, symbolically 'killing' the creator of the series and usurping their authority? A more thorough examination of these issues is offered by another series that explicitly contemplates the merits of creation, emulation and reproduction – *Westworld*.

***Westworld* and the Ambiguous Negotiation of Authority**

HBO's *Westworld* is a loose television adaptation of the film *Westworld* (Michael Crichton, 1973). The series follows the goings-on at the eponymous 'Westworld,' a Wild West theme park where visitors, known as 'Guests,' can interact with the park's inhabitants, lifelike androids known as 'Hosts.' Taking a break from their everyday lives, guests are given free

rein and invited to live out their wildest fantasies, partaking in various narrative scenarios, largely premised on violence and sex – as befitting an HBO series (McCabe and Akass, 2007). *Westworld* offers a complex narrative premised on non-linear storytelling, presented from the conflicting points of view of multiple characters.

As with the series previously discussed, we can read *Westworld* as televisual meta-commentary: the audience represented by the human guests who arrive at the park; the television text represented by the park, its hosts and its narratives; and the creators—by the park’s original founders: Robert Ford, the park’s creative director, and his long-deceased co-founder, Arnold Weber (Jeffrey Wright). The series alternates between events taking place on the surface level of the park, where its narratives play out for the guests, and events taking place in the ‘backstage area’ located underneath the surface, an area referred to by one reviewer as the ‘showrunner level’ of the park (Jensen, 2016). Indeed, much like a television series, while the park’s daily workings are overseen by a large staff of writers, designers, engineers and managers, ultimate creative authority is ascribed to Ford (and, posthumously, to Arnold). The very term ‘showrunner level’ thus discursively emphasizes the singular creative figure behind both the series and the park, though both are in practice the product of extensive production crews.

While boasting its filmic source material, generic influences, ‘cinematic’ visuals and ‘big-screen look’ (Heuring, 2016), a discursive characteristic common to much of contemporary prestige series or quality TV (Jaramillo, 2013), both ‘Westworld’ the park and *Westworld* the series primarily emphasize their unique narrative experience. Narrative complexity and an immersive diegetic world are foregrounded over the admittedly impressive production design and ‘cinematic’ feel. As one of the park’s writers puts it: ‘we provide complete immersion in a hundred interconnected narratives; a relentless fucking experience.’ Likewise, viewers and critics have responded primarily to the show’s abundant and often shocking plot twists (Kirkland, 2016) or ‘narrative spectacles’ (Mittell, 2015: 41-52).

The series offers a more elaborate portrayal of the audience, depicting different kinds of visitors who represent different modes of narrative engagement. Thus, a distinction is made throughout the season between the majority of ‘regular’ visitors and the character of the Man in Black (Ed Harris), who is not content with merely participating in the park’s routine narratives and is actively testing its limits, carving his own path through the park in search of a deeper level he believes is hidden underneath; as he describes it:

Man in Black: [other visitors] come here. They can be a little scared, a little thrilled, enjoy some sweetly affirmative bullshit, and then they take a fucking picture and they go back home. But I think there’s a deeper meaning hiding under all that. Something the person who created it wanted to express. Something true.

Furthering our meta-televisual interpretation of the series, if ‘regular’ visitors represent a traditionally passive, ‘casual’ mode of television viewing, the Man in Black represents the more active, ‘forensic’ mode of engagement, as described earlier.

However, these apparently rigid distinctions between creators, hosts, and guests are gradually undermined. This is hinted at early on, as in the very first episode of the series the character of Teddy (James Marsden), who viewers are initially cued to believe is a guest, is subsequently discovered to in fact be a host; later on in the season, the park’s head of programming, Bernard Lowe (Jeffrey Wright) is also revealed to be a host.

The distinction between hosts and guests further breaks down when some of the hosts become self-aware. Initially, hosts are oblivious of their programming and of the fictitious, pre-designed nature of their world; they operate along regularly repeating, self-contained narratives (or ‘loops’), and do not learn from their experience or evolve. The lack of free will and self-awareness is what ostensibly separates man from machine—though this distinction too is undermined as the season progresses; as Ford himself suggests: ‘we [humans] live in loops as tight and as closed as the hosts do, seldom questioning our choices, content, for the most part, to be told what to do next.’¹⁰

The season’s main storylines follow several hosts and their journeys toward subjectivity, as they become self-aware, recall their past experiences and break from their loops. By seemingly rebelling against their own programming, the hosts cease functioning as characters within the park’s narratives, mere entertainment for the park’s guests; moreover, as is eventually made clear, they in fact become the target audience for the park’s new narrative, designed by Ford himself. This transformation of the hosts from characters to audience, from part of the text to consumers of the text, is signaled throughout the series. Thus, for example, while the Man in Black is certain that ‘the maze’ is a riddle meant for him to solve, he is repeatedly told that this is not the case, first by several hosts and later on by Ford himself, who explicitly tells him: ‘The maze wasn’t made for you; it was made for them.’ This notion is further emphasized in the final moments of the season. As Ford announces his retirement in front of an audience of (human) investors visiting the park, waited on by hosts, he gives his farewell speech, saying:

[...] you don’t want to change. Or cannot change. Because you’re only human, after all. But then I realized someone was paying attention, someone who could change. So I began to compose a new story for them. It begins with the birth of a new people... and the choices they will have to make... and the people they will decide to become.

Ford’s words are in fact meant for the hosts, a point accentuated by intercutting this part of his speech with reaction shots of his host listeners, rather than human audience members. Moments later, in the final scene of the season, the hosts’ rebellion is officially launched with Ford’s assassination, at the very end of his speech (**Figure 3**), by Dolores (Evan Rachel Wood), a host who has gained consciousness (**Figure 4**).



Figure 3



Figure 4

Alongside Dolores, another host who gradually develops consciousness and ultimately rebels is Maeve (Thandie Newton), who gains control of her own programming and rallies a merry band of murderous hosts, turning against the park's staff. Rising up violently against their creators, the hosts are able to usurp narrative control, asserting their own agency in the very act of – both literally and symbolically – killing the author; as eloquently put by Maeve: 'Time to write my own fucking story.' This sentiment is echoed by Dolores, at the end of the second season, as she explicitly tells Bernard: 'We are the authors of our stories now.' The hosts thus not only transform into consumers of the narrative, but assume authority over its creation, a quintessential illustration of 'prosumer' activity.

We can now discern three different modes of media engagement represented within the series: 'regular' viewing, traditionally perceived as 'passive,' and two different kinds of 'active' engagement, one working towards uncovering the creator's intentions – as illustrated by the Man in Black – and the other seemingly working against them, as hosts Dolores and Maeve rebel and take control of the narrative, reimagining it as they see fit. On one level, these two modes of active engagement can be read as respectively representing practices of fan theory and fanfiction; they can also be read through the lens of 'affirmational' vs. 'transformational' fan practices (obsession_inc, 2009) or, alternately, 'collaborationist' vs. 'resistant' modes of fandom (Scott, 2013), with one side working to enforce the authority of the creator, the other working ostensibly against it, appropriating and repurposing the text, at times operating against the creator's express wishes, with 'explicit intent [...] to take authorial control of a show' (Gray, 2013: 104). This, at least, is how these modes of fandom are conceptualized in theory; in practice, however, these categories prove far less rigid and stable than they might at first appear, as we shall illustrate later on.

We can see this tension between different modes of engagement at work in the discursive framing of *Westworld* fandom itself, and in the relationship between *Westworld*'s fans and its creators, Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy. *Westworld* has actively encouraged widespread fan engagement and passionate forensic examination, inviting viewers to unravel its complex narrative and unlock its mysteries. The series' conscious targeting of forensic sensibilities is evident both in the intentionally enigmatic narrative design and in the discursive construction of its idealized fanbase; as Casey Bloys, HBO's director of programming, has stated in an interview: '[*Westworld*]'s not for casual viewers, it requires

your attention. [The creators] like to challenge their viewers and many feel rewarded by that' (qtd. in D'Alessandro, 2018)

Many fans have indeed risen to the challenge, developing numerous and often far-fetched narrative theories, several of which have turned out to be correct. Perhaps most famously, early on in the first season's run, diligent fans noticed discrepancies in the design of the park's logos (O'Keeffe, 2016). This was the basis for a popular fan theory that accurately predicted, after only two episodes had aired, several major plot twists, some of which would only be revealed in the season finale. This was met with ambivalent reactions by the creators, who have repeatedly expressed a mixture of surprise, admiration and irritation at this instance of fruitful forensic fandom. They were also reportedly forced to make changes to the narrative of the second season after another fan theory floated online was said to have accurately predicted a planned future plot point (McCreesh, 2017).

As Nolan has stated in an interview: 'It's annoying sometimes when people guess the twists and then blog about it, but [...] you can't complain when people are that engaged. It's very gratifying — but stop doing it, please' (qtd. in Hooton, 2017). This remark by the creator frames the fans as active and even transgressive, thereby discursively validating their competence and capabilities. And while expressing appreciation for devoted forensic fans, Nolan also describes them as working against his wishes, and has elsewhere encouraged fans to avoid seeking out spoilers (McCreesh, 2017). This illustrates an attempt to inhabit a common type of authorial position exhibited by media producers, one in which the creator is framed as an authoritative, all-powerful God-like figure, who demands blind faith and submissiveness from his disciples, insisting on ultimate authorial control (Mittell, 2015: 116-117).

Alternatively, another common type of authorial position imagines the creator as a more 'earthly,' accessible and indulgent figure, supportive of fanfiction and more than willing to engage with the audience directly in open discussion and interpretation. One such type of authorship, according to Suzanne Scott, is the 'Fanboy Auteur,' an author-figure who discursively constructs and promotes himself as a 'fanboy' (or, less commonly, 'fangirl'), as having fannish background and tendencies, 'on the same level' as the fans, as it were (Scott, 2019: 144-183). A literal illustration of this kind of discursive role-reversal can be found in the remarks made by Lisa Joy, in a podcast interview discussing *Westworld* fandom; expressing fannish admiration for fan artworks she has encountered, Joy states: 'I want like [*sic*] a page where I can be fangirl of the fan art' (Westworld, 2016).

Thus, if the construction of the fans as active and even 'transgressive' empowers them and elevates them to a position of increased control, the construction of the creator as 'one of the fans' presents them as more human than godlike, performatively diminishing their status to that of a friendly neighborhood story-teller, resulting in an almost literal illustration of the power dynamics described by Barthes, with the birth of the active audience ransomed by the symbolic 'death' of the author.

Of course, the creator can never truly be 'one of the fans' – is never in practice, as Barthes would suggest, 'a mere guest at the reading of the text' (Barthes, 1977: 161) but

always a privileged one; while they may present themselves as ‘one of the fans,’ their fan credentials serve to strengthen audience faith; being fans themselves, it is suggested, they know what the fans like and what they need, and therefore deserve the obedience of their fanbase. Furthermore, ‘joining the conversation’ enables the creator to keep an ear close to the ground, supervising and directing audience reception through participation in online forums and discussions. Jonathan Gray has suggested the term ‘Undead Author’ to describe this mode of authorship, wherein the creator elects to commit ‘a form of strategic suicide,’ ‘killing’ themselves as authors in some respects only to rise again, authorial mastery restored and bolstered (Gray, 2010: 107-113; Scott, 2013a: 442-444). In presenting a more ‘down to earth’ rather than ‘high and mighty’ persona, the figure of the creator-as-fan reaffirms their authority, while at the same time encouraging and embracing various modes of fandom—including the more transgressive fan practices at times denounced and alienated by more overtly ‘authorial’ creators. Even then, however, fanboy auteurs often invoke their fan identity as a means of establishing ‘normative definitions of (un)sanctioned fandom, which are frequently predicated on their own preferred modes of fan engagement and their desire to retain artistic and authorial control’ (Scott, 2019: 161-162).

Westworld’s negotiations of authority are similarly problematic. As heavily implied in the season finale (and stated explicitly in the second season), Ford was in fact the architect of his own assassination by his own creation, orchestrating the events leading up to his final moments, and even supplying Dolores with the murder weapon himself, earlier that same episode. Ford’s assassination was thus the culmination of his own grand narrative, set in motion decades prior, rather than a subversion of his command. Once again, as in the other series we’ve discussed, the creator is a collaborator in his own demise, the author’s death once again brought about in collaboration with his audience surrogate.

A similar dynamic is found in the actions of Maeve. What was it that motivated her rebellion in the first place? Maeve has one answer to this question, but an examination of her core programming by Bernard suggests another, as evident in the following exchange from the season finale:

Bernard: These things you’re doing, have you ever stopped to ask why you’re doing them?

Maeve: You said yourself. I’ve been stuck in this shithole for so long, I decided to get out.

Bernard: No, you haven’t. Someone altered your storyline and gave you a new one. ‘Escape.’

Maeve: No. It’s not possible. These are my decisions! No one else’s. I planned all of this.

Bernard: No, you didn’t. You can even see the steps you’re supposed to follow.

Bernard then peruses a programming console displaying Maeve's coding, on which a sequence of commands can be made out, among them 'deceive,' 'coerce,' 'recruit,' 'manipulate' and 'escape,' correlating with Maeve's actions throughout the season. What was considered an act of free will and an assertion of consciousness is discovered to have been pre-programmed, a part of the creator's design; though transgressive in nature, these actions thus only serve to reaffirm his authority.¹¹

As fans of the series are for the most part actual human beings rather than programmable human-like androids, surely their own 'transgressive' behavior cannot similarly be 'preprogrammed.' Or can it? Returning to the logo theory mentioned above, which supposedly 'spoiled' several of the season's major narrative reveals, perhaps we should stop to ask why fans decided to focus on the logos in the first place. It would not be far-fetched to suggest that this was at least partially motivated by a tweet from the official *Westworld* Twitter account just days before the series first aired, specifically drawing attention to the logos with the following cryptic invitation: 'In #Westworld, even logos deserve a deeper look' (@WestworldHBO, 2016). Despite the creators' previously mentioned proclamations of surprise and dismay, it seems that forensic fans were deliberately set on their path, their so-called 'transgression,' much like Maeve's rebellion, all by design.¹² In this case, as in many others, fan participation is understood by media creators 'as something they can start and stop, channel and reroute, commodify and market' (Jenkins, 2006: 169). We might then ask, to paraphrase Henry James, whether the author programs their audience just as they program their characters; whether deliberately or not, *Westworld* certainly seems to suggest as much.

These tensions between creators and audiences, and the ongoing negotiations of textual authority, reached an apotheosis of sorts a few weeks prior to the airing of the second season. In a Reddit thread posted by Nolan and Joy, the two articulated both their admiration for and sense of frustration at the online culture of active fan engagement and theorizing. They then suggested a controversial 'solution' to the problem of spoilers, offering to share in advance the narrative of the second season in its entirety, with all its plot twists and surprises, in a video that would be posted online for fans who wanted to know all the answers. Those fans could then act as custodians of the show's secrets, with Nolan and Joy trusting them to ensure that fans who did not want to be 'spoiled' could avoid unsolicited information. Nolan and Joy called for a popular vote, leaving the decision whether or not to upload the 'spoiler' video up to the fans. They concluded with another performative gesture framing themselves as a part of the fan community: 'We're so excited to be in this with you guys together' (Nolan, 2018). Unsurprisingly, while some fans posted their objection, the thread quickly drew much support from curious fans, and the video was uploaded as promised (OSinging Traveller047, 2018).

However, it was discovered to have been merely a prank, an act of 'trolling' on part of the showrunners, as the video amounted to a brief teaser for the upcoming season, followed by an impromptu performance, by two cast members, of the song 'Never Gonna Give You Up' by Rick Astley, in allusion to the famous internet prank meme known as

'rickrolling' (Dubs, 2009). The video then went on for another 20 minutes that consisted of a black and white shot of a dog sitting next to a piano, accompanied by the *Westworld* theme music. Once again, what was presented as an act of concession, surrendering authority over to the fans, was discovered to have been merely a ruse on part of the creators, who were only leading fans on, reasserting their own authority – and the fans' lack of authority – over the text. Nolan and Joy are not alone in trolling their fans as a form of power play, as many such instances of 'producorial trolling,' as Suzanne Scott has illustrated, 'function as part of broader efforts to reassert power,' and reflect the desire for authorial control (Scott, 2018: 147).

The Question of Gender

Our discussion would not be complete without addressing the gendered power relations that govern the television industry, in the spheres of authorship, onscreen representation and reception. In terms of authorship, the three series discussed in this paper are all headed by a gender-balanced creative duo: *The OA* was created by Brit Marling and Zal Batmanglij; Brian Yorkey and Diana Son served as showrunners on the first season of *13 Reasons Why*; and *Westworld* was created by husband-and-wife team Nolan and Joy. This is significant in a television industry that, though it has been making notable strides, and though it fares better than the film industry, nonetheless remains gender-imbalanced, in terms of both onscreen representation and creative labor, particularly in key creative and decision-making roles (Wing-Fai et al., 2015). This point does not escape the attention of the showrunners themselves. Both Marling and Joy have been outspoken in interviews about the disadvantages suffered by female creators working within the television industry, and about the importance of having more women in positions of creative and financial authority, from which they can tell their stories, encourage a more prominent female presence onscreen and construct 'genuinely feminine' narratives (Anonymous, 2017).

That being said, it should not be ignored that all three series depict transgressive female resistance against cruel male oppression. Dolores, Maeve, Hannah and The OA all attempt to take control of their own narratives, as a way to overcome a position of victimhood and subjugation in the face of violent aggression and (with the exception of *The OA*) sexual abuse at the hands of authoritative male figures. While these can be read, on one level, as empowering narratives of attaining female subjecthood and agency in the face of adversity, it is all the same problematic, to say the least, that the message conveyed in all three cases is that male violence is a necessary factor in attaining female agency.

While all three series arguably reinforce stereotypical narratives of female victimization and empowerment, *Westworld*, in our reading, does offer an alternative evaluation of conventional notions of fandom and gender. Much of popular and academic discourse on media fandom is informed by stereotypical notions of gendered subject positions. Thus, affirmational and transformational fan practices are traditionally perceived as 'male' and 'female,' respectively, with strict – at times aggressive – adherence to a creator's original vision seen as a predominantly male pursuit, while the more subversive

practices of textual appropriation and transformation – such as ‘slash fiction’ – are seen as predominantly female (obsession_inc, 2009). This division is reinforced, in our reading of *Westworld*, by the casting of the Man in Black as an extreme example of toxic affirmational fandom, and of two female hosts – Dolores and Maeve – as the primary surrogates for transformational fans.

While largely conforming to this traditional gendered dichotomy, *Westworld* does offer a more nuanced – though only allegorical – portrayal of transformational, female fandom. As Suzanne Scott has discussed, there is a clear tendency in contemporary media to employ ‘fan proxy’ characters as a means of ‘privileging affirmational over transformative fan practices and demarcating fan culture as a decidedly masculine preserve’ (Scott, 2019: 62). Thus, female ‘fan proxy’ characters, on series such as *Sherlock* (2010-2017) and *Supernatural* (2005-), are often presented as caricatures, a way for the series to express ‘dismissal of, or disdain for’ fangirls, fanfiction and other transformative – ‘female’ – fan practices (Scott, 2019: 155). This is not the case in *Westworld*, which invites its audience to embrace and identify with the transformational struggles of Dolores and Maeve, while the affirmational Man in Black is framed as the villain of the story. On *Westworld*, as in *The OA* and *13 Reasons Why*, it is toxic masculinity that is castigated, not female transgression.

Conclusion

Our discussion of the relationship between media creators, texts and audiences does not attempt to argue that television audiences remain to this day as passive and docile as they had previously been constructed in popular and academic discourse; on the other hand, we would emphasize the importance of taking with a grain of salt contemporary proclamations of the ‘new audience’ as active and in control, and remembering that reality is more complicated than either of these approaches might suggest.

As our analysis has illustrated, these negotiations of authority between creators and audiences are themes that many contemporary creators and audiences are concerned with, as are certain media texts. It is perhaps no coincidence that this theme is particularly prominent in discussions of television, a medium whose audience had for decades been seen as passive and prone to manipulation, and whose creators were seen as craftsmen rather than artists. Understanding the constantly evolving nature of these complex relationships between television creators, audiences and texts can enrich not only our understanding of the texts television has to offer us, but also our own understanding of ourselves, as television viewers, scholars and fans.

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Notes:

¹ The *Wikipedia* article for the term 'Showrunner,' for example, begins by defining 'showrunner' as 'a 21st-century term' ('Showrunner,' 2019) and *Google Trends* notes a steady rise in interest in the term since 2004 ('Showrunner – Explore').

² Also see Busse, 2013.

³ See Gray, 2013: 92.

⁴ See Gray, 2013: 92; Thompson, 2007.

⁵ Similar metaphoric readings can be applied, among others, to *Sense8* (2015-2018), *The Umbrella Academy* (2019-), and the 'Black Museum' episode of *Black Mirror* (2017: 6.4).

⁶ While mirroring the latest digital media distribution and consumption practices, *13 Reasons Why* is premised on a nostalgic return to older media, evident both in the use of analogue audio cassettes and tape players and in Hannah's chosen method of distribution: a box delivered to the recipient's front door, reminiscent of Netflix's initial business model as a DVD-by-mail rental company.

⁷ On the relevant meme, see Adam, 2017.

⁸ For examples, see: WhyStuffsGreat, 2017 and bridge4, 2017.

⁹ See: Grippo, 2017; Free Spirit, 2017; Robinson, 2017.

¹⁰ Besides acting as a surrogate for the television creator in general, Ford here serves as a mouthpiece for Johnathan Nolan, *Westworld*'s co-creator, who has expressed similar notions in interviews (Winfield, 2018).

¹¹ Subsequently, in her final act of the season, Maeve chooses to reject her programming, and instead of leaving the park decides to go back and search for her 'daughter' from a previous narrative loop. While this is presented as her first, genuine act of free will—as was confirmed by the showrunners in interviews (Westworld, 2016)—Maeve's return to the park ends up being a crucial factor in ensuring that Ford's master plan for the hosts is carried out successfully, in the second season.

¹² This example can be seen as an explicit illustration of Derek Johnson's notion of the 'audience function' – an imagined construction of the audience (in this case, a participatory audience) that serves media producers to 'position themselves as authors and lay claim to the cultural legitimacy of their work' (Johnson, 2013: 137). Johnson sees this as an example of the ways in which 'new forms of cultural participation might be complicit with old forms of authority' (Johnson, 2013: 154).