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THE CANVAS AND THE MAZE

Deconstructing the Wall and the Frontier in Contemporary American Science Fiction

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In his 1974 article "Who Is an SF Writer?," Philip K. Dick describes the author of science fiction (SF) as "a dreamer with one eye open, always coldly appraising what is actually going on" (75). In this sense, despite the escapist tendency about which many critics complain, this genre is rooted in the empirical experience of our natural, historical, and social environment. Starting from reality, SF ventures into the almost infinite possibilities of the 'what if,' to the extent that, in periods of crisis and new social anxieties, it gains new strength, informing literature and art. The plethora of SF movies in recent years can be easily explained as an attempt to define, analyze, and reinterpret the most significant issues of our times. In particular, the recent sociocultural upheaval caused by the migration crisis—along with the restored interest in the semantic fields of 'wall' and 'frontier'—has redefined the role of the Other in Western society and deeply influenced recent SF productions. Jonathan Nolan's and Lisa Joy's TV series *Westworld* and Denis Villeneuve's movie *Arrival,* two of the most acclaimed works of 2016, stand out for the highly symbolic representation of the relationship between the individual and the Other, a relationship addressed through a complete re-elaboration of two of the most controversial elements of today's international politics: the frontier and the wall.[1] By considering the different

1. This essay was written and presented before the second season of *Westworld* was released in 2018.

declensions of the myths of the frontier and the Wild West along with the idea of "wall as canvas," I will discuss the compelling perspectives concerning the relationship between the individual self and the Other provided by *Westworld* and *Arrival*.

Providing a fair definition of SF is beyond the purpose of this work and rather controversial. All the attempts made so far by writers and critics to give a comprehensive definition of the genre have only demonstrated the difficulty of enclosing SF within the boundaries of rigid categories, images, and styles (Sobchack 63). Nonetheless, as Darko Suvin pointed out in his famous *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction,* what deserves particular consideration is the difference between SF and mythic narratives. According to Suvin, SF "sees the mythical static identity as an illusion, usually as a fraud, at best only as a temporary realization of potentially limitless contiguities" (7). The common denominator of SF narratives, then, lies in the rejection of stability as an indisputable trait of identity and in the affirmation of change and movement as the essential factors upon which life is based. As a result of its dynamic nature, SF has very often been connected to real and metaphoric frontiers, symbolizing the progressive movement of the human race towards the future. Of course, this has been especially evident in the United States, where, particularly after John F. Kennedy's idea of the New American Frontier, SF has become synonymous with the concept of regeneration by means of discovery and conquest. And yet, the *Star Wars* saga of the Seventies, as well as films and TV series like *Star Trek* and *Battle Beyond the Star*s, were not simply representing the "final frontier" on a metaphorical level. Rather, they were concrete examples of the conflation of SF tropes and Western movies archetypes, in what might be called SF Western (Slotkin 635). By means of their wasted landscapes, the futuristic spaceships, and the high-tech blasters of their heroes, these works were reinterpreting elements typical of the Western genre (the canyons, the horses, the guns), reintroducing the old myth of the American frontier into the present.

Even if it does not address the trope of the space odyssey, *Westworld*, the highly praised 2016 TV series written by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, represents a good example of the SF Western genre. Set in an indefinite future, the series portrays a Western-

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themed amusement park called Westworld. The park is populated by highly technological, human-like androids called "hosts" who (or that) interact with human visitors, the "guests." Two main features characterize Westworld. First, each android, as a non-player character in a video games, is provided with its own "life story," written by a professional writer and played on a loop every day. Second, following Isaac Asimov's three laws of robotics, each android is programmed not to injure the guests and to protect its own life insofar as it does not harm human beings (85–86). In this sense, despite the human-like perfection of their bodies and the vividness of their emotions, the hosts are stuck in their eternal return, unaware of their programmed experience of life.

Episode after episode, however, two of the androids (the beautiful, naive Dolores and the prostitute Maeve) begin to perceive the unreality of their world.[2] Following the typical plot of SF movies, their newfound consciousness leads to the revolt of the robots against their fathers/creators. This theme was also chosen by director Michael Crichton in his 1973 movie *Westworld*, which inspired Nolan and Joy for their TV series.[3] While the robots' sudden outburst of violence in Crichton's film is due to a technical malfunction, Nolan's and Joy's androids revolt against the artificiality of their existence by following the impetus of their newborn consciousness. As a result, the audience is not supposed to identify with human beings, threatened by the violence of the machines. Instead, following a trend that emerged in the Eighties, androids are humanized to allow the viewer to identify with their existential anxieties and uncertainties. This increasing emotional sympathy for the mechanical Other is connected to the alienation that people experience in a society in which life is mediated by technology

2. The role women play in contemporary SF movies and TV series is becoming more and more important. As both *Westworld* and *Arrival* suggest, the new hero of the future is a woman whose presence in the story is no longer that of a passive object, affected by the actions of a male hero or villain. Rather, she is an active protagonist, very often embodying the last hope for the redemption of the human race. For further recent productions addressing this topic see also Cuaròn and Miller,

3. Even if one of the most famous examples of the typical trope of the robots' rebellion against human beings is represented by Fritz Lang's 1927 movie *Metropolis*, its origins lie in Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein.*

and virtual reality, and in which "everyone is less conscious of existence than of its image" (Sobchack 229). In other words, what the audience experiences on the screen is its own artificial life.

The issue of the artificiality of human existence is further developed through an insightful investigation of the myth of the American frontier. In fact, thanks to the complex representation of its fictional future, *Westworld* provides the viewer with three different frontiers: technological, simulated, and inner. In the first case, the frontier corresponds to the condition of technological perfection that humanity has finally reached in this fictional future. After debunking the myth of human unstoppable progress, scientists' attention is now directed towards the only field in which significant improvements can still be made: artificial intelligence. The last frontier of science, in this sense, is represented by the 'creation' of consciousness.

The second frontier is associated with the simulated experience of the guests. Drenched with the narrative lore of the mythic American West, the park is meant to resuscitate the old spirit of the pioneers and the rejuvenating force of the frontier. Frederick Turner underscores the essential role of westward expansion in the formation of American democracy in *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*; however, rather than focusing on the historical significance of the West, President Theodore Roosevelt spent his whole life celebrating the tough, adventurous experience of the frontier. Cowboys and hunters were the rough heroes of the West, "tall and sinewy, with resolute, weather-beaten faces, and eyes that looked a man straight in the face without flinching" (18). As a consequence, a whole collection of symbols and narratives was created and consolidated even before the American frontier closed in 1890. Contributing to the formation of a collective repertoire of glorifying narratives and legendary *lieux de mémoire*, the American myths of the Old West were populated by men and women that resembled the types and the heroes of ancient mythology. One of the most popular cantors of this Pantheon—still vividly present in today's collective consciousness thanks to literature and, most of all, Western movies—was Buffalo Bill, whose Wild West Show contributed to the diffusion of the American myth throughout the Old and the New worlds.

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According to Richard Slotkin, his "reenactments were not recreations, but reductions of complex events into 'typical scenes' based on the formulas of popular literary mythology" (69). The stories performed by Buffalo Bill's company, in other words, set the free, pure life of the frontier in opposition to the conventional, false existence of the industrialized world (Wrobel 51).

In a similar way, *Westworld*'s theme park blends history and myth, authenticity and sensational fiction to exploit the visitors' need to escape the constrictions of modern society and everyday life. In Nolan's and Joy's park, the typical features of the Old West turn even wilder: freedom is replaced by vicious lust and individualism by egotism, while adventure meets with grotesque violence. In this sense, *Westworld*'s portrayal of the myth of the frontier evokes the criticism that Jean Baudrillard expresses against the distorted reality built by artificial worlds like Disneyland. In his essay "The Procession of Simulacra," Baudrillard denounces Disneyland's entertainment for allegedly representing an escapist immersion into the real pleasure of American society while masking a "simulation of the third order": the park exists to "hide that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America that *is* Disneyland" (461). The ways in which Westworld alters the perception of the frontier are similar. First, the park's artificiality indelibly turns the frontier not only into a simulacrum of reality but into a reality that looks even more authentic and vivid than real life. In other words, the simulated frontier replaces both the historic frontier and the outside reality. This is made possible because, as Louis Marin suggests, visitors are not mere spectators but active performers of that simulated reality (54). This first-person experience induces the guests to perceive the life inside the park as the real life, even if what they actually taste is nothing more than a "real *'imaginaire,'* a fixed, stereotyped, powerful fantasy" (56). Consequently, the experience of the park deceives guests into believing that in Westworld they are weaving a thoroughly personal story, a self-narrative freed from the entanglements of social conventions. On the contrary, their freedom is constrained by the narrative itineraries provided by Westworld's writers and "contained in a stereotyped system of representations" that the guest is unconsciously forced to borrow in order to spin his/her own 'real' self-narrative (59). Visitors

are attracted by the possibility of finding their 'real' selves, but, hidden behind the thick curtains of inculcated dispositions and social conventions, the only thing they can obtain from a simulacrum of reality is a simulacrum of identity.

Finally, the third frontier consists in an inner, dynamic itinerary leading the individual towards a full comprehension of the self and a firm demystification of the simulacra of reality. This inward frontier is explicitly addressed in the last scenes of the series by the park's creator, Dr. Ford. In fact, after admitting that human beings are irreparably lost within the unreality of simulation, Dr. Ford confesses that Westworld is

> a prison of our own sins. Because 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.

Therefore, what *Westworld* portrays is more than a rebellion against the god/father. Rather, the audience witnesses (and identifies with) a revolution of the self against the modern anesthetization of consciousness, a rebellion that, of course, also includes the assassination of the creator. To achieve this new awakening, androids have to follow "the maze," a symbolic labyrinth hidden inside Westworld and gradually unveiling an interior itinerary, a frontier moving inward. Dolores, the oldest android of the park, ventures into a quest for consciousness that will eventually help her to demystify her own Wonderland, a place of the imagination caging the blond protagonist within a dream of the consciousness.[4] Waking up from that dream means follow-

4. Dolores' resemblance to *Alice in Wonderland*'s protagonist is striking. Not only do her physical features and clothes evoke Lewis Carroll's heroine, but the writers of the series overtly underline the connection with the novel by making Dolores herself read a passage from the book. In the third episode of the first series, Bernard Lowe, head of the programming division of the Westworld Project, recommends that she read a few lines from Carroll's novel: "Dear dear, how queer everything is today and yesterday things went on just as usual. I wonder if I've been changed in the night." While suggesting that Dolores is living in a dream-like reality similar to Alice's

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ing the frontier inward, reaching the center of the maze, and being able to distinguish the simulacrum from reality.

The labyrinth, however, is an ambiguous construction, involving at the same time order and disorder, logic and chaos, clarity and disorientation, linearity and circularity (Doob 1–2). The double nature of the maze depends on the opposite spatial and, most of all, temporal points of view of its creator and its "visitor." While the architect has a comprehensive view of its intricate structure, which s/he has built linearly and logically, the visitor loses the conventional sense of linear time. From the inside, the maze is perceived as a cluster of 'befores' and 'afters,' switching, alternating, and repeating themselves in a hallucinatory way. The narrative of the maze Dolores experiences is a schizophrenic juxtaposition of autobiographical events from her past and her future, emerging from her unconscious in the form of mirages and phantoms. No longer a straight boundary extending through space, the inward frontier becomes an intricate network of narrative threads that, once ordered, will solve the enigma of Dolores' identity.

The controversial relationship between self-narrative and perception is likewise essential for the development of *Arrival*'s plot.[5] A first-contact story, Denis Villeneuve's movie introduces another female protagonist, Louise Banks, a university professor of linguistics, as the main mediator between humanity and alien visitors. Generally, in American first-contact narratives, aliens represent the external threat to the American way of life, a threat that, as Susan Sontag suggests, satisfies the "hunger for a 'good war'" (219). However, as previously underlined, a trend that emerged during the Eighties has turned the fear of the "Diverse" into a feeling of sympathy for and identification with the "Alien" (Sobchack 293).

Wonderland, this association turns Dr. Ford into the Red King of the novel *Through the Looking Glass*, in which Alice is again facing a reality "dreamt" by the King.

5. The movie *Arrival* is an adaptation of Ted Chiang's 1998 short story "Story of Your Life," which won the prestigious Nebula Award for best novella in 2000. See Chiang.

Human beings are not only "embracing the alien," but they have finally realized that they themselves *are* alienated.

In *Arrival*, however, the aliens (called heptapods because of their anatomical structure) are more than friendly visitors, since their primal interest is to communicate a message to the inhabitants of the Earth. Interestingly, the movie draws new attention to the issue of language and incommunicability in a two-fold way. First, unlike in previous SF movies, in *Arrival* the heptapods' language is represented in all its complexity. In fact, apart from Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*—in which, according to Vivian Sobchack, the English spoken by the characters was expressive, realistic, and, most of all, actively learned by the viewer—SF movies have hardly ever addressed the problem of future or alien languages (147–149). On the contrary, while watching Villeneuve's film, the viewers deal with the heptapods' language from both a visual point of view—for they are overtly shown the unintelligible signs used by the aliens—and a theoretical point of view, in that they follow Banks and her team in their analysis of the alien linguistic system.[6] Second, the fact that Banks has to teach her language and, at the same time, learn several basic words and everyday expressions from the aliens has a powerful symbolic meaning. In so doing, the director hints that, while serving as a point of contact between two cultures, the process of learning a language also puts the individual and the Other on the same level.

Nonetheless, no form of physical contact between the human teamwork and the aliens is expected. Resembling *2001: Space Odyssey*'s monolith, the spaceships are dark shells made of pure, soft lines, transcendental and, in a way, hallowed. Inside the womb of the vessel, both human visitors and heptapods have to make compromises in order to establish a productive communication. On the one hand, human beings have to adapt to the different gravitational forces present inside the spaceship. In one scene, in particular, the shift from the gravity of Earth to the vessel's gravity forces Banks and her team to walk on the 'roof' of the internal corridor. Besides the fascinating construction of the scene, what is significant is that human beings have to see reality from

6. The aliens' language is defined as semasiographic, a linguistic system in which symbols do not represent sounds but only convey meaning.

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a different perspective to make successful contact with the alien. On the other hand, a glass wall divides heptapods from the visitors, so as to provide human beings with an environment suited to their biological functions. However, this opaque boundary is turned into a screen or, better, a canvas on which the heptapods can write their obscure, circular characters with the black substance spurting out from their limbs. A symbol of division and incommunicability *par excellence*, in *Arrival* the wall is presented as the *conditio sine qua non* of communication. No longer a barrier, the wall connects addressers and addressees in a one-to-one relationship, involving not only linguistic but also cultural, psychological, and emotional factors.

It is possible to find some examples of this symbolic transformation of the wall in real life. The Berlin wall and the Belfast Peace Wall show how barriers may turn into canvases, with graffiti serving as enduring symbols of collective memory and mementos of social traumas, grief, and hope. Moreover, the recent works of the popular British graffiti artist Banksy on the Israeli West Bank Barrier have shown the borderline position of this form of self-expression, caught between illegality and art. What is significant in Banksy's case, however, is the importance given not only to the message conveyed by the images themselves but most relevantly to the channel, the actual public space where his works are drawn. Potentially, the wall is a highly symbolic element.

Nevertheless, despite being invested with new powerful meanings, the wall still represents a physical, linguistic, and cultural barrier that has to be crossed. Banks, who is aware of the importance of physical contact in interactions, is the first person to take off her hazardous material suit, used to prevent any contamination caused by interaction with the Other. In her white T-shirt, Banks walks toward the screen and eventually puts her right hand on its surface. One of the aliens does the same, thereby demonstrating that the long limbs on which the creatures seem to walk are similar to fingers and that, anatomically, aliens have the shape of enormous hands. Henceforth, the symbolism associated with the concept of 'hands' (both human and alien) is repeatedly emphasized throughout the movie as a reminder of the importance of contact in the creation of a fruitful communication among

individuals and among cultures. This symbolism is particularly evident in the dream-like visions Banks begins to experience right after this episode. The woman's hallucinations are like scattered memories of a past not yet occurred, predicting the death of her not-yet-conceived daughter. Just like Dolores, Banks perceives these visions as blurred images of her autobiography, visions she has to arrange chronologically to discover the purpose of the aliens' arrival as well as her role in this story.

Interestingly, the experience of the canvas faced by the protagonist recalls what viewers experience in front of James Turrell's light artworks. Primarily concerned with the ambiguous, malleable "thingness or physicality of light" and its perception, Turrell tries to demonstrate that "we create reality by the way we perceive" (FAIchannel). Even though our perception of reality and of the Other is inevitably prejudiced, he suggests, we can *learn* to perceive differently. In particular, Turrell's 1976 work *Acton*—evocative of his experience as a pilot in the foggy skies of the homonymous Californian city—exploits the deceptive nature of light to make the viewers see a "false canvas" hung on the wall of the museum. Surprisingly, the closer the visitor moves to the foggy, gray canvas, the more s/he realizes that what s/he thought to be a plain surface is nothing but a hole in the wall, the delusive result of an artful projection of lights (Newfields).

What Banks experiences in the final part of *Arrival* is remarkably similar. While, after a misunderstanding with the aliens, the Chinese government is preparing to launch a preemptive attack against the spacecraft, the heptopods lead Banks to the other side of the screen.[7] Inside the misty canvas, Banks realizes that what the aliens are offering is a gift in return for which they will need humankind's help in three thousand years. Their gift is their own language, which, as Banks realizes, is "free of time" because

7. Once more, the adventures of Alice in Wonderland prove to be an interesting instrument of analysis. Bank's crossing of the opaque screen reminds one of Lewis Carroll's 1871 novel *Through the Looking Glass*, in which the young heroine reaches a dream-like realm by walking through a mirror. As in *Westworld*, the overlapping of dream and reality leads the protagonist towards a condition of intense bewilderment, thanks to which the heroine is able to reach the truth and solve the puzzle of her identity.

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it is characterized by a non-linear orthography: each written sign has no forward or backward direction, no beginning or end. Banks understands that, while learning their language, "you begin to perceive the time the way they do." No longer constrained by a linear, progressive conception of existence, human beings would be able to open time up, to unfold it, and see the past, the present, and the future simultaneously. *Arrival*'s wall, thus, is a glass canvas overlooking the flux of time: by glancing "through the looking glass," individuals are enabled to perceive reality in its wholeness, just like, when looking a maze from the outside, it is possible to see the entirety of its structure, its dead ends and center.

Westworld's and *Arrival*'s depictions of alternative futures demonstrate how SF is drenched with the social dilemmas of our time. The attention paid to the relationship between the Other and one's self shows that issues of otherness and diversity affect not only the political sphere but also the perception the individual has of his/her identity. Even though they address two different symbols and deal with different aspects of the self/Other relationship, the analyses of society and of individuals offered by *Arrival* and *Westworld* have at least two main points in common. First, by means of a process of assimilation, deconstruction, and reconstruction, they celebrate the malleable nature of symbols. In so doing, they remind the audience that symbols, even when associated with negative values and memories, can be transformed into new creative inputs. As such, they can serve as meaningful instruments for transcending the collective boundaries that affect the individual's perception of identity. One of the main points highlighted by these works is thus that consciousness of one's self and of the Other is based on perception; as a result, it is possible to adapt one's perception of reality and learn to perceive the 'I' and the 'you' in a more conscious way.

The second element shared by *Arrival* and *Westworld* is strongly connected to the idea of a newfound self-awareness. They both express a desire to perceive life in its wholeness, to be aware of one's "being in time," to gain back the authority to write one's own self-narrative. The frontier and the wall, reinterpreted as canvas and maze, help the two female protagonists to solve the puzzle of their autobiography, guiding them to a deep and fruitful knowl-

edge of the 'you' and the 'I.' As in Marin's description of the "real *imaginaire*," the inner maze showed in *Westworld* and *Arrival* is made of walls directing the visitor towards wrong solutions, fake perceptions, and deceitful truths (56). As a system of walls and boundaries, the labyrinth symbolically represents the way in which external, collective forces shape individual identity, the direction that one's life might take, and people's perception of reality. In this sense, the heroes portrayed in *Arrival* and *Westworld* celebrate a new form of self-empowerment of the (female) individual, struggling to become aware of the deceitful reality in which she lives and chasing her identity within the maze of time and memory.

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