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## C O M M U N I O

# A Journey to *Westworld* Guided by Eliade and Culianu

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*“What is terrible in the amnesia of a poet, he resumed after a long silence, is that, as the personal memory disappears, another memory, I would say cultural, comes from the depths, and if a miracle does not occur, eventually it takes over completely.”*

*Mircea Eliade*

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### **The Stage**

**W**ESTWORLD IS a successful HBO series, nominated in 2017, among other selections (and prizes), for three Golden Globes. It is created by Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan. The official website describes it very briefly, in these words: “drama series *Westworld* is a dark odyssey about the dawn of artificial consciousness and the evolution of sin. Set at the intersection of the near future and the reimagined past, it explores a world in which every human appetite, no matter how noble or depraved, can be indulged.”

The story is intentionally complex but, as with any TV show, it is meant to provide entertainment. Simple at first—a thematic park filled with androids (called *hosts*) was created for rich people to entertain themselves as they please, with no consequences (e.g. they can kill or/and rape)—it gets more and more complicated as the episodes evolve: the creator of the park,

Dr. Robert Ford, masterfully played by Anthony Hopkins, is not happy with such simple stories, he wants his creatures to become independent, develop personalities, and think and feel for themselves. Therefore, he creates some narrative threads which complicate the existence of both visitors and the board of the company which owns the park. Enough reasons for the board to want to dismiss him; certainly, as any brilliant creator, Dr. Ford cannot accept that without fighting back, which he does in his particular style: by using the humanoid robots he created.

The main aim of Dr. Ford is to endow his creatures with consciousness. In psychological terms, this can be seen as the development of the self. There are several conditions to be met: trials and errors, memories, and so on, but the most important one is suffering. The main characters are given sad stories. For example, one female, Maeve, has a missing daughter, another central character, Bernard, lost his boy, while Dolores, a troubled woman in search of something ambiguous and elusive (which increases her sorrow), also lost his father. These choices of the creators of the movie are based on important psychological researches made in the last years regarding traumatic events.

Calhoun, Tedeschi, Cann, and Hanks (2010, 136) propose the term *posttraumatic growth* (PTG) to explain how traumatic events including the loss of a significant other can be a source of personal growth. Due to the unraveling of the world that someone knew until the traumatic event occurred, that person has to search for meaning and make sense of what happened. The process involves cognitive reconstruction and efforts to adjust to a negative situation through changes in the so-called “core beliefs” about the world and life. Loss brings the need of self-evaluation and self-understanding which consequently may result in gaining a deeper level of meaning and a new “life narrative.”

The recent work of Tedeschi and Blevins (2015, 375) in posttraumatic growth theory asserts that “a certain degree of trauma is necessary to initiate processes of intrusive and deliberate rumination in relation to embedded schemas and life narratives.” A similar position regarding the relation between suffering and consciousness can be found in Charmaz (1999, 364): “Suffering poses existential problems of identity and continuity of self.”

## The Guided Tour

**W**ESTWORLD CAN be also “read” differently, with the help of two scholars, Mircea Eliade and Ioan Petru Culianu. There are several keywords that could send the view directly to their oeuvres. The first and the most obvious one is *maze*. One of the characters, the Man in Black

played by Ed Harris, who in the end turns out to be the same person as the young William, played by Jimmi Simpson, is in search of something for about thirty years. All he has is a map on a scalp, nothing else than the labyrinth of Dolores. His entire journey is a path to the center of the labyrinth. Once he gets there, he realizes that the road to the center is actually a way to the center of himself, the Center of the human being.

For Mircea Eliade, the labyrinth is one of the most powerful symbols. Even in his early books, for example in *Yoga*, Eliade (1969b, 222) describes the symbolism of the labyrinth in these terms: “the labyrinth symbolized the beyond, and whoever entered it as a part of initiation realized a *descensus ad inferos* (‘death’ followed by ‘resurrection’).” Then, in his dialogues with Claude-Henri Rocquet, Eliade clearly said: “A labyrinth is a defense, sometimes a magical defense, built to guard a center . . . . That symbolism is the model of all existence, which passes through many ordeals to journey toward its own center. . . .” (Eliade 1984, 185).

This common point, of Eliade’s theory and *Westworld*, regarding the ordeals people (or androids, respectively) are going through, is well explained by recent psychological theories, e.g.:

*Posttraumatic growth (PTG) . . . can be understood to refer, broadly, to a cluster of benefits that result from a complex combination of cognitive, emotional, and social processes. PTG is assessed and represented by the five factors . . . : new possibilities, personal strength, appreciation of life, spiritual/existential change, and relating to others . . . . In the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event, intrusive ruminations enter unwittingly into an individual’s consciousness, causing activation of the stress response and possible experiences of anxiety, hypervigilance, dissociation, and so on.* (Tedeschi and Blevins 2015, 373–374)

Another key term used in the series is *narration*. Dr. Ford creates narrations, not only to entertain guests who paid lots of money to feel the reality of this artificial world, but also to “awaken,” to enlighten his creatures. For Eliade, things are clear: the narration, the story, is the inheritor of myth. And for Eliade myth is by definition “is always related to a ‘creation,’ it tells how something came into existence, or how a pattern of behavior, an institution, a manner of working were established” (Eliade 1998, 18).

There is a story written by Eliade himself, “Ghicitor în pietre” (first published in 1963 and translated into English by Mac Linscott Ricketts, in 2001, under the title “The Man Who Could Read Stones”), which, linked with his theory of myth, could shed new light upon the TV show. This prose piece is an example of how a story, a narration—i.e. a myth—is born, and of how it has consequences

in real life. Dr. Ford—or, in Eliade’s prose, Adriana/Ariana, the one who created the story, which is the myth—knows the power of the narration: he and she, respectively, know that on one hand it has a value of truth for those involved, and on the other hand it generates consequences and unexpected actions. Eliade’s short story perfectly mirrors the script of the series: a time loop is created in order to prevent the engagement of Emanuel with Adina, whom the latter remembered only the night before (David 2014, 64).

The power of a story is entirely proven by Eliade in “Pe strada Mântuleasa” (published for the first time in 1968, and translated into English by Mary Park Stevenson in 1979 and by Mac Linscott Ricketts in 1981, under the title “The Old Man and the Bureaucrats”). Here an old man named Fărâma, a retired teacher, survives all the interrogatories of a totalitarian regime, the communist system of Romania, and of all the officials who interrogate him, because he knows, and tells, stories. Just like the voice of Arnold in the movie, he always repeats: “remember.”

Dolores tries hard to remember. She is a sort of artist—because the artist has access to other realities than the common human beings; she likes to draw. In one of her drawings, she imagines a nice place, with mountains and a river. Soon, in her journey alongside William, she discovers that the place is real, and it was not only her imagination. She is only one step away from remembering her “home.” Eliade’s “creature,” Adrian, in another prose writing, “În curte la Dionis” (1977), is also an artist, a poet. He also knows the power of the imagination, which is in reality the power of remembering. He is a perfect match for the android characters in the series: he is an amnesiac, so he remembers only fragments of memories, he doesn’t know what is real or what is a dream, and he finds himself in all kinds of unexpected situations over which he has no control. Yet, like Dolores, he is the only one who could guide someone through the labyrinth or, in this case, though the three levels of reality according to Eliade: the everyday level (historical level), the cultural (mythological) level, and the most profound one, the level of being pure and simple (which in his theory is equated with the sacred level):

*What is terrible in the amnesia of a poet, he resumed after a long silence, is that, as the personal memory disappears, another memory, I would say cultural, comes from the depths, and if a miracle does not occur, eventually it takes over completely. Sir, he said gravely, I am threatened to be reduced to culture, to become a purely cultural person! And I do not even dare to imagine what would happen later, when even the cultural memory will release itself of its historical frame, and I will remain human in general. . . (Eliade 1991, 3: 191).*

In what concerns Eliade's theory, things are obvious: the way to the center is equivalent with the discovery of the sacred. In other words, as Eliade states: "the sacred is an element in the structure of the consciousness, not a stage in the history of consciousness" (Eliade 1969a, i). Are the androids also in search of the sacred, as they develop consciousness? Actually, in the center of the town where Dolores discovers herself, in other words, in the center of the terrestrial labyrinth, there is a church. A nice, tall church. On the other hand, for some of the androids, who see things, the humans—company employees in charge of maintenance or even repair work—are considered gods. The humans know they are not gods, but the poor robots don't.

At first sight, where there are gods there is religion. But they are not gods, they are humans, so is it a fake religion? Not necessarily: the issues involved here can be seen as religious in the broadest sense of Eliade's terms: "perhaps it is too late to search for another word, and 'religion' may still be a useful term provided we keep in mind that it does not necessarily imply belief in God, gods, or ghosts, but refers to the experience of the sacred, and, consequently, is related to the idea of *being, meaning, and truth*" (Eliade 1969a, i). The androids are on their path to discovering their self. They have existential issues, they are 'beings' in search of meaning and truth. Things are not at all simple, and they get even more complicated: near the church there is a cemetery. One grave belongs to Dolores, the place where she will never go, because she is not human, so she cannot die. Instead of her body, a small box is buried in the tomb, inside which there is nothing else than a maze having the same shape as the one the Man in Black carries with him. It is actually a toy, a kid's game, in which one has to guide a little metal ball inside the labyrinth to reach the center.

Inside the real labyrinth, instead of finding a revelation, the answer to his searches, the Man in Black finds nothing but this game. Which for him is equivalent to nothing.

To find out the key to this situation, we will turn to the other guide, Ioan Petru Culianu.

Culianu (or Couliano) stated as early as 1982–1983, when he intended to publish a study, titled "Mircea Eliade Unknown," that Eliade is a mystagogue, one of the most famous ones, and for sure one of the last of this kind. Not only because he initiated people into mysteries, or guided them, as the original first meaning of the word indicates, but also because he himself created the mysteries, and that is another meaning, less known. "Both significations apply to Eliade: he is the master, the initiator, in the mysteries created by himself" (Culianu 1995, 256).

Culianu planned a discussion with Eliade, so he sent him several questions. In one of them he asked Eliade: "My interpretation of your literary work is that of

an Eliade the great mystagogue, who creates myths fully knowing that they are founded on nothing, but is convinced of their existential and pedagogical value. The goal is, in a sense, soteriological: he wants to help the humans recover the lost significance of their existence, of their destiny on Earth... Do you agree with this interpretation?" (Culianu 1995, 270).

The question remains without an answer, but is important in itself. As *Westworld* proves, even one of the merciless human beings, the Man in Black, was in search of meaning, of the sense of his existence. He thought he would find this meaning in Westworld, and not in the real world, which proves to be meaningless.

Culianu agrees that what matters is not the exposure, but the process of revelation. In other words, important is the hermeneutics, the interpretation. In some cases, as in Eliade's work or in *Westworld*, it is based on *nothing*. It doesn't matter that the box contains a toy, or nothing, as the safe some androids fight for, because everything is a game. What sort of game? A game of mind, of course. *Nothing* is not really nothing, because it has to be *something*. In other words, it is the creation of the mind itself.

For Eliade and Culianu, as for Dr. Ford, everything was clear. They understood the importance of the road. Because it was the path which helped the androids which made the effort to traverse it to comprehend something of huge importance: the humans are not gods, as the androids considered them.

The equivalence of the worlds is obvious: Westworld is the creation of Dr. Ford's mind. Does this make the humans gods? No, on the contrary, it reveals the fact that humans are creatures not very much different from the androids.

The demonstration is given by the same Dr. Ford. He has a representation of Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* on his wall. He explains it: a scientist observed that the outline of God's background is actually an accurate representation of the human brain. The scholar Dr. Ford refers to is a real person, Frank Lynn Meshberger (1990), and his study was published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. It is not important whether Michelangelo drew or did not draw a human brain intentionally, it is important that Dr. Ford believes that he did, and he transmits his message forward.

For Culianu things are not much different. He—in his last writings—asserts that everything in our history is a creation of the human mind. Religion itself, subject of divergences and conflicts, in the name of which people were ready to kill, or die for, is also nothing else than a game of mind. "To many the description of religion as a game of mind will come as a shock, and many believers will be repelled by what may seem a diminishment of their faith. They should not be" (Couliano 1992, 268).

Humans are not gods, but their mind is godlike. They are but fragile creatures, easily killed. Androids are stronger, so they can start a revolution.

Dr. Ford wants to set them free. He writes a new narration, and commences it, at the cost of his life. It will allow his creatures to choose. In other words, he institutes free will. Of course, as in everyone's life, human or android, each choice has consequences, and they are all in the same situation: in this world or in Westworld, we are all inheritors of our own choices.

Dr. Ford tries to give the androids free will and consciousness in order to bring them closer to the human condition, but studies in neurobiology and neuropsychology have proven quite the opposite: human beings lack free will, as their neurological functions take place almost entirely pre-consciously. In other words, the biochemistry of the brain is active before a person becomes aware of the consequences of that activity (Sandkühler and Bhattacharya 2008). In the context of the script, it means that androids are already capable to understand their condition as pre-programmed machines and the humans have to make the leap to recognize and understand that they share the same state.

Dr. Ford's self-sacrifice from the last minutes of the first season of the series is complex in itself, holding more than one meaning: the significance can be that a new world can rise only when the old one disappears, or it is the desire of its creator to exert power, as he will always be remembered as the first who freely gave his own life in order to bring change to the others.



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## Abstract

### A Journey to *Westworld* Guided by Eliade and Culianu

This article formulates an analysis different from regular film criticism of the HBO series *Westworld*. It presents several ideas of two scholars of Religious Studies, and at the same time writers of fiction, Mircea Eliade and Ioan Petru Culianu, ideas that can be identified in this series, such as the path to the center, the symbolism of the labyrinth, the myth, or the games of mind, along with confirmatory support from the psychological domain. It is in the intention of the article to provide a “guided tour” of *Westworld* with Eliade and Culianu as “hosts,” considering that it is of great interest to reveal common points that appear in unexpected places (e.g. a TV show that features future, and for sure futuristic, realities) so many years after the authors’ disappearance from this world.

## Keywords

*Westworld*, Mircea Eliade, Ioan Petru Culianu, center, game of mind, posttraumatic growth