The Techno-Dystopia of Contemporary Film and Television

There's a creative strain that has haunted film, television, and streaming services for the past decade. Though the seedlings of this strain have been around for a long time, it has now become a cornerstone of entertainment, which makes it both compelling and worrisome. I'm referring to techno-dystopianism.

The general idea behind techno-dystopianism is using technology to escape a world that has fallen into ruin. Whether by the hands of the government or a powerful corporation, reality becomes either unbearable or undesirable. Consequently, people start looking for ways to escape.

A recent example is the 2018 film *Ready Player One*, directed by Steven Spielberg and based on a 2011 book of the same name. The story takes place in 2045 where millions of people have sought to escape the world through a virtual reality universe called the OASIS (Ontologically Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulation).

The real world in *Ready Player One* has been gripped by global warming, economic stagnation, and overpopulation. The characters linger in the real world just long enough to eat something before plugging back into the OASIS. The virtual reality is every player's ideal life: They can choose their appearance, navigate thousands of worlds, and have their dream job. It's essentially a utopia. Only, there's a catch: None of it's real.

However, *Ready Player One* is one of the more optimistic iterations of techno-dystopianism. Over the past three years, the genre has taken on a more sinister nature. The so-called

escapes in more recent productions feature what may be called second-order dystopias. A second-order dystopia is one where the world escaped to is just as bad (or worse) than the world escaped from. It depicts, in some ways, an irredeemable world. But it also reveals the futility of escaping reality.

An example of one of these sinister techno-dystopias is *Severance*, a 2022 series from Apple TV+. The real world in the production seems normal enough. There are no worldwide disasters, and no imminent dangers appear to be on the horizon. However, the main character, after losing his wife, opts in for a procedure known as *severance*, which aims to separate one's consciousness into two parts. This procedure allows the main character to forget about the loss of his wife while he's at work, as well as forgetting about work while he's at home. The catch is that the procedure is carried out by the character's mysterious employer, Lumon Industries.

Though there are many worthy themes in *Severance*, a major one appears to be how far humans will go to evade tragedy and emotional pain. The production presents a moral problem: Is it better to avoid emotional pain by forgetting someone you loved, or is it better to emotionally suffer with the memory of your beloved? It's a complicated question.

But there is an overarching message to techno-dystopias. The genre suggests that there's something within human nature that makes us more than willing to destroy ourselves in the process of avoiding reality. It's only after we've been through the alternative reality that we come to realize that the real world, despite all its faults and imperfections, is much better than the one we escaped to.

There are many more examples of techno-dystopias, such as *1899*, *The Peripheral*, *Dark*, and *Westworld*. All of these films and television shows explore, in one way or another, the sinister nature of escapism. Some offer a moral judgment on said dystopias, and others leave it up to the viewer to

decide.

Of course, none of these shows would extend beyond the reach of mere entertainment if it weren't for the possibility of such technologies existing in the real world. And the implementation of such a technology is on the horizon. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, after changing the company's name to Meta, introduced the idea of a non-game virtual reality, which would be known as the metaverse. Though the idea is in its [early stages](), the possibility of people having the option to retreat to a virtual world is more realistic than ever.

The advent of techno-dystopianism presents serious implications that we, as a species, have never faced before. It's easy to imagine a future where virtual reality has developed to such an extent that whole worlds are digitally built, campaigning for our citizenship. And with national and international conflict continuing along its current trajectory, there would certainly be a market for those who wish to live in a completely different world, even if it were a digital one. But if techno-dystopianism has taught us anything, it's that the digital world we trade for reality is often far more nightmarish than we could have ever imagined.

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