

What the Helly: Bodily Autonomy in *Severance* and “A Cyborg Manifesto”

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While much discourse surrounding Apple TV's *Severance* focuses on the psychological fragmentation of identity and the ethical implications of consciousness manipulation, the show's deeper horror lies in the pursuit of something far more invasive: bodily control. *Severance* follows several characters who work at Lumon Industries, a corporation that requires surgical insertion of a chip that splits their memories between their office lives and their conscious experiences outside of work.

This surgical splitting gives a single worker two distinct identities, an innie and an outie, each without memory of the other. The bifurcation of consciousness in *Severance* depicts a dystopian future where people freely give their minds and bodies to corporate control. The female characters, particularly Helly R. and her counterpart Helena Eagan, become vessels through which the show interrogates gendered dimensions of autonomy and consent. This contemporary conceptualization of the cyborg re-envision

Donna Haraway's assertion that “the relation between organism and machine has been a bordered war,” with the battlegrounds as “the territories of production, reproduction, and imagination.”¹ Ultimately, *Severance* reveals that true corporate dominance lies not in partitioning the mind, but in gaining unregulated access to the body, particularly women's bodies, through technological means of creating manipulatable “hybrids of machine and organism.”²



As *Severance* dramatizes these very conflicts, it invites a posthuman reading of the body as both a site of labor and resistance. Using Haraway's cyborg theory, I will argue that control of bodies through minds in *Severance* reveals a chilling vision of capitalism's potential to monopolize our physical existence, as well as possible resistance through bodily autonomy.

Severance opens with Helly R. lying unconscious, sprawled across a sterile conference table before gaining consciousness for the first time. Essentially, Helly is born synchronously with the show. The first words uttered are, "Who are you?" a question that lies at the thematic center of the show: Who *are* you? What makes you *you*? These questions reverberate throughout the course of the narrative as sequential revelations seem to "suggest that the procedure could isolate consciousness from the body," confining an entire being into a singular severance chip.³ The audience is invited to ask with the characters whether specific memories make us who we are.

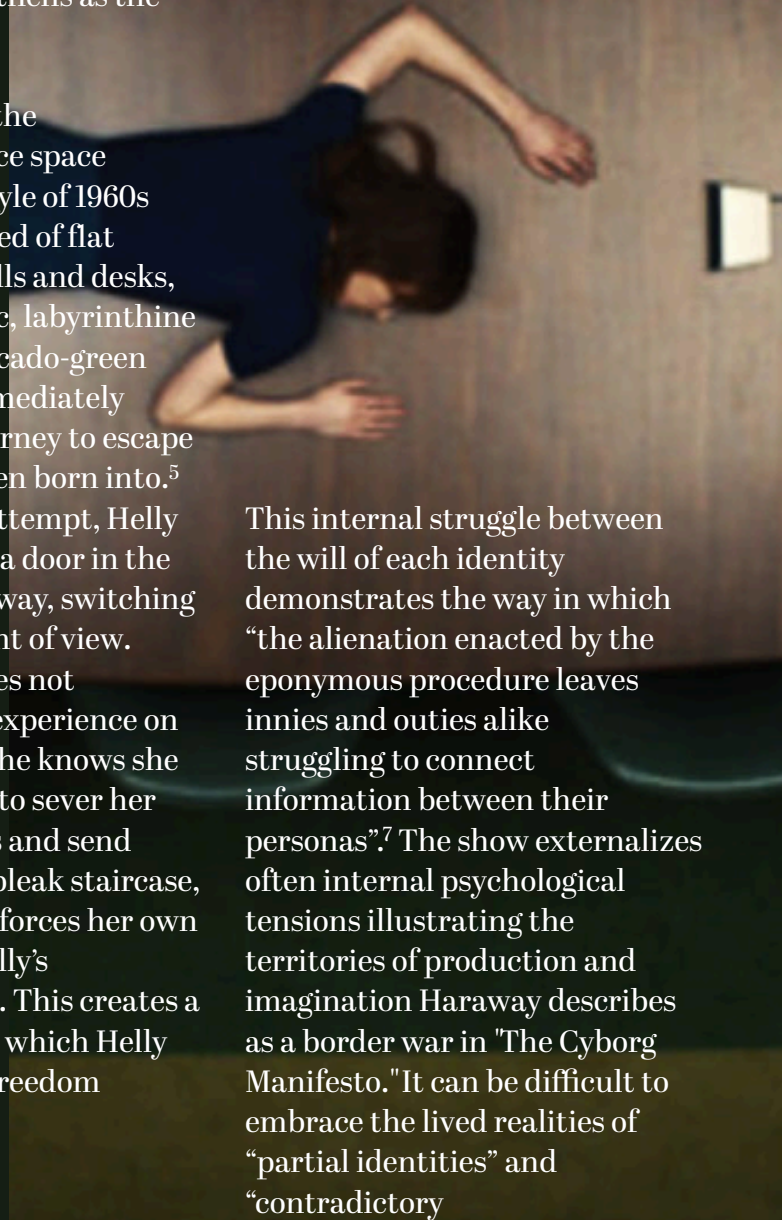
Once awake, the mystified ginger dressed in form fitting, color blocked shades of blue business wear is asked a series of questions: her name, what state she was born in, to name any U.S. state, what Mr. Egan's favorite breakfast is, and what color her mother's eyes

were. The answers recorded are unknown, unknown, Delaware, unknown, unknown. Following the realization that she knows nothing of her own identity, she asks "what's happening, what the hell did you do to me?" with a voice quivering full of fear.⁴ This scene is both Helly's and the viewer's introduction to the concept of severance, establishing Helly R. as a vessel for the audience's voyeuristic confusion. This mutual confusion creates a connection between character and audience, a bond that strengthens as the plot progresses.

Once Helly enters the "subterranean office space portrayed in the style of 1960s décor and comprised of flat surfaces, white walls and desks, and claustrophobic, labyrinthine hallways, with avocado-green carpeting," she immediately begins the long journey to escape the hell she has been born into.⁵ In her initial exit attempt, Helly R. pushes through a door in the severed floor's hallway, switching her to Helena's point of view. Though Helena does not remember Helly's experience on the severed floor, she knows she made the decision to sever her own consciousness and send herself in. From a bleak staircase, Helena repeatedly forces her own reentrance and Helly's entrapment inside. This creates a continuous loop in which Helly opens the door to freedom

only to reawaken in Lumon's corporate shackles. She is reminded, "Every time you find yourself here, it's because you chose to come back," bringing into focus the question of what and who constitutes you.⁶ Multiple exit attempts result in relentless return, with each side of the mind residing on opposite sides of the door, proving the barrier to be both physical and mental.

This internal struggle between the will of each identity demonstrates the way in which "the alienation enacted by the eponymous procedure leaves innies and outies alike struggling to connect information between their personas".⁷ The show externalizes often internal psychological tensions illustrating the territories of production and imagination Haraway describes as a border war in "The Cyborg Manifesto." It can be difficult to embrace the lived realities of "partial identities" and "contradictory



standpoints”.⁸ Helly R. reaches a breaking point following the revelation regarding the futility of her attempts to escape condemnation to the severed floor by her outie. These attempts include multiple instances in which she determinedly involves the physical form of her body in the mind games of the severed state.


Though writing, power, and technology are often partners, Haraway argues, it can be difficult to understand the role of each in our domination or our freedom.⁹ Helly writes on her arms and contemplates swallowing a message, both of which render fruitless results. This leads to an increasingly aggressive approach in sending a message to her counterpart, who returns her body to the office each morning. She progresses from harmless acts of using her body as a communicative channel between her selves to leveraging her anatomy to obtain her desired results. She does so by threatening to dismember her fingers from her hand with an office supplied paper-cutter, an act inexplicable to her ignorant outer form as “The traces of physical and emotional imprints on the body are the only evidence each protagonist has of the hours their counterpart spent inside or outside of the office . . . each employee is aware of how

they left the body and were returned to it (the “input” and “output” data of their on-or-off-hours), but are left to speculate about anything which may have occurred in the interim.”¹⁰ Helly’s confusion about who she is converts to imprints on her body, as she struggles to understand how a mind that shares her body could want her to suffer.

Weaponization of their shared appendages provides Helly the first, and only, successful attempt to convince her superiors to allow her to film a video message to her outie pleading for resignation. Her body is her leverage. Although the attempt is successful in convincing her superiors, her outie responds uncooperatively with the chilling message: “I am a person, you are not. I make the decisions, you do not,” followed by the threat, “If you ever do anything to my fingers, know that I will keep you alive long enough to horribly regret that.”¹¹ Helena’s retort matches the violence of Helly’s threat in their anatomical border war and illuminates the significance of the weaponization of the body in this narrative by the opposing minds of the severed victim and the seemingly omnipotent abuser. Additionally, Helena’s sadistically dehumanizing threat echoes Haraway’s claim: “Modern machinery is an

irreverent upstart god, mocking the father’s ubiquity and spirituality.”¹² Helena places herself in a godlike position over her innie in a display of tyrannical power over their shared body. By seizing what would be deemed the unalienable rights of an outie through the degradation of an identity intentionally brought into existence by herself, Helena not only places herself in the position of a deity but reveals her self-appointed deification to be one of merciless wrath.

Helly is hopeless following the revocation of her personhood in words spoken by her own mouth. “From one perspective, a cyborg world is about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet, about the final abstraction embodied in a Star Wars apocalypse waged in the name of defense, about the final appropriation of women’s bodies in a masculinist orgy of war.”¹³ In an ultimate state of alienation, the weaponization of their shared body becomes a threat against life and the very existence of breath and body Helly shares with Helena. In response to Helena’s flex of power, Helly attempts to take them both out of all worlds. Following the completion of yet another nine-to-five in the hellscape she has been returned to yet again, Helly R. hangs herself from the elevator

A woman in a dark blue dress is performing on stage with her arms raised. The background is dark with a spotlight effect on her. The text is overlaid on the image.

shaft using an extension cord found in the office. The setting she chooses for her suicide holds significance, as the elevator is the apparatus in which “their minds switch from one identity to the other, which likewise reverts back to their original non-work identity when they ride the elevator back up to the surface at the end of the working day.”¹⁴ Helly seeks to end their bordered war by stripping Helena of the functionality of their singular shared possession, her body. As the elevator rises, she leaves Helena to awaken to a level of suffering synonymous with the misery Helly wakes to each day as it lowers. In this way, Helly’s suicide attempt reveals itself as the murder of her outer form, reaffirming Haraway’s assertion that existence as a cyborg is “a struggle over life and death.”¹⁵

Though Helly’s death attempt fails, the experience gives her renewed motivation and connection to her fellow innies, who now understand the stakes of the border war. For the audience, Helly’s desperation forces us to confront whether identity can endure when memory is fractured beyond recognition; her suffering makes the cost of severance painfully tangible. In witnessing her renewed resolve, we are left to

question whether it is shared memory or shared embodiment that ultimately anchors who we are. The innies learn of the “overtime contingency protocol,” a biometric hack that allows innies to become aware and active outside of the confines of the severed floor. Mirroring her first coming to consciousness, Helly awakens bright eyed, clad in blue, only this time her environment does not obscure its identity or hers. Instead, she sees each clearly displayed with Helena’s name, image and likeness projected onto mechanistically revolving screens. It is revealed to her that her outie is Lumon’s CEO-in-waiting, meaning her face belongs to both the individual she has spent her entire consciousness fighting against, as well as the corporate giant subjecting each and every severed employee on her floor to a capitalistic drive for control.

Alone in a room full of strangers, a father and friends believing they know her, imprinted with her image and identity, Helly sinks into a loneliness of the estrangement brought on by the “more broadly experienced state of alienation and extraction under capitalism.”¹⁶ Plunged into the heat of a spotlight on a stage meant for her ulterior identity, Helly uses the demonic platform,

which was constructed on the backs of the severed by the Eagan dynasty, to wage war on the subjection her innie has endured. She reveals to the world the truth of the severed floor. She lays clean her truth, turning the gala into an expose, with the words, “My name is Helly R. I’m and innie and everything they’ve told you about severance is a lie.” She continues, pleading with the crowd: “we’re not happy, we’re miserable. They torture us down there. We’re prisoners.” Labeling the innies prisoners underscores their lack of agency, as the severance procedure forces them to become corporately puppeteered jailbirds whose identities, minds, and bodies belong to Lumon and their outies before they belong to themselves. In this way, they are prisoners of their own bodies with no true autonomy, condemned to a limited life in corporate shackles. As Helly R. is forcibly removed from the stage, the literal and symbolic spotlighting highlights the tumultuousness of the border war created between organism and machine, as the evolved hybrids face the unattainability of true autonomy.

Through the exploration of the consequential lives of severed cyborgs, *Severance* masterfully visualizes the core concerns of Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto," transforming the theoretical "border war" between organism and machine into a visceral, lived experience in Helly R.'s harrowing struggle for autonomy. By dramatizing the fragmentation of identity and the weaponization of the body under corporate control, the show exposes the dystopian potential of posthuman labor systems that erase consent and commodify existence. Helly's arc, from a confused newborn consciousness to a rebellious voice leading a resistance, lays bare the inescapable, intrinsic entanglement of body, identity, and power. Her resistance, though brutally suppressed, reveals the cyborg not as a symbol of triumph through technological evolution, but as a tragic figure trapped in a system that exploits the very concept of selfhood. Through Helly, *Severance* doesn't just echo Haraway's warnings, it embodies them, showing that the fight for bodily autonomy in the age of techno-capitalism is not only ongoing, but increasingly urgent.



Endnotes

1. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 143.
2. Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 143.
3. BeardedPuffin (u/BeardedPuffin), "Severance, the Afterlife, and the Nature of Human Consciousness," Reddit, accessed 2023, http://www.reddit.com/r/SeveranceAppleTVPlus/comments/1220rmc/severance_the_afterlife_and_the_nature_of_human/.
4. Severance, season 1, episode 1, "The Good News About Hell," written by Dan Erickson, directed by Ben Stiller, aired February 18, 2022, on Apple TV+.
5. Matthew Flisfeder, "Severance, Alienation, and the Futility of Reintegration," *The Philosophical Salon*, 2022, <https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/severance-alienation-and-the-futility-of-reintegration/>.
6. Severance, "The Good News About Hell."
7. Madeliene Collier, "'Unknown, Unknown, Delaware, Unknown': The Mind-Games of Severance," *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, accessed 2023, <https://www.nrftsjournal.org/television-studies/severance>.
8. Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 148.
9. Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 147.
10. Collier, "Mind-Games of Severance."
11. Severance, season 1, episode 4, "The You You Are," written by Dan Erickson, directed by Aoife McArdle, aired March 11, 2022, on Apple TV+.
12. Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 147.
13. Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 148.
14. Flisfeder, "Severance, Alienation, and the Futility of Reintegration."
15. Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 143.
16. Collier, "Mind-Games of Severance."

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Severance. Season 1. "The Good News about Hell" and "The You You Are." Written and directed by Dan Erikson. Apple TV, 2022.

*Cover Image credit Apple TV, accessed 2026, <https://www.apple.com/tvpr/originals/severance/episodes-images/>

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Leah Robinson is a student at the University of Alabama, graduating with a BA in English and History and a BS in Marketing in May of 2026. She doesn't really want to discuss post grad plans right now . . . mostly because it's March and too many of the law schools still haven't texted her back. She is an advocate for spontaneous travel and often finds herself on trips she's not sure how she ended up on, in countries halfway



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