



The Backrooms Aesthetics of Severance and the Alienated Office Worker

Severance Dizisindeki Backroom Estetiği ve Yabancılaşmış Ofis İşçisi

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores how the Apple Original Series *Severance* employs the aesthetics of backrooms and liminal spaces to critique modern office work and the alienation experienced by white-collar employees. Drawing from online liminal aesthetics, video games and theoretical perspectives on capitalism, the show presents a dystopian corporate environment where workers are psychologically and physically severed from their personal identities. Using the poetics of David Bordwell and neoformalist analysis of Kristin Thompson, the study examines *Severance*'s classical yet subversive narrative structure, its use of restricted narration, and its manipulation of space and time to enhance thematic depth. The paper further explores the show's visual style, characterized by corporate minimalism, cassette futurism, and geometric compositions that reinforce the sterility and dehumanization of the workplace. Beyond its aesthetic and formal properties, *Severance* functions as a critique of late-stage capitalism, workplace alienation and ideological control. By severing employees' identities, the show literalizes the compartmentalization demanded by corporate culture, reflecting the real-world erosion of work-life boundaries. The show's depiction of arbitrary labor, hierarchical secrecy, and corporate propaganda parallels historical critiques of capitalist labor structures while offering a stark vision of a workforce deprived of agency. Ultimately, the paper argues that *Severance* is not only a stylistic exercise in liminal mystery but also a powerful cultural reflection on contemporary labor conditions. Its engagement, with both narrative and visual elements, underscores a broader social anxiety about the meaninglessness of work, the psychological toll of corporate control, and the possibility of resistance in an era of pervasive economic alienation.

Key Words: *Style, Liminal Space, Backrooms, Meme Aesthetics, Late-Stage Capitalism, Corporate Dystopia.*

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Öz: Bu makale, Apple Orijinal Dizisi *Severance*'in modern ofis işlerini ve beyaz yakalı çalışanların yaşadığı yabancılaşmayı eleştirmek için arka odaların ve liminal alanların estetiğini nasıl kullandığını araştırıyor. Çevrimiçi liminal estetikten, video oyunlarından ve kapitalizm üzerine teorik perspektiflerden yararlanan dizi, çalışanların kişisel kimliklerinden psikolojik ve fiziksel olarak koparıldığı distopik bir şirket ortamı sunuyor. David Bordwell'in şiirselliğini ve Kristin Thompson'ın neoformalist analizini kullanan bu çalışma, *Severance*'in klasik ancak yıkıcı anlatı yapısını, kısıtlı anlatım kullanımını ve tematik derinliği artırmak için mekân ve zaman manipülasyonunu inceliyor. Çalışma ayrıca, gösterinin kurumsal minimalizm, kaset fütürizmi ve işyerinin sterilliğini ve insanlıktan çıkarılmasını pekiştiren geometrik kompozisyonlarla karakterize edilen görsel stilini de inceliyor. *Severance*, estetik ve biçimsel özelliklerinin ötesinde, geç dönem kapitalizminin, işyerinde yabancılaşmanın ve ideolojik kontrolün bir eleştirisi olarak işlev görüyor. Çalışanların kimliklerini parçalara ayıran dizi, şirket kültürünün talep ettiği bölümlere ayırmayı gerçekçi bir şekilde ifade ederek, iş-yaşam sınırlarının gerçek dünyadaki erozyonunu yansıtıyor. Dizinin keyfi çalışma, hiyerarşik gizlilik ve şirket propagandası tasviri, kapitalist emek yapılarının tarihsel eleştirileriyle paralellik gösterirken, eylemlilikten yoksun bir işgücünün keskin bir vizyonunu sunuyor. Sonuç olarak bu makale, *Severance*'in sadece liminal gizemde biçimsel bir egzersiz değil, aynı zamanda çağdaş çalışma koşulları üzerine güçlü bir kültürel yansıma olduğunu savunmaktadır. Hem anlatı hem de görsel unsurlarla olan ilişkisi, işin anlamsızlığı, şirket kontrolünün psikolojik bedeli ve yaygın ekonomik yabancılaşma çağında direniş olasılığı hakkında daha geniş bir sosyal kaygının altını çiziyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Stil, Liminal Alan, Backrooms, Meme Estetiği, Geç Aşama Kapitalizm, Kurumsal Distopya.*

INTRODUCTION

Severance is an Apple Original Series that draws clear influence from online liminal aesthetics, particularly the backrooms meme, as well as video games like *The Stanley Parable*, which employ similar stylistic and thematic elements. These works share a common visual and conceptual language characterized by liminal spaces (Shortt, 2015), *corporate minimalism*, *cassette-futurism*, *existential dread*, and themes of alienation and identity—specifically tied to the experience of white-collar office workers engaged in monotonous, menial computer tasks. In this setting, employees are required to sever their professional and personal identities, both psychologically and physiologically, an idea that reflects the corporate ideal in postmodern and post-postmodern society. *Severance* presents a dystopian interpretation of contemporary office life, where workers are largely unaware of the nature of their tasks and are only provided with information deemed necessary by their employer.

This paper analyzes how the stylistic choices in *Severance* parallel the aesthetics and themes of the backrooms meme (Patston, 2022) and how both mediums reflect the alienation and detachment of modern office workers and contemporary life more broadly. These depictions frame corporate workspaces as liminal, repetitive, and disorienting environments that strip employees of personal identity and purpose. The stylistic choices in the show function as cultural critiques of contemporary labor conditions, capturing a broader societal sentiment: many workers perceive their workplaces as impersonal, meaningless, and isolating, akin to being trapped in an infinite, liminal space. Through this lens, it is not merely a stylistically

compelling show but also an expression of collective unease regarding the psychological effects of modern labor in late-stage capitalism.

The show merges the aesthetics of the *backrooms* meme with a classical yet subversive narrative structure to portray alienation and detachment in contemporary office work. The show employs stark, minimalist hallways, sparse furnishings, and outdated machinery reminiscent of online liminal spaces. These sterile, empty environments, combined with their eerie silence, evoke a profound sense of displacement. The result is a corporate setting that appears boundless, isolating workers from the external world. While the show adheres to a recognizable narrative structure, it incorporates modern twists: the main characters harbor hidden motivations, and their assigned workplace tasks often lack clear meaning. This narrative approach generates tension that immerses viewers while reinforcing the unsettling realities of corporate life. The cinematography, lighting, and editing techniques focus intently on the characters and the monotonous, labyrinthine corridors. The sudden appearance of objects from the outside world disrupts this controlled environment, catalyzing moments of clarity and small acts of resistance.

The *severance procedure* depicted in the show encapsulates its central critique: corporate entities wield such influence over employees that personal identity and autonomy become eroded. Late-stage capitalism serves as the backdrop for this phenomenon, where work increasingly infiltrates every aspect of life, and the external world becomes another domain under corporate control. The rigid, maze-like hallways of Lumon Industries symbolize both contemporary offices and the *backrooms* meme—spaces that feel endless and devoid of humanity. However, the show also offers glimpses of resistance. It suggests that the only effective countermeasure against such systemic power lies in collective action. The protagonists gradually recognize that they cannot navigate their struggles in isolation; instead, they must collaborate and exchange knowledge. These alliances reveal fissures in the corporation's control. Real-world examples of labor unions demonstrate that collective action can challenge even the most entrenched systems. *Severance* translates this notion into a stark allegory, implying that meaningful change is possible through solidarity.

This thematic conclusion further reinforces the connection between *Severance* and the *backrooms* meme. The featureless, sterile hallways in *Severance* evoke the pervasive fear of being ensnared in an unending cycle of work. For many, the daily corporate grind mirrors this existential entrapment. The show employs unsettling visual motifs to emphasize the lived experience of countless employees, capturing the alienation and uncertainty of modern labor. In this sense, *Severance* functions not merely as fiction but as a reflection of a deeper reality—one in which labor and personal identity become severed under a system that prioritizes profit above all else.

To analyze the stylistic tendencies of the show, it is appropriate to apply the methodological framework developed by Kristin Thompson (Thompson, 1988) and David Bordwell (Bordwell, 2008). Their approach, known as *historical poetics* (Bordwell) or *neoformalism* (Thompson), provides a systematic method for examining film and television. This framework emphasizes a comprehensive understanding of a work's formal structure and constituent elements, allowing for a holistic evaluation of its aesthetic and narrative strategies. The following section will begin by assessing the show's narrative form.

1. Narrative Structure

The show displays a classical narrative structure engaged with modernist subversions. Bordwell highlights how narrative events are driven by character goals and causal chains (Bordwell, 2008). He says that in this tradition, characters' objectives are clearly stated early in the story, and while they may be adjusted or refined, they remain central throughout the narrative. This structure creates a pattern of progression toward a climax. Bordwell also highlights how narration can withhold information about character goals to shape audience engagement. For instance, in Ozu Yasujiro's *Early Summer* (1951), the protagonist's motivations remain a mystery until later in the film, at which point her decision to marry a friend becomes clear in retrospect. Similarly, in *Claire Dolan* (1998), the protagonist's goals are hidden for much of the story, leading the audience to focus on her routines and interactions rather than a clear trajectory of goal-driven action. In contrast, some films—especially in the "art cinema" tradition—downplay clear character goals and instead construct stories around chance events, passive protagonists, or psychological and social themes. For example, in *Vagabond* (1985), the main character lacks a defined goal, making her motivations opaque. Instead of following a classical causal progression, the film presents episodic encounters that reveal different aspects of the world she navigates.

In *Severance*, causality is established through both workplace and external investigations into Lumon Industries. The primary protagonist, Mark, serves as the focal point of the narrative. His actions as both an "innie" (his *severed* workplace self) and "outie" (external self) drive the narrative forward. At work, his orientation of Helly and reaction to Petey's disappearance establish Lumon's constraints. Outside work, his accidental discovery of Petey's reintegration serves as key. Similarly, Helly's resistance to severance functions as a secondary causal chain. Her repeated escape attempts and eventual public declaration of the innies' suffering contribute to escalating tensions. Petey's deteriorating state after reversing severance introduces risk beyond Lumon's immediate work culture. Petey's sickness and death give Mark a mystery that he feels he must investigate. Additionally, Irving and Burt's relationship introduces another causal line that intersects with the broader mystery, culminating in Irving's external quest to locate Burt, which he succeeds to his disappointment. Each

of these strands intersect, creating a classical cause-and-effect chain that propels the plot forward.

Bordwell also emphasizes how narratives manage time through linearity, parallel timelines, and temporal ellipses (gaps that are formed because of the difference between the plotline and the storyline). *Severance* primarily follows a linear chronology, with minor use of flashbacks (i.e., Petey's reintegration, Helly's onboarding). The show employs parallel timelines between the severed workplace (innie perspective) and the outside world (outie perspective). This is especially prominent in sequences where Mark's innie and outie face different yet thematically related challenges.

The show also makes considerable use of compression and expansion of time. Certain sequences—such as Helly's prolonged stay in the break room or Dylan's awakening to his child—extend time for emotional and narrative weight, while others, such as Ms. Casey's removal from MDR, contract time for narrative economy. This manipulation of temporal progression creates tension while maintaining narrative coherence. It also serves as another way to create the eerie atmosphere that is ever-present in the *backroom* halls and corridors of the Lumon building.

Bordwell also notes that classical narratives establish a clear spatial geography for viewers. *Severance* adheres to this principle while subverting it for thematic effect. The severed floor is a labyrinthine, sterile space with controlled movement. Spaces like the Perpetuity Wing and Wellness Room serve as both functional settings and symbolic reinforcements of Lumon's ideology. As the characters explore the severed floor, the geography expands. The discovery of additional departments (O&D, the goat room, the testing floor) aligns with classic exploration narratives. The strict separation of workplace and outside world is a key structural device which serves as a good allegory of the experience of the modern office worker which we will touch upon later. The transition between these spaces (e.g., Helly's resignation attempts, Mark's fragmented knowledge) reinforces the thematic divide between control and agency. The climactic spatial convergence occurs in the season finale when Dylan activates the overtime contingency, allowing innies to inhabit the outside world. This moment marks a major structural shift in the narrative, breaking previously established spatial constraints.

In line with Bordwell's conception of patterns of development in classical narratives, typically involving goal-oriented progression and rising action *Severance* follows this structure with distinct narrative phases:

- 1. Exposition (Episodes 1-2):** The show begins with Helly's onboarding, establishing the severance concept, workplace rules, and character dynamics.

2. Complications (Episodes 3-6): Multiple threads develop—Mark’s investigation of Petey, Helly’s rebellion, Irving’s discovery of O&D, and Dylan’s realization of his son.

3. Climactic Escalation (Episodes 7-9): The MDR team unites, the overtime contingency is activated, and characters physically and narratively step beyond their designated spaces.

4. Cliffhanger Conclusion: Unlike classical closure, the season ends on unresolved tension—Mark’s realization about Gemma, Helly’s public outcry, and Irving’s failed reunion with Burt.

This structured progression keeps the audience engaged while gradually revealing *Severance*’s deeper mysteries.

Apart from the classical structure *Severance* predominantly employs restricted narration, aligning the audience with Mark’s and Helly’s limited perspectives. Their lack of knowledge about their outie lives creates dramatic tension. As the show progresses, viewers gain insights into Lumon’s deeper workings, such as Ms. Casey’s identity and the overtime contingency. The season finale disrupts this restricted perspective when the *innies* experience the outside world, radically shifting the narrative viewpoint. The restricted narrative style is present in almost all mysteries because it gives the author a lot of breathing room to play with. While we are kept in the dark on most matters, the fact that we can also take a glimpse in the life of some of the *outties* of the characters means we get to be more unrestricted than the *innies* and vice versa. This is an interesting concept to follow in such a show and creates a double-edged mystery narrative.

In Bordwellian terms, *Severance* operates within a classical narrative framework but integrates modernist and post-modernist trope subversions. It follows a goal-oriented protagonist, cause-and-effect progression, and clear spatial organization while delaying full causal explanations, restricting audience knowledge from two sides, and disrupting conventional spatial and temporal boundaries. This blend, of classical and (post)modernist techniques, creates a suspenseful and thematically rich narrative, engaging audiences while gradually unraveling its core mystery. This style also means that the audience itself is *severed* when they are watching the *innies* and the *outties*, this becomes clearer with the change in visual style which will be explored now.

While the narrative structure of *Severance* establishes the thematic foundation of workplace alienation through carefully controlled information and causal chains, the show’s visual style physically manifests these themes through deliberate aesthetic choices. The transition between these two formal elements is not merely stylistic but functional—the visual design of Lumon’s severed floor directly

reinforces and extends the narrative's exploration of corporate control and psychological compartmentalization. As we move from analyzing how the story is told to how it is visualized, we can observe how these elements work in concert to create the show's distinctive critique of contemporary work culture.

2. Visual Style of *Severance*

The show presents a controlled, highly stylized vision of office life, using stylistic techniques to underscore its central themes of alienation, control, and psychological compartmentalization. It blends minimalist set design and precise cinematography to construct a world that is both sterile and surreal. The show's influences—ranging from dystopian literature to surrealist cinema—are evident in its aesthetic and formal strategies. The visual style of the show could be defined as *cassette futurism* (*Cassette Futurism*, TV Tropes) blended with *liminal backroom*, dead mall set in a low-populated North-American midwestern smalltown aesthetics. The apparent retrofuturism while giving no other indication about the show's actual timeline is another mystery that contributes to the whole *feel*.

The show's editing style does not impose and instead emphasizes the thematic focus on control and fragmentation. This style of editing also in-line with the classical narrative structure where invisible cuts are preferred to focus on the story. However, just like in the narrative style, the editing is subverted in some scenes to amplify the psychological effect of the reveals in the scene. Mostly, though, cuts are often slow and deliberate, allowing the discomfort of long silences to linger. When Mark (Adam Scott) and his colleagues transition between their severed and non-severed lives, the editing accentuates the rupture through abrupt scene changes that lack background visual continuity. This technique echoes the disorienting jump cuts of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), where memory erasure is represented through discontinuous editing. To contrast this, the *normal* transitions that happen in the elevator before and after the workday are done with the use of camera movement instead of cutting. This is a very significant point because the stylistic choice between cutting and moving the camera is known to have very different meanings and effects on the audience (Yilmaz et al., 2023). Additionally, *Severance* avoids rapid cutting in moments of high tension, instead holding on to shots longer than expected, amplifying the claustrophobia of the workplace environment.

The mise-en-scène of the show relies heavily on symmetrical and geometric composition, recalling the formalist tendencies of Jacques Tati's *Playtime* (1967) and Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985) – which is important because these films also share common themes regarding capitalism and its critique. The camera often frames characters in isolated, dehumanized spaces, reinforcing the themes of corporate control. Wide-angle shots emphasize the vast emptiness of Lumon's office, with its maze-like hallways and cubicles arranged in unnatural formations almost always

centered in an unnecessarily large office space. The use of overhead shots enhances the characters' insignificance within the system, a visual echo of *The Truman Show* (1998), where similar high-angle perspectives underscore surveillance and artificiality.

The lighting in *Severance* contributes to its unsettling atmosphere. The Lumon office is bathed in bright, uniform fluorescence, creating a barren and oppressive environment. An artificial glow of white fluorescence is different from the *backrooms* meme and its yellow and murky lighting but is more relevant in the shows' case because of the color tone of Lumon being green and blue. In contrast, the outside world is shot with softer, more naturalistic lighting, emphasizing the divide between the two realities. This duality visually reinforces the severed employees' inability to integrate their two existences.

The set design of *Severance* is one of its most distinctive elements, heavily influenced by the online urban legend of The Backrooms—a concept describing an eerie, liminal space of monotonous office interiors that stretch endlessly. The Lumon office embodies this aesthetic, with its endless white corridors and anachronistic technology, giving the environment an out-of-time quality. The dated computers and telephones, reminiscent of the 1980s and early 1990s, evoke a sense of temporal stagnation, as if Lumon exists outside conventional history. This blend of past and future resembles the production design choices in *Brazil* and *The Stanley Parable* (Wreden, 2013), both of which depict bureaucratic systems as absurd, timeless constructs.

3. Alienation as a Theme for the Critique of Late-stage Capitalism

Beyond its visual style, *Severance* is influenced thematically and narratively from existential and dystopian literature, especially from an anti-establishment and anti-capitalist viewpoint. The psychological imprisonment of the severed workers mirrors the existential entrapment in Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* (Sartre, 1989), where characters are doomed to remain in a single, inescapable room after dying for eternity. The authoritarian control of Lumon recalls the omnipresent surveillance in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Orwell & Fromm, 1961), while the absurdity of corporate jargon and meaningless office tasks aligns with the satirical tones of *Dilbert* (1999) and *Office Space* (1999). Before comparing *Severance* to these themes let us first explore the alienation that the modern-day worker faces in late-stage capitalism.

Fredric Jameson proposes that late-stage capitalism shapes not only the economy but also the culture (Jameson, 1991). It absorbs everything, including art and daily life, into its drive for profit. This creates a situation where workers feel cut off from the products of their labor and from any deeper sense of purpose. Culture, which once had room for independent voices, now spreads everywhere like a commodity. As a result, older ways of criticizing or resisting capitalism grow weaker. This is one reason

why the modern worker often seems more alienated than ever before. In this world, the line between high art and mass culture fades. Pop culture merges with what used to be considered “serious” culture. Many artworks no longer try to criticize society in a forceful way. Instead, they reflect or repeat popular styles and older artistic elements without protest. Some call this “pastiche”—a mix of past styles without the bite of true parody. Because of this, culture no longer offers a clear space for workers to see their struggles or to break free from the system. This era also weakens our sense of history. Older forms of storytelling, such as the classic novel, once helped people connect the past with the present. Now, popular entertainment often mines the past in shallow ways, showing it as glossy images and nostalgic references. This can leave workers feeling cut off from the broader history of labor and social struggles. Without a firm sense of how things once were, it becomes harder to imagine a different future.

New architecture shows how late-stage capitalism reshapes physical space. Large buildings, like certain hotels or malls, try to seal themselves off from their surroundings (Jameson, 1991 p. 80). They become self-enclosed worlds where visitors lose their bearings. Elevators and escalators replace the older habit of wandering freely. This can mirror how workers feel in a system that seems vast and beyond their reach. It is not that these buildings are evil on their own, but they reveal a system that leaves many to feel overwhelmed and unsure how to act. A key problem is how to map this new reality. Economic networks now wrap around the globe in ways that are hard to grasp. Workers suffer from alienation because they do not see how their work fits into the immense web of commerce and media (Kassem, 2023). Jameson argues that a new form of “cognitive mapping” is needed (Jameson, p. 89). This means finding ways—through art, politics, or new tools—to understand and picture the world system. Without such maps, the alienation of the worker persists. But if these new maps can be made, they might offer a path to fresh forms of solidarity and change. Jameson's concept of “cognitive mapping” provides a particularly useful framework for understanding *Severance*'s visual strategy. Just as Jameson argues that individuals in late capitalism struggle to mentally map their position within global economic systems, the characters in *Severance* literally cannot map their position within Lumon's corporate structure. The labyrinthine, disorienting hallways of the severed floor—visually reminiscent of the backrooms meme—serve as a physical manifestation of this cognitive inability. When Mark discovers the map in O&D that reveals connections between departments, it represents a small victory in cognitive mapping that immediately threatens Lumon's control. This visual revelation mirrors Jameson's call for new representational strategies that would allow workers to understand their place within larger systems of power.

While Jameson highlights how postmodern culture erodes historicity and disorients our sense of place, Žižek focuses on how ideology and fantasy structures sustain the same system. Jameson looks at how we lose the ability to imagine different

futures, whereas Žižek uncovers how we secretly enjoy and reproduce our own subjection to capitalism. Žižek shares Jameson's concern that workers are profoundly alienated in late-stage capitalism, but he approaches the problem through Lacanian psychoanalysis emphasizing the role of ideology in our lives. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, he maintains that ideology is not merely a set of false beliefs; it is embedded in everyday practices, routines, and fantasies. People might say they see through consumerist illusions, yet they continue to act as if these illusions were real. For Žižek, this is "cynical" ideology, where one knows something is false but acts on it anyway (Žižek, 1989).

Žižek develops this theme in *The Plague of Fantasies*, arguing that capitalist culture provides fantasies that fill the worker's sense of lack (Žižek, 2009). Even if individuals feel cut off from their labor's true value, they can buy into fantasies of personal fulfillment through brand loyalty or popular entertainment. In this view, alienation persists because it taps directly into the psyche, creating an emotional dependency on what the system sells. Such fantasies hold society together, even when people consciously distrust the official narrative.

Jameson calls for "cognitive mapping"—an effort to "map" the global structure of capitalism so that workers can see their real place within it (Jameson, 1991). Žižek, however, describes how individuals defer to what he calls the "Big Other," a symbolic authority in which everyone believes but which no one fully embodies (Žižek, 1989). Late capitalism becomes a kind of Big Other, a faceless network that seems inevitable. Both thinkers thus recognize how people feel overwhelmed by larger structures; however, Jameson highlights the *spatial* challenge of mapping these structures, while Žižek dwells on the *psychic* entanglement that prevents us from acting.

Jameson famously analyzes the shift to "depthlessness" in cultural production, as in reflective glass buildings or pastiche styles (Jameson, 1991). He sees these surfaces as evidence of a broader social condition in which workers, too, are prevented from seeing deeper conflicts. Žižek agrees there is a loss of depth, but he frames it as the victory of ideological symptoms that satisfy unconscious desires (Žižek, 2002). Buildings, advertisements, or films that appear shallow still operate as fantasies. In that sense, both identify surface effects, but Jameson treats them as signs of a historical break, whereas Žižek interprets them as illusions that underscore our complicity.

In the end, however, neither Jameson nor Žižek believes the system will collapse on its own. For Jameson, the first step is the creation of new cultural forms that can map the global totality. Only then can workers and the rest of society push back against the dispersal and confusion wrought by late capitalism (Jameson, 1991).

Žižek, in *Living in the End Times*, maintains that simply recognizing one's alienation is not enough; the structure of fantasy and enjoyment must also be challenged (Žižek, 2018). Both thinkers thus stress that a fresh way of seeing the world—whether spatially in Jameson's sense or psychically for Žižek—is essential for radical action.

Where Jameson calls for new “maps,” Žižek calls for a break in the fantasy. Rather than rely on a fully conscious blueprint, we might embrace the real contradictions in capitalism to disrupt the hold of ideology. His concern is that without confronting the fantasies that tie us to capitalism—our consumer pleasures, our attachment to easy choices—we will fail to use any cognitive map effectively (Žižek, 1997). Jameson, on the other hand, continues to believe that depicting the larger totality is a power in itself. He sees in that collective representation a chance for workers to unite on the basis of shared locations in the global network.

Furthermore, *Severance* reflects real-world corporate dynamics, as noted by creator Dan Erickson (Zacharias, 2022). His personal experiences in office jobs informed the show's depiction of workplace alienation, where employees are expected to give unconditional loyalty without reciprocity. This sentiment is reinforced by the show's aesthetic strategies—characters appear as pawns within a rigidly structured frame, their agency stripped away by both visual composition and narrative constraints. However, this gets disrupted when an *outtie* object, in this case a book, gets into the *innie* world.

In the fifth episode of *Severance*, a pivotal moment is presented as the protagonist, Mark, reads from a self-help book unknowingly written by his brother-in-law—one that many would dismiss as hollow, regurgitated pop psychology. However, for Mark, the main character, these words are more than just ink on a page; they are the only truths he has encountered that were not dictated by the corporate entity that controls his life as an *innie*. This moment highlights a critical theme of the show: the insidious nature of unchecked corporate power and its ability to shape, distort, and dominate the human experience. The book's agonizing message—*should you find yourself contorting to fit a system, stop and ask if it is truly you that must change or the system*—resonates deeply in the context of late-stage capitalism. The term, coined by German economist Werner Sombart and later adopted by European Marxists, describes a stage of capitalism where corporate interests become so deeply embedded in society that they begin to dictate morality, reality, and personal identity (Jameson, 1991). This stage of capitalism's lifetime, as proposed by Marxist critical theory, is marked by extreme wealth inequality, corporate exploitation, and a workforce so entwined with their labor that it defines their very sense of self-worth.

In modern media, critiques of late-stage capitalism have gained traction, with shows like *Severance*, *Squid Game*, and *Succession* offering cutting portrayals of

corporate greed and social imbalance. Video games, too, have entered the conversation—titles like *Disco Elysium* (2019) and *Cyberpunk 2077* (2022) depict dystopian futures and exploitative labor conditions that mirror real-world corporate practices. These portrayals serve as both cautionary tales and reflections of our present reality.

At its core, *Severance* explores the power that corporations wield over their employees and the extreme lengths to which they will go to maintain control. The titular procedure—the surgical severing of personal and professional consciousness—symbolizes the fragmentation of self that many workers already experience under capitalism. Employees are expected to exist as two separate beings: the professional, subservient worker during office hours and the personal, autonomous individual outside of work. But what happens when the corporate sphere begins to seep into every aspect of life? This question is not a dystopian future but our reality today. *Severance* heavily stylizes to exaggerate the current situation and does a brilliant job of doing it while ironically being published by one of the biggest companies in the world. This is something Slavoj Žižek has also explored (Žižek, 1997): the really interesting commentary of capitalism comes from capitalist countries and corporations and people who work under these systems, a good example is Orson Welles working in the Hollywood studio system while also criticizing it with his work.

The characters in *Severance* represent different archetypes of the working class: Dylan, the disillusioned realist; Irving, the faithful company man; Mark, the reluctant opportunist; and Helly, a younger generation newcomer who sees through the illusion from the outset. Helly's attempts to escape the system—only to be forcefully restrained—underscore the reality that for many, leaving exploitative work environments is not a viable option. Her struggle mirrors the constraints imposed by real-world economic conditions: for the vast majority, financial survival necessitates compliance, even at the cost of personal well-being. It is not a question of whether you would work in such an environment but what lengths would you go to in order to put yourself in that environment simply because you need the money you will earn doing whatever job the company would want you to do. This reminds us of the online meme where the interviewer asks the applicant why they want the job and the applicant says, "I've always been passionate about not starving to death" (Doc_Hersh3y, 2021). Everyone knows this truth but acts as if it is not known, because as Žižek would say it is not said so that the Big Other does not know it that they know (Žižek, 2008). Žižek's analysis of ideology and fantasy in late capitalism finds direct expression in *Severance*'s portrayal of workplace rituals. The bizarre "Music Dance Experience" and quasi-religious "Kier worship" represent what Žižek would identify as empty ritualistic practices that create the illusion of meaning while obscuring the true nature of exploitation. Even more telling is how the innies continue to participate in these rituals despite recognizing their absurdity—precisely the kind of "cynical

ideology" Žižek describes, where subjects know very well what they are doing but do it anyway. The severed workplace thus becomes a perfect laboratory for examining how ideology functions not at the level of knowledge but at the level of social practice.

This theme of corporate deception and control extends beyond fiction. In reality, companies frequently blur the line between professional obligation and personal identity, compelling employees to prioritize corporate interests over their own lives. The concept of work-life balance becomes a myth when technology enables 24/7 access to workers, eroding any remaining boundaries between labor and leisure. The illusion of workplace loyalty is maintained through performative gestures—meaningless rewards, corporate-sponsored social events, and hollow promises of career advancement—all designed to pacify employees and deter collective action.

Lumen, the omnipotent corporation in *Severance*, embodies the worst excesses of corporate capitalism. Its employees are stripped of their autonomy, reduced to nameless cogs in an enigmatic machine. Their labor is assigned arbitrary importance, yet its true purpose remains obscured, much like many real-world jobs that lack tangible fulfillment. Management fosters division among departments, manipulating employees into distrusting one another rather than uniting against their true oppressor—an all-too-common strategy in actual workplaces, where secrecy around salaries and hierarchical structures prevents workers from recognizing their collective power. These workers are also mostly encouraged not to engage openly about their work and compensation with each other because it is not *appropriate*, however the real reason is so that they would not find out that they are not fairly compensated and, in fact, are being violated in terms of human rights, possibly (Cullen & Perez-Truglia, 2018). In the show this is shown through the divided nature of not only the *innies* and *outties* but also the departments of the company. The company encourages the departments to be hostile to each other, even, making up myths about how departments once fought each other and are actually *enemies*. As preposterous as it sounds, it is an impeccable strategy to keep the secretive nature of the work under wraps and prevent workers from *unionizing* as well as *whistleblowing*, which happens *anyway* because of the predictability of human nature.

Despite the bleak outlook presented in *Severance*, the show ultimately suggests that resistance is not futile. The characters' realization that they cannot change the system alone is a powerful call to action. When individuals recognize their shared struggle and unite, they can challenge even the most entrenched structures of power. This sentiment is not merely theoretical—it has been demonstrated in real-world labor movements, such as the formation of the first Amazon labor union, where workers defied corporate resistance to secure better conditions. The problem explored in *Severance*—and of late-stage capitalism critiques in general—is clear: systems of power do not change themselves; they must be challenged. Workers must question

the narratives fed to them by corporations and recognize that their interests are fundamentally at odds with those of their employers. If the current trajectory continues unchecked, we risk a future where autonomy is not just diminished but entirely obsolete. The time to question, resist, and organize is now, before the severance between corporate control and personal freedom becomes irreversible. Whether this was something Apple wanted to convey or rather wishfully *let* be conveyed is debatable, but it is apparent that it *is*.

CONCLUSION

Severance blends a backrooms-inspired look with a classical yet twisted narrative to portray alienation and detachment in modern office work. It shows dull halls, sparse furniture, and outdated machines that echo online liminal spaces. These empty spaces and their eerie quiet evoke a sense of dislocation. The result is a corporate setting that feels like it stretches on forever, leaving workers cut off from the world outside. The show follows a clear story pattern but adds modern twists. The main characters each have hidden goals, and their workplace tasks seldom make sense. This narrative structure creates tension that draws viewers in, while also stressing the uneasy truth of corporate life. The camera style, lighting, and editing stay tight on the characters and the never-ending corridors. When out-of-office objects appear in their world, they spark moments of clarity and small acts of rebellion.

The procedure of being *severed* in *Severance* sums up the show's biggest message: corporations can demand so much that personal identity and free choice slip away. Late-stage capitalism drives this point. Work can bleed into every corner of life. The outside world becomes another place where the company holds influence. The locked-down, maze-like hallways at Lumon stand for both modern offices and the backrooms meme—spaces that feel unending and lacking in humanity. Yet there are faint signs of pushback. The show suggests that the only way to fight such total power is through shared effort. Characters discover that they cannot solve their problems on their own. They must team up and compare notes on what each has learned. These alliances produce cracks in the company's walls. Real-world stories of labor unions show that when workers come together, they can oppose even the most entrenched systems. *Severance* turns this idea into a stark allegory, hinting that big shifts may be possible if people stand together. This conclusion also circles back to the backrooms theme. The nameless, drab halls in *Severance* reflect a fear of being trapped in a never-ending work loop. For many, the daily office grind can feel that way. The show uses these unsettling visuals to underscore what countless employees experience in real life. The show points to a deeper truth: many workers see themselves in these blank hallways, unsure of their role and uncertain if they can ever break free. In that sense, *Severance* is not just fiction. It is a mirror on how labor and identity can get severed under a system that values profit above all else.

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