

Severance: Employees undergo surgery to separate work and home life

Emma Arceneaux
26 August 2022

Created by Dan Erickson. Directed by Ben Stiller and Aoife McArdle.

Television that examines the relationship between corporations and their workers is in short supply. *Severance*, a science-fiction dark-comedy thriller released earlier this year on Apple TV, takes a step in this direction, with mixed results. The show received 14 Emmy nominations in July.

The story centers around the employees of a shadowy, multi-national technology and pharmaceutical corporation, Lumon Industries, as they begin to investigate its many secrets.

What exactly the company does, no one seems to know, though it has its hands in many pots. The corporation is headquartered in the town of Kier, named after its 19th century founder and former CEO, Kier Eagan. A proprietary new technology has put Lumon at the center of a heated controversy. *Severance*, a procedure used on certain employees, implants a chip into the brain, partitioning one's memory in two. The "severed" employees thus have a work self (an "innie") and a non-work self (an "outtie"), who know nothing of each other. For the innies, their entire existence and consciousness are confined to the office.

The protagonist, Mark Scout (Adam Scott), is one such employee who took a severed job at Lumon two years ago in order to forget about his wife's tragic death, at least for eight hours a day. On the outside, he spends his nights drinking alone in front of the television. At work, Mark is a dutiful employee who has just been promoted to Department Head of Macrodata Refinement (MDR) after the unexplained disappearance of his co-worker Petey (Yul Vazquez). Petey's disappearance is the catalyst that allows Mark to ask questions and break rules for the first time.

Mark's first task is to train Petey's replacement, Helly (Britt Lower), who struggles to adjust to her new position. She submits multiple desperate resignation requests to her outtie via management, only to have them repeatedly denied. Irving (John Turturro) and Dylan (Zach Cherry) are the other two data "refiners." The refiners' jobs consist of looking at a computer screen and sorting floating numbers based on the emotion the numbers inexplicably evoke.

Lumon is a bizarre place. The layout of the "severed" floor is a maze of sterile, white hallways punctuated by many unmarked doors. The Lumon handbook, a three-volume tome from which management constantly quotes the cult-like, revered founder Kier, sits in a special nook beneath his portrait. Paintings of Lumon parables and placards with Kier's words are mounted to the walls: "Let not weakness live in your veins."

At times the unsettling atmosphere inside Lumon successfully conveys the company's secrecy and its efforts to control its workforce. After MDR befriends the Optics and Design Department, management "accidentally" faxes them a picture of a painting which appears to depict Optics massacring MDR. Clearly, lengths are taken to keep the departments divided.

Other times, Lumon's peculiarities add nothing but unnecessary and even silly mystery. The refiners discover a department where a man is feeding bottles of milk to a roomful of baby goats. As a perk for meeting his quarterly data-refining quota, Dylan gets to eat waffles and watch an erotic dance.

One night after work, outtie Mark is approached by his former co-worker Petey, whom he of course does not remember. Petey has undergone a reverse procedure to undo severance and is trying to uncover Lumon's secrets.

After Petey dies, Mark's curiosity mounts and he

searches for answers. Meanwhile, innie Mark stumbles upon a contraband book that his supervisor accidentally left lying around. The book is a pseudo-philosophical self-help book, which nevertheless arouses a sense of independence and defiance in Mark. For various reasons, each refiner comes to reject their innie existence, and the group plots to find a way out.

The show has certain healthy tendencies. The criticisms of corporate culture and conformity are appropriate, and the show convincingly portrays the hostile and violent antagonisms between employers and employees. The close collaboration between the corporation and the state is alluded to.

The upper middle class's penchant for inanity and pretension gets a welcome and humorous jab. Mark attends a "non-dinner" party with his sister's and brother-in-law's friends. Their guest pontificates on the value of dinner without dinner: "Life is not food. You've got life, this complex quality of sentience and activity, and then you have food which is what? Fuel? calories? It's not the same thing."

The characters overall are well-rounded and portrayed with sensitivity, and the cast suit their roles quite well. As Mark's menacing boss, Patricia Arquette gives the impression she could shoot venom from her eyes.

More importantly, the show raises questions about the nature of work and social relations. But this is precisely where its limitations are felt most clearly. The cloud of mystery shrouding Lumon and founder Kier, quasi-religious and even Illuminati-like, is heavy handed and disorienting. Instead of looking directly or deeply at issues such as the corporation's exploitation or political influence, the viewers are left wandering through Lumon's strange halls.

Even the idea of worker consciousness is given some attention. The refiners come to recognize they have power against management. But their awareness is informed mainly by the self-help book that is filled with its author's subjective and often nonsensical musings such as "machines cannot think for themselves. They are made of metal, whereas man is made of skin," "a good person will follow the rules, whereas a great person will follow himself" and "at the center of industry is 'dust.'"

Overall, the show is characterized by an unfortunate dichotomy. It raises a number of relevant social and

political issues with some degree of seriousness. Clearly the creators want to make a statement. But they do so with enough ambiguity to indicate they are unable or unwilling to commit to a determined critique.

This isn't particularly surprising given their uncritical and politically mainstream outlook. Writer Dan Erickson said his inspiration came from working in a windowless office and wondering what it would be like to turn off his brain for eight hours. He also said his wish for Season 2 would be to cast Barack Obama, who would bring the show "gravitas"! In June, during the ongoing US-NATO proxy war against Russia, director Ben Stiller traveled to Ukraine as a representative of the UN Refugee Agency where he met with President Volodymyr Zelensky, whom he praised for his "leadership and true resolve."

It is possible the earnest and critical elements will be further developed in the next season, although given the limitations already evident, it seems more likely that the series won't push far beyond its amorphous, noncommittal anti-authoritarianism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact