You Only Own Yourself If You Can Sell Yourself: Wage Labour, Agency, and Self-Denial in *Severance*

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"*Moments are the elements of profit.*" Factory owner, quoted by Marx in *Capital vol. 1* (167).

"What don't [Lumon] make?" This question, raised at a dinner party without dinner to a man with no knowledge of his own job, comes once the audience of *Severance* has already been introduced to Lumon, and to Mark S. in his capacity at the mysterious corporation. Despite the close looks we're given at the inscrutable computer screens operated by Mark and his team in the Macrodata Refinement department, we are just as in the dark as he is about the nature of their business. If work is supposed to provide meaning, then why is Mark unable to answer this simple question about his employer? Having undergone the surgical procedure giving the show its name, Mark has no memory of his time at the office, nor does his clocked-in counterpart know anything about his outside life. He is divided between two selves, neither of whom can relate to their peers or live whole lives. What we as viewers know is that Lumon buys time, but not merely in the sense that all wage labour is the conditional sale of labour time; how the employees' total surrender of agency (and experience of time) affects this negotiation is the question driving the show.

Severance (like wage labour) is voluntary, as audience surrogate and new hire Helly R. explains to herself via expository videotape, and only reversible insofar as her external self can choose not to return to the office. Helly's existential crisis deepens at the revelation that from her "inside" perspective, she'll never leave work. She has been created without her consent (a universal condition of real life, to be fair) and imprisoned in the squared off, sunless sea that is Lumon. This is alienation, that of the worker from ownership of their product, brought to a grotesque extreme in which Lumon employees are severed in consciousness from, and briefly granted ownership over, their working (valued) selves, only to sell those selves whole for wages into a system that does *something* with them, but they can't know what. There are at least two overt references in the first episode to Lumon employees being somehow cannibalized. Through severance, workers are able to opt out of the drudgery of work, but only by making themselves less (in the sense of absolute time lived) while Lumon continues claiming their share of labour and productivity. One might still see the appeal; work is often boring and disempowering, whereas taking home a paycheque is potent and exciting. Most of us have no choice but to sell our labour itself, because

we own little else of value. Who wouldn't at least consider doing so in a manner that saves them the trouble of "being" at work? If all of us are brought into the world involuntarily, then iterating the process by surgically subdividing ourselves into worker and consumer should be a form of empowerment through "self"-ownership and the removal of work from our lived experience. Why, then, does the severed work arrangement feel that much more dystopian?

For Mark, a widower, consciousness is grief, a container he only knows how to escape by the drastic means of severance. Why not go all the way, leaving himself at the door with his baggage? The perfect employee, here, is one whose outside life warrants escaping. From his conscious perspective, however, severed time is instantaneous; Mark's misery continues uninterrupted outside of sleep. His days are simply sixteen hours long and his only job duty is his commute, which is short enough that he can see the Lumon facility from his condo. Despite his shortened days, he keeps every spare moment to himself, resting his unaccountably tired body and burying his emotions beneath solitude and alcohol. Work, consume, work, consume. Severance has afforded him freedom from neither work nor grief, but rather brought him closer to both. Despite the voluntary nature of his career choice, he is still exploited and depleted of his most valuable commodity: time.

One has to wonder how severance affects dreams. In one scenario, dreams are the unconscious laboratory of the conscious (in *Severance*, the "outie") mind, as in real life. For us, sleep occupies the minority of our time, a quarter to a third. For the severed, workday life is split in roughly equal proportions between consciousness and sleeping. This raises questions: how does this altered ratio affect the content and influence of dreams, and what are the concomitant psychological implications for the third, severed self? Are there more dreams, or less? Are they in any way influenced by the experiences of the innie? Do dreams serve a necessary cognitive function, and if so, do the innies suffer in its absence? In another scenario, the dream space is shared or contested territory where the conscious and severed minds do (dialogue/battle/intercourse/who's on first). The first episode provides no insight to the topic beyond introducing Mark's former coworker Petey with a callback to dialogue spoken by another coworker, Irv: "Hi kids. What's for dinner?" It shouldn't be surprising that someone in Petey's position, being formerly severed, would remember their time inside Lumon; same body, same brain, after all. Why shouldn't the dream space be shared? Let's assume that the severance procedure is well-established and reasonably safe, based on the legality of its use for profit. Since

it seems imperative that Lumon operate behind a veil of absolute secrecy, it stands to reason that the prospect of the innie sharing dream space (thus memories) with their outie would have been predicted and prevented. It's hard to imagine the unconscious mind dealing easily with this disconnect between sixteen hours of fatigue and eight hours of consciousness, but if the dream space is truly off-limits to the innie, then the outie wakes up every day having just processed their previous abbreviated day as though it had been long, exhausting, and complete. I'd be crying in my car before work every day too.

It's a testament to the underlying strength of the show's premise that Petey's banal memory feels like such a revelation. Well before we understand the plot driving the season, we are teased with the possibility of Mark's severed self meeting his outie in his (their) dreams. Perhaps the power dynamic would be reversed, with Mark's relatively confident and relaxed innie controlling the dream space and undermining outie Mark's agency, as Petey does in their short meeting. This subconscious self-denial could point to a critique of wage labour as a coercive and dehumanizing force, in which the question of how far one will degrade oneself becomes a matter of price. While such a thematic leap could veer perilously into a colourblind slavery analogy, the premise strongly insists we interrogate the disposition of property and value as represented through the dual selves of the severed and the social relations governing them. Indeed, property and value themselves are social relations, as evidenced by the constructed ability of Lumon employees to divide themselves between (self-)owner and product for sale. In the world of *Severance*, like ours, capital needs labour. Severed workers don't have to be conscious of their workday, but they also don't get any say in its disposition; they sell control of their bodies. Agency is tied to the body, meaning it is part and parcel of the exchange between Lumon and their staff, and the prior exchange between innie and outie, ego and id, conscious and subconscious. Through separation of agency from their conscious selves, and subsequent forfeit of that agency to Lumon, workers deny themselves the ability to govern and respond to their working conditions.

Arguably more importantly in Mark's case, he gives up time in which he could be processing his grief and carrying on with life. Mark taught history before his wife's death, and could surely have carried on to tenure. In choosing severance to spend less time grieving her, he also chose to abandon his role as cultural memory keeper. This is a symbolic reflection of his refusal to mourn; he admits to his sister that he's been skipping therapy. I think it also points to an evolved preference of capitalist enterprise that its workforce be not just isolated from each other

(as seen in employees' staggered entries and exits at Lumon), but separated from time itself, from a sense of agency within history. Some Lumon employees wear watches, and there are clocks to be seen in the basement offices, but there's no sunlight, no indication that days change in any logical, natural fashion from one to the next. Severed employees never leave the office, as far as they perceive–Mark trades his wet boots for dry shoes at his locker before entering the office, a mundane act in real life that stands here as another layer of obfuscation between the severed and the outside world. Time is manipulated, effectively owned, by Lumon. It's got to mean something that Mark also leaves a more ornate watch in his locker on the way into work, switching to a subdued one (on the other wrist) matching the minimalism of the office wall clock. Once again, where wage labour is the conditional purchase of a worker's labour time, severed labour is the absolute dominance of that same time.

Outies seem to have no idea of the nature of their work, thus no ability to strategically withdraw it as political or economic leverage, as in the traditional strike model. What is Macrodata Refinement? It's deliberately unclear, just as real-life causes of social atomization are obscured through propaganda and asymmetry of information. Atomization, Macrodata Refinement, and the severance procedure can all be described as the separation of fungible value from an organic whole. *Severance* gives little purchase to anyone making the case that wage labour depends on deprivation and coercion, though no more effort is made to refute the argument. One would think Lumon has to be paying their severed employees well enough to buy this automatic complicity, and to the extent that limits on acceptable workplace conditions exist, the company is free to fudge the details as suits them, such as telling Mark his head injury came from a fall rather than an altercation with Helly. We see Mark's house, though, and moreover, we see the type of bribe Lumon is confident he'll accept: exclusive admission to the least exclusive diner in town. He's not rich, which means he's closer to starving than to retiring early. Surely every severed Lumon employee isn't there to escape their turbulent interior life the way Mark is; "we used to wonder what kind of men we were on the outside," Petey reminds him. This seems at odds with Mark's casual acceptance of the same ignorance when explaining to Helly that she'll "never know" if she has a family. Petey must have been the catalyst for this kind of speculation even before he had his severance procedure reversed. His invocation of male bonding and Helly's of the family as reasons to object to/undo the procedure indicate the natural collectivism and desire for self-realization that is muted by severance, by the total submission of the id to the capitalist superego. (By going to work?) This division of society

into self, and then self into time-as-commodity for only enough pay to keep coming back, is shown to be a state of permanent psychological adolescence, just as an individualized working class is an unrealized precursor to unionism.

For a lot of severed workers, it stands to reason that their most lucrative (or easiest) career path is to partition themselves into owner and product, free to dispose of themselves how they (but really Lumon) will. Everyone's price can be lowered with enough external pressure, such as a venerable megacorp competing in every sector they can, driving a pan-industrial race to the bottom where wages and standards are concerned. Presumably there is some thread of this dimension underlying the "congressional goings-on" mentioned at Not Dinner. In real life, questions of worker agency in the marketplace are more diffuse than those presented by this unique sci-fi premise, but *Severance* still offers a model for examining our perceptions of self, trauma, work, and society that includes the possibility of economic pressure undoing individual self-ownership and collective bonds.

Works Cited

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