

When work-life balance turns sinister

## The fantasy of *Severance* is that we can avoid facing the moral peril of the structures we inhabit.

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [November 2022](#) issue



Photo courtesy of Apple TV+

I knew the Great Resignation and growing unease with the conditions of work were finally making their way into pop culture when this summer's blockbuster action flicks *Thor: Love and Thunder* and *Bullet Train* both opened with crises of work-life balance. If superheroes and globe-trotting hired assassins are finally feeling the pain, we might be at a moment of cultural reckoning. But my favorite exploration of this ubiquitous crisis is in the dystopian TV series *Severance*, created by Dan

Erickson on Apple TV+. *Severance* doesn't offer much hope, but it is a smart, captivating account of our growing pervasive unease with the structures and demands of work.

A mysterious company, Lumon, has perfected a technology that allows select employees to undergo a "severance procedure" that separates their working from their nonworking consciousness. Upon passing an invisible boundary, the employee forgets everything about life outside of work, and vice versa when they leave for the day. The company touts this as the next level of corporate security—employees can't spill secrets they don't even remember. And some employees are drawn to the procedure as a way to escape their real lives, hoping to find peace in eight hours of forgetfulness each day. Such is the case of the protagonist, Mark (Adam Scott), who undergoes severance to escape his crippling grief over his wife's death.

Rather than turn this into a mere gimmick where we, as viewers, get to see all that is lost (or gained) in the transitions between severed sides of life, the show instead allows us to enter the same strange and disorienting reality Mark experiences each day. Like Mark himself, we don't know what work he actually does for Lumon, or even what Lumon as a company does. Far from being a futuristic haven of cutting-edge technology, the Lumon campus looks and feels like a semi-deserted corporate experiment from decades ago—all concrete and fluorescent lighting, mostly empty parking lots, and sad cubicles with outdated computer modules. The employees on the severed floor have almost no contact with anyone else at the company, and they can only speculate as to what their work means or whether it correlates to something in the real world. Their workplace is strictly regimented and controlled with elaborate company lore and corporate reward and punishment tactics that turn increasingly cultish and bizarre. It all makes the mundane dreariness of corporate workplace culture feel like the setup for a horror movie.

But even as Lumon reveals itself as sinister and weird, it feels infinitely more alive than anything in Mark's nonwork life, which is dismal and perpetually darkly lit. This is partially because the "real" Mark is only ever at home in the late evening and early morning hours and partially because he is immediately jettisoned from his work life into suddenly remembered sadness. In attempting to escape his grief and loneliness for the workday, he has imprisoned himself inside it absolutely.

His "innie"—Lumon lingo for employee consciousness while at work—on the other hand, undergoes an existential awakening when his best friend from work is fired

and a new replacement, Helly (Britt Lower), joins his data-cleaning team. Mark's job is to orient Helly to her new form of consciousness, which never experiences a break from work, a weekend, or a human relationship outside the cubicle. "I like to focus on the feeling of being rested," Mark tells her, since innies have no memory of sleeping or resting when they are outside the office. Helly resists this reality, and her increasingly dramatic attempts to contact her outer self unleash a cascade of events that builds toward one of the most perfect season finales I have seen in recent memory.

The innies remind me of robots in sci-fi stories, except the humans are themselves their own form of artificial intelligence. The innies have full adult reasoning capacities, but they have no reservoir of emotional memories or experience to interpret their lives. Like AI, they must achieve consciousness and emotional intelligence through learning. In a beautiful plot twist, the innies come into possession of a self-help book that they begin to read in secret, devouring its clichéd aphorisms like biblical parables or Zen koans—teachings that ignite a sense of purpose, integration, and meaning in their lives as they struggle to interpret and apply them.

There are many potential parables buried in the conceit of the show: about how easily we give over our lives (or even our souls?) to corporate work structures for virtually nothing in return, about how illusive work-life balance feels and how far we would go to achieve it. *Severance* probes deeper to suggest that middle-class, consumer-oriented life as it is currently arranged demands tedious, mendacious, and morally compromised actions. The fantasy of severance is that we could hide all these unpleasant or despicable realities sufficiently from our consciousness, rather than face the moral peril of the structures we inhabit. The sinister horror is that we are the very ones paying the price for that disconnected reality.

Because they are the only ones actively attempting to face the truth of their reality, the innies are also, in effect, the only real people in the show. Their world inside Lumon, however truncated and bizarre, thrums with the energy of curiosity and self-discovery. The real parable on offer may be less about work-life balance and more about how community is made, how meaning is wrested from even the most fragmented signs and symbols, and just maybe how revolution is fomented.