

Institute of Art, Design and Technology - Dun Laoghaire  
School of Creative Arts

***Designing Severance:***

An analysis of the systems controlling corporate workers

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*Submitted to the faculty of Film, Art and Creative Technologies  
in candidacy for the BA (hons) in Graphic Design 2026*

## **Declaration of originality**

This thesis is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire, in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Hons) in Graphic Design. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

Signed: 

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## **Abstract**

*Severance* is an American science fiction TV series created by Dan Erickson and released in 2022. The show tackles the idea of separating personal life from work life through a procedure called ‘severance’ which inserts a chip inside the individual’s brain to split human consciousness into two separate identities. The show then explores the moral and ethical dilemmas of workers who have undergone the procedure and now inhabit a corporate environment without recollection of their lives outside of it and the consequences of what that entails.

This thesis aims to analyse the office space design, as well as the use of visual language and the company’s practices to demonstrate how design is used as a tool for control. By drawing from key thinkers like Foucault, Marx, Baudrillard and Debord, I set out to explore how spaces that appear pleasant and centred around the workers actually disguise surveillance, control and manipulation. I also aim to draw clear connections with real corporations, as well as systems of power, such as totalitarian regimes and organised religions, that employ similar tactics to manipulate people into obedience and subjugation.

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## Introduction

(...) I just found myself walking in one day and thought, I don't want to do this anymore. And if I have to go in today, I would prefer to just skip ahead to the eight hours and disassociate. And then the whole thing just kind of came from that.

(Evans, 2025)

This quote is from the creator of the show Dan Erickson, who was discussing the inspiration of where the show came from. As stated by him, the dystopian world showcased in *Severance* is not just fiction-based but rooted in reality, with the eerie and more sinister traits of this series originating from Erickson's own previous work experiences. The show follows the story of four employees, Mark, Helly, Irving and Dylan, who have undergone the 'severance' medical procedure through the company they work at, *Lumon*. The surgery consists of inserting a small biochip inside their brains which splits their consciousness in two, creating separate identities: one for personal life, also defined as 'outie' in the series, the other for work life, also named 'innie'. The series then follows the experience of these workers inside the office as they navigate the space and their work with no recollection of who they are outside of it. All of their conscious life as the 'innie' is spent in front of a screen, fitting numbers into boxes that make no sense to them, whilst the managers keep their every move under strict surveillance. The corporation takes away any form of privacy from the workers as all aspects of their lives are minutely controlled by *Lumon*.

Because science fiction lends itself to exposing societal fears, *Severance* utilises this genre to address anxieties surrounding modern corporate culture environments. With the increase of controlling and overly surveillant practices from corporations, such as the introduction of a "productivity score" in Microsoft 365 which gives managers the opportunity to track each of the workers' activity (Hern,2020), or the case of Virgin Media employees being forced to reduce their toilet breaks to strictly two minutes (Pringle and O'Leary, 2019), it is not hard to see how closely related to reality *Severance* is, and these are only a few of the many examples and stories out there. As the connection between real life and the series grows clearer, the

exaggeration of the workers' conditions in *Severance* becomes less of an absurdity, and more of a heightened representation of what workers have to put up with every day.

This was partly what sparked my interest in analysing the topic, as viewing the series has brought forward much reflection about the state of the corporate world. However, what fully drew me into analysing this series for my thesis was the scope of attention to detail brought forward by the production design team: no detail is left untouched and every aspect of the design in the show builds into the storytelling element of it. What particularly sparked my interest was how the story is truly brought to life through design and all the elements inserted into it add to the plotline without the characters necessarily being aware of them or discussing them.

Whilst there are existing academic works around the series, there are still few that foreground an analysis of how the design in the show produces psychological or behavioural outcomes. Rather than analysing the more philosophical aspects of the show related to ideas of identity and memory loss, this thesis focuses more in depth on the visual and spatial elements of the series, and how they go beyond acting as aesthetic components as they affect the people that come in contact with them. To strengthen this and ground the thesis in reality, I will be contrasting images from the show with ones from real corporations as well as systems of power, such as totalitarian regimes and organised religions, which present tactics of control that mirror the ones portrayed in the series.

Throughout the thesis Baudrillard's concept of simulated reality will be used in relation to the notions of manipulating reality to its owner's gain whilst Foucault's frameworks around discipline, surveillance and torture will provide a scope of analysis into the corporation's practices and to what purpose they are being implemented. Theories from Marx will be utilised as well throughout the thesis to provide more context in relation to discussions of labour under capitalism, while Shoshana Zuboff's works will add a more modern perspective for discussing this topic in the current stage of capitalism.

The first chapter opens with an in-depth analysis of the office design and how it presents elements of infantilisation as well as notions of working like a machine. It follows on with the exploration of surveillance present inside and outside the workplace: to do this we analyse the spatial design, presence of cameras and lastly the invasiveness of the biotechnology itself. The

chapter closes with an investigation of other environments present within this space and how those aid in creating a self-sustained world meant to satisfy all of the workers' needs.

Chapter 2 focuses on analysing the visual language that exists within the spaces previously discussed and how it shapes employees into becoming the machine-like workers the corporation desires. The first part examines the specific components that are created to standardise the workers' existence inside the office as well as mechanise them. The latter part focuses on the graphic elements that reinstate the presence of the corporation and push the ideals of efficiency and productivity. It also explores how the corporation fabricates a reality to erase dissent and feed into its own agenda: to do this, theories brought forward by Jean Baudrillard are considered.

Chapter 3 analyses how values and behavioural correction is treated in the corporation, as they take on religious connotations that deeply affect the workers' psyche. More specifically, it analyses the series of principles imposed on the workers and how their depiction can influence the workers' perception of the corporation as almost God-like. The first part explores how these simple notions can create a great sense of self-checking and morality in the worker, as well as the implications of the corporation presenting itself under the guise of religion. The second part of this chapter focuses on the consequences of not following the values imposed on the workers and how the corporation disciplines them. Foucault's framework becomes central in this, as his ideas can help unmask these mechanisms for what they really are.

The fundamental focus of this thesis is to dissect design elements of this show to reveal how corporate design reinforces particular systems of control built on the exploitation, surveillance and suppression of the worker's individuality.

## **Chapter 1. The corporate interior as a system of control**

- 1.1. The adult playground
- 1.2. Surveilling the children
- 1.3. The office as a self-contained world

## 1.1. The adult playground



*Figure 1. Severance (2022). Lumon's endless white corridors that lead to the office. AppleTV+*



*Figure 2. Severance (2022). Main office space. AppleTV+*

The main events of the show *Severance* take place within the workplace environment: a space that from the elevator feels claustrophobic, sterile and uninviting. It extends through a maze of cold white halls (figure 1) that confuse, not just the viewer, but the workers themselves. The corridors then lead to the office (figure 2) where the ‘innies’ carry out their work; here the sense of discomfort reaches its maximum expression. Between the use of colour, the design of the space and singular elements themselves, the space manages to become one where the work takes importance over the human and the employees are reduced to over infantilised machines that cannot think or act for themselves.



*Figure 3. Unknown. (1965) Office space designed by Eero Saarinen and Kevin Roche, John Deere building.*

As discussed by Jeremy Hindle (cited in Chapman, 2022), production designer on the show, one of the main inspirations for the aesthetics of the space is the work of Eero Saarinen and Kevin Roche (figure 3). He suggests this choice lies behind the nature of these environments, where the aesthetics became central to creating a beautiful workspace that divided the person's work life from their personal life. We can see it clearly in the simplicity of the desk space with its chair, typewriter and storage space: there is no decoration that gives personal information about the worker because the sole function of this space is for production. This ties into the working principle of these spaces, the notion of 'form follows function' which in this case corresponds to creating as many modular, "cell" like spaces, that can be utilised by any corporation rather than building an environment tailored to the specific needs of the workers that inhabit the space each day. (Saval, 2014, pp. 114 – 115)

However, when this principle is applied to the spaces in *Severance*, it really highlights the push for productivity and isolation from the outside world. If we observe figure 4, we can notice the same principle of form following function, that is present in Eero Saarinen's space. The desk replicates the same simplicity, with only the computer and the tools they might need for their work being present. Furthermore, if we look into figure 5 we start noticing the introduction of the infantilisation element, as well as the retro feel. The computer replicates

the look of toy ones (figure 6) utilised by children to learn their function and how to type. Though they differ in colour palettes, with the *Lumon* one being more muted to fit the colour scheme and the context of the office, the computers share a similar simplicity in the overall layout: a screen for viewing one's work, a keyboard and a bigger button for confirming a selection.



**Figure 4.** *Severance* (2022). Bird's eye view of the workers' desk space. AppleTV+



**Figure 5.** *Severance* (2022). Computers used by the employees for their work. AppleTV+

**Figure 6.** Unknown. (1984) Tomy Tutor Play Computer

Taking a step back to the overall design of the space, by choosing to implement the modular desks (figure 4) typical of the mid-century modernist design, *Severance* highlights one of the main issues of this style as it may work well aesthetically but it strongly pushes ideas of conformity and lack of individuality as the space is not designed for “human function or human needs” (Saval, 2014, 138).



*Figure 7. Severance (2022). Wider shot of the office space. AppleTv+*



*Figure 8. Terence Conran. (1977) The Bed & Bath Book*

If we zoom out and notice the space surrounding the desks we can clearly see the ideas of infantilisation and push for productivity heightened by the design choices. Through the use of green carpets, over simplified furniture, simple colour palettes and low ceilings (figure 7), the space looks eerily similar to a kids' indoor playground (figure 8). However, unlike the space in figure 8, where the child plays a game to enjoy himself, here it is the work that becomes the game, with the employees pressing numbers aimlessly with the promise of working on something “important”.



*Figure 9. Severance (2022). Award given to Mark S. for completing his work. AppleTv+*



*Figure 10. Severance (2022). Prizes given to the workers as they complete their work. AppleTv+*

The environment treats the workers as children who, in the eyes of the company, cannot think or act for themselves: the “game” they play is controlled by *Lumon*, who rewards their success (productivity) through childlike prizes as we can see in figure 9 and 10. It places them

in a space where *Lumon* is able to control how they behave, and it builds a new reward system where happiness or satisfaction is not related to one's self but to commodities. As suggested by Debord (1967, para. 11 ), under capitalism the consumer no longer gains satisfaction from themselves and, to fill that void, the hoarding of gadgets and material commodities functions to replicate that feeling; however, it only results in a submission to this system. In the context of the workers, this mechanism helps give meaning to what they are doing as well as create that same submission Debord talked about, though in this case the system workers submit to is *Lumon*.



*Figure 11. Severance (2022). Elevator used by employees to transition from 'outie' to 'innie' and enter the office space. AppleTV+*

Before the workers even sit down in front of a screen of numbers that do not make sense to them and experience everything discussed so far, the first major space they are introduced to when they transition from 'outie' to 'innie', is the elevator (figure 11). This space is the first establishment of that sense of claustrophobia we then see in the office space, with its low ceilings. As stated by Hindle (cited in Chapman, 2022) himself, this was done to communicate the lack of escape and the urge to only look forward. From the sense of suffocation in the elevator, we then move onto the vast white halls that lead to the office space (figure 12).



*Figure 12. Severance (2022). White halls leading to the office space. AppleTV+*

If, previously, the issue was the lack of space, now it is the opposite, as these tunnels are vast and extend in all different directions. This not only heightens the sense of desperation and lack of escape felt in the elevator, but also introduces an element of confusion and feeling lost: the innies are left at the mercy of the corporation, running around in this liminal space almost like rats. The halls become what Augé (1995, p.77) would describe as a ‘non-place’, an environment that cannot be attached to any historical, relational or identity connotation and is therefore bare. Although he states that this gives the human an opportunity to be free from being tied to their identity, in this context it takes on a darker meaning as the “freedom” the worker might experience is not real and is yet another opportunity for *Lumon* to instil control. The push for simplicity and the rationality of the mid-century modernist style has now become a trap for them, where conformity of the space oppresses the workers’ will and bends it to that of the company, erasing their individuality. In its bareness, the space becomes a blank canvas which can be utilised to push whichever narrative the company prefers, whether it is through visuals like posters and paintings or through the design of the space itself.

The disorientation within the space is also translated within the bounds of the design choices, where retro and futuristic elements coexist. The biotechnology presented should hint at equal innovations in terms of the workspace machinery, but that is not the case. Jameson (1991,

p.85) suggests the use of retro aesthetics becomes a consequence of late stage capitalism, as they are utilised to gloss over the violence and alienation of these times, whilst also being cleansed of their historical value. We can see this happening in *Lumon*: the technology given to the workers is not fitting with their times, and although these computers might be aesthetically appealing they are emptied of their historical value and they become a tool to mask the corporation's intentions. The idea of not giving workers the same technology the corporation has, truly reinforces their submission to it, as it is *Lumon* that controls when and what they can utilise. Moreover, this design choice cuts off the workers from what goes on in the real world; they are forced to use outdated technology while the outside world advances unbeknownst to them, creating a degree of separation.

From the moment they step into the office to when they sit down at their desks, the *Lumon* employees are thrown into an environment that confuses, disorients and infantilises them. The claustrophobic elevator is the first reminder that the worker will barely get what they need, and that polished look hides an aim to control and shape their behaviour. Moving through the maze of identical white halls pushes an ideal of conformity that is echoed throughout the office and annihilates any wishes of escape the worker might have. The green carpets and the oversimplified furniture present the office space as a playground where the instrument that should be used for working is reminiscent of a child's computer. In its totality the space tries to make the worker feel safe enough to not want to rebel, as *Lumon* keeps them under control by infantilising them in a space that dazes them into subjugation.

## 1.2. Surveilling the children

Through the use of spatial design, both inside and outside the office, the workers are thrown into an environment which, aside from feeling cold and unwelcome, is also surveilling their every move. The omnipresence of cameras at every corner of the office, including the workers' computers creates an extreme level of supervision. The artworks and the motivational posters infiltrate the corporation's eyes even more into the office, making sure the workers check themselves without managers or superiors necessarily being present. The highest degree of scrutiny is achieved through the biotechnology inserted into their brain, that, with its inner workings, gives the corporation the ability to be present inside the employee and dictate control over them, ridding them of their free will.

If we observe the space in figure 13, we notice how already from the outside there is an overarching sense of surveillance which will be then followed through inside the workplace as well.



*Figure 13. Severance (2022). Façade of the office Mark S. walks by. AppleTV+*

The worker is introduced to the corporation's presence from the moment they walk into the office, as we see happening with Mark who walks by the sunken relief of Kier Eagan (the corporation founder) as he heads inside the office. The massive representation on stone, in such a cold and austere environment, is reminiscent of the ones created for despots under totalitarian regimes, more specifically those of Stalin under the soviet regime as we can see in figure 14. Here this practice pushed his presence in every context of the citizen's life, so much

so that it created a sense of spiritual presence that affected their behaviour, creating a sense of self-checking in them (Plamper, 2012, p.12).



**Figure 14.** Roger Rössing. (1950) Portrait of Stalin displayed at a public event in Leipzig, Germany. Wiki Commons

Furthermore, in the case of Stalin, it also established a ‘cult of personality’, whereby the individual pictured became idolised, their ideology magnified and the government associated with them was increasingly legitimised (Kulik, 2023). In a similar way Kier is placed as a role model for the workers. That being said, in both cases, behind the glorification of the “ruler”, there is a reminder to the people that they are always being watched and judged.



**Figure 15.** Severance (2022). ‘Kier Pardons His Betrayers’. AppleTV+



**Figure 16.** Viktor Zinov. (1940) “Glory to the victorious people! Long live our dear Stalin!” Soviet Propaganda poster celebrating Stalin

We see a physical depiction of this in figure 15 where Kier is portrayed beyond his role of CEO, more similar to that of a despot. Here he is shown sitting above the workers, holding a sword with his left hand and laying his other hand on the employee’s head. Behind him we see a representation of the industries he built and an army of people next to it. This representation is quite interesting as it mirrors similar characteristics we can find in Soviet propaganda which promotes Stalin’s cult of personality (figure 16). If we compare the two, we can see how in both cases the person in charge takes up much more space in the composition, compared to the common people. In both cases the system/people in power are presented with a circle of light emanating from them: this creates an image of them as the sun, that is central to the people’s lives as it nurtures them. We also see a parallel with the way they are celebrated: they are both clearly painted in a positive light, with Stalin being celebrated for having brought victory to his people whilst Kier is celebrated for his

forgiveness. Kier holds the power to eliminate his betrayers and yet he is seen showing mercy to them, feeding into this cult of personality in a similar way it does with Stalin.



*Figure 17. Severance (2022). ‘The Exalted Victory of Cold Harbour’. AppleTV+*



*Figure 18. Severance (2022). ‘Bee Ever Merry’ motivational poster. AppleTV+*

Art and visual elements inside the office space are utilised time and time again, to infiltrate the corporation in the worker’s life. In figure 17 we can observe one of the paintings that is

hung in honour of one of the employees, Mark S, for completing the project he had been working on for months. Although the artwork is dedicated to him and it is meant to communicate the faith everyone has in him, we can also take away a strong sense of supervision and monitoring as both his managers and the corporation founders sit above him, meticulously watching the work he produces. This same feeling appears in the motivational posters (figure 18): in their attempt to promote productivity, they once again introduce the image of the founder, infiltrating the eyes of the company on the work floor. Marx (1932, pp. 28-29) suggests how under capitalism the worker's accomplishments, as well as the worker himself, become property of the system in which they are producing. We see this principle applied here, as Mark's celebration becomes a way for the company to reinstate its presence, as it does with the motivational posters.



*Figure 19. Severance (2022). Open plan layout of the office. AppleTV+*

In terms of the workplace itself, surveillance is presented through the use of an open plan layout (figure 19). As Kaufmann-Buhler (2020, p.6) suggests, these spaces, born from a necessity to foster productivity and efficiency in co-workers, actually rid them of their privacy and give the corporation more space for monitoring its workers. As they lack their own personal space, managers have the opportunity to have a much better view of their

employees. Moreover, the presence of movable panels between desks ends up creating an additional level of monitoring that happens between employees.

It could also be said that this space becomes what Foucault (1975, p.200-202) describes as the ‘Panopticon’, as the presence of cameras both inside the computers and all around the space places them under inspection the whole time spent in the office, whether it is their personal guards (figure 20) or their managers watching them. Beyond this structural similarity, the uncertainty of if and when they are being observed leads them to internalise discipline, as discussed by Foucault.



**Figure 20.** *Severance (2022).* “The Watchers” controlling the camera footage coming from each of the employees’ computers. AppleTV+



**Figure 21.** *Severance (2022).* Mark S. being surveilled from his computer by one of “The Watchers”. AppleTV+

The camera footage becomes a tool to control every aspect of the worker's experience in the workplace from their productivity to the way they interact with other workers. It strips away any concept of intimacy, authenticity and humanity as now emotions are regulated by the managers who can decide what is appropriate and what is not. It also helps them mitigate dissent as workers become aware they could be watched at any moment, they realise they cannot plan an escape or protest. They then enter a state of what is defined as 'learned helplessness' whereby they start believing they are powerless and cannot change the situations they are in, even if opportunities arise (Nickerson, 2022).



*Figure 22. Severance (2022). Mark and Irving watch Helly gain consciousness through cameras. AppleTV+*

Cameras are present from the moment they are “born” in the office, as we can see from the pilot episode where Helly first gains consciousness on the meeting table (figure 22). She is not met by human eyes but by a camera which becomes a tool of mediation between people. Her coworkers talk to her through a microphone as they are being fed the footage recorded in real time (figure 22). Haraway (1985, pp.84-97) suggests how in this environment machines and humans become one, so called ‘cyborgian subjects’, where the machine shapes and affects aspects of socialisation that were previously only dictated by the person. The scene in its totality really sets the tone for the rest of the experience which she, as well as the others, are going to have in the office where every aspect of them will be observed, controlled and mechanised.



**Figure 23.** *Severance* (2022). Neurological data obtained through the chip. AppleTV+

The ultimate form of surveillance is internal and more specifically it is the biotechnology used in the severance procedure. This small chip inserted in the employees' brains, gives the corporation the highest scope of observation possible as they are now able to have a built-in monitor for their workers. The level of surveillance now goes even deeper as the corporation is able to extract neurological data from the employee (figure 23). As Zuboff (2019, p.14) suggests, under surveillance capitalism, all aspects of the human experience become sources of extraction and *Severance* exemplifies this to the highest degree.

Furthermore she suggests how under this system:

The dark data continent of your inner life—your intentions and motives, meanings and needs, preferences and desires, moods and emotions, personality and disposition, truth telling or deceit—is summoned into the light for others' profit. (Zuboff, 2019, p.164).

This obsession with transforming the human experience into a piece of data for the scope of profit or, in this case, gaining control, inherently dehumanises the person in question as now what belongs to their private life goes into the hands of the corporation.

Finally, through their means of monitoring their employees, *Lumon* fails to treat its employees as humans. The more physical aspects of surveillance, like the art or the spaces

themselves, act as a tool to reinstate the corporation's presence inside the spaces, creating in the workers a sense of being watched. The cameras scattered across the office help the managers truly mechanise every aspect of the worker's lives as they have the chance to insert themselves into their minds, taking away the last element of privacy they had. The workers' lives are turned into a form of experiment constantly monitored by their superiors. Finally, the chip becomes the greatest tool for the corporation as they are now a part of the worker's consciousness and they are able to surveil and control them even outside the workplace.

### 1.3. The office as a self-contained world

In *Severance*, the corporation presents the workers with a version of an office they would not necessarily need to leave, as all of their needs are being met. Through spaces like the ‘Wellness Centre’, the ‘Family Visitation Suite’ or the ‘Perpetuity Wing’, *Lumon* tries to go beyond its initial reason of existence and provides its workers with mental care, familial and personal relationships, as well as a sense of history. By creating a parallel world, the corporation has the opportunity to shape the experience of the workers and filter through what they want or do not want them to experience and be aware of. Furthermore it gives the workers no reason to leave the workplace as they are offered all the services they might need by the company.



*Figure 24. Severance (2022). Irving at the ‘Wellness centre’. AppleTV+*

In figure 24 we can see a depiction of the ‘Wellness centre’, a space where employees who are sensing a feeling of discomfort or are struggling with their mental health can seek the help of Ms. Casey, who will aid them in their path to recovery. In its design, the space seems to follow the ‘Bürolandschaft Flow’, where the space follows the workflow, prioritises a more natural look and features the use of organic shapes (Saval, 2014, p.12). We see this in the choice of the wood walls, the circular windows filling the space with light, the presence of natural elements like the tree and the seashell on the table. The chairs too, resembling the ‘Tulip Chair’ by Eero Saarinen (figure 25) inspired by the homonymous flower, give a sense

of order to the space (New, 1999, p.220) and fit in with the overall feeling communicated by the space. These design elements help to provide the sense of care meant for this environment.



*Figure 25. Eero Saarinen. (1956-57) Tulip Chair*

However, the space becomes yet another tool of control for the company, as they now become the carers for the employees, taking away the need for them to seek help outside of the corporation. The space behaves similarly to how Baudrillard (1994, pp.64-66) discusses the Beaubourg centre (today known as the Centre Pompidou) in relation to the idea of ‘cultural deterrence’. Although this space tries to preserve culture, it does the exact opposite as it destroys the meaning of it and becomes an empty, surface level vessel. Likewise, *Lumon* presents its workers with an environment that is meant to provide care, however it is emptied of its meaning as its purpose becomes that of controlling an aspect of the workers’ lives that was previously personal and private.



**Figure 26.** Unknown. (2024) Example of corporate wellness room for employees

Additionally it is interesting to note that, unlike real life corporate wellness rooms, like the one pictured in figure 26, in *Severance* the care person is inserted into this space. On one hand this could help the worker feel at ease, have someone to talk to and make them believe the corporation has their best interests at heart. On the other hand, *Lumon* inserting internal personnel refers back to the ideas of surveillance mentioned in the previous section, as Ms. Casey can also act as a spy for the company. While disguising her work as helpful, she is able to monitor and influence the employees. Foucault (1975, pp.21-22) suggests how in modern systems of punishment, agents of care like psychologists and psychiatrists become a part of the ‘disciplinary power’ as they can now suggest whether they deem a patient sane or not. This reflects in the role of Ms. Casey as she could eventually report back to the management that can decide whether or not the worker should be punished.



*Figure 27. Severance (2022). 'Family visitation suite' created to give 'innies' the opportunity to see their family.  
AppleTV+*

The idea of simulated care presents itself again in the 'Family visitation suite' (figure 27), a space created to give workers the opportunity to meet their families. Although this is meant for them to foster their more personal and private relationships, it has a somewhat cold and distant feel to it. Even the space seen outside the windows creates a sense of 'uncanny valley', that is the "theorised relation between the human likeness of an object and a viewer's affinity toward it" and, once a certain threshold is reached, the likeness causes a sense of discomfort in the watcher (Kendall, 2022). The blurry, blue and undefined background clashes with the plants in the foreground which look out of place with their warm tones, creating a sense of unease in the viewer as the space attempts to resemble a known place but it fails to fully do so. This probably speaks to the dichotomy of what is presented in this environment: aspects of the workers' lives which are more human and private lose their value as they are now calculatedly mediated by the corporation (figure 28).



*Figure 28. Severance (2022). Different angle of the 'Family visitation suite'. AppleTV+*

Furthermore, this place acts as a new form of prison where the personal life of the employee is utilised to keep them in the office and complacent, without them realising it. As Jubert and Leitão (2024, pp. 202-203) suggest, the creation of entertainment spaces gives the corporation the opportunity to exploit its workers without outrightly dominating them: they offer these spaces, rather than force it on them, and in doing so it gives them the illusion of freedom.

This environment acts in a similar way to entertainment rooms in real life corporate offices like the one in figure 29 found in the Google headquarters in Chicago. These feature the same element of simulated care: the company offers workers a space to relax and foster their connections with others, however it is still created with the intent of keeping workers inside for as much time as possible. (Jubert and Leitão, 2024, p. 204)



*Figure 29. Spencer Green M. (2017) Recreation space at Google Headquarters in Chicago*

Finally, one of the other spaces created for the employees is the ‘Perpetuity wing’, presented in figure 30, which is a section of the office dedicated to the company’s history and previous CEOs. Although it is built for the workers like the previous spaces, it differs in clearly showing how it benefits the company’s agenda. The workers get another space they can explore and walk around in at the cost of having to learn about the corporation’s history. As suggested by Debord (1967, para. 5), because the dominant mode of production in this context is the corporation, they are the ones who can control the space to their liking and therefore establish a space like the ‘Perpetuity wing’, that is fully populated by their goals and agenda.



*Figure 30. Severance (2022). ‘Perpetuity wing’, dedicated to celebrating the company. AppleTV+*

Through the spaces discussed, *Lumon* tries to cater to most human needs by providing mental health assistance, fostering workers' relationships and giving them meaning to their work. In reality however, they fail to do this, as the wellness centre that should help employees feel better, turns into a space to surveil and keep people in check. This also happens to the 'Family visitation suite'; it may be a positive space for workers but, in actual fact, it is just a prison that keeps the worker in for longer and gives the corporation the opportunity to mediate relationships. The company mirrors the role of police officers in prisons who mediate the connections between inmates and their families (Foucault, 1975, p.238). It speaks to how their agency is taken away from them and handed to the company. Through the creation of a self-contained world the company is able to take away from workers the need to go outside the corporation to seek help: it gives *Lumon* another level of control over their lives. The following chapter will analyse how the corporation extends its domination beyond the spatial design as it starts utilising graphic design elements to push desired narratives.

## **Chapter 2. Mechanising the worker**

2.1. Efficiency that erases humanity

2.2. Fabricating reality

## 2.1. Efficiency that erases humanity



*Figure 31. Severance (2022). Banner put up for Irving's farewell party. AppleTV+*

Through its visual system, *Lumon* has a great amount of freedom and power to shape its workers into becoming less human and more machine-like. Specifically, by equating time to production and programming every aspect of the workers' routine from the moment they enter the space, the corporation successfully erases their individuality in favour of production. The scene presented in figure 31 depicts the workers taking part in a farewell party for their now former colleague, Irving B. As Dylan recites a few nice words in honour of his friend, the viewer can notice an imposing banner standing above him. Here we can make out the logo of the corporation, as well as the name of the former employee followed by the time he has spent working in the company, expressed in quarters rather than years. The context this exists in is relevant, as it communicates the relationship between employer and employee and how the corporation perceives them.

Irving is presented to the audience stripped of his identity. The lack of pictures and his personal information being reduced to his name and surname initial, introduce the element of identity loss. Additionally, he is not celebrated for the years spent in the company, rather he is appreciated for the volume of labour produced. Marx (1844, p.6) discusses how under capitalism the worker is viewed and appreciated only through the lens of his labour, and all

the other aspects which make him human are not considered as they are left to other institutions and figures to oversee. Considering the context the show lives in, a system similar to the one discussed by Marx, there is no need to know more about Irving. As the worker's productivity is all that matters, then it would make sense that the only information we have of him is the period in which he produced a commodity and his first name, the bare minimum to identify him. These elements together fit into what Marx suggests is the goal of the corporation to “not know them as men, but only as instruments of production which have to yield as much as possible with as little cost as possible”(1844, p.10).

It can also be argued that the lack of any image of the worker, now replaced by the logo of the company, adds another level of detachment and alienation as research suggests images of humans and their emotional expressions are able to cause similar sensations in the viewer (Seo and Dillard, 2019, p.133). If we had seen an image of Irving instead of *Lumon*, the viewer might have been able to feel a sense of empathy or connection with the character but as that is absent, it ends up creating more distance between Irving as a human, and him as a worker. More importantly for the workers themselves, it creates a further degree of separation from the person they were close to.

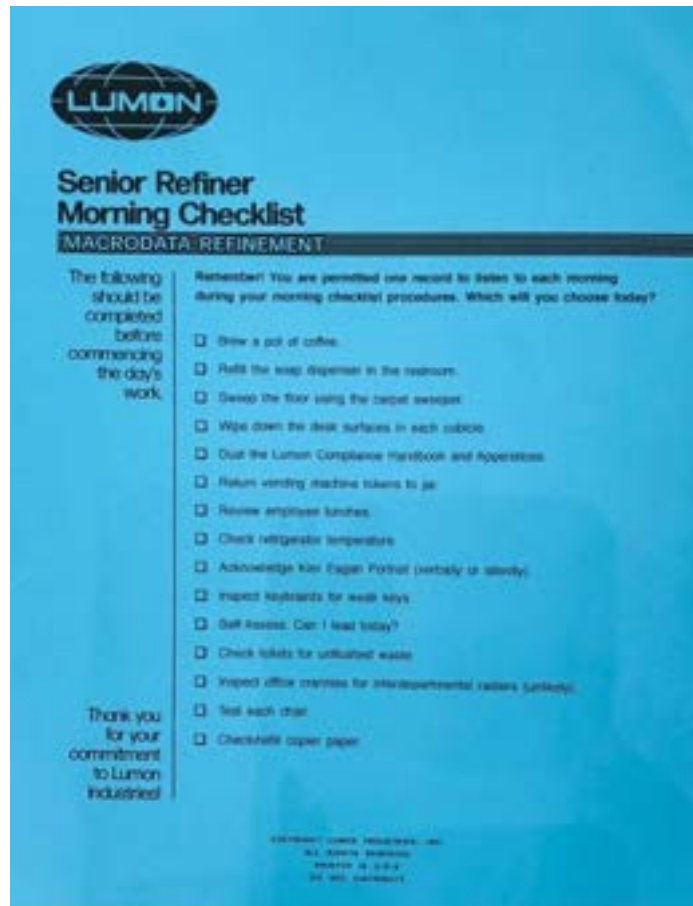


**Figure 32.** *Severance* (2022). Badge belonging to Irving B. AppleTV+

The other element which strips Irving's character (figure 32) of his humanity is the presentation of his time spent at Lumon through quarters. Debord (1967, para.149-150) would discuss this as the concept of 'commodified time' where, under capitalism, time is only valued through the lenses of production and consumption. This idea of commodified time is expressed visually and, with the loss of identity previously discussed, it creates a sense of disconnection from time: the viewer, as well as the other characters in the show, are not aware of what quarter 870 equals to, if it is the current year or 50 years ago. It drives the employees away from experiencing and viewing life as humans rather than workers, with the company having the upper hand to control the narrative.

The farewell ceremony is meant to be a moment that foregrounds memory, emotion and personal relationships; however here, the presence of the banner reframes this event as more of an institutional procedure rather than a celebration of the individual. The blandness of the design suggests how it could be applied to any worker, showing how employees are seen as easily interchangeable units rather than human beings. It creates a system of standardisation that repeatedly shows up throughout the office.

Another instance of this occurring is through lists like the one in figure 33. Here we get a clear checklist of all the different tasks the senior member of the team, Mark S. in the show, should go through and, as we take in the extensiveness of the list, the depth of control becomes more apparent. Although to the corporation this might be useful to avoid any distractions from the employee and push maximum efficiency, it turns into another way to remove components of the worker that make him human. Through the introduction of a standardised routine the worker is deprived of his individuality, and they become a part of a system, just like Irving does.



*Figure 33. Severance (2022). Senior Refiner Morning Checklist. AppleTv+*

In their totality, the banner, as well as the list, become an embodiment of the company’s power and process of mechanisation; as they let the workers have their “celebration”, they still reinstate in physical form the domination and control they have over the workers as their drive to push efficiency erases the workers’ humanity and individuality. This is supported by Foucault’s (1975, pp. 187-188) writings about modern day demonstrations of power which, according to him, no longer happen through spectacles but, rather, they manifest by observing, evaluating and recording people, which inherently objectifies them. This is exactly what we see happening in *Lumon*: the company does not need to celebrate itself or require a grand spectacle as it is able to reassert its power by evaluating and reducing its employees to data, just like what was discussed by Foucault. Through this process of objectification in even the most minute aspects of their work, the corporation drives the employee away from experiencing reality as a human as they are turned into machines programmed for maximum productivity.

## 2.2. Fabricating reality

Through the use of posters meant to boost efficiency, *Lumon* is capable of promoting and pushing the company's values on the workers. The insertion of the corporation in the workers' lives becomes more sinister as the artworks are another tool of its propaganda. This manipulation of reality takes its most extreme implementation as employees are given a fake newspaper which feeds into a narrative that reinforces obedience and erases dissent.



*Figure 34. Severance (2022). Posters featured across different spaces in the office. AppleTV+*

The posters (figure 34), scattered across the office floor, with their slogans “Bee ever merry!”, “Grin and Baird it!” or “I’m a Frolic-aholic”, act as a tool of psychological conditioning. What is disguised as a “motivational poster” becomes a way to redefine moral good: the workers should be delighted to work like bees in a hive, their conditions must be faced with a smile, and being in the office is connected to being happy and having fun. By comparing the worker/corporation to the bee/hive it reintroduces the erasure of individuality and places production at the centre of the workers’ lives while the notions of “Grin and bear it” and the workplace as a happy place push the people to accept their conditions and be happy. These visuals are another manner for the company to insert themselves into the workers’ consciousness and to keep them under surveillance. The employees are placed into what Foucault (1975, p.137) defines as a ‘disciplinary institution’, a place that through its use of

repetition and surveillance (both mechanisms utilised to instil discipline) creates ‘docile bodies’, beings that are completely obedient and under control.



**Figure 35.** Unknown. (1926) “Let’s play to win” motivational work poster for Mather and Company, Chicago.

**Figure 36.** Unknown. (1926) “Fair, Good, Better, Best” motivational work poster for Mather and Company, Chicago.

The posters at *Lumon* closely resemble early 20<sup>th</sup> century industrial propaganda posters (figure 35 and 36). They glorify productivity and hide capitalistic values behind the farce of humour (Rennie, 2005, p.139-141). The posters here deliver the same messaging as the *Lumon* ones: a push for production and automation of the human. By using phrases like “Mistakes delay the work”, “Alert workers avoid fumbles” it becomes clear the company wishes the workers to behave in a machine-like way that does not make the mistakes a human would. The headline “Let’s play to win” not only reintroduces this idea of work as a fun activity, but it also fosters the sense of loyalty and commitment to the team/corporation. Additionally, the use of words like “Fair”, “Good”, “Better”, “Best” to describe the workers’ production becomes a clear attempt to utilise positivity as a disguise for pushing maximum efficiency. Overall, this use of language to promote self-improvement and efficiency, hides an underlying goal of obedience, loyalty and control. As suggested by Roland Barthes (1957, p.116) design has the ability to transform ideology into a moral myth; by reframing ideas of machine automation and obedience under the guises of happiness, moral goodness and fairness,

*Lumon* is able to do exactly this. Through its semantic design, in both cases, the corporation has the ability to shape the narrative and control the reality consumed by employees.

There is another element utilised towards the goal of constructing a reality: nostalgia. The retro aesthetics utilised by the company are not just decorative but also functional as they are a way to make these visuals feel more familiar and normal. As Boym (2001, p.41) discusses, this acts as ‘restorative nostalgia’: recreating an idealised past to use as a model for the present time, to reconstruct a sense of truth. However, this only works as a form of sedative: it creates an emotional connection when there is actually none.



*Figure 37. Severance (2022). Newspaper given to the employees after their rebellion. AppleTV+*

The fabrication of reality infiltrates the workers’ lives even more as it takes the form of a newspaper (figure 37). In this case, unlike the posters which, in a way, are still linked to reality, what is presented here is completely fabricated as there has been no employee celebration in the outside world and the image itself has been created by the company. The manipulation of reality and the subsequent creation of a false one becomes what Baudrillard (1994, p.2) defines as a ‘hyperreal’. This term is used to describe a world where reproduction replaces truth and an event that never happened, is fabricated. In the hyperreal, whoever controls the reality is able to also control the narrative that will then inherently affect the consumer.



*Figure 38. Severance (2022). ‘The grim barbarity of Optics and Design’. AppleTV+*



*Figure 39. Severance (2022). ‘The Macrodata Refinement Calamity’ depicts the same scene as figure 38, however the colours of the badges are swapped. AppleTV+*

Art is also used for fabricating reality, just like the newspaper did. ‘The grim barbarity of Optics and Design’ (figure 38) depicts a gruesome and violent encounter resulting from two departments coming into contact; Optics and Design and Macrodata Refinement. Members of the Macrodata Refinement are shown in disbelief as employees from Optics and Design (those with green badges) are starting fires, killing their co-workers and going to the lengths of eating their interiors. However, this is not the only version of the artwork as there exists another one, ‘The Macrodata Refinement calamity’ (figure 39), which displays the same events with the key differences being the colour of the badges: it is now the members of Macrodata Refinement that are attacking Optics and Design.

The presence of multiple versions of the work not only provide further evidence of this manipulation of reality, but they also introduce us to the idea of *Lumon* utilising their visual

language to foster conflict and fear among different departments. This creates a division between them that goes beyond animosity, as they share different versions of the past that clash with each other and stop them from being a collective. Each version of the painting respectively places the other department as the enemy, thus making it impossible for the workers to experience solidarity or consider group action against the real enemy. This tactic is quite typical of totalitarian regimes; as Arendt (1966, p. 245) suggests, to reach their maximum efficiency, these systems of power, would insert themselves even in the most private aspect of their citizens' lives and get rid of any form of autonomous activity that would still grant them a form of community and moral consciousness. *Lumon* does exactly this through the artworks, as they get workers to be terrified of communicating with the other department, erasing their possibility of uniting. It also provides the corporation with a scapegoat, as the respective departments declare the opposite one the common enemy and put all the blame on them: this is yet another practice that mirrors totalitarian regimes which famously utilised scapegoating to shift blame and “unify fractured populations under a common enemy” (VerPlanck, 2025).



**Figure 40.** Francisco Goya. (1820-23) ‘Saturn devouring his son’.

Furthermore, these artworks become the only source of proof for the events, giving the corporation the capacity to construct a reality so tangible that there is no longer a need for a real memory as they can now forge the past. *Lumon* is able to form what Assmann and Czaplicka (1995, p.129) define as ‘cultural memory’ whereby the past is recorded through ‘figures of memory’ like images, texts and monuments making them able to transcend time. *Lumon* is now able to create its own past that has the ability to shift the workers’ perception to the corporation’s desire.

To finally add to this analysis, both artworks resemble Francisco Goya’s ‘Saturn devouring his son’ (figure 40). Goya gives the viewer a depiction of the myth of Saturn, who, after receiving a prophecy of being overthrown by his sons, decides the only solution is to eat them. The artworks are similar in style and meaning: Goya’s piece represents Saturn eating his sons out of fear of being overthrown, in the same way *Lumon* fabricates a violent depiction of events to avoid employees’ solidarity that could end up with the corporation being overthrown like Saturn.

Across *Lumon*’s use of visual language, from posters to paintings, the corporation strives to shape its own reality where it is able to influence the workers’ psyche and control what they believe in. They are able to create their own world with its own values and morals that overtake all else that matters. In the “motivational posters” the messages are just constructed to turn workers into machines, whilst the newspaper and paintings create a new reality to mitigate dissent: everything presented to the employees is a fabrication, whether it is reality itself or the message that is being pushed. Through this process of reality, history and morality being warped, *Lumon* changes the conditions under which belief is formed, creating a fertile ground for constructing a belief system that will be discussed in depth in the following chapter.

## **Chapter 3. Producing the perfect employee**

3.1. Building a belief system

3.2. Conditioned obedience

### 3.1. Building a belief system

To create the perfect worker, one who wholeheartedly believes in the corporation's message, *Lumon* utilises principles and values that inform the workers' discipline. What is meant to represent the corporate mission or statement becomes a sort of commandment the worker needs to follow as the corporation sits above to make judgement of their choices. The principles become a tool to instil a sense of meaning and purpose in their work as well as create a sense of self-discipline in them. Through this and the use of physical artifacts the corporation ends up presenting itself more as a religion rather than just a workplace. This sets a series of implications for the workers and their behaviour in this environment, which will be analysed in this section.



*Figure 41.* Severance (2022). Embroidered piece illustrating the nine core principles displayed in Harmony Cobel's House. AppleTV+



**Figure 42.** Unknown. (1968) *Serenity Prayer Cross stitch framed*

When workers join the corporation they are presented with nine core principles (figure 41) which are: Vision, Verve, Wit, Cheer, Humility, Benevolence, Nimbleness, Probity and Wiles. Each one of them represents an aspect of the company as well as a virtue the worker should aspire to, but when looked at more closely, we start to realise the extent of how it benefits the company. For example, the first principle relates to the idea of having faith and no doubt in Kier's prospect for the corporation. On one hand this projects an image of the corporation's grandiosity onto the worker while on the other it also introduces an element of reverence for the CEO.

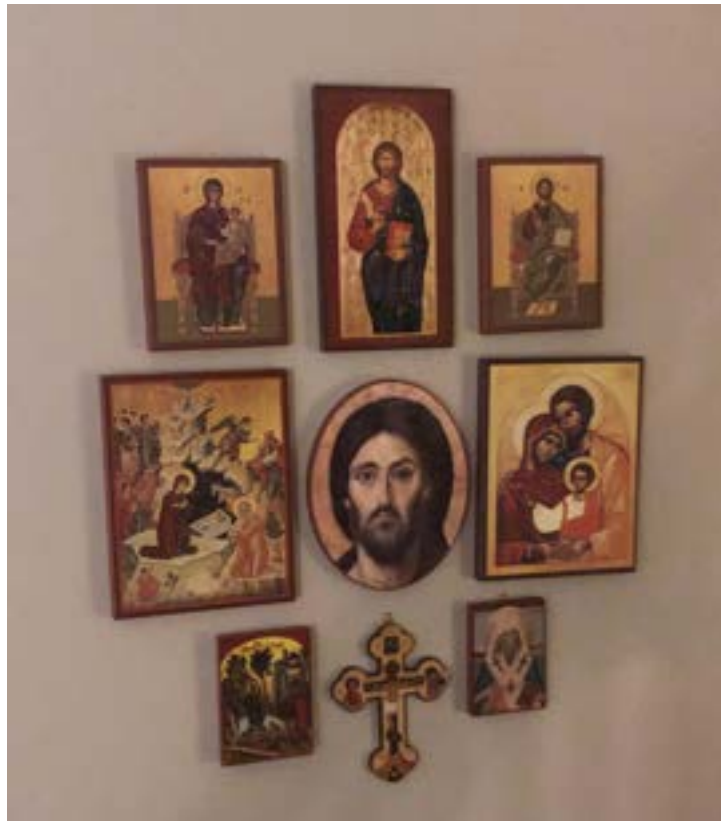
If we compare figure 41 with figure 42, a real embroidery artwork depicting a serenity prayer, the religious undertones in *Lumon's* work become clearer. Both pieces not only share similar features, like the floral theme around the message, but they also have the same function: they act as reminders of their faith, what it consists of and provide a sense of comfort. However, the work in figure 41 takes on a darker meaning as the embroidery piece placed inside Harmony Cobel's house (the manager of the office space) introduces the presence of the corporation inside a person's private and personal space.

The religious undertones of these principles are also supported by their resemblance of the ten commandments present in the Bible. In both cases these notions act in a similar way to the disciplinary systems discussed by Foucault (1975, p.180) where individuals are judged against a standard or norm (in this case it would be the principles) and the process of doing so encourages self-checking. Furthermore, in terms of the language used, the stern and rigorous tone adds a sense of higher purpose and meaning to what they are doing. This is also suggested by the creator of the show, Dan Erickson, as he states that these principles, taken from places he has worked in, exist to create a deeper philosophy in that workplace (Stefansky, 2022).

The addition of the spiritual element works, as religion exists with the purpose of providing meaning, comfort and consequentially having an influence on beliefs and behaviours (Stibich, 2022). This is fundamental to the employees as they have no real awareness of what their work is for, or what their purpose is. Workers are required to believe in the corporation for it to be able to instil this level of control and it is through the religious-like notions and values that they are able to do this. It works because a great part of religion is founded in mystery or filling in the gaps for what cannot be explained. By treating itself like a religion *Lumon* no longer needs to answer their employees' doubts as they can just point to their values and say “this is what Kier (God) wants”.



**Figure 43.** *Severance (2022). Portrait of Kier being displayed at an employee’s desk. AppleTV+*



**Figure 44.** Unknown. (2020) Iconography wall inside a house.



**Figure 45.** Unknown. (1952) Photograph of group including a portrait of Stalin hung on the wall.

The embroidery piece in figure 41 is not the only piece of physical artifact that possesses religious themes. In figure 43 we can observe a portrait of Kier being displayed on an employee's desk. When we analyse it in contrast with figure 44, which depicts several

iconographies of Jesus displayed in a house, it is possible to denote how both function with a similar role. Visually they represent the figure of worship but they also illustrate this idea of having them be with you at all times and protecting you. In the case of Kier's depiction though, it reintroduces the element of surveillance and constantly being under scrutiny that we also found with the piece of embroidery. It is important to point out how this goes beyond mirroring a religious practice, as it starts to resemble the one seen in totalitarian regimes, whereby a picture of the despot would be placed inside people's houses and in all different kinds of spaces (figure 45) to remind them they are constantly being monitored.



*Figure 46. Severance. (2022) 'Kier Taming the four tempers'. AppleTV+*



*Figure 47. Valentin De Boulogne. (1618) Christ driving the money lenders away from the temple.*

There is a tendency with *Lumon*, to utilise artworks for portraying Kier beyond his role of CEO and more as a deity. If we observe figure 46, we can see the corporation's founder depicted as he dominates the four tempers: Woe, Malice, Frolic and Dread. He stands above them, illuminated by a warm light coming from the sky as the four tempers stand beneath him scared and awaiting his punishment. This depiction illustrates Kier beyond human guises as he is able to control human characteristics. This becomes quite clear when we compare it to a depiction of Jesus like the one in figure 47. Not only the pieces share characteristics in style, with the strong chiaroscuro being central in both works, but their main subjects also share similar roles. They are both depicted holding a whip, in the same position, about to punish those who deserve it. Jesus is attacking the money lenders that are too attached to their material belongings and are going against God by bringing their commercial activities in the temple. Similarly, Kier punishes (or "tames", to reinforce this idea of domination) the four tempers, which are also a reflection of the more material and physical qualities of the workers. In both cases there is an aim of getting rid of "sin" or those qualities that distance the human from God.

The four tempers that we see him taming in the artwork exist to contrast the nine principles initially discussed. If the latter were meant to indicate what one should aspire to, the former set out what the worker should steer away from. If we circle back to the disciplinary system discussed by Foucault, these act as the negative counterpart in this punitive system. The notion of outlining a structure that defines right from wrong relates to infantilisation as the corporation once again sees the worker as a child that needs guidance, rather than as an adult.

Furthermore, the whip in Kier's hand, that in a religious context is meant to represent purification, here takes more on a meaning of subjugation (Goodbody, 2025). In the context of this work being present in the office, it truly reinforces the idea of Kier as a religious figure standing above the workers and judging their behaviour. This shift in portrayal of his figure is quite important as it highlights a practice typical of totalitarian regimes. In her writings Arendt (1966, p. 324) suggests how under these systems of domination the leader is presented beyond his initial political function, as he is now granted unending infallibility and all information goes through him, he is able to shape and interpret all events that happen around him. This closely matches the representation of Kier, and it becomes more evident as Arendt consequentially states that for this structure to flourish, obedience is essential. This

would explain the need for the corporation to introduce this depiction of Kier, as a success in their endorsement would grant them the required level of compliance and belief needed.



*Figure 48. Severance (2022). The ‘Perpetuity Wing’. AppleTV+*



*Figure 49. Unknown (2015). Shrine room below the sanctuary of St. Anthony - St. Alphonsus church in Greenpoint, Brooklyn.*

The final physical manifestation of the religious aspect of the corporation is through the ‘Perpetuity Wing’ (figure 48). This space holds the history of the corporation, featuring real scale models of each one of the CEOs that have run the company. Although this place does not have as clear religious symbols as the elements previously discussed do, it could be said that existing within this context, the ‘Perpetuity Wing’ becomes a sort of church as it holds and encapsulates all the principles as well as the figures of “devotion” of the corporation, the same way a space of worship would do. Compared with an existing shrine room inside a

church (figure 49) we can see the overlap between the two spaces, as the CEOs' statues mirror the ones of the saints. The workers look up to the CEOs just like the worshippers do to the saints, whilst they are being "looked over" by them. It provides the workers with a sense of purpose and grandiosity, filling up the void created by the lack of knowledge in regards to the work they perform.

What truly ties in all the components discussed, is language, as it becomes the true telltale sign of the reverence towards the corporation. If we observe figure 50, we can see Harmony Cobel, office manager, saying to one of the workers "We serve Kier, you child!". This phrase very clearly illustrates the relationship expected between worker and company.



*Figure 50. Severance (2022). Harmony Cobel talking to one of the employees. AppleTV+*

Placing the worker as a server of the corporation once again has religious undertones as it displays them as a sort of disciple to the "God" they serve. Secondly, the idea of the employee being addressed as "child" once again presents the aspect of infantilisation. It ties in the perception of the worker as an infant that needs to be guided by his parents, with the notion of disciples (or "children" like the believers are often referred to) being led by God. This idea of serving and being a child pushes the workers to decentre themselves and puts the corporation at the core of who they are and what they do, and in turn it eases their anxieties as they no longer need to be worried because their work serves Kier (God) and they are being led by him through good and bad.

Through the use of principles and condemnation of particular emotions (tempers) *Lumon* is able to engineer a sense of self-checking in the worker by communicating to them what is deemed as right and wrong. The religious undertones present in both creates a sense of rigor and purpose, much like the ten commandments do in Christianity. This is reinforced by the

portrayal of the corporation through religious lenses, as we see Kier depicted dominating human qualities as he becomes God-like. The sense of worship reaches its full expression in the 'Perpetuity Wing', where the workers can consult the history of the corporation and its CEOs. This environment becomes the place of worship for the workers, with the CEOs becoming the saints they would look up to if they were in a church. Through the creation of a room that hosts the history and the past of the company the employees are able to feel secure as they are now provided with a sense of belonging. Finally it is through the language that we see the full extent of the corporation treated like a religion. "We serve Kier, you child!" perfectly summarises not only the kind of relationship between workers and corporation, but it also demonstrates once again how the corporation does not view its employees as independent adults, but rather as children in need of guidance.

### 3.2. Conditioned obedience



*Figure 51. Severance (2022). Helly R. is brought to the 'Break Room' to be punished. AppleTv+*

The scene presented in figure 51 introduces the viewer to a new environment featured throughout the show, the 'Break Room'. In the series, Helly R. is taken here by Mr Milchick (the floor supervisor) after trying to escape the work floor multiple times. She is forced to sit in front of him while a light is shone on a screen in front of her, revealing an apology she is supposed to recite to be able to return to her workspace. Mr Milchick sits in front of her, counting the amount of times she reads the script and reads the data being recorded to determine whether she is being sincere or not. What is commonly known as a space for the employee to relax in, transforms in a place of torture and behavioural correction. The break is no longer time the employee dedicates to themselves but rather it is for the corporation. This scene reveals how employees' behaviour is corrected in the company but also how far the corporation is willing to go to keep their workers in line.

The setup of the room itself already communicates a different feeling to one of a typical office break room: the space is dark and unsettling, it is hard to make out the details in it and its main focus is set on the table Helly is sitting at. The only light is provided by the small lamp which serves to highlight the words on screen; in its attempt to only insert the bare minimum needed, the space lacks humanity and, in turn, feels cold, sterile and uninviting. Furthermore, the presence of the screen with the apology script creates a bigger divide between the characters, as well as building on the sense of coldness, with the words being written in a monospace font that mimics a sense of machinery, automation and conformity.



*Figure 52. Severance (2022). Outside corridor and entrance door to the 'Break Room'. AppleTV+*



*Figure 53. Lee Ferran. (2017) KGB prison door in Tallinn, Estonia*



*Figure 54. Unknown (2025) Interrogation Room in KGB prison in Tallinn, Estonia*



*Figure 55. Severance (2022). Counting device to track the amount of times Helly R. repeats the apology. AppleTV+*

These elements make the space mimic the look of an interrogation room: the external steel and cold door is designed to appear exactly like a prison cell (figure 52), whilst the seating arrangement, mixed with the dynamic of the pair and the data tracking (figure 55), further add nuance to the scene. The resemblance with a prison becomes evident when we compare the images from the show with ones taken from a KGB prison in Tallinn, Estonia (figure 53-54): not only the doors leading up to the room are practically identical but the rooms themselves share a similar bareness as they both only feature one single lamp to light up the whole room. This comparison is crucial as these were the spaces where the KGB, the security and intelligence unit of the Soviet Union, would fulfil its role of “ensuring that behaviour was enforced accordingly and any internal resistance to Soviet rule was suppressed” (Leah, 2023). This is quite similar to the role of Mr Milchick who is also trying to reinforce a particular behaviour and make sure that Helly no longer tries to escape from the office.

Foucault (1975, pp. 129-131) discusses the nature of interrogations beyond their function of plucking the truth out of the accused and rather he suggests how, through the use of this practice, institutions are able to go beyond this and discipline the person in a more profound and lasting way. This applies to Helly's interrogation as the nature of this session is more disciplinary than questioning. The manager's goal is not to actually get "truth" out of her, instead it is more about shaping her behaviour into not wanting to act against the company, much like how modern day interrogations described by Foucault are more about indoctrination.

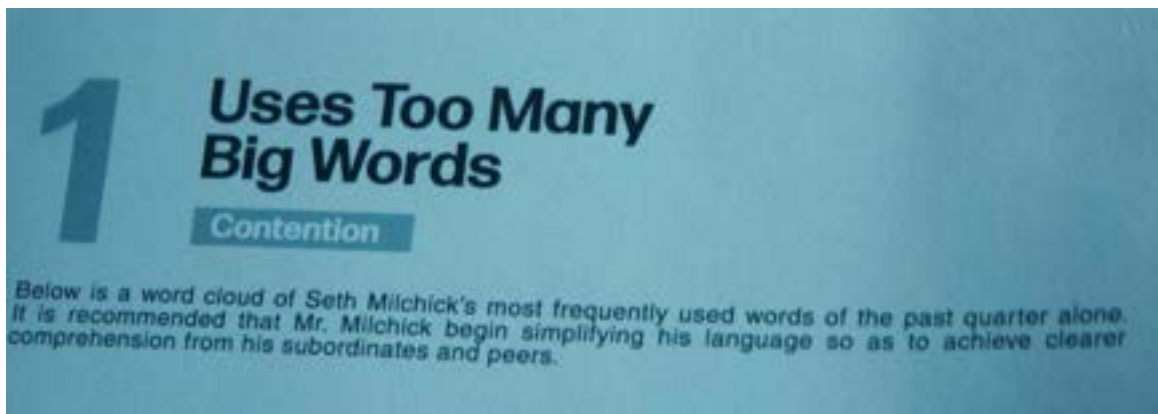
Furthermore, on the topic of indoctrination, if we consider what has been previously discussed regarding the mystification of the company, this environment also doubles as a sort of confessional. Here, the employee is the repenting sinner and the corporation is now the god that will absolve them of their sins. This is showcased through various ways, one of them being Helly sitting in front of Mr Milchick, her face partially hidden by the screen (figure 51), replicating the arrangement of a confessional. Much like in that setting, there is the element of repetition here as well. The believer can only find true forgiveness once they have gone through the repetition of prayers ordered by the confessor, the same way Helly will only be freed if her apology is repeated enough times to be considered truly sincere.

Even the language utilised in the scene gives off a sense of witnessing a religious confession. When Helly first starts reading the words on the screen what the viewer hears is "Forgive me for I have [...]" which in a way replicates the formula pronounced by religious believers when they are confessing, "Forgive me for I have sinned [...]" . Although it is not exactly identical, it is still interesting to consider, especially taking note of the context it sits in. She could have been asked to simply make a formal apology but, instead, the one she is asked to perform is much more visceral and minimises her in the eyes of the company. By masking a disciplinary act through a different language (that of a ritual) there is an opportunity to make it appear as something else, in this case a religious confession (Fairclough, 1985, p.215). This is important as it gives more leverage to the corporation since it becomes harder for the worker to distinguish what is a confession/apology and what is an act of behaviour conditioning.

Additionally, the element of repetition in the apology, besides alluding to the aspect of mystification, also turns the apology from emotional into a signal of brainwashing, obedience and automation. By having the worker constantly repeat the same stream of sentences over

and over again, it creates what is defined as the ‘illusory truth effect’ whereby repetition overpowers rationality, making the individual believe what they are saying is fact, regardless of whether that is true or not (Hutchinson, 2024). Building on this, Foucault discusses (1975, p. 139) how the repeated practices imposed as behavioural correction result in an obedient subject. Together, these explain how the process of repetition goes beyond a sign of repentance, and rather becomes a form of torture that results in a compliant worker that believes whatever they are fed by the corporation.

Language is another way for the company to instil obedience, and we can denote this clearly in the scene, if we look at the contrast in how the two characters pose themselves. Mr Milchick stays composed throughout the duration of the scene, policing Helly around the way she speaks.



*Figure 56. Severance (2022). Report handed to Mr Milchick, addressing his language. AppleTV+*

This notion of language control is present in other moments as well where even Mr Milchick himself gets reprimanded for his use of words and is asked by his superiors to use simpler words (figure 56). This gives the corporation the opportunity to imprint control on its employees, no matter the rank, as well as bring in conformity as much as possible. According to Foucault (1980, pp.99 – 100) power finds its ramifications in all aspects of the individual’s life and it is through these smaller enactments of it, like language control, that institutions possess the ability to instil dominance over individuals.

The scene in its entirety showcases how the company corrects the employees’ “bad behaviour” and how the mechanisms utilised to do this inherently build obedience, fear and submission in them. Firstly, the space these practices are conducted in are uninviting and already give off a sense of discomfort. The room looks like an interrogation room and the

supervisor acting like an officer adds a level of guilt to the employee and a sense of formality that makes the act feel more solemn. The room also doubles as a confessional as it reaffirms the idea that the corporation is a sort of deity that the employee has to confess to; with the supervisor acting as the priest, the corporation itself as God, and the employee as the sinner who has to beg for forgiveness.

The apology features an element of repetition which transforms the act into a form of labour and it strictly relates to the way in which under surveillance capitalism, Zuboff (2019, p. 14) suggests that emotions are quantified (like Mr Milchick analysing the data to be able to tell if the apology is sincere) and behaviour is transformed for optimisation (the obedient worker will not run away and they will continue producing for the corporation). The language in the scene becomes another case of how the corporation enacts behavioural correction, as it is utilised to remind each employee of their place in the corporation and reinforce power dynamics between employers and employees.

## Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore how corporations utilise design to exercise control over their employees and mask malpractice under the guise of design choices seemingly meant to benefit the worker. To do this the show *Severance* was analysed, as it provides a great scope of design used for control that is not only based in fiction but finds its roots in reality.

In Chapter 1, the office space was analysed in the way it infantilises and surveils its workers, whilst also creating a self-contained world within this space. As shown, the workers are inserted into an environment that replicates a playground which rewards each of their achievements with a small gadget or toy. As they do this, all their activities are monitored, creating in them a sense of self-checking that gives the corporation a higher level of control without being physically present. To keep workers content in the space and, once again, have more power over them, the corporation creates a small world inside the office, that is meant to satisfy all their needs, from less to more personal. This overlaps with a practice done by modern day corporations, to keep workers inside the office as much as possible by providing them with all sorts of entertainment they might require.

In Chapter 2 we explored how the corporation forces a narrative on the worker through the fabrication of reality. Through visual media such as banners and lists, it is able to push the idea of quantifying time, erasing individuality and mechanising the workers' actions. Motivational posters further push those ideals as well as endorsing efficiency and connecting one's happiness to productivity. By manufacturing reality, the corporation is also able to repress discontent that is present on the office floor, going to the extent of creating a fake newspaper to reassure the workers their needs are being heard and there should be no need to protest. Artworks are also used to do this, as *Lumon* manipulates the representation of events to create a divide and foster animosity between departments. Together these visual elements set the foundation upon which *Lumon* will build its belief system.

The final chapter focused on analysing how the corporation, through the use of visual language and values, builds a belief system that portrays the CEO/company as a god and how the corporation gets rid of disobedience. The first section analyses how *Lumon* presents itself under religious guises and how that affects the employees' behaviour and view of the company. Through the introduction of a series of principles the employee should follow, the corporation is able to create a sense of self-scrutiny in the employees. Moreover, both in its

treatment of these principles and the language surrounding them, the corporation utilises similar methods associated with organised religions. On one hand this creates a feeling of purpose and belonging in the workers while, on the other, the corporation is provided with the opportunity to maintain a level of mystery and shape reality to its liking. In the final section, it is analysed how the company sets out to correct the employees' misbehaviour and acts against the corporation. *Lumon* produces an environment that recreates the look of an interrogation room, with elements reminiscent of those used in totalitarian regimes. Additionally, this environment also doubles as a form of confessional with several aspects of the behavioural correction having religious connotations. The process of repeating an apology not only reminds of the act of reciting prayers after confession but it also becomes a form of torture that beats the employee into submission, like interrogations would do under totalitarian regimes.

Through these analyses it was shown how design goes beyond its material or aesthetic role and becomes a tool for reinforcing control. Controlling the way the workplace offers comfort, entertainment or punishment consequently and actively shapes the way the workers think, move and behave in these spaces. *Severance's* portrayals of control are substantial as they are not just matters of fiction, but they are grounded in how humans enforce control over other humans in real life. Furthermore, the show also exposes how methods of control originating in authoritarian and religious contexts can be easily adapted to late-stage capitalism corporate environments. Though corporations today might not utilise all of these same tactics, I believe it is still essential to bring these analyses to the forefront to raise awareness, start discussions and preserve human agency within these increasingly regulated and mediated environments.

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