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**“MAYBE LOVE TRANSCENDS SEVERANCE”: CONTROL OF EMOTIONS
AND REBELLION AGAINST DEVELOPING TECHNOLOGY IN THE DYSTOPIAN
TV SERIES *SEVERANCE***

Keywords: dystopia, *Severance*, capitalist affects, grief, emotion as commodity

Dystopia, Emotions and Capitalism

Since the release of Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), dystopian stories such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) or *The Hunger Games* (2008) have turned towards the illustration of subordinated societies. Often alienated from the rest of the world, countries placed in alternative realities serve as a warning against contemporary or possible threats to human agency. In some of the most recognizable narratives, such as George Orwell's *1984* (1949) or the abovementioned *The Hunger Games* (2008), written by Suzanne Collins, a conflict preceded the emergence of the new oppressive order. These stories imply that the easiest way to gain control over a group of individuals (whether a district, country or continent) is to do so during or in the aftermath of a chaos-inducing event, such as a world war or at least an internal political conflict. Moreover, they reflect anxiety connected to the loss of agency of the individual under the government. In his totalitarian dystopia, Orwell expressed his fear of the corruption of intellectuals in the socialist movement (Claeys 118). Collins wrote *The Hunger Games* influenced by a number of factors, including the Iraq War and its portrayal (Finnsson 15). These literary works can be classified as

rebellious responses to palpable instances of the abuse of power by the government.

In 2022, the dystopian genre welcomed a new addition. It was no longer a literary work or a movie adaptation thereof, but a TV series—*Severance*. Its premise also differed from that of its predecessors. The setting of *Severance* does not involve any particular military conflict, nor does it seem to comment on a totalitarian government. In fact, *Severance*, in an unusual style, focuses on the relationship between workers and corporations. Its vision of everyday reality welcomes the viewers to a cryptic world of numbers and classified data. Early into the show, it can be noticed that *Severance* does not mirror the twenty-first century reality, but exaggerates it in a sinister way. The aim of this essay is to examine *Severance* as a piece of dystopian fiction and showcase the correlation between emotions, agency, and consumption in the story.

Dystopias often refer to what comes after: the aftermath of the collapse of the current social order, government, or even economic systems. Mariya Zhurkova and Elena Khomutnikova state that the dystopian genre is concerned with “the disastrous consequences that the attempts of bringing to life the utopian society might lead to” (188). They describe the dystopian society as “miserable and wretched,” highlighting that it is a place “where inequality and injustice prevail” (2019: 186). Dystopias warn readers against a failed attempt to bring utopian visions to life. Moreover, they highlight that the state under the dystopian conditions makes society “easily manageable” and prone to submission (188). In *The Rise of Knowledge Society*, Peter F. Drucker states that capitalism became society (1993: 52). He suggests that in its late stage, capitalism no longer serves as the economic system, but rather, it becomes intertwined with daily life of a person to a degree that no longer makes it a part of life but life itself. The fundamental rules of capitalism have thus become the fundamental rules of life; capitalism no longer influences society but dictates its very existence. This late extreme stage of capitalism may later transform into a post-capitalism. Drucker predicts that “[t]he post-capitalist society will be

divided by a new dichotomy of values and of aesthetic perceptions,” stating that “[t]he dichotomy will be between ‘intellectuals [...] and ‘managers,’ the former concerned with words and ideas, the latter with people and work” (2012: 7). With the idea of the clear division of society, there emerges the question whether the separation itself is not a catalyst of dystopia. The question seems to be answered by David Beech; he explains that “[p]ostcapitalist discourse is always utopian,” stating that post-capitalist world consists of human beings “freed from the need to work or the drive for capital accumulation” (2019: 2). Therefore, postcapitalist society is a dual structure designed to free humanity from its relentless chase after a higher income. It can be deduced that the members of postcapitalist society, or some of them, according to Drucker, may be able to detach themselves from the purely economic value of the world and simply be able to enjoy what the rest of the world has to offer. The postcapitalist utopia, whose inhabitants are freed from the need to work, omits the shifts through which society would need to go in order to attain this transformation. Perhaps these mechanisms and their emergence make room for dystopia.

While Drucker states that capitalism and society are inextricably bound, Eva Illouz focuses on the capitalist self and its individual relationship with emotions. In her book *Emotions as Commodities: Capitalism, Consumption and Authenticity*, she states that, “consumption works from within the very core of the cultural scripts of selfhood” (2018: 7). Moreover, Illouz writes that “consumption directly taps into the core elements of social identity—sex, gender, desire” (2018: 7). With consumption being a preconceived part of selfhood that takes over various spheres of one’s consciousness, the freedom of an individual seems to be in jeopardy. Strictly dictated capitalist goals and a simultaneously nurtured internal need for continuous consumption limit one’s point of view to a degree that influences a person’s hierarchy of needs, taking away or at least limiting their agency. Fueled by the capitalist paradigms, the

desire to consume in Drucker's dichotomic society can be fulfilled according to one's place in the hierarchy.

As suggested by Illouz, it is not only the outside system that takes away one's agency. Occasionally, the agency of a person can be restricted by their own decisions or the limitations imposed by or on their physical body. In "The Contingency of Pain," Sara Ahmed mentions period pains as the pain she tries to move away from, "even though what is being moved away from is felt within [her] body" (26). The period pain mentioned by Ahmed manifests itself as a physical sensation and is a result of biological and chemical changes in her organism. A body tries to move away from something that seems unknown and unwelcome, despite being a reaction of the same nervous system that fights it. The alien sensation sabotages the body that has created it. In cases such as chronic pain, the internal, physical pain affects the mental state of the person. One's agency is restricted by physical pain: it disturbs the one who experiences it, prevents a person from performing regular tasks despite being the product of the same body.

As pain from the inside may influence one's perception of reality, it is worth mentioning that there exists a range of services dedicated to the improvement of one's mental state. In *Emotions as Commodities: Capitalism, Consumption and Authenticity*, Eva Illouz comments on such services and their role within the capitalist system; referring to her earlier study, she writes that mental health services are "an industry which sells mental health, self-realization, well-being, and an ideal emotional make-up" (Illouz 2008 in Illouz 2018: 20, emphasis original). The involvement of the mental health industry within the framework of the capitalist system expands the notion of consumption to include the emotional sphere. Illouz not only states that the need for consumption is an emotion of its own that tends to dominate over other emotions, but also comments on commodification of those subordinated emotions. Paying for a therapy session itself is an act of participation in the capitalist framework imposed by the mental health industry. Patients pay to exchange negative

emotions for solutions found during therapy sessions. The expected result is to feel better and to be able to do more. Illouz's "ideal emotional make-up" is therefore something that directly taps into the capitalist system. The services meant to improve one's mental state improve it in a way that leads to increased productivity, and, as a result, benefit the status quo. A complementary observation is made in her book *Ugly Feelings* by Sianne Ngai, who states that certain negative emotions are not erased but rather "counter-valori[zed]" by the capitalist framework (3). Ngai provides examples of such practices: she describes the transformation of fear and anxiety about being replaced in the workplace into "flexibility, adaptability, and a readiness to reconfigure oneself": in her analysis, these negative emotions are not discouraged but "integrated" into the workplace (4).

Both Illouz and Ngai address the subordination of the individual's emotions to capitalist ideas. The desire to be productive and serve the system well exceeds the simple need to feel good in one's body, and makes individuals better subjects. Counter-valorization and emotional make-up reconstruct negative affects by turning them into "the psychic fuel on which capitalist society runs" (Ngai 3). Finally, the notion of self-care becomes a myth slowly growing into self-policing and self-preparation to excel as a part of capitalist framework.

Corporate Dystopia

The Apple TV+ series *Severance* (2022–) shows that, on the surface, a postcapitalist dystopia does not need to be drastically different from the reality as its viewers know it. The show tells the story of Mark Scout, a seemingly unremarkable everyman, whose work for the Lumon company is described as "mysterious and important" (*Severance* Season 1 Episode 4). The name of the show originates from the severance procedure present in the series: the surgical insertion of a severance chip into the brain of the employee, causing the consciousness of the person to split into two separate personas—an "innie"

who exists on the severed floor of Lumon, and an “outie,” who has no memory of their actions at work. According to Dan Erickson, the creator of the show, the idea for it was born from life itself. The creator admitted that the idea of splitting oneself into two, in order to avoid work, occurred to him as his own desire. Erickson added that after a deeper analysis he realized that the idea left room for abuse on the side of the employer (Dean 2022). However, the mystery of unawareness became a catalyst for the story.

Severance takes the insipidity and boredom of the so-called 9-to-5 work and twists it. The conventionality of corporate life in *Severance* seems almost off-putting. According to some critics, despite its eeriness and uncanniness, the viewers have found the show relatable: perhaps precisely because of its depiction of white-collar work as nonsensical and alienating. One of the reasons behind its popularity may thus have been its premiere during the early stage of post-COVID era, when some employees began to question their relationship with their work (Arunasalam 2025). The show delves into the core of corporate life. The insight into the severed floor reveals Mark S. to be a part of a small team of Macrodata Refinement workers whose job is to sort numbers that “feel different.” Besides Mark S., the team consists of Irving B., an older man devoted to company’s mission and its core principles, Dylan G., who, unlike Irving B. seems to be motivated by benefits offered by Lumon instead of an internal need to fulfill some sort of mission, and Petey K.—the well-liked department-chief. Irving’s religion-like devotion to the workplace and Dylan’s materialism surely resemble characteristic the viewers may have noticed in their own coworkers, albeit depicted in an exaggerated way. The average viewers of *Severance* may see themselves in the character of Mark S., who initially does not seem to possess any characteristics that make him unique in his workplace. However, the balance of Mark S.’s life is disturbed when his friend Petey disappears (*Severance* Season 1 Episode 1). Later in the same episode, Mark Scout notices a strange man in the woods outside of his sister’s house. As the plot unravels, Mark S. begins to uncover new layers of the system he is a part of. Moreover, his

curiosity is fueled not only by his interior motives, but also by his encounters with Helly R., a rebellious figure whose main goal is to leave the company and the work she has been assigned to do.

The case of Mark and his colleagues becomes an example of Drucker's dichotomy. Because of Lumon's invention, the division is no longer between intellectuals and managers designated as separate groups consisting of different people; instead, it comprises different parts of the same person. In this case, Drucker's theory leaves room for abuse mentioned by the creator of the show. While individuals such as Mark Scout agree to the procedure, willingly subjecting their body to work, the innies, as separated fragments of their consciousness, experience the work physically and mentally. However, due to Lumon's policy, they are not able to resign, as it is their outside selves who make the final decisions. Mark S. cannot ever leave the floor where his only purpose is to meet the end-of-quarter goals; he ceases to exist the moment Mark Scout's consciousness is triggered by the sound of an elevator. To Lumon, Mark S. does not exist outside of the company; to Mark Scout and his family, he initially exists as the idea; to the rest of the world, he is nonexistent. His time on the floor depends on his performance as the employee and, as the second season reveals, his existence will be terminated the moment he finishes refining the last file. Mark S. is set to exist for only as long as he brings profit to the system that created him.

However, Mark Scout also cannot live outside of the economic system he serves, and that is why undergoes the eponymous severance: Mark S.'s existence is rooted in Mark Scout's need to persist in the capitalist system. Moreover, the abbreviation of worker's full surnames into a single initial immediately highlights the degradation of an innie to a unit. The surname is something inherited or taken from a spouse: it is a sign of connection and belonging, indicating a personal history and bonds with others. In contrast to outies, innies do not have the privilege of remembering their roots, as their purpose is not to form relationships but to produce satisfactory outcomes for

the company. Additionally, the contrast between the innie and the outie becomes permanent with Helly R.'s failed journey to freedom. Conscious of her fabricated existence, Helly does not hesitate to test the limits of her own agency. Desperate for freedom after having her request to resign denied by her outie, Helly decides to hang herself in the elevator that allows the workers to enter the severed floor (*Severance* Season 1 Episode 4): an attempt that is prevented, showing that innies do not even have the right to terminate their own existence.

In contrast, because of the chip, Mark S. seemingly considers himself to be "living" his best life, at least at first. He likes his job and most of his colleagues, and he does not appear discouraged by the hostile, labyrinth-like design of the severed floor, which itself creates a dissonance between the viewer and the characters. Understandably, to the innies, the severed floor is all that they initially know, but the viewers can notice the disturbing artificiality of white walls and green floor coverings. This unwelcoming minimalism strikes from the first introduction of the oddly symmetrical workstations of Mark S. and his coworkers. The hyperbole of regular corporate activities such as a celebration of achievements also contributes to the awkwardness of a place. However, Mark S. seems to enjoy various activities prepared by his supervisors as means of reward or entertainment. In contrast, Mark Scout, who decided to subject the body to the severance procedure and, therefore, seems to have more power over it, struggles with his reality. At the beginning of the first episode of the series, he can be seen crying in his car before entering the workplace: however, it is not the workplace that causes this reaction. Further glimpses into Mark Scout's life prove that he is experiencing more difficulties. Moreover, the coldness of the outside world escalates his alienation and withdrawal. While the office setting presents itself as hermetic through set design, the world outside is represented as endlessly empty and lonely, with the snow-covered and seemingly nearly empty town. Similarly, the house Mark lives in appears impersonal and the neighborhood it is a part of seems desolate. The world in

which Mark Scout lives is thus an embodiment of a “miserable and wretched” reality mentioned by Zhurkova and Khomutnikova.

A valuable perspective on the role performed by Mark S. is afforded by Ngai’s concept of a “knowledge-seeking man.” Drawing upon Fredric Jameson’s analysis, Ngai explains that a “knowledge-seeking man” in conspiracy film is a stand-in for the postmodern intellectual who attempts to unravel the possibly infinite network of relations which establish the social order. The character at some point of the story finds out that he is just a part of the system that functions beyond his comprehension and control (298–299). The duality of the world presented in *Severance* illustrates the complex network of connections with innies, outies, and characters that exist between or outside these notions. As representatives of the dystopian genre protagonist, Mark Scout and Mark S. find themselves in the middle of such a system orchestrated by the Lumon company. Additionally, Mark’s ability to comprehend the reality he is a part of is limited by the severance procedure. The role of the knowledge-seeking man is not a role he is initially introduced with, but, rather, it is something that is passed onto him and encouraged by outside factors, such as Petey’s (dis)appearance or Helly’s attempt to free herself. The severance procedure and chip become not only elements of dystopian development meant to entrap him but also symbols of capitalist goals. They limit his agency as the innie, but also extend the restraint to the person he is a part of—Mark Scout.

Furthermore, from the beginning, the show directly showcases an abuse of the severance procedure through the character of Harmony Cobel. Known to Mark S. as Ms. Cobel and to Mark Scout as Mrs. Selvig, Harmony supervises Mark S.’s work inside of the company and spies on Mark Scout as his neighbor. She embodies the paradox of Lumon’s policies and dystopian, everlasting control over the employees/citizens. On one hand, Lumon’s marketing strategy highlights the balance and separation that may result in full psychological autonomy from the capitalist morals and goals which prioritize productivity and performance. Lumon advertizes the severance procedure as an

unbreakable wall that separates the innie from the outie, enabling the outie to never concern themselves with their job. However, Mark's autonomy is repeatedly violated by the presence of Harmony in his life. At first, he is unaware of the oppression he faces. The initial episodes of *Severance* explain the severance procedure as a security tool, highlighting that not only is the job "mysterious and important," which means it can only be done by a severed employee, a person freed from everyday distractions, but also that the data Mark is processing is so sensitive that it must be protected from the outside world. However, one of the earliest demonstrations of alternative reasons for chip usage can be seen in the fifth and sixth episode of the first season when Mark's sister, Devon, meets a severed woman, Gabby Arteta, outside of the company headquarters, which is supposed to be the only "severed" location. At first, Devon encounters Gabby at a "baby camp," a retreat consisting of cottage-like buildings, where Devon (accompanied by her husband and brother) goes to give birth.. As the two women talk about parenthood, Gabby mentions that she plans to name her son William. Devon notices the woman again later when they are both in the park with their newborns. She approaches Gabby, who does not seem to recognize her. Shortly after they begin an awkward conversation, Devon tells her that her newborn son "looks like a William," to which Gabby responds, "his name's Bradley, actually" (*Severance* Season 1 Episode 6): Gabby has no memory of the name her innie wanted to choose for the child she birthed. The chip, whose sole purpose was supposedly to prevent company secrets from being released into the outside world, seems to be used as a method of avoiding unpleasant experiences by those who can afford it: the Artetas are revealed to be wealthy, as Gabby's husband is a politician supporting the legalization of severance.

Emotions under Capitalism

As demonstrated above, *Severance* takes the already existing industry of emotional make-up to the next level by selling good emotions (or at least, a way

to dispense with negative emotions) with the help of futuristic technology. This example highlights the implied class difference but it also proves technology to be a tool of power which might easily contribute to imbalance in a relationship such as a marriage. Gabby Arteta's innie, despite going through labor, does not possess any decisive power, as she is unable to control the name of a child she gave birth to: she is effectively enslaved by Gabby and her husband, and exists only for the purposes of going through unpalatable birth experiences; at the same time, Gabby is divided into two, while her husband does not need to undergo a similar dangerous procedure to benefit from the way it makes it possible for him to have more children than his wife might otherwise want, as implied in the ninth episode of the first season. The existence of innie Gabby implies inequality between a woman and a man in a marriage. Despite having her consciousness split in two, Gabby's body remains as one. She is subjected to the dangers of birth and severance procedure at the same time. Additionally, the existence of her innie raises questions about the notion of consent in the relationship as outside the Lumon company, severance seems to be a procedure unregulated by any law.

Episode seven of the second season helps the viewer uncover yet another truth about Lumon's developments. The episode focuses on the mysterious character of Gemma, who haunts the narrative from the beginning of the show. Gemma is Lumon's special project, as her consciousness has been divided into twenty-five alters instead of the regular two presented in all previous cases. One of her innies exists solely to go to the dentist and undergo dental procedures, another writes Christmas cards for an eternity, and the third flies as a passenger in an apparently crashing plane. In Gemma's case, the chip is a commodity able to erase the smallest fears of the human who can afford it. While the outies slowly approach an emotionally utopian phase of societal development, their innies continually experience both common and extreme horrors, deprived of any comfort. Mark Scout and Mark S. become an extension of Drucker's theory; meanwhile Gemma, similarly to the mother mentioned in

the paragraph above, represents the effects of efforts to achieve “an ideal emotional make[up]” as introduced by Illouz. The invention perfected by the exploitation of Gemma’s body is presumably meant to allow individuals to experience a pain-free, fearless life without the need to undergo therapy, as negative experiences can seemingly be severed and externalized: Gemma and her innies become a means of outsourcing all negative emotions. While therapy helps a person with healing, it also requires time, effort, and energy put into the process of becoming a healthier version of oneself. In contrast, the severance procedure reduces the time contributed to the process of healing by temporarily erasing negative factors from the life of a severed person.

It is important to mention that while Lumon offers a range of commodified effects and seems to possess significant power, the procedure remains controversial in the world of the show. Mark’s choice to sever himself is something that becomes a topic of an uncomfortable debate. His sister refers to it as something that he is supposed to share with people only if he decides to do so (*Severance* Season 1 Episode 1), implying the need to shield him from negative reactions. However, at first Mark sees himself as benefiting from the procedure. During the first episode, when Mark and Devon talk, she asks him about the therapy he is supposed to be attending to cope with the tragic death of his wife Gemma and the depression he suffered as its consequence. Her question is met with Mark’s response, “Well, the work thing’s helped,” which implies that he has abandoned the more traditional form of treatment. Devon replies, “I just feel like forgetting about her [Gemma] for hours a day isn’t the same as healing” (Season 1 Episode 1).

To Mark, the severance procedure may be compared to extremely strong painkillers. Mark’s pain is something that he experiences as an emotional reaction to grief. It is the pain from within that he tries to move away from by avoiding it with the help of severance. In the second season, Mark’s grief is confirmed to be “a primary motivator for severing.” During the same scene, the pain associated with losing a loved one is connected to the physical sensation

as a metaphor for the suffering. One of the characters, Mr. Milchick, tells Mark, “You said that since she died, every day feels like a year. That you feel like you were choking on her ghost” (*Severance* Season 2 Episode 2). The reaction of choking moves the choking subject closer to death. The pain from within is something that a person usually desperately tries to move away from, but for obvious reasons cannot. Even when the pain someone feels inside is physical and can be treated with medication, the thought of it still keeps it present; therefore, the person in pain does not move away from it. The inventors of the severance procedure, or, rather, its sellers, prey on that. In the same conversation, Mr. Milchick tells Mark that his innie is happy and knows nothing about the pain that is visible in Mark’s reaction at the moment (*Severance* Season 2 Episode 2). On some level, severance proves to be more effective than medication or therapy, because it eliminates pain from one’s memory. Innies Mark does not know about Gemma and her fate; therefore, he cannot experience longing for her or associate anything with her past presence. In turn, even though Mark Scout does not know life without pain, he is able to function more effectively in the postcapitalist social framework because of the existence of Mark S.; consequently, Mark Scout becomes capable of fulfilling the role of a worker, even though it is only through externalizing the work tasks onto a separate persona. Therefore, Mark Scout is perceived as functioning better than before, when he was constantly affected by his grief and his emotions interfered with his productivity and, accordingly, his social value.

Conclusion

Emotions, agency, and consumption function indissociably in the world of *Severance*. It can be stated that consumption is a predominant factor as it is the core of the capitalist and postcapitalist self. The story of Mark’s severance begins with his inability to perform at his workplace due to the traumatic loss of his wife. It seems significant that despite his grief being an omnipresent part of Mark’s life, it is precisely when he is unable to work that he ultimately

decides to pursue the procedure. By severing himself, Mark gives up a part of his free will. Arguably, grief as a pain from within, an alien feeling overtaking his body, also restricted him without the need for physical presence. Despite being the product of Mark's life and psyche, grief seemingly limits his agency. The severance procedure, connected with a well-paid job and a number of bureaucratic arrangements, seems to create an illusion of control, necessary when fighting against unrestricted emotions. In order to fulfill his role in the economic system, Mark decides to give his agency away to Lumon instead of having it restricted by his own grief. It is the act of making a decision itself that differentiates severing oneself from grieving. While involuntary surrendering to grief reduces his productivity almost completely, the severance procedure increases it by separating his consciousness from his internal pain. However, it must be emphasised that Mark falls victim to the misleading advertising of commodified affects sold by Lumon. As stated before by Zhurkova and Khomutnikova, the society "bends into submission" because of how "easily manageable" it is (188). By selling something that basically turns off negative emotions and experiences, Lumon company slowly subordinates people. Mark Scout has two motivations in severance—to remain a capitalist consuming subject and to escape pain even temporarily instead of either working through it or living with it. The severance procedure becomes the key to fulfillment of both of these desires. However, it leads to the creation of another subject—Mark S.—whose dystopian existence is removed from view while he undergoes labour and torture in the service of the system he is subordinated to. Mark S.'s existence and life on the severed floor makes it impossible for Mark Scout to learn about Gemma's suffering. As the viewers observe Mark S. and the relationships he has formed and developed on the severed floor, it becomes evident that Mark Scout's choice to undergo the procedure will result in disastrous consequences. Between the two seasons, Mark S. seems to have evolved from the character whose sole purpose was to separate Mark Scout from the memory of Gemma to a bridge that finally reconnects Mark and his

wife. However, as the show's plot concludes with the final episode of the second season, Mark S. becomes a character of his own with separate goals and struggles, despite still being tied to Mark Scout. Nevertheless, his rebellion induced by his romantic relationship with Helly R. ties to the show's premise. In his case, love transcends severance because it encourages him to fight for his right to permanently exist in a world that designed him as a temporary solution to Mark Scout's problems.¹

Endnotes

1. The early draft of this article was submitted as an assignment for Literature and Culture Today: The American Nightmare course taught by Dr Nelly Strehlau in 2025.

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Abstract

A number of literary works, especially those from dystopian genre, such as George Orwell's *1984* (1949) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) have been concerned with the notion of agency and its limitations, and have explored it in various settings. In 2022, the broad catalogue of dystopian media welcomed a new addition, the Apple TV+ series *Severance*. The show creates a setting familiar to the potential viewer by exploring the eerie corporate world of consumption-fueled capitalism, whose subjects chase after emotionlessness required for satisfying results in a profit-oriented workplace. The show explores the relationship between negative affects and late-stage capitalist society, modified by the use of a neurological chip designed to increase the productivity of an employee. The aim of this essay is to apply notions developed by, among others, Sara Ahmed and Eva Illouz, to explore the connection between the agency of a person, their emotional make-up, and an economic system enhanced by futuristic technological advancements.