

Research Article

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“Normal Is What We Make It, Right?” Ordinary Aesthetics and Uncanny Twists in Contemporary TV Series

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Abstract: Contemporary TV shows, characterized by their complex narrative form, are designed to reveal the simple. They enable characters and viewers alike to discover the ordinary by coupling the everyday to an underworld populated by criminals, demons, vampires, and other kinds of “lowlives.” I will argue here that the structure of the Möbius strip, or Escher twist, draws a particular aesthetic appeal at the intersection of these worlds. I call these twists uncanny in the Cavellian sense that the underworld, looking strangely familiar, has the capacity of making the ordinary look unfamiliar, inherently strange, and unstable. Rather than allowing us to judge the demonic or illegal, they disclose what is normally inaccessible to us precisely because it is so ordinary and simple, so familiar and in plain sight. I will support this idea of Escher-twisting from one world to another by analyzing examples from *Twin Peaks* (ABC 1990-2, Showtime 2017), *The Sopranos* (HBO 1999-2007), *Awake* (NBC 2012), and *Ozark* (Netflix 2017–2022).

Keywords: ordinary aesthetics, American TV shows, complexity, simplicity, ordinary, two worlds, Möbius strips, Escher twists, uncanny, Stanley Cavell, *Twin Peaks*, *The Sopranos*, *Awake*, *Ozark*

1 Introduction: The Twisted Shows of the New TV

Marked by their complex narrative form that transcends the distinction between more traditional episodic and continuous serial forms (between, to wit, the sitcom, and the soap opera), contemporary drama shows on American TV spin intricate webs of multiple interweaving storylines across vast spans of time, even while offering various forms of consistency to individual episodes.¹ In this essay, I argue that this complex narrative form serves the purpose of revealing the simple, or the ordinary. I do so, however, by demonstrating that contemporary TV shows do not abide by any “simple” binaries (of, say, the simple/complex; form/content). Indeed, if I further postulate the (related) thesis that the drama series of the New Television, or neo-series,²

¹ Mittell, *Complex TV*. I have discussed my account of this book more extensively on several occasions, including in another contribution to Open Philosophy (Gerrits, “From Episodic Novel to Serial TV”). See also Gerrits, “Im/Moral Perfectionism”.

² Shuster, *New Television*; Engell, *Thinking Through Television and The Switch Image*. The kind of contemporary TV shows I have in mind here are the hour-long drama shows that have emerged since the millennial turn, with important predecessors in the 1990s. These TV shows have been grouped by a variety of other names as well, such as Art television (Thompson) and Quality TV (Robert J. Thompson; Akass & McCabe 2007). I find such terms to bypass the relevant “fact of television” (to speak with Cavell) that these shows precisely challenge any clear distinctions between the popular and the high arts (Cavell, “The Fact of Television”). That is not to deny that the series of the new (third and esp. fourth) Golden Age of TV do not differ from preceding formats. Lorenz Engell’s

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tend to situate their protagonists at the intersection of two equally actual worlds, I will continue to show that these coexisting worlds rarely (if ever) function as stable parallels. This is certainly true of a prominent form this two-world premise takes on, which is that of a division between the everyday world, or the domain of what Emerson calls “the low,”³ and a world “lower yet” – that is, an “extraordinary” underworld populated by criminals, demons, vampires, etc. From Laura Palmer (*Twin Peaks*) to The Jennings (*The Americans*) and from Buffy the Vampire Slayer or Veronica Mars to Dexter (in their eponymous shows): characters in contemporary TV shows tend to live split, double, or secret lives. Their one half, or one world, may be refracted through the other; it may complicate, encroach, threaten, or destabilize the other. Far from merely “standing for” the ordinary though (as in: monsters in *Buffy* are metaphors for teenage anxieties), the underworld rather functions to reveal something about it – something not already known about it, or some difference or change that has emerged in it, but that tends to be overlooked due to our very familiarity with it. As Stanley Cavell has often insisted, the ordinary tends to remain unavailable or inaccessible to us, or unapproachable by us. What is more, Cavell intuits that there is something intrinsically paradoxical about the ordinary, as the very idea of “the ordinariness of human life” includes “human life’s avoidance of the ordinary.”⁴ The ordinary, in short, is neither simply given, known, nor discovered. By venturing into the underworld, the protagonists of contemporary TV series reveal the ordinary to be inherently extraordinary, vulnerable, and unstable: under the standing threat of being lost, it turns out it has yet to be gained. Indeed, the ordinary is thus not revealed to be a (mere) construction; it is revealed to stand in need of construction. Or as Marty Byrde puts it at the close of *Ozark*’s first season: “Normal is what we make it, right?” (S1Ep10 “The Toll”).

In what follows, I will focus on a specific kind of connection between the two worlds that draws a particular aesthetic appeal across a number of shows and that aptly captures something of that paradoxical nature inherent in the quest for the ordinary: that of the Möbius strip or Escher twist.

This geometric figure bears the name of one of two German mathematicians who discovered the Möbius strip independently of one another in the mid-nineteenth century (the other being Johann Listing). Its surface can be formed quite simply by attaching the ends of a strip of paper together with a half-twist (or any odd number of such twists). The effect, however, is far from simple: Were one to walk one loop of this boundless, single-sided curvy surface (as the ants do in one of M. C. Escher’s famous renditions of the Möbius strip, depicted in Figure 1), one would quickly find oneself back at the original place again, but inside out and upside down. In terms of space, we could say that the endless continuum of crossing a Möbius strip gives rise to a non-orientable experience, which technically means that one cannot consistently distinguish clockwise from counterclockwise turns, though it more generally points to the inability of making conscious choices about compatible directions. In temporal terms, the strip can be said to be emblematic of the way we might experience time in a nonlinear way. Its shape implies a return, but its twists prevent a return to any original past event; it suggests repetition, only to introduce differences with each new loop (to the point that it could be said, with Deleuze, that it is only ever difference that repeats itself); and it suggests an infinite continuum, whose irreversible, a-logical unfolding does not end but can at best be interrupted arbitrarily. The figure of the Möbius strip, in short, complicates any mode of thinking in terms of beginnings and endings, as well as in terms of a strong sense of causality that would lead from the one to the other, without abandoning the idea of a design to mere chance and randomness.

term neo-series captures this formal difference well. In his words, “Neo-series can be characterized by a temporal structure and temporal semantics that go beyond the duality of identical repetition [of sitcoms, JG] and differential flow [of soap operas]” (Engell, *Thinking Through Television*, 194–5). Engell identifies three main temporal characteristics of neo-series: temporal limitation (acceleration or retardation towards an end), transformation, and a splitting of the series into “two or more lines of images governed by different temporal regimes” (ibid., 197). This last characteristic, which Engell takes from Oliver Fahle, who in turn draws on Deleuze’s concept of series as developed in *The Logic of Sense*, resonates in important ways with my two-world hypothesis.

³ As Emerson writes in “The American Scholar”: “I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia, what is Greek art, or Provencal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low.” (Emerson, *The Essential Writings*, 57).

⁴ Cavell, *In Quest*, 154.



Figure 1: M. C. Escher, Möbius Strip II, 1963, woodcut print.

Before entering into a discussion of the Möbius strip in contemporary TV shows, let me qualify my claim here. I hope it will be obvious that the use of this figure is far from unique to TV shows. While the shape of the Möbius strip has been deemed “impossible” for the fact that it does not occur in the organic environment,⁵ it has found a variety of applications in the arts, arguably long before its invention in mathematics, but coming to prominence especially in the second half of the twentieth century. It is frequently used in the plastic arts (Max Bill’s 1953 “Endless Ribbon” being among the most famous sculptures of this kind) as well as in painting and printing, as in the aforementioned example of M. C. Escher,⁶ who in turn lent his name to the use of this figure in Jane Langton’s 2012 murder mystery novel *The Escher Twist*.⁷ Earlier literary plot structures based on the Möbius strip include stories by Edgar Allen Poe and Gabriel Garcia Marques,⁸ and the figure features significantly in postmodern fiction, especially in the stories of John Barth (a literal Möbius strip narrative, “Frame-Tale,” opens Barth’s 1968 collection *Lost in the Funhouse*).⁹ Such plot structures occur in film too, for example, in Chris Marker’s *La Jetée* (1962) and its more popular rendition *12 Monkeys* (dir. Terry Gilliams, 1995), or in works of David Lynch, such as *Lost Highway* (1997). Indeed, Lynch can be said to have introduced the shape into TV plotting too when he turned to that medium with *Twin Peaks* in 1990. In that sense, *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990–1991) once again confirms its status as a precursor to the new television.

While far from unique to it, then, the fact that Möbius strips and Escher twists feature as strongly in contemporary TV series as I claim they do is neither without reason nor without specific merit. The figure primarily functions as a way of dis/connecting the two worlds between which the series’ protagonists find

⁵ Alagappan, “The Timeless Journey.”

⁶ Crato, “Escher and the Möbius Strip.”

⁷ The novel also draws on Escher’s related interest in the coexistence of two worlds, as expressed, for example, in his 1949 wood engraving “Double Planetoid.”

⁸ Harrison, “Poe Möbius;” Alagappan, “The Timeless Journey.”

⁹ Barth, *Collected Stories*, 13–4.

themselves caught. Like the Möbius strip, this two-world premise is itself not unique to TV either – Brian McHale, for example, finds it characteristic of postmodernist literary fiction, while Stanley Cavell has shown its persistence throughout the history of philosophy¹⁰ – though it too takes on a specific form and significance here. That is, within the context of contemporary TV series, the two worlds are equally actual: neither serves as the identifiably unreal, virtual, or eventual version of the other. Even if the ontological status of either is rendered uncertain, the uncertainty pertains equally to both. In short, even when they are mutually exclusive, the two equally actual worlds coexist *simultaneously* in TV series.

Owing to the “original” live status of all television programs and the “uninterrupted casual chain” of the medium’s direct transmission, “the order of the simultaneous” (to speak with Engell) has, of course, long been identified as a defining feature of the medium.¹¹ Over and against film’s “*succession* of automatic world projections,” Cavell, for one, specified the material basis of TV in 1982 as “a current of *simultaneous* event reception.”¹² Since the advent of video, the live mode is no longer (necessarily) part of TV’s material basis, of course: the TV series under consideration in this essay are never broadcast live and are indeed conditioned by this break. Rather than discarding it altogether, however, I contend that series have displaced the medium’s essential simultaneity onto the diegetic plane.¹³ The advent of video, meanwhile, also brought with it the phenomenon of the video feedback loop. As Douglas Hofstadter has argued, when a video-recorder is pointed at its own playback video monitor, a loop delay introduces twisted “emergent reverberations” within a series of infinite regress.¹⁴ If we further take into account that the emergence of contemporary TV series coincides with the advent of neoliberalism and late capitalism – at a time, Alenka Zupančič argues, in which capitalist democracy “is no longer subjected to historical time, but to its own temporality in which there are no intrinsic reasons for it to end”¹⁵ – we could argue, as Jela Krečič does, that TV series indeed offer an apt form for our twenty-first century. As Krečič puts it: “[TV] series do end, to be sure, but no end today can be considered as final, as a true end. Every ending in popular culture – at least in really popular products – can be seen as provisional, as temporary.”¹⁶ The figure of the Möbius strip not only gives further expression to this sense of endlessness; it does so by returning to the medium’s original mode of simultaneity and its association with the domains of domesticity and ordinariness... Well, it returns with a twist, naturally.

Having said that *Twin Peaks* introduced the use of the Möbius strip to TV series incurs me to add a second precautionary comment. As we shall see, this show, or its return, rather (*Twin Peaks: The Return*; Showtime 2017), uses the shape in the strict sense that the narrative ending returns to the beginning – with, of course, a twist. Used as such, the Möbius strip involves twisted temporal loops and requires the narrative to involve

¹⁰ McHale, *Postmodern Fiction*; Cavell, *Cities of Words*. On the latter, cf. Gerrits, “Im/Moral Perfectionism.”

¹¹ Engell, *The Switch Image*, 21.

¹² Cavell, “The Fact of Television,” 85.

¹³ Lorenz Engell claims that the order of the simultaneous also applies to the kind of series between live TV and neo-series. Based on a reading of Cavell’s essay “The Fact of Television” (I will put aside here my various reservations of his interpretation), Engell argues that TV’s essential simultaneity is grounded in its formulaic nature of episodic seriality (sitcoms). Despite the fact that episodes occur in linear fashion, one after the other, as formats determining all possible variants, such series are simultaneous: “The combinatorial formula that determines all of the possible variants that a format permits gradually wears down, but combinatorics makes them all available in one format of possibility. As formats, therefore, series tend to be simultaneous; like matrices or diagrams, they actually operate in a rather flat arrangement whose individual combinations are updated one after the other” (Engell, *Thinking Through Television*, 20).

¹⁴ Hofstadter, *I Am a Strange Loop*, 67.

¹⁵ Zupančič, “The End of Ideology,” 833.

¹⁶ Krečič, “In Defense,” 170. Beyond Alenka Zupančič’s “The End of Ideology, the Ideology of the End,” Krečič also refers to Gérard Wajcman’s 2018 book *Les séries, le monde, la crise, les femmes* to recognize that TV-series as a new form of narration in this twenty-first century is intrinsically linked to political and social symptoms of our era. Series, Krečič claims, is an apt form for a limitless, global world which no longer functions as a coherent, comprehensible, functioning whole. An ideology of ending would be necessary for the constitution of meaningful wholes. The impossibility for TV shows to end in any definitive sense has implications for the specific form of the two-world hypothesis as equally actual. As Krečič suggests, “The fact that TV-series is structurally defined by the impossibility of the end, and also by the inability to exit a certain fictional universe or its political paradigm (late capitalism), goes hand in hand with contemporary stories which rarely present a vision of an alternate world” (Krečič, “In Defense,” 175).

some forms of time-traveling and visionary scenes. While this kind of jumbled temporality indeed occurs frequently enough in neo-series generally, and while I will discuss another example of the Möbius strip used in this strict sense below (with the single season show *Awake*, NBC 2012), the application of the Möbius strip in TV series is, as such, rather limited and specific. The kind of warp or half-twist that leads to the strip's non-orientable, a-logical continuity, however, is all the more prevalent in contemporary TV shows. In the context of simultaneously co-existing worlds, they occur at those occasions at which these worlds fold into or out of one another, at points of their bifurcation or confluence. To mark this expanded sense, I will henceforth mark them as “Escher twists” to distinguish them from Möbius strips proper.¹⁷

Either way, in the context of the TV shows I will be discussing, I shall call such strips and twists uncanny, though I won't use the term in the conventional Freudian sense of un/familiarity signaling the return of some Oedipal drama or other repressed traumatic scene rooted in castration anxiety. I rather use it in the Cavellian sense (as expressed in his 1986 lecture “The Uncanniness of the Ordinary” and published in *In Quest of the Ordinary*) to indicate that the underworld, looking strangely familiar, has the capacity of making the ordinary look unfamiliar, inherently strange, and unstable. The Möbius strips and Escher twists thus underscore that the significance of these “twisted” TV shows lies less in their ability to uncover the hideous and hidden, or in allowing viewers to judge the demonic or illegal, than in their ability to disclose a “horrificed vision of ordinariness, of the unremarkable other as just that unremarkable other.”¹⁸ What's more, TV series' return to the ordinary tends to undo dichotomies (yet highlight paradoxical relations) between the remarkable and unremarkable, self and other, the human and the horrific, the criminal and legal, as well as between cause and effect, origin and end.

To underscore this, I will analyze four uncanny twists from four different shows: *Twin Peaks* (ABC 1990-2, Showtime 2017), *The Sopranos* (HBO 1999–2007), *Awake* (NBC 2012), and *Ozark* (Netflix 2017–2022). While I listed the shows chronologically, I will discuss them out of this order, in pairs: *Twin Peaks* and *Awake* will be considered together as they share the fact that their entire plot structure is shaped like a Möbius strip in the strict sense, whereas the Escher twists in the scenes from *The Sopranos* and *Ozark* are like inverted mirror images of one another.

2 Returning with a Difference in *Twin Peaks* – *The Return*

As the show's famous poem (“one chants out between two worlds: ‘Fire... Walk with Me’”)¹⁹ and indeed its very title readily announces, the original *Twin Peaks*, a quintessential precursor of neo-series, puts the idea of two

¹⁷ In this broader conceptualization, Möbius twists approximate other topological or “alogical” figures such as random walks (stochastics). In *Cinema 2*, Gilles Deleuze appealed to such figures as marks of the cinematic time-image. I will leave a discussion of neo-series in light thereof for another occasion, referring the reader to the work of Günther Anders and Lorenz Engell for the time being.

¹⁸ Cavell, *In Quest*, 158. In his interpretation of Freud's famous reading of “The Sandman,” Cavell does not deny that castration anxiety does in fact have a role to play in E.T.A. Hoffmann's story, hence in the concept of the uncanny; he rather insists on Freud's own denial, repeated four times over, that the experience of the uncanny should (also) be related to the uncertain difference between the animate and inanimate (as Jentsch had asserted before him). For Cavell, the two accounts of the uncanny (Freud's and Jentsch's) are not mutually exclusive, and Freud's new account cannot resolve the uncertainty regarding the distinction between the animate and inanimate, which is so obviously at stake in the story Freud singled out for his analysis (in which the hero Nathaniel falls in love with the beautiful automaton Olympia). For Cavell, the significance of Freud's denial lies in the related “denial that the uncanny is unsurmountable (that is, his denial that it is a standing philosophical threat)” (Cavell, 156). In other words, Cavell sees Freud as implicitly denying that the problem of skepticism of other minds is at stake here – a problem Cavell himself claims cannot be overcome in terms of knowledge (it remains a “standing philosophical threat”), but only be responded to by way of acknowledgment. That such a form of skepticism is indeed at stake in contemporary TV series as well will become evident in the course of the current essay, though it will be foregrounded at another occasion.

¹⁹ The poem, which first occurs in the international pilot (US episode 3) as Mike's monologue (part of Cooper's dream), also alludes the temporal paradox of the “future past” on which I'll elaborate shortly.

worlds front and center. Already in the pilot episode, it becomes clear that Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee), found dead, wrapped in plastic, has led a double life, as suggested by her diary. The homecoming queen, who had been working a volunteer job for Meals on Wheels or took care of a mentally handicapped man during the day, lapsed into sex and drug addiction during the nights. As the one central narrative question (who killed Laura Palmer?) constantly splits to give rise to subplots that take over the center stage, however, it appears that basically everyone in the town of Twin Peaks is leading a double life of their own. Ultimately, this double life in the small town is itself doubled by the mystery of the woods, thus opening up a third, metaphysical plane. The black lodge has its analogue in the white lodge: the physical, material world in the transcendental, spiritual world. In *Twin Peaks*, spirits have the ability to inhabit human hosts to complement their split existence – a split that is given visual significance of various kinds: serial killer spirit BOB (Frank Silva) can only be seen in mirror reflections; Mike (Al Strobel) has only one arm. While the crimes are committed in, and upset, the everyday world of Twin Peaks, they find their source in the transcendental world. To descend into the underworld, then, one would have to ascend to the metaphysical – a lesson learned the hard way when, after the killing of Laura and her double Maddy, Laura's father Leland Palmer (Ray Wise) is finally arrested only to see the spirit BOB escape this human host to continue his serial killing (hence the serial TV show). Season two ends with a major cliffhanger when BOB comes to possess FBI Special Agent Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan), a man amazed by the commonplace in Twin Peaks (Douglas firs, cherry pie) while remaining unimpressed by its mysterious counterpart.

As is well known, David Lynch withdrew from the series' production in all but in the name after this "resolution" of the series' leading question (pushed for by ABC) halfway through the second season, leaving the rest of the season to his partner Mark Frost to complete.²⁰ When *Twin Peaks* returned to the screen in 2017, it not only gave Lynch the chance to make good on what he saw as a botched second season (thus making the series a return of the repressed in its own right); it also made good on a dream sequence offered in the first season's pilot episode (of the international release; inserted in the third episode "Zen, or the Skill to Catch a Killer" of the American version). Set 25 years in the future in the Red Room (Black Lodge), this vision involved an unaged Laura Palmer whispering an unheard name in the ear of an aging Cooper. In other words, the time that actually came to pass between the first two seasons in the early 1990s and *The Return* practically matches the 25-year lapse of storytelling time, as though Cooper's diegetic dream found its double in Lynch's actual vision.

With *The Return*, *Twin Peaks* doubles down, so to speak, on its theme of doubling and splitting.²¹ In so doing, it completes its narrative shape into a Möbius strip, as Carlotta Susca has shown. Having pointed out that the second season ends with a prophecy from The Man from Another Place ("When you see me again, it won't be me") and the aforementioned cliffhanger of BOB's possession of Cooper, Susca argues that in the finale of *The Return*, "Special Agent Dale Cooper and his former secretary Diane Evans (Laura Dern) find themselves on the other side of the narration, turning into the characters of Richard and Linda."²² This had

²⁰ Cohen, "How 'Twin Peaks' Got Lost."

²¹ In fact, Martha P. Nochimson argues that the original series fall into an earlier phase of Lynch's work, in which he presents ontologically multiple but stable parallel worlds, whereas *The Return*, as Matt Hills rightly points out, presumably falls within his later, second-stage period (from *Lost Highway* (1997) onward), a period in which Lynch "adopts a more quantum-mechanics-indebted perspective, representing 'the dissolution of the external world' in his films in favor of a poeticized 'many worlds' orientation" (Hills, "Welcome," 192; Nochimson, *David Lynch Swerves*, 13).

²² Susca, "When You See Me Again," 107. Per Susca's analogy, *Twin Peaks—The Return* is "a complex narrative object that stands to a detective story in the same way as a cube stands to a tesseract" (Ibid. 107). While *Twin Peaks*' first two seasons are probably not the intended equivalent to "a detective story," the point of Susca's argument is that *The Return*, as a product of the digital era, is far more complex than, and in her judgment also superior to, the first two seasons, which were hampered by the limitations and constraints of the multichannel era. There is some truth to that, no doubt. *The Return* certainly expands dramatically, in terms of both its setting and its simultaneously developing storylines. It is also temporally more jumbled than the largely chronological development (and depiction) of the series of events in the first two seasons. But as a series, *Twin Peaks* could not have formed a Möbius strip if it weren't for its warping across the 25-year abyss that separates the third from the first two seasons, both in actuality and in diegetically. Viewers have had to wait for *The Return* to give significance to the future vision from the first season's international pilot or the major cliffhanger of the second's finale. At the same time, Cooper captures the paradoxically nature of the



Figure 2: The Owl Cave symbol morphing into a Möbius strip in *Twin Peaks – The Return* “Part 17.”

been prophesized at the very beginning of *The Return*, when Cooper, having spent 25 years in the Lodge, is told by the Giant to “remember Richard and Linda: Two Birds with One Stone.” Both Cooper and the viewer are thus asked to recall something at the beginning of *The Return* that will not occur until the very end of it. Turning the tables, the Giant, still standing next to him, then tells Cooper: “You are far away” – upon which Cooper’s body (or its image) vanishes in thin air at the sound of electricity sparks.

In between *The Return*’s opening and closing moments – over the course of its 18 episodes (or “parts”) – Cooper had to overcome the double challenge of finding a way of releasing BOB from the body of his malevolent doppelganger and of releasing himself from his materialization in the tulpa Dougie Jones. Cooper manages to find himself again just in time to finally defeat BOB in episode 17 (“part 17”). Right after, Cooper witnesses how an Owl Cave symbol transforms first into a double diamond shape and continues to morph into the number 8 which is curved like a Möbius strip (Figure 2).²³ The strip turns around on its axis and a bead rolls across the curve at the bottom of this figure, at which point Cooper is told he “can go in now.” In the subsequent scene – a mesmerizing synthetic blend of original footage from 1990 and newly added images – Cooper returns to the events of the first season to intervene in – and successfully prevent – Laura’s murder. The show’s opening scene is then repeated, with Pete Martel (Jack Nance) going out fishing, but with minor differences: Josie Packard (Joan Chen) looks over her shoulder at a slightly different moment; there’s no longer a foghorn to inspire Pete’s poetic response (“the lonesome foghorn blows”). The scene ends with the major change resulting from Cooper’s intervention: instead of finding Laura’s body “wrapped in plastic,” Pete goes about this ordinary life and throws out his fishline into the lake.

In the final episode (“part 18”), Cooper, having himself been transformed into Richard by now, finds an aged Laura Palmer, who identifies as Carrie and claims not to know the name by which Cooper/Richard addresses her. Together, they return to the town of Twin Peaks, but Laura/Carrie fails to recognize her childhood home, now occupied by a couple that doesn’t recall the name Palmer either. Cooper/Richard and Laura/Carrie end up being lost in time (“What year is this?” Cooper wonders), but when the subdued voice of Laura’s mother, seemingly coming from the house, calls out Laura’s name in the same manner we had heard in Cooper’s initial dream, Laura/Carrie finishes off the season, hence the series, with a terrified shriek.

It might stand to reason to interpret this shriek as a response to the return of the repressed. As with the show as a whole, however, it subverts psychoanalytic readings at the same time as it invites them. Or rather, I contend that no such reading would manage to put the pieces together to make the story fall in place. The sudden character metamorphoses or doublings, the bifurcating and merging plotlines, the non-orientable temporal loops, and the series of differential repetitions do not translate into a decodable defense mechanism of displacement and condensation. Were we to move “away from the Freudian oedipal grid structured around

Möbius strip when he remarks after BOB’s defeat: “there are some things that will change: the past dictates the future.” Things are indeed about to change in the past when Cooper goes back in time to critically intervene in Laura’s life (or death), and yet the past events also condition the possibility for the future series to return in the first place.

²³ The number 8 (also an infinity sign) is itself relevant for multiple reasons – it marks the number of an important motel room in the show, for example, and refers to the seminal episode (“part”) in which Lynch narrates a new origin (the atom bomb) behind the show’s evil, thus fracturing the already unstable assumptions of the show’s epistemological/ontological grounding.

the crimes of the obscene father to the pre-Oedipal, distinctly Kleinian world of the mother,” Ellis and Theus suggest that we would at least allow for the recognition toward a certain incoherence in psychoanalytic explanation by pointing to those aspects of a case history that inherently resist narrativization.²⁴ Even so, such a reading would only be useful, as the authors themselves argue, “insofar as it helps draw attention to the way in which [a] distinctive kind of unrepresentability stands for the impasse of time itself, retroactively haunting each season’s obsession with temporality, history, and the ‘return’ of the past.”²⁵ Indeed, the authors conclude that “*The Return* asks us to repeat the past with a difference.... If ‘the past determines the future,’ as the title of the first episode of the two-part finale suggests, it is not in a linear causal way. Rather, it is the past’s own indeterminateness that determines the future.”²⁶

Instead of revealing a hidden past of sex and drug abuse through the cracks of her ego’s defense mechanism, then, Laura’s/Carrie’s shriek rather expresses what Sandra Laugier called “the paradox in the idea of a return to the ordinary,” which she indeed finds at stake here: “we are returning to something we never had ..., to a place where we have never been.”²⁷ Indeed, having returned to a town trembling with an inherent strangeness and difference even now that normality has seemingly been restored, Laura/Carrie dramatically expresses the unavailability of the ordinary and of herself (as well as Cooper) in the process.²⁸

3 Returning to a “Normal Dream”: *Awake*’s Impossible Worlds

That neo-series remain elusive to normalizing psychoanalytic interpretations is literalized in NBC’s show *Awake*, in which two psychiatrists cancel one another out. Despite being highly acclaimed by fans and critics alike, the show got canceled after a single season of 13 episodes (2012). I nevertheless assign it an important place in the taxonomy of contemporary TV shows, because it serves as a prototype for a specific version of the two-world premise, namely for the kind in which the two worlds coexist in a state of impossibility. I borrow this term from Gilles Deleuze (who draws on Leibniz in turn) to mark the idea that the two worlds are equally possible, but not at the same time.²⁹ Each being unreal from the perspective of the other, their simultaneity is paradoxical and their ontological status within the diegesis indiscernible: neither is ultimately exposed as false (a dream, fantasy, illusion, simulation, etc.). To be sure, *Awake* is not the first show to invoke impossibility *per se* – elsewhere I discuss, for example, how *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* employed it ten years earlier in the episode “Normal Again” (S6Ep17, UPN 2002)³⁰ – but it stands out for making this the basic premise of the show as a whole. Moreover, like *Twin Peaks* – a TV series which *Awake*’s writers acknowledge as an

²⁴ Ellis and Theus, “Is It Happening Again?,” 23.

²⁵ Ibid., 33.

²⁶ Ibid., 34–5.

²⁷ Laugier, *TV-Philosophy*, 42.

²⁸ That the loss of characters relates the uncanniness of the ordinary to skepticism – an important point of connection for Cavell and a critical aspect of contemporary TV shows more generally – I will leave for future occasion to explore. For now, I will leave it to Laugier to point in this direction in a paragraph worth quoting as a whole: [I]n the joyful 16th episode of *Twin Peaks: The Return* [...], we are finally reunited with our old friend Dale Cooper from the first two seasons. However, we quickly lose him again, and not just because he has an evil twin. The final episode is a veritable descent into hell for anyone attached to Cooper and even to Dougie, his first reincarnation in *Twin Peaks: The Return*. Dale Cooper gradually becomes unrecognizable and is lost. The uncanniness we usually find in Lynch’s work is pushed even further here, for we radically lose contact with the most important characters of the series, who have shaped our experience of it. The meaning of “return” in the title is thus tragically converted: the world that Cooper’s return seemed to have restored to us is torn from us again. Frost and Lynch position the television series within the skeptical tradition proposed by Cavell, but they take skepticism one step further: if they give the world back to us, it is only in order to better deprive us of it. The effect of the restoration of the world and its lively intensity (Cooper’s joviality and the jubilation of the episode) is to make us even more radically strangers to it. (Laugier, *TV-Philosophy*, 72–3)

²⁹ See, for example, Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 130–1.

³⁰ Cf. Gerrits, “When Horror Becomes Human,” and “Im/Moral Perfectionism”

important influence (*Lost* being another inspiration) – the show’s narrative structure as a whole, as Sarah Hatchuel pointed out, takes the shape of a Möbius strip.³¹

Awake initially seems to unfold by following a relatively simple, and perhaps rather contrived, formula, which the pilot episode quite explicitly puts on the table. As the result of a car accident shown in the pilot episode’s cold open, homicide detective Michael Britten (Jason Isaacs), who drove the vehicle, either lost his wife Hannah (Laura Allen) in the crash while he continues to live with his teenage son Rex (Dylan Minnette), who behaves rather distantly toward him, or he lost Rex while he continues to live with Hannah, whose mourning borders on PTSD. Whenever Michael closes his eyes to fall asleep in one world, he immediately opens them again as he wakes up in the other. While equally drab, then, the one dimension thus stands as a dream to the other. For Michael, however, the two realms or scenarios are equally real, as he tells his psychiatrist in his respective worlds, Dr. Lee (BD Wong) in the one, Dr. Evans (Cherry Jones) in the other. Each psychiatrist tries to convince Michael of the reality of their world, explaining the other in terms of an (admittedly unconventional) coping mechanism that helps him avoid taking on responsibility for the death of his wife/son. Both of them suggest that he won’t recover from his loss unless he comes to acknowledge the unreality of the other world. Unwilling to let go of either his wife or his son, and unable to make an informed decision between the worlds, Michael keeps twisting back and forth, thus creating what Dr. Lee calls “a mental Möbius strip.” To keep track of the world he’s in, Michael wears colored wristbands: a green one for his life with Rex; a red one for his life with Hannah. The coding is marked for the viewer through the use of camera filters, whose colors match those of the wristbands.

Michael’s professional life, finally, follows a basic episodic formula. That is, in every episode Michael works a different homicide case (with a different partner) in each world, and by the end of it, he will usually have managed to solve the one with clues offered in the other. Along the way, it becomes more of a challenge for Michael to explain and justify his “intuitions” to his colleagues than to solve the cases in the first place.

Whereas these premises seem to make for a rather stable, dualistic equilibrium, the formula starts shifting soon enough. Indeed, already in some of the pilot’s earliest scenes, we can see the worlds slipping into one another, as aspects from the one start smudging the other. Take the scene starting barely six minutes into the pilot, which cuts back and forth between Michael’s synchronous explanations of his situation to his respective psychiatrists. While giving the impression that the conversation continuous across the two worlds, the two intercut scenes, each of which follows the conventions of shot-reverse shot editing, are initially clearly marked as separate: they are not only distinguished by their red and green color filters; Michael also wears a blazer in only one session (with Dr. Evans). Over the span of its one and a half minute, however, the scene starts cutting back and forth not only between Michael and his psychiatrists, but also between the psychiatrists themselves, who, as Hatchuel has noted, therefore appear to respond directly to one another.³² “Incredible,” Dr. Evans says, for example, directly after Dr. Lee asked Michael the question if he could tell whether he’s dreaming at this very moment, leaving it in the middle as to whether she’s intrigued by Michael’s (unheard) affirmation or by Dr. Lee’s assessment of it. The two worlds commingle even more paradoxically when we see Michael from Dr. Lee’s perspective in the red-filtered world (and without blazer), while we hear him being addressed by Dr. Evans: “Well I can assure you, Detective Britten, that this is not a dream” – to which Michael responds: “That’s exactly what the other shrink says” (Figure 3). The scene thus effectively uses the Escher twist as a technique to cross the abyss between the two impossible worlds.

Later on in the same episode, Michael wakes up alone in his bed and finds that he has lost his wristband. Unsure which world he is in, and finding neither Hannah nor Rex in the house, his confusion turns into despair. Hoping to reassure himself that he’s “awake,” Michael cuts himself in the arm, at which point Hannah casually walks into the room, wondering what could be the matter. When she attends to his wound, Michael sees the red wristband on his bed sheet, twisted in the shape of a Möbius strip. This is commensurate with the red-filtered shot (and Hannah’s presence), but it contrasts with the green-filtered (hence crisper) shots with

³¹ Hatchuel, “Écrire le début.”

³² *Ibid.*, 13.



Figure 3: Escher twisting across two worlds in *Awake*, S1Ep1 “Pilot.”

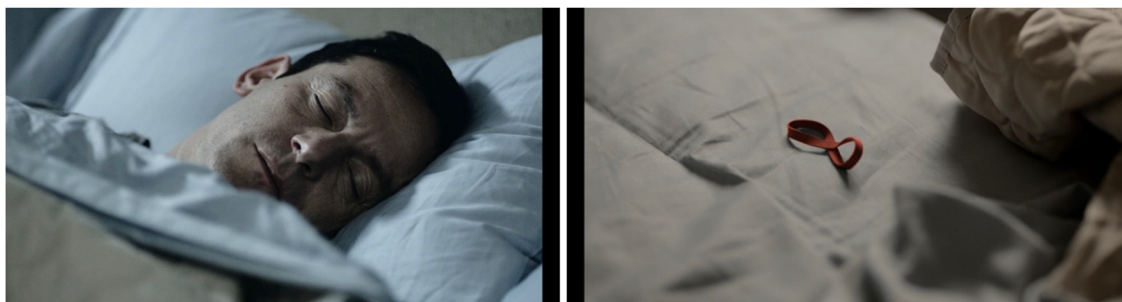


Figure 4: Contrasting filters at the beginning and end of the lost wristband scene. *Awake*, S1E1 “Pilot.”

which the sequence opened (Figure 4). So while Michael is relieved that the equilibrium has been restored, the viewer may well realize that his ordinary life is inherently unstable in either scenario.

Starting in the second episode, this instability also affects Michael’s professional life, which in turn becomes implicated in his personal life. The basic formula is still at work here – Detective Britten works an episode-specific homicide case in each of his two worlds – yet in this second episode (“The Little Guy”) only one of the two cases gets resolved by the end of it, with clues provided by the other. It is not that the unresolved case continues into the next episode; rather, it opens onto a new dimension by offering a clue about the titular “little guy,” which feeds into a central question that will continue to run through the season as a whole, namely whether Michael’s car accident may have been foul play, and who were behind the setup if so.

In the show's final few episodes, Michael unravels an elaborate scheme in his green world, in which drug trafficking and murderous captains in the police department are responsible for the death of his son. In the other world, however, Michael "discovery" is rejected as a delusional conspiracy theory, and he is framed and imprisoned for the murder of a fellow police officer (who turns out to be the "little guy"). In the final episode (S1Ep13, "Turtles All the Way Down"), the narrative takes on the form of Michael's psychosis, which Dr. Lee conveys as follows: "A fractured psyche like Britten's can take a host of real details, weave them into an incredibly elaborate story and then constantly adjust it to sweep away the holes and inconsistencies." Thus: In the red world, an imprisoned Michael is visited by his green world double, and in an extended surrealist sequence, Michael moves continuously through a series of spatiotemporally disconnected places, meeting both of his psychiatrists together, watching one of his captains kill another (as we viewers saw her do earlier on in this episode, but without this observer present), and saying one last goodbye to his wife Hannah before reintegrating with his double.

The end of this final episode corresponds to the opening of the pilot, in which Michael responded to Dr. Lee's questions "tell me how this works" and "let's start at the beginning" with, "No, let's start right here" and an explanation of his two-world experience, thus laying out a blueprint for the series' formula. Here, at the end of episode 13, these metacommentaries on beginnings with Dr. Lee turn into a conversation about closure with Dr. Evans. Having successfully closed the case against his captain for her responsibility in his accident (in the green world), and despite the fact that he can't even tell just how many cases he has closed since his accident, he tells Dr. Evans (still in the green world) that he nevertheless does not feel a sense of closure himself and that he would need a time-machine to achieve it. Dr. Evans responds that "life only moves in one direction," and congratulates him on finally having come to see that (green) life is the real one, as opposed to the dream state of the other – a step she sees as a necessary condition for closure in the first place. Still resisting or avoiding this idea, Michael suddenly offers up a third hypothesis: "why can't I just have had a *normal* dream?" An alarmed Dr. Evans insists that Hannah is gone, that Michael acknowledged this in his "dream," and that "it's time to come back to living in one world, and not run off seeking a third" – but then she suddenly freezes up, and the camera pans toward the left (against the direction of the forward drive) to reveal a door opening directly into Michael's home. Here, in a final scene shot without any colored filters, Michael finds both Hannah and Rex running their daily errands.

This ending may seem to suggest that things have returned to being "Normal Again" (to speak in terms of the aforementioned *Buffy* episode), thus following the standard formula of episodic series. It thus appears to offer a very different sense of closure than *Twin Peaks – The Return*. Indeed, whereas Cooper/Richard ended up being so lost in time as to wonder what year he was in (a question which a perplexed Laura/Carrie had left unanswered), in *Awake's* final moments Rex responds to Michael's question about what time it is in the most casual of manners: "8:30. Are you gonna drive me? Registration starts at 9:00." This may suggest that the ordinary had never been lost or even interrupted: the whole series had just been a "normal dream." The reintegration of Michael's split or doubled character likewise stands in contrast to the loss of Laura and Cooper. And yet Dr. Evans already suggested that such a "happy ending" is even more phantasmatic than the compensation of one world with another and that the return to the ordinary in fact amounts to an escape to a third world, or anyway a new plane, signifying the further fragmentation of Michael's psyche.³³ This implies that the "normal dream" may not refer to the events we have just been witnessing thirteen episodes long, but to an as yet unseen, third plane that would have occurred (as "normal dreams" do) between the moments at which Michael closes his eyes (in one world) and opens them again (in the next). Either way, Michael postulates the idea based on the fact that there is no criterion for distinguishing between the worlds of waking and dreaming, and so, rather than providing a ground for the real, the happy ending suggests a mise-en-abyme scenario (akin to the video feedback loop mentioned previously). Speculating on the idea of a second

³³ In the aforementioned text "In Defense of Happy Endings," Jela Krečić argues not only (with reference to James McDowell's *Happy Endings in Hollywood*) that unambiguously happy endings in fact rarely occur in Hollywood (and are rather the fantasy of film critics and theorists), but also that the non-ending of contemporary TV shows is not ideologically superior to such happy endings. On the latter point, see footnote 16 above.

season (after the show had already been canceled), *Awake*'s creator and showrunner Kyle Killen in fact explicitly references *Twin Peaks* with this idea of a third world, comparing it to the black lodge:

Twin Peaks being a show that was very close to my heart and a seminal thing in my childhood, the third space was sort of our Black Lodge. It was a place where almost anything could have happened. What happened initially was [that] he [Michael Britten] found himself in his house with his wife and his child, but there were a lot of other places we would have taken that dream space. I don't know that it would have always been that linear or happy. I think it would have been a place where he had a lot less control than he thought.³⁴

Despite significant differences, then, the finales of *Awake* and *Twin Peaks – The Return* share a twisted return to the ordinary that is far more disturbing than the slight modification of a restored normality that arguably characterizes classical film and episodic TV series. As the twist in *Awake* forms a Möbius strip, it opens up the possibility of waking up to a dream within the dream. *Awake* thus thrusts the ordinary into an abyss of infinite regress that separates the two worlds just when they finally seemed to come together, and its fall can only come to an end with the end of the series – with its complete loss in the black hole of skepticism's radical conclusion. But Killen's own denial notwithstanding, it remains equally possible within the parameters of the show that Michael does in fact return to the ordinary, embracing it despite his awareness that this may well be illusory. The impossibility of these two endings (a happy reunion with the family or a tragic splintering of a psychotic mind) thus deepens the impossibility of the two worlds the series premised from the outset. In so doing, it dramatizes the ordinary's vulnerability to the standing threat of skepticism. And either way, Michael's return to it makes us realize that he enters a place he has never been before and that he enters it transformed – for better or for worse.

4 Escher Twisting Across Two Worlds

Both *Awake* and *Twin Peaks – The Return* offer an uncanny twist as they return to the ordinary at the end of the show. These twists result from their narrative structures, which in these two series are shaped as a Möbius strip. As such, they are quite exceptional cases: Although temporal loops are characteristic of most contemporary TV shows, as Lorenz Engell argues,³⁵ they rarely turn the entire narrative into this specific shape. But even when the ending of a show (or season, or episode) does not return to, and invert, the beginning, we can see that this kind of Escher twist is used profusely in contemporary TV shows, especially as a way of crossing from one world to another, or of having the two worlds fold into or out of one another.

We can think here, for example, of the opening act of *The Sopranos*' pilot episode, in which Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini) gives psychiatrist Jennifer Melfi (Lorraine Bracco) a chronological account of the events leading up to his blackout. Initially, a series of flashbacks simply illustrate what he is saying during the session, as in the celebrated scene in which we see him wading into his pool in his bathrobe to feed a family of ducks. Connected by voice-over sound-bridges, the act keeps cutting back and forth between the conversation in Melfi's office (where she warns him, for example, that there are limitations to patient confidentiality, "technically"), and the chronologically ordered flashbacks of events unfolding on the fateful morning. The status of these flashbacks changes, however, as Tony transitions from his family life at home in suburban New Jersey to his work for the DiMeo crime family. On his way from one to the other, Tony has a chance encounter with a man who owes him money. Here Tony's voice-over tells Melfi one thing ("we had coffee") while we get to see another (a tray of coffee cups dropping to the floor as the man prepares to flee, cf. Figure 5). "You had *coffee* [...]" Melfi responds sarcastically while the chase scene turns into a violent beating. Tony reassures her – "Yes, *coffee*" – only to return the viewer to the scene in which he continues to violently crack down on the "degenerate gambler."

³⁴ Bierly, "Awake' Finale Questions," quoted in Hatchuel, "Écrire le début," par. 42, note 46.

³⁵ Cf. Engell, *Thinking Through Television*, 196ff.



Figure 5: Splitting narration and monstration in *The Sopranos* (S1, Ep 1 “The Sopranos”).

In short, as Tony moves from his suburban life to the underworld, the flashback sequence stops illustrating his words and turns into a separate track at odds with his narration. In terms of André Gaudreault’s film narratology, we could say that the narration differs from the monstration.³⁶ This split, to be sure, is a function of the ironic “gangster in therapy” premise of the show: how, after all, could a mafia capo talk about causes of stress without incriminating himself? But as Tony keeps relating a continuous series of events while the “flashbacks” change in function, we can also see how an Escher-twist works to mark the crossing, or, as in this case, the separation, of his two worlds.³⁷ That Tony and Melfi will soon find a way around the confidentiality issue does not stop the show from using similar types of twists at the intersection of Tony’s two worlds. So when, after Tony’s deadly feud with the New York mafia, his broken family finally sets out to meet again in a diner to return to the ordinary in show’s final scene (S6 ep.21: “Made in America”), the “non-sense of an ending,” or what Dana Polan also calls the “non-ending ending”³⁸ – the show’s infamous turn to the black screen – may equally signal that Tony ultimately fails to keep his two worlds kept apart (someone has just killed him by entering the ordinary, or the low, from the world “lower-yet”), or that the quest for the ordinary could go on forever, such that the show can only be cut off randomly, *in media res*.

As mentioned, many memorable scenes in contemporary TV series owe their impact to the twists that occur when characters or plotlines move from one world to another in a seemingly continuous way, though these twists can function in an indefinite number of ways.³⁹ I will here offer just one more example, which I’ll take from *Ozark* (Netflix 2017-2022), as its twists form a fascinating counter-example to the one I just described.

In the final scene of the first season’s second episode (“Blue Cat”), Wendy Byrde (Laura Linney) arrives with her children Charlotte (Sofia Hublitz) and Jonah (Skylar Gaertner) at their new home in the Ozarks, Missouri. Wendy’s husband Marty (Jason Bateman), the relatable and respectable financial advisor from Chicago, has been laundering money for a Mexican drug cartel and narrowly escaped death at the hands of one of its leaders by promising to launder even more money at the shores of lake Ozark. The reason behind the family’s sudden move had carefully, though not without difficulty, been kept from their teenage children, who are understandably upset by the move to the Midwest. Now arriving at their new home, Charlotte immediately spots an old man with a breathing machine inside the house. Wendy explains that is the previous owner Buddy Dieker (Harris Yulin), who is staying to live with them while he awaits his imminent death. “Mom,” Charlotte asks in her characteristically sarcastic tone, “*what* are we doing here?” – to which Wendy drily responds, “Your father’s laundering money for a Mexican drug cartel. I shit you not.” The episode closes with Charlotte

³⁶ See, for example, Gaudreault’s, “Narration and Monstration,” or *From Plato to Lumière*.

³⁷ The series of flashbacks continues to fracture and complicate as it progresses, for example by including the scene in which Chris kills Emile, his counterpart from a rival gang – an event Tony could not possibly have witnessed or even have known about at the time.

³⁸ Polan, *The Sopranos*, 8.

³⁹ In another article published in this journal, I argue, for example, how *The Handmaid’s Tale* Escher-twists between the internal and external perspectives that characterize, respectively, Margaret Atwood’s 1985 novel and Volker Schlöndorff’s 1992 film adaptation (Gerrits, “From Episodic Novel to Serial TV”).



Figure 6: Disclosing the real reason for the move to the Ozarks, and the real reason for this disclosure. *Ozark* S1, eps. 2 (“Blue Cat”) and 3 (“My Dripping Sleep”).

and Jonah giving their mother an incredible look, leaving it in the middle as to whether their disbelief concerns the revealed fact or the fact of the revelation itself (Figure 6, left).

The children’s further response to this unexpected disclosure of a carefully kept secret thus looms as a cliffhanger over the end of the episode. Instead of picking up with this response, however, the next episode (S1, ep. 3: “My Dripping Sleep”) begins with a scene in which Marty gets upset with the movers who are leaving the Byrde’s belongings on the lawn in front of the house as they unload the truck. When Wendy warns him that his anger is scaring the kids, he responds, “At least I didn’t tell them their father launders money for a drug cartel.” Wendy prepares to pick up a fight, but their children draw their attention to a butt-naked Buddy Dieker, who is walking around with his respirator to go skinny-dipping in the lake, thus shifting planes to a new normal.

The humor at work in both Wendy’s unprovoked revelation and Marty’s sarcastic comment is of an interesting kind, as it turns well-known rhetorical devices inside out. On her part, Wendy makes ironic use of hyperbole. Instead of using an exaggerated expression that is not to be taken literally (as in: “I’m so angry I could kill you”), she reveals an extravagant truth in such a deadpan manner that it must surely be dismissed as a ridiculous exaggeration, especially considering that it does nothing to explain Buddy Dieker’s presence (the relatively less disturbing fact that had provoked Charlotte’s question). In this context, Wendy’s colloquial addition “I shit you not” only serves to cover the shocking fact under another layer of casual conversation. By introducing the extraordinary in such an ordinary language game, she may well be hiding the truth precisely by revealing it.

Marty on his part not only shifts focus from the disturbing fact to its disclosure; in so doing, he also gives a spin to the idea of dark humor. That he “at least” didn’t tell Charlotte and Jonah about the laundering implies that this fact (or its telling) is scarier than his anger toward the movers, yet it also assumes a mere difference in degree rather than in kind: the very comparison puts the two on the same plane, as though they occur within in the same human form of life rather than in different worlds altogether. This, then, is not quite an example of dark humor, which generally makes light of a subject matter that is considered taboo. Marty is technically making his illegal business heavier, so to speak, by letting it outweigh the ordinary reaction to an obnoxious moving company. But in so doing he is also making it less dark, as he has drawn it into the context of the everyday.

Lest the point would get lost on us, Charlotte, rather than being upset by having been lied to, fires another one of her biting questions at her mother.

CHARLOTTE: “Why did you tell us the real reason we’re here?”

WENDY: “Because you’re too smart for bullshit.”

CHARLOTTE: “Please don’t pander.”

WENDY: “I’m not pandering. [Turns to Jonah] You both have a right to know why your lives were uprooted and the more you know, the safer you’ll be.

CHARLOTTE: Is it? Or is it because you wanted to turn us against Marty here? (nodding at her father)

Chiming in, Marty raises his eyebrows, giving Wendy the “well?” look that tells her Charlotte may have a point (Figure 6, right), at which Wendy stares (and backs) down. If Charlotte thus lays bare a real reason behind the disclosure of the real reason to move to the Ozarks, she also makes clear that, like Marty, she is less

disturbed by the extraordinary fact of laundering millions of dollars than by the disclosure of it, or more generally by the ordinary family dynamics within which this fact now circulates.

Together, then, these three scenes not only cross an episode break but also cross the gap between the two worlds of the low and lower-yet. More pertinent, perhaps, is the fact that, in the very act of disclosing the family's incredible involvement in the world of drug cartels and criminal organizations, these scenes also reveal the extraordinariness of the ordinary: the webs of half-lies, veiled motivations, and power dynamics that are spun during casual conversations and everyday family business appear so much more volatile with the disclosed fact circulating through them. And yet, throughout the four seasons that are to unfold, the challenges to the consistency of the Byrde family rarely come from the world of crime, which rather serves as a welcome excuse for trouble arising from within. Indeed, we may well wonder whether the family would hold together without it, and by the same token, we may ask to what extent the two worlds remain extraneous in the first place.

A brief conversation between Marty and Wendy in the first season's final episode ("The Toll") perfectly captures this unstable relation between the ordinary and the extraordinary. Marty is installing a trampoline – an object, we know since the pilot episode, which he associates with a blissful family life, though that ideal picture only occurred to him as refracted through a violent near-death experience. He tells Wendy that he should have installed the trampoline the moment they arrived at Lake Ozark. Wendy pardons him, referring to the extraordinary circumstances surrounding their move, by saying that "things weren't exactly normal when we got here." Marty responds, "I guess normal is what we make it, right?" More than to a specific extreme circumstance or abnormal interruption of the ordinary which has been restored since, Marty's point here is rather that the normal is not originally given in the first place. If it is to be had (made) now, it will not safeguard them as moral bystanders to "abnormal" forms of life around them, as the Snell family will painfully rub in during this very episode.

5 Conclusion: Returning to (The Aesthetics of) the Ordinary

In the final section of this essay, I compared scenes from shows that share a similar two-world premise: *The Sopranos* and *Ozark* both construct these two worlds around two different kinds of families to which their protagonists belong: one bound by marriage and kinship, the other by crime. The scenes I selected from each show center on the critical moment at which the criminal world is to be disclosed. I suggested, however, that the sequence from *Ozark* works as a counter-example to the one I discussed from *The Sopranos*; we could say that they Escher twists in opposite directions, albeit to similar effects. In *The Sopranos*' opening act, Tony uses an ordinary expression ("we had coffee") less as a way to veil what really happened than as a rhetorical device that enables Melfi to get around the patient confidentiality rules she had just laid out to him (hence around his own reluctance to go in therapy in the first place). To wit, she would have the duty to report him if a crime were revealed and end the therapy, hence the show, before it even started. Tony knows that Melfi knows he didn't have coffee, and this gives the monstration, which just now deviates from the narration, a highly ambiguous status. That is, he may well allow her to see "through" his words, to "see" what viewers see, without incriminating himself.

In the first scene of the *Ozark* sequence, by contrast, Wendy communicates her revelation of their involvement in crime so directly and in such a colloquial manner that it may well be rejected as bogus. In other words, Wendy's ironic use of hyperbole, which hides the truth by disclosing it, is matched in reverse by what we may call Tony's ironic use of euphemism, which discloses the truth by hiding it. When Charlotte and Jonah end up realizing that Wendy nevertheless meant what she said when she gave them the real reason for their move, Charlotte adds another half-twist by challenging the motivation behind the disclosure, thus deflating Wendy's moral pretensions.

This is not to say that some characters are morally superior or inferior to others: like most protagonists in neo-series, the members of the Byrde and Soprano families (and indeed Melfi, too) are all morally ambiguous characters, which only contributes to contemporary series being such outstanding "laboratories of moral

conversation,” as Sandra Laugier puts it.⁴⁰ But while they are mutually implicated, my point in this essay concerns ordinary aesthetics more than ordinary ethics. With the examples from *The Sopranos* and *Ozark*, I hope to have shown how contemporary TV series turn audiovisual or linguistic expressions inside out, bending them so as to produce a seeming continuity as we cross over from one world into another. The figure of the Escher twist aptly captures the non-orientable, ambiguous moment inherent in such coils, moments at which we cannot know whether we are moving inside or out of any world. Moreover, I have called such twists uncanny in the Cavellian sense of the word, as they tend to disclose not only, or not primarily, the proximity of the abnormal as much as they mark the extraordinariness and instability of the ordinary. When such twists loop back to their beginning, they complete a Möbius strip proper, as happens in the cases of *Twin Peaks – The Return* and *Awake*. Both these series, which explicitly showcase this figure on which their narratives structures are molded, conclude with a return to the ordinary. This return is truly *unheimlich* in that “home” strikes us at once as strangely familiar and recognizably strange, thus giving a sense, for better or worse, that it wasn’t originally given in the first place.

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⁴⁰ Laugier, *TV-Philosophy*, 28. On Tony Soprano’s moral ambiguity in the context of ordinary ethics, see Gerrits, “Im/moral Perfectionism.”

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