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Writing the Beginning and the End of a Mobius Strip:

Dreams of Starting Anew in TV Series *Awake*

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“Of course I’m awake. I’m awake with my wife. I close my eyes, I open them, I’m awake with my son.” (S01E01) This is how Detective Michael Britten (Jason Isaacs) describes to Dr. Judith Evans (Cherry Jones) the incredible situation he is experiencing. A few weeks beforehand, he was driving at night with his wife Hannah (Laura Allen) and their teen-aged son Rex (Dylan Minnette) when their car fell off a cliff. Since then, when he wakes up in the morning, he finds himself in a reality where his wife has survived but his son is dead; when he falls asleep at night, he immediately wakes up in another reality that seems as real as the first, in which his wife died and his son is alive. Each dimension works as the other’s dream, creating a “mental Mobius strip”¹ where echoes and coincidences arise between the two “universes.” Michael seems to be constantly awake or he could be continually asleep, perhaps even in a coma following the accident. If Michael, as a detective of the Los Angeles police department, works on cases in both realities, it will be the spectators’ job to investigate on the status of the dimensions: which is the real world and which is the dream world – a fiction in the second degree?

Created by Kyle Killen and Howard Gordon, TV series *Awake* (NBC, 2012) includes 13 episodes lasting 43 minutes each – a single season due to the cancellation decided by NBC. The show’s pilot lays the groundwork for the serial narration. As a semi-episodic series, *Awake* shares common points with the classical, self-contained,

procedural drama with cases solved at the end of each episode, the only difference being that there is no longer one but *two* cases per episode. Clues echo one another from one dimension to the next: Michael has crucial intuitions to solve each case, which are, in fact, generated by the other reality in which he also lives. In a pattern that repeats itself from one episode to the next, Michael needs to come up with credible explanations to justify his astounding inspiration to the other police officers. However, as a semi-serial narrative, *Awake* creates suspense with two issues at stake. The first, “Was the car accident really an accident?” – a question which amounts to wondering whether Michael was the victim of a conspiracy – underlies the narrative arc that runs through the whole first season. This question is eventually answered in episode 13 (S01E013). The second, “What is the nature of each dimension?”, was to maintain the suspense over the course of the whole series. But as NBC decided to cancel *Awake* at the end of Season 1, episode 13, initially conceived by the screenwriters to be a first flagpole, eventually served as a final conclusion. This article explores the narrative tensions at work in *Awake*’s first and last episode, between progression and repetition, in order to produce:

1. a pilot which may, at the same time, start a long-term narrative and allow for early termination;
2. an ending flexible enough to play the role of temporary closure or definitive conclusion.

Flexibility was all the more necessary since the series was broadcast on NBC, a mainstream network that strongly depends on advertising revenue and where programs can be cancelled at any moment if they do not attract a large enough audience.

The series opens in flashback with the car accident. It begins with a shock, the breaking point from which the two paths of reality started to branch off. While on screen we see the three injured (or dead) characters inside the damaged car; we hear the voice of Dr. Lee (BD Wong), a psychiatrist who inhabits the dimension in which Michael’s wife is alive: “So tell me how this works.” Michael replies: “I don’t know. I close my eyes. I open them. Same as you.” The first words are programmatic. They call for the beginning of a narrative (“Tell me”) and help the viewers grasp the

concept of the series: not only is Michael present in two realities, but he is a character *aware* of living two different scripts. Like *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010), another series that generates alternative worlds and is punctuated by eyes opening and closing, *Awake* opens its eyes on two realities – or two dreams. When Hannah asks her husband who is about to fall asleep if his therapy is helping him to deal with their son’s death, Michael replies: “Yes, I feel better each time I open my eyes.” At this very moment, the camera shows us Michael waking up in the other dimension with his son in front of him. Michael can bear his son’s death because he does not really have to say good-bye to him. Through its alternations of light and darkness, its play on eyes that close only to open immediately onto another world, *Awake* presents falling asleep as waking up – or waking up as dreaming. Fiction might be everywhere. As Emmanuel Burdeau asserts, in *Awake*, seriality never stops:

What happens to Britten when we do not see him? Nothing, so it seems. Just the nil time it takes to blink an eyelid. When he closes his eyes here, he instantaneously opens them there. Britten stays in position, loyal to the job. If he is allowed to start from scratch each time, he is, however, never given the right to forget. He lives as in death: interminably.²

Nevertheless, despite this perpetual continuity, the series starts at a very specific moment. Dr. Lee, as a therapist used to treating his patients by making them speak about their childhood so that they can go back to the origins of their neurosis, asks Michael to tell his story from “the beginning.” But Michael interrupts him to indicate that, on the contrary, he will “start right now” – in *medias res*. The slight difference that the series makes between “Let’s start at the beginning” and “Let’s start right now” appears as a reflexive way to present the beginning of the fiction but also to mark the entry point into the narrative. The dialogue signals the moment chosen by the screenwriters to start the narration in this endless Mobius strip composed of two dimensions that seem to be dreaming each other.

The fact that Michael wants to talk of the present instead of recalling his past or explaining how he can move from one world to the other, can also be interpreted as a way to focus less on the mystery of the situation and more on the characters’ emotions, as he is forced to live the break-up of his family and a form of double mourning. According to Jason Mittell, *Awake’s* pilot invites us to care about what

Michael is going through and to accept the fracture of reality as a phenomenon for which there is no explanation; finding reasons for it would just be a waste of time.³ The first minutes of the pilot may thus intend to take away some of the burden that series such as *Lost* put on themselves—since they need to answer all the questions and enigmas they have raised. And yet, this has not prevented the spectators of *Awake* to hope they would one day learn which dimension was “true.”

On the aesthetic level, the fracture of reality appears through the use of color filters: the dimension in which Michael’s wife is alive is filmed with a yellow filter, bringing a warm connotation to the images; the dimension in which Michael’s son is alive is shot with a blue-green filter, conveying a colder feeling (see Plate 1). Because *both* dimensions are ostensibly marked, the change in the filmic image cannot be read as an “operator of modelization”⁴ coding the dreamlike and unreal nature of a sequence. Through the saturation of markers, *Awake* eventually erases their ontological meaning.

The aesthetic difference is anchored in the diegesis itself. So that Michael, just as the spectators, may find his way around and know which dimension is which, he wears a red rubber band when he is with his wife and a green one when he is with his son—colors which echo the filters’ hues.⁵



Plate 1: Promotional picture emphasizing the color filters used for each dimension

In the red dimension, Michael teams up with a new cop and consults Dr. Lee, a man who keeps contradicting him and attempts to bring him to his senses; in the

green dimension, Michael still works with his old partner and sees Dr. Evans, a woman who tends to reassure him and tells him what he would like to hear. The two therapists, however, have an essential point in common: each tries to convince Michael that his or her “reality” is the genuine one and that the other is just a dream. At the end of the pilot, while Dr. Evans asserts, “This is not a dream,” Michael pulls a face and answers back with a vertiginous, “It is exactly what the other shrink said.” According to Dr. Lee, if Michael spots strange similarities and echoes between the dimensions, it is simply because what he experiences in “real life” is reworked by his subconscious within his dreams.⁶ Michael may have invented a whole new world to handle his son’s death and his feeling of guilt (since he was driving when the car fell). According to Dr. Evans, it is her own dimension that is obviously genuine. To prove her point, she makes Michael read a random passage from the Constitution and asks him how this moment could be a dream if he never learnt the Constitution by heart. She concludes her demonstration by saying “Tell Dr. Lee that Dr. Evans says that it’s not as simple as he made it sound.” For each therapist, failing to convince Michael that his/her dimension is the “true” one would amount to negate his/her own existence. The therapists thus start a debate that transcends dimensions and is reflected in the montage: a sequence can start in Dr. Lee’s office and end in Dr. Evans’s or vice versa. The shots/reverse shots create an exchange not only between Michael and each psychiatrist but also between the psychiatrists themselves (see Plate 2). This montage that blurs and merges both dimensions goes together with the doubt we feel as far as the “reality” of what we see is concerned.



Plate 2: The fight between Dr. Lee and Dr. Evans from the pilot onwards

According to Mathieu Pierre, *Awake* asks the “question of our ability to ascertain what is real and what is not, raising the following idea: what if what I think is real is a misinterpretation? Can we trust our perceptions? Is the world I perceive the real world, or even the only possible world?”⁷ To quote Alain Badiou on *The Matrix* (dir. Andy & Larry Wachowski, 1999), the series consists in “making visibly uncertain the certitude of what is visible.”⁸ Kyle Killen, who created the series, has revealed that he was inspired by the way “your dreams feel real, the way you seem to experience them as something that you don’t blink at until something crazy happens that sort of bursts that balloon.” Killen asked himself “what if nothing ever popped that balloon?”—i.e., what if the illusion was permanently maintained?⁹ Michael tells Dr. Evans: “When I’m with my wife or with my son, it all feels completely *real* to me.” But the remarks by Dr. Evans (“You mean you’re not sure which is a dream?”) and by Dr. Lee (“Meaning you can’t tell whether you’re awake or asleep at this very moment?”) point to an essential problem raised by the series: will spectators be able to side with the characters and project themselves in the situations *if the very status of what they are watching remains uncertain?*

In episode 9 (S01E09), Michael watches a football match on TV. The LA team wins in the red dimension but loses in the green one because they failed to hit the ball between the posts by an inch. Michael understands that victory may go either way depending on very small things and stops being interested in matches. Similarly, spectators may grow tired of the series due to too many repetitions in variation in the two dimensions. For instance, in episode 4 (S01E04), Rex’s former baby-sitter Kate has difficulty recovering from her sister’s death. In one of the dimensions, she has become a junkie; in the other, she has fought her way out of her drug addiction. Only one detail made all the difference: her mother simply insisted once more that she pull herself together. In that same episode, in the green dimension, Michael discovers that Rex’s girlfriend was pregnant before losing the child; in the red dimension where Rex is dead, Michael finds the girl whose pregnancy is, this time, well under way.

The series is thus “pregnant” with all its narrative possibilities and dramatizes choices which affect the course of a mere football match or the life of a dear one. These diverging possibilities are superimposed to create effects of palimpsest. In

Awake, a script never erases the other: both options are conveyed as true and draw their emotional force from each other. This figure of the palimpsest finds its way in the diegesis itself. In episode 7 (S01E07), the character of El Diablo stole his dead brother's identity and, to make the illusion perfect, has transformed the tattoo he wears on his back. Thanks to a few additional injections of ink, the picture of a devil has been turned into that of a tiger (see Plate 3). In that same episode, Dr. Lee shows Michael an art book displaying canvases that were altered by their painters to add or transform characters or to modify shapes or positions (see Plate 3). Through this aesthetic metaphor, the series uncovers its narrative mechanism, showing different facets of the same situation when Michael oscillates from one world to the other.

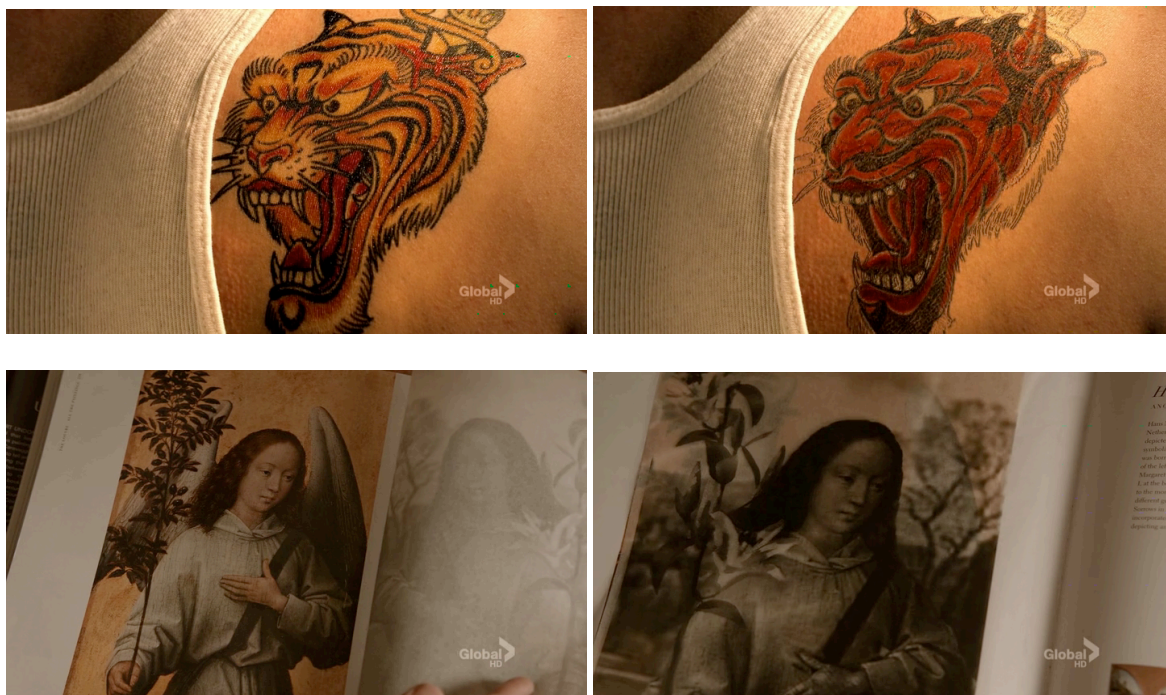


Fig. 3: From the transformed tattoo to the modified painting in episode 7

However, spectators may actually wonder: if half of the sequences (maybe even *all* of them) are mere dreams, only showed to be, one day, sent off to a possible narrative abyss where they would not count for advancing the “real” plot, why would anyone want to watch the series? When Dr. Evans tells Michael he seems suddenly very anxious to determine what is real and what is not, this could be applied to spectators as well, as they are on the lookout for the “true” dimension.

But since one world always serves to advance the plot in the other, the series' force and originality lie in its ability to reveal that, although we are prepared to the idea that one of the dimensions may be "fake," we remain interested in what it has to say. *Awake* shows that any fiction, whatever its degree of *mise-en-abyme* or virtuality, may be worth following and that ontological uncertainty linked to the degree of fictionality is a matter of suspense on which a serial can definitely rely. A case in point takes place in episode 8 (S01E08): in the green dimension, Michael has to protect witnesses who have to start over and abandon every personal belonging in order to be relocated; this experience helps him to let go of his own keepsakes in the red dimension and to contemplate moving out of the house with a lighter heart. When Hannah asks him what made him change his mind, he answers, "I've slept on it." The green dimension—whether a dream or not—allowed him to move on in his life, while also advancing the plot in the red dimension.

The investigation we lead to determine the status of each dimension depends on the clues we spot and on our personal intertextual "encyclopedia." If we are influenced by the idea that US fictions generally spare the lives of children and teenagers, we will be tempted to consider the (green) dimension in which Rex lives as the true one. If, on the contrary, we think that the death of a child is precisely so unbearable that a man is likely to dream up a whole world in which that child continues to live, we will see the green dimension as one imagined by Michael's psyche. Moreover, if we notice that Rex is performed by Dylan Minnette who, in *Lost*, played David Shephard, the son Jack creates for himself in the post-mortem dream that all characters share in the afterlife, we may think that Dylan Minnette has been cast to embody an "imaginary" son again. The dimension in which he is present may thus be the fake one. Each spectator's interpretation amounts to a projection, a Rorschach test that tells as much about us as it does about the series. *Awake's* opening credits actually appropriate and rewrite famous plates from the Rorschach test (see Plate 4).



Plate 4: An image from the opening credits inspired by the Rorschach test

The pilot episode shows images in which Michael and his wife Hannah bury their son Rex in the red dimension and images in which Michael and his son bury Hannah in the green dimension (see Plate 5). The repetition in variation is the mark of serial narration, but *Awake* is specifically based on a tension between absence and presence. In this series, the former cannot be defined without the latter so that it is sometimes very difficult to describe each dimension. Which reality do we, indeed, associate with Hannah? The red one because she is present in it? Or the green one because her absence is so painfully felt there that, paradoxically, she is referred to even more? Because *Awake* is centered on mourning in progress, on the guilt of being the one who was spared, on the ordeal of having to choose between the life of a spouse and that of a child, and on the coping mechanisms that the mind can implement to protect itself, absence always mean obsessive presence.



Plate 5: Michael buries his son or his wife

The diegetic swaying from one reality to the other takes part in a narration that itself oscillates, from the pilot onwards, between the notion of progression/evolution and that of repetition/cyclicity. The first questions that Dr. Lee asks Michael reflect this tension:

Dr. Lee. And then, what?

Michael. Then I go home

Dr. Lee. And then, what?

Michael. I wake up.

If the therapist's questions call for linear progression, reflecting the spectators' desire to know what happens next, Michael's answers take us back to a monotonous daily routine that seems to negate any kind of suspense, only to eventually introduce doubt and originality within routine itself. While we may expect from a pilot that it focuses on the themes of opening, change and evolution, the emphasis is, in fact, on the hero's absence of movement. From the first episode, we learn that Michael's wife would like to cope with her son's death by changing everything – painting the house, quitting her job, moving out, having another child. On the contrary, Michael does not want to stop being a detective or move house. He fears that any kind of change might make one of the “survivors” disappear from his life. As he tells Dr. Lee at the end of the pilot:

The thing is, Doctor, yes, I still see my wife *and* my son. But I've also watched both of them lowered into the ground. And when you see a loved one buried, your one thought over and over and over again, is that you'll do anything, *anything*, to get them back. So if you're telling me that the price for seeing them, feeling them, of having them in my life, is my sanity, it's a price I'll happily pay. Now I'll come and see you and talk to you as long as they make me, but trust me, when it comes to letting one of them go, I have no desire to ever make progress.

Reflecting this “one thought” that repeats itself “over and over and over again,” the series promises to deliver a fiction closed on itself. Paradoxically, there will be some evolution but only between two dimensions clearly identified from the start. Alternation is combined with stability; the episodic form merges with seriality,

notably in an attempt to keep audience ratings stable since the semi-episodic structure allows spectators to continue following a story even when they have missed one episode. But danger is lurking: the lack of progress(ion) promised by Michael may hinder narrative events, thus weakening our interest in the series. Contrary to Michael who is obliged by his hierarchy to consult a therapist regularly, spectators do not constitute a captive audience. They need to be won over every week.

The pilot offers only one moment of instability in which the awful doubt of being completely left alone arises. Michael wakes up one morning in a dimension where he does not wear any rubber band. His panic is underlined by a jump-cut montage and a lack of any color filter. He calls to Hannah, then to Rex—no one answers. He tries to wake himself up, slaps himself in the face, even cuts his hand—until his wife finally arrives in the bedroom and the color filter clearly goes back to yellow. The series thus plays at the same time on the anguish of the nightmare from which one does not seem to be able to wake up and on the desire never to leave a wonderful dream.

Michael does not wish to stop oscillating between the two dimensions. He sees himself as a bridge between his wife and his son—and this situation will not, indeed, change all through the season, except for episode 11. After bungee-jumping at a fun fair, Michael hurts his head, faints and remains stuck in the red dimension. In this episode, he must really face the loss of his son for the first time. However, oscillation still takes place: the green dimension is replaced by dreams of the accident that we see happening over and over again in flashback until Michael remembers crucial details of the events that led to the car falling off the cliff. It is only after recovering his memory that he can start moving from one reality to the next again. The shift between the two dimensions thus contributes to the character's anamnesis surrounding the causes of the accident. According to Dr. Evans, the creation of another reality is Michael's way of recalling what actually took place on that tragic night. The therapists' words thus offer a meta-analysis of the series. As *Awake* works in the semi-serial mode, it needs to give out clues on a possible conspiracy that the spectators will set their minds on uncovering.

From the very first episode, we are given leads as to how the story could end. Michael rephrases what Dr. Lee has tried to make him understand: “You’re saying that as soon as I decide which one is dead, then they’ll stop showing up in my dreams?” The series should, therefore, stop when one of the dimensions is revealed to be a dream or when Michael’s mind no longer copes with the situation. Dr. Lee claims: “While your brain should be resting, recharging, your subconscious is using it to hold up a detailed and complicated alternate reality. If we don’t deal with that, this situation will ultimately become unsustainable.” (S01E01) The situation that is deemed “unsustainable” sends us back reflexively to the idea that the series’ viability might be threatened by the repetition of similar episodes and might disappear prematurely.

This is precisely what happened on 11 May 2012 when NBC decided to cancel *Awake* after its first season.¹⁰ The series had been received favorably by critics (it was ranked the second best series of 2011-12 on the Metacritic website with a 75/100 mark given by journalists and 8.3/10 awarded by spectators,¹¹ but NBC considered that ratings were just too low.¹² If the first episode gathered 6.2 million spectators, the second only attracted 4.3 million. On average, each episode garnered some 4.8 million viewers (with a minimum of 2.1 million). Even the last episode was viewed by only 2.87 million spectators. The series was ranked 125th in ratings for the 2011-12 season. For some critics, the series was too complex to be broadcast on a mainstream network such as NBC, especially on the Thursday-night slot when shows must compete with CBS’s successful *The Mentalist* (2008-).¹³ In a blog entry entitled “*Awake*, Multitasking, And What It Means to Be Complicated,”¹⁴ Linda Holmes claims that *Awake*, as a fiction calling for unflagging attention, was pulled off the air because it was not adapted to the multiple tasks that viewers now expect to be able to accomplish while watching a procedural drama. Since *Awake* was first advertised as a semi-episodic cop show, it aroused the type of expectations that comes with these programs. The series turned into a serial from the eleventh episode—a new way of telling the story which allowed screenwriters to finish off the first (and last) season but which came too late to change the genre of the series and attract viewers used to the serials produced by cabled channels. The series’ fans got organized and launched a campaign entitled “Save Awake” in order to convince other TV channels to take up

the show. In a reflexive dream of resurrection, this campaign consisted of organizing sit-ins in front of the main US networks, writing letters to Fox or CBS and broadcasting videos on YouTube¹⁵ – all in vain.

Because the last episode was scripted well before the broadcast and NBC's decision,¹⁶ there is no way screenwriters could have rewritten the ending to make it stand as a definitive conclusion, but since early termination had already hit other shows on the same NBC slot one can definitely imagine that they had the risk of cancellation in mind.¹⁷ The challenge was, therefore, to write an ending that may open up onto a second season or play the role of a final sequence.

In episode 13 (S01E13), Michael uncovers a conspiracy of corrupt cops working against him. His investigation, which uses both dimensions to progress, eventually has two outcomes. The screenwriters' hesitations over the kind of ending they should write for the story are here made literal in a double, even triple, conclusion offered to the spectators. In the red dimension, Michael finds out (too late) that his boss, Tricia Harper (Laura Innes), is responsible for the accident that killed his son. His fury leads to him being taken for a mad and dangerous man and then locked up for murder; Michael expresses his anger, frustration and despair in his prison cell and starts to doze off (see Plate 6).



Plate 6: Michael falling asleep in jail in the red dimension

He is woken up by a guard who tells him he has a visitor. Michael is actually visited by his “double” in a sequence that, for the first time, denies the character's

unicity. From each side of the glass, the camera films the imprisoned “red” Michael and the free “green” Michael with their respective filters in a puzzling merger of the two worlds (see Plate 7).



Plate 7: Michael is visited by his “double” in the last episode

The free Michael makes the imprisoned Michael notice the sound of a tick-tock which conveys the idea of time ticking towards the end of the season/series and gives a clue that will help incriminate Tricia Harper in the green dimension. When Tricia murdered one of her accomplices to prevent him from giving her up, she lost the tip of one of her heels at the crime scene, thus giving her walk the sound of a discordant tick-tock. Following his meeting with his double, the locked-up Michael sees a door open before him and walks down a long corridor where he is joined by his two therapists—who meet for the first time. Dr. Lee and Dr. Evans fight over the nature of the final outcome (see Plate 8): at the end of the corridor, will they learn which dimension is the “true” one? Or is Michael’s psyche in the process of fracturing again? For Evans, what is going on is “fantastic”; for Lee, it is “madness”—comments that echo what viewers might be thinking in front of this extreme narrative surrealism.



Plate 8: Michael and his two therapists in the prison corridor – Marching towards the truth?

The corridor eventually leads to another door—a multiplicity of thresholds recalling the way the psyche and the subconscious are represented in Alfred Hitchcock’s films, notably in *Spellbound* (1945). Michael opens the door in a moment of overexposure that delays discovery. The sequence finally does not disclose the mystery of the dimensions but offers a moment of pure cinema in which Michael becomes the spectator of what the series already showed us. The door has opened on the motel room at the moment when Tricia shoots her accomplice. Michael witnesses the murder as if he were watching a video of it, with the ability to pause, rewind and fast-forward—until he spots the incriminating clue in the shape of the missing heel.

With a dreamlike lack of transition, he then finds himself in a restaurant for a romantic dinner with his wife. She asks him to give her one last kiss before he leaves to unmask his boss in the green dimension. The series seems here to be presenting the red world as the dream. The “red” Michael sees his double asleep in the green dimension and uncannily lies on top of his sleeping double, thus restoring his character’s unicity. When he wakes up with his new knowledge of the facts, he can go and arrest Tricia Harper (see Plate 9). The narrative arc of the conspiracy ends happily in the green dimension while allowing uncertainty to persist as far as the red one is concerned: was it a dream? Could Michael still go back there? Would he find himself in prison again?



Plate 9: Michael unmask and arrests Tricia Harper in the green dimension

The last two sequences in the series offer a reflection on these issues. While Dr. Evans presents this ending as non-problematic since it has (seemingly) revealed her dimension (the green one) as real, Michael doubts there can ever be true *closure*—where “closure” may allude at the same time to closing a case, concluding the series and saying a final goodbye to a loved one:

Michael. I can't tell you how many cases I've closed. [...] I feel, I don't know, not satisfaction, closure, I guess.

Dr. Evans. And this doesn't feel that way?

Michael. No.

Dr. Evans. How does it feel?

Michael. Like it doesn't matter. I want a time machine.

Dr. Evans. [...] The good news is that you've finally realized that this is life. [...]

Michael. What if I just had a dream? [...] Why can't I just have had a normal dream?

Dr. Evans. Are you saying that you were having a dream while you were dreaming?

If Dr. Evans wants the series to end as one closes a case, Michael cannot bring himself to turn the story into a cold case. Either this “happy ending” does not make sense since he remains in a dimension where he is still missing someone, or he could just have had a dream in the red dimension. In fact, the meeting with his double took place while he had just started to doze off in his cell. Each dimension can thus include its own dreamlike visions. In episode 6, for instance, Michael suffered from hallucinations within each “reality”: he saw a penguin appear or he imagined Dr. Lee standing next to him while he tried to negotiate with a schizophrenic criminal.

Kyle Killen's idea was to include dreams using an uncanny, surrealist aesthetic within the realistic dimensions.¹⁸ The dual world thus always threatens to break again, creating other forks. This is what takes place at the very end of the last episode. In deep conversation with Michael, Dr. Evans suddenly freezes as she had just started her sentence “If you could...” — reflexive words pointing to all narrative possibilities. The camera turns around her while she remains perfectly still recalling the *bullet-time* shot in *Matrix* which seems to stop time, “imply artificial spatiality”¹⁹ and reveal the pictorial natural of representation (see Plate 10).



Plate 10: The camera turns around Dr. Evans as time seems to have stopped

Again, a door opens. Michael can go, as if by magic, from Dr. Evans' office to his own house. There is no longer any color filter. There is no longer any rubber band—recalling the scene of desperate loneliness in the pilot. The door slams behind him, enclosing him in a space at once familiar and disturbing (since we still do not know what this new dimension has in store for him—and us). Alone at first, Michael soon sees his son appear, then his wife—here reunited for the first time since the start of the series (see Plate 11). Rex and Hannah behave as if everything was normal, respectively saying “I was beginning to think that you would never get up” and “Look at this, he lives!”



Plate 11: The family reunited in the last sequence

These sentences may invite us to think that Michael is waking up from a long nightmare and that both dimensions were dreams. However, as Michael closes his eyes, a sudden cut to black may lead us to imagine that he is moving yet to another world (see Plate 12) and that the dimension where Rex and Hannah are together is just an illusion emerging from a new dimensional fracture. According to Killen, if Michael can dream inside a dream, it is possible that he seizes the opportunity of creating the very world he has been wishing for—that where he is reunited with his wife and son.²⁰

Episode 13 first encourages us to believe that the green dimension is the real one and that closure is possible, before opening up to all sorts of ambiguities and possible interpretations. Is the green dimension the “genuine” one? Could Michael have dreamt the happy ending in which he unmasks Tricia Harper only to escape the terror of imprisonment in a red dimension that may be, in fact, “real”?²¹ Is Michael finally back in the “real” world at the end? Did he dream the two dimensions? Or has he just created a third one? If so, is this new dimension parallel to the two others or is it a dream within one of them? The last scene remains ardently open on all these points.



Plate 12: Michael closes his eyes in the series' last shot

However, because the end of the season became the end of the series, many viewers made the optimistic choice of reading the last sequence as a happy ending in which Michael joins his wife and kid in real life—as if everything that happened before had been a very bad dream.²² The episode's change in status (from provisional

and partial ending to definitive conclusion) has influenced reception: the audience's desire has melted into the character's own wish. The end is sometimes when one chooses to see it. If the series had been renewed, the sequence's ambiguities and opacities may have been more noticed and remembered.

Interestingly, since the series' cancellation, Kyle Killen has tried to deny vehemently the optimistic interpretation as if it were too easy or shameful:

I've seen some really interesting [theories], and I wouldn't say that anyone is wrong—except the people who are calling it a *Dallas* or a *Newhart*, any variation on "...and then he woke up."²³

For Killen, if the ending is interpreted as erasing what took place during 13 episodes, *Awake* would have merely reproduced what famous sitcoms or soaps did before. All *Dallas'* season 9 (CBS, 1978-1991), starting from Bobby Ewing's death, was for instance deleted from the "real" story: Pamela Ewing woke up after a very long nightmare to find Bobby in the shower. This dream was not scripted *a priori* but devised as a last resort so that actor Patrick Duffy could star again in the series. As far as sitcom *Newhart* (CBS, 1982-1990) is concerned, it ended by revealing that the whole story had been the dream of the character Bob Newhart had played one decade earlier in the sitcom *The Bob Newhart Show* (CBS, 1972-1978).

In her book *L'Ombre d'un doute : Le cinéma américain contemporain et ses trompe-l'œil* (2012), Aurélie Ledoux claims that, in films playing with the "dream hypothesis," the character who wakes up "is dissolved and erased in the second 'reality' that is offered to him, apparently "not retaining any traces of [his former life] or feeling nostalgic for it." According to Ledoux, these films only offer "a collection of identities" instead of "the construction of a complex identity," favoring the plot's original narrative structure over the character's moral and psychological coherence.²⁴ In the case of *Awake*, this assertion is to be qualified. Killen wishes to distance himself from "the dream hypothesis" precisely because Michael's experiences in the two dimensions cannot be dissolved. Since each dimension represents the other's dream and memory at work, there cannot be any erasure. The character's evolution and construction depend on the very oscillation between worlds. If *Awake* had been renewed, season 2 would not have started with Michael having definitely woken up

from a double nightmare but would have continued to raise doubt over the reality of the green and red dimensions, giving as much ground for their respective authenticity as possible.

At the end of episode 13, if one is to believe Killen's interviews in May 2013 just after NBC cancelled the show, screenwriters had not decided which dimension was true.²⁵ However, just a few months before, on March 1st as the pilot was about to be broadcast, the screenwriter and main actor Jason Isaacs had told a different story: one of the dimensions was definitely real and they knew exactly which one:

Rest assured, the writers and Isaacs know which one [reality] is real. 'We have a very long-term secret planned for exactly what's going to happen, but our lips are sealed,' Isaacs said, laughing: "I don't think even our wives know.'"²⁶

The promotional campaign first consisted in guaranteeing the viewers that the mystery would be solved eventually, that one of the dimensions would one day be revealed as "real" and that no-one would be wasting time looking for clues in the series. Although the pilot seemed to imply that *Awake* was going to focus more on Michael's pain and dilemmas, the pressure exerted by "forensic fans" (a pressure that had been anticipated by critic Jason Mittell when the pilot was first broadcast²⁷) clearly influenced the series' paratext. During the different promotional phases, *Awake* was presented as going against every easy solution constructed as such by the viewers' community. The series has positioned itself as the anti-*Dallas* (it will not erase a whole season by labelling it a dream) and the anti-*Lost* (it will not improvise as it goes along and will eventually settle the argument). Killen actually referred to *Lost* as the series which led producers to demand that screenwriters set narrative milestones to be reached at the end of each season.²⁸

If season 2 had been made, the sequence where the family is reunited at the end of season 1 would not necessarily have given rise to another dimension that would have competed with the green or red one. Far from being rooted in reality, this new world would have been a dreamlike space apart and would have very likely stemmed from one of the two "realistic" dimensions. In this world, screenwriters could have been freed of the logic and constraints of the "real" and played with

surreal situations and images, as in *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990-91)'s Black Lodge.²⁹ At the beginning of season 2, Michael would have continued to move from one dimension to the other. In the red one, he would still have been in jail³⁰ and his wife would have moved away from him, which would have allowed the screenwriters to imagine a love affair between Michael and Tara, Rex's tennis coach, in the green dimension.³¹

Like many contemporary series, *Awake* includes dream sequences to offer alternative versions of the script. It produces a kaleidoscope of possibilities around a given situation and presents every event in the script as potentially dreamed up or virtual, revealing the part of fictive construction in every "reality" and the part of "reality" in every fiction.³² Nevertheless, *Awake*'s specificity and complexity lie in the fact that its dreamlike sequences are never recognizable and are even reversible since they are always constructed as "real." Michael appears as the spectator's mirror image since he too tends to "read as real what is filmically shown."³³

In the overwhelming majority of films and series based on fictional illusion, trompe-l'œil relates to, as Ledoux asserts, "film's diegetic ontology: what was taken for reality in the narrative is revealed to be 'unreal'" and "the spectator is as deceived as the character."³⁴ The twist or moment of disillusionment happens as filmic enunciation reveals itself, challenging the viewers as far as their beliefs in the images and the fiction are concerned. *Awake* is definitely about diegetic ontology and about trompe-l'œil as "an assumption of reality [...], simultaneously a belief in existence and the ignorance of a representation."³⁵ One of the issues at stake is the "very indistinguishability of dream and reality."³⁶ But the series never went as far as the twist where the "truth" is finally revealed, as in *The Matrix* for example. In the last episode, when Michael finds himself with Hannah and Rex, the way the viewers' surprise is organized so as to create an effect of partial or total re-reading could itself be a trompe-l'œil. Moreover, is it appropriate to say that the series deceived the viewers since, from the start, we know, just like Michael, that one of the dimensions may be unreal? The spectators may be *mistaken* concerning the dimension they choose to view as "true" but *never are they deceived* by filmic enunciation. In *Awake*, if there is conspiracy, it takes place at the diegetic level—in the plot contrived against Michael by Tricia Harper—but not at the meta-diegetic level. Dream is signaled all the time—we simply do not know exactly where it lies.

Even though the fictional dimensions are double (even triple), their frames are never sealed: in what stands as constant metalepsis, the story needs to oscillate between worlds to progress. *Awake's* dimensions work as communicating vessels in the same way as the two parts of the film *Mulholland Drive* (dir. David Lynch, 2001), which Ledoux analyses in these terms: "It does not matter if the first part is a dream: what it expresses may never have taken place, but it remains that from which the second part takes its meaning; there is no part 'more real' than the other. As such, they certainly belong to the same whole."³⁷ If *Mulholland Drive* eliminates the distinctions between its two parts by including surreal elements in both, *Awake* makes its two dimensions undistinguishable by making them both obey the laws of the "real." In both cases, dreaming can no longer be understood as the opposite of being awake. The two states are presented as not opposed but complementary.

We may actually wonder whether *Awake* does not undermine the very notion of ontology since a sequence is never invalidated by another, contrary to what happens in a film such as *Vanilla Sky* (dir. Cameron Crowe, 2001) where a scene in which a character wakes up presents explicitly the previous scene as a dream which may, therefore, be dismissed. Therapists Lee and Evans, who wish to defend the idea of a single and ultimate truth, are unaware that their similar assertions only contribute to undermine the existence of this very truth (let's remember Michael's sighing "It is exactly what the other shrink said" in S01E01). However, because the screenwriters announced that they had planned an ending which would have revealed the secret of the "true" dimension should NBC have given them the opportunity of prolonging the story, *Awake* presents itself *virtually* as a series that does not eliminate truth and reality as an ideal horizon to be reached,³⁸ but only postpones *sine die* or avoids the moment of revelation—as in *Total Recall* (dir. Paul Verhoeven, 1990) or *eXistenZ* (dir. David Cronenberg, 1999). Moreover, if one chooses to interpret the end of season 1 as if Michael actually woke up from a double nightmare and was reunited with his family, the sequence could be read as disclosing and reaching an ideal, ultimate truth, thus conveying the "contemporary and nostalgic utopian idea of a 'true' image."³⁹ *Awake's* conclusion might, therefore, resemble that of *The Matrix* or *Fight Club* (dir. David Fincher, 1999) where "the real/unreal duality is not only posited [...] but *elucidated*"⁴⁰ and the value of the

“real” is reasserted.⁴¹ Nevertheless, in *Awake*, this interpretation remains a *choice* we are not obliged to make.

Because the series never had the opportunity to provide a final word, it has preserved the bewildering and intelligent mystery of its images: throughout the whole series, what we think is a dream could be real and what we think is real could be a dream. *Awake* finally denies the possibility of ever reaching a reality that would discredit what the viewers (through Michael) have experienced. Contrary to many Hollywood films using trompe-l’oeil devices, Michael is not an ordinary man in one dimension and a superhero in the other.⁴² No fantasized identity comes to replace his initial personality. No dimension is presented as “ideal” or utopian: each one is marked by pain and loss (of the wife, of the son) and each is kept in memory; none is denied or recanted when he moves from one to the next. The truth is not a horizon to be striving for because it is always already there, in this peculiar existence that the character lives through and that makes him grow. Because the series was interrupted before being completed, no final waking up comes to bring the debate to a close and proclaim an image “truer” than another. Paradoxically, NBC’s decision may be the greatest gift the series could have received. The Mobius strip will go on forever in the viewers’ dreams.

Notes

¹ These are Dr. Lee’s words at the end of the Pilot: “You’ve created a mental Mobius strip.”

² “Que se passe-t-il pour Britten quand nous ne le regardons pas ? Rien, à ce qu’il semble. Juste le temps nul d’un battement de paupières. Quand il ferme les yeux ici, il les rouvre instantanément là. Britten demeure à sa place, fidèle au poste. S’il peut chaque fois recommencer à zéro, il n’a en revanche le droit à aucune sorte d’oubli. Il vit comme on est mort : interminablement”. All translations from French are mine. Emmanuel Burdeau, “*Awake*, ou le cauchemar de l’éveil”, *Mediapart*, 15 July 2012, p. 1.

³ See Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, pre-publication edition, MediaCommons Press, 2012-2013, Chapter “Beginnings,” #17.

⁴ François Jost, *L’Œil -caméra*, Lyon, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1987, p. 29.

⁵ DR. EVANS. What’s the purpose of the rubber band?

MICHAEL. It helps me keep things straight. Green is Rex’s favorite color. I wear a red one with Hannah.

⁶ “I’d say it’s entirely reasonable, it’s even expected that these sorts of details would begin to cross over. The things you’re wrestling with in real life are likely to manifest themselves in your dreams.”

⁷ “[...] la question de notre capacité à déterminer ce qui est réel et ce qui ne l’est pas,

revendiquant ainsi une idée: et si ce que je tiens pour réel n'est qu'une erreur d'interprétation? Le monde que je perçois est-il le monde réel, voire le seule monde possible? Peut-on faire confiance à nos perceptions". Mathieu Pierre, « *Awake* ou la multiplication des réalités », *Implications Philosophiques*, 13 août 2012, <<http://www.implications-philosophiques.org/semaines-thematiques/philosophie-des-series/awake-ou-la-multiplication-des-realites>>

⁸ "rendre visiblement incertaine la certitude du visible". Alain Badiou, « Dialectique de la fable », in *Matrix, machine philosophique*, Paris, Ellipses, 2003, p. 120. Quoted by Aurélie Ledoux, *L'Ombre d'un doute: Le cinéma américain contemporain et ses trompe-l'œil*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2012, p. 70.

⁹ Steve Eramo, "Q & A with *Awake*'s Howard Gordon and Kyle Killen", *The Morton Report*, 19 February 2012, <<http://www.themortonreport.com/entertainment/interviews/q-a-with-awakes-howard-gordon-and-kyle-killen>>

¹⁰ Michael Ausiello, "NBC Cancels *Are You There Chelsea?*, *Awake*, *Best Friends Forever* and *Bent*", *TVLine*, 11 May 2012, <<http://tvline.com/2012/05/11/awake-cancelled-best-friends-forever-chelsea-bent>>

¹¹ See <<http://www.metacritic.com/tv/awake>>

¹² See audience ratings and market shares on Wikipedia:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Awake_%28TV_series%29>

¹³ See James Hibberd, "Will viewers understand NBC's *Awake*?", *Inside TV*, 7 January 2012, <<http://insidetv.ew.com/2012/01/07/nbcs-awake>>

¹⁴ Linda Holmes, "*Awake*, Multitasking, And What It Means To Be Complicated", *NPR*, 1 March 2012, <<http://www.npr.org/blogs/monkeysee/2012/03/01/147728266/awake-multitasking-and-what-it-means-to-be-complicated>>

¹⁵ The video, entitled "It's our turn. Save AWAKE!", was posted on Youtube in May 2012: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FU2QZKESjpE>>

¹⁶ "The finale was written and filmed before the show's cancellation." Mandi Bierly, "*Awake* creator answers burning questions", *Inside TV*, 26 May 2012, <<http://insidetv.ew.com/2012/05/26/awake-finale-kyle-killen-burning-questions>>

¹⁷ See Alan Sepinwall, "Interview: *Awake* producers Kyle Killen & Howard Gordon". *HitFix*, 24 February 2012, <<http://www.hitfix.com/blogs/whats-alan-watching/posts/interview-awake-producers-kyle-killen-howard-gordon>>; "Our ratings weren't great, so there was some suspicion that we might not be back, but nobody had any idea what NBC would do." Matt Webb Mitovich, "*Awake* Creator Nixes One Theory, Hints Dream-y Finale Was In Fact Britten's Worst Nightmare", *TVLINE*, 25 May 2012, <<http://tvline.com/2012/05/25/awake-season-series-finale-review-questions-answered>>

¹⁸ Mandi Bierly, "*Awake* creator answers burning questions", *Inside TV*, 26 May 2012, <<http://insidetv.ew.com/2012/05/26/awake-finale-kyle-killen-burning-questions>>

¹⁹ See Ledoux, "signifier une spatialité artificielle", p. 75.

²⁰ See Bierly, <<http://insidetv.ew.com/2012/05/26/awake-finale-kyle-killen-burning-questions>>; Webb Mitovich, <<http://tvline.com/2012/05/25/awake-season-series-finale-review-questions-answered>>

²¹ Bierly, <<http://insidetv.ew.com/2012/05/26/awake-finale-kyle-killen-burning-questions>>

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Webb Mitovich, <<http://tvline.com/2012/05/25/awake-season-series-finale-review-questions-answered>>

²⁴ Ledoux, p. 120. Le personnage "se dissout, s'effaçant dans la seconde 'réalité' qui lui est proposée", "ne semblant garder ni traces ni même nostalgie de [son ancienne vie]"; les films proposeraient une "collection d'identités" plutôt que "la construction d'une identité complexe".

²⁵ Bierly, <<http://insidetv.ew.com/2012/05/26/awake-finale-kyle-killen-burning-questions>>

²⁶ Drusilla Moorhouse, "Five Reasons You Can't Miss Tonight's *Awake* Premiere", *E! Online*, 1 March 2012, <<http://fr.eonline.com/news/297952/five-reasons-you-can-t-miss-tonight-s-awake-premiere>>

²⁷ "Instead through its compelling writing, performances, visual style, and emotional realism, *Awake's* pilot suggests that the series cares more about going forward with its character-driven storytelling than solving the mystery; however, the pull of forensic fandom might make it seem like the goal of the show is to provide answers to the mysterious concept, rather than exploring its consequences in the lives of characters." Mittell, #19.

²⁸ "Literally, that last scene was something we had talked about from before the pilot was even written. Post-Lost, [network execs] are looking to make sure that you have flagpoles that you're heading toward, and that was always our Season 1 flagpole." Webb Mitovich, <<http://tvline.com/2012/05/25/awake-season-series-finale-review-questions-answered>>

²⁹ "For me, *Twin Peaks* was a seminal show, and what we started to miss from the red-versus-green [story] and the procedural crossover clues and the fact that they were both completely grounded and therefore impossible to tell apart, was that despite being a show where half of it took place in his imagination, we rarely got to play with any 'fun' imaginary elements. This [finale] was always intended to open up a third space, a dream space, to introduce some of the more surreal elements." Webb Mitovich, <<http://tvline.com/2012/05/25/awake-season-series-finale-review-questions-answered>>

"*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 he 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." Bierly, <<http://insidetv.ew.com/2012/05/26/awake-finale-kyle-killen-burning-questions>>

³⁰ Bierly, <<http://insidetv.ew.com/2012/05/26/awake-finale-kyle-killen-burning-questions/2>>

³¹ "Once he's imprisoned and he's considered essentially a mad man and there's not really a clear way out, we would have used that and Dr. Evans to really try to convince him that that was his imagination and there was a psychological reason that he was holding himself there. That would have opened the door enough for us to begin something with Tara. And then by the time the red world resolved itself and he was extricated from prison, without really meaning to, he would have gotten himself in two different relationships. By the time things were repaired with Hannah, he would have already begun a relationship with Tara because he had been leading himself to believe that Hannah wasn't real and it was something that he needed to get over. By the time that flipped on him, he would have been a man divided. That was something we were really eager to explore in the second season." Bierly, <<http://insidetv.ew.com/2012/05/26/awake-finale-kyle-killen-burning-questions/2>>

³² See Sarah Hatchuel, "Rêves et fantasmes dans les séries télévisées américaines contemporaines : des apparitions a-cinématographiques ?", in *Le Rêve au cinéma : Iconographie, procédés, partitions. L'onirisme filmique au prisme des autres arts*, ed. Patricia-Laure Thivat, *Ligeia*, to be published at the end of 2013.

³³ Ledoux, "tendance à lire comme réel ce qui est filmiquement montré", p. 99.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10. "porte [...] sur l'ontologie diégétique du film : ce qui passait pour la réalité dans le récit se révèle 'irréel'", "le trompé est le spectateur et pas seulement le personnage".

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27. "assomption de réalité [...], simultanément croyance en une *existence* et ignorance d'une *représentation*".

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43. "cette *indiscernabilité même du rêve et de la réalité*".

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 139. "peu importe que la première partie soit un rêve : ce qu'elle exprime peut n'avoir jamais eu lieu, elle demeure cependant ce à partir de quoi la seconde partie prend

son sens ; il n'y en a pas une qui est 'plus vraie' que l'autre. En cela elles font bien partie de la même totalité".

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 174-175.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 204. "l'utopie contemporaine et nostalgique d'une image 'vraie'".

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 140. "la dualité réel/non-réel, être/apparence est non seulement posée [...] mais élucidée".

⁴¹ However, contrary to what happens in *The Matrix* or *Vanilla Sky*, the reality posited by this interpretation of *Awake* is not characterized by imperfection, inadequacy or horror. *Awake's* "real world" (should it exist) is linked to happiness and fullness. This interpretation of the final sequence is maybe (ironically) to be rejected precisely because it so blantly goes against the Hollywood trend: illusion is generally attractive and reality is harsh and dreary.

⁴² See Ledoux, p. 158-160.

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