

The OA, Season 2



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The OA. Season 2, produced by Brit Marling and Zal Batmanglij, Plan B Entertainment and Anonymous Content, 2019.

THE second season of *The OA* picks up exactly where the first one left, and both continues and, arguably, doubles down on its strange allegorical and metaphysical take on science fiction and transdimensionality. To recap, the first season centers around a young woman named Prairie Johnson (Brit Marling) who returns to her adoptive family after disappearing under mysterious circumstances seven years earlier. Now preferring to go by “The OA”, Prairie, who had been blind for most of her life, assembles a misfit group of four local high-school students and one teacher (called the Crestwood Five) for the purposes of travelling to another dimension, utilizing a method she and another four other people developed during their time in captivity, as revealed in the first season.. Season 2 of *The OA* is set in the second dimension. We are introduced to a private eye named Karim Washington (Kingsley Ben-Adir), who has been hired to investigate the disappearance of a young teenage girl named Michelle. In this dimension, the captives (Homer, Rachel, Scott, Renata) as well as Hap and OA have jumped into different versions of themselves. Hap is now Dr. Percy, the director of a large psychiatric institution where Homer works as a resident psychiatrist. Rachel, who had a beautiful singing voice in Season 1, is mute in Season 2 and OA has jumped into a version of herself that did not have a car accident as a child, thus she never had a near death experience so she never lost her sight, was never adopted, and instead led a life of luxury and privilege with her biological father who was alive and present throughout most of her life. Despite her being thrust into this new dimension, OA remembers her seven-year captivity, she remembers her friends, the movements, and the Crestwood Five, as well as everything else from the dimension whence she came. The entirety of Season 2 weaves an endlessly intriguing narrative of how Karim Washington’s search for a missing teenager interconnects with the people and events surrounding the OA and the mysteries of interdimensional travel.

Whereas the first season of *The OA* is told like an ordinary drama, recounting an emotional tale of narrative fiction while hinting at the trappings of science fictionality, the second season is more akin to a neo-noir thriller, told particularly effectively visually through the use of unbalanced camera angles. In addition, the narrative at times blurs the lines between good and bad, right and wrong and employs thematic motifs that include

revenge, paranoia, and alienation.

Admirers of allegorical science fiction television and film such as *The Prisoner* (McGoohan, 1967), mystery horror drama such as *Twin Peaks* (Lynch, 1990-2017), supernatural drama *Lost* (Lindelof, 2004-10), supernatural mystery drama *The Leftovers* (Lindelof, 2014-17) or German science fiction drama thriller *Dark* (bo Odar and Friese, 2017-20) will appreciate *The OA*. Like these various examples of allegorical science fiction television and film, *The OA* engages audiences that revel most in unravelling the mysteries of decoding a myriad of literary and historical references and associations, while seeking the sophisticated underlying and cosmic meanings embedded within the show that slowly reveal themselves on multiple narrative, visual and metaphorical levels.

However, while *The OA* occasionally uses science fiction tropes, it does so without deploying the hard mechanics of sci-fi. For example, while interdimensional travel is a key narrative device in *The OA*, it generally does not use technology as a means to travel, unlike recent science-fiction films *Inception* (Nolan, 2010) or *Interstellar* (Nolan, 2014) which do employ technology as a means to enter metaphysical worlds. When science fiction technological devices become divulged towards the end of the second season of *The OA*, they are as a revelation because the audience has grown accustomed to the idea of achieving interdimensional travel through choreographed movements, as entirely plausible. That *The OA* is wholly convincing about interdimensional travel as an analogue activity, arrived at through a series of physical movements executed in unison and with perfect feeling, differentiates this series from other science fiction narratives that deal with interdimensional travel. The second season of *The OA* ends climactically with characters in dual dimensions jumping together to a third dimension whose conditions are immediately apparent as meta-narrative. The season-ending cliff-hanger is maddeningly self-referential, drawing to attention the idea of its own artificiality while tangibly questioning the very medium through which *The OA* is being told.

According to the show-runners, the entirety of the narrative arc of *The OA* was meant to be told over five seasons and it had all been mapped out before production began. In an allegorical work such as this, the number five is in itself significant because it is one of many emblems that is repeated throughout the series. Five seasons, presumably five dimensions, told in five distinct genres, corresponding to the five Crestwood characters, the five captives, the five connected glass chambers in which they were imprisoned, Hap's name short for 'haptic' meaning the five senses, and the five movements which enable interdimensional travel.

Scholars and researchers interested in televisual works invoking intertextuality as an aesthetic strategy will recognize *The OA* as a profoundly postmodern media text. though

not in the way Frederic Jameson defines postmodernism, which in Jameson's view, relies too heavily on nostalgia for a past that never existed. Rather, the postmodernism expressed in *The OA* is more analogous to the way Linda Hutcheon describes it: “that which paradoxically wants to challenge the outer borders of cinema and wants to ask questions (though rarely offer[s] answers)” (117). Further in line with Hutcheon's theorizing, *The OA* leaves behind unresolved tensions, challenges spectators expectations, and allows contradictions to deliberately manifest. *The OA* is shaped by adjunct literary references that elaborate a narrative which reveals clues pointing to a series of mysteries which are never entirely articulated, self-reflexively. *The OA* is meta-cinema. Some of the literary references in *The OA* are overt and others are covert. For example, Karim Washington gives Octavia Butler's novel *The Parable of the Sower* (1993) as a gift to another character in Season 2. *The Parable of the Sower* is a sci-fi novel featuring a character with hyper-empathy following the collapse of society due to climate change. During experiments, Hap fixates on the audio recordings captured during near death experiences, which he then situates as occurring among Saturn's Rings. That immediately calls to mind W.E. Sebald's 1995 novel *The Rings of Saturn*, a hybrid work of history, myth and memoir in which themes of time, memory and identity feature prominently. Interdimensional travel and communication (not limited to human communication but interspecies communication as well) is a central focus of *The OA*. Prairie/Nina/The OA uses the term an 'invisible river' as a poetic description of interdimensional travel achieved by executing the five movements. This reference to an invisible river in *The OA* recalls German poet and philosopher Friedrich Hölderlin's influential hymn *The Ister* (1803) which, briefly, is a poem about the Danube River concerned with cyclical history while unpacking concepts of space and time. A documentary was made of *The Ister* (Barison and Ross, 2004) where well known philosophers including Bernard Stiegler, Jean-Luc Nancy and Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe discuss myriad, interconnected relations and, of particular significance here, the film is divided into five chapters that end as the river reaches its source, seeming only to claim the failure of its own project.

Despite the highly enigmatic ending of Season 2, Netflix unceremoniously cancelled *The OA* shortly after the second season aired, citing that it didn't generate enough new subscriptions, which is one of the key metrics that Netflix uses to measure the success of its productions. The fandom of *The OA* was in an uproar, and conspiracy theories abounded about the characters having jumped into our present dimension as well as theories circulating about supposedly innovative marketing plans for subsequent seasons by faking out the audience about the show's cancellation. A fan went on a weeks-long hunger strike at Netflix headquarters and fans raised money to install digital billboards in New York's Times Square in protest of the cancellation. Unfortunately, at the time of writing, the series remains

cancelled. The showrunners, however, stand by their 16 hours of unfettered television, which shares narrative and conceptual elements with other examples of independent, speculative fiction as exemplified in films by Benson and Moorhead: *Resolution* (2012), *Spring* (2014), *The Endless* (2017). As well, *The OA* shares conceptual commonalities with works such as *Coherence* (Byrkit, 2013), *Arrival* (Villeneuve, 2016), films written by Alex Garland *28 Days Later* and *Sunshine* (both 2002), *Never Let Me Go* (2010), and *Annihilation* (2018) and similar radically sincere (Gilbert), independent works such as *Primer* (Carruth, 2004), *Upstream Color* (2013) and the German sci-fi *Dark* (bo Odar and Friese, 2017-20).

Works Cited

Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. Routledge, 1993.

Gilbert, Sophie. "The Radical Sincerity of *The OA*." *The Atlantic*, 19 Mar. 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/03/the-return-of-the-oa-tvs-strangest-most-sincere-show/585208/>.