



David Sweeney, *The OA*. Cambridge: Auteur, 2022. 112pp. US\$35.99 (pbk).

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David Sweeney's 2022 book *The OA* provides a concise exploration of the eponymous television series created by frequent collaborators Brit Marling and Zal Batmanglij. The book dissects the narrative and thematic elements of the show, offering insights into possible inspirations for the series, its execution, and the show's abrupt cancellation that left committed audiences in the lurch. Sweeney's slim volume presents a cohesive analysis of *The OA* (2016–19), a show which has

achieved a cult-like status, notwithstanding the show's premature cancellation at the end of season 2. Originally conceived as a five-season arc, Netflix cancelled the show unceremoniously, apparently due to an internal metric suggesting it had failed to attract enough new viewers (43), resulting in the enigmatic series ending on a cliffhanger, truncated and unfinished. *The OA* has been criticized in the press for being crowded with underdeveloped ideas (26); this is essentially an unfair criticism for a series originally conceived for five seasons, and littered with foreshadowing that, due to its cancellation, represent planned elements that never had the opportunity to be fully fleshed-out. Nevertheless, Sweeney presents a considered approach in which various analytical themes are presented with which to unpack the enigmas of *The OA*.

Following a brief synopsis of the show, chapter 1 summarizes the working history of *OA* creators and producers Marling and Batmanglij, revisiting past collaborations such as *Sound of My Voice* (2011), *The East* (2013), and *Another Earth* (2011). (Since the conclusion of the series and publication of *The OA* book by Sweeney, Marling and Batmanglij have produced another seven-episode limited series titled *A Murder at the End of the World* (2023) for FX on Hulu, and signed a multi-year deal with Sister, an independent global entertainment company.) Sweeney proposes various objective similarities between their previous works, including a fascination with augmented reality, charismatic yet flawed leaders, the existence of and ability to travel through the multiverse, repeated visual motifs that form part of the overall storytelling, multiple protagonists as opposed to a single protagonist, and unreliable narrators, in addition to recurrent theoretical underpinnings that Marling and Batmanglij's previous collaborations share with *The OA*.

Furthermore, Sweeney suggests the contemporary sensibility of dislocation or, more precisely, Emile Durkheim's concept of *anomie*, as a key throughline. Sweeney presents *The OA* as conceived of and presented as a critique of the conditions of contemporary society within late capitalism in which values and goals are uncertain, and in which the effectiveness of frameworks regulating individual and collective experience have been diminished resulting in a general sense of dissatisfaction in contemporary life. Sweeney focuses on the tropes of many worlds, unreliable narrators, and metalepsis (a story within a story) as recurrent themes across Marling and Batmanglij's previous work, while highlighting other works of literature in which these tropes also exist, such as Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962) and the stories of Jorge Luis Borges. In particular, the sixth episode of season 1 of *The OA*, "Forking Paths" (December 6, 2016) explicitly shares an episode title with Borges' short story "The Garden of Forking Paths" (1941), and the multiverse, or many-worlds trope in which all

possible outcomes are realized in some world or universe, is apparent in both Borges and *The OA*, as well as many other examples of literature, television series, and films.

Chapter 2 considers *The OA* in the context of prestige television, and the oft-used format of contemporary online viewing platforms that periodically release all episodes at once, allowing the audience to control the speed at which they view a particular series. Sweeney points out the linkages that *The OA* has with other forms of creative expression, namely comics and graphic novels, but also other examples of media texts that share similar sensibilities. Sweeney specifically mentions the comics imprint Vertigo that produced *Sandman* (1993–20), which is another work with a cult following that employs metalepsis and whose narrative is also embroiled in ideas of a multiverse. Sweeney articulates similarities between comic book publishing and *The OA* more generally as well.

Another fascination in *The OA* has to do with “old” media. Sweeney contends that one of the ways Prairie Johnson (Brit Marling), the protagonist we are introduced to in season 1, expresses her “otherness” or anomie is often through media. Sweeney invokes Steven Shaviro’s post-cinematic affect as an active concept in this respect. Sweeney compares *The OA* to both *The X-Files* (1993–2002), *Twin Peaks* (1990–91) and *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017). Aside from all these shows enjoying a cult following, *The X-Files* and *Twin Peaks* represent a similar approach to generic play as *The OA*, including the blending of police procedurals, sf, and horror. Sweeney also draws links between other serialized television phenomena and films such as *Stranger Things* (2016–25) and *Beyond the Black Rainbow* (2010).

In chapter 3, Sweeney examines the hybrid genre nature of *The OA*. Increasingly genre is becoming hybridized, and certainly *The OA* is an example of genre hybridization. While Sweeney examines various traits within different genres that are apparent in *The OA*, the two seasons themselves constitute different genres. For example, season 1 is a family drama/supernatural mystery, whereas season 2 shares many features of neo-noir. It is entirely possible that had *The OA* continued through five seasons as originally planned, each season would have perhaps embodied a distinct genre or genres. Nevertheless, Sweeney carefully examines tropes from different genres and how they arise in *The OA*, primarily focusing on mystery and horror. Delving further into particular horror genre tropes, Sweeney considers tropes of possession and multiversal fiction, as well as how *The OA* displays commonalities with and inspiration from H.P. Lovecraft’s renowned short story “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928), Justin Benson and Aaron Moorhead’s body horror film *Spring* (2014), and David

Lynch's *Inland Empire* (2006). Sweeney explores aspects of multiversal fiction with considerable depth and suggests *The OA* as part of a new emergent genre termed "New Age" which evolved as a genre from the gnostic tendencies of the Wachowski sisters' film *The Matrix* (1999).

Chapter 4 covers instances of real-world unlawful imprisonment and discussion of an augmented reality game that may have inspired Marling and Batmanglij. "The Jejune Institute" was an augmented reality game, installation, and immersive experience produced by artist Jeff Hull that operated in San Francisco from 2008–11. The Jejune Institute blurred distinctions between fiction and reality. San Francisco is also the setting for season 2 of *The OA* and features an augmented reality game titled "Q Symphony" and provides an entry point into that season's mysteries. In Q Symphony, the further players get into the game, the more intertwined the game becomes with the real world. This sensibility mirrors the fandom which sprang up around *The OA* upon its abrupt cancellation. Fans performed coordinated flashmobs of the five movements which in *The OA* can transcend reality, and made fan-produced films that continued the story of *The OA*, for example, *Invisible River* (2020). The idea that the game can enable players to jump from one reality to another, similar to the movements in season 1, fueled the fandom and the mythology surrounding *The OA*, especially considering the final cliffhanger at the premature ending of series. At the end of season 2, Karim Washington (Kingsley Ben-Adir) the private detective attempting to solve a missing persons case, eventually transcends a stained-glass window located at the top of a house featured in Q Symphony, and sees actor Brit Marling being injured on a film set. The film set witnessed by the character Karim contains simulacra of all the visual and *mise-en-scène* elements of season 2.

It is interesting that Sweeney tackles inspirations for *The OA* in chapter 5 because discussion of possible texts that may have informed *The OA* are in fact spread throughout the book, long before the final chapter. In that sense, the book mirrors the television series with clues, puzzles, suggestions, and foreshadowed elements sprinkled liberally throughout. It is unfortunate that the series was not completed, leaving much of the analysis open to speculation. The metaphysics of *The OA* – whose central conceit is the ability to transcend reality through specific, coordinated movements, movements that are performed in person throughout the first season with "perfect feeling" and mechanized in the second season – are such that the philosophical questions generated from the content, the narrative delivery, and the endurance of *The OA* beyond the screen remain extremely compelling, even after its premature cancellation.