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“The Dream it’s Always Been: Fractured Narratives in *Awake*”

by Paul Zinder

Michael Britton, the psychologically damaged detective-protagonist of the short-lived NBC series *Awake* (2012), creates his own alternate universe as a subconscious response to his grief following a car accident that took the life of either his wife or his son. In the series’ “Pilot”, the viewer learns through Britton’s visits to two separate therapists in two separate realities, that he lives with his wife, until he goes to sleep, only to awake the next day a widow, living at home with his teenage son. The series’ season-long mystery questions whether the world he experiences with his wife and his male therapist, or the one he experiences with his son and his female therapist, denotes true reality. *Awake*, created by Kyle Killen, utilizes a complex narrative structure that mirrors Britton’s fragile psyche as he undertakes a separate investigation in each of his alternating worlds as a police detective. While the story design of *Awake* initially depends on a dual episodic case-of-the-week construction, where his potential dream(s) offer clues that assist him in solving the mysteries of individual police cases in two different realities, the series evolves and ultimately transcends these initial (rather forgettable) cases to focus on Britton’s mind, and his inability to allow one of his family members to die, even in a dream-state. Eventually, Britton begins to experience hallucinations in both realities, and his therapists (and the viewer) are lead to question whether these visions infer that a total psychological breakdown is imminent. The following essay offers a close-reading of the narrative strategy of the cult series *Awake*, considering how the show’s dystopic viewpoint counters the more ambiguous thematic concerns of more popular texts that include alternate realities in contemporary media.

The series “Pilot”’s main concern is to make this complicated series palatable (and understandable) for the first-time viewer (If the rather abysmal ratings throughout the show’s run are any indication, one could argue that the series never succeeded at achieving this aim). In its opening minutes, the “Pilot” divulges that Britton is being forced to visit a therapist by his police captain, only to reveal that he is actually seeing two different therapists in two different realities. Apparently his supervisor in each world believes that he returned too soon after the death of a family member so close to him.

The series splits each of Britton’s worlds by the colors red and green. In an effort to keep track of where he is at any given moment, Britton wears a red rubber band around his wrist when he’s living in the reality where his wife, Hannah, survived the accident. His therapist in the red universe is the male Dr. Lee and his partner is a rookie detective named Vega. After going to sleep for the night, Britton awakens with a green rubber band around his wrist when the world he inhabits includes his surviving teenage son, Rex. His female therapist in the green universe, Dr. Evans, gives him advice, and he continues work with his longtime partner, Bird. A subtle visual filter utilized for each world recalls the tonal quality of each rubber band, in an effort to assist viewers in comprehension.

Interestingly, character traits seem to tie directly to the visual universe in which each of Britton’s surviving family members resides, from the very beginning of the series. The red universe of the pilot is brighter, and mirrors Hannah’s approach to dealing with Rex’s death. Her renovation of the house in bright colors is a precursor to her eventual suggestion that she and Britton move away and start anew (an attempt to bury the past), an approach that includes her suggestion that they

have another child. The green universe, however, is darker in both conception and mood. Rex is depressed over his mother's death, and his inability to relate to Britton makes clear Rex's dependence on his mother's love as a main source of happiness (or illumination) in his life. It seems that the sun in the green world died along with Hannah.

Britton is a character attempting to negotiate these two worlds, as each of his therapists tries to convince him that the world he inhabits during each individual therapy session is his true reality, and that a danger is posed by his insistence on keeping both Hannah and Rex alive in his mind when one of them is obviously dead.

This first episode establishes the narrative structure of the early part of the series. In the red universe, Britton and Vega investigate a serial killer, while in the green universe, Britton and Bird search for a missing child, each case providing subtle clues to inform the other. These early episodes utilize rather silly plot devices that place the viewer inside of Britton's confused mentality.

The therapists in each of Britton's realities are endlessly fascinating, primarily because of their insistence that the other therapist (and the world she or he inhabits) is a dream. Dr. Lee (in the red reality) and Dr. Evans (in the green), are both highly intelligent, rational, convincing characters, and each serves as a lynchpin that grounds Britton in the world he's in when he visits one or the other for an appointment. Perhaps more importantly, they place the viewer in the seat next to Britton, raising the question both he and we maintain as we watch these therapy sessions and each individual episode: Which world is real and which is a dream? Each therapist overtly challenges the protagonist to solve the mystery of his dual-existence by challenging the viewer with the same questions, which are supported (and, at times, thwarted) by the show's narrative construct.

For example, regarding the kidnapping investigation in the green world in the "Pilot", the "red world's" Dr. Lee notes that Britton is working on a missing child case in his other universe because his subconscious is attempting to deal with the loss of his own son Rex in the accident. While this sounds highly logical, later, in that green world, Dr. Evans prints out some text from her computer and asks Britton to read it aloud. When he questions her on what he's doing, she asks him if he's memorized the entire constitution of the United States, because "if this is a dream... explain to me how you can turn to a random page and start quoting it... word for word" ("Pilot"). These jockeying viewpoints are matched by both therapists throughout the series, and by the narrative paradigm of the show itself, making the true mystery of *Awake* – whether Britton is alive with only his wife or with only his son – its central question for both its protagonist and its external audience. But this fact is complicated by one of the sequences in the first episode, when Britton makes his position perfectly clear to Dr. Evans: "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... So if you're telling me that the price of seeing them, feeling them, of having them in my life is my sanity? That's a price I will happily pay... When it comes to letting one of them go, I have no desire to ever make progress." While Britton delivers this soliloquy, the episode's sequential and visual makeup defend him, as the scene in the therapist's office cuts to flashback shots of Hannah and Rex screaming as the car flips during the accident, to "present day" shot/reverse shots of Britton having Chinese take-away with Rex in the green world match cut to a dinner and wine with Hannah in the red world. Why *would* he want to make progress?

Now that's a herculean task for the writers of a mystery series – develop a protagonist who doesn't want to actually solve the series-long mystery established in

the “Pilot”, the one the viewer invests in from the very beginning. Will Britton (or we) ever find out where the dream world begins and the real world ends? The makers of *Awake* answer this challenge by complicating the plots of stand-alone episodes even further, making them fantastical escapades into the mind of a hallucinating protagonist.

These visions shatter narrative expectations in episodes like “That’s Not My Penguin”, only to re-establish Britton’s aforementioned thesis. In “That’s Not My Penguin”, Gabe Wyath, a highly intelligent delusional schizophrenic, wires a hospital to explode, and Britton is sent in to talk him down. Gabe wants to see his sister, who he’s convinced was “abducted by agents related to the lab where he used to work,” when in reality she was murdered four years ago. At one point, Gabe says to Britton, “Did they tell you that I’m making it up? Because that’s how they dismiss you...” In essence, Gabe is unknowingly giving Britton counsel, advice that only Britton could understand, that to give up on a belief system simply because the authorities tell you to is to give up on yourself.

Essentially Gabe’s problem is the same as Britton’s. He longs to see a dead family member, so he invents a reality in which she exists. This fact, from a psychological standpoint, would seem to infer that the red universe, then, is Britton’s dream, as Gabe’s missing sister substitutes for the deceased Hannah, who exists solely in that universe. But then why does Britton see a penguin standing in his therapist’s office upon his return to the green universe?

Dr. Evans in the green universe insists that Gabe’s hostage drama is a positive step as Britton has linked himself with a schizophrenic in his dream state, which makes his own “well-being” dependent on defeating the schizophrenic. She makes this argument while Britton stares into the eyes of the penguin standing next to her, a hallucination narratively (and only potentially) justified by the psychiatric drug he was injected with in the hospital before he passed out. But that’s not nearly as important as Britton’s chosen means utilized to defeat Gabe and prevent further violence.

Britton tells Gabe that his sister escaped her abductors and is living a happy life, encouraging the latter’s delusion by giving it a positive spin. As Britton tells Evans when he returns to the green world, what’s “so great about seeing reality?” Again, the protagonist (and the series narrative) sides with the ambiguity of the unknown.

The writers eventually up the ante by replacing the more standardized case-of-the-week procedural element of *Awake* with an urgent, personal, mystery-within-the-larger-mystery configuration. In “Say Hello to My Little Friend”, for the first time in the series history, Britton does not awaken in the green world, finding himself instead “trapped” in the red reality. Although Dr. Lee and Hannah both attempt to comfort him as he begins to panic that his only son is actually dead, a recurring hallucination of a man he’s never met appears (and openly speaks to him) throughout the episode. These visions, of course, indicate that the red world remains dreamlike, and discount Dr. Lee’s contention that the disappearance of the green world means that Britton has finally accepted Rex’s death. In fact, by the end of the episode, when Britton “sees” a long-form vision of his car accident for the first time, he realizes that the man haunting him in the red world is Hawkins, a cop who intentionally ran him off the road that night, causing the accident. It is only upon the “solving” of this particularly mystery that Britton awakens in the green universe again, thrilled to embrace the son he thought he had finally lost.

The true fracturing of Britton's mind (and of the series narrative), however, doesn't occur until the series finale, a radically structured episode that recalls classic mindbenders like the final installment of *The Prisoner* (1968).

By the time "Turtles All the Way Down" begins, Britton sits in a jail cell after being arrested in the green universe after killing Hawkins, the dirty cop who ran him off the road. Upon his return to the red universe, however, Britton finds himself bleeding in an alley after being shot by Hawkins, who's still alive there. After Britton escapes Hawkins' custody, the visual strategy focuses on shots that trap Britton in the frame, including a shot through a bannister that foreshadows Britton's eventual (second) arrest.

In the red reality, an impatient Britton suffers trapped in a holding cell, his bruised and punctured body closely framed and restrained by the setting. Discontinuous editing infers his mental state – but this time, the jump cuts serve as a prologue to a complete diversion from the rules of narrative established in the series' early episodes, a departure that pushes the external audience to consider the warnings given Britton by the show's internal audience (Drs. Lee and Evans) throughout the show's run. Has he finally lost any sense of what is real?

After the guard informs him that he has a visitor, Britton enters a room with a row of phones - an overly dark, wholly abandoned visitation room, a room of the mind, not of any reality. Why is he alone in this environment? After he sits in a stall waiting for his visitor to arrive, only to discover that his visitor is himself from the green universe, the viewer may conclude that the setting (a place of incarceration, a location expected to keep the peace, to block unruly behavior) has failed in its duty, and that the prison door of Britton's mind has just swung open.

He has one more goal to achieve – to implicate Harper, his immediate boss, in the conspiracy that led to Britton's car accident and the death of Hannah or Rex. After he convinces himself (literally) that "we can stop her", the Britton of the red universe walks down a long dim hallway as both of his therapists trail behind him, discussing whether he has finally gone mad, in a comical ode to the ambiguous space they at that point inhabit.

Following a revelatory scene in which Vega (dressed in a giant penguin suit) leads him through a freeze-framed motel room flashback to find the evidence he needs to implicate Harper, Britton sits across from Hannah in a swanky, deserted club. As Britton looks into Hannah's eyes in this highly Kubrickian moment (the sound/image relationship in this scene recalls the bar setting in *The Shining*, a telling intertext that includes an insane protagonist), she asks him what's wrong. His response, "I'm afraid I'm never going to see you again..," is followed by her reply: "Just give me one last kiss goodbye." Her final line, "Now go and get her," pushes Britton back into his own empty bedroom in the **green** world, where he successfully nails Harper for her crimes.

As the series draws to a close and the viewer finds herself at least partially satisfied that the aforementioned events may finally prove that the red world was all a dream and that Hannah is indeed dead, Britton sits across from Dr. Evans in the green world, where his therapist assures him that his investment in "one real life is ultimately going to be a richer experience than dividing yourself between two." But Britton, the protagonist who simply will not concede defeat, informs Evans that he'd rather dream, and the narrative structure of this complicated series takes a final, drastic turn. Evans freezes in her chair like a film projector stuck on a single frame, allowing Britton to walk right by her (ignoring both her presence and advice), re-enter his house and walk down the stairs. When he finds both Hannah and Rex happily

going about their business in his kitchen on a bright sunny day, the idyllic - yes, dream-like scenario, matches Britton's ultimate fantasy for the entire series. Finally, the story design of *Awake* has caught up with Britton's insanity, to give him what he wants the most.

This leaves the audience of *Awake* with an oddly satisfying and yet strangely unsettling finale. While more popular media texts like *Lost* (2004 – 2010), *Inception* (2010) and *Fringe* (2008 – 2013) all end their stories of alternate realities in varying, but fairly optimistic, ways, *Awake* concludes with a protagonist who has chosen to fracture his own mind in order to enjoy the satisfaction demanded by his personal quest. But in fact, Michael Britton *has* lost either his wife or his son, and now he has lost himself, which results in the absolute abandonment of his sole remaining family member in whichever world is actually real – a selfish, if not dystopic finish to the journey of a man who could not let go.