'*To exist is to survive unfair choices.*'

'Tribal Ontology' in the Netflix Originals Series *The OA*

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May 2019

In 2017, *Vox* journalist David Roberts used the term 'tribal epistemology' – borrowed from the anthropologist Helmut Wautischer (1998) – to describe a tendency for certain groups, in our current 'post-truth' environment, to trust information which is 'evaluated based not on conformity to common standards of evidence or correspondence to a common understanding of the world, but on whether it supports the tribe’s values and goals and is vouchsafed by tribal leaders' (Roberts: 2017). In the Netflix Original series *The OA* (2016-19), Prairie Johnson – played by the series' co-creator and writer Brit Marling - is such a leader, however the knowledge she gives her tribe, that the universe is in fact a multiverse and that inter-dimensional travel is possible, widens rather than narrows their understanding of the world. Convinced of Prairie's claims, the tribe becomes focused less on their personal difficulties than on what Brian McHale calls 'problems of modes of being' (10), as does the series; however, Prairie may be an unreliable narrator, and therefore both her status and her claims are put in question. McHale identifies the preoccupation with modes of being as a characteristic of postmodernist fiction which is distinguished from its modernist predecessor by a shift from 'an epistemological dominant to an *ontological* one' (10; original emphasis). Where tribal epistemology of the type Roberts identifies resolves problems of both being and of knowing by uniting them in a subjectivity guaranteed by what Max Weber termed the 'charismatic authority' (2012) of a leader, Prairie's tribe, each of whom feels marginalised by normative society, are given agency by the knowledge they acquire. This knowledge empowers them to become more than mere followers, particularly when they start to doubt Prairie. In Nietzsche's terms, they become who they are and as the series is set in a multiverse, this becoming involves engaging with multiple modes of being: a tribal *ontology* rather than epistemology.

In this essay, I will discuss the 'tribal ontology' of *The OA* in the context of current debates pertaining to the social construction of both knowledge and identity. Significantly, a member of Prairie's tribe, Buck, is transgender as is the actor who plays him, Ian Alexander, who also plays himself in the second season finale where the previous events of both seasons are implied to have all been a 'series within a series'.I argue that this episode's deployment of metafictional techniques and the series' use of the trope of the multiverse are ultimately utopian in motivation, calling for a corresponding social multiplicity in the actual world which overflows 'tribal' boundaries and removes the need for an epistemology guaranteed by charismatic authority.

In Marling and Batmanglij's first collaboration, the 2011 film *Sound of My* Voice, Marling plays Maggie, a cult leader in the Los Angeles of 2014 who claims to have travelled back in time from the year 2054 to warn her followers of the destruction of American society in her time. I have previously compared Maggie to Walter Benjamin's 'Angel of History' from Thesis IX of his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*: both have their backs to the future, 'but unlike the angel, [Maggie] has already seen it and so for her the past to which she travels is a moment in the ‘single catastrophe’ of capitalist “progress”' (2015). Maggie uses her knowledge of the future to educate her followers about a new, better way of living based on a return to community and the replacement of the 'culture industry' with an authentic folk culture, as valued by Benjamin and the members of the Frankfurt School with which he was associated, most notably Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. However, Maggie's cult has been infiltrated by two undercover documentary film-makers determined to expose her as a con-artist exploiting the credulous and needy. These characters, particularly Peter (Christopher Denham), are the film's protagonists and Maggie is represented as a potentially unreliable narrator to her cult. This is particularly evident in a scene where Peter attends a cult meeting during which, after she has described her 2054 community's focus on 'singing and dancing', Maggie a delivers a shaky rendition of 'Dreams', a hit single by the Irish band The Cranberries from 1993, in response to her follower's request for a song from the future. When challenged by a baffled acolyte, Maggie claims ignorance of the song's origin, explaining that she learned it from a folk-singer in 2054. She shames him and he is quickly removed from the room; however, the rest of the cult – who, because of their familiarity with the song, were able to bolster Maggie's performance – accepts her explanation. If Maggie is a fraud, then her decision to sing 'Dreams' is a masterstroke: the song's familiarity immediately undermines her credibility, while her nervous, accapella delivery of it is in sharp contrast with her earlier confident oration; however, both of these factors combine to consolidate her charismatic authority over the cult. Such authority is originally associated with religion – charisma deriving from the Ancient Greek term for divinely conferred grace – although Weber also applied it in a secular context. Maggie's cult is structured around a kind of secular mysticism – Maggie appears to have time-travelled through magical rather than technological means - and an organicism which values the 'natural' over the artifice of modern society. Weber described charismatic leaders as having a 'certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which [they are] set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities' (358). Her time-travelling aside, Maggie does not appear to have any extraordinary abilities and, indeed, is severely allergic to the toxins of the industrialised 21st century to the extent that she needs to use an oxygen tank (although this may also be part of her ruse as she also smokes tobacco and drinks alcohol) but nevertheless her apparent sincerity combined with her angelic beauty, and radiant, all-white wardrobe, gives her an air of divinity. The desire of her anomic followers for meaning in their lives further fuels this sense of Maggie as somehow otherworldly and their belief in her claims becomes a form of faith.

*Sound of my Voice* ends on an ambiguous note, with Maggie's true status unconfirmed and it is easy to see how the mystery could have been developed in the film had been a TV series or film trilogy as originally conceived. It is easy, too, to see how Marling and Batmanglij have imported ideas and concepts from the abortive series into *The OA.* Certainly, Maggie and Prairie have much in common beyond being played, and co-created, by Marling. Both are charismatic leaders of a group of disenfranchised individuals. Both claim to have travelled to their current milieu from a fantastic point of origin: the future in Maggie's case; in Maggie's, imprisonment in the underground dungeon-laboratory of Hap, a deranged scientist obsessed with the Near-Death Experience (NDE), which Prairie has had. As a result of her NDE, Prairie has also learned the secrets of the multiverse and inter-dimensional travel. She promises her followers that they too can acquire this knowledge, improving their lives as a result, just as Maggie attempts, at least ostensibly, to benefit her followers by disabusing them of their rationalist and materialist worldview. And like Maggie, Prairie may be an unreliable narrator to both her group and the audience, although her status as protagonist/audience-identification figure means that, the doubts of some of her group notwithstanding, her fantastic story is presented as genuine right up until the final episode of season one.

Both Maggie and Prairie present an *alternative* way of life to her followers, which is preferable to their current circumstances. The future Maggie describes, although borne from catastrophe, is preferable to the present because it promises community over and a re-connection with nature over urbanised alienation; Prairie improves the experience of her group not only by giving their lives purpose (to help her liberate Hap's other prisoners) but also by offering them a new understanding of the nature and construction of reality. This theme of alternative ways of life is also evident in *The East* (2013), Marling and Batmanglij's second collaboration in which Marling plays Sarah, a corporate investigator who infiltrates, and subsequently becomes sympathetic to, an anti-capitalist group. It is present too in the 2011 film *Another Earth*, co-written by Marling and its director Joe Cahill, which uses the 'many worlds' trope to represent the way in which Marling's character's life might have turned out if she had not made the reckless decision to drive drunk, killing a woman as a result. In quantum physics, the concept of 'many worlds', as theorised by Hugh Everett in 1957, posits that the universe is in fact part of a potentially infinite multiverse in which everything that possibly could have happened did happen, in parallel dimensions, other realities. This concept was anticipated in literature by Jorge Luis Borges's story 'The Garden of Forking Paths' (1941), which lends its title to the sixth episode of *The OA*'s first season ('Chapter 6: Forking Paths', 2016) in which Hap uses the phrase to describe the multiverse.

Brian McHale has identified Borges' story as a key text in the move from modernist to postmodernist fiction in the 20th century. This movement is characterised by a corresponding shift in the poetic 'dominant', a concept which McHale takes from Roman Jakobson who defined it, in a 1931 lecture, as the 'focusing component of a work of art [which] rules, determines and transforms the remaining components' (McHale: 6). McHale describes the dominant of modernist fiction as epistemological which is concerned with 'problems of knowing'; postmodernist fiction has an ontological dominant and a corresponding preoccupation with 'problems of modes of being' (10). 'The Garden of Forking Paths' anticipates such a shift in its depiction of a labyrinthian novel discussed by the narrator, which is revealed to also be a model of the multiverse. Although the story is not itself a multiversal fiction, as characters do not cross dimensions, for McHale its 'possibilities' (21) were developed in the work of subsequent postmodernist writers, notably by Robert Coover in his collection *Pricksongs & Descants* (1969).

The concept of multiple earths is also a central tenet of David Lewis’s philosophical thesis of 'modal realism' in which he argues for the existence of a 'plurality of worlds' (2011: vii); Lewis refers to this plurality as *possibilia*. All possible worlds exist somewhere, but are mutually isolated because '[t]here are no spatio-temporal relationships at all between things that belong to different worlds'; there is also no causal relationship between events in possible worlds (2). However, neither restriction necessarily applies in the case of multiversal fiction, including in the work of Brit Marling. In *Another Earth*, a 'mirror' version of Earth enters the solar system and is revealed to be inhabited by counterparts of Earth's population; the film concludes with Marling's character Rhoda meeting her counterpart who appear more prosperous than Rhoda who is working as a domestic cleaner, implicitly as a result of not having made the same reckless decision as Rhoda did earlier in her life. Furthermore, in *The OA,* Prairie, Hap and other travellers' can move between worlds; however, they can only do so after death, taking over the body and and displacing the consciousness of their counterpart in another dimension, altering the course of events in that world, as Prairie alo does in season 2.

*Another Earth* is similar to the romantic comedy *Sliding Doors* (1998) which shows two forking versions of the protagonist Helen's life resulting from her making or missing a particular subway train. However, neither version of Helen is aware of her counterpart or her universe. While no explanation is provided for the existence of the mirror-world in *Another Earth*,it, and *Sliding Doors*,are comparable to both Borges' story and Everett's theory in their representation of multiple versions of reality. Both films are also comparable to the 'choose-your-own-adventure' sub-genre of fiction in which readers are allowed a small degree of the control of the narrative in the decisions they make over characters' actions, except, of course, that the viewer has no control whatsoever over onscreen action. One notable example of this form is *Life’s Lottery* (1999) by the novelist and film critic Kim Newman, who has described his oeuvre of interlinked novels, short stories and comic books as a 'multiverse' and acknowledged the influence on it of the science fiction and fantasy writer Michael Moorcock (Newman: 2005, 13). Moorcock's body of work is similarly multiversal (he even wrote a series for DC Comics' Helix imprint entitled *Michael Moorcock's Multiverse* [1997] featuring characters from his prose fiction). Moorcock explored alternative history in his proto-Steampunk trilogy *A Nomad of the Time Streams* (1971-81); as the title suggests, the trilogy involves inter-dimensional travel, although the worlds visited do not come into contact. 'Choose-your-own-adventure' texts recall, in simplified form, the labyrinthian novel from Borges's story in which multiple stories/worlds featuring variations of the same characters co-exist. This also becomes the case with *The OA* in season two which reveals that Prairie was telling the truth about the multiverse and inter-dimensional travel all along.

Prairie's lesson to her followers, referred to by fans as her 'tribe', is that the multiverse not only exists, but is navigable. The tribe acquires purpose in season one by agreeing to learn the physical movements required for inter-dimensional travel in order to help Prairie rescue her friends from the dimension Hap has taken them to after his realisation that NDEs show glimpses of ‘other lives' rather than 'the afterlife' (season 1, episode 6). Their lives are enriched too by the sense of camaraderie they develop and in the re-enchantment of the world they acquire from Prairie's tales of encountering the angelic being Khatun during her NDE, who informed Prairie of her own true identity as the 'Original Angel' (as abbreviated in the series' title). I use 're-enchantment' here in reference to Weber's concept of the 'disenchantment' of the world brought about by the scientific rationalism of the Enlightenment, the subsequent rise of capitalism and, with it, secularisation and a societal focus on efficiency. The effects of disenchantment are evident in the search for meaning common to both Prairie's tribe and Maggie's cult. For Weber, European society after the Enlightenment, and under the emergence of capitalism, was characterised by a change in the motivation for 'social action' which resulted in secularisation. Where hitherto social action had been motivated by kinship and lineage, in the modern world efficiency became its key driving factor, resulting in 'the bringing of calculation into the traditional brotherhood, displacing the old religious relationship' as Weber writes in his *General History of Economics* (356), the sub-title of which is *The Social Causes of the Decay of Ancient Civilisation* (1927). Elsewhere, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), Weber writes:

The order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. (108)

Weber compares this situation to Puritan life: 'the Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so' (108), the implication being that a forced vocation is not a true calling at all. Furthermore, the revelation of the existence of multiple dimensions also serves to relativize the one the tribe inhabits; such relativism emphasises the contingent nature of history including the opportunities, or, in Weberian terms, 'life chances', available to individuals in their particular society and in relation to such factors as social class, ethnicity and gender, which I will return to below in reference to the members of the tribe, particularly Buck.

This contingency is a key characteristic of 'alternative history' fiction as in for example, the contemporaneous online TV series *The Man in the High Castle* (2015-2019) produced by Amazon Studios. An adaptation of Philip K Dick's 1962 novel of the same name, the series, like all fiction of its sub-genre, is built around a point of divergence from actual history: in this case, the premise is that the Axis powers won World War II and subsequently occupied the United States. *The OA* displays alternative history characteristics when Prairie jumps dimensions in the second season, to a world in which Joe Biden is president of the US in 2016 rather than Barrack Obama. Although this element is not subsequently developed in the season, its presence is nevertheless consistent with the series' general thematic concerns with the nature and construction of reality. Prairie's tribe come to learn that their destinies are not set in stone and that action can improve their life chances. Similarly, alternative history fiction challenges any fatalistic view of historical inevitability showing instead, as McHale puts it, 'our world *as it might have been* if at certain branchings in history's garden of forking paths some path *other* than the one which produced our world had been chosen' (19; original emphasis). Having Biden as US president in 2016 is an example of what the historian Richard J. Evans calls a 'counterfactual' (2016) and can also be interpreted as a satirical comment on the election of Donald Trump later that year, Trump's campaign having benefited from the support of the racist 'Alt-Right' which emerged under Obama's term in office (2009-17) but which would likely not have organised if Biden had been president. 'To exist is to survive unfair choices,' Khatun tells Prairie in the fourth episode of season one; however, to recognise these choices as 'unfair' is also to recognise the power structures which create them. In discussing Benjamin's approach to history, and his belief in the mutability of the past, Terry Eagleton (2009) used the example of Obama's presidency as an event which shows 'that history, however tragic, is not destiny':

What happens, happens. But as Benjamin’s friend and colleague Bertolt Brecht never ceased to remind us, it could always have happened differently, or not happened at all […] Looking back from the standpoint of Barack Obama’s White House, we can see more than the 19th- century slave-owners of the American deep south could. We can see that slavery did not need to happen because, one day, an African American would be president, thus finally putting paid to the myth that his people are inferior.

The Biden presidency in *The OA* holds, in Evans' phrase, 'an ironic mirror' up to actual history (134) which allows us to speculate on, among other things, what Trump's electoral chances might have been without the assistance of his racist supporters, mobilised by Obama's presidency.

In his article on tribal epistemology for *Vox*, David Roberts cites the right wing radio host and Trump supporter Rush Limbaugh's views on climate change as an example of the phenomenon. Limbaugh has his own, if not multi, then *bi*-universal model, based on ideology. For Limbaugh, the 'universe' of the left, with its belief in human-created climate change, is 'an entire lie'; furthermore, the universes of the right and the left 'seldom […] ever overlap' (Roberts: 2017) The result of such a worldview – interchangeable here with 'universe' in Limbaugh's use of the term - is that information cannot be separated from ideology, authority can never be 'transpartisan': under these conditions, Roberts writes, 'there is only zero-sum competition between tribes, the left and the right. Two universes.' (2017). Jodi Dean has taken issue with the view that the Internet – where, today, tribal epistemology flourishes – is 'as a site at which multiple realities converge', writing:

The idea of multiple realities is one of the most pernicious today. There is one reality. It is a site of conflict. (2003, 105)

In this context, 'multiple realities' refers to a plurality of worldviews, many of which are, as Dean observes, antagonistic. Dean sees the Internet as a platform for ‘contestation' which '[p]aradoxically perhaps […] signifies collectivity' (108); tribal epistemology, however, implies collectivity only in the context of mutual isolation.

Which is not to say that there is no antagonism or contestation under conditions of tribal epistemology; there very much is, as Limbaugh's attitude towards the Left demonstrates. Where alternative history and parallel universe fiction relativizes the actual world, Limbaugh's bi-universal model is utterly devoid of relativism, presenting instead a binary opposition that is not between 'correct' and 'incorrect' but, rather, 'true' and 'false'. That Limbaugh believes that the institutions of the media, academia, government and science – what he calls the 'Four Corners of Deceit' – are deliberately misleading the public in pursuit of their anti-capitalist agenda also frames this opposition as a struggle between 'good' and 'evil'. Under Trump, Roberts argues, 'tribal epistemology has found its way into the White House'. This is particularly evident in Trump's self-described 'running war with the media' (Hirschfield-Davis, Rosenberg: 2017), which, in a Tweet posted on February 17th 2017 cited by Roberts, he labelled as not only 'FAKE NEWS [*sic*]’, but also the 'enemy of the American people'. Trump's tribal epistemology is also apparent in his rejection of theories of human-created climate change, including a US government report, The Fourth National Climate Assessment, to which Trump's response was: “I don't believe it” (BBC: 2018a). This rejection is indicative of Trump's view that scientists who are proponents of the theory that climate change is human-induced have a 'very big political agenda' (BBC: 2018b).

The period Maggie claims to come from in *Sound of My Voice* is both post-industrial, in terms of Western history, and pre-industrial, in terms of its way of life. It is also without the internet, which recalls the 'fantasy of a disconnected life, a life liberated from the networks of global corporate technoculture' which Dean identifies in the 'ideal of autonomous spheres and freefloating, spontaneous reasons and values' (104) underpinning the notion that the internet is a public sphere, a concept she rejects in preference for a model of it as, like her view of reality in general, a site of conflict. Allergic to the toxins of modern industrialised society, Maggie compares the 'poison' of insecticides found in industrially farmed fruit with the 'logic, bitterness, intellectual bullshit' of the instrumentally rationalised, disenchanted, modern world. The modern-day hoboes Sarah encounters in *The East* similarly reject the perceived inauthenticity of modern life, and Prairie's tribe in *The OA* are also in search of a more meaningful existence, which her mission to rescue Hap's prisoners promises. Prairie's position, as stated in the very first episode, that '[i]t’s not really a measure of mental health to be well-adjusted in a society that’s very sick', recalls both Maggie's view of the modern world, and the late Mark Fisher's argument that mental illness, including his own depression, are products of what he termed, and used for the title of his 2009 book on the subject, 'capitalist realism'. This term describes the conditions under which it is 'accepted, even assumed, at the level of the cultural unconscious' that there is no alternative to capitalism (6), a system which already presents a form of Maggie's organicism in the marketing of expensive 'natural' produce and a related environmentally conscious lifestyle which Fisher identifies as 'the problem' because it is 'simulated-organic' (2009b).

Fisher's use of 'simulated' here evokes Jean Baudrillard's study of 'hyperreality', *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) which influenced, and made a cameo appearance in, the Wachoswkis’ seminal science fiction film *The Matrix* (1999) which, as I will show, bears some similarities to *The OA*. For Baudrillard, capitalism, and the related phenomenon of urbanization, both separate humans from the natural world: in the era of late capitalism/postmodernity humans experience the 'precession of simulacra' in which the simulacrum exists *before* the real. In *The Matrix*, the familiar world of late 20th century capitalist society is revealed to be a computer simulation used by artificially intelligent machines to control an enslaved human population. As Prairie teaches her tribe that there is more to the universe than the materialist model allows, and more to life than the experience of capitalist realism, so, in *The Matrix*, the enlightened Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) challenges his protégé Neo's (Keanu Reeves) conception of reality. When Neo breaks free of the computer simulation Morpheus announces, 'Welcome to the desert of the real', a reference to a phrase from *Simulacra and Simulation*. However, where this desert is the result of a future catastrophic conflict between man and machine in *The Matrix*, for Baudrillard it is already the result of capitalism and the term refers to modern society itself, as represented in *The OA* by Crestwood, the drab Michigan suburb inhabited by the characters whose residents seem to live in a state of mutual isolation. The suburb includes the unfinished house in which the tribe meet, abandoned after its owners couldn't afford to complete it, a reference, perhaps, to the financial crisis of 2008, caused by a bubble in the American housing market. It is from this desert which Prairie, like Maggie, offers escape. While they do not actually travel to another dimension in the first season, Prairie's followers nevertheless experience significant existential changes and perform an heroic act when they use the moves for inter-dimensional travel which Prairie has taught them to, instead, distract a high-school shooter in the first season finale.

The shooter kills Prairie in the episode. In the season two premiere, she is resurrected into the body of a Russian woman, Nina Azarova, also played by Marling. Azarova is the identity Prairie, who was adopted by an American couple, had claimed was truly hers in season one, telling the tribe that she is the daughter of a powerful Russian oligarch and, as a child, survived an assassination attempt by his enemies which left her blind after an NDE. Sent to a school for the blind in the US, she was later adopted after her father’s death, and renamed Prairie. The Nina whose body Prairie occupies in the second season is her counterpart in the parallel dimension where Joe Biden is the American president in 2016. This version of Nina has not suffered the death of her father as a child and is active in his semi-legal business empire. She is also romantically involved with Pierre Ruskin, himself an oligarch, whose name is an allusion to real world tech-billionaires Elon Musk, who co-founded PayPal, and EBay founder Pierre Omidyar. Ruskin is behind 'Q Symphony', an online game which he uses for crowdsourcing and recruitment. Ruskin, who monitors dreams of the gamers he recruits via Q-Symphony for potential coding purposes, practices what Shoshana Zuboff calls 'surveillance capitalism’ (2019). Zuboff compares surveillance capitalists, such as the owners of online platforms like Google, Facebook, Amazon and EBay, to the industrialist 'robber barons' of the American Gilded Age (c.1870-1900). Like their predecessors, Zuboff's surveillance capitalists stand

on the frontier of a vast discontinuity in the means of production with nothing but blank territory in which to invent a new industrial capitalism free from constraints on the use of labor, the nature of working conditions, the extent of environmental destruction, the sourcing of raw materials, or even the quality of their own products (106)

Ruskin's own disregard for ethics and contempt for the law is represented in his dismissive attitude towards the private investigator Karim Washington (Kingsley-Ben Adir) who is searching for a missing woman Ruskin had recruited.

It is because of what Zuboff identifies as the 'cyberlibertarian ideology' (109) of the capitalists who built and control the 'architecture' of the internet that Dean argues it is not a public sphere, despite claims and appearances to the contrary. In this sense, it is another simulation, serving what she terms, via Paul A Passavant, 'communicative capitalism': neoliberalism in the age of network digital communications which relies upon, and perpetuates, 'fantasies' of 'abundance', 'participation/activity', and 'wholeness':

The fantasy of abundance leads to a shift in the basic unit of communication from the message to the contribution. The fantasy of activity or participation is materialized through technology fetishism. The fantasy of wholeness relies on and produces a global both imaginary and Real. This fantasy prevents the emergence of a clear division between friend and enemy, resulting instead in the more dangerous and profound figuring of the other as a threat to be destroyed. (2005:51)

For Dean, the internet is not a public sphere but rather a 'zero institution', that is, an 'an empty signifier that itself has no determinate meaning but that signifies the presence of meaning’; furthermore, '[i]t is an institution with no positive function at all: all it does is signal the actuality of social institutions as opposed to preinstitutional chaos' (2003: 105). The anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss used the term to, as Dean puts it, 'explain how members of a tribe are able to think of themselves as members of the same tribe even when they are radically split, even when their very representations of what the tribe is are radically antagonistic to one another' (105): in this context, the 'tribe' itself is a zero institution enabling a sense of unity even when there is conflict. In Dean's view, the World Wide Web is also a zero institution which 'enables myriad conflicting constituencies to understand themselves as part of the same global structure even as they disagree over what the architecture of this structure should entail' (106). The Web is 'particularly powerful' because 'its basic elements seem a paradoxical combination of singularity and collectivity, collision and convergence' (106) which creates the conception of the internet is itself a kind of multiverse consisting of 'multiple realities', which, as we have seen, Dean rejects. Dean's rejection anticipates the emergence of the current, of not passing, 'post-truth' environment in which reality is made a matter of ideological/consumer choice.

For Zygmunt Bauman, modernity and postmodernity are distinguished by the attitude towards individual responsibility prevalent in each era. Bauman saw modernity as a 'gigantic exercise in abolishing individual responsibility other than that measured by instrumental rationality and practical achievement' (xxii); as a result, individuals were expected to follow the rules and laws of 'power-supported structures' which proclaimed universal truths. Postmodernity, on the other hand, is characterised by a 'privatization' of morality and an emphasis upon individual choice. While this may appear more intuitively desirable than being subject to a monolithic external authority, such 'exhilarating freedom to pursue anything' is, in Bauman's view, essentially a consumerist experience, a 'life-long commitment to the shopping mall' which can also bring 'the mind-boggling uncertainty as to what is worth pursuing and in the name of what one should pursue it' (vii). Post-truth also seems intrinsically consumerist in its treatment of reality as something to be chosen in accordance to individual ideology or taste. As we have seen, McHale identifies an 'ontological dominant' in postmodernist fiction, which is characterised by an emphasis on 'problems of modes of being'. In his later writings, Bauman preferred the term 'liquid modernity' over 'postmodernity' which he considered a more accurate description of the constant change characteristic of late 20th century society. Such liquidity is particularly evident, for Bauman, in the move from a societal focus on hardware to software and in cultural attitudes towards self-identity. In his book *Liquid Modernity* (2000), Bauman anticipates the present day cultural prominence of identity politics, including the increased visibility in mainstream media of transgender individuals. *The OA*'s Buck Vu is not only transgender, but so too is the actor, Ian Alexander, who plays him. Marling and Batmanglij refused to be 'flexible' over the casting of Buck, insisting that the gender and Asian-American ethnicity, of the actor match that of the character (the Wachowskis, who are both trans women, also cast a trans actor as a trans character in their Netflix Originals series *Sens8* [2015-18]). Alexander, who had no previous professional acting experience, was recruited by casting director Avy Kaufman via trans websites (Renfro: 2016). Of all the members of Prairie's tribe, Buck displays the most faith in her in the first season, sacrificing his access to a supply of testosterone in order to ensure a safe space for tribal gatherings in the second episode. When the truth of Prairie's claims is called in to question by the discovery of a collection of books from which her backstory may have been assembled (season 2, episode 8), Buck keeps one of the texts as both a souvenir and a kind of talisman. There is little, if any, attempt to explain *why* Buck is transgender in *The OA* but his gender is not represented as a *choice*. Buck's loyalty and compassion places him, as Renfro observes, in 'direct opposition' (2016) to another member of the tribe, Steven, a cis-gender, heterosexual and rather macho character, who questions Prairie's authority. Buck's masculinity not only relativizes Steven's own, it stands in contestation to it, often literally when Buck stands up to his aggression (including sacrificing the testosterone which Steven supplies Buck and attempts to use to manipulate him). Dean has expressed her rejection of relativism as an effective political tool because 'far from negating or even taking issue with these absolutes, relativism requires the acceptance of particularized convictions, the acknowledgement that each is entitled to her own beliefs and opinions' (2009: 120). This is indicative of relativism's relationship to an 'individualization of politics into commodifiable ‘‘lifestyles’’ and opinions [which] subsumes politics into consumption':

That consumer choices may have a politics—fair trade, green, vegan, woman-owned —morphs into the sense that politics is nothing but consumer choices, that is, individuated responses to individuated needs. (11)

Dean echoes Bauman here and quotes from his *The Individualized Society* (2001), immediately after, including the text:

With eyes focused on one’s own performance and thus diverted from the social space where the contradictions of individual existence are collectively produced, men and women are naturally tempted to reduce the complexity of their predicament. (Bauman: 2001, 106; cited in Dean: 2009a, 11)

Bauman was writing before the rise in prominence of ‘woke culture' and social media activism in the second decade of the 21st century under which Buck (and Alexander) would be well aware that the 'misery' he experiences is due to a systemic bias against trans people which limits his life chances. Therefore, Buck's relativization of Steven's masculinity – that being male is not dependant on biological sex nor characterised by aggressiveness - *is* contestation (particularly given that Trump has attempted to prevent trans people from serving in the US military, ostensibly because of 'tremendous medical costs and disruption' [Hirschfield-Davis, Cooper, 2017]). Buck sings in his school choir, including performing as part of a male-voice quartet, at an event, in season 1, episode 5, where another member of the tribe, French, meets the trustees of the college scholarship which he has received, and which comes with a 'character clause'. That Buck is permitted to perform as part of the quartet is indicative of a cultural acceptance of trans individuals, although one of the trustees dismisses the value of a 'choir voice' to French, emphasising the importance of industry and Michigan's high national ranking in that area. This seems another satirical comment by Marling and Batmanglij given the on-going financial and health emergencies experienced by the Michigan city of Flint due to neoliberal policies of de-industrialisation and cost-cutting, as addressed by Flint native Michael Moore in his documentaries *Roger & Me* (1989); *Bowling for Columbine* (2002); and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004). It appears, then, that Buck's life chances are only limited by his abilities, not his gender, and the representative's statement that French has a promising political future because the 'demographic has' changed seems to suggest that French's mixed race background (his father is European; his mother Asian) will in fact stand in his favour. However, an earlier act of casual racism by another trustee towards French (episode 2) and the name of the trust itself, Knightsman, with its white supremacist connotations, suggest French may merely be situationally useful to an inherently exclusionary organisation. The inclusion the scholarship seems to provide is comparable to the 'fantasy' of 'participation/activity' Dean identifies as a key characteristic of communicative capitalism.

It is because of the character clause that Buck sacrifices his access to the testosterone dealt by Steven who severs his supply after Buck forbids him from dealing in the abandoned house in order to protect French (episode 2). This action is another indication of Buck's compassion, and of the value he places on the tribe. Earlier in the episode French refuses to join the tribe in their high school cafeteria and scoffs at their query over whether he will attend that night's meeting with Prairie. French's double rejection angers Steve whose physical strength and aggression makes him an 'Alpha male' outside of school, but whose rebellious behaviour and poor academic performance put him in a lowly position in the institutional hierarchy where French, who is a model student and star athlete, flourishes. For all his participation in the choir, Buck also feels excluded socially and is visibly grateful when allowed to join Steve and Jessie in the cafeteria. Buck later convinces French to attend the meeting with Prairie, partly by appealing to his curiosity over how 'it ends', by which he means not only Prairie's story but the tribe itself. Buck is convinced Prairie has chosen her tribe – which, he acknowledges, consists of anomic individuals, himself included but with the exception of French – for a purpose. However, Buck's impression of French is based on his public image: the audience, and Steven who has known French since childhood, are aware of the truth that French's father is absent and his mother an alcoholic, incapable of working, and that French supports the family through two part-time jobs. The audience also sees French covertly take drugs, in a scene recalling another also apparently exemplary student, Laura Palmer in *Fire Walk With Me* (1992) by David Lynch whose influence on *The OA* is discussed below. In season 2, French is revealed to be gay (episode 3), which he has been hiding in case it limits his own life chances, including his future political career, again drawing attention to institutionalised exclusivity.

In season 2, Ian Alexander also plays Michelle Vu, the young gamer whom Washington is seeking. Michelle seems to be a version of Buck who did not transition: Michelle is Buck's birth name, by which his father constantly refers to him in season one. In the season finale, in which the previous events of both series are implied to have been a 'series-within a series' after Prairie jumps dimension again, Alexander plays yet another character who appears to be a version of the actor himself, but who also responds to the name Michelle. As the series was cancelled after season 2, we can only speculate on the identity of this new character, however that both Marling and Jason Isaacs do play versions of themselves with their off-screen names, but Alexander responds to his character's birth name, seems significant. The conceit of a series-within-a series recalls the structure of the 'Beckett Trilogy', the name given to three interlinked novels by Samuel Beckett: *Molloy* (1951); *Malone Dies* (1951); and *The Unnameable* (1953) in which, for McHale, Beckett 'makes the transition from modernist to postmodernist poetics' (12). This is achieved by the use of nested-narration: the eponymous narrator of *Malone Dies* claims to have written *Molloy*; the nameless narrator of *The Unnameable* claims authorship of *Malone Dies* and by extension therefore, of *Molloy.* These layered claims of authorship have 'the effect of foregrounding the projection of a world, of fictionalising' and in doing so they raise 'ontological questions' about modes of being (12). McHale notes that there is a 'hesitation' within *Malone Dies* between an epistemological and an ontological dominant which is evident in the ambiguity over 'which was “more real”, the world in which Malone lives (and presumably dies), or the world which he has projected, and within which the text ends' (12). However, and as with Borges' 'The Garden of Forking Paths', the 'possibilities' (21) of the Beckett Trilogy would be developed in subsequent postmodernist fiction, including *The OA.*

The narrative nesting in The Beckett Trilogy recalls the formation of Russian dolls, which Prairie's adoptive mother encounters in the house where the young Prairie lives with her aunt (season 2, episode 2), foreshadowing the series' thematic preoccupation with multiplicity and layering. (It is worth noting too that *Russian Doll* is the name of another Netflix Originals series [2019-] which uses the trope of alternative timelines in its first season finale.) And the layering of reality, potentially unreliable narration and Prairie/Nina's Russian origins also recall another possible influence, *Pale Fire* (1962) by Russian novelist Vladimir Nabokov. The layered structured of this novel includes a poem ostensibly by John Shade which may really be the work of its editor Charles Kinbote, who claims to be an exiled Northern European monarch but may actually be either insane or even the alter ego of another character, also insane. McHale describes *Pale Fire* as 'perhaps the paradigmatic limit-modernist novel' (19) due to its 'absolute epistemological uncertainty' (18): the reader can never be sure if Kinbote's claims are true or not. Although season two seems to confirm Prairie's claims from the first season, the finale throws all of this into question. The shift into metafiction with the ‘series-within-a-series’ device is reminiscent of David Lynch's *Inland Empire* (2006) which also resembles *Pale Fire* and *Malone Dies* in that the viewer is unsure which layer of reality presented is the ‘most “real”’. Like the season 2 finale, *Inland Empire* reveals that what the viewer had perceived to be a fictional reality is in fact a film set; which is, of course, still a fictional reality but nested, Russian Doll-like, within a larger one. (The final episode of Lynch's TV series *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017), to which the afore-mentioned *Fire Walk With Me* is a prequel, also features an act of inter-dimensional travel in which characters take on new identities). In the season 2 finale, Hap acknowledges that he has jumped into Isaacs which suggests that while this third dimension may not be “more real” than the other two shown for him, the dimensions do exist in some kind of hierarchical order, the third generating the other two, as is the case with The Beckett Trilogy.

Calling Borges to mind, Mark Fisher has described *Inland Empire*'s 'labyrinthine, rabbit-warren architecture', which he describes as an 'ontological rather than merely physical' space: the film makes extensive use of 'Lynch's signature corridors' in its 'world-haemorrhaging' (2016: 57-8). Corridors also feature prominently in scenes of season 2 of *The OA* set in another abandoned house, a Gilded Era mansion in San Francisco's Nob Hill district, which is also a labyrinth, consisting of layers of puzzles. Solving the puzzles allows players to ascend the levels of the house. In the attic, Prairie and Karim discover video footage of Michelle together and later Karim, alone, sees - through the attic’s round window, recalling the holes Fisher identifies as the 'dominant motif' of *Inland Empire* (2016: 57) *-* the soundstage in the third dimension Prairie has reached after being shot by Hap, furthering the comparison with Lynch's film and bringing the layering of both the Beckett Trilogy and *Pale Fire* to mind. It is here that Ian Alexander's character – who resembles Buck, but may be a version of Alexander playing that role - responds to Karim calling the name 'Michelle'. As with the example of 'interpellation' Louis Althusser gives of a person in the street turning their head at a policeman's hailing, thereby being subjected to the ideology of the state, by responding to Karim's call, the character played by Alexander enters into the subjectivity of 'Michelle' with all that that entails in terms of gender and identity.

This raises questions about Alexander's character, who we might expect in this dimension, where Marling and Isaacs appear to play versions of themselves, to be called 'Ian Alexander'. We see Michelle awaken from her coma when Alexander's character in the third dimension – whom, for the sake of convenience, I will refer to as 'Ian-2' - climbs, in an action typical of Buck's fearlessness, through the window of the attic – a studio set, in this dimension - to reach Karim. For Judith Butler, the subject is not the equivalent of the individual, although the two terms are often used interchangeably; instead, the subject is 'the linguistic occasion for the individual to achieve and reproduce intelligibility, the linguistic condition of its existence and agency' (11). Butler criticises Althusser's example of subjectivity being formed through the policeman's hailing – which does not include the individual's name - by pointing out that Althusser 'does not offer a clue as to why that individual turns around' and suggesting that his theory of interpellation needs to take 'conscience' into account (5): perhaps the individual was already feeling guilty. That only Ian-2 responds to Karim suggests that ‘Michelle' is that character's name or that the name is of some significance to the character's 'conscience'. However, his brief hesitancy and confusion before ascending the ladder to Karim suggest that his turning is an act of, in Butler's terms, 'tropological inauguration of the subject’ which is 'a founding moment whose ontological status remains permanently uncertain' because 'there is no subject, strictly speaking, who makes this turn' (3). As Butler observes, there is always a 'figure' who turns and into whom the subject is inaugurated: in this case, Alexander plays that figure.

That it is a character who is not only trans-dimensional but also transgender who turns is both significant and provocative. 'Ian-2' appears to *become* 'Michelle' at Karim's hailing and is subsequently shown with long hair rather than Ian's signature crop. This could be read as an assertion of gender essentialism: Buck was 'really' Michelle all along and the hailing caused not only Michelle's awakening but her *anamnesis*. However, given Alexander's activism and the series' creators' commitment to inclusive casting, it is highly unlikely that this is the case, and much more probable that the intention was instead simply to create a compelling cliff-hanger for season 3. As such, the ending of season 2 is highly effective, raising further questions about the nature and construction not only of subjectivity but also of reality, and affirming the status of *The OA* as a text which, with its 'ontological dominant' and preoccupation with 'problems of modes of being', is highly relevant to, and valuable in, these times of reductive tribal epistemology.

*The OA* presents its audience with not only a multiverse but also a *multiplicity*. In Gilles Deleuze's use of the term, a multiplicity

remains completely indifferent to the traditional problems of the multiple and the one, and above all to the problem of a subject who would think through this multiplicity, give it conditions, account for its origins, and so on. (2011:13)

For Deleuze, '[t]here is neither one nor multiple, which would at all events entail having recourse to a consciousness that would be regulated by the one and developed by the other' (2011:13). Prairie may be the 'Original Angel' and Nina may be her inter-dimensional 'counterpart', but both are irreducibly themselves, as is evident when Nina reasserts, albeit briefly, control of the body into which Prairie has incarnated. The dual occupation of Nina's body by her and Prairie's consciousness’s is not, in the term used by Deleuze and Felix Guattari, a 'mutuality', which they exemplify with reference to the mutually beneficial relationship between the orchid and the wasp. This relationship is a 'unity' in nature which consists of a multiplicity: the connection or 'rhizome' formed by insect and plant (2004:11). Multiplicity is a feature of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of *assemblages* defined by Andrew Parr as 'complex constellations of objects, bodies, expressions, qualities and territories that come together for varying periods of time to ideally create new ways of functioning' (18), a definition which could apply to Prairie's tribe. 'An assemblage', Deleuze and Guattari write, 'is necessary for organisms to become caught within and permeated by social fields which utilize them' (79), which again could describe the tribe, caught within the 'beautiful net' (season 1, episode 2) of Prairie's story. Assemblages are also necessary for 'the relation between two strata to come about' (79); in the case of the wasp and the orchid 'strata' refers to species; this is the case with Prairie's tribe which unites the 'strata' of angel (the OA herself) and human (the tribe).

However, this unity seems to make the humans, or Buck at least, angelic too (significantly, the text he took as souvenir of the tribe in the season one finale was a book on angels). That Deleuze and Guattari discuss assemblages in terms of 'constellations' seems apt for an analysis of *The OA*, given the series’ use of cosmic imagery. A constellation is a kind of cosmic territory created by an assemblage which is both inclusive and exclusive. The assemblage of a tribe territorializes its members and their 'forms of expression' (74). However, assemblages always run the risk of 'deterritorialization', as occurs when the discovery of Prairie's books undermines her charismatic authority and breaks up the tribe, although Buck appears to remain loyal to, if not Prairie herself, then to the assemblage formed around her storytelling. The dispersed group experience a new form of anomie even as they return to normalcy, as is shown in the cafeteria scene in the final episode where each member sits with – is reterritorialized by - another 'click', another constellation-assemblage. The finale is entitled 'Overview' which, as well as describing the new perspective the episode provides of previous events following the discovery of Prairie's books, may also refer to the panoramic shot of the cafeteria which precedes the arrival of the shooter. In this shot, the various clicks form a 'galaxy' of constellations which repeats the cosmic imagery deployed throughout the series. The image is, then, one of a multiplicity of multiplicities and as such is consistent with the series' multiversal themes while also representing both the similarities and differences that exist within society, of which the school functions here as a microcosm: all of the constellation-clicks exist in a single reality, which is a site of conflict. However, the similarities between groups is emphasised when the shooter opens fire and they merge to become a single mass of bodies either fleeing or hiding beneath tables. Prairie’s tribe is reterritorialized by the shooter's act, albeit without Prairie’s presence, when they perform the movements she had taught them to distract the shooter rather than to jump dimension, emphasising the shift in focus from the multiversal to the microcosmic.

The representation in season two of the tribe struggling to cope with Prairie's death appears to emphasise their reliance upon her charismatic authority. However, the members of the tribe have all experienced personal improvements because of Prairie and while their reterritorialization may be around her significant absence, they are nevertheless possessed of a sense of purpose previously lacking in their lives. The tribe in *The OA* is both a unity of multiplicities, in Deleuzian terms, and a model of *intersectionality*, to use a term which has migrated from academia into the popular vernacular with 'Woke' culture. But the 'diversity' of the tribe is not simply an exercise in audience-solicitation nor is the recruitment of the previously unknown Ian Alexander an instance of 'stunt casting'. The character of Buck not only increases the visibility of trans identity (as does Alexander's subsequent fame and activism) but also explores, particularly in the season two finale, the formulation of subjectivity which, like *The OA* in general, stands in opposition to the simplistic and reductive worldviews found in the tribal epistemology identified by Roberts, which values mutual isolation over mutualism.

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