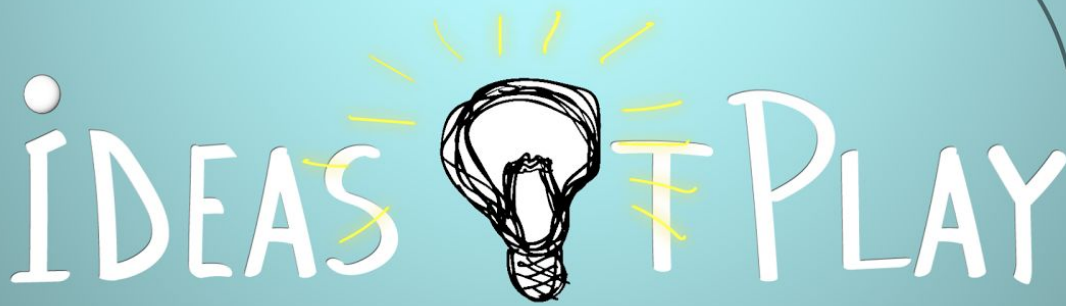




September 2017

Ideas At Play Newsletter



Hello! My name is Jackson and this is the monthly Ideas At Play newsletter! Sorry for skipping August, it was a really hectic month, full of trying to figure out ways to make this space better. Nothing too different is going to happen this month, but stay tuned!

This special reward is meant to thank my Patreon supporters and provide a look into a lot more of the stuff I've watched from the previous month. Each title includes a hyperlink to the show's trailer if you're interested in seeing a sneak peek at it or even if you just need to jog your memory. This is my first time watching all of these shows unless otherwise specified.

I've tried to keep it light on the spoilers, although I realize that talking about a show at all is going to spoil a few things. I've marked where I've deemed it a little more than light, but other than that, enjoy! Feel free to give me feedback or just talk to me in any way either on Twitter (@jackapn2) or email (buntugglies@gmail.com)

Thanks!
Jackson



Game of Thrones

HBO

Eps: 701-707

Spoilers

This season was disappointing. There's really no way around it. For any fan of the TV show and the world it created through 6 seasons, it's hard to see it any other way. The careful, meticulous plotting that had come to define the show was traded in for fast-paced payoffs that lacked thought and development. Tyrion came up with the worst plan ever, Arya and Sansa clashed for plot-convenient reasons, and some of the best characters (Varys, Littlefinger, and Davos to name a few) were reduced to arm candy.

The plot of this season was a vehicle rather than a naturally evolving story. Characters went along with Tyrion's plan to capture a single wight from a hive-minded army of millions so that he can convince Cersei to stop being petty. Does that sound good to you? And nobody even *mentions* that it's a bad plan.

What's worse was when character development was rolled back in order to manufacture story. The Arya/Sansa/Littlefinger triangle of character regression featured Arya forgetting that she spent two seasons learning to detect lies and Littlefinger abandoned his MO of manipulating from three steps away to get his fingerprints all over this scheme. And here's another question: why should Sansa be catching flak even if she was (she's not) planning for a scenario where Jon doesn't return? The last 3 Stark Lords to travel South have been murdered (Brandon, Ned, Robb). They all told him not to go because they were afraid of that, so why is it crazy to prepare for the worst? It'd be irresponsible not to.



Sam left the Citadel he'd spent 6 seasons dreaming about because he had a couple bad days? Apparently he thought learning to cure grayscale and discovering caches of dragonglass weren't a big deal. The Artist Formerly Known As Bran knows everything but also none of the details because... well, who knows really.

This is a betrayal of trust to the audience and makes us all more aware of flaws and cracks in the show's logic. The incredible compression of time and space isn't inherently bad, but when things already feel off, those inconsistencies are highlighted. If you want a really detailed breakdown of how this season didn't make much sense and failed its fantasy audience, I cannot recommend the Binge Mode podcast enough.

But for me, an even more annoying problem was that this wasn't just an illogically written season, but that it drew attention to that bad writing through its execution. Why this season was seven episodes we may never know. Nobody told the creators they had to shorten the final two seasons and that structure failed to give most of its plots time to breathe and develop. "Beyond the Wall" wouldn't have annoyed nearly as many fans if it ended with the Suicide Squad surrounded by wights in the middle of a frozen lake, given its audience a week to process that, and then start the next episode with Thoros dying and Gendry reaching the Wall. That episode break is exactly the kind of ellipses the show desperately needed but denied itself. Time can heal a lot of those poor character motivations too. By exploring them, they feel like deliberate choices rather than rushed mistakes. It's not that you can't make Arya and Sansa act in the ways that they did, but you can't flip their motivations off-screen at the snap of your fingers.

Ultimately, I don't have an issue with where the story ended up after season 7, but its road there was poorly planned and executed and betrayed the logic the show had spent 6 seasons building. And that's bad TV.



Rick and Morty

Cartoon Network Eps: 302–306

The best seasons of television come from writing out of a hole. It's a challenge that pushes creators to dig deep and find new angles and solutions. Greatness exists on the edge between success and failure; where you're not sure what will happen; when the end result is in doubt. Think about the greatest moments in sports. Were they blowouts or tightly contested games?

Well after nearly 18 months of leaving fans in limbo (any tips for Game of Thrones fans?), Rick and Morty has officially returned, finally and triumphantly. Last season ended on a somber note in unfamiliar territory: with Rick behind bars, and the Earth visibly different for everyone. While the premiere earlier this year (it aired in March while the rest of the season started on July 30th) saw him escape from prison, it also threw a new complication into the family's dynamic: divorce.

It would have been easy for Rick and Morty to stick to their formula. The team behind the show has mastered using the infinite expanse of the multiverse in order to show us characters who fundamentally don't change. After all, these are complicated people, and there's still much we can learn about Rick, Morty, Summer, Beth, and Jerry. But instead, Rick and Morty challenged itself and its characters by forcing them to face change and explore the inevitability of the personal change that must follow.

Every episode this season has brought me back for multiple viewings not just because they're funny (they are), or because they're smart (they are) but because they're examples of great storytelling. Each fascinating take on existence highlights its own contradictions with the sharpest wit, but what makes the show truly special is how it uses that as a conduit for the characters within. From early on, Rick and Morty has focused on its human characters. Two seasons were spent hinting at the softer side of Rick and the darker side of Morty. We saw Beth and Jerry's marriage cracking along the faultlines it was built on. But the show always stopped short with those ideas. It just showed that they existed, but it didn't explore them. This season is different.



World shifting change hasn't happened yet, but we can feel it building. The internal struggles of Rick and Morty are starting to gain momentum, slowly, from episode to episode, and their relationship is on the line. Who knows what the final push or direction will be, but I'm looking forward to more challenging situations for TV's most dysfunctional family.



Ozark

Netflix Eps: 101–106



Snowfall

FX Eps: 101–106

I had high hopes for each of these shows when I started. After all, they're clearly inspired by two great shows that have come before them: *Breaking Bad* and *The Wire*. I loved *Breaking Bad* and I respect the hell out of *The Wire*, which is one of the most thoughtfully written shows of the past 20 years. But *Ozark* and *Snowfall* don't go much further than fan fiction. At their best, they're a fine imitation, and at their worst, they're derivative.

That's not to say they aren't well-produced. They are. It's actually a testament to the excellence of *Breaking Bad* and *The Wire* when we see two other shows with solid writing, acting, and direction fall flat simply because they're not quite as extraordinary or visionary.

Breaking Bad shows us the journey of a man's descent into the criminal underworld of meth. *Ozark* shows us a man who has already descended into the less interesting world of money laundering. *The Wire* shows us every angle of the drug war in Baltimore and how many lives it affects directly and indirectly. *Snowfall* shows us a similar story but it ignores some crucial sides: the police, the addicts, and the adjacent lives.

Ozark and *Snowfall* are both fine. They're perfectly enjoyable shows that cover interesting topics, but they've already been done better. Maybe it's unfair to hold them to that standard. Few shows can rise to it. There's absolutely nothing wrong with being genre works made for fans of the best the genre has to offer. But they lack any addition to the conversation other than to take proven ideas and apply them to slightly different subjects.



Look, I get it. *Breaking Bad* and *The Wire* were incredibly popular and important shows that influenced viewers and creators alike. They showed us worlds we never understood or had explored on TV in ways that were refreshing and different. We all yearn for more shows like that on TV, because after them nothing felt quite the same. And don't get me wrong, these shows will scratch that itch. But you'll never reach the high you got the first time you saw it on screen.



Atypical

Netflix

Eps: 101-108

Atypical is the story of Sam, a high school senior on the autism spectrum, and his exploration of the ideas of relationships and love. But it's much more than that. It's the story of his family, the ways he relies on them and the ways they rely on him. This is a relatively fresh concept for a show. I can't think of many shows or movies that show us a genuine look not only at a person on the spectrum, but the people caught in their orbit, all while treating Sam's condition with respect.

Now, I've never experienced autism that closely, so I'm not sure how factual the show is, but it seems to me the show never uses autism as a gimmick. *Atypical* is earnest. It's a genuine and sweet show, that can only be classified as a comedy based on its runtime. It's not strictly a drama, but it is light on jokes. More than anything, I find it to be in the feel-good genre of storytelling. As cheesy as it sounds, it's heartwarming.

The acting on the show delivers this feeling. I'm completely sold on the family's genuine affection for each other despite the challenges they face, both the challenges and the love stemming directly and indirectly from Sam's autism. I've never been a fan of Michael Rappaport's acting (his podcast and interview appearances are a completely different story), but being an Average Joe father struggling to connect falls directly into his wheelhouse. Keir Gilchrist fleshes out Sam far beyond his idiosyncrasies. His performance



uses autism to show us that Sam's struggles are really just the same as anyone else. His loneliness and his desire to fit into a world that he doesn't quite understand make for a quintessential coming of age story.

Jennifer Jason Leigh, the actor with the highest billing, provides an interesting conflict between being a mom and being her own person. But that idea is much more interestingly played out by Sam's younger sister Casey, played by Brigitte Lundy-Paine. Casey is struggling with a lot of the same issues any high schooler faces: bullying, budding relationships, and changing family dynamics. But the aspect of her character that stands out is her role as surrogate parent to Sam. She's responsible for Sam at school. The show explores how Casey needs that role just as much as Sam does, and as it becomes time for her to spread her wings, it's that change in role that gives her the most pause.

Atypical is about autism, a subject worth exploring, but more than anything, it's about growing up, and how that experience never stops.



Dunkirk



Baby Driver

What? Movies? Oh yeah. I saw two movies in theaters recently, doubling my yearly total. And they were great. I know I'm late to the party on both of these films, but I do think they're worth talking about as opposite ends of the same spectrum.

At first glance, Dunkirk and Baby Driver seem like totally different movies. And they are. They're distinct films that embody their creators. In film, there's an idea known as auteur theory, where a director controls a work to such great extent that they're said to be its author, and the work their singular vision. And with Baby Driver and Dunkirk, it feels as though Edgar Wright and Christopher Nolan were born to make these movies.

If you've seen any of Edgar Wright's previous work, you know that his style is fast-paced fun. He makes dynamic scenes, using every visual and audio trick he can think of. His films move. So it only makes sense that he'd make the best music video of a getaway driver ever made. Baby Driver is fast, bright, and fun, a



showcase of every audiovisual technique Wright's ever used to tell a story since he first started filmmaking.

On the other end, Dunkirk is tense, muted, and serious. It contains nearly no dialogue, features a soundtrack heavy on ticking clocks, and takes place across three overlapping timelines of varying lengths. These innovative concepts build tension in ways I've never seen in a mainstream film, and certainly not together. Christopher Nolan is known for his filmic puzzles, his sometimes overly-layered plots, and his unique manipulation of time.

These films are showcases, portfolios of each director's greatest hits, given free reign to be fully realized. But what I find most interesting about these films is not that they're created by auteurs. Many films have their director's fingerprints all over them. The reason I find these two to be on the same spectrum is because they are two drastically different takes on what kind of spectacle a movie should be.

With the prestige television industry exploding—and because we live in a culture of instant gratification—filmmakers are struggling to find a way to get audiences to come to the theaters. Why should you go spend \$15 to see "Enter Latest Oscar Nominated Film Here" when you can binge Breaking Bad and then catch that film on demand in five months? The answer seems unanimously to be spectacle. No matter how good television sets or surround sound systems get, they can't quite rival the awe a movie theater can induce.

And in Baby Driver and Dunkirk, Wright and Nolan offer their opposing approaches to that answer. Neither is particularly interested in plot or story here, but instead in telling those stories in the most interesting and striking ways. Dunkirk is an art-house war movie designed to build tension that feels (and looks) like drowning, all carried by the drama and visual gravitas of World War II. Baby Driver's plot is a vehicle—ha!—for set piece after set piece of quick cutting, highly choreographed action.

Watching the trailers for Thor: Ragnarok and Black Panther, I can already feel this idea of auteur spectacle creeping into the realm of franchises. They're both highly stylized, light on the details, and serve as showcases for their unique aesthetics. I'm not sure if this is going to be the new normal for film: story and character taking a backseat with the aesthetic being the main draw and work on display. That kind of world makes me hesitant, as it's just a stone's throw from all-flash-no-substance, but for now, it sure does make for a good movie-going experience.