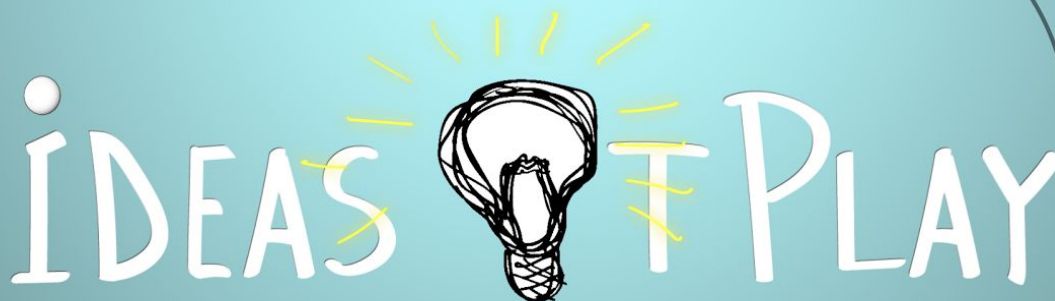




June 2017

Ideas At Play Newsletter



Hello! My name is Jackson and this is the second monthly Ideas At Play newsletter! 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. Last month I focused on just covering everything I watched and writing something down on it, but this month I've tried to go a little deeper with each show. The drawback is that I haven't been able to include some shows, but don't worry, I'm sure they'll show up in the future (looking at you Six Feet Under and Master of None).

I've tried to keep it light on the spoilers, although I realize that talking about a show at all is going to include some light ones. I've marked where I've deemed it a little more than light, and the titles of each series are links to their trailers if you haven't seen them yet. Feel free to give me feedback or just talk to me either on Twitter (@jackapn) or email (bumtugglies@gmail.com).

Thanks!
Jackson



The Americans

FX Eps: 509–513

I've mentioned before that *The Americans* is my favorite show on TV right now so I watched this season in a bit of a rose-colored haze for a while. And then at some point I looked in the mirror and asked myself, "Did you really like that 15 minutes hole digging scene from the premiere or are you just blinded by your own fandom?" It was a tough call. Ultimately, I decided that I like dirt, shovels, and Stanley Yelnats, but my faith was shaken.

Every slow scene after that had me questioning if the show had lost its way and was coasting on its reputation and secure future. Philip, Elizabeth, and the gang spent a larger swath of their time combing through rooms looking for the slightest clues to tie their operations up, and I found myself grasping for the threads that must be holding the story together. Even the truly heartwarming moments left me thinking, after I wiped away my teary eyes, "Wait, why did that happen?"

And then towards the end of the season it clicked into place. I realized that the narrative force the show had been meandering around, which it had spent so much time developing, all came back to the central thesis of the show: identity. Throughout the series we've heard Philip, Elizabeth, and other Directorate S agents concede that the Soviet Union has its problems, but that was as far as those conversations got. This was the first time that *The Americans* has shifted its attention toward defining what it means to be Russian.

Even as the show has offered an alternative to the American perspective on the Cold War, this season it truly humanized the Soviets instead of just humanizing those Soviets who are pretending to be Americans. Oleg reintroduced himself to his homeland and his family's history. Philip and Elizabeth were faced with a decision that pitted their dual identities against each other in ways that they've never had before, while Paige and Henry symbolized the two sides of this same coin. It wasn't my favorite season of *The Americans*, but it was undoubtedly great and I apologize to the Jennings family for my wavering faith. It will never happen again.



Better Call Saul

AMC Eps: 301–303

I wrote about this in last month's newsletter, but I wasn't able to get to the problem at the center of the show. What I was really circling around is the idea of stakes. It's the main challenge that faces *Better Call Saul*, because we know so much about these characters already, from five seasons of *Breaking Bad*, and we can infer so much more. We already know the ultimate fate of Mike and Gus and we know a lot about the fate of Jimmy. Although I suppose it's possible Saul Goodman left his high stakes meetings with Walter White, drove home to a cozy Santa Fe 3-bedroom, and was greeted by his beautiful children and their golden retriever, it's probably safe to assume that he'll lose Kim and Chuck, either through his own actions or through some other heartbreaking tragedy. So the challenge lies in making *how* these ideas play out as interesting and devastating as possible.

****Spoilers****

"Chicanery", the fifth episode of this season, is the best of what the show can be. We get *Breaking Bad* backstory in the forms of a Huell introduction and a flashback to Jimmy and his brother on very good terms. But these primarily serve the plot of the episode rather than being pure fanservice. We're reminded of where Jimmy used to be and where he is on his path to becoming Saul Goodman and sure, we know the outcome of this court proceeding before anything happens. Jimmy isn't going to be disbarred permanently. Chuck will lose this battle. So even as evidence mounts against Jimmy, we're waiting for the other shoe to drop. It's the way in which Jimmy embarrasses Chuck and publicly outs him as a mentally ill individual that is so devastating. It's not just that he's beaten Chuck, but that he's destroyed him in order to do it. The stakes are raised from a sibling rivalry to a full blown smear campaign, with their careers hanging in the balance. Brothers will fight and make up, but *Better Call Saul* is bringing us ever closer to that point of no return.



UnREAL

Lifetime

Eps: 201–210

Speaking of stakes, here's a show that finds ways to make the highest possible tension out of a reality TV show. There is no stakes problem on UnREAL. If you aren't familiar with the Lifetime Drama, I recommend it but with the caution that if you watch more than a couple in a row, you may become nauseous. It follows the cast and crew of what is essentially The Bachelor, but if it was run by the government of House of Cards.

Every scene brings with it an escalation of pressure on each character as the producers play God inside the sandbox of their mansion. But as playing God tends to go, consequences spread, and soon there is a network of cause and effect that isn't just affecting their prospects on the show, but their lives.

At the center of it all is Rachel, a mentally unstable producer whose only anchor in life is manipulating people to the highest degree. The good news for her is that she's really freaking good at it. In much the same way that House of Cards comments on the fakeness of politics by imagining its seedy underbelly, UnREAL depicts ruthlessness behind one of our country's most popular forms of entertainment. Manipulation exists in Russian nesting dolls. Characters manipulate the emotions of contestants to produce scenes, which in turn manipulate the emotions of their audience in order to fuel ratings, all while doing the same to us, the viewers of UnREAL. And they should know—Sarah Gertrude Shapiro was a producer on The Bachelor before she created this show.



The Handmaid's Tale

Hulu

Eps: 101–107

I'm not really sure where to begin with this one. I really like this show and I feel really bad about liking it. It's an awkward feeling as a man to take pleasure in a fictional world that is so brutal and violent towards women. And that is something that the show certainly makes no effort to hide or smooth over. So far we've seen people get executed, raped, disfigured, and beaten to death all in the name of whatever Christian fundamentalist sect it is that runs this world. It's a chilling vision of the world that was relevant in 1985 when Margaret Atwood wrote the novel, and it's unfortunately still relevant today.

But that brutality is necessary for this story and I respect this show for not shying away from the horrors it's talking about. Visually, it's a beautifully stark and bleak version of Boston. Reds pop from the green background, forcing you to notice the enslaved women, a stand in for the marginalized people of today. Elizabeth Moss is tremendous in the show. She subtly conveys so much while still remaining poised, which is exactly what her character, June (I'm not calling her Offred because that's some patriarchal b.s.), experiences, as she looks for little rays of hope while she survives only by saying all the right things.

And that's what I imagine it's like to be a minority in the United States. Get Out touched on a lot of the same ideas. Both June and Chris struggle to say the right things to fit in, and June is kind of living her life from "the sunken place," able to see and feel how terrible everything is, but unable to do anything about it. She literally doesn't have control or ownership over her body, a fact she is made acutely aware of once a month during "the ceremony." It's tough to watch, and I imagine much tougher for the people who live this metaphorical reality every day, but it's important.



Samurai Jack

Adult Swim Eps: 507–510

Not much in my opinion of this show has changed and it will be the subject of my next video, but the final four episodes provided two absolute masterpieces (XCVIII and C). Of course, the artistry was amazing, and for that alone I would recommend them, but the way Genndy Tartakovsky introduced poetic justice and mirrored storylines was a thing of beauty. Again, more to come on this in video form.



Catastrophe

Amazon

Eps: 301–306



Divorce

HBO

Eps: 101–110

I'm lumping these two shows together because they're both written and produced by Sharon Horgan, who is totally ruling TV comedies right now. Her style of humor is the rare kind that has knack to make even heavy and emotional subjects brighter. And those heavy subjects are often in the spotlight. The first season of *Catastrophe* started with a multi-night sex fling turning into a pregnancy and Rob Delaney's character dropping everything to move to London to be a father. He literally left his whole life behind to be with a woman he just met, which seems like a recipe for disaster. And there certainly is some disaster. They're constantly dodging one bullet just to find themselves in the path of a larger one. Yet they take it all in stride and choose to make jokes about it. *Divorce* deals with the lengthy and ugly process that divorce entails. Nothing in either of these shows is ever easy, but their characters seem to look at their situation and think, "Well this sucks, but we don't have to be completely miserable about it."

Often we give ourselves the choice of being either an optimist or a realist, without realizing that that's a false dichotomy. It's not just that these shows are funny (and they are very funny), but that they embrace both realism and optimism at the same time at the same time. They don't shy away from the real struggles that life will provide but they also don't despair in them. They accept that disaster is part of living and choose to focus instead on the opportunities for humor that are there. I'm not saying they're the most realistic shows on TV (is Amazon TV? Is that settled yet?). They don't have entirely believable plots or finances or even relationships. But they do have the most human characters.

In *Catastrophe*, Sharon says, "You know, it's a tough time. There's a lot of... Brexit and your new president." I think that's exactly why we need to remember our humanity and the value of being both realistic and optimistic.



Code Geass

Cartoon Network (U.S. Release)

Eps: 101–115

I've watched this show from start to finish more times than any other show. It's not particularly close—I believe this is my eighth or ninth watch through, but I've lost count. I can't think of a more perfectly paced story that I've watched or read, which is insane for the amount of exposition and world building that it has to do. (For reference, this show takes place in an alternate timeline that split from ours in the 11th Century and features both elements of magic and science fiction). Code Geass excels at making that exposition concise and multi-purposed. Major events are discussed simultaneously by multiple characters across storylines in a way that establishes the scale of the story, examines each character's personal feelings, and outlines their faction's point of view, all the while explaining what is going on. It utilizes every second of screen time in order to cover as many bases as possible. All of this is done in a very pointed way, such that it serves the narrative directly, which is something that so many shows and books fail at (I'm looking at you, Game of Thrones, The Walking dead, and so many more).

The recurring motif of the show is a game of chess, where everything is placed and moved meticulously. Any wasted move gives your opponent a chance to take control of the game, so the placement of every piece must be maximized, a principle that's espoused in the storytelling process of the show itself. Every time I watch it, I'm blown away with the sheer amount of information and story that the show can burn through in an episode without it feeling like an overload. And what's more amazing is that I find new information each time. It's not that I'm *that* smart, it's just that I've spent so much time obsessing about this show and reading through the wiki that I'm surprised that there could be something that I missed that was a clue.

It's a task that I think is only possible in animation, where everything from color coordination to set design can be controlled and tweaked endlessly to be hyper efficient. I'll touch more on this in future newsletters as I work my way through the show and get to the more philosophical questions that are at its core.



Transparent

Amazon

Eps: 308-310

Watching *Transparent* triggers a visceral emotional response from me. It's not the story or the ideas that get me. It's not the issues of gender identity. It's the raw compassion and empathy. While all of those issues are there and certainly play a role in building empathy, the compassion the show exhibits is so genuine and unbound that it's hard to give credit to any one thing that it does. Art is when you can create something that personifies some aspect of the human experience and the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts, and that is exactly what *Transparent* does. While I think the work that it's doing in raising the visibility of transgender people is awesome, it wouldn't be half as effective if it didn't evoke such a strong human response.

While there is a singular narrative running through the show, it's not hard to pick up any individual episode and feel the emotional weight. That's different from something like a soap opera where those feelings are exploited and played in a completely over the top way in order to get investment. Instead, *Transparent* handles these emotions like fragile pieces of stained glass, examining how the light dances through each panel before moving us back to see the entire picture. It's only through this examination that we get an understanding for the details and come to understand the piece as a beautiful living thing and not just colored glass.

That understanding, on an emotional, almost primal level, isn't something you comprehend. That is to say, it's not intellectual. It's something that you feel, and is therefore a connection that is much harder to forge with an audience. You can have your characters and stories make perfect sense, but the best stories are the ones that don't need to be logical, because they're something that you just get.