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-Research Article-

The End of American Exceptionalism Through Two Family Sagas: *Breaking Bad* and *Ozark* in the Face of Neoliberal Collapse

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate, following a film-philosophical methodology, the politics of two extremely popular North-American TV series. Thesis of the paper is that, by mapping particular narratives and aesthetic patterns concerning family-dramas and the desire of economic emancipation and social mobility, as well as the crisis and decay of the male bread-winner, Breaking Bad and Ozark describe a critical and cynical attachment to the modern American Dream. Passing from the "tragic" arc of Walter White to the dejected and melancholic struggles of the Byrdes, it is possible to detect a declining faith in the individualist, family and ownership-oriented values that have informed the neoliberal ecology and a consequent pervasive sense of loss in the longstanding tenets of American Exceptionalism.

Keywords: *American Exceptionalism, Breaking Bad, Ozark*

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-Araştırma Makalesi-

İki Aile Sagası Üzerinden Amerikan İstisnacılığının Sonu: Neoliberal Çöküş Karşısında Breaking Bad ve Ozark

Francesco Sticchi*

Özet

Bu makale, film-felsefi bir metodoloji izleyerek, son derece popüler iki Kuzey-Amerikan TV dizisinin politikalarını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışmanın tezi, Breaking Bad ve Ozark'ın, aile dramları, ekonomik özgürleşme ve sosyal hareketlilik arzusu ile ekmek kazanan erkeğin krizi ve çürümesine ilişkin belirli anlatıları ve estetik kalıpları haritalandırarak, modern Amerikan Rüyası'na eleştirel ve alaycı bir bağlılığı tanımladığıdır. Walter White'ın "trajik" serüveninden Byrdes'lerin kederli ve melankolik mücadelelerine geçerken, neoliberal ekolojiye yön veren bireyci, aile ve mülkiyet odaklı değerlere olan inancın azaldığını ve bunun sonucunda Amerikan İstisnacılığının uzun süredir var olan ilkelerinde yaygın bir kayıp duygusu olduğunu tespit etmek mümkündür.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Amerikan İstisnacılığı, Breaking Bad, Ozark*

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Introduction: A Film-Philosophical Approach

'Families are always rising or falling in America'

(Nathaniel Hawthorne)

When commenting on the politics of *Breaking Bad* (Gilligan, 2008-2013), on the capacity of this extremely popular TV series to capture the crisis of the American dream and of the heteropatriarchal family, Mark Fisher (2013) asked to imagine the events of the story to be set in a country with well-structured welfare, and specifically health-focused, institutions. In this hypothetical scenario, after the revelation that Walter White (Bryan Cranston), notable main character, was affected by a lethal lung cancer, the doctor would have only added that the free treatment was going to start soon; end of the story, problem solved (at least the most urgent one). No moral dilemma, no character's arc describing a tragic trajectory of always bloodier moral compromises; Heisenberg, the drug kingpin acting as alter ego of the protagonist, and revelation of the multiple sides of his personality, would have never been born: no rise of his criminal status and success, fall, and final partial redemption would follow as well. This simple thought experiment shows us how easy is to connect fictional scenarios, dramatic situations, characters, and tropes with a larger social context, in order to map and identify the ways they may reflect contextual anxieties, fears, and affective tensions. At the same time, understanding and highlighting this link is also helpful for the purpose of evaluating the ways in which a specific audiovisual object dialogues with a larger ecology of emotions, concepts, social and political ideas, while contributing in changing the landscape where it operates.

The film-philosophical approach that I am adopting in this paper starts exactly from this assumption, and adopts cinema and television as organic, operational and material(ist) expressive forms that interrelate with viewers and the world surrounding them in an affective and transformative way. The dialogue that films and TV series establish, in fact, is not an abstract process that allows viewers to identify symbolic and intellectual patterns and interpret them in accordance with variably complex, elaborate, and poignant or research supported subjective considerations. Audiovisual media, instead, think and make us think through what we could define as bodily *encounters*; they produce blocs of sensations, operational dimensions, where every aesthetic and stylistic choice implies a series of interactive possibilities. These same features entail the definitions of ethical and moral systems since they display worlds with internal rules and logics, within which characters exist by responding, adapting, or living in conflict with their own reality. The capacity of cinematic experiences (and of the arts in general) to generate new virtualities (new worlds, see Deleuze, 1989, pp. 81-83), however, does not make them self-referential and closed systems; on the contrary, they are always affected by an intrinsic openness that, on the one hand, makes of each work of art a multiple and manifold encounter and, at the same time, reveals their modes of talking to the world beyond them. Mikhail Bakhtin has thoroughly analysed these essential characteristics of the artistic experience through the notions of *chronotope* and *dialogism* (in turn connected with considerations on polyphony/heterogrlossia, see 1981, pp. 80, 243, 400). The chronotope indicates the power to generate spatio-temporal dimensions, to define ecological and experiential coordinates with complex philosophical and intellectual values (1981, pp. 97-100). The focus on dialogism (to an openness opposed to fixed monological structures), at the same time, underscores the process-based nature of these same configurations (1981, pp. 279-280). Artistic objects are internally multiple because they are the result of continuous interactions between their components and the participation of not-detached observers/explorers always complicates and enriches their communicative potentialities. If a film or TV series exists, then, as a series of potentialities (or virtualities) to be mapped, the interaction with its material folds shapes and actualises them at each encounter (cf. Deleuze, 1989, pp. 79-80). In direct continuity with this brief theoretical

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introduction, it is important to reiterate that artistic experiences, because of their affective and material nature, are immanent parts of the general infrastructure, as Félix Guattari notably argued (1995, pp. 1-30). They contribute in defining and redefining subjectivities in accordance with parameters that belong to the contingent social apparatus; however, they may possibly indicate fractures, contradictions, conflicts, and lines of flight within these same systems of reference.

Neoliberalism and Family Values

Purpose of this paper, indeed, is to evaluate the role of two extremely popular TV series released in the last twenty years: *Breaking Bad* and *Ozark* (Dubuque and Williams, 2017-2022) in addressing the crisis of the American family and, more broadly, of the progressive fates of neoliberalism; in this sense, notwithstanding the very specific national focus, it is important to consider that some of the analytical and critical points raised about these two shows could be easily extended to social contexts outside the North-American one. Both series feature two traditional (low, in the former case) middle-class heteropatriarchal white families facing economic collapse and attempting to come out of the mire of precarisation, debt, and economic urgency, through the drug market and the collaboration with Mexican drug cartels. In both cases, therefore, we experience 'complications' of the American Dream, which take place through the contamination of the existential aim of social mobility and class uplifting with criminal and *foreign* elements. Notwithstanding the evident similarities and parallelism between the two stories, we will examine how the two shows feature heterogeneous if not diverging and conflicting aspects and dynamics indicating, also because of the different time of their release, a progressive disenchantment in relation to the progressive fates of the neoliberalism.

It is often argued that the neoliberal turn corresponded with a political shift on individual freedoms against society and collective rights ('there no such thing as society' Margaret Thatcher argued), with the welfare State progressively disappearing in favour of an economic and more 'utilitarian' governmental logic (Dardot and Laval, 201, pp. 3-5). The free market, as cold and detached agent, then, was indicated as the rational institution capable of 'naturally' allocating rewards and punishments to the purpose of allowing the improvement and realisation of every faithful citizen/worker/entrepreneur. However, if we complete the reading of the just-mentioned Thatcher quote, we could see that for the infamous British prime minister, only individuals and families existed as proper and rational social units. To further prove this point, Melinda Cooper has studied the connection between the triumph of the neoliberal regime in political and financial institutions together with the redefinition of conservative thought around 'new' familistic and moralistic coordinates (the so-called invention of tradition, see 2017, pp. 17, 67-72). The ideal subject at the centre of the neoliberal ecology is defined by a strongly culpable individuality, made of debts, credits, and guilts that correspond with her/his own human capital, a sort mystical of accounting book evaluating the economic rationality and efficiency of the choices carried out (Ciccarelli, 2021, pp. 148, 154; Stimilli, 2018, pp. 126-130). While consumerist hedonism has played and plays a big role in displaying the existential promises offered by the existing social apparatus, these same dreams of enjoyment and of a good life are solely framed as awards and compensations to be obtained through sacrifice and complete self-commitment (Cooper, 2017, pp. 63, 141; Deleuze, 1995, pp. 178-181). Therefore, the neoliberal subject is, ideally, a strongly moralised one, and the heteropatriarchal family (though I would not essentialise this structure either), with its historically defined gendered division of roles (set around reproductive and caring functions see Federici, 2009, p. 115), operate as the mainstay for its formation and education. The family becomes, consequently, the space where each subject is constructed around values and targets of individual responsibility to be measured in accordance with the capacity of making proper existential investments and, when thinking about the traditional family man, on the ability to provide for those in your 'custody'.

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Neoliberalism, therefore, configures a strange combination between two movements: financial flows appear completely decentred and deterritorialised, capable of moving around the globe searching for new possibilities for extraction of value. At the same time, this endless fluid nature is associated with very harsh processes of reterritorialization, of coming back home of capital, which, requires borders, solid and codified social terrains for private property to be accumulated and managed (Fumagalli, 2019, p. 87; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2019, pp. 85-87). The family is, then, a key space of reterritorialization; it prepares subjects for economic competition and for acting as fluid and adaptable human investors and does so by enforcing a very strict and naturalised hierarchy. It is not incidental that the triumph of neoliberal rationality was related to the explosion of a debt economy, and with the housing market enormous expansion (closed by the 2007/2008 Wall Street crash), where 'home sweet home', the apparently most private and sacred space, becomes another element of financial speculation. Of course, where poor and average households must take on their shoulders the guilt, shame, and risks connected with the necessity to sacrifice and invest on their private life, on the other hand of the spectrum we witness the development and increasing relevance of a new rentier economy, made of pure parasitical accumulation of property and capital (Fumagalli, 2019, p. 64). In this sense, when thinking about depictions of neoliberalism, and in particular of the world of finance, such as *The Wolf of Wall Street* (Scorsese, 2013), 'successful' people in these narratives may seem to display an immoral conduct with their nihilist and grotesque excessive enjoyment; however, this depends on the fact that wealth and economic abundance, in this political context, by themselves operates as a moral justification of their status, thus making these subjects free to lose any culpability or even making them feel obliged to exhibit their right to consumerist pleasure as much as possible (cf. Stimilli, 2018, pp. 34, 159-160). The moral economy of the neoliberal ecology is, indeed, one driven by resentment, envy, and negative solidarity. It puts individuals and families one against the other and, notwithstanding its evident flaws and lack in terms of long-term planning, it survives because of an entrenched distrust in collective action and cooperation produced by these same contextual power relations (Read, 2013). *Parasite* (Bong joon-ho, 2019) epitomises these tensions by displaying a precarious mononuclear family operating in the guise of a perfect and ruthless economic enterprise, in competition with other precarious households, and apparently deprived of any affective or caring bond (Sticchi, 2021, p. 181). The division of roles in this microsocial unit, paradoxically, are enforced to reflect a commanding and productive hierarchy where the sentimental connection, or nurturing activities, are often sacrificed or suppressed in favour of the most effective short-term utilitarian choices. In this sense, this latter case study expresses a grotesque extremization of the dynamics that we are discussing in this section, displaying the progressive dismantling of any network of care and affective connection (one of the core violent effects of the neoliberal ecology). However, it is important to stress how the analysis of the crisis of the heteropatriarchal (and non) family system does not call for a nostalgic longing for its reassessment and protection; this critical perspective, instead, aims to historicise the configurations and transformations of this social unit, while highlighting the modes in which neoliberalism, on one side, exploits our capacity for mutual caring (the reproductive economy); on the other hand, aim of this paper is to foreground the complex and conflictual relationship between this social structure and the context in which it operates.

Closing this long initial section, we will observe how the two case studies selected dialogue with these major social dynamics, displaying a trajectory moving from the crisis of the neoliberal family to the complete deglamourisation and failure of this same economic and political model. We will discuss this relentless process of collapse as key evidence of the loss of hope in the possibility for the current situation to progress and, concurrently, of its transformation into an always more destructive model of social relations, persisting only through increasingly more brutal forms of violence.

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Case Studies: From Resentment to Disenchantment

As already stated, the main character of *Breaking Bad* is widely known as an iconic criminal and tragic figure (see Sánchez-Baró, 2014, p. 150). Walter White (whose name etymologically means 'white man who rules'), brilliant chemist, leading a 'mediocre' life as a result of a series of unfortunate circumstances and impulsive personal choices undermining his professional dreams and aspirations, finds in the 'cooking' of methamphetamine, at first, a way out of financial troubles. Later, as we follow the character's wilful journey to the dark side, it is possible to appreciate how this unexpected career operates as a new life chance, giving Walter a space to test and exhibit his managerial, technical, and manipulative/leading skills up to his final partially redemptive death. In this sense, the affective tension that informs this character may be associated with the classical dialectic and binary conflict displayed by figures such as Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, as he also progressively moves to a new personality when becoming a drug lord. The choice of his criminal alias 'Heisenberg' does not merely operate as a tribute to one of the most important physicists of the twentieth century (Werner Karl Heisenberg), but it clearly evokes his notable *uncertainty principle*: the possibility for physical phenomena to variate based on the point/moment of observation due to their phenomenological mutability and multiplicity (Pierson, 2014, p. 40). His new personality does not infer a complete transformation on his behalf, but reveals an internal conflict and multifaceted assemblage of desires now coming to the surface in a more deliberate form. Indeed, all the resentment and frustration accumulated over years of a demeaning career as school teacher (plus working in a car-wash during weekends and spare time), and to not have any of his qualities recognised either through cultural approval or an outstanding financial status, drive this character quite automatically to immoral and destructive choices. However, while there is an evident element of anger and unsatisfied will to power (or domination[1]) that drives Walter, his choices are, until the end, justified with the same refrain: that every decision he made was for the good of his family (see Fisher, 2013). Cooking meth had to be a quick solution to the lack of money for cancer treatment while leaving his family enough financial substance for the kids' education and future investments in a stable life. As a matter of fact, even his wife Skyler (Anna Gunn), once having discovered his illegal trade and having shown signs of moral conflict towards Walter's secret life, forcibly decides to help her husband in the financial management of their new family empire.

On this note, Walter's journey displays also a series of evident anxieties about his status as father, family man, and, apparently, castrated authority figure micromanaged by a loving but suffocating domestic environment (see Faucette, 2014, pp. 73-86). His initial submissiveness to contextual pressures and needs, and the continuous confrontation with a strong and determined life partner, in fact, fuel the misogynistic desire to reassess a lost centrality, to take revenge of his passivity (Faucette, 2014, pp. 77). All these tensions find a way to be released within the criminal world, though with evident contradictions and paradoxes. Where Walter cannot father, as he would like, that is through consistent manipulation and psychological control, his son Walt Jr. (RJ Mitte), he finds a new occasion at parenthood with his former feckless student, now drug addict, pusher, and business partner, Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul). With this character Walter can experiment all sorts of nefarious psychological practices in order to obtain a faithful replica of his own will. Furthermore, the drug market gives Walter an occasion to push back against his former research colleagues and business partners, now at the head of a successful high-tech firm, though the main character's enterprise is built through a bastardisation of the WASP American Dream. Indeed, apart from the illegal dimension (which, in the dynamics of the crime genre often operates as an 'exasperation' of a ruthless market economy) in order to reassert his power, Walter must get in touch with the Mexican underworld and to mix and hybridise with *foreign* elements. This tension is detectable in the fact that the only other character showing some similarities and comparable attitudes with

[1] At a certain point of the series, Walter argues that he is not in the drug business but in the empire business.

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Walter is Gus Fring (Giancarlo Esposito), Chilean leading criminal figure, who initially acts as his direct boss and displays an even more rational and professional attitude when operating as the man in charge. As a matter of fact, looking at the ways in which the story events unfold (with Walter and Gus fatally clashing for dominance), we could even argue that the former boss operates as the proper incarnation of what Walter aims to be, that is the perfect neoliberal entrepreneur (Pierson, 2014, p. 24). The dialogical nature of the main character's crossing a moral threshold and losing any supposed idea of innocence through his mingling with what is supposed to be outside of his existential plane is stressed also by the chronotope of the border, which stands as one of the most evident aesthetic patterns of the series. The events are set in New Mexico (specifically Albuquerque) and, while Walter domestic life is located in a suburban area, reflecting his alleged middle-class status, the dramatic development of the story show the dialogical liminality between spaces, subjects, and power structures in a way that compromises the purity of this same social context.

While we may be tempted to read the corruption of Walter White in a mere individualised psychological fashion, and so to read his journey as the explosion of a longstanding conflict due to negative life events, it is interesting that the main intention of the character remains that of reassessing something that has been lost. As Mark Fisher highlighted, indeed, it is the very dream of operating as a family man that contains this dark and violent side, and so the series operates as a critical examination of the flaws of the economic and moral function of the family system in moments of economic crises (2013). *Breaking Bad* does not simply feature a world 'beyond good', where antiheroines/es and tragic arcs take the centre stage; it rather displays a materialist world moving against classical or higher moral categories. In this existential space, choices are not the result of the disembodied will of independent individuals, but they are made in accordance with social pressures, ideals, economic circumstances, and expectations that have very little to do with the intervention of transcendent forces and values (which are effects of immanent processes). Exactly as the proper father operating in the crises of the neoliberal ecology, Walter's frustration is both evidence of the failure and cracks of a model, and expresses the wish to fit this role and abide by contextual social rules. The poor status and pay associated with his job as high school teacher (working in a public institution, the symbol of everything going against free market ideals) operate, as we have seen, as a pushback against the character's expectations and dreams about himself. Therefore, Walter's joining the criminal part of society does not constitute an act of rebellion (claiming the development of universal collective structures of care would be a step in this direction); rather his decisions express a different way to achieve an existential goal that he feels the necessity to respond and adapt to. In his adherence to an amoral familistic logic (see also Brodesco, 2014, pp. 57-58), Walter needs to prove his economic efficiency and sense of responsibility, to make everyone else perceive the economic and moral standing of his human capital; in fact, he even rejects donations from friends and charity, as if these were further evidences of an inability to achieve what he was expected to.

It is the dream of a functioning familial order, therefore, what morally justifies Walter's actions and intentions. As discussed by Mark Fisher (2013), the most revealing episode of the series in underscoring the perverse aspects of Walter's personality is *Ozymandias* (Rian Johnson, 5x14). After his momentary defeat, the murder of several friends and relative by the hands of former partners, and the loss of cover and control over the money accumulated during his illegal career, Walter runs home to take his family and run away using his remaining portion of wealth. However, as he arrives home, he finds Skyler ready to resist him, now tired of all his abuses, lies, and attempts to rationalise his actions, and standing strong and knife-armed against him. To this threat against his alleged authority, which he perceives as a direct betrayal, Walter reacts by screaming: 'What the hell is wrong with you. We are a family'. In this violent exchange we can see the final and even most ludicrous attempt of the character to reassess his hegemonic masculinity and the morality supporting it, while also witnessing

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an explicit materialisation of the conflict defining his relation with Skyler, who courageously reacts against her husband's violent and resented desire for centrality and recognition[2]. All these affective and dramatic patterns of the series allow us to be in touch with several social crises: the loss of centrality of the male worker due to precarisation and the loss of dominance in the job market, together with the lack of welfare and solidarity structures, make of Walter a violently resented subject. For this same reason, as indicated by David P. Pierson, *Breaking Bad* operates as a clear case study of the automatic effects of the post 2007/2008 recession, with the consequent fall of housing market, the fragmentation of middle-class households, and connected collapse of structures of care (2014, p. 11). Likewise, Walter's criminal career still highlights the need to identify with a traditional idea of individual success and exceptionalism, which is at the core of North-American competitive myths. It is only near the end, once all the masks of morality and dreams of accomplishment have fallen, that Walter will admit to have made specific choices for himself and his well-being.

In a way, though flawed and visibly hypocritical, Walter dialogically embodies aspects of competitive individualist mythology, as he features incredible skills and knowledge and can apply his theoretical and scientific mindset to all sorts of social and critical situations in a very creative way. Therefore, Walter could be associated with figures such as Thomas Edison or Henry Ford, combining a series of individual merits and skills in the construction of a personal fortune. This same adherence to traditional images of subjective accomplishment is associated with tone and mood of the series that fit the patterns of the epic westerns of the classical crime and gangster stories (there is also a rise and fall narrative as we have discussed, see Sánchez-Baró, 2014, p.150). Even the setting, characterised by the desert, the villas of bosses of the Mexican cartel, together with several spaces hosting Albuquerque's criminal underworld, enrich the chronotope with a romantic imagery, and play a role in emphasising the status and dramatic relevance of specific characters and situations. Similarly, the series features a very intense narrative, often adopting cliffhangers, fast-paced cutting, and twists in order exasperate the constant sense of danger affecting the lives of the main figures and the intensity of the story events. Even the score, constituted by a very eclectic mixture of popular genres, is often adopted to reinforce and charge situations of dramatic and tragic intensity. What is more, as fans of the series already know, there are many iconic lines and paradigmatic situations that allow us, notwithstanding the evident flaws considered, to appreciate Walter as a negative but still tragic and dominant figure (the 'Say My Name' moment is probably the most telling in this sense). His same alias as the obscure and terrifying Heisenberg ends up providing the character with a sort of legendary status, provoking, consequently, a conflictual admiration for his skills, his will to power, and knowledge. Villains and moral figures have very different agendas and express extremely different values, even though, as already mentioned, *Breaking Bad* presents a cinematic chronotope in which individual choices are always the result of larger social processes, thus diminishing their sense of complete independence. Still, we can appreciate differences and place particular figures into a moral hierarchy. Some secondary characters, such as the samurai-like hitman Mike Ehrmantraut (Jonathan Banks) display a very clear code of conduct that we may end up respecting and approving of, even though related to immoral actions. The same calculative Gus Fring, again, appears as the improved version of what Walter might have been.

These examples and comments are just further points to prove how, in all its expressive and artistic complexity, *Breaking Bad* hints at a crisis in the American Dream, showing a decaying and shrinking middles-class, and increasing unresolvable fractures in the family system. At the same time, the series still lingers on some of the most glamourous aspects of the myth of realisation and commitment, thus making us acknowledge the persistence and fascination we nurture for specific imagery and ideals and a difficulty in overcoming them, notwithstanding their fatal corruption and decay.

[2] Mark Fisher also highlighted how Skyler was the character receiving most online backlash from male fans of the series, since she was perceived the actual villain of the story, always trying to undermine Walter's plans and aspirations (see 2013).

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First as a Tragedy, Then, as Despair

Tragic and epic tones and characters, as we have seen, dominate the chronotope of *Breaking Bad* and inform its manifold affective dynamics. *Ozark* offers us a very similar story: the Byrdes family, composed by Marty (Jason Bateman) and Wendy (Laura Linney), parents of Charlotte (Sofia Hublitz) and Jonah (Skylar Gaertner) lives in Chicago and manages to keep a higher-middles class status thanks to the family man's (a renowned accountant) dedication to money-laundering for one of the major Mexican drug cartels. A series of dangerous events drive this nuclear unit out of a metropolis to start a new precarious life in the small community living around the Lake of the Ozarks. Notwithstanding the continuous threat of death and destruction, the Byrdes will find a way to settle in this new environment while still performing their criminal activity and even ascend to always more prominent levels in the cartel hierarchies and in the North-American political and economic establishment. Again, therefore, we can identify in this series a similar progression, with the display of the amoral realisation of the American Dream, combining family-oriented entrepreneurship and the embrace of criminal activities. The very opening monologue, acted by Marty's voice over, links to the morality of human capital and individual responsibility by stating that 'money' has nothing to do with social issues or complex economic dynamics, it is just the effect of individual choices. Collective or systemic processes do not exist or are irrelevant, while the measure of everyone's success is demonstrated by the ability they have to financially express themselves in the world market. Marty's words, therefore, hint at a moral ecology that has not transformed in its core values and political coordinates. Competition between individuals and households, as well as an entrenched distrust for any action and organisation of care and solidarity still move the main (and many of the secondary) characters of this chronotope.

However, differently from what happens in *Breaking Bad*, this same possessive and competitive individualist morality is not reassessed in the form of glamourous or intense dramatic patterns. Apart from the narrative complexity of the series, displaying always more difficult and unmanageable situations for the family to overcome, the affective patterns of this storyworld are dialogically set around very gloomy and even depressive tones. The cinematography is most times characterised by softened colour palettes, while the slow-paced cutting rate and relative length of many exchanges between characters tend to remove from the events and situations features of excitement and dramatic intensity. The same score used for the series often features moody indie and electronic tracks (the first episode of the series ends on the note of Radiohead's *The Daily Mail*), thus differing from the previous case study discussed in favouring a more contemplative and melancholic mood. Indeed, according to the very creators of the series, it was not their purpose to present a storyworld determined by violent and dramatic urgency, but to invite viewers to a different kind of experience, based on more dejected tonalities (Netflix, 2022). It could even be argued that if not were for the intricacy of the plot and for the continuous situations of danger and risk threatening the Byrdes, the entire series may adhere to the dynamics of slow cinema. At the same time, the characters and the family at the centre of our interest feature very few positive or engaging characteristics. Marty is smart and sophisticated in his managerial functions, but appears as a conflicted, cold, and mostly passive figure, initially responding to his wife's infidelity through progressive detachment rather than showing any pro-active emotion; similarly, notwithstanding his upwards moving career and his expertise, he operates as an employee of the cartel and other economic and political authorities, always receiving orders or adapting to higher hierarchies' decisions and agendas; thus, he never demonstrates a clear autonomous will (if there exists anything as such) or capacity to act as the brilliant entrepreneur he claims to be with his opening words. As a matter of fact, in the first episode of the series, *Sugarwood* (Jason Bateman, 1x01), we see Marty inclined to commit suicide in order to save his family from the possibility of violent retaliations from the Mexican cartel that has recruited him.

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This character's passivity and lack of a tragic personality is contrasted by the prominence and affirmative role of Wendy, who seems to replace a failed male authority with her controlling rule. She, in fact, exhibits the courage and, more specifically, the brutality and ruthlessness of a definite hierarchical figure and, similarly to Walter, manipulates her relatives and everyone around her for the good of her business. Wendy is cynical and displays communicative and persuasive qualities that allow her to gain important political connections and roles (she worked in several main electoral campaigns in the past). However, very limited are the moment in which these skills could be associated (as it happened for Walter White) with a romantic or tragic status. As a matter of fact, the sort of corruption-based, and clientelist model of family business run by the Byrdes does not evoke myths of free enterprise or self-made fortune; it rather appears to connect this unit to numerous popular stories of family success in corporate America, with levels of distressing similarities with specific events and figures (for a comparison with the Clintons' story see Zickgraf, 2022). Therefore, notwithstanding specific features of characters that may provide them with a singular stature, these aspects are always downplayed in their being sign of individual exceptionalism. The chronotope of the series, in fact, in addition to the mentioned melancholic patterns, evokes a general feeling of decay, thus visibly separating the moral ecology of the series from any narrative of progress, realisation, and fulfilment.

It must be highlighted, as well, that Wendy's attributes and apparent leading role relate to a lack of care or with very few empathic qualities: she even accepts and somehow approves the murder of her beloved brother (Ben [Tom Pelphrey]) in order to protect the family (a paradox, indeed) and, while we, as viewers, may recognise her bravery and respect her resolve, at the same time, are pushed to feel conflictual if not completely negative emotions towards this character. This depends also on the fact that, because of several complex narrative and dramatic situations, Wendy's pure selfish agenda and objectives contrast with those of characters that may seem to elicit more allegiance and emotional connection. This conflict is detectable in the relationship she has with her children, who end up being manipulated in order to become duplicates of their respective parents (Jonah as a cold and calculating accountant, and Charlotte as a ruthless business woman) and, more distinctively, in her ongoing relationship to Ruth Langmore (Julia Garner). This latter figure is an intelligent, strong, and ultimately good-hearted young criminal from the local *lumpenproletariat*, who finds an occasion to move out from her starting social condition thanks to her partnership with the Byrdes. Notwithstanding Ruth's dedication, competence, and loyalty, this economic link will always be conflicted and based on suspect and diffidence, with Wendy, most of the times, perceiving the young woman as an intruder in the family business.

It is not ironic, in this sense, that Ruth (for whose performance Julia Garner has won several awards and recognitions) is often indicated as one of the most beloved characters of the series. Cunning, brave, and, in her own way, connected with a moral code based on affection and some level of accountability for individual choices, Ruth constantly opposes Wendy's selfishness with a more humane and empathic form of self-interest. In fact, this same character is the only one displaying sincere feelings of love and care for figures such as her cousins (Wyatt [Charlie Tahan] in particular) or Ben. Her final death (taking place in the last episode of the series, *A Hard Way to Go* [Jason Bateman, 4x14]) by the hand of the same drug cartel she has been indirectly working for, together with the demise of her entire family and group, then, testify of a further failure taking place in the political ecology of the *Ozark*. Because of her positive characteristics, Ruth's rise across the four seasons of the series may appear as a reiteration of the motif of exceptional individualism, where the peculiarities of this character (who could be disparagingly labelled as a *redneck* or *white trash*) allow her to embark on a journey of personal improvement and realisation. However, her shocking murder together with many other deaths taking place during the progression of the narrative dialogically counteract this traditional pattern and highlight an endemic process of natural selection and violence dominating social relations in the storyworld.

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The Byrdes' arrival to the Ozarks, in fact, operates as a catastrophe over the urban and human ecology inhabiting this space; without covering the local social agglomerates with an aura of holiness or purity, the series shows us, nonetheless, how for the main family to thrive other forms of life need to disappear or be eliminated. No progression and improvement are granted without ecological corruption (several hotels and casinos built on the lakes) and without the removal of possible competitors and social forces operating outside of this Malthusian logic. For this reason, the family acts as a sort of parasitic force over the chronotope, at first, trying to turn every local business into another cover for money laundering operations and, then, expanding as a necropolitical force. In this sense, *Ozark* marks a further passage on the road of the crisis of the neoliberal model, displaying a family-enterprise in which every bond of care has been lost or sacrificed, and where even economic success and influence are reduced to petty achievements. The romantic characterisation and personal prowess of the protagonists of *Breaking Bad* goes away in favour of the analysis of a banal evil, which, nonetheless, perseveres in the absence of any other options or political alternatives. As highlighted by the creators of the series, the Langmore's curse (which allegedly implied that Ruth's family was condemned to remain at the border of society) is nothing but the curse of capitalism itself, which, despite any dream or narratives of social mobility, prospers over the destruction of liveability and the creation of marginalisation (Netflix, 2022). Every bond of care and affection needs to be sacrificed and violated for private accumulation to continue, while utilitarian logic of profit and interest loses any positive or pleasurable effect and charm, and is revealed in its brutal and cannibalistic implications.

Even more blatantly than in *Breaking Bad*, the world of *Ozark* does not feature or display alternative ways of living; the conflicts we witness and participate in, as viewers, have mostly to do with the confrontation between opposed interests for control and supremacy. It is true that characters like Ruth embody a more humane and compassionate attitude, and that bonds of care are the first victims of the ecological dynamics of the series. At the same time, friendly or loving relationships between a few characters never end up forming or generating a new political consciousness, or radical ethical repositioning. Politics (at least in its institutional form), on the contrary, is described as a realm of pure corruption, completely detached from any consistent ideas of consent and participation, thus emphasising a complete distrust in its possible constructive functions. These affective and conceptual patterns reveal, on one side, a further break in the imagination of contemporary North-American society. Ideas of progress and linear development are sacrificed in favour of a gloomy landscape of carelessness and endemic violence. The nuclear family, devoid of any sentimental function, persists by operating as a social tool to exasperate class divisions and violence, in a world where even anti-heroines/es have lost their appeal. Exactly because of the disenchanted and cruel melancholic mood of the series, we could argue that *Ozark* underscores the exhaustion of the power of the individualist myth of self-accomplishment. No tragic arc supports the trajectory and engagement of a world left in disarray, where the characters, no matter how cunning may appear, do nothing but managing the debris of capitalist processes and political violence they do not control or understand, but contribute in preserving by becoming passive reproducers of their logic.

Conclusions

As a way of leading the discussion to a partial closure, we could add that the trajectory described by the two TV series maps, in its conflictual relationship with stories of success and familial struggles, a general tension in western and, more specifically North-American imaginary. Manifest destiny, the illusion of existing as a reference point for "the human project" at large, an alleged sense of endless upward mobility for working people, together with the idea that, for better or for worse, the "American Dream" and (dis)integrated world capitalism would be the best it not the exclusively viable existential options, are all fading away. Still,

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we feel, in the struggles of the Byrdes and the Whites, a distress in managing this collapse; a process of recognition that is met with rage, fear, denial, and an undeniable melancholic undertone. These images of failure highlight also one of the decisive turning points of a larger ecology; where we perceive that neoliberalism exists as a zombie governmental logic, surviving through annihilation and destruction, without futurability or progressive hopes, no new social model or political ecology seems to emerge to oppose it (at least in a classical molar fashion). Here, as the Byrdes, we are torn, on one side, between negative solidarity: the passive reiteration of the consumed ideals of possessive and competitive individualism with the consequent distrust in any collective dimensions or new world. On the other hand, this sense exhaustion reveals the possibility to configure a new emancipation, as Mark Fisher would argue, destroying any supposed natural and final order of things (2009, p. 17).

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