

TELEVISION AND PODCAST REVIEWS

Dark, Seasons 1-3 (Netflix, 2017-20)

This year saw the finale of the Netflix original, *Dark* (2017-20), directed by Baran bo Odar. *Dark* focuses on a number of missing-child cases in Winden, a fictionalised town in Germany, and time travel is eventually revealed to be the cause of the disappearances. However, the simplicity of such a statement ignores the extent to which *Dark*'s multiplicity of themes, characters, and looping temporal cycles combine to produce a compellingly bleak picture of small-town life. Characters become split subjects travelling through time and confronting their own uncanny 'Otherness' when they meet their own doppelgängers. Due to the complexities of time travel, mothers and sons, fathers and daughters are entangled in a complex family tree, raising questions such as 'who are we as a family?', 'who are our ancestors?', and 'where did we come from?'. As characters travel and confront their older or younger selves, they gain maddening glimpses of knowledge; familial roles shift rapidly as characters unearth their own entangled lines of descendants and ancestors, discovering that they are actually a part of other families that they once despised or loved.

As the main leads, Jonas (played by Louis Hofmann) and Martha (Lisa Vicari), encounter and interact with other versions of themselves, the question becomes whether they should or will support or subvert these entities' agendas. For example, Jonas encounters a solitary figure on the road, referred to as 'The Stranger', who wields extensive knowledge of the intricacy of time and certain foreboding events. This fanatical stranger is later revealed to be Jonas's own adult self, who has succumbed to his own fears and obsessions as a result of enduring the apocalypse. Another zealot figure that Jonas meets, who we perceive at first to be the villain of the show, Adam, is in fact an older version of Jonas again; Adam heralds his further descent into fatalism and violence. A parallel plotline unfolds in the third season, tracing Martha's own journey, as she meets othered versions of herself that point to her own transition into a manipulative archetypal figure – the Eve to Jonas's Adam. It is therefore fair to say that *Dark* is not about the 'double' but the 'multiple', as each double become an echo of othered selves from different worlds. As Martha dies in one world, Jonas meets her doppelgänger from another in ways that shifts *Dark*'s essential question from 'when' to 'where'.

What makes *Dark* a show that strikes at our sense of terror is, therefore, its insistence that the postmodernist monstrous ‘Other’ is now inside the home, the body, the skin, and psyche. The human façade of the normal becomes a place of horror. As Jonas comes to grasp the futility of his own future, he recognises the monster within, comprehending who Adam is, by seeing the scars and facial deformities that signal his own reckless experimentations, risking humanity’s very existence to stop the repetition of time in Winden. Adam’s monstrosity therefore also references the notion that the aging process is not a peaceful passage, but a frightening inevitability, as adulthood and old age become inextricable from zealous fanaticism and stern rigidities.

Dark’s title therefore refers both to the darkness within, and to the picturesque ways in which the town of Winden is often seen through a gloomy gaze, heralding the approaching Doomsday, on 27 June 2020. Winden is often described as a ticking time-bomb. However, the dreary *mise-en-scène* is contrasted by a thread of visual cues that creep into the space of the screen. Something struggling against the encroaching dark is often indicated via a yellow jacket that Jonas and Martha wear when journeying back and forth, trying desperately to break the looping cycle. The time-travel plotline also allows for a range of visual registers, including a nostalgic depiction of the 1980s, in contrast to the stern past of the 1960s. The eras depicted stretch back to the 1930s and forward to the 2050s. In addition, the musical score encompasses several cover versions and remixed songs that range from 1980s rock to current pop music. Thematically woven into the show, songs become markers of specific moments, like the frequent use of ‘You Spin Me Round (Like a Record)’ (1984) by Dead or Alive, signalling the transition into that timeline in the very first episode, significantly entitled ‘Secrets’, in which two young boys, Erik Obendorf and Mikkel Nielsen, go missing because of their transportation to a different timeline. In the ‘present’ of the show, the camera sweeps through a passage hidden in a local cave under a power plant, while in the ‘past’, we are shown a bunker decorated as a child’s bedroom containing a spinning chair, a prototype of a torture device linked to the time-travelling process. In the latter scene, as Eric is spun to the year 1986, a television plays the aforementioned song, signalling the time shift to the mid-1980s, as the lyrics interlace with the scene. In both scenes, *Dark* points to the secrets that nature and industrialised spaces hold within.

These markers of popular culture – whether songs, gadgets, or figures – take on further significance when they are displaced from their points of origin. For instance, in 1953, a child’s body is discovered wearing modern-day headphones that have not yet been invented, a scene that parallels the discovery in 2019 of another child’s body, this time

carrying a 1980s Walkman. These markers also include frequent references to the band Kreaktors, and the lyrics to their album, *Pleasures to Kill* (1986). One of the prominent characters, Ulrich Nielsen (played by Oliver Masucci), suffers the loss of his younger brother, Mads, thirty-three years before once again losing his own son, Mikkel, to what he eventually learns is time travel. As he travels to 1953, on what will become a series of futile quests, he quotes the lyrics from the yet-to-be released 1986 album to a police officer, who uses this as a proof of Ulrich's dangerous insanity (allowing the officer to implicate Ulrich in the child murders), only to connect the dots later in 1987.

As the tagline states, and as each of the characters ultimately comes to understand, 'the beginning is the end, and the end is the beginning'. The show's deterministic take on time travel (it treats time as a synchronous lump rather than a line) is a key aspect of its plot, which suggests that that the future is as likely to influence the past as the past is to influence the future. For the characters, realising this offers some hope that things could change for those trapped in Winden's time loops. However, *Dark* also questions whether humanity has the knowledge, expertise, machinery, or youthful determination to stir such a change. Adding to the show's complexity is the depiction of the cycle of time. Whenever characters feel relatively safe at home, the intrusive awareness that time will repeat itself disrupts the fleeting moments of security that these families seek. As the show has progressed into Season 3, it reveals an alternate world with portals of connection and confrontation to our own.

Although *Dark* concluded its run on Netflix after three seasons and twenty-six episodes, it has left many questions unanswered. Are we capable of breaking free from the repetitiveness of history and our cyclical time? Do we really know everything about ourselves? Do we have a chance to be free of our *darker* selves? This should ensure its re-watchability; it becomes a particularly layered viewing experience, as audiences understand the family tree in ways that were impossible upon the first viewing of the earlier seasons in particular. This open-endedness is what makes the show striking, as it continues to challenge us.

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