

Religion and/on Television

“Atheology, Nothingness, and No One in *Game of Thrones*: Religion for the Faceless?”
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In Seasons Five and Season Six of *Game of Thrones*, Arya Stark trains with the Faceless Men who serve the Many-Faced God; she is on a trajectory of self-erasure, an abnegation of an existential and ontological entity born into the family Stark: Arya herself, the girl with a given birth name. After physically and psychologically rigorous training, not to mention extremely brutal, with the Faceless Men, Arya still (despite her self-annihilating beatings) nevertheless retains a residual, albeit muted, ego, one transposed onto an object—her lance, a veritable and incontrovertible phallic symbolic for this girl who is *not* a girl—and also projected onto an obsessive, singular desire, one that also potentially hazards self-destructive ends: blood revenge. In Episode 2 of Season 6, when asked “*who are you?*,” Arya flatly answers, “I am *no one*.” Arya’s self-abnegation, or nihilistic and existential absences, are the definitive gestures—annihilationist in its motions—of this scene.

In the same episode, John Snow—who returns from the dead (or is conjured back through black, or red, magic) tells Melisandre, the Red Woman (when she asks—impassionedly, anxiously—what he, the departed, saw in the beyond and what he, the resurrected, can confess and convey (Lazarus-like) as the returned): —“nothing.” Again, we are televisually cast into the abyssal, the infinite, unbound terrains of the *atheological* and the annihilationist.

Season Six, Episode Two: Snow’s Return from the Dead

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cyc6aGpk90&app=desktop>

Although both—Arya Stark and John Snow—are almost, as if atavistically and phoenix-like, reborn from the nihilistic ashes of the atheological; and although both re-emerge as the heroic individuals (representing family, genealogy, homeland lost) that embrace the seemingly primal essences of self, design, and destiny, their “mise-en-abyme” moments *in the abyss* mark rare televisual moments of atheological disavowal—the repudiations not only of religion, but also, and more significantly, of the very possibility of religious possibility. As Martin Heidegger might have intimated, we are faced with the “possibility of impossibility,” or what Jacques Derrida (in his Heideggerian deconstructive meditations) delineates as the “impossible possibility” of death—that imprecise, yet precise moment of ontological *aporia*.

Season Six, Episode Three: Arya’s Existential Absences

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owAFW11_bBA&app=desktop

In this paper, I take a televisual turn toward the atheological. I also examine the philosophical underpinnings and televisual representations of nothingness as an *a priori* ground for atheology, the absencing of of *theos*, god, in a secular post-postmodern context. I do so by philosophically detouring: first a detour through Fredric Jameson’s meditations on Georg Wilhelm Friedrich’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* in *The Hegel Variations* (2010); and second through Emmanuel Levinas’ wrestling and agonistic intellectual *tête-à-tête*, or philosophical *logomachia*, with his Professor Heidegger, especially over the “being-toward-nothingness”—that is precisely a “*Sein-zum-Tode*”—and over the

question of whether first philosophy *is* ontology (Heidegger) *or* ethics (Levinas). Both Arya Stark and John Snow thus enter into a *mise-en-abyme*, or annihilistic abyss, in ethical and also unethical negotiations with others, those who *will-to-be* or *will-to-power* in an agonistic struggle for domain and dominion: —in Arya’s case, it is quite literally a mission and a pilgrimage to seize the “face” of the other (*visage de l’autre*); in John’s state, in death, we confront the impassive, non-responsive *vis* of nothing, not only non-being, but an unknown and indiscernible state of nothingness *propre*. Here we return to Hegel: it is in Hegel’s *Science of Logic* that we confront—face on, *en face*—the incalculability (literally: no accounting) or ineffability of pure nothingness.

The Many-Faced God, then, is an illusion of power, conflict, and human domination. To become “no one”; to see “nothing” is the only possible eclipsing of atheological agon. And by the end of Season Six, both Arya Stark and John Stark re-emerge as post-initiated, heroic individuals (icons of family, territory, and ancestry) prepared to assume a humanist mission in this post-atheological world that is the *Game of Thrones*.