

That's Where We're Living. Determinism and Free Will in "Unthought Known"

1. Introduction

FlashForward is a science fiction television series which opened on ABC in September 2009 and was canceled after 22 episodes because of the decline of viewers, in spite of generally positive reviews and a pending cliffhanger. The first episode portrays a mysterious event that causes nearly all human beings to simultaneously lose consciousness for about two minutes, during which they have access to what appear to be visions—flashforwards—of their lives six months later. In the following episodes, it becomes evident that those visions always come true, even when people struggle to prevent the foreseen events from happening. It is only at the end of the seventh episode that FBI agent Al Gough succeeds at the price of his life in saving a woman, Celia Quinones, who was foreseen to die. Human free will here makes a point against the apparently indisputable tyranny of a predetermined fate.

At the beginning of the eighth episode, the Pearl Jam's song "Unthought Known" is deployed as a sort of reflection on the extraordinary story of Al and Celia.¹ The song here becomes a cinematic element which, borrowing Peter Kivy's words on film music, one might describe as "a palpable player in the drama, though heard but not seen by the audience and neither heard nor seen by the characters."² Specifically, I will argue that the combination of "Unthought Known"'s music and

¹ The sequence is visible on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFJGx0DYmlo>).

² Peter Kivy, 'Realistic Song in the Movies', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71, 1 (2013): 79.

lyrics with *FlashForward*'s cinematic narrative ends up in a peculiar piece of philosophical art, which is worth figuring out. I will thus extract meaning from the dialectic between the song and the images.

2. The letter from nowhere

The first images of *Playing Cards with Coyote*—*FlashForward*'s eighth episode—show, in a slight slow motion, a postman delivering a letter to Celia. This is the letter from Al, the man who gave his life to save her. The instrumental intro of “Unthought Known” accompanies the scene but the entering of Eddie Vedder's voice is postponed with respect to the original version of the song included in Pearl Jam's album *Backspacer*. In the edited version deployed in *FlashForward*, the musical module of the intro keeps being repeated on the slow motion images of Celia reading the letter, and in the meanwhile we hear Al voice saying: “Dear Celia, I don't know your last name, and I don't know where you live, but I know you've two young boys, twins, probably. And I know you didn't have a flashforward.”

Vedder's voice enters the song just after Al pronounced the keyword “flashforward,” in correspondence with an editing cut that symbolically connects Celia's glance to a traveling shot of the Ocean. The song here functions as a sort of imaginary continuation of the letter that makes abstraction from the particular case of Celia, thereby connecting this case to the vicissitudes of the other characters, and capturing its universal meaning. It is as if, through Vedder's voice, we could keep listening to the series of thought and feelings constituting Al's subjectivity. While the words of Al's letter to Celia give us access to Al's mental states just before his death, the lyrics of the song seems to give us access to a possible *post mortem* experience of Al, who is now a sort of disembodied subject constituted by nothing but the series of his visual perspectives which we can

share through the images, and the series of his thought and feelings that we can share through the song.

In previous works, I have argued films can provide us with an imaginary disembodied experience of outer fictional events,³ just as songs can provide us with an imaginary disembodied experience of inner states of fictional characters.⁴ Here, I am drawing on those works to show that the combination of motion pictures and songs can enable a complex imaginary experience whereby we can perceive outer fictional events from a disembodied perspective while, at the same time, sharing the thoughts and feeling of a fictional character on those events. Specifically, the combination of *Flashforward*'s images with "Unthought Known" provides us with a sort of imaginary access to the disembodied point of view of a dead fictional character, agent Al Gough. It is as if we were sharing his perspective when, after his death, he is observing, from without, the world within which he had spent his life. We thus see existing things from the imaginary perspective of a subject who does no longer exist.

3. Ordinary thought and scientific knowledge

The original version of "Unthought Known" is a heartfelt song about human condition, whose title is inspired by Christopher Bollas' *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (1987), a book in turn inspired by Freud's idea that one can know things about which one is unable to think. *FlashForward* deploys an edited version of the song whose duration is around two minutes instead of the four of the original version. In this context, the dialectic between

³ See Enrico Terrone, 'Imagination and Perception in Film Experience', *Ergo* 7, 5 (2020a): 161–90.

⁴ See Enrico Terrone, 'Listening to Other Minds. A Phenomenology of Pop Songs', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 60, 4 (2020b): 435–53.

thinking and knowing that characterizes “Unthought Known” acquires a peculiar connotation which is especially interesting from a philosophical perspective. Specifically, the warm spirituality of the song fruitfully interacts with a narrative universe that appears to be governed by a cold determinism since the flashforwards have put human beings in the tragic paradoxical condition of being capable of seeing their future but unable to change it. One can thus interpret the combination of the song with the narrative as a reflection on the human condition in the age of the scientific image of the world, which provides human beings not only with an unprecedented knowledge of the universe they live in, but also with a growing awareness of their impotence and irrelevance in it.

According to metaphysicians such as Wilfred Sellars (1962), Hugh Mellor (1981), Willard Quine (1987), John Smart (1989) and Laurie Paul (2010), science encourages a conception of the universe as a block of space-time strictly governed by the laws of nature, which leave no room for human initiative. Even if those laws are formulated, following quantum mechanics, in statistical terms, nothing changes at the level that is relevant to human experience and action. In such a world, as pointed out by philosophers of mind such as Daniel Dennett (1992) and Jaegwon Kim (1998), consciousness is nothing but an epiphenomenon, that is, a causally inert side effect of underlying physical and biochemical processes that occur in the brain. Consequently, free will boils down to a representational device, namely, the way in which the brain represents the outputs it sends to the periphery of body, just as perception is the way in which the brain represents the inputs it receives from the periphery of the body. We feel that our actions occur because we have freely chosen them, but the right order of explanation is the other way around: we have the impression of having freely chosen our actions because they occur, and they do so just in virtue of physical and biochemical processes in the brain.

All of this is something we *know*, at least in the sense that those are plausible conclusions that

we can draw for the best scientific theories at our disposal. Yet, this is something we find extremely hard to *think*. That is because, as effectively explained by Peter Strawson (1974; 1983), free will is so entrenched in the most basic emotional responses and moral judgments on which we constantly rely in everyday life that we cannot give it up.

That being the case, the very title of the Pearl Jam's song acquires a new connotation in the narrative context of *FlashForward*. The “unthought known” is what could be *known* through science but cannot be *thought* in everyday life, since the latter cannot give up the presupposition of free will. The whole narrative of *FlashForward* rests upon this tension. On the one hand, the characters *know*—not only through science, as we do, but also through their visions—that their future is determined and their free will is illusory. On the other hand, they cannot help but *thinking* that they are free to change the predetermined course of action—and since *FlashForward* is a fiction, after all, they can even succeed in doing so, as it happens in the story of Al and Celia.

Just as Steven Spielberg's film *Minority Report* (2002), indeed, *FlashForward* is an inconsistent narrative from a scientific perspective. Such inconsistency depends on the way in which both *Minority Report* and *FlashForward* deploy science fiction mechanisms that provide characters with mental states of clairvoyance.

While perception allows us to experience the present, and memory allows us to experience the past, we lack an analogous mental state which would allow us to experience the future. Of course, we can make conjectures or predictions on the future, imagine or suppose how it would be, and we can even form intentions concerning our future actions as well as expectations concerning the actions of other subjects. Nevertheless, we cannot experience future actions and events in the direct way in which we experience present actions and events through perception, and past actions and events through memory. The future remains somehow opaque to us in a way in which the past and the present are not.

In *Minority Report* and *FlashForward*, clairvoyance overcomes this limitation by enabling characters to experience the future in the same direct way in which they experience the present through perception and the past through memory. So far so good. Clairvoyance, as such, does not involve inconsistency. Yet, direct experiences such as perception and memory are factive, that is, they entail the reality of what is experienced. If one perceives an event, that event must be real, otherwise one would not be in a state of perception but rather in a state of hallucination.⁵ Likewise, if one remembers an event, that event must be real, otherwise one would not be in a state of memory but rather in a state of deceptive imagination.⁶ The same holds true for clairvoyance. If the events foreseen will not happen, the putative state of clairvoyance would come down to a wrong prediction. The inconsistency of science fiction narratives such as *Minority Report* and *FlashForward* derives from the fact that they insist that the characters are in a state of clairvoyance, and yet the development of these stories ends up in contradicting what those characters have foreseen.

On the one hand, *Minority Report* and *FlashForward* portray a world that complies with the scientific conception of the world as a block of space-time in which the future already exists and thus, in principle, might be directly experienced. On the other hand, those narratives make room for changes in the future thereby violating the basic principle according to which the whole universe as a block of space-time is determined once and for all. Given this principle, it makes no sense, from a scientific perspective, to state that the future can be changed.⁷ Narratives such as *Minority Report* and *FlashForward* are thus inconsistent since they portray a future that can be not only seen but also changed.

⁵ See Michael G.F. Martin, 'The Transparency of Experience', *Mind & Language* 17, 4 (2002): 376–425.

⁶ See Alexander Byrne, 'Recollection, Perception, Imagination', *Philosophical Studies* 148, 1 (2010): 15–26.

⁷ See Damian Cox and Michael P. Levine, *Thinking Through Film: Doing Philosophy, Watching Movies* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2011); Andrea Iacona, *L'enigma del futuro* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2019).

In spite of their inconsistency, however, these narratives remain interesting from a philosophical perspective since they express a clash between scientific knowledge and everyday thought. Such clash depends on the human innate tendency to think of the future as depending on free will in such a way that, even if one saw the future, one still could deploy one's free will in order to make the future different from how one had seen it.

4. The future can be changed

In the narrative context of *FlashForward*, "Unthought Known" becomes a song on the human condition within a universe that seems to have no room for consciousness and free will. The first verse starts in correspondence with a traveling shot of the Ocean, and ends up in the images of worker Aaron Stark who observes his daughter Tracy sleeping. This verse highlights a hidden dimension of the human mind that lies in the brain but is out of the reach of consciousness.⁸ The images of the vast expanses of water followed by those of Tracy sleeping nicely match these lines of the song, which concern what lies beneath the realm of conscious thought.

The second verse accompanies the images of FBI agent Demetri Noh who is studying the post-it notes that he has put on a wall with the aim of making sense of the flashforwards, and then leads us back to Celia who is now meeting the journalists who are crowded in front of her house. The combination of these images with the song's lyrics raises the issue of choosing and acting in a world that seems to be devoid of meaning.

At this point, a close-up shows the newspaper headline "The future can be changed," and then another traveling shot of the Ocean begins. Here the edited version of the song skips a verse of the

⁸ Pearl Jam, 'Unthought Known', in *Backspacer* (2009). The lyrics of the original version of the song can be found at this webpage: <https://pearljam.com/music/song/unthought-known>

original version thereby directly jumping to the next one. The lyrics of this verse, emphasized by the crescendo of the instrumental accompaniment, and perfectly matched by the beauty of the California coast, celebrate the irreducible richness of human perceptions, feelings and emotions. The possibility of changing the future, announced by the newspaper, seems to have brought enthusiasm into the music, the lyrics and the images.

The traveling shot of the Ocean ends up in a hotel on the shore where FBI agent Mark Benford and his wife Olivia are making love in spite of knowing, from Olivia's flashforward, that their marriage is destined to break as she will cheat on him. Here, another part of the song's original version is skipped in order to jump to the verse that occupies the position that in songs is usually occupied by the chorus (but which lacks the auditory specificity that usually distinguishes the chorus from the verses; that is why I prefer to cast it as a verse). Interestingly, this verse matches, and somehow solves, the paradoxical situation that Mark and Olivia are living as a couple. By making love with Olivia, Mark is somehow "dreaming the dream" of the man who will become Olivia's lover, but that man is not really "a rival" of him since the notion of a rival makes sense only against a background of free options and choices, not in a universe where everything is already determined.

The crescendo culminates in the bridge that, in the edited version of the song, connects the main section to the last verse. While we see other characters struggling with their fate, the lyrics of the bridge, which are dramatized by the musical dominance of drums, compensate the previous enthusiastic emphasis on human feelings and wishes with a quite bleak description of the universe, whose nihilism, in the narrative context of *FlashForward*, tends to match the scientific image of the world: "Nothing left [...] nothing here."

Scientific nihilism is not absolute nihilism, it is not the claim that nothing exists. Rather, as pointed out by John Smart, it is the claim that "there is nothing in the world over and above the

entities of physics, and ... everything operates according to the laws of physics.”⁹ However, from the human perspective, scientific nihilism and absolute nihilism have the same upshot, namely, they both make human existence completely irrelevant and pointless. If there is nothing in the world over and above the entities of physics, and everything operates according to the laws of physics, human beings are nothing but physical mechanisms that operate according to the laws of physics. Surely, human beings are very complicated mechanisms, perhaps the most complicated mechanisms in the universe. Yet, one should not mistake quantitative complication with qualitative difference. In fact, these complicated mechanisms, in virtue of their very complication, tend to *think* of themselves as qualitatively special, but when their thought has reached the level of scientific *knowledge*, such putative qualitative specificity reveals itself to be nothing but quantitative complication. Here is the ultimate unthought known, what we know but we are not disposed to think, namely, that there is nothing over and above the cold mechanism of the universe: “Nothing left [...] nothing here.”

5. So what ya giving?

The musical bridge leads us to the last verse, which provides the song, as well as the cinematic sequence, with a circular closure. The sound of the drums fades and Vedder’s voice is just accompanied by the simple musical module that we already have heard in the intro. The slow motion of the images provides a visual analogue of the slowing down of the rhythm of the song, whose lyrics keep describing a spatiotemporal universe whose immense distances seem to make human life irrelevant: “A distant time, a distant space / That’s where we’re living”

⁹ J.J.C. Smart, *Our Place in the Universe: A Metaphysical Discussion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 79.

These lines of the song rise the philosophical issue of our place in the universe. According to Smart (1989), the expression “our place in the universe” can be read in three different ways. First, a “literal” reading according to which the universe is a system of expanding galaxies such that, as Smart puts it, “it can be seen that our location in the universe is in no way an important looking or central one. Indeed there is no central place.”¹⁰ Then, a “semi-literal” reading according to which we occupy the highest place in the hierarchy of the entities of the universe. Yet, from a scientific perspective, this makes sense only if we consider the hierarchy in terms of quantitative complication, not in terms of qualitative difference. We are perhaps the most complicated mechanisms in the universe, and yet we remain mechanisms. This claim is questioned by what Smart calls the “metaphorical” reading of the expression “our place in the universe.” According to this reading, one can wonder whether the human mind is just a complicated piece of the universe or it is rather the universe that depends on the mind. While the former option leads to realism, the latter rather leads to idealism.

The lines “A distant time, a distant space...” in the narrative context of *FlashForward* surely favor the realist option. To be is to have a place in space and time, regardless of whether this place is occupied by an lifeless thing or by a subject of experience. The latter just has the capacity to represent the spatiotemporal universe in addition to having a place in it. But this capacity does not mean that space and time are a product on the mind, as a transcendental idealist in the Kantian tradition would be inclined to claim. This capacity rather means, from a Darwinian perspective, that the primary function of the mind is to provide the living body with an approximately objective representation of its surrounding environment, thereby improving its adaptation and its capacity of survival and reproduction.¹¹ It is not that we have a special meaningful place in the universe, it is

¹⁰ Smart, *Our Place in the Universe*, 2-3.

¹¹ See Robert Nozick, *Invariances: The Structure of the Objective World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,

just that we are capable of representing our meaningless place in it, as the lines “A distant time, a distant space / That’s where we’re living” remind us.

Drawing on Kant’s third antinomy in the *Critique of Pure Reason*,¹² one might say that the scientific image of the world, in which everything has its place in space-time and is determined by the laws of nature, is contradicted by the introspective evidence of free will and spontaneity. Kant notoriously overcomes the contradiction by stating that scientific determinism only concerns the superficial domain of phenomena whereas free will and spontaneity belong to the deeper domain of things in themselves. Yet, from a Darwinian perspective, one might reject Kant’s way of drawing the distinction between phenomena and things in themselves. One might state, instead, that phenomena are subjective spatiotemporal representations of an objective spatiotemporal environment that natural selection has endowed us with. Hence, the domain of things in themselves is not something beyond space-time but rather space-time as revealed by science, while the domain of phenomena is rather space-time as represented in everyday experience. If this is right, free will and spontaneity do not belong to the domain of things in themselves but rather to that of phenomena; they are a sort of side-effect, noise, distortion, of our subjective way of representing an objective spatiotemporal order.

Although the song’s lines “A distant time, a distant space / That’s where we’re living” seem to summarize and endorse such a bleak view, the images that accompany them have positive valence. FBI Special Agent Janis Hawk, who was critically injured in episode 6, is back to the Los Angeles field office, where her colleagues celebrate her return. The FBI team has regained its unity and is ready to address new challenges, as emphasized by the images of Janis kissed and hugged by Stanford Wedeck, the head of the office. Finally, a last cut leads us back to the newspaper headline

2001).

¹² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

stating: “The future can be changed.” The positive valence of these images is matched by the last line of the song, which asks a question that seems to reaffirm the role of human consciousness and free will in the predetermined indifferent universe: “So what ya giving?”

The point is that the mind does more than just representing what is going on in the spatiotemporal surroundings of the living body. The mind also assesses events and actions through feelings and emotions. Things are not just represented as far or close, big or small, soft or hard. Things are represented also as pleasant or unpleasant, good or bad, beautiful or ugly. In other words, things are not just perceived but also evaluated. Perception and evaluation are inextricably intertwined in experience. This fact has a crucial consequence. Even if the universe, as such, is irredeemably meaningless, the way in which we represent it makes it meaningful, that is, imbued with values that provides us with goals and purposes in our lives. We thus represent a meaningless universe as if it were meaningful. From a scientific perspective this is just a fiction, but this fiction cannot be given up in the way we give up fictions when we end reading novels or watching films. Engaging with such fiction is what constitutes our existence, is the basic framework of our life as conscious subjects. We cannot help but thinking of such fiction as paramount even though we know that it is just a fiction. From this perspective, “So what ya giving?” becomes the question that makes our lives worth living. We are to play a game of values, goals, purposes, and meanings, a game in which the future is up to us, and thus “the future can be changed,” in spite of our place in a meaningless universe in which the future is determined once and for all. We are to take such fiction seriously, thinking of it as worthwhile, and *give* our contribution to it—“So what ya giving?”—in spite of knowing its ultimate fictional nature.

6. The ontology of “Unthought Known”

So far, I have articulated the ontological view that is expressed by “Unthought Known” in the narrative context of *Flashforward*. Specifically, I have pointed out what human beings are and which is their place in the universe according to that conception of the world. Still, something remains to be said on the ontology of the song itself. What is “Unthought Known”? In the first instance, one might answer that this is a song written and composed by Eddie Vedder, and released in 2009 as a track of Pearl Jam’s album *Backspacer*. Songs, however, are complicated entities from an ontological perspective, since things like songs or films, unlike concrete things like rocks or animals, do not have a single place in space and time. There is no single place in the world where one can find “Unthought Known.” Thus, songs, just like films, are better cast as abstract objects, namely types, whose instances or tokens are those particular events called playbacks.¹³ From this ontological perspective, “Unthought Known” is a sort of norm that prescribes how its instances should be: they should last four minutes and nine seconds, exhibit peculiar auditory qualities, and have lyrics organized in a structure involving an initial series of five verses, then a bridge (“Nothing left...”), and finally a series of three verses.

The song that we hear in *FlashForward*’s episode *Playing Cards with Coyote*, however, does not abide by this norm since it lasts only two minutes and sixteen seconds, and has lyrics organized in a slightly different structure. So, one can wonder, is that song “Unthought Known”? Well, yes and no. One might answer “Yes, it is” because there is a proper causal chain that allows us to trace that song back to the original creation by Eddie Vedder (and this also explains why *FlashForward*

¹³ See Theodor Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); Andrew Kania, ‘Making Tracks: The Ontology of Rock Music’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64, 4 (2006): 401–14; Julian Dodd, *Works of Music: An Essay in Ontology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

producers had to pay copyright fees for their use of the song). However, one might also answer “No, it is not” because what that song does is to establish a new norm rather than following the original one.

In order to solve this tension, one might say that the song we hear in *Playing Cards with Coyote* is a variant of “Unthought Known,” namely, as Nemesio García-Carril Puy (2019) puts it, a type “nested into” “Unthought Known”’s type. If this is right, songs such as “Unthought Known” are abstract objects that make room not only for proper instances but also for improper ones. A proper instance of “Unthought Known” lasts exactly four minutes and nine seconds, and exhibits all the features specified by the original type. Improper instances, on the other hand, can have a different duration, a different organization of the lyrics, and different auditory features, and yet they remain instances of the song in virtue of an appropriate causal connection to its creation. For example, the live version of “Unthought Known” recorded in Berlin in 2010 lasts only three minutes and fifty seconds.¹⁴ Eddie Vedder’s cover performed at the 2016 Ohana Festival, on the other hand, preserves the original duration but exhibits different auditory features due to its acoustic guitar solo arrangement.¹⁵ In another acoustic cover, which one can hear in the 2011 documentary *Water on the Road*, Vedder modifies also the structure of the lyrics, thereby reducing the duration to one minute and forty-five seconds.¹⁶

The *Flashforward* version of “Unthought Known” also can be seen as a variant so understood. In this case, the auditory features of the original version are preserved, and yet the song is edited thereby changing the organization of its lyrics and reducing its duration, so to adapt it to the narrative context of the TV show. Interestingly, an analogous operation can be found in another TV

¹⁴ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFRQIEv6mC0>.

¹⁵ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y36BgBb1Rw8>.

¹⁶ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJre7ZGFJm8>.

show, *Castle*, aired on ABC for a total of eight seasons from 2009 to 2016. In each episode of *Castle*, novelist Richard Castle and detective Kate Beckett of New York Police Department cooperate to solve a crime. In particular, *Den of Thieves*, the twenty-first episode of the second season, is about a crime involving double-crossing and betrayal in Beckett's team. "Unthought Known" shows up in the finale of this episode, which was aired in 2010, just a few months after the airing of *Playing Cards with Coyote*.¹⁷

The *Castle* editing of "Unthought Known" lasts around two minutes and organizes the lyrics by directly connecting the initial five verses to the last one, thereby skipping the bridge, which was instead crucial to the *FlashForward* editing. The bridge's lines "Nothing left [...] nothing here," indeed, supplied the ultimate nihilist truth which was somehow known and yet could not be thought in the narrative context of *FlashForward*. In the narrative context of *Castle*, instead, the emphasis is rather on the hidden psychological dimension that underlies social relations. The investigation carried out by Castle and Beckett in this episode has revealed truths that was somehow known to the other members of the police team, who nevertheless were unable to think of them. And Castle and Beckett, in turn, find it hard to think of their deep sentimental bond in spite of ultimately knowing it. All this does not involve the sort of nihilism that is at stake in *Flashforward* but rather a firm confidence in the capacity of human beings to succeed in thinking what has remained so far unthought in their social lives. The key lines of the *Castle* version of "Unthought Known," in this sense, are the optimistic ones stating "Look for love..." which were instead dropped in the bleaker *Flashforward* version of the song.

To sum up, a song like "Unthought Known" does not only express the feelings and ideas that are embodied in its original version but also constitute a potential for further versions that can

¹⁷ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5i7aft9O3XM>.

express slightly different feelings and ideas. In this paper I have argued that, in *Flashforward*, “Unthought Known” expresses feelings and ideas concerning the clash between determinism and free will. The song, as it is deployed in the *Flashforward* episode *Playing Cards with Coyote*, not only makes us aware that knowledge of the deterministic laws of nature leaves no room for free will but also makes us feel that we cannot give up free will in our practical thought.

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