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Truth Takes Time: the Interplay between Heroines, Genres and Narratives in three J. J. Abrams' Television Series

Truth Takes Time. Los vínculos entre heroínas, géneros y narrativas en tres series televisivas de J. J. Abrams

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ABSTRACT: This paper suggests that J. J. Abrams' serial universe has been shaped by the management of truth and time bound to the great feminine protagonists in *Felicty* (WB, 1998-2002), *Alias* (ABC, 2001-2006) and *Fringe* (FOX, 2008-2013), analyzed as a progression at three levels: the character's heroic identity, the thematic and generic mutations that take shape, and the ideas of serial timing that undermine space-time continuity. From a series that assimilates its moulds and plays at denouncing them (*Felicty*) to a series exploring the traps of time by inhabiting its limits (*Alias*), and one that transforms such ambiguities into an ontological division between parallel universes (*Fringe*).

RESUMEN: *El presente artículo analiza cómo el universo serial de J. J. Abrams ha evolucionado a partir de la gestión de la verdad y el tiempo ligada a sus grandes protagonistas femeninas en *Felicity* (WB, 1998-2002), *Alias* (ABC, 2001-2006) y *Fringe* (FOX, 2008-2013), mediante una progresión a tres niveles: la identidad cambiante de sus heroínas, las mutaciones genéricas que corrompen tal identidad, y las ideas de temporalidad serial que socavan la continuidad espacio-tiempo. De una serie que asimila sus moldes y juega a denunciarlos (*Felicity*) a otra que explora las trampas del tiempo habitando sus límites (*Alias*), y a otra que transforma esos interrogantes en una división ontológica entre universos paralelos (*Fringe*).*

Keywords: J. J. Abrams, Television, Series, Narrative, Genre, Science-fiction.

Palabras clave: J. J. Abrams, Televisión, Series, Narrativa, Género, Ciencia-ficción.

In less than ten years, J. J. Abrams has moved from appearing in the reserve list of a few scripts to occupying a strategic position in the battlefield of contemporary Hollywood. A decade separating films such as *Regarding Henry* and *Armageddon* from the revolution of TV series such as *Felicity* and *Alias*, the interplanetary success of *Lost* and the dazzling power of three film-franchises such as *Mission: Impossible III*, *Cloverfield* and *Star Trek*. Moving from production to direction and scriptwriting, Abrams has succeeded in achieving something even more complex: to integrate the talent of a group of narrators –from Matt Reeves to Alex Kurtzman and Roberto Orci, including Damon Lindelof and Drew Goddard–, who form one of the most promising horizons in Hollywood’s audio-visual landscape. To associate Abrams’ work to authorial poetics would be to betray his sources and modes of production, based on the intermittent logic of seriality as much as the collective work of televisual narrative. And yet, it seems obvious that behind Abrams’ founding influence there is a distinctive imaginary, the rhythm of a great narrator who thinks, recovers and reinvents stories belonging to the best filmic and televisual mainstream.

This paper suggests that, beyond the massive commotion caused by *Lost* (and its attendant distorting aura), Abrams’ universe has been shaped by the management of truth and time bound to great feminine characters: Felicity Porter, Sydney Bristow and Olivia Dunham. *Felicity*, *Alias* and *Fringe* enable us to locate the themes and variations of Abrams’ serial constant, that is, his favourite character scheme: university student and dilettante lover in *Felicity*; spy daughter, mother’s Other and ghost in *Alias*; literal figure of the double –in terms of identity, time and history– in *Fringe*. Although it could be argued that such themes and variations have its greatest example in *Lost*, we have consciously chosen to focus on three much more feminine, protagonist-driven shows like *Felicity*, *Alias* and *Fringe*. While it is rather obvious that, complexity-wise, a harmless series like *Felicity* doesn’t stand comparison with *Lost*, it is our goal to vindicate certain traits of the former that work as narrative seeds for the latter, traits that in spite of being undeveloped or naive are essential to fully grasp the evolution of Abram’s work.

Our purpose is to understand the relationship between the series as a progression at three levels: (1) the *character’s heroic identity*, updated and repainted in each series; (2) *the thematic spectrum and generic mutations* that take shape, from soap and

preadolescent comedy to espionage and science fiction; (3) and, finally, the *ideas of serial temporality* that gradually undermine the space/time continuity in three narrative strata. We will discuss that process, from a series that assimilates its moulds and plays at denouncing them through temporal exceptions (*Felicity*) to a series exploring the lies and traps of time by inhabiting its limits (*Alias*), and one that transforms the ambiguities and thresholds of the precedent model in an ontological division between parallel universes (*Fringe*). Three heroines, three generic registers and three manifestos on narration and time¹.

1. *Troubled heroines: sentimental education / drama and identity / doppelgangers*

‘Truth takes time’, the title of Episode 18 of the second season of *Alias*, condenses the variables of Abrams’ method: the inscription of the characters in a restricted temporary structure that questions their very own identity (a strategy later picked up in *Lost*’s interplay between flash-back and flash-forward). *Truth takes time...* if we read the statement literally, as Sydney Bristow reclaims before her father Jack –‘It’s only a matter of time before I find out the truth’– we are faced with a management of time based on lies, which gradually lengthens the advent of truth in conflicting time lines (the heroine, its parents, its progeny). That is, of course, a typical narrative framework since Greek tragedy, but Abrams’ finding consists in problematizing the prevailing post-9/11 conspiracy theory through the changing identity of his heroines, linking serial temporality with heroic insight, and personal truths with universal lies: “the withholding of information, doing that intentionally”².

Truth and lie integrate a territory in perpetual mutation, going from the romantic adventures of *Felicity* to the familiar ambiguity in *Alias* and the ontological duplication of the real in *Fringe*. Each model resonates in the precedent one and outlines a portrait of the heroine permanently split between the truths of her feminine condition (shattered and elliptical) and the lies of the universe she is doomed to save (legal, ethical). This juxtaposition of personal –heroic– journeys and collective –global– communities is very much traced by the impact of pre/post 9/11 discourse, and it evolves from one series to another: we go from a heroine in an idealised universe (pre-9/11 New York in *Felicity*), to a heroine in a universe in permanent crisis (post-9/11 terrorism in *Alias*), ending up with both a heroine and a universe in process of healing (the Twin Towers still standing in the parallel universe of *Fringe*, where 9/11 never took place). The individual process of the main character is therefore linked with the plural sense of her community, truth and lies rising from casual love affairs to state crimes and multi-universe conspiracies.

In *Felicity*, Abrams and Matt Reeves activate the emotional carnival of the university years, reducing lies and half-truths to the grade zero of love relationships. The series establishes a constant in Abrams’ universe by introducing feminine characters in search of a vocation and a love ideal, pairing the method of the director of *Super 8* with the tradition of the *bildungsroman*, in its most popular and televisual sense. Werther’s diaries and Jane Austin’s writings are substituted by a recorded diary, personally kept

¹ At the time of delivering the final version of this text, *Fringe* is still being broadcasted on FOX Channel, so our comments will focus on the first four seasons of the show (and, of course, some of our concepts are provisional since they may vary in light of the series’ finale).

² ABRAMS, J. J., “Abram’s Mystery Box”, TED Conferences Video Lecture, 2008.

by Felicity throughout the series, a strategy that recalls Agent Cooper's recorder in *Twin Peaks* and the magical powers of *Bewitched*³.

Despite the obvious differences between the series and Flaubert's revolutionary cynicism, Felicity Porter progresses in a similar way to Frederic Moreau in her *sentimental education*, only trapped in the contemplative *bovarism* and *snobism* fleshed out by René Girard in his analysis of Triangular Desire: "The same ignorance, the same inconsistency, the same absence of individual reaction seem to make them fated to obey the suggestion of an external milieu, for lack of an auto-suggestion from within"⁴. Often ingenuously, almost always as an idiot devoted to the humour of the cause, Felicity spends four seasons deciding what to do with her life, declaring her love, being accepted or rejected, playing at truth and false as a pastime... just as she points out in the show: 'I guess that when your heart gets *broken* you sort of start to see the *cracks* on everything'. While in *Felicity* such *cracks and breaks* work as love triangles, entangled and yet harmless, in *Alias*, the heroine's indecisions and adventures are transformed into a net of complex conspiratorial relationships around Sydney Bristow, taking the model of the tragic family to graft it onto the deceptive and volatile routine of espionage: here the *cracks* are no longer love-talk but rather real trauma. Abrams understands that behind Felicity's formative errors and love deceptions emerges a fertile ground for *Alias*' great narrative, complex and ambiguous. Characters no longer lie to boost the intensity of a turn in the script, or to sublimate the value of *anagnorisis*: they lie organically, because lies are the only naturalised space they can inhabit in a post-9/11 context. They don't live next to lies, for lies, or under lies, but rather live *in* lies: 'A family where the members are in orders to lie to each other', as Sydney points out in one episode.

The series combines the dramatic intensity of Sophocles and Euripides' *Elektra* with the bluntness of Frank Miller's *Elektra Assassin*, composing a family labyrinth typical of Greek tragedy, which brings Hegel's interpretation of tragic poles up to date: "Antigone, the woman, has the family interest as her 'pathos', Creon, the man, has the welfare of the community as his"⁵. Abrams' heroine oscillates between the regime of the paternal *Logos* represented by her father Jack Bristow –order, law and the well being of the community– and the temptations of a maternal *Eros* brilliantly celebrated in her absent mother Irina Derevko –blood, family, cosmos–, one of the most powerful off-screen presences of contemporary television (in the show's first season). Just as in the classical Jungian model of *anima* and *animus*, throughout five seasons Sydney experiments with the powers and dangers of her heroic condition: the –masculine– codes of lightness and *Logos* versus the –feminine– traps of darkness and *Eros*⁶.

Alias brilliantly dislocates the puerile conflicts of *Felicity* in the vortex of tragedy. Not even Hegel's dual and conceptual interpretation can give an account of the evasive and intermittent character of Abrams' most achieved protagonist. A tragic atmosphere dominates the series going beyond the light and dark scheme of the Hegelian proposition and plunging Sydney into a true blood betrayal (specially during its first three –more accomplished– seasons). At certain points, strategically located in-between

³ The liaisons between XIXth century serial literature and contemporary television have been deeply explored by authors such as Jennifer Hayward, whose case study of Dickens *Our Mutual Friend* particularly highlights the link between character development and serialization: HAYWARD, Jennifer, *Consuming Pleasures. Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 1997, p. 41.

⁴ GIRARD, René, *Deceit, Desire and The Novel. Self and Other in Literary Structure*, The John Hopkins University Press, London, 1976, p. 5.

⁵ HEGEL, G. W. F., *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1975, p. 464.

⁶ JUNG, C. G., *Aion. Researches into the Phenomenology of The Self*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1978, p. 14.

the show's mid-season and summer interruptions, the heroine seems caught in the radical loneliness of truly tragic heroes: "Aeschylus's hero could fall victim to the fight for the pre-eminence of one order above the other [...] but he could never suddenly lose his sense of belonging to the environment, his inclusion in the world, to remain so alien, abandoned and betrayed as Sophocles' human being"⁷.

Sydney lives on the edge, like the characters that Karl Reinhardt analysed in Sophocles' tragedies: *monoúmenoi*, *áphiloi*, *phrenòs oiobôtai*, 'left aside', 'isolated', 'friendless'. Amnesia, suicide, fake death, shock therapy, supplanting, sacrifice or ovule theft are some of the traumas marking Sydney's identity, turning serial dramatic devices into deep heroic wounds. The protagonist falls to pieces and is yet reborn with each end and start of season, in a system of mathematical precision: the brutal murder of her fiancé (pilot episode), the veiled resurrection of the mother (seasons 1-2), one's own death and the impossible love (seasons 2-3), the lie and death of the loved one (seasons 4-5). Relying on cliff-hangers and serial ruptures, *Alias* builds on the legacy of the great film heroines analysed from a feminist perspective by Tania Modleski or Teresa de Lauretis:

"The heroine's double relation of desire for the Father and for the Mother [...] functions not as a mirror, a flat specular surface, but rather as a prism diffracting the image into the double positionality of female Oedipal desire and sustaining the oscillations between femininity and masculinity"⁸.

Such complex prism leads Sydney Bristow to the vortex, between desire and death of the mother, the two main themes of the serial plot. The apparitions of Irina Derevko catalyse the homicidal potential of the heroine, symbolically nocturne. We may argue that, in *Alias*, the heroine doesn't suffer because her boyfriend has texted her best friend (as it occurred in *Felicity*), but because she has deceived and killed, because she doesn't know whether she has one or two fathers, because her sister is slit open on an altar, because the spectres of the past reclaim victims and rituals... That is to say because her mother attempts to kill her once and again, hollowing her identity in an almost Lacanian sense: "What happens to her desire? Shouldn't it be the desire of The Other linked to the desire of the mother? [...] the desire of the mother is the origin of everything. The desire of the mother is the founding desire of the whole structure [...] but it is also a criminal desire"⁹. It is here that Abrams inserts the master mechanism of *Alias*: to corrupt the daughter's identity thorough the homicidal desire of the mother.

Mother-daughter mirages are a serial constant, it is not surprising to see Sydney Bristow recreating the death of her mother to discover that she is still alive (literally throwing herself into the sea, just like she had done years before); or to see her dressed and acting as Irina to revive her father's memory and desire (in the episode 'Mirage'); or, of

⁷ REINHARDT, Karl, *Sófocles*, Destino, Barcelona, 1991, p. 17. English version: *Sophocles*, Barns & Noble, New York, 1979.

⁸ DE LAURETIS, Teresa, *Alice doesn't. Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, The Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1984, p. 151. The strength of Abram's show lies in how this tension between *anima* and *animus* is naturally blended in a mass-consumption TV show: "... an ass-kicking, self-sacrificing, tortured heroine, and as such falls into a new tradition of series within cult television, seeking to redefine the action heroine within a post-feminist world", BROWN, Simon and STACEY, Abbot, *Investigating Alias: Secrets and Spies*, I. B. Tauris, London, 2007, p. 5. For Molly Brost, such post-feminist stand offers a unique chance to reinterpret Laura Mulvey's notion of *the male gaze*: "We might argue that placing a female in the lead role makes it necessary to renegotiate how the gaze is employed" BROST, Molly. "Spy Games: *Alias*, Sydney Bristow, and the Ever Complicated Gaze", in *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture*, Spring 2007, vol. 6, Issue 1.

⁹ LACAN, Jacques, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis. 1959-1960*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1992, p. 283.

course, to see mother and daughter fighting to death –and dying– in the last episode of the series. Although far removed from the radicalism that Lacan finds in Sophocles' text (the similarities Irina/Jocasta notwithstanding), *Alias* does succeed in problematizing the heroine within the tragic *impasse* that the French psychoanalyst designated *between-two-deaths*. The lies (and the false death) of the mother modulate the identity of the heroine in a mirrored structure; a process that has its most achieved manifestation in the two-year ellipsis introduced between seasons 2 and 3. Such ellipsis functions as a black hole used by Abrams' team to portray a Sydney *between identities*, dead and immoral, whose retroactive amnesia casts the shadows of her criminal mother.

What did Syd become during that two-year ellipsis? Did she kill and betray, just like Irina had done years before? The figure(s) of the *doppelgänger* becomes the ideal motif to explore such a radical juncture of the heroine's identity, linking *Alias* with *Fringe*. The heroine is not only one but many heroines, layered and intertwined. In *Alias*, Sydney's symbolic doubles (the mother, the sister, the aunts) gradually give rise to a nocturnal *femme fatale* double (Lauren) and, finally, to Sydney's direct DNA clone in the last season (incarnated in Ana Espinosa): "The recognition of oneself, which implies a paradox in itself [...] also implies an exorcism: the exorcism of the double, which presents an obstacle to the existence of the only one and demands that this one is not only himself and nothing else"¹⁰. The essential mechanism of *Fringe* lies in this exorcism of the double (previously explored in *Alias*), which transforms the traditional projection of the *doppelgänger* –the shadow, the other– in a gradual coexistence of two real, serialised heroines. The series literally splits the character in two: Olivia from the world as we know it, and Olivia from the parallel universe. A division insinuated in the final chapter of the first season and reinvented, in a revolutionary way, in the masterly ending to the second season.

Although we may claim that the two Olivias in *Fringe* don't reach Sydney's tragic ambiguity, since they coexist with other –sometimes more appealing– double figures (Walter and Peter), the series' great finding is to transfer the doubling of the heroine to the narrative as a whole: it brings forward the fictional experiments that Abrams and his team had already conducted in *Alias*. Not only the individual identity is doubled but also a universe inhabited by double-heroines and double-fathers, double-relatives and double-cities, alternating between parallel universes: "With the advent of cinema, Narcissus seems led by the technological double to a field of new tension: retrieved from the death of the self, he is revived and reconstituted on a new basis"¹¹. Here Gino Frezza refers to cinematographic narrative as a point of departure for the new dimension of the double; similarly, when thinking about *Fringe*, we may consider televisual narrative as the most fertile ground for a form of storytelling in exponential mutation. A narrative reaching global acclaim with *Lost*, and which nevertheless finds its true origin in Abrams' female characters, *between heroines*, since we already find two Felicities in *Felicity* and two –and more– Sydneys in *Alias*, before the changes in colour –blue, red, yellow– marking the jump between universes in *Fringe*'s credits¹².

¹⁰ ROSSET, Clement, *Lo real y su doble. Ensayo sobre la ilusión*, Tusquets, Barcelona, 1993, p. 87. English version: *The Real and its Double*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2012.

¹¹ FREZZA, Gino, *La macchina del mito tra film e fumetti*, La Nuova Italia, Scandicci, 1995, p. 150.

¹² *Fringe*'s debts to *Alias* with regards to *doppelgängers* exceed the scope of the series' global plot –the role of shape shifters as double agents– and it is rather concentrated in the episodic structure itself. Just as *Fringe* consecrates an episode of its third season to the self-conclusive story of two twin brothers (echoing Olivia's double), the same occurs in the *Alias* episode "Double Agent", where Ethan Hawke is doubled by means of a genetic clone (a clear homage to his role in *Gattaca*). Two cases illustrating another of Abram's most treasured strategies: the reflection of the episodic plot (what happens in a given

This leads us to suggest that the success of Abrams and his team is to a great extent due to their ability to explore female characters using variables and differences, conceiving heroines that go beyond the traditional male hero: “It is the rational, logical male mind that declares that opposites such as the ego and its shadow, light and darkness, will never coalesce. Yet, the feminine soul is able to reach a synthesis beyond logic”¹³. Therefore, the trail left behind by Jung, Mircea Eliade and Gilbert Durand (the vindication of a feminine narrative) seems one of the keys of Abrams’ method, able to integrate the faces of time and the traps of identity: “a particularly interesting example of not only doubling but also the indiscernibility of true and false that can be seen in reflected images”¹⁴.

2. Genre mutations: soap-comedy / action-espionage / science-fiction

From Athena and Medusa to *Marnie*, the cadence of moving hair remains as a foundational image of the heroine: “it is not the hair’s form that makes us think of running water, but its movement. It could well be the hair of a heavenly angel: from the moment it undulates, it naturally leads us to an aquatic image”¹⁵. Liquid and moveable, the mutation of audiovisual genres in J. J. Abrams’ series undulates as feminine hair in Bachelard’s depiction, descending from Felicity’s sentimental surface to the depths of Sydney’s past and down to Olivia’s conflicting universes. Hence, the transformation of each heroine during each show –from the *southern belle* to the *femme fatale*– involves a generic mutation, from soap to espionage and science-fiction.

In *Felicity*, for instance, the protagonist’s haircut makeover during the second season unchained the rage of millions of fans just as much as it achieved the comic demystification devised by the screenwriters (creating *inside jokes* about the change of look). The hair motive became a chronological cyclical marker –from long and curly to short and straight, and back to curly again– which condensates the generic foundations of the series, with sentimental drama and romantic comedy constantly coalescing. This mixture, characteristic of the scripts created by Abrams and Matt Reeves, lightens and legitimates the sentimentalism of the soap genre, while portraying its caricature at the same time: it mixes strong love clichés with gags ridiculing those same love clichés. The important issue is not genre identification *per se*, but the interplays and oscillations between different generic shades:

“Even if they are not self-aware of the process, viewers who enjoy a particular genre are always affected by experiences of crossroads particular to that genre, for the simple reason that the prolongation of their pleasure depends on the ‘adequate’ management of those crossroads”¹⁶.

episode) in the events of the serial plot (the overall arch of the main character). Moreover, *Fringe*’s fourth season has increased the number of double-universes up to four, radicalizing the *doppelgänger* strategy.

¹³ SANFORD, J. A., “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde”, in *Meeting The Shadow. The Hidden Power of the Dark Side of Human Nature*, Tarcher-Putnam, New York, 1991, p. 75.

¹⁴ ASHTON, Dyrk, “Reflection of Deleuze: An Alias-ed Critique of Truth”, in *Investigating Alias: Secrets and Spies*, I. B. Tauris, London, 2007, p. 137.

¹⁵ BACHELARD, Gaston, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, Institute of Humanities & Culture, Dallas, 1999, p. 133. A monographic exhibition held at the Paris’ *Cinémathèque* has recently highlighted the symbolic value of feminine hair through art history, as well as its particular links with the language of moving images: *Brune Blonde. Une exposition arts et cinéma*.

¹⁶ ALTMAN, Rick, *Film Genre*, British Film Institute, London, 1999, p. 199.

Abrams' method is characterised by mixing sequences of blatant Hollywood sentimentalism with delirious comedy and action sequences, which undo the emotive tone of the former, *à la* Howard Hawks. There is a constant play between what we could call *emo gen* (emotional substratum) and its counterpart, the *wow gen* (action-movement)¹⁷. The *emo* tone is composed of moments of great intimacy and dramatic *anagnorisis*, from Felicity's tears to Sydney's loneliness over glasses of wine, including Michael Giacchino's deeply melancholic orchestration (yet another example could be the emotional shot / counters scenes where humans and monsters look at each other in *Cloverfield* and *Super 8*). We are confronted with a sentimental fixation in certain images of the past, often belonging to the characters' childhood (the lost mother), which awaken an idealising and nostalgic *emo* connection.

Conversely, the *wow gen* emerges in moments of pure action, in order to lighten up and mock the *emo* moment (so that it doesn't appear as corny as it actually is). It encompasses scenes full of adrenalin and kinetic excess –topped with gags *à la* Spielberg– such as the memorable fights of the Bristow family in *Alias*: “The word that recurs most often in the notes I took while watching *Mission: Impossible* is *Fab!* [...] we have no adequate vocabulary to describe or evaluate such films (which are now the dominant mode of Hollywood film-making) so we tend to dismiss them as popcorn. Your Mission, should you choose to accept it, is to take Popcorn Movies seriously”¹⁸. Abrams and his team not only take the action “popcorn” sequences seriously, they are capable of using them as a precise catalyser of the heroine's emotional misadventures.

Therefore, the interplay between *emo* and *wow* constitutes a serial mechanism: the moments of revelation of the plot and the narrative strand emerge with such power (we listen to Irina for the first time, we see the Twin Towers still standing) because they rely on strong action routines (the heroine injecting herself with adrenaline, once and again). It is fundamental to see Sydney and Francie or Olivia and –the other– Olivia fighting, beating each other over ten minutes (*wow*), in order to understand why two lovers like Vaughn and Sydney are forced to stay apart or the emotional saturation of the Twin Towers reappearing (*emo*). The script and the *mise-en-scène* are boosted in continuous crossroads between emotions and actions... a duel between conflicting forces, as in Deleuze's canonic definition of action¹⁹.

This formula was reshaped in *Alias* by corrupting the innocent appearance of the heroine's quotidian life, cloning and exterminating her friends. On the one hand, sentimental pauses are conceded to the protagonist between mission and mission, brief pop digressions that depict the daily home life of Syd offering a respite to the plot. On the other hand, those kinds of soap/romantic comfortable space (which recall Felicity) become ruptured by the criminal dynamics of espionage and suspense (which foretell *Lost* and *Fringe*). We witness how the heroine's friends and relatives are retrospectively corrupted using shape shifters, one of Abram's most treasured themes. This idea of friends being murdered and cloned to infiltrate the heroine's intimacy regulates the serial rhythm of *Alias* –her roommate Francie being the greatest example– and also functions as an element of contamination between universes in *Fringe*: “the possibility

¹⁷ We borrow the *wow* concept from Henry Jenkins' celebrated book on the subject: JENKINS, Henry. *The Wow Climax. Tracing the Emotional Impact of Popular Culture*, New York University Press, New York, 2006.

¹⁸ ARROYO, José, “Mission: Sublime”, in ARROYO, José (ed.), *Action/Spectacle Cinema*, British Film Institute, London, 2000, p. 22. On the relationship between such *Fab!* and the enjoyment and perception of contemporary spectators as fans, see: JENKINS, Henry, *The Wow Climax*, New York University Press, New York, 2007.

¹⁹ DELEUZE, Gilles, *Cinema 1*, The Athlone Press, Cinema 1, 1986, p. 146.

of treason within the group, mutual distrust and certain paranoid attitudes [...] a trail of wounds that can't properly heal"²⁰. The stability of certain genre conventions (those of romantic comedy) are largely threatened by the traps and tensions of contrasting genres (between espionage and science-fiction).

Moreover, generic tensions are literally embodied in the heroine's flesh:

“having gained consciousness of his or her belonging to a sombre machination, any noir character faces the question ‘who am I’ [...] the body as a desire or pleasure machine; the body as machinery of a mechanized world, arranged according to the confusional rites of the orgiastic”²¹.

In *Alias*, we may trace such confrontation between the genre and the character-body referred by Tomasovic: amnesia and paranoia, organ theft and genetic experimentation, the implantation of bombs in corporal tissues, gas secretion and weapons of mass destruction, ubiquity, hypertrophy and teleportation are only some of the materials Abrams' team discovers in *Alias* and transforms into *Fringe*'s episodic structure (materials that also appear in *MI-3*, *Lost*, *Cloverfield* and *Star Trek*). Genres mutate like body implants, and the process is completely self-conscious as we can see in two of *Alias*' most accomplished episodes featuring Quentin Tarantino (“The Box”, season 1) and David Cronenberg (“Conscious”, season 3) as guest stars.

The fact that Abrams and his team invited key figures of contemporary cinema, such as Tarantino and Cronenberg, proves an understanding of how generic references intersect and enrich among each other, grafting the mutant DNA of televisual seriality onto their actor/filmmaker/genre bodies. The pleasure of a contemporary viewer comes from the promiscuity *between-genres* (neo-noir McGuffin in Tarantino's episode, horror embodiment in Cronenberg's) rather than fidelity to a particular genre spectrum. Such referential tendency, fundamental within contemporary audiovisual aesthetics, has been analysed through the concepts of *allusionism*²² and *self colonization*²³, which study appropriation, allusion and elective affinities between works. Instead of hiding such oscillations, Abrams' series underline generic frictions: *Felicity* is not an espionage series but, even so, it contains certain informational devices (secret reports at college, Sean's recordings, briefings with several psychologists) that foretell *Alias* conspiranoia; likewise, the sci-fi roots of *Fringe* are clearly based on certain *Alias* episodes that use scientific procedures to reprogram the characters' memory (child experiments being a particularly powerful example throughout both series).

Why this tendency towards masking genres within genres and adding references over references? We may argue that Abrams and his team use generic mutations as a means to an end, juxtaposing layers inside a deep referential tapestry (that's why Anna Tous has coined the term *hipergeneric pastiche* to refer to the mutable genre affiliations in *Lost*)²⁴. But what we find more interesting is how that self-referential and mutant

²⁰ BALLÓ, Jordi y PÉREZ, Xavier, “El círculo infernal”, in CASCAJOSA, Concepción (ed.), *La caja lista: televisión norteamericana de culto*, Laertes, Barcelona, 2007, p. 29.

²¹ TOMASOVIC, Dick, *Le palimpseste noir. Notes sur l'impétigo, la terreur et le cinéma américain contemporain*, Yellow Now, Liège, 2002, p. 195.

²² CARROLL, Noël, *Interpreting the Moving Image*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1998, p. 255.

²³ ELSAESSER, Thomas, “Specularity and Engulfment: Francis Ford Coppola and *Bram Stoker's Dracula*”, in NEALE, Steve and SMITH, Murray (ed.), *Contemporary Hollywood*, Routledge, London, 1998, p. 20.

²⁴ TOUS, Anna, *La era del drama en televisión. Perdidos, CSI: Las Vegas, El ala oeste de la Casa Blanca, Mujeres desesperadas y House*, UOC Press, Barcelona, 2012, p. 101.

strategy is very much related with the narrative core of science-fiction: “all science-fiction is fantastic in some way, because it departs from a supposition that inverts the basic rules of the world outside the text, in order to create the *world within the text*”²⁵. That is the mechanism of Abrams’ generic *pastiches*, a nerve twisted *within the text*, mixing mythical-religious fantasy (the Rambaldi plot in *Alias*, the origin of the Island in *Lost*) with spies and mad scientists typical of popular science fiction (from Dr. Brazzel to the initiative Dharma or the Walter Bishop laboratory). In this hiatus, a flashback may suddenly transform into a flash-forward, an ellipsis into a parallel dimension, a memory crack into an underworld. Truths and lies become relative, and so does time. Wasn’t *Lost*’s greatest achievement to plunge us into the spiral *within the text*, which some call a labyrinth and others a McGuffin? Precisely, *Fringe* has regained the beat of visionary science fiction by remaining in-between worlds, *inside and outside the text*, as proven by the third’s season episode “Lysergic and Acid Diethylamide”, which takes place entirely in an animated LSD world *inside* Olivia’s head. Even more, Abrams himself has explained how this *limit outside/inside the text* functions in his work as a powerful imagination trigger, by recalling the *Mystery Box* that his grandfather bought for him in a magic store in New York when he was a child:

There was this *giant questionmark*, and I started to think why haven’t I opened this box, and I realized I haven’t opened it because it represents something important... to me, it represents my grandfather. Am I allowed to cry at TED? (laughs) But, hmm, the thing is that it represents *infinite possibility*, it represents *hope*, it represents *potential*. And what I love about this box, and what I realized I sort of do in whatever it is that I do is I find myself drown to infinite possibility in the sense of potential, and I realize that *mystery* is the *catalyst for imagination*. No, this is not the most ground-breaking idea but when I started to think that maybe there are *times when mystery is more important than knowledge* I started getting interested in this. So I started thinking about *Lost* and other stuff we do and I realized: Oh, my god! *Mystery Boxes* are everywhere, in what I do!²⁶

Since the Adirondack Mountains and Hitchcock’s bomb under the table, what matters when we speak of suspense is the unopened box. Isolated as a quote, Abrams’ thoughts may seem a blatant cliché –*the blank page is a mystery box*–, but luckily, we find many concrete examples of how that “cliché” wonderfully works in his series, since mystery boxes are a motive literally filmed and ritualised in most of his works: Meghan’s box in *Felicity*, Tarantino’s torture box and Sloane’s safety box in *Alias*, the island-hatch in *Lost*, the extraterrestrial cubes in *Super 8*, the time machine in *Fringe*... In Abram’s universe, the box incarnates an *ambiguous limit between the presentation and the explanation of the mystery*. According to Jean Gattégno, it is this border which demarcates the difference between fantastic literature and science-fiction: “where Poe presents the unfathomable mystery (for instance, the apparition of death in *The Fall of the House of Usher*), Jules Verne explains it: in *The Carpathian Castle*, the phonograph and a primitive form of a cinematograph dissipate any belief in the ghosts”²⁷.

²⁵ RABKIN, Eric and SCHOLLES, Robert, *La ciencia-ficción. Historia, Ciencia, Perspectiva*, Taurus, Madrid, 1982, p. 87. English version: *Science-Fiction: History-Science-Vision*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977.

²⁶ ABRAMS, J. J., “Abram’s Mystery Box”, TED Conferences Video Lecture, 2008. *Wired*’s monographic issue on mystery, conceived by Abrams, operates within this tendency: ABRAMS, J. J. (ed.), “The Mystery Issue”, *Wired Magazine*: 17.05, 2009.

²⁷ GATTÉGNO, Jean, *La ciencia-ficción*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, 1985, p. 56. Original French version: *La science-fiction*. Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1983.

The frontier between the mystery's presentation and its explanation becomes a path open for generic shifts, proving how Abrams and his collaborators understand sci-fi as a sort of umbrella genre, one that fosters mutations and question marks. In that equation, scientific anchorage –defined by Gattégno as the genre's key– becomes an excuse for generic experimentation, one that encourages writers to go beyond the limits of science and fantasy. Genre is therefore opened and questioned like a huge narrative toolbox (gadgets in *Alias*, quantum physics in *Fringe*), and images work like hidden tricks in a magic box: “open them up, screw them, and reveal their inner workings”²⁸.

3. *Shifting time-lines: mould time / time between times / parallel times*

Abrams' quote brings us to a third key of his method: his ideas on narrative and time. Drawing upon Mittell's notion of *narrative complexity* in television series, Paul Booth has coined the term *temporal displacement* to refer to a type of television storytelling that seduces its audience by challenging the temporal continuum, seeking for a participatory approach:

“In terms of television shows with narrative complexity, nothing can elicit spectator attention and emotional attachment more so than a well-executed moment of temporal disorientation. Narrative affect can become spectacle in and of itself. The audience may experience breaks in the temporal structure of the narrative, only to ‘wow’ at their return to the relative ‘present’ of the show with their knowledge of the narrative somehow altered”²⁹.

Booth quotes *Lost* as an example of such serial openness that encourages the spectator to reconstruct the show's temporal structure, enhancing a feeling of playfulness and control.

In order to better understand how Abrams and his team reached the temporal revolution of *Lost* and the parallel realities of *Fringe*, we need to stop in an episode of *Felicity*, the extraordinary episode in homage to *The Twilight Zone* which emerges as an anomaly – like the mushrooms in Hergé's *The Shooting Star*– in the series' second season³⁰. Titled *Help For The Lovelorn* and filmed by the veteran director of *The Twilight Zone* Lamont Johnson, this chapter shows Felicity Porter in a black and white noir extravaganza, entering a mysterious clinic where she will have her heart removed (a sinister gag on the series itself and a precedent to another *anomalous episode* in *Fringe*: ‘Brown Betty’). *Help For The Lovelorn* frustrates the usual course of a TV show and exposes how a series can perceive its own limitations, by ridiculing its very structural framework and *questioning its own mould*.

Towards the end of the episode, in a perfect Russian Doll structure, Abrams situates *Felicity*'s leading characters in a sort of Brechtian/Beckettian box from where it is impossible to escape. A box that condemns them to a senseless existence, doomed to the

²⁸ ABRAMS, J. J., “Abram's Mystery Box”, TED Conferences Video Lecture, 2008.

²⁹ BOOTH, Paul, “Memories, Temporalities, Fictions: Temporal Displacement in Contemporary Television”, in *Television and New Media* 12 (4), July 2011, p. 374.

³⁰ We use the metaphor of Hergé's “mushroom” to refer to a specific kind of *anomalous episode* that pops up during a television series, whose structure is blatantly opposed to the normal episodic form of the show, appearing as an exception (usually self-conclusive). For a discussion of such episodic anomalies see: NDALIANIS, Angela, “Television and the Neo-Baroque”, in HAMMOND, Michael and MAZDON, Lucy (ed.), *The Contemporary Television Series*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2005, p. 87.

void and nothingness: “Felicity Porter. Stucked *inside a box*. But not just a box that happens to be the sole, magical possession of her roommate, but another kind of box. A *strange grey area*, where what you want, what you need and what you’ll be are *forever in question*”. Her roommate’s box is used as a McGuffin and the chapter culminates –à la Poe– with the paradox of a closed episodic plot, containing a triple reference to Abrams’ universe. First of all it mocks the thematic excuse of the series: a heroine trapped in her own sentimental education in college. Secondly, it contains a direct reference to the genre that the series would like to be but can’t really inhabit: the grey zone of fantasy and sci-fi typical of *The Twilight Zone*. Finally, the whole episode questions the limits of television narrative through temporal references: it works as a time-line anomaly where the identity of the heroine and the structure of the show itself remain *forever in question* (almost foretelling the behaviour of Desmond in *Lost*)³¹.

However the temporal findings in *Felicity* are not only constrained to the exception of *Help For The Lovelorn*, they find an even more fertile ground for the evolution of Abrams’ method in the last season’s ending. In Episode 18, after Felicity has spent four years (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior) struggling between her two pretenders, Ben and Noel, the series becomes unhinged and resolves the love plot in a suicidal –and yet visionary– way: time travel. After leaving for California with Ben and being deceived again, Felicity comes back to New York to attend Noel’s wedding... and that’s when she travels back in time one year (eighteen episodes) in order to fix her previous choice. Titled *Time Will Tell*, the episode makes real an unattainable dream of hundreds of televisual series: to see the girl staying not with one but both boyfriends, thus portraying two possible endings within two parallel time lines.

The will to experiment with serial time is obvious, since Abrams and his team are literally allowing the series to *re-imagine* itself, bifurcating the plot backwards. Throughout four episodes, we witness the kind of ‘what would have been if...’ that any serial fiction hides behind the resolution of its plot, an on-going alternate ending. And, most importantly, we experience Abrams’ first trial with the temporality of parallel universes. In its final episode –symptomatically titled ‘Back To The Future’– the series falls back into a sort of *deus ex machina* by justifying time travel as the protagonist’s nightmare; but even so, the powerful impression of those five episodes confirms *Felicity* as a sort of proving ground where Abrams’ team started experimenting with time lines within a serial structure (always with *The Twilight Zone* in mind).

To a certain extent, in *Felicity* Abrams challenged the mould of the televisual format, and tried out forms of boycotting the *temporal mould* of the soap, which normally doesn’t allow fiction to question itself. That impulse towards challenging the limits of fictional moulds connects with different contemporary serial narratives, such as Jodorowsky and Moebius’ *The Incal* or Grant Morrison’s *Animal Man*, which confront a character with his own fictional frame: the outlines of a cartoon in the case of comics, the empty box of a television set in *Felicity*. Such questioning of temporal structures lead Abrams to the equivocal and multiform territory of *Alias*, where he reinterpreted formal self-reflexivity to the point of invoking geniuses such as David Cronenberg and Quentin Tarantino (as we have already mentioned), who literally act as analysts and catalysers of the series time line, *inside and outside the text*.

“Series such as the Bond films can endlessly propagate themselves because their form is so adaptable, elastic, abstract. Such qualities of *archtypicality* and *ubiquity* make the action film a suitable generic platform for the articulation of critical ideas about

³¹ The reference to Edgar Allan Poe’s universe –as a working model– has been elucidated by Abrams himself in self-evident references to *The Murder in the Rue Morgue* inside *Wired*’s “The Mystery Issue”.

cinematic space and time”³². This is precisely why the progression from *Felicity* to *Alias* marks the transition from a series that wants to experiment with time and space but sees itself constrained (trapped in what we may call *mould time*), to another one that gives free reign to the unstoppable imagination of its makers, becoming a platform for the articulation of critical ideas (differential and open to a sort of *time between times*). Consequently, *Alias* turns to the ambivalent spaces of the spy genre by quoting great heroines such as Modesty Blaise or *The Avengers*’ Emma Peel, and even consecrating an integral episode of the fourth season – ‘Welcome to Liberty Village’ – as a homage to the unbeatable British series *The Prisoner* (a key influence in Abrams’ universe), which achieved a true revolution of space/time variables in the late 60’s.

Whereas we have referred to Sydney Bristow and her heroic mutations in terms of *between-deaths* and *between-genres*, the temporality of *Alias* works as a laboratory that juxtaposes *time-between-times* (always ambiguous and problematic). Regarding the episodic structure, the series contributes to the method of its creator in two fundamental fields. On the one hand, it enables the writers to fix the model of *anomalous episode* previously tested in *Felicity*’s “Help for the Lovelorn”: in *Alias* those graft-episodes include the Tarantino/Cronenberg appearances, the homage to *The Prisoner* and other self-conclusive centripetal episodes such as ‘Tuesday’, where Sydney is buried alive in a coffin (a double tribute to Poe’s *The Premature Burial* and *Hitchcock Presents*’ first episode). On the other hand, the series consolidates two of Abrams’ signature devices: the use of *teaser in flash-forward* to open an episode, and the *palimpsest recording*. We will now address both strategies as fundamental examples of such *time between times*, so dear to Abrams and his team.

The first mechanism refers to the habit of beginning the story with a sequence that foretells the episodic plot’s climax using a flash-forward, preceding the opening credits as a cold open. Such technique, already insinuated in *Felicity*, was perfected in *Alias*’ pilot episode and used as the dramatic opening of *MI-3*: a character with tied hands, tortured and on the verge of dying, serves as a gateway to the story and the narrative retrospectively unveils how this vanishing point was actually reached. *Flash-forward cold opens* are explored as a threshold “between times”, both accelerating and exacerbating the series’ rhythm towards a given image (usually a last minute rescue), in a rather smart use of narrative temporality. It is not a coincidence that Lisa Coulthard uses Thomas Elsaesser’s notion of *mind game films*³³, to refer to that kind of teasers and cold opens that literally play with the audience’s mind, as we can see in a significant number of *Lost*’s season-opening episodes³⁴.

The second device, that we may call *palimpsest recording*, is used to rewrite a certain temporal margin –normally the same episode– on a precedent temporal frame, so what we thought to be real is re-explained under a new light. This usually happens by means of certain recording devices that inscribe images and sounds on a pre-existent recording: *Felicity*’s cassettes, the video camera in *Cloverfield*, the Dharma tapes in *Lost*, the amateur movie in *Super 8*. Vicente Domínguez connects this strategy to the ruins of human memory, after the Socratic model of Mnemosyne: “the simile between the memory of the soul and a wax tablet takes us back to a vision of the future [...] our life is being recorded, more and more, in digital rather than wax tablets, [...] the digital

³² FLANAGAN, Martin, “Get Ready For Rush Hour. The chronotope in action”, in TASKER, Ivonne (ed.), *Action and Adventure Cinema*, Routledge, London, 2004, p. 103.

³³ ELSAESSER, Thomas, “The Mind-Game Film”, in BUCKLAND, Warren, (ed.), *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2009, p. 13.

³⁴ COULTHARD, Lisa, “The Hotness of Cold Opens: *Breaking Bad* and the Serial Narrative as Puzzle”, *FlowTV*, vol. 13, Issue 3, University of Texas, Austin, 2010.

memory cards are, in a real sense, electric extensions of the memory of our soul”³⁵. Video recordings thus become a temporal palette with different layers, from an idealised past to a traumatic future. Such a re-setting of time and memory links *Cloverfield*'s tape recordings (which bring the past into the present) with the tragic dimension of ‘White Tulip’, a master episode of *Fringe*'s second season (that loops the past into the future). We have seen how Abrams and his team explore narrative “between times” by fragmenting the climax as a precedent (*flash forward teaser*) and by overwriting time in its fractures (*palimpsest recording*). It is now time to see how such use of ellipsis and intertwined time reaches its height in the serial fracture that separates *Alias*' second and third season. In the DVD extras, J. J. Abrams explains why he decided to insert a temporal ellipsis of two years between both seasons: a two year lapse where Sydney is thought to be dead and from which she returns submerged in amnesia *d'entre les morts*. It seems that the idea came about whilst thinking of his favourite TV show, *The Twilight Zone*; the format of Rod Serling's mythical series inspired the possibility to use a two-year narrative blank, which could be elaborated both as a *flash back* (the heroine remembers or believes to remember) and a *palimpsest* (the heroine reinterprets her previous identities, doubts her past, suspects she was a *femme fatale*). Such *potential temporality* constitutes the distinctive trait of Abrams' method, from *Alias* to *Lost* and *Fringe*, an enigma always connected to the shifts of narrative, time and heroic identity: “It is time, and time only, that transforms the identity principle into a risk to be taken”³⁶. Time, considered as a risk to be taken, enabled Abrams, Lindelof and the rest of their team to conceive the revolutionary structure of *Lost* and to encompass it into *Star Trek*'s system of generations, exploring the figures of the sacrifice of the father (Kirk: flash back) and the death of the mother (Spock: parallel dimension). After *Alias*' tragic family treasons, temporality is conceived as a conflict between the *hamartia* of the parents (the error of the past generation) and the *anagnorisis* of the sons (the trauma of the present generation). So occurs in *Fringe* with the culminating motive of death and theft of the progeny: a father steals sons between universes. Of course, other television series such as *Heroes* have sought to adapt that filiations scheme, following the steps of inter-generational masterworks like *Watchmen*. But, as scholars like Sarah Himsel-Burcon have pointed out, Abrams' time breaks are deeply linked with the traumas of a Post-9/11 society, transforming time into a wound to be explored and ultimately healed: “Both the form (use of flashbacks, flashforwards, flashsideways, and the unfathomable endings to episodes) and the content (the storylines themselves) of the program, then, paralleled the struggles Americans were facing at the start of the twenty-first century”³⁷. That idea is literally translated into images in *Fringe*, where the Twin Towers remain unharmed, still standing in the series' parallel world. As far as time narratives are concerned, *Fringe*'s innovation resides partly in the way it articulates the tension of the serial plot within a particular episode model, halfway between series of a procedural logic like *CSI* and hybrid formats such as *The X-Files*. As Angela Ndalians suggests (adapting Omar Calabrese's ideas), such a way of mirroring the episodic crime-case in the serial overall plot implies a prototypical revolution in the treatment of time, one that

³⁵ DOMÍNGUEZ, Vicente, “Miedo borrador. *Cloverfield*: monstruos de ciencia-ficción en la ciudad del alma”, *Revista FORMATS*, n° 5, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2009.

³⁶ DURAND, Gilbert, *Las estructuras antropológicas del imaginario*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Madrid, 2005, p. 419. Original French version: *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*, Dunod, Paris, 1993.

³⁷ HIMSEL-BURCON, Sarah, “*Lost* in Our Middle Hour. Faith, Fate and Redemption Post-9/11”, in AMES, Melissa (ed.), *Time in Television Narrative: Exploring Temporality in Twenty-First-Century Programmin* University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2012, p. 126.

conceives temporality as a playground for contemporary popular culture³⁸. To that end, *Fringe* arranges and swaps a series of temporal games with the easiness and ludic spirit of televisual science fiction classics such as *Star Trek* or *Doctor Who*, key referents for the articulation of serial time and expanded narratives³⁹. Considering the impetuous pop style of Walter Bishop's laboratory, we may argue that such –sometimes careless– way of multiplying *parallel times* (up to four time lines in *Fringe's* fourth season) recalls the visionary and popular tradition of Kurt Vonnegut or Philip K. Dick.

From Vonnegut, as far as temporal experiments are concerned, *Fringe* mainly recovers moments of suprasensorial connection and almost randomized celebration: the simultaneous perception of the doubles of each parallel universe (recalling *Slapstick's* telepathic twins); the periodic and immanent materialisation of the cyborgs and shape shifters crossing from one world to the other (such as Rumfoord in *The Sirens of Titan*); and, most importantly, the war between both universes embodied in Peter Bishop's apocalyptic-nuclear Doom Machine (that recalls *Cat's Cradle's* foundational image). It is not a coincidence that Sarah Clarke Stuart identifies the most accomplished Vonnegut novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, as an essential influence on *Fringe* and *Lost*⁴⁰. However, and beyond the particular analogies between the series and Vonnegut's temporal tricks, there is a secret affinity in the treatment of characters as well: a familiarity bringing together the lunatics and outsiders so dear to *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater's* author and the delirious experimental group of characters in *Fringe*, exceeding the logics of scientific anchorage inside their extravagant labs.

Moreover, the powerful image of the reconstructed Twin Towers, symbol of a parallel universe in *Fringe*, brings to mind the historical pregnancy of some texts by Philip K. Dick such as *The Man In The High Castle* (imagining how History may have evolved in *parallel times*). Likewise, the presence of the so-called 'Observers' through the series – men in black guarding the threshold between worlds– recalls the *teeps* and oracles appearing in *Ubik* and *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*. With this psychotropic bravery, *Fringe's* team films memorable instants using the two Walter Bishop (one on the promethean side, Walter, the other on the Faustic side, Walternate), which recall the K. Dick's megalomaniacs, from Palmer Eldritch to the old eremite in *Solar Lottery*. It is precisely in that novel where we find an inclination for formal games and randomness, an interest in the order and disorder of time that recalls Borges' *The Babylon Lottery* and Bioy Casares' *The Invention of Morel* and *The Dream of the Heroes*. All of them works connected to the imaginary of J. J. Abrams, since they share a similar passion for the equivocal and playful nature of time: a tapestry in *Lost*, a rollercoaster in *Fringe*.

If we invoke such analogies between *Fringe* and the unleashed sci-fi of two authors like Vonnegut and K. Dick is simply to point out how the temporal structures of *Felicity* and *Alias*, which still operated within the realm of plausible logic (prohibited logic: *mould time* in the former / identity logic: *time between times* in the latter), are completely challenged during the adventures of (the many) Olivias, Peters and Walters. *Parallel times* then become both the greatest discovery and the biggest danger of the series. In previous shows Abrams and his team had clear temporal boundaries, and therefore, it was easier for them to maintain a certain balance “within” such boundaries. Conversely, *Fringe's* complete structural freedom and absence of any real boundary in terms of

³⁸ NDALIANIS, Angela, *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics in Contemporary Entertainment*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2004, p. 74.

³⁹ HARRIGAN, Pat, WARDRIP-FRUIIN, Noah (ed.), *Third Person. Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2009, pp. 17, 350.

⁴⁰ CLARKE-STUART, Sarah, *Into The Looking Glass. Exploring the Worlds of Fringe*, ECW Press, Toronto, 2011, p. 79.

temporal experimentation, is both a creative blessing and a curse: moments of magnificent serial architecture and impressive storytelling (like the ensemble of ending episodes in Season 2) are mixed with poor resolutions for too great expectations (the evolution of the quadruple universe in the fourth season, for instance). All in all, a loose account of *parallel times* may very well imply a descent in the show's quality, and excessive time-line freedom may not necessarily mean narrative creativity.

Final remarks: cycles and constants

It doesn't seem fair to conclude this paper without emphasizing that, beyond the distinguished names and revolutionary strategies that we have linked to Abrams' method (conceiving it as a collective, team-based dynamic), his distinct combination of *emo gen* and *wow gen* virtually always leads to happy ending formulas. Formulas close to what Northrop Frye called Hollywood *gimmicks and weenies*, thus bringing his series nearer to comedy⁴¹. We have analyzed so far how generic mutations and experimental time lines both contribute to problematize the journey of Abrams' heroines, proving that conflicting identities, genres and times are three essential keys of his creative universe. But, nevertheless, it is now necessary to state that such paths generally end in good terms, and that such experiments remain within the borders of mainstream television (as much as they may try to challenge them).

If *Felicity*, *Alias* and *Fringe* patiently teach us why *truth takes time* –the secret of serial narratives–, it is also true that, within them, “truth” is almost always a happy ending. The tragedies clouding the journey of the heroines, the transformations of genre and the fractures troubling temporality... are all made relative at the end of each series, through peaceful meetings, parties among friends, and close encounters distilling an optimistic spirit (where Spielberg's influence remains constant). Such almost maternal endings, so typical of Abrams and Reeves, seek to heal trauma with hope, to seal the fractures of time using cycles and constants:

By way of contrast with the faces of time, then, another imaginative attitude takes shape, which consists in capturing the vital forces of the future, exorcising Chronos' lethal idols, to transmute them into benign talismans, finally incorporating to the ineluctable mobility of time the calming figures of constants, of cycles that even in their becoming seem to be performing an eternal plan⁴²

Adopting Gilbert Durand's beautiful expression, *to reconcile the faces of time*, Abrams' ideas on heroic identity, genre and temporality can't be isolated from his sense of cyclical construction, one that treasures the caress of happy endings and the figures of constants. The characters' passion (towards love but also towards adventure) distils oasis and little meanders, between the laughs of close friends and the hopes of future challenges. We witness that same reconciliation in *Felicity*'s laughter at the end of her college years, as well as in the image that closes *Alias* with Sydney embracing her new family, at home... and even in the chapel scene that heals fractures at the end of *Lost*, with the cast finally reunited, no matter where or when. Truth takes time, and so does happiness, bringing television series closer to the mysteries of everyday life: another secret waiting inside Abram's magic box.

⁴¹ “We may know that the convention of comedy will make some kind of happy ending inevitable, but still for each play the dramatist must produce a distinctive ‘gimmick’ or ‘weenie’, to use two disrespectful Hollywood synonyms of *anagnorisis*”. FRYE, Northrop, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1957, p. 170.

⁴² DURAND, Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

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