"Starting Off with a Bang: the Whirl of Reflexive and Metatextual Images in the Pilot Episodes to Three ABC Series (*Desperate Housewives*, *Lost* and *Flashforward*)"

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The paramount importance of the pilot episode of a series has already been studied in many of its facets: in terms of production, as the major step after the creator's pitch has been green-lighted by a studio; as a narrative hook, in the case of continuous narratives, (as opposed to series where each episode is self-contained), powerful enough to lure viewers into watching the entire season; in its narrative function as "expository scene", introducing the cast of characters, the setting, and the "pitch" of the plot; as setting the ambience and introducing us to the ethics or ideology of the series itself... But little has been written on the sly metatextual images that these initial episodes often tease viewers with, in a wink at the genre's narrative conventions. Through the close reading of a few of these episodes in series that have already obtained the status of "classics," one can bring to light some of these reflexive signs, which must stay discreet enough not to distance the "innocent" and emotionally engaged viewer even as they amuse the ironic or second-time viewer. I shall be analyzing the opening of three ABC series: Desperate Housewives (Marc Cherry, 2004-), Lost (J.J. Abrams, Jeffrey Lieber, Damon Lindelof, 2004-2010), and the short-lived Flashforward (2009), in running commentary form, with a focus on visual and verbal ironies of metatextual import, and show that, as much as about the spectacular, truly successful series can point to viewing as a "game" and to themselves as a construction, because, like the well-wrought literary texts or films, they have thought every shot, every line of dialogue, every sound effect through.

#### A Word of Context

For a network like ABC, which depends only on advertising revenues—as opposed to premium cable networks like HBO or Showtime which are financed through viewer subscriptions and are advertisement-free<sup>1</sup>—ratings are absolutely essential: they determine a show's life expectancy. This puts extra pressure on the creators and

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=86vE13EesOg

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Because premium cable is financed through viewer subscriptions, it is shielded from pressure that sponsors and advertisers often put on networks as far as content and language (also regulated by the FCC) are concerned. HBO's tagline *It's Not TV, It's HBO*, pointed to its groundbreaking revival of the soap opera as "new soap" with series such as *Sex & The City* (Darren Star, 1998-2004); *The Sopranos* (David Chase, 1999-2007); *Six Feet Under* (Alan Ball, 2001-2005); *Deadwood* (David Milch, 2004-2006) *Big Love* (Mark V Olsen and Will Scheffer, 2006-2011), and *True Blood* (Alan Ball, 2008-), to quote but a few. Showtime has made its own niche, since its 1998 advertisement as the *No Limits* cable network, with such provocative creations as *Queer As Folk* (Russell T. Davies, 2000-2005); *The L Word* (Ilene Chaiken, 2004-2009); *Weeds* (Jenji Kohan, 2005-), *Dexter* (2006-); *The Tudors* (Michael Hirst, 2007-2010); or *The Big C* (Darlene Hunt, 2010-). To see the *No Limits* ad, which was an aesthetic declaration as well as an ideological one:

screenwriters of a new series to impact viewers from Episode One, and to generate enough of a narrative event and of a media *buzz* to ensure the producers will program an entire season. It also forces them to hook viewers from the outset, not once, but over and over, since each "one-hour" episode in fact only lasts 42 minutes, the rest being taken up by the four breaks for advertising, which require the writing to create enough suspense (or miniature cliffhangers) within an episode for viewers not to flip channels until the episode's cliffhanger; and the latter, of course, ensures that viewers will be back for the following episode, even if it is a week, or more, later. True, all viewers do not watch series as a "flow"; some wait for the entire *opus* to be available in boxed sets to "binge view" and thus bypass, to an extent, the serial mode (providing that their memories can accommodate 12 to 24 episodes as a single narrative...). But many, including those who watch series through streaming, are still caught in the suspense between episodes and between seasons.

As Olivier Joyard and Loïc Prigent point out in their documentary Hollywood, le règne des series (2005), for a pilot episode to be broadcast, it already has to get past a number of hurdles. Out of 300 series that are "pitched" by the creator in a 20-minute presentation to potential TV producers, only 10 will make it to the stage where a pilot episode is tested on a panel of viewers; and only 3 will make it to the general audience in broadcast. The importance of the pilot episode thus cannot be stressed enough. While one might expect network series in particular to "start off with a bang"—and we will see here a few that literally do-my contention throughout this study shall be that, precisely because of professional critics' bias in favor of premium cable's (HBO, Showtime, and now, AMC's) more "sophisticated" fare, the creators of shows on networks feel added incentive to write into their pilot evidence of their having a wry, tongue-in-cheek approach as to their series' mechanisms: hence the metatextual images to display, in retrospect, at least, this ironic form of reflexivity. Of the series we shall be investigating here, Desperate Housewives is currently in its 8th and final season (or so its creator, Marc Cherry, claims); Grey's Anatomy is embarking upon its 8<sup>th</sup> too; Lost lasted 6 seasons and came to a triumphant finale in 2010, while Flashforward did not survive past its Season 1—and I contend the reason for this is Flashforward's lack of narrative sophistication and its reverting to old forms of storytelling, contrary to the promise held by the promotional material that accompanied its launch, and by the first episode itself.

# Desperate Houseviwes: Soap with a Dark Twist

Desperate Housewives starts with a voice-over. The narrator, Mary Alice Young, will provide the opening and closing voice-over and the "moral" of the episode, and of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> For an exploration of these issues of seriality or serialization of continuous narratives, see Monica Michlin, "More, more, more: Contemporary American TV Series and the Attractions an Challenges of Serialization As Ongoing Narrative." Les Cahiers de l'AFECCAV n°3, avril 2011, 36-76. <a href="http://www.afeccav.org/les-cahiers-de-lafeccav/les-cahiers-de-lafeccav-no3">http://www.afeccav.org/les-cahiers-de-lafeccav/les-cahiers-de-lafeccav-no3</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> See Jason Mittell, "Serial Boxes: The Cultural Values of Long-Form American Television", January 20, 2010: <a href="http://justtv.wordpress.com/2010/01/20/serial-boxes/">http://justtv.wordpress.com/2010/01/20/serial-boxes/</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Although the use of voice-over is often seen as a no-no, a number of successful series choose to have a voice tell, instead of merely showing: ABC's hugely successful soap *Grey's Anatomy* (Shonda Rhimes, 2005-) also starts and closes each episode with a (wry, mildly ironic) voice-over about the conflicts doctors face. While less frequent in action series, the voice-over appears

practically all the episodes over the next 7 seasons. Hers is a voice-over fraught with ironies, since it participates in the diegetic illusion, while foregrounding metalepsis as a distancing technique, as Catherine Hoffman points out in "Narration from beyond: Mary Alice and the Justified Viewer." I shall focus on the first three minutes of the pilot, a sequence that ends with the first instance of the title credits of the show, and the pop-up parody of Cranach's "Adam and Eve." As we crane down onto Wisteria Lane, the camera pans on the white picket fences signaling "tinseltown" suburbia<sup>7</sup>; as a character emerges from the doorway, the camera, in one seamless move, moves towards her; this coincides with the beginning of the voice-over:

My name is Mary Alice Young. When you read this morning's paper you may come across an article about the unusual day I had last week. Normally, there's never anything newsworthy about my life; that all changed last Thursday. Of course, everything seemed quite normal at first: I made breakfast for my family; I performed my chores; I completed my projects; I ran my errands.

As Mary Alice lists what she did that day, the word "perform" takes on all of its meanings, including, in a *mise en abyme*, that of playing a part. Her life looks like a page taken from housekeeping magazines: from the perfect breakfast, to washing the laundry, taking care of her flowerbeds and even painting over the garden chair, all shots are noticeably overexposed, and Mary Alice herself seems to radiate the type of beauty (blonde hair, blue eyes, perfect skin) in TV advertisements. Everything about her is elegantly understated and the creamy colors she is dressed in remind one of ads for Woolite. All of which allows a series of dark, reflexive puns, whereby the series nods to its own genre, *soap*, which derives its name from the fact that major brands of laundry detergents sponsored the televised serial narrative melodramas slotted to maximize viewing by bored, if not *desperate* housewives, from the 1950s to this day. As Mary Alice turns the washer to *ON*, extreme close-ups emphasize this gesture, focusing our attention on this reflexive image for the start of the narrative:

in Season 1 of Fox's 24 to emphasize the real-time conceit that was still new to viewers ("I'm Agent Jack Bauer and I'm about to live the longest day of my life"); *Heroes* opens and closes every episode with the Indian doctor's philosophical considerations on humanity, destiny versus freedom, good versus evil, etc; and finally *Dexter* also has as its trademark Dexter's specific form of confessional narrative (with an introductory voice-over that sometimes resurfaces within an episode, as inner monologue only the viewers are privy to).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> To read the entire article: <u>http://www.graat.fr/backissuepiegesseriestv.htm</u>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> To see this opening: <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fvGNtZ4KGzQ">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fvGNtZ4KGzQ</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> And, since 2004, associated with the series itself, as the collection of articles edited by Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, *Reading* Desperate Housewives: *Beyond the White Picket Fence* (London: IB Tauris, 2006) exemplifies.





As we zoom through the glass door of the washing machine, Marc Cherry nods at the twist he is putting on an old genre (*soap*) as he spins this machine (his *satirical* series)<sup>8</sup> into motion... and deliberately segues seamlessly into another "spin": as the camera moves back we realize this is Mary Alice swirling paint in the can—again, an "ordinary" gesture, but filmed in extreme close-up, so as to be obviously aesthetic:





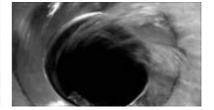
The intertextuality to swirling imagery in Hitchcock's thrillers comes to mind; below, Kim Novak's chignon in *Vertigo* (1958), a film which plays on "spin" in all the meanings of the term, and the image of blood and water swirling together in the shower scene in *Psycho* (1960):

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Upon receiving prizes galore for this first season, Marc Cherry explained that as long as he had pitched it as a satire, no network would pick it up. Even HBO had rejected it; ABC bought it because he presented it as *soap*. His next project is apparently a twist on *Desperate Housewives*, an adaptation of a Mexican telenovela to be entitled *Devious Maids*:

http://www.deadline.com/2011/10/marc-cherrys-next-abc-project-devious-maids-primetime-soap-set-in-beverly-hills/







Again, when Mary Alice picks up her dry cleaning, the punching of the "STOP/GO" button on the conveyor belt of clothes is filmed in close-up<sup>9</sup>:





The moment when Mary Alice retrieving the mail is a first obvious filmic cue of something sinister—in an anomalous subjective camera shot, we are literally kept in the dark with a cut to black, light dawning on the screen only as Mary Alice looks in, pointing to our being *inside the box*, a joke on television and its presumed lack of originality. One might also see in this image a form of black humor—a "light at the end of the tunnel" joke (given the shape of the mailbox) on *desperation*:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Virginie Marcucci reads these variations on circles as allegorical images of *routine*, an interpretation I concur with, of course, although I am stressing its metatextual significance here. Her own analysis puns subtly on the "domestic sphere" and the circle of "confinement" thus portrayed: "Le paradigme du rond peut être une manière de symboliser l'éternel retour des tâches ménagères finissant par confiner à l'enfermement dans la routine, voir dans un lieu, celui de la sphère domestique au sens large (la maison voire le quartier)". (Marcucci, 103).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Hence the title of the collection of articles edited by Gary Edgerton and Brian Rose: *Thinking Outside the Box: A Contemporary Television Genre Reader* (2005)





The significance of this black screen as "dark space" but also as the "dark origin" that *triggers* what happens next cannot be grasped until episode 2, when we find out that this letter is a piece of *blackmail*—the term is thus literalized by underexposure.

In her next lines, Mary Alice queers all of the conventions of the soap opera, in post-modern parody: "In truth, I spent the day as I spent every other day—quietly polishing the routine of my life till it gleamed with perfection." Even as the viewer might be savoring the magnificent satirical twist in the shift from literal to allegorical in "polishing the routine," the series spins out of control. As Mary Alice adds "That's why it was so astonishing when I decided to go to my hallway closet and retrieve a revolver that had never been used," the soundtrack is noticeably amplified—Mary Alice's voice now reverberates ominously, in the distance, while slightly eerie music can be heard. In a visual "echo" of this audio echoing, the camera literally "revolves" around the character as she points the revolver to her head (notice the unchanging

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Sadly, in the French subtitles on DVD, all of the ironies, social and metatextual, are lost. For instance, the reflexive "everything seemed quite normal at first" for the start of that Thursday (and the start of the series) is translated by "au depart, c'était une journée ordinaire", which translates the idea of the norm but leaves behind the word "seemed" which points to our gaze, as viewers. Similarly, the term "perform", in "I performed my chores," which points to acting both intra and extra-diegetically (Mary Alice's playing a part, the actress Brenda Strong's playing Mary Alice, etc…) is flattened into "j'ai fait le ménage." But worse is to come with "quietly polishing the routine of my life" which is mistranslated into the un-ironic "I went about my tasks for everything to gleam with perfection" ("je me suis attelée à mes tâches pour que tout brille de perfection").

caption for the 4 shots below), in a series of puns on twists, revolvers, and "first shots" of the series:



These puns are visually enhanced by the extreme-close-ups on the trigger, the revolving chamber and our looking into the muzzle, however briefly, as it flashes.



While this last effect is not perceptible on first viewing, another is: Mary Alice's collapsing body is not filmed directly, but captured in its reflection, on the glass frame of her family photo, thus reviving the ironies of *gleaming with perfection* and highlighting the reflexive conceit of deceptive surfaces:



This image materializes what has been true all along—that Mary Alice is speaking from beyond the grave, as a ghost/angel. The overexposed images of her now seem to have been signaling this "unreal" status all along (mirrored by the voice-over as neither "here" nor "there" as Catherine Hoffman emphasizes) and as an ironic bending of the "ideal" image of the perfect housewife in a "seemingly normal" *soap*. What we do not know *yet* is that this blurred after-image—reflecting the blurring of Mary Alice's projected image (intradiegetically, for her friends who will investigate her death)—is intimately connected to the guilty secret framed in the family portrait.

On first viewing, however, viewers are jolted into another shock through the ironic use of editing, since we segue into "My body was discovered by my neighbor, Mrs. Martha Huber", against this visual backdrop:





The fact that we briefly believe that Mrs. Huber is actually licking Mary Alice's blood is in itself a *queering* of *soap* into vampire story; as local gossip and greedy neighbor, Mrs. Huber is metaphorically a *bloodsucker* and parasite, but only metaphorically.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Rosalind Coward points to the element of parody in this "kitsch segue between the graphic horror of Mary Alice's blood and the local busybody, Martha Huber, licking the ketchup from her finger" (Coward, 2006: 36). Indeed, kitsch, queer, camp shall be at the heart of the series, as Virginie Marcucci develops pages 377 and seq. of her doctoral dissertation: <a href="http://www.applis.univ-tours.fr/theses/2010/virginie.marcucci">http://www.applis.univ-tours.fr/theses/2010/virginie.marcucci</a> 3542.pdf

This image is also a tongue-in-cheek reminder that the "real" blood Mrs. Huber catches sight of, when she peeps into Mary Alice's window, *is* of course... ketchup, in another reflexive image of the construction of fiction; where all is make-believe:



Mrs. Huber's gaze, framed within the window (and by the theatrical curtain, on the left hand) acts as a parody of the voyeuristic impulse, and as a deformed mirror-image of viewers themselves (the visual focalization through Mary Alice having created a bond with her, as opposed to the repulsion Mrs. Huber is meant to inspire):



The entire sequence amply illustrates how the series has prompted the use of the term *dramedy* for its hybrid combination of thriller elements, ironic humor, overt satire and soap. The humorous music as Mrs. Huber saunters around the house, on the pretext of returning a blender borrowed *six months* before, acts as an ironic counterpoint to the drama: this use of the soundtrack shall be a recurring feature of the series—one need only think of demented fairy tale-like theme composed by Danny Elfman for the title credits. The sequence ends in overt satire, when Mary Alice, with a hush in her own voice, speaks the words "And for a moment, Mrs. Huber stood motionless in her kitchen, grief-stricken by this senseless tragedy"—before perkily adding, in a radical shift of mood: "But... only for a moment!" An extreme close-up follows, on Mrs. Huber peeling the label PROPERTY OF MARY ALICE YOUNG off the blender she will never return, while the sound of the rip is amplified to signal, in a reflexive image, the tearing apart of the conventions of *soap*, in this shift from cliché (the mourning of a neighbor) to pragmatism at its most cynical:





One could also see, in this image of "re-appropriation," a metatextual image for Marc Cherry's move to repossess and integrate to his soap the codes of *high culture* as well as low, much as his credits sequence assembles in imitation pop-up-book mode works by Lucas Cranach the Elder, Jan Van Eyck, Grant Wood, Andy Warhol, and Robert Dale, (plus a representation of Nefertari, and a World War Two propaganda poster), in a collage of representations of women as wives, mothers, and lovers, since Eve... The stripping of the label can also, metatextually, point to Cherry's freeing his own creation from labels such as "soap", or "drama", or "satire", while recognizing, with typical *camp* humor, all he owes to all of the genres that he "remixes", so to speak.

Within the diegesis, of course, the stripping of the label allows bathos, since Mary Alice's voice-over comments: "If there was one thing Mrs. Huber was known for, it was her ability to look on the bright side." In a visually ironic counterpoint, the next image is of darkness, as Mrs. Huber closes the cupboard on the stolen blender, leaving us, in a subjective shot, locked in the cupboard:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> To see the title credits: <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bHjKxETaQzo">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bHjKxETaQzo</a>





This image, which repeats that of the mailbox, and which metatextually closes the prologue before we cut to the title credits, is also, one might argue, a literalization of the "skeletons in the closet" that are the driving force of this Season's plot. Retrospectively, this shot is also intertextually connected to the "washing the laundry" shot analyzed earlier, since the promotional clip for Season 1 had emphasized the following tagline (and dark visuals):





This surrealistic use of the bubbles of soap to reactivate the dead metaphor of the "dirty laundry" people hide from their neighbors also allowed the network to "brand" the series—and, seen from 2011, to rebrand itself, although producers at ABC could not know *then* the fabulous success *Desperate Housewives* would turn out to be. Indeed, one of the bubbles of soap turns into the trademark bubble "abc":



Viewers having seen the promotional material would thus be bound to spot the visual pun in Mary Alice's turning the washer on, even if they did not spot the puns on *soap*; Season 3 turned to the same play on secrets and on the clichéd language of soap opera, in its promotional clip, the final tagline of which was "TIME TO COME CLEAN." <sup>14</sup>

A series of shots show the five protagonists—the desperate housewives—in a seemingly perfectly green (Edenic) garden where sheets have been hung out to dry. All of them are dressed

Between the promotional material and the first three minutes of the pilot itself, Marc Cherry had thus made the viewing contract clear: *Desperate Housewives* would be a satirical, tongue-in-cheek, witty play on the clichéd conventions of *soap*: its political incorrectness was proclaimed in this pilot that literally starts with a *bang*. Let us now turn to another ABC series, *Lost*, which went even further, in a televisual effort to *shock* and awe.

# The Violent and Reflexive Beauty of the Opening

*Lost* opens on the most beautiful and explicit of metafilmic images: an eye opening, in extreme close-up. <sup>15</sup> An eye filled with terror is a hallmark of the horror genre; here, in a twist on the male gaze as theorized by Laura Mulvey, <sup>16</sup> this beautiful green eye is not a woman's, but a man's:



It opens to a startingly loud sound effect, reminiscent of the sound of eyes opening like camera shutters as heroin addicts shoot up in Darren Aronofsky's *Requiem for A Dream* 

in white, but all are associated visually with stains of blood, and violent imagery as a cue appears on a sheet to characterize each protagonist in turn: "ACHING FOR PERFECTION" (Bree), "THIRSTY FOR BLOOD" (Gabby), "LONGING FOR TRUTH" (Lynette) and "DYING FOR LOVE" (Susan); "HUNGRY FOR REVENGE" (Edie). As all five women advance abreast in fashion show/martial determination, the last sheet reads "TIME TO COME CLEAN." See the complete video at the following link:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LIptokRpjys

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Alejandro Amenábar's *Abre Los Ojos* (1997), literally "Open Your Eyes", and Cameron Crowe's 2001 remake *Vanilla Sky* (starring Tom Cruise) both play on this filmic pun on seeing and believing (or disbelieving) what we see.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> To read the celebrated article: <a href="http://terpconnect.umd.edu/~mquillig/20050131mulvey.pdf">http://terpconnect.umd.edu/~mquillig/20050131mulvey.pdf</a>

(2000)—below, one of the film's such extreme close-ups, and the poster including yet another:





But where the sound of opening was a shutter whirr and *click* in the film, here in *Lost*, it is a loud *whoomp*, causing our own eyes to open in shock, even as we see this eye flipping open and its pupil contracting in panic, thus setting up an extended mirror effect between viewer and terrified protagonist. The close-up is so extreme that we almost expect to see our own reflections on this eye's surface—but are reminded, for now, that our TV or computer screen is not a transparent window<sup>17</sup> by the reverse low-angle shot of bamboo trees that rise in a dense canopy above the protagonist. Only then, at the twentieth second of this initial episode, do we hear the background sound of birds, as if the soundtrack of the diegetic world were belatedly reaching us. But in the split second that follows, a muffled explosion rings out, causing the protagonist to whimper in fear and pain. We realize he must be wounded, since, even as a mysterious presence makes itself heard, to the right-hand side of the screen, he whips his head around, in close-up, without moving the rest of his body. Again, the camera eroticizes his helplessness, as he turns his handsome, slightly scraped face towards us:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> *Lost* deliberately plays on this ambiguity of the "fourth wall", as Sarah Hatchuel demonstrates in "Lost in *Lost*" (TV/Series n°1, 2012). <a href="http://www.univ-lehavre.fr/ulh\_services/Numero-1-Issue-1.html">http://www.univ-lehavre.fr/ulh\_services/Numero-1-Issue-1.html</a>



What emerges from the trees is a white Labrador, who pauses briefly then rushes past the protagonist/focalizer. Apart from the latter's panting, the only sound is that of eerie, Twilight Zone<sup>18</sup>-like music; we are further destabilized by the hand-held camera motions that give us wobbly low-angle shots of the protagonist as he painfully hoists himself up. As he tries to regain his balance, he takes from his pocket a miniature liquor bottle (of the type served in airplanes, a clue one does not necessarily catch), but replaces it without drinking, and rushes headlong through the bamboo forest, in the direction taken by the dog. As he runs, all is filmed in hand-held camera: the image is motion-blurred, the soundtrack that of crackling vegetation, and of the character's panicked and painful panting. If the spectator (this was my case on first viewing) has managed to escape previews, trailers, TV shows and all other material revealing the central concept of Lost, the image that comes to mind is that of Alice following the white rabbit 19: everything unfolds too fast for one to interpret it (a lone sneaker dangling from a tree seems ominous but incomprehensible). We emerge on a seemingly deserted, beautiful, sandy beach—paradise itself. In a sleight of hand, our gaze is turned to the right, where only the white sand and blue ocean stretch out before us; as the camera starts a long 180° swivel towards the left, we discover, straight ahead, the ocean as far as the eye can see (a conventional image of freedom):

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> To hear and see an iconic intro to the show: <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NzlG28B-">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NzlG28B-</a>

Readers not familiar with the cult series, can look up this link:

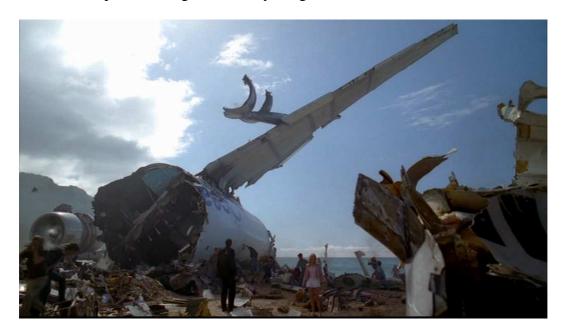
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The Twilight Zone (1959 TV series

19 This is the subtitle of Angela Ndalianis's article "Lost in Genre: Chasing the White Rabbit to Find a White Polar Bear" (Pearson, 2009: 181-197). Episode 5, which reveals certain magical qualities of the island, is called "White Rabbit."





As the 180° pan to the left continues, we start to hear hysterical screams: the camera finally discloses a disaster scene. As the protagonist rushes towards a voice crying for help, running past a burning jet engine, lifeless bodies, survivors desperately calling out names of missing loved ones, we catch glimpses of debris (an airplane's main cabin, one of the wings) and understand that this is a plane wreck—this *pilot* has crashed. While at first the wreck is seen in blurred bits and pieces, against a backdrop of pandemonium, spinning camera movements convey the protagonist's feeling of disorientation and echo our own. As the camera moves back to reveal the disaster scene in focus, for the first time, it gives us a sense of scale, and symbolically, of the magnitude of the disaster. Not coincidentally, the plane's broken wing forms a double, slanted "L": to the left, in reverse writing, an L (and half of an O); and towards the sea, in 3D, so to speak, the angle formed by wing to main cabin:



Although the genre of the series is as yet unclear—part disaster film, part *Survivor*, although soap and science-fiction elements are to become increasingly important<sup>20</sup>—the insistent focus on the remaining, screeching, churning jet engine can be decoded (retrospectively) on two levels.

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 $<sup>^{20}</sup>$  Angela Ndanialis (2009) develops this issue, see pages 182-185 in particular.



First, as in a macabre fairy tale, adults who have been warned again and again not to approach it, do—and in a horrific shot, one man is sucked up into it, causing it to explode.





On another, more reflexive level, this engine is to *Lost* what the washing machine was to *Desperate Housewives*: an image of the plot being set in motion, of its "wheels" spinning. In the first three minutes of chaos, before the first credits appear, reminding us that this is a fiction, this expository scene sets the stage and the pilot ends on the perfectly reflexive "Where *are* we?" In the space of *Lost*'s first three minutes, we move from trauma in the psychological sense to trauma in the medical, as Jack organizes a triage of the wounded, filters our horrified viewing of mutilation, and resuscitates a woman who had not been revived by another passenger's efforts. This last fact—his seemingly bringing her back to life—can be ascribed to his being a doctor, as we shall soon find out, but perhaps to some other quality, as we necessarily think, when we find out his name is Shephard, might not Jack be *the Good Shepherd*?

It shall be difficult to shut out the religious overtones of the term "lost", when it become evident that all the survivors are haunted by feelings of guilt, and that some see the dead. From the moment one thinks of the *lost/found* paradigm, the first image, of Jack's eye, seems to illustrate the opening lyrics of the gospel "Amazing Grace": "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound/ That saved a wretch like me/ I was lost, but now I'm found/ Was blind, but now I see." For what *is* the opening, if not a man

opening his eyes to see—and what is the Labrador, if not the blind man's dog par excellence? To avoid spoilers, I shall not argue how the entire narrative arc of Lost upholds this reading; I shall simply argue that the very last image (the temporality of which I shall not reveal here) creates the perfect reflexive loop one can expect of a series that thinks of itself as audiovisual text, in all of the narrative, symbolic, and aesthetic meanings of the term, as we find Jack, again lying prone in the forest, but this time, on his right side and smiling in recognition of the Labrador, who, in perfect déjà vu, emerges from the trees to come to him:





Then and only then does *Lost* end, on the perfect symmetric image of its opening, this time with an extreme close-up on Jack's left eye:



... as it closes and the screen fades to black.

The *ultimate* image of the series that comes next, once the screen has turned dark, has been prepared by the very first of *Lost*'s title credit clip, which, on DVD, at least, precedes the pilot episode, which itself is split into two episodes—Pilot part I and part II—in a mirroring of the crash and of the series' discourse on doubles, split selves, parallel time-lines, etc. *Lost*'s original choice is to forgo a title credits sequence resembling a clip, with title song, and crediting the main actors, which is typical of the

vast majority of series.<sup>21</sup> Throughout the six seasons of *Lost*, each episode starts *in medias res*; at the first break for advertising, the title, in white block letters set against a pitch-black screen, spins towards us to the sound of eerie music and to the loud whirr of an airplane's engines. As the letters seem to tumble out of axis, still zooming towards us, the camera passes "through," into the dark space between the letters "O" and "S", in an image of losing ourselves in the mystery of the series itself:





At the end of each episode, just after the cliffhanger (generally an astonishing twist in the plot, or startling verbal or visual cue), the title again appears, projected horizontally across the screen, to the sound of a loud bang. In a fan's homage to be found on internet,<sup>22</sup> in a play on the symmetries of the opening/shutting eye, and of reversals from left to right, the last image we see is this reversed mirroring of the title, which, in the final episode, does, at it does in the anonymous homage, appear in silence:



It suggests either that we see it in a rear-view mirror, or that we have passed through, into the mysteries of the screen, and are looking back, now, through the looking-glass, towards the place we occupied as viewers before. This conceit, while that of time itself, is more specifically that of viewing time—the 6 years spent in this other universe, this other life, as the character called Desmond constantly reminds us, each time he says

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> See Ariane Hudelet's article on title credits: "Un Cadavre ambulant, un petit-déjeuner sanglant et le Quartier Ouest de Baltimore: le générique, moment-clé des séries télévisées" <a href="http://www.graat.fr/tv01hudelet.pdf">http://www.graat.fr/tv01hudelet.pdf</a>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xEqcMPsUqQ8

farewell: *See you in another life, brother. Lost*'s finale *is* an emblematic example of a TV series whose opening contains the seed of all that follows, despite fans' anxieties that the narrative had no "master plan," an issue Ivan Askwith<sup>23</sup> has addressed in depth. If Jason Mittell's assessment<sup>24</sup> "that *Lost* presented narrative and aesthetic value, as a unified text" (125), combining "narrative complexity and the aesthetics of surprise" (125) was fully validated by the closing shots of the series, it could be surmised from its opening. To read *Lost* was to understand, as Mittell has pointed out in all of his articles, the "forensic" aspects of viewing (decoding clues, seeing the series as a puzzle) beyond the blockbuster elements<sup>25</sup> so prominent in the pilot; and to relish the reflexiveness of being lost deeper and deeper into the narrative's intricacies.

Forensic and blockbuster elements were, in fact, connected: for what could viewers think of a plane crashing, when the series *premiered* in September 2004, just two weeks after the third anniversary of the attacks of September 11, 2001? Julian Stringer's analysis<sup>26</sup> of this dimension rightly emphasizes the palimpsest of historical memories brought into play, from 9/11 to Pearl Harbor, since the pilot—one of the most expensive ever made—was shot on location in Oahu, Hawaii (and all of the series would be shot on location). The fact that TV series were ready to capitalize on, rewrite, or provide a form of narrative catharsis for the "virtual trauma" experienced by TV viewers who had seen the images of 9/11 played over and over again by all networks had become obvious by 2004.<sup>27</sup> Other series like 24 (Robert Cochran and Joel Surnow, Fox, 2001-2010) or *Sleeper Cell* (Ethan Reiff and Cyrus Voris, Showtime, 2005-2007) focused on "sleeper cell" domestic attacks in urban America, justifying the war on terror—but the series that went so far as to crash its pilot in urban America, as *Lost* had done on a remote island, was *Flashforward* (2009).

# A Smash Opening: Flashforward

Flashforward opens with a loud crash and amplified noises of panicked breathing; this enigmatic blue-lit image in close-up of Joseph Fiennes's face, hanging upside down:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> "Do You Even Know Where This Is Going?': *Lost*'s viewers and Narrative Premeditation" (Pearson, 2009: 159-180).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> "Lost in a Great Story: Evaluation in Narrative Television (and Television Studies)" (Pearson, 2009: 119-138).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> The two-part pilot episode, shot on site in Oahu, Hawaii, was the most expensive ABC had ever known. It was written and directed by the creators of the show. To read up on the budget spent, the critical acclaim and the awards it garnered, see Stacey Abbott (14-15), and this Wikipedia link: <a href="http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pilot\_(Lost)#cite\_note-1">http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pilot\_(Lost)#cite\_note-1</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Julian Stringer, "The Gathering Place: Lost in Oahu" (Pearson, 2009: 73-93).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> In an upcoming book I explore at length the fictional rewriting of 9/11 in American TV series. While Stringer (83) stresses the constantly replayed images of 9/11 as a form of trauma, this must of course be put in perspective as a form of "cultural trauma" for those who did not live it in their flesh or in the loss of loved ones. Marc Redfield's definition of "virtual trauma" in the Derridean perspective of "hauntology" is essential to anyone studying the hyper-mediatization of the event, its status as the "real" in the Lacanian sense; and the ideological implications of all representations and discourse around 9/11 (and the ensuing War on Terror). See Marc Redfield, *The Rhetoric of Terror: Reflections on 9/11 and the War on Terror*, NY: Fordham UP, 2009, in particular 1-5 and 13-28.



Then, to an amplified soundtrack of crunching glass, labored breathing, and human screams farther in the background, the following slant shot of shattered glass and oranges appears, signaling again that we are in a world turned "upside down". Marketing experts will note that the oranges do not merely allow an aesthetic contrast with blue while creating an image of impossible gravity, but also serve to emphasize the abc logo:



As the camera draws back, it becomes apparent this is a car crash; while Fiennes extracts himself from his vehicle, this shot, of a wheel reflected on the car window, is clearly visible for a few seconds.



This wheel, like the rolling oranges, is a reflexive image for the setting in motion of the "wheels" of a story, and a dark joke on the Medieval notion of the wheel of fortune and the attempts to change one's destiny through a "rewinding" of time (although this will only come to light later). Viewers of *Lost* were bound to see the intertextual echo in this pilot starting off with a crash—but this time, in an urban setting, and on what might initially seem a smaller scale (a car pile-up). Much as in *Lost*, handheld camera movements and deliberately jerky zooms, as well as 360° swiveling, and amplified sounds of motion, screaming, and explosions create blurred motion and a feeling of chaos. The camera conveys the dizziness the protagonist feels as he takes in the scene around him—bodies lie strewn on the highway; survivors nursing the wounded—while amplifying his and our sense of disorientation:



As a new horror suddenly fills the screen—a man on fire screaming for help—we cut, at slightly under one minute, to the title, seen in a reflexive forward zoom in flashing, overexposed, circles of light. The tunnel of light thus created, as well as the overlap of the word FLASH sliding over the word FORWARD, visually signal the *tunnel effect* of a jump in time:



We literally pass through the word (into what seems a giant pupil, or the reflection of our own, a technique which is the trademark of *Heroes*, another post-9/11 series<sup>28</sup>), into the white on black insert: **FOUR HOURS EARLIER**—in yet another form of paradox and "upside-down" logics: being propelled into a flashback, to explain the *flashforward*.

ABC deliberately promoted *Flashforward* during the 100<sup>th</sup> episode of *Lost*, to attract fans into the new opus as the old was coming to a close<sup>29</sup>; rather than a spin-off, it was meant as an "overlap" and crossover of sorts. To make sure that fans of *Lost* and of blockbusters like *Batman: the Dark Knight* would tune in for the premiere on the 24<sup>th</sup> of September 2009, ABC aired a promotional trailer in August that emphasized this intertextuality and their brand ("From the Network that brought you *Lost*"…)<sup>30</sup> while also pitching the concept of the series: in the diegetic universe of the series, the entire planet blacks out on September 24, 2009, and seven million people experience a flashforward into their future, 6 months ahead:



The white-on-black graphics (in attempted *mimesis* of blackout) and the title were also, of course, an intertextual nod to *Lost*, which from its third season swerves into science-fiction mode, and adds *flash-forwards* and *flash-sideways* (season 6) to flashbacks;

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> See Monica Michlin, "The American Presidency and the 25<sup>th</sup> Amendment in Contemporary TV Series: Fiction, Reality, and the Warped Mirrors of the Post-9/11 *Zeitgeist*" in *TV/Series*  $n^{\circ}1$ , 2012 <a href="http://www.univ-lehavre.fr/ulh\_services/Numero-1-Issue-1.html">http://www.univ-lehavre.fr/ulh\_services/Numero-1-Issue-1.html</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> To see the short teasers, with a commentary by *The Hollywood Reporter*: http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/blogs/live-feed/video-abcs-flash-teaser-clips-51526

To see the trailer: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2XVeYwHJJq8&feature=related

Flashforward also deliberately cast two of Lost's prominent actors.<sup>31</sup> It also, in a wink, features an Oceanic Airlines poster in the background in the pilot—Oceanic is the fictional airline of the plane that crashes in Lost:



While the irony of the catch-phrase "A PERFECT SAFETY RECORD" will not have evaded viewers, this is a multi-layered joke: *Lost* used Oceanic<sup>32</sup> and other fictional brands, such as Dharma products, in a form of multiplatform trans-media marketing<sup>33</sup> to advertise the series itself (below, with the tagline "the adventure begins here"):

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Sonya Walger, the actress who played Penny; and the Dominic Monaghan, the actor who played Charlie.

played Charlie. <sup>32</sup> The Oceanic Airlines brand and logo was actually used by J.J. Abrams, the creator of *Lost*, on his previous series *Alias*, and has in fact appeared in numerous other fictions as evidenced by this wiki link: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oceanic\_Airlines#Other\_media

The fact that the "O" seems designed as Aboriginal art is not coincidental in *Lost*, at least, since the airplane that crashes was en route from Sydney, Australia, to Los Angeles, and since the "Walkabout" represented by the dots surrounding the "O" is a central theme of the first Season. Indeed, Episode 4 is entitled "Walkabout" (in a flashback, we learn what brought one of the main characters to Australia and what miraculous changes the island has brought for him). All of *Lost*, of course, can be read as one gigantic Walkabout, intra-diegetically as well as extra-diegetically: like most "cult" series, what starts off as adventure turns into a form of spiritual initiation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> For more on this topic, read Stacey Abbott, "How *Lost* Found its Audience: the Making of a Cult Blockbuster" (Pearson 2009: 9-26), especially page 13 on the use of Oceanic Airlines billboards to promote the series; and Derek Johnson, "The Fictional Institutions of *Lost*: World Building, Reality and the Economic Possibilities of Narrative Divergence" (Pearson 2009: 27-49) on the choice of marketing "virtual" brands rather than opting for traditional product placement with "real-world" sponsors.



A similar meta-filmic pun introduces the actual beginning of *Flashforward*'s (long-awaited) eponymous sequence. Indeed, the flashback initiated at the first minute shows a somewhat slow start of the hero's day; at the seventh minute, precisely at the site of the Oceanic Airline poster, Joseph Fiennes, a.k.a. Mark, and Dmitri, his partner (both FBI agents, in ABC's attempt to compete with Jack Bauer of 24) spot the suspected terrorist they have been staking out. Dmitri metatextually calls out "Showtime!" as they take off in hot pursuit, signaling that the "real" action has begun. As they barrel down the highway, in typical blockbuster car-chase fashion, we suddenly experience the flashforward, with no advance warning, through Mark's perspective, at 8:45 minutes:



In an extremely rapid series of reverse shots, we see his eye as a spiral image forms on its pupil, and then enter this propeller-like/labyrinthine spiral, into another dimension of time, as shown by these macro shots:

<sup>34</sup> There is in fact another clue in the stakeout scene that the flashforward is about to begin: Mark is reading a newspaper, the last page of which is an advertisement, the first word of which is "Timeless." This kind of metatextual joke particularly appeals to those whom Jason Mittell has called "forensic" fans, who think of the series as a puzzle.

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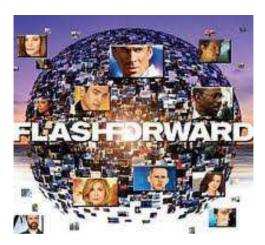
Then, in very rapid montage, with cuts from black to overexposed blurred images, we see flashes of Mark himself, in a dark place, on the point of cracking an investigation. First we catch a glimpse of the date—April 29, 2010—as he writes a note to himself, in a metalepsis, meant to remind viewers that the fictional and the extradiegetic timelines were being blurred. Then we see an investigator's board of clues, which, very much like the visionary artist's paintings in *Heroes* (Tim Kring, NBC, 2006-2010), functions both as "forensic" mise-en-abyme of clues and reflexive, X-Ray vision into the storyboard and master plan of the series, with the same philosophy that Heroes developed—"The future is not written in stone." Flashforward indeed took a page from all "antiterrorist" series from Sleeper Cell to Heroes, by making its plot the effort to avert a terrorist event of great magnitude. The very name of the investigation—"Mosaic" (see below) which hero and the viewer alike discover in the flashforward, points simultaneously to the puzzle that must be assembled before traumatic repetition occurs, to the fragmentary nature of viewing within the diegesis (each human being, we shall find out, has had her or his glimpse of his own future 6 months ahead), and to each viewer's "isolation" before his or her TV screen:







The ambiguities set by the pilot are those of any time-loop and/or prophecy: are not the characters conditioned by their fear or desire of what they have glimpsed into acting in ways that will ironically bring them to what they most fear, like Macbeth misinterpreting the witches' prophecy? But the central conceit of the series—that both our individual and collective existences resemble so many short films in a mosaic of interconnected screens—points to post-9/11 images of surveillance, rather than to the baroque idea of life as a dream or to the reflexive image of film itself as "other life" (below, a poster for the show):



When, in a perfect time-loop, Mark's flashforward ends with a cut to the first minute of the pilot—starting again with Mark's head hanging upside-down in the car, the oranges rolling, and the shattered glass—it prepares us for a grander-scale  $d\acute{e}j\grave{a}-vu$  as he realizes that the blackout he experienced was global and the accident no mere isolated traffic accident; this is another (global) 9/11, complete with a helicopter striking a building (although here, by accident):





In a foregrounding of cultural trauma, the pilot's title is "No More Good Days." Since a 9/11-haunted, blockbuster formula served *Lost*, *Heroes* and 24 well—the latter staging new attacks on Los Angeles as well as on New York City—why did *Flashforward* turn out to be a *flash in the pan*? The consensus seems that episodes after the pilot seemed anticlimactic; that the plot progressed achingly slowly; that there was no comic relief; that after being hyped as "the new *Lost*" the series turned out to be too staid, too slow, too earnest. While *Flashforward*'s use of diegetic retelling—that *Lost* had antiquated—sometimes bordered on self-parody, it is doubtful, on the other hand, that any of its millions of viewers, by the end of its energy-charged pilot, could have surmised the show's only real flashforward was to its own blackout.

#### Conclusion

What, then, do the opening moments of a series reveal? Beyond the obvious setting of the atmosphere, and of the story in motion, and beyond a few indications as to the genre of the narrative, most pilot episodes point, metatextually, to their status as the "beginning", with images of machines being turned on, wheels or turbines spinning, and so forth. Beyond the most obvious reflexive images of screens and windows onto other houses, worlds, or realities, most pilots do attempt a number of intertextual moves—to other forms of televisual images (everything from the news to reality shows); to other series, especially if they are produced by the same network, intent on luring viewers from one show to another; to the history of cinema, literature or the arts in order to ground a popular culture form in high culture.<sup>38</sup> The three ABC series selected here chose to literally start off with a bang<sup>39</sup> (a revolver shot; a plane crash; a car crash, a

<sup>35</sup>For instance, TV producer and blogger Richard Drew's biting but astute comments: http://www.remotepatrolled.com/2010/04/flash-in-the-pan/

Her article also points out how the series, while remaining a *soap*, included post-9/11 episodes that attracted massive audiences as early as Season 2: episodes 16 and 17 were one episode, "split" in its very title "It's the End of the World" / "As We Know It." This idea of a pivotal moment of trauma will (of course) be used over and over in the series, particularly in Season 7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> The same could be said of the short-lived series *Jericho* (2006-2008) centered on a small town in Kansas surviving a series of nuclear attacks that have apparently wiped out most of the United States.

Although many mocked the deliberately obscure dialogues of *Lost* and the technique of answering a question with another question, in Freudian therapist style, *Flashforward*'s dialogues had none of that deadpan humor.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> The title credits of *Desperate Houseviwes* are of course emblematic of this desire to claim a place for TV series in the History of Art (as the contemporary form).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> ABC's *Grey's Anatomy* (Shonda Rhimes, 2005-) arguably starts off with a bang too, but of a sexy kind, as Aurélie Blot has pointed out: <a href="http://www.graat.fr/tv03blot.pdf">http://www.graat.fr/tv03blot.pdf</a>
Her article also points out how the series while remaining a sagn, included post 0/11 episodes

flashforward, a blackout in reverse order). To the question *Flashforward* asks, and that each of these three openings asks of us—*What did you see?*—the true answer is in the subtext. For if each spins an enigma, the true appeal is never that of the investigation—there are, after all, procedural series for those viewers whose pleasure is to know *who did what when, where, and how*. Ongoing narratives, no matter how hybrid, are forms of soap—soap/thriller/camp satire in the case of *Desperate Housewives*; sci-fi/adventure/soap in the case of *Lost*; techno-thriller/male soap in the case of *Flashforward*—and soap, ultimately, is always character and dialogue-driven, requiring moments of irony, of comic relief, of intertextual quoting, of metatextual sophistication, alongside special effects, astonishing landscapes and the casting of beautiful actors and actresses. Ultimately, what these openings teach us is that a series need not shock and awe so much as, week after week, weave its spell, to enchant the audience and lure it deeper into its never-ending story.

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