

**Agent + Image:  
How the Television Image Destabilizes Identity in TV Spy Series**

by

Lisa Marie Bidlingmeyer

B.A. Biology/Studio Art  
Kenyon College

M.F.A. Painting  
Tyler School of Art

SUBMITTED TO THE PROGRAM IN COMPARATIVE MEDIA STUDIES IN  
PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE  
OF

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN COMPARATIVE MEDIA STUDIES  
AT THE  
MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

SEPTEMBER 2007

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Signature of Author

Program in Comparative Media Studies  
August 7, 2007

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Certified by

Wyn Kelley  
Senior Lecturer in Literature  
Thesis Supervisor

---

Accepted by

Henry Jenkins III  
Peter de Florez Professor of Humanities  
Professor of Comparative Media Studies and Literature  
Co-Director of Comparative Media Studies

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ABSTRACT:

This thesis explores the intersection of the television image with the presentation of self-identity. I examine two TV series in the spy genre -- *Alias* (2001 - 2006) and *The Prisoner* (1967 - 1968) -- discussing how each employs strategies of *visual representation* to present its protagonist as decentered or unfixed; in so doing, these programs complicate and problematize within their narratives the terms by which “subject” and “agency” have been traditionally understood and represented to popular TV audiences. This problematizing in turn opens up possibilities for detecting new modes of subject formation.

This paper argues that television, communication tool and historical and cultural artifact, must be regarded equally as a visual medium. In fact, the TV image brings the enacted identity theorized by Judith Butler into direct contact with Henri Bergson's formulations of memory and image, creating characters and spaces within TV stories that vividly illustrate the limitations to and potentials for creativity within the domains of action and identity. In addition to Butler and Bergson, this paper turns additionally to Gilles Deleuze for an understanding of cinematic image and time, and to the concept of masquerade developed within feminist theory.

In *The Prisoner*, a modern hero must make sense of a landscape of discontinuities and repetitions that challenge his ability to act, react, move, and escape. In *Alias*, a postmodern heroine must master the art of changing selves in order to move across spaces that, like her own identity, are conditional and are never what they initially appear. In both series, the television image, freed from an obligation to represent only one thing while ruling out others and made multiple by the TV episode format, assumes a resonance over its duration that creates the conditions for the depiction of fluid and changeable spaces and characters. In both cases, the TV image repeated enables a paradigm shift where the depiction of a decentered protagonist, once exceptional, now becomes a normative subject on television.

KEYWORDS:

*Alias* • Bergson • Butler • decentered subject • Deleuze • feminism • identity • image • Jennifer Garner • Patrick McGoochan • *The Prisoner* • spy shows • television • visual theory

Thesis Supervisor: Wyn Kelley

Title: Senior Lecturer in Literature

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the support of the dedicated faculty and staff of the Comparative Media Studies Department in the preparation of this thesis.

Specific acknowledgment is extended to my thesis committee members: Professor Diana Henderson, for her perceptive comments and for challenging me to articulate and to defend my ideas, and Professor Wyn Kelley, for her consistent support, guidance, and enthusiasm and her appreciation of the poetic.

In addition I would like to recognize Henry Jenkins III for his insights and suggestions throughout the development process, David Thorburn for both his encouragement and his impassioned introduction to the complexities of television, and Giuliana Bruno for helping me elaborate a discursive framework around which to fashion my study of self and space in the third chapter of this thesis.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

This thesis considers television spy series as significant popular constructs that invoke and articulate an important range of cultural concerns. I propose to explore, within several television spy shows, the intersection of Image with the presentation of self and gender, identity, and the melodramatic text. As a product of collaborative authorship and selective commercial and cultural pressures, the network television series can be viewed as a form of consensus narrative (*cf.* Thorburn 1987, Carey 1989). As such, this media form provides a place to look at cultural assumptions and anxieties. I shall examine two TV series in the spy genre -- *Alias* (2001 - 2006), *The Prisoner* (1967 – 1968) -- discussing how each employs strategies of visual representation to present its protagonist as decentered or unfixed; in so doing, these programs complicate and problematize within their narratives the terms by which "subject" and "agency" have been traditionally understood and represented to the popular audience. This problematizing in turn opens up possibilities for detecting new modes of subject formation.

By engaging in this discussion, I hope to create a space for a specific analysis of TV's *images* that regards their specific movements, repetitions, circulations, and transformations, and in so doing moves away from a bias-- implicit in many studies of television-- that the value, complexity, and cultural resonance of series are located

principally in their narrative structure or explicit subject matter. That the movements and migrations of the televisual image are in dialogue with the shows' narratives is both obvious and apparent, but the specific operations of TV visuals, their complexity and mobility, not only intertextually between different TV shows and other media but also specifically *within individual programs*, still seems to be less frequently considered in studies of television. Such an analysis can complement work already done in what is a constantly evolving, rich, and challenging field of media inquiry.

### **WHY TELEVISION? CONSENSUS NARRATIVE**

I locate this principally visual analysis in the field of television. James Carey (1989) reminds us that media can be understood as ritual, and that one purpose of ritual is to maintain a space of shared drama, effectively constituting and maintaining a cohesive social group within a culture. Consistent with Carey's ritual view of communication, television stories can be understood to function as a kind of shared discussion space within contemporary America. By doing so, the programs form what David Thorburn has referred to as a "consensus narrative" within a collective American culture. Thorburn argues that

The conservatism of consensus narrative ... makes it a chief carrier of the lore and inherited understanding of its culture, as well as a society's idealizations and assumptions about itself. That inherited understanding is no simple ideological construct but a matrix of values and assumptions that undergoes a continuous testing, rehearsal, and revision in the culturally licensed experience of consensus narrative. If consensus narrative is a site or forum where the culture promulgates

its pathologies of self-justification and appropriation, it is also the 'liminal space,' as anthropologist Victor Turner names it, where the deepest values and contradictions of society are articulated and, sometimes, understood. (Thorburn 171)

As cultural forum and consensus narrative, TV fictions have thus reflected social ideologies as well as questions, challenges, and changes to social norms. Because they are received as entertainment, TV narratives especially are licensed to express new ideas in a way to which the culture may be receptive. Television programming provides rich material for accessing both the hegemonic master narratives that work to consolidate a culture, as well as for seeing how these narratives are challenged, complicated, or fragmented by conflicting cultural, social, and aesthetic forces and concerns.

Television stories result from collective authorship and creation, and emerge under relatively stringent cultural constraints because of their status as corporate product, property and commodity and even more so as broadcast material. Therefore, individual programs necessarily navigate the limits of what is considered culturally acceptable to represent. Speaking about 1960s television, Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin state, "primetime programs [are] not mere escapism, but [are] centrally involved in sustaining, interrogating, and even transforming social relations and cultural affinities" (Spigel and Curtin 11). Even with shifts that have since changed and fragmented the space of television (the VCR, cable, TiVo, direct and interactive television, internet programming), contemporary TV programming continues to occupy a crucial cultural space. Network television, especially, often integrates

established political and social ideologies -- familiar and comfortable to the consumer groups that comprise its audience -- with the new and sometimes unsettling aspects -- news items, contemporary events, demographic and cultural shifts -- about which the audience is actively thinking. The familiar pop-criticism of TV programming as being devoid of meaningful content, as being simply escapist, misunderstands the programs' content and the contexts that audiences bring to the TV shows they watch. Even as they have historically affirmed traditional or reassuring cultural assumptions, television stories have simultaneously addressed in the conservative manner of consensus narrative such contested arenas as gender, race, politics, and lifestyle, these programs emerging as a complicated cultural forum for debating and restructuring that consensus.

### **WHY TELEVISION? FORMAL DYNAMICS**

Beyond its cultural relevance, another reason for my focus on television is that the TV series, which exists as a collective assemblage of temporally discrete events, has a particular relationship to ideas about time, repetition, and duration. As a dominant cultural serial form employing an audiovisual vocabulary, television series afford their audiences an ongoing relationship that evolves and changes over time; the show exists as a kind of unfolding text, where the whole of a series is modified by each individual constituent episode. Additionally, the television series, rarely conceived as complete upon its premiere, unfurls over time and episodes, and therefore has a

protean nature allowing for theme and variation that may be responsive, for example, to a changing political climate, cultural trends, shifting intertextual references, perceived audience preference and demands, or even the weight of its own narrational complexity. Television is experienced in a social and domestic space, a lived space, that gives the medium a kind of immersive familiarity that allows its stories and imagery to insinuate themselves into audiences' imaginations. I therefore also like the idea of the television series as a site of connectivity and exchange, as series exist in direct contact with not only other programs and the commercial advertising they support, but also the social and domestic, public and private settings in which they are consumed.

To this end, this paper seeks to establish and discuss two separate cases in which the repetitive nature characteristic of television's series and serial forms constitutes a specialized formalism that communicates, through a characteristic repetition, meaning independent of or in addition to the individual instances of image and visual that appear onscreen. This paper takes in part as its object of inquiry both the moving image and the repetitive image formally present in TV's series.

### **A BRIEF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE SPY GENRE AS CONSENSUS NARRATIVE**

When viewed through the lens of consensus narrative, television spy series have reflected and spoken to the political and social concerns of the time periods that produced them. The escalating Cold War served as a political background to the spy

show's rise to prominence in 1960s America. The genre resonated with the public's concerns about global politics, concerns sparked by the perception of a growing communist threat, and by events like the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Soviet launch of Sputnik, and, later, Vietnam. Eric Barnouw (1990) suggests that the spy shows' themes of intrigue, conspiracy, and shady double-dealings were part of the public's perception of political reality, and therefore formed popular plot lines. In fact, spy shows of the 1960s dramatized, critiqued, and parodied real-world political issues -- with shows like *Mission Impossible* taking a clearly subtler and comparatively more realistic approach to the topic than a comic send-up like *Get Smart* -- in ways that were diverse and that moved well beyond the direct reflection of propaganda or paranoia that Barnouw insinuates; nonetheless, their popularity reflected the larger cultural and political climate that surrounded them. Beyond the foreign policy backgrounding the show's storylines, spy shows both on television and in film equally reflected domestic social and political shifts being tested culturally at the time. Gender, for example, became one of the themes specifically contested within spy series, especially following the influence of James Bond and *Goldfinger* described below, which in turn of course resonated with the growing women's movement and subsequent debate over women's cultural roles.

Early representatives of TV's spy and espionage genres took their cues from older, more established story forms, or from the rich history of the espionage genre in literature; secret agents were often portrayed as variants on private investigators or policemen, their stories integrating the stylistic elements of crime dramas or shadowy

*film noir*. The phenomenal success of the James Bond films and, retroactively, Bond novels helped shape the "spy show" as a distinct and recognizable form, with dozens of examples of the genre crowding the American primetime schedule in the mid- to late 1960s. The popularity of the genre waned in the 1970s, its representative programs replaced on television by waves of other genre types. The spy stories of later decades reflected subsequent concerns about clashes between emergent and established global orders, changes in technology resulting in an increasingly pervasive system of information and monitoring, and more. Just as TV's early spy series borrow their formal styles from more established genres, the spy genre today as an established and recognizable genre now lends its framework to stories where the "spy" aspect serves as background and convention for stories exploring other concerns, for instance, the wave of children's programming and advertising popular in the late 1990s featuring "spy kids."

### **GENRE AS IT PERTAINS TO MY ANALYSIS**

Although it grounds itself principally in programs in the spy genre in order to make a manageable argument, this thesis rejects characterization as a genre study in that it does not take the spy genre as a contingent category for its analysis. What I analyze in the shows can therefore be expanded and my analysis brought to and tested on programming in other genres. Genres in general exist as useful categories of convenience. From a practical and economic perspective, TV audiences are

demonstrably drawn to programming that they can identify and frame within the categories with which they are already familiar and that they know they enjoy; from the perspective of the cultural researcher, genre is used as a category to detect patterns -- formal, narrative, cultural -- where generic content becomes the constant (or catalyst). As discussed above, in the case of the spy genre, external cultural forces influence fictional narratives. While the generic category of the "spy show" may indeed help maintain a thematic consistency between the two shows that I analyze, this consistency yields to the unique makeup of and concerns addressed by the individual programs. It would not benefit my analysis to focus on demonstrating patterns of continuity between the programs I consider, which are to begin with extremely intertextual. Therefore, I employ the designation "spy show" as a practical category but distance my study from those where genre becomes a primary concern.

That having been said, I do feel that the spy series is an ideal space to explore certain types of concerns. For my purposes, the spy genre becomes a useful popular cultural space for thinking about layers of meaning, about the collapse of a stable distinction between truth and falsehood and between appearance and reality, and about selfhood that resists stable identity. Specifically, the protagonists within the spy genre are defined by their ability to elude definition, creating or constructing projected and multiple identities (aliases) that destabilize the boundaries between an internal or essential self and external situations. From the fact that a rift between appearance and actuality (as with, for example, literal disguise) can be seen as a staple of the spy genre, we can further think of the spy show form as necessitating a

severing of the link between signifier and that which is signified, a connection that is often naturalized in many other genre forms. This in turn has the effect of freeing up the visuals within the spy story from their referents, giving them a kind of mobility or fluidity, a freedom to move on their own terms. The appearance of a person, object, or place is no longer tied to an underlying meaning; in fact the audience is constantly encouraged to question appearances. Appearances therefore become fluid, and are easily mobilized, cast off, replaced, or transformed. One object, one person, can be disguised as something or someone different as a necessary part of the intrigue. The often dramatic detachment of the signifier, the visual sign, from its referent comprises an expected element of the genre, and is a natural part of how we understand the spy story.

Therefore, because spy fictions take crises of representation as givens, and thereby become hyperbolic spaces where rifts between appearance and actuality, between action and intent are necessarily dramatized, I have chosen to situate my analysis in these fictions. I see themes of 1) disguise, 2) technology and gadgetry, 3) remoteness/surveillance, 4) deception and double-dealing, and 5) a mission that requires both covert action and global (and hence unconstrained spatial) reach as essential to my definition of the spy genre. One also typically finds the residue of paranoia and the sense that something very large is at stake, that the spy is an actor in an all-encompassing conspiracy.

## AGENCY AND THE AGENT

The term "agent" itself carries oppositional meanings. Under one rubric and as an extension of a conception of "agency," the agent exhibits a pronounced freedom of movement and ability to act. The agent *exists* in order to enact, and as such is endowed with specialized capacities to penetrate space, to enter restricted areas, to access codes and secrets. The true identity of the agent concealed, she has the ability to create and project a constructed and directed self. As such the agent represents a fantasy in which is enacted a kind of freedom of movement, a capacity for action, and a mastery of self-definition. On the other hand, the word "agent" refers to the fact that the spy becomes a *tool* through which espionage is enacted. The agent embodies a disassociation of the true actor -- the corporation, syndicate, cell, or government -- from its action, which occurs then through the body of the spy. The agent becomes action embodied, a vehicle through which the will of another is executed. In this she has very little freedom, and only a contingent unity with the agency she represents and which will, should she fail, disavow all knowledge of her actions.

Any attempt to locate agency within or outside of the body of the agent resonates with Judith Butler's discussion in the concluding chapter of *Gender Trouble* (1990). Identity politics in particular seeks to define (often problematically) the disempowered subject in order to then claim power in the form of political action on behalf of that named subject. The model upon which this politics is based necessarily presupposes an identity that is at odds with "the cultural field that it negotiates" (Butler 182) and is defined through a process of exclusion. Butler argues that the

project of identity politics and of feminism ultimately reinforces the very epistemology it seeks to oppose:

The language of appropriation, instrumentality, and distancing germane to the epistemological mode also belong to a strategy of domination that pits the "I" against the "Other" and, once that separation is enacted, creates an artificial set of questions about the knowability and recoverability of that Other. (Butler 183-184)

Conversely, Butler proposes an alternate strategy outside of this binarism and in so doing enables a discourse that will not obscure either the constructedness of identity categories or the operations of hegemonic culture, power and language, operations that are naturalized and reinforced whenever the "I" of identity asserts its independence from or struggle against an external cultural logic. Butler's model for discourse establishes that identity is always grounded in and bounded by language and signification, cultural category and linguistic rule, a premise that, rather than being limiting, can in fact open up new possibilities. Identity, understood "as a practice, and as a signifying practice" (Butler 186), instead of being seen as embodied, is seen as located within a series of acts -- as enacted -- and, contingent upon these actions and repetitions of actions, as fluid and unfixd.

Paradoxically, the reconceptualization of identity as an *effect*, that is, as *produced* or *generated*, opens up possibilities of "agency" that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed ... Construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible. (Butler 187)

Butler continues,

The critical task for feminism is not to establish a point of view outside of constructed identities; that conceit is the construction of an epistemological model that would disavow its own cultural location and, hence, promote

itself as a global subject, a position that deploys precisely the imperialist strategies that feminism ought to criticize. The critical task is, rather, to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the imminent possibility of contesting them. (Butler 187-188)

In concert with Butler's proposition, it is not the imagery chosen within the TV shows but rather the circulation of that imagery that becomes the object of my analysis; I am not examining women characters on TV as a subject, but instead use these characters as the site for an investigation of how the movement -- the activity -- of images activates ideas about identity and gender. Here, the agent not as a stable subject but as identity enacted becomes the process that I will examine in my subsequent chapters. Further, the parody that Butler cites as a site of intervention and contestation reveals itself I believe within each of the TV shows I examine.

### **MELODRAMATIC SIGNIFICATION**

Beyond its intersection with theories of gender and identity, this paper draws from the field of melodrama studies to several effects. The first is to insert itself as an analysis where the visuals onscreen can be understood to be an externalization of the internal logic of the story. Television fiction takes as its model the popular democratic form of the melodramatic narrative, producing stories where visuals reveal hidden or internal truths. Furthermore, melodramatic studies have created a foundation for understanding the psychic mechanics of soap opera and other serial narratives for women, and contain rich descriptions regarding specifically "feminine"

forms of pleasure. These studies argue that, as women have historically occupied a marginalized or decentered place in Western society and narrative, many women's stories have created a landscape where different individual characters occupy multiple subject positions that the female reader or viewer may (simultaneously or sequentially) engage with, relate to, or occupy. In fact, "decentering" and multiplying insistently in the contemporary programming at which I am looking, and have been picked up, repackaged, and re-presented in the advertising that surrounds the shows. Consumerism is ideologized as identity-crafting, with one's material effects a means to project and perform a deliberately constructed identity; this in turn is offered as a specifically feminine prerogative. The multiple subject positions and multiple narrative paths historically common in popular women's melodramatic stories suggest that the recent "postmodern turn" and new "narrative complexity" apparent in the most current television fictions may simply acknowledge something that has been there all along and has only been recently embraced by and critically celebrated in stories that are not just specifically "for women." The fantasy spy series specifically activates the field of the melodramatic, reveling in (visual) melodramatic signification, and provides an interesting twist to the reception concept of floating subject positions; this is something I will develop in more detail in the third chapter.

## INTERTEXTUALITY AND THE IMAGE

Often television series are treated within criticism almost as if they have no visual or auditory components, simply as narratives; when the visuals are considered it is often only for how they fit into cultural models of representation. In this thesis I want to open up the discussion of TV series to terms of the Image, and in so doing consider the formal elements of space and time, rhythm and duration that inform our perception of the television image and the image in general. For that consideration we need Henri Bergson. Indeed, this thesis derives its interest in and its specific definitional sense of Image from Bergson's writings on matter and memory (Bergson 1988). Bergson, in describing the operations of perception and memory, discusses how the image (which conceptually is located somewhere between the object itself and the perception of the object) creates an associative or resonant space. Our experience of an image/object is not just the instance of image/object that we encounter and perceive but also the sum of our previous encounters with that image/object, our recollections, that are now being brought into a dialogue with the specific instance of the image/object that we presently encounter. Gilles Deleuze applies this concept to the mediated, cinematic image, and this line of thought moves the discussion of image and perception toward larger questions of time and duration, and toward the emergence of the new out of the present. So when the term "Image" is used in this thesis, it is meant not simply as a synonym for anything that's visual but instead specifically to evoke the idea that the visual operates through association and resonance, and at an additional, non-verbal or non-linguistic although nonetheless extremely complex, cognitive level.

An instance of the image generates energy through its association with other

images. In his discussion of the image, Bergson might as well have been speaking about television, where the multi-layered image is made especially apparent intertextually by the medium's repetitive conventions. Episodic TV series engage in and are defined by visual repetition; images -- characters, places, and objects -- in TV series conventionally repeat over time, reinforced episode after episode, through multiple seasons, and within the memory of the series' viewership, who ideally return again and again to the space of these programs. I therefore see television as enabling specific ideas about action, duration, repetition, and identity through a characteristic repetition.

## CHAPTER LAYOUT

*What happens when the same scenes from a series' title sequence are rerun in the middle of an episode, as a discrete event?*

In the second chapter I move back 30 years; I argue for an incommensurability between the protagonist's actions and the emergent postmodern landscape of the series, and look at how this is communicated specifically at the level of the (tele-) filmic in the 1967 spy TV series *The Prisoner*. I examine how visuals in *The Prisoner* communicate to the audience disjointed events and spaces that complicate actions undertaken by the series' modern hero. I contextualize the series relative to similar TV programs at a time when spy shows dominated the TV schedule, and beyond this historical context examine concepts of repetition and television's series form, subject and object, and of memory and false time, against the background of Deleuze's analysis of the cinematic image doing the work of thought.

***How does a TV series about a woman who changes her appearance make visible the operation of gendered masquerade in a newly accelerated, exponential fashion?***

Segueing from the prior chapter, in the third chapter I begin by exploring an additional dynamic in *The Prisoner* in which women literally wear disguises to access power (by way of the visual clichés available to them). This preface sets up an exploration of the presentation of self and gender through appearance and particularly fashion that occurs in the contemporary TV spy series *Alias*. *Alias*, like other spy fantasy series, engages in melodramatic signification, but here the multiple subject positions normally ascribed to multiple characters within the melodramatic text are activated by an individual, the protagonist Sydney Bristow, through her constantly-changing appearance. Key concepts explored in this chapter include melodrama and the woman's text, audience engagement with the text through "floating subject positions," the operation of masquerade, and Fashion as discourse -- as a lens for understanding the illusory construction of spatial relations as real/tangible/physical, and also as a mode of understanding the "evocative image," in this case of the image of Woman. In *Alias* the fashioned image acts, as is suggested by Carolyn Evans in her analysis of contemporary fashion's syntax, as an emblem or metaphor generating power by networking multiple, visual associations. *Alias*'s fashionable protagonist likewise reconstitutes space as network in order to move freely through a postmodern environment.

\* \* \* \* \*

Through an engagement with the constructedness of the worlds and characters made visible on TV, the two chapters above share an involvement with the processes by which cultural identity and cultural narrative is constructed on television -- through the movements, repetitions, and transformations of visual signifiers and through the associations that audience memory generates. These chapters interrogate the figurative image on television to create a way to discuss identity construction on a *visual, associative* plane. In order to be able to rethink the medium's future within the technologically and socially evolving space it will inhabit, we must understand the multiple ways in which the TV format currently engenders unique visual and mental spaces.



## 2. REPETITION, MEMORY, AND RETURN OF THE IMAGE IN TELEVISION'S *THE PRISONER* (1967-1968)

This chapter describes the incongruity between the modern hero, with his method of modern action, and an emergent postmodern environment that is central to the 1967 spy TV series *The Prisoner*, and it looks at how this conflict is communicated visually throughout the program. The analysis that follows seeks to move beyond direct questions of representation -- that is, what is being represented -- toward addressing how these representations are deployed and are experienced over time, episodically, and as an additive and associative (audio)visual process. This chapter will focus principally on two components of the series. The first of these is the title sequence and its many repetitions, both its obligatory return to commence each episode and its reuse at other times during the series to represent new events within the narrative. The second focus of the chapter is on the series' formal rejection of a modernist understanding of space. This rejection presents itself as an engagement in "round-trips" in which travel is spatially collapsed, and as a fascination with incommensurate locations -- that is, where two geographically remote locations are impossibly made adjacent. Space within the series is no longer mappable, and this fact, like the repetitions, activates a challenge to old regimes of image and of thought that conceive of action as effective, time as progressive, and subjectivity as localizable. To

understand how this series, conceived of and positioned as a work of social critique, functions as aesthetic object, we need to create a discussion that engages what might be called elements of sensation -- those formal elements not as recuperable by an ideological, cultural, or semiotic analysis.

## BACKGROUND

A British commercial television program, *The Prisoner* was produced in 1966-1967, and aired in the UK from 1967 through 1968 (1968 and 1969 in the US and Canada). In the show, a man (unnamed throughout the series and presumably a British government agent, although even this is never stated) resigns from his post, only to be drugged upon returning to his apartment and relocated immediately to a mysterious village. This Village turns out to be a kind of compulsory retirement home for individuals -- government officials, spies, strategists, scientists, academics, and others -- whose knowledge of state secrets makes them valuable assets, security threats, or both. The series focuses on the man's repeated (unsuccessful) attempts to escape from the Village, and the repeated (unsuccessful) efforts of Village officials to try to coerce the man into naming the reason that he resigned in the first place. Throughout the series, it is unclear who actually runs the Village, and deliberately so; as one official states, "it doesn't matter which side runs the Village -- both sides are becoming identical ... when the sides facing each other suddenly realize they're

looking into a mirror, they will see that this is the pattern for the future” (“The Chimes of Big Ben”).

### **"The Name's Drake, John Drake."**

Important to the audience's experience of the program during its original run was its familiarity with the show's lead, Patrick McGoochan, as a significant and familiar figure within television's spy genre. Coming from a stage background, the American-born McGoochan became a ubiquitous and acclaimed television actor in England. By the mid-1960s, he was also Britain's most highly-paid TV star (Britton 96).

McGoochan starred as agent John Drake in the successful spy series *Danger Man*, which was produced in 1960-1961 and 1964-1965, and aired variously in the UK and the United States from 1960-1968. At this time, the American television market was by far the most profitable, and overseas production companies such as England's ITC tailored their series toward American tastes; the character Drake was first written as an American who worked for NATO in the series' early half-hour episodes.

The transatlantic success of the James Bond film *Goldfinger* (which was set in America) in 1964 formalized emergent conventions within the spy genre, helping to shape the "spy show" of the 1960s as a distinct and recognizable form and to establish in mainstream pop consciousness the idea of the suave British super-agent (Bennett and Woollacott, 30-32). *Danger Man* was the earliest in a long list of television spy series that found increased popularity and success in the Sixties. In 1966 alone, American primetime audiences enjoyed spy series including *Mission*

*Impossible*, *The Man from UNCLE* and its spinoff *The Girl from UNCLE*, *The Man Who Never Was*, *Get Smart*, *Honey West*, and *I Spy*, along with imports of ITC's *The Avengers* and, in 1967, *The Saint* (Brooks and Marsh, various entries). Some TV characters from other genres, especially police and detective programs, even 'went spy' -- rewritten as secret agents midway through their series' runs; for example, Four Star's *Burke's Law* (1963-1966) began as a campy network cop drama (Amos Burke was a millionaire who happened to work with the police) but was transitioned in September 1965 into a spy show, with an accompanying title change to *Amos Burke: Secret Agent* (Brooks and Marsh 170). With US television audiences now favorable toward the fashionable British spy, *Danger Man* was reintroduced in Britain in 1964, and in 1965 to the US market as *Secret Agent*, with hour-long episodes (the standard length for a TV drama in the US) and with John Drake rewritten as an agent of British Intelligence; the Johnny Rivers title theme from the US broadcast reached #3 on the Billboard chart (Brooks and Marsh 1047; Allmusic.com, <http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=11:skngtq8zbu45~T51>).

McGoohan became closely associated by the public with his character, intelligence agent John Drake, so much so that during the show's run he reportedly was considered for but declined the spy roles of both James Bond and, later, *The Saint's* Simon Templar (Sean Connery and Roger Moore, respectively, accepted these roles, with Moore eventually taking on Bond as well). In 1966, McGoohan left *Danger Man* just as the series was switching to color. Soon after, he and some of *Danger Man's* principal writers and producers, George Markstein and David Tomblin

among these, co-created *The Prisoner*. McGoohan starred as the new show's lead. In a gesture that was practically unheard of for its time, or today, British production company ITC's president and financier Lew Grade gave McGoohan's team total creative freedom on the project; the investment involved an even greater leap of faith since a completed script was never delivered prior to the show's approval (Williams 2001).

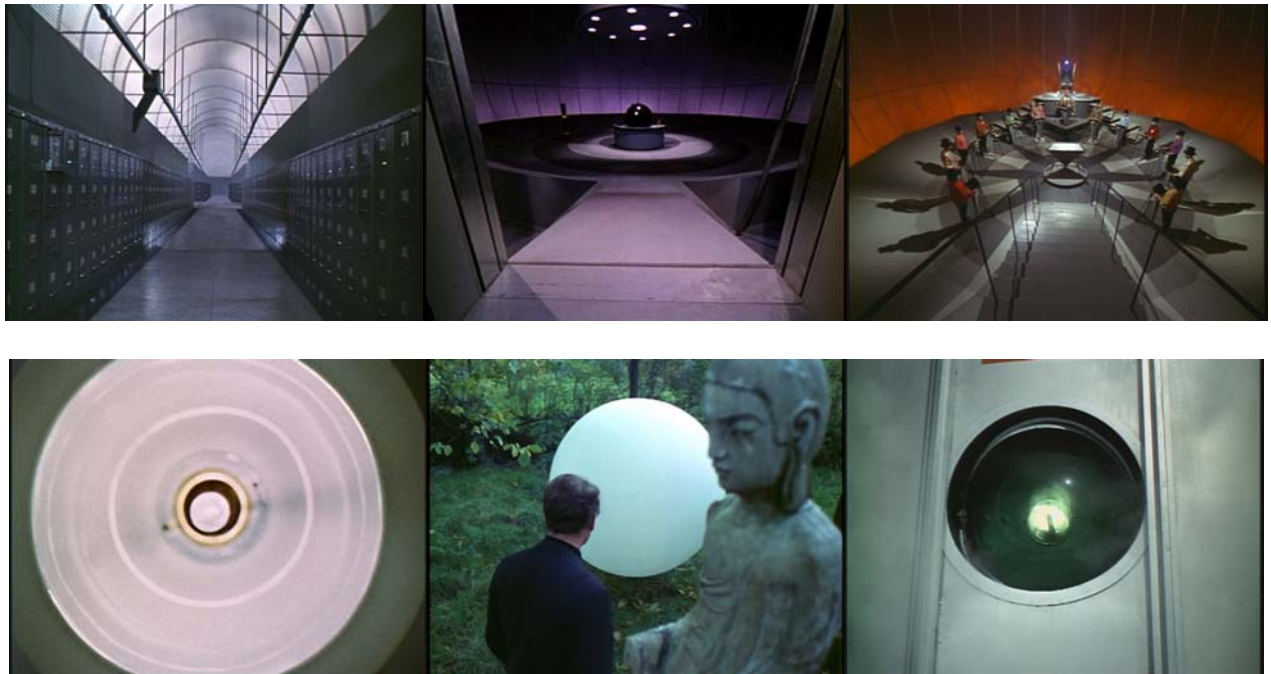
*The Prisoner's* contemporary viewers brought to their viewing experience their conflation of McGoohan with *Danger Man's* hero John Drake, and of Drake in turn with the many spy heroes popularized by television, film, and novels especially over the past decade. This context helped viewers situate the series, which because of its unconventional premise was itself difficult to categorize in relation to other primetime TV shows. Without McGoohan's presence, the show would have been a much harder sell as a sci-fi adventure series which, by the way, happened to take place in a Welsh village; the series itself with its often surreal and allegorical leanings already strayed pretty far from its implicit spy show premise. Additionally, the associations McGoohan evoked allowed the series to enter the US television broadcast market with its strong demand for British spies. And, just as audiences in 1967 watched *The Prisoner* within the context of *Danger Man*, later *The Prisoner* would through its distinctive feel and departures from convention effectively hijack McGoohan's likeness from his earlier work, creating a new condition where today's audiences generally consider *Danger Man* within the context of the more stylistically and conceptually distinct *The Prisoner*. Likewise, the reclusive McGoohan has become

synonymous with the character he played in the series, Number 6's principled, independent, even antisocial and elitist attributes now projected back upon the actor, especially by fans who would ascribe to McGoohan an auteur status.

## **Aesthetics**

As a series, *The Prisoner* aspired to social critique even as it retained a conventional TV series format. Its critique was predicated upon a dismissal of mass culture and media (including television) as degraded and hollow forms, as well as the recurrent affirmation of the value of the “individual” among the masses in combating the disintegration of intelligent society, its arts and its culture. This critique, reflecting high-modernist biases and replete with historical and literary allusions, was accompanied by disruptive formal elements like rapid editing, aggressive camera movements, zooms and abrupt cuts, as well as the bold geometric patterns and primary colors of the village uniforms, signage, and vehicles contained within the shots.

Additionally, the repeated use of “pure” geometric forms announced an additional level of formal Modernism that challenged the naturalism of the on-location adventure series, suggesting that the program should be “read” on the level of the symbolic. For example, forced perspective and a single, central



vanishing point were consistently used to create pyramid-shaped compositions out of stairways, halls, and roads, communicated more directly by architectural elements like the flat pyramid behind the speaker's chair in the town hall. Likewise, circles -- the sinister "rover" sentinels (actually white weather balloons), the round, flashing mechanical "eye" of Number 1, the brain-washing lamp over G's bed, the entire dome of Number 2's chamber complete with round Eero Aarnio chair ascending from a circular hole in the floor -- proliferated throughout the series. Among conventional-looking scenes of dialog and action were inserted shots that isolated and distilled objects from their contexts, abstracting their surroundings to reveal these items' symbolic import. An entire modernist architectural infrastructure, complete with spare and geometrically-perfect tunnels, antechambers, and high-tech control rooms,

was implied to lie behind the postmodern architectural pastiche of William Henry Clough's Hotel Portmeirion, which comprised the series' exterior.



*Portmeirion vs. Borehamwood Studio: Postmodern exterior, modern interior.*

## The Series Form

Speaking specifically about British TV programs, James Chapman points out one reason for the lack of critical regard for episodic TV series in general and adventure series in particular.

Unlike the serial (which features a continuing story over a set number of episodes) or the single play (now a virtually defunct form of drama that has been all but replaced by the made-for-television film), the series form resists conventional methods of filmic or literary analysis due to the necessarily repetitive and formulaic nature of each self-contained episode ... once the characters and situations have been established then only minimal variation is possible within each episode. The series form therefore relies upon highly standardized narrative conventions, plotting and characterization. (Chapman 4)

The episodic TV series' repetition of conventions doesn't fit literary or filmic standards of analysis and judgment, and, regarded as "formulaic," has received critical

disdain. Hence there has been relatively little serious work done on these “series form” episodic adventure programs (Chapman 2-3).

Due to its repetitive formal conventions, the series form TV program might be suited best by an approach that considers the potentials as well as the limitations inherent to such conventions. Chapman summarizes the views of Umberto Eco and Chris Gregory, who each consider the episodic structure of genre series as necessity rather than limitation; Eco in particular reiterates the notion of TV’s consensus function. The predictability of a returning narrative structure or formula serves as reassurance, “reward[ing] our ability to foresee” (Eco, in Chapman 5); reductively, “if the viewer is able to predict that ‘good’ will triumph over ‘evil’, for instance, then it affirms the viewer's faith in the value systems and moral codes which the hero represents” (Chapman 5). Beyond repetition’s relationship to this consensus function or its role in meeting the industry’s production and economic constraints, repetition within the TV series can also be considered for the specific aesthetic effects it enables. An approach that integrates visual analysis, one that considers both meaning and affect communicated on a visual level and that considers specifically the movements of these visuals within a TV program's episodes, may be helpful in showing how episodic or “series-form” TV programs are able to create meanings that resonate both beyond and because of their repetitive narrative frameworks. I will engage in this type of analysis in the following paragraphs to discuss how, in the case of *The Prisoner* specifically, the series form *itself* becomes a meaningful construction.

Such an analysis might be informed by Gilles Deleuze's reading of cinema, in which he constructs a discourse alternative to the dominant semiotic (Metzian) and psychoanalytic tropes used in film analysis. Through a Deleuzian lens, cinema becomes a kind of "thinking with images," just as philosophy may be considered thinking with concepts. The historical development of cinema recapitulates the development of modern philosophy especially with respect to the concept of time. Modern cinema in particular does the work of thought especially when it creates what Deleuze refers to as "direct time-images" (in which time "appears for itself" (Deleuze *Cinema 2*, xi) beyond its subordinate role as the substrate in which movement takes place). These time images often result from the disruption of natural perception and sensory-motor linkages; for example, sound and image that are no longer causally related or moments of past and present that exist and coexist outside of a unified narrative. Although in 1967 there was (and there largely remains today) no place for Godardian disruption on primetime network television, TV series may nonetheless by way of their characteristic episodic presentation reorder how we think about time, event, and the image; the perception of TV series is "natural" only within the context of an agreed-upon set of structural rules and conventions. Furthermore, the "naturalness" of the dramatic TV program's address is always challenged by the fact that series on TV call attention to their own "provisionality" as one of many interchangeable choices within an environment of broadcast programs, styles, and networks, what Jim Collins describes as (through a comparison with Robert Venturi's architectural model of the strip) "provisional piazzas" that lead to television's

"proliferation ... of centers" (Collins 263). And just as the series becomes one possible version of the programming choices that are out there, the episode is one of multiple episodes, each a different version of the story that the audience consumes.

### TIME AND EVENT: THE TITLE SEQUENCE

Each episode of *The Prisoner* begins with an aggressive, rapidly-edited expository title sequence. The pacing of the scene was unusual for its time; in 1 1/2 minutes the opening recounts how the protagonist (known throughout the series only as Number 6 and played by McGoohan) resigned, was drugged, and was immediately relocated from his home to an identical apartment in a country villa. The sequence contains no dialogue and is accompanied by composer Ron Grainer's dramatic instrumental theme, with forceful actions punctuated by occasional (and non-diegetic) bursts of thunder.

A brief description of this sequence may be helpful in discussing how the TV program as a whole plays with time, memory, and repetition. The opening shot shows first the sky (blue but accompanied by audio of thunder), then a road receding toward a deep, single vanishing point at the center of the screen; a car emerges from this point and drives straight toward the camera. Next follows a head shot of the protagonist ("Number 6"), looking determined. A series of shots shows the car driving through streets familiar as those of downtown London, past Parliament, then turning down a side street and into a parking garage; all are filmed with strong angular

movements made by both the camera and the sports car on screen, the entire sequence rapidly edited.

In the next sequence, Number 6 swings open a first set of doors, and is shown walking briskly down a long hallway (as with the opening shot of the highway, this is again in a kind of forced perspective); a series of rhythmic cuts show 6's face, over which a shadow sweeps, his feet, then, again, his face, the shadow, his feet (accompanied by the rhythmic, mechanical sound of echoing footsteps). 6 swings open a second set of doors (this pose, again accompanied by the sound of thunder, is held for a beat before the shot again becomes active) and then enters a room where an administrator sits at his desk in front of double maps of the world. A short series of shots shows Number 6 yelling (but without the accompanying audio) and pacing, slamming down a letter (his face shown looking serious), then striking the desk with his fist, the tea saucer on the desk breaking in two.

As 6's car is next shown departing the garage, the scene is intercut first with a file cabinet (its drawer label reading, "Resigned," and it among an infinite row of filing cabinets), then with a black-and-white photographic image of 6/McGoohan (the image is recognizable as a promotional photo from *Danger Man*). The off-angle shot of the photo fills and traverses the screen as a typewriter pounds X's across its face. The image partially dissolves into a shot of 6's own face as he drives in his car. The next series of shots reveals the Xed-out photograph on a punchcard, transported by an automated device along a long line of filing cabinets (which also recede into a deep, single vanishing point).

Number 6 now pulls up to a curb, leaves his car, and enters his apartment. As he rushes to pack his things (including travel brochures) into a case, outside a man in a black top hat exits an approaching black car and climbs the apartment stairs. Smoke pours through the apartment door's keyhole; a close-up is shown again of 6's face, frozen as he stops what he's doing. The smoke is shown again entering the room, followed by a close-up of 6 becoming disoriented. This close-up dissolves partially into a shot of the view out the window: tall city buildings, shown blurry, then vertiginous, the camera in motion. Number 6 passes out and the screen goes blank. We next see him awaken and slowly get up from his couch to go to the window. He pulls up the blinds as we see a close-up of his face staring blankly, then a view from the window: not the cityscape he left but an antiquated, pastoral resort Villa. A final shot, again of 6's blank stare, blinking once, before this wordless sequence gives way to dialogue (beginning with Number 6 asking, "Where am I?," the answer always, "In the Village"). Audio of a conversation then commences between the protagonist Number 6 and, representing his captors, the voice of Number 2, while visuals of 6's movements through the Village, along with the viewing screens and surveillance apparatuses that form the inner workings of the place, complete the introductory sequence.



*Title stills from the series: diegetic, with strong compositional elements.*

The title sequence produces several effects. It establishes the highly composed visual style of the series, and aligns the series' protagonist with both movement and the technologies of spatial translation; it also establishes a narrative sequence of events that serves as the point of departure for each episode. It is important for the audience to understand what has happened to Number 6 in order to contextualize the events about to take place, the events that make up the storyline of each episode.

*The Prisoner's* title sequence differed from those of its contemporaries in the action and spy genres. Experimenting with different techniques of presentation,

every other major spy series in the 1960s either featured still graphics (e.g., photographs, stills, silhouettes of figures in action poses) stylistically montaged, or experimented with blocking or dividing up the spatial field of the TV screen itself into multiple moving and still images. Compared with these contemporaries, *The Prisoner's* title sequence remains determinedly filmic: all of the images fill the screen and move in real-time. Unlike other title sequences which occupy a more symbolic or graphic space (containing images that might be characterized as non-diegetic), *The Prisoner's* opening has a "natural" narrative or (diegetic) filmic feel that suggests it can be read as an event that is occurring, as opposed to a symbolic representation of events, a fact that will be important to this analysis. Only the theme music, a few sets of text overlays (series title, star and production credits, and episode title), and its predictable repetition at the beginning of each episode formally distinguish the title from the episode that follows. The title sequence "reads" like a part of the story, like a series of events that are happening because, unlike with most other action and spy shows where convention provides that title images act principally as signs, in *The Prisoner's* titles images appear within a normalized or naturalized narrational context.



*Title stills from I Spy, The Avengers, and The Saint.*

## ENDS AS IT BEGINS: THE CIRCULAR LOGIC OF *THE PRISONER*

Seventeen episodes of *The Prisoner* were produced and aired; upon the final episode's airing in the UK, angry viewers phoned and wrote ITC in record numbers to complain, leading the company to produce a form letter explaining the gesture (Chapman 51), and prompting Patrick McGoochan to lie low, and even allegedly to leave the country, until things settled down. What fascinated and frustrated *The Prisoner's* audience was that the series finale, filmed in three days and edited in a hurry as the series was both canceled and overbudget, offered no closure, no easy interpretation, and no direct or correct meaning; in fact, elements of absurdity, chaos and a kinetic energy uncharacteristic of the earlier episodes seemed not only to resist interpretation but also to imply that perhaps the whole thing had no meaning. One final, specific problem was the finale's final scene: Number 6 driving down a long road in his Lotus 7, the scene recognizably identical to the opening shot of the title sequence, one that began the first episode and (nearly) every episode thereafter<sup>1</sup>.

That the final scene was the same as the first shot of the opening was apparent to an audience that had viewed the opening sequence week after week. With this final shot, the finale's viewers could sense that Number 6 had either not actually

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<sup>1</sup> The only two episodes not to include the standard opening sequence were the unusual, Western-themed episode "Living in Harmony" and the finale itself; as a continuation of the preceding "Once upon a Time," the finale began where the prior episode left off and then ran the title credits and an extended title theme over an aerial shot of the Village, also revealing for the first time the identity of the location as the Welsh Hotel Portmeirion.

escaped from the Village, or had only escaped in order to begin the whole story again, as a cycle: to resign from his job (again), to be (re)captured and brought (back) to the Village, from which (again) repeatedly to attempt escape. The experience of the repeated scene occurs either as an explicit moment of recognition: "It's going back to the beginning"; or as an intuited or "felt" sense like that of *déjà vu* that robs the final scene, the escape, of its authenticity: it's constrained within a language of previously-aired ("stock") footage that preexists the action now being depicted onscreen as new.

Rather than bringing the abstruse series to a conclusion and answering the questions the show had provoked, the finale's final sequence implied circular narrative, one in which the "conclusion" linked up again to the beginning and for which there was no release point allowing for an ending (in the logic of *The Prisoner*, no escape)<sup>2</sup>. This circularity became even more apparent to later viewers of the series on VHS or DVD. The reprise of the opening "road scene" at the conclusion of the series embodies not just a return of the original action -- through which time becomes circular -- but also the question of whether here anything new is possible. The final shot as a gesture of return retains an indefinite quality, becoming perhaps an opening. The prisoner must resist through the escape attempt even though the escape attempt fails; yet his resistance in the face of failure manifests the chance of

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<sup>2</sup> Deliberately incongruous elements that appear throughout the last ten minutes of the finale seemed to prompt this "circuit" reading from its audience. Most notably, G's apartment door in London is shown opening automatically, something it had not done when it was shown at earlier points in the series. The unlocked and automatic door was a distinctive feature of the *replicated* apartments within the Village, representative of the Village's "open" (nonprivate) society and culture of surveillance. The door's final inclusion in the London home implies a flattening not just of the two times but also of these two spaces (London/Village) and two conditions (free/imprisoned).

difference -- it may be different this time. Alternately, the inauthentic, replicant gesture confronts the audience. Not only does the final footage, as stock video from the series' opening shot, preexist that last action's place within the narrative, but also by so doing it both predicts and defines the (visible) form that the final action takes. A persistent subtext of the series questions whether meaningful action can take place, whether those acts can take us new places, within a control society (Deleuze 1992) that both prescribes and predicts social behavior. The final shot of the finale evokes that same misgiving, makes it urgent, and even confronts the viewer with the question of whether his or her personal investment in the series could itself have had any meaning, since the protagonist's "resistance" week after week has in the end taken both him and us nowhere.

### **Hasn't He Done This Before?**

The opening "road scene's" reprise at the series' conclusion makes obvious the type of time implicit in the earlier episodes. That is, the individual episodes don't simply describe moments within a larger story, but carry within each of them through repetition an insinuation of circularity. This insinuation of circularity creates an alternate type of understanding where, contrary to a modern expectation of forward (narrative) progress, in fact the introductory (title) series of events (driving, resigning, drugging, relocation) is *recurrent* in each episode. Every episode begins with the resignation/relocation event. Could it not have been the actual event *each time* and not just a representation of that event? Each episode is superimposed upon the

others, the resignation enacted 15 times. Each successive story becomes a slightly different manifestation of the same repeated event, ultimately leading to a stalemate ending (Number 6 fails to escape, Number 2 fails to get his information). These events therefore carry with them the implication of an inevitability, felt by the audience -- we're watching him go through it again.

If the conclusion helps make obvious the type of time implicitly present in the earlier episodes, these earlier episodes have already created a logic outside of (linear) narrative convention, generating an interpretive space where events challenge linearity and continuity and anticipate a time that is "out of joint." As a fine example of this, in the episode "Many Happy Returns," Number 6 awakens to an inexplicably deserted Village. Over time he builds a boat and embarks on a long journey of escape, eventually and unexpectedly winding up in the second half of the hour-long episode in the heart of downtown London (in a very disorienting sequence in which 6 climbs out the back of a moving vehicle in which he has stowed away and lands in the middle of a busy traffic rotary). He returns to his apartment (which now has a new owner), gets back his old car, and drives back to the office from which he resigned (this time in order to expose the existence of the secret and sinister Village -- or is his own government in on it?). During this driving scene, shots from the title sequence, those now-familiar images replayed at the beginning of every episode, are intercut with shots of Number 6 at this new moment. This has the effect of flattening the two different times -- one past and one present -- into a single event. A new close-up of the driving McGoochan with longer hair and a tired look intersects

with a familiar title shot of the Lotus 7; another new image of McGooohan precedes a title shot of the car first entering (now returning to) the office garage. McGooohan then repeats the familiar action of flinging open the same double doors, now wearing a white instead of a black shirt. The whole sequence unfolds with a reprise of the dramatic *title* music playing loudly over top -- abruptly cut off this time by the unexpected introduction of new dialogue. The successful return is a pleasurable moment for an audience that's used to seeing its protagonist fail, but it's severely undercut by the expectation of his failure here being inevitable (after all, we've seen this scene before!). On the simplest level, the repetition of these title sequence shots reminds us as viewers of how badly 6's resignation went the first time; simply put, we know this strategy, this action, doesn't work. On a more complicated level, this iteration of the same shots and the same actions taken by the lead character at two different chronological points in the same episode reveals a slippage or dissociation of the image and event from naturalized or sequential time (see the following page for visuals illustrating the repeated gesture).



***Resigned to Return:*** “Many Happy Returns” is one of numerous episodes in which 6 repeats the gesture of opening the double doors so prominent in the title sequence. Each time, the event is revisited visually, here as the original, the return, in a different body, and as a recurrent dream sequence projected (Top Left: Title Sequence; Top Right: “Many Happy Returns”; Lower Left: “Do Not Forsake Me, Oh My Darling”; Lower Right: “A. B. and C.”).

## GOING NOWHERE: THE ROUND TRIP

When Deleuze speaks of the action image undergoing a crisis, he gives special attention to the round-trip, the "continual return journey." This voyage form replaces the sensory-motor schema of directed action, which, once possible and able to effect change, is now lost. Deleuze divided his work on film into two volumes. *Cinema 1* addresses what he terms the movement image or action image typical of early cinema and much of commercial film today; *Cinema 2* discusses the time image described earlier in this chapter, in which time is freed from its subordinate position relative to movement. He attributes the break that leads to the new time image, which constitutes a new way of thinking, to the particular political, economic, social, and artistic conditions emergent especially following World War II. These conditions challenged the legitimacy of such (modernist) conceits of historical continuity and causality, narrative totality, and the linkage of situation to action; in their place emerge open and irreducible forms. He writes that, "[now] we hardly believe any longer that a global situation can give rise to an action which is capable of modifying it -- no more than we believe that an action can force a situation to disclose itself, even partially ... We need new signs" (Deleuze *Cinema 1*, 206).

The voyage form and several other characteristics constitute the break but do not "constitute the [new mental] image although they make it possible" (Deleuze *Cinema 1*, 215). Many of these elements, among these a "consciousness of clichés" (meaning that slips away from the characters and places represented), the insinuation

of a (self-perpetuating) global conspiracy that is not localizable to an individual or an agency, and a general, underlying “condemnation of the plot,” all appear in *The Prisoner*, if tempered by the conservative and narrative tendencies of entertainment television (Deleuze *Cinema 1*, 210). None, however, is more central to the operation of the 1967 series than the “continual return journey” that aggressively replaces “the sensory-motor action or situation” of the old action image (Deleuze *Cinema 1*, 208). The round-trip as “a question of undoing space” (John Cassavetes, quoted in Deleuze *Cinema 1*, 208) is central to an analysis of the series as it calls into question the legitimacy of the action image, the directed actions and their results, so prevalent in television’s reassuring fictions.

With the return journey, the S-A-S' form Deleuze elaborates (Situation - Action - Modified Situation) in *Cinema 1* is replaced by a form where action leads perpetually back into an unmodified situation. *The Prisoner* evokes this space of the round trip. The protagonist Number 6 exists as a hero within this older narrative form, as a reduplicated John Drake and refugee from normal television fiction: fiction which, like classical Hollywood cinema, maintains action as the necessary and effective condition for the story. Only here, this new version of Drake is thrown into a space where action is impossible, meaningless, and always leads back into itself, the point of departure becoming the site of arrival. In fact, the series begins with an episode entitled, "Arrival." So here an arrival, normally marking the endpoint or destination of a journey, describes instead the beginning of the story (and possibly, if we maintain that the whole series is cyclical, a return).

The show indulges in this round-trip form, with each episode subverting the narrative structure of the classical television and film text. Rather than a disruption-of-order/action/return-to-order, repeated episodes describe instead a capture/action of escape/recapture (and sustain in the audience a (*sometimes* pleasurable) frustration). Within each episode, genre expectations are undermined according to this logic of "going nowhere." The conventional "action scene" and accompanying action theme music are used at inappropriate times, that is, when an action takes place but spatial movement isn't really happening. One such chase sequence has Number 6 driving one of the low-speed, golf cart-like Village taxis (6 quickly learns to refuse rides since walking is faster, with one driver informing him, "In emergencies, we walk"), and pursued by a giant gliding white balloon. Scenes in both the pilot episode and "Schizoid Man" feature helicopter trips that appear to promise escape but, as in "Arrival" when the controls are remotely overridden, become just another round-trip, beginning and ending at the Village heliport. Also of note is the inherent problematic of a series that is shot "on location" -- at great expense relative to the standard studio production -- but in one place, a small and isolated Welsh village. Besides being responsible for the prohibitive costs that led to the series' cancellation, this production condition undermined the well-established expectation that both spy and adventure series, in travelogue fashion, should transport the audience to "exotic" global locations (maintaining television's seductive role as a domestically situated window to the world). Movement throughout *The Prisoner* is spatially collapsed.

## Multivalent McGoohan

Throughout the series, 6's relentless activity -- driving, pacing, running, escaping, and, as described by Number 2, "Always walking! Irritating man!" -- is juxtaposed with a reflectiveness established by the significant number of reaction shots; 6 the action hero becomes 6 the observer, his constant movement giving way to a reflection necessitated by an inability to act. These two divergent states might be visually summarized by the editorial decision McGoohan made when he made a series of final edits to the title events<sup>3</sup>. The 6 who had been originally represented in the title sequence as physically responding in fear to the displacement of his apartment yields to a 6 whose face is unresponsive, since there is no way to react to the rupture with which he is confronted. Not only is 6's face unresponsive; its blankness literally fills the screen: first a scene of the Village green is presented for our consideration from the point of view of the protagonist as he looks out the window; this is followed by his blank stare. 6's face becomes a blank screen and a tangible break from all of the movements that preceded it.

Correspondingly, throughout the series 6 is portrayed as a body in motion while his facial expressions are usually unresponsive. Within the narrative this might suggest 6's resolute and impassive approach to a persistent opposition, but as imagistic strategy it resonates strongly with the postmodern, which Deleuze, who does not use that term, might align with cinema's move from a motion and emotion-

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<sup>3</sup> Footage of the early edit of the title sequence may be viewed at the beginning of the alternate version of the pilot episode, "Arrival" (dir. Don Chaffey), featured in *The Prisoner: 35th Anniversary Companion DVD* (ITV DVD: 2002).

oriented condition (established through illusions of seamlessness) toward a state where characters onscreen, confronted by the loss of causal linkage and their own inability to act, now function as observers. With the collapse of the action image, characters are assimilated into spectators, observing events and landscapes along with the film's viewer. As an action hero unable to act, *The Prisoner's* Number 6 oscillates between subject positions of protagonist and spectator, corresponding to the series' precarious navigation of modern and postmodern epistemologies.

#### **"WHERE AM I?": SLIPPAGE OF SPATIAL LOGIC IN *THE PRISONER***

The interior of the prison is designed to implement a sophisticated program of psychological manipulation and control: barless windows, a pastel color plan, prison staff in preppy blazers, well-tended patio shrubbery, a hotel-type reception area, nine recreation areas with nautilus workout equipment, and so on. (Davis 257)

Here Mike Davis assesses the Metropolitan Detention Center in Downtown Los Angeles, one of many examples of the city's "bad postmodernism" and patterns for the future of urban design detailed in *City of Quartz* (1990). He might equally well have been describing down to detail *The Prisoner's* Village, where a resort atmosphere and amenities create an illusion of comfort and choice. And as Davis points out, what makes the arrangement of this type of place so sinister is that, having denied its captives the contrast of oppressive imprisonment conditions, it likewise denies them the psychological capacity to envision the freedom that lies outside:

Its upscale ambience is more than mere façade ... the psychic cost of so much attention to prison aesthetics is insidious. As one inmate whispered to me in a course of the tour, "Can you imagine the mindfuck of being locked up in a Holiday Inn?" (Davis 257)

The conditions both of the Village and of the English society to which the prisoner seeks return disguise behind an appearance of choice a repression of options, and hence their reality as oppressive control regimes; here, you can do whatever you want as long as what you want to do is what they want you to do.

Additionally, the Portmeirion resort denies the setting of the TV program a specific geographical, and arguably national or temporal, visual identity as instead a remix of relocated "fallen buildings." The location of the Village was hinted at during the series as being in Lithuania, then an island off the coast of Morocco; the final episode revealed the secret identity of the show's filming location as Northern Wales. Portmeirion's bricolage sets the tone for a series predicated upon spatial interruption and disruption, and the accompanying "shock" of this disruption.

These displacements create the sense that geography has gone by the wayside and that one can no longer rely upon a Cartesian sense of space as a starting point for action. This idea is summarized early in the series' pilot by a playful scene (with the obligatory humorless implications) depicting an exchange between 6 and a Village shopkeeper on the day 6 arrives:

*SHOPKEEPER: Good morning. What can I do for you then?*

*NUMBER 6: I'd like a map of this area.*

*SHOPKEEPER: A map? Color or black-and-white?*

*NUMBER 6: Just a map*

*SHOPKEEPER: A map ... Here we are sir. I think you'll find that shows everything.*

*Number 6 unfolds the map on the counter. It depicts only the Village, with its various buildings labeled, surrounded on three sides by mountains (labeled "The Mountains") and on the fourth by water, labeled "The Sea."*

*NUMBER 6: I ... I meant a larger map.*

*SHOPKEEPER: Only in color, sir. Much more expens--*

*NUMBER 6: That's fine.*

*The shopkeeper hands Number 6 a map. Number 6 unfolds the second map the shopkeeper has handed to him, revealing a diagram identical to the first, this time printed on a larger scale and, as promised, in color.*

Principal among the series' spatial displacements is, of course, the dislocation of 6's apartment shown in the opening credits. Situated first in downtown London, the apartment is visually displaced when 6 opens the window blinds to reveal to him and to us its new situation -- the Village. A return to the real apartment back in London in "Many Happy Returns" is met by doubt from both protagonist and TV viewer; the authenticity of the original has been compromised by its Village simulation. Similar displacements take place throughout the series. 6 undertakes a lengthy voyage of escape in "The Chimes of Big Ben," traveling at last as a stowaway contained within a freight shipper on a commercial liner. Ultimately, however, the government office in which he ends up, complete with the persons he reports to, is unmasked as a set-up, the London office a replica that is located -- where else? -- back in the Village from which he began his escape. The office door is opened to reveal this new linkage: the London office opens up onto a Village courtyard.

In "A. B. and C." Village officials hope to uncover the reasons behind his resignation by infiltrating 6's dreams, which are broadcast on a giant projection screen. The final act of the episode culminates in 6 opening the doors of the Parisian church in which, in his dream, he has met and unmasked his captor. The church

doors flung open (*again* visually recapitulating the title sequence's gesture) reveal the Village as the true location of the drama, impossibly linking the space of the church to the space of the Village. To further undertake this compression of space, the 6 projected on the screen (dreamt by the real 6, drugged and asleep on a cot below the projection) next deliberately makes his way onscreen through the projected Village and into the same lab in which the experiment is taking place. The doors of the lab onscreen slide open mechanically, prompting the actual officials, Number 2 and the scientist Number 14, to turn toward the *real* door, which remains closed. Displaced by their representative images within the dream/projection, the two officials can only watch the drama onscreen unfold as their projected selves confront the intruder 6 onscreen while the real 6 lies sleeping on the laboratory cot. Onscreen, 6 reveals to Number 2 that the concealed documents he's secured are actually travel brochures, nothing more. The sequence ends with 6 lying down on the cot projected on the screen; the illusion that representation and that which is represented are the same is now restored as the 6 onscreen and the 6 in the lab coincide, the dream broadcast ending with the resumption of the predictable projected images of the memory of his resignation (looped footage taken from the familiar title sequence).

## INTERPRETATIONS (WATCHING WITH THE LIGHTS ON)

As stated earlier, the series lasted only 17 episodes. Although the program was originally conceived of as a seven-part miniseries by its production crew, financier Grade requested that a total of 26 episodes be filmed so that the program could later be sold in syndication. It never received the ratings it needed, and, despite a small loyal following, the series was canceled midway through its anticipated run. During its original broadcast the program gained notoriety among the general British and American publics; likewise it received mixed critical reviews for its unconventional style and its allegorical indulgence (Chapman 50- 51). Upon its rebroadcast in the mid-seventies, a community of fans grew around the show, making the series one of the first TV programs to have a "cult" following and giving the program life well beyond its air-dates.

Deleuze only briefly considers television, discussing how the medium has informed cinema (for example, television anticipated an independence of audio and visual elements) but had not yet itself engendered art. Beyond its function as a commercial space, the television screen as a technological apparatus manifests “an opaque surface ... on which characters, objects and words are inscribed as ‘data’” (Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 266); television has remained largely a device of transcription and transmission, and hence information and control. Beyond its distinctive technology and transmission, the viewing practices and conditions associated with television are very different from those associated with film. Specifically, the attention level (often dilute), location (within a domestic and social space versus within the "black cube"

that forms the film's (debatably) ideal immersive environment), scale, and even a TV show's relationships to the other programs and ads surrounding it place the television program within a significantly different space of popular consciousness.

The fact that TV audiences have not therefore entered into the same "contract" as have those of film and particularly art film arguably makes dubious an attempt to create alternative or disruptive programming; TV programs created for the primetime broadcast environment necessarily could not stray too far or for too long from established narrative and generic conventions. On the other hand, by the 1960s, primetime TV programs on the major networks had the potential to reach a much larger and certainly less rarefied viewing public than the noncommercial cinema Deleuze considers. In fact, television had largely replaced film as the medium serving the public consensus function (Thorburn 161-173). Arguably, there was also not the critical distance and detachment enabled by the "black cube"; instead, television infiltrated the private and domestic spaces of American and British homes (Zielinski 187, 201). Embedded within these specifics of TV viewing practice was the potential for subversion: for critique of the social conditions in which TV actively existed, influenced and was influenced by. So while *The Prisoner*, through its storyline of surveillance and control (Village residents are continuously monitored by video even at home, with the TV serving as a two-way transmission unit), critiqued the intrusion of the public into private spaces, the show itself encroached upon these same spaces with its own message.

There is necessarily a redundancy and limitation to the scope and sophistication of the program's social critique, especially within a medium that might be characterized as having early on dispensed with the high/low distinctions upon which this critique is based; in 1967 TV was already reflexive, increasingly multi-vocal, inconsistent, self-critical, and certainly not easily reduced to one thing. However, the expression of false time and incommensurate space within a conventional narrative served as an additional strategy to destabilize the televisual conventions that *The Prisoner* as a primetime program necessarily employed. Roland Barthes's writings on image and meaning in film can be applied here (Barthes 46-68). *The Prisoner* can easily be viewed at the immediate level of entertainment -- an adventure series complete with the requisite fights, chase scenes, intrigue, and the concluding "reveal" -- offering frustration and reward to its audience. At the level of the symbolic, the second-order level of signification and Barthes's "second meaning," it offers among other things a cautionary tale about the social construction and control of the individual and a critique of TV that dismantles the clichés of the adventure and spy genres. Barthes (perhaps erroneously) contends that the "third meaning" can only be truly felt through freezing the filmic image, revealing disjuncture between the illusion of the story and its constructedness as film. In a series-form TV program the type of analysis engendered by the freeze frame is paralleled through the series' repetitions. Reinforced over time and through iteration, the repeated image and repeated sequence on TV, like the film still, establishes its presence, and, refusing to be ignored, must similarly be reexamined when it is

revisited. In the case of *The Prisoner*, this third-meaning analogue communicates through the series' impossible repetitions the sense that something is off, that some part of time is out of joint.

This understanding isn't communicated directly to or experienced directly by the viewing audience; instead, it is intuited, *felt*. Therefore, the fact that time is out of joint is not in *The Prisoner* what the program is "about" (as a series, *The Prisoner* was deliberately resistant to clear meaning), but rather creates the environment or atmosphere in which the episodes then take place, the (visual) space surrounding the story. Through the series' sustained spatio-temporal "weirdness" -- the sense throughout that something is off, communicated through the seams in the story's unity and the gaps and leaps in continuity discussed throughout this paper -- the program is able to convey meaning beyond the symbolic as *feeling* experienced by an audience engaged in normal television viewing practice<sup>4</sup>.

Throughout the series, in fact, repetitions and disjunctions challenge each episode's ability to sustain both spatial illusion and continuity of events. This set of disjunctions culminates in the series finale, of course, which *chooses* not to fulfill the obligations of either the completion of the narrative or the maintenance of a physically coherent space (no viewer believes that London is actually accessible by a short trip by highway from the Village). Slippage and spillage become pleasures of

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<sup>4</sup> The symbolic second-order level itself often requires a *specialized* kind of reading to unpack the potential meanings layered within and throughout a series, carrying with it the implication that complexities with a program can only be appreciated by a select and limited group of viewers that engage the text using this practice of decoding, and that "good" television subscribe to a literary model.

the text. All of the series' repetitions and inconsistencies may remind us of our own agencies and complicities as viewers, ones who willingly accept (or reject) agreed-upon viewing practices in order to work to sustain or to deconstruct through an active negotiation the illusion of the narrative presented to us.

\* \* \* \* \*

By making use of series form TV fiction's specifically repetitive format, *The Prisoner* found within the terms and limitations of the adventure series the conditions to create something new. The program reveals a time and space normally invisible and questions through audience memory the stability of events. Repetition produces disruption that performs a kind of violence to normal perception, showing a time outside of the naturalized sensory-motor schema not unlike the time image Deleuze describes in cinema.

Throughout the series, the familiar Modernist critique of contemporary society and its mass media present within the episode storylines works at cross-purposes with the problematic implicit when the "enlightened" modernist subject, the "individual," is revealed as ineffectual and incapable of action by an insistent postmodern reconfiguration of both space and time. On one hand, through the episodic, repetitive structure of the series form, the program seems to question whether autonomous action is in fact possible in a postmodern scheme. The actions of the hero, repeated indefinitely, seem to become inevitable; Number 6 becomes an agent without agency, imprisoned within totalizing systems of control and information that predict and predicate his every act. However, at

the same time these same actions become *unknowable*. There is an inherent falsity to these acts. Moments seep into one another, present actions lead up to earlier events, and times become indistinct -- all of which ultimately implies a space outside of determinacy, and perhaps a space of escape not unlike what Number 6 seeks. Spatial and temporal disjuncture creates an open or ambiguous time where, in the finale for instance, escape is both foreclosed and enabled within the same moment. Ultimately, the complex formed by the interaction between actual yet incompatible versions of places and events allows the series to exist as open, as a space in which a return might yield new trajectories of thought.



### 3. "I WON'T NEED BACKUP, BUT I WILL NEED CLOTHES": IMAGE AND THE FASHIONED SELF IN TELEVISION'S *ALIAS* (2001-2006)

Most of the women characters in *The Prisoner* assume positions traditionally afforded to them by the spy genre: agency doctors and scientists, desperate young women in need of help and potentially decoys, a few *femme fatales*, and two particularly fashionable lady spies. However, the women serving as the Village's Number 2 (three among a total of fourteen officials in this position over the course of the seventeen episodes are female) all, significantly and unlike their male counterparts, engage in a literal masquerade in order to access a narrative power that makes these three episodes among the most unnerving. The woman Number 2 in the episode, "Dance of the Dead," begins to create an opening for women characters beyond their conventional spy series roles when she hosts a masquerade ball dressed as Peter Pan. Dressed in drag as a whimsical character who is a boy who does not grow up and who is traditionally performed by a woman, 2 positions herself ambiguously relative to gender, to reality, to power and the social. As an authority figure Number 2 presents herself visually as both fairytale character and child; yet she is arguably made more menacing in the episode by doing so.

This literal masquerade is succeeded by two other instances that exemplify

masquerade as the strategic and detached redeployment of the signifier (here, instances of visual iconography of “woman”); in the world of *The Prisoner*, the concept of masquerade is activated particularly by women. Particularly, the women Number 2s in "Free for All" and "Many Happy Returns" do not reveal their positions until the end of the episode, performing variants on femininity that conceal these characters' hidden power. For all but the final shot of "Free for All," the woman who will be revealed as the Village leader serves as a maid and assistant to Number 6 as he runs for office in a "democratic" free election. The man who from the beginning identifies himself as Number 2 and serves ostensibly as 6's opponent in the campaign is in fact simply another decoy. Not only does the real Number 2 serve as Number 6's maid; she, much to 6's annoyance, "doesn't even speak English." Throughout the episode she displays a childlike enthusiasm, her actions are unexplained, and her speech is, quite simply, incomprehensible, all facets through which she performs an infantileness. It is from this position that her final "reveal" derives its power and conveys shock to the audience, proving to be one of the cruelest spoils of the series.

The Number 2 of "Many Happy Returns" also won't be revealed as such until the very end of that episode. She is encountered first, in London, as "Mrs. Butterworth," a very stylish and welcoming widow who has since 6's abduction purchased the lease on his old apartment and the title to his Lotus 7. Upon 6's return and intrusion upon his old home, she invites him inside and serves him tea, sandwiches and some very good fruitcake. She also offers 6 the use of the car for his return to his old headquarters and the clothes that she's kept from her departed

husband.

Here, a performance of feminine altruism, English hospitality, and a casual elegance that announces a certain indifference characteristic of upperclass British society conceal a much more sinister, engaged reality. Her real function as Number 2 and Village chieftain here, unlike the performed incompetence that gives way to underlying control in the case of "Free for All"'s Maid/2, is quite compatible with her performance of Mrs. Butterworth; implicit in this game of masquerade is the fact that Mrs. Butterworth's politeness, fashionability, and seeming effortlessness, like that of Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway, marks a disengagement from the affairs of men. In fact Mrs. Butterworth's nonchalance and generosity -- "You would help a person who was in need, wouldn't you?" she asks of an ostensible government investigator and actual Village collaborator -- return as double signifiers, simultaneously concealing and facilitating her direct engagement in G's captivity and recapture. This same feminine performance secures a trust and complicity in G that makes him willingly participate in his own re-imprisonment, her mannerisms the direct conditions of both G's escape and return. Revealed in this particular Number 2 is feminine grace and tact, positions which have been historically viewed particularly from a masculinist perspective as frivolous and nonthreatening, and from which women have been traditionally licensed to exert influence. What complicates this episode's particular masquerade is that the detached position 2 takes is not essential to her being but rather deliberately performed; through this performance, 2's assumption of a dual subject position within the narrative activates a space of production and positive action for the

character. As if to acknowledge that the strategy by which she has successfully released and recaptured the prisoner is here a privilege of the feminine and the multiple positions from which a *woman* particularly might drive the story, upon 6's unwitting return to the Village Number 2 bakes him a cake.

The power to create new situations wielded by the disguised women of *The Prisoner* emanates from positions which are 1) restricted in the sense that these characters all work within the visual clichés and stereotypes culturally afforded to them as female, 2) significant in that the inconstancy of these multiple and often contradictory clichés results in an energy from which new meanings might be generated, and 3) localizable largely to these characters' *visual presentation*, which evoke symbolic and cultural associations that resonate above and beyond the individual moments of the characters performed onscreen. Visually incongruous images such as the maid repeatedly slapping the protagonist, the London widow abruptly turning up in the Village apartment with a birthday cake, or the sophisticated lady spy helplessly begging for help (a manufactured dream-image in "A. B. and C.") all betray a slippage where (symbolic) meaning pulls away from these clichés, leading to disruptive images that reveal "something else" behind the representation.



Women characters, who are more likely than their male counterparts to be coded as culturally specific rather than universal figures, serve as sites specifically suited for these elisions, which in turn create spaces for the expression of complicated new concepts. These incongruous images function in a manner analogous to the formal spatial and temporal displacements abundant in the series and described earlier.

### ***ALIAS*: SHE FASHIONS HER IMAGE AND HER ENVIRONMENT**

In *The Prisoner*, all female characters of consequence and authority engage in masquerade; in *Alias*, masquerade enters a space of hyperbole. The floating subject positions normally ascribed to multiple characters within women's melodramatic stories are activated within *Alias* by a single character who tailors multiple versions of herself through constantly-changing fashions. While *Alias* activates ideas of how masquerade constitutes the female subject, the program additionally through its especially excessive and accelerated, unending transformation of the fashioned self illustrates how image resonates with memory and how the fashionable image in particular might signify beyond the image or object it presents. In *Alias* the image of fashion, as Caroline Evans suggests, acts as an emblem or metaphor activating a network of meanings. I see in the image of *Alias*'s heroine Sydney Bristow a strategy of movement opposite to that of *The Prisoner*'s Number 6. Within the space of melodrama, *Alias*'s fashionable protagonist emerges as a heroine adept at constituting space as network, destabilizing linear notions of truth and travel as she navigates

through a postmodern landscape.

### THE MELODRAMATIC TEXT

*Alias* (2001 - 2006) is both explicitly and implicitly linked to melodrama. The program was the second show by creator JJ Abrams (who, like Joss Whedon (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Firefly*) and David E. Kelley (*The Practice*, *Ally McBeal*) is regarded as a kind of TV *auteur*); his first work, *Felicity* (1998-2002), along with *Party of Five* and *Dawson's Creek* helped establish the emergent genre of the teen drama on the upstart Warner Brothers TV network. *Alias* adopted a tone similar to that of its predecessor, hybridizing the teen drama with the fantasy spy thriller. Among *Alias*'s immediate fan base was a crowd of viewers, many of them young women, who had followed Abrams to ABC's *Alias*, which debuted soon before the series *Felicity* concluded. *Alias* maintained some of *Felicity*'s staple traits, including a young woman protagonist, two central competing love interests, and drama that centered on friends and family. Of course, these arguably mundane dramatic concerns were inflated to hyperbolic proportions by the additional layer of spy genre conventions: the accompanying secret missions, double crosses, gunfights and explosions.

Both the teen drama and the spy genre aspects of *Alias* align themselves with melodrama. Although the melodramatic thrives in both so-called “masculine” and “feminine” genres, melodrama remains closely linked within contemporary popular imagination with stories for women. In cinema, women's films, unlike films that

belong most apparently to a specific, critically-established genre -- the Western, the gangster film, *film noir* -- do not fall into another obvious generic category first. Therefore, although women's films, the Western, the gangster film, and *film noir* all often contain melodramatic plot devices and formal qualities, women's films in particular have become both critically considered and popularly understood to exemplify the melodramatic in cinema (Williams 50). Melodrama is regarded popularly as both excessive and emotional, and is therefore linked to the idea of femininity. Furthermore, melodrama's direct presentation rather than symbolic representation is conceptually connected to woman's direct relationship, her closeness, to the real (this as opposed to masculinity's symbolic distance). Both melodrama and women's texts have been similarly critically and popularly devalued as "cheap" and unartistic.

The fantasy spy genre, less obviously (because it is regarded as a predominantly masculine form) than the teen relationship drama, participates in the construction of the melodramatic by presenting a Manichaean view of the world (simply, good versus evil) and excessive signification in a dramatic attempt to imbue ordinary life with spiritual meaning -- what Peter Brooks calls the "moral occult" (Brooks 32). In the spy genre, the political and sociological conflicts embodied in the espionage narrative are both personalized and assigned moral and ideological meaning, meaning developed through such formal elements of *mise en scene*, visual spectacle, bodily gesture, and music.

Women's popular, melodramatic texts, particularly soap operas and romance

novels have been the subject of numerous audience and reception studies. By interviewing women regarding their relationship to these types of text and their embedded characters, theorists including Tania Modleski and Ien Ang have argued that their textual pleasure emerges from audience engagement with "floating subject positions," in which the viewer aligns herself variously with multiple characters within the narrative. These multiple characters reflect the multiple subject positions that women in contemporary western society occupy. That is, contemporary women are asked to play multiple, often incompatible roles in their daily lives (for example, reductively, the choices between career and family that a woman may be asked to make). More generally, the female subject is necessarily decentered because she lives outside of the symbolic order. Society has no language to fully describe her role, nor to inscribe her within a single, centralized and stable identity position. She remains on the periphery of societal narrative. Linking the structure and reception of the soap opera to the lives of the women who read them for pleasure, Tania Modleski states that, "women are, in their lives, their work, and in certain forms of their pleasure, already decentered -- 'off-center'" (Modleski 105). Similarly, Ien Ang analyzed the reception of primetime soap *Dallas*, stating, "the adoption of a feminine subjectivity is never definitive but always partial and shaky: in other words, being a woman implies a never-ending *process* of becoming a feminine subject -- no one subject position can ever cover satisfactorily all the problems and desires an individual woman encounters" (Ang 94).

## Many Roles, Many Disguises

I am interested in the case of the female protagonist within the nominally masculine genre of the fantasy spy thriller, because I feel that she as a single character has the potential to embody the multiple subject positions normally embodied by the multiple characters in the soap opera, the romance novel, or other women's texts. Arguably, in a non-melodramatic text an individual, central character normally exhibits a complex range of emotional states. Melodrama takes these emotional and moral states and assigns to each a separate character within its story. This is a simplification of the proposed distinction between a dramatic form like tragedy and melodrama. However, in the case of a spy show like *Alias*, which is clearly melodramatic and in which the different characters do embody different emotional and moral positions, the individual female protagonist, through both her actions and her appearance becomes reduplicated into multiple selves occupying multiple positions within the narrative. This is a complication of character that bridges the distinction between "complex" narrative and melodrama's direct scheme of signification. What emerges is a kind of liminal figure here articulated through the language of fashion, one who is both a fragmented character (less than whole) in response to social demands and a woman who is greater than whole -- who is literally many people within a single self.

In *Alias*, protagonist Sydney Bristow's multiple identities include both her "real" and her assumed identities. Sydney balances (and fails to balance) her multiple roles of secret agent, double agent, friend to her acquaintances outside of the agency,

daughter, and graduate student. These identities, real roles within the narrative, are complicated by the identities she assumes -- Sydney's disguises -- which form the central pleasure of the show. These different assumed identities are represented by elaborate costumes, which portray archetypes -- ideas of women taken from popular culture and particularly popular entertainment media imagery.



In a single program, Sydney assumes as many as four or five of these disguises, these in addition to the instances in which she is shown dressed for her different “real” roles, both dressed up for the office end of work and casual, relaxed at home. These disguises, these fashions, both emphasize and literalize the already apparent fragmentation Sydney feels from trying to balance the incompatible roles that form the basis of her life. Additionally, they illustrate concepts developed by Kaja

Silverman and Mary Ann Doane about gender, identity, fashion and the masquerade.

One cannot overemphasize that Sydney's disguises are fashions. Her outfits do not usually conceal her physical appearance much beyond the requisite wig and occasional pair of sunglasses; however, her shifting fashions as cultural transformations afford Sydney almost unlimited access to different social and cultural situations. Her appropriation of fashion is consistent with Anne Hollander's and Kaja Silverman's assertions that it is fashion that shapes social and cultural identity and specifically class and gender identity. "Clothing draws the body," writes Silverman, "so that it can be culturally seen, and articulates it as a meaningful form"; "dress is one of the most important cultural implements for articulating and territorializing human corporeality, ... for fixing a sexual identity" (Silverman 189-190).

Particularly, Kaja Silverman maintains that emphasis has shifted from fashion as defining class toward fashion as defining and fixing gender identity: "class distinctions have 'softened' and gender distinctions have 'hardened' since the end of the eighteenth-century" (Silverman 191). Accordingly, the sartorial conventions that define masculine identity as stable and constant and feminine identity as capricious and mercurial, even volatile, suggest an idea of female identity that has the potential to be destabilizing. "The endless transformations within female clothing construct female sexuality and subjectivity in ways that are at least potentially disruptive, both of gender and of the symbolic order, which is predicated upon continuity and coherence" (Silverman 192). However, this suggestion of subversion is bounded by

the fact that women's fashion is based upon an opposition to male stability. The "fashion that constructs a new female body every year" (Silverman 192), through its dependence upon and maintenance of the illusion of male constancy, ultimately reinforces the symbolic order it would otherwise subvert.

## **Masquerade**

In an article cited by Silverman, Mary Ann Doane develops the concept of masquerade as it relates to cinematic depictions of women and to female spectatorship (Doane 131-145). Laura Mulvey has famously argued that classical cinema privileges a male gaze, positing an active and controlling, masculine viewing subject and a passive, to-be-looked-at female object (Mulvey 6-18). In this scenario, woman is too close to the object of cinematic representation to enjoy the position of subject or of viewer. While Mulvey suggests that female spectatorship therefore relies upon an oscillation between male and female, viewer and viewed positions, and by extension a kind of spectatorial transvestism, Doane proposes the concept of masquerade as an alternate way to understand female spectatorship. "Masquerade," she writes, "is not as recuperable as transvestism [transvestism, like the ever-changing nature of female dress, reaffirms the social order that necessitates it] precisely because it [masquerade] constitutes an acknowledgment that it is femininity itself which is constructed as mask -- as the decorative layer which conceals a non-identity" (Doane 138). Doane continues,

The masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance. Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed. The masquerade's resistance to

patriarchal positioning would therefore lie in its denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as presence to itself, as, precisely, imagistic. ... By destabilizing the image, the masquerade confounds the masculine structure of the look. It effects a defamiliarization of female iconography ... disarticulating male systems of viewing" (Doane 139).

Returning to Silverman's language (regarding "retro" fashion), the masquerade similarly reveals itself as "a sartorial strategy that works to denaturalize the wearer's specular identity" (Silverman 194). Simply put, the masquerade reveals itself as constructed. In doing so it demonstrates woman's ability to distance herself from the image, and hence both to read it and to create it (Doane 143).

Certainly, this process of defamiliarization accounts for how the image of woman functions in *Alias* as fashion that simultaneously draws and conceals an identity. In fact, the program effects an acceleration of the masquerade, where the replication of fashion and by extension the fashioned identity, spy mission after spy mission, episode after episode, undermines the viewer's sense that the protagonist can be represented by any one visual cliché, or indeed that she can be represented at all. Sydney dons identities as fashions, literalizing Silverman's assertion that fashion in many ways *is* identity. Simultaneously, Sydney at any moment both is and isn't as she appears; the fashion functions as social identity but is also quickly cast off as pretense. Sydney's social performance ends as soon as she is outside of the space of the other characters' vision (but still within our own).

## ALIAS'S TITLE SEQUENCE, BERGSON'S CATWALK

The excessiveness of the replication and the frequent transformation of Sydney's image, this multiplication of possible selves, is made obvious by the series' most recent title sequence. The first three seasons of the series were unusual in that the title sequence featured no images. Although the show itself traded in appearances, for two minutes a blank, black screen formed the backdrop to the title credits, over which the single letters of the word "ALIAS" ("A" followed by "L", followed by "I", *etc.*) emerged and, strobing and accompanied by occasional lens flares, spun into fixed positions on the screen.



Read metaphorically, this sequence spoke to the unknowability of the heroine's appearance, and hence the indefinability of her subjectivity. Simply put, the alias conceals the identity. However, by the fourth season a new title sequence was introduced, one in which the alias *is* the identity. Now images of Sydney in her multiple disguises, culled from the episodes of earlier seasons, appear in such rapid succession that they almost seem to morph into one another.



In opposition to an idea of disguise, here costuming announces itself through its repetition and its obviousness, to the extent that it has subsumed the entire title sequence, declaring itself the dominant theme of the program.

This new title sequence makes explicit how these appearances, these fashions, collude and fuse into a composite perception of who this character is. The fourth season title sequence literalizes (and animates through movement) the process of perception's and memory's role in the formation of the image that Henri Bergson describes in *Matter and Memory* (1988). While doing so, the title sequence calls to mind a second fashionable metaphor in addition to the masquerade -- that of the catwalk. In the fashion show, the multiple styles presented by models on the catwalk fuse, through movement and sequencing not unlike cinema, into a perception image that, through these multiple instances, creates an embodiment of what Dior Spring '05 is.

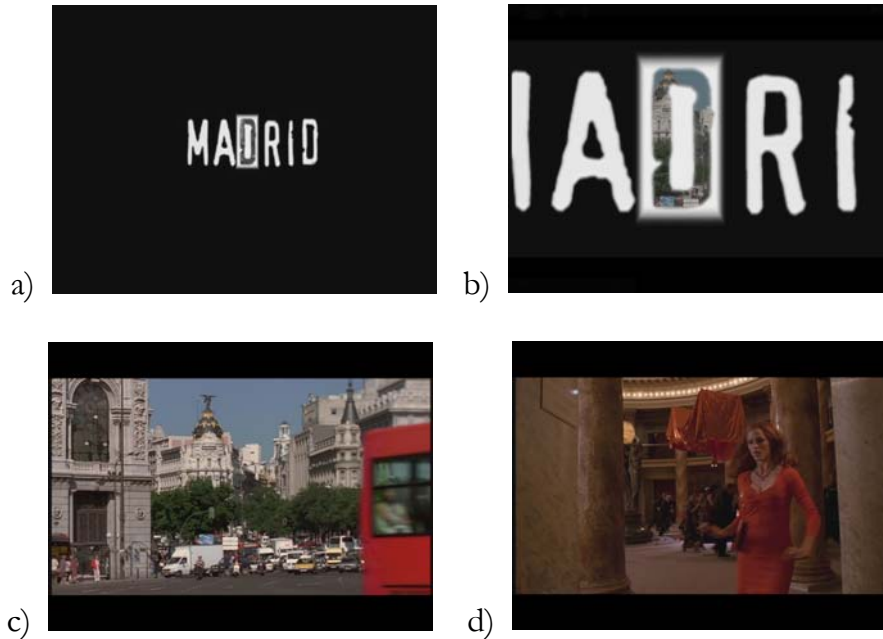
The collection proper becomes something greater than the sum of its constituent parts, of the individual instances of woman and dress that appear and disappear in succession on stage. Additionally, *Alias*'s title sequence as runway show references the experience of reading images – of leafing through -- a fashion magazine. The different ads and images, creations of different designers photographed through different lenses, combine into a fluid and mobile, moving and shifting idea of the *image of fashion*, evoking associations well beyond the present moment of its pages.

Lastly, these instances of compounded moments -- the literalness of multiplicity in *Alias*'s title sequence, its evocation of the catwalk and by extension the fashion magazine -- suggest a relationship to the episodic nature of television. In TV viewing, each episode becomes superimposed upon the others, creating layers of memories of image, action, character, and space that transform -- *e.g.*, inform, affirm, contest -- the meaning of each present moment. As such, television generates a Bergsonian catwalk; TV resonates with the experience of fashion as movement, as ephemeral and transitory, and channels fashion's "peculiar attraction of limitation" (Simmel 303). All of the above associations suggest that the total *experience* of Sydney's changing appearance as a manifestation of fashion exploits the associative process of memory normally involved in reading the image. I shall return to this point later.

## THE IDENTITY OF PLACE: MAKING A SPATIAL LOGIC IN *ALIAS*

In *Alias*, physical space itself becomes an extension of the masquerade. The spaces of melodrama express the psychic life of the characters that inhabit them. This is a symptom of melodrama's excess -- that the abundance of emotion and signification spills over from the characters into the spaces that they inhabit, making these spaces expressive and significant (Elsaesser 52, 56-57). In keeping with its melodramatic character, the space of *Alias* reflects a similar attitude toward material effect as its fashionable protagonist. Episodes feature as many professed exotic and cosmopolitan locations as the different identities that Sydney's costume changes suggest; space disguises itself as specific place.

In *Alias*, the identities of mission locations are established through both imagistic and textual strategies. In keeping with the convention of the television spy series, place is first established through a headline that grounds the viewer, followed by a shot (that, in the case of *Alias*, actually visually emerges from within the text) immediately recognizable as signifying the named place -- a landmark, a vista, piece of architecture, busy street or marketplace. This establishing shot is followed at last by the place in which the narrative will unfold, often a soundstage or substitute location dressed according to an idea of what the professed location's interior space should most resemble given its cultural identity.



While this form of sequence -- movement from text to image-landmark to image-interior -- does not vary greatly from the convention of the establishing shot, the spaces of *Alias* particularly do not sustain the illusion of reality or of permanence that the establishing shot normally establishes. *Alias*'s places are obviously fictional, constructed, and, if scrutinized, collapse as faked. And, as I will describe below, this scrutiny is inevitable and it takes the form of the protagonist's own movement through the space.

In melodrama, critical or analytical looking is normally discouraged; melodrama pulls the audience into its world of exaggeration, seducing rather than shocking it. "Believability" as an evaluative consideration yields to an emotional form of truth -- it "feels" right. However, in *Alias* there is a tension between this specifically melodramatic type of signification and the disjuncture that the masquerade -- a specifically *apparent* and *repetitive* form of the masquerade -- generates.

While melodrama asks us not scrutinize, Sydney's own movements do just the opposite. As she moves from an initial room, associated with a specific geographic location by the strategy described earlier (*e.g.*, "Madrid"), toward her ultimate goal -- a hideout, secret laboratory, vault, or underground lair -- Sydney through her trajectory undresses the very space that was only just established as a specific place. She passes from a specific location into an anonymous space, a stairwell or a hallway perhaps, no longer singular but instead an any-space-whatever.

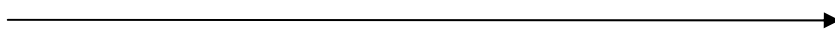
Origin

In transit

Destination



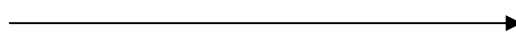
"Madrid"



Vault



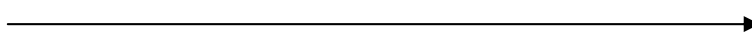
"Los Angeles"



Secret headquarters



"Taipei"



Laboratory

This mediating non-space serves as a conduit, connecting her point of origin to her destination. Her original location conceals a sinister secret, an underground truth that is entirely distinct and that feels geographically incompatible. These two places that are one are impossibly different, so that we might think of every location in *Alias* as having several irreconcilable identities and thereby participating in masquerade. It's not that either place is the reality, the other an illusion. Space *itself* is produced, the way gender must be produced.

It is these white spaces (not always white but always non-particular, generic) in which I am interested because they visibly call into question meaning and fixity in identity, and because they serve as conduits networking all these different spatial identities. In London, Sydney moves away from the white space of an art gallery, minimally attired with paintings and patrons to resemble an *idea of a gallery*, into an any-white-space. The gallery folds open into a hallway that, beyond connecting the gallery to Sydney's objective (an office containing a hidden vault), ultimately becomes a non-space -- all white, all empty.



Here then is an instance of a person who is not as she appears engaging a space that is also, apparently, not as *it* appears.<sup>5</sup>

The non-space's lack of identity calls into question all prior and latter assertions of geography; location is all affect achieved through effect, all in the attiring of space. Abstracted, free from association to particular location<sup>6</sup>, the white halls beyond *Alias*'s ballrooms, nightclubs, and villas reveal the places they connect as clearly constructed, as accessorized the way Sydney herself accessorizes, her outfits creating a social identity rather than the sustained illusion of a different face. Like the fashionable woman updating her wardrobe, the well-dressed spaces of *Alias* become agreed-upon places through a few well-chosen accents.

Sydney's actions, her movements through these different zones, dress and undress the space -- deconstructing and reconstituting place as somewhere else, exposing the masquerade. Ultimately, space in *Alias* is mapped in name only, while an almost obsessive use of hallways implies a postmodern landscape where space is networked in such a way that characters can create real connections between different geographic nodes by assuming different identities.

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<sup>5</sup> The identities of the spaces of *Alias* are already undermined by their high rate of turnover, which functions to deny the spectator familiarity. This distinction is illustrated in the "felt" difference between the Las Vegas or Boston of the *CSI* or *Ally McBeal* series and the Madrid/Berlin/Santiago/Archangelsk of a single *Alias* episode -- the latter places don't have time to establish themselves as real through either repetition or through a population of particularly well-chosen objects, and exist instead only as fashioned impressions. The repetition of location has the same effect as Sydney's constantly changing fashions.

<sup>6</sup> White space and black space read in film and television as pure light/dark and therefore as contentless. However, Mark Wigley points out that the architectural white space itself is a fashion, a recognizable Modernist trope of purity and formalism set up (interestingly) in opposition to the artifice of fashion (Wigley 149-267). Nevertheless, at the very least the white spaces of *Alias* are dressed as "nowhere," and read accordingly as its conceptual analog.

Additionally, there is an issue of reciprocity in *Alias*: just as Sydney constitutes the space, the space constitutes Sydney. Just as these spaces need her to connect them to one another, to engineer these rooms into a meaningful spatial configuration, the heavy turnover of her fashion demands of the narrative changing spaces to accommodate Sydney. She needs these spaces to remain in focus.

Sydney maintains her centrality in the narrative because the space that contains her constantly changes. Space folds again and again to accommodate the female protagonist -- she is a shifting center. She cannot resign from this position (spies can *never* resign), cannot rest and become a fixed center. She is (socially) inscribed in this indeterminate role, and her movement through space folds that space accordingly. The female spy is thus well-suited for the postmodern narrative because, as decentered subject, as shape-shifter and fashion's emissary, she has a hand on every narrative thread. Within the series it is her partner Marcus Dixon who becomes a point of fixity, a false center. When working in tandem with Sydney, Dixon repeatedly creates distractions in order to keep his marks static, away from the real action of Sydney's intrusions into the (significant) periphery.

### **DIALECTICAL IMAGE: THE FASHIONED IMAGE AS POWER OF THE NEW**

The use of the fashioned image as a symbolic tool ultimately helps the subject evade becoming trapped within symbolic order; in *Alias* dress is adopted in order to subvert the system that otherwise inscribes the self. However, beyond this

subversion, the potential of the image of woman is revealed in *Alias* particularly through disguises that do not mask an identity but create fashionable images with social and symbolic power. The conceit of the emblem that Carolyn Evans explores helps us extend the concepts of masquerade and fashion. Evans discusses fashion as creating charged images that function like Renaissance emblems, as icons that deploy symbolic and associative language.

Evans describes how in the contemporary moment the images of fashion actually create the real, functioning as networks that have reach beyond fashion's prior status as object. The image has the power to *mean* something, to *evoke*, as does a metaphor or an allegory: "If the fetishized commodity became image in the late twentieth century, it began to function more like a Renaissance emblem than a commodity per se, as the image became flooded with meaning." Evans asserts, "fashion images, like emblems or metaphors, are by their very nature densely packed with meanings which may be both complex and contradictory." And as such, fashion designers themselves become "fabulists," their work "profoundly narrative" (Evans 99-100).

The fantasy embodied by *Alias* is that perhaps, like the "semaphore of secret signals of the future" that Walter Benjamin finds contained within fashion's transformations, the fashionable woman has access to a coded language from which she generates a third meaning (Benjamin, quoted in Evans 102). She is no longer confined to (and by extension, inscribed by) semiotic, symbolic language but -- maybe even, by her implicit closeness to this language, to the sign that seeks to represent her

-- able to create something more, something that is beyond signification. By employing masquerade, Sydney may be doing more than dissociating the image from its object (in this case, her image from herself) in order to reclaim the position of subject. Instead, the disguises that are assumed here become, through resonance within a society where fashion, image, and especially the image of woman functions as spectacle and as network, emblems with associative power.

This implicit power occasionally seeps into the explicit areas of *Alias*'s narrative, becoming real power manifested through kinetic, cause-and-effect relationships. A telling example of this occurs early in Season Three, where Sydney must reclaim a position of authority within her agency (and, in doing so, free her imprisoned father). Within the show's narrative, this power-play takes the form of a solo, rogue mission to recover a microchip. She tells her source she does not need backup, "but I will need clothes." She dons a red dress, and it is the initial assumption by the audience that this dress will give Sydney through her appearance access to a particular place or situation. Instead, this expected narrative pretense collapses in a sequence that functions on a purely symbolic visual and auditory level.

Sydney stands in the middle of an empty street in Prague as by chance the car carrying her adversary/target and his henchmen slowly approaches. The camera pauses on Sydney before an abrupt pan to her matching red handbag, from which she draws a handheld rocket launcher, aims, and shoots at the oncoming car.



It would seem that in this case, the red dress has served no purpose beyond allowing Sydney to blow up the car. The dress itself imparts a kind of power or resonance through its presence that quite literally causes the explosion -- the explosion emanates from the dress as an emblem of power, as associating with all previous instances, cultural representations, of *the red dress* and what *the woman* in the red dress means.

While this kind of total slippage from reality (even in the loose sense of melodramatic reality) is rare in the series, it illustrates what has been going on all along. Every disguise, as fashion object deterritorialized, accesses a field of associations from which it generates power that is greater than the fashion object or its wearer, greater even than the sum of the instances of fashion that it evokes.

The fashioned self moves beyond mere inversion. In the contemporary moment, the masquerade does not merely reclaim women's power over the image of woman by problematizing that image; when invoking the fashionable image-emblem,

masquerade activates what Stephan Georg names the *Denkbild*, or "thought-image," "a way of writing with hieroglyphic clarity in which objects are steeped in traces and energies, electric with significance. ... Around each image others come into being, forming a field of analogies, symmetries, confrontations" (Evans 100). The fashion image carries traces of the instability and transience that have always characterized fashion, traces that allow it the fluidity to be reconfigured to mean something new, giving it a generative property.

\* \* \* \* \*

In *Alias*, the attempt to represent a female lead using the trope of fashion leads to the elaboration of a complicated visual space. The series' melodramatic format -- similar to soap opera in its narrative complexity, structure of interpersonal relationships, and seemingly endless serial storyline -- constitutes its lead character as decentered both through her roles within the narrative and through the series' constant visual reinvention of her appearance. What emerges is a complicated effort to describe the complexity and contradictions of Sydney Bristow's place as a woman in society. By attempting to overdetermine its protagonist by inscribing her in as many different fashions as it takes, what is represented is the very failure to represent that occurs through masquerade; by definition, every fashion is replaced by a new one as soon as it becomes established. This frustration is accompanied by a positivity where the female subject creates new meaning precisely because she occupies a space

outside of stable representation, networking images rather than occupying them. Fashion produces new meaning out of a socially-determined language of images that, as emblems, carry historical and cultural weight and resonance. In *Alias*, the image of the fashioned woman slips outside of more narrow accounts of degradation and empowerment, emancipation and repression based upon older models of representation, and toward a discussion of how images circulate and animate thought. The use of masquerade in *Alias* creates a new space for Sydney as female protagonist and for the female spectator and fan. It is a space outside of space that takes the form of the network, and it embodies a larger strategy to make sense of, engage in, occupy and create from the contemporary moment a space of pleasure and possibility for the female subject.



## 4. CONCLUSION

In *The Prisoner*, a modern hero must make sense of a landscape of discontinuities and repetitions that challenge his ability to act, react, move, and escape. In *Alias*, a postmodern heroine must master the art of changing selves in order to move across spaces that, like her own identity, are conditional and are never what they initially appear. In both series, the image, freed from an obligation to represent only one thing while ruling out others and made multiple by the TV episode format, assumes a resonance over its duration that creates the conditions for the depiction of fluid and changeable spaces and characters. In both cases, the image repeated enables a paradigm shift where the depiction of a decentered protagonist, once exceptional, now becomes a normative subject on television.

## IDENTITY AND MULTIPLES

### “Welcome to Your Home from Home”



When, in an episode partway through the series, the protagonist of *The Prisoner* finally returns to his apartment in London, he can't believe what he sees. This isn't because the apartment and the things inside have radically changed since his absence; they haven't. On the contrary, his disbelief arises from of a sameness. He stands and simply observes things inside for several moments; he then approaches the individual items of furniture in a mannered, sequential fashion, picking up objects, touching surfaces, taking them in. This activity gives presence, tangibility, to these objects, not just for the story's protagonist but also for the TV viewer; the activity is paralleled by a larger *mapping* of the space that takes the form of an overhead shot revealing to the TV viewer for the first time the layout of the familiar apartment. This really *is* his apartment, everything in its place. His disbelief subsides. As does ours.

The audience like the prisoner has experienced this place many times before. We've known it first as "the real thing," the London apartment depicted (and revisited) in the title sequence of every episode we've watched. In the titles, the original apartment's exterior and interior are shown only briefly and in wide, sweeping camera movements as a background to the restless back-and-forth actions of the

protagonist packing at his home. Then, later, we've known this place through the nefarious simulated apartment to which the protagonist has been displaced within the sinister prison known as the Village. During each individual episode, the protagonist and his captors interact domestically within a replica of the original flat, their movements and tasks inside this space presented in a manner that allows us to really see into the space and experience its interior in the leisurely manner that the title sequence never allowed.

The two apartments are basically identical; there are practical physical differences between the two sets, most notably a fourth wall that, if we remember from the pilot episode, slid up and out of the way in the Village apartment to reveal the kitchen, bedroom, and bath, making the physical space accessible to the actions of the characters and the camera, and giving the set an open versus claustrophobic feel. Virtually fashioned the same by way of the objects and furnishings contained within, it is up to different narrative situations and the exterior shots provided as the character leaves the space to distinguish where the particular instance of apartment we view is supposed to be situated.

So when, in the episode "Many Happy Returns," the protagonist escapes home to the "real" apartment that has prior to now only been shown to us quickly and distractedly in that opening sequence, it must now be reconciled with the *impression* of the space that has been formed over the past weeks. Having been displaced by the Village simulation with which we are familiar through previous episodes, the London flat must now be recuperated as authentic. For 6, this

recuperation includes restoring his relationship to the space: 6 is himself both narratively displaced -- he has been absent-- and visually displaced as he arrives at the apartment on foot and as the new owner pulls up, as he himself has been shown repeatedly in the titles, in his old car; he must make overtures toward this new owner to establish the authenticity of his connection to that space by describing particularities of the apartment, paralleling his own need to reconnect to the space by, while alone, walking through and touching elements of the space. Having been displaced to a simulated location, it would seem he has had his own authenticity compromised as a person who is now literally out of place.

The return to the apartment presents a new relationship between the two spaces, the authentic and the copy, speaking to questions of representation and simulation, identity and difference: the simulated apartment becomes the basis for our knowledge of the "real," re-placing that reality. Spatial disjuncture and collapse is facilitated repeatedly by visuals in the individual episode, "Many Happy Returns": 1) through the appearance and substitution of the original apartment by the simulated apartment enacted within the title sequence, 2) through an extended scene taking place within the simulated apartment at the beginning of the episode, 3) through the return depicted in which 6 encounters the real apartment from which he has been displaced, and, later, 4) through his reinstatement within the simulated apartment when a reconnaissance mission is sabotaged. All of these events occur within the single episode.

But just as significantly, this disjuncture and collapse has been further

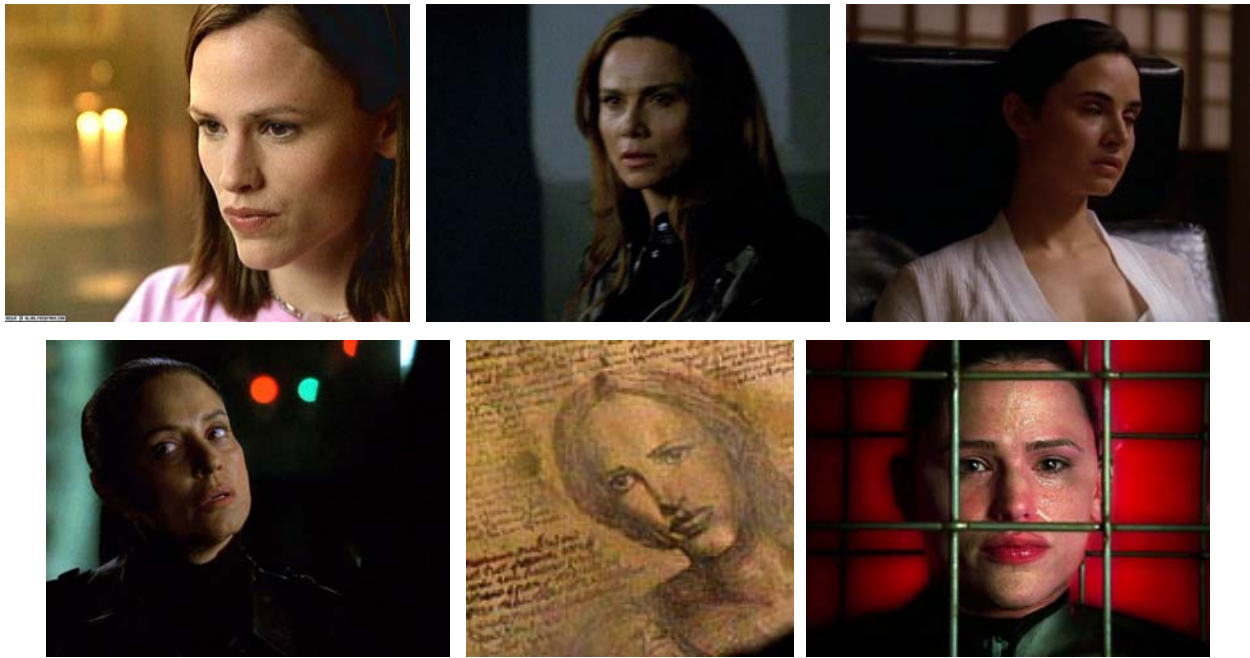
facilitated by all prior episodes, literally the audience's own many happy returns: the substitution of the original by the simulated apartment continually repeated within each showing of the title sequence, and extended sequences set with the simulated apartment during the earlier episodes of the series that we viewed. Although they are not intended to be serialized, episodes prior nonetheless reinforce our impression of what is happening now, what is present now, how "now" should be represented. Although a non-serialized episodic TV program like *The Prisoner* (the standard format for shows in the mid-1960s) disavows the presence of a memory linking the events of its individual episodes, it nonetheless -- through its necessary activation of the *memory of its audience* -- creates networks of trace and of meaning that allow the series and images contained within to exist in a changeable, unstable state of flux and transformation. The experience of viewing the series is contingent and inseparable from this memory process.

### **No One True Self**

In *The Prisoner*, the repetition of a shared appearance contradicts the narrative insistence that the original apartment and the simulated apartment are two distinct and separate places. This contradiction forms an unstable impression of a place that is neither London nor Village but is also a combination of both, a third apartment perhaps, the identity of which is constantly being reworked as the series progresses. The identity of this place is non-localizable, instead contingent upon circumstances. It is unstable, and is constantly being called in to question; instability opens up the

space of the story to allow for the existence of multiples through the operation of the visual memory of the audience.

Likewise, the multiplication of visual signifiers in *Alias* has the effect of challenging the authenticity and authority of individual identity. In *Alias* the multiplication of subject positions for the protagonist Sydney Bristow, embodied by her many disguises, is mirrored by a literal multiplication of selves represented through a proliferation of instances of characters that *look* like Sydney. The image of Sydney is obviously and deliberately reflected in the appearance of her mother Irina, an evil and enigmatic superspy, her two aunts and Irina's sisters (powerful and dangerous women in their own right), and Sydney's half-sister Nadia. The attractive actresses Jennifer Garner (Sydney), Lena Olin (Irina), Isabella Rossellini (Katya), Sonia Braga (Elena), and Mia Maestro (Nadia), despite being of two generations, share similar build and physical traits made more apparent by the long dark hair (Rossellini the exception with short hair), classic yet minimal makeup style, and the (frequent) close-fitting dark outfits that their characters all wear.



*Upper left to right: Sydney, Irina, Nadia;  
lower left to right: Elena, page 43 of the prophecy, Altered Anna.*

Add to this roster of look-alike superwomen a 15th century drawing of a woman, significant to the series' storyline and frequently visually revisited, that appears to strongly resemble Sydney (or is that Irena? Or Nadia?), the duplicated "evil self" Sydney dreams of and battles, and a real-world doppelgänger, her arch nemesis Anna genetically altered to exactly duplicate Sydney's appearance. Through the associative nature of the image, these characters not only reflect Sydney's appearance but both multiply and animate it, becoming multiple alternative versions -- unrealized but potential identities -- of Sydney herself.

Melodramatically these characters visually signify the confusion of identity and the flirtation with schizophrenia that the fragmented protagonist experiences within the plot of the series. Activated by their emergence and reappearances throughout the episodes and seasons of the series, they do more than this. The multiples

question the stability and the knowability of Sydney's identity and experience; could she, like her mother, betray those who care about her? Could she really bring about the end of the world as prophesied by the drawing? Unlike the disguises, within the narrative the multiple selves named and pictured in the paragraph above create a composite identity that is both fashioned and co-opted, not entirely the product of individual agency or the environment that would prescribe it. It doesn't belong to the individual, yet the individual negotiates, subverts, or innovates within its terms to create something new. Most significantly, through this idea of multiple simultaneous selves, here activated by the televisual image, the future opens up to possibilities of the self that the present fails to contain; the protagonist's image multiplied in the images of these many others dilates the protagonist's identity as "simultaneous alternatives" of a self that is both enacted and contested. As Jim Collins asserts, "what is so interesting about television . . . -- and popular culture in a Post-Modern context -- is the simultaneity of the original and its multiple rearticulations" (Collins 269). Collins writes about the intertextual environment of television programming as a whole, with its multiplication of choice and its reflexivity. I would add that not just between TV series and channels but even within the TV series isolated, an episodic, time-based visual presentation allows for a mobilization of character and identity, challenging notions of fixity and even contingency.

## THE FILMIC IN TV STUDIES

Through a discussion of the third meaning, Roland Barthes arrives at the concept of the "filmic."

The filmic is that in the film which cannot be described, the representation which cannot be represented. The filmic begins only where language and metalanguage end. The filmic ... lies ... in that region where articulated language is no longer more than approximative and where another language begins (Barthes 64-65).

Barthes describes how certain elements of film are not reducible to story, meaning, or symbolism, existing instead at a level that language cannot fully describe or circumscribe:

The obtuse meaning is not in the language-system (even that of symbols). Take away the obtuse meaning in communication and signification still remains, still circulates, still comes through: without it I can still state and read. ... in other words, the obtuse meaning is not situated structurally, a semantologist would not agree as to its objective existence ... The obtuse meaning is outside (articulated) language while nevertheless within interlocution. For if you look at the images I am describing, you can see this meaning, we can agree on it 'over the shoulder' or 'on the back' of articulated language. Thanks to the image ... or much rather thanks to what, in the image, is purely image (which is in fact very little), we do without language yet never cease to understand one another. (Barthes 60-61)

This paper tries to sustain within its analyses a sense of something akin to the filmic of which Barthes writes, perhaps here best called the "televisual." Like film, television speaks through image, sound, and movement; the episodic instances of images developed on TV may be alternately consistent, discontinuous, variable, and multiple. Similarly, this televisuality opens up a discussion of the medium to possibilities that might otherwise be overlooked. For example, at the second-order level of signification, the activity of an action heroine would be at odds with her appearance in an evening gown (as in Singer 224); semantically the combination

appears as a contradiction, a conflict of meanings, of passive and active archetypes. However, considered in the context and terms of the Image, it makes perfect sense -- the gown articulates a visual power that is in synergy with the physical power of a hyperkinetic body.

### TELEVISION POSTFEMINISM

If, as Deleuze suggests, “we need new signs,” TV fashions these signs accordingly by supplying an environment ideal to describe characters that exemplify the emergence of the postmodern subject. As described earlier in this thesis, women in particular seem to make good decentered characters on television because they occupy a more marginalized place within society than their male counterparts. Linking Postmodernism with Fashion as discourse (“fashion ... is a world of constant change, transformations, shifting surfaces” (Gibson 355)), Pamela Church Gibson suggests that

women's involvement with fashion -- women's identification with fashion, the identification of women with fashion -- can be read positively, as identifying women with a world of contingent material surfaces, as opposed to the world of ideas and the spirit that has constituted the intellectual world of patriarchy ... A material politics of fashion, then, might involve a positive (rather than a moralistic or critical) thinking of fashion, insofar as it recognizes and works with fashion as an instrument crucial to the destabilization or deconstruction of identity politics. (Gibson 356)

Amanda D. Lotz (2001) reminds us that when we speak of women characters on broadcast TV, we are speaking typically about *white, upper-middle-class* women.

Likewise, the type of feminism(s) these characters embody is specifically a liberal feminism and a non-radical version of liberal feminism at that (Lotz 110); TV's woman, in negotiating commercial and cultural constraints, emerges as a consensus embodiment of both the working women and of feminism. Lotz helpfully traces the progression of contemporary representations of women and feminism on television from TV's "new women" popularized in the 1970s through today's more complicated or nuanced "new, new women;" however, she falls short when she describes a solution to the failure that she perceives in TV criticism to fully describe these characters' complexities and their significance in embodying elements of the contemporary postfeminist moment.

Lotz writes, "postfeminism is a more useful critical tool when it can be used simply to identify ideas evident in texts, ideas that may be contested internally" (Lotz 115). She then suggests that postfeminist perspectives on television can be described as: "narratives that explore the diverse relations to power women inhabit" (115); "depictions of varied feminist solutions and loose organizations of activism" (116); narrative representations of how the contemporary struggles faced by women and feminists are raised and examined within TV series (116). She also suggests that the analyst "deconstruct binary categories of gender and sexuality, instead viewing these categories as flexible and indistinct," explicitly evoking Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and Donna Haraway (Lotz 117). However, Lotz then grounds this proposition within the very literal example of a transvestite character in an episode of *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002). Likewise, the examples of how lawyers in *Ally McBeal* deal with sexual

harassment in the workplace, how the women of *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) seek out romantic companions, or how Amy Gray deals with motherhood after divorce in *Judging Amy* (1999-2005) serve as sites for the new type of inquiry that Lotz elaborates (Lotz 115-116). Although Lotz claims that she does not “seek to identify series, episodes, or characters as postfeminist, or set up a formula whereby a series/ episode/ character should be classified as postfeminist, as in if X many attributes are present then Y is postfeminist” (Lotz 115), this formula limits postfeminist perspectives on TV to the bodies of its female characters.

I focus on Lotz’s essay because it is typical of much feminist TV criticism in that it grounds identity politics explicitly in the bodies of and literal storylines about women characters, and because in fact Lotz specifically evokes a critical remediation in the name of postfeminism. Obviously, cultural ideas about gender and feminism are represented by how women characters are treated within the plots of television series, making them logical places to focus; however, the way we think about gender and identity is also reflected *throughout* TV’s stories. Limiting a discussion of gender and identity politics to the moments that Lotz and others identify, the bodies and narrative situations of women particularly, restricts discussion, often reducing it to an elaboration of binaries. That is, describing the many ways that women characters corroborate or complicate cultural categories of gender ultimately reinforces and stabilizes the same categories that these characters are often professed to challenge and that postfeminism would have us think beyond.

So although this thesis is not explicitly about women, it is still very much about women in that it is about the spaces in which and the movements by which identity, as Butler suggests, may be enacted. Movement within prescribed spaces, movement between and outside of these spaces, and spaces themselves that move, fold inward and outward. Spaces that create new characters and characters that create new spaces. As such, I hope to have engaged in an analysis that has built into itself the possibility for as yet unseen trajectories for subjects that have yet to be determined.

\* \* \* \* \*

Embedded in the arguments developed throughout this thesis is the argument that characters and environments on TV today express ideas about identity formation, construction, and migration; this expression is enhanced by their visual quality and is synchronous with Gibson's "destabilization or deconstruction of identity politics." Today's televisual image reflects a tension between providing a consensus or reassurance function and contradicting the stability upon which consensus depictions often depend with unstable characters and landscapes perhaps more consistent with the instability and flux of real-world, postmodern conditions. Moving away from an idea that identity and particularly gender politics are on display selectively through TV's women, I suggest that any attempt to characterize gender as a discourse on television needs to include a larger view to how categories of identity

are challenged *throughout* TV's fictions. Such an inquiry is well-served by an analysis that recognizes the specificity of the "visual" on TV, and the visual's characteristic ability both to fix and to unsettle the objects, places, and characters represented by the image. Characters may be both described and defined by their image, but the image itself escapes from a purely signifying function through its associative and affective capacity. Image evokes well beyond representation; television studies broadly, and especially targeted postfeminist interrogations of television, must consider this fact.



## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

**CHAPTER 2:** *All images are screen captures, episodes listed below, from The Prisoner TV series except on page 39 as indicated; all Chapter 2 captures taken by author.*

- Page 31: Upper row, left to right: Title Sequence; Title Sequence; "Free for All."  
Lower row, left to right: "A Change of Mind"; "Arrival"; "Fall Out."
- Page 32: Left: "Fall Out"; Right: "Arrival."
- Page 38: All images, Title Sequence.
- Page 39: Left to right: *I Spy* Title Sequence, "So Long, Patrick Henry" (Season 1, Episode 1); *The Avengers* Title Sequence, "Death at Bargain Prices" (Season 4, Episode 4); *The Saint* Title Sequence, "Legacy for the Saint" (Season 6, Episode 4).
- Page 45: Top row, left to right: Title Sequence; "Many Happy Returns."  
Lower row, left to right: "Do Not Forsake Me, Oh My Darling"; "A. B. and C."

**CHAPTER 3:** *All images are screen captures from episodes of Alias except on page 64 as indicated. Captures taken as indicated by author or from Alias screen capture archive at [alias-media.com](http://alias-media.com) (<http://alias-media.com>).*

- Page 64: Left to right: "Free for All"; "Many Happy Returns"; "A. B. and C."; all three stills from *The Prisoner*, captures by author.
- Page 70: Images from various episodes; all, [alias-media.com](http://alias-media.com).
- Page 74: Season 3 Title Sequence, capture by author.
- Page 75: All four images from Season 4 Title Sequence, [alias-media.com](http://alias-media.com).
- Page 78: All four images from "Parity" (Season 1, Episode 3); captures by author.
- Page 79: Various episodes; captures by author.
- Page 80: All, "Doppelgänger" (Season 1, Episode 5); left image, [alias-media.com](http://alias-media.com); center and right images, captures by author.
- Page 85: Top row: both "The Two" (Season 3, Episode 1), [alias-media.com](http://alias-media.com)  
Lower row: both "The Two"; left by author; right, [alias-media.com](http://alias-media.com).

### CHAPTER 4:

- Page 90: "Many Happy Returns," *The Prisoner*; capture by author.
- Page 95: Various episodes, *Alias*; [alias-media.com](http://alias-media.com).

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