

Rania Stephan Isn't It About Time

in collaboration with
Stefan Tarnowski



Beirut Lebanon
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1.

It always starts with a folder where images pile up in a vertical column.

The images exist in all formats. Some have names, titles and authors, others only numbers, file extensions and data.

Some of the captured images are taken with my phone, others are downloaded, copied, pasted, pirated, grabbed as screenshots on my desktop.

The images come from all kinds of media: films, TV series, social media, YouTube, photos, posters, illustrations, paintings, drawings.

They rest there, in disorder. I look at them regularly, scrolling.

A rhizomatic map starts to be drawn in my head with invisible lines linking them. A constellation appears in a parallel world in my mind.

From the whirl of images that I cross, capture, and keep, a new ecosystem emerges offering the possibility of a line, a form, or maybe even a story, which can illuminate, if only ephemerally, the uncertain wavering of any creation.







2.

For a long time, I resisted television and series. I came from another space-time paradigm: cinephilia. Two visions confronted each other. The possibility of cinema's poetic logic on the one hand, against the storytelling logic of the series on the other.¹

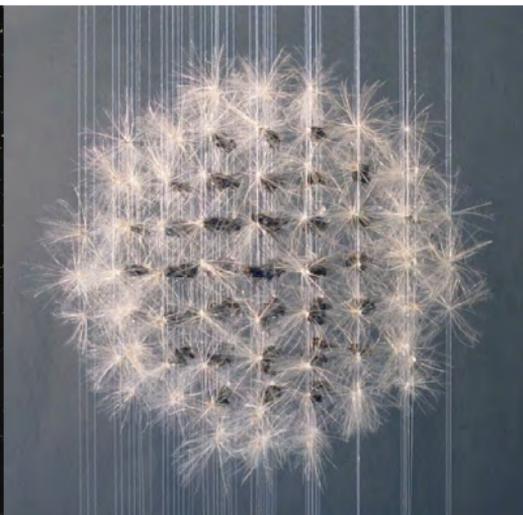
It was *Twin Peaks*, David Lynch's iconic work, that marked the arrival of cinema in television like a train entering the station, an aesthetic revolution.

However, it is through my research on science fiction that I became fascinated with series. A new universe opened up for me. Another experience of viewing, of being a spectator, of seeing different registers of images and narrations.

The first thing that troubled me was trying to understand why I could never remember a shot in a series while I remembered almost every shot of the films I love.

I found that watching a series is like being in a flow, in a kind of liquid time where different narrative lines are weaved into a fabric making the driving force of a series, a time we might call the meanwhile.

¹ Ariane Hudelet, Ce que les séries télévisées font à la discipline des "études filmiques", <https://doi.org/10.4000/tvseries.7533>



A serie's narrative often rests on the close-up, where characters say what is happening in an action-reaction shot structure. Images don't stand alone.

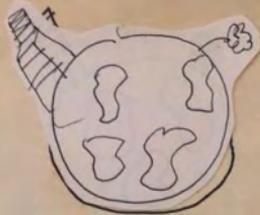
Watching a series is about being in a certain atmosphere that one longs to rejoin, a universe one yearns to inhabit, but also to leave and return to, intact, with an obsessive-compulsive cozy familiarity.

What was compelling was that I wanted to be there again, in this particular space, and glide through that narrative time, with these characters who grew on me, with me, episode after episode, over time, over years.

What one seeks in a series is the repetition of the same with variations, narrative arcs that stretch to the limit.

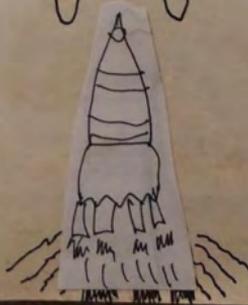
This universe looks like a sky studded with seemingly identical stars where one cannot retain a single image of them.

What makes the experience of series so fascinating is that their construction and experience resemble the proliferation, fragmentation, interconnection and instability of reality outside.

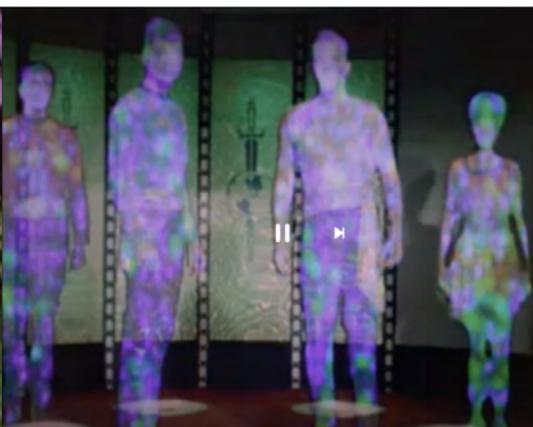


THERE'S A PLACE IN THE SKY
IT'S CALLED THE MOON

action
reaction
action
reaction
action
reaction







3.

Star Trek, the original season, was the first series I was hooked on as a kid. We didn't have a television and I needed to get impeccable school grades for my parents to allow me to watch the series at our neighbors, who had a huge Grundig TV set.

"Beam me up, Scotty" was the magic refrain. Being teleported from one space to another instantly, in the present, inside a glittering beam was mesmerizing. Even though it was not exactly uttered in the original series, it became a popular saying.

In *Beam me now*, the beam is transfixed in an in-between space and lasting present.



4.

One of the *Fringe* science fiction series' loglines is: "There is more than one of everything".

Science fiction series quote extensively from cinema; often it is more than just quoting, it's like mirroring.

Contrary to the cinephile's anxiety that film has been eclipsed by streaming platforms and the proliferation of the serial format, some suggest that cinema has become invisible as a medium because it has become ubiquitous; meaning that its specific imagery, its way of framing the world and us within it, but also distinct from it, has become the default value of the real.²

In today's polymorphic visual landscape, we have to consider the multiplicity of media rather than the dominance of one medium over another.

² Thomas Elsaesser, *Film History as Media Archaeology*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2016.



In *Corridor Two*, Olivia Dunham, the heroine of the *Fringe* series, walks through the corridor of time that exist between two worlds. The world as we know it, and an alternate universe that exists at the same time. They are very similar but a bit different. Like the characters who inhabit them.

In “our” world, the blonde Olivia Dunham is an FBI agent, driven, stubborn, relentless at her job, troubled and steely with her emotions.

In the alternate world, there is the red-haired Faux-Livia played by the same actress Anna Torv. She’s also an FBI agent, who has the same moral and professional qualities of the other, but is more playful and sexual.

She lives in a parallel world, where the Twin Towers have not fallen.

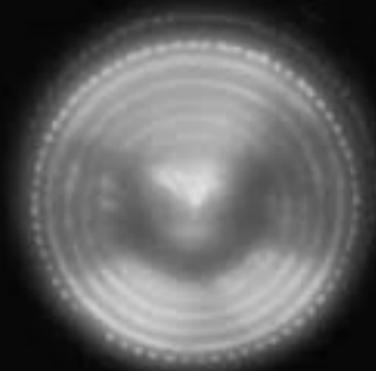


A GIRL
AND
A GUN



In the second corridor, the detective Lemmy Caution walks through the iconic corridor of *Alphaville*, the 1965 science fiction film by Jean-Luc Godard. He wants to rescue Anna Karina from a world where love is banned, a futuristic dictatorship dominated by the computer Alpha 60.

Corridor Two creates a metaverse between the worlds of cinema and television, between the analogue and the digital formats that mirror each other; they are the same but a bit different.





**The present is terrifying
because it is irreversible**



5.

In *Alphaville*, the main computer controlling the city Alpha 60 has a strange and moving soliloquy at the end of the film. The computer's metaphysical words sound like the last sentences of a dying person.

"Time is the substance of which I am made. Time is a river which carries me along. But I am time. It's a tiger, tearing me apart; but I am the tiger."

In another Godard film, *Sauve qui Peut (la Vie) / Every Man for Himself* (1980), the main character Paul Godard, a television director, declares that he's not dying because he doesn't see his life streaming before his eyes like in a film.



6.

One of the first videos I made in the late 1980s was in Video 8, the first accessible video format at the time. It shows me taking a polaroid picture of the editing suite I was working with. The polaroid shows the charming bulky analogue video editing set up: a viewing monitor, a recording monitor, an editing A/B roll switch board, all made of thick eighties plastic.

Video 8 was a magnetic analogue tape with a single track for both image and sound. To edit a sound independently of an image, one had to reinscribe the same image on the recorder again along with the new sound, so that the edit didn't erase it.

Editing a single shot took endless time, a loop.

In the film and video collective I was part of called The GIE (Groupement d'Intérêt Esthétique) we had fashioned a way to make our films with different layers of sounds and images despite the technical limitations of the equipment.

This artisanal bricolage in making images and sounds has remained the mark of my practice.



Nearly 40 years later, I now edit with an industry standard digital application on a fast computer, with a flat screen, a mouse and a keyboard set up.

In *Instant Return*, the present emerges from the past, and the past surfaces in the timeline of the present, like ghostly appearances haunting both temporalities.

Present and past exist in the same time, in parallel and simultaneous universes.

For me editing, “my beautiful anxiety”³, the orchestration of time through images and sounds is a unique gesture that can create new forms. It’s a way of thinking, a technique, and a discipline all at once. It’s a way to see and to understand the fabrication of the world, of representations and of oneself, in order to be able to live in this world.

³ Jean-Luc Godard, *Montage, mon beau souci*, Cahier du cinéma 65, 1965.

7.

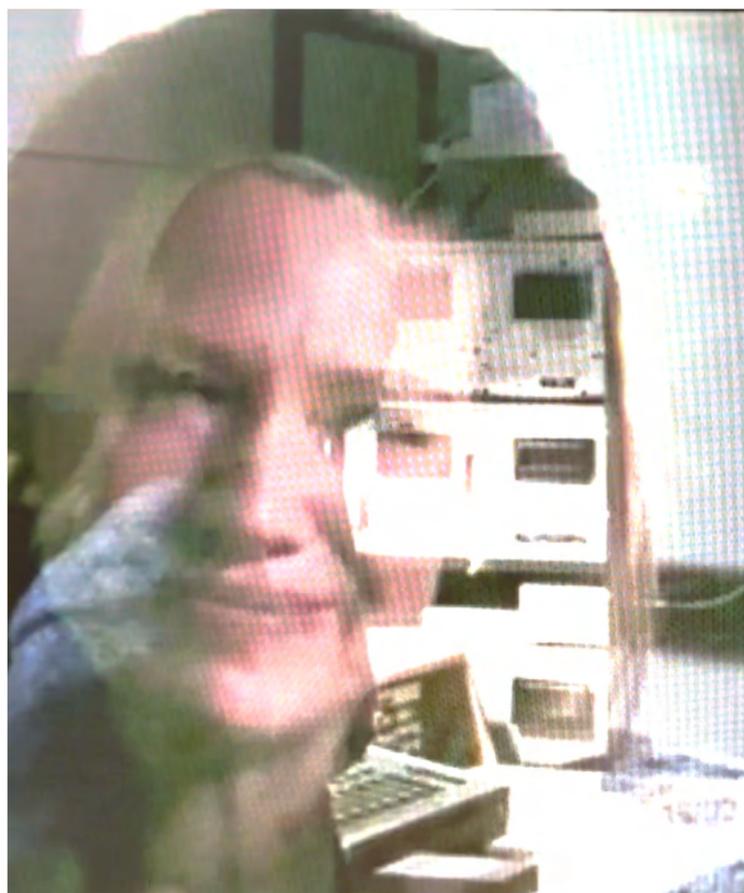
In 2022, Anna Torv became Helene Novell in the series *The Newsreader* (2022-2025).

She played a talented news anchor with a borderline personality disorder, who struggles to make her way through the cutthroat world of eighties commercial television, dominated by men.

At the time, TV journalists used the first professional video equipment, bulky U-Matics cameras and Beta-Cams, analogue tapes and AB roll-editing suites.

Helen encounters an ambitious reporter, Dale, who is revealed as bisexual. Their challenging but trusting work relation is conjugated through an unusual range of narrative situations, from colleagues to lovers, rivals to friends, and finally partners.

The first television story they cover together is the launch of the Space Shuttle Challenger which explodes midair, ending the US space program for more than five decades.









CREDITS

Death of the Sun, Moon and Stars Falling - Cristoforo de Predis / Promising – Kiki Smith / Constellation - R.Stephan / Twin Peaks - David Lynch & David Lynch / Quintet of Edward Stephan & Nipple - Claire Morgan / There is a place in the Sky - R.Stephan / Moon in Earthlight - Wolfgang Tillmans / Star Trek Original Series & Deep Space 9 / Self Portrait: Loyalty to the Past - Tavares Strachan & Self Portrait - Elliot Erwitt / Fringe Series - JJ. Abrams & Alphaville – JL.Godard / Fringe Series - JJ.Abrams / Olivia Dunham in Fringe Series & Scenario of the Film Passion JL.Godard & The Book of Miracles / Hal in Space Odyssey - Stanley Kubrick & Alpha 60 in Alphaville – JL.Godard / Alphaville – JL.Godard & Every Man for Himself – JL.Godard / Instant Return 1&2 - R.Stephan / Anna Torv in The Newsreader / My Saucer x 2 - R.Stephan / Y.Stephan.

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