

Preface: Five Incredible Years

“Thank you for five incredible years.”

—Placard at the end of ‘All the Time in the World’, the final episode of *Alias*

Dictionary

in•cred•i•ble |ɪnˈkredəbəl|

adjective

1 impossible to believe : *an almost incredible tale of triumph and tragedy.*

2 difficult to believe; extraordinary : *the noise from the crowd was incredible.*

- informal amazingly good or beautiful : *I was mesmerized: she looked so incredible.*

‘Incredible’ is an incredibly ambiguous word. The producers of the recently deceased *Alias*, an ABC television spy drama that ended its five-year, never-quite-successful-in-the-ratings run in May 2006, were, of course, thinking of the Oxford English Dictionary’s (informal) second definition—“extraordinarily good”—when they posted their now obligatory tip-of-the-hat-to-the-fans closing title.

The finales of popular television series—of a *M*A*S*H* or *Seinfeld* or *Friends*—often engender “cultural spectacles” (Morreale 2003), and the endings of most long-running episodic series, with their permanent closure of complex narratives, ordinarily result in at least an attendant sense of the dramatic. But *Alias*’ return to the air on 19 Ings,¹ resulted in little fanfare, and the airing of the 104th and 105th episodes on 22 May 2006 went virtually unnoticed. As Colin Mahan (2006) would note the day after the end, “*Alias* left the air forever last night, but audiences denied knowing it existed. Instead of giving the show a normal send-off, ABC moved the finale to Monday and pitted it against the season finales of 24 and TV’s number-one sitcom, *Two and a Half Men*. Even Sydney Bristow couldn’t get out of that kind of fix.”

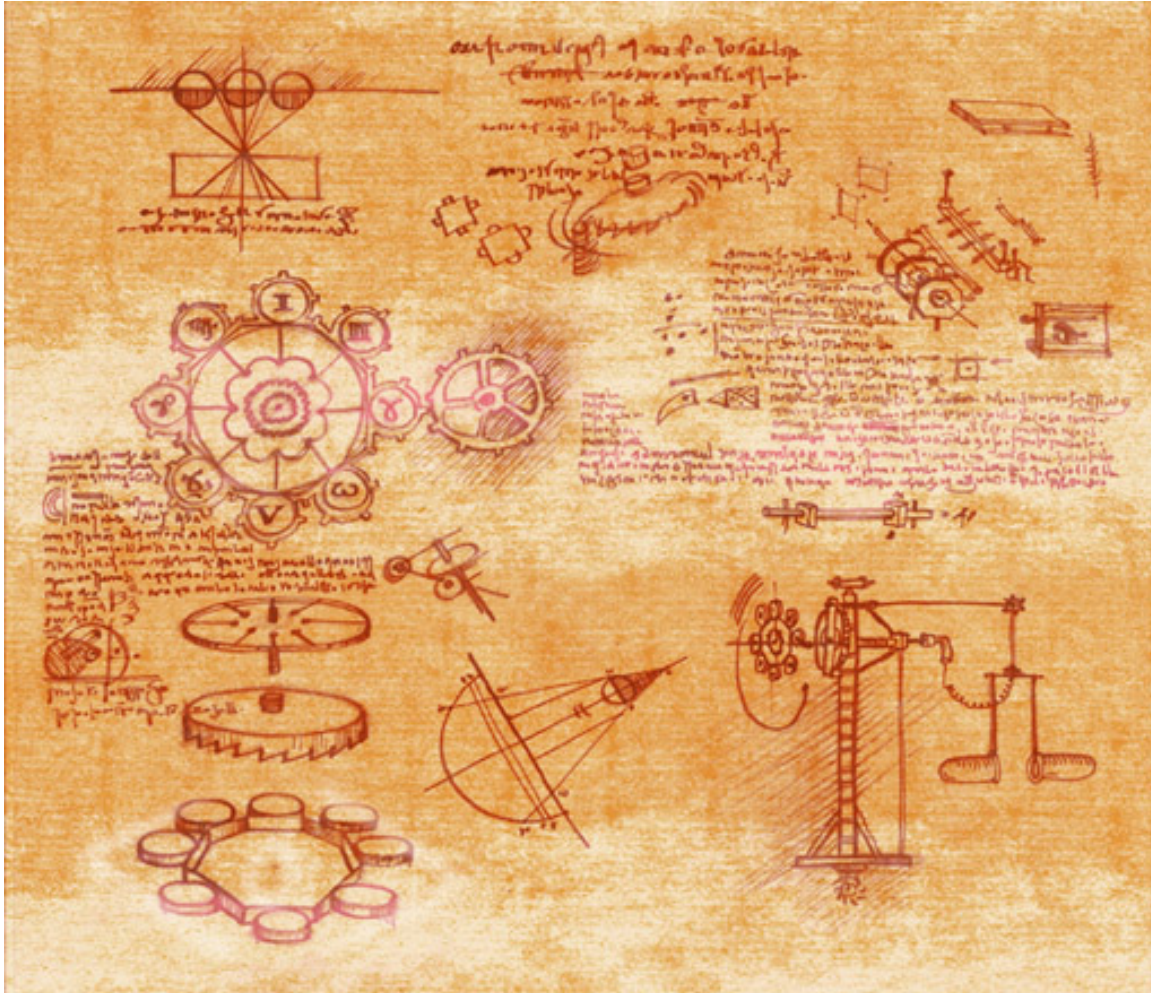
Recapping the final episode of *Alias* on the ever-snide TelevisionWithoutPity.com website, “Erin” would seem to have been reverting to the original meaning of “incredible”: “impossible or hard to believe.” Snidely observant, Erin describes the setup for a sequence in which five years of Rambaldi mythology (and a thirty-year quest by criminal mastermind Arvin Sloane) comes to a climax:

Mongolia. Somebody get me a sherpa and a flagon of yak’s milk and get me the hell out of here. At a large encampment in the middle of Palm Desert, Sloane

¹ In Season Four, *Alias* had been paired on US television with fellow Bad Robot production, the phenomenally successful *Lost*, resulting in an upturn in its ratings. In Season Five, ABC perversely severed the two J.J. Abrams series, and *Alias*’ rating dipped.

The Collected Works of David Lavery 2

arrives in a Humvee. He gets out and meets with a man speaking Russian. The man says he thinks they've "found it," and Sloane walks with him into a bunker that has the Rambaldi eye symbol <O> on it.



But then her incredulity gets the best of her and she loses it:

Well, that [a Rambaldi symbol in Mongolia] can't be good. Or maybe it's awesome. Anything that moves this plot along is fine by me. The closer we are to this mess ending the better. Oh, what? Like YOU don't feel the same? Please. Even the ACTORS think this show should've ended, like, two seasons ago. And they actually LOVE it. And Jaybrams CLEARLY thought it should have ended ages ago because he left back when shit still made sense, and he's barely returned long enough to have a piece of cheesecake down in the damn commissary. This shit is over, dudes. OVER. (my italics)

Well the shit (aka *Alias*' no longer credible writing²) may have been "over" (aka "outstayed its welcome," "continued its narrative too long," "didn't know when to quit"), but the episode was not.

Much had already transpired: Sydney rappelled off a skyscraper in a pretend Sydney, managing, incredibly, to snap photos of The Twelve on the way down! (and perhaps inspiring the leap of faith of Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) in a real Shanghai in Jaybrams' *Mission Impossible III*); Marshall Flickman's revealing photoshoot in a Bangkok sauna; Marshall and Rachel's kidnapping; dizzying planet-hops to Rome, Ixtopia, London, Mount Subasio, etc. that made even *24*'s instantaneous crisscrossing of Los Angeles seem languid; the destruction of APO (and a good portion of downtown LA) by a Sarkplanted explosion; numerous flashbacks to Syd's childhood; Peyton's Uzi-in-each hand slaughter of The Twelve (or was it the Circle of the Black Thorn?).³



And much was yet to come. The satellites ("stars") had not yet fallen from the sky; the planned launch (by Irina Derevko) of stolen Russian ICBMs toward London and Washington had not yet been activated (and then prevented). Jack had not yet been shot in the chest by Sloane or Sloane gunned down by Sydney, nor had Vaughn shot Sark in the leg, or Rachel revealed the secret (snakes) to getting answers out of Peyton. Sloane had not yet become immortal. Sydney had not battled-to-the-death with her mother. Irina had not, like all good movie supervillains, plummeted to her

² It is the writers that Television Without Pity's exasperated critic, by the end incapable of suspending her disbelief, cannot forgive:

After more commercials (yay!), Irina finally opens up the case and fondles The Sphere. 'So that's it,' says Syd, entering the room.' That's The Horizon, isn't it?' Well, sure, Syd. It's The Horizon. Except that The Horizon that Irina stole back in 'Maternal Instinct' seemed to be about the size of a book and about as flat, so unless The Horizon started out deflated and had to be inflated in order to receive the Red Juice of Rambaldi, I'd say that the writers had NO IDEA what The Horizon was supposed to be and had to just retrofit it into this plot line previous episodes wouldn't be totally moot. Also? Rambaldi 's really fond of spheres because there was already a Sphere of Life back in Season Four and now there's another Sphere that may have been a Horizon but only if it's made of beach ball material and, and, honestly? I could give two fucks because obviously the writers don't.

³ I trust I am not alone in detecting similarities between final episodes of *Alias* and Warner Brothers' *Angel*, 2004's 'Not Fade Away'. After all, Jeffrey Bell, co-author and director of the *Angel* finale had become an executive producer on *Alias*, and Drew Goddard, co-author of 'All the Time in the World,' had been story editor on *Angel*'s last season. And, of course, Amy Acker appeared in both: as *Angel*'s Illyria and *Alias*' Peyton.

death from a high place. Nor had Jack set off the explosion that would bury his friend-turned-nemesis Sloane, doomed to live forever-interred, or uttered his candidate-for-the-Last Words Hall of Fame exit line: “You beat death Arvin, but you couldn’t beat me.” Sloane was still to be abandoned to eternal loneliness by the ghost/hallucination of Nadia, the daughter he had murdered. Nor was “All the Time in the World” over until Dixon visited an obviously content Sydney and Vaughn and children at their beach home, living, but not spying, happily ever after.



Arvin Sloane, Jack Bristow

Still, TelevisionWithoutPity.com’s ire is hardly sui generis nor without some justification. After a strong and promising start, creator J.J. Abrams’ series about a dysfunctional spy family had, by almost any measure, indeed become “a mess,” if not shit. Yes, following his modus operandi—during its inaugural season, he would later abandon the most successful of his progeny, the international hit *Lost*, as well—“Jaybrams” had left the spy business long before his creation Sydney Bristow would, back when *Alias* made very good sense indeed.⁴

Before *Alias*, the Mount Holyoke film studies major Abrams had authored/co-authored a variety of feature films⁵ and created the television series *Felicity* (1998–

⁴ Abrams would, of course, ‘come in from the cold’—returning, an unhappy creator, for a visit to *Alias* after a Season Three that pleased him not (‘We weren’t as true to the characters, he would tell *USA Today*’s Bill Kaveney. ‘They became pawns in a plot-driven story’.). And he would leave *Lost* to ‘spy again’ in his first assignment as a feature film director: 2006’s *Mission Impossible*, starring Tom Cruise, who had sought out Abrams as the franchise’s saviour after watching *Alias* on DVD. Asked to compare making *Mission Impossible III* and *Alias*, Abrams to identify one basic difference: ‘Instead of saying “We’re in Rome” and shooting in Burbank, we’re actually shooting in Rome’ (Rapkin 2005: 201).

⁵ *Taking Care of Business* (1990), *Regarding Henry* (1991), *Forever Young* (1992),

2002). *Alias*, he has suggested, was the result of wanting to do “something with dramatic stakes a few notches higher than the romantic turmoil of a college coed” (Dilmore 2005: 22).⁶ “[My] favorite kind of story,” genre fan Abrams insists,⁷ is “something that’s just left of real but done with the commitment and the respect for characters and the audience that any well-told drama would apply. When that happens, you’ve got something special” (my italics; Dilmore 2005: 24).

Although admitting he’s uncertain “[w]hether it’s smart or successful storytelling,” he confesses to being driven by the need to add a “hyper-real” element (Gross 2005: 36). Under his guidance *Alias* developed a series-long “mythology” involving the Renaissance genius Milo Rambaldi;⁸ and in Abrams’ (and co-creator Damon Lindelof’s) hands, *Lost* become much more than the originally proposed low concept “plane crashes on a desert island.”⁹ “Well begun is half done” (according to Aristotle—an old cliché), but as the second Iraq War and many a failed or never-having-lived-up-to-their-potential television series attest, half done ≠ well done.



Given her anger bred of disappointment and betrayal (an emotion not uncommon among *Alias* aficionados, as Hillary Robson chronicles in her history of the evolution and dissolution of *Alias* Fandom in this volume), Erin may well not be anxious to read into this exemplary collection of investigations into nearly every corner of the *Alias*verse. Her loss. You, however, will find a wide variety of ingenious maps by which to navigate such topoi as narrative, myth, heroism, body image, family dynamics, race, ethics, epistemology, and fandom/fanfic. If the essential

Gone Fishin' (1997), *Armageddon* (1998), and *Joy Ride* (2001).

⁶ It should be noted that, like Felicity Porter, Sydney Bristow was, at least in the first two seasons, still a college student (at UCLA), but the dual life of superspy and coed always seemed forced. In 'A Free Agent' (2:15), her school days would end as she earned her MA in English. Fascinating, is it not, that contemporary American television's two most badass secret agents, Sydney and 24's Jack Bauer (see Cerasini 2003: 7), are both English majors?

⁷ "There's always a place in my heart for the genre stuff that is more pulpy storytelling," says Abrams, 'Look at *Jaws*, *Alien*, *Die Hard*, *Tootsie*, *Back to the Future*. They're all movies that if you pitched the story [to studio executives], you'd probably get a little, polite smile. But done as well as they were and with the commitment with which they were executed, they become as good as anything' (Dilmore 2005: 24).

⁸ '[I]n the pilot of *Alias* we had Sydney going after this antique Rambaldi device and not just a disc of information. It's just my tendency. It's just what interests me' (Gross 2005: 36).

⁹ For more on Abrams' genre aesthetics and on the creation of *Alias*, see Porter and Lavery's *Unlocking the Meaning of Lost* (2006), pp. 9-12 and 108-10.

function of all criticism is to send the reader back to the text renewed, reinvigorated for a fresh exploration with enhanced perception, this book is indispensable.

At the inception of Buffy Studies half a decade ago, no one dreamed that a television series to which *Alias* is compared in these pages (in Elizabeth Barnes' essay) would in a few short years inspire hundreds of essays and at least eighteen books. *Alias* is not likely to have an afterlife as rich as Buffy's, but even if it does not continue in the years ahead to garner critical scrutiny, even if five seasons of *Alias* DVDs come to lie buried in a Rambaldish crypt, it will always have this comprehensive, pluralistic, ingenious book to remind us of its moment in the small-screen sun and our while-it lasted fascination.