

Serial repetition, imperfection and the time loop narrative in women-centric US TV

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Abstract

Some of the millennial women to have recently emerged in half-hour US TV shows navigate not only their already messy lives, but also find themselves time-travelling, transcending the boundaries between parallel realities or stuck in time loops. Programmes such as *Undone* (Amazon Prime Video, 2019–2022), *Russian Doll* (Netflix, 2019–2022) and *Slip* (The Roku Channel, 2023) question the millennials' messy but ultimately successful character trajectories through their recursive narrative structures. Characters' repetitive experiences foreground the effort that goes into constantly improving oneself and one's relationships within the context of what Angela McRobbie calls *p-i-r*, or 'perfect-imperfect-resilience', where resiliently working on oneself balances imperfection and perfection. In contrast to other contemporary women-centric programmes on television and streaming services, the excessive recursiveness in *Undone*, *Russian Doll* and *Slip* spectacularly concretises the neoliberal imperative to turn one's flaws into recovery and success stories. The analyses in this article will thus focus on excessive repetition via the time loop trope in *Russian Doll* and *Undone*, and parallel realities in *Slip* to consider how these programmes and their female leads question feminist resilience on television and embody Orgad and Gill's notion of the bounce-backable woman. These characters all eventually return to their more flawed, 'original' selves, but they take the lessons they learned and the ways they have improved themselves or their relationships with them, offering an ambivalent outlook on the messy millennial's relationship to the idea of self-optimisation and resilience.

Keywords

Feminism, messy millennial woman, resilience, time loops, US TV

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Introduction

From one day to the next, you inhabit one body; you have access to one set of memories; your personality, values and appearance hold more or less steady. [. . .] But what if some of those components peeled off into alternative versions of you? (Schwitzgebel, 2025)

Eric Schwitzgebel's op-ed 'Severance, *The Substance* and Our Increasingly Splintered Selves' was published in *The New York Times* in anticipation of *Severance*'s (Apple, 2022–) season 2 premiere and speaks to the ongoing cultural proliferation of screen narratives that turn the idea of an individual's multiple selves into tangible, literal offshoots. Apart from recent filmic examples such as *The Substance* (Fargeat, 2024), *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (Scheinert and Kwan, 2022), *My Old Ass* (Park, 2024) or *Kinds of Kindness* (Lanthimos, 2024), splintered selves, as well as clones, doubles, doppelgängers and twins, have been popular on television as well, from *Orphan Black* (Space/BBC America/Netflix, 2013–2017), *Living with Yourself* (Netflix, 2019) and *Dead Ringers* (Amazon Prime Video, 2023, a women-centric reimagination of David Cronenberg's 1988 film of the same name) to *Severance*. Other programmes feature characters who temporarily splinter, such as season 4 of *Search Party* (TBS/HBO Max, 2016–2022) and season 2 of *Made for Love* (HBO Max, 2021–2022). A handful of millennial women have recently emerged in half-hour US TV shows, splintering quite literally as well, as they navigate not only their already messy lives but also find themselves stuck in time loops, time travel and transcend the boundaries between parallel realities. Programmes such as *Undone* (Amazon Prime Video, 2019–2022), *Russian Doll* (Netflix, 2019–2022) and *Slip* (The Roku Channel, 2023) question millennials' messy but ultimately positive, optimistic and successful character trajectories through their recursive, loopy narrative structures. Particularly *Russian Doll* and *Undone*, like recent filmic examples such as *Palm Springs* (Barbakow, 2020) and *The Map of Tiny Perfect Things* (Samuels, 2021), take inspiration from time loop films such as *Groundhog Day* (Ramis, 1993), *Sliding Doors* (Howitt, 1998), *Looper* (Johnson, 2012) and *Edge of Tomorrow* (Liman, 2014), and work the mechanisms of time loops and time travel into their half-hour episodes. Significantly, in contrast to the aforementioned films – all directed by men – the televisual time loop narratives I discuss in this article are all written, produced and directed by women. Focusing on somewhat messy female subjects, these stories foreground repetitive experiences that revolve around self-management and self-optimisation and thus exemplify what Angela McRobbie (2020) has termed *p-i-r*, or 'perfect-imperfect-resilience', where resiliently working on oneself ultimately balances the imperfect and the perfect. These characters all eventually return to their more flawed, 'original' selves, but they take the lessons they learned and the ways they have improved themselves or their relationships with them, offering an ambivalent outlook on the messy millennials' relationship to the idea of self-optimisation and resilience.

This article contends that the time loop narrative emphasises the constant, repetitive work that goes into a messy millennial's narrative trajectory from imperfection towards

ideals of positivity, recovery and successful self-management. In all shows, the messiness that defines main characters is not only shown as internal and psychological but also concretised through their surroundings and predicaments, which can be read as manifestations and symptoms of their mental distress. In *Russian Doll*, which premiered in February 2019 on Netflix, Nadia Vulvokov (Natasha Lyonne) keeps reliving the same day in a *Groundhog Day*-esque story, though Nadia's days always reset after she dies in various, often violent ways. Her first loopy occurrence takes place during the night of her 36th birthday party inside her friends' New York City apartment. After leaving the party late at night to enjoy a casual one-night stand with one of the party guests back at her own apartment, Nadia returns to her desk, where she works on a programme code as part of her work as a freelance software designer. She discovers that she has run out of cigarettes and leaves her place to get more, but is struck by a taxicab on her way back and dies. This scenario keeps repeating itself, and Nadia has to question her perception of reality and, increasingly, her choices, behaviours and familial and romantic relationships, as she investigates why she might be stuck in a loop. At the end of the programme's third episode, Nadia comes across Alan Zaveri (Charlie Barnett), who is experiencing time in exactly the same way. They then explore and ultimately resolve their recursive predicament (and their traumas) together. *Undone*, a half-hour US streaming series that premiered in September 2019 and Amazon Prime's first original animated series, uses rotoscoping animation and the time loop trope to articulate its imperfect protagonist's changed experience of time after a car accident. Alma Winograd-Diaz (Rosa Salazar) starts seeing her dead father, Jacob (Bob Odenkirk), who enlists her help in solving the mystery of his death two decades prior, and this endeavour entails manipulating and controlling the flow of time. Alma repeatedly works through difficult moments and conversations with her mother, her sister and her boyfriend, improving her relationships by way of better managing her own and others' emotions (Hochschild, 1983) from loop to loop. *Slip* premiered in 2023, after *Russian Doll* and *Undone*'s two-season runs had already concluded, and its premise is yet another spin on the idea of parallel realities and exploring roads not taken. Mae Cannon (Zoe Lister-Jones) is bored and restless in her marriage and has a one-night stand with a stranger she meets at a bar. Upon waking the next day, she realises that she has slipped into a parallel reality when she orgasmed with this person and is now married to him. This scenario keeps repeating itself several times with different people in different parallel realities over a total of seven half-hour episodes. In one sequence, Mae dreams and is faced with an endless row of doors in an otherwise empty space, with each door containing a possible world. *Slip* is thus particularly concerned with the exploration of what could have been had Mae made different (romantic) choices, though she ultimately ends up back in her original reality with newfound appreciation for her relationship and life.

Russian Doll and *Undone*'s time loops and time travel, as well as *Slip*'s parallel realities require their imperfect subjects – who are not only messy but in mental distress – to resiliently bounce back from failed attempts at improving themselves and their relationships ad infinitum. Thus, their protagonists question feminist resilience on television (Gorton, 2021; Lahm, 2024) and embody Orgad and Gill's (2018) notion of the bounce-backable woman who is injured, yet resilient. Messy, flawed women on television have been theorised extensively over the past decades, as difficult women or antiheroines

(Buonanno, 2017; Hagelin and Silverman, 2022; Pinedo, 2021; Tally, 2016), with regard to their implications for contemporary feminisms (Cattien, 2019; Gorton, 2019; Kaklamanidou and Tally, 2014; Perkins and Schreiber, 2019; Petersen, 2017; Rowe, 1995, 2021; Tomsett et al., 2024), and in relation to racial and class politics (Johnson and Minor, 2019; Minor, 2023; Sobande, 2019; Thornham, 2022; Wanzo, 2016) in US and UK contexts. In contrast to other recent women-centric programmes on television and streaming services, the excessive recursiveness in the recent examples discussed in this article spectacularly concretises the neoliberal imperative to turn one's imperfections into recovery and success stories. Their narrative structures thus also draw attention to the practice of recursion, looping, spiralling (Holdsworth, 2021), as well as the recycling of content within the medium of television.

Undone, *Russian Doll* and *Slip* carry forward a feminist sensibility, a defining characteristic of a cycle of shows such as *Transparent* (Prime Video, 2014–2019), *Better Things* (FX, 2016–2022), *Shrill* (Hulu, 2019–2021), *Broad City* (Comedy Central, 2014–2019) and *Insecure* (HBO, 2016–2021) identified and examined by Jessica Ford (2019), who writes that these 'series negotiate and explore feminist politics, ideology and issues in deliberate and distinct ways' (p. 929), while also pointing out that this is not a new development, but that such a sensibility can be traced through television history, from *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951–1957) to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB/UPN, 1997–2003). Patricia Mellencamp (1992) writes about *I Love Lucy*'s titular character as an early 'loopy' woman when she points out that Lucy's mode of operation is one of repeatedly breaking 'for freedom, her anarchism against wifery' before asking for forgiveness, and then episodically repeating that process (p. 6). Indeed, Lucille Ball's Lucy Ricardo and the sitcom form embody the medium's repetitive, iterative temporality and foreground women's work and identity. Sianne Ngai also invokes Lucy in her theorisation of zany, cute and interesting as ubiquitous, yet simultaneously marginal and somewhat elusive aesthetic categories, with a still of a 'zany' Lucy Ricardo gracing the book's cover. Zany, as Ngai (2012) explains, is a category bound to late capitalist production, 'an aesthetic about performing as not just artful play but affective labor' (p. 1). Zaniness, Ngai (2012) elaborates, is 'about a strenuous relation to playing that seems to be on a deeper level about work' (p. 7), exemplified by Lucille Ball's zany performances that hover between work and play, which will be discussed in more detail below. Returning to this more recent cycle, Jessica Ford (2019) further places it 'in between genres, in between television and cinema, and on the fringe of popular visible feminisms' (p. 929). Importantly, when Ford examines meaningful overlaps and similarities between women's indie cinema and the cycle that she terms women's indie television, she is careful to consider contemporary debates about television's cinematic qualities and refers to Wheatley's (2016) argument that both cinema and television are spectacular at different moments. While programmes whose diegeses are more grounded in realism tend to 'depict dysfunctional family dynamics through an emphasis on dialogue, emotion and tone, rather than narrative or spectacle' (Ford, 2019: 933), *Russian Doll*, *Undone* and *Slip* depart from this mode in that they intertwine the former with the latter, with their content often conveying ordinariness and spectacle *simultaneously* rather than alternately. This goes especially for *Undone*, whose rotoscoping animation and direction facilitate this simultaneity through the use of the same style of classical oil paintings as backgrounds for

every single one of its frames, rendering ordinary and spectacular moments, as well as those that contain both modes in the same aesthetic.

The programmes I examine in this article are part of a recent cycle of women-centric, feminist TV shows that offer new meditations on the neoliberal imperative to turn one's imperfections into recovery and success stories. As McRobbie (2020) explicates, "'perfect-imperfect-resilience' or *p-i-r* [. . .] steps forward to offer young women a popular therapeutic strategy that permits some aspects of feminism to be retrieved and drawn upon for support' (p. 7). She goes on to define the mechanisms of *p-i-r* as a balancing act between the perfect as encompassing ideas of the 'feminist 'good life' and the imperfect that 'offers some scope (but within carefully demarcated boundaries) for criticism of and divergence from these ideals', positing resilience as 'the favoured tool and therapeutic instrument for recovery and repair' that ultimately achieves this equilibrium (2020: 42). While the shows from the previous cycle, such as the ones mentioned above, and, for example, *Girls* (HBO, 2012–2017), are structured more or less according to this logic and their characters undergo personal growth – with ups and downs – in an ultimately linear way, the time loops and parallel realities in the programmes discussed here negate the logics of any straightforward linear trajectory that begins with imperfection that ultimately turns into perfection (or something closer to it) through resilience. Theorising televisual melodrama, Pribram (2018) asserts that seriality's 'meanings and emotional effects rest in its succession of moments, not necessarily significant in themselves but important in their accumulated relationality, and in the way they are gathered for audiences over narrative time' (p. 246). These temporal affordances of television are well-suited to explore the narrativisation of McRobbie's *p-i-r*, and programmes that employ time loops do so in a more condensed, compressed way. In other words, the excessively loopy, cyclical narrative structures of these programmes convey a sense of urgency and overwhelm, that cumulative moments in other programmes with more linear storylines that stretch over more than two seasons do not.

Content, form and (no) endings

Within an era of slowly declining Peak TV, *Undone* and *Russian Doll* position themselves as prestige television through their paratexts and supplementary and promotional materials. For example, *Undone* emphasises its artistry in terms of its storyboarding, pre-production (oil paintings constitute the background of each frame), its production process where what happens during filming resembles theatrical performances rather than acting for television due to the absence of 'real' sets, as well as the labour-intensive post-production process that includes rotoscoping animation, compositing, 2D and 3D animation (Ars Technica, 2020). In contrast to the mundane, everyday problems their predecessors dealt with, these protagonists have, as Nadia remarks a few times throughout *Russian Doll*'s first season, 'bigger fish to fry'. Individual responsibility as a core tenant of neoliberal subjectivity and feminism (see, for example Rottenberg, 2018) is a key theme in these programmes, with imperfect protagonists often being surrounded by supporting characters who push them, or try to push them, to aspire to become 'entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating' (Gill, 2008: 436). And while it is common for 'female competition [to be] inscribed within specific horizons of

value relating to husbands, work partners and boyfriends, family and home, motherhood and maternity' (McRobbie, 2015: 7) in women-centric television in one form or another, the programmes discussed here emphasise competition with the self, as different versions of these women replace earlier ones from loop to loop or in parallel realities. Self-replacement is thus a consequence of excessive recursion – for instance, Nadia and Alma repeat certain encounters and conversations as a 'better' version of themselves who has already felt anger in a previous loop and is able to act differently in a subsequent iteration of the same conversation. Another example of self-replacement in a literal way is an active transition from one reality to another, as is the case at the end of *Undone*'s first season, with its second season being set in one particular alternate reality that Alma has supposedly 'created' and transitioned to. In *Slip*, Mae navigates four different, distinct alternate realities in addition to her 'original' reality over a total of seven episodes. In *Undone*, the time loops are a smaller part of Alma's transition to one parallel reality, and in *Russian Doll*, the time loops imply that each reality may be a 'new', parallel one.

In the context of complex television, *Russian Doll*, *Undone* and *Slip* all deal with the psychology of millennial women as instances of collaborative televisual authorship, where feminist sensibilities are articulated through affect. In her analysis of the miniseries *Sharp Objects* (HBO, 2018), Ford argues that the series departs from the historically prevailing 'single authorial figure as [a] series' feminist voice' and that this 'departure from individual authorship and singular "feminist" characters marks a shift in how "feminism" circulates on US television', which Ford (2024) contends is here a 'feminism performed through affect' (p. 278). Ford's examination of *Sharp Objects* in this context is compelling, and as the production contexts of *Russian Doll* and *Undone* involve similarly collaborative efforts, it is worth looking at these more closely. *Russian Doll* was created by Leslye Headland, Amy Poehler and Natasha Lyonne, who also stars as the show's protagonist, Nadia Vulvokov. Headland is a director, writer and playwright, known for her directorial work on indie films such as *Bachelorette* (2012) and *Sleeping with Other People* (2015) and as a writer for *About Last Night* (Pink, 2014), before directing and/or writing for television programmes such as *SMILF* (Showtime, 2017–2019) and creating *The Acolyte* (Disney +, 2024). Poehler is well-known as a *Saturday Night Live* (NBC, 1975–present) veteran and star of *Parks and Recreation* (NBC, 2009–2015). Lyonne started acting as a child in 1986 and is known to be an avid reader and viewer, and particularly knowledgeable about film history and philosophy (Lindsay, 2020). The creators of *Russian Doll* have stressed that their goal was to craft a narrative that was decidedly not about a female lead's attempts at balancing a career and a relationship, but instead about philosophical questions (Yang, 2019). Arguably, this deliberate sidelining of such prevalent themes (love and work) to instead explore the implications of time loops and parallel realities as both metaphorical and concrete conceptualisations of resilience, recovery and self-management chimes with Ford's (2024) argument that there is a reorientation 'towards the immaterial (feelings, trauma, instinct) and away from the material (reproductive rights, employment conditions, domestic violence)' (pp. 280–281) in recent female-driven television. *Undone*, on the other hand, places a bit more emphasis on its protagonist Alma's romantic and familial relationships while she is busy trying to gain control over the flow of time as she navigates time loops and time travel, sometimes simultaneously. The programme was created by Kate Purdy and

Raphael Bob-Waksberg, who worked together as writer and showrunner, respectively, on *BoJack Horseman* (Netflix, 2014–2020). They worked with Dutch director and animator Hisko Hulsing to create *Undone*'s particular aesthetic. For *BoJack Horseman*'s penultimate season 4 episode, 'Time's Arrow' (2017), which thematises dementia and trauma and employs a non-linear structure, Purdy won a Writers Guild of America Award for Television in the animation category. Like *BoJack Horseman*, *Undone* centres questions around depression, anxiety, mental distress and trauma, and the possibility that Alma is showing signs of congenital schizophrenia is an autobiographical element of the narrative (Baer et al., 2020). *Slip* is a women-led production as well, created by and starring Zoe Lister-Jones, who also directed all seven episodes of the programme, and Dakota Johnson appears as one of the show's executive producers. It premiered on The Roku Channel, an OTT streaming television service which has been growing rapidly over the last few years (Huston, 2025). Nevertheless, *Slip* was removed from the channel in 2023 without being officially cancelled. In this way, the programme's fate is similar to *Russian Doll* and *Undone*, with Netflix and Amazon Prime, respectively, neither renewing nor cancelling these series in any official capacity. While *Slip* concludes somewhat neatly with the implication that Mae has literally and figuratively found her way back to herself and her partner, *Russian Doll* and *Undone* do not provide a sense of an ending, with season finales concluding in open ways and without tangible resolutions, mirroring the fate of the shows themselves.

Women's televised messiness and mental distress

P-i-r and recovery are closely intertwined in narratives that evoke trauma and grief in their portrayals of messy millennials, and in their emphasis on mental distress, characters' lamentations of larger structural problems are ultimately always directed back towards their individual selves. These narratives draw attention to the construction of and the contradictions inherent in *p-i-r*, and they illustrate Tolentino's (2019) assertion that contemporary subjects are 'always optimising', Han's theorisations of current psychopolitics that fashion every individual as a project (Han, 2015, 2017), and anxieties around being replaceable (Husain, 2021). Within the logics of these narratives' excessively loopy, recursive structures, characters effectively *replace themselves* through compounding loops and repetitions within and across episodes, leaving versions of themselves behind. Consequently, the idea of having discarded versions or parts of oneself becomes somewhat of a moral dilemma, especially in *Undone*, where Alma's return to her 'original' self she had abandoned is implied at the end of season 2. In that way, both *Undone* and its contemporaries call attention to questions about the politics of managing oneself, such as how much or what aspects of the self – especially anything associated with imperfection, mental distress and trauma – can and should be discarded. It is through their excessive repetitions of conversations and experiences with family members and partners that they draw attention to the mechanisms of recovery narratives and the logics of *p-i-r*, in addition to pointing to larger questions about Western ideas of a unified self. Excessive repetitions, especially of difficult conversations with loved ones, evoke melodramatic traditions of long-running soap operas where characters

would work through the difficulties of interpersonal relationships again and again over time.

All narratives examined here start out with exhaustion and an underlying nihilism when characters are describing the meaninglessness of their everyday lives, which could be interpreted as meta-commentary about genre and form, as characters frequently lament being confined to acting out the drama that lies in the mundane, the domestic and their familial and romantic relationships, before the narrative's inciting event brings about generic, aesthetic and spatio-temporal upheaval. Moreover, anxiety, hedonism, heteropessimism and self-destruction are filtered through mental distress in these programmes, which thus exemplifies Dobson and Kanai's (2018) assertion that the 'portrayal of young women's mental health in recent female-centred TV shows is perhaps a space where the tension between a neoliberal affective orientation and the reflective questioning of such is most apparent' (p. 13). *Russian Doll* and *Undone* both deal with their protagonists' fears of congenital schizophrenia, and an important moment in *Russian Doll* is when Nadia and Alan retrace their previous loops and realise that Alan's first death was a suicide, while one of *Undone*'s flashbacks shows Alma self-harming, suggesting she has tried to end her life. Depression, schizophrenia and suicidality are often associated with and read as symptoms of capitalism (Cvetkovich, 2012; Deleuze and Guattari, 1980; Jameson, 1991). Thus, they serve as further concretisations of characters' affective dissonances (Dobson and Kanai, 2018) in the context of late-stage, neoliberal capitalism. In addition, discomfort has been charted in relation to its role on television (Hargraves, 2023) in this era, as viewers of especially, though not exclusively, post-recessional television are invited to revel in uncomfortable situations and atmospheres. In this context, it is worth considering the simultaneity of comedy and discomfort, or stress, that accompanies characters' experiences of loopy time or parallel realities.

In her theorisation of 'zany' as an aesthetic category, Ngai (2012) outlines that 'by turning the worker's beset, precarious condition into a spectacle for our entertainment, zaniness flatters the spectator's sense of comparative security, thus hailing her as a kind of phantasmagoric manager or implicit owner of the means of production' (p. 11). However, as secure as spectators might feel watching characters navigate stressful, overwhelming time loops or alternate worlds from the relatively safe position of sofa or chair or seat on a train, Ngai (2012) contends that the 'experience of zaniness ultimately remains unsettling, since it dramatizes, through the sheer out-of-controlness of the worker/character's performance, the easiness with which these positions of safety and precariousness can be reversed' (p. 11). Characters such as Nadia in *Russian Doll*, Alma in *Undone* and Mae in *Slip* are not constantly performing in zany ways, but they are doing so more often than many other leads in women-centric programmes, and this is directly linked to the nature of their unique positions within space and time. In some instances, zany comedy is linked with precarity and even danger or death (Ngai, 2012). For example, one of *Russian Doll*'s running gags that spans over multiple episodes is that Nadia keeps exiting the building where her birthday party is taking place and where her loop keeps restarting via the fire escape after a montage where she repeatedly dies tripping over and falling down the stairs, usually breaking her neck. Her performance after dying on the stairs the first time becomes more comical and exaggerated as she keeps

trying to walk down the stairs as carefully as possible, but keeps tripping, dying and returning to the bathroom, where the loop always restarts. In *Undone*, Alma uses a portable Blackjack game to anchor herself to her current reality when space and time threaten to collapse and rearrange themselves around her in an attempt to control her movements through time and space, and here her strained effort is comical in some instances. In one scene, she finds herself inside her father's car in a past moment leading up to her father's car accident 20 years prior, and Alma, with a strained, almost funny facial expression, inserts her hand into her chest and rips out the electronic Blackjack device, which then transports her back to the narrative 'present'. Even though Alma is aware that she is experiencing a memory and that she is not in immediate physical danger, she is reliving a traumatic moment – her father's fatal car accident – and her main concern in that moment is to escape this overwhelm. Over the course of *Slip*'s one and only season, Mae finds herself in various situations during which she literally becomes a zany actor who is 'constantly in motion and in flight from precarious situations in particular' (Ngai, 2012: 182). In one particular parallel reality, Mae is trying to establish contact with her boyfriend, Elijah, so she knocks on the door of the house they share in Mae's 'original' reality. She finds a woman there who is Elijah's partner in this reality and who mistakes Mae for the woman who may become the surrogate mother of their future child. Mae, perplexed, goes along with the situation for a while as she does not immediately grasp what is happening, and when Elijah's partner realises Mae is not her potential surrogate, she calls the police. Mae flees and comically climbs a succession of fences that lead her from one backyard to the next. Importantly, this woman is furious with Mae, specifically when she becomes aware that she made a woman feel welcome in her home who has nothing to offer her. Mae's decision to play along with the situation in an effort to find out more about Elijah's life in this reality shows how zaniness can be a destructive force, and as Ngai (2012) elaborates, 'one might even describe it as the dramatization of an anarchic refusal to be productive' (p. 12), which leads to Mae's comical escape. This refusal to be productive, however, is an intriguing side effect in all three examples discussed in this article, as characters' loopy and convoluted experiences of time and space take them away from their regular jobs and workplaces for most of the time. In *Undone*, Alma's work at a daycare suffers from her lack of presence as she moves in and out of her current state of consciousness, space and time. In *Russian Doll*, Nadia, in her capacity as a freelance software designer, attends one work meeting at the start of her loopy experience, but decides that the meeting is a waste of her time (she is accused of having left a bug in the code of a particular programming sequence and needs to point out that this was someone else's mistake before fixing it within mere seconds), and it is subsequently not part of any future loops. In *Slip*, one of the first things Mae decides to do after waking up in a parallel, slightly different reality is to go to her workplace, a museum and art gallery, convinced that even if she is tied to another partner in a parallel universe, she certainly has to still be a curator. She realises that nobody at the museum knows her, and she subsequently spends none of her time in any of the parallel worlds she traverses being productive in the conventional sense.

Ngai (2012) further questions the boundaries and possibilities of funniness when she compares a lead's zaniness to other characters' relative lack thereof. 'If the rigidity of others is what makes us laugh', she asks, 'can an absolutely elastic subject – one who is

nothing but a series of adjustments and adaptations to one situation after another – be genuinely funny?’ (p. 174). As elastic – or bounce-backable – subjects, Nadia, Alma and Mae are indeed adapting to sudden changes in how the very fabric of space–time works, and their respective performances reflect their efforts to adapt, which is starkly contrasted with other characters’ lack of awareness, as they seemingly experience time in a linear fashion – and only once. The ‘rigidity of others’ can be a source of humour in these narratives. Nadia’s friends and acquaintances present at her birthday party are clearly rendered as non-playable characters – and Nadia, a game designer, refers to them as such at one point – in the way they behave. Nadia’s friend Maxine (Greta Lee) says the same lines every time Nadia returns from the bathroom after the time loop resets, and both Nadia and Alan realise, in different situations, that their actions and words can alter other characters’ responses and actions, which these characters, however, cannot remember from loop to loop. Alma, in *Undone*, finds herself in situations and conversations where other people’s lack of awareness of the many times they have said or done the same thing becomes a source of humour and frustration. In *Slip*, Mae is in a different relationship in each parallel reality, so there are fewer direct repetitions, although she repeatedly tries hard to convince her best friend, Gina (Tymika Tafari) – who inexplicably is her closest friend in each alternate world – to believe her when she tells her that she is trapped in a parallel reality and trying to somehow return to her original one. The excessive repetitions that are part of the time loop mechanism, and the contrast between ‘knowing’, aware main characters and oblivious secondary characters offers a particular answer to Ngai’s (2012) question – they can simultaneously be genuinely funny, but precisely because other characters often dismiss these subjects as “crazy”, [this is] a way of simultaneously acknowledging the negativity of the zany person but also that negativity’s lack of any real impact on us’ (p. 24), which draws out the frustrations felt by those who experience the world differently than what is considered ‘normal’ or ordinary, and reminds us as viewers that resilience, adaptability and the maintenance of one’s relationships requires spectacular levels of emotion work and self-management.

Time loops, time travel, parallel realities and self-optimisation

Russian Doll employs jarring visual imagery, again and again, of the televisual white female victim (Klinger, 2018), with its shots of Nadia’s lifeless body and face, especially when she initially dies getting run over by a cab. Once Nadia encounters Alan, who seems to be experiencing the same loopy time, they start tackling their predicament together in addition to working through their own respective trauma and mental distress to break the cycle. *Russian Doll*’s first season ends on a somewhat hopeful, celebratory note, suggesting that mutual aid and relationality can be harnessed for resistance and change rather than perpetual resilience (Lahm, 2024; Lewis, 2020). Season 2 abandons the loop narrative for time travel to the past that deals specifically with intergenerational trauma. Nadia keeps returning to the night of her 36th birthday, whose significance is tied to her mother’s age at the time of her death. Consequently, Nadia’s perpetual experience of the same significant night forces her to confront the grief and guilt she feels regarding her mother’s death, and simultaneously, Nadia is also able to better regulate

her own emotions and manage others' emotions in situations that she has mismanaged in previous loops. In *Russian Doll's* second season, Nadia travels back in time and experiences New York City in the 1980s as her own mother, Lenora (Chloë Sevigny), and is taken to a clinic due to exhibiting symptoms of schizophrenia, which are understandable to viewers when seen as part of the story logic, as Nadia is inhabiting her mother's body. Nadia's efforts to rectify her mother's mistakes in the past culminate in a scene where Nadia travels back to the moment of her own birth and tries to take her infant self back to her own present, which violates basic time travel rules and almost causes a collapse of space-time, so Nadia has to abandon this idea and leave herself with her family. Nadia's desperate desire to mother and care for herself and to effectively replace her own mother who failed her amid her own struggles with mental distress and addiction in this way epitomises the idea of a 'middle-class hegemony against which less advantaged families can only feel themselves to be inferior or inadequate, or else condemned for not having tried hard enough' (McRobbie, 2020: 40).

In *Undone*, Alma's repetitive experiences are rendered in a way that foregrounds the constructedness of stories based on what McRobbie (2020) calls *p-i-r*, or 'perfect-imperfect-resilience', where resiliently working on oneself ultimately balances the imperfect and the perfect. As *Undone's* time loops require resilience and the ability to bounce back from failed attempts at managing others and oneself, Alma also embodies Orgad and Gill's (2018) bounce-backable woman who routinely 'disavows and self-polices negative feelings and dispositions' (p. 5) in her repeated attempts to better regulate her emotions during confrontations with family members or her partner. For example, in 'The Wedding', season 1's penultimate episode, Alma says something hurtful to her sister, Becca, that threatens to ruin Becca's wedding, but Alma decides to loop back and undo her actions by regulating her own feelings that prompted her hurtful comment, and the wedding day commences as planned. The version of Alma that made a mistake after failing to police and control her own emotions loops back in time with this knowledge and replaces this past self and is able to successfully regulate her emotions and consider her sister's feelings this time around. The rapid accumulation of both mundane and spectacular moments in *Undone*, especially in a few time-loopy sequences that dramatise Alma's relationships with her boyfriend, her sister and her mother, speeds up this process in a narrative with fewer episodes and less narrative time than long-running programmes. *Undone* then uses the affordances of televisual seasons to create a more or less clear cut between Alma's 'original' reality in season 1, and another, alternate reality in which her father is alive in season 2, during which it does away with season 1's time loop mechanism and instead focuses on time travel, with some loopy repetitions within those time travels.

In *Undone's* second season, Alma travels back in time to talk to her paternal grandmother, Geraldine, who lives in a psychiatric facility due to her schizophrenia diagnosis, where Alma is mistaken for another patient and held while she is not able to use her time-travel capabilities to escape. Alma's mission is part of a plot strand that stretches over the entire second season of the programme, wherein Alma, her sister, Becca (Angelique Cabral), and her father find out that Alma's mother, Camila (Constance Marie), had a son with a priest in Mexico when she was very young. Due to the taboo nature of such a relationship, Camila's son, Alejandro (Carlos Santos), was raised in an orphanage.

Within a series of flashbacks that Alma and Becca are experiencing as time travellers, it is revealed that once Camila had emigrated to the United States, gotten married to Jacob and had her daughters, she expressed a desire to adopt Alejandro, but took Geraldine's advice not to bring her past back into her life. Alma, Becca and Jacob take it upon themselves to change this aspect of the past so that Alejandro can become part of their family, and this mission takes them back all the way to Poland in the 1930s where Geraldine (whose real name is revealed to have been Ruchel) and her parents are persecuted by members of a fascist organisation, the National Radical Camp. Ruchel alone is able to escape to the United States and changes her name to Geraldine upon arrival, deciding to leave her past behind, and it is thus implied that she is unable to confront her survivor's guilt. While *Undone*'s second season mainly operates via time travel, the programme still employs loops, such as in 'Rectify', the penultimate episode of season 2. During this episode, while Alma, Becca and Jacob find themselves in 1930s Poland, their first plan is to undo Ruchel's trauma from losing her parents by preventing her parents (Jacob's grandparents) from being abducted by the National Radical Camp. In order to do so, Jacob repeatedly, in a loop, inhabits his grandfather's body (similar to Nadia *becoming* her mother and Alan *becoming* his grandmother in *Russian Doll*) in order to act differently, but these attempts fail, as Ruchel's parents end up being arrested during every repetition despite Jacob's attempts. After this approach via a controlled time loop proves ineffective, Alma, Becca and Jacob decide to take a more therapeutic approach. Subsequently, they travel to different moments in Geraldine's (Ruchel's) past and effectively therapise her, as they get Geraldine to confront her guilt, forgive her younger self, which directly leads to Geraldine advising Camila to adopt Alejandro. Thus, Alma goes so far as to not only resiliently fix her own past mistakes in the show's first season, but season 2 expands the storyworld considerably as Alma feels responsible for her mother's and her grandmother's decisions as well.

Russian Doll and *Undone* share a few commonalities in addition to their use of time loops and time travel – they were both released in 2019 and returned with their respective second seasons in 2022 after delays caused by COVID-19; neither programme was renewed, despite critical acclaim; both shows move on from their respective first season's time loop logic to have their characters venture into the past to (potentially) undo intergenerational trauma, and both narratives delve specifically into trauma related to the Holocaust. Nadia tries to save a small family fortune from the Nazi Gold Train (Dunn, 2002; Zweig, 2002) in *Russian Doll*'s second season, while Alma attempts to ease her grandmother's survivor's guilt after escaping Poland as a child in the 1930s in *Undone*'s second season, leaving her parents behind. As is evident from these short descriptions, both programmes tackle quite expansive, elaborate ideas and histories in their complex serial narratives. However, they both balance their characters' spectacular, excessive experiences of time loops and time travel with mundane, everyday problems and situations, and these are often intertwined in such a way that characters utilise these particular temporal complexities to resiliently work on themselves, attempt to undo trauma and improve their relationships.

Slip revolves around Mae's exploration of various alternate lives she could have led had she made different choices, which are most often tied to romantic relationships within the context of the show. Individual choice, responsibility and resilience remain

the narrative's most important markers of agency and are here tied to libidinal control as Mae has to climax in order to be transported to a different reality. However, the series never explores what might happen if Mae climaxed by herself instead of with another person, and her ultimate return to her original reality is tied to her mending her platonic relationship with her best friend, though Mae's goal is to return to her heterosexual relationship (which was set up as stale and boring in the first episode), and Mae's lessons learned seem to revolve around a newfound appreciation for her relationship and her friendship. Mae's character trajectory in *Slip* is repetitive and loopy in a way that foregrounds self-improvement as Mae learns different lessons in each parallel reality that she takes forward to the next. In contrast to *Russian Doll* and *Undone*, which thematise mental distress throughout their narratives, in *Slip*, there is only a brief moment during which Mae performs an Internet search of symptoms of schizophrenia. The programme neatly resolves the story and clearly shows viewers that Mae has returned to her 'original' reality through the use of a recurring motif – her shoes. In the first episode that sets up the story and shows us the 'regular' or mundane repetitiveness of Mae's everyday life and the rut or staleness of her relationship, our attention is drawn to Mae's shoes, all neatly placed next to one another in a few shots that clearly show us the setup. In subsequent episodes, when Mae wakes up in various parallel realities, only the pair of shoes she was wearing when the first 'transition' occurred is present, including when she strikes up a 'new' relationship in a parallel reality with her 'original' husband, Elijah (Whitmer Thomas). With the idea of starting over with him without the 'shortcut' of slipping into a new parallel reality with him where they are already married, Mae avoids climaxing with Elijah at first. However, she eventually does have an orgasm at the end of the last episode, and when she wakes up the next morning and steps out into the living room, the camera pans over to the front door, where all of her shoes have reappeared. Viewers familiar with this recurring motif will understand that instead of slipping into a 'new' reality with Elijah, where she would only find one pair of her shoes, Mae has returned to her 'original' reality, as evidenced by the presence of her entire shoe collection. *Slip*, in this way, differs from *Undone* and *Russian Doll* in that, first, its narrative trajectory revolves around romantic, heterosexual love (despite the subplot centring on Mae's friendship with Gina, as mentioned above), and second, in that there is a positive outcome linked to a metaphorical closing of the loop in *Slip*, while the latter two shows' lack of resolution (for various reasons, including the fact that the programmes were not renewed) further cements Nadia and Alma as divergences from recovery narratives that provide a sense of closure or happy ending.

Conclusion

This article has considered the portrayal of imperfection and the neoliberal politics of resilience to offer ambivalent outlooks on the messy millennial's relationship to the idea of self-optimisation and resilience. In the programmes discussed in this article, dissatisfactions and affective dissonance that underlie messiness are not only expressed through performances, dialogues and strides and setbacks within an overall chronological, progressive narrative timeframe, but they are concretised through time loops, parallel realities and the excessive repetitions that are part of these logics. This draws attention to the

construction of narratives, especially the loopy, recursive structure of televisual ones (Holdsworth, 2021), as well as the logics of neoliberal success and recovery narratives (Dobson and Kanai, 2018; McRobbie, 2020), as the protagonists in *Undone*, *Russian Doll* and *Slip* all experience mental distress or are trying to work through trauma. Many of the precarious female leads Lagerwey et al. (2016) discuss are ‘burdened and troubled by forces that are shown to be systemic and social as often as they are individual’. By merging the mundane with the fantastic and spectacular, the programmes discussed here simultaneously and alternately employ the constrictive yet potentially liberating logics of time loops, time travel and parallel realities as metaphors for systemic and social issues and concretise individual feelings and experiences in ways that become or are framed as part of a larger whole.

The way in which recent programmes dramatise and concretise characters’ overwhelm at the same time as they may still feel the imperative of positivity and make efforts to self-manage and improve, according to McRobbie’s logic of *p-i-r*, could be investigated further and in more detail through what Manuel Garin (2017) calls ‘comparative seriality’. Further analyses of serial narratives that employ time loops, time travel and parallel realities in their storytelling, alongside the use of these tropes in films and video games, for example could provide more insight into how recursive narratives of recovery and repair unfold, with comparisons drawn both between types of seriality and in standalone works of fiction. This is relevant especially if sustained expressions of affective dissonances that unfold only over time, in conjunction with delayed story resolutions and a definitive lack of positive resolutions, may have different potentials to critique neoliberal conceptions of resilience.

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