

Unit 4 J.J. ABRAMS

The Mystery Box

Part 1

[. . .] Why do I do so much stuff that involves mystery? And I started trying to figure it out. And I started thinking about why do I do any of what I do, and I started thinking about my grandfather. I loved my grandfather. Harry Kelvin was his name, my mother's father. He died in 1986. He was an amazing guy. And one of the reasons he was amazing: After World War II, he began an electronics company. He started selling surplus parts, kits, to schools and stuff. So he had this incredible curiosity. As a kid, I saw him come over to me with radios and telephones and all sorts of things. And he'd open them up, he'd unscrew them, and reveal the inner workings—which many of us, I'm sure, **take for granted**¹. But it's an amazing gift to give a kid. To open up this thing and show how it works and why it works and what it is. He was the ultimate deconstructor, in many ways.

[. . .] He sort of **humored**² my obsession to other things, too, like magic. The thing is, we'd go to this magic store in New York City called Lou Tannen's Magic. It was this great magic store. It was a **crappy**³ little building in **Midtown**⁴, but you'd be in the elevator, the elevator would open—there'd be this little, small magic store. You'd be in the magic store. And it was just, it was a magical place. So I got all these sort of magic tricks. Oh, here. I'll show you. This is the kind of thing. So it would be like, you know. Right? Which is good, but now I can't move. Now, I have to do this, the rest of the thing, like this. I'm like, "Oh, wow. Look at my computer over there!"

Anyway, so one of the things that I bought at the magic store was this: Tannen's Mystery Magic Box. The **premise**⁵ behind the mystery magic box was the following: 15 dollars buys you 50 dollars worth of magic. Which is a savings. Now, I bought this decades ago and I'm not kidding. If you look at this, you'll see it's never been opened. But I've had this forever. Now, I was looking at this, it was in my office, as it always is, on the shelf, and I was thinking, why have I not opened this? And why have I kept it? Because I'm not a **pack rat**⁶. I don't keep everything, but for some reason I haven't opened this box. And I felt like there was a key to this, somehow, in talking about something at TED that I haven't discussed before, and bored people elsewhere. So I thought, maybe there's something with this. I started thinking about it. And there was this giant question mark. I love the design, for what it's worth, of this thing. And I started thinking, why haven't I opened it? And I realized that I haven't opened it because it represents something important—to me. It represents my grandfather. Am I allowed to cry at TED? Because—no, I'm not going to cry. But—the thing is, that it represents infinite possibility. It represents hope. It represents potential. And what I love about this box, and what I realize I sort of do in whatever it is that I do, is I find myself drawn to infinite possibility, that sense of potential. And I realize that mystery is the catalyst for imagination. Now, it's not the most **groundbreaking**⁷ idea, but when I started to think that maybe there are times when mystery is more important than knowledge, I started getting interested in this.

¹ When we "take something for granted" we don't fully appreciate it.

² To "humor" someone means to go along with what someone wants even if you don't agree.

³ The adjective "crappy" is a colloquial term used to describe something of poor quality.

⁴ "Midtown" refers to an area of Manhattan in New York City.

⁵ A "premise" is a fundamental idea that shapes something.

⁶ A "pack rat" is a person who saves everything, including things that are no longer useful.

⁷ Something that is "groundbreaking" is innovative and new.

[. . .] What's a bigger mystery box than a movie theater? You know? You go to the theater, you're just so excited to see anything. The moment the lights go down is often the best part, you know? And you're full of that amazing—that feeling of excited anticipation. And often, the movie's, like, there and it's going, and then something happens and you go, "Oh—" and then something else, and you're, "Mmm . . ." Now, when it's a great movie, you're along for the ride 'cause you're willing to give yourself to it.

Part 2

[. . .] This is something online; I don't know if you've seen it before. Six years ago, they did this. This is an online thing done by guys who had some visual effects experience. But the point was that they were doing things that were using these mystery boxes that they had—everyone has now. What I've realized is what my grandfather did for me when I was a kid, everyone has access to now. You don't need to have my grandfather, though you wished you had. But I have to tell you—this is a guy doing stuff on a **Quadra 950 computer**⁸—the resolution's a little bit low—using **Infinity software**⁹ they stopped making 15 years ago. He's doing stuff that looks as amazing as stuff I've seen released from Hollywood.

The most incredible sort of mystery, I think, is now the question of what comes next. Because it is now **democratized**¹⁰. So now, the creation of media is—it's everywhere. The stuff that I was lucky and begging for to get when I was a kid is now ubiquitous. And so, there's an

amazing sense of opportunity out there. And when I think of the filmmakers who exist out there now who would have been silenced, you know—who have been silenced in the past—it's a very exciting thing.

I used to say in classes and lectures and stuff, to someone who wants to write, "Go! Write! Do your thing." It's free, you know, you don't need permission to go write. But now I can say, "Go make your movie!" There's nothing stopping you from going out there and getting the technology. You can lease, rent, buy stuff off the shelf that is either as good, or just as good, as the stuff that's being used by the, you know, **quote unquote**¹¹ "legit people." No community is best served when only the elite have control. And I feel like this is an amazing opportunity to see what else is out there.

Part 3

When I did *Mission: Impossible III*, we had amazing visual effects stuff. **ILM**¹² did the effects; it was incredible. And sort of like my dream to be involved. And there are a couple of sequences in the movie, like these couple of moments I'll show you. There's that.

OK, obviously I have an obsession with big crazy explosions. So my favorite visual effect in the movie is the one I'm about to show you. And it's a scene in which **Tom's**¹³ character wakes up. He's drowsy. He's crazy—out of it. And the guy wakes up, and he shoves this gun in his nose and shoots this little capsule into his brain that he's going to use later to kill him, as bad guys do.

⁸ The "Quadra 950 computer" refers to an early Apple computer that was discontinued in the mid-1990s.

⁹ "Infinity software" refers to an outdated software program.

¹⁰ Something that is "democratized" is available to everyone.

¹¹ The expression "quote unquote" is a spoken phrase which refers to putting quotation marks before and after the next word that you say. This is usually done to indicate that the words are not something that the speaker would agree with.

¹² ILM is the special effects company, Industrial Light & Magic.

¹³ Abrams is referring to actor Tom Cruise who starred in *Mission: Impossible III*.

Bad Guy: Good morning.

OK, now. When we shot that scene, we were there doing it, the actor who had the gun, an English actor, Eddie Marsan—sweetheart, great guy—he kept taking the gun and putting it into Tom’s nose, and it was hurting Tom’s nose. And I learned this very early on in my career: Don’t hurt Tom’s nose. There are three things you don’t want to do. Number two is: Don’t hurt Tom’s nose. So Eddie has this gun—and he’s the greatest guy—he’s this really sweet English guy. He’s like, “Sorry, I don’t want to hurt you.” I’m like—you gotta—we have to make this look good. And I realized that we had to do something ‘cause it wasn’t working just as it was. And I literally, like, thought back to what I would have done using the **Super 8 camera**¹⁴ that my grandfather got me sitting in

that room, and I realized that hand didn’t have to be Eddie Marsan’s. It could be Tom’s. And Tom would know just how hard to push the gun. He wouldn’t hurt himself.

So we took his hand and we painted it to look a little bit more like Eddie’s. We put it in Eddie’s sleeve, and so the hand that you see—I’ll show you again, that’s not Eddie’s hand, that’s Tom’s. So Tom is playing two roles. And he didn’t ask for any more money. So here, here. Watch it again. There he is. He’s waking up. He’s drowsy, been through a lot. Tom’s hand. Tom’s hand. Tom’s hand. Anyway. So. Thanks. So you don’t need the greatest technology to do things that can work in movies. And the mystery box, in honor of my grandfather, stays closed. Thank you.

*This is an edited version of Abrams’ 2007 TED Talk.
To watch the full talk, visit TED.com.*

¹⁴ The “Super 8 camera” was a popular home motion picture camera in the 1960s and 1970s using 8mm format. Abrams wrote and directed a film called *Super 8*.