

Benjamin Beil, Herbert Schwaab, Daniela Wentz (Eds.)

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LOST IN MEDIA: LOST GOES TO THE MOVIES

Although the final episodes were broadcast in 2010 and transmedial extensions such as the virtual LOST-University have closed down and no longer offer degrees and courses on the “Advanced Physics of Time Travel”, the television series LOST has inspired and continues to inspire a myriad of scholarly and non-scholarly publications, participating in a LOST-hagiography. A slightly different example of the afterlife of LOST (2004–2010) can be found in the comedy THIS IS 40 (2012) which invites us to contemplate the nature of LOST as a medium. The Judd Apatow comedy centres on a family in Los Angeles struggling with a midlife crisis and the burdens of adolescence. The 13-year-old Sadie is just about to watch the final episodes of her most beloved programme LOST, which becomes one of the film’s central recurring motifs. The first scene of the film coincides with the 40th birthday of a central protagonist and shows Sadie sitting on a sofa with her younger sister watching LOST on a tablet PC in her hand. Her reception is interrupted by her sister’s question: “Can I watch LOST?” Sadie answers negatively: “You can’t handle LOST”, which is accompanied by a facial expression of utmost arrogance. This scene illustrates two things: As a comedy, THIS IS 40 mocks the narrative complexity of LOST, which is not only one of the strongest marks of a program that no one seems to fully grasp, but which is also an important criterion for quality programmes in creating the impression to appeal only to a particular and ‘knowing’ and smarter part of the audience. However, “You can’t handle LOST” could also refer to the melodramatic nature of LOST, to the emotional overstimulation that arises out of the dramatic events haunting the characters. Their being set in the past, the present, the future and in an alternative reality not only contributes to LOST’s complex temporal structure. It is also a means to intensify the emotions created by the program.

As a rare example of a realistic comedy that documents the social, material and psychological reality of its protagonists, THIS IS 40 also shows the use of media in everyday life. Sayid running through the jungle is framed by the screen of a new handheld mobile media technology. THIS IS 40 documents how media become increasingly detached from the clearly defined contexts of their reception.

As Max Dawson implies, *Lost* is a programme that suits itself to a variety of screens (Dawson 2007, 238f.), it is a 'traditional' television programme produced by ABC, one of the three representatives of the broadcast era, and it works on the traditional television set. However it also demands to be seen on DVD, so that the viewer may freeze the image in order to identify minor details that may or may not be important to solve the many mysteries of the *Lost* Universe (ibid., 231).

How *Lost* and the new media technologies move to other places is revealed in the second scene, that shows the family driving in a car. The younger sister informs the parents that Sadie is secretly watching *Lost* on her tablet PC. A discussion arises about the new reception mode of binge viewing as she informs her parents that she has only eight more episodes to finish the programme and that she has watched all the other episodes within five weeks: "You can't watch over 100 episodes of a show in five weeks. It'll melt your brain." She replies: "It is not melting my brain, it is blowing my mind. My relationship with *Lost* is not your business. It's extremely personal." This scene illustrates another mobile mode of reception. Viewing on a tablet PC mirrors the process of mediatisation, in this case, turning the mobile reception of television with earplugs into something similar to listening to music with the Walkman or iPod. The mobile becomes the personal as it creates one's own territory for a mobile viewer in public or semi-public spaces. Therefore, Sadie's remark that it is "extremely personal" is evidently true. It refers not only to her emotional relation to *Lost*, but also to changing modes of reception provided by new media. The personal and intimate is not only an effect of *Lost*'s narration but is also an effect of the object-like quality of programs played on tablet PCs and mobile phones which move with the user and separate the individual from their surroundings. In this sense *Lost* could be regarded as a highly mediatised television text that offers many points of entry, not only as a multi-coded text that merges different media, but also in its union with new media technology that creates new occasions and habits of reception. The argument about *Lost* as either melting the brain or blowing the mind captures the ambivalent and addictive nature of such new serial texts, and their obsession for repetitions and variations which curiously find their exact counterpoint in the obsessions of *Lost*'s characters and their craving for redemption.

In the following scene involving the show, *Lost* becomes the medium of a conflict between Sadie and her parents who ban the use of computer, mobile media and the internet in order to save money. Since Sadie has to postpone her plans of watching the final episodes, she becomes extremely upset with her parents and screams with juvenile anger and despair: "You guys took away my

shit before I could watch the final episodes." In the following scene, Sadie has watched the final episodes without her parents' permission, and is caught by her father who finds her in an extreme state of mourning and crying: "I just watched the last episode of *Lost*. They are all dead. Jack, Kate, Saw, Jin, Sun..." As her father, amidst the planning of a disastrous birthday party, reacts rather insensitively, a quarrel ensues about his most beloved programme: "I don't make fun of your stupid *MAD MEN*," provoking her father's remark: "What Don Draper has gone through beats whatever Jack is running from on some fucking island." Sadie counters this remark with an accurate description of the format: "Bunch of people smoking in an office. It's stupid." There are two perspectives on the serial and medial nature of these programmes: A naïve perspective, taken on by the father, of character reading that attributes the quality of a programme to the depth of the characters' psychology, and Sadie's more sophisticated perspective on the setting of a programme, the elements that have to be exchanged in order to distinguish one serial programme from the other. It seems to indicate that the smartness of the audience is not a matter of age, that the reading of objects of popular culture affords a literacy widely and indiscriminately spread among people of all ages and possibly of all classes.

In the last scene featuring *Lost*, the series is no longer a programme that separates the members of the family. It reunites and reconciles the two sisters and their grandfather, who has long been alienated from his daughter and granddaughters, before a television set to watch the final episode a second time. Since the grandfather does not understand the ending of *Lost*, Sadie explains the meaning of the final scenes, seemingly overcoming her own mourning about the deaths of her beloved characters: "It's happy, because they helped each other achieve their destiny." This last scene is also a scene of reconciliation of the traditional use of media and the use of new media, as the television set is finally granted a place in the media ensemble of the family.

THIS IS 40 perfectly illustrates the title of this collection of essays on *Lost*. That *Lost* becomes the subject of a blockbuster comedy from one of the main producers of comedies in the 2000s and 2010s makes us aware of how this television program – which seems to ward off the world with its conspiracies and its retreat onto an island as a place of a collective but still solipsistic imagination – is still an object 'in the world', a programme that is closely linked to the material reality of media technologies, the content that is produced for a wide variety of platforms and displays. In this case, *Lost* is the object of the medium of film. However, the film does not exclusively refer to the narrative complexity, the intertextuality and transmediality or the enigmatic nature of the program, as most of the scholarly literature on *Lost* tends to do. The film seems to share

the general approach of *Lost in Media*, namely to explore the program in the light of a process of mediatisation or media change. THIS IS 40 mainly focuses on the reception, on the emotions evoked by the program, on the repetitive nature of a serial narrative and on the new times and places to watch a television programme. With its capacity to separate and reconnect the members of a family, the serial narrative itself literally functions as a medium to communicate feelings or to transmit information and to link people, narratives, images and technological artefacts. *Lost*'s transmediality is mostly referred to as an extension that is motivated by the programme's complex nature, but in this case it is more an effect of the way people react to a programme, how they love it or use it, how it becomes, like many other long-running TV programmes, something that structures everyday life. *Lost in Media* is based on the assumption that a television programme monitors the reality and the ongoing process of mediatisation, but also points to the mediality of the television series itself, meaning that it simultaneously contributes to this process of mediatisation.

This line of inquiry is embedded in a general assumption about the relationship between television and media change, in which the medium fulfils a triple role since 1950 and especially in present times. Firstly, it observes the change and makes it visible in a structured way. It makes these observations available for a society's economy of meaning, and feeds into its cycles of self-definition and self-description. Secondly, insofar as television attributes a central technological, institutional or epistemological role to media in the process of transformation, it turns into an agent of change in its own right and observes its own function in the process. Thirdly, television is affected by media change and has to expose its forms and formats to the observed change; consequently, it has to perform change itself. The television series (and serial) is particularly representative of these dynamics due to its fictional potentials and its specific temporality. If those assumptions about television entertaining a specific relationship with and fulfilling a special role within media change and mediatisation are correct, the question remains how *Lost*, taking into account its aforementioned ambivalence, can be addressed in terms of being an agent of change, and in terms of reflecting and projecting media change. What is ultimately at stake is the status of television itself within this very same media culture, and – beyond that – the whole idea of what television was, is and might become.

Lost in Media uses the concept of mediatisation to address the programme from a new scholarly perspective mostly ignored by volumes that focus on *Lost* as a quality programme. In a sense, it exploits *Lost* in order to think about media technologies and their invasion into the everyday, to study the serial, to

evaluate transmediality not only as a narrative strategy but also as an effect of new media and to explore the connection of other media (like literature) and genres, to *Lost*.

Roberta Pearson's chapter addresses the question of *Lost*'s place in television history and within the contemporary television landscape. Considering the show from the perspective of text and industry, she asks whether *Lost* has left a significant legacy with a lasting influence on the television industry and its serial production, or whether it was a one-off phenomenon with a success that can never be repeated. Was *Lost* a game changer? Has it forever changed the ways in which television dramas tell their stories? Without giving a definite answer to that question, Pearson analyses in detail the influence *Lost* had and still has on subsequent programmes and the consequences for production circumstances of TV dramas.

Simon Spiegel's contribution contemplates the origins of mystery as a genre and the volatile nature of this denomination, leading us back to the history of television and *Lost* predecessors like *THE X-FILES* (1993–2002) and *TWIN PEAKS* (1990–1991). As an important extension of this perspective, Spiegel also elaborates on the meanings embodied by the genre of mystery and its 'indecisiveness' which finds a form for the modern subject's quarrel with contingency.

Michael Cuntz's essay on *Lost* reflects on how *Lost* figuratively refers to the medium of television and the notion of telepresence with the image of the lighthouse as a recurring motif of the island's topography. With Luc Boltanski's concept of distant suffering, Cuntz develops a philosophical perspective that addresses moral dilemmas of becoming an audience to torture and human suffering. *Lost*'s flashbacks and flashforwards emphasize the nature of *Lost* as a medium, as it produces images of suffering and does not merely represent or document them.

Dominic Maeder draws what may at first glance appear to be an unlikely comparison between *LOST* and *DSCHUNGELCAMP* (2008–), the German version of the reality show *I'M A CELEBRITY...GET ME OUT OF HERE!* (2004–). Maeder argues that both *LOST* and *DSCHUNGELCAMP*, in relying upon the poetical template of the robinsonade, can be situated in a common framework of televisual governmentality, which enacts and reflects the changing governmental constellations of the present, essentially because television itself is both the object and agent of these transformations, shaping the interrelation between mediatisation and society.

Andreas Sudmann's essay analyses *Lost* as an example of the concept of television as an "experimental system". Using this concept, the contemporary TV series can be considered as an epistemic object that is concerned with the production

of uncertainty – about itself as well as its medium. Sudmann shows that *Lost* in particular is characterised by a dynamic of productively dealing with uncertainties inscribed and involved in the whole field of popular seriality. He thereby identifies two essential aesthetic strategies: self-recursivity and serial outbidding.

Herbert Schwaab explores *Lost*'s status and role in the current television and media culture, taking into account the series' transmediatisation. In contrast to conventional interpretations of the so-called convergence culture and *Lost*'s relation to it, Schwaab shows that *Lost*'s transmedia strategies and effects follow a genuine televisual logic, which is itself based on melodramatic excess, massive expansion and repetitiveness. The series thus creates a "neo-baroque mentality" which he reads as the manifestation of a form of coming to terms with the traumatic events of 9/11.

Addressing the similar topic of melancholia, the contribution of Katharina Niemeyer and Daniela Wentz explores the relations between *Lost* and Umberto Eco's novel *The Island of the Day Before* (1994) and how both are indebted to a Baroque sensibility. The transmedial and intermedial elements of the literary and the televisual may add to their labyrinthine nature, but they also evoke a certain mentality of a melancholic detachment from the world that links the Baroque to our era and which may find, as the essay further argues, its source in the events of 9/11 and its representation in media.

Benjamin Beil takes the analysis of three video game adaptations of *Lost* as a point of departure for a discussion of the alleged video game logic of the series. He shows how some of the game adaptations fall short of the potential of transmedia storytelling because they neither succeed in the further development of *Lost*'s worldbuilding nor in the foregrounding of their ludic capacities vis-à-vis the series. Conversely, the ascription of a logic normally associated with video games does not live up to the complexity and creativity of *Lost*.

Gabriele Schabacher's essay shows an interesting twist on the concept of *Lost*'s (in-)famous qualities as a complex narrative. Her approach focuses on the mechanisms by which the series copes with its own complexity using recaps. By identifying and analysing different recapping strategies – including summarising, paraphrasing, recapitulating, and re-accentuating – Schabacher shows that although recaps use specific techniques of simplification they nevertheless can also generate their own elaborate forms of narrative complexity.

Coming back to Sadie's arrogant answer to her sister that she cannot handle *Lost*: All of these essays can be seen as proofs that it is possible to handle this programme and to even use it as a helpful resource in doing media studies.

As a reversal of the more common approach to use media studies to reveal the hidden truth behind the magical powers of the island, *Lost* contributes to an understanding of media culture. However the essays do not intend to demystify this program – or the efforts of transmedia storytelling and the conditions of an evolving convergence culture that are entangled with it – but to rearrange the perspective on a television programme from the mysteries of the island to the still unsolved mysteries of media culture: the role of television, the essence of seriality, the process of mediatisation, and – since the program monitors as well as contributes to the process of mediatisation – the impact of a programme and its aesthetics on media culture and the use of new media technologies. The essays understand *Lost* as some kind of seismograph, which is also the very reason why *This Is 40* turns to *Lost*, not to deride the *Lost*-hype, but as a way to reflect on the characters use of and love for media and on the ways in which media and television series have always granted a mode to express or articulate one's feelings or to explore the material and social conditions of our culture that is constituted by media. The virtual *Lost*-University may be closed down, but the afterlife of *Lost* (as a medium and in other media) will go far beyond the final gathering of the characters in a small church.

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LOST'S LEGACY

The editors of this volume have assigned me the daunting task of addressing *Lost*'s place in television history. During its six years on the air, the programme undoubtedly had a significant short term impact upon the American television industry, however assessing its longer term impact would require years, if not decades, of perspective. *LOST* ended its first run a little over two years ago as I write, while the original *STAR TREK*, a show that has an undisputed place in television history, went off the airwaves in 1969. I can confidently say that without *STAR TREK*, the original series (TOS) and its most significant successor, *STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION* (TNG) there would have been no *Lost*; the various *STAR TREK*s demonstrated that what my colleague Catherine Johnson (2005) terms telefantasies had the same capacity as more established genres to accrue both immediate and longer term profits. *STAR TREK* also contributed to the industrial conditions into which *Lost* emerged, having an immediate and longer lasting influence upon the TV1, 2 and 3 landscapes. In the United States, TV1, dating from the late 1940s to the early 1980s, was the era of channel scarcity, the mass audience and, from about the mid-fifties on, the three network hegemony of ABC, CBS and NBC. TV2, dating from roughly the early 1980s to the late 1990s, was the era of channel/network expansion, quality television and network branding strategies. TV3, dating from the late 1990s to the present, is the era of proliferating digital distribution platform and further audience fragmentation.

As I have previously argued (Pearson 2011), TOS, while a TV1 product, presaged many of the trends of TV2 and 3 and TNG played a significant role within the industrial transformations of TV2. If without TOS and TNG there could have been no *Lost*, then without Gene Roddenberry, the *STAR TREK* creator, there would have been no J.J. Abrams, Carlton Cuse and Damon Lindelof, the *Lost* showrunners. In the TV1 era, television producers kept a low profile; most television scholars trace the emergence of the television authors, the vaunted showrunners who now play such a prominent role in the industry, to the 1980s. However, the publicity hungry Roddenberry actively cultivated a brand based upon characterizing TOS as a quality product distinct from the run of the mill

fare that supposedly dominated the three networks; in doing so he provided a template for the Abrams and Whedons of the future. If without Roddenberry there could have been no Abrams, without the Trekkies there would be no *Lost*s. As Henry Jenkins tells us, the active audience that so actively embraced *Lost* "is now taken for granted by everyone involved in and around the media industry" (Jenkins 2006, 1). In 1966, ardent television fans were far from taken for granted; they were rather deemed a bit unusual if not demented. But the campaigns to save TOS from cancellation followed by the emergence of a widespread fandom generated by the syndication success of the 1970s offered a model for the subsequent fandoms that have become increasingly central to industry strategies. While TNG did not perhaps have quite the impact of its progenitor, the success of its first run, off network syndication did contribute to the channel proliferation and audience fragmentation of the TV2 era. This in turn meant that even though *Lost* aired on one of the three major networks, it still had to struggle to build and maintain an audience through publicity strategies and paratexts undreamed of in the TV1 era.

Almost half a century after its debut, it is now possible to assess the impact of *STAR TREK* upon *Lost* and upon television more generally and to assert that it will maintain an important place in both popular and scholarly television histories. While I think it unlikely that *Lost* will equal *STAR TREK* either in its impact upon television or upon television histories, only the passing of several decades can confirm or repudiate my judgement. In the meantime, with the limited hindsight of a mere two years, by what criteria can we judge *Lost*'s influence and reputation? By considering the show from the perspective of text and industry, the rest of this essay makes some preliminary judgements as to whether *Lost* left a significant legacy or was a one-off phenomenon that can never be replicated within the contemporary television landscape.

Lost's Narrative Innovations and Its Audience

Showrunner Carlton Cuse claimed that *Lost*'s narrative innovations made it a game-changer. "We showed that it was possible on network TV to tell a highly complex, serialized narrative with intentional ambiguity – leaving the audiences room to debate and discuss the meaning and intentions of the narrative – and still find a large audience" (Sutter 2010). Cuse correctly identifies *Lost*'s highly complex serialization as an innovation, but it was an innovation with many precursors. The soap operas that dominated American daytime television until recently were complex, serialized narratives that generated

audience debate and discussion, although, given their melodramatic roots, did perhaps lack ambiguity. In 1978 DALLAS brought serialized soap opera to prime-time, in the process introducing the convention of the cliffhanger season finale with the “who shot JR?” plotline that ended the second season and was resolved several episodes into the third season. Programmes as diverse as TNG and ER adopted the convention; this aspect of *LOST*’s serialized narrative had many precedents. Models for seriality can be found in other prime-time dramas, most notably HILL STREET BLUES. Debuting in 1981, the police procedural adopted the continuous storylines for ongoing characters that had hitherto primarily been confined to soap operas, although many of the crime stories were resolved in individual episodes. Two programmes often identified as templates for *LOST* that had complex serialized narratives organized around narrative enigmas are TWIN PEAKS (1990–1991) and THE X-FILES (1993–2002). However, since TWIN PEAKS lasted a mere nineteen episodes while THE X-FILES deliberately combined an ongoing storyline, the mythology, with one-off episodes and the monster of the week, these predecessors equalled neither *LOST*’s intense seriality nor its non-linear narrative. While some have argued that single episodes of *LOST* could be watched in isolation (see, for example, Hills 2010), the close linking of each instalment to events in previous and subsequent episodes produced a very tight continuity while the flashbacks, flashforwards and flashsideways, in conjunction with the time-hopping island and characters, added an intricate temporality encompassing myriad timelines and locations.

From this perspective, Cuse is correct to characterise *LOST*’s narrative as an innovation, but was it a game changer? In other words, did it succeed and did its success change forever the ways in which television dramas tell their stories? We can measure success by three criteria, first by the sheer numbers of viewers, secondly by the satisfaction of those viewers and thirdly by *LOST*’s influence upon subsequent programming. By the first criterion, *LOST* performed well; over eighteen million viewers watched the premiere in 2004 and 13.5 million the finale in 2010, although the average viewership for the final season was 11.5 million, two-thirds the average of the first season (Carter 2010). ABC had reason to be pleased; as Cuse said, *LOST* managed to find a large audience within the fragmented TV3 universe and, together with DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES, greatly improved the fortunes of the hitherto struggling network. However, the ratings decline speaks to some amount of viewer disenchantment; many, increasingly baffled by the ever multiplying enigmas, stopped watching, while many of those who continued watching suspected that the showrunners were multiplying enigmas which they had no intention of answering. Ivan Askwith said that “An increasing number of viewers have given up on the show since

LOST’s sophomore season, insisting that its inexplicable twists and turns [...] were now beginning to serve as proof that the writers had no long-term plan in mind, and that the show’s endless mysteries would never be resolved in a satisfying manner” (Askwith 2009, 161). The sixth season as a whole and the finale in particular generated so many negative reactions from fans and in the media that two years later, Damon Lindelof defended the last episode in an interview with the tech/entertainment website *The Verge*. The interviewer expressed his “extreme disappointment with the ending. What was the point? It felt like they didn’t have the answer and this was the neatest way to wrap it up” (www.theverge.com; Lindelof 2012). Fan James Hunt responded to the interview on the *Den of Geek* Website. “*LOST*, at least as we saw it, was driven by questions, and the answers to those questions [...] To end the show without giving us the biggest answers wasn’t just a bad idea, it was out of step with everything we’d been watching” (2012). Askwith had earlier argued that “*LOST*’s creative legacy will eventually hinge, in large part, on whether the writers were able to finish what they started” (Askwith 2009, 161).

Many have said that the writers didn’t finish what they started, although others protest that it wasn’t about the end, it was about the process, or that it wasn’t about the mythology, it was about the characters. But Cuse and Lindelof themselves set up expectations about a satisfactory conclusion being contingent upon wrapping up the myriad puzzling plot points. Early in the show’s run they insisted that they did indeed have answers to the many questions that they had raised. In the promotional show *LOST REVEALED* (2005), aired in conjunction with the show’s UK premiere, Lindelof said “We have the answers to what the monster is or where does the polar bear come from, but we’re just not at the point yet where we need to answer”. The showrunners made the unprecedented announcement of a definitive end point for a well performing show to ensure the careful planning of the rest of the story, a response both to accusations of making it up as they went along and to the perceived failures of their oft cited progenitors, TWIN PEAKS and THE X-FILES. Carlton Cuse said

I think that’s really the lesson of THE X-FILES and TWIN PEAKS – but mainly THE X-FILES. If X-FILES had ended after the fifth year, it would have a very different legacy. [...] We became painfully aware of the limitations of this particular type of show – it needed to end. [...] And then the show [...] really kicked into another gear – because at that point, we could really map out the mythology with the remaining time we had for telling our story, and it just made all the difference. (Pappademas 2009)

The showrunners often invoked *TWIN PEAKS* and *THE X-FILES* as famously not having delivered on their elaborate mythologies. Lindelof considered this point: “Will [Lost] be a cautionary tale, or will it be, ‘This is how to do it right?’ When *LOST* was coming together [...] the show that was always referenced was *TWIN PEAKS*. [...] It was always a cautionary tale” (Pappademas 2009). Will, as Lindelof feared, *LOST* become another cautionary tale, occupying a similar place within the popular memory of television history as its two predecessors? Lindelof might be satisfied with that legacy since, as he said of *TWIN PEAKS*, “Although they didn’t end it well – at the very least, it’s a cultural landmark. How many shows get to say that?” (Pappademas 2009).

Lost’s Immediate Influence on the Television Industry

TWIN PEAKS ended in 1991; two decades can bestow cultural landmark status but not two years. Two years, however, is enough time to gauge *Lost*’s immediate influence upon subsequent television programming. The television industry has always copied particularly successful shows; *TNG*’s excellent ratings in off-network syndication gave rise to the telefantasies *BABYLON 5* (1993–1998), *ROBOCOP* (1987), *TIME TRAX* (1993–1994), *HERCULES: THE LEGENDARY JOURNEYS* (1995–1999), *XENA: WARRIOR PRINCESS* (1995–2001), *FOREVER KNIGHT* (1992–1996) and *HIGHLANDER: THE SERIES* (1992–1998). But since *LOST* was more than a telefantasy, what constitutes a copy? When *LOST* won a Peabody, awarded for excellence in electronic media, Allison J. Waldman wrote that “The Peabodys cited *LOST* for breezily mixing metaphysics, quantum physics, romance and cliff-hanger action in a genre-bending series about a group of air-crash survivors on a mysterious island. *LOST* has rewritten the rules of television fiction” (2009). Indeed, as Angela Ndalians wrote, *LOST* at first resisted generic classification, mixing romance, melodrama, the supernatural, fantasy and horror. It also deliberately teased “the viewer with fixing its affiliation with science fiction, only to then deny this association or, at least, delay the fuller development of that association” (2009, 184). Only with Desmond’s time-travelling in *FLASHES BEFORE YOUR EYES* (S03E08), did *LOST* definitely become science fiction. As producer Brian Burke said, the network dictated *Lost*’s generic instability.

They were very nervous about how far we were going to push anything that seemed like science fiction. And in defense of the network, there had been a plethora of science fiction shows before [...] that all failed, for a variety of reasons. (Pappademas, 2009)

Both the network and the showrunners wanted to avoid alienating the large general audience that *LOST* first attracted with a generic affiliation. At the same time, this type of mass appeal risked putting off a select group of viewers. The showrunners had thought that *LOST* would be a niche audience cult show like Abram’s previous project *ALIEN* (2001–2006) and were astonished when the premiere attracted over eighteen million viewers. Carlton Cuse commented:

At the beginning, no one thought the show was going to last more than 12 episodes and that was liberating because it allowed us to sit down and say, ‘Well, we’ll make the 12 best episodes in television ever.’ *THE PRISONER* (1967–1968) was a reference for us because it was a great show that lasted 17 hours and it’s still got this incredible cult reputation. (Cuse/Lindelof 2009)

But *LOST* became a unique phenomenon, one that scholars have variously labeled a cult blockbuster, mainstream cult and event television; it had the textual characteristics and dedicated, active, niche audience of a cult show like *ALIEN* yet also attracted a large, mainstream audience. Stacey Abbott notes that

LOST is a series that is cult to the core in terms of its content and narrative structure and yet is has been carefully marketed and strategically structured so as to appeal to as wide an audience as possible while also encouraging a level of engagement with the show previously associated with cult audiences. (Abbott 2009, 23)

Abbott also calls *LOST* “event television” that aimed for

large and diverse audiences whilst simultaneously fostering the interactive engagement with the series that is so often associated with cult, and in so doing courting the niche demographics of loyal and interactive cult TV fans as well as inviting viewers who might not normally engage in fan practices to commit to the show on a cult level. (Abbott 2009, 11–12)

Matt Hills makes a similar case in characterising *LOST* as mainstream cult; its narrative enigmas demanded “highly focused, attentive viewing”, but it also had “a strong narrative drive at the level of individual episodes, each aiming to hold audience attention through the juxtaposing of ‘present’ and ‘flash-back’ storylines, even if the specific viewer is not immersed in tracking the bigger, story-act questions posed”. Hills concluded that *LOST* was designed to operate on “different levels for audiences who desire to consume it more-or-less intently or to work with it more-or-less casually” (2010, 72).

In the years that *LOST* was on the air, three ‘*Lost*-alikes’ aimed at cult blockbuster status, emulating *LOST*’s large ensemble cast, multiple international locations, complex seriality, non-linear temporality and overarching mythology. The first was *HEROES* (2006–2010), its title indicating its derivation from superhero comic books; it centred on a group of ordinary people who discovered that they had

extraordinary superpowers. The show achieved good ratings during its first two years, but could not sustain them into its third and fourth seasons. Jennifer Gillan reports that NBC's controversial decision to strip the Jay Leno talk show in the ten o'clock slot usually dedicated to dramas stemmed from "increasing frustration with *HEROES*, which had been steadily hemorrhaging on-air viewers and had reached a new low in its third season in 2008–09" (2011, 7). So badly received was this third season by critics and fans that showrunner Tim Kring made a public apology and promised a fourth season reboot that would bring back old viewers and attract new ones. This strategy didn't succeed and NBC cancelled the show. *LOST*'s own network, ABC, tried to make lightning strike twice with *FLASHFORWARD* (2009), its time-hopping premise involving multiple characters all having visions of their lives on a specific date a few months in the future. Science-fiction, time-travel and intense serialisation forged links between the two shows, as did *FLASHFORWARD*'s promotion during *LOST*'s commercial breaks and a billboard for Oceanic Airlines seen in *FLASHFORWARD*'s pilot. Damon Lindelof believed that *FLASHFORWARD*'s success or failure would determine whether the big three networks would ever again produce a show like *LOST*.

People say to Carlton and I [sic], 'Do you think you could sell *LOST* today?' JJ and I didn't sell *LOST*. We didn't walk into a room and say, 'Hey, we have this idea.' *FLASHFORWARD*, I feel, did get sold. It's a multi-character, heavily serialized science-fiction show [...] And from what I understand [...] they spent a lot of money on it, too. So the networks still think they can swing for the fences. But if tomorrow morning, the ratings aren't good, if it craters – then the story will be, 'This is the death of the behemoth genre show'. (Pappedemus 2009).

FLASHFORWARD cratered spectacularly. When the show premiered to an audience of over twelve million, it seemed that ABC might have found another *LOST*. But viewership rapidly declined to a third of that figure (Seidman 2010) and the show was cancelled after one season. NBC tried once more with *THE EVENT* (2010), a tale of extraterrestrials held captive by the US government, which, like *LOST*, presented much of its story through flashbacks, but which, like *FLASHFORWARD*, premiered to good numbers that tailed off rapidly, leading to cancellation after only one season. Since *THE EVENT*'s demise, what Abbott calls cult blockbusters and Lindelof calls behemoth genre shows have been absent from the big three networks' schedules. NBC and ABC however continued to give more modest telefantasies a chance in the 2011/12 season with the former airing *ONCE UPON A TIME* and *AWAKE* and the latter *GRIMM*. *ONCE UPON A TIME* and *GRIMM* updated fairy tales for contemporary America and have been renewed for second seasons. Although the former jumps between fairy tale land

and contemporary America, neither has a particularly challenging narrative structure. *AWAKE* was the most critically well received of the three, with critic Tim Molloy calling it the "best new show of the season" (Molloy 2012). The show is a police procedural with a twist in which, after a car crash, the detective hero switches between two realities; in one his son is dead and wife alive and in the other his wife is alive and his son dead. Molloy compared the show to *LOST*: "Despite the most complicated narrative since ABC's *LOST* kept skipping through time, *AWAKE* makes a fast, emotional connection that gives viewers an almost immediate stake in the lives of its compelling characters" (Molloy 2012). If, as Carlton Cuse claimed, *LOST* showed that an ambiguous, complicated narrative could find a large audience on one of the three networks, *AWAKE*, in conjunction with *HEROES*, *FLASHFORWARD* and *THE EVENT*, may have shown that such narratives can no longer attract large audiences. As Jennifer Gillen argues, this may lead the networks to avoid shows with heavy serialization that can baffle existing viewers and fail to attract new ones. In the 2005 and 2006 seasons a host of long-arc narratives premiered, some telefantasy (*INVASION*, *THRESHOLD*, *SURFACE*) and some not (*KIDNAPPED*, *SMITH*, *VANISHED*); none lasted more than a season. Gillen says that "the failure of these new series to generate good ratings and the subsequent decline of *LOST*'s numbers caused networks to reevaluate the suitability of the long-arc serial for broadcast schedules" (2011, 136). Shows with heavily serialized narratives and cult sensibilities may now be relegated to the smaller networks that tolerate lower ratings as with Fox's *FRINGE* (2008–2013) and Syfy's *BATTLESTAR GALACTICA* (2004–2009). That being said, NBC will premiere the science fiction series *REVOLUTION* in the autumn of 2012. Produced by *LOST*'s J.J. Abrams and Bryan Burke, *REVOLUTION* is set in a post-apocalyptic future in which all advanced technologies have failed. Tellingly however, series star Billy Burke implicitly contrasted the new show with its illustrious predecessor, *LOST*: "I don't think people will be confused in the slightest watching it. [...] We cut back and forth a little bit in time, but it's all pretty linear and very easy to follow and highly entertaining" (Bentley 2012). NBC is clearly heeding the lesson of *LOST* as well as of its own *HEROES* and *AWAKE* and will undoubtedly exert pressure to ensure that the narrative remains linear and easy to follow.

REVOLUTION is but one of several television shows produced by Abrams since *LOST*'s 2004 premiere; one of *LOST*'s undisputed legacies is the transformation of Abrams from promising wunderkind to one of the most powerful men in Hollywood. Prior to 2004, Abrams had produced only *FELICITY* (1998–2004) and *ALIAS* (2001–2006), yet this track record was sufficiently impressive for ABC to trust him to take *LOST* from treatment to pilot in four months, completely

bypassing the usually lengthy series development process. Since 2004, Abrams' Bad Robot Productions has produced *WHAT ABOUT BRIAN* (2006–2007), *SIX DEGREES* (2006–2007), *FRINGE* (2008–2012), *UNDERCOVERS* (2010–2011), *ALCATRAZ* (2012) and *PERSON OF INTEREST* (2011–). Only two of these, *FRINGE* and *PERSON OF INTEREST*, lasted more than one season, but the former reinforced Abram's association with science fiction and complex storytelling, featuring multiple parallel universes and timelines and an overarching mythology. It became a fan and media favourite with *The New York Times* designating it one of the ten shows worth watching in 2010 (Hale 2010). NBC's turning again to Bad Robot for *REVOLUTION* attests to the power of Abram's brand, now augmented by its successful transfer to film; Abrams produced *CLOVERFIELD* (2008) and produced and directed *STAR TREK* (2009, with a sequel currently in production) and *SUPER 8* (2011). Abrams' success in both film and television may be part of a new media phenomenon, the cross-media producer brand. Joss Whedon of *BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER* (1997–2003) fame has had similar success in crossing over between film and television. He came to *BUFFY* as a not overly successful screenwriter, but parlayed his cult television profile into producing the horror film *CABIN IN THE WOODS* (2011) and directing the major blockbuster *AVENGERS ASSEMBLE* (2012). Stephen Spielberg has come the other way, with the establishment of Dreamworks Television in the 1990s. The studio's most high profile television ventures have been the mini-series *BAND OF BROTHERS* (2001) and *THE PACIFIC* (2010–) but the Spielberg name is prominently associated with science fiction spectacles *TAKEN* (2002), *TERRA NOVA* (2011) and *FALLING SKIES* (2011–). The cross-media producers' value may stem more from lending a name to a project than from direct involvement in it. Abrams brought the most recognisable name to *LOST*, but as Denise Mann tells us, he "left the day-to-day operations of the series shortly after the pilot was completed, further evidence that his value to the studio-network complex is a function of his ability to launch and oversee a number of franchises at once" (2009, 108). With Abrams operating at a distance, Carlton Cuse and Damon Lindelof emerged as *LOST*'s on-the-ground internal coordinators and external publicists. Showrunners have had an ever more prominent public role since the days of TV1, when Roddenberry's brand recognition was a rarity. In TV2, the showrunner brand became linked with both quality and cult television, with well-known names such as Steven Bochco and Aaron Sorkin associated with the former and Chris Carter and Joss Whedon with the latter. TV3's disruption of television flow has made the showrunner's name a vital branding mechanism for programs that can no longer rely upon their place in a network schedule to attract viewers. Cuse and Lindelof's publicity

activities, however, signalled yet another major expansion of the role. As Cuse said,

Damon and I became the public face of *LOST* in a way that no other showrunners had been before us. We hosted a *LOST* podcast where we discussed the show that was regularly the #1 podcast on all of iTunes. We shot a whole series of comedic videos sponsored by Verizon called *LOST Slapdown*, and we were guests on shows like *Jimmy Kimmel Live* and *The Letterman Show*. We did a *New York Times Talk* that was simulcast in over 400 theaters in the US and Canada. Honestly, it was crazy on some level. (Sutter 2010)

LOST'S Multi-platform Innovations

Part of the craziness stemmed from *LOST*'s heavy promotion through trans-media storytelling, the expansion of a narrative through different media and across multiple platforms which has become an integral component of TV3. According to Cuse, he and Lindelof

creatively brainstormed and oversaw all the new media extensions. We wanted to see if we could use other platforms to tell stories that would never make it onto the network show. We started out by creating the first ARG (Alternative Reality Game) that connected as a narrative into a network TV show. This ARG redefined the way in which the Internet and a TV show could be integrated, and the ARG also broke new ground in how a TV show could be marketed. We were also the first TV network series show to create original content for mobile phones. (Sutter 2010)

Cuse incorrectly claims that *LOST* first created original content for mobile phones. That accolade goes to *24* (2001–2010) which released *24: CONSPIRACY* in 2005; *PRISON BREAK* (2005–2009) followed shortly with *PRISON BREAK: PROOF OF INNOCENCE* in 2006. However, both were low-budget productions that featured none of the actors from the originating series. The *LOST: MISSING PIECES* mobisodes, distributed between November 2007 and January 2008, were the first to maintain the high production values of and feature the actors from the originating series. Cuse also incorrectly claims that the *LOST* ARGs were the first tied into a television show's narrative; the *ALIAS* web game was an important precursor. But, despite these caveats, *LOST* can certainly claim the honour of generating the widest and most diverse transmedia storytelling of any television show to date with, in addition to the mobisodes, websites for Oceanic Airlines, the Hanso Foundation and the Dharma Initiative, five ARGs, including *THE LOST EXPERIENCE* 1, *FIND 815*, and *DHARMA WANTS YOU*, the computer game

LOST: VIA DOMUS and DVD extras including the epilogue, “New Man in Charge” that answers some of the questions left unresolved by the finale.

If, as Cuse says, he and Lindelof had oversight of all of the above, LOST’s transmedia storytelling added considerably to the showrunners’ already extensive duties. Denise Mann says that the “heightened demands placed on television writer-producers who [...] have been handed greater responsibility for steering massive, global, corporate TV empires like LOST have a negative cultural impact on production culture” (2009, 98–99). The 2008 Writers Guild of America strike attempted to address the negative financial impact upon their members stemming from the demands for transmedia extensions. According to Mann, the “WGA leadership wanted to call ancillary texts ‘content’ and management at studios and networks wanted to call it ‘promotion’ and avoid paying residuals” (ibid., 110). Since transmedia extensions have become a mandatory component of any successful television show, defining them as promotion would have increased the writers’ workloads with no increase in their remuneration through residuals. As Gillan says

even though this transmedia side of the business is dependent on the expansion of storytelling and brings in new revenues, the old compensation methods remain in place. Networks [...] too often still calculate return on investment [...] through traditional broadcast methods and metrics, causing them to overlook [...] that one of the reasons for the success of the TV franchises is the emotional investment encouraged by transmedia programming. (Gillan 2011, 16)

Lindelof and Cuse confronted this problem when asked to produce the MISSING PIECES mobisodes. Rather than following the example set by 24 and PRISON BREAK, Cuse told the studio that the mobisodes had to be covered by Hollywood union agreements and written, directed and acted by the LOST production crew. According to Cuse, then ABC head, Mark Pedowitz, “literally moved mountains within the ABC/Disney culture to make it happen. In the end we made the very first new media deal of any kind with Hollywood Guilds – the WGA, DGA [Directors Guild of America] and SAG [Screen Actors Guild]”. Cuse commented that

The LOST deal became an important template for the first new media deals that were negotiated into the guilds’ overall agreements with the AMPTP [Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers]. [...] It was of critical importance to establish that writers had the rights to residuals in new media. I think the concessions we won will be a very important source of income for future generations of writers. (Sutter 2010)

If future generations of writers do indeed have Cuse and Lindelof to thank for their augmented incomes, then LOST will go down in television history if only for this reason. It may also go down in television history as one of the first shows to fully embrace the multi-platform distribution characteristic of TV3. The Disney studios, the producers of LOST as well as DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES (2014–2012), did a deal with Apple in 2005 to make both shows available for download through iTunes; these were the first television shows to be sold online. The ABC website also streamed episodes commercial free. Several cable carriers included LOST in their video-on-demand services, permitting users to view episodes for up to a week after their initial broadcast (Kelly 2011, 156). LOST also became the most downloaded series amongst file sharers trading episodes illegally through peer-to-peer networks (Kelly 2011, 157). LOST’s complex narrative and multiple enigmas rendered it ideal for consumption on internet platforms and DVD. As Gillan says, “As LOST had to be watched in order from season one, episode one forward, it is hardly surprising that it lost on-air viewers over time, but that it continues to be a blockbuster series on DVD and download” (Gillan 2011, 7). Disney profited and will continue to profit from DVDs and downloading (at least of the legal kind), but ABC did not and will not. And therein lies LOST’s most puzzling conundrum. LOST’s complex narrative demanding multiple viewings, its transmedia storytelling and its multi-platform distribution perfectly suited the new TV3 environment; as I suggested in my first essay on LOST, it emblemized many of the trends that were transforming television in the first decade of the new millennium (Pearson 2007). But those transforming trends might leave behind the traditional networks with their business models predicated upon advertising revenues; this is particularly the case with cult blockbusters like LOST with their complex narratives decreasing audiences for the network broadcast and their technologically savvy fans accessing alternative viewing and re-viewing modes.

Conclusion

When I began writing this chapter I asked Denise Mann whether she would stand by her assertion made at the MIT Futures of Entertainment conference in 2011 that LOST had shifted the entertainment model. She replied

I still feel like LOST is a key show that shifted the entertainment model; there’s a caveat, though. Both ABC and NBC appear to have moved away from these types of hyper-serialized, multi-genre, cross-platform, transmedia storytelling experiments in the aftermath of their challenging

experiences on *LOST* and *HEROES*, respectively. Since 2010, the networks appear to have returned to more traditional, mass-oriented TV series. (Mann 2012a)

Mann also kindly shared with me a paragraph from her forthcoming essay on *LOST* in which she quotes Carlton Cuse speaking at a Society for Cinema and Television Studies workshop in March, 2010 on the future of innovative shows like *LOST*. “We’re like blacksmiths in the Internet era. We’re making a show that I’m not sure will ever be replicated [given the tremendous] resources we used [...] So we are dinosaurs that are dying on May 23 [the date of the series’ finale]” (Mann 2012b). Will *LOST* have a significant legacy or was it a one-off phenomenon that can never be replicated? Without a flashforward to several decades in the future, that question, like so many others posed by *LOST*, must remain unresolved.

Notes

01► Cf. Benjamin Beil’s contribution in this volume.

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