

Lost in transition: from post-network to post-television¹

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The crash of Oceanic Flight 815 marooned forty-eight survivors on a desert island in uncharted waters far from shipping lanes and flight paths. The island lures them with tropical beaches and stunning sunsets, mystifies them with sixteen-year-old messages and enigmatic hatches and terrifies them with a gigantic but invisible beast. The threats and opportunities of a rapid reconfiguration of the media landscape similarly lure, mystify and threaten television producers and network executives who daily face uncertainties far scarier than a pilot-munching monster. In the introduction to *Television After TV*, Lynn Spigel lists factors that are altering the channel scarcity and mass audience landscape of broadcast television; the demise of the American three-network system, the rise of multichannel cable and global satellite delivery, multi-national conglomerates, internet convergence, changes in regulation policies and ownership rules, and the innovation of digital television systems like TiVo. Says Spigel, “If TV refers to the technologies, industrial formations, government policies, and practices of looking that were associated with the medium in its classical public service and three-network age, it appears that we are now entering a new phase of television—the phase that comes after TV.”² The mega-global hit *Lost* emerged from the relatively stable industrial conditions of the post-network era of the last part of the 20th century, when television, even if no longer broadcasting to mass audiences, still retained its centrality as a domestic medium. But *Lost* also reflects the increasingly unstable industrial conditions of the post-television era of the early 21st century, when the continual convergence of platforms and fragmenting of audiences morphs the medium into something rich and strange.

Lost, owned and funded by Touchstone Television, made by Bad Robot, co-creator and executive producer J.J. Abrams’ production company and aired on ABC, typifies the post-network vertical integration of content production and distribution within a vast multi-national conglomerate, in this case the Disney Corporation. Jennifer Holt tells us that ‘The quintessential New Hollywood

marriage of product and pipeline was achieved in 1995 when Disney bought ABC for \$19 billion. This was the first merger of the post-Fin Syn landscape between a studio and broadcast network.... At the time, the new conglomerate represented the promise of boundless synergy for a brave new Magic Kingdom'.³ But the promised synergy failed to deliver. 'ABC took a nosedive and languished in third place almost losing out to Fox at one point'. Writing in 2003, Holt offered a gloomy prognostication for ABC's future. 'The long-term prospects for ABC are unsteady at best, presently resting on a very narrow strategy of reality-based programming.... The company has yet to create any new ideas of visionary programming for their properties'.⁴ But in that same year development began on *Lost*. Lloyd Braun, then president of ABC Entertainment, had an idea about the survivors of an air crash on a tropical island. 'I want to do *Castaway* as a series,' he told fellow executives at a network retreat in the summer of 2003. Finding support for his idea from Thom Sherman, head of Drama, Braun commissioned a script from writer Jeffrey Lieber, who still retains a co-creator credit on *Lost*.⁵ Finding the script unsatisfactory, Braun passed it to J.J. Abrams, who had already produced the successful *Alias* for the network, to see what he could do with it. Abrams wrote the successful pilot script together with co-creator Damon Lindelof.⁶ *Lost* premiered in the autumn of 2004 and, together with *Desperate Housewives*, 'is credited with raising formerly beleaguered ABC to the top of the US network ratings chart'.⁷ In January 2006, *The Hollywood Reporter* praised *Lost* as 'the rare combination of a critical and commercial hit for ABC, earning a rabid worldwide following, the Emmy last year for best drama series and the drama series Golden Globe last week'.⁸

'Lost Revealed', a making of programme shown on Channel Four in conjunction with the show's UK premier, says that *Lost* 'is the creation of two of Hollywood's hottest young producers, Damon Lindelof and J.J. Abrams'.⁹ The prominence in *Lost* publicity of the two men specifically credited as the show's creators, Abrams and Lindelof, obscures the complex industrial arrangements behind the show's origins and subsequent commercial and critical success. The post-network era highly values the creating, writing and executive producing of television shows, assigning authorship to the individuals who fulfil these functions. This is a significant departure from the industrial practices of the network era in which

executive producers, even those who were also creators, kept a low public profile in keeping with their relative lack of power. In her 1971 book, *The Hollywood TV Producer: His Work and His Audience*, Muriel Cantor says ‘Even when a man owns, creates, and produces his own show, the network retains the right to *final* approval of scripts, casts and other creative and administrative matters’.¹⁰ Executive producers achieved far greater creative freedom and the public prominence attendant upon it in the post-network era because their names proved more attractive to demographically desirable audiences than did the network brand, diluted by the new technologies of the remote control and the video recorder together with the proliferation of new networks and satellite channels. Michele Hilmes says of Steven Bochco, perhaps the most fabled of all the post-network executive producers, or, in *Variety*-speak, hyphenates

As one of television’s premier auteurs in a fragmented business that provided few forms of continuity, his name had begun to mean more in terms of genre, quality, style, and audience than did the name of the network his shows appeared on. The stamp of an author – even when actual authorship was somewhat removed by the production practices of television – gave a program a degree of authenticity and legitimacy absent from television’s earlier decades.¹¹

Lost’s authenticity and legitimacy stemmed not from the struggling ABC network but from its creators Abrams and Lindelof. Abrams is undoubtedly the more highly valued Hollywood player, called by the *Los Angeles Times* ‘the hottest young producer in television’.¹² Industry insiders confirm his importance. Speaking of the need to find someone to re-write the unsatisfactory first script, Thom Sherman said, ‘Anytime we had an idea at ABC that we were having trouble with the first idea that popped into our head was what would J.J. do with it?’¹³ Harold Perrineau, who plays Michael, recalls that at the time of the casting call, ‘There was great buzz about the show. J.J. Abrams is creating this great new show. You should go [read for a part]’.¹⁴ ABC’s faith in the Abrams brand radically curtailed the usual lengthy process of commissioning a script and then a pilot for a new show. Mark Cotta Vaz says in the *Lost* companion book, *The Lost*

Chronicles, ‘*Lost*, in practically every respect, was an anomaly in the business of launching a television series’.¹⁵ Cotta Vaz explains that the development of a new show normally takes a year, starting in June when networks begin accepting scripts for potential pilots. The networks greenlight the lucky ones in January, at which point the producers must quickly assemble cast and crew and wrap production of a pilot within two weeks. Over the next few months network executives screen the pilots and make the final selections. After the schedulers have determined timeslots, the new shows are presented to the advertisers in May.

The *Lost* pilot was given the go ahead simply on the basis of a treatment within a week of Abrams being called in by the network. The overall time between Braun’s initially contacting Abrams and the delivery of the pilot was less than four months. That pilot, rather than being shot rapidly on a relatively restricted budget on a studio backlot, had a production schedule of eight weeks, a budget which various estimates put at five or ten million dollars and an exotic location on the Hawaiian island of Oahu. Says Bryan Burke, one of the first season’s five executive producers, ‘It was amazing that the network and the studio took a chance and decided that if they were going to do it, they were going to do it right, regardless of the expense. Everyone made a leap of faith with an immense project, before there was even a script. They had complete faith in J.J. and Damon’.¹⁶ Burke speaks of the network’s faith in Abrams and Lindelof, but ABC had brought in the latter simply to guarantee that the overcommitted Abrams, who was writing another pilot, would be able to produce a script. Abrams himself seems happy to share the credit.

It became apparent that Damon ... was not just running the show but as much or more the creative vision as I was.... I got a lot more credit for the show, incorrectly, just because people are more familiar with the work I did on *Alias* than what Damon did on *Crossing Jordan*. I always feel a little guilty when I hear, ‘Wow, I love J.J.’s show’. I’m happy to be a part of it, but I’m certainly not entirely responsible for it.¹⁷

Abrams may generously try to put the record straight, but industrial conditions may in the future militate against his or other creators too selflessly sharing the

credit. The multiplication of channels which diluted the network brand during the transition from the network to the post-network era placed increased importance upon the brand of the author. As the multiple platforms available for digital distribution (of which more below) further dilute network brands in the transition to post-television, the author brand may become an even more important marker of the quality now expected by demographically desirable viewers. May *Lost*'s anomalous conditions of production, the short circuiting of a usually tortuous process, presage the reconfiguration of the industry's standard production practices to accommodate ever more powerful executive producers who will be granted ever more creative freedom (as long, of course, as they continue to boost that bottom line)?

The attribution of authorship to the executive producer has been one of the most striking aspects of a post-network television era that saw the emergence of so-called quality television and the concomitant increase of the medium's cultural value. For much of its history, television was the Cinderella of the entertainment industries, left in the kitchen with the servants while the theatre and the cinema went to the ball and mingled with the aristocracy. Like any new medium, television made strident bids for respectability in its infancy, mimicking its older sisters in the anthology programmes of the so-called "golden age" of the 1950s. But the stability of the three-network hegemony largely freed the medium from concerns about cultural value, the overriding goal the simple one of retaining roughly one-third of the mass audience. The 1980s and 90s reconfiguration of that hegemony which resulted in the post-network era entailed new discourses of quality, many of which now circulate around *Lost*. But the quality discourse concerning the respective cultural values of television and cinema looks ahead to a post-television era in which these two media may become all but indistinguishable. As Cotta Vaz puts it, 'the medium has traditionally been looked down on by the movie side of the entertainment industry. But many in the business feel that television is finally getting some respect'.¹⁸ Playing Prince Charming, cultural critics have fitted the glass slipper, daring to suggest that television equals its glamorous older sister in accomplishment (and perhaps even occasionally surpasses her). Take for example Stephen King, who knows a thing or two himself about shifting cultural hierarchies and critical re-evaluations. In his

Entertainment Weekly column at the start of the 2005 television season, King wrote ‘Maybe one of the reasons this summer’s movie offerings looked so cheesy was that they came after a particularly brilliant TV season, starring ... *Desperate Housewives*, *24*, *The Wire*, *The Shield* and *Lost*’.¹⁹

Jack Bender, Hawaiian executive producer of *Lost*, asserts that ‘Episodic television has changed, thanks to cable. There’s no more “it’s good enough for television”.... It’s the quality – episodic television has to look like a feature film’.²⁰ Bender sees cable competition, a key driver of the post-network era, as pushing the networks toward quality programming that’s as visually appealing as the cinema. Others in the production crew perceive the convergence of film and televisual technology and personnel, a key driver of the post-television era, as generating *Lost*’s high production values, which, at least in terms of location and visual effects, surpass the cinematic look of such quality predecessors as *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under*. First assistant director Allen DiGioia boasts that ‘we’re using the same elements, the same equipment and cameras [as in film]’.²¹ Director of Photography Michael Bonvillain is proud that ‘our crew is all A-list feature guys. Paul Edwards, our A-camera operator, has done a ton of features.’²² Perhaps as a result of the presence of so many feature guys, the *Lost* crew employs shooting techniques more characteristic of film than of television, the time and budgetary constraints of the latter medium often imposing standardisation and routinisation. According to director Tucker Gates, ‘Some shows have very strict rules about how to shoot things, what’s expected in terms of coverage, how scenes are approached. *Lost* seems to be more film-oriented in its style, that’s something J.J. and Jack [Bender] have instilled in the show’.²³

Both production personnel and critics particularly lauded the cinematic look of the pilot, which production designer Mark Worthington thought resembled a ‘\$100 million feature’.²⁴ Dominic Monaghan (Charlie Pace), who’s gone from hobbit in the mega-film hit *Lord of the Rings* to failed rock god in the mega-television hit *Lost*, claimed that the pilot ‘looks like a film. I’d been immersed in the film industry for so long I got confused and thought we were making a film. I thought at some point ABC were probably going to say “Let’s try to release it in the cinema and turn this into a feature film.” It was that grand in scale and

ambition'.²⁵ The critics agreed. Interviewed in 'Lost Revealed', Boyd Hilton of *Heat Magazine* was 'struck by how much like a really good film it is. It's brilliantly directed, it looks amazing'. On the same programme, E! Entertainment's Kristen Veitch praised the quality of the plane crash scenes as 'just as good if not better than anything seen in the cinema'. The crash scenes looked so good because the pilot, said to be the most expensive ever made, availed itself of visual effects more often seen in a summer blockbuster than a television pilot. Reported Cotta Vaz, 'the pilot was a major visual effects effort, with close to 200 shots.... There were twenty-five to thirty shots alone required for the digital removal of the crane and wires holding up an airplane wing. A dramatic scene in which a live engine sucked in a bystander and explodes was a heavily visual effects number'.²⁶

Lost's production values, no matter how cinematic, could not alone have guaranteed favourable critical reception or the quality label. Since *Hill Street Blues*, *Thirty Something* and other shows of the early 1980s demonstrated the appeal of dense serial storytelling to viewers with the desirable demographics, narrative complexity has become a hallmark of the quality television of the post-network period. In an article in the online television studies journal *Flow*, Jason Mittell claims that '*Lost* is the best show on American broadcast television'. Mittell, himself part of that desirable demographic to which quality television has been primarily marketed, not surprisingly values the narrative even over the very impressive production values.

For a show with such a high-budget and elaborate visual style, the most impressive special effects are accomplished within the writing itself -- sophisticated and surprising twists, reveals, and structures offer what we might consider storytelling spectacles, a contemporary "television of attractions" that asks viewers to marvel at the sheer bravado of the creators.²⁷

Lost's 'sophisticated and surprising twists, reveals, and structures' occur within the overarching serial narrative of a twenty two episode per-year television season; if the programme runs for the minimum of four to five years necessary for successful syndication that seriality may well encompass eighty eight to one

hundred and ten episodes and if for the seven or more years enjoyed by many ratings-toppers, one hundred and fifty four or more episodes. In an act of creative bravado unequalled in any other contemporary medium, *Lost*'s creators had to devise a narrative premise and group of characters capable of sustaining audience involvement over tens of episodes until an ultimate resolution that probably, given the show's current success, lies years in the future.

J.J. Abrams, speaking of his previous creation, *Alias* 'once likened the start of a season to driving through a fog towards a distant mountain with landmarks to aim for along the way, the fog clearing the deeper one went on the journey'.²⁸ Unlike their castaways, *Lost*'s creators knew their exact location, even at the very start of the journey when the mountain may have been entirely obscured by fog. Bryan Burke describes a meeting with Abrams and Lindelof very early in the pre-production of the pilot. 'We started talking about what the show was, who these people were and where they had landed ... and the big picture of where we were going. At the end of an excited conversation of twenty to thirty minutes we had discussed where the show was going over the next five or six years. We realised we know what this show is'.²⁹ But as the myriad disappointed fans of *The X-Files* know all too well, producers may claim to know the way but still drive endlessly through the fog and in the end completely bypass Resolution Mountain. *Lost*'s producers, aware of this public scepticism, insist that they've got a very good map; they're just not ready to show it to the audience. Lindelof asserted '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'.³⁰

They have some of the answers but by no means all of them; the evolution of a dense serial narrative, with multiple character story lines and lengthy narrative arcs, constitutes what Cotta Vaz refers to as the 'little miracle of episodic television'.³¹ Like many creative endeavours, a television show to some extent takes on a life of its own, moving in unpredictable directions. Carlton Cuse, another of the show's five original executive producers, likens the ongoing development of a television series to a 'two-way street'. 'A show is a very organic entity and you don't just force your will upon it.... We get feedback watching an actor's performance and the qualities they bring to a character,

there's the dynamics we discover when two actors are paired and we see how they interact'.³² Lindelof acknowledges that the show's organic nature may look rather like making it up as they go along. 'The "making it up" part is just our acceptance that this is a collaborative process, that the show is about writers and actors and directors and all these voices. There's a jazz-like quality to *Lost*. ... That's the sense in which we're making things up. It's all about trusting each other'.³³

It might seem that television's intensely pressurised production conditions -- episodes penned by multiple writers and shot in a few days on relatively small budgets -- would forever culturally disadvantage the medium relative to the cinema. But *Lost*'s producers imply that it is precisely the pressurised, continual and collaborative process that produces the multi-layered and complexly woven narratives of serial television drama. Like many critics, Stephen King believes that these new narrative forms make post-network television drama superior to the dramas of the 50s, 60s and 70s. 'The perfect critique of the old TV is offered in Rob Reiner's *Stand By Me*. Gordie Lachance asks his buds if they've ever noticed that the people on *Wagon Train* ... never seem to get anywhere. "They just keep on wagon-training" ... He knows that stories should resemble life and life has a beginning, a middle and an end'.³⁴ Cinema reaches the ends rather too rapidly for those of us who prefer our resolutions almost infinitely delayed, our imaginary worlds almost infinitely expanded and our middles almost infinitely elaborated. Since cinema's industrial conditions of production and reception preclude multi-year narratives constructed over hundreds of episodes, television may now be the superior medium, at least for some kinds of storytelling.

Since the early 1980s increasingly high production values and increasingly dense serial narratives have boosted television several rungs up the cultural hierarchy. In this respect *Lost* typifies much post-network television drama accorded the quality label, but perhaps also looks forward to a post-television era in which the medium may be perceived as not only equalling but perhaps even surpassing cinema's cultural status. *Lost*'s sharing many characteristics with what those in the industry call genre shows and those without cult shows may also presage the post-television era. Said Lindelof, 'We were aiming for that *Alias*-type audience. We knew it was a little bit weird. It has a huge cast, it's serialized, and it requires

the audiences' attention. It's everything procedural crime drama's aren't'.³⁵ *Lost* accords almost precisely with the definition of cult television given by Matt Hills.

Cult TV series like *Angel*, *Babylon 5*, *Blake's 7*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Doctor Who*, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, *The Prisoner*, *Star Trek*, *Twin Peaks* and *The X-Files* ... tend to be marked by sustained enigmas, and by ongoing or unresolved mysteries about their characters, character relationships, or aspects of their invented worlds. Regardless of how TV narratives progress ... there is a sense in which what we see on screen is only a part of a much wider narrative world, always implying further events and developments.³⁶

Genre shows construct their wide narrative worlds within dense webs of precedent and intertextuality, laying bare the device in a deliberately self-conscious manner designed to appeal to the knowing viewer eager for clues to the show's mythology. *Lost* has a legion of obvious literary, filmic and televisual ancestors: desert island stories (*Robinson Crusoe*, *Mysterious Island*, *Swiss Family Robinson*, *The Lord of the Flies*, *Gilligan's Island*); science fiction/fantasy television (*The Twilight Zone* in particular); reality television shows (*Survivor*). The *Wikipedia* entry for *Lost* features a helpful discourse on the show's intertextual references. Character names allude to Enlightenment philosophers who theorised about man's natural state and the relationship among nature, civilisation and government: John Locke to the Englishman of the same name and Danielle Rousseau to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Lost* Locke's father Anthony Cooper shares his name with Enlightenment Locke's political mentor and patron, Lord Anthony Ashley-Cooper. Locke's protégé Boone Carlyle shares his name with Thomas Carlyle, who spoke of the 'organization, structure and leadership of society'. Books prominently displayed or mentioned include *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Turn of the Screw*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*, *The Bible* and *Alice in Wonderland*.³⁷ The reference to *Alice in Wonderland* takes place in the first season's third episode 'White Rabbit', when Locke mentions the book, although Jack's supposedly dead father appearing and disappearing like the titular white rabbit should make the Lewis Carroll

connection abundantly obvious. But the *Star Trek* competent viewer like myself may also think of the original series episode ‘Shore Leave’, which features various creatures seemingly spontaneously generated by the planet: Alice and a large white rabbit straight out of the Tenniel illustrations as well as people from the characters’ pasts. This intertextual frame made me speculate that the ghosts, polar bears and other mysterious phenomenon on *Lost* Island might be, as on the *Star Trek* planet, of alien manufacture. *Lost*’s multiple precedents and references are designed precisely to engender such speculation and to appeal to the specialised knowledge and puzzle-solving propensities of many genre fans.

Lost may look like a genre show but has achieved greater commercial and critical success than any of its precursors. Genre shows benefited from the increasing audience fragmentation of the post-network era by attracting small, but dedicated and demographically desirable niche audiences. In its seventh season (2002-2003), the very successful (by genre standards) *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* often ranked below 100th place and achieved a highest rating of five, representing approximately five percent of all households.³⁸ *Buffy* and other genre shows such as *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *The X-Files* have garnered the occasional critical accolade and even the occasional award from Viewers for Quality Television, but not industry awards (except in technical categories) or very large audiences. *Lost* has achieved top ratings, Emmies and a Golden Globe. Its producers, obviously keen to retain the show’s broad critical and commercial appeal, resist the potentially damaging genre/cult label. ABC Entertainment president Steve McPherson invokes the mantra of the quality drama. ‘I’m constantly telling [the producers] “Character, character, character.” If you just had the machinations of the mythology it would be a cult show’.³⁹ The executive producers get the message. Carlton Cuse, another of the first season’s five executive producers, credits the characters’ backstories with the show’s wide appeal. ‘The flashback stories are the emotional core of the series and give a much broader audience access. There’s a genre audience that enjoys the mythology, but the broader audience wants to know more about the characters and the flashbacks and go back to the seminal events in their lives’.⁴⁰ Says Burke ‘These are real people in extraordinary situations. If [fans] are sticking around hoping to find out what this crazy monster thing is ... then, fine, stick around. But that’s not what

this show is about'.⁴¹ The producers may deny *Lost*'s cultness, but a 'host of new sci-fi series' appeared at the beginning of the 2005 season, as, in accordance with usual industry practice, other networks, clearly having categorised the show as cult, tried to imitate its success.⁴²

Do *Lost*'s big audiences, prestigious awards, positioning as quality television and host of would-be imitators indicate that genre shows will play an increasingly important role in the future? The vast narrative worlds and complex narrative enigmas of genre shows engender an intense viewer involvement in a programme's virtual world that has benefited producers in the post-network era.⁴³ Fan studies has established that keen genre viewers are more likely to be repeat viewers and to purchase DVDs and licensed products, as illustrated by Abram's previous show *Alias*, now cancelled after five years. Referring to the show as 'cult-fave spy-fi drama', *The Hollywood Reporter* said that it 'was among the first of a new breed of TV series that can be sustained for multiple seasons of modest primetime numbers on the strength of such ancillary businesses as DVD sales and video games'.⁴⁴ Might genre shows, particularly if they equal *Lost*'s mainstream success, offer business models particularly appropriate for the post-television age? I have speculated above that the value of the author's brand may increase as multiple platforms further dilute the network brand. Might the author's brand hold even more value for genre fans, who attribute the origins of their beloved virtual worlds to Chris or Joss or J.J. and Damon? Paramount-Viacom's listing the deceased Gene Roddenberry as the creator in *Star Trek* credits is one marker of the value of authorship to a genre audience. Does the need for immersion in and speculation about the virtual world drive genre fans to create more internet sites and engage in more internet chat than their non-genre counterparts, giving rise to the internet buzz increasingly important to a show's success? Will genre fans seeking immersion be more eager to download episodes to their hard drives or iPods or to purchase supplementary texts constructed for their mobiles?

An advertisement in a recent *New Yorker* appeals to those desiring a media-immersed life, offering a range of content-to-go on the new visual iPod: music; audio books; pod casts; photos; music videos and TV shows.⁴⁵ The TV show is, of course, *Lost*, its presence on the iPod the result of a deal between Apple and

Disney which makes the studio a Hollywood leader in exploiting current television programmes across multiple platforms. Reported *Television Week*

In one fell swoop, The Walt Disney Co. was transformed ... from the staid media company it had been known as under former Chairman and CEO Michael Eisner into a technologically innovative first mover under current CEO Robert Iger, according to many technology analysts. Disney and Apple unveiled a deal last Wednesday to make episodes of some of Disney-owned ABC's most popular television series - including "Desperate Housewives" and "Lost" - available for download on Apple Computer's popular iTunes Music Store.

Michael McGuire, research director at technology consulting firm Gartner, is quoted in the article as saying, 'This is an inkling of the steps of large media companies coming to grips with the issue of broadband distribution....'⁴⁶

Coming to grips with the issue of broadband distribution entails media industries rethinking their basic organisations and strategies. Jennifer Holt, quoted above, attributes Disney's 1995 purchase of ABC to the 'promise of boundless synergy'. That promise has failed to pay off not only for Disney but also for the other mega-companies created to maximise the profits from one product across all divisions. Part of the failure stems from the fact that not all products lend themselves to synergy. Paramount-Viacom could market *Star Trek* television, *Star Trek* films, *Star Trek* books and *Star Trek* theme parks but it's difficult to see how Disney could do the same with *Desperate Housewives* or even, perhaps, with *Lost*. Even when synergy works it can't last forever; franchises inevitably age past their sell-by dates, as did *Star Trek* with the failure of the fifth series, *Enterprise*, and the tenth film, *Nemesis*. Another reason for the failure lies in the clash of organisational cultures created by mergers; it's hard to maximise profits across divisions when those divisions can't work together. All those divisions also made companies just too big to respond flexibly to a rapidly changing business environment. Whether coincidentally or not, soon after the *Star Trek* franchise timidly went, Paramount-Viacom split into two separate companies, CBS Paramount Television and Viacom. Media industry executives no longer worship

at the alter of synergy but rather adhere to what John Caldwell calls the ‘gospel of “repurposing content” and “migrating content” to this or that “platform”’. Says Caldwell

The rhetorical shift from talking about productions as “programs” to talking about them as “content” underscores the centrality of repurposing in industrial practice. The term “content” frees programs from a year-long series and network-hosted logic and suggests that programs are quantities to be drawn and quartered, deliverable on cable, shippable internationally, and streamable on the Net.⁴⁷

Rather than seeking long-term synergies, media industries now seek hot properties, which enable the extraction of maximum profits in minimum time through simultaneous distribution across multiple platforms and across the globe.⁴⁸ As one of the hottest of hot properties, *Lost* epitomises the repurposing of content and globalisation which lie at the heart of the transition to a post-television era.

We’ll return to global distribution in a bit, but for now let us now consider the transformative potential of multi-platform distribution. Will the direct-to-video, viewing-on-demand models now emerging threaten the decades-old distribution arrangement of networks and affiliates? ABC’s affiliates, reported *Television Week*, were ‘up in arms’ about the iPod deal, fearing that it threatened ratings and advertising revenues. The network issued a placatory press release. ‘Through our arrangement with Apple, we are not only taking advantage of new technology, but hoping it will bring increased interest to the first-run broadcasts of “Desperate Housewives,” “*Lost*” and “Night Stalker” on our affiliates....’⁴⁹ Some network executives believe that downloading may actually help to build audiences for serialised shows, which may otherwise fail to attract viewers who miss the first few episodes or lose viewers who miss mid-season episodes. *Broadcasting and Cable* reported that the iPod deal turned an executive from a rival network into a *Lost* fan. “I downloaded all the old episodes, caught up, and am now hooked and I’ll watch it on ABC when the next first-run comes out so I can be part of the social experience.... So that platform has created a viewer that would never have been.” Viewership for *Lost* and *Desperate Housewives* increased by 17% and 8%

after episodes were made available for downloading.⁵⁰ *Lost*'s having increased its audience by more than double that of *Desperate Housewives* would seem to support my hypothesis about the suitability of genre shows to the post-television era; a *Lost* viewer seeking clues to the narrative's hermeneutic may be more fearful of missing an episode and more inclined to repeat viewing than a *Desperate Housewives* viewer. Said one 15 year old *Lost* fan, 'I make sure to watch every episode on TV because the screen is bigger and the stereo is better and it's a more fun experience.... But if I'm talking to people about episodes on the forums and we decide to go back and look at one or want to screen-capture something, I will go and watch them from the computer.'⁵¹

Multi-platforms have implications for narrative as well as for industrial organisation, enabling what Spigel refers to as 'transmedia storytelling': 'content ... designed to appear across different media platforms so that we can now access our favorite media "franchises" and characters in multi story-telling universes'.⁵² *Lost*'s transmedia storytelling is well-adapted to the post-television age. Declared a headline in *The Los Angeles Times*: '*Lost* is easy to find, and not just on a TV screen; Fans can get fixes from iPods, blogs, podcasts, and soon, cellphones. It's a new media model.' The article reports that *The Lost Video Diaries*, two-minute episodes about castaways who do not appear on the show, is available on Verizon cellphones. ABC is also 'developing an interactive website to delve into aspects of the show's mythology that will never be explored on air', with content created by a staff writer.⁵³ Fans, or at least fans with sufficient disposable income, will be able to spend many happy hours lost in a *Lost* virtual world created by the programme's producers. Said yet another of *Lost*'s executive producers, Carlton Cuse, "The show is the mother ship, but I think with all the new emerging technology, what we've discovered is that the world of 'Lost' is not basically circumscribed by the actual show itself". Fans, of course, have known for years that a show's metaverse expanded far beyond the confines of a weekly episode, but may media producers' commercial and authorised expansions of programme metaverses decrease the non-commercial, non-authorised, bottom-up expansion of fan fiction and other fan-created texts? That is a question for another article, but clearly these new modes of distribution and narrative have profound implications

for audience reception in the post-television age. Might multiple platform distribution and transmedia storytelling perhaps take us ever closer to the totalising vision of the Frankfurt School?

Lost also offers a model for the global distribution so crucial to a post-synergy strategy of the maximisation of profits. Caldwell says that ‘syndication possibilities and foreign distribution in particular are now always very much on the minds of producers and executives, so much so that such perspectives encourage a “collage” approach to series development and a penchant for aggregating an ensemble of actors and story lines that will travel across national boundaries’.⁵⁴ The desire to cross national boundaries has resulted in Paramount working with the British Sky network during the development of the science fiction series *Threshold* and in 20th Century Fox’s top development executives regularly consulting with foreign broadcasters.⁵⁵ I have no evidence that any such consultation took place during *Lost*’s development, but the producers certainly aggregated an ensemble of actors with appeal to a global audience. Said *Lost* executive consultant Jeff, ‘We knew early on we were going to have an international cast. It was an international airline and it wasn’t going to be a bunch of Americans’.⁵⁶ The first season cast included two Korean born actors (Yoon-jin Kim and Daniel Dae Kim), an Asian-British actor (Naveen Andrews), a British actor (Dominic Mongahan), an Australian actor (Emilie de Ravin), a Canadian actor (Evangeline Lilly), two African-American actors (Harold Perrineau and Malcolm David Kelley) and an American actor of Chilean descent (Jorge Garcia). Not only was the cast multi-national and multicultural, two of the actors (Kim and Kim) actually spoke to each other in a foreign language translated only by subtitles. Even more surprisingly, one of the actors (Andrews) played an Iraqi and former member of the Republican Guard as a hero rather than a villain. Abrams wrote the character consciously thinking about ‘what’s going on globally. Let’s take an Iraqi and make him an heroic character on an American television show’. Andrews professes astonishment at this decision. ‘I couldn’t believe that a major network was going to have an Iraqi character who was also from the Republican Guard’.⁵⁷

Lost has been seen in Britain, Germany, Russia, Australia, the Philippines, Ireland, Sri Lanka, India, Greece, Japan, Italy, France, Spain, Belgium and more than a hundred other countries, its global success so striking that some have credited it and its ABC stalemate *Desperate Housewives* with reviving the erstwhile flagging fortunes of American television drama abroad. At the beginning of 2006, *Broadcasting and Cable* reported that ‘since 2000 or so, foreign content providers quit leaning as heavily on American shows’. But the article offers evidence that overseas sales have by now rebounded. Belinda Menendez, president of NBC Universal International Television Distribution, said ‘There is more interest in US shows and willingness to schedule them in prime time’. Tom Toumazis, executive VP of Buena Vista International Television, Disney’s overseas television distribution division, said that the last fiscal year was the ‘biggest in our history by some margin’. ‘The most obvious examples’ of this upward trend, says the article ‘are ‘*Lost*’ and ‘*Desperate Housewives*,’ two shows that are racking up record ratings around the world’.⁵⁸ *The Hollywood Reporter* concurs. ‘The international success of such shows as ‘*Desperate Housewives*,’ ‘*Lost*’ and the ‘*CSI*’ franchise has been helping to drive Hollywood programming back into primetime slots abroad...’⁵⁹ Hans Seger, chief programme officer at leading German pay TV company Premiere, attributes American television drama’s renewed international success to the signifiers of quality discussed above – production values and narrative complexity. ‘Last year with ‘*Lost*’ and ‘*Desperate Housewives*’... we saw a real jump in quality – in the storytelling and in the production look. The money was on the screen.’⁶⁰ Buena Vista has licensed *Lost* to more than 180 international territories, making it the ‘fastest-selling TV series’ in Disney’s history, outstripping even *Desperate Housewives*.⁶¹ On Britain’s Channel 4, *Lost* achieved the best-ever ratings for a US series, with a viewership of 6.4 million and a 28% share of the audience, overturning the record previously held by *Desperate Housewives*.⁶² *Lost*’s premiere on Russian public service broadcasting’s First Channel attracted 42% of the 18 plus audience, 50% higher than the channel’s primetime average for January-May, 2005.⁶³ *Lost* has been a major hit in Germany and in Australia.⁶⁴

I have likened the plight of media industry executives to that of *Lost*'s castaways, both faced with the uncertainties of unknown environments. Television studies scholars face similar uncertainties, as the post-television era transforms the well-known industrial landscapes of the network and post-network ages out of all recognition. *Lost*, the programme that represents the culmination of industrial trends of the post-network era and may presage many of the industrial trends of the post-television era, illuminates some areas of a largely uncharted new landscape. But the case study has produced more questions than answers: will the post-television era see an increased valuation of authorship, a further re-evaluation of cultural hierarchies, with television seen as cinema's equal or superior, a rise in the critical and commercial stock of genre shows, even more emphasis upon international distribution? Just as *Lost*'s viewers must wait several years to solve the mysteries of the island, television studies scholars must wait several years to solve the mysteries of the post-television landscape. But while J.J. Abrams and Damon Lindelof may have the answers to some of the viewers' questions no one as yet has the answers to ours.

¹ This article grows out of discussions with several of my colleagues in the Institute of Film and Television Studies at the University of Nottingham about a potential collaborative research project on *Lost*. My thanks to Paul Grainge, Gianluca Sergi, Julian Stringer and Peter Urquhart for their input.

² Lynn Spigel, 'Introduction', in Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson, eds., *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 3.

³ Jennifer Holt, 'Vertical Vision: Deregulation, Industrial Economy and Prime-time Design', in Mark Jancovich and James Lyons, ed., *Quality Popular Television: Cult TV, the Industry and Fans* (London: British Film Institute, 2003), p.19. Post fin-syn refers to the FCC's relaxation of rules governing the networks' ownership of the shows they aired.

⁴⁴ Holt, p. 20.

⁵ 'The Genesis of *Lost*', *Lost: The Complete First Season*, The Essential *Lost* Bonus Features (Buena Vista Home Entertainment and Touchstone Television); Mark Cotta Vaz, *The Lost Chronicles: The Official Companion Book* (London, Transworld Publishers, 2005), p. 19.

⁶ James B. Stewart gives an account of the origins of *Lost* which highlights the tensions over development between key players at Disney, Touchstone and ABC. See *Disney War: The Battle for the Magic Kingdom* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2005), pp. 485-487. Thanks to Paul Grainge for this reference.

⁷ Cotta Vaz, p. 10

⁸ Nellie Andreeva, 'Touchstone offers '*Lost*' cast a raise', *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 23, 2006.

⁹ 'Lost Revealed', (Noblesgate Film and Television Productions, 2005)

¹⁰ Muriel G. Cantor, *The Hollywood TV Producer: His Work and His Audience* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1971), p. 9, emphasis in original

¹¹ Michele Hilmes, *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States* (Belmont, CA.: Wadworth, 2002), *Only Connect*, p. 312. For more on the importance of authorship in the post-network era see my 'The Writer/Producer in American Television', in Michael Hammond and Lucy Mazdon, *The Contemporary Television Series* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), pp. 11-26.

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- ¹² Meg James and Claudia Eller, 'Paramount Chief said to be Wooing Top TV Producer; Chairman Brad Grey is trying to lure J.J. Abrams to the studio, according to sources', *Los Angeles Times*, December 15, 2005, Business, Part C, p.1.
- ¹³ 'Genesis of Lost'
- ¹⁴ 'Lost at the Museum of Television and Radio', (excerpt from salute to *Lost* held by the Directors Guild of America at the 22nd Annual Paley Festival). *Lost: The Complete First Season*, The Essential *Lost* Bonus Features.
- ¹⁵ Cotta Vaz, p. 18.
- ¹⁶ Cotta Vaz, p. 31.
- ¹⁷ Cotta Vaz, p. 76.
- ¹⁸ Cotta Vaz, p. 55
- ¹⁹ Stephen King, 'Lost's Soul', *Entertainment Weekly* (838/839), Sept. 9, 2005, p. 150.
- ²⁰ Cotta Vaz, p. 55
- ²¹ Cotta Vaz, p. 161
- ²² Cotta Vaz, p. 56.
- ²³ Cotta Vaz, p. 65.
- ²⁴ 'Designing a Disaster', *Lost: The Complete First Season*, The Essential *Lost* Bonus Features, 'Designing a Disaster'.
- ²⁵ 'Making of the Pilot', *Lost: The Complete First Season*, The Essential *Lost* Bonus Features, 'Making of the Pilot'.
- ²⁶ Cotta Vaz, p. 31.
- ²⁷ Jason Mittell, 'The Loss of Value (or the Value of Lost)', *Flow* 2:5 (May 2005) (<http://idg.communication.utexas.edu/flow/?issue=Volume%202,%20Issue%205&jot=view&id=786>)
- ²⁸ Cotta Vaz, p. 55.
- ²⁹ 'Genesis of Lost'
- ³⁰ *Lost Revealed*
- ³¹ Cotta Vaz, p.17
- ³² Cotta Vaz, p. 55.
- ³³ Cotta Vaz, p. 83.
- ³⁴ King.

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- ³⁵ Jennifer Armstrong, 'Love, Labor, Lost', *Entertainment Weekly* (838/839), Sept. 9, 2005, p. 30.
- ³⁶ Matt Hills, 'Cult TV, Quality and the Role of the Episode Programme Guide', in Mazdon and Michael, p. 190. I must admit to being a bit baffled by the inclusion of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* in Hills' list.
- ³⁷ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lost_\(TV_Series\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lost_(TV_Series))
- ³⁸ <http://home.insightbb.com/~wahoskem/buffy7.html>, accessed 08/02/2004
- ³⁹ Cotta Vaz, p. 32.
- ⁴⁰ Cotta Vaz, p. 55.
- ⁴¹ Cotta Vaz, p. 17.
- ⁴² Armstrong, p. 30.
- ⁴³ For academic speculation about viewer involvement in virtual worlds, see Sara Gwenllian Jones, 'The Sex Lives of Cult Television Characters', *Screen* 43(1), 79-90.
- ⁴⁴ 'Alias ends mission with fifth season', *The Hollywood Reporter*, November 29, 2005.
- ⁴⁵ iPod advertisement, *The New Yorker*, Feb. 6, 2006, pp. 2-3.
- ⁴⁶ Jay Sherman, 'Disney Transformed: Other Media Companies Expected to Follow Technology Trail', *Television Week*, Oct. 17, 2005. p. 26.
- ⁴⁷ John Caldwell, 'Convergence Television: Aggregating Form and Repurposing Content in the Culture of Conglomeration', in Spigel and Olsson, pp. 49-50.
- ⁴⁸ I am grateful to Graham Murdock for explaining the failure of synergy to me.
- ⁴⁹ Michele Greppi, 'ABC Affils Remain Uneasy; Network Does Little to Erase Concerns Raised by iPod Pact', *Television Week*, Oct. 24, 2005. p. 5
- ⁵⁰ Ben Grossman, 'The New Deal; How TV executives will find digital dollars in the coming year', *Broadcasting and Cable*, Jan. 2, 2006, p. 16.
- ⁵¹ Maria Elena Fernandez, 'ABC's 'Lost' is easy to find, and not just on a TV screen; Fans can get fixes from iPods, blogs, podcasts, and soon, cellphones. It's a new media model.' *Los Angeles Times*. Jan. 3, 2006, Calendar Desk, Part E, Pg. 1.
- ⁵² Spigel, p. 6
- ⁵³ Fernandez.
- ⁵⁴ Caldwell, p. 48.
- ⁵⁵ Steve Brennan, *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 26, 2005 (online).

⁵⁶ 'Before they were lost', *Lost: The Complete First Season*, The Essential *Lost* Bonus Features.

⁵⁷ 'Lost Revealed'

⁵⁸ George Winslow, 'We Want Their Shows, They Want Ours; NATPE international market is vigorous for content providers', *Broadcasting and Cable*, Jan. 23, 2006, p. 16.

⁵⁹ Steve Brennan, *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 23, 2005 (online).

⁶⁰ Steve Brennan and Mimi Turner, *The Hollywood Reporter*, Oct. 20, 2005 (online).

⁶¹ Steve Brennan, *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 23, 2005 (online).

⁶² Stuart Kemp, *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 12, 2005 (online).

⁶³ Nick Holdsworth, *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 16, 2005, (online).

⁶⁴ Steve Brennan, *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 20, 2005 (online).