VII. LOST in a Great Story:
Evaluation in Narrative Television (and Television Studies)

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LOST is a great television programme. Such a statement should be almost self-evident given the existence of this book, dedicated to exploring and analyzing its significance. *LOST*'s numerous successes, in generating a worldwide fan base, spawning a multimedia franchise, and accumulating awards and critical accolades, should all point toward a consensus opinion about the show's quality and value. If you are a fan of the show then you will almost certainly agree, as perceived greatness is a common, if not essential, rationale for fandom.

However, for the readers and writers within this book's core genre of television studies, such an explicit assertion of evaluation and praise probably seems out of place, as evaluation is generally off-limits for television academics. For a typical instance, the preface to Jeremy Butler's *Television*, probably the most in-depth overview of US television textuality, dismisses questions of evaluation in a few sentences:

> *Television* does not attempt to teach taste or aesthetics. It is less concerned with evaluation than with *interpretation*. It resists asking, 'Is *The O.C.* great art?' Instead, it poses the question, 'What meanings does *The O.C.* signify and how does it do so?'[1]

Such distinctions between evaluating television programming and interpreting the processes of meaning-making frame virtually

the entire field – we media scholars are heavily invested in understanding how meaning is made, conveyed, and consumed, but we parenthesise questions of evaluation as outside the scope of our expertise. It is not as if we avoid completely the act of *judging* in our scholarship, as we regularly evaluate television programmes on their political merits, their social relevance, their economic motives, their impacts on the television industry, or even their appeals to popular tastes. But while we may judge a show's various merits or flaws on these more sociological grounds, it is seemingly off-limits to reflect on whether we think the programme is ultimately any good.

Losing Value

The evacuation of the evaluative from our field's critical purview is lodged within the intellectual history of television studies. For the earliest decades of television, questions of aesthetics and value were seen as losing battles – justifying the medium's study by asserting its aesthetic merits, an avenue pursued in the early years of film studies, was to engage the debate on hostile terrain. Detractors of television, both within and outside the academy, effectively framed the medium as aesthetically inferior to, or at best a low-resolution imitation of, other media like film, theatre, literature and radio. Instead, television emerged as an object of study on sociological terms, serving an important role in conveying ideologies, defining identities and influencing behaviours. Social scientists in the USA created a paradigm invested in cataloguing the various social ills and 'effects' caused by television, creating a de facto condemnation of the medium's quality based on all of the horrible things that television allegedly did to us. For critics unsympathetic to the pseudo-scientific claims of media effects researchers, an alternative paradigm emerged out of British cultural studies – the idea that audiences were active agents, not passive subjects, and thus studying decoding processes enabled a defence of television through the surrogates of sophisticated viewers who might have less-than-sophisticated tastes.

Television studies today, as influenced by cultural studies, still cares about issues of quality and value, but locates evaluation on its

agenda once removed, placing 'quality' and 'value' within the conceptual safety of scare quotes (or inverted commas, depending upon your side of the Atlantic). Following Pierre Bourdieu's sociological takedown of aesthetics, television scholars look at quality and value as discursive formations practised by the industry, by journalistic critics, by viewers, by activist groups – essentially by everybody except television scholars. While in most other fields Bourdieu's critique of aesthetic judgment emerged after decades or centuries of canon formation and cultural hierarchies, television studies never had an era of evaluative innocence – we never even had a chance to construct a canon to be deconstructed! For the most part, evaluation's place on the agenda of television studies is solely as an external practice to be observed and critiqued, not a potential avenue of scholarship in itself.

A similar firewall has emerged around how we teach television studies. After reading Susan Douglas's *Where the Girls Are*, my students are usually swayed by her claims about the ambivalent gender politics of *Charlie's Angels* (Spelling-Goldberg Productions, 1976–81) – not because she is intrinsically correct, but because she makes a good case.[2] However, after screening an episode, my students always comment about how 'bad' the show is, with simplistic narratives, lack of suspense, wooden acting and bland visual style. As per the unstated boundaries of media scholarship, the acceptable responses are either 'well, we're all entitled to our opinions', or 'what cultural hierarchies are you endorsing by valuing suspense, complex writing, subtle acting, or visual vibrancy?' The boundaries of media studies propriety seem to forbid discussions of our own tastes and evaluations while wearing our expert garb, whether in print or in the classroom, restricting the discussion of evaluation to the casual realms of the water-cooler or barstool, or their online surrogates.

When evaluation does occur by scholars, it comes in disguise. Surveying the field of television studies – or the other volumes in this book series – it becomes apparent that a great deal of scholarship focuses on the programmes that scholars find most 'compelling,' 'interesting,' 'engaging' and 'complex' (i.e. the shows we like), such as The Sopranos (HBO, 1999–2007), The West Wing (John Wells

Productions, 1999–2006), The X-Files (20th Century Fox Television, 1993–2002), and The Simpsons (Gracie Films, 1989–). How else can we account for the fact that Buffy the Vampire Slayer (Mutant Enemy, 1997–2003), a cult show with marginal cultural and industrial impact that the vast majority of US television viewers have barely heard of, has more books published about it than the number of scholarly articles published about Law and Order (Wolf Films, 1990–), a much more successful, widespread, long-running and influential franchise? It is not because Buffy has more sociological relevance or resonance, as Law and Order would be just as fertile terrain for exploring the cultural representations and identity politics that constitutes a good deal of Buffy Studies. The only plausible explanation is the one that is almost never explicitly articulated – for most television scholars, Buffy is a better show than Law and Order.

It is time to let evaluative criticism out of the closet. It is not enough to use coded signifiers of value like 'sophistication' and 'nuance' in referring to television programming worth studying or teaching – let us admit openly when we think a programme is great. Especially in the context of a book dedicated to exploring a single programme in depth, we must be explicit in acknowledging the roles of evaluation and aesthetic judgment that help to frame our research and drive our field. Many of our scholarly efforts are focused on programmes that we enjoy, value, and think are better than others, a forbidden admission that is more often assumed in other fields like film or literary studies, where engaging in close study of an author or a text often constitutes an implicit endorsement of its aesthetic merits. We simply cannot pretend that our own taste and evaluation do not matter.

Even if we admit that we write about shows that we like, some might question the purposes of evaluative criticism – why waste ink explaining why we like something? Isn't it just a futile attempt to treat a personal opinion as something to be proven? And aren't there dangers in claiming quality for certain shows over others, with fears of elitism and exclusion – if scholars assert their tastes as 'correct', will marginalized groups be exiled even further and will ideological systems of oppression masquerading as aesthetic value be main-

tained? Such concerns echo a defensive posture embedded in television studies, as the medium, per Charlotte Brunsdon's reference to 'poor old television', is always bound to end up on the low end of cultural hierarchies below both older and newer media.[3] Especially in the often-caricatured populist turn of television studies of the 1990s, any assertion of taste or value could be seen as hegemonic impositions of bourgeois norms against the popular taste for the vulgar and base. However, even within the realm of the vulgar and base, we must acknowledge that some crap is better than other crap. Might we benefit from understanding why 'the people' discern between choices that might otherwise seem identically awful to outsiders?

Claims that evaluative criticism would disempower marginal tastes seem to misread what is meant by criticism and scholarship, as well as overstate their cultural power – while what I write usually reflects what I believe, my scholarly arguments are not statements of fact, but rather assertions to be discussed and debated. In positing the value of a programme, I am not offering such a judgment as incontrovertible fact but strong belief, starting a debate with a defensible position that matters only in relation to other opposing positions: in stating that LOST is a great programme, I am starting a conversation, not ending one. I don't yearn for a day in which television studies publishes a definitive canonical list delineating the best of television once and for all, but I relish the opportunity to debate openly the value of programmes without suggesting that all evaluations are equally justifiable as idiosyncratic personal taste or simple ideological manifestations. Just because aesthetics can be done in a way that disenfranchises some positions does not require the evacuation of evaluative claims altogether in the name of a egalitarian (and, I believe, ultimately dishonest) poetics of inclusion.

Television programmes offer different meanings, different politics and different aesthetics – and we should be able to engage with these differences without worrying that asserting an evaluative claim might offend someone's taste. Our individual tastes are certainly both socially forged and individually idiosyncratic, but they are also shaped by our study of the medium and influenced by the basic fact that television scholars (hopefully) know much more about television

than most viewers or critics (that may be an elitist position, but I am pretty sure 'expertise' is part of the job description for teaching and studying something). If our scholarly expertise helps shape our tastes, which I am certain it often does, we should acknowledge and examine how this happens, making arguments as to why a programme might be seen as more valuable by following particular criteria, and examining how those criteria function culturally.

Thankfully there have been signs in recent years that some cultural studies scholars have turned back to some of the field's earliest writings to explore the role of aesthetics and evaluation in popular culture. Before Stuart Hall effectively defined the scope of one strain of television studies with 'Encoding/Decoding', he co-wrote The Popular Arts with Paddy Whannel, offering a defence of popular culture via aesthetic analysis and evaluation. For Hall and Whannel, the category of popular art is forged by the type of distinctions made unfashionable by Bourdieu, but still possible even after the recognition that aesthetic judgments are embedded more in cultural power than transcendent essences of beauty. Hall and Whannel, like other early cultural studies work by Raymond Williams and Dick Hebdige, look for the aesthetics of everyday life, attempting to understand popular culture on its own terrain, not measured against alien paradigms of high art.[4] Likewise, a number of newer works of cultural studies,[5] and a few in television studies,[6] return to questions of aesthetics and value to open up the possibilities of evaluative criticism, although this trend has been more common among British and Australian scholars than in US media studies. Following the lead of this return to questions of form and value, we must look closely at popular texts to understand the ways that taste, evaluation and aesthetics matter to both scholars and everyday viewers – by allowing ourselves to evaluate, we can strengthen our understanding of the broader cultural practice and importance of evaluation.

In offering my own evaluative criticism here, I am not trying to convince anyone that LOST is the essence of television, or the pinnacle of the medium's artistic possibilities. But it is a great show, and I wish to explore why. I hope to model a mode of evaluative criticism that avoids the universalistic and canonistic tendencies that

other fields have been fighting over for decades. I imagine an explicit awareness of the practices of evaluation in all spheres of television creation and consumption, including a discussion and defence of our own taste practices. Such a mode of evaluation would not seek to make taste judgments the final words of a debate, but the openings of a discussion. What makes shows like Buffy and LOST so appealing to scholars? How do criteria of cultural politics and poetics intersect or conflict? How might we account for our own shifts in taste as tied to changing cultural contexts, textual exposures, formal education and transformed aesthetics? What might a non-foundational aesthetics of television look like, and how might we use such contingent evaluations in our teaching and scholarship? Just because we want to avoid the flaws of traditional aesthetic criticism does not mean we cannot imagine a more sophisticated, historically-aware – and, yes, better – way to place evaluation on the agenda of television studies and proudly acknowledge and examine our own tastes.

Valuing LOST

As I have already asserted, *LOST* is a great television programme. To understand why, we need to consider how it works as a television show, how it adopts some core conventions of the medium and innovates others. There is no singular aesthetics of television – great television can aspire to artistic ambition, or revel in lowbrow attractions, or do both at once. However, even if televisual aesthetics are plural rather than universal, we can still explore how a show fits into a particular set of aesthetic possibilities and judge how it fulfils its ambitions. Aesthetic plurality is not the same as aesthetic relativity – greatness might come in a variety of packages and styles, but that does not mean everything is equally great.

In arguing for *LOST*'s greatness, I will consider four aesthetic norms that the show successfully achieves – unity of purpose, forensic fandom, narrative complexity and the aesthetics of surprise – suggesting that these aspects account for much of the show's value. This is not an exclusive list: there are certainly other great elements of the show for which I do not give an account, and there are

certainly many other aesthetic norms or qualities that *LOST* fails to achieve. Nevertheless, I believe these qualities provide a compelling argument for the show's value, and at least provide a starting point for a debate over televisual aesthetics.

Unity of purpose

LOST is a unified text, with every episode contributing to a larger whole. Perhaps more than with any other US television series, this 'wholeness' is central to our understanding and appreciation of the programme. The pilot episode (1:2) ends with Charlie (Dominic Monaghan) asking a seemingly simple question, 'Where *are* we?', which seems to define the entirety of the series. Every episode, every flashback and every character's story can be understood as contributing to a larger understanding of the nature (or artifice) of *LOST*'s island locale. Unlike nearly every other television series, *LOST* features no stand-alone episodes, and no 'monsters-of-the-week' that offer reprieves from the serialized mythologies as on ancestral shows like *The X-Files* or *Buffy*. As unity has long been valued aesthetically as an essential component of narrative art, it is not surprising that a television series that can deliver a compelling sense of its whole offers particular pleasures and values.

Unity is particularly complicated, however, within the serialized form of television. As of this writing, *LOST*'s first three seasons have aired, comprising just over half the anticipated entirety of the series. Thus my claims toward aesthetic unity are, ironically enough, inherently partial. However, for serialized narratives in progress, unity is less of an absolute quality than an ideal to be anticipated and perceived – viewers watch *LOST* with a mind toward the totality of the series, working to assemble each segment into a unified narrative that will not be fulfilled for years to come. As the series unfolds, fans judge each episode in large part against their own notions of the show's whole, and frequently rework their assumptions about this whole in light of new narrative twists and storytelling strategies. For instance, the twist of concluding season three with flash-forwards, scenes with characters finally off the island, reset *LOST*'s basic storytelling strategies and

norms, changing our focus away from the question of 'Will they get off the island?' to the broader quest of understanding how post-island life fits in with the narrative world that we have already seen.

US television has an additional challenge with unity, as a successful series is typically rewarded with continuation toward infinity, or at least until ratings sag. Before May 2007, it would have been impossible to even gauge what portion of the series had aired, as US broadcast television typically equates a show's conclusion with failure and cancellation, not planned narrative resolutions. The unprecedented announcement of the show's planned date of conclusion three years in advance made an explicit nod toward this ideal of unity – in ABC's press release announcing the end-date of May 2010, producers Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse noted:

> We always envisioned *LOST* as a show with a beginning, middle and end. By officially announcing exactly when that ending will be, the audience will now have the security of knowing that the story will play out as we've intended.[7]

Thus the producers' conception of the show's unity eventually triggered ABC to grant the unique gift of a planned conclusion, although as of this writing, that plan is in jeopardy due to the ongoing Writers' Guild of America strike of 2007–08.

More than utilizing the unity of a continual narrative, *LOST*'s aesthetics value a perceived purpose motivating its narrative whole. The story's unified scope and shape follow a design, and much of the aesthetic pleasure offered by *LOST* involves viewers attempting to parse out the rationales behind the show's storytelling. At times this sense of purpose links directly to authorial intention, as typified by some fans' cultish devotion to Lindelof and Cuse's podcasts, Comic Con appearances and media interviews, citing producer commentary as divine proclamations from TPTB (The Powers That Be). However, the show's unity is not always tied to the specificities of authorship, as many fans recognize the collaborative nature of television writing and the shifting involvement of key production figures like J.J. Abrams, David Fury, Drew Goddard and Javier Grillo-Marxuach.

Rather, the motivation behind *LOST*'s unity stems more from the assumed sense of purposefulness that seems embedded in the narrative design at the textual level more than in its actual process of creation. When fans lose faith in the show, underlying doubts are often triggered by a sense of disunity stemming from the fear that the show is 'made up as it goes along', rather than having been planned out carefully in advance.[8]

For me, one of *LOST*'s great pleasures is the sense of faith in its narrative design and purpose that the show manages to instil. Some of this faith stems from extra-textual consumption of interviews, podcasts and the like, but more often it is the recognition of thematic and factual continuities that attest to a master plan, or at least more advanced planning than is typical of series television. For instance, Rousseau's (Mira Furlan) maps first seen in 'Solitary' (1:9) briefly show a smaller island next to the main island – and season three reveals the existence of this smaller Hydra Island, a minor internal consistency that proved reassuring to viewers' doubts of coherence and purposefulness. Such instances extend faith that other narrative pieces still dangling after three seasons, such as Adam and Eve from 'House of the Rising Sun' (1:6) or the statue of the giant foot in 'Live Together, Die Alone' (2:23), will eventually receive a narrative payoff true to *LOST*'s internal unity.

The pleasure of purposeful unity directly contrasts with other serialized programmes that cannot live up to this ideal of internal logic. Programmes like *24* (Imagine Entertainment, 2001–) and *Heroes* (Jackson Films, 2006–) arguably fall short of this goal, with illogical plot twists, dropped characters, or questionable continuity raising doubts about the show's consistent sense of purpose and design, even for ardent fans. Other programmes, like *Alias* (Bad Robot, 2001–06) and *Veronica Mars* (Silver Pictures Television, 2004–), experience radical shifts in tone, style or narrative structure as seemingly motivated by network pressure to boost ratings by making the show less complex and easier for new viewers to join. Such shifts fracture a sense of unity, which many fans attribute to the commercial constraints of television narratives rather than a loss of faith in the producers' storytelling abilities. *LOST*'s ability to withstand such

commercial pressures, and even to feature moments when creative purpose trumps network norms (as with the announced end-date), attest to the show's purposefulness and appeal to the aesthetic value of unity.

Forensic fandom

If one of the great pleasures and values of *LOST* is its purposeful unity, the show extends this narrative logic to support a particular mode of engagement that might be termed 'forensic fandom'. Since the show's internal logic is motivated around the central mystery of the island and its complex history and powers, *LOST*'s narrative structure encourages viewers to parse the show more than simply consume it. Research in both cultural studies and cognitive theories of comprehension highlights how viewers are actively engaged in the act of consuming programming, being mentally and emotionally involved with media rather than passively accepting meanings. However, most of this research has highlighted either how viewers 'read against the grain' by creating dissonant meanings within the conventional and unchallenging margins of popular culture, or how texts set the terms for their narrative comprehension and emotional reactions in an active but still highly conventionalized manner.

LOST's narrative design discourages casual consumption. While there are certainly moment-to-moment pleasures of humour, suspense, action and romance, the show's most distinguishing attribute is its central mystery that demands a hyper-attentive mode of spectatorship. To be a *LOST* fan is to embrace a detective mentality, seeking out clues, charting patterns and assembling evidence into narrative hypotheses and theories. This forensic engagement finds a natural home in online forums, where viewers gather to posit theories and debate interpretations, and fan 'wikis' like *LostPedia.com* allow the sharing of fan-produced knowledge and theories. While many fans certainly do watch the show in a more self-contained fashion, *LOST*'s moments of information overflow, as in the blast door map first seen in 'Lockdown' (2:17) or the brainwashing video shown to Karl (Blake Bashoff) in 'Not in Portland' (3:7), seem to

demand a mode of forensic engagement to organise and uncover a wealth of narrative data.

The show even reflexively comments on this mode of engagement – Locke (Terry O'Quinn) responds to the Swan orientation film in 'Orientation' (2:3) with a line that has become a motto for forensic fandom: 'We're going to need to watch that again.' For Steven Johnson, this mode of engagement suggests television's power for cognitive exercise and intellectual development; whether such programmes trigger self-improvement or not, we cannot deny the mental pleasures of forensic fandom that shows like *LOST* provide.[9]

Traditionally, texts that demand and encourage a mode of close reading and repeat engagement position themselves in rarefied categories of high art and narrow appeal for connoisseurs, whether for the literary modernism of James Joyce and Thomas Pynchon, or the art film aesthetics of Michelangelo Antonioni and David Lynch. For television aiming toward popular culture rather than modernist art, immersive forensic fandom is often performed on texts for corrective ownership rather than aesthetics – fans of long-running soap operas or science-fiction stalwart *Star Trek* (Desilu Productions/ Paramount Television, 1966–69) often command greater mastery of narrative backstory and continuity than the producers themselves, making 'nit-picking' fandom less a case of textual pleasure than one of policing and competitive claims of ownership. While other series have tried to mine the pleasures of forensic fandom aimed at complex mythologies, innovators like *Twin Peaks* (Lynch/ Frost Productions, 1990–91) and *X-Files* have typically fallen short of the balance between spinning a satisfyingly complex mystery and achieving sufficient consistency and coherence to meet the expectations of viewers' narrative investigations. Thus far, *LOST* seems to be the first popular show to successfully mobilize fans' forensic impulses toward sustained narrative pleasure over frustration – although its success rate might certainly change over the final three seasons.

LOST's successful fostering of forensic fandom attests to the show's ambitions that extend beyond the televisual text itself. The show has been hailed as one of the primary examples of 'Television

2.0', extending the narrative through transmedia storytelling strategies that serve not just as spun-off ancillaries but core additions to *LOST*'s central narrative design and mythology. The show's aesthetic successes as a television series are highlighted by its comparative failures in other media – the tie-in novel *Bad Twin*[10] was seen by most as a fairly incoherent add-on blurring boundaries between fictional worlds, and as of this writing fans have not seen the other videogame and tie-in ancillaries as essential. The alternate reality game (ARG) 'The *LOST* Experience' extended the forensic model of participation most successfully, but the majority of fans either were dismayed by the overt commercialization of the game, or disappointed that the ARG's narrative revelations did not seem to resonate within the core television series during season three. Despite such ambitious but unsatisfying paratextual extensions, fans have remained invested in parsing the narrative world constructed on the television series, especially after the show's resurgence in the latter part of season three.

Narrative complexity and the operational aesthetic

Both the show's purposeful unity and forensic mode of engagement are grounded in *LOST*'s innovative narrative complexity. As I have examined elsewhere, US television in the 2000s has embraced a mode of narrative complexity marked by heightened seriality, formally innovative techniques of temporal and narrational experimentation, and a toleration for storytelling confusion and delayed gratification.[11] I argue that one of narrative complexity's chief pleasures is an 'operational aesthetic', that is, calling attention to how the machinery of storytelling works as an additional level of engagement beyond the storyworld itself. *LOST* is exemplary of this operational aesthetic at work – we watch the series not just as a window into a compelling fictional universe, but also to watch how the window itself works to distort or direct our line of vision. Watching a series like *LOST* demands dual attention to both the story and the narrative discourse that narrates the story, with particular pleasures offered exclusively at the level of a story's telling.

The third-season finale, 'Through the Looking Glass' (3:22), provides one of the show's most exceptional and lauded storytelling tricks. *LOST*'s season finales have typically offered rewarding cliffhangers in their final moments, such as Walt's (Malcolm David Kelly) abduction in 'Exodus' (1:24) and Penny's (Sonya Walger) discovery of the island in 'Live Together, Die Alone' (2:23) – twists that raise narrative suspense and point future stories in new directions. However, season three concluded less with questions of story suspense than with what we might term 'narrational suspense' – by revealing that Jack's (Matthew Fox) supposed flashbacks were actually flash-forwards to life after escaping the island, the show invites us to marvel at its own storytelling mechanics. The suspense created by this revelation raises questions about how the story will be told in future seasons. Will it focus on life on the mainland with flashbacks to the island? Will there by more flash-forwards to characters post-rescue? Is this one of many alternate futures? For once, the key question isn't 'What will happen?' (as we learn that at least Kate (Evangeline Lilly) and Jack will be rescued), but 'How will they tell us what happens?' To appreciate this moment requires viewers to think about the show's narrative mechanics, embracing the operational aesthetic to enjoy the storytelling spectacle provided by this narrational cliffhanger.

The operational aesthetic can even serve as the focal point of entire episodes. 'Exposé' (3:14), with almost parodic rewriting of island history to include Nikki (Kiele Sanchez) and Paulo (Rodrigo Santoro), divided fan opinions about the episode's quality and relevance to the series as a whole. To appreciate the episode, it seems necessary to engage it at the level of storytelling discourse, considering how the revisionist history of island life resembles fan fiction rewriting of canonical events, scribbling in the margins of the established story world. For fans who disliked the episode, one chief complaint was the lack of continuity and disruptions of what they felt had already been established – the episode presented new information about already-established events, but did not seem to contribute toward the greater mythology. However, for fans willing to play the storytelling game that 'Exposé' offers, the pleasures stem from the wilful knowl-

edge that the episode is marginal to the point of being almost non-canonical, playfully tweaking some of the fan's forensic obsessions for continuity and coherence.

LOST's operational aesthetic offers particular expressive possibilities that only become available to a serialized form like television narrative. The show develops intrinsic norms over time, establishing conventions and rules that viewers internalize as defining the show's storytelling strategies – for instance, that each episode features a flashback of a single character intercut with island life. Episodes violating these norms stand out as exceptional, either in violating fan expectations or providing unexpected pleasures. 'Maternity Leave' (2:15) and 'Three Minutes' (2:22) feature flashbacks internal to island life, which signals a narrative mode of filling in crucial story gaps during Claire (Emilie de Ravin) and Michael's (Harold Perrineau) respective absences from the main group of protagonists, which thus escalates viewer expectations for crucial plot revelations rather than the character backstory resonances typical of flashbacks. 'Flashes Before Your Eyes' (3:8) offers a more ambiguous temporal rupture, with Desmond (Henry Ian Cusick) reliving and potentially altering moments from his past, rather than presenting such moments as temporally distinct (as in a typical flashback). To understand this episode and its larger narrative importance, viewers must be operationally attuned to the show's intrinsic storytelling norms and consider the significance of such a violation upon its broader formal narrative system, positing questions about the show's treatment of temporality that have yet to be answered.

Most television mimics cinematic narration's goals of invisibility and transparency, presenting the story world in a style that viewers have learned to regard as naturalistic and unmediated. Typically films that embrace self-consciousness and invite viewers to reflect on their storytelling processes use reflexivity for comedic purposes, as in self-aware moments in cartoons, parodies, or musicals, or they embrace a formal game along a modernist aesthetic typical of the art film or its popularization in contemporary indie films like *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000) and *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001).[12] Narratively complex television programmes, ranging from

Seinfeld (Castle Rock Entertainment, 1990–98) to *Veronica Mars*, *Scrubs* (Doozer, 2001) to *Battlestar Galactica* (various, 2004–08), embrace a model of self-conscious narration and formal play, but they import this art-film aesthetic to the realm of mainstream popular culture and genre fiction. Although *LOST* plays with highbrow themes of fate versus free will, and namedrops philosophers from Rousseau to Bakunin, ultimately the show is clearly lodged within the realm of popular culture, with pulpy genre moments drawn more from science-fiction and adventure tales than art cinema. However, *LOST* tells its stories using formal techniques atypical of mainstream genre programmes, providing its dedicated and forensically minded fans an additional level of pleasure to be explored via the operational aesthetic, simultaneously invested in the story and analyzing how it is being told.

The aesthetics of surprise

Many of the long-term aesthetic values of *LOST* can be understood through the show's investment in narrative complexity, encouraging an analytical mode of viewing and generating a larger sense of unity and purpose. On the moment-to-moment level, much of *LOST*'s pleasure stems from the show's ability to confound expectations and deliver a sense of authentic surprise. Even though US television is nearly defined by its predictability – of schedule, of genre, of narrative form, of character type and of commercial rationalization – *LOST* aims to surprise us at nearly every turn. While many shows offer surprises and thrills, from *Law and Order*'s heavily promoted plot twists to *South Park*'s (Comedy Central, 1997–) daring refusal to respect any taboo, *LOST* is innovative in embedding surprise into every level of the series.

For me, the show's pilot pleasurably confounded expectations. The first surprise was the show's opening depiction of the plane crash – few sequences I have seen in my years of television connoisseurship offer such unflinching intensity and sense of heightened dramatic stakes. My expectations were at once raised and diminished – how might this possibly work as a series? Like many, I approached *LOST*

with frames of reference from other deserted-on-an-island narratives, from *Lord of the Flies* to *Survivor* (Mark Burnett Productions, 2000–) or, if it turned out to be a true disaster, *Gilligan's Island* (CBS Television, 1964–67), assuming that the story would focus on the castaways' struggles to escape from and survive in an isolated world. And if this were the sole thrust of the narrative, it would have been disappointing, as nothing could match the intensity of the show's opening moments.

However as with nearly every element of *LOST*, the first impressions were misleading. The island is not what it seemed at first, just as each character and event turn out to be more than they first appeared. Thus the show's genre is not what it first appeared to be: this is not television's attempt at a disaster show, a genre seemingly unsuited for an ongoing situation and storyline. Ultimately the show's genre still remains uncertain three seasons in – is it a supernatural thriller, a scientific mystery, a soap opera in the wilderness, a religious fantasy, or all of the above? Unlike previously lauded genre mixtures like *Twin Peaks* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *LOST* refuses to wear its genre references on its sleeve, preferring to allow audiences to speculate on relevant interpretive and aesthetic frameworks, and then to confound our expectations through twists and reversals.

An exemplary episode is 'Walkabout' (1:4), a fan favourite that certainly catapulted the programme into my personal canon. This episode is the first to focus on John Locke, the island's resident shaman/safari guide whose expertise seemingly knows no bounds – a role that is confounded when flashbacks reveal that, before the crash, Locke was a cardboard box salesman with a penchant for phone sex. On the island we learn that Locke travelled with a suitcase full of hunting knives and can hunt wild boar, wheras the flashbacks reveal that Locke was bound to a wheelchair and denied a chance to go on an Australian walkabout, the reason he is on the doomed flight in the South Pacific. The island's first manifestation of seeming paranormality, the sequence revealing Locke's earlier disability and subsequent healing, is breathtaking, visually intricate and heightened by the power of Terry O'Quinn's engrossing performance. While this twist ending might simply have been a *Sixth*

Sense-style fake-out, the show's serial form allowed this singular surprise to resonate throughout *LOST*'s narrative architecture, as it raised questions within the backstories of many characters and signalled that life on the island might be markedly different from the passengers' pre-crash existences.[13]

Such surprises and violations of expectation and convention are key reasons why viewers flock to the show. In an online survey of *LOST* fans, conducted to understand why people read spoilers about this twisty and suspenseful show, the pleasures of surprise and the show's uniqueness compared to other television were among the most cited rationales for watching, with over three-quarters of respondents highlighting these reasons.[14] For me and many other viewers, the ability to be pleasantly surprised by a television series violating conventions and expectations keeps us tuning in and anticipating future twists, offering a wealth of pleasures within both the show's story content and storytelling form.

To be clear, these aesthetic qualities of surprise, complexity, forensic engagement and unity are not a universal ideal to be elevated for all television to strive toward. Indeed, the rarity of a series meeting or even attempting such goals might account for *LOST*'s unique pleasures, as the element of surprise extends to the ability of a mainstream commercial television programme to deliver such uncommon goods. Comparing *LOST* to another show with entirely different aesthetic goals – for instance, the conventional sitcom *Everybody Loves Raymond* (CBS Television, 1996–2005) – highlights how television can offer a wide range of pleasures and expectations. *Raymond* neither achieves nor aims for any of *LOST*'s attributes of unity, forensic engagement, complexity or surprise, yet it still offers its own pleasures of comfortable routine and familiarity, consistency in delivering humorous moments and performances, and a real sense of place and locale that feels tangibly human. I offer this comparison not to demean *Raymond*'s seemingly 'lesser' achievements, but to highlight how no iteration of aesthetic norms should be regarded as universally applicable or ideal for all television. While I ultimately prefer *LOST*'s more ambitious goals and accomplishments, there is sufficient room in the range of television's aesthetic possibilities to

embrace both innovative genre mixtures and well-executed conventional genre pieces, and thus we need to judge any show on its own terms of purpose and design.

Additionally, *LOST*'s aesthetic values are not limited to these four qualities. For many viewers, the show's core pleasures might be found in specific characters portrayed with psychological depth and compelling performances, in the relationship dramas and love-triangles celebrated by 'shipping' fandom, in the exceptional production values capturing the island locale and visualizing action sequences in medium-transcending 'cinematic' quality, in the melodramatic moments of emotional revelation and transcendence that *LOST* offers amidst the conspiracies and action sequences, or in the broader philosophical themes and issues that often underlie the dramatic action. Any assertion of aesthetic evaluation is inherently subjective and open for debate, but cannot be dismissed as merely opinion without justification or rationale. We should debate the comparative merits of *LOST*'s textual achievements and failures, holding it up to other programmes and measuring relative quality not to arrive at an objective hierarchy of taste, but to engage the processes of taste-making that comprise a central part of our television consumption.

Hopefully it is clear not only why I think *LOST* is a great show, but why it matters that television scholars allow evaluative concerns into our writing. I am not suggesting that the field embraces a wholesale shift toward aesthetic criticism, and ultimately celebrating or denigrating programmes is rarely a worthwhile singular scholarly goal. But we can imagine an academic engagement with television that embraces its own subjective evaluations more openly, and foregrounds evaluative rationales as part of a critical analysis. The act of evaluation is one of the chief reasons why I and many other avid viewers consume media – we want to assess a show's quality and engage in friendly and playful debate over the relative values of both beloved and dismissed programmes. Currently television scholars can continue doing such evaluation only while off-duty, on barstools and blogs, but there is something more to be gained by incorporating explicit evaluative claims into our scholarship. We can help posit television as a more legitimate and culturally validated medium by

highlighting what it does well with precision and rigor, thus rescuing 'poor old television' from its island of cultural devaluation and embracing the possibility of shows like *LOST* to achieve greatness.

Notes

This chapter is an expansion and revision of thoughts previously published in 'The loss of value', *Flow* ii/5 (2005), available at *http://flowtv.org/?p=577*, and 'The value of *LOST*', *Flow* ii/10 (2005), available at *http://flowtv.org/?p=435* and presented at The Flow Conference, Austin Texas, October 2006. Thanks to the many who commented on, challenged and helped me refine my positions.

1 Jeremy G. Butler, *Television: Critical Methods and Applications*, 3rd edn (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007), p.ix.

2 Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Times Books, 1994).

3 Charlotte Brunsdon, 'Is Television Studies History?', *Cinema Journal* xlvii/3 (spring 2008), pp.127–37.

4 See Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, *The Popular Arts* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965); Dick Hebdige, *Subculture, the Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979); and Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

5 See Michael Bérubé, *The Aesthetics of Cultural Studies* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005); Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); and Alan McKee, *Beautiful Things in Popular Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006).

6 See Christine Geraghty, 'Aesthetics and quality in popular television drama', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* vi/1 (2003), pp.25–45; Jason Jacobs, 'Issues of judgment and value in television studies', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* iv/4 (2001), pp.427–47; Alan McKee, *Australian Television: A Genealogy of Great Moments* (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Greg M. Smith, *Beautiful TV: The Art and Argument of Ally McBeal* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007).

7 '*LOST* to Conclude in 2009–10 Television Season', ABC Television Press Release, 7 May 2007, available at *www.abcmedianet.com/assets/pr%5Chtml/050707_01.html*.

8 This idea of the narrative's assumed purpose was inspired by Greg Taylor's discussion of aesthetic evaluation. See Greg Taylor, 'But Is It Any *Good*? Evaluative Assessment Reconsidered', unpublished manuscript presented at Middlebury College, 18 October 2007. Thanks to the author for sharing this work prior to publication.

9 See Steven Johnson, *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005).

10 Gary Troup, *Bad Twin* (New York: Hyperion, 2006).

11 Jason Mittell, 'Narrative complexity in contemporary American television', *The Velvet Light Trap*, 58 (2006), pp.29–40.

12 See David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985) for the defining analysis of the narrational mode of both Hollywood and art cinema, and David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) for an account of contemporary cinematic narrative strategies.

13 See Jason Mittell, 'Film and Television Narrative', in David Herman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), pp.156–71 for further analysis of 'Walkabout' and *LOST*'s narrative techniques.

14 This survey research was conducted for Jonathan Gray and Jason Mittell, 'Speculation on spoilers: *LOST* fandom, narrative consumption, and rethinking textuality', *Particip@tions* iv/1 (2007), available at *www.participations.org/Volume%204/Issue%201/4_01_graymittell.htm*. The most cited reasons for watching were 'I want to discover the answers to the island's mysteries' (91%), 'I enjoy the suspenseful plot' (90%), 'The show surprises me' (77%) and 'The show is unlike anything else on the air' (75%).