

Lost and the Viewing Public:
Paving the Way for Postmodern Television

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Abstract: Introduction, Purpose and Thesis

This paper will provide an analysis of ABC's *Lost*, examining how various aspects of the show are representative of postmodern television. The purpose of this analysis is to explore *Lost*'s postmodern content, including its hybrid genre and multiple interpretations through a coalition audience, nonlinear story structure, ahistorical plotlines and intertextual references.

This paper will discuss how *Lost*, as a hybrid, combines elements of different genre conventions to create a layered concept and encourage multiple interpretations from the diverse viewership of its coalition audience. The use of flashbacks, flash forwards, flashes sideways and time travel will provide a breakdown of the show's nonlinear story structure and ahistorical plotlines. Finally, this paper will explore the show's intertextual references to history and popular culture.

Lost both follows the existing conventions of postmodernism and, with the help of viewers, establishes new ones. *Lost* uses postmodern techniques to distinguish itself from modern television through multidimensional storytelling and unparalleled audience participation.

Hybrid Genre

One reason that *Lost* has such a widespread appeal is because it is a hybrid genre. Rather than sticking to the conventions of one genre, *Lost* combines elements of many—adventure, drama, fantasy, science fiction and thriller. This process of mixing and matching is what first built, and what now maintains, a coalition audience for the show. Viewers with different interests watch *Lost* for different reasons—to see the action scenes each week, follow the connections between and histories of each character, escape to a fantasy world or predict what the “smoke monster” might be. Some watch merely for entertainment, while others watch attentively for hidden messages.

Typically, a given genre appeals to a specific group of people who think similarly. According to Jane Feuer, the concept of genre “can bring into play...the reception process with the audience conceived as the interpretive community—that is, a social grouping whose similarities cause them to interpret texts the same way, as opposed to completely individual interpretations” (Feuer, 1992, p. 144). In addition, Steve Neale defines genre as, “systems of orientations, expectations, and conventions that circulate between industry, text, and subject” (Feuer, 1992, p. 144). This means that genre can limit thinking and meaning because it tells viewers what to expect and how to interpret what they see.

Working as a postmodern show with a hybrid genre has allowed *Lost* to keep viewers in a state of suspense—because the show is not restricted to the conventions of a single genre, viewers never know what to expect. And because multiple groups of people are watching the show and interacting with each other, meaning is expanded—rather than limited—through the multiple interpretations that surface and the resulting exchange of ideas between viewers.

Nonlinear Story Structure

As a postmodern show, *Lost* engages viewers by breaking away from the linear storytelling structure in each episode and in the series overall. Early episodes move between on-island scenes and flashbacks to the lives of the main characters before the crash of Oceanic 815. Mid-series, *Lost*'s writers incorporate flash forwards, and in the final season of the show they create an alternate reality explored in flashes sideways. Viewers who pay close attention theorize about the connections between each reality, while others follow only one storyline at a time.

In *Lost*'s third season finale, “Through the Looking Glass,” viewers see what they believe to be flashbacks of main character Jack Shephard throughout the episode. Jack has a beard, is clearly depressed and uses alcohol to console himself (which viewers accept as just another past

revelation, remembering that Jack's father drank himself to death at the beginning of the series). At the end of the episode, Jack meets up with another main character Kate Austen, when it is revealed that the scenes throughout the episode have really been flash forwards to a time when Jack has returned home from the island. "We have to go back!" Jack yells, trying to convince Kate that they have to return to the island. "But wait, go back? When did they leave?" viewers wonder as the screen fades to black and the season closes.

Regarding *Lost*'s postmodern story structure, author and editor Brian Doherty said that "halfway through the show's entire six-season arc, the viewer can be certain of very little—neither what lies ahead nor precisely what's already happened -- and certainly not the *meaning* of what's happened" (Doherty, 2008).

Ahistorical Plotlines

Similar to *Lost*'s disjointed narrative structure are its ahistorical plotlines. The series does not follow a conventional timeline because it relies on time travel and dual realities. The sense of a perpetual present develops as "past elements lose their historical place and significance, and the past is deprived of its 'pastness'" (Bignell, 2003, p. 167). French philosopher of culture Jean-François Lyotard argues that "postmodernism entails a loss of confidence in theories which map out historical progress" (Bignell, 2003, p. 167).

In the final episode of *Lost*'s fourth season, "There's No Place Like Home," Benjamin Linus pushes a large wheel to move the island through time and space. This begins a series of flashes through time that continue throughout the fifth season. Miles Straume explains the time travel in the eleventh episode of season 5, "Whatever Happened, Happened": "Once Ben turned that wheel, time isn't a straight line for us anymore. Our experiences in the past *and* the future occurred before these experiences right now."

Researchers on the island thirty years prior to the time of the pilot episode had drilled into an energy pocket, causing the plane crash in 2004. After 108 days, some of the survivors return home from the island, but eventually come back—time traveling to the 1970s—in an attempt to save those left behind, by detonating a hydrogen bomb in the fifth season finale, “The Incident.” When the sixth season opens, viewers see two realities—one in which the bomb detonated, the other in which it did not—and are left theorizing which is actually occurring and which events on the *Lost* timeline, if any, have been erased. History is fleeting, and the perpetual present remains.

Intertextual References

Lost is noted for its use of intertextuality, “how one text draws on the meanings of another by referring to it, by allusion, quotation, or parody, for example” (Bignell, 2003, p. 163). A text “will inevitably reproduce or re-represent earlier positions, earlier ideas” (Butler, 2002, p. 32). The character Sawyer is known for his allusions to literature and popular culture. In the season 1 episode “...In Translation,” Sawyer threatens Jin for allegedly burning a raft saying, “Folks down on the beach might have been doctors and accountants a month ago, but it’s Lord of the Flies time now,” referring to the 1954 novel *Lord of the Flies*.

Sawyer is also repeatedly connected with references to *Of Mice and Men*. In the season 3 episode “Every Man for Himself,” Benjamin Linus comments on Sawyer’s emotions toward Kate saying, “A guy goes nuts if he ain’t got nobody. It don’t make any difference who the guy is, so long as he’s with you. I tell ya...I tell ya, a guy gets too lonely, and he gets sick.” This is a reference not only to the John Steinbeck novel itself, but also to the fact that Sawyer was reading it while imprisoned. In the season 6 episode “The Substitute,” Sawyer threatens to kill the Man in Black by shooting him in the back of the head, the same way George killed Lennie in the novel.

Other intertextual references in *Lost* include the episode titles and character names. The episode title “There’s No Place Like Home” and character name Henry Gale are references to *The Wizard of Oz*. The episode title “Tabula Rasa” and character name John Locke are references to the eighteenth century philosopher John Locke. Other character names such as Danielle Rousseau, Desmond David Hume, Daniel Faraday, Richard Alpert and Mikhail Bakunin are references to historical figures with names and philosophies similar to those of the characters. According to Umberto Eco, a postmodern theorist, “Books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told” (as cited in Butler, 2002, p. 32).

Postmodern theorist Lawrence Grossberg said that postmodern television is “a collection of quotations from our collective historical debris, a mobile game of Trivia...The Narrative is less important than the images” and the focus shifts from the narrative to the methods of production and consumption (as cited in Connor, 1997, p. 190). *Lost* has taken the simple plotline of a plane crashing on a deserted island and emphasized symbolism and intertextuality to transform the show into a phenomenon that has become more about the process of watching and creating meaning than about the actual narrative.

Conclusion

Lost can be classified as a postmodern television show as a result of its hybrid genre, multiple audience interpretations, nonlinear structure, ahistorical timeline and intertextual content. The show’s multidimensional storytelling approach has gained the loyalty of diverse viewers who interact with each other and present theories from different perspectives. The viewers have influenced the show itself, and have paved the way for other postmodern television series and their audiences.

References

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