Complex Meaning Construction in *Lost* and Its Effects on Audience Engagement

Keri A. Flaccomio

Ramapo College of New Jersey

Abstract

This paper seeks to examine how and why audiences have continued to theorize about and draw from the phenomenon that is *Lost*. An exploration of *Lost*'s complex layers of meaning, active audiences and the ways in which viewers physically and mentally watch and comprehend episodes of the show, led to the development of the research questions: What are the processes by which audiences use the narrative, visual and semiotic elements in episodes of *Lost* to interpret and construct meaning? How do viewers engage in the process of interpellation when watching *Lost*; is it a conscious practice and how does it affect their interpretations of reality? Why are people drawn to shows such as *Lost* that depict characters in situations of crisis? The analysis presented in this paper: reflects secondary research on audiences, polysemy, interpellation and meaning construction; provides a narrative, textual, semiotic and visual analysis of two characters represented in two episodes from the television series *Lost*; reports on the viewing habits of *Lost* fans as collected through primary research, including survey data gathered from 15 viewers; and seeks to answer the research questions through analysis of the connections between these factors. Findings indicate that audiences use symbols, myths and archetypes within in the show's narrative and visual structures to create meaning, seek out active texts that address multiple perspectives, identify with certain characters they feel similar to or favor, use television as a means for both entertainment and education and construct meaning through collaborative discourse in a post-9/11 world.

Complex Meaning Construction in *Lost* and Its Effects on Audience Engagement

During the *Lost* series finale, which aired on May 23, 2010, viewers and critics alike watched to see what would happen in the show's final moments. They questioned who would live and who would die. They asked what it all meant—the questions, the answers, the past, the present, the future and the alternate reality.[1] They hoped the crises plaguing the main characters for six seasons would finally be resolved—that this group of people who once were lost had let go of the past and found themselves. They watched the television screens. They watched the reactions of other viewers. They posted on social networking websites and in online forum discussions. Because six years of active engagement with the show and its characters, of taking on multiple perspectives and constructing meaning, of reflecting on the culture, community and crises in their own lives, was all about to come to an end. They had stepped outside of their own worlds and into the world of *Lost*. When the final credits drew to a close, they took a moment to consider all that had happened over the past six years. And then, in the true spirit of the *Lost* viewership, they went back to the beginning and started all over again.

This paper seeks to examine how and why audiences have continued to theorize about and draw from the phenomenon that is *Lost*. An exploration of *Lost*'s complex layers of meaning, active audiences and the ways in which viewers physically and mentally watch and comprehend episodes of the show, led to the development of the following research questions: What are the processes by which audiences use the narrative, visual and semiotic[2] elements in episodes of *Lost* to interpret and construct meaning? How do viewers engage in the process of interpellation[3] when watching *Lost*; is it a conscious practice and how does it affect their

interpretations of reality? Why are people drawn to shows such as *Lost* that depict characters in situations of crisis?

Active Audiences and Interpretation

Over the past decade, producers, writers and directors working to create successful modern television shows have aimed to engage audiences and motivate them not only to watch episodes as they air, but also to participate in the culture of fandom—to discuss, speculate and inspire plotlines and references they come across. Those working behind the scenes of ABC's *Lost* throughout its six-season run made a breakthrough in television history by building a show around which an entire culture was born. Numerous studies have been conducted on the benefits of audience engagement and the role of active audiences in *Lost*.

In two such studies, Philo (2008) and Gray and Mitchell (2007) examined public knowledge as constructed through active audiences. Philo asked what conditions cause audiences to accept or reject a perspective when they are aware that alternatives exist, what conditions allow for alternatives to be made available for public discussion, especially for those audience members who are strongly influenced by a hegemonic ideology, and what conditions allow for audiences to critique the existing ideologies. Gray and Mitchell asked why some audience members become "spoiler fans," searching for ways to jump ahead of the narrative content on television shows such as *Lost*, advancing fandom and public discourse to an extra-textual level, and either accepting or rejecting the nature of their practices.

In interviewing audience members about their perceptions of news events depicted on television, Philo (2008) found that people carry their subcultures and participation in certain institutions into their viewing experiences, thus interpreting—and either accepting or rejecting—the media representations they see either as in accord or discord with what they already perceive

to be true. In analyzing the online forum community populated by *Lost* fans through an anonymous qualitative survey of 179 significant respondents, Gray and Mitchell (2007) found that audiences interpret multiple meanings even within the structured text of the show, and that the majority of the respondents (51%) approached the narrative with the intention of solving a puzzle before answers were revealed publicly, rather than with the intention of enjoying a passive viewing experience. Gray and Mitchell concluded that audience preferences showed a desire for texts to be seen as active spaces, rather than as fixed pathways leading to one end.

While Philo (2008) suggested that viewers interpret texts based on their previous knowledge and ideologies, Gray and Mitchell (2007) proposed that audiences take their analyses a step further and seek out Philo's alternatives on their own, creating the public discourse rather than waiting for it to appear—they view the spoilers themselves as texts and favor controlling their responses on their own terms, rather than on those of the show's creators. Both studies suggest that modern audiences are engaged and active, questioning the representations they encounter and looking for ways to connect with other viewers and fans in an attempt to collectively accept and reject ideas.

Polysemy, Interpellation and Meaning Construction

Studies have shown that television shows are more likely to prompt audience engagement when they allow viewers to draw multiple meanings from their storylines. Fiske (1986) argued that the viewing audience—which can either accept or reject programming—is composed of members of diverse subcultures and that, in order to be popular, television shows must be polysemic[4] and provide these audiences with unique opportunities for interpreting information and constructing meaning that reflects their different social interactions. Fiske also questioned whether the dominant ideology present in television programming is automatically ingrained in

viewers' minds, or whether room is left to divulge from that ideology. Hoffner and Tian (2010) asked what factors, including parasocial interaction—one-way relationships between audiences and television characters—identification and social attraction, predict whether viewers of shows such as *Lost* will alter aspects of themselves to become more like characters they like, dislike and feel neutral about. Hoffner and Tian also examined the differences between the three character types, in terms of those whom viewers identify or engage in parasocial interaction with.

As Fiske (1986) examined the need for polysemic television content and Hoffner and Tian (2010) analyzed the benefits that audiences gain from being able to interpret texts in multiple ways, Lozano and Singhal (1993) explored the use of melodramatic television serials as educational tools. Lozano and Singhal looked at the role of the mythical narrative in educational development, and the potential for television to entertain and educate simultaneously.

In an analysis of scenes from the television show *Hart to Hart*, Fiske (1986) found that viewers had a divided subjectivity—the symbolic language that awaited them often conflicted with their material social experiences, suggesting that meaning occurs in the interactions between texts and subjects, and that no text or subject can ever be controlled by a single dominant ideology. Through a questionnaire given to 226 users on *Lost* online message boards, Hoffner and Tian (2010) found that viewers identified most strongly with characters they were socially attracted to and who they liked or felt neutral about—meaning they considered themselves to be similar to those characters—and were most likely to have parasocial relationships with characters they felt similar and socially attracted to. Self-alteration to match the identity of characters was found to follow parasocial interaction, but not necessarily identification, and to occur in viewers with the least amount of education. Lozano and Singhal

(1993) examined the Mexican experience with the entertainment-education dynamic, finding a strong case for using television melodramas for educational and developmental purposes.

The findings of Hoffner and Tian (2010) that audiences are likely to engage in relationships with characters they favor and consider themselves similar to furthered Fiske's (1986) argument that meaning is created in interactions between texts and subjects, and that no text's or subject's meaning is limited to be created or interpreted on the basis of one ideology. But while Hoffner and Tian argued that increased audience interaction is a result of less education, the research of Lozano and Singhal (1993) suggested that television can actually be a catalyst for informing and stimulating audiences as they accept its realism or criticize its lack thereof, just as Fiske said that audiences have the power to accept or reject what they see.

Cultural Understanding

One aspect that influences the construction of meaning and the nature of audience participation is the cultural perspective that a viewer brings to a television program. Research has proven that cultural and social influences align viewers with certain ideologies and ways of thinking, and that television works to raise questions about what viewers already believe or have not yet considered. Clark (2008) questioned what role the media—specifically online forums and discussions—play in changing the processes by which people identify and interact with the religion and philosophy in society. Clark's research analyzed the ways in which television shows such as *Lost* allow people to communicate, learn and debate about religion and philosophy, while also developing an appreciation for these studies and considering them when constructing future meaning. Lain and Treat (2010) explored the realm of subplots and extra texts, and the shift from texts being constructed by producers to texts being constructed by consumers. They questioned

how narrative scripts have changed in the post-9/11 world, and how this social and cultural transformation has affected authors, audiences and the arguments that they make.

Clark (2008) analyzed 500 entries—62 in depth—contributing to conversations about religion, philosophy and similar themes on forums, blogs and other online settings that feature content connected to *Lost*. The research findings showed that there are patterns in the ways fans discuss religion, mythology and philosophy in relation to *Lost*: references to Christianity are the most prominent, but also the most conflicted and debated; references to Islam and Judaism appear the least; and references to Greek mythology are discussed in the context of literature, while other mythological references are rarely topics of discussion, appearing only in entries on the fan-run lostpedia site that explores specific episodes, themes and references in greater depth. Lain and Treat (2010) examined how the "narrative fragmentation and indeterminacy" of *Lost* oppose the "moral certainty" in the Bush administration in post-9/11 American society. Findings showed that *Lost* fandom is an example of consumers acting as co-authors in the narrative process, constructing and deconstructing texts to provide and uncover multiple meanings. This creates a process of interpellation by which cultural ideologies are represented through the perspectives of different characters and storylines in the show, and viewers interpret textual and social meaning through the eyes of these middlemen.

The research findings of Clark (2008) and Lain and Treat (2010) all indicated the presence of a postmodern practice in television programming—that of audiences using collaborative dialogue to build a collective intelligence. As the aforementioned studies on active audiences and polysemy, interpellation and meaning construction showed, multiple meanings in television are derived from the ways viewers choose references to interpret, construct meaning from and further explore them. While Clark's findings highlighted the new abilities of audiences,

producers and other content creators to interact via the online environment, the research also showed that this engagement only exists to a certain extent because viewers are limited in their willingness to pursue religious and philosophical debates in depth. Lain and Treat agree that much of the weight of collaborative discourse now falls on active viewers, but that it can be more democratizing and engaging than limiting.

Methods

The analysis presented in this paper: reflects secondary research on audiences, polysemy, interpellation and meaning construction; provides a narrative, textual, semiotic and visual analysis of two characters represented in two episodes from the television series *Lost*; reports on the viewing habits of *Lost* fans as collected through primary research, including survey data gathered from 15 viewers; and seeks to answer the research questions through analysis of the connections between these factors.

Lost: Creating Crisis, Culture and Critical Praise

ABC's *Lost* first aired on September 22, 2004, establishing one-way character-audience relationships that would develop over a span of six seasons, and emotional ties that would linger for many more. As the story goes, Oceanic Flight 815 crashes en route from Sydney to Los Angeles, leaving 48 survivors stranded 1,000 miles off course on an island in the South Pacific. The survivors await rescue while struggling to sustain themselves, but soon find that the island has secrets of its own, including supernatural properties and a political history.

The show's main characters deal with situations of crisis in which they are "lost" not only on the island, but also in their own lives prior to the crash. Each character is running away from the past and looking for an answer, for a second chance, for redemption. Viewers see the characters face their demons on the island and gain insight into their past, present and future

lives through flashbacks and flashforwards. The stories of each character tie into a larger narrative arc that juxtaposes faith with science and destiny with free will. Adding flashes sideways and an alternate reality in its final season, *Lost* raised an all-encompassing question: What if all the misery you have been through was wiped clean? Would you be better off?

When Lloyd Braun, former chairman of ABC, developed a concept in January 2004 for a show about a plane crashing on an island, the network was doubtful that a story with so many characters and plotlines could succeed (Stafford, 2006). But after it aired, the series—a hybrid genre incorporating drama, adventure, fantasy and science fiction—quickly attracted a coalition audience. Viewers were attracted to the nonlinear story structure, ahistoric plotline and intertextual references that *Lost* used so well. They watched for different reasons and constructed meaning in different ways, creating a culture of audience engagement that garnered unprecedented ratings, sent critics and bloggers raving and paved the way for postmodern television.

"Walkabout" and "White Rabbit": The Healed, the Healer and Hunt

"Walkabout," directed by Jack Bender and written by David Fury, aired as the fourth episode of *Lost*'s first season on October 13, 2004. On the island, the survivors consider what to do when a family of wild boar discovers the bodies of dead passengers in the plane's fuselage. The character John Locke emerges from silence and takes on a leadership role in this episode when, in response to collective anxiety over the dwindling food supply, he suggests that the group should hunt boar. Flashbacks reveal that before the crash, Locke longed to be a leader but instead lived as a disabled man, confined to a wheelchair and constantly reminded that he was incapable of being independent and accomplishing his goals.

"White Rabbit," directed by Kevin Hooks and written by Christian Taylor, aired on October 20, 2004, directly following "Walkabout" in the first season. On the island, the character Jack Shephard saves one survivor from drowning in the ocean, but is unable to reach another before she dies, consequently believing that he has failed and is incapable of being a leader. When the group's water supply goes missing, Jack is distracted by the image of an old man in a suit off in the distance. While Locke heads into the jungle to find fresh water, Jack's pursuit for his hallucination leaves him clinging to the edge of a cliff. Locke saves Jack and encourages him to assume the leadership role on the island. Flashbacks identify the man in the suit as Jack's late father, who constantly told Jack that he does not have what it takes to be a leader.

John Locke, a paraplegic healed by the island, and Jack Shephard, a doctor obsessed with fixing what is broken, both maintain leadership roles throughout the series. There are times when the two work toward common goals, but they are often divided in their beliefs about the island. Locke is portrayed as the man of faith and Jack as the man of science; Locke believes that the survivors were brought to the island for a reason—that it is their destiny—and Jack believes that the plane crash was a result of bad luck and coincidence—that the survivors can determine their fate based on free will. Locke and Jack represent the two extreme perspectives that audiences share when interpreting *Lost*.

Surveying Audiences

In conducting primary research, I created a survey (see Appendix C) to study the viewing habits, preferences and interpretations of *Lost* fans. The 15 participants ranged from 19 to 68 years of age and represented a mix of ethnic and racial identities including Caucasian, Chinese American, Hispanic, Indian and Puerto Rican/Caucasian. The education levels of the participants included the completion of high school, the completion of some college, the attainment of an

Associate's degree and the attainment of a Bachelor's degree. Six participants identified themselves as male, and five as female. Five participants chose not to identify themselves by age, gender and level of education completed. Six participants chose not to identify themselves ethnically and racially.

The survey consisted of general questions about viewing and interpreting *Lost*, as well as questions specific to "Walkabout" and "White Rabbit" for participants who viewed those episodes. The survey, created and conducted online through Qualtrics Survey Software, consisted of multiple choice and open-ended questions, as well as questions that asked the participants to rate their degree of agreement or disagreement and the frequency of their viewing habits. All 15 participants responded to some of the general questions.[5] Eight participants answered all of the questions in response to "Walkabout," and six participants answered all of the questions in response to "White Rabbit."

This paper will analyze the survey responses in connection with elements of narrative, textual, semiotic and visual analysis to explore the process by which viewers interpret episodes of *Lost*, construct meaning throughout the series and engage in the viewing experience.

Discussion

The analysis presented here is broken into three sections, each of which will address a separate research question through an examination of *Lost* characters John Locke and Jack Shephard in the episodes "Walkabout" and "White Rabbit" in relation to survey data collected from audiences.

Active Audiences and Interpretation

Audiences watching *Lost* tend to embrace the opportunity to accept or reject the perspectives of each character and the series as a whole. Just as *Lost*'s writers did, viewers have

the chance to either support or critique ideologies that exist within the themes of the show and the minds of the characters. However, it appears that audience interpretations of *Lost* challenge the norms of television analysis as described by Philo (2008), encouraging viewers to leave their own subcultures and lifestyles behind when entering into the world of the show. Survey data show that 10 out of 14 participants (71%) said they separate their pre-existing ideas and beliefs from their viewing and interpretation of the show, while only 4 out of 14 participants (29%) said that they view and interpret the show with their pre-existing ideas and beliefs in mind.

This suggests that audiences turn to *Lost* not for a passive viewing experience, but for an active and engaging one, strengthening Gray and Mitchell's (2007) findings that audiences prefer texts to be active spaces rather than fixed pathways. The findings also suggest that audience interpretation, then, relies on other factors, including narrative, textual, semiotic and visual analysis.

The episodes "Walkabout" and "White Rabbit" are riddled with symbols, myths and archetypes in their narrative, textual and visual elements. Both episodes open with a close-up shot of a main character's eye—Locke's eye in "Walkabout" and Jack's eye in "White Rabbit." This symbolizes the need of these characters to open their eyes and wake up, so to speak. Each of them is carrying a sense of guilt, and each of them is feeling lost. The island itself is a symbol for redemption, as it is a place where the main characters are given a second chance. The eye-opening visual technique also symbolizes the need for audiences to take a closer look and realize that not everything is as it seems, both in the world of *Lost* and in the real world. In "White Rabbit," the rock star character Charlie Pace displays a tattoo of a lyric from the Beatles song "Strawberry Fields Forever"—"Living is easy with eyes closed, misunderstanding all you see." One survey participant who recognized the referenced interpreted it in relation to the show:

"Only when you open your eyes and truly realize what's around you / where you are, are you able to grow / develop." In a sense, the characters were "lost" in their lives prior to the crash and "found" themselves on the island.

Camera close-ups are used to obscure the vulnerabilities of the characters throughout each episode, until these weaknesses are revealed later on. In "Walkabout," Locke is portrayed in his flashbacks as someone who wants to be a leader, but who is constantly discouraged. He often repeats his mantra, "Don't tell me what I can't do!" In one flashback, Locke is seen playing a war simulation game with a co-worker in his office lunchroom. When Locke's boss, a much younger man, finds out that Locke aspires to embark on a walkabout—an exploration of the Australian outback—he mocks the idea. In this episode, the camera pulls back in the final flashback to show that Locke was confined to a wheelchair before coming to the island. The game is a symbol for the island, a place where Locke is able to be a leader.

In "White Rabbit," Jack is portrayed in his flashbacks as someone who wants to fix everyone's problems, but who is discouraged by his father and comes to internalize the belief that he is a failure. "You don't want to be a hero," his father says, "You don't want to try and save everyone. Because, when you fail, you just don't have what it takes."

On the island, Locke is portrayed as the hunter and as the archetypical wise elder. He believes that the island is his salvation, and takes pride in being able to do the things he was once told he could not. Locke describes the walkabout as "a journey of spiritual renewal where one derives strength from the earth and becomes inseparable from it. Although Locke is unable to take part in the walkabout, he takes the same journey on the island. In doing so, John Locke's character is modeled after the eighteenth century philosopher by the same name. Both Lockes are known for their beliefs that every person is a blank slate, or "tabula rasa," upon which experience

writes, that people are inherently good and that every human being is entitled to the basic rights of life, liberty and estate (Stafford, 2006). As the series progresses, Locke is the main source of philosophical wisdom and spiritual inspiration for both the survivors on the island and the show's viewers—the characters and the viewers learn and develop simultaneously. Six out of 15 survey participants (40%) said they "Agree" that *Lost* has led them to discuss and/or learn about religion and philosophy.

On the island, Jack is quickly elected as the leader of the survivors. He is the doctor, the problem solver, the decision maker and the hero, as his last name—Shephard—symbolizes. When he fails to save one castaway from drowning, Jack again feels as though he is a failure. He tells the other survivors that he no longer wants to make decisions, and chases an image of his father into the jungle. When Locke saves Jack's life, he says that the survivors "need someone to tell them what to do." Jack says he is chasing a white rabbit—a reference to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*—and looking for something or someone that does not exist. Here Jack is portrayed as the man of science, calling this a hallucination, and Locke is portrayed as the man of faith, saying that the island is different than the real world and that everything that happened on the island happened for a reason. Locke leaves Jack with the sentiment that "a leader can't lead until he knows where he's going," giving him the strength to try again.

The episode title symbolizes that each character is running away from a past and chasing a future. Both "Walkabout" and "White Rabbit" introduce musical narratives—musical cues specific to Locke and Jack—as well as emotional music in the final flashbacks and on-island scenes. The "Life and Death" theme song used in "White Rabbit" is used throughout the series, and both episodes end on a musical note, rather than with the ominous boom that usually accompanies the final cut to black.

Polysemy, Interpellation and Meaning Construction

As evidenced by the variation in age, gender and ethnic background of the survey participants, *Lost*'s viewers come from all walks of life, as do its characters. Data shows that they watch for different reasons: mainly to entertain themselves, to solve the show's puzzles and to spend time with friends, as well as to learn about religion, to learn about philosophy, to relate to certain characters, to see their own lives reflected in the show, to watch certain actors and to see the outcome of the episodes and series. When asked whether they believe *Lost*, as a series, revolves around one central meaning or idea or it can be explained through multiple interpretations and meanings, 100% of 15 participants selected the latter choice. This suggests that viewers watch *Lost* for the opportunity to take on any of the various perspectives presented, and supports Fiske's (1986) findings that successful television content caters to a coalition audience.

Participants were also asked to identify the Season 1 character they feel most similar to and the Season 1 character they prefer to watch. Finally, they were asked to specify the character whose perspective they usually share. Out of 15 participants, 33% said this is the character they feel most similar to, 20% said this is the character the prefer to watch, 40% said that both choices applied and 7% said this is the character featured in whatever episode they are watching. Furthermore, 60% of the same participants agreed that, prior to taking the survey, they were aware that they shared the perspectives of certain characters. This means viewers consciously engage in the process of interpellation.

Survey data questions the argument raised by Hoffner and Tian (2010) that increased audience interaction is a result of less education and that viewers are likely to take on the characteristics of characters they feel similar to and prefer to watch, yet supports the findings of

Lozano and Singhal (1993) that television can actually be a catalyst for educating audiences when, as Fiske (1986) described, those audiences have the power to accept or reject what they see. The majority (53%) of 15 participants neither agreed nor disagreed that they have taken on characteristics of one or more characters from *Lost*. But all participants had earned at least a high school diploma. Many said that they have learned about religion and philosophy from the show, and 87% said they engage in a discussion with other viewers "often" or "sometimes" after watching an episode. Furthermore, 100% of the participants said they have quoted *Lost* in conversation at least once. This suggests that viewers do engage in parasocial interaction, but that viewers more often analyze the show from the outside looking in, rather than by actually becoming the characters. Their interpretation of reality is not affected because they separate the *Lost* world from their own, aside from gaining specific knowledge that may be useful to them.

When asked which elements of *Lost* they use to construct meaning, the participants selected the following choices: symbols (93%), narrative (storyline) elements (73%), visual imagery (87%), music and sound (67%), cultural references (53%), historical references (60%), character dialogue (87%), flashes forward/backward/sideways (100%), connections to previous episodes (87%) and other (please specify) (7%). The "other" response referred to the philosophy of a specific character known as "Hurley." So, not only do viewers watch *Lost* for different reasons, but they also make sense of the show in different ways. What is believable to one viewer may be over the top to another. The oldest viewer both accepted and rejected elements of the show, commenting, "The program *Lost* was interesting, but I felt at points it was too far-fetched and disbelievable when they started to incorporate the island moving, or rotating the island, and when Sayid was dead but came back to life because he wasn't fully dead."

Cultural Understanding

Although survey data indicate that the majority of viewers tend to separate their pre-existing ideas and beliefs from their interpretation of *Lost*, cultural understanding is likely to influence which character's perspective a viewer takes and which character a viewer prefers to watch. The show, however, depicts characters as changing and evolving rather than as static. *Lost* is about community and collectivity. Out 15 survey participants, 53% said that they watch the show with one or two other people. And many engage in discussions in community settings, such as online forums, to create what Lain and Treat (2010) call a collaborative discourse, suggesting that meaning construction is influenced by cultural understanding, and therefore constructed by a network of media consumers. While Clark (2008) argues that this may be limiting, Lain and Treat suggest that it is stimulating. One reason for this is because the show provides so much room to read between the lines. Some call *Lost* a television show with footnotes (Poniewozik, 2010).

Lain and Treat (2010) also suggest that the narrative scripts of *Lost* were adjusted to fit the culture of a post-9/11 world. As the island's hero and leader, Jack is often faced with situations in which he is willing to make sacrifices for the greater good. In "White Rabbit," he gathers the survivors and tells them that they have to stop waiting for rescue and start figuring out how to live as a community on the island. "If we can't live together, we're gonna die alone," he says. This reflects the united stand Americans took after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The show began with a plane crash, and continued with a communal search for meaning. The characters have to venture out in the jungle in order to survive, and in doing so must confront their fears and the terrors that lurk there (Tapper, 2006).

The show also incorporates characters known as "The Others" in Season 1. Locke points out that these characters have attacked and sabotaged the survivors, encouraging the people on

the island to stop attacking each other and start coming together as a group against the enemy. Looking back, writer Damon Lindelof said he noticed similarities between the show's treatment of The Others and Fox News' treatment of al Qaeda. This inspired the writers to delve into the background of character Sayid Jarrah, a former Iraqi torturer trying to come to terms with his actions. But *Lost* introduced a new perspective—one that, for the first time, led many Americans to sympathize with the Iraqi torturer and question the American. This is exemplified when Sayid tortures a character who has allegedly hoarded the medicine supply in order to save another survivor. Sayid is hesitant to perform the torture, but Jack supports it (Tapper, 2006).

Lost is a show that depicts characters in situation of crisis, both on the island and in flashbacks, flashforwards and flashes sideways. It seems that audiences are drawn to this because few other shows so readily reveal the flaws and the scars of their characters. Plotlines change and characters are killed off of *Lost* without any warning. The postmodern show has a nonlinear narrative structure with unpredictable and ahistoric plotlines that engage audiences on multiple levels. Survey participants agree that it is exciting to watch the characters take on challenges and understand their motives. The participants said they wanted to see the outcome of the crisis and find out what moves each character would make. Some said *Lost* allows viewers to reflect on their own crises, while others said the show provides a getaway. One participant commented, "Life itself is a crisis, there is no escaping that. However, with that said, I believe watching the show enables most people to reflect and free themselves of their situations for an hour." Television is a fair representation of how people reason out, deal with and solve problems in their own lives, and *Lost* provides insight into the thought processes of characters who see the world from many different angles (Lembo, 2007).

Few television shows retain the interest of audiences both throughout their original runs and in the aftermath of their conclusions. The fact that *Lost* is an exception to this rule prompted my interest in researching why audiences engage in and interact with the show and its characters in unique ways, and whether these processes have an affect on the viewers' perceptions of reality. I reviewed literature on audience behavior, polysemy, interpellation, meaning construction and culture to build a foundation for my research questions. To conduct my own research, I used an online survey to acquire data from 15 participants who have viewed episodes of *Lost*. The survey results found that the majority of viewers tend to separate their own beliefs and ideas from those of the show, contrary to Philo's (2008) argument, but support Gray and Mitchell's (2007) findings that audiences prefer active texts to those with fixed paths and predictable outcomes.

Findings show that audiences use symbols, myths and archetypes within the show's narrative and visual structures to create meaning, as well as character dilemmas—such as those faced by John Locke and Jack Shephard in the episodes "Walkabout" and "White Rabbit"—to stand as metaphors for the pasts viewers run from, and the futures they run to, in their own lives. The results also strengthen Fiske's (1986) argument that texts must address the varied perspectives of diverse audiences in order to be successful and Hoffner and Tian's (2010) findings that viewers tend to identify with characters they feel similar to and enjoy watching. In disagreement with Hoffner and Tian's findings, and in agreement with those of Lozano and Singhal (1993), the results show that television can be a catalyst for education more often than a limitation or hindrance. As Fiske found, the survey results connect this benefit to the viewer's power to accept or reject the content and ideologies of the show. Collaborative discussion is found to be more stimulating than limiting for the process of meaning construction, in

accordance with the findings of Lain and Treat (2010) and discordance with those of Clark (2008). Finally, the survey results and subsequent analysis support Lain and Treat's argument that *Lost*'s narrative scripts are framed in terms of a post-9/11 culture.

Topics for exploration in further research could include an examination of the effects of viewing *Lost* in a group—rather than individual—setting, as well as an analysis of how the findings of this study differ between viewers watching *Lost* for the first time and those engaging in additional viewings. It has been said that television will not see another show like *Lost* in the near future, but it might be telling to research the connections between *Twin Peaks* and *Lost* in order to predict how the "next" show of its kind might be structured.

Notes

[1] In the sixth and final season of *Lost*, "flashes sideways" were used in addition to flashbacks and flashforwards. Many viewers interpreted the flashes sideways as an alternate reality in which Oceanic 815 never crashed on the island.

[2] Semiotics is the study of communication, signs and symbols (Grossberg, Wartella, Whitney, & Wise, 2006).

[3] Interpellation is "the process by which individuals are given identities by being placed into one of a binary pair, by becoming identified with one term" (Grossberg, Wartella, Whitney, & Wise, 2006).

[4] Polysemy is the view that signs and signifiers can have multiple, layered meanings. As the signifiers slide into other signifiers, meaning results from the nature of the connections between the signifiers. This approach allows for complex and differing interpretations, understandings and creations of meaning by the audience members. (Grossberg, Wartella, Whitney, & Wise, 2006).

[5] Questions 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9-13, 15-18 and 20 were answered by 15 participants and questions 2, 6 and 14 were answered by 14 participants.

References

Clark, L. (2008). Sustaining the mystery, developing cross-religious understandings: Religion, philosophy, and convergence culture online in ABC's "Lost." Unpublished paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

Fiske, J. (1986). Television: Polysemy and popularity. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication, 3*(4), 391-408.

Gray, J. & Mitchell, J. (2007). Speculation on spoilers: *Lost* fandom, narrative consumption and rethinking textuality. *Particip@tions, 4*(1).

Grossberg, Lawrence, Ellen Wartella, David C. Whitney, and John M. Wise. *MediaMaking: Mass Media in a Popular Culture*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1998. Print.

Hoffner, C. A., & Tian, Q. (2010). Parasocial interaction with liked, neutral and disliked characters on a popular tv series. *Mass Communication & Society, 13*(3), 250-269.

Lain, B., & Treat, S. (2010). Authors, audiences and argument: ABC's *Lost* and narrative agency after 9/11. Unpublished paper presented at the Alta Conference on Argumentation, Alta, UT.

Lembo, R. (2007). Components of a viewing culture. In H. Newcomb (Ed.), *Television: A Critical View* (7th ed., pp. 455-470). New York: Oxford University Press.

Lozano, E., & Singhal, A. (1993). Melodramatic television serials: Mythical narratives for education. *Communications (18)*1, 115-127.

Philo, G. (2008). Active audiences and the construction of public knowledge. *Journalism Studies, 9*(4), 535-544.

Poniewozik, J. (2010). *Preparing for life after* Lost. Retrieved from http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1989123-1,00.html

Stafford, N. (2006). *Finding Lost: The unofficial guide*. Toronto: ECW Press.

Tapper, J. (2006, October 17). Behind the secrets of "Lost." ABC News *Nightline*. [Interview transcript]. Retrieved from http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/story?id=2553741&page=1

Appendix A

Scenes from *Lost*

1. Season 1, Episode 4: “Walkabout”

2. Season 1, Episode 5: “White Rabbit”

3. Season 1, Episode 8: “Confidence Man”

Appendix B

Themes for Analysis

1. Active Audiences and Interpretation

This theme was chosen to examine what preferences audiences have for activity and interpretation opportunities in television viewing and how *Lost* fulfills these needs. This theme also includes an exploration of public knowledge as constructed through active audiences, the power of audiences to accept or reject dominant ideologies, the scope of extra-textual elements, the influence of personal beliefs and media representations on viewing interpretations and symbols, myths and archetypes present in the narrative, textual and visual elements of *Lost*.

2. Polysemy, Interpellation and Meaning Construction

This theme was chosen to examine the process by which audiences engage in interpellation and construct meaning through multiple perspectives. This theme also includes an exploration of the need to provide diverse audiences with multiple layers of meaning in television, the parameters of parasocial interaction and the entertainment-education dynamic, the different reasons why audiences watch *Lost* and how their identification with and preference for certain characters affects the perspectives they take on, as well as their interpretations of reality.

3. Cultural Understanding

This theme was chosen to examine the cultural and communal perspectives that viewers bring to the television viewing experience, the role of the media in influencing identification and interaction with religion and philosophy, the influence of the online world, subplots and extra texts, the adjustment of narrative scripts in *Lost* to fit a post-9/11 culture, *Lost* as a postmodern show, the use of collaborative dialogue to build collective intelligence and the reasons why viewers are drawn to a show in which the main characters all live in crisis.

Appendix C

Survey Questionnaire

LOST Analysis

Q1 How many seasons of LOST have you watched in full?
- ❍ 1 (1)
- ❍ 2 (2)
- ❍ 3 (3)
- ❍ 4 (4)
- ❍ 5 (5)
- ❍ 6 (6)

Q2 Which main character from season 1 of LOST do you consider to be most similar to yourself?
- ❍ Jack (1)
- ❍ Kate (2)
- ❍ Hurley (3)
- ❍ Sawyer (4)
- ❍ Locke (5)
- ❍ Sayid (6)
- ❍ Jin (7)
- ❍ Sun (8)
- ❍ Claire (9)
- ❍ Charlie (10)
- ❍ Michael (11)
- ❍ Walt (12)
- ❍ Shannon (13)
- ❍ Boone (14)

Q3 Which main character from season 1 of LOST is your favorite to watch?

- ❍ Jack (1)
- ❍ Kate (2)
- ❍ Hurley (3)
- ❍ Sawyer (4)
- ❍ Locke (5)
- ❍ Sayid (6)
- ❍ Jin (7)
- ❍ Sun (8)
- ❍ Claire (9)
- ❍ Charlie (10)
- ❍ Michael (11)
- ❍ Walt (12)
- ❍ Shannon (13)
- ❍ Boone (14)

Q4 Which of the following is true about the character whose perspective you usually share?

- ❍ This is the character I feel most similar to. (1)
- ❍ This character is my favorite to watch on the show. (2)
- ❍ Both of the above. (3)
- ❍ This is the character featured in whatever episode I am watching. (4)

Q21 Prior to taking this survey, I was aware that I shared perspectives of certain characters in episodes of LOST.

- ❍ Strongly Disagree (1)
- ❍ Disagree (2)
- ❍ Neither Agree nor Disagree (3)
- ❍ Agree (4)
- ❍ Strongly Agree (5)

Q7 Which of the following is true about your style of viewing and interpreting episodes of LOST?

- ❍ I view and interpret the show with my pre-existing ideas and beliefs in mind. (1)
- ❍ I separate my pre-existing ideas and beliefs from my viewing and interpretation of the show. (2)

Q8 Which of the following do you believe is true about LOST as a series?
- ❍ LOST revolves around one central meaning or idea. (1)
- ❍ LOST can be explained through multiple interpretations and meanings. (2)

Q19 I watch LOST for the following purposes (please check all that apply):
- ☐ To entertain myself (1)
- ☐ To solve the show's puzzles (2)
- ☐ To spend time with friends (3)
- ☐ To learn about religion (4)
- ☐ To learn about philosophy (5)
- ☐ To relate to certain characters (6)
- ☐ To see my own life reflected in the show (7)
- ☐ None of the above (8)
- ☐ To watch certain actors (9)
- ☐ Other (please specify) (10) _____

Q14 When watching LOST for the first time, I used spoilers to find out what would happen in future episodes.
- ❍ Never (1)
- ❍ Once (2)
- ❍ Rarely (3)
- ❍ Sometimes (4)
- ❍ Often (5)

Q15 Using spoilers to theorize about LOST detracts from the viewing experience.
- ❍ Strongly Disagree (1)
- ❍ Disagree (2)
- ❍ Neither Agree nor Disagree (3)
- ❍ Agree (4)
- ❍ Strongly Agree (5)

Q28 Which of the following best describes how you normally view LOST?
- ❍ I watch alone. (1)
- ❍ I watch with one or two other people. (2)
- ❍ I watch in a group larger than three people. (3)

Q16 After watching an episode, I engage in a discussion with other viewers.
- ❍ Never (1)
- ❍ Once (2)
- ❍ Rarely (3)
- ❍ Sometimes (4)
- ❍ Often (5)

Q17 In my own life, I have taken on the characteristics of one or more characters from LOST.
- ❍ Strongly Disagree (1)
- ❍ Disagree (2)
- ❍ Neither Agree nor Disagree (3)
- ❍ Agree (4)
- ❍ Strongly Agree (5)

Q20 If you answered "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" to the previous question, which best describes the character(s) whose characteristics you have taken on?
- ❍ Character(s) I like (1)
- ❍ Character(s) I dislike (2)
- ❍ Character(s) I feel neutral about (3)
- ❍ I did not answer "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" to the previous question (4)

Q22 LOST has led me to discuss and/or learn about religion and philosophy.
- ❍ Strongly Disagree (1)
- ❍ Disagree (2)
- ❍ Neither Agree nor Disagree (3)
- ❍ Agree (4)
- ❍ Strongly Agree (5)

Q23 LOST has led me to analyze situations or relationships in my own life.
- ❍ Strongly Disagree (1)
- ❍ Disagree (2)
- ❍ Neither Agree nor Disagree (3)
- ❍ Agree (4)
- ❍ Strongly Agree (5)

Q25 I quote LOST in conversation.
- ❍ Never (1)
- ❍ Once (2)
- ❍ Rarely (3)
- ❍ Sometimes (4)
- ❍ Often (5)

Q26 I believe LOST's viewers, in addition to its writers, played a part in determining how the show's plot played out.
- ❍ Strongly Disagree (1)
- ❍ Disagree (2)
- ❍ Neither Agree nor Disagree (3)
- ❍ Agree (4)
- ❍ Strongly Agree (5)

Q27 When watching LOST, I construct meaning through analysis of the following (please check all that apply):
- ☐ Symbols (1)
- ☐ Narrative (storyline) elements (2)
- ☐ Visual imagery (3)
- ☐ Music and sound (4)
- ☐ Cultural references (5)
- ☐ Historical references (6)
- ☐ Character dialogue (7)
- ☐ Flashes forward/backward/sideways (8)
- ☐ Connections to previous episodes (9)
- ☐ Other (please specify) (10) _____

Q29 Which of the following best describes your television viewing habits?
- ❍ LOST is the type of show I usually watch. (1)
- ❍ I don't usually watch shows like LOST. (2)
- ❍ I don't watch certain types of shows more than others. (3)

Q30 LOST is a show that depicts characters in situations of crisis, both on the island, in flashbacks, flashforwards and flashes sideways. Why do you think you are drawn to a show whose characters are in this state?

Q35 Please answer the questions in this section only if you have watched the episode "Walkabout."

Q37 I believe this episode was highly representative of LOST as a series.
- ❍ Strongly Disagree (1)
- ❍ Disagree (2)
- ❍ Neither Agree nor Disagree (3)
- ❍ Agree (4)
- ❍ Strongly Agree (5)

Q38 Which character's perspective did you take in this episode?

Q39 How does the portrayal of Locke in this episode set up his portrayal in the series?

Q40 What purpose is served by Locke's flashbacks in this episode?

Q41 In this episode, Locke is portrayed as a man of _____, and Jack as a man of _____.
- ❍ science, science (1)
- ❍ faith, faith (2)
- ❍ science, faith (3)
- ❍ faith, science (4)

Q42 What emotions do you feel in the final flashback and on-island scene in this episode?

Q43 What major LOST theme emerges in this episode?

Q45 Please answer the questions in this section only if you have watched the episode "White Rabbit."

Q47 I believe this episode was highly representative of LOST as a series.
- ❍ Strongly Disagree (1)
- ❍ Disagree (2)
- ❍ Neither Agree nor Disagree (3)
- ❍ Agree (4)
- ❍ Strongly Agree (5)

Q48 Which character's perspective did you take in this episode?

Q49 How does the portrayal of Jack in this episode set up his portrayal in the series?

Q50 What purpose is served by Jack's flashbacks in this episode?

Q51 Locke and Jack discuss the White Rabbit from Alice in Wonderland. What do you think is the purpose of that discussion in relation to the episode, the series and the series finale?

Q55 Charlie’s tattoo says, "Living is easy with eyes closed, misunderstanding all you see." Did you notice this? Do you know what this line is a reference to? How do you think it relates to the show?

Q31 What is your age?

Q32 What is your gender identity?
- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Other (3)

Q33 What is your ethnic or racial identity? (optional)

Q34 What is the highest level of education you have completed?
- Some high school (1)
- High school diploma or equivalent (2)
- Some college (3)
- Associate's degree (4)
- Bachelor's degree (5)
- Master's (6)
- Doctorate (7)

Q53 Thank you for your responses! If you have any further comments, or wish to leave your name, feel free to do so here.