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»Whatever Happened, Happened«

Serial Character Constellation as Problem and Solution in *Lost*

Frank Kelleter

Good times for television scholars? In the wake of HBO productions like *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), and *Deadwood* (2004-2006), serial television has received widespread public and academic recognition as an innovative storytelling format. Of course, American TV series have been ›complex‹ and ›experimental‹ – buzzwords in our current media discourses – for a long time. Programs like *Taxi* (ABC 1978-1982, NBC 1982-1983), *Dallas* (CBS 1978-1991), *Hill Street Blues* (NBC 1981-1987) and *Seinfeld* (NBC 1989-1998) have refined televisual narrative since the 1970s and 1980s. And yet, only recently has it become possible to argue without bathos that television is an inherently philosophical medium: a medium that constantly investigates the conditions of its own possibility, supposedly analyzes the depths and profundities of existence itself, and allows television scholars to profitably quote Heidegger or Luhmann when discussing Bart Simpson.

This essay cautiously relies on such media ›philosophy‹ but tries to avoid its investment in the charisma of deep thought. My topic is *Lost*, which aired between 2004 and 2010 on ABC: hence, a network series, and not one of the single-creator-driven cable programs that did so much to ennoble American serial television around the turn of the century. Despite this institutional difference (and sometimes without being interested in it), a more theory-oriented television scholarship has harped on *Lost* as being a prime example of the medium's inherently experimental nature.¹ At the same time, detailed discussions of the show are difficult to maintain, because like any longer-running serial, *Lost*, with its six years of intertwined plotlines, all but prevents a unified perspective on what is going on in the narrative. Professional and amateur viewers alike are confronted with a moving target that evolved in a

¹ | Among the many thoughtful interpretations in this vein, see Schabacher 2010a, 2010b, Jahn-Sudmann 2013, and the forthcoming volume *Lost in Media* (Beil/Schwaab/Wentz 2015).

permanent feedback loop with its original audiences. This situation offers a common challenge to seriality studies: When scholars isolate individual episodes of an initially open-ended series to analyze them with tools developed for stand-alone or closed works, they certainly miss something important about serial narration.² Therefore, in the following I will try to avoid cherry-picking disconnected scenes that illustrate larger observations about time and mediality, perceptive as such readings often are. I will also refrain from the unpromising endeavor of summarizing plot developments to map *Lost*'s narrative universe. Instead, my chapter hopes to do justice to the serial (i.e. dynamic, evolving, interactive) character of *Lost*'s six years of storytelling by way of a modular approach that describes one issue – that of experimental character constellation – from different, partly overlapping angles. I will assume that readers are familiar with the show but will phrase my points in such a way that they should remain comprehensible for readers who are not.

WHICH EXPERIMENTS?

They're never gonna pick this thing up anyway.
DAMON LINDELOF

In content and narrative technique, *Lost* is obviously concerned with ›time.‹ But the show's interest in questions of chronology, frequency, and duration markedly differs from the scholastic or contemplative modes of engagement typical of philosophical discourse. Similarly, the experiments run by this, or any other, television series should be distinguished from the epistemic regimes of scientific experimentation, occasional analogies to the contrary notwithstanding.³ At its most obvious, *Lost*'s reflexive play with narrative chronologies helps to solve one of the most difficult problems of serial storytelling: How can variation be plausibly converted into continuation and vice versa? What looks like a simple matter of narrative technique turns out, on closer inspection, to be an elementary paradox of all capitalist culture, namely its dependence on methods of reproduction that simultaneously operate as methods of innovation. And, true: Commercial series, in whatever medium, exhibit an almost innate interest in issues of renewal, expansion, and supersession. In this regard, they are prime sites of capitalist self-reflexivity.

² | For a similar assessment, see Hayward 1997.

³ | Some such analogies are usefully pursued in Engell 2009, Stauff/Keilbach 2011, and Jahn-Sudmann 2013, all of which draw on Rheinberger's concept of ›experimental systems‹ (2001) and their productive self-references.

In the case of *Lost*, the challenges of innovative reproduction are intensified by the show's equivocal genre identity. Basically, the pilot establishes a mystery series that will unfold around an ensemble cast: Oceanic Flight 815, a passenger plane on its way from Sydney to Los Angeles, crashes on a tropical island. While approximately fifty survivors struggle to set up camp on a beach – a situation that provokes first conflicts between various figures –, strange occurrences raise the question of the island's character. (Despite the climate, a polar bear makes an appearance and a noisy monster seems to be moving destructively through the trees.) In a manner that has become almost conventional in the wake of shows like *The X-Files* (FOX 1993–2002), this scenario of castaway story plus (supernatural?) thriller combines two basic modes of TV storytelling: the progressive movement of a mystery ›serial,‹ which aspires to reach an ultimate solution, and the episodic movement of a character-driven ›series,‹ which repeats the same or similar situations and constellations with slight permutations from week to week. The challenge of such formats is to perpetually delay resolution without frustrating the audience's desire for answers. Commonly, this can be achieved by constantly expanding the series' repertory of partial mysteries, thus allowing for a permanent stream of partial solutions that gratify viewers' curiosity. As Matt Hills has argued, such deferrals often create cultish dedication, which can turn these ›flexi-narratives‹ (Nelson 2006) into intensely interactive programs.⁴ Still, ›hyperdiegetic‹ flexibility (Hills 2002) is risky, as the example of *Twin Peaks* (ABC 1990–1991) shows. *Twin Peaks* – a favorite reference point for practitioners and scholars of contemporary ›Quality TV‹ – originally revolved around a whodunit, but sought to prolong its existence beyond the solution of the story's central case through a proliferation of follow-up mysteries. Thus, already before explaining Laura Palmer's murder, the narrative effectively switched genres from being a single-minded murder mystery to being a potentially endless supernatural mystery. At the time, most viewers chose not to notice or did not go along with this generic mutation:

⁴ | Compare Hills 2002: 14; Nelson 2006: 82. Lavery (2009) also speaks of the ›long-term television narrative.‹ Booth (2012) argues that soap opera-like plot proliferations and character constellations invite types of audience engagement that resemble the modes of interaction in digital social networks. – While the series/serial-hybrid is often seen as a relatively new format on American TV, it has been familiar to other television cultures for a long time. Its American origins can be traced in pre-1990s episodic programs, to the extent that they constitute ›cumulative narratives‹ (Newcomb 1974, 1985, 2004; see also footnote 29 below). In Germany, the format has been described systematically for the soap opera *Lindenstraße* (WDR, since 1985) and its ›Zopfstruktur‹ (Geißendörfer 1990). In fact, oscillation between episodic and open-ended structures may be a basic feature of all popular seriality in any medium (Kelleter 2012a).

Twin Peaks, though one of the most transformative shows in TV history, was cancelled after the second season.

The creators of *Lost* were well aware of this precedent.⁵ But instead of proceeding cautiously, they almost perversely raised the stakes for a show that they thought would never be continued beyond its pilot. As writer Damon Lindelof explained later, it seemed doubtful that the series would go into production, so the writers of the first script had fun parading all kinds of eccentric events and techniques.⁶ In consequence, *Lost* already in its first installment accumulated so many mysteries that it rendered a satisfying conclusion in later seasons almost impossible. After all, TV seriality requires a long-term suspension of final resolutions anyway, instead favoring ongoing variations, increasing entanglements, and ever deeper complications. Typically, any open-ended series after three or four episodes has accrued so much narrative information that establishing coherence becomes a problem of a decidedly different nature from the coherence management involved in work-bound structures such as novels or movies (or preconceived mini-series). Moreover, in commercial serial storytelling, production and reception overlap, so that a narrative's increasing complexity is usually monitored by dedicated or »forensic« audiences who, depending on the media at their disposal, tend to become active players in the story's continuation and self-conception.⁷ In the case of *Lost*, the production company Bad Robot quickly set up a website (»The Fuselage«) for discussions among writers, actors, and viewers. As a result, »a fascinating contest for meaning« (Dolan 2010: 155) ensued that turned the series almost immediately into »a communally consumed text« (Gray/Mittell 2007: n. pag.). In a next step, user-generated websites and wikis began to explicate and organize the serial universe while it was still unfolding.⁸ This, in turn, had consequences for the activities of writers, producers, and other official agents of continuation and hence for the development of the collectively produced narrative itself.

5 | Apart from *Twin Peaks*, they also cite the lessons learned from *The X-Files* and its (somewhat indecisive) wavering between episodic dramaturgy and an overarching mythology; see Mittell 2005b, Gray/Mittell 2007.

6 | See »Damon Lindelof's History« (also the source for this section's epigraph). Interestingly, co-creator J.J. Abrams has a different explanation for the cryptic nature of the pilot: »For me it was like looking at the show in a long term« (quoted in Dolan 2010: 150). The contradiction between Lindelof's and Abrams's accounts – one stressing the precariousness, the other the purposefulness of serial endurance – is resolved in popular seriality's general project of innovative reproduction.

7 | On »forensic fandom,« see Mittell 2006.

8 | On the *Lostpedia* wiki, see Mittell 2009.

Under such conditions of dispersed storytelling it is not surprising that a series should sooner or later emphasize the simultaneity – and hence the convertibility – of narrative segments and figures. Consider the *evolving* structure of *Lost*'s temporal techniques and how this fosters a dynamic of serial expansion.⁹ Whereas the first three seasons establish flashbacks, which focus on individual characters, as the show's signature mode of non-linear storytelling (while retaining a linear narrative universe), the final episode of season three introduces a first flash-forward.¹⁰ Significantly, this prolepsis is not explicitly marked as such, so that viewers initially suspect a flashback and learn only gradually that the show has changed the rules of its game. This revelation comes in a season finale, no less, as if announcing more game changers in coming seasons. In consequence, viewers are encouraged to wonder not only *what* the solution of the island's mystery might be but also *how* the series will continue on its way to this final, increasingly unlikely solution. Such »operational aesthetic« (Mittell 2006) in turn invites a drastic increase of settings, which makes it possible to reshuffle the ensemble cast in ever new constellations.¹¹

In other words, *Lost* starts out as a serial drama that is driven, like most network productions, almost entirely by plot and character constellation. There is little interest in what it means to live in a specific place, little about the physical realities of beach and jungle, about the bite of the sand, the terror of the wind, the feel of the water. Instead we see highly profiled bodies traveling almost like avatars through a limited but internally open scenery of clues and memories – a story-engine turned landscape. In this manner, the first three seasons follow a game structure, leading a distinct group of characters, campaign-like, from task to task (including flashbacks and parallel action, but within a consistently

9 | Compare Jahn-Sudmann/Kelleter 2011 and Jahn-Sudmann 2013, where the employment of different narrative temporalities in *Lost* is discussed as an example of serial one-upmanship (*Überbietung*).

10 | The best discussion of *Lost*'s strategies of temporal narration is Schabacher 2010a, 2010b. Schabacher notes that already the use of flashbacks in the first three seasons proceeds in an increasingly nuanced manner (2010a: 213).

11 | Mittell defines »operational aesthetic« as the forgoing of »realism in exchange for a formally aware baroque quality« in television storytelling (2006: 35; this description relies on Ndalianis's 2005 identification of a »neo-baroque« tendency in contemporary television series; the term »operational aesthetic« goes back to Harris 1973). Effectively, such formal self-awareness, accompanied by interactive audiences and their devotion to a specific show, turns hitherto professional and academic reading practices (especially the practice of re-reading as described in Calinescu 1993) into forms of mainstream reception. Also see Stein 2012.

linear storyworld).¹² Later seasons then employ a multi-linear storytelling mode that introduces ever more characters, frequently changing alliances, and recurring views of the future. These switches make it increasingly difficult for viewers to focus on particular (favorite) characters as privileged figures of sense-making. Instead, the audience is kept busy tracing the game's own shifts and turns: Which *problem* will the narrative pose next and how will it solve it? Put differently, one is invited to identify less and less with characters and more and more with the series itself.

Appropriately, these later seasons are characterized by entangled motion. We see small groups coming together and separating again, constantly and simultaneously moving from goal to goal, using ever new modes of transportation (walking, boat, helicopter, disembodiment, etc.). For an individual viewer, it is nearly impossible to keep track of this narrative traffic, unless she taps into or contributes to online fan discourses that provide some order to the show's cascading complications.¹³ At the same time, actually finding out which character is situated where in a specific moment becomes increasingly irrelevant, because the final season explicitly revolves around the question of how a particular set of characters will *wind up* in a particular place. In the sixth season, we already anticipate that the six castaways who managed to escape from the island will return in the finale, but we don't know how. (In contrast, the straightforward mystery of ›the corpse in the coffin‹ is solved almost in passing, and John Locke's feeble pseudonym ›Jeremy Bentham‹ only remains a puzzle for about two episodes.) In fact, the series now takes its operational aesthetic to extremes by disconnecting the lives and movements of the six refugees as

12 | Almost all discussions of *Lost*, be they professional or amateur, comment on the show's game structure; see, for example, Gray/Mittell 2007, Dolan 2010, Jahn-Sudmann 2013. As an extreme example, Dolan points to the fan-site »all_games,« *Lost is a Game.com* (2010: 157).

13 | Of course, to produce more difficulties than a single human mind can process is the very definition of ›complexity,‹ as Schabacher reminds us (2010b: 272). Confronted with such complex narratives, communal sense-making is not just an option but a necessity. »[P]ositioning its fans as players instead of viewers« (Mittell 2012: 6), a series like *Lost* explicitly calls for – and counts on – networked hermeneutic contributions. These can fulfill manifold functions and usually develop their own show-specific logic (compare Kelleter 2014 on television series as actor-networks in Latour's sense). For instance, spoilers and foilers can influence a show's development by upping the ante in an operational game of expectations (for a qualitative study of *Lost* spoiler-fans, see Gray/Mittell 2007). Conversely, webisodes or paratextual games can outsource unsolved or secondary mysteries from the core narrative to transmedia extensions, creating »a package of answers« for impatient fans (Mittell 2012: 7-8). On the terms ›linear,‹ ›multi-linear,‹ and ›cascading,‹ see Kelleter/Stein 2012.

widely as possible, thus making their reunion a highly improbable occurrence. This step, in turn, transforms the question of how they will be reunited against all narrative odds into the show's central procedural mystery that possibly even eclipses the hopeless mystery of the island's identity.¹⁴

Non-chronological narration and the motif of time travel certainly invite philosophical questions about the nature of temporality and television.¹⁵ However, the chief function of *Lost*'s temporal experiments is to substitute the increasingly irresolvable problem of serial resolution with the more manageable problem of serial continuity management. Gradually replacing the question of ›what is the island‹ with the question of ›when is the island,‹ the series skillfully dodges, for much of its running time, expectations of final closure. To put this more abstractly: The more *Lost* stresses simultaneity over teleology – the more it highlights the paradigmatic over the syntagmatic –, the more it embraces its own seriality as a principle of plausible proliferation.

It would be a mistake, therefore, to think of *Lost* as a unified »vast narrative« (Harrigan/Wardrip-Fruin 2009). Current discourses of Quality TV often

14 | *Lost*'s interest in operational suspense is shared by many TV dramas of its era (see the large number of contemporary shows drawn to time-tripping scenarios, such as *Life on Mars*, *FlashForward*, *Ashes to Ashes*, etc.) but also by ›puzzle films‹ like *Memento* (2000), *Hangover* (2009), or *Inception* (2010). Compare also Mittell 2013 on the *West Wing* episode »What Kind of Day Has It Been.«

15 | Both professional and amateur follow-up commentaries readily took up that challenge. See, for example, the ›philosophical‹ readings in Kaye 2008, an often unintentionally funny compendium that, like others of its kind, treats *Lost* as an allegory of this or that metaphysical, religious, or master-theoretical problem: »But really the island's smoke monster is just an external representation of the metaphysical mysteries within us all« (ibid. 4); »Though not castaways, we all have our Others, and we would do well to think about why« (ibid. 5). In this manner, the show can be aligned with almost any previously existing type of knowledge, regardless of its cultural or media activities: »Shai Bidermann and William Devlin make the surprising proposal that Locke represents the eastern spirituality of Taoism. Brett Patterson, in contrast, sees *Lost* as a staging ground for the theme of redemption found in the Christian tradition. We find another point of debate between the next two authors. David Werther contends that, by constructing a world in which everything happens for a reason, *Lost* makes a powerful case for the existence of God. [...] Finally, Jeremy Barris dissects the meaning of life through the lens of *Lost*« (ibid. 5). Another author provides a »Sartrean reading« (»No Exit ... from the Island«), by which is meant a reading that demonstrates how *Lost* validates Sartre's text. As in esoteric shops or certain strands of German media philosophy, it doesn't seem to matter which philosophy is ›represented‹ by the series, so long as the media text can be shown to be ›philosophical‹ – and the current discussion to be deeper or more surprising in its scholastic references than its predecessors.

perpetuate the self-descriptions of their objects when they stress that series can span extended story arcs and provide hyper-connected coherence. »We're going to need to watch that again,« says John Locke in *Lost* after discovering another mysterious clue (in the form of a video tape), thereby mirroring the detective stance of forensic fans but downplaying the show's own dependence on recursive sense-making (S2E03). However, these are not large miniseries that simply withhold their answers until they reach a pre-ordained conclusion. Rather, we are confronted with evolving narratives that establish continuity (always also) retrospectively, revisiting their own pasts even as they move toward an inevitable ends.¹⁶

For that reason, the complexity of television series is neither the systemic complexity of self-contained structures nor the epistemic complexity of, say, Luhmann's monumental description of social systems. Rather, the complexity of contemporary serial television reaches us as a deliberate and dynamic excess of information: the running production of ever more characters and clues, some of which will be »remembered« later in the story (i.e. put to further narrative service), while others will not. Under such conditions, explanations are often acts of creative reactivation. *Lost*, too, busies itself in promising unity by permanently generating new connecting options for selective future use. As a result, the story *accelerates* as it goes along, forming a fast rather than a vast narrative. Divided into short segments (with an episode usually running at 43 minutes), the series supports not only the weekly audience re-engagement typical of appointment-television but also the quick consumption of consecutive episodes on DVD. Rarely does the narrative take a breath; rarely does it make time for extended or contemplative scenes, despite its expanse over six years of storytelling. Similarly, at the level of macrostructure, *Lost*'s shift to a multi-linear and ultimately non-linear vision of narrated time correlates with the reduction of the show's time of narration: As of season four, the series switches from the classical network model of 23-25 episodes per season to a more cable-like model of 14-17 episodes per season. Concurrently, its story transforms from a mystery drama into an operational action drama. *Lost*'s experiments with »time« have to be viewed in this context of contemporary American TV seriality and its institutional, generic, and narrative specificities.

¹⁶ | See, for example, how Jack's discovery of black and white stones in an early episode (S1E06) is associated five seasons later with the new characters of Jacob and his brother (S6E15). For the relationship between serial self-descriptions and academic discourses, see Kelleter 2014.

REVERSALS

What's done cannot be undone.

LADY MACBETH

Can't repeat the past? ... Why of course you can!

JAY GATSBY

Season six of *Lost* was the final season, not only in the sense that it wasn't followed by another, but also, and more importantly, in that this season *knew* that it would have to conclude the narrative. In television storytelling, this is a rare situation. Commercial series do not usually finish in any ambitious, closure-bound sense. Instead, they often just disappear, ending abruptly in the middle of an incomplete plotline whose continuation was no longer financially feasible. The narrative simply doesn't return from its seasonal commercial break.¹⁷ This state of affairs shows television series for what they are by their very materiality: industrial mass commodities, commercial »things,« profitable for only so long. In an important sense, this is also true for *Lost*, but the show's success allowed for a carefully planned exit, a departure more dignified than that granted to most of its peers. In other words, the series, somewhat untypically, was allowed to have the final say on its own narrative. This doesn't alleviate the difficulty of creating consistency where, after six years of sprawling mysteries, consistency is fundamentally doubtful. On the contrary, knowing that closure is both anticipated and impossible, the narrative can only choose which expectations to gratify and which to frustrate.

Lost signals awareness of the formidability of this task in what is perhaps the most frequently uttered sentence in seasons five and six: »Whatever happened, happened.«¹⁸ This statement perfectly captures the dilemma of all ongoing series. Evolving texts have to do their work of coherence-building as they go along, because they usually cannot be revised before publication to get rid of inconsistencies. As a result, they are often forced to change their pasts in the act of storytelling itself. To do so plausibly is a major structural problem for all running serials; failure sets up the show for ridicule. *Dallas* provided a classic example when it declared an entire season never to have happened. Mindful of this, the final season of *Lost* constantly assures both the viewers and itself: Whatever happened, happened. But how is this possible, when so many happenings of a six-year run simply refuse to cohere, or will only cohere through flimsy contraptions that threaten to expose the show's impressive narrative gamble as a mere bluff? The final season reacts to this question with

¹⁷ | Compare Kelleter 2010.

¹⁸ | See also the title of episode S5E11.

yet another operation of non-linear storytelling – another emphasis of the paradigmatic over the syntagmatic – that not only seeks to manage the problem of serial continuity but effectively dramatizes such management itself.

Again, the solution is to draw attention to the series' very seriality, fostering viewers' playful engagement with the specific challenges of this type of storytelling and hence their identification with *Lost* as a serial brand. The introduction of »flash-sideways« in season six – time-jumps to a different, conjectural storyworld, albeit with the same characters – not only raises the narrative stakes one more time, outdoing flashbacks and flash-forwards with an even more unconventional technique, but, in a final experiment, also promises to turn the shifting of character constellations from a problem into a solution. Basically, the flash-sideways allow the narrative to make (at least) two characters out of one. Michael Emerson, the actor portraying one of the show's villains-turned-heroes, quipped: »I played Ben and Sideways Ben.« Of course, redefining character is always an attractive way of repeating something with a difference. Insofar as plausible variation is a defining structural problem of serial storytelling, the flash-sideways were »an opportunity« for the show's producers »to have [...] characters choose differently,« as co-creator Damon Lindelof explained.¹⁹ Apart from the »fun« involved in »play[ing] with the characters« (Adam Horowitz, one of the show's executive producers), such trips into a parallel universe speak to what may well be the secret desire of any series: the desire to *reverse* what has been told. This is such an appealing prospect because everything that has been established in a serial narrative effectively limits further possibilities of continuation: whatever happened, happened. Splitting up the storyworld into two or more universes provides a compelling solution to this dilemma. It allows the series to tell the same or similar plots, repeat the same or similar situations, and span the same or similar arcs – but differently. In this way, season six of *Lost* revels in revisiting scenarios that viewers have already seen, but with the characters' roles reversed: Penny jogs up the stairs of the stadium, not Desmond; Kate and Sawyer return to the cages but their relationship has changed; John Locke wants to leave the island while others are trying to find a way to stay, etc.

The show explicitly highlights such reversals by its conspicuous use of mirrors in season six, as Lindelof and Jack Bender have acknowledged.²⁰ Indeed, the flash-sideways permit the series to reflect on itself in a literal sense, to stage echoes, fears, doublings, or wishful thoughts about its own identity. In

19 | All quotes are taken from the Bonus Material on DVD 6.5, »See You in Another Life, Brotha.«

20 | Compare Bender (another executive producer): »[M]irrors in the idea of all our characters confronting their images and the reflections of themselves in a moment in the episodes of the sideways has sort of been a visual metaphor« (ibid.).

this respect, they can be regarded as functionally equivalent to the Elseworld- and »What if«-spinoffs of superhero comics, which in turn resemble officially produced fan fiction – except that *Lost* includes these spin-offs and reversals squarely within the ongoing master narrative (rather than delegating them to separate imprint formats). The effect is that the series' characters become increasingly visible as serial *figures*, i.e. as malleable and moveable narrative elements.²¹ This doesn't mean that they are rendered as flat and stereotypical.²² Instead, these serial figures allow and even provoke ever more rounded incarnations that explore alternative shapes and nuances in great detail (Ben Linus as a school teacher, Sawyer as a cop, etc.). Perhaps this is what defines serial figures in the current media ecology: They *produce* characters; they have a marked – and often marketed – capacity for multiple characterizations.

Significantly, this logic of reversal occurs not only in the sideways-flashes but pervades the series' character constellation in its original storyworld as well. Of course, dramatic turnarounds of character are common practice in serial narration, but with *Lost*, the traditional flexibility of serial ensembles seems to have reached a new intensity and a new self-reflexivity.²³ From early seasons onward, the series abounds with figure/background-shifts, turning main characters into accessories and back again, protagonists into antagonists and vice versa. There is hardly a figure that remains what he or she was in the beginning. Little of this has to do with the kind of character »development« that often defines the aesthetic ambitions of closed artworks. In a scene near its unlikely finale, the series seems to call attention to this fact. At the end of episode S6Eo6, Sayid, Kate, and Claire leave the temple, walking over corpses and burned ruins. There is a heart-of-darkness air to this scene, the camera hovers over a field of destruction, and from that distant vista we realize that,

21 | In fact, the characters themselves begin to suspect that they are tokens in a game. Many *Lost* characters seem driven by the fear that they have been *performing* where they thought they were *acting*. In self-reflexive media systems, this is an often-staged paranoia, from modernist drama to popular democracies. For a discussion of »What if«-stories in American superhero comics, including DC's »parallel worlds« (which are integrated into the continuity of a larger canon), see Kelleter/Stein 2012. On conjectural modes in contemporary American television, see Sconce 2004.

22 | For »flat« serial characters, such as Frankenstein or Fu-Manchu, whose malleability depends on their iconicity, see Denson/Mayer 2012. On the difference between iconic and more self-reflexively serial forms of popular repetition, see Gardner 2010. Gardner argues that iconic formats (such as the single-panel comic) lend themselves to stereotypical representations while more fully executed serial formats (such as the multi-panel gutter) invite ambivalent characterizations. The ideological dimension of iconic serialities is also stressed in Mayer 2013.

23 | On unexpected character changes in serial narratives, see Hayward 1997.

yes, we've come a long way with these characters. But this is actually the wrong way of putting it, for the characters are no longer the same anyway. Had we jumped from the first season immediately to this episode, we wouldn't have recognized them. They have changed, but hardly ever slowly or subtly, as if this was a vast narrative of delicate moves. Instead, their transformations have been enacted, again and again, through numerous makeovers and reversals. In other words, they have changed serially, sometimes within one episode, because they are figures of a fast narrative, and that this narrative has made us accept sudden shifts as a plausible way in which to proceed represents no small aesthetic accomplishment. Like modernity itself, it has created stability out of instabilities. Of course, the challenge of such reversals, both in the flash-sideways and in the original storyworld, remains in bringing the series around to its scarcely achievable end, to make it circle and close in on itself. I shall address how *Lost* grapples with this problem but will first discuss one particular character constellation in greater detail.

JACK AND JOHN (AND SO ON)

Works of fiction [in *Tlön*] contain a single plot, with all its imaginable permutations. Those of a philosophical nature inevitably include both the thesis and the antithesis, the rigorous pro and con of a doctrine. A book which does not contain its counterbook is considered incomplete.

JORGE LUIS BORGES²⁴

No television series, not even an open-ended, post-episodic serial like *Lost*, would pass the test that Wayne C. Booth, calling on Aristotle, put up for good narrative: Individual parts should be non-transposable and non-expungeable in their construction of a story with a beginning, middle, and end (cf. Booth 2006: 126). The Aristotelian triad presupposes a specific type of narrative – directed, controlled, authorized, and authoritative –, that is often mirrored in its protagonist, the resolved and resolution-oriented hero. In an important sense, *Lost* can be read as a story that reflects on the fate of this type of hero within a serialized ensemble cast.

Like many commercial storytellers, the writers of *Lost* have paid tribute to Joseph Campbell, whose *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) provided inspi-

²⁴ | A connection between *Lost* and *Tlön* is also made by Seiler (2008), who discusses the »viral marketing« of *Lost* (for example, the publication of the tie-in novel *Bad Twin*, written by a fictional author referenced in the series, and then publicly protested by the equally fictional Hanzo Foundation on real websites, etc.).

ration for George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977), which Damon Lindelof claims influenced the mythology of *Lost* in turn. Except: »Instead of saying, this is Luke Skywalker's journey, maybe we could [do] it with sixteen heroes.«²⁵ Like all acts of serial one-upmanship (*Überbietung*), such quantitative enhancements have qualitative effects. In popular seriality, numbers make a difference, whether they be of installments, characters, or fans. Unlike the *Star Wars* movies, then, which evolved as a trilogy before they expanded into a trilogy of trilogies surrounded by an expanded transmedia universe, *Lost* produces a mythology that is not the mythology of a multipart work but the mythology of an ongoing, fast narrative. Nowhere can this difference be better observed than in how the series pitches two types of hero against each other: Jack Shephard and John Locke.

The contrast between Jack and John includes more than the simple dichotomy of man-of-science vs. man-of-faith. The series itself initially offers this clear-cut description to explain the opposition of both men.²⁶ However, the longer the narrative continues, the more it highlights the shifting relations between these characters, again playing on the logic of reversal. This may seem unremarkable because serial ensemble casts often tend to deconstruct their original protagonist. In the case of *Lost*, Jack Shephard is the first character we see, and he is quickly established as the show's hero, at least after he outlives the pilot.²⁷ What is remarkable, however, is how Jack is challenged in the course of the story by another type of hero who gradually emerges as a model of seriality itself. What's more, Jack wants to change into this kind of character himself.

At first, Jack Shephard embodies determined, even teleological action: a purposeful drive forward. He is not only a man-of-science (a surgeon) but also – and chiefly – a man-of-results, a leader and a possible savior. Time and again in early seasons, he situates himself at the center of conflicts by resolving them. This type of heroism correlates with a specific kind of sequential plotting: Jack is the figure who is moving things towards an *end*, a conclusion that makes sense. Other characters can count on his power to influence and produce outcomes when they – just like the viewers – are overwhelmed by inexplicable events.

John Locke, by contrast, is not an active but a re-active hero. Better still: he's an inter-active hero, always waiting for new clues to be provided by his surroundings and co-actors. Instead of driving events, he explicitly goes with

²⁵ | See Bonus Feature »A Hero's Journey,« DVD 6.5.

²⁶ | »Man of Science, Man of Faith« is the title of episode S2E01.

²⁷ | This was not planned originally: In accordance with their reckless approach to the series-to-be, and perhaps remembering a similar surprise in the first episode of HBO's *Oz* (1997-2003), Lindelof and Abrams intended to kill off Jack Shephard at the end of the pilot.

their serial flow. Hoping to understand how one piece fits into the next, he may wind up frustrated in his search for larger meaning but ultimately retains trust in the island's capacity to lead him in the right direction. In this sense, John's character perfectly corresponds with the story's own ludic structure. Externally self-possessed, he remains willing to commit to cascading narratives even if they seem to lead nowhere in particular. (Jack asks him in episode S1E24/25: »You like to play games, John?« Locke replies: »Absolutely.«)

Hence, as the narrative continues on its perpetual journey away from linear sequentiality, John changes along with it, searching less and less for »the answer,« and more and more for the next task to be performed on his way toward an elusive solution. Put differently, John Locke increasingly embodies the show's own principle of open-ended movement. He literally becomes the figure of seriality within the series itself, always asking, »what's next?«, and always answering this question by saying, »I haven't figured that out yet.« But for narratives and characters on the go (and Locke is the most mobile of characters), there is always something to be figured out. In fact, this now becomes the principal task in (and of) *Lost*: to find a way to continue that allows whatever came before to be understood as having been *leading up to* the present moment of decision. When time-traveling back to his own past, Locke revisits the night Boone died (in the first season); seeing again the light that shoots up from the hatch into the sky, he tells Sawyer: »At the time, I thought it meant something.« He explains that he knows now that it was »just a light« (S5E04). But this is not the whole story, because Locke adds: »I needed that [...] – to get to where I am now.« At this point, in season five, the series can say as much about itself. It can account for how it reached its current situation. What's next? This will be figured out along the way: serial order is a game that moves as it is played.²⁸ Epitomizing this dynamic, Locke is clearly not qualified as a stand-in for viewers who try to make definitive sense of continuing riddles. Instead, he comes to express the creative quest of all agents involved in the series' continuation. Whether these agents are producers or fans, professionals or amateurs, they are permanently forced to come to terms with the sprawling consequences of their own narrative actions.

28 | Ganz-Blättler points out that Newcomb's concept of a »cumulative narrative« (see footnote 4 above) was already attentive to this dynamic. Originally coined to account for the inherent tendency of serialization in episodic programs, especially in *Magnum, P.I.* (CBS 1980-1988) and *Cagney & Lacey* (CBS 1982-1988), Newcomb's term covered more than just the existence of small progressive elements from episode to episode. According to Ganz-Blättler, »cumulative narrative« already took note of »the pleasure of remembering,« i.e. the retroactive self-serialization of a series as it addresses and fosters operational audience expertise (2011: 81).

Thus, while Jack Shephard is working out a purposeful plan to get everyone off the island, John Locke insists that he is simply doing what he is »supposed to do« (S1E04). For him, as for *Lost* itself, this literally means continuing, i.e. staying on the island, or better still: *returning* to it, just like viewers are made to return week after week, season after season. The crucial narrative project in (and of) seasons four and five is precisely that: to return, and to do so in large numbers. »All of them« have to go back, maintains Locke. When Sayid asks him why – »is it just because you have nowhere else to go?« (S5E07) –, his question implies a thought that has haunted many a longer-running series: Recurrence, properly a condition of survival, can foster an excess of self-reference that may turn unhealthy, sickening, mad. It is the same shock of recognition that the final episode of *The Sopranos* forced on itself and its viewers three years earlier with a kind of desperate fury: Don't you have anywhere else to go? Don't we have anything else to do than always to return to these people, these stories?²⁹

Impressively, a similar sense of self-disgust seizes Jack Shephard. As later seasons recognize that the narrative's fate might lie in *not* getting off the island, the series begins to have second thoughts about its protagonist as well, to the point of casting him almost as a dislikable figure.³⁰ And perhaps it is correct in doing so: In a self-aware series like *Lost*, the determined action hero can always transform into a manic character, especially when compared to Locke's generally relaxed attitude toward the openness of possible continuations. In fact, Jack Shephard in his discontented state begins to mirror Michael, the other do-or-die character who is obsessed with leaving the island. The end of *Lost*'s third season gives a first glimpse of where such single-mindedness can lead in a serial narrative, reinventing Jack abruptly and shockingly as a character of ambiguity and self-destruction. Finally off the island, the rescuer winds up begging to undo his rescue, precisely because it is his best hope for permanence. But once this is achieved, when Jack returns to the island in season five, he pointedly refuses to play the role of leader (with Sawyer taking over this function). With a certain spiteful indifference, he now slips into the position of amused spectator (»Where is Jack?« – »He's in the shower, I think.«) – or, if he acts at all, suddenly shows himself capable of immoral choices (refusing to save kid Ben). When Juliet asks him why he came back at all, Jack habitually quotes his old role (»to save you«), but since this no longer makes sense – Juliet and Sawyer insist they don't need saving, having resigned themselves to a

29 | On the final episode of *The Sopranos*, see Kelleter 2010.

30 | When Kate tells him: »I don't like the new you. I liked the old you, who wouldn't just sit around and wait for things to happen,« he retorts: »You *didn't* like the old me, Kate« (S5E11). He may be right, because even before his return to the island he became increasingly unpleasant. – On the ability of series to »have second thoughts,« i.e. their agency as actor-networks, see Kelleter 2012b.

more balanced life in the storyworld's new timeline –, he replies: »I came back because I was supposed to.« With this sentence, the reversal between Jack and John seems complete, but the series ups the self-reflexive ante one more time. »Supposed to do what?« Juliet asks. Jack doesn't know the answer. »You'd better figure it out,« says Juliet (S5E11).

So when Jack aspires to John's equanimity, trying to do justice to the unending sprawl of events, his trust in whatever's coming next ultimately manifests itself as opportunism and bitterness. With such constellations, *Lost* joins several American television series of the early 21st century that have dramatized – some would say, explored – the discontents of serial mass-address. In particular, critical variations of purposeful sequentiality abound in American television of the 2000s, and post-heroic Jack Shephard calls to mind Seth Bullock of *Deadwood*, whose righteous determination after just a few episodes began to resemble tense obsession. Like a John-Locke-figure gone wrong – and hence like one of this figure's perpetual possibilities –, Jack in the closing season embodies a type of narrative self-despair that has almost become a hallmark of popular seriality in the age of its canonization. And yet, unlike some of the darker reflections on serial auto-obsession, *Lost* upholds throughout all its reversals a classic promise of continuity and closure. For a network production aiming to entertain large audiences, this may be an appropriate way to handle the reflexivity inherent in commercial storytelling.³¹ In the end, then, Jack Shephard cannot leave himself behind. Even in his incarnation as a »believer,« willing to take chances, he keeps looking for a *final* self-sacrifice: Nothing less than the explosion of a hydrogen bomb is supposed to bring salvation.

Consider, therefore, these two figures of popular seriality bouncing off each other: Jack remaining loyal to his fundamental desire for results throughout all dramatic transformations – and John, shifting shapes under a calm surface of continuities. When Jack Shephard has changed, he's nonetheless himself – but when John Locke assures Sun that he is »the same man I've always been,« he is already another: »the Man in Black« (S5E12). Thus, John even survives his own death, going on and on, like a figure of absolute seriality – until Jack prepares the impossible standstill that is the fate of every series, too.

31 | See Dolan, who describes *Lost* as »a peculiar hybrid: a mainstream cult show« (2010: 149).

SOME OTHERS: EXTRAS AND HEROINES

Analysis of the original *Star Trek* episodes shows that of the 59 crew members killed in the series, 43 (73%) were wearing red shirts.

WIKIPEDIA

Serial ensemble casts often appear larger than they are. The original fifty survivors of Oceanic 815 provide a huge reservoir for possible constellations, but there is a limit to how many of them can become focal points of attention in a recurrent television narrative. There are major characters, there are minor characters, and then there are extras: people in the background, usually without speaking parts, serving as the human equivalent of a setting. Ever since *Star Trek* (NBC 1966-1969), television viewers have learned to regard such extras as functional figures whose main contribution to episodic narratives lies in their expendability. In other words: Whenever an unknown figure steps from the background into the foreground and starts to interact with the established cast, we can assume that he or she will probably not survive the episode. Redshirts die.

The potentially fatal line that separates characters from extras betrays an act of narrative construction; it shows the manipulative hand of writers and creators. For viewers who want to identify with an epic storyworld, this can be an occasion for mockery or annoyance. In the case of an intensely fan-monitored program like *Lost*, dedicated viewers quickly began to question the status of extras, querying and quarreling about the importance of the story's personnel beyond its rank of central characters. Unfolding in serial feedback with its audience, the narrative of *Lost* reacted to these discussions in ways that were fully consistent with its playful, sometimes discontented attitude towards its own seriality. Thus, the interaction of extras and characters became a site where writers and fans struggled over their involvement in serial continuation.

For instance, when a figure like Arzt emerges from the unspeaking masses to take on a speaking role, this is obviously meant to answer viewers' questions about the reality of the rest of the group.³² Like Frogurt later on, he is a character of fan service. At the same time, Arzt and Frogurt come to express the producers' uneasy relationship toward meddling fans, because, in terms of narrative, the principal activity of these characters is to keep complaining about their marginal status, as if they knew they were extras in a TV show. Again, serial figures are made visible *as* figures, but this time in order to stress the power of official over unofficial storytellers. Whoever questions the

32 | See also Askwith (2009: 165) and Booth (2012: 318) on the characters of Nikki and Paulo.

wisdom of authorized (diegetic) leadership – whoever nitpicks with established constellations – is quickly punished in *Lost*: first, by being given no other role to play than that of the irritating backdrop character who tries to push himself center stage, and subsequently by being blown to pieces (Arzt), buried alive (Nikki and Paulo), or pierced with burning arrows raining down from a fateful sky (Frogurt, in a scene that ironically replays Arzt's death).

This cruel fate is not restricted to extras who act as effigies of intrusive audiences; it also threatens more central characters and, ultimately, all agents of serial continuation. When Isabella is unexpectedly blown up by dynamite toward the end of season six, Ben Linus explains: »The island was done with her« (S6E12). With only six episodes to go, viewers might well wonder what will happen to other characters – and to them – when the island is done with everyone. It is not just fictional characters that thus come to recognize themselves as figures in a running narrative game, fulfilling useful functions until the series disposes of them.

And the heroines? Of all the figures in *Lost*, the female protagonists are perhaps the ones most securely controlled by the show's writers. While arranged in constellations, they are shielded by firm representational purposes from the dynamics of serial reversal and chiasmus. No ambiguous pattern like the one between Jack and John materializes between them. Instead, most leading women characters of *Lost* are positioned on a rather narrow scale of vigor and force. They are physically fit, contoured, persevering, and willing to pick up weapons whenever necessary. The militarization of the female body, a prevailing feature of American popular culture since the 1990s, is consistently upheld and perpetuated here, as in numerous other TV series of the period.³³ Even Sun, who in the beginning plays the formulaic submissive Asian, reveals herself before long to be a rather muscular heroine. These figures of female resolution look like many variations of one type, the *strong woman*, who in turn appears as the last fully realized, if often marginal, incarnation of the potent hero-character that the series comes to question for a time in the trajectory of Jack Shephard. Unlike Jack, in other words, the female characters do not usually crack for more than just a moment (or an episode), as if such ambiguity would open their creators to charges of chauvinism. As a result, the series cannot imagine a female John Locke either, a female figure of serial shifting. Instead, a chicks-with-guns aesthetics permeates all seasons, most obviously in the mud-fight and wet T-shirt-contest between Kate and Juliet (S3E15). Rose may be the exception, as she flaunts a Locke-like willingness to ride the wave, accepting what she cannot change. Like Locke, too, she does not want to leave the island. But Rose remains a minor (and hence stable) character, and her age,

33 | See, in particular, *Battlestar Galactica* (Sci-Fi 2004-2009).

weight, and race place her squarely outside the main female cast of Kate, Juliet, Charlotte, etc. For long stretches, the series simply forgets her.

NEW GENERATIONS

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.

PHILIP LARKIN

Whatever happened, happened. But what *did* happen? Many things, but behind all the shifting configurations, at least one leitmotif can be identified. Throughout all of its conflicts and complications, the series almost obsessively repeats a family drama. Again and again, the dark force behind numerous adversities proves to be some older generation: Jack's father (transforming from a tragic into a charismatic character as the story progresses), Sun's father (himself another stereotypical Asian), Penny's father Charles Widmore (the demonic manipulator behind the scenes), Shannon's mother (who turns out to be her stepmother), Kate's father (an abusive alcoholic who is also revealed as a stepparent), and so on. With such forebears, it seems a little less surprising than it perhaps should that after four seasons we have already been introduced to three parricides (John, Kate, Ben Linus). In fact, all the show's protagonists are representatives of a middle generation of individuals who are alienated from their parents and find it difficult to establish meaningful relationships with their peers. If it were not for the island, we are made to understand, they would form no bonds at all. At the same time, the island literally embodies a dominant concern among these unhappy sons and daughters: the dread of becoming or being parents themselves. The anxiety of parenthood, presented in many variations throughout the series, coincides in suggestive ways with one of the island's central enigmas, which is that no babies can be born there. Hence, child abduction remains a crucial motif and motivation in all six seasons. Again, Rose and her husband can be seen as partial exceptions, but then Rose is well beyond childbearing age. All in all, family relationships in *Lost* are starkly asymmetrical and usually fraught with a powerful terror of hierarchy. By contrast, relationships among members of the same generation are laterally open and constantly liable to shifts and turns.

Of course, this pattern provides no deep-structural code that would or even could determine all plotlines in a serially unfolding television narrative. But the series' increasingly explicit interest in its own operations seems to be connected in suggestive ways to its thematic interest in the drama of generational succession. Note that all father figures in *Lost* are either unattainably successful in economic or professional terms (John's father, Sun's father, Penny's father, Jack's father) – or, conversely, professional losers who

must be abandoned or even killed for exactly this reason (Kate's father, Ben's father, Jack's father again). An anxiety of economic power runs through various narrative strands. Sons and daughters are commonly haunted by the specter of professional failure, a fear that they will not live up to inherited tasks. But in the end, they keep going, and with them prevails a new set of skills that differs conspicuously from the traditional ethos of achievement represented, if sometimes *ex negativo*, by their parents. In fact, *Lost*'s anxious protagonists are always on the move; each problem solved breeds a plethora of follow-up problems rather than bringing a settled accomplishment. In the same way – and this is no accidental analogy –, dedicated audiences are encouraged to pay close attention, to not miss important details, to stay alert and to form networks in order to organize their knowledge. If they do not, it is suggested, the narrative will leave them behind.

The series' hyperactive characters thus perfectly match their »hyperactivated audience« (Lavery 2009: 317). In fact, *Lost*'s serial game structure fosters a procedural approach to problem solution at all three levels of serial narration: narrative action, storytelling practice, and audience engagement. It is exactly this multiple process of reflexive experimentation that journalist Steven Johnson had in mind when he declared (in 2005, the year in which *Lost*'s second season took its course) that participatory entertainment formats, such as computer games and TV series, are better at promoting cognitive skills than supposedly linear activities, such as book-reading. Or as Johnson's bestselling title has it: *Everything Bad Is Good for You*. The question is, good for what purpose? The »cognitive workout« (Johnson 2005) provided by contemporary popular culture obviously calls upon skills that characterize labor in the age of its digitization: network thinking, situational feedback, dispersed information processing, multitasking and, above all, people's willingness to no longer distinguish between work and leisure time (cf. Kelleter 2012c). Digital culture modularizes not only our screens, conversations, and study programs, but also the stories we consume, tell, and live. In this fashion, the current generation of TV series requires and stages a labor-like type of dedication that corresponds well with a communicative environment in which people are supposed to be at work at all times, in all places. This is entertainment for a new age of capitalist stress indeed, and *Lost* knows it, its cognizance evident in the way it tells stories about driven individuals forced to become temporary team-players, and in the way it collectivizes viewers into restlessly committed and connection-friendly peer communities, always mindful of the demands put on them by generational belonging and the new forms of sociability made possible by unapologetic TV consumption.³⁴

34 | In this context, it is telling (and worthy of further investigation) how the concept of »community« has become almost indispensable both in fan self-descriptions and in

TV SPIRITUALITY

Hello, God. How are you? I'm Liz. It's nice to meet you [...] Please tell me what to do.

ELIZABETH GILBERT (*Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything across Italy, India, and Indonesia*)

Where constellations shift prismatically, the distinction between good and evil, a mainstay of popular storytelling, is difficult to uphold. From the beginning, *Lost* dramatizes the fluidity of moral divisions. As befits a story deeply invested in the question of community improvisation, the good/evil dichotomy proves dependent on insider/outsider-definitions – and hence wobbly and stress-ridden throughout. Thus, *Lost* repeatedly pits antagonistic groupings against each other, but then allows each of them to claim, »we're the good guys,« often in these very words. The starkest such contrast is provided, of course, by the conflict between the survivors of Oceanic 815 and the mysterious inhabitants of the island, called »the others« by the castaways (and »the hostiles« by another group, introduced later). Until season three, there is no change in perspective – for two years, we have no clear understanding of who the others are or what they are up to –, but as the relationships among the focal characters are already based on uncertain moral identities, we suspect that the others, too, could have a story of their own to tell and that it might even show them to be good guys after their own fashion. In fact, at various points in season two, *Lost* seems to be preparing a narrative switch reminiscent of *I Am Legend* (1954) that would reveal our heroes to be the real others in a larger morality play. However, the others have already committed too many dreadful acts, including abduction and murder, for a complete reinterpretation to be credible. As a result, season three steers a tricky middle course between humanizing them (i.e. making them accessible to the serial ensemble cast) and explaining their criminal energy (i.e. creating recursive plausibility). In essence, this is achieved by portraying the others as a kind of self-convinced 1950s-type of totalitarian society, a perhaps well-intentioned but definitely paranoid Cold-War community, whose seclusion

the narratives of many contemporary shows, including *Lost*. The incessant invocation of this term, especially in fan (self-)studies, often carries normative claims that, in turn, produce all sorts of auto-referential debates about the values and duties of belonging and participation. Of course, the solidarity addresses, ownership claims, or subgroup-formations that come with online-»friendships« are not essentially different from their offline varieties, but the explicitness with which (aca)fans turn such issues into matters of urgent concern, is. For an instructive fan testimony, see Jon »DocArzt« Lachonis/Amy »hijinx« Johnston's (suggestively titled) volume *Lost Ate My Life: The Inside Story of a Fandom Like No Other* (2008).

and self-centeredness breed passionate belief and an impressive expertise in technologies of mind control and brainwashing.

Thus, the series obviously favors the ambiguous integration of new characters over the one-time revelatory inversion of established positions. This fits well with *Lost*'s self-understanding as a combinatory game. The underlying structure of such permanent reconfiguration is made explicit in the series' final character constellation, which supposedly frames and absorbs all previous conflicts and mysteries: Jacob and his brother, the figures in white and black. With this final contrast, *Lost* seems to have adopted as its culminating generic identity the look and the logic of a Manichean religious drama. Jacob and his brother, as endgame figures, suggest that the narrative has been about the struggle of darkness and light all along.³⁵

On the one hand, this suggestion is not surprising, because long-running serials have an inherent tendency toward the metaphysical. A play with combinations often turns narrative (and other practices of sense-making) into a medium of supernatural enlightenment.³⁶ Sometimes metaphysics actually be the last possibility to provide a plausible end at all. If the entanglement of ever new innovations has gone on for long enough, realism will have ceased to be realistic, because realism – as an effect of correspondence between lived and watched stories – requires planning and design, whereas an ongoing creation of complexity requires the ongoing reduction of complexity, i.e. a running self-reinvention whose success can certainly look like magic.

On the other hand, *Lost* even serializes its own Manichean explanation, turning the final character constellation from a solution into a problem once more – and over and over again. Jacob and his brother may enact a fight of darkness and light, but in so doing they continually switch roles and characters. One of them is a devil – and the devil has the best lines. However, *Lost*'s game of reconfiguration is based on the possibility that any of these figures can potentially and persuasively turn into the other. Thus, Dogen tells Sayid as he sends him out to kill Locke/the Man in Black: »He will come to you as someone you know. [...] If you allow him to speak, it is already too late« (S6E06). But so says Jacob's brother to Richard, referring to Jacob, in a perfect chiasmus: »Do not let him say a word. [...] He can be very persuasive« (S6E09). With these addresses, the series seems to dramatize its own operations of address. After

35 | These two figures also recall – and redevelop – John Locke's description of the game of backgammon from the pilot: »Two players. Two sides. One is light. One is dark« (S1E02). – The name of Jacob's brother and antagonist is not mentioned in the show. In paratexts, he is sometimes called »Samuel«; fan discourses often refer to him as »the Man in Black«.

36 | Compare Borges on »making metaphysics [...] into a kind of play with combinations« (1962: 213).

all, being convincing has been one of its principal problems, and *Lost* has solved this problem by generating an excess of possible options, so much so that the question of »who can we trust?« quickly became the show's default mode of encountering characters. More simply put, everyone in this narrative – even Ben, even the others, even the devil himself, whoever he may be – can tell a persuasive story and make a convincing case. With these shifting possibilities, the distinction between good and evil is not so much dissolved as perpetually reproduced in competing manifestations.

Unlike in movies, then, where the appearance of the devil – usually as a singular figure – or of some other supernatural force can be used for a surprising final turn of events, suddenly revealing a hitherto hidden perspective, as in *Angel Heart* (1987), the agency of evil in contemporary television series is a recurrent, hence structural affair. (In movies, of course, the surprise of all-explaining malevolence only works at first viewing. But then, movies are still often conceived as one-time narrative events.) When *Twin Peaks* multiplied evil along with its own generic identities even before solving its central murder case, many viewers regarded this as a failure of nerve and concentration. For a new generation of television series, more attuned to, but also more anxious of, such complexities, this historic failure seems to represent exactly what is challenging about popular seriality's self-reflexive gamble. Only now, perhaps, that we have seen *Lost* and *Carnivàle* (HBO 2003–2005) – another show deeply interested in a demonology based on repeated moral chiasmus –, has it become possible for larger audiences to return to the post-Laura-Palmer episodes of *Twin Peaks* and appreciate their irritating achievement. For it is in these episodes that the series insisted that it had been a television series all along – a soap opera, to be precise, the darkest possible version of *Invitation to Love*. Conversely, where *Twin Peaks* left its original audience wondering, *Lost* succeeds structurally and institutionally in moving the closure-bound mystery format into ever new generic terrain, shifting shape while staying the same, and producing a compelling effect of mythological density into the bargain.³⁷ (In contrast, *Carnivàle* failed because it did exactly the opposite: Conceived as a complex multipart work, its mythology largely plotted beforehand, the show made new entries extremely difficult. It was perhaps HBO's only true attempt at a »vast narrative« in serial format – cancelled like *Twin Peaks* after two magnificent seasons.)

Thus, when two figures of light and dark make their appearance toward the end of *Lost*, this spiritual turn is less conclusive than inspirational. It is mystical more than eschatological, producing schisms rather than the key to all preceding mythologies. Confronted with the overriding question of direction

37 | For *Lost*'s structural successes, see also the articles collected in Pearson 2009, Abbott in particular.

that has haunted American popular culture at least since the turn of the millennium – everything goes on and on, but someone is always supposed to know where to go –, *Lost* not only amplifies this question but effectively and explicitly multiplies it. Every viewer's reception can now contribute to unlocking the story's metaphysical subtext, not by chancing upon the correct answer but by opening up the narrative to even more answers and organizing them in quarreling theories, schools of thought, fan communities, etc., that, in turn, influence the narrative's further course and authorization. As Schabacher writes, there has been a »downright contest about the legitimacy of explanations offered,« including, for example, the Valenzetti-equation, the vile-vortices-theory, and the Casimir effect (2010a: 226, my translation). In a more traditional manner, viewers published a list of »15 Must-Answer-Mysteries« (in *Entertainment Weekly*), pressuring the show's writers to deliver.³⁸

In this fashion, popular culture's ostensibly undemocratic enchantment with leadership figures – knowing writers, in this case – logically coalesces with its profound investment in ideologies of democratic participation: If our leaders, our storytellers, our characters don't get us what (or where) we want, we will elect new ones (rather than, say, getting rid of leadership figures altogether). Just like Elizabeth Gilbert's contemporaneous mega-seller *Eat, Pray, Love* (2006), which showed marketplace spirituality to be serial spirituality by definition, television seriality in the early 21st century routinely combines dispositions of individualistic entitlement with acts of extreme dedication and strong belief. The frivolous analogy that is sometimes made between TV fandom and religious belief – expressed, for example, in T-shirts reading »Joss Whedon is God« – perhaps points to a real structural resemblance (that in turn invites us to rethink traditional practices of religious faith). But it goes hand in hand with fan cultures that configure serial characters with increasing frankness into new relationships to express their own (often sexual-amorous) preferences and identities.³⁹ A single narrative may still be at the center of audience desires, but its authority resides less and less in one canonical dispensation. Instead, narrative authority is spread across multiplying and open-ended debates about textual canonicity (compare Kelleter 2012b). Similarly, if the relationship between writer and reader comes to recognize itself as one between producer and consumer, authority primarily takes the form of serial contracts. In other words, as soon as diegetic authority is established, it is open to contestation,

38 | Compare Schabacher 2010b: 273. The Valenzetti equation is also discussed in Seiler 2008.

39 | For a careful discussion of the relationship between TV seriality and religious belief that moves beyond the polemical paradigm of audience fanaticism, see the chapter on »Authorship« in Mittell 2015. On fan appropriations of TV characters for purposes of personal expressiveness, see Mittell 2009.

rebellion, usurpation or being voted out of office. Thus fans willingly enlist in the division of labor that is serial narration, carrying out unpaid work for a larger brand, but not without insisting on their right to service from those whom they're serving.⁴⁰ Dedicated viewers may be fearful that one day they will have to live without the running narrative they came to inhabit, but if a series disappoints, it will be abandoned in turn, like a local god encountered for a while on this woman's or that man's search for everything.⁴¹

FINAL EPISODE | RESURRECTION

This is that one day, that shall include and comprehend all that went before it, wherein, as in the last scene, all the Actors must enter to compleate and make up the Catastrophe of this great peece.

SIR THOMAS BROWNE (*Religio Medici*)

There is no satisfying end to a story that is structurally premised on its own return and continuation.⁴² Mindful that finality is bound to disappoint in a serial

40 | Not just unpaid labor: The 2013 Kickstarter initiative to fund a movie based on the TV cult series *Veronica Mars* (UPN/CW 2004-2007) asks fans to contribute money in advance of possible later consumption. Obviously, contributors regard the potential movie less as a commodity (which they co-finance without sharing in the proceeds) and more as a service (their contributions putting producers under implicit pressure to fashion a fan-friendly product). In fact, spending money is now cast and experienced as part of a larger participation process that transcends the mere »reception« of a commercial story. This development is both a condition and an effect of Kickstarter's business model. – The structural resemblances between crowdsourcing and shareholding – between contemporary entertainment and contemporary economic culture – are also visible, and even actively espoused, in *Spreadable Media* (Jenkins/Ford/Green 2013), a revealing recent blend of academic and business perspectives, which combines Cultural Studies populism with a keen interest in creating new revenue streams.

41 | See also the phenomenon of the anti-fan, who spends as much creative energy on hating a show as others do on loving it. The psychology of the lapsed believer seems to be at play; on anti-fandom, compare Gray 1997.

42 | As Jason Mittell commented on a panel about »The Functions of Finales: Serial Television and the Problem of Ending« (SCMS Annual Convention, 15 March 2011, New Orleans): Satisfaction in TV storytelling means to go on, not to finish. Sean O'Sullivan concluded that there is no room for the concept of »satisfaction« in the assessment of serial narratives.

narrative, *Lost* offers a finale that seeks less to satisfy all possible expectations than to change the narrative game once more. Impossible as a gesture of solution, it makes further solutions possible by officially handing over the story to its viewers, so that the narrative will go on outside its authorized text.

Lost's finale has all the marks of a curtain call: The series says farewell by remembering itself in an omnium gatherum of the entire ensemble, regardless of which characters are dead or alive. Like all curtain calls, this memorial stages a resurrection, a triumph of some spirit over material occurrences (»whatever happened, happened«). Jack Shephard's father, acting as a spiritual emcee, explains to his bewildered son that everyone has reached their serial heaven now: »the place that you all made together« (S6E17/18). It is a self-generative place, where all the anxieties a series can feel about itself are resolved: anxieties concerning the characters' existence (»you are real, everything that's ever happened to you is real ... all those people in the church, they're real«), concerning the relevance of the narrative community (»the most important part of your life was the time that you spent with these people«), and concerning the two key problems of serial narration: memory and finish (»Why are they all here now?« – »To remember ... and to let go«). These reassurances apply to characters and viewers alike. In fact, they are supposed to provide a tolerable way out for all agents of serial continuation. This finale effectively performs a leap of faith into a time that shall see no more new stories about Jack, John, Kate, Sawyer, Ben, Juliet, etc. And yet we are made to understand that *Lost* will survive its ending.

The religious overtones of this terminus are fully appropriate. By trying to gather all that it has ever been, *Lost* essentially celebrates its coming resurrection as an inspiring force of popular seriality itself. Note that the concluding ensemble reunion has been organized by Hurley, the only character who is passionate about movies and television. Like Lindelof and other writers of *Lost*, Hurley is a *Star Wars* fan. (And an active one: The chief benefit of time travel, he thinks, is that it allows him to write a better script for *The Empire Strikes Back*.) In fact, Hurley's frequent references to *Star Wars* throughout the series assume an air of explanatory authority, shedding surprising light on the actions of more central characters. Starting out as a figure of comic relief, whose exclamation »dude« provides a pragmatic antidote to the seriousness of purpose that drives other characters, Hurley, after a detour via a mental clinic, eventually transforms into a kind of popular-culture sage, almost in the tradition of »The Dude« Lebowski. The sixth season, then, is his season: In the end, he is the narrative's final hero, the candidate, the new man in charge. In this unexpected role, he may not be able to solve the island's portentous mystery, but he brings it down to human proportions. He even humanizes Ben.

Presenting the figure of Hurley as the central agent behind its spiritual ensemble reunion, *Lost* ultimately rejoices in itself as a piece of popular enter-

tainment. It is a fitting conclusion for a fast network series whose self-understanding necessarily deviates from the self-understanding both of self-contained movies and single-creator cable programs. This is an important difference, considering how strongly the critical reassessment of television seriality since the 1990s has hinged on the re-imagining of the television »creator« (usually in personal union with the showrunner) in the wake of Pay-TV narrowcasting. Often acting as an originating but intermittently absent authority behind all serial complexity, this figure should not be confused with that of the author, the purveyor of an individual style in more work-bound media. Strong TV creators (mostly working on cable), such as David Chase, David Simon, and David Milch, all but prevent the emergence of personal authorship styles among a show's row of writers and directors.⁴³

Lost's reputation and success, however, is explicitly not based on a central creator-figure. And yet, numerous plotlines and viewing practices revolve overtly around the metaphysical connotations of creatorship. At the levels of narrative, narration, and reception, the search for a higher authority, a court of last appeal, is central. »Where secrets persist for a longer time, there must be someone, it seems, who harbors them,« writes Ganz-Blättler (2011: 85, my translation). But just as *Lost* stages a curtain call that provides no resolution other than the consecration of »what happened« itself – and just as it introduces figures of light and darkness only to serialize them –, so the narrative refuses to identify a final instance of sense-making. Instead, *Lost* sets in motion ever new creative possibilities that, in their sum, show TV creatorship to be precisely that: a series of self-derived decisions and recursive consequences.

It is revealing in this regard that many of the documentaries included in the series' complete DVD edition strongly emphasize the division of labor at the heart of its production. The DVD bonuses are largely about the pleasures and challenges of joint storytelling, so that the show's self-description virtually runs parallel to its narrative operations as an ensemble series. Often taking the form of paeans to televisual time management, these self-descriptions range from little features about, say, Richard Alpert's long work-day to specials about the underlings in a just-in-time production system, such as the dedicated drivers who transport the show's dailies from LAX to post-production. Mastering logistical challenges in the service of better entertainment is a job that Hurley, the story's one and only nerd, would appreciate. In fact, a cardinal difference

43 | If they didn't, their creations would turn into competitive anthology formats. This may help to explain why the emergence of strong *authorship* figures in popular culture frequently coincides with the revision of *iconic* figures, such as Frank Miller's Batman. By contrast, Bob Kane laid claim to the Batman-figure as a *creator*, not as an *author*: as an initiating, potentially absent, but therefore all the more binding authority (compare Kelleter/Stein 2012).

not only between *Lost* and more fan-insulated – i.e. more creator-conscious programs – like *The Wire* (HBO 2002-2008), but also between *Lost* and ambitious network productions like Aaron Sorkin's *The West Wing* (NBC 1999-2006), is its generally benevolent – and in the end celebratory – attitude toward the geeky TV aficionado, despite all the digs it makes at meddling fans.⁴⁴ *Lost* provides a large arena for competing claims of participation by paid and unpaid storytellers, but in the end, when the job of production is essentially done, the narrative does not seem to care any longer about the difference between the professional and the amateur. Instead, it hands itself over to someone who is frequently both: the nerd. *Lost* knows that this is where its future lies.

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