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LOST Culture

LOST is a popular television show broadcast by the ABC television network. It is known for its science fiction themes and complex storylines. The program is currently in its fifth season. LOST centers around a group of people who survive a plane crash and are stranded on a mysterious island where remarkable and unexplainable phenomena frequently occur. Production costs are expensive because the show is filmed in Hawaii and features a large cast. Critics of LOST tend to cite it as being incomprehensible and formulaic. Almost every episode uses several cliffhangers and poses major developments before commercial breaks. The producers leave the audience with dozens of questions that build as the series progresses. The numerous plot lines and story twists make the show somewhat inaccessible to new viewers. Despite its shortcomings, LOST is a uniquely collaborative experience as well as a form of elite art that separates itself from every previous mainstream popular television program. The nature of the show allows one to deduce a great deal about popular culture using Silverblatt's Media Literacy formula and simple common sense.

LOST fits the definition of elite art in every discernable way. Silverblatt outlines Russell B. Nye's definition of elite art on page 53. According to Nye, Elite art is defined by characteristics of Exclusivity, Aesthetic Complexity, Historical Context and Experimentation. LOST presents exclusivity to its viewers with complex story lines. Those who do not frequently watch the show are unlikely to understand what is going on. And only true zealots catch many of the small details the producers include. LOST also features aesthetic complexity. Scenes are filled with techniques and special effects often only reserved for high-budget movies. Furthermore the program has an almost uncanny attention to detail featuring small quirks and cameos from characters that play only small roles in the show. The hit ABC show is also elite art because it is part of a larger artistic tradition. As Gina Belfonte of the New York Times notes, many of the science fiction themes in LOST are reminiscent of the novels of Kurt Vonnegut and other writers. In addition, the show functions as elite art as a result of its innovation. The program explores numerous complexities such as faith and redemption in a manner few other television programs have attempted to tackle. The scope of LOST is among the most grandiose of any show ever broadcast (Silverblatt 94).

LOST is not the first piece of elite art to become popular. There are many other examples. But LOST features more exclusivity and innovation than any other popular show that came before it. This reveals that American society is more receptive to broadly complex themes and plots than it was previously. It also reveals that television producers are more willing to take risks in attempting to gain viewers. The emergence of LOST is likely a result of falling ratings for many conventional sitcoms and dramas. Like almost all network television shows, the

ultimate purpose of the show is to generate ratings. LOST is able to achieve this function successfully because it is interesting and challenging, without losing the interest of its audience (Silverblatt 94). The show has had an average of between 10 and 15 million viewers per episode every year.

As Silverblatt suggests, one must also view programs such as LOST in the context of society to understand their unique nature. Mass media is reaching more and more of a segmented audience due to an increased number of entertainment options on television and the Internet. The response by many television producers is to make shows that are more easily digestible by mainstream audiences. Reality TV shows, game shows and family sitcoms have become the go to strategy for attracting viewers. LOST bucks this trend by going the polar opposite direction. Instead of creating a show that is easily accessible and mindless, they have created a production that offers followers an extremely complex plot that is difficult for outsiders to follow. One of the reasons LOST is attractive to viewers is because it is the anti-reality show. The audience appreciates the show's complexities and enjoys the challenge of keeping up with the creators. Peculiarly, LOST is more popular because it is so exclusive. Lost "refuses our passive interest while it denies us the satisfaction of ever feeling that we might confidently explain." explained Belfante in the New York Times in May 2008. "It has maximized the potential of narrative uncertainty and made it a beguiling constant."

Another part of the context surrounding the popularity of LOST are the ways new media is used to consume the show. iTunes, online viewing and DVD are all common forms of media that viewers use to watch the program. These types of new media are innovative for mainstream network television shows. This type of consumption makes clear how television is becoming just one of many ways mainstream culture enjoys its entertainment.

One other unique phenomenon about LOST is its social element. LOST is the ultimate water cooler show. With so many questions and plot twists to speculate about each week, there is great room for debate among viewers. Often when a non-viewer overhears a conversation about the show, they want to get in on the discussion. Outsiders are compelled to figure out just what 'everyone' is talking about. This says something about our culture. It is human nature to want to be part of the group. Individuals do not want to be left behind. LOST takes advantage of herd mentality. The show's draw is that non-viewers want to be confounded by the show like the rest of the audience. Every LOST viewer develops their own theories and conjectures. They share that information within interpersonal relationships and the show becomes a collaborative experience.

The collaborative aspect is part of what makes LOST unique. Fans of the show share ideas and theories with one another that impact the experience of watching the show. There was a widely circulated belief during the first season of the series that the characters in the show were in Purgatory. The theory turned out to be false, but speculation adds an extra element to the program. And in today's culture the internet has made the sharing of predictions and forecasts more prevalent. There are hundreds of LOST blogs and information sites for fans, many of which are dedicated to offering answers to questions posed in the show. Aficionados of the program process these speculations and deduce their own philosophies.

Because LOST is so complex and unique, the creators need to balance challenging the audience and providing adequate answers to questions on the show. They have been reported to read blogs and viewer comments in an effort to know what their audience is concerned about. Silverblatt explains this relationship in his text.

This relationship between popular artist and the audience might best be characterized as reciprocal. Clearly, media presentations are beyond the immediate control of the audience; in that sense the media is prescriptive. However because the Western Media is a market-driven industry rooted in popular culture, media communicators must be responsive to the needs and interests of their audience. Gifted media communicators intuitively sense what people are interested in and are able to anticipate potential questions and concerns (94).

The creators of LOST have been able to satisfy viewers while also challenging them. That is one of the main reasons for the success of the show. LOST has been able to adjust to the requests of viewers without diminishing the vague nature of the story. As Alessandra Stanley notes in the Times, “The writers of “Lost” say they pay close attention to Web sites and blogs devoted to the show, and sometimes adapt the script accordingly.”

Taking note of certain items in the show allows one to deduce the worldview of LOST’s creators. For instance, there is a fair amount of diversity in the cast. Characters range from African Americans, Japanese, Hispanic and several different nationalities. The multiplicity illustrates improving race relations from past eras where many shows featured mostly white characters or actors with unvarying skin colors. Another diagram of the worldview of the creators comes from several of LOST’s themes. There is a blur between who is good and who is evil on the program. The opinion of the creators therefore possibly suggests that there are grey areas between right and wrong and the best course of action is rarely obvious. Another constant topic of LOST is faith. The creators of the show seem to feel faith is important. There is a moral battle between secular and god fearing characters. The faithful protagonist appears to be the most righteous hero. It is also evident that the creators feel that the audience is willing to be patient so long as they receive a thrill once in awhile. Silverblatt says that Mass media calls for very specific cognitive, attitudinal or behavioral responses from the audience (23). The creators of LOST seek to generate a few feelings of shock and revelation each week.

Sometimes the effort of LOST’s architects to create thrills every episode lead to cheap tricks and story holes. But these tricks and holes have not prohibited LOST from maintaining its stature as one of the most popular shows on television. Using Silverblatt’s media literacy keys as a guide, it is clear the message of the show is secondary and the decisive function of the property is ratings. In that sense, perhaps LOST is not so unique after all. Nevertheless, LOST is one-of-a-kind as a collaborative piece of media that frequently challenges its viewers.

Works Cited

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