

Once or twice upon a time: Temporal simultaneity and the Lost phenomenon

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Above **Fragmented Narrative:**
The opening minutes of *Lost*

WITH THE BEGINNING of the industrial revolution a new relationship began to develop between the public and its collective sense of temporality. As railways expanded, and as factory work increased, a more rigid time schedule became necessary to establish working hours, productivity schedules and the like. Time became less and less associated

with 'natural phenomena', like the movement of the sun and the moon, and understood more as a variable in the formula for profits. In addition to industry, an increasing awareness of time was also associated with the increasing urbanisation of the country. In 1903, George Simmel attributed the newfound obsession with pocket watches to faster tempos and the

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increased stimulation of urban life (Doane 2002:4).

Nowotny discusses how the rise of the industrial society and increased communications systems created the discovery of 'simultaneity', the notion that we are experiencing multiple temporalities at once. Beginning just before the turn of the century, the notion of simultaneity arose with this increase in urbanisation, and changed the way the public understood time. One of the primary results, according to Nowotny, was the recognition, within the age of modernity, of two separate temporal spheres, encompassing the public (work) and private (leisure) worlds.

This changing conceptualisation of time and simultaneity began to be expressed in the work of many artists, poets and writers (Kern 1983). Among the visual arts, however, the cinema had a distinct ability to represent these ideas. While photography and painting could only capture one frame or scene at a time, film could juxtapose its many frames in a multitude of ways to condense, expand or reorder time. The ways in which film and television have done so has changed over the years, documenting changing perceptions of temporality.

These changes have led us to a new apogee of simultaneity today. In this article, I will go through a brief history of the concept of simultaneity and temporal fragmentation as expressed through the mass media, and then to where these increasing instances of simultaneity have brought us today, as exemplified through the television series *Lost* (2004–). *Lost* has fused together in a televisual format the present-day conceptions of simultaneity and fragmentation of time which have developed since the age of modernity. I will argue that the show's appeal is that its representation of memory and temporality mirrors current modes of comprehension in the public sphere.

The effort to reproduce a sense of simultaneity in the cinema at first utilised three techniques as identified by Kern (1983: 70): double exposure, the montage balloon and parallel editing. In these ways present time was expanded, so that the viewer could witness at the same time, or through cross cutting, events taking place in different locations. *Intolerance* (1916) famously exemplified the parallel editing technique developed earlier by D.W. Griffith by cutting across four different eras of world history. More political representations of this simultaneity that arose with increasing urbanisation appeared in films

such as Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) and Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a City* (1927), which both attempted to express the barrage of sensory stimulation at work in the major metropolitan areas of the day.

Toward the end of the classical period of American cinema, Orson Welles's 1941 film *Citizen Kane* established alternative ways to represent time through a cinematic narrative. When it was released, it became one of the films that marked a crossover to a new modern cinema. Part of Welles's innovation lay in his weaving of different representations of temporality. By switching between the past and the present, Welles was not only able to show that Kane's life was a veritable 'jigsaw puzzle', and that no single version of a story is complete, but also that time can be represented in many ways in the unique medium of the cinema. He showed this not only in flashbacks to earlier times, but also in ellipses to compress time and long takes coupled with deep focus to show 'real time'.

According to Simon (2005a) his true innovation lay in his intertwining of all three of these representations, along with classical continuity editing, and thus '[reinvigorating] the temporal resources of film narration'. It altered the relationship of the narrative to chronological time more than any other film to that point, paving the way for even more complex rearrangements of time that would become popular in later films. Welles continued and elaborated on these themes even more explicitly in *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), exploring the experience of simultaneity that developed at the arrival of the modern age by not only addressing the issue explicitly through the narrative (the story involves the invention of the automobile and the disappearance of an older, slower lifestyle associated with pre-industrial times) but also, like Vertov and Ruttmann, through the use of montage and superimposition to present a new urban landscape (Simon 2005b).

Temporality and 'modernity'

Harvey identifies another juncture in the public conception of time in the 1950s, when there was a focus on short-term profits in the business world. This led to an increase in 'throw-away' items such as paper plates and tissues. He argues that this orientation towards ephemerality led to a parallel ephemerality in values, and was part of what led to the increase in the divorce rate in the late 1960s and 1970s.

ESSAY » TEMPORAL SIMULTANEITY

Richard Sennett (1998) goes even further and says that the focus on short-term profits has led to a 'corrosion of character' in American society. Brose (2004: 6) adds that this caused a level of uncertainty about the future, an emphasis on 'discontinuities and uncertainties and hence the perforation of the linearity of time'. Not insignificantly, this era of ephemerality and discontinuity coincided with the increase during the decade of household television ownership. Television, more and more, became ineluctably intertwined with our sense of time. It is worth noting that the era of postmodernity came briefly after this new medium's nationwide diffusion.

The notion of the term 'postmodernity' itself is also inherently linked to a changing concept of time and of memory. The structure of temporal-

ity and chronology in the novel, and in the narrative in general, also experienced a shift during this period. Hayden White argues that the 'modernist event' has altered our modes of representation, and of narrative, by causing a temporal breakage.

Modern events are more incomprehensible than anything earlier generations could possibly have imagined ... the photo and video documentation of such accidents is so full that it is difficult to work up the documentation of any one of them as elements of a single 'objective' story. (White 1995: 23)

This idea of story, likewise, 'has suffered tremendous fraying and an at least potential dissolution as a result of both that revolution in

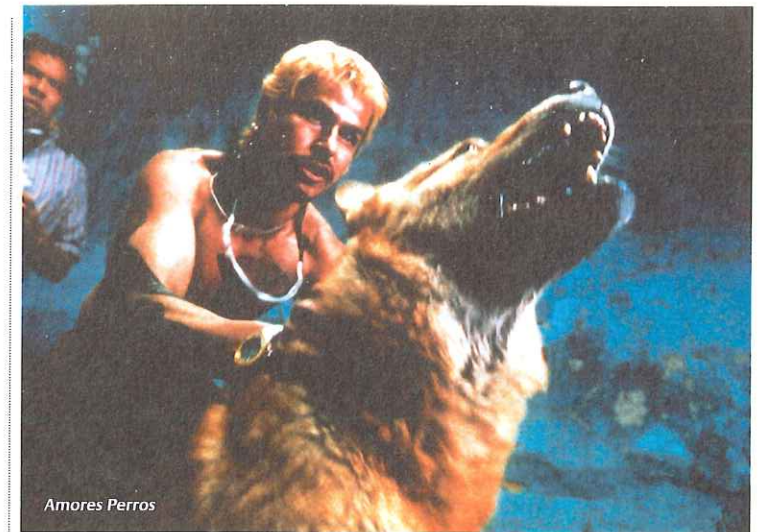
representation practices known as cultural modernism and the technologies of representation made possible by the electronics revolution' (White 1995: 22). He uses the example of the explosion of the NASA space shuttle Challenger in 1986 to illustrate how the incessant replaying of the video of the event, in an attempt to understand it, only emphasised its evanescence and produced 'widespread cognitive disorientation' (White 1995: 24). Like *Citizen Kane*, the multiple re-presentations of stories only serve to illustrate even further our distance from the subject/event.

Jameson and White point to Jean-Paul Sartre's 'Nausea' as an example of this type of postmodern text that breaks from traditional narrative temporality. White (1995: 25) notes that Sartre 'thematizes the experience of time as a series of instants which either fail to take on the form of a story or fall apart into shards and fragments of existence'. As a result of this, according to White, the traditional modes of narration lose their usefulness, as our sense of a clear, continuous, linear temporality disappears. We can see nuances of this in *Citizen Kane* in its attempt to fragment and demarcate time so that it can be viewed from a number of points of view, and this tendency becomes even more apparent in Sartre's work. In reference to 'Nausea', White (1995: 29) writes, 'the outside phenomenal aspects, and insides of events, their possible meanings or significance, have been collapsed and fused. The meaning of events remains indistinguishable from their occurrence, but their occurrence is unstable, fluid, phantasmagoric...'. Jameson (1984: 219) explains that the 'increasing primacy of the instant' in modernity has broken the link between sign and referent, signifier and signified, and ultimately led to an 'absolute dissociation between existence and narrative intelligibility which cannot but empty traditional human

ESSAY » THE LOST PHENOMENON

stories of their significance. The crisis called modernism is a result of this structural dissociation on the temporal level...' (Jameson 1984: 215). As has become increasingly evident in our understandings of the world around us, stories which follow a traditional linear storyline lose their significance in a world which has ceased to function in this way.

Max Nordau wrote in 1892 that the typical newspaper reader 'interests himself simultaneously in the issue of a revolution in Chile, a bush-war in East Africa, a massacre in North China, a famine in Russia' (Nordau 1968: 39). Today the television produces an even stronger sense of simultaneity than the printed media. A viewer in California can watch a live broadcast from Baghdad, be interrupted by, or hear the voice-over of his local anchorman, and all the while be able to read the stock market quotes (based in New York) which scroll across the bottom of the screen. Nowotny and Kern both state that our sense of simultaneity 'became dramatically comprehensible through events like the sinking of the Titanic' (Nowotny 1994: 22), when people on both sides of the Atlantic were able to read about the disaster in their morning newspapers. Suddenly the world became intimately connected. Today, with media events that are presented repeatedly and continuously, involving multiple structures and points of view, the phenomenon of the television news, especially with the advent of 24-hour news channels, represents a clear manifestation of a current platform for visual simultaneity. Doane (2002: 231) describes the live coverage of various catastrophes as 'the ultimate representation of contingency, chance, the instantaneous...'. We are not only constantly bombarded with news, but we are inundated with news in different temporalities. In a literal sense, we can now be in all places in the world at once. Television's inherent sense of liveness creates an



'Our conversion into a throw-away society has had the inverse effect of creating an obsession with memory and a desire to forestall death.'

artificial present, whether the news is happening live, happened in the recent past, or happened three months ago but no one took notice of it. The events are, in terms of a collective memory, happening now. Some is information which is presented over and over again (such as the second plane crashing into the Twin Towers), until time actually seems to slow down (Hoskins 2004: 114) and its meaning, like that of the Challenger, begins to wane. The signifier is separated from its signified, and the event loses its indexicality. Hoskins adds that the detrimental effect of this 24-hour barrage, in which time turns to jelly, is that 'the world out there is reduced to wallpaper, to muzak, with global events as background consciousness' (Hoskins 2004: 112).

Current experiences of simultaneity

All of this has led us to our current state of collective awareness. Now, in

the year 2006, hardly anyone could argue with the idea that we live in a 'fast-paced world'. New technologies have increased the efficiency of communication, of travel and even of entertainment. Entertainment can now be found, and work can be performed, 24 hours a day from virtually (no pun intended) anywhere, and multiple forms of visual activities can be experienced simultaneously. Nowotny writes, in 1994, 'there is no lack of protagonists seeking to celebrate each latest generation of telecommunication technologies as a revolution and promising a fresh liberation of human beings through the merging of space and time, of workplace, working hours, free time and home' (Nowotny 1994: 28). Beepers, mobile phones, e-mail (mobile phones with e-mail) and the like have created a world in which public (work) and private (leisure) spheres have increasingly overlapped. Work can be done anytime, anywhere. We can perform



Above Altering the relationship of the narrative to chronological time: *Citizen Kane*



Clockwise from top *Lost* / *Memento* / *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*

leisure activities, like shopping online while at work. This new mass culture of simultaneity can be experienced everywhere and at all times.

In film today, this barrage of temporality has evidenced itself as well. The temporal complexity of films like *Citizen Kane* pales in comparison with many modern and postmodern literary works, and the twisted chronologies of more recent popular films such as *Amores Perros* (2000), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) and *Memento* (2000), to name only a few. The modern-day viewer not only comprehends the storylines that do their best to confuse him, but has even learned to relish them. Coupled with this is a new generation's distaste for classical cinema. It is not hard to find a young person today who claims that they do not like 'old'

movies because they're 'boring' or, to put it in temporality-speak, because they are too slow. The system of narration that became standardised during the period of classical cinema has become increasingly outmoded. The digital age has brought with it an even higher degree of temporal malaise than was developed through modern and postmodern texts, and this fragmenting and simultaneity of time has changed the way our minds process information in the world around us.

ABC's primetime hit: *Lost*

Amidst this temporal turmoil, the ABC television station's mystery series *Lost* has cultivated an enormous following and has been highly successful, consistently pulling in over 20 million viewers each week for its Wednesday evening time slot

(*Variety*). Television differs from cinema in multiple ways, but is uniquely positioned to tap into a culture of simultaneity and liveness that the cinema cannot. The television pervades our everyday lives, and itself is broken into fragments by its very structure. In this way television, more so than cinema, reflects the simultaneity present in our everyday lives today. *Lost*, through its extremely intricate plot and its additional information and clues on the Internet, appears to be, at least temporarily, the apex of media stimulation and temporal non-linearity in a narrative format. I would contend that not only was this fusion of television and the Internet inevitable, but that it could not have appeared until recently, when the public has grown accustomed to the assault of 24/7 media stimuli and when a new generation of media savants has emerged.

The plot of the show revolves around a group of airplane-crash survivors stranded on a tropical island. The levels of temporal discourse are four-fold, attesting to the complexity of the show's relationship to time. Just like the world around us, *Lost* forces us to piece together fragments, moments and episodes of memory, to create a coherent understanding of time, in an attempt to comprehend 'the whole story'. Like Hayden White's assertion that our world is viewed in these bits and fragments, the show reinforces the realization that there is no one, true version of anything, and that we are forced to digest everything, piece it together ourselves, and make of it what we can. Recent films like *Memento* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* play precisely off this dialectic.

The four temporal levels of the show work together in this way to appeal to the viewer's desire to synthesise these many conceptions of time. The first-order line of temporality is the storyline of the characters themselves – of their

'Television's inherent sense of liveness creates an artificial present, whether the news is happening live, happened in the recent past, or happened three months ago but no one took notice of it.'

existence on the island. Second is the temporality, within the storyline, of the characters' lives before they reached the island, which is, as is so trendy, told out of order and often backwards through flashbacks. The third is the added element of imposed time on the islanders by an unknown force (not imposed until the second season of the show), and fourth is the temporality of the show for the viewing audience, which includes the scheduled time of the episode, and the 'timeless time' (Castells 1996) of the show's second medium: the Internet.

On the island, cut off from society, the survivors live a simple life, and eventually become resigned to the possibility that they may never be rescued. They work to establish a new life on the island, forge friendships and function as a community. They are thus removed from the industrial world's conceptions of time. Instead of clocks and time schedules and working hours, the survivors return to a 'natural' or 'task-oriented' (Thompson 1967) sense of time – counting days by the setting and rising of the sun, eating when they are hungry, sleeping when they are tired. In fact, any attempt to use industrialised time is foiled due to the mysterious magnetic force on the island that renders their personal watches useless.

According to E.P. Thompson, a task-oriented sense of time differs from an industrialised sense of time not only in its inherent tie to more biological rhythms of nature and of man, but in that it eliminates a distinction between 'work' and 'life'. As Doane (2002: 8) states, 'work and the social are intermingled effortlessly, and there is no great conflict between labour and one's own time'. This is the state the characters find themselves in during the first season of the show. On the island, the plot becomes the survivors' attempt to understand the strange nature of the island – there is something seemingly supernatural about it and its effect on them. There are hints that they are there for a very particular reason, and that the plane crash was not an accident. Their most important obstacles, what would amount to their 'work' life, are the continuous search for food, and the continuous threat of something sinister and threatening (and seemingly man-made) that exists on the island, but that no one can identify.

Like *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, the story mixes its linearity between a straightforward storyline (their life on the island), and a storyline of the characters' pre-island

lives that often moves backwards. While the characters (and the audience) attempt to discover some secret truth through their story on the island, the audience is given additional clues regarding the interconnectedness of the characters by seeing, through flashbacks, the stories of the characters before they reached the island. With few exceptions, each episode that focuses on a particular character gives us a certain 'episode' in that person's life – a memory, a fragment. Each memory episode in a character's life is presented as a clue to their current status on the island, and as the show progresses, we are given more and more sense, through the flashbacks, that many of the characters have had direct or indirect encounters in this previous life. We are working towards some moment, in the past, that will reveal the source of these mysteries.

In the second season, a third order of time is imposed on the group. After an encounter with a mysterious stranger and a film he shows the survivors indicating a past presence of man on the island, the details of which I will not go into here, the survivors are forced to enter a code into a computer, every 108 minutes, almost to the dot, perpetually. The survivors are not given a reason why they must do this, only a vague threat that if they do not, something 'very bad' will happen. This creates two camps among the survivors: those who are willing and eager to follow these rules and structure their new lives into two-hour segments, and the opposing camp which understandably questions the authority on which they are changing their lives to correspond with a new order of time. Who is saying they must conform to this schedule, and what right do they have to do so?

Jameson discusses the particularity of science-fiction films and their relationship to a breakage in time:

If the historical novel 'corresponded' to the emergence of historicity, of a sense of history in its strong modern post-eighteenth-century sense, science fiction equally corresponds to the waning or the blockage of that historicity, and, particularly in our own time (in the postmodern era), to its crisis and paralysis, its enfeeblement and repression (Jameson 1982: 284)

An excerpt from the diary of one of the survivors highlights the opposition to this change: 'We've worked

so hard to make a life here. And now I fear that the reintroduction of civilization will only lead us down that same dark path.' Eventually however, rebellion succumbs to fear, and the job is performed, religiously, every two hours. The instinct to question authority thus gives way to an intrinsic dependence upon it. After the initial protestations from the small contingency of survivors who question the change, the schedule becomes incorporated into their daily lives, it becomes routine, and is rarely mentioned.

Lastly, we have the 'real' time of the show's viewing audience. Each episode that is aired corresponds to one day on the island, and *Lost*, like most shows, has a regularly scheduled time slot on ABC at 9 p.m. on Wednesday nights, so that fans can make sure to schedule the other parts of their lives around the show. While new TIVO-type recording devices may permit some viewers to work around this rigidity, they run the risk of coming in late on the other world that evolves at 10 p.m. once the show ends: that of the Internet.

The virtual *Lost* community

This brings us to the unique phenomenon of the World Wide Web: the ultimate example of time collapse and simultaneity in the twenty-first century. Castells remarks that on the Internet a different type of time exists, a 'timeless time' and Holtgrewe (2004: 130) adds that this 'differentiates social and cultural temporalities, immediacy and eternity'. The Internet, in many ways, has come to represent a new form of collective memory – a collective memory which 'fundamentally changes the relationship of social memory and social forgetting' (quoted in Holtgrewe 2004: 131) by also working in fragments – the Internet user forges connections, and creates a new mode of logic, by leaping from one image/idea/fragment to another, partially in control of his



Clockwise from top Wheelchair no longer needed / Locke (Terry O'Quinn) / The survivors adapt

'Lost forces us to piece together fragments, moments and episodes of memory, to create a coherent understanding of time, in an attempt to comprehend the whole story.'

movements, partially abandoning himself to the trajectory of the Web, creating through these links, in the words of Elena Esposito, 'memories which have never been thought of before' (quoted in Holtgrewe 2004: 131).

Many television stations have created websites to promote their shows, featuring interviews, bloopers and behind-the-scenes gossip. *Lost* has these features as well, but its Internet structure works rather differently. The

show's makers, in what would seem a risky move, have tied the show and the Internet so closely together that Internet access is, in effect, required in order to complete the viewing of the show. This occurs in two ways. First, certain parts of the show are literally indecipherable. This comes across most apparently in the 'voices' the characters hear on the island. These sometimes take the form of whispers in the woods, and sometimes that

'...the tragic hero is generally a person with some genuinely impressive and admirable qualities who, however, possesses an ineradicable flaw that ultimately helps to seal his (or, much more rarely, her) own doom'

of an apparition of one of the characters. The whispers themselves are impossible to understand and one of the main characters who appears to particular remaining survivors speaks backwards (another example of the show's manipulation of time). The show's characters, who were unfortunately not stranded with any sound-mixing equipment, cannot understand what is being said. The viewers however, by going online, can crack these codes. This represents an explicit attempt on the part of the show's producers to tie the Internet into the storyline. The website itself even supplies additional clues to the nature of the show. (The diary excerpt quoted above, for example, was never revealed on the show itself.) There is even an entire website which appears to be the corporate website for a company discussed on the show (only through some digging is it clear that the website is owned and operated by ABC Television), with many links that are inaccessible until a certain episode of the show has aired. The second attempt at a direct tie-in with the Internet is the enormous number of 'clues' provided during the show. Some of the visual clues are very subtle (for example, a shark that almost attacks one of the survivors has a faded symbol on it which matches a symbol seen in a secret chamber on the island), and some require outside knowledge (such as the significance of the book *The Turn of the Screw*) to be interpreted. Viewers must therefore rely on the 'Lost community' to string together the pieces of the puzzle. This sense of community is one of the key discourses of the show and its marketing. While the viewer must try to understand the interconnectedness of the characters on the show, he must connect as well with his fellow fans, forming a second community in addition to the survivors, which must link all of their disparate information together to try to learn as much about the storyline as possible.

Lost fans thus move fluidly between the world of the show and the show's parallel universe on the Internet. They can create as much of a world around it as they want to – placing themselves anywhere on the continuum from casual watcher to obsessed fan. The show in this way leapfrogs off the popularity of recent interactive games: 'the new interactive media allow the participant to forge a more personal temporality ... It is meaningless to ask the [length] of an interactive narrative or game or CD-ROM. The participant decides the duration' (Stam and Shohat

1995: 396). Rosen (2001: 340) discusses the notion of interactivity and the attempt to take a spectator who is 'outside' the image and insert him 'into' the image, noting phenomena such as the early cinematic novelty of Hale's Tours and the more modern experience of the IMAX as two such examples. He maintains that similar attempts in the digital age, such as virtual reality and video games, are simply different formulations of a historical trend, but if we think of this interactivity not as 'the aspiration toward a phenomenal simultaneity of subjective cause and imaged effect' (Rosen 2001: 344), interactivity can be interpreted in *Lost* not as the ability to affect or mediate the storyline, to have the medium actually respond to the viewer, but to take the story outside the realm of the television set altogether. The community surrounding the show, the requisite of their interaction, creates a part of the narrative that takes place, in a sense, in the 'real world': the viewers are given the chance to feel like they are involved in solving the mystery; the fact that they cannot affect what happens on the island is immaterial. This interaction with fellow viewers, as well as time spent outside of the show trying to interpret its various clues, is unquestionably a prefigured part of the show's enjoyment and entertainment.

When we look at these four levels of discourse as a whole, and the unique relation of the show to the Internet, *Lost* in many ways becomes an allegory of the Internet story. Time on the island is in many ways 'timeless', there are 'viruses' in the vicinity of the island's only computer (the nature of which is not yet known), electronic simulations and projections of objects that could not exist on the island appear, 'instant message' conversations take place through the computer, etc. Most significantly, there is the interlinking of characters (both on the island and in their back stories) into an artificial community. Just like the viewers, the characters have to piece together forgotten memories of their past to construct their purpose on the island in the present. They are literally lost in time, and lost in these memories. This is not to say that the island is a symbolic representation of the Internet, but it is clear that the story tries in every way possible to interweave a pre-industrial sense of temporality with one that pervades the age of the Internet.

This temporal weaving was perhaps an inevitable melding of two prominent media arenas, and a fortunate

foresight on the part of the show's producers. *Lost* would have literally been 'lost' on viewers had it come out several years ago, when the Internet was younger. It is only in this period of almost-complete Internet dissemination that a television show employing it to such a high degree could survive and flourish. As evidence, the HBO series *Carnivale*, which came out just two years prior in 2003, had several of these ideas in common (especially the fact that it relied on an electronically connected group of fans to interpret its intricate plot), and was very well received by critics, but never reached the tipping point to make it a hit. Now that this format has proven so successful with *Lost* there is, in fact, a movement to bring the show back.

Lost's popularity lies in its embrace of current media trends in temporal manipulation. The show is uniquely targeted at an audience that has learned to 'think' like the Internet, processing different temporalities at once and linking disparate pieces of information. Where postmodernity brought the fragmenting and breakage of events as described by White and Jameson, the Internet age has taken those fragments and incorporated them into the public mode of consciousness. The show portrays the modern fusion of simultaneity and fragmentation that has taken shape due to our modern understanding of the world around us as represented in the news, and in the various forms of media that function in our lives.

The public's current obsession with time could be seen, on certain levels, as underscoring an attempt to control our own ephemeral existence. Our conversion into a 'throw-away society' has had the inverse effect of creating an obsession with memory and a desire to forestall death. This is shown not only in the spate of films exploring the subject of memory but in a rise in the construction and popularity of museums, and the restoration of historical buildings (Rosen 2001). We cling to our history even as we constantly annihilate it. Rosen discusses Bazin's theory of the 'mummy complex' in both these historical constructions and in film, and notes our 'preservative obsession', a desire to defeat time and death, as a characteristic that draws audiences to the cinema. In contrast, many cultures around the world, such as the Navajo of North America and aboriginal Australians, embrace the ephemerality of human life and aura to a point many in the urban world could not comprehend. Beautiful sand paintings may be made for a particular ceremony, only to be brushed away hours later. A person who has died is not to be spoken of again, and all of their possessions are burned. Hanns-Georg Brose maintains that for postmodern Americans, our increasing simultaneity and speed has caused a concomitant non-simultaneity and counter-culture of slowness. *Lost*, in addition to providing an onslaught of temporal stimulation, also allows its audience to rebel against it by losing itself in a world that abandons the

structures of modern society. *Lost* may not purport to be high art, but it has tapped into something fundamental in today's media world. It is no accident that the place where these characters crash is a beautiful tropical island, not the polar ice caps. Part of what makes the show enjoyable is simply a fantasy of an alternative to our current existence. Perhaps it will cause its viewers to change the way time structures their lives. On a less drastic level, we are reminded that, once in a while, we all need a vacation. ●

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