

‘Til Series Finale Do Us Part? Fan Commitment and the Long-running Series **Anthony Smith**

Reasons for Staying Faithful: The Influence of Industry Discourses on Viewer Commitment for *Enigma-Centric* Prime-Time Drama Series

The infinite is lucrative. Contemporary industrial and technological landscapes motivate media institutions to increase revenues via the extension of serial narratives over time and across multiple media platforms. Yet such economic rationale runs counter to classical reading strategies that many viewers bring to bear on TV drama series. Many enjoy seeing conflicts manifest and develop, but they also seek conflict resolution. Producers of serialised drama usually provide for such a desire for coherence and unity (a desire they often share) by confining discrete storylines to individual episodes or across multiple-episodes in the form of discernable arcs. But, for producers of series that represent a loose tradition of *enigma-centric* narratives, providing such coherence is often a tricky task. These series, such as *The Fugitive*, *Twin Peaks* and *Lost*, as well as more recent commissions, such as *Rubicon*, *The Event* and *FlashForward*, revolve around particular mysteries – such as the identity of Laura Palmer’s killer in *Twin Peaks* and the nature of *Lost*’s isle – that are hard-wired into their narratives’ identities. To resolve such enigmas might result in the loss of viewer interest; yet to string out such hermeneutic codes in potential perpetuity risks testing viewers’ patience. How, then, can these series foster anticipation among viewers that rewarding narrative ‘pay-offs’ await?

There are doubtless myriad factors that have the potential to encourage such viewer anticipation, but I will narrow focus here by considering how industry discourses that circle such narratives can determine viewer loyalty. Breaking such discourses down into three distinct categories – *authorial*, *institutional* and *promotional*, I will rely predominantly on the example of *Lost* to demonstrate how they operate.

Authorial

Lost showrunners Carlton Cuse and Damon Lindelof consistently endeavoured to reassure viewers, via interviews published/transmitted during the series’ run, that enigma-resolution was forthcoming. As Lindelof promised in 2007, “Answers are going to be coming a lot sooner than you think. The reality is, we’re not going to make you wait until the last episode to give you everything.”¹ In the case of NBC’s new enigma-centric drama, *The Event*, its showrunner Evan Katz sought to issue similar reassurances even before his series had begun airing: “We’re very cognizant of the audience’s patience, of rewarding the audience, ... the show’s really designed to answer questions, to satisfy people.”² Such discourses emanating from creative figureheads have the potential to stem audience fears that a series’ hermeneutic codes will remain indefinitely incomplete.

Institutional

In the case of *Lost*, Cuse and Lindelof’s efforts to reassure viewers that their faith was well placed were supported by ABC’s decision to set, in 2007, a 2010 end date for the series. As Cuse suggested, the move, which he and Lindelof had lobbied for, would provide “a certain measure of confidence for the fans.”³ But the institutional discourses that surrounded the decision further reinforced the showrunners’ pledge for narrative coherence. “We felt this was the only way to give it a proper satisfactory

conclusion...and to give the audience the pay-off they deserve,” said former ABC Entertainment president Stephen McPherson.⁴ Such comments further signalled to viewers that enigma resolution would not be detained by the industry’s prevailing economic logics.

Promotional

Trailers, posters and other marketing tools often play an integral role in framing viewing experiences around the mysteries that drive enigma-centric series; witness, for example, ABC’s *Twin Peaks* poster featuring Laura Palmer’s corpse and AMC’s promotion of espionage-drama *Rubicon* as a conspiracy thriller. But, with the case of *Lost*, promotional material specifically echoed authorial and institutional discourses. For example, an ABC promo for *Lost*’s final season asserted, “The answers are coming,” while, similarly, billboards, promoting *Lost*’s fourth season in the UK, were dominated by the three words, “ANSWERS ARE COMING.” Such discourses distilled Cuse, Lindelof and McPherson’s reassurances.

Of course, it would be wrong to presume that the commitments viewers make to enigma-centric series hinge entirely on whether or not they perceive answers to be forthcoming. Viewers may well take more pleasure in other narrative elements that comprise these series, such as action sequences, romantic sub-plots, well-written/acted character beats, for example. Yet, taking into account many of the viewer responses to enigma-centric series, the promise of mystery resolution often appears a key factor in viewers’ commitment towards them. Industry discourses, as we can see, have the potential to make this promise and to determine such commitment.

¹ Jeff Jensen, ‘The Q&A: A Map for *Lost*,’ EW.com, 8 May 2007, http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20036782_20037403_20038202,00.html

² Rick Porter, ‘*The Event*: Producers Promise Not to Frustrate Viewers,’ ZAP 2 it, 30 July 2010, <http://blog.zap2it.com/frominsidethebox/2010/07/the-event-producers-promise-not-to-frustrate-viewers.html>

³ Jackieboy, ‘Official *Lost* Podcast Transcript / May 11, 2007,’ Lostpedia, http://lostpedia.wikia.com/wiki/Official_Lost_Podcast_transcript/May_11,_2007

⁴ Andrew Collins, ‘Do the Stranded,’ *The Word*, September 2009, p. 65.