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Islands in the Screen: The *Robinsonnade* as Television Genre
Des îles à l'écran : la robinsonnade comme genre télévisuel

Paul Heyer

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Article abstract

The island survivor narrative, or *robinsonnade*, has emerged as a small but significant television genre over the past 50 years. The author considers its origins as a literary genre and the screen adaptations that followed. Emphasis is placed on how "island TV" employed a television aesthetic that ranged from an earlier conventional approach, using three cameras, studio locations, and narrative resolution in each episode, to open-ended storylines employing a cinematic style that exploits the new generation of widescreen televisions, especially with the advent of HDTV. Two case studies centre the argument: *Gilligan's Island* as an example of the former, more conventional aesthetic, and *Lost* as an example of the new approach. Although both series became exceedingly popular, other notable programs are considered, two of which involved Canadian production teams: *Swiss Family Robinson* and *The Mysterious Island*. Finally, connections are drawn between *robinsonnades* and the emerging post-apocalyptic genre as it has moved from cinema to television.

Islands in the Screen: The *Robinsonnade* as Television Genre

Paul Heyer

ABSTRACT

The island survivor narrative, or *robinsonnade*, has emerged as a small but significant television genre over the past 50 years. The author considers its origins as a literary genre and the screen adaptations that followed. Emphasis is placed on how "island TV" employed a television aesthetic that ranged from an earlier conventional approach, using three cameras, studio locations, and narrative resolution in each episode, to open-ended storylines employing a cinematic style that exploits the new generation of widescreen televisions, especially with the advent of HDTV. Two case studies centre the argument: *Gilligan's Island* as an example of the former, more conventional aesthetic, and *Lost* as an example of the new approach. Although both series became exceedingly popular, other notable programs are considered, two of which involved Canadian production teams: *Swiss Family Robinson* and *The Mysterious Island*. Finally, connections are drawn between *robinsonnades* and the emerging post-apocalyptic genre as it has moved from cinema to television.

No phone, no light, no motor car
Not a single luxury
Like Robinson Crusoe
It's primitive as can be

Theme song (*Gilligan's Island* [Sherwood Schwartz, 1964-1967])

The Island brought us here...
It's a place where miracles happen

John Locke (*Lost* [J.J. Abrams, Jeffrey Lieber and Damon Lindelof, 2004-2010])

In its initial 2004-2005 season, *Lost* earned an Emmy and a Golden Globe for best television drama. It employed a narrative concept that derives from a literary tradition often labelled the *robinsonnade*. The term was first applied to categorize a trio of novels that depict isolation, survival and self-sufficiency in remote island settings—Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (2003), Johann Wyss's *The Swiss Family Robinson* (2004) and Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island* (2004). Literary commentary on these texts is abundant and their stories have had a hundred-year history of being rendered into the cinema of a variety of nations (Stam 2005) after having achieved, in the case of *Robinson Crusoe*, the status of literary myth (Watt 1996).

Largely overlooked is the fact that these *robinsonnades* have inspired at least a half-dozen television series. This admittedly constitutes a minor genre. Two of these series, however, became enormously successful, although they could not be more different from each other in the way they employed the television aesthetic. The farcical *Gilligan's Island* used the formula of one basic set, a finite cast of characters, and self-contained weekly stories which has been a part of television situation comedies from their inception to the present. *Lost*, in contrast, reflected recent changes in the narrative style and technology of television: the open-ended ongoing plot format that developed in the 1990s, when at the outset of a program's new episodes we began to hear, "Previously on..."; and spectacular location filming consonant with the emergence of widescreen television and subsequent HDTV.

Two lesser-known series that employ the same formats will also be considered in the present discussion, and are notable given their Canadian production components. *Swiss Family Robinson* (Gerald Mayer, 1974-1975) follows the model of self-contained stories centring on a small cast performing mostly on a soundstage using a limited number of sets. *Mysterious Island* (Chris Bailey, 1995) is a Canadian-New Zealand co-production and anticipated *Lost* in its frequent use of exterior locations and a serialized format.

The novels upon which these programs are based—as well as the long tradition of *robinsonnade* cinema—tell their island survivor stories with different social emphases. Defoe's *Robinson*

Crusoe was a product of the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment. It addressed the notion of the individual as an autonomous being who, if forced to, could live outside society. It also explored the existential crisis and sense of angst, social and religious, that might result from such isolation. These themes have been easier to depict cinematically than televisually—the two Crusoe television series we will assess necessarily depart significantly from Defoe's emphasis on the individual's long sojourn in social isolation.

Johann Wyss's *The Swiss Family Robinson* emerged at the outset of the Romantic Rebellion, which saw the family within the nation as the irreducible human unit—the Robinsons called their island "New Switzerland." This format proved compatible with several family-centred children's programs during the 1970s. Jules Verne's *L'île mystérieuse* (*The Mysterious Island*) uses a group of diverse individuals as its castaways, thus providing the *robinsonnade* template found in programs such as *Gilligan's Island* and *Lost*, as well as for earlier novels such as William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954).

The *robinsonnade* in Cinema

Cinematic adaptations of these *robinsonnades* date back as early as Georges Méliès's one-reel *Robinson Crusoe* (1902). The following list includes some of the more notable feature film versions of the three novels. It also provides a point of comparison for an assessment of television examples.

The first feature film adaptation of *Robinson Crusoe* was M.A. Wetherell's 1927 silent production, which had been preceded by shorter versions plus a serial. Five years later *Mr. Robinson Crusoe* (A. Edward Sutherland, 1932), a silent film with a soundtrack (*sans* dialogue), turned the story into a contemporary burlesque featuring the comedic energy of Douglas Fairbanks Senior. The earliest version of *The Swiss Family Robinson* (Edward Ludwig) was released by RKO with little fanfare in 1940 and is a much darker film than the famous Disney adaptation two decades later. A talking version of *Robinson Crusoe* was not released until 1952. Although the story is a classic and in the public domain, producers of early talking

pictures would have been hesitant to engage in a project so short on dialogue. The film that finally emerged, *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1952), featured a most unlikely director, Luis Buñuel, renowned and notorious as a surrealist filmmaker. Using voiceover, surprising fidelity to the text and his evocative surrealist touches, this film remains the definitive cinematic rendering of Defoe's novel.

It is hard to imagine a cinematic tradition more diametrically opposed to Buñuel's than Disney's. Steeped in the family values of the 1950s, the "Magic Kingdom's" colourful *Swiss Family Robinson* (Ken Annakin, 1960) became a huge hit and an inspiration for later television adaptations. With this success, and the studio's earlier hit *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* (Richard Fleischer, 1954), also based on Verne's work, thought must have been given to adapting *The Mysterious Island*. Cy Endfield got there first, however, with a 1961 version that added to (or diminished) Verne's story with romances and bizarre animals from the special effects imagination of Ray Harryhausen.[1] Further deviations from the novel would characterize three telefilms: a French, Spanish and Italian co-production, *The Mysterious Island of Captain Nemo* (Juan Antonio Bardem and Henri Colpi), a 1972-1973 miniseries with various versions released theatrically; a 2005 made-for-television movie, *The Mysterious Island* (Russell Mulcahy), again with only the most minimal connection to the novel; and, equally at a remove from Verne, *Jules Verne's Mysterious Island* (Mark Sheppard), a 2010 production notable (or forgettable) for using time travel to bring in several themes popularized by *Lost*. Verne suffers again in the 2012 theatrical feature *Journey 2: The Mysterious Island* (Brad Peyton), in which fabricated elements of the plot are made to appear as if they come directly from the novel.

Unlike cinema's first half century, the second has seen a diverse array of Crusoe films. In 1964 Byron Haskin took the venerable story into the realm of science fiction with the cult classic *Robinson Crusoe on Mars*. A decade later, Adrian Mitchell's play *Man Friday* was turned into a 1975 film by Jack Gold. It starred Peter O'Toole and Richard Roundtree in a comedic retelling of the story from Friday's perspective, in

which indigenous wisdom faced off against an unbending imperialism. Caleb Deschanel's *Crusoe* (1988) also raised the stature of Friday in the context of an action film in which Robinson is made an early-nineteenth-century American slave trader. *Robinson Crusoe* (Rod Hardy and George Miller, 1997) turns its protagonist (newly minted James Bond, Pierce Brosnan) into a Scottish refugee from injustice, bringing elements from several Sir Walter Scott novels into the narrative. Most recently, Thierry Chabert's *Robinson Crusoe* (2003)—a France/Canada (Quebec) co-production with multilingual dubbing done during post-production—sets its narrative in the French Enlightenment with Crusoe turning from slave holder to abolitionist.[2]

Some elements from these adaptations can also be found in television *robinsonnades*, but for the most part the small screen brings different requirements to the task of rendering an island novel into a weekly series.

Enter Television

The first *robinsonnade* television series, *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (Jean Sacha), was produced by Franco London Films in 1964. A France-based Euro-marketed project, the series featured minimal dialogue and employed extended voiceover. This facilitated multilingual dubbing during post-production (as would be the case with Thierry Chabert's film 40 years later).[3] *Adventures* became available in French, Italian, German and English and had a multinational cast. The series allowed for a diverse array of versions and format options: four ninety-minute segments, what we would today call a miniseries; six one-hour programs as a limited run series; or thirteen half-hour episodes. It was broadcast until the early 1980s and subsequently made available through various VHS and DVD editions. The unofficial (but sanctioned) website suggests that interest in the series reflects a nostalgic, almost Proustian recall among those who experienced it in their youth.

Needless to say, significant alterations had to be made in adapting the novel. *Adventures* nevertheless remains the most faithful rendering of any *robinsonnade* to the small screen. In contrast, the recent *Crusoe* (Justin Bodle and Stephen Gallagher,

2008-2009) series on NBC resembles the novel only in basic concept, with the narrative departing radically from its source. The fidelity of *Adventures* could be attributed to the familiarity European youth at the time had with the novel, versus its unfamiliarity on the part of today's comic book and video game generation.

In accommodating the scope of the novel, *Adventures* repositions some of its themes. It begins with the shipwreck then follows with flashbacks whereby Robinson recalls his youthful experiences and misadventures. Later in the series the flashbacks become more extensive, to the point where we might refer to them as "back-stories," a term that gained wide usage as a result of the narrative format employed in *Lost*. These back-stories include Crusoe's previous shipwreck experience, his being sold into slavery and life as a slave-holding plantation owner, events generally absent from other adaptations. For narrative convenience, *Adventures* reduces the time frame of Crusoe's island sojourn from twenty-seven years to six—only Buñuel's film gives Robinson his full stay on the island. *Adventures* also goes beyond the novel with a quaint postscript that has the protagonist, now back in England and having turned Friday into a literate gentleman, dictating his island saga to the former cannibal, now scribe!

The series is unusual by contemporary standards—and this is perhaps part of its appeal—given the way it combines a storytelling narration geared towards young viewers with mature themes from the novel. What must young viewers have made of the famous God versus the Devil debate in which Friday, confused by some of the tenets of Christianity, proffers a series of rational and even sceptical queries? Add to this the uncompromising violence, which at times surpasses what is in Defoe—especially regarding the issue of cannibalism—with Crusoe shooting, stabbing and blowing up the practitioners.[4] In the final episode, the killing spree extends to the mutineers. In the novel Robinson spares the life of several and sentences them in turn to become castaways on the island, whereas in *Adventures* he and Friday see the necessity of killing all of them. This kind of violence (and racism towards the cannibals) in a children's

series, then and perhaps now, could perhaps only be justified on the grounds that the source material is a literary classic.

The *Robinsonnade* as Sitcom

Easily dismissed, impossible to ignore, *Gilligan's Island* remains in permanent orbit on the television nostalgia radar, demonstrating a staying power in global syndication that rivals *I Love Lucy* (Jess Openheimer, Madelyn Pugh and Bob Carroll Jr., 1951-1957) and *Baywatch* (Michael Berk, Gregory J. Bonann and Douglas Schwartz, 1989-2001). It conforms to the dominant model of the television situation comedy: characters take precedence over plot (for example, the latter being virtually absent in that famous "show about nothing," *Seinfeld* [Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David, 1990-1998]); locations are few (as in the apartment in *Friends* [David Crane and Marta Kauffman, 1994-2004] or the bar in *Cheers* [James Burrows, Glen Charles and Les Charles, 1982-1993]); and each episode provides resolution. There is also what the industry calls the "fish out of water" theme—employed most successfully prior to *Gilligan* in *The Beverly Hillbillies* (Paul Henning, 1962-1971)—in which characters habituated to one world are forced to cope with another.

Gilligan, and situation comedies in general, also conforms to the earlier prescient views of television elaborated by Edmund Carpenter ([2012], a colleague of Marshall McLuhan's). He argued that television is more ritualistic than cinema—an idea readily applicable to the redundant and predictable elements of situation comedies such as *Gilligan*. More than cinema, television favours broad gestures and facial expressions, along with reaction shots. Nowhere is this more in evidence than in that benchmark series *I Love Lucy*, with Gilligan adapting these conventions to a larger ensemble cast.

The show has always been popular with children, although it began as light fare on the CBS prime-time schedule and remains a guilty pleasure for adults. Gilligan, as a man-child creating chaos in an adult world that is not very stable to begin with, does have raw comic appeal. Episodes are enhanced by the ability of the cast to perform absurdities with

a level of commitment that, although unlikely to earn Emmys, does engender a certain respect. Comedy is never easy and a concept alone, without memorable characters, will not carry a situation comedy. The central pairing of Gilligan (Bob Denver) and the Skipper (Alan Hale Jr.), with the former frustrating the latter at every turn, suggests the influence of, and might have evoked in the minds of 1960s viewers the legendary duos of Laurel and Hardy or Abbott and Costello. The timeless situation of being cast away on an island and the simplistic dialogue and crass slapstick have allowed for easy global exportation and dubbing. Physicality, be it in television situation comedies like *I Love Lucy* and *Gilligan* or in more recent action films, has been a key to Hollywood's success in international media markets.

In his recent scholarly study valorizing *Gilligan's Island*, Walter Metz (2012) sees Shakespeare's *Tempest* (1789) as its *urtext*. In his analysis of many of the show's episodes, he argues that other Shakespearean themes are also transposed into farcical plot devices. Nevertheless, my point of view is that the literary text which is closest to the premise of *Gilligan's Island* is Verne's *Mysterious Island*. In *Gilligan*, the Professor (Russell Johnson) shares a number of traits with Captain Cyrus Smith (Harding in some translations) from the novel. Although he is a high school teacher in the series, he is reputed to have authored several scientific treatises. His constant attempts at harnessing the island's resources through applied science in order to bring more creature comforts to the castaways are often thwarted by the latter's ineptitude. Also, not all of his creations pan out. In the great *robinsonnade* tradition, his attempt to build a houseboat raft as a way of escaping the island proves quite fallible. Other links to the literary tradition include a fear of cannibals, as in Defoe, and the making of coconut bombs, doubtless inspired by the Disney version of *Swiss Family Robinson*. As in classic island novels, typhoons and earthquakes pose a recurring hazard.

A more modern and technological threat occurs when Gilligan, out fishing, drags in an unexploded World War II mine. This episode serves to illustrate a number of themes that

recur throughout the series. One of them is verbal misunderstanding. The Howells believe Gilligan is referring to a mineral mine and swear him to silence so they can profit from the discovery. Meanwhile the Professor needs metal to make an anchor for a raft—he has built a smelter à la Captain Smith in *Mysterious Island*. When the truth is finally discovered, one slapstick scenario follows another regarding what to do about the mine. Finally, Gilligan tows it offshore where it explodes, raining down a plethora of fish for the larder, which loops us back to Gilligan's now-successful quest for fish which began the episode. A darker alternative story idea, which we later find in *Lost*, might have involved the discovery of a hydrogen bomb, given the nuclear testing that was once frequent in the South Pacific.

Although the show was cancelled before the castaways could be rescued, it had, and continues to have, a remarkable afterlife. A cartoon version followed on ABC (1975-1977) and later on CBS (1982-1984). Three made-for-television movies were aired (1978, 1979 and 1981). There has even been a 1990s musical, and rumours persist that the show will join a long list of 1960s television programs to be turned into a motion picture.[5] In a touching bit of irony, the show's creators, possibly aware that they were working at the nadir of lowbrow, might have had clever cause to name the ship in the series *Minnow*. In an oft-cited declaration, it was Newton Minnow, Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, who, in surveying the changing landscape of network television at the onset of the 1960s, had declared it to be "a vast wasteland."

Swiss Family Values

After Disney released *Swiss Family Robinson*, still the most popular *robinsonnade* film, at the close of the 1950s, the subsequent decade would unleash a youth rebellion without precedent. The term "generation gap" gained wide currency. The family-friendly ethos of Disney, as well as much of the mainstream media, became anathema to a restless generation of post-war baby boomers. By the early 1970s, however, the lack of interest in the 1960s in the conventionally familial began to ameliorate. Two television series, which although not Disney

were Disneyesque, became enormous hits: *The Waltons* (Earl Hamner Jr., 1971-1981); and *Little House on the Prairie* (Ande Lamb, 1974-1983). Family values had returned to prime time, but not in terms of the bourgeois domesticity of 1950s standbys such as *Father Knows Best* (Ed James, 1954-1960), *The Donna Reed Show* (William Roberts, 1958-1966) or *Leave it to Beaver* (Joe Connelly, Dick Conway and Bob Mosher, 1957-1963). The way these and other series from that time were ensconced in the values of consumerism and conformity has been meticulously traced by Lynn Spigel (1992) in *Make Room for TV*.

Although neither the *Waltons* nor *Little House* can be regarded as *robinsonnades* in the strict sense, they do contain aspects of the tradition—self-sufficiency through rural isolation in the case of the former and wilderness isolation in the latter. This allowed a generation that had come of age in the tumultuous 1960s, with its "small is beautiful" mantra, to re-embrace the idea of family when it was presented in a context free of the "evils" of industrial capitalism, alienated labour and the rigid sex roles that characterized many of the television programs they grew up with in the 1950s.

The success of these shows invited television producers to repeat the formula. The venerable S*wiss Family Robinson* provided a ready-made option. It yielded two series: a low-budget half-hour syndicated Canadian production (1974-1975)[6] and a prime-time sixty-minute program produced by Irwin Allen on ABC (1975-1976). Plans to market the Canadian series in the United States proved unsuccessful, perhaps because the more lavish ABC version was already in production (or took the idea from the Canadian version). Somewhat ironically, it is the Canadian series that has endured, going on to global syndication and occasionally airing on television nostalgia channels. In 2007 it was released in a restored and colour-enhanced DVD collection, whereas ABC's *Swiss Family* seems only to have survived in the form of episode guides and the production information available on various websites.

The Canadian series, filmed in Kleinburg, Ontario, with scenes requiring natural vistas shot in Jamaica, is a pastiche of concepts from the novel significantly augmented by a mix of

supplementary story ideas. The four sons in the novel have been reduced to two, with a daughter added to enhance televisual appeal. Narration is provided by Father (Chris Wiggins), while Mother (Diana Leblanc) dispenses maternal wisdom to their frequently headstrong brood. Unlike the novel, and even the Disney film, where the majority of adventures are with the exigencies of the island and the rituals of everyday life, the series evidences a pattern of trying to build ongoing excitement around two recurring themes: the anxiety of separation and encounters with visitors to the island.

With such a cohesive family so isolated and dependent on one another, the temporary absence of any family member creates a tension that is exacerbated the longer the person is missing. In most cases it is not the parents who become lost, but one of the children, especially the boys who overreach their abilities in several adventurous sojourns. Sometimes it is serious illness that distances an individual from the living bosom of the family—in one episode it involves the near death of Mother after eating tainted oysters. Even more disconcerting is an episode titled *Disappearance*, in which after being caught in a storm both parents fail to return from a canoe excursion. Compounding the anxiety over whether they are dead or alive, the daughter becomes ill following a spider bite, an incident in the 1940 film version (with one of the sons) but not in the novel. The children, with one son in denial at first, realize they have to give up hope regarding their parents' return (they eventually do) and become self-sufficient. These events play on a child's greatest fear, loss of parents and how to respond, which compounds sibling grief with confusion.

Frequent visitors to the island, although not an aspect of the novel or the two *Swiss Family* films, keep the teleplays from lapsing into the overly familiar. These include a British naval vessel, subsequently destroyed by pirates; more pirates; natives; a young woman who lives a feral existence on another part of the island (as in the novel, where she is not feral); and a wild man of the woods who is modelled on the Ayrton character in the novel and perhaps on Ben Gunn from *Treasure Island* (Stevenson 1990). There is no clear-cut finale to the series, so most episodes

can be viewed in any order when syndicated, as is the case with *Gilligan's Island*, but certainly not with *Lost*.

Island of Mysteries

The Canadian *Swiss Family* (Peter Carter, Don Haldane and Stanley B. Olsen, 1976) was produced by the Fremantle Corporation, a Toronto-based group involved in film and television production since 1952. They would also go on to produce another television *robinsonnade* two decades later, Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island*, which was first released in syndication in 1995. The series was a Canada/New Zealand co-production. Co-productions involving Canada and other countries have been traditionally more common in feature films than in television series. Although the *Mysterious Island* (Chris Bailey, 1995) is one of the earliest examples, the growing internationalization of the entertainment media industry has recently led to a number of successful co-productions involving Canada, such as *The Tudors* (Michael Hirst, 2007-2010), *The Pillars of the Earth* (Sergio Mimica-Gezzan, 2010) and *The Borgias* (Neil Jordan, 2011-).

The Mysterious Island anticipates the far more famous *Lost* in a number of significant ways. Cinematography plays an important role. Spectacular New Zealand locations (later to gain worldwide acclaim in the *Lord of the Rings* films [Peter Jackson, 2001-2003]) function as those in Hawaii do for *Lost*. This represents a new television aesthetic born of the availability of widescreen sets and later HDTV.

The resulting look of these series—moving away from sets on a soundstage and a handful of familiar locations—becomes an integral part of the viewing experience. Still, the production difficulties and expense involved have not made this a common practice; the most recent examples are Fox's *Terra Nova* (Craig Silverstein and Kelly Marcel, 2011) and ABC's *The River* (Michael R. Perry and Oren Peli, 2012). Whether or not the creators of *Lost* were familiar with the *Mysterious Island* series—now available on DVD perhaps because of the interest generated by *Lost*—there are uncanny similarities. Although the online *Lostpedia*[7] mentions numerous links between Verne's

novel and *Lost*, no mention is made of the earlier television series.

The Mysterious Island series does not deviate quite as much from Verne's novel as does the 1961 film with its Ray Harryhausen monsters, but it still makes major narrative alterations. In order to give the series an ongoing villain, the personality of Nemo (John Bach) is skewed to a degree that should displease devotees of the original story. From being an avenging angel with questionable methods in the novel to a well-intentioned but mad scientist whose experiments have gone awry in the 1961 movie, he is now a self-deluded villain conducting unscrupulous experiments in human behaviour. The plight of the castaways is observed through a series of camera placements around the island (not even Verne imagined television), almost as a personal form of reality TV. Although the castaways in the series parallel in name and background those in the novel, a woman is added: Pencroft's wife, adolescent Herbert's stepmother and Captain Harding's romantic interest, much to the Oedipal annoyance of Herbert, after Pencroft dies. Verne himself was not a big fan of romantic intrigue in his stories, believing that his characters' adventures were complex enough without adding female distraction. Television, of course, must have it otherwise.

The early episodes are convincing and tightly scripted. Eventually they give way to implausible and often silly scenarios; with twenty-two one-hour programs to fill for a primarily young audience, the conventions of entertainment television must usurp those of the nineteenth-century novel. Visually, the New Zealand locations feature stunning ocean vistas, lush rainforests, volcanic hot springs spouting geysers and picturesque mountains, which gained a wide viewership and created a boom in tourism following their reappearance in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Whether or not further episodes were planned, the series ends with what could only be described as a partial resolution. Nemo reneges on his promise of rescue and sails off in the *Nautilus*, leaving the castaways stranded on the beach after having released their animals.

Lost in Prime Time

Before *Lost* became caught up with scenarios involving time travel, alternative realities and the after-life, and before the back-stories seemed to overwhelm the front or island stories, the series began as a contemporary *robinsonnade*. At that time the show employed classical elements of the genre defined by Defoe, Wyss and Verne. The formula was an unqualified success. Not only did seasons one and two score the series' highest ratings; the former earned Emmy and Golden Globe awards as best television drama, and the cast was chosen as *Entertainment Weekly*'s 2005 "Entertainer of the Year." The two-hour pilot stands as one of the finest ever produced for the medium; taken on its own it constitutes a remarkable made-for-television movie and a case study for the changing television aesthetic of the new millennium.

It involves, of course, the frequent use of CGI (computer-generated imagery). Nevertheless, and *Lost* is representative in this regard, television generally avoids the overuse of CGI found in many action and adventure movies. Although the plane crash that opens the series is done with CGI, the subsequent (exterior) set which serves to introduce us to a number of characters makes use of actual parts from a scrapped airliner.[8] The convergence with cinema is even more direct when it comes to sound. As John Ellis (1992) points out, for most of its history television has been characterized by audio flatness when compared to cinema (and to home sound systems for the playing of recorded music). The new millennium has brought about changes in both home television technology and program production to match the capacity of these new receivers. *Lost* evidences an audio depth of field rare in earlier programs but more common now. Nowhere is this more in evidence than with the soundscape we find in episode one, with the diverse array of survivors on the beach amidst the still-smouldering wreckage of the plane.

Initially, series creator J.J. Abrams and his team of writers had envisioned a one-season run. Renewal for three and then six years necessitated expanding the concept beyond the basic *robinsonnade* paradigm and into experimental areas the likes of which prime-time network television had not seen since *The Prisoner*

(Patrick McGoohan, 1967-1968) and *Twin Peaks* (David Lynch and Mark Frost, 1990-1991). At a certain point in the second season a good portion of the mass audience, which had initially made the series so successful in the Nielsen sweepstakes, began to abandon the show. A hard core of Lostaholics, however, held on with sufficient intensity to keep it going. They flooded the internet with interpretation and speculation, organized the online *Lostpedia* and dared ABC to drop the series. Academics joined the fray, organizing conferences and publishing books. Not since *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Joss Whedon, 1997-2003) had enthralled the cultural studies crowd had a program prompted so much campus discussion. Much of this dealt with minutiae that was news to the show's creators, but very little of it involved the classical island survivor tradition.

The origin of the series remains under wraps, but the idea is not new, even for television. Following *Gilligan's Island*, several desert-island pilots failed to make it into series. The most notable was *Lost Flight* (Leonard Horn) from 1970, featuring Lloyd Bridges and a 100-plus cast who divide into factions and turn the island into a *Lord of the Flies*-type battleground. Whether or not the producers of *Lost* were aware of *Lost Flight*, they most certainly were aware of two notable media productions that opened the new millennium with island survivor themes: the film *Cast Away* (Robert Zemeckis, 2000) and the television series *Survivor* (Charlie Parsons, 2000-). Still, *Lost*'s approach to its island-survivor scenario seemed unique to many. But is it? Consider the premise that launched the series: a plane takes off on a trans-Pacific flight; its passengers each harbour a dark secret; back-stories reveal transgressions involving crime, marital infidelity and corruption; the plane goes off course and crashes on a remote South Pacific island; at first rescue seems imminent, then not; from the bric-a-brac of the crash site and the resources of an intimidating jungle the survivors must find the means to sustain themselves into a future filled with uncertainty; they soon realize that they are not alone on the island. This scenario matches almost perfectly the little-known film *Sinners in Paradise* (1938) by James Whale (of *Frankenstein* [1931] and *Bride of Frankenstein* [1935] fame).

In various ways, *Lost*, in establishing the island context that frames the series in its first two seasons, incorporates and updates elements from the Defoe, Wyss and Verne classics. One crucial such element is what the survivors are able to salvage from the vessel that brought them to the island.

Until the opening of the mysterious hatch in season two the castaways were dependent on what could be dredged up from the crash site: guns, tools, serviceable parts of the vessel, clothes, booze, books and drugs, medicinal and otherwise. These resources help them to build a raft to escape the island, as does Crusoe with his boat building. In both cases the projects fail and the castaways are forced to return.

Being cast away upon an island initially involves hoping that you are not alone, then after a time fearing the possibility that you might not be. Sometimes that fear is imaginary, as in *Lord of the Flies*; sometimes it is well founded and there are "Others" such as those with whom the survivors on *Lost* must contend. Crusoe also had his Others in the form of cannibals, heralded by that iconic moment when he discovers a footprint in the sand, and then later when pirates arrive. Verne's castaways also had their pirate problem. Not so the *Swiss Family*, except when Disney decided the original narrative was not cinematically exciting enough. Despite his homage to Crusoe, Wyss remained content to dispense with any human threat and instead put his offspring under siege by wild animals. *Lost* evidences the worst of both worlds, with the castaways being pursued by a wild, almost supernatural monster; and when one of the Others preying on the castaways sports an eye patch—all that missing is the Jolly Roger.

Putting a group rather than an individual or a family in peril on an island allowed *Lost* to exploit character interaction in seemingly unlimited ways. What a television series can accomplish, which is less viable in a ninety-minute cinematic feature, is to allow characters to evolve over time. Here *Lost* kept engaging its audience by having the bad turn good, the good turn bad and the innocuous rise to a position of leadership in an unpredictable human drama as the island toys with their fate. It could be argued that the ensemble cast constitutes one of the most

diverse arrays of characters ever to appear in a prime-time series—among the mix a doctor, a con artist and a former member of the Iraqi Republican Guard. Effective casting made their plight and transformations compelling. Most were not well-known performers who could be identified with particular roles in either television or cinema, making it easier for audiences to accept whatever they might become in the series, especially in seasons one and two.[9] After that, with the addition of new characters and additional back-stories, the series became the most narratively complex in the history of television. To maintain interest, as many viewers drifted off in favour of less challenging fare, episodes began increasingly to end with riddles, and sometimes involved life-and-death scenarios that harked back to the old movie serials of the 1930s and 1940s. This prompted considerable chat-room speculation before the next instalment's often ambiguous resolution.

Whether or not it was the intent of *Lost*'s creators, parallels with Verne's *Mysterious Island* abound. Both narratives, for example, feature an African-American character, an unusual grotto, a dog, a submarine, a wild man living alone in the woods (a woman in *Lost*), pirates, a discovery of supplies someone else brought to the island, an incident with a helicopter in *Lost* that parallels one with Verne's castaways in their balloon, and an individual arriving on the island in *Lost* via balloon. Parallels with the earlier *Mysterious Island* television series include most of the above, along with a presence on the island vexing the castaways—Nemo in Verne's story and the Others in *Lost*, both of them making use of a form of video surveillance. *Lost*'s eventual departure from the classic *robinsonnade* formula to an unclassifiable series steeped in the paranormal and replete with time travel may have cost it a viewership accustomed to a more linear form of television narrative; not since the *X Files* (Chris Carter, 1993-2002), however, has there been a series that has delivered the incredible with such effectiveness.

"Lost" for Kids

Inspired by *Lost* and programs such as *Survivor*, and using some of the same locations as the former, *Flight 29 Down* (D.J.

MacHale and Stan Rogow, 2005-2010) brought the island survivor scenario to children's television. Surprisingly, this very Disneyesque idea was rejected by that studio but found a home with Discovery Kids, where it aired both there and on NBC. Comprised of two runs of thirteen half-hour episodes and a four-part telefilm finale, the series was later released on DVD and successfully marketed internationally. Despite the teen angst and petty squabbling that might lead an adult to regard the series as a soap opera for the Clearasil set, it deals with the exigencies of survival in ways that are often more realistic and informative than we find on *Lost*.

The premise of school children marooned on an island is not new. William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* gave it literary cachet—although half a century earlier Jules Verne had explored the concept in one of his lesser-known novels, *Deux ans de vacances* (*Adrift in the Pacific* [2000]). Neither Golding nor Verne, however, made their castaways co-ed. *Flight 29 Down* has a group of nine adolescents and one kid brother tossed ashore on a South Pacific Island after the plane taking them on a school field trip to Micronesia goes off course and crashes. When they realize that rescue is not imminent, they must use their wits and available resources in order to survive.

There is the requisite amount of teen drama and petty jealousies we would expect from such a series. On a more pragmatic level, since the show was part of the Discovery Network, pedagogical themes play a significant role. Practical science lessons and survival skills figure in the storylines. These include shelter building, collecting drinking water from dew, making fire by friction, diagnosing food allergies and various infections, building a proper latrine and several examples of bricolage, such as using jewellery to make fishing lures. Unlike *Lost*, there are no Others on the island, no monsters or mysteries involving the supernatural. There is, however, a compromise with the exigencies of survival when it comes to the killing of animals. As an acknowledgment of *Lord of the Flies*, a pig is captured, but instead of a bloody ritual à la Golding, it is allowed to escape; ditto with a feral chicken. Fish and fruits have to suffice until a rescue takes place four weeks later.

Robinson Redux

The most recent foray into the island genre was NBC's *Crusoe* (Justin Bodle and Stephen Gallagher, 2008-2009). As in the very first *Robinson Crusoe* television series, this one was a multinational (but English-language only) collaboration involving the U.S., Britain and Canada. Despite heavy promotional spots during the Beijing Olympics and spectacular South African locations, *Crusoe* was a ratings and critical failure.[10] It can best be described as a historical action series with liberal doses of comedy. Obvious new millennium influences include the film *Cast Away*, television's *Survivor* and *Lost*. One source that is acknowledged in a "behind-the-scenes" documentary episode is the highly successful *Pirates of the Caribbean* (Gore Verbinski, 2003-2007) film franchise, as buccaneers figure in half the episodes. Adding to the mix and detracting from the series' credibility as serious drama is an elaborate tree house recalling the one used in the MGM *Tarzan* films and Disney's *Swiss Family Robinson*.

The indebtedness to *Lost* is evident in extensive and complex back-stories. These contrast with the simple adventures that take place on the island, especially since the back-in-England sequences resemble the type of period dramas popularized for television by PBS's *Masterpiece Theatre*. To provide more information on Crusoe's life before he became a castaway—and more than Defoe provides—the series imparts to Crusoe aspects of the life of Defoe. Crusoe in the novel never married; Defoe married a Tuffley as does Crusoe in the series; Defoe witnessed the Great Plague and London Fire, as does Crusoe in the series. There is also a sub-plot regarding Crusoe being deemed a treasonous Protestant dissenter, one of the more harrowing episodes in Defoe's life.

Events on the island itself are far more straightforward, with Crusoe (Simon Winchester) and Friday (Tongayi Chirisa) forming a duo who evoke the white/black buddy film formula. Indigenous wisdom figures into most episodes, with Crusoe learning as much from Friday (whom he teaches to read Milton!) as vice versa. A major theme that strays far from the novel is how Crusoe was swindled out of his inheritance, falsely

accused of several crimes and forced to flee family and country before he winds up a castaway. The series finale does not provide a clear resolution with a return home. After a false rescue attempt the two protagonists escape back to their island to await a second season that will not be.

Cinematically, the *robinsonnade* has a history that spans over 100 years. *Robinson Crusoe* alone was filmed as early as 1902 (Georges Méliès) and as recently as 2003 (Thierry Chabert). The genre's television history spans the last five decades. In the narratology of television, the *robinsonnade*-type series could be categorized, using James Monaco's terms (2009), as either open-ended, in the sense of static situations (resolved in each episode), or as having a developing plotline. *Gilligan's Island* and the *Swiss Family Robinson* are examples of the former, the *Mysterious Island* and *Lost* evidence the latter. The *robinsonnade*'s appeal as what we might call an "occasional television genre" (as opposed to those more regular, such as situation comedies and police shows) resides in the way social isolation highlights character by taking protagonists away from their everyday norm—often as dramatic illustrations of the fish-out-of-water theme. These narratives can also appeal to our sense of situational logic—perhaps more so than their cinematic equivalents, given the intimacy of television. In other words, what would I do if I were stranded on that island? Although it is not a true *robinsonnade*, *Survivor* has a similar appeal. Interestingly, the show's format was originally inspired by a Swedish Television series called *Expedition Robinson* (Charlie Parsons, 1997-).

Finally, what is the likelihood of having future *robinsonnades* on television, or in cinema for that matter? The answer resides in the closely allied post-apocalyptic narrative. Its literary beginnings can be seen in the 1895 H.G. Wells novel *The Time Machine* (2005); a half-century later Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1997) inspired three movie adaptations;[11] most recently Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Road* (2006) became a motion picture in 2009. Post-apocalyptic narratives, like *robinsonnades*, involve isolation, survival and self-sufficiency—Matheson's protagonist even likens himself to a contemporary

Robinson Crusoe. Such films have been a staple of cinema since the Cold War of the 1950s, but completely absent from television until the appearance of series such as *Jericho* (Stephen Chbosky, Josh Schaer and Jonathan E. Steinberg, 2006-2008), *The Walking Dead* (Frank Darabont, 2010-…) and *Revolution* (J.J. Abrams, 2012-…).[12]

Whether a response to the uncertainties of the new millennium or to economic collapse, pandemics, terrorism or technology gone awry, post-apocalyptic television series, like the *robinsonnades* before them, deal with humans negotiating life and death situations in an unpredictable world devoid of the familiar and secure.

Wilfrid Laurier University

NOTES

1. A 1929 version, silent with several sound dialogue passages, although called *The Mysterious Island* (Lucien Hubbard, Benjamin Christensen and Maurice Tourneur), features a completely unrelated storyline.

2. Mention should also be made here of Robert Zemeckis's *Cast Away* (2000), starring Tom Hanks. Although not a Crusoe adaptation *per se*, the film works as a contemporary retelling of the "myth" using numerous themes found in Defoe.

3. This is exceedingly rare today, either in film or television, where dubbing is usually done in the country of distribution.

4. In the novel he only imagines doing the latter by conjuring the idea of placing an improvised bomb under the fire pit.

5. The list includes: *Bewitched* (Sol Saks, 1964-1972), *Get Smart* (Mel Brooks and Buck Henry, 1965-1970), *The Avengers* (Sydney Newman, 1961-1969), *Mission: Impossible* (Bruce Geller, 1966-1973), *I Spy* (Robert Culp, 1965-1968), *Star Trek* (Gene Roddenberry, 1966-1969), *Lost in Space* (Irwin Allen, 1965-1968) and *The Wild, Wild West* (Michael Garrison, 1965-1969).

6. It should be noted that as early as 1957, B-movie director Edgar G. Ulmer (of *Detour* [1945] fame) produced a poorly made and ultimately unsold pilot for a *Swiss Family Robinson* television series to be shot in Mexico.

7. See http://www.lostpedia.wikia.com.

8. Perhaps the most provocative use of CGI in the series is contemplative: the recurring image of a gigantic and mysterious statue that looks like some colossus from antiquity.

9. When more well-known actors were used they appeared in smaller guest roles.

10. *Television Weekly* listed the series as one of the five worst new shows of the Fall 2008 season.

11. *Last Man on Earth* (Ubaldo Ragona and Sidney Salkow, 1964), *The Omega Man* (Boris Sagal, 1971) and *I Am Legend* (Francis Lawrence, 2007).

12. Post-apocalyptic themes have occasionally been featured in anthology series, such as the various incarnations of the *Twilight Zone* (Rod Serling, 1959-1964) and *The Outer Limits* (Leslie Stevens, 1963-1965).

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RÉSUMÉ

Des îles à l'écran : la robinsonnade comme genre télévisuel

Paul Heyer

Le récit de rescapés échoués sur une île, ou « robinsonnade », s'est érigé au cours des cinquante dernières années comme un genre télévisuel mineur, mais important. L'auteur aborde les origines littéraires de ce genre et les adaptations filmiques et télévisuelles qui ont suivi. Il met l'accent sur la grande variété d'approches esthétiques dont ont fait preuve les séries télévisées ayant développé ce thème : du tournage conventionnel en studio, à l'aide de trois caméras, avec une clôture narrative après chaque épisode, jusqu'aux longues intrigues continues, servies par un style cinématographique qui tire profit de la nouvelle génération de télévisions à écran large, particulièrement depuis l'avènement du HDTV. Deux exemples seront au cœur du propos : *Gilligan's Island*, en tant qu'exemple de l'esthétique plus conventionnelle, et *Lost*, en tant que représentant de la nouvelle approche. Bien qu'ils n'aient pas connu l'immense popularité de ces séries phares, d'autres exemples notables seront considérés, parmi lesquels deux productions canadiennes : *Swiss Family Robinson* et *The Mysterious Island*. Enfin, des parallèles seront proposés entre la robinsonnade et le récit post-apocalyptique, alors que ce genre émergent se déplace du cinéma vers la télévision.