Sound in *Lost* and the disavowal of reality

**CARLO NARDI**

**UNIVERSITY OF NORTHAMPTON**

**ABSTRACT**

This paper looks at the use of synchronised sound in the American television series *Lost* (2004-2010). Here the score bypasses the conventional distinction between diegetic and nondiegetic sound, thus affecting the viewer’s capacity to make sense of the narrative. I will show how this reflects a current tendency in the media towards the spectacularisation of reality and the fictionalisation of information. The inclusion in the plot of issues such as torture, terrorism or racism, which at the time of the screening were at the centre of the public debate, makes this use of the medium especially problematic. The effect of the score in *Lost* is not just one of disorientation, as it also contributes to the conviction that there is no available perspective that would grant an understanding of the countless mysteries that characterise the series; accordingly, the possibility itself of a rational explanation of the fictional events is often avoided through illogical turns in the plot. Background sounds play a role in generating this divergence between (fictional) reality and perception: if the fictional world is mystified, any means to know, understand and control it through our senses is frustrated, so that the spectator has to relinquish to the inexplicability of events. I will read this loss of perspective in the light of the theory of alienation, explaining how music is used in order to obtain a derangement of perception.

**KEYWORDS:** *Lost*; senses; alienation; conspiracy theory; infotainment.
In this article I will discuss the use of music and sound in the ABC television series *Lost*, which between 2004 and 2010 entertained a vast international audience with the adventures of a group of castaways on a mysterious and seemingly unmapped island. In particular, I will argue that diegetic and nondiegetic sounds are blurred, generating confusion in the fictional events and thus breaking an implicit contract between the spectator and the producer; it is my aim to show how this blurred soundscape is typical of contemporary television, affecting our sensory capacity to interpret media messages and hence raising concerns about media literacy.

**The fictionalisation of reality**

In recent years, in concomitance with the development of time-shifting and cross-platform technologies from videotape recorders to smartphones, we have witnessed significant changes in mediated communication. More precisely, information has become more and more commodified, so that its adherence to reality is not as important as its appeal for an audience of potential consumers. Accordingly, sensationalistic news, rather than being confined to tabloids, lives side by side with more accountable journalism, making it harder to distinguish between the two.

Thussu (2007, p. 2) notices how the growing commercialism of television is the result of at least three factors: the privatisation of global communication, the deregulation of broadcasting and the convergence between different media. Furthermore, globalisation has meant that this commercial model of broadcasting is now dominant across the world (ibid.). The rise of infotainment is a direct consequence of these changes:

> As television news has been commercialized, the need to make it entertaining has become a crucial priority for broadcasters, as they are forced to borrow and adapt characteristics from entertainment genres and modes of conversation that privilege an informal communicative style, with its emphasis on personalities, style, storytelling skills and spectacles. (ibid., p. 3)

Moreover, the public have been gradually co-opted as co-author and broadcaster in the production of media content (see, for example, Keen 2007). It is hard to say whether this can be understood as an advance in participation, though we may assume that any new potential agency of the *prosumer* (Toffler 1980) will be subject to subsequent and specific constraints.

Even if there is evidence that the emotional impact linked to the fictionalisation of information can be used intentionally to generate consensus, at this point it is not my aim to investigate if this process is also manipulated for some specific political purpose. Instead, I want to look at a use of media that characterises both infotainment and fiction and that apparently is changing our sensory approach to reality. Augé (1999, p. 6) calls it a “new regime of fiction”, where the conditions of circulation between individual and collective imagination and fiction have changed: “We all have the feeling that we are being colonised but we don’t exactly know who by”
Augé recalls the film *Invasion of the body snatchers* (1956), where aliens have invaded the earth, taking the identity of the humans that they killed so that the survivors cannot trust anyone any longer. This is to suggest the pervasiveness and contamination of this new regime, “to the point where we mistrust [social life], its reality, its meaning and the categories (identity, otherness) which shape and define it” (ibid., pp. 2-3).

In this context, conspiracy theories find a fertile ground, both for their inherent ambiguousness and the popular appeal of their narratives. Many films and television shows suggest the idea that “conspiracies shape many events, hide others, and generally dictate much of the course of modern life, often to the disadvantage of the average person” (Arnold 2008, p. 10).

Looking at a larger picture, the diffusion of such distorted interpretations of the world, together with the dissolution of lasting identities, indicate a lack of comprehension of the present and a need for self-explaining certainties. The sites where decisions about our lives are taken are seen as off limits, while reality has become more and more complex, eschewing our capacity to understand it, to the point of doubting the existence of reality itself. Especially in the event of collective traumas, the diffusion of conspiracy theories may become complicit in preventing citizens from mobilising, hence keeping the public away from the “red zone” of contemporary capitalist societies.

Also *Lost* incorporates conspiracy theories in its plot; however what interests me is that a sense of helplessness, of inexplicability of the events, and ultimate distrust of the possibility to recognise something that we can call “reality” – all typical features of such theories – pervades the entire series. In this sense, *Lost* participates in a wider media discourse that diffuses a climate of generalised uncertainty whose first casualty is political engagement: if the place where decisions are taken is out of reach, how can we even dream to change things? As in the *Invasion of the body snatchers*, only a few chosen ones, who are aware of the conspiracy, will recognize the threat, but they are left to themselves.

In line with this reading, a common criticism about *Lost* is that it asks too many questions while providing too few answers. One of the series’ writers revealed:

> There was absolutely no master plan on *Lost*. [...] They keep saying there’s meaning in everything, and I’m here to tell you no – a lot of things are just arbitrary. What I always tried to do was connect these random elements, to create the illusion that it was all adding up to something. (Cited in Askwith 2009, p. 164)

An open-ended narrative structure is typical of serial fiction, accompanying popular culture through technological advances in printing, radio and television. However, what the new interactive media promote is the direct involvement of the public in the production of the content, something that the producers of *Lost* encouraged from the start. Consequently, a significant if not predominant part of the audience was actively involved in Internet forums, speculating about the fictional events, sug-
suggesting explanations for the mysteries and expressing doubts about certain narrative solutions, thus influencing the writers.

However, this leaves us with two, interrelated concerns. First, the lack of a master plan does not refer only to the narrative, but also to aspects of the show like its production features, most notably the score. Second, the feedback about the show participates in the same commercial context of the show itself, as the term prosumer indicates: to quote Drake and Haynes (2011, p. 79), “such sites are potentially more critical and reflexive of the viewing experience and yet connected by the act of consumption to the original television texts”; in other words, prosumption constitutes less a free expressive domain than a spontaneous – and for this reason even more valuable – contribution to market research; moreover the public becomes co-author of the show, but the outcome of this labour is not rewarded economically².

**Senses and Estrangement**

Someone might object that *Lost* is only entertainment, so why bother about its degree of disavowal of reality? To which I would reply: what isn’t entertainment nowadays? It is not simply that fictionalisation characterises information, which is partly explained by the fact that it has to respond to the market, but that the two – fiction and information – are more and more indistinguishable, especially in the process of mediation, and even more in relation to their effect on the formation of opinions. It must be noted that the spectacularisation of information clearly includes not only the content, but also production features like lighting, shots, editing, sound design, background music or layout design. Also for this reason, the short circuit between information and fiction can be understood at the level of sensing: this is where music and sound play a role in alienating sensory perception from reality.

Now I will briefly highlight some relevant features of the score, starting with a few notes about its process of production. Michael Giacchino, author of the music for *Lost*, started his successful career designing sound for the video game *Medal of Honor* (1999), which already shows some of the typical features of his style, namely the attention to timbre and the frequent use of glissandos. His approach to scoring is fragmented and extemporaneous: he only had two or three days to complete the score for *Lost*, which is common in tight-budget television productions; on the other hand, he could count on a dedicated orchestra of Los Angeles studio musicians³. Giacchino chose to work on single scenes: since he did not want to be influenced by the whole story, he did not read the script in advance, “preferring to react as events unfold” (Ross 2010, p. 60). His use of the orchestra is peculiar in that his exploration of timbre, based on instrumental techniques rather than on editing or processing, frequently draws on the aesthetics of electroacoustic music.

The orchestral score is often mixed with sound effects, which in their turn include ambient sounds and more undetermined effects that don’t always relate to visible objects. The point is that it is difficult to differentiate between these sounds, even more when considering that the orchestra can perform tonal or atonal music (where pitched tones are still recognisable), electroacoustic music (through close-miking
techniques), ambient sounds and other sound effects. If we add to this that the plot is already confused enough, and the visuals are often elusive, we shall understand how frustrating the experience of *Lost* can be for its audience, incapable of distinguishing between comment and ambient sound.

In an article for the *New Yorker*, Ross (2005, p. 2) recalls that “Eisenstein and other Soviet directors wrote a manifesto declaring that soundtracks should create ‘sharp discord’ with the visual dimension, in order to cultivate critical thinking on the part of the audience”. Then he argues that “Giacchino’s music for *Lost*, in its own non-Marxist way, plays this same game of estrangement” (ibid.). What I contend is that this estrangement doesn’t seem to be aimed at cultivating critical thinking, but is an end in itself. Due to the structure of the score, the spectator cannot achieve a perspective from which to evaluate the fictional events. What is seriously challenged is our capacity, as sensient beings, to relate to a message and understand it with the means at our disposal. At the same time *Lost*, dealing with political and ethical issues such as torture, gun control, racism, xenophobia, colonisation or euthanasia, touches themes that instead are very real and hence require a communicative context that supports critical thinking.

As Howes (2003, p. XI) writes, “sensation is not just a matter of physiological response and personal experience. It is the most fundamental domain of cultural expression, the medium through which all the values and practices of society are enacted”; in other words, every aspect of culture intersects the senses: if we cannot trust what we see, hear or touch, we are actually handing over our already limited command over mediated messages to better equipped and not necessarily well-intentioned entities. In this sense, alienation concerns the capacity itself to know the world; the senses are the *sine qua non* of knowledge, and alienation describes a condition in which an individual or group of individuals have become estranged from their world because the means to interpret events and messages and to produce knowledge have been impaired; this as a consequence will determine a condition of helplessness and powerlessness towards cultural objects or social relations, that are actually the product of one’s intellectual or practical work (Gallino 1969).

Summing up, *Lost* not only is confused in its narrative, but also generates a situation in which the process of signification is continuously slipping out of the spectator’s control so that themes like torture or racism are thrown into a backdrop that does not allow the spectator to reflect critically on them. In particular, the score for *Lost* breaks film conventions, generating a state of uncertainty about the fictional events. I have set this mode of communication in comparison on the one hand with the fictionalisation of information, and on the other – somehow in a specular way – with the inclusion of controversial themes in popular culture narratives.

More precisely, what I suggest is that *Lost* engages the audience in an experience that challenges their sensory faculties. The concept of alienation – seen as a culturally-informed psychological condition – can help to shed some light on this process of estrangement, both from culture and from ourselves as sensing subjects. As Tagg and Clarida (2003) suggest, in a context of inattentive listening mixed with musical illiteracy, every message, even – or possibly most of all – the most ambigu-
ous, is potentially manipulative. In other words, such use of sound negates a self-conscious and autonomous subject.

Lost suitably depicts an anti-utopian universe where everyone suspects everyone; a battle for the survival of the fittest engages the characters in a condition of extreme individualism⁴, while the only relief seems to come from nostalgic reminiscences of consumerism. The sensation of helplessness that permeates the series is conveyed also through the fusion of diegetic and nondiegetic sound into a blurred soundscape portraying a world where nothing can really change or be humanly understood. I have argued that this sensation, rather than simply being represented in the fiction, belongs to the act of perceiving itself. What is at stake, because of this sensory derangement, is the capacity of listening as a critical and mindful act, suggesting, among other things, that there cannot be a thorough understanding of media processes without consideration of the role of the senses.

ENDNOTES
1. Regarding this issue, there is empirical evidence that “the media are, overall, a factor of depoliticization, which naturally acts more strongly on the most depoliticized sections of the public, on women more than men, on the less educated more than the more educated, on the poor more than the rich” (Bourdieu 1998, p. 73).
2. If Marx identified the source of alienation in the sale of labour force to the capitalist (see, for example, Marx 1844), here I am apparently dealing with an act of cultural consumption. As a matter of fact, we should distinguish the Lost audience at least according to their degree of active involvement in the show. We may come to a suggestive conclusion: fans, writing comments and sending suggestions to the legitimate authors, are hence co-opted into the culture industry; in this way, they not only advertise the show, but play a part in producing the show. Yet, they don’t get any substantial acknowledgement for this effort.
3. Overall, the composition of the orchestra is very peculiar and has largely remained unchanged throughout the whole series; in the sixth season it consisted of forty-one string players, four trombonists, one harpist, one pianist and two percussion players. This gamut of instrumental effects, together with the more common leitmotivs associated with the characters, produce a soundscape that soon becomes familiar to every fan of the show.
4. Aptly, Sartre (1960) considers alienation a consequence of the condition of scarcity that pushes man against man for their own subsistence.

REFERENCES
Askwith, Ivan. 2009. “‘Do you even know where this is going?’: Lost’s viewers and narrative premeditation”. In Pearson, Roberta (ed.), Reading Lost, Tauris, London and New York, NY, pp. 159-180.


