

[With minor differences, these are my opening remarks from “Religious Themes and the Human Prospect in Lost,” a public panel discussion with Dave Calhoun, Michael Collender, and Daniel Walter at the Faith, Film, and Philosophy Conference, Whitworth and Gonzaga Universities, Spokane, WA (Oct. 2010). fj]

MacGuffins and Mad Science:

How *Lost* Dodges Moral Consequences by Ignoring the Bloody Potential of Its Premise

I have to start by saying that I enjoyed watching *Lost*. The show was beautifully photographed and paced, offered up a number of compelling characters, compellingly acted by a fine cast, and, of course, was a master class in the art of the cliff hanger. It was also a mess. I kind of liked the mess, too, because it seemed to me the writers were having a lot of fun with form and taking risks in order to work out some themes that aren't ordinarily tackled on television (or even in movies). But—here's the but—I am still at a loss to explain why a story about a *magic island* turned out to be a story about getting into what I call *Lost* heaven, even though *Lost* fans will insist to me that it's not really heaven, it's some other thingy where good and evil are being balanced out through harmonic relationships. Fine, okay. But it's an afterlife based on friendships formed during *life-life*, and *it doesn't have a magic island in it*. It doesn't need a magic island to proceed it. It could have been proceeded by a drama set in a hospital. Or a drama set in a diner in Milwaukee. I don't mean to diminish the show by saying it's about a magic island. This is just the way I tend to start thinking about great stories. *Moby Dick*, before it's anything else, is a story about a whale hunt. *The Great Gatsby* is a story about a successful gangster who stalks his upper class ex-girlfriend in a tremendously creepy way. These descriptions don't diminish the stories but instead suggest the ways that the stories are rooted in human experience and are—to get our panel's theme in here—explorations of human potential.

The whale hunt is not merely what the filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock would call a MacGuffin, a plot device that is more or less irrelevant to the story but moves the story along, or serves the purpose of bringing together a group of characters in the first place. It doesn't simply drop into the background as the story proceeds. But when I finished watching *Lost*, my first thought was, "So the island was one big MacGuffin?" There are some elements that intrigue me still in the way *Lost* was ended, and I eventually might go back to the show and think a bit more about its success with some of its themes and formal experiments. I'm even here as part of this panel to do a little of that thinking today. But what I'll claim here in my opening remarks is this: By making the island a MacGuffin, an arbitrary space in the universe designed to help the characters of *Lost* reach their fullest human potential, *Lost*'s creators made their characters less human and the failures of their characters less meaningful.

To get at what I mean, I want to consider "The Pardoner's Tale," from Chaucer. In brief: Three drunkards set out to kill death himself, the old scoundrel, and are directed to a tree where, they are told, death can be found. At the tree, they find a pile of gold and proceed to kill one another in order to become the sole surviving treasure-finder. In this story, the discovery of treasure reveals the human weaknesses in these characters that will, by and by, bring about their deaths. The treasure turns out to matter to the conclusion of the story and to the story's moral about how death is something we carry with us. Now, MacGuffins don't work like that treasure, quite. The black bird statue in *The Maltese Falcon* is often pointed out as a MacGuffin that brings the characters together but ultimately has little to do with their fates or with the significance of their stories. We could also look at the rosebud sled in *Citizen Kane*—a word and an object that inspires the search for answers but has little to do with the movie itself. We might

say that there are shades of MacGuffin-ness, with the most MacGuffin-like items being those which have the least thematic significance to the story's eventual conclusion.

Now, *Lost* and its magic island. While I can see a certain logic in the idea that the earth is one vast cosmic MacGuffin upon which we are to work out our fates, I don't know if that's a likely premise for good fiction. And I think this island could have been much, much more to the ending, if it had been handled well all along. Look at the qualities of this thing. For starters, it cures cancer, and it makes the lame to walk. It's hidden from the best technology money can buy, and it can apparently be moved through time and space, if needed. It enables time travel now and then, and at least one character, Daniel Faraday, does some serious, genius-level scientific research on how to harness that power. Thinking back to "The Pardoner's Tale," I have to ask: Doesn't that suggest to you a whole lot of potential for inspiring human greed and wrongdoing? Of course, they fight over the island in *Lost*, but it's never clear exactly what they're fighting over, except something very abstract about the cork that keeps the good and evil in the universe separated, or in balance, or something. It's as if the drunkards in "The Pardoner's Tale" actually find death and then have to arm wrestle him for the fate of the universe. That's a good fight scene, I suppose, potentially. But *this island cures cancer!* No character at any time is tempted to bring even one cancer patient to the island. No researcher on the island is trying to bottle that cure for any reason, though both humanitarian and profit-driven motives seem possible. And why-oh-why do none of the characters master the trick of navigating to and from the island in order to turn this thing into the best pirate island in the history of pirate islands? Sawyer and Kate as insane pirates? There's got to be something in that. How about having one group on the island protecting the island's secret for piratical gain while another group seeks to expose the island as a cancer-curing miracle resort? I've only got about ten minutes here, so I'm

going to stop spinning this out, but the point is that the island itself, like the Pardoner's treasure, is fraught with death. The best science fiction often asks something like, "If this piece of technology existed, what temptations would it offer, and what would happen if human beings were to succumb to those temptations." I wanted *Lost* to do that with the island, and I find its failure to make more of the island very disappointing.

For contrast, consider Joss Whedon's swiftly cancelled recent series, *Dollhouse*. Whedon is a master of ensemble dramas built around unlikely premises, and in shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, and *Firefly*, he's shown a remarkable ability to follow his premises to the end even while under constant threat of cancellation. It seems to me he brought *Buffy* to an end three times, once by destroying Buffy's high school at her graduation, once by killing Buffy (temporarily, as it turned out), and a third time by destroying the entire town around which the show was built. Each time he was under threat of cancellation, and each time he chose an ending that followed his characters through to the unpleasant consequences of their situation. There's a scene in an early episode where the three main characters laugh about how their vampire and monster problems will keep them from finding normal lives and normal love. They laugh. Then they stop abruptly and don't look happy at all. The episode ends. That's Joss Whedon, leaving his characters in the messes they make and the messes that are thrust upon them.

Whedon's *Dollhouse* was built around the idea that a shadowy organization had developed the ability to erase and rewrite the software in a human brain, as if we were all hard drives awaiting a new operating system upload. The Fox network bought this show thinking of it as a kind of new *Alias*, where a super cool agent could be implanted with different personalities to infiltrate targets each week. Whedon took it farther than Fox expected, I think, exploring prostitution, slavery, the temptations of power, the way the controllers could abuse the tech for

their own gain, and the fact that if this kind of technology became generally available we would be tempted destroy civilization by zapping each other's brains willy nilly with new personalities. By the end, Whedon had imagined a civilization brought to its knees by this technology, which at first seemed sinister but not nearly *so* sinister. Not everything about the show worked, it took Whedon and his writers several episodes to figure out which characters they cared about, and Fox seems to have kept Whedon from doing some things that might have made it better. But he followed the technological temptation through to its terrible possibilities, and so he made a show that looked hard at the good and the evil human potential embedded in this technology and the scenario in which it appeared—a kind of pile of gold at the foot of a kind of tree where, Whedon shows, a kind of death was actually waiting all along. And Whedon managed all that in 27 episodes aired over two abbreviated television seasons while under constant pressure from Fox.

And here's what frustrates me most about *Lost*. They knew for three seasons, more than 70 hours of scripted television, that they were working toward a conclusion of some kind, and what they came up with was having their characters create an afterlife suited to their needs as characters. I'm not interested in seeing Chuacer's drunkards reunite in heaven, having learned through striving with one another how to be reconciled to themselves and the universe, balancing the good and evil in themselves by understanding their harmonic pairing with other human souls. Nope. I am interested in seeing how temptation plays out for them in death and bloody mayhem. The mayhem story is about what it is like to live on earth, and I wish *Lost* had kept its eyes on that problem. By looking away and redeeming all their characters (or nearly all of them) in the end, they distract us from contemplating the terrible weight of consequences that their characters queued up for themselves over the course of the show.

(Also, I wish they had done something with the polar bears. What's with the polar bears? And who keeps dropping Dharma initiative food for everyone? And I don't get why Nadia isn't in Sayid's heaven. She's so much cooler than Shannon.)