CREATING THE NEXT LOST
OR "WHAT IS MY "OPERATIONAL THEME" AND WHY DOES IT NEED TO PLAY NICE WITH MY STORY ENGINE?

One of the great gifts I received as a result of my contribution to the success of *Lost* was that, once my time on that show ended, I was in high demand for the slew of "mystery box" shows that came in the wake of our success. The serialized mystery/heavy-mythology vogue triggered by *Lost* sent the entertainment business into a frenzy: everyone wanted "the next Lost".

The next five plus years of television would be flush with shows about mysterious people meeting mysterious phenomena and having no idea what it was... or why it happened. The list of titles goes on and on: *Flash Forward, Kingdom Hospital*, *Surface*, *The Event*, *Invasion*, *V*, *Threshold, Under the Dome*, *Heroes*, *Alcatraz, Awake*, *Drive*, *Journeyman*, *Revolution*, *Dollhouse*, *Persons Unknown*, *Terra Nova*, even the American remake of *Life on Mars* sought to sprinkle some of that *Lost* magic on its execution of the premise.

The *Lost* magic eluded all of them.

Even the ones that came out of the gate hot (*Heroes* shone brightly in its first season) eventually crashed and burned. It wasn't for a lack of ingenuity, or resources, or even a high enough concept, but rather, the absence of a crucial element I call “the operational theme".

Now, "theme" is a tricky word. In high school and college, most of us could pick a lofty word or idea and designate it the “theme” of a play or novel: “power,” “alienation,” “banality of evil,” or (my personal favorite) “the shallowness of modern life.” We could then write a coffee-and-Red-Bull-fueled paper, using choice quotes from the partially-skimmed bit of required reading, and have a pretty good shot at not winding up ashamed to show the report card to our parents in the morning.

Sadly, if you are a professional television writer, this is neither enough to create something that will connect with an audience, nor will it help achieve the goal of six seasons and a movie.

Television is a populist medium. Its audience has little patience. Success in hour-long drama hinges entirely on creating

immediately compelling characters driven by internal forces that fuel every action, every line, every scene, and every plot for hundreds of successful episodes.

What I call the "operational theme" is the show's final theme in working clothes. It is a vector that points the way to endless variations of the show's premise in service of the protagonist's consistent emotional need. This is *crucial* to the success of a television pilot. It is crucial to the success of episodes to come. It is, indeed, what television series should see as the first order of business to establish.

And yet, it is most often the part that's missing. Especially from sci-fi shows, which are my preoccupation, form the majority of my work, and need the exact same characteristics as any other type of show to succeed.

Too many people mistakenly believe that all you need to make a successful genre series is a high enough concept (A mysterious event causes everyone on Earth to see fifty seconds of their own future! A mysterious event awakens superpowers in ordinary people! A mysterious event brings magic back to the world"), but here's the dirty little secret of high concepts...

They really aren't that hard to come up with.

In one of those job interviews I had after I left *Lost*, the show's creator breathlessly described his incredibly clever, ultra high concept mystery box: an airplane vanishes for several years due to a mysterious event, then lands... but to the passengers no time has elapsed!. After he finished, perhaps expecting applause, I shrugged and asked "okay - so is it magic, science, or aliens?"

Why? Because at the end of the day, however skilled a show creator might be at hiding the source of their mystery box... it's ALWAYS magic, science, or aliens.*

But it's not magic, science, or aliens that keeps you on the air. Al shows, regardless of their genre or subject matter need the same thing to succeed: a protagonist or ensemble with an easily understandable operational theme.

In a procedural series, the operational theme of the protagonist is usually pretty cut-and-dry. He or she is - sometimes quite literally - dedicated to bringing about law and order. The reason

cops, doctors, and lawyers will probably always roam the airwaves in some form or another is that their operational theme is baked into their personality. It is a function of their job: the eradication of suffering and injustice at any cost. This workaholicism is usually fused with personal obsession brought about by past trauma.

If television is to be believed, the most dangerous thing to be in the world is the spouse of a detective. Most of them wind up dead at the hands of some psychopath who remains uncatchable for the span of episodes the series takes until its finale. Television thrives on protagonists who sacrifice their personal relationships and all other extraneous concerns in favor of protecting people like us, the viewer!

The reason you see this as an operational theme so frequently is that it is bulletproof. A major article of faith in American TV is that cops who lose their spouses to crime will want to solve every possible murder in the world in an unconscious attempt to bring them back. The job is always personal for them.

Take what is arguably the best show of the "second golden age", *Breaking Bad.* Walter White's operational theme - "To save everything I love I must become something everyone hates" - creates an endless supply of drama. Every single situation Walter enters requires him to tell, develop, and sustain a lie.

This brilliant operational theme means that every movement in the show is front-loaded with deception and subterfuge. It's a recipe for ongoing conflict that allowed the show to slowly string out and develop its more academic theme: the seduction of a good man by the infinite charms of wealth, power, and his descent into ultimate darkness. But make no mistake, academic is the right word for that last sentence. It was the initial simplicity of Walter White's *operational* theme that consistently opened dramatic avenues episode after episode.

It doesn't end with Walter White. The second "golden age" of television is littered with indelible operational themes. Tony Soprano wants to remain a sadistic mobster even though his unconscious musters every weapon at its disposal to get him to turn away from his horrific life. Dick Whitman continually tries to keep up the idealized appearance of the successful mid-century man in the grey flannel suit as his inner demons plague him with the truth that his entire life is a lie: the truth is that he is an uneducated hick who stole the identity of the real Don Draper.

The above is why I say the operational theme is the show's ultimate theme in working clothes. In its gross anatomy, *Mad Men* is, in fact, a show about the emptiness of modern life (no, for realsies) but in working clothes that means "a guy wants modern life so much he constantly lies through his teeth to get it and even though he keeps trying, it never matches up to his unreasonable expectations."

It seems obvious, and, frankly, inevitable that simple operational themes are the key to success in creating a TV series. A lot of science fiction shows, however, completely lose that thread in favor of deception, misdirection, and spectacle. The truth, however, is that the most successful science fiction TV shows are the ones whose operational themes most match those of non-genre shows.

The brothers Winchester, Nick Burkhardt in *Grimm*, Mulder and Scully in *The X-Files* - even *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* - are all basically cops: rolling into a new case week after week, interrogating suspects, finding lore that matches the methodology of the villains, confronting evildoers, serving justice, and moving on to the next week's transgressor.

In the best of these series, an overarching theme buttresses the set-up: Mulder and Scully's dynamic was defined by opposing viewpoints which fueled every scene. In addition to being thrust into stories by their occupation every week, they always had a basic ideological conflict that spoke to their character. Scully was a skeptic, Mulder a believer, and they were tasked with investigating the supernatural. Thus, every single scene had a default opposition baked into it.

Even the beloved crew of the Starship Enterprise are hyper-competent trouble-shooters placed into stories weekly because of their mission and franchise, as opposed to their internal needs. That said, characters with strong operational themes are needed in procedural shows because how the characters react to their immediate situation reveals who they are. In the best *Star Trek* series, this boiled down to a unique representation of Freudian theory: Captain Kirk, Spock, and McCoy are a three-man representation of the ego, superego, and id.

As with the Mulder and Scully dyad, the drama of the series lay in watching three archetypes integrate their separate points of view into a coherent solution to the planet-of-the-week's

problem. McCoy would shout, “Dammit, man, we gotta do something!” Spock would reply that, “To do something would be illogical.” Kirk would eventually say, “I have a plan.”

Compare that infinitely fruitful character dynamic with the first two seasons of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* - a long and tedious stew of underdeveloped, under-thought characters only kept afloat by the exigencies of a procedural franchise. On *Star Trek: The Next Generation*’s first two years there was always a potentially interesting issue with the planet-of-the-week. But it took almost two years for the characters to become anywhere as interesting as the show’s premise.

(It’s a miracle of the extant love of *Star Trek* in the core audience, or the innate intrigue of the show’s premise, or the economics of first-run syndication in the late eighties - or maybe some combination of the three - that the show survived long enough for its characters to find their way into being fully-realized people who could carry a story like “The Inner Light,” “Chains of Command,” or “Tapestry.”)

Had the writers merely dropped the original characters of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* on a place with no innate sense of mission, like a desert island, the series would have surely collapsed. In its first two seasons, the protagonists of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* were all prey to the fallacy that "characteristics" = "character". All the members of the crew had attributes that were supposed to make them interesting - an android who wanted to be human, a half-Klingon wrestling with his identity, two bridge officers who had been in a romance that did not work out, Captain Picard didn't care for children - but these attributes didn't become drivers for action and meaningful perspective on the events of the show until well into its run.

That said, the show lumbered on because of the premise's innate sense of mission. By that, I mean to the yin to the operational theme's yang, the show's "story engine". In the case of Star Trek, it's simple: every week we go to a new planet where there is a problem to be solved. Though closely related, the story engine and operational theme of a series are very separate and distinctive parts of the same whole, and have to work smoothly with one another to succeed.

Consider *The X-Files*. The show has a simple story engine: every week a monster of one form or another terrorizes someone somewhere, and Mulder and Scully show up and investigate. The

show also has a strong and clear ideological opposition between the characters that drives their attitudes toward the cases at hand.
All of this was backed up by a very strong operational theme: Mulder's belief was not merely a weird quirk, it was backed up by the operating theme of needing to solve the unsolvable because he witnessed his missing sister's abduction by aliens.

Like a cop with a dead spouse, Mulder was on a quest to find the truth about paranormal phenomena to absolve his own fear, shame and guilt over the loss of his sister. Of course, this closure proved impossible, and in being so, Mulder's quest powered hundreds of episodes. More importantly, because of Mulder's deeply character-driven passion for the paranormal, Scully's skepticism - born of her training as a physicist and physician, and her relationship to her no-nonsense Army Colonel Father - found a worthy opponent who could hold his own week-after-week.

This is a great example of a show with a strong and extremely clear-cut story engine coupled with a strong operational theme. As stated before, doctor/lawyer/cop shows have been a mainstay of television precisely because the story engine tells the audience (and the writers, frankly) exactly how the journey is to begin and a rough idea of the destination. Many cop/doctor/lawyer shows have weak operational themes because the passion for the work is the operational theme, and the operational theme does not have to do the heavy lifting of generating story.

The best example I can give of a successful show with a strong story engine and a weak operational theme (and to be clear, I am only using the words "strong" and "weak" as descriptors with no value judgment) is the classic *Law & Order*. In this series, the audience only knows the characters by how they behave in the moment. There are no lengthy expository monologues, character backstories are seldom mentioned if at all, and the audience never sees the life of the characters outside of work.

In *Law & Order* the story engine is the main narrative driver, and the operational theme is assumed: the characters are there because they are *de facto* heroic police and legal personnel who do not question their mandate. It would be an insult to call the characters in Law & Order "flat", but they are certainly "flattened" in that by and large, they exist and relate only within the world of a workplace that presents them with mysteries to be solved on the field and tactical brinksmanship in the courtroom on a sustained basis.

A producer like Dick Wolf on *Law & Order,* or Jack Webb on *Dragnet* before him, can make the choice to let the propulsive forward motion of plot and the allure of sensational stories with shocking twists be the centerpiece of the show and succeed. It is important to not only understand that this is a choice, but a choice that expresses the theme of the show. Consider the first words of the show's preamble "In the criminal justice system". That's the show's theme in a nutshell and the reason the show survived to be the second longest running drama in the history of television: we are watching characters who work in a system designed to bring criminals to justice and we are to love these characters for their dedication to the common good.

In that way, the operational theme often serves as a blanket statement of purpose and meaning. *ER* is an interesting example. Obviously, *ER* had a very strong story engine. It was also committed to keeping that vast majority of its action within the titular emergency room and spent little time on the lives of the characters outside the hospital. The operational theme of ER was simple, strong, and expressed the central thesis of the show very concisely.

When Michael Crichton wrote the screenplay that eventually became the pilot for *ER* he had a very powerful conviction he wanted to express: doctors are heroes. What made *ER* such a compelling series is that we knew just enough of the private lives of the characters to understand how much it took for them to rise to the occasion every single time. The operational theme contradiction is plain to see: the ER demands your best even when your life is at its worst.

In the case of sci-fi shows with strong procedural story engines - *Supernatural*, *Buffy*, *Grimm* - the characters have to be forced to do the work without the assumption that it is their vocation. In *Buffy*, the operational theme supports the strong story engine. Buffy is cursed to be her generation's chosen monster slayer and struggles to juggle that with her contradictory desire to be a normal high school girl. Similarly, the Winchester brothers in *Supernatural* are following their family legacy and must hunt monsters in order to understand and avenge the death of their mother by supernatural forces.

On *Grimm*, the producers just doubled down by making their protagonist both a cop and the heir to a centuries-long tradition of monster-slaying.

In shows with weak story engines, operational themes have to be especially strong because they compensate for the characters' lack of a franchising device. In a show where the bodies don't crash through the front door of an emergency room or the murders through 911, the character's central contradiction must serve as the driver that excavates plot from a situation.

Breaking Bad is exemplary in having a weak story engine that is completely compensated for by a commanding operational theme. In *Breaking Bad*, Walter White has to drive all of the action - he decides that cooking meth is the solution to his problems, he has to find a partner, he has to set up the operation, he has to find his way into the criminal underworld. Plot follows Walter White's operational theme because the show's narrative hinges entirely on the moves he makes, and his successes and failures.

In *Breaking Bad*, Walter White's endless quest to become a master criminal, and to fight off everyone who eventually wants to stop of kill him, brings all the drama to his doorstep. The show is about his attempts to manage all the drama while preserving his secrets, and as Walter White expands the scope of his criminality, the world around him blossoms with new antagonists and new challenges.

Then there are shows with strong story engines and strong operational themes. Take *House MD*. While the show is a medical procedural, much of the drama comes from the central conceit that in addition to being a brilliant diagnostician, Dr. House is also a belligerent and self-destructive drug addict being forced to perform his medical duties as punishment for his many transgressions.

While *House MD* always has a case coming in, the show also builds drama because the titular character and putative hero prefers to spend his time scoring vicodan, berating interns, avoiding his responsibilities, and generally making the lives of the people around him a living hell.

None of this is to say that a series is inherently better because it has both a strong operational theme and a strong story engine. However, a show needs either one or the other to be absolutely bulletproof in order to succeed.

Believe it or not, *Lost* is a great example of a show with a weak story engine; as are most of the "mystery box" shows that tried

to replicate its success. Yes, the island had plenty of mysteries and the need for survival presented a number of exigent threats, but there are only so many compelling ways to present the physical struggle of survival (finding a source of water, burying bodies, finding shelter, building fires, digging latrines, etc.) in interesting ways. People don't show up week after week to watch flattened characters dig wells - while the situation is inherently challenging, it does not present an immediate, compelling dramatic hook in the way that an injustice like a murder compels the audience to follow the dogged detective on the case.

Lost succeeded in telling a longitudinal serialized story because it managed to create a central operational theme that applied to every single one of the characters in its voluminous ensemble. In the earliest days of the creation of the series, the creative team behind *Lost* came upon the idea of using flashbacks to develop the operational themes for each character. The island stories were presented in direct contrast to who the characters were in their former everyday lives: every action in the island present became an attempt to compensate for shortcomings in the past's real world.

The operating theme of *Lost* is simple: Who do you say you are when you can reinvent yourself with impunity? Every member of the *Lost* ensemble was living a lie on the island. These lies dictated their behavior and led them to try to remake themselves - successfully or unsuccessfully - into their most desired version of themselves.

What's important in the case of *Lost* is that <u>every</u> character had the *same* operational theme. The synthesis of personal desire for reinvention in contrast to the reality of each character's previous life actively propelled the actions of the characters on the island, delivering 48 hours of television - the first two seasons - that cemented the show's enduring place in the popular culture.

Obvious as it seems in retrospect, the Operational theme of *Lost* did not become clear to the creative team until after the pilot had been shot and we were tasked with figuring out *how* exactly the series would work in episode after episode. We were very close to falling prey to the fallacy that makes for the downfall of most of the proposed serialized sci-fi pilots that come down the pike: we were almost seduced by the shiny blandishments of a mysterious island, from a smoke monster, to the presence of

ghosts, and an incongruous polar bear attack. We almost focused on the mystery instead of the operational theme of the characters. I'm certainly glad we found it early.

By dealing with the unknown, beguiling, and generally spectacular (aliens! robots! vampires! alien robot vampires!), sci-fi as a genre has the sneaky ability to fool otherwise extremely capable writers into believing that a nifty concept and a lot of unanswered questions is enough to carry a television series.

It isn't.

To have something mysterious take place and then spend 22 episodes showing a bunch of flat or flattened characters merely figure out what happened, how, and whether it can be fixed, is not only the biggest failure of the imagination possible in sci-fi, it is also an insult to the genre. It assumes that sci-fi is somehow "easier" and doesn't protagonists that have a rich inner life in order to motivate conflict.

In truth, the island on *Lost* served the same purpose as the ad agency on *Mad Men.* It was a space where the protagonist sought to invent a new life in spite of all evidence to the impossibility of that endeavor. Many big and shiny ideas can tap dance around a lack of an operational theme for a while, but no amount of jazz hands can replace a protagonist or ensemble with a robust, and easily-identifiable operational theme.

Ironically, sci-fi, the genre that most often suffers from underdeveloped characters, probably demands more *character* from its characters than any other genre. Why? Because it is, at the core, a metaphorical exercise.

Sci-fi poses a question that extends beyond the easily understandable stakes of the cop, doctor, or lawyer. How are the aliens, robots, mysterious islands, viral outbreaks, and vampires an external manifestation of your main character's self-concept? If you are writing a genre pilot and your premise can't answer that question then, like any other writer in any other genre, you have to dig deeper.

The most salient problem with the vast majority of the "mystery box" shows that followed *Lost* was a profound misunderstanding of the relationship between story engine and operational theme. Because *Lost* appeared to succeed by dint of having a compelling mystery at its core ("what is the island?") many writer/producers

assumed that a question alone could take the place of both story engine and operational theme.
It can't.

The question, and the source of the question has to either create consistent exigent threats, or the characters have to have an internal reason that drives them to create the plot and uncover the world of complications therein in an interesting way.

Characters with strong operational themes create the story in shows with weak story engines. Characters with flatter operational themes work best in shows with strong story engines. Shows with both strong story engines and strong operational themes have a much broader bandwidth from which to create drama, but tend to keep the characters locked within a more rigid narrative structure. In all of these scenarios, however, a strong operational theme always enhances the final product and expresses the thematic concerns of the show through the actions of the character.

The privilege of having a scholar find and explain your lofty thematic concern like “power,” “alienation,” or (still my personal favorite,) “the shallowness of modern life” doesn’t come right away. Scholars and bloggers don’t proclaim the deep meaningful metaphors of your creation if you have not done the hard spade-and-trowel labor of putting a main character on the screen whose travails evoke all of those big thoughts. You must first put your characters in the one, singular (and for my money preferably science-fictional) situation that *most* challenges their true self.

A great operational theme is a weekly duel between your show's story engine, and your characters' innermost identity. It is knowing the one thing your protagonists need more than anything else in the world, and then putting him or her in the drama-producing machine most likely to challenge it for years to come.

Operational theme is the contradiction that keeps on giving: a feat of invention that will sustain hour after hour of narrative storytelling, season after season, preferably to the delight of millions of viewers, the acclaim of hundreds of critics, and the munificence of a murder of blue-chip advertisers.

To find the next *Lost*, or to create a television show that earns the right to persist, you must not only have the beguiling high concept, you must also create that perfect puzzle-piece of a

protagonist; the one whose innermost need most conflicts with the worst case scenario of your high concept...

And when you find that, have your agent call my agent.

*In response to my question, the show's creator smiled, looked me in the eye, and said "you worked on *Lost*, you tell us". I had two answers to that, one of them was the polite deflection I gave in the room, the other was the one I chose to keep safely inside my head: "fuck you, pay me!"