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Using contemporary American television serials for the study of culture, fiction and English as a foreign language (EFL)

Dennis Riches

Introduction

Television serials may seem like an unlikely resource for the serious scholar of fiction, culture or language. The scholars of one age usually devote themselves to the established canon of past eras, and ignore the popular entertainment of their own time. Scholars in television studies have expressed frustration in having the medium taken seriously in academia, but considering the nature of many American television serials, a skeptical attitude would seem to have been justified. Television entertainment has a well-deserved reputation for being made quickly for a mass audience that commercial sponsors do not want to offend, edify or arouse to any significant degree. However, television scholars argue that a form of entertainment that the public devotes so much of its time to should be the object of academic inquiry. Furthermore, technological and cultural changes have brought about a structural reform of the television industry and an improvement in content, and this calls for a reassessment of the negative image of fiction for the small screen. In an article entitled *TV's Golden Age*, television critic Heather Havrilesky describes these changes:

Remember the good old days, when TV was the favorite whipping post of the cultural intelligentsia? ... How it was really just an idiot box with "the bland leading the bland" (Murray

Schumach)? ... Television has become a more reliably fulfilling medium than film. This is largely due to the rise, in the last decade, of the serial drama, with its season-long arcs, slow-simmering character development, and diverse permutations, all of which have allowed TV writers more creative range than ever before. Instead of concise, often formulaic, self-contained episodes, we're treated to rich, complexly plotted stories about tortured Mafia families, soulful Muslim CIA agents and intergalactic spirituality crises that we end up caring deeply about. ... Meanwhile, most movies are preceded by five or 10 minutes of commercials before the previews even begin, and are positively littered with product placements. As Charles Taylor argued, the marketing machine behind big releases has undermined the quality of movie-making considerably, with studios focusing on "increasing the size of the product, the size of the hype, and, of course, the size of the process -- all the while reducing the time anyone has to savor or respond to what they're putting out" (Havrilesky, August 21, 2006).

Technological innovations such as cable (commercial free) television, videotape and subsequently DVD distribution, and legal and illegal digital distribution of programming changed the nature of television programming. These changes diversified and fractured the previous uniform market of the major television networks, and blurred the line between television and cinema.

As resources for foreign language study itself, television serials have traditionally offered little advantage for classroom use. Before there were recording technologies, there was no way to bring material into the classroom for repeated viewing, or to assign it for homework, especially in settings where the shows were not broadcast locally in English. Even if the shows had been available, there would have been a lack of supporting material such as transcripts, subtitles and

published commentary on the programs that can now be accessed easily on the Internet. Additionally, as mentioned above, the shows of old had little merit as works of art to warrant their use in academic study, even if they had been accessible.

In this paper it is argued that it is time for the television serial to be better valued and used as a resource for studies of fiction, culture and language. New technologies have made television serials globally accessible for independent language study, as well as for legal 'fair use' in the language classroom. The quality of the programs has improved to a point where they rival the social significance and storytelling of Dickens, Dostoevsky and other greats who wrote serialized fiction before the age of film and television. Yet even if some would disagree with this view, the parallels between 21st. century television fiction and classic fiction are obvious. The antecedents of some television dramas are to be found in works such as *Oliver Twist* and *Canterbury Tales*, so for contemporary audiences, little inclined to reading novels, they can function as a valuable introduction to the art of storytelling and a bridge to the classics.

1. An ideal medium for language learning

As little as a decade ago it would not have been possible to say television serials are an ideal medium for language learning. The artistic merit of many shows was questionable, and the technology for using them in educational settings was not reliably widespread and accessible. Only in recent years has it become possible, in developed countries at least, to assume that students and institutions will have access to the basic requirements: DVD players, computers and high speed Internet connections, projectors and large monitors, and affordable rental or purchase of the shows to be studied. With these supplies, students can view the shows at home and access reviews, commentary and resources related to their topic of choice. In the

classroom, educators can, in most jurisdictions, legally present 10-20% of a show's content under fair use laws that permit review and study of copyrighted works of art. This may seem like too little, but it is plenty for the language classroom. Any course based on the study of television dramas should be a survey of the medium that has students doing most of their viewing as preparation for class time. In the classroom, select scenes can be viewed and commented on by teachers and students, with writing, reading and discussion activities taking up the majority of time in the classroom.

An additional advantage of television serials, as opposed to feature films, is that they are intentionally designed to hook the viewer into coming back for more and staying with the series for dozens of episodes. In most cases, this is a feature of television that educators decry as a crass manipulation of the viewer, leading him away from better uses of his time. However, for the foreign language teacher who is constantly looking for ways to motivate learners to study a language that is not socially relevant to them, it can be quite useful if a language resource has addictive properties. On the other hand, this is also what makes a television series difficult to introduce. Intense interest in the show develops as the viewer invests time in it from the first episode onward. This is especially true now that most television writers have abandoned the format of the self-contained episode that demands little understanding of the longer story arc.

It is important to note, too, that if we consider which medium could serve as an introduction to the study of fiction, a television serial is, as the Spanish term *telenovela* suggests, more like a novel than a two-hour film. A play is easily adaptable to a film, but a four-hundred page novel is easier to adapt to a television serial. Many classic novels were originally presented in serialized format, and many of the 'cheap' elements of television, such as cliffhangers and surprising twists of fate, were invented by writers who were published in weekly installments. Like television dramas, novels are to be

enjoyed over a period of days, weeks or months, and they are often quite difficult or impossible to adapt into two-hour films.

An additional advantage of television series is that they are by nature timely, deliberately attempting to be reflections of, and sometimes escapism from, contemporary culture. In this time of rapid technological and social change, the fiction of just a decade ago, let alone a century ago, is difficult to make relevant and interesting to audiences. But here are some examples of completely modern issues portrayed in recent television series: In *Desperate Housewives* a couple hires their Chinese housekeeper, an illegal alien, to be their surrogate mother. Trouble ensues in the marriage when the husband devotes too much attention to the surrogate as the pregnancy progresses. In numerous police and forensic procedurals, criminals are convicted thanks to DNA evidence, high technology video and audio enhancements, and a vast array of data kept on the nation's computer servers. In *House*, a hospital director realizes her fast track career has left her with no options for finding a husband in time to have children, so she begins screening donors at a sperm bank. In an episode of *The Office*, the dismal reality of American employee health care plans is portrayed with the show's typical dark humor. In *The Sopranos*, the mob boss is shown, in a great episode of ironic humor, raging against the lax security at the Port of Newark - which his mob family has corrupted for decades - because it might allow a terrorist to smuggle an atomic weapon into America. Studying the classics has its merits, but they afford students no opportunity to see these contemporary issues portrayed in fiction.

Another advantage of the new technology is in the numerous features that can be found in the video and audio options of a DVD. Viewers in Japan, for example, can choose to listen to the audio track in Japanese or English, or to view subtitles in either language. These options are not consistently available, but in recent years it has become standard for distributors to pack in as many language options

as possible. The DVDs often contain additional resources such as interviews with the writers and directors that can be used as sources for research.

The recommendation that students make good use of English subtitles to comprehend dialog may strike some teachers, inculcated with communicative methodology, as ill-advised. The emphasis of the language training in recent decades has been on top-down mental processes. In this view, listening skills develop by listening, by comprehending gist and intention from context and knowledge of how others think. They don't develop by recourse to crutches like reading the subtitles, or pausing playback to ask questions and consult the dictionary. Many courses and textbooks designed to teach listening skills intentionally withhold transcripts from students, based on the theory that a resort to analysis will divert attention from the need to holistically comprehend the message. Ironically, the recommended best practice in education generally is that teachers should deliver a message through both visual and auditory channels.

For activities in modern listening courses, students fill in gaps, answer multiple choice questions, catch key words, and form an understanding of what they listen to by making best guesses about it, but they rarely do analytical work such as following transcripts, shadowing, or rehearsal of dialog. The usual teaching method allows students to progress to what is called intermediate or advanced levels, but they still lack the skill to hear with confidence every word spoken in film dialog or narration. Native speakers can repeat dialog if called upon to do so because the stream of speech is perceived effortlessly. However, this skill is very slow to take hold in L2 learners, and contemporary methods do little to help them and offer mostly compensating strategies for the handicap.

Native speakers have a vast vocabulary and knowledge of grammar, but more importantly a highly accurate knowledge of the phonology that has been functioning unconsciously since early

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childhood. If necessary, they can accurately repeat what they listen to, forming mental transcripts in real time, without recourse to guessing what is being spoken, and this efficiency is what allows them to tirelessly follow a narrative and enjoy it. Having to listen to a narrative without this ability is mentally exhausting. L2 listeners may sometimes be able to guess accurately about what is happening, but comprehension of the whole is likely to break down before too long when too many strands of the storyline become ruptured. They will lose interest, fall asleep, or hit the menu button and select their native language option to listen to the rest of the story. Thus, although making use of transcripts and subtitles may be a dry and analytical way to study a work of fiction, it could be an effective bridge toward better listening ability, and a solution to the de-motivation that occurs when straining to figure out context clues and gist does not provide a cohesive understanding of a narrative.

There are numerous ways that teachers might use television series in the classroom; however, the intended purpose of class time suggested here is to develop a student interest in the series so that most of the listening, reading and analysis will occur as student preparation for class. When learners get little exposure to the target language, the goal is to have students listening to several hours of the language between each weekly session of the class. Class time should be used for discussion, study of commentary on the series, vocabulary review, or any other activity that supports the students' independent study.

Some teachers may hesitate to use television series because of the widely accepted belief that reading novels is the preferable objective of serious language study. Novels are thought to be superior to visual media because they leave more to the imagination and employ more descriptive vocabulary. Yet this high valuation of reading is derived from settings where it is assumed that learners have acquired naturally the language skills to comprehend a television program in

their native language. The educational objective is literacy, but a foreign language course has additional objectives. Listening and speaking need to be taught as conscientiously as literacy, so there is no reason for teachers to adopt a disparaging attitude about the use of films and television. As far as foreign language learners are concerned, visual and audio media may be superior to novels. With the recent DVD technology, we have a language learning opportunity that integrates vocabulary building, reading skills and listening skills, yet it has not been fully exploited or appreciated.

Another unacknowledged benefit of studying a television series is that even if it does not develop reading skills as much as a novel, the L2 viewer still reads subtitles and engages the cognitive skills necessary for comprehending a narrative. For a teacher who is passionate about the study of fiction and who has viewed hundreds of television shows and films, and read hundreds of novels, these skills might be taken for granted. However, teachers cannot safely assume that their students are practiced in these skills. These skills might be seemingly simple abilities such as being able to remember who did what to whom, or getting engaged with the false social reality of fiction. With other forms of entertainment in children's lives, it may not be right to assume that they all develop the skills or temperament to enjoy fiction, if ever it was a universal interest. Think of the proverbial husband falling asleep in the cinema while his wife gets teary eyed at the scenes unfolding on the screen. Teaching fiction has always been a challenge, but if we live in an age when we hear the common lament that 'no one reads novels anymore,' and there is no common national conversation about the top-selling novels, we may have to take consolation from the fact that there is at least a conversation around office water coolers about the final episode of *The Sopranos*. Television series may be the only way to get contemporary young people involved in the art of storytelling and benefiting from its purported advantages to intellectual and emotional development.

Additionally, as far as foreign language learners are concerned, the reading of fiction has become a rare element of the EFL toolkit. Most course books have self-contained dialogs spoken by nameless, undeveloped characters that appear and disappear with each self-contained lesson in the book.

2. Selection of resources

One reason teachers may hesitate to use television series is the difficulty of selecting material that will be entertaining, worthwhile, and inoffensive. One of the adages about television programs is that they always aim for the 'lowest common denominator' to gain mass appeal. Above it was stated that many commentators refer to a new 'golden age' of television, but the opinion is by no means universal, and even those who agree with it would say that the gems are the exceptions. Each year the major American cable and commercial networks produce dozens of pilots and launch dozens of new series, but most of them fail to be long-term commercial successes, and fewer of those receive critical acclaim. Teachers have a difficult task in selecting series of artistic merit that are also recognizable, popular hits that students will want to watch. A teacher may also have to deal with students who come to class thinking *Family Ties* was the best television show ever made, and take them from there to an appreciation of a ground-breaking family tragedy like *Six Feet Under*.

This question of how to teach *Six Feet Under* raises other difficult questions. Its psychological complexity, symbolism and the blend of fantasy with realism are what make it both worthwhile and problematic to bring into an educational institution, especially if the institution is culturally distant from modern day Los Angeles where the story takes place. The series revolves around the Fishers, a family that has operated a small funeral home for three generations. In the opening episode, the father dies in a car crash (the company car, a

hearse) while on the way to pick up his son at the airport. At the moment of his death, the eldest son is in an airport broom closet having sex with a woman he met on the flight. Later we find out that the mother is guilt-ridden over an affair she was having, and there is another son who is breaking down under the stress of concealing his homosexuality. Little sister is suffering from adolescent depression. The father, we find out later, troubled the family in his own special way. It is a study of a dysfunctional family, and the dysfunction manifests itself outwardly as graphic portrayals of promiscuity and substance abuse. There are no heroes in the classic sense of television heroes, but this is what brought the show such critical acclaim. It was an overdue reaction to the traditional saccharin family drama, a reaction which some critics might say has now swung too far in the opposite direction.

The merits of these mature themes are precisely what make the series problematic for presentation in the classroom. Although 'safe' segments of the shows could be selected for classroom study, a serious project on the show would lead a student to watch it in his free time, and there is a risk that parents, administrators or the student himself will object to the content.

If this problem pertained to only one series, it could be easily avoided, but in fact it presents itself to some degree in almost every series that has been critically acclaimed recently. The writers and purveyors of television programming no longer feel any imperative to morally instruct the public with uplifting tales that come to tidy, optimistic conclusions at the end of each episode. Traister and Miller note that it comes down a new emphasis on a classical, or tragic view of fiction, as opposed to the traditional romantic approach to television fiction:

American culture is fundamentally Romantic, individualistic and Christian; when it's not exhorting you to "follow your

dream" it's reassuring us that in the eleventh hour, we will be saved. American culture is a perpetual pep talk, trafficking in tales of personal redemption and the ultimate triumph of good over evil. We don't do doom. *The Wire* is not Romantic but classical; what matters most in its universe is fulfilling your duty and facing the inexorable with dignity... to even introduce the idea that art is meant to nudge us toward moral improvement and social awareness is to concede to Romantic hope. But for some people, in some places, the classical view is more true, and in such cases, the artist's duty is to show us that these lives are no smaller for that. And it is -- as we always, always seem to forget -- not depressing but strangely exhilarating to see this truth about humanity acknowledged for once. It may not be the only truth, but it's a truth all the same (Miller & Traister, Sep. 15, 2007).

Havrilesky comments on the trend toward the classical with more wit:

In the old days, TV writers used to give their characters lovable traits: He has a soft spot for the downtrodden! She's self-involved but ultimately principled! He sings in the shower! She makes great banana bread, and sneezes cutely around cats! These days, crazy is the new lovable. All you need to get viewers hooked on a character is a succulent psychological disorder or two: Awww, he's so obsessive-compulsive! Look, an alcoholic with violent mood swings! How cute! Her sense of self is so malleable. Oh, I love it when she gets all socially withdrawn and displays flattened affect like that! (Havrilesky, Jul. 29, 2007).

When the cable broadcasters were able to avoid censorship

regulations and pressure from sponsors, writers were able to develop morally ambiguous situations and to depict the 'kiss kiss, bang bang' element of entertainment much more graphically than before, and depart from the romantic genre. In fact, this became the selling point of cable television (HBO's slogan: "It's not TV, it's HBO"), and it is clear that they have often been a bit too eager to show the mature content that cannot be shown on commercial television. In recent years, the commercial networks have been so outpaced by the cable broadcasters that they have begun to alter their own standards and push the limits of what sponsors and the public will accept. The hit series on ABC, *Desperate Housewives*, is a prime example of the more risqué content that has found its way to commercial television, in spite of protests expressed by sponsors and segments of the public.

It is interesting to note that the one show that social conservatives rarely object to is the massively popular *CSI* franchise (a series of series based on a team of forensic crime scene investigators, so popular that it was spun off into series based in each of Miami, Las Vegas and New York). It is arguably more gratuitously violent and pornographic than any show on television. It regularly portrays nudity, perverse, violent crimes, and shows the investigators handling and discussing all forms of bodily fluids and dissecting grossly mutilated corpses. What saves it from the criticism of social conservatives is that it falls into the romantic genre. Justice prevails at the end of each hour of a high contrast black and white fight between good and evil. The forensic team leader in the New York series keeps a portrait of Ronald Reagan on his desk, his counterpart in Miami supports the death penalty and takes supreme satisfaction in getting the bad guy at the end of each show. The writers can maintain this fantasy of heroism and justice, ignoring the actual low rate of murders solved in these cities,¹ only by avoiding character development. Horatio Caine, the protagonist of *CSI: Miami*, has an ongoing sexual tension with his dead brother's wife, but it is never

resolved. As for meaningful representation of the ultra-commercial for a private fiction, so much sometimes in series that have classical genres poses some challenges to learning series to learn

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resolved. As far as the audience knows, Horatio is celibate and has no meaningful relationships, or even a life, outside of his work. In fact, the ultra-committed professional cop/doctor/lawyer/spy with no time for a private life is a recurring figure in contemporary television fiction, so much so that many dramas can be seen as intentional, and sometimes unintentional, satires of contemporary careerism. The series that have captured the respect of critics and scholars are in the classical genre. They are character-driven, ironic realism, and this poses some difficult choices for teachers who wish to present such series to learners far from the American cultural context.

Philosopher Dan Dennett suggests approaching this problem of cultural contamination with the metaphor of the spread of deadly germs in the Americas by the European migrants who were immune to them. He claims that ideas and cultural practices - called memes to suggest that they self-replicate and persist like genes - spread from one mind to another and are no different than these germs. Harmful memes such as pornography and self-medication with mood altering substances seem like dire threats in places where they are new because they are devastating when they are new. In places where they have existed for a long time, the majority of people have built up immunity to them. They persist as deadly or corrupting problems for some, but most people survive exposure to them and avoid them. Americans now blithely view television programming with graphic depictions of sex and violence, or public discourse of once-private topics. So when it comes to handling possibly objectionable material in works of art outside of their cultural context, it is helpful to keep

1 In 2006, cable channel Showtime introduced its own forensic drama, *Dexter*, also set in Miami. It seems to be a satirical response the improbable virtue of the forensic teams portrayed in the *CSI* franchise. The protagonist is a sociopathic forensics officer who channels his urges by killing only the hideous criminals whom he knows have escaped punishment in the justice system. In the season premiere he scoffs at the low rate of murder cases solved and the incompetence and moral weaknesses of his colleagues.

this in mind. In some cases it may not be advisable to present it, in others it may be threatening and unwelcome, but if they are presented carefully people may see that they can survive exposure to them, and then they will be able to assess the artists' claims that these depictions are justifiable, or whether they truly are reflections of a decadent culture.

Finally, we should ask if the study of fiction was ever as clean and wholesome as we tend to think of it. Novels are now revered in education, but at the time when they first became widely available, they were seen as being as frivolous and corrupting as television is considered now. Most of the novels in the canon studied in universities has its own problematic content. It involves people struggling to resolve conflicts of loyalty, and competing and cooperating to achieve the ultimate goal that our species evolved to achieve: passing genes into the next generation - or in some cases, suppressing this instinct to live for a bigger idea. In any case, all the conflicts portrayed in literature revolve ultimately around cooperation, violent competition and the sexual instinct. It is hard to see how any serious study of literature could avert its attention from the so-called corrupting influences of fiction.

Some might disagree with this if their view of literature is too shaped by a socially enforced sanitization of art. In a broader historical perspective, however, we can see, for example, that the mid-twentieth century in America was an anomalous period when censorship rules and the pressures of advertisers forced the fiction of television to be sanitized beyond a point where it held any value or interest for viewers. Whenever we had the 'father knows best' type of protagonist, or a celibate, undeveloped character like *CSI: Miami's* Horatio Caine, the hero had to exist on a pedestal that kept him dehumanized. Such characters may serve a propaganda purpose, but they make for boring art. Fiction, as far as the cognitive scientist is concerned, may be no different than pornography. The reader or

viewer's mind has to be stimulated by an extraordinary artificial reality. It has to experience vicariously the most extreme and unlikely situations one could face. At its worst, it is pornography, a mere rush of neurotransmitters provoked by the perception of a virtual experience, but at its best it is a moral education, a rehearsal for real future conflicts and moral dilemmas that might arise, or an expansion of empathy for the diversity of human experience.

Thus it could be argued that if our purpose is to teach an appreciation of fiction, rather than to just teach snippets of American English that appear in anodyne situation comedies, then we will have found some measured way of dealing with realistic language, and realistic portrayals of sexuality and violence in works of fiction.

A case in point in American television is the HBO series *Deadwood*. The writer, David Milch, has been acclaimed as "television's great writer," (MITWorld) and with *Deadwood* he took on the task of desanitizing the American Western. He did extensive historical research on the 1870's frontier gold mining camp of Deadwood, in present-day South Dakota, and he took as his theme the formation of a community under deliberate attempts of the settlers to stay beyond the reach of government, law, and the corporate interests which would take over their claims.

In a public lecture at MIT Milch said, "I had a hunch Calamity Jane didn't look like Doris Day," (Milch) while he was discussing the ethical code followed by Hollywood studios during the mid-20th. century. This code produced the familiar vision of Western settlement in which saloon girls were seen only dancing and pouring drinks, John Wayne never cussed, and justice usually prevailed. To correct this vision of the old West, in Milch's vision of *Deadwood* he held back nothing to portray frontier life in the extremely nasty way he believes it must have been.

As gold is discovered on land that has recently been granted to the Sioux Indians, the settlers who come from the East to claim the gold

are outside of American jurisdiction, and want to stay that way lest their claims be overturned. Profane language is such an ingrained habit of many of the characters that they cannot speak for ten seconds without resorting to it. Audiences are shown graphically how the camp doctor used crude 19th. century medicine to control venereal disease in the brothels. The brothel owner, Swearengen, engages in fraud and murder as a side business to steal gold claims. He encounters resistance from other businessmen who came to camp with loftier ideals, but they are eventually corrupted and allied with him as the camp faces greater external threats. Swearengen first appears as a monster, but as the series progresses Milch succeeds in humanizing this anti-hero by revealing details about his horrific childhood, and by showing how his emergence as a leader in the new community gives him a comfort zone in which he can occasionally show compassion and cooperation with his fellow settlers.

Milch defended the language, violence and depictions of sexuality by claiming that this was necessary to convey the reality of the lawless gold rush town. The population was ninety per cent male, with 90% of the females working as prostitutes. There was no law or system of social sanctions to rein people in - people who would have had, in modern parlance, severe 'adjustment disorders' in the society back east that they had left. Foul language was a first line of defense and deterrence in a place where every man was a potential threat. The series' explicit content can be defended by arguing that if we want to understand the emotional states of the characters living in this fearful state, we have to be shown what they are living through. The show succeeds all the more because this depravity is juxtaposed with scenes in which the characters find moments of redemption and grace in their newly forming community. As much as the language is shockingly foul, it comes in dialog, monologue and soliloquies of a complexity never seen before on television. As in a Shakespearean drama, the characters often express their thoughts in minute, poetic

detail, with references to classic literature, and speaking in lengthy sentences of inverted clauses.

It may be too much to say that Japanese students and curriculum planners are ready to have *Deadwood* in the syllabus. The students themselves sometimes write in their book reports that they did not like a novel because "the ending was sad." I discuss *Deadwood* because it is a typical example of the classic genre that is now commonplace. It has no hero, no happy endings, and no justice prevailing in the end. It has a shocking level of profanity, and explicit violence and sexuality - yet it is one of the most widely acclaimed series on television, most likely because audiences felt that the depictions were an honest portrayal of what a frontier town must have been like. A cleansed version of the story would not have been as well received, not because Americans are 'addicted to violence,' but because the graphic content was effective in telling the story. It is an extreme example, but it illustrates the point that any attempt to present only 'safe' content for classroom viewing will defeat the purpose of teaching an appreciation of narrative fiction. If we cannot get Japanese students to pay attention to such works of art, we might as well go along with all the other cultural influences that have produced young adults who go to Disneyland for dates.

3. The ideal candidate

Having said that the most explicit shows are still too problematic to introduce in the classroom, and that the traditional situation comedies are too lightweight to bother with, the only possible solution is to look for a series that can act as a bridge between the low and the high art. Some candidates for this are listed in the appendix, but the series *Lost* is described in detail here because of its stature as the preeminent popular and critical hit of the decade, while it fits the pragmatic requirement that there not be too much explicit offensive content. Its

creators are well versed in literature and philosophy, and it has caught the attention of serious literary critics who have noticed the influences of literary classics. It is a rich resource for study because, in addition to the professional criticism, there are numerous websites, magazines and books that have appeared out of the enthusiastic reaction to the show. Finally, it has a novel element for American television that will appeal to EFL learners - the inclusion of an international perspective, which quickly gave it an international market. In addition to having British, Canadian and Australian English speakers, in the main cast there are two Korean characters who struggle with learning English, and a refugee Iraqi soldier.

At first glance, the story seemed to be a sort of fictionalization of the reality program *Survivor*: a diverse cast of plane crash survivors awaits rescue from a deserted tropical island. So what's new here? Executive producer J. J. Abrams, already established with previous hits, hesitated to take on the project because of this initial first impression, but he made it more interesting by adding a mysterious group of antagonists already on the island, and by giving the island itself inexplicable properties.

The producers quickly realized that the fanatical reaction to the show meant they had struck upon the zeitgeist of the post 9/11 era. Critics noted that the show could be an allegory of the modern age. A multi-cultural community of alienated and lost souls, freed of technology and given a chance at redemption, learns to come together as a community while they decide whether to rush to war with shaky leadership and a poorly understood enemy. There is an obvious parallel in America's actual rush to war in Iraq, but the allegorical nature of the story makes it easier to bring to a mass audience that television networks do not like to expose to explicit references and depictions of the 'war on terror.' Overt political commentary is taboo because it threatens to alienate the half of the viewing audience that voted the other way.

The survivors are immediately aware that something extraordinary has happened to them, and this is what makes the show about so much more than just finding food and deciding who will be leader. First of all, why did they survive the crash when normally a mid-air break up of an airplane would leave everyone dead? Then, before their first night is over, a gigantic creature noisily thrashes in the bushes. Later, one of the survivors shoots dead a polar bear that rushes out of the jungle. Eventually, they find that there are others on the island with malicious intent toward them. Who these 'Others' are, and what their motives and intentions are, form the core of the suspenseful tease that keeps audiences coming back every week. At the time of this writing, after some seventy one-hour episodes, the mystery is far from being revealed. The producers have promised to bring it all to a conclusion over the next three years.

In two books about *Lost* that appeared after its second season, several writers illustrate why *Lost* is such an excellent point of entry to studies of literature and philosophy. Evelyn Vaughn notes that the series is influenced by such classic "frame" stories as *Canterbury Tales* and *Decameron* (one could also add *One Thousand and One Nights* and *The Tale of Genji* to her examples). These are the type of story that "presents a whole series of short tales, often with different tellers, wrapped in the frame of one large extended story." *Lost* has these qualities, and also shares with them the quality of the story being about a group of travelers from diverse walks of life thrown together in a common circumstance. In *Canterbury Tales*, the pilgrims tell a series of stories that give them moral guidance during their pilgrimage. In *Decameron*, a group of young nobles comes together while fleeing the city of Florence to escape the plague. In *Lost*, a dozen or so modern travelers, who normally would have no reason to associate with one another, come together on a Pacific island, also in an era of perceived social crisis. In *Decameron*, it was the plague, but now it is the threat of terrorism and the wars begun in

reaction to it. For Vaughn, this successful creation of a frame story is what makes *Lost* “one of those rare shows to straddle the line between critical success and popular triumph.”

For Orson Scott Card, the most important literary precedent to *Lost* is the serialized fiction of Dickens. The serialized novels of the 19th. century were, in effect, the television serials of the day served in a different medium. They had large casts and prolonged and divergent plots revolving around the story of the main protagonist. He writes:

The real secret of *Lost* is the secret of Dickens’ serials: These aren’t really episodes or installments we’re watching. They are really a single, continuous story. Yet we leave each episode satisfied, even thrilled, not because we’ve been given grand adventures, but because we have been shown at least one character’s epiphany — a realization, a flash of light, a glimmer of understanding or resolution — immediately followed by a tongue of fire, a glimmer of danger or deception that functions like, but actually is not, the traditional cliffhanger.

In *Lost*, there is a main cast of twelve to sixteen characters (the number is fluid because minor characters and new characters come to the fore as others die). Minor stories about each one are revealed through their interactions with other survivors and through the back stories of what they experienced before the crash on the island. The story is made suspenseful and intriguing in this aspect because it is revealed that there is an inexplicable mystery in the way the survivors passed, usually unnoticed, through each others lives before they all got on the same doomed flight from Sydney to Los Angeles. These stories all fit into the larger arc of the story which is the mystery of the island’s supernatural forces and the conflict with The Others. Viewers can enjoy the minor story of the week while the progress of the larger story arc moves slowly forward.

Amy Berner writes in *Double Locked* of the obvious significance of a character named John Locke². Just as the 17th. century philosopher of the same name believed that man is a blank slate, forming his character and morals by his experiences, the *Lost* character John Locke is the embodiment of Locke's philosophy. She wrote her essay in the persona of John Locke looking into the future and praising the television show that has a character with his namesake. The entire essay is written in 17th. century English, with a tone and a locution that would be recognizable to anyone who has read one of Locke's essays. In the essay, Berner's imagined voice of John Locke (the philosopher) finds much to commend in the story and in the character who bears his name.

Aside from the philosophical question of how memory, experience and will shape the character of man, there are other philosophical themes pursued to an extent that is rare in popular television. Fate, religion, rationality versus faith, hope, the nature of leadership, redemption and technology are other examples. The series is also genre-defying in the way that it blends so many genres simultaneously. It has romance, action, suspense, crime, comedy, ironic turns of fate, science fiction, and as a common element in every character's life, a conflict with parents. Whether it is realism or fantasy remains to be seen, as there have been several hints that the bizarre supernatural phenomena will turn out to be plausibly explained as the effects of cutting edge scientific research that has been done only on the island.

In addition, for the generation that grew up with computer games, it has been evident that the series blends elements of traditional storytelling with gaming, so much so that a *Lost* game for all the major game consoles will be released in 2008 (Faylor). Even at its

2 There is also a character named Rousseau, whose situation resonates with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's concept of the Noble Savage, but the writers stopped there (at least as of Season 3), choosing not to populate the show further with characters named Descartes, Hobbes, Nietzsche, Darwin, Sartre and so on.

inception, before ABC had made a long-term commitment to the series, its creators were busy building a fan base through websites that included interactive games, message boards, websites of the fictitious airline in the show, and fan generated content. Now, many of these sites give clues and answers to the mysteries in the show before they are revealed on air. By the time of its third season, the creators were consciously creating the show with an awareness of how it would be immediately scrutinized by thousands of viewers who can capture, enhance and replay portions for immediate analysis.³ When the enigmatic and reclusive leader of *The Others*, Jacob, was shown for an instant in a dark shadow, in a flash that was barely perceptible to the viewer, the frame showing the silhouette of his face was captured and digitally enhanced by a fan who then posted it on the Internet. Whether the leader exists is a fundamental question left unclear in this episode, but the creators left the answer discoverable, inadvertently or not, by leaving evidence that could be found by a determined viewer. This sort of interaction between audience and authors has only recently been available with Internet technology, and it represents an entirely new way to create fiction. *Lost* seems to be the first television series to take such full advantage of it. It is yet to be seen whether the strategy of putting so much of *Lost* on these other media will eventually backfire before the planned six-year run of the series finishes. Turning it into a game and a treasure hunt for the most zealous fans could turn it into a parody of itself, alienating the majority of viewers who simply want an hour of thrilling entertainment every week.

It was mentioned above that *Lost* can serve as a gateway to the study of novels, and this is not only because of its literary influences, and precursors in the genre such as *Robinson Crusoe*, *Lord of the*

3 See Warner, 2006 for a compilation of various official and unofficial *Lost* websites.

Flies and *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, but also in the way that literature itself is an element of the series. Bill Spangler wrote the essay *The Lost Book Club* to take an inventory of the novels that appear in the series and to discuss their relevance to *Lost* themes. Famous novels are put into the hands of the characters and discussed in the dialog. It is a high school English teacher's dream to have a popular television show using works of literature as story elements. The Others have a book club, and Sawyer (who took this alias from the Mark Twain novel), the uneducated, cynical con man, is, ironically, an avid reader of fiction. He has been seen on camera reading *Watership Down*, a novel that shares an obvious theme with *Lost*. By season three, the leader of the others, Ben, is making frequent references to literature as clues to the crash survivors that there are bigger issues at stake than getting off the island. They might just be the unfortunate collateral damage in a fight for the greater good being done by The Others for mysterious benefactors off the island. He cannot yet reveal why he doesn't arrange their rescue, but he can make oblique references to *Of Mice and Men* when trying to argue a point.

Because of its literary antecedents, intellectual literacy, inclusion of literature as a story element, and its superb storytelling, as well as its massive popularity, *Lost* is the ideal candidate for the combined study of culture, fiction and EFL. It is not the only candidate, but it is the best example to offer up for the argument that changes in the technology and art of television series have made the time ripe for their use as language learning resources and as worthy objects of academic inquiry.

Appendix

A starting point: Fifteen contemporary television series for study of culture, fiction and English as a foreign language

The list below is intended for teachers living outside the United States who might be unfamiliar with the selection of television series available for study. Some readers may disagree with what I have included or excluded, but it is offered only as an introduction to some critically acclaimed and innovative shows, or in some cases, shows that are worth viewing because of their popularity or uniqueness. For the sake of recommending what will be most accessible and available with English subtitles, the list is limited to series that have been broadcast since the year 2000. Many of them, marked with an asterisk (), have been broadcast or distributed in Japan with accompanying Japanese subtitles and voice dubbing. In most cases, the original English language options are available in the DVD menus. In other cases, the series may be available only as imports which need to be played on a region-free DVD player.*

The purpose of this list, and the preceding essay, is not to suggest accessible entry-level English resources for EFL students. Rather, these suggestions are for advanced learners who still need to improve their foreign language skills but are ready to study content areas as well, in this case courses in the study of fiction. The descriptions are left brief with the producers' websites listed as the best starting points of further inquiry.

1. 24*

This series has been massively popular in Japan. A compelling thriller in an original format. Each season, 24 episodes are produced, each one being an hour of real time in a single day in which a counter-terrorism unit battles a major threat to national security. The format allows for no character development or nuanced discussion of

the political issues of the day, but viewers get addicted to it easily.
(<http://www.fox.com/24/>)

2. Alias *

Light entertainment that has a clever blending of spy, science fiction and family drama genres. Female CIA agent Sydney Bristow gets herself out improbable jams as she deals with the discovery that her mother was an undercover Soviet agent who married her CIA agent father. They all meet up again on opposing sides in the post-Cold War era in pursuit of a secret technology sought by various shadowy networks of terrorists.

(<http://abc.go.com/primetime/alias/missions/episode101a.html>)

3. CSI: Miami*

The most successful example of the modern procedural forensic crime genre. The portrayal of police officers and of the justice system is a fantasy, but this probably explains its popularity. Each week it serves up the heroism and justice that Americans know is missing from real life. (http://www.cbs.com/primetime/csi_miami/)

4. Curb Your Enthusiasm

Wealthy from the royalties he received as creator of the *Seinfeld* series, Larry David developed this unusual series as a semi-fictionalized version of his mundane life as a middle-aged, bored millionaire working in Hollywood. Much of the comedy revolves around his blindness to, or impatience with social taboos.

(<http://www.hbo.com/larrydavid/>)

5. Deadwood

Discussed in detail in the main text. (<http://www.hbo.com/deadwood/>)

6. Desperate Housewives*

This was an instant hit in 2004, quickly gaining an audience of more than 20 million viewers per week. Critics have surmised that it must be capturing the new zeitgeist of contemporary feminism, but they are stumped by the public fascination with the lives of suburban housewives. (<http://abc.go.com/primetime/desperate/index.html>)

7. Grey's Anatomy*

A medical drama that updates the stale format of the long-running *E.R.* series. A popular and critical hit, but it has been faulted for sacrificing plausibility for dramatic and comedic tension.

(<http://abc.go.com/primetime/greysanatomy/index>)

8. House*

House has been received as a welcome reworking of the tired genre of the medical drama. Dr. House is the first anti-hero to wear the white doctor's coat. He breaks rules and ethics, insults patients, and hides his wounded heart under layers of cynicism, but he holds onto his job because he is a genius diagnostician. The NBC network originally commissioned a procedural medical thriller in which the disease would be the villain, but in addition they got great character development and cynical, dark comedy. (<http://www.fox.com/house/>)

9. Huff*

This series ran briefly on cable channel Showtime, but it was unique in having a troubled psychiatrist as the protagonist of a family drama. The doctor, his family and friends are as troubled as his patients. The show won awards and critical acclaim, but was dropped by the network after two seasons. (<http://www.sho.com/site/huff/home.do>)

10. Lost*

Discussed in detail in the main text.

(<http://abc.go.com/primetime/lost/index>)

11. Six Feet Under*

Discussed in the main text. (<http://www.hbo.com/sixfeetunder/>)

12. The Office

The American version of the hit BBC series of the same name. In terms of language content, the American version is more comprehensible, and in terms of content, it is not quite as pessimistic as the British version. A small and struggling regional branch of a paper company is led by an insecure and incompetent manager. The show succeeds by making great comedy out of a mundane situation familiar to millions of

office workers. (http://www.nbc.com/The_Office/)

13. The Sopranos*

The most famous and successful American series of the last decade. Series creator David Chase said, "The essential joke (of the story) was that life in America had gotten so savage and ... selfish that even a mob guy couldn't take it anymore. He and his guys were the ones who invented selfishness... and now he can't take it because the rest of the country has surpassed him" (The Sopranos, disc four, interview with David Chase, 15:50 ~). In this way, the show came to be a superb reflection of contemporary America, not only of only mafia sub-culture. (<http://www.hbo.com/sopranos/>)

14. The Wire

Critically acclaimed drama about the police, schools and urban politics of a fictionalized Baltimore. Unlike many police dramas, this is not a procedural that brings everything to a tidy conclusion at the end of each episode. Story arcs and characters develop over long periods, and they are the opposite of escapist entertainment. The show is praised for its realism and relevance to social problems in cities like Baltimore.

(<http://www.hbo.com/thewire/>)

15. Ugly Betty*

This show is unique for an American series because it is an adaptation of a popular Colombian *telenovela*, *Yo soy Betty, la fea*, and because it portrays a character crossing lines of race and social class. Immigrants, the working class and the poor are rarely at the center of an American television series, but in this comedy the lines between race and class, and between the beautiful and the plain, are at the center of the story. Betty travels daily from her working class, immigrant neighborhood in Queens to her office job at a Manhattan fashion magazine.

(<http://abc.go.com/primetime/uglybetty/index.html>)

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